

A NEW
JOHNNY LIDDELL
THRILLER

**“The name’s Liddell,” he told
the blonde--“cabin 321, and
don’t bother to knock”**

**Crime of
their Life**

Frank Kane

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**“HOW WOULD IT LOOK,”
LIDDELL
ASKED, “IF YOU GOT SHOT
WITH YOUR OWN GUN?”**

“No, don’t, Liddell!” Handel crawled over to him on all fours. “Give me a break. You can have everything I’ve got. Money, her, anything. But don’t kill me. Don’t.”

The voluptuous redhead looked down at the man cowering on the floor. She tossed her white sweater onto a chair, reached back and pulled down the zipper of her gown. “All right, Liddell. He’s being so generous. Be my guest.”

CRIME OF THEIR LIFE

FRANK KANE

A DELL FIRST EDITION an original novel

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in the story are fictional, and any resemblance to real
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CHAPTER 1

The cruise ship *Queen Alexandra* caught the storm full-on less than a hundred miles off Hatteras. The companionways were laced with ropes, most of the passengers hadn't shown from their bunks since the afternoon tea. By dinner time, the saloons were deserted, the bar crowd had dwindled to three hardened passengers and the bartender. He stood at the far end of the bar, made no attempt to erase the boredom from his eyes as he stared out onto the rain-lashed deck. Most of the crew of the *Queen* welcomed an occasional spell of bad weather because it kept the passengers occupied and out of their hair. Not the bartender, whose take depended on a heavy play from the passengers and their tips.

On the bridge, Captain Delmar Rose was scowling as he watched the build-up of the black walls of water that were buffeting the ship. She was beginning to creak and groan as the waves grew in strength and size. There was no danger that the old girl couldn't ride this one out as it had ridden many others out in its day. The captain's main regret was that when the storm had finally blown itself out, he'd have to face the complaints of the passengers at the daily cocktail parties and explain how "unusual" this weather was. He burrowed his balled fists into the pockets of his heavy-weather coat, gave orders to reduce speed.

In the glass-enclosed lounge that adjoined the bar, a thick-set man with an unruly shock of white hair sat chewing on the stem of a battered bulldog briar. The drink on the table in front of him was untouched, he seemed to be devoting his full attention to the lace-capped waves that rushed by the side of the ship to congeal in a thrashing wake at her stern.

He gazed up at the heavy, black clouds overhead that writhed and twisted like something alive, something in ferment. It would be dark in an hour or less, he estimated. But tonight very few of the passengers would be in condition for a game of musical beds. Tonight, most of them would be grateful to stay in their own beds and suffer.

He sucked absently on the pipe-stem, the juice in it rattled, he realized he had allowed it to go out. He tapped the bowl against the heel of his hand, dislodged the dottle into the ash tray.

Tonight would probably be an excellent opportunity for him to check out a few impressions he had formed of his fellow passengers in the short time they had been aboard. There wouldn't be too many curious onlookers to wonder what he was doing, prowling in parts of the ship where he had no obvious business.

As darkness started to enfold the ship, the screech of the wind reached the pitch of a stage-struck banshee. The high and heavy seas were battering at the ship with sledgehammer blows. But her high, knife-edged bow cleaved through the high waves, tossing mountainous billows to either side, exploding cascades of spray that drenched the decks, turned the covers of the lifeboats black with dampness.

Some place, a telephone shrilled.

The man at the table was reloading the bowl of his pipe when the white-jacketed barman lurched in from the bar.

"You're Mr. Landers, aren't you, sir?" The bartender steadied himself on the back of a chair.

"That's right."

"I have a call for you at the bar, sir."

Landers frowned briefly, stuck the pipe into his jacket pocket. He pulled himself to his feet, followed the bartender's rolling gait and bowlegged stride that testified to years at sea.

There was only one die-hard at the bar now. He eyed Landers with a lack of curiosity as the thick-set man walked to the end of the bar, picked up the telephone.

"Landers," he told the party on the other end.

The voice was muffled. "I know who you are, Mr. Landers, and what you want. I think I can help."

Landers frowned, his eyes rolled up from the bar to meet the incurious eyes of the lone bar patron. "Who is this?" he asked gruffly.

"This is no time to talk. Meet me tonight at twelve on the sports deck aft. I have the information you're looking for."

"Now wait a minute—" Landers started to argue. There was a click at the other end as the connection was broken. He tapped the crossbar on the phone with a spatulate index finger, ignored the mild look of curiosity on the bartender's face.

“Order, please?” a heavily accented voice answered.

“I just had a telephone call here at the bar. Can you tell me from what room?”

There was a slight pause. “126 on A deck, sir.”

“Who has that stateroom?”

There was another pause, then the accented voice was back. There was a puzzled note in it. “That’s funny. 126 on A deck is vacant. We’re picking up the passenger at our first stop at Antigua on Saturday.” His voice died down to a murmur as he rechecked. “It was 126, sir. I got it logged right here.”

Landers said, “Thanks,” dropped the receiver back on its hook, squinted at it for a moment. He checked his watch, decided the only thing he could do would be to wait, signaled to the bartender.

The man in the white jacket laid his half-smoked cigarette on the upturned end of a glass, shuffled down to where Landers leaned on the bar.

“Scotch on the rocks,” Landers told him.

The man behind the stick made a production of selecting a bottle from the backbar. “Get your party, sir?” He made a halfhearted attempt to disguise his curiosity.

Landers grinned at him; winked. “Recognize the voice?”

The bartender looked chagrined. He shook his head. “Sounded like she took real good care I wouldn’t,” he conceded. He glanced out into the gathering darkness. “What a night for it,” he sighed enviously.

By midnight, the *Queen Alexandra* was in the heart of the blow. Despite her 36,000 tons, she was beginning to pitch and roll. The creaking and groaning meant nothing, she was completely seaworthy, but it was a prerogative she reserved out of deference to her age. She had been built in Rotterdam and launched in 1935. In the twenty-seven years that she had been in active service, she had been a luxury liner, a troop carrier and now, after eighteen months of restoring her from the years of hard usage the troops had given her, she had been put out to pasture on the Caribbean cruise run.

Harry Landers opened the door onto the glass-enclosed lower promenade deck, stepped out. The bulldog briar was clenched between his teeth, his neck was submerged in the collar of his topcoat, he had his balled

fists dug deep into his pockets. As he stepped out, the *Queen* slid down a large switchback to head into an oncoming wave with an impact that shook the whole ship. Landers swore under his breath, grabbed for the handrail to steady himself.

Outside the spray-spattered glass windows, the jet-black waters with white lace antimacassars of foam capping the waves seemed to be reaching up the side of the boat. A few feet farther out, there was nothing but a black void, the darkness so solid that he had the sensation that he could reach out and touch it, as if a black velvet curtain had been lowered between him and the horizon.

The length of the promenade was deserted as he headed for the aft stairway that led to the upper decks. The open upper promenade was equally deserted as he climbed up and stepped out onto the sports deck.

He looked around, saw nobody. Above him, sparks from the aft funnel streamed into the darkness, volumes of smoke mingled astern with the ship's foaming wake.

He hunched his shoulders against the chill, walked over to the veranda with its overhang designed to protect the piano used in the sports deck activities from the weather. He didn't see the two figures that had melted into the shadows of the stairway leading to the sun deck above until it was too late. He tried to get his hands out of his pockets fast enough to protect his head from the murderous blow one of the figures aimed at him.

The belaying pin caught him on the arm, it snapped under the force of the blow. He tried to scream, his voice was lost in the banshee howl of the wind. The second figure was behind him. He was hardly aware of the blow that caught him on the back of his head, knocked him to his knees. He tried to pull himself to his feet, as another blow brought the deck up to smash against his face. He could feel himself spinning into a deep black pool.

The two men straightened up, made sure they weren't being observed. Then they caught him under the arms, dragged him to the rail. One of the men caught him by the ankles, the other caught him under the neck. At a signal from the man at his neck, they straightened up and flipped the unconscious man. He described an arc over the rail into the darkness beyond. In a moment he had disappeared into the swirling foam of the wake.

There is very little that goes on on a ship that the captain doesn't know. He has hundreds of eyes working for him in the form of stewards and bar

men, stewardesses and the employees of the ship's beauty parlor. No one takes the trouble to guard his tongue or to hide from his steward or stewardess his peccadilloes. These, in turn, are dutifully passed along to the captain. He requires this information, not to act as a censor but rather so that he can be alert to any situation that might develop to a point where it interferes with the orderly operation of his ship or with the enjoyment of his passengers.

So Captain Delmar Rose of the *Queen Alexandra* was not unduly alarmed the morning after the storm when Louis Armando, the steward on B deck, reported that Mr. Landers in 321 hadn't slept in his room the night before. Captain Rose had already heard about the telephone call to the bar for Mr. Landers and the assignation that had been arranged.

But by noon he was beginning to worry. He had checked out his other sources, the other stewards and stewardesses. None of them had seen Mr. Landers and in no case had any of their charges been in the mood or condition for an assignation. Most of them were still in their staterooms, their complexions tinged with green, despite the fact that the wind had died down, the old ship had stopped her chronic creaking and complaining and the sun had shown a cautious face.

By three o'clock, thoroughly concerned, he had ordered an unscheduled fire drill. While the passengers were milling ill-humoredly at their various boat stations, Captain Rose personally instituted a search of the ship. By four o'clock he was convinced that Harry Landers was no longer aboard.

When the man on the telephone switchboard belatedly reported to him that the call to Harry Landers had come from stateroom 126 and that the passenger for 126 was not due to board until the *Queen* reached Antigua, Captain Rose marched into the radio shack and reported the incident in full detail to his home office.

CHAPTER 2

Johnny Liddell yanked irritably on his coat collar, drew it closer to his face to stave off the cold drizzle that had replaced the big-flaked, wet snow that had been coming down since early morning. The slush was almost up to his ankles, his feet were wet and cold, and it seemed every cab driver in New York had suddenly gone deaf and blind. He took a deep drag on the soggy cigarette he held cupped in his hand and delivered a colorful diatribe against New York, its people and especially its cab drivers.

There were other ways to get downtown, but he preferred to get soaked to the skin waiting for a cab rather than risk certain maiming in the subway at an hour when almost every building in mid-Manhattan was vomiting thousands of workers out its doors to be siphoned into the subway entrances.

Suddenly, one cab swung out of the line that had been passing him for the better part of a half hour. It skidded to a stop at the curb in front of him, sprayed him with a geyser of slush.

Liddell sighed, reached for the cab door, pulled it open.

“Easy with the door, Mac,” the cabbie told him. “It bruises easy.”

Liddell caught the door handle, tugged with all his strength. The door slammed with a bang that shook the whole cab.

The cabbie swung around on his seat, started to say something. He took a good look at Liddell—the set jaw, the angry ridge between his eyes, the splashed coat—and decided against it.

“You could bust the glass right outta the window, you know?” he complained mildly in a hurt tone. “Glass like that costs money.” He turned back to his wheel, stared forward through the windshield. “Where to?”

“Luchow’s. On Fourteenth.”

The hurt tone was back in the cabbie’s voice as his eyes met Liddell’s in the rear mirror. “I know, I know. I’m not just pushing this hack since yesterday.” He swung away from the curb, underscoring his resentment that a fare should try to tell him the location of a landmark.

In New York City at the turn of the century 14th Street was the heart of the musical, theatrical, literary and political life of the town. Tammany Hall

was located catty-cornered from Luchow's. Tony Pastor's famous variety house was on 14th Street as was the original Academy of Music where Mrs. Fiske, Julia Marlowe, Sothern and others appeared. Steinway Hall was there for the music buffs. Literary greats like Arthur Brisbane, O. O. McIntyre and O. Henry trekked uptown from Park Row to meet their cronies and swap reminiscences and lies.

Today all that's left of the old 14th Street is the restaurant founded by a German immigrant named August Luchow. Little has been changed and the old, high-ceilinged, dark-paneled dining room that stretches from 14th Street through to 13th is still the gathering place for The Names of stage, politics, music and finance. Leonard Bernstein has replaced Paderewski; Helen Traubel represents opera as Caruso once did; Billy Rose, rather than Ziegfeld, carries the standard for producers and Bob Considine takes the place of O. Henry. The table where Victor Herbert called a meeting of fellow composers to form ASCAP is still known as the Victor Herbert corner.

Johnny Liddell shucked off his damp overcoat in the checkroom, ambled in toward the back room that was originally an open-air beer garden. As he stepped into the Garden, Julius Richter, the leader of the string trio, tapped his bow on his music stand. The music stopped, then the strains of "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" reached out to welcome Liddell.

He forgot his wet shoes and cold feet, waved a greeting. The blond owner of the restaurant, Jan Mitchell, hustled over from a table where he was welcoming an out-of-town columnist.

"Long time, Johnny," he greeted Liddell.

"Too long. I don't get downtown as often as I should." He glanced around the big room. "Connie Michaels get here yet? I was supposed to meet him for dinner."

Mitchell nodded. "He's back in the new room. He said you'd want some privacy. The new room doesn't usually fill up until later." He turned, led the way through the tables back to what was originally the stables where Luchow kept his horses before Prohibition.

Connie Michaels waved a greeting from a corner table as Liddell walked up. He stuck a beefy hand across the table at Johnny, crushed his hand in a welcoming grip.

"Tough day to drag anyone out of their office," he apologized. He sank back into his chair, waited until Liddell was seated.

The restaurant man excused himself to greet another newcomer.

“How busy are you, Johnny?” Michaels wanted to know.

Liddell scowled, ordered a scotch and soda from the waiter who had materialized at his elbow and then hustled away.

“I could be a helluva lot busier and still qualify for unemployment insurance,” he growled.

“Good.” The man across the table nodded his satisfaction. “I want you to handle something for us. Something big.”

Liddell waited until the waiter had slid a drink in front of him then shuffled back toward the bar. “That what you wanted to see me about in such a fever? You have an office on 47th Street and I have one on 42nd Street, so we make a meet on 14th Street?” He tasted the drink, approved. “Not that I’m complaining. But why?”

“I didn’t want anyone around the Diamond Exchange to see you with me,” Michaels told him. His face was heavy, serious. In the ten years Johnny Liddell had known the man, he had changed very little. The jowls were a little heavier, the network of lines under the eyes had become more intricate, the hair had receded farther on the pate of his head. But Connie Michaels’s jaw was still strong, his eyes direct and commanding. “How would you like to take a Caribbean cruise, Johnny? At our expense?”

“Sounds interesting,” Liddell conceded. “What’s the gimmick?”

The heavy-set man across the table picked up his glass, stared down into the amber liquor. “We’ve got some man-sized troubles, and we think the answer to them could be found on this cruise.” He looked up, frowned at Liddell. “It won’t be just a junket. We had a man on the ship I want you to take—”

“Had?”

The big man bobbed his head glumly. “We just got word that our man cannot be found aboard and must be presumed to have been lost at sea.”

Liddell considered it soberly. “Couldn’t have been an accident?”

“You know Harry Landers?”

“Landers was your man?”

Michaels nodded.

“It was no accident,” Liddell grunted. He took a swallow from his glass, set it back on the table. “Okay, so let’s talk about these problems of yours.”

“Diamonds,” the heavy-set man told him. “Somebody’s been smuggling diamonds in, dumping them and kicking hell out of prices.”

“I thought you boys controlled the output. Where are they getting them to smuggle?”

Michaels drained his glass, set it down. He managed to look unhappy. “We do control practically the whole world output. Every place except South America. And that’s where the damn things are coming from.”

“South America?”

“Brazil.”

Liddell looked puzzled. “I thought South American diamonds were industrial diamonds.”

“A lot of it is industrial stuff. They call it carbonado. But a lot of valuable gem diamonds show up down there, too. Half their output is gem quality. The Star of the South they found down there weighed 261 carats and the President Vargas was even bigger. Weighed over 725 carats.” He caught the eye of the waiter, signaled for two refills. “But those big babies we’re not worried about. We’re worried about the two-, three-, four- and five-carat stones that have been flooding the market. They’re murdering us.”

“That serious, huh?”

Michaels reached into his pocket for a balled handkerchief, swabbed his face and jowls. “Serious enough that if we don’t find a way to put the cork in the bottle there could be a complete price collapse.”

The waiter was at the table, removed two empty glasses, replaced them with fresh drinks. Liddell waited until he was again out of earshot.

“And you think they’re being brought in on this cruise ship?”

“Harry Landers did. He’s been working on the case for over a year. Three weeks ago he showed up at the Exchange all excited. He had finally gotten a break through some of the lines he had out. He was confident that by the time the *Queen Alexandra* returned home, he’d have the whole thing wrapped up.”

Liddell considered it, nodded. “He give you any idea of what the break was or how he was handling it?”

“You said you knew Landers? Then you know how he worked.”

“So we start from scratch.”

The big man reached out for his drink, swirled the liquor around the side of the glass. “Not entirely from scratch. We know he must have been onto something and that something was on the boat. She’s due to arrive in Barbados on Sunday. I’ve made arrangements for you to pick her up there and finish out the cruise. Maybe with luck you’ll latch onto what Landers was working on.”

“That gives me how many days?”

Michaels drew an envelope from his breast pocket, squinted at the scribbled notes on its back. “She docks back here a week from next Tuesday. That gives you roughly nine days aboard.”

“What am I going to do with all my spare time?”

Michaels sighed, returned the envelope to his pocket. “I know it’s a pretty tough assignment, Johnny, and I know you don’t have much time. But we’ve never been this close to them up to now. Before the people on that ship can scatter to all corners of the country, I want to take a crack at bagging them.” He eyed Liddell glumly. “You willing to take it on?”

Liddell took a swallow from his glass, shrugged. “Hell, for a chance to get away from this weather and get a look at the sun, I’d sign to find a spit in the ocean.”

The big man nodded his satisfaction. He held his glass up in a silent toast. Liddell clinked his against it, they drank.

“I can’t tell you what a load that is off my mind,” Michaels told him. “From now on I’m dumping it right into your lap. Just so there can’t be any possibility of a tip-off from this end, I don’t think we should get together again before you leave.”

“You think there’s someone working from this end?”

“Somebody fingered Landers. Somebody who saw him coming or going from our office. This is no petty larceny operation, Johnny, and these boys play for keeps.”

Liddell managed to look unimpressed. “How about my transportation, cruise tickets and stuff?”

The man across the table grinned. “I had all that sent over to your office this afternoon.”

“You were pretty damn sure I was going to accept,” Liddell growled.

“Why not? With all that slush and cold out there, if I wasn’t so damn fat and old, I’d go myself.”

CHAPTER 3

The *Queen Alexandra* dropped anchor in the harbor outside Bridgeton in Barbados early on Sunday morning. When the natives awakened and wandered down to the dock from Literary Row, Flower Pot Alley and the other sections of town, she lay bobbing and swaying at anchor out in the blue waters. Already preparations were being made to take off her passengers by tender. In a few hours, the regulars at the Paradise Beach Club, the Coral Reef Club and Sam Lord's Castle would be complaining bitterly about the vulgar clothes and the loud talking of the cruisers. The island merchants would be agreeing with them, but would be less critical of the tourists' equally vulgar squandering of money.

By 9 a.m., the first tender was loaded and headed for the dock. Men in shorts and slacks, all sizes, all shapes, with weird and wild straw hats protecting their bald pates from the beaming sun, lined the deck of the tender. Their feminine counterparts in halters and short shorts or gaily colored blouses and slacks two sizes too small were clotted in little groups busily comparing plans for the day in shrill and strident tones.

Johnny Liddell stood on the dock at Bridgeton, squinted out at the *Queen*. She was painted gray, her superstructure a pure white. Her two funnels were tilted at a rakish angle, the slight swirl of smoke rose lazily toward the blue of the sky.

Liddell watched the tender slowly draw away from the big boat and head toward shore. Overhead the cottony white clouds seemed to hang motionless in the blue sky. It didn't seem possible that only twenty-four hours before he had been ankle-deep in slush, that the breeze that now cooled the perspiration on his body had been cold and cut through him like a knife. Instead of the blue skies and white clouds, New York had been in its tenth consecutive dark, dreary day with skies the color of lead.

When the tender had been secured in her berth, its chattering cargo scurried off, determined to pack as much activity into the day ashore as they could. Johnny Liddell walked over to a thin, darkly tanned man in summer whites.

"My name's Liddell. I'm joining your cruise from here. Can I take my gear aboard?"

The man in white smiled, wrinkles dug deep trenches in the tan of his face, carefully capped teeth gleamed whitely. “Sure thing. I’m Jack Allen, cruise director for the *Queen Alexandra*.” He stuck out a heavily corded hand, gave Liddell a firm shake. “I’ll have one of the crewmen bring your stuff out. That it over there?” He indicated the two suitcases and the attaché case on the dock bench.

“That’s it.”

The man in the white uniform motioned for one of the crewmen to bring the luggage aboard the tender, turned his attention back to Liddell. “You’re pretty lucky to be picking us up here. Had quite a blow couple of nights back. We should have clear sailing from now on.” He squinted up at the sky. “Couldn’t ask for anything better than a sky like that, could you?”

“Look’s pretty good to me,” Liddell conceded.

The cruise director nodded. From close, it was obvious that he was older than he had appeared at first glance. “Been having a pretty good stretch of weather down here the past few weeks?”

Liddell grinned. “Couldn’t prove it by me. I only flew in a couple of days ago from New York. Got my business cleaned up faster than I expected, so I figured I’d combine business and pleasure and take the long way home.”

The man in white nodded, raised his hand in salute to the tender captain who split the silence with two toots of his siren.

“You coming back to the ship, Mr. Liddell, or you planning on doing a little sightseeing? If you feel like it, you can stay ashore and catch a later tender.”

“Think I’ll get myself settled, get things squared away. I’ve already seen the island.” He followed the man in the white uniform on board. Slowly, imperceptibly, the tender started to pull away from the dock. Sluggishly, it felt its way past the breakwater to the deeper water of the channel. The shoreline began to fall behind, the people and liquor shack on the dock became smaller and smaller. The drone of the engine was steady, soothing.

Liddell stood at the rail of the tender, watched as the distance to the shore grew. The combination of the balmy air, the warm sun and the soothing sound of the motor made it difficult for him to realize that he was here to catch a murderer. It was hard to think of murder in connection with these surroundings. But somewhere behind them in the ocean, Harry Landers’s body was irrefutable proof that it could happen. And if he got

careless, Liddell might find himself playing gin with Landers in Davy Jones's locker.

It was still better than having wet feet and chills in New York!

The tender captain expertly maneuvered the small craft to the gangway on B deck forward, made it fast. Inside the open hatchway another load of impatient cruisers was lined up waiting to rush down the gangplank for their trip to the island.

The man in the white uniform signaled for one of the crewmen to transfer Liddell's luggage onto the *Queen*. Liddell climbed the gangplank, ducked his head as he stepped aboard. The long line waiting to board the tender looked at him curiously. Some of the women stared and whispered. The men just stared.

The cruise director brought over a plump, sweating little man in an officer's uniform. "This is Andy Gartner from the purser's office, Mr. Liddell. He'll take care of you from here in." He signaled to the steward at the head of the line to start loading the tender. "I'll see you around."

Liddell turned to the short, fat man. "My name's Liddell. I'm joining the cruise here, booked through to New York."

The assistant purser stuck out a damp, pudgy hand, gave Liddell's a wet squeeze. "Glad to have you with us." He reached for a clip board that hung from a hook on the wall, ran a sausage-shaped forefinger down a list of names, underscored with his nail one that had been written in longhand. "Liddell. You'll have stateroom 321 on this deck. Will that be satisfactory?" he asked anxiously.

Liddell nodded. "Any accommodations will do. I'm not planning to spend much time in my cabin."

"Hardly anyone does," the purser agreed sadly. He consulted his watch. "The captain would like to meet you as soon as it's convenient. He was on the bridge until almost five this morning so he's still resting. Would noon be satisfactory?"

Liddell nodded. "Gives me a chance to wash up and get settled."

The purser chewed on his lower lip. "Of course. I'll have your baggage sent up directly." He snapped his fingers, a uniformed page boy stepped up. "Take Mr. Liddell to cabin 321. See that he meets his steward."

The page boy bobbed his head, turned and led the way into the companionway. They skirted the staircase leading to the upper decks, headed down a narrow passageway. He stopped outside a door on which the numerals 321 were painted in gilt.

A doorway marked *Beauty Salon* opened at the end of the corridor. A tall, well-stacked redhead in a white nylon uniform that clung to curves that showed signs of being worth clinging to stepped out, locked the door behind her. She wasted an incurious glance on Liddell and the page boy, headed for a stateroom a few doors from the salon. She opened it with a key, disappeared through the door without a backward glance.

Liddell grinned his approval. "Well, I can see I'm going to be real comfortable. Especially with such nice neighbors."

The page boy managed a lewd grin. "That's Meg. She runs the beauty shop. She tops a lot of the boys' lists, mister. But you got to sport some real gold braid on your sleeve to rate."

A wizened little man in a white jacket and dark trousers materialized at the head of the corridor, hustled down to where they stood. He stopped in front of them, rubbing his hands.

"This is the new passenger, Henrik," the page boy told him. "Purser says make him comfortable." He turned to Liddell. "Anything else I can do for you, sir?"

Liddell shook his head, held out his hand. The folded bill changed hands, the page grinned his thanks, turned and headed back toward the loading ramp.

"Welcome on board, mister." Henrik grinned. Even when he was showing the brown stumps of his teeth, the steward had a worried expression by the V etched between his heavy brows. "Your baggage is coming?"

"They're sending it up."

The steward unlocked the door, pushed it open. "I bring it in and hang your things up as soon as it arrives." He flicked on the light in the lavatory, walked over to check on the air conditioning. "Something else I can do for you?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not right now, Henrik. Give me a little time and I'll think up something."

The captain's cabin was in actuality a two-room suite high above the foredeck. It was a suite that spoke volumes of its owner's love of comfort and good living.

The walls of the outer room, a combination office and den, were paneled in a dark wood that had been polished to a soft patina. The front wall consisted of huge panes of glass which gave an uninterrupted view of the blue-green water stretching between the vessel and the tiers of pastel-colored houses that were tiered around the harbor at Bridgeton. The pull drapes that could be drawn over the glass were obviously hand loomed, of exotic Oriental colors. The floor was covered wall-to-wall with thick-pile wheat-colored carpeting.

A large desk set catty-cornered was the room's main concession to its function as the captain's office. Here, Captain Delmar Rose, master of the *Queen Alexandra*, did the minimum amount of paper work required of him. Even that minimum he considered of staggering proportions. The loss of the passenger Landers during the storm had been a considerable inconvenience with the mounds of reports and forms to be filled out for his home office and for the officials at his first port of call.

Set against the glass wall, a large library table groaned under an assortment of choice liquors, brandies and liqueurs. It was here that the captain did most of his VIP entertaining, the guests of his choosing. Others, he greeted and endured at the periodical captain's cocktail parties, which were penciled in at appropriate intervals during the cruise by the cruise director's staff.

The rest of the room was given over to comfortable armchairs, low tables and lamps. On the walls, photographs of celebrities who had sailed with Captain Rose were recessed in indirectly lighted frames.

The other room of the suite was a bedroom with one huge king-sized bed. It was furnished in strictly functional male style—heavy pieces, comfortable chairs, a personal bar and direct communications to the bridge. Here, too, the captain did some VIP entertaining and again it was guests of his own choosing. On every crossing there was always one or more women whose heels turned to rockers at the sight of the man who held the whole ship's destiny in his calloused hands and of the uniform that represented power, authority and dauntless heroism. It was the duty of his personal steward to convoy the chosen ones among this group to and from the captain's quarters with a minimum of exposure.

Captain Delmar Rose was sitting in one of the easy chairs in the outer room, his feet comfortable on a small ottoman, a glass in his hand, when his personal steward knocked at the door to announce Liddell. The captain waved for the steward to bring him in, dropped his feet to the floor, stood up. He waited until the steward had closed the door behind him, offered Liddell his hand. His grip was firm, sincere.

“Glad to have you aboard, Mr. Liddell.”

Johnny frowned. “I thought this was all hush-hush, that no one was supposed to know who I am?”

The captain shook his head. “No one does. Except me, of course.” He walked over to the table of liquor, reached for a glass, dumped some ice into it. “On board this ship, Liddell, I am the last word. Right or wrong, my decisions stand.” He turned, looked at Liddell. “My home office made a mistake when they did not tell me from the beginning that Landers was a private detective. They are not likely to make that same mistake twice.”

Liddell rubbed the heel of his hand along his jaw. “Then the radio shack knows who I am and what I’m here for?”

The captain shook his head. “In matters of this kind, my home office communicates with me only through code. No one has the code book to decipher it but me.” He indicated the bottles. “What’ll it be?”

“Scotch on the rocks.”

Liddell watched the back of the captain as he poured the drink.

Captain Rose was short, squat. His skin was horny, weatherbeaten by the gales in winter, burned to a mahogany by the suns of summer. He had the slightly bowlegged stance of a man used to walking a pitching deck. His every movement gave the impression that he was used to giving orders and used to having them obeyed. When he had built Liddell’s drink, he held it out to him with a hand that dwarfed the glass.

“If I had known Landers was what he was, I might have been able to prevent what happened.” He shrugged, turned back to the table to freshen his drink. “Everything that happens on my ship while I am in command is my business, Liddell. It has to be, because I alone am responsible not only for the ship but for everybody on board.” He turned, walked back to his chair. “Do we understand each other?”

“Do I have a choice?”

The captain considered, shook his head. “No.”

Liddell grinned, shrugged. “Then we understand each other.”

The captain stared at him for a moment, liked what he saw. He relaxed sufficiently to return a half grin. He motioned Liddell to sit down, dropped back into his chair. “What was Landers looking for?”

Liddell managed to look startled. “I thought your home office cued you in?”

The captain took a deep swallow, shook his head. “They told me that he was a private detective, that he was to be replaced by you, and that no one was to know what you were doing aboard.” He leaned his head back against his chair, half closed his eyes. “What are you doing aboard?”

Liddell considered for a moment. “I’m representing some important diamond dealers. They think Brazilian diamonds are being smuggled in, they think some of them are coming in on cruise ships like this.”

The captain nodded. “Then we do understand each other. You’ll excuse me for testing you, Liddell, but if you had given me the wrong answer to that one, you and your gear would be back in Bridgeton before the *Queen* cleared the harbor.” He reached out to a table, picked up a battered old briar, stuck it between his teeth. “Do you have any idea who Landers was after?”

Liddell shook his head.

The captain sighed. He scratched a long wooden match on the under part of the table, touched it to the bowl of his pipe. “That’s the hell of it,” he growled. “Neither do I.”

CHAPTER 4

Johnny Liddell fumbled through his pockets, came up with a wilted pack of cigarettes. He fitted one into the corner of his mouth, made a fruitless circuit of his pockets for a match. The captain tossed one over to him, waited until Liddell had lit the cigarette with the wooden match, nearly searing his nose in the process.

“Be easier to light a cigarette with a blowtorch,” he complained.

Captain Rose shrugged. “You ever try to get a good light for a pipe with those paper things? You use a whole pack and you still can’t get it started.” He removed the pipe from between his teeth, blew out a cloud of blue-gray smoke. “Takes a real flame to light a pipe.”

“You say you don’t know who Landers was interested in?” Liddell asked. “Wasn’t there anybody in particular he seemed to pay special attention? Some woman, some group he played cards with, somebody whose company he sought out, somebody he asked questions about?”

The captain sucked at his pipe, rattled the juice in the stem. “We weren’t out very long when he went over the side. Just this side of Hatteras,” the captain reminded him. “Not much time for me to get too clear a picture.”

“Yet whoever it was he was after had enough time to know that Landers was dangerous to him,” Liddell commented.

The captain shrugged, considered. “The killer, if there was a killer, might have been warned.” He took the pipe from between his teeth, warmed his palm with the bowl. “Maybe Landers had the whole thing worked out and only took the trip to catch the smugglers in the act.”

Liddell nodded his head gloomily. “That’s pretty much the way I read it. But he didn’t keep any notes or any records that we know about. So that leaves me right where we started.” He looked out the glass side of the room at the white and pastel-colored, one-storied buildings around the harbor. “I’ll appreciate anything you’ve heard or anything you know about the other passengers. It might give me a line to what he had and any help I can get I’ll need. I’ve only nine days to find out what it took Landers over a year to dig up.”

The captain leaned back, lifted his feet to the ottoman. He stared up at the ceiling. “Landers was on table 48. That’s right next to the captain’s table.” He rolled his eyes down to Liddell’s face. “He claimed to have wanted to sit at my table—” He shrugged. “There are only so many seats. Besides, when the man from the home office brought me the passenger list, he didn’t suggest Landers for my table. If he had wanted it badly enough they would have suggested it. Not that I’d necessarily take the suggestion, but at least they would have tried.”

“Maybe it wasn’t until he saw who was at your table that he decided that’s where he wanted to be. Mind telling me about the people at your table?”

“The usual. We’ve got a writer who fancies himself a bit of a character. Got lucky and sold a best-seller a couple of months ago. Name’s Herrick—”

Liddell nodded. “Lewis Herrick. I’ve heard of him.”

“A rather gamy character. Been making a play for every unattached woman on board. I have the feeling he’d drop dead if one of them took him seriously. We’ve got to put up with him because he’s persuaded the home office that his next book will be about cruise ships.”

“And?”

“Robin Lewis. She is—or rather was—a movie star. You may remember her?” Liddell nodded, the captain continued. “She’s retired now and we’ve had her for a couple of regular crossings as well as these off-season Caribbean runs. Still pretty attractive, you know?”

“And the others?”

Captain Rose wrinkled his nose disapprovingly. “Bloody bores. The Conways—eminently respectable Philadelphians. Feuding a little with the other couple at the table, the McDowells. Conways wanted the presidential suite, our de luxe accommodations. The McDowells—he’s in oil in Texas—they pulled some strings with the home office, out bid the Conways. They make a big show of being polite to each other but they hate each other’s guts. That leaves only Carson Eldridge and his daughter, Fran.” He shook his head sadly. “Homely as sin and dull as dishwater. My guess is her father brought her on the cruise hoping she’d land somebody who’d take her off his hands.”

“Not very promising,” Liddell conceded. “How about the table where Landers was sitting?”

“I’ve arranged for you to be given his sitting. That way you can look the others over and reach your own conclusions.” He shook his head. “To tell you the truth they don’t look a helluva lot more promising.” He checked off on his fingers. “There’s the newlyweds—the Doyles from Wisconsin. They won the trip in some kind of a contest. So wrapped up in each other they might just as well have stayed in the haystack back home.” He pursed his lips for a moment. “The Sands, uncle and niece in adjoining cabins. Her luggage is initialed H. B. while his is M. R.” He shrugged. “Long as they’re discreet and don’t interfere with the operation of my ship and the enjoyment of my passengers, it’s no concern of mine. Mrs. Phelps, she’s a familiar figure on this run. Has nothing but money and time on her hands and she loves to spend both on young men. She keeps my junior officers on the jump. The other couple, the Keens, he’s some kind of a lawyer, I gather. Doesn’t talk much, doesn’t mix. Jack Allen, our cruise director, is host at that table.”

“I met Allen on the dock. Seems like a nice guy.”

“A cruise director is a cruise director.” The captain shrugged. “An over age cheer leader. But Allen’s been with us ever since the *Queen* went back on the passenger run. Keeps out of my hair and the passengers like him.” He sucked on the stem of his pipe, discovered he had let it go out. He knocked the dottle out of the bowl with the heel of his hand. “You didn’t happen to meet Ingrid, did you?”

Liddell shook his head.

“Ingrid Sorenson, Allen’s assistant. Blonde and Scandinavian. No one will have to point her out to you. When you see her, you’ll know her.”

“Something special I should know about her?”

The captain reached for his glass on the table, peered at it owlishly. “Maybe yes, maybe no. Nothing right now that would be of any help to you.” He swirled the liquor around his glass. “To tell you the truth, when word got to me that morning that Landers hadn’t returned to his cabin, and that he had set up some kind of a date for midnight, my first guess was that it was Ingrid. It was the kind of a night when most of the other women on board were in bed—their own beds—because of the weather. But when I checked it out, I found out that Ingrid was helping out in the dispensary from before eight well past three the next morning because the nurses had their hands full. She couldn’t have seen him that night.”

“She might be worth looking into anyhow.”

The captain grinned. "It's one of the sights you shouldn't miss."

"Anything else that might be helpful?"

The grin faded off the captain's face. "I don't know if you were told about this, but Landers got a call in the bar. When he hung up, he flashed the operator, asked what stateroom it had come from. It came from cabin 126 ___"

Liddell frowned. "So?"

"Cabin 126 was empty until we made our first port of call, Antigua, two days later. I called the steward who handles that cabin, but he was at dinner at the time the call was made."

"How could anyone get into the cabin?"

"The keys are hung in a glass case on the wall in the companionway. Almost anyone could have had access to them."

Liddell crushed out his cigarette, drained his glass, sighed. "You make it sound so simple. Did anybody check through Landers's luggage?"

"I did, personally. Nothing very interesting." He leaned over, pushed a button on the table. "There were a few papers, some notes. Nothing I could make heads or tails of. But, just to be on the safe side, I had them put in my strong box." He looked up as the door opened, his steward walked in. "Emil, bring out the manila envelope with the things I removed from Landers's room for safekeeping." When the steward had crossed to the bedroom door and closed it after him, the captain turned back to Liddell. "It didn't mean anything to me, as I say, but in a case like this where a man has disappeared and there is a possibility of foul play, I always figure the shore authorities might want to have a look. So before I had his bags repacked and stored in the hold, I took out anything that looked like it might be personal or might mean something." The steward walked out of the bedroom with a manila envelope, handed it to the captain. "When my home office got around to telling me who Landers was, I had Emil check his baggage in the hold."

"And?"

"Someone had broken into it, gone through it."

Liddell brightened. "Then what he was looking for may be in here, you think? This could be the break I need."

"Don't expect too much." The captain sighed at the necessity for movement, pulled himself to his feet. He led the way over to the desk,

opened the clasp on the envelope, emptied its contents on the desk. Johnny Liddell stared at the small pile of papers, the key ring and the address book with unconcealed disappointment.

“That’s all?”

The captain raised his shoulders in an expressive shrug. “His wallet, his notebook if he had one, his personal belongings—probably went over the side with him.”

Liddell picked up a chair, pulled it up to the desk. Captain Rose dropped back into his chair, watched as Liddell pored through the small pile of papers, put each aside with a frown. He picked up the address book, flipped through the pages. He was about to toss it aside when a second thought seemed to occur to him. He went through the book again, page by page, stopped at one page, studied the notations on it for a moment. Then continued to the end of the book. He looked up.

“Something?” the captain wanted to know.

“Maybe, maybe not.” He held up the book. “All of the addresses in this book are from the mainland. All but one.” He flipped through the address book again, stopped at the page he had studied. “This one.” He held the book out to the captain.

“Hans Reyder, 25 Vervoort, Willemstad,” the captain read. He rolled his eyes from the book to Liddell’s face. “You think this means something?”

Liddell shrugged. “It’s the only address in the book that has any remote connection with the *Queen’s* itinerary.” He studied the address again. “But what the connection is, I don’t have any idea.”

“Maybe Curaçao is where they bring the diamonds aboard.”

Liddell considered it, frowned. “Why? If the stuff is coming from South America, we stop at La Guaira. That’s South America, isn’t it? Wouldn’t that be more logical?”

“Curaçao’s a free port. Getting articles of value into and out of a free port is a lot simpler than getting them into and out of a place like Venezuela with its customs regulations. That’s doubling the risk,” the captain pointed out.

“And somehow Landers comes across the name of Reyder. In what connection? As an informer, or as one of the ring?”

The captain shrugged. “We could alert the Antilles police—”

Liddell shook his head. “That would tip our hand. I’d prefer to talk to Reyder when I have a better idea of what’s going on. If the Antilles police start asking questions, they may scare him off.”

The captain shrugged. “That’s your department.”

Liddell brought an envelope from his breast pocket, scribbled Reyder’s name and address on it, stuck the envelope back in his pocket. He tossed the address book back on the desk, picked up a sheet with a list of names. “How about this?” He passed the list to the captain.

Captain Rose glanced at the list, shook his head. “Doesn’t look like anything to me. Just a list of the people sitting at my table and the list at Jack Allen’s table. Both our names are on it, for that matter.”

“How do the people at these tables get selected?”

The captain shrugged. “Some of them, like Hilda Phelps and Robin Lewis, are old-timers. Made several trips on the *Queen*.” He glanced at the list. “Carson Eldridge has been with us several times, too. This is his daughter’s first trip, so he asked to be at my table for her sake.”

Liddell nodded. “And the McDowells and Conways?”

The captain made a face. “They’ve been with us before, but never at the same time, thank God. They strike sparks, the men can’t stand the sight of each other and the women loathe each other.”

Liddell grinned. “How about Allen’s table? The one I’m to sit at?”

The captain rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “Outside of Hilda Phelps, Allen drew quite a few first-timers. We’d never had Landers on board before this trip. The Doyles—they’re newlyweds—so they’re getting red-carpet treatment. Martin Sands and his so-called niece have never been with us before and neither have the Keens.”

Liddell scowled. “Doesn’t look like that list is going to be much good. He might just as well have left me a copy of the Manhattan Directory. The people I’m after wouldn’t be first-timers.”

“Maybe he had a bad memory for names and wrote them down to remember them,” Captain Rose suggested.

“I don’t know. That doesn’t sound like the Harry Landers I know. He never wasted any motion. He drew that list up for some reason and it had to do with the smuggling. He wouldn’t have been wasting his time with that group just for the sake of socializing.”

The captain shrugged. “Every job has its own built-in headaches. Only difference seems to be that yours may be more permanent than others.”

Liddell nodded lugubriously. “I was hoping for a short-cut from his belongings. But I guess there’s no easy way to tackle this one. What time do the passengers get back on board?”

“The last tender leaves from shore at 5:30. You’ll be at the first sitting for dinner, 6:30.”

Liddell bobbed his head absently. “I suppose I’ll be seeing you there? Will it be common knowledge that we had this little talk?”

“No. You can trust Emil to be completely discreet. The purser need only know that there was some discrepancy in your passage arrangements. I took over handling the situation personally in the event it became advisable for me to return you to shore—” He shrugged. “As far as the purser was concerned, it relieved him of a possibly uncomfortable duty. I will tell him that you straightened things out to my satisfaction and that you will make the rest of the trip with us.”

“In that case, there is no need for any unduly cordial relationship between us?”

The captain shook his head. “At dinner, as usual, I will be devoting most of my attention to my guests. At other times during the cruise, there will be very little occasion for our paths to cross. When they do, it will usually be at cocktail parties or at the farewell dinner. If, for any reason, it becomes necessary for you to see me, try to cash a check for \$100 with the purser. He has orders to refuse to cash anything higher than a \$50 check for you and to refer you to me if you become insistent.”

Liddell grinned. “You think of everything, Captain.”

“In my position, I have to.” He stuck his hand out at Liddell. “Remembering what happened to Landers, you’d better do the same. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes. How about the boys in the radio shack? Can they be trusted?”

The captain considered. “What are you planning to do?”

“I want to have the people on Landers’s list checked out by an agency I use in New York.”

The captain nodded. “I’ll handle it. Give me the message, the names of the people you want checked out. I’ll send it to my home office in code.

They can forward it to your agency.” He wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. “You want the answer sent here?”

Liddell shook his head. “I’ll pick it up at the American consulate in Curaçao.”

“That gives them only about seventy-two hours. Think they can do much in that length of time?”

“Acme has a full staff that works twenty-six hours a day. If there’s anything to find out about any of them, they’ll find it out. And fast.”

CHAPTER 5

Johnny Liddell sat at the bar in the French Quarter Salon aft on the promenade deck, stared out through the glassed-in enclosure toward the shore. The last tender had already left the dock, was swinging in a wide arc to pour the last load of tourists up the gangway onto B deck. Half a dozen of the tables in the bar were occupied by early returnees, bedraggled looking and sweat stained.

Liddell swung back to face the bar, signaled the bartender for a refill. At the far end of the bar, the bartender was polishing his glasses, getting set for the onslaught that invariably followed a shore trip. His cigarette was expertly balanced on the bottom of an upturned glass, a shot glass full of scotch was hidden from sight by the stack of freshly polished glasses. By the time the cocktail hour was over, he knew from experience that he'd need it.

The bartender caught Liddell's signal, nodded, made a production of setting down the cloth and glass. In the split second his back was turned, the shot glass reached his mouth, was returned to its position empty. He shuffled down to where Liddell sat examining the table sitters in the backbar mirror.

“Again?” he asked.

Liddell nodded. While the bartender was pouring some scotch over the ice in a fresh glass, Liddell laid a five-dollar bill alongside his empty glass. “We'll be spending a lot of time together. Might as well get acquainted.”

The bartender grinned broadly. His hand snaked out with the ease of long experience, the bill disappeared from the bar. He slid the refill in front of Liddell. “Name's Cyril, sir. Anything you want, you just yell.”

“I'll remember that, Cyril. My name's Liddell.”

The bartender nodded. “I know, sir. Came aboard this morning. Cabin 321 on B deck, isn't it?”

Liddell grinned. “Word sure does get around.”

The bartender shrugged. “You know how it is aboard ship, sir. Hardly anything happens that isn't all over the ship in an hour. Like a small town, you might say.”

“Hmm. And here I was figuring I could get a little time off for good behavior without anybody paying too much attention—”

The bartender grinned knowingly. “Don’t give that a second thought, sir. They talk and talk, but all of them are measuring each other for a little fling.” He dropped his voice, leaned across the bar. “On a cruise like this with the warm nights and stuff, everybody expects it.”

Liddell seemed to brighten. “I haven’t had much of a chance to look around. Got any suggestions?”

A cautious look crept into the bartender’s eyes. “Not off-hand, sir.” He studied Liddell’s face. “Ingrid would be the girl to see. You meet her yet?”

Liddell shook his head.

“She’s a real smart girl, Ingrid is. Knows everything that’s going on. First night out she holds this dance for unattached men and women.” He winked. “Like that there’s no making mistakes. You know right from the start who’s looking for it.”

“Looks like I’m a little late.”

The bartender took in the broad shoulders, the heavy jaw, shook his head. “You won’t have no trouble. The competition ain’t that good.” He reached down under the bar, brought up a phone, pushed a button on the base. “This is Cyril in the bar,” he told the operator. “Is Ingrid back on board yet?” He waited for a moment, nodded. “Okay. Ask her to come up to the French Quarter. Got somebody here who wants to meet her.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook. “She’ll be right up.”

A waiter leaned on the bar at the far end, rapped his knuckles on the mahogany. The bartender nodded to Liddell, shuffled down to where the waiter stood.

Somewhere deep in the innards of the ship, there was the soft rumble of the engines. Liddell consulted his watch, checked the time out at 5:45. By now the tender was out of sight under the side of the ship discharging its passengers. In another hour, the *Queen* would be slicing the waters of the harbor into rippling waves on its way to Grenada. The following day it would be in La Guaira and the third morning in Curaçao. He wondered what it was that made Landers think the diamonds would be brought aboard in Curaçao rather than La Guaira which was on the coast of South America. Why the double risk, when the delivery could have been made in one motion on the north coast of South America?

He heard, rather than saw, the girl's entrance. There was a perceptible break in the hum of conversation, then it resumed with greater vigor. Liddell glanced up into the backbar mirror, saw her for the first time.

The captain said this was one of the sights he shouldn't miss. It only took a glance to tell him why.

She was tall, generously proportioned in a Scandinavian way. Her hair was a golden brown, piled on the top of her head, her skin was sunburned to a soft nut-brown. Her thick-lipped mouth was a crimson slash in the cocoa of her complexion.

She wore a navy blue blouse, its V-neck slashed deeply enough to make speculation whether she wore anything under it unnecessary. As she walked, her full breasts had a motion of their own which, combined with the white sheath skirt that clung to her rounded hips and thighs, made her progress across the room to the bar a production.

Liddell swung around as she walked up, stopped alongside him. Her eyes were green, slanted, an effect that was enhanced by expert tinting of the lids. She looked him over frankly, appraisingly, seemed to like what she saw.

"So you're the new passenger?" Her voice was husky, slightly accented. "I've been hearing about you. They weren't exaggerating."

"It sure doesn't take much to make the bugle around here." Liddell grinned. "I thought I was being nice and inconspicuous."

The blonde shrugged, did interesting things to her façade. "An unattached man always creates some excitement. Especially an attractive one." She eyed the broad shoulders, the thick hair flecked with gray, the humorous grin. "They're sure going to be drawing straws for you."

Liddell grinned. "You make a guy feel right at home. And you don't even know my name."

"Johnny Liddell. You're in 321 B deck—"

"I hope you remember that."

The blonde pasted a saucy grin on the full lips. "I don't usually remember passengers' cabin numbers." The green eyes flicked around the room, she dropped her voice. "The paying guests resent competition." She brought her eyes back to his face. "The staff is only supposed to stand in in basket cases."

"Such as?"

Ingrid shrugged, looked over at a table near the wall. “Mrs. Phelps. Over there near the wall. The stewards, the junior officers, even the cruise director have orders to see that she doesn’t have to sit out any dances, doesn’t have to drink alone.”

Liddell followed the girl’s glance. Mrs. Hilda Phelps was in her sixties, a fact that the hennaed hair, two face lifts and three strands of beads around her neck failed to conceal. She was addicted to too much make-up, her rouge was two blobs of red in the dead white of her skin, her mouth a garish smear of carmine. When she talked, her glistening white teeth were far too even to be real. Seated opposite her, trying to look enthusiastic and interested, was Jack Allen, the cruise director. From the way his eyes hopscotched around the room at intervals, Liddell got the impression that he was looking for relief. But the junior officers, if any were around, were steering clear of the bar.

“Mrs. Phelps is unattached and very generous,” the blonde told Liddell. “If you’d care to meet her—”

“No, thanks. I wouldn’t think of trying to cut in on Allen or any of the rest of the staff.”

Ingrid’s chuckle was deep. “Maybe you like them a little younger? Fran Eldridge is only about twenty or twenty-one and I’m sure her father has as much money as Mrs. Phelps.” She turned, surveyed the room. “They may not have come back aboard yet, but—” She broke off, squinted at the glass-enclosed area on the port side. “Oh, there they are, in the lounge. The tall girl with the white-haired man.”

Fran Eldridge was not only tall, she was pitifully thin. Her hair was a mousy color, wispy. She wore it tucked untidily behind her ears. She squinted as she looked around, in preference to wearing the glasses that had been prescribed for her.

The man at the table with her was small, dapper. His white hair was plastered neatly on his head. Despite the informality of the attire of the others in the bar, he wore a shirt and tie with his blue linen suit. As Johnny watched, the man snapped something at the girl, she self-consciously dropped her hand from her mouth where she had been macerating the cuticle of her thumb.

“Another basket case?” Liddell wanted to know.

“Not exactly. She’ll be well taken care of for the rest of the cruise. The junior officers drew straws for her and the third officer won—or lost as the

case may be. Anyway, he's been real attentive." She checked her watch. "Usually around by now to take her off her father's hands."

"And old Dad?"

Ingrid grinned. "Finds himself a card game or someone to drink with. He usually closes the Midnight Sun. That's our late bar. Opens when the others close. All the regular crowd ends up there every night."

"You make it?"

Ingrid pursed her lips. "Depends. Sometimes I drop by for a nightcap on my way to bed. I can't stay up late like the passengers can. I've got to be up at six to give the fatties their morning exercises."

"Maybe it would pay to stay up all night."

"Not for me. I have to get my beauty sleep."

Liddell grinned. "Looks like you're a little ahead of the game."

The blonde pouted with mock severity. "We're not getting very far—"

"I wouldn't say that," Liddell told her.

"I mean about finding someone to introduce you to. After all, that's what I'm here for. To see that you unattached passengers get acquainted. And you're making it pretty tough."

"Why don't we do it this way? Let me look around, and if I see anything that appeals to me, I'll ask you to do the honors."

Ingrid looked doubtful. "The captain doesn't like it if there's any trouble on his ship. He gets real narrow-minded."

"I've already met your captain," Liddell said.

The blonde raised her eyebrows. "Then you really are VIP?"

Liddell shook his head. "It wasn't exactly a social call. You see, I pulled a couple of strings to get on board and apparently he doesn't like the idea of people trying to go over his head. He wanted to let me know not to expect any special treatment just because a vice president of the line is a fraternity brother."

"It's easier to get vice presidents than captains," Ingrid observed. "Then you know he can be a pretty rough character."

"I got that impression."

“That’s why it would be better for me to point out the ones that are available, where you won’t be stepping on some husband’s toes. Last cruise he had a passenger confined to his stateroom until we got to La Guaira, had his baggage carted out onto the dock and kicked him off the ship.”

Liddell frowned. “He could do that?”

“While this ship is out of New York, the captain can do anything and make it stick. And the company would back him up, vice president a fraternity brother or no fraternity brother.”

Liddell managed to look impressed. “I’ll watch my step,” he promised her solemnly.

The blonde studied the backbar mirror, smiled. “Don’t look over there now, but the third officer has just come on duty. He and Fran will start with cocktails and finish the night dancing in the Grand Salon.” She shook her head. “The third must be getting ready to settle down. I’ve seen him operate before but the way he stays close to Fran it looks like he means to stake a claim on Eldridge’s private Fort Knox.”

Liddell glanced over to the white-haired man’s table. Eldridge stood talking to a tall, broad-shouldered man in an officer’s uniform, while the girl sat simpering in her chair. The third officer wore his hair in a short crew cut, his teeth were startlingly white against the deep tan of his face. Eldridge bobbed his head at something he said, started for the bar. The man with the crew cut slid into the chair across the table from the girl. She started talking animatedly.

The white-haired man walked over to where Liddell stood with the blonde. “Ingrid, I don’t mean to interrupt, but how much time will we have on Grenada tomorrow?”

“First tender leaves at 8:30. Last tender from shore at 2:30, Mr. Eldridge.” She turned to Liddell. “Have you met our new passenger, Mr. Liddell? He came aboard this morning. This is Mr. Eldridge, Mr. Liddell.”

Eldridge turned a speculative glance on Liddell. His skin was like dark parchment, his lips thin and colorless. The only thing alive in his face was his startlingly blue eyes. He had the expression of a man who had been badly disappointed in life and was reproachful rather than bitter. “Liddell? Have we met before, Mr. Liddell? Your name sounds familiar.”

Liddell considered it, shook his head. “I don’t think so, Mr. Eldridge. But it’s a pleasure.” He indicated the almost empty glass on the bar. “Would you join me?” He turned to the blonde. “Ingrid?”

The girl shook her head. "I've got too much to do. Don't forget there'll be dancing in the Piccadilly Lounge for first sitting passengers at 7:30 and a movie at 8:30."

"And the Midnight Sun at twelve?"

"It's been a long day," the blonde countered. "I don't know if I could keep my eyes open that long. Anyway, I'd better help them get set up for the dancing. I'll probably see you both later."

She turned, headed across the bar. Both men watched wordlessly until she had disappeared into the companionway. Cyril was polishing the bar in front of them with a damp rag that left oily circles. "All woman, that Ingrid," he commented.

"How about making Mr. Eldridge a drink, Cyril?" Liddell asked.

"The usual, Mr. Eldridge?" the bartender wanted to know.

The white-haired man nodded. While the bartender headed down the bar for the ingredients for a Bloody Mary, Eldridge turned, cast an appreciative eye on Liddell. "You don't waste much time, do you, Liddell? Only on board a few hours and already you're moving in on Ingrid, and you have Cyril jumping for you. What's the secret?"

Liddell grinned. "I've got talent."

The white-haired man's eyes hopscotched across the broad shoulders, down to the tapering waist. Then he dropped his eyes to his own slim figure, nodded glumly. "It shows."

Cyril was back with a Bloody Mary, slid it across the bar to Eldridge. "Like me to freshen your drink, Mr. Liddell? Next fifteen or twenty minutes, they're going to be trooping in here dying of thirst. It usually gets pretty busy."

Liddell took a deep swallow from his glass, handed it to the bartender who reached for the scotch bottle, tilted it over the glass, filled it to the brim. He replaced the bottle on the backbar, handed the glass to Liddell, shuffled down toward the service end of the bar.

The white-haired man shook his head in admiration. "Now that's what I call a drink."

Liddell held the glass up, admired the deep color of the liquor. "No sense drowning the taste in water." He raised the glass. "Here's to a nice cruise."

The old man touched his glass to Liddell's. "There's room for a lot of improvement as far as I'm concerned." He looked over to where his daughter and the officer were talking, heads together. "But as long as the girl has a good time, that's all I ask."

Liddell followed the old man's eyes. "Good-looking boy she's with."

"Too good-looking," the old man grunted. "Guy with his looks could move in on almost any female on the ship. Instead, he's latched onto Fran and has been giving her a rush that would turn Suzy Parker's head." He sipped at his glass. "I just hope the kid doesn't get hurt."

"She won't be. These shipboard romances are just something to write in a girl's diary. Besides, how do you know? Maybe he's tired of the doll-faced ones and—"

Eldridge shook his head. "The boys who work these scows are walking Dun and Brads. They know what a passenger is worth to the penny the minute he sets foot on the gangplank. And they act accordingly."

"You've been on board the *Queen* before, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Make it Carson, Liddell. There are very few privileges left to a man these days. He's told who he can eat with, who he can't; who he can send his kids to school with, who he can't; who he can do business with and who he can't. The one privilege they haven't taken away from him is the right to decide who he will permit to call him by his first name and who he won't. I'd like you to." He took a deep swallow from his glass. "Yes, I've been aboard the *Queen* a few times. It's the first time for the girl, though." He set the Bloody Mary down on the bar. "That's why the trip has been a little trying. You see, Fran doesn't live with me. Matter of fact, this is the first time I've seen her since her mother died ten or twelve years ago. The kid's been living on a ranch with her grandparents."

"I see."

"When I saw her a month or so ago, I figured she could use some polishing up. So I booked passage for both of us." He shook his head doubtfully. "I'm beginning to wonder if it'll do any good."

At the girl's table, the man in uniform looked toward where Eldridge stood with Liddell, said something to the girl, who nodded. He got to his feet, threaded his way through the tables to the bar.

"Could I talk to you for a moment, sir?" he asked.

Eldridge nodded, the smile on Crew Cut's face became a little strained. His eyes flicked to Liddell uncertainly.

"It can't be that private. You haven't known her long enough," Eldridge snapped. "As a new member of our little band, Mr. Liddell here will be getting all the news along with everyone else." He shook his head to Liddell. "You can't blow your nose around here without everybody hearing about it by the time you get your handkerchief back in your pocket."

Crew Cut wasted an incurious glance on Liddell, smiled. "I'm Weston, sir. Third Officer. A pleasure to have you on board." He turned back to Eldridge. "I'm posted for shore liberty at Curaçao on Wednesday. With your permission, I'd like to take Fran to lunch in a favorite place of mine out in the country."

"As long as you get her back before we weigh anchor, anything you want to do is all right with me. Within reason, of course," he amended hastily.

Crew Cut bobbed his head, included Liddell in a nod, headed back to the table where the girl sat waiting. Eldridge stared at his back bleakly. "I don't know what the tab for all this is going to run, but I'll bet it's a doozy!"

CHAPTER 6

The main dining room in the *Queen Alexandra* runs the length of a city block on A deck. In the center of the huge room, the captain presides over his table of selected guests, some of whom are designated by him, some of whom are “suggested” by the home office.

The other tables set aside for designated guests are hosted by the first officer, the purser, the chief engineer and the cruise director. Of these, the most eagerly sought seatings are at the cruise director’s table.

When Johnny Liddell walked in for the first serving at 6:45, all of the guests at the captain’s table were seated; all but three seats at the cruise director’s table were filled. Jack Allen stood up as Liddell felt his way through the tables, waved to him.

“Well, here’s our new shipmate, ladies and gentlemen,” Allen told the people at his table as Liddell walked up. “Mr. Liddell joined our little party this morning at Barbados. Let’s make him welcome.” He applauded lightly, the others at the table followed suit. “Now that they’ve met you, how about meeting our little group? Right here on my left is Rita and Peter Keen—”

Liddell stared at the hawk-faced man the cruise director had indicated. A mass of thick black hair rolled back in oily waves from his low hairline. He wore it in a three-quarter part revealing the startling whiteness of his scalp. His thin, bloodless lips were split in what was intended to be a smile, but there was no sign of it in the eyes that squinted across the high bridge of an enormous hooked nose. A faint sheen of perspiration glistened on the man’s upper lip.

The cruise director looked from Liddell to Keen and back. “You folks know each other?”

Liddell hesitated for a moment, shook his head. “Never saw Mr. Keen in my life.” It was true. The last time Johnny Liddell had seen the man with the hooked nose, his name wasn’t Keen—it was Handel, and he was squirming and sweating in the witness box giving a jury the information it needed to send Big Howie Ryder to the prison cell where he died three years later. After the trial, Maurie Handel had been disbarred and disappeared. There had been a price on his head in those days, but time, a new leadership in the

mob and the gradual disappearance of the old-timers had caused almost everybody to forget Maurie Handel.

The squinty eyes stared nervously at Liddell, and decided to play along. “This is Mrs. Keen.” He indicated a flashy, upholstered redhead who was doing interesting things to a tight-fitting green dress. The redhead eyed Liddell with no show of interest, smiled briefly.

Jack Allen was moving on. “This is Mrs. Hilda Phelps, Mr. Liddell. Mrs. Phelps has been with us so often she’s like one of the staff. We wouldn’t consider a trip without her to be official.”

In the bright light of the salon, the woman’s make-up stood out like blotches against the pallor of her skin. She simpered, showed the too-perfect teeth in a smile.

“And Mr. Martin Sands and his lovely niece, Helen.” The cruise director indicated the other couple at the table.

Martin Sands was in his early sixties, a fact which careful diet and constant massage failed to hide. His eyes were encased in a fine-lined web of pouches, his chin line was losing the battle against jowliness. When he wasn’t smiling, heavy lines from his nostrils ran to the corners of his mouth to imprint a triangle. The girl alongside him was easily thirty years younger, pretty in a vapid way. Her dark hair was styled in a gamin cut, the emphasis in her make-up was on her eyes, brought out their extraordinary hazel color.

“Our other two table-mates haven’t shown up yet. Sometimes they forget to come to meals at all. They’re newlyweds, you see.” Allen looked around the table expectantly. The line always drew a laugh. He wasn’t disappointed but the laugh was beginning to sound a little tired by now.

Liddell slid into the seat next to Mrs. Phelps, across from the disbarred lawyer. He glanced over to the captain’s table where Captain Rose was trying to disguise his impatience with the apparently interminable story a beefy man in a black silk suit was telling. To the captain’s left, Liddell recognized the fading beauty of one-time movie star Robin Lewis. Her hair was still the taffy blonde of her heyday, her lips as bright and shiny. But the lines in her face were tired, the ends of her mouth drooped and the lines that formed at the corners of her eyes were more wrinkles than crinkles. She was feigning interest in the story the beefy man was telling, but the way her eyes wandered gave her away.

The woman on the story-teller’s other side made no attempt to disguise the fact that she had heard the story too many times even to pretend to be

listening. Her blue hair was bent over her plate, she was eating with no apology to anyone. No one would have to be told she was the beefy man's wife.

Liddell's inventory of the captain's table was interrupted by the arrival of the honeymooning couple. Harry Doyle was tall, hulking, with a shock of yellow hair that refused to stay down no matter how much water he poured on it. He grinned shyly at the people at the table as he ushered his wife Belle to her seat. She was a tall, fair-skinned, big-breasted, big-hipped farm girl who used no make-up, combed her long blonde hair back from her face to sit in a heavy coil on the back of her neck. They acknowledged the introduction to Liddell in low tones, quietly slid into their seats.

"Thought you'd forgotten about eating altogether." Jack Allen winked lewdly.

Doyle fumbled for his fork with heavy knuckled fingers, colored slightly. "It was real hot on that island. Me and Belle we got real tired—"

The color deepened at the guffaw this brought from the cruise director and the farm boy grinned.

"We just figured to catch a little rest. I guess the sound of the ship woke us. I hope we didn't delay nothing."

"I don't blame you, Belle," Martin Sands's "niece" told the newlywed. "I thought it was awful hot on that island. I was sweat—" She broke off momentarily, recovered. "I was perspiring something fierce. I hope the other islands are cooler."

She wondered if anyone had caught the slip. She knew Martin did. He always winced when she used the old expressions. Despite the long and arduous training at Miss Renfield's Secretarial School designed to eliminate the Brooklyn accent and the Brooklyn expressions, they always managed to crop up at the wrong time.

She studied him from the corner of her eye. Aside from the fact that his mouth had lengthened into a thin, hard line he gave no sign that he had heard. For the tenth time in the six days since they'd left New York she wished she had never agreed to come.

Helen Burns, which was her right name, had been properly impressed when Miss Renfield's School told her she was to be interviewed for the job of secretary to Martin Ritter, vice president of Lorelei Fabrics. His office was on the 28th floor of the Textile Building on Park and 56th Street. The

girl in the outer office had eyed her quizzically as she directed her down the hall to Ritter's office.

She had gotten the job and had been flattered when he started asking her to dinner. They stuck to the dark corners of the boîtes that line the Sixties between Park and Lexington, always hiding around corners, using shabby hotel rooms for the nights he could arrange to stay in town.

It had happened two weeks ago.

Martin was sprawled out on his back, arm flung over his head. He was snoring lightly. The sheet was pulled halfway up, exposing the heavy matting on his chest. Outside the window it was dark and gray. Helen slipped from under the sheet, walked to the window, looked out through its dusty, streaked panes to the cold, cheerless street below. Above the window, the hotel sign was clicking on and off, alternately spilling a bright yellow light then darkness into the early dusk. She shivered, rubbed the backs of her arms with her palms in an effort to warm herself.

When she turned around, Martin was sitting up in bed. He was eying her nudity approvingly. Automatically she tried to cover the heavily nipples breasts with her arms, dropped them to her sides when the absurdity of it struck her.

"I'm going to get another job, Martin," she told him. "I can't go on like this any more."

She walked over to the chair where she had thrown her clothes.

"You can't walk out on me now. Knowing how much I need you, how much you mean to me," he told her.

"You can't talk me out of it this time, Martin. I—I'm getting so I can't even face myself in the mirror." She looked around the squalid room. "How much longer do you think I can go on living in places like this, sneaking out in the morning, hoping no one will see me?"

The man got out of the bed, crossed to where she stood with her back to him. Gently he turned her around.

"You're just depressed, tired. It's this damn weather." He put his finger under her chin, lifted her face. "You know what you need? A change of scenery, some place where the sun's shining. How would you like that?"

"I couldn't. I've never been away alone and—"

"Who said you were going alone? We'll go together."

The girl looked up, searched his face with her eyes. “But—aren’t you afraid someone might see us, someone who would tell your wife?”

He shook his head. “We’ll take a short cruise to the Caribbean. The kind of a cruise none of my wife’s friends would be found dead on. Besides, you’ll be traveling as my niece. Who’d be the wiser?”

That day, standing barefoot on the cold floor of the hotel, with a bitter wind whipping down the man-made canyons outside, it had seemed a good idea. But the *Queen* had barely made Antigua before she got the hemmed-in feeling, like a kid surrounded by a gang of bullies ready to pounce on her, every time she felt someone’s eyes on her. The other women were wives, legal and legitimate. She had the feeling they could see through her, know her for what she was, resent her for what she was doing to one of their own kind. Men, she was sure, spotted her immediately and were measuring her for their bed from the moment they laid eyes on her, convinced that getting her there was a foregone conclusion and only a matter of time.

She wished she hadn’t come. She wondered if she could fake an appendicitis attack convincingly enough to make him put her on a plane at the next port of call.

The woman with Maurie Handel was just as uneasy. When she was sure he wasn’t looking, she flashed curious glances at Liddell, wondering about him. She felt the way Handel stiffened when he came face to face with Liddell. She knew they both lied when they pretended not to know each other.

Rita had known for years now that his name was Handel, not Keen. There had been the clippings she found locked in the tin box he kept at the bottom of the closet. Curiosity plus an expertly wielded hairpin had given her most of the story. The night she found the clippings she got the rest of it out of Handel.

Maurie had been the legal wonder boy for the organization. His nimble brain and silver tongue had kept the big boys out of jail and immune from prosecution for years. He knew what they were and what his chances for existence would be if he didn’t have enough on all of them to put them away for life. Then one day he learned that having all that knowledge could be a double-edged sword.

Big Howie Ryder had been indicted by a federal grand jury on an income tax rap and before the ink was dry on the indictment, he disappeared. For eighteen months federal agents put out a dragnet for him,

but he had completely dropped out of sight. Then suddenly he reappeared and surrendered in Albany, rather than in New York City.

His acquittal was one of Maurie Handel's most masterful manipulations. He had arranged for the Albany surrender so that Ryder would be under the jurisdiction of the northern federal district. Before Ryder surrendered, it was also arranged in which town in that jurisdiction the trial would be held. The day Ryder surrendered, his men descended on the town, spending money like it was going out of style. Drinks for the house were the order of the day the minute these boys walked into a bar. Contributions to local charities, big tips, parties and picnics for the kids and all at the expense of the man "who's having the same trouble all of us have—they income tax guys trying to get blood out of a stone."

Then, as soon as bail could be arranged, Big Howie himself showed on the scene. He was quiet, generous, a big tipper and a free spender. The local gentry, who would be the jury to decide his guilt or innocence, were stunned. They had expected a movie gangster, hands dripping with blood, driving around in a car bristling with machine guns and filled with hoods. Instead they found Big Howie, adhering strictly to the script written for him by Maurie Handel—a big, friendly, generous visitor.

They acquitted him on the first ballot.

That night Maurie Handel stayed at the courthouse tying up all loose ends and Big Howie and the others returned to the hotel to celebrate. By the time Handel got back to the hotel, it was almost 3 a.m. and the hotel was deserted. As he reached the top floor, which Big Howie had rented along with the floor under it, he heard his name. He listened outside the door.

"What do you want to kill the mouthpiece for, Howie?" a drunken voice asked petulantly. "Look what a job he done for you. If it wasn't for him and his ideas they'd have nailed you sure."

From the sound of Big Howie's voice, he was on his second bottle. "That's just the trouble with him. He's too smart—and he knows too much. One of these days the heat might get too much and he'd talk."

Handel tiptoed back down the stairs, caught a milk train to New York. The next morning he was in the special prosecutor's office spilling everything he knew about the operation of Big Howie's rackets. The prosecutor put him into protective custody, hid him out on a farm in New Jersey until the trial.

At the trial, it was Handel's testimony that sent Big Howie to the cell he never walked away from.

Rita Keen knew all about that. She knew for how many years Maurie had hidden out, fearful every day that the next knock on the door would reveal some of Big Howie's boys. It wasn't until the last couple of years that he had felt safe, secure enough to agree to come out of hiding and to start enjoying life again. Like this.

She stole another glance at Liddell, wondered whether in him Maurie had finally come face to face with the firing squad he had been expecting all these years.

Jack Allen was listening to Mrs. Phelps with half an ear. He was wondering how Liddell could have spent any time in Barbados and still have no trace of a tan, let alone a sunburn. Normally, even a one-day stay on the island would show some effect—

Mrs. Phelps broke off in the middle of a sentence, frowned at the cruise director. She wasn't used to having people listen to her with only half an ear. Especially since she was in the habit of more than paying her way, and had gotten used to people fawning over her instead of half ignoring her. She flashed an especially warm smile at the young waiter who reached past her to remove her soup plate. Word of Mrs. Phelps's generosity had already filtered down into the galley and the salon. He returned the smile and Mrs. Phelps made a mental note to ask her room steward to see if "that nice dining room steward" couldn't arrange for her to have a warm milk and sandwich every night.

The honeymooners talked to each other in low voices giggling at some secret joke. The conversation at the table lagged, became desultory with each of the diners lost in his own thoughts.

CHAPTER 7

After dinner, Jack Allen, the ship's cruise director, sprawled comfortably in a chair on the lower promenade deck, enjoying his first few minutes of solitude for the day. In the west, the sun was getting ready to make its exit in a technicolor spectacular. Already, the sky was a blaze of red and the billowing water picked up the rosy glow and seemed to catch fire.

For the past ten years, the winters had all been like this for him. The days hot and the perspiration dried on his skin by the trade winds, the evenings ushered in by pyrotechnical displays like this one, the nights cool and black.

But it hadn't always been so. His mind went back to the winters of his childhood on the East Side of New York. The cold winds that blew off the East River sent the kids running off the streets to huddle around the oversized stoves in the kitchen of the railroad flats. Hardly a week passed that some old bum was found dead in a hallway along the Bowery, or some family was found asphyxiated when the cold drafts that roamed the ramshackle buildings blew out an oil heater while they slept.

The kids almost all wore rubbers from right after Thanksgiving until the April showers were finished. The rubbers served a double purpose—kept their feet dry and postponed the need for putting on new half soles. A piece of cardboard cut to fit on the inside and rubbers on the outside doubled the lives of their shoes. Most of the kids took their rubbers off the minute they were called into the house because it was a widely known fact that rubbers worn indoors could ruin a boy's eyesight.

Allen watched the slow, leisurely descent of the sun. Back in the old days there was nothing like this. Night came with startling swiftness, the gas jets were lighted in the flats and in the hallways. There was always a faulty one some place in the building that gave the halls a permeating smell of gas.

On the streets, the hardy old pushcart peddlers stood watch over their wares, which included everything an ordinary household could use—clothing, crockery, food, even furniture. Their faces almost invisible under the stockings pulled down to protect their ears from the cold, old fedoras pulled down over the stockings, they stood sentry over their merchandise,

ready and anxious to haggle with any soul hardy enough to make an appearance.

Sometimes it was not a customer who made the appearance. It might be a band of hoodlums intent on upsetting the pushcart. One would hold the struggling, begging merchant while the others dumped his merchandise into the slush. Other gangs would show up to offer the peddlers insurance against these raids. Sometimes the protectors would be challenged by other gangs wanting a slice of the protection money. This led to gang fights, the most famous of which was between the Monk Eastmans and the Paul Kellys on Allen Street where over a hundred armed men fought a pitched gun battle.

But this didn't stop the East Siders from being proud of their neighborhood. In spite of the decaying, unheated hallways and the peeling paint and overcrowded flats, this was the neighborhood of Cherry Street where George Washington once lived; of Mulberry Street where Al Smith started his climb that reached almost into the White House, and of Hester Street where Jacob Epstein first molded a piece of modeling clay into a semblance of the human figure.

Barney Ryan was the name of the cop who walked the beat on the block where Jack Allen lived. Ryan was before the days of the new breed, back when a cop spoke with a brogue instead of a cultivated accent, when he won more arguments with a nightstick than with logic. There were none of the bleeding hearts to decry police brutality and to coddle the underprivileged when Ryan found it necessary to line some of the boys up against a wall and rap their shins with his nightstick if he wasn't satisfied with their answers.

The neighborhood hangout, unlike the candy stores of today, was the local poolroom. Here behind shuttered doors, in the midst of the odor compounded of part stale nicotine, part untended toilets, many an education that had been started in P.S. 104 was completed.

It had been on a winter night around this time of the year that Barney Ryan strolled into Mac's Poolroom, his nightstick dangling from the oversized pin that held his badge in place. He closed the door behind him, wrinkled his nose at the characteristic odor of the place, squinted through the ever present fog that swirled in the inverted cone of light spilling from the lamps down onto the green tables.

Mac, the operator of the poolroom, was sitting in his regular spot behind the glass case displaying cigarettes and an open cigar box. He was thin to the point of emaciation, wore a black, sleeveless sweater over a wool shirt, a spit-stained unlit cigarette dangled from the corner of his lips.

The muted clicking of the pool balls stopped, all eyes in the room turned to stare at the red-faced man in the blue uniform.

“Old Doc Schwartz was robbed tonight,” Ryan told them in his husky brogue. “Whoever did it hit the old man too hard. He might die.” His eyes glared balefully around the room. “That would mean that some rat faces a murder one.” He turned to the thin man with the sleeveless sweater. “I warned you what would happen to you if anybody got out of line on my beat. Who did it?”

Mac’s face gleamed wetly in the reflected light. He lifted the dead cigarette from between his lips, shook his head. “Why ask me, Barney? I ain’t been outta the place since I opened up at noon.” The hand holding the cigarette shook.

Ryan walked over to the glass case where the thin man sat. Contemptuously he shouldered past him, almost knocking his high stool over. He reached for a sliding panel behind the counter, slid it back, exposing a pile of cartons of cigarettes. “Whoever robbed Doc got away with a lot of butts.”

He started to turn to face the room when it happened. Rusty Garsen, at table one, inverted his cue in his hands, caught it by the shooting end. It described a short arc, caught the patrolman across the side of his head with a sound like the popping of an overripe pumpkin. Ryan’s uniform hat flew halfway across the room, blood ran down the side of his face as he tumbled into a heap behind the counter.

There was a sudden silence. The others in the room stood frozen, with vacant, staring expressions on their faces. Suddenly they all seemed to come to life at once. Garsen threw the cue across the room, sprinted for the door. The others stampeded after him. As suddenly as it happened, it was all over. The room was empty save for Mac, the poolroom proprietor, wringing his hands. He stood staring with stricken eyes at the unconscious man, whose blood was running down his face to stain the blue of his uniform a dark black.

Jack Allen had no idea where he was going when he ran out of the closeness of the poolroom to the cold clearness of the winter night. All he did know was that he was not going home, that he probably could never go home again. He’d listened too often with morbid interest to the description of what happened to cop killers in the back rooms of the precinct houses. He never returned to the East Side. Weeks later, when he had bummed his way half across the country, he read that Rusty Garsen had been arrested for the

murder holdup of old Doc Schwartz, that Barney Ryan's uniform cap had saved his life and that he was alive to testify against Rusty. Mac, the poolroom owner, was being tried for receiving stolen property.

Allen kept traveling west, managed to wangle a job as a page boy on the old Panama Pacific Lines. By the time his first voyage through the Canal brought him back to New York, he had discovered the world outside the East Side and had learned that the combination of a boyish smile, exuberant good health and a lonely female passenger with plenty of money could add up to a very pleasant existence.

It still held true, he conceded, as the round ball of the sun melted behind the horizon.

Today, although he'd never see fifty again, there were still plenty of women stalking him, but all too often these days it was the basket cases. The junior members of the staff, like Larry Weston, caught the fancy of the younger, more eligible ones.

Idly, he wondered if Weston might finally hit the jackpot with the Eldridge girl. The kid had been trying hard enough to connect with someone wealthy for the past three or four cruises. This one was the most likely of all, Allen conceded, lonely, grateful and impressed by the rush Weston was giving her. The pay-off would be worth all the work he was putting into it, but even so Allen didn't envy the kid.

Just the memory of the girl's shrill giggle sent chills up and down the cruise director's spine. And that old man of hers was no pushover. Allen didn't envy anybody who had to go up against him. He had that cold dignity, the ability to make a man ill-at-ease with a word. He had been around and wasn't naïve enough to think the third officer was giving his daughter a rush for her good looks. He'd seen the cold calculating look in Eldridge's eyes several times when he was watching Weston and the girl. Anything Weston got out of him he'd have to work for.

Allen squinted at the horizon. For a hard-boiled, down-to-earth character like Eldridge, his choice of Lew Herrick, the writer, as an almost constant companion was a little out of character. But it was probably attributable to the fact that Herrick and the old movie star were constant companions. Less puzzling was the old man's immediate acceptance of the newcomer, Johnny Liddell.

He frowned as the new passenger popped into his head. There was something about Liddell that made him wonder. Maybe it was the fact that

Keen had turned so green when he got his first glimpse of him at dinner. Keen had struck him as a pretty cold character, not easy to stampede. There was no question that he had seen Liddell before and was scared of him. That would seem to indicate that the new passenger wasn't the amiable, easy-going vacationer he tried to portray.

It bothered Allen not to be able to put the passengers in their rightful niches. He had spotted from the first the fact that the Sands couple were anything but uncle and niece, just as easily as he had been able to see through Lewis Herrick's pose as a great and insatiable lover. There had been any number like him prancing around in the past ten years, waging a conscious or unconscious fight against a latent homosexuality and cloaking it by trying to prove they were male to the soles of their shoes.

But Liddell as a type eluded him. After the Landers incident, it was more than curiosity that made Allen want to know more about the newcomer. He seemed interested in Ingrid, he mused, but then so did almost every other male on the ship, eligible or otherwise. He wondered if it would do any good to have Ingrid make a play for Liddell and find out who or what he really was. He had the unhappy conviction that it would be Liddell who would wind the blonde around his finger rather than vice versa. But it might be worth trying.

Allen sighed, headed for the companionway.

It was a good thing that he had finally decided that this would be his last year of cruising. He must be getting old if little things like these bothered him, after all these years!

CHAPTER 8

Johnny Liddell stood at the rail, stared down into the thrashing water as it rushed past the hull of the ship to be congealed into a wake at its stern. The sun had gone down in a blaze of red that spilled a rosy glow over the water and left streaks of color in the sky. He took a last drag on his cigarette, flipped it out into the water. The screaming gulls that had followed the *Queen* from Barbados looking for a meal ticket had long ago given up and turned back.

Carson Eldridge, his white hair covered by a plaid cap, nodded briefly as he passed Johnny on his second lap around the deck. There was no sign of his daughter, Fran, or the crew cut type on the deck. They were probably in the grand hall dancing to the after-dinner music, Liddell figured.

Nor had he seen any of his table companions after they had all straggled out of the dining salon in ones and twos after the meal. The honeymooners, Harry and Belle Doyle, had remained oblivious to the rest of the diners through most of the meal, were the first to finish and disappear. Maurice Handel and his well-stacked wife had lingered only a short time after the honeymooners, then had beat a hasty exit. Only the “uncle and niece” were still dawdling over dessert when Liddell had left. He thought he detected signs of disillusionment on the part of the girl, wondered if the idyll would survive to the end of the cruise.

The door to the Piccadilly Bar opened, Rita Keen stepped out on deck. She saw Liddell leaning against the rail, walked over to him. Her red hair was covered with a wisp of green silk; she had drawn a white cashmere sweater over her shoulders. Her body was ripe, lush. Swelling breasts showed over the top of her low-cut dress; a small waist hinted at the full hips, long shapely legs concealed by the fullness of the skirt.

She stopped alongside Johnny, looked out at the streaked sky, the expanse of water as smooth as a millpond. “Quite a show tonight,” she commented.

“In technicolor,” Liddell agreed.

She turned to him, gave him the full impact of her slanted eyes. “Would you have a cigarette? I left my purse in the cabin.”

Liddell fumbled through his pockets, brought out a pack of cigarettes, held one out to her. She stuck it between her lips, accepted a light, waited until he had lit one for himself.

“The cruise director was right, wasn’t he, Mr. Liddell—”

“Johnny.”

The redhead inclined her head. “Okay, Johnny. You did know my husband from some place, didn’t you?”

Liddell took a deep drag on his cigarette, exhaled in twin streams from his nostrils. The wind caught the smoke, whipped it away. “That what your husband says?”

Rita shook her head. “He wouldn’t discuss it. Said you just looked like someone he once knew. That’s all it was. Just a resemblance to someone.” She took the cigarette from her mouth, let smoke escape from half-parted lips. “I don’t think he was telling me the truth.” She studied the carmined stain on the end of the cigarette for a moment, brought her eyes up to his face. “Was he?”

“I’ve never seen Peter Keen before and I never heard the name,” Liddell hedged. “Incidentally, where is your husband?”

The redhead shrugged, with spectacular effect on the décolleté of her dress. “He’s a gin fiend. Plays every night from right after dinner until bedtime.” She pouted. “I’m a gin rummy widow.”

Liddell shook his head. “No accounting for tastes.” He let his eyes roam from the top of her head to her feet and back with appropriate stops on the way. “I couldn’t keep my mind on the game knowing something like you was waiting for me at home.”

She dimpled at the compliment. “Just for that, I’m going to let you buy me a drink.” She took a last drag at the cigarette, flipped it out into the water. She tucked her arm under his. “That is, if you’d like to?”

“Best offer I’ve had today. But that Piccadilly Bar is jammed. You can cut the smoke with a knife. How about having a drink of some of my private stock? I picked it up in Barbados.”

The redhead frowned slightly. “In your cabin?” She considered for a moment, shook her head. “You have no idea how these stewards gossip. I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to be seen going into your cabin.” She hesitated for a moment, turned the full power of the slanted eyes on him. “I don’t think there’d be quite as much talk if you were seen going into

mine, though. Especially at this hour. And we did some shopping in Barbados, too.”

“You talked me into it.” He dropped his butt over the railing, let the redhead lead him toward the forward companionway.

The Keens had a cabin de luxe on the lower promenade deck. The redhead opened the door, led the way in. The sitting room was comfortably furnished with a sofa, a couple of small tables and some upholstered chairs. The entrance to the bedroom beyond was curtained.

Maurie Handel sat in one of the chairs, facing the door. He held a .45 in his hand that was aimed at a spot a few inches above Liddell’s belt buckle. Wordlessly, he waved Johnny in with the muzzle of the gun.

The redhead waited until Liddell was in the room, closed and bolted the door after him. She walked over to a table against the wall that held some liquor, made herself a drink, turned, leaned her hips against the edge of the table.

“Do you always greet your wife’s guests with a .45?” Liddell asked amiably. “I was invited in for a shot. I didn’t know it was going to be a shot in the head.”

“Very funny,” Handel conceded. “So the boys found out I was on this boat and they flew you down to look me over, to make sure it was the right guy, huh? But you got to report back to them before they’ll know whether or not it pays them to meet the boat. And maybe you won’t be in any condition to report.”

“You’re scaring me to death, Maurie,” Liddell said. “You know I never bird dogged a pigeon for a hit in my life. And I’m not going to start dirtying my hands with something like you.” He ignored the gun in the man’s hand, walked over to the table with the liquor. “How about that drink you promised me, doll?”

The redhead chewed at her lower lip, looked nervously from Liddell to her husband and back. “Is he right? Is that why you’re on board? To set him up for the organization?”

Liddell reached out, caught the scotch bottle by the neck, spilled some into a glass. He dropped some ice into it, swirled the liquor over the ice. “What do you think?”

Handel was on his feet, the cords in his neck showing. “Turn around, Liddell. Unless you want to get it in the back.” There was a shrill note of

desperation in the disbarred lawyer's voice. "I didn't get you in here so you could get cozy with my wife. I brought you here because if it's either you or me, I intend to walk away from it."

Liddell turned, studied the man's face. There was a faint twitch under his left eye, a thin film of perspiration glistened on his upper lip. "You always do, don't you, counselor?" He took a long swallow from the glass. "That why you're so scared?"

"They're not scaring me." He hit his chest with the side of his hand. "They're not scaring me even a little bit. So they sent you to make sure they got the right guy. So what? There are still four stops on this cruise and they can't cover them all."

Liddell finished the drink, set his glass down on the table. "You're not scared? Then how come you're shaking yourself apart?" He dropped his eye to the whitened knuckle on the trigger. "That why you killed Harry Landers? Because you found out he was a private eye and you figured he was sent to finger you?"

Maurie Handel's jaw went slack, he stared at Liddell. "The guy who went over the side? That was an accident. He got washed over during a storm—"

The redhead dropped her glass. "He was a private detective?" She stared at Handel with stricken eyes. "Look, mister, I told you I'd stick with you through thick and thin. But if you're mixed up in a murder, that scratches everything. Little Rita wants no part of a ride on the thunderbolt. A stool pigeon saving his skin I can stomach, but a killer, pardon me!"

As Handel started to blurt a denial, Liddell moved in. The disbarred lawyer tried to swing the gun back into firing position, Liddell caught him a crippling blow on the wrist with the side of his hand. Handel screamed his rage, tried to bring his knee up in Liddell's groin. Johnny caught him under the arms, lifted him and threw him into the chair he had just vacated. The chair went over backward, spilled Handel onto the floor, a tangle of arms and legs.

Liddell walked over to where the gun lay on the floor, picked it up. He weighed it in the palm of his hand.

"Nice iron," he grunted. He examined the serial number. "You could get in a lot of trouble carrying a piece like this."

Handel was on his hands and knees, staring up at him. The carefully combed hair hung lankly over his face, beads of perspiration glistened at his

hairline, along his jowls. “I’ve got a license for it.”

Liddell looked up, grinned bleakly. “So it’s registered in your name. Convenient, huh?”

Panic widened the lawyer’s eyes until the whites showed. “What do you mean?”

“If I was doing a job for the organization, look how nice and neat it would be. You got shot with your own gun and when they found out who you really were it would make a lot of sense that you did the dutch because you were afraid the boys were catching up with you.”

“No, don’t, Liddell!” Handel crawled over to him on all fours, caught his leg. The perspiration was streaming down his face. “Give me a break, Liddell. You can have everything I’ve got. Money, her, anything. But don’t kill me. Don’t!”

The redhead stared at the man on his knees, loathing in her eyes. “You trying to use me to buy your own lousy life?” She walked over, put the flat of her foot against his shoulder, toppled him on his side. “I hope he does kill you. If you don’t die of fright first.”

Handel lay prone on the floor, sobbing. Liddell shook his head, stepped across the prostrate man, walked to a porthole. He threw the .45 out.

When he turned around, the redhead was staring at him with narrowed eyes, parted lips. “Then you weren’t sent here to set him up?” Her voice was low, sultry.

Liddell shook his head. “I had no idea he was on board. When I recognized him, I couldn’t care less. He called for the showdown, not me.”

The girl looked down to where her husband was cowering on the floor. “He made you a bargain, Liddell. We always keep our bargains, my husband and me.” She tossed the white sweater onto a chair, reached up and yanked at the zipper of her gown. The skin tight dress peeled away from her body, verified his guess that she wore little under it. Slowly she pushed it down over her hips, stepped out of it. On the floor, Handel groaned, shook his head. “Don’t, Rita. Don’t do it. I—I was only talking—”

The redhead ignored him, stared at Liddell, wet her gleaming lips with the pointed tip of a pink tongue. She hooked her thumbs into the elastic band of the wispy pants she wore, rolled them down. When she had kicked the panties aside, she straightened up.

Her legs were long, sensuously shaped. Full, rounded thighs swelled into high-set hips, converged into the narrow waist he had admired earlier in the evening. Her breasts were full and high, their pink tips straining upward.

As she stood there, she raised her hands slowly from her sides, loosened her hair, let it cascade down over her shoulders.

“All right, Liddell. He’s being so generous. Be my guest.”

The man on the floor moaned. “For God’s sake, no!”

“What’s the matter? It was okay when you thought it might save your hide.” She turned back to Liddell. “You get nervous with an audience or something?”

Liddell grinned at her. “It would be a pleasure under any other circumstances. But I’ll take a rain check on it this time.” He walked across the cabin, watched while the redhead hightailed it through the curtain into the bedroom section beyond. He looked back at the man on the floor. “Me, I’d rather face one of the organization’s guns than what you’ve got staring you in the face, Maurie.”

He unbolted the door, stepped out into the corridor, closed the cabin door behind him. He fumbled in his pockets for his pack of cigarettes, stuck one in the corner of his mouth. From behind the closed door, he could hear the shrill voice of the redhead. He grinned glumly, shook his head and headed for the elevator to take him to the Piccadilly Bar on the deck above.

Fran Eldridge was whirling around the floor in the arms of the broad-shouldered crew cut type as Johnny Liddell walked into the Piccadilly. Her extreme décolletage served only to reveal the pitiful boniness of her back and upper chest. The mousy hair sticking out at wild angles, the protruding teeth, were wreathed in a smile of pure delight. Crew Cut was leading her through the intricacies of the dance with a far-away expression, and Liddell could almost hear the clicking of the meter, ticking off the time he was investing building up a rental fee.

Liddell was heading for the bar when he was waved down by Carson Eldridge from a rear table. He walked over, accepted an invitation to join his party.

“I’m sure you know Robin Lewis,” the white-haired man introduced the woman at his left.

“I’m one of her most loyal fans.” Liddell smiled.

“Which means one of two things—you either have a wonderful memory or you watch the late late shows.” The actress grinned.

“And you’ve probably read Lewis Herrick’s new book,” Eldridge introduced the other man at the table.

Lewis Herrick was thin, esthetic looking. His hair was a thick brown mane, brushed upward from his face, his eyes were heavy-lidded, half closed. He eyed Liddell with no show of interest.

“Mr. Liddell just joined our cruise at Barbados. He’s in—” He managed to look blank. “What line did you say you were in, Liddell?”

Liddell smiled easily. “A little of this, a little of that. I keep my eyes open for an interesting situation and take a piece of the action.”

“Sounds fascinating,” Robin Lewis murmured. “Spend much time down here on the islands?”

“No. Matter of fact, I feel pretty much like a paleface among this crowd. I had expected to spend some time in Barbados lining up my deal, but it didn’t work out that way. I have some friends with the line operating the *Queen* so I pulled a few strings to have her pick me up.” He grinned ruefully. “I gather the captain didn’t approve of my using my connections.”

Herrick snorted. “Fussy little man.” He raked his long, thin fingers through the high pompadour. “Takes himself very seriously. It’s all pretty much of a bore. He doesn’t make a statement. He issues a pronunciamiento.”

The actress laughed. Her smile lit up her face, seemed to erase the network of lines. “The ship’s captain’s a dear compared to that captain of industry we’ve got at the table.” She turned to Liddell. “We’ve heard the story of his climb to success in different versions at every meal since we sailed. I don’t know how much longer the captain’s going to put up with him monopolizing the conversation.”

“Name’s McDowell,” Eldridge told Liddell. “Big in Texas oil.”

“A bloody bore.” Herrick bobbed his head. He reached for his drink, lifted it to his lips. “Whole table’s pretty much of an intellectual wasteland other than Carson here and Robin. Weren’t for them, I’d be taking my meals in my cabin.”

The music had ended, the couples on the dance floor were wandering in the direction of their tables. Eldridge turned in his chair, watched with a frown while Crew Cut and Fran took their places at a table for two near the dance floor.

“Fran looks very lovely tonight,” Robin Lewis told him. “She seems to be enjoying herself with that boy.”

Eldridge shook his head. He looked up at the waiter who had materialized next to the table. “Same for us. You take a scotch, don’t you, Liddell?”

Liddell nodded, the waiter glided off.

“You’re a woman, Robin. What can I do with Fran?”

The actress studied the animated face of the girl across the room, pursed her lips. “She seems to be doing all right.”

The white-haired man snorted. “I can’t go through life hiring escorts for her and I won’t have her hanging around my neck like an albatross. Is it too late to slap on a little polish and brighten her up a bit?”

“How old is Fran, Carson?” Robin wanted to know.

“Nineteen, almost twenty.” He shook his head. “I know it should have been done years ago instead of letting her grow up wearing jeans and breeding horses. I guess I’ve been too busy to pay any attention to the kid.” He looked over to where Fran was drinking in every word her escort said. “I’d like to try to make it up to her now if it isn’t too late.”

“You make it sound like she’s hopeless.”

“Isn’t she?”

“I don’t think so. Why don’t you let me take her in hand for the next few days? See what I can do.”

“She’s pretty stubborn,” Eldridge warned.

“So am I.”

The waiter was back with the drinks, slid them onto the table in front of the three men and woman.

Herrick, who had done time in a Hollywood syndication factory, launched into a recital of how much Hollywood had changed since Robin’s day as a reigning film star. He complained about the status of the “serious writer,” detailed a list of complaints and indignities he had endured until his latest book had hit the best-seller list.

Liddell and Carson Eldridge listened with a polite show of interest while the actress and the writer compared experiences. Covertly Liddell was studying Herrick as he declaimed. The type was a familiar one, a loud,

aggressive manner hiding a natural timidity. It was easy to see why he had attached himself to the former movie star—she was still attractive, her name was still associated with the sex-pot characters she played, and she was old enough, experienced enough and tired enough not to be too demanding. Thus the writer could give the appearance of being masculine right down to his socks without having ever to prove it in bed.

Liddell glanced at his watch, grunted. “I didn’t realize it was so late. It’s been a big day.”

The actress looked mildly disappointed. “You’re not going to leave us this early?”

Liddell drained his glass, set it back on the table. “I think I’ll take a couple of turns around the deck, then hit the sack. See you all in the morning.” He pushed back his chair, headed across the floor toward the forward exit.

“Interesting man,” Robin Lewis murmured. “I wonder what he really does?”

“Something terribly physical, I’m sure,” Herrick put in. “Do you believe that story of his about just happening to be in Barbados when we dropped anchor and coming along on the cruise on an impulse?”

“Why not?” Eldridge frowned at him.

The writer made overlapping circles on the top of the table with the wet bottom of his glass. “I’m just wondering if he could have any connection with the man we lost overboard during the storm. The Landers chap.” He looked up from his design on the table top, eyed his two companions. “Suppose he wasn’t washed overboard during the storm.” He pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I never could quite figure what anybody would be doing out in a storm like that, anyway.”

“You think he might have been murdered?”

Herrick shrugged. “It’s happened.”

Robin Lewis laughed nervously. “Don’t pay any attention to Lewis, Carson. He’s a writer, and like all writers he sometimes lets his imagination run away with him.” Despite the smile there was an uneasy look in her eyes.

CHAPTER 9

Captain Delmar Rose stood in the companionway outside the Grand Salon, watched the chefs setting up the long table of cold cuts and other delicacies that were set out nightly as a midnight snack for those passengers who hadn't gotten enough at the dinner table.

There was ham and turkey, hors d'oeuvres of every type—fish, pâtés, shrimp, crabmeat, lobster all nestled on finely crushed ice; there were out of season delicacies, caviar, cold cuts of every conceivable type. Already, in the background, a line was forming of those who were only an hour or two away from the dining table.

On every cruise there is a select group known as the Gobblers. These are the gourmands who infest every ship, who do most of their sightseeing via the menus, testing and tasting every item, monopolizing the services of the dining room stewards. They reduce the chief steward and his aides to a state of hopeless despair when the neighboring tables are left untended by the steward who spends most of his time transporting every item on the menu to the Gobblers' table. These, too, are first in line every midnight to carry off heaping plates full of the delicacies prepared for the midnight snack.

Captain Rose nodded his satisfaction to the men behind the counters as they piled the hors d'oeuvres in appealing tiers ready for dispensing. He was about to turn to join the chief steward when Mrs. Hilda Phelps slipped up behind him, caught him by the arm.

"Wherever have you been keeping yourself, Captain? We never get to see you except at mealtimes, and then you're so busy with your VIPs we don't even rate a hello," she simpered. In the bright light of the companionway, the heavy blotches of her make-up were even more pronounced, the uneven smear of her make-up more obvious. Her hennaed hair looked orange in the light, her teeth clicked as she talked.

The captain sighed softly, worked at a smile which didn't quite come off. "Somebody's got to steer the ship if we're going to keep on our schedule, Mrs. Phelps," he explained.

"I'm sure you have plenty of help who could do that. We miss your company," she pouted. "There are so few really attractive men around."

Captain Rose dug his balled fists even deeper into his jacket pockets. “I’m sure you haven’t looked very carefully. I’ve noticed quite a few. There’s that writer fellow, that Mr. Eldridge—both unattached, I understand.”

The pout gave the old woman’s face a gargoyle-like appearance. “I suppose there are a few. Like that new passenger—that Mr. Liddell. What about him, Captain?”

Captain Rose raised his eyebrows. “I don’t understand?”

The old woman smiled fatuously. “There’s such an air of mystery about him. Nobody seems to know anything about him. And he certainly doesn’t do much talking.” She peered at the captain with bright eyes. “He gives the impression that he’s a white-collar worker of some kind. But have you noticed those shoulders, the size of his hands?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t, Mrs. Phelps,” the captain told her coldly. “All I have noticed about the gentleman is that he’s rather presumptuous. Because he has some contacts with our home office I have agreed that he may finish out the cruise. But aside from that, my interest in your Mr. Liddell is nonexistent.”

Mrs. Phelps tittered at him. “I do believe you’re jealous, Captain. I never heard you talk like that in all the years I’ve sailed with you.”

The squat man’s harsh look dissolved. “Sorry. I am a little overwrought. It has been a difficult voyage so far.”

Mrs. Phelps managed to look sympathetic. “You mean about that poor Mr. Landers?” She shook her head. “A terrible thing. I guess it has made the voyage more difficult.” She unhooked her hand from the captain’s arm. “I won’t keep you any longer with my silly questions.” She turned away, headed for the grand staircase leading to the promenade deck.

Captain Rose stared after her thoughtfully. He rubbed the heel of his hand along the side of his jaw. He spotted the cruise director in one of the small groups that stood clotted in the hallway awaiting the signal to grab plates and queue up. He nodded for Allen to join him, walked out of earshot of the chief steward and the others who had been inspecting the buffet.

“Evening, Captain,” Allen greeted him. “Anything I can do for you?”

Captain Rose bobbed his head. “This Phelps woman, she’s at your table?” The cruise director nodded. “And this new passenger, Liddell? He’s there, too?” Allen nodded again.

“Anything wrong?”

The captain considered, shrugged. “Is there some talk going around about this Liddell?”

Allen frowned, shook his head. “None that I heard. I guess the unattached women are speculating about him. They do about every unattached male. Especially one with his looks. Why?”

The squat man in uniform considered. “Mrs. Phelps was asking me a lot of questions. Who he was? What was he doing here? Things like that.” He frowned. “Anybody else asking questions? Anyone seem to know him?”

The cruise director plucked at his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger. “I did get the impression—but that’s all it was, an impression—that one of the couples at my table knew him, or he knew them.” He shrugged. “I asked them if they knew each other, but both denied it. But from the look on Keen’s face when Liddell came to the table, I would have bet they’d met before. And not under very pleasant circumstances.”

“What about this Keen? What do you know about him?”

Allen shook his head. “Nothing. He and that redheaded wife of his stick by themselves. Talk very little, don’t mix with the other passengers. Kind of odd that way.”

The captain nodded uncertainly. “You’d better keep an eye on both Keen and Liddell. If there’s something funny going on aboard my ship I want to know about it.” He bobbed his head curtly to the cruise director, turned and strode off.

The chief steward walked over to the cruise director. “Okay, Jack. We’re all set up. Time to feed the natives. They’re kind of restless tonight. Guess a day shore-side gives them an appetite.”

Jack Allen pasted his ready cruise director smile in place, clapped his hands. “Okay, ladies and gentlemen. The buffet is open. Come and get it.” He stood aside, watched the quickly queuing, noisily chattering Gobblers expertly maneuver to the front of the line. His experienced eyes flicked around the companionway, failed to locate Liddell. He, too, was beginning to get extremely curious about the new passenger.

His blonde assistant worked her way through the small groups of gossiping passengers to where Allen stood. She had changed her blouse and tight-fitting skirt for a décolleté gold lamé gown that complemented the color of her hair, provided breath-taking contrast for the cocoa color of her

skin. She blinked at the firefly effect of the lights on the sparkling bracelets, the diamond earrings, sighed. “Every morning I spend hours trying to take off the poundage they put on here every night,” she told the cruise director in an undertone.

“Look at it this way, Ingrid, if they didn’t put it on for you to take off, maybe there wouldn’t be any job,” Allen told her. He eyed the dress, let his eyes roam from the top of her head to her feet with appropriate and interesting stops. “You’re breaking out the glad rags real early this trip. You usually keep that one for the big night.”

The blonde grinned at him. “Maybe this is the big night.” She turned, let her eyes wander around the crowd.

“Looking for anybody in particular?” Allen wanted to know.

“Just making sure that my basket cases are all being taken care of.” She nodded her satisfaction when she saw Fran Eldridge hanging onto the arm of Crew Cut with fierce determination. “Where’s Mrs. Phelps?”

“Out on deck parking her broom, no doubt,” the cruise director growled. “I wish you’d find somebody to take her off my hands. She’s getting to be a nuisance. Turns up no matter where I go with a lot of ridiculous questions. And she’s been annoying the captain, too.”

The blonde raised her eyebrows. “How?”

“Asking questions. Seems she’s real curious about this new passenger, Liddell. Captain sounded a little irritated. Know anything about him?”

Ingrid brought her wandering eyes back to Allen’s face. “He only came on board. How would I know anything about him?”

“It doesn’t take some people as long as others. I saw you and him getting real confidential this afternoon at the bar.”

The blonde shrugged. “It’s part of my job, making the new passengers feel at home.”

“You seem to like your work.”

Ingrid frowned at him. “Look, Jack, you and I understand each other. You do your job and have your own fun on the side. That goes for me too. We agreed on that when I took the job. It still goes.”

The cruise director grinned at her. “What are you getting so sensitive about? I’m not trying to write him out. Matter of fact, I’d like you to get to know him better.”

“Why?”

Allen shrugged. “Captain wants to know more about him, for one thing. And I always like to keep the captain happy.”

“Why don’t you ask Liddell who he is or what he is?”

“I’m not his type.” He let his eyes wander over her lush figure. “I think you might be.”

The blonde looked at him. “Okay. I’ve had worse assignments. If I have anything for you, I’ll call your stateroom.”

“Why don’t you drop by and—”

The blonde grinned at him. “That’s one thing I have in common with Liddell, Jack. You’re not my type, either.”

Allen scowled at her. “I’ll expect to hear from you.” He spun on his heel, headed for the grand staircase, shouldered his way through the hungry horde that was descending on the midnight spread.

Ingrid frowned at the cruise director’s back until it was swallowed up in the crowd, turned to find Robin Lewis watching her with an amused smile. “Looks like our genial cruise director is unhappy. I thought it was part of his contract to keep smiling.”

The blonde shrugged. “I don’t know about his contract, but he sure doesn’t understand mine. It calls for bed and board along with the salary. He has it figured it should be his bed.”

The actress eyed the lush lines of the blonde’s figure. “You can’t blame him for trying. The time to start worrying is when they stop.”

Ingrid smiled. “I guess so.” She looked past Robin to the long line holding plates to be filled from the tiered tables. “If you’re going to get anything to eat, you’d better get in line.”

The actress shuddered delicately. “I couldn’t eat another bite if my life depended on it. I don’t know how they manage to do it.”

The blonde compared the ample lines of the other passengers to the carefully massaged, svelte figure of the actress. “They kid themselves that the more woman there is, the more their husband has to love. You know the old story—acres and acres and all mine! Then they pull a faint when they find out that he’s been keeping a secretary half their size.”

Robin brought a jeweled cigarette case from her handbag, offered it to the blonde, drew a shake of her head. She reached into the bag, found a cigarette holder, screwed a cigarette into it. “I don’t see our new shipmate among the hungry horde. I guess that build of his is no accident.”

“You mean Mr. Liddell?” The blonde’s green eyes flicked along the line. “He doesn’t strike me as the Gobbler type. He’s more likely to be at one of the bars.”

The actress leaned over, accepted a light from one of the junior officers, thanked him with a smile. She took a deep drag, let the smoke escape from between half-parted lips. “Something about him intrigues me. I have the most peculiar feeling that I know him from somewhere. You wouldn’t happen to know whether he’s ever been in Hollywood?”

The blonde considered, shrugged. “I don’t know anything about him, frankly. But he doesn’t seem to me to be the type. To be an actor, I mean.”

Robin tapped the end of the holder against her teeth absently. “I don’t mean as an actor. It’s just some association that escapes me—” She broke off, shook her head. “I’m probably mistaken. In a town like Hollywood if I’d ever met a man like that, I don’t think I would have forgotten him.” She consulted the tiny baguette on her wrist. “I think I’ll drop by the Midnight Sun for a nightcap. Maybe you’ll drop by?”

“That’s the second invitation I’ve had tonight. I might just decide to do that.”

The actress smiled around her cigarette holder, headed for the grand staircase. She was oblivious to the epidemic of whispering she caused. The older passengers were consoling each other with comments on how old she looked, while the younger members were wondering how many face lifts it took to make such an ancient look so good.

To Robin, the whispers were an old story. She pretended not to hear the comments as she swept regally up the stairs and out of sight.

CHAPTER 10

The Midnight Sun was a small, intimate bar set off the main foyer on the promenade deck. It opened nightly at twelve when the other bars closed for the night and provided a headquarters and a refuge for the night owls.

Johnny Liddell walked into the room, stood in the doorway and looked around until his eyes became accustomed to the dimness. There was a small, circular bar set in the center of the room. It had red-leather elbow rests and a ring of matching stools. The only lighting in the room came from hidden fixtures in the corners, giving it a dim, intimate air. A number of comfortable armchairs and low tables were scattered around so as to provide each with the maximum of privacy. Near the ceiling, a pall of gray smoke stirred lazily in the draft from the open door.

Most of the tables were already filled, a handful of loners perched on the stools at the bar. Liddell could see Carson Eldridge at one table, his neatly combed white hair shining dully in the gloom. He was deep in conversation with Lewis Herrick, emphasizing his points with the flat of his hand on the edge of the table.

Nearby, at another table, the newlyweds Harry and Belle Doyle sat nursing two bottles of beer, their knees touching under the table, their heads together, oblivious to anyone else in the room.

Liddell walked over to the bar, slid up onto one of the stools. He signaled to the bartender for a scotch and soda, watched while the man in the white jacket made a production of building the drink.

The door to the companionway opened, agitating the cloud of smoke near the ceiling. Robin Lewis stood in the doorway for a moment, then crossed to where Eldridge and Herrick were sitting. Liddell could understand why the actress would like the indirect lighting of the late bar. It was like being photographed through a filter that miraculously erased the lines, softened the tendency to sag along the jaw line, wiped away the droop to her lips. Viewed in this light, she was still an excitingly beautiful woman.

The bar continued to fill up as late arrivals filtered in from the buffet. Martin Sands and his "niece" were among the latecomers, sat at a corner table, seemed to be having trouble finding things to talk about. The girl was

smoking a cigarette with short, nervous puffs; the man's eyes kept darting around the room as though in search of something to spark the conversation.

Liddell was on his second drink and third cigarette when Ingrid walked in. She acknowledged a wave from Carson Eldridge, crossed to where Liddell was sitting, squirmed up onto the stool alongside him.

“Waiting long?” she asked.

“Like forever,” he assured her.

The blonde grinned at him, asked the bartender for a brandy and soda. “It felt like forever to me, too. I didn't think they'd ever stop eating.” She waited while the man in the white jacket slid the glass in front of her. “Jack Allen and I alternate in playing host at the buffet. Tonight was my turn.” She wrinkled her nose. “I'm glad it's over.”

Liddell crushed out his cigarette in the ash tray, asked, “If you dislike the job that much, why do you keep doing it?” He raised his eyes from the spiral of smoke that rose from the ash tray, took inventory of her obvious assets. “A gal like you could do herself plenty of good in lots of other spots.”

The blonde sipped her drink, turned the full impact of her slanted eyes on him over the rim. Then, “Maybe this job offers me something I've been looking for that I couldn't find in another job.”

“For instance?”

She shrugged, with interesting effect on the bodice of her gown. “A chance to meet rich men. Maybe even marry one.” She half closed her eyes, studied him from under expertly tinted lids. “You wouldn't happen to be rich, would you, Liddell?”

He shook his head.

The blonde sighed philosophically. “It figured. The only rich men I ever meet on these cruises are fat, fifty and with more hands than an octopus.” She reached across to where his cigarettes lay on the bar, helped herself to one.

“But you still keep the job.” He waited while she fitted the cigarette between her lips, then held a match for her. “How come?”

She blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling, winced as a stray tendril stung her eye. “It has other compensations.” She reached down, smoothed the fabric across her well-rounded thigh. “I manage to make ends meet.”

Liddell grinned. “I'll bet.”

Ingrid removed the cigarette from between her lips, speared a tiny piece of tobacco with her long fingernail. “Now that you know all about me, how about you? Who are you and what do you really do?”

Liddell shrugged. “What’s to tell? My name’s Johnny Liddell. I take a little, leave a little, do a little of this, a little of that.”

The blonde studied the charred end of her cigarette. “Not exactly a pillar of society, huh?” She rolled her eyes up to his face. “You don’t smell like one.”

“How does a pillar of society smell?”

“Part wanting something he’s not supposed to have so bad he can taste it and part fear of being caught at it.” She drew a deep drag on her cigarette, let the smoke escape from between half-parted lips. “They sit there so god-awful proper, with their fat wives, looking like butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths. You wouldn’t know they were the same men if they happen to corner a girl behind a lifeboat or up on one of the top decks in the dark.” She brought her eyes back to Liddell. “You smell more like my kind of people. The kind who take what they want and don’t give a damn who knows.” She studied his face. “Are you?”

Liddell considered for a moment. “Part of my business does involve taking an occasional risk,” he conceded.

“I thought so,” Ingrid dropped her eyes to her glass, picked it up. She swirled the liquor around her glass thoughtfully. “You know, you’ve made an awful lot of people curious since you came on board this morning. Even the captain has been asking questions about you.”

“That so? Who’s he been asking?”

The blonde considered it. “Jack Allen, my boss.” She grinned at him frankly. “That’s why I’m here. To find out who you are and what you do.” She took a swallow from her glass, studied him over the rim. “I’m going to be awfully disappointed if you tell me you’re in stocks.”

Liddell chuckled. “Why stocks?”

“You said in your business you take a little, leave a little. That you take an occasional risk.” Her eyes flicked over his face. “What do you do?”

Liddell shook his head. “You’re making this all sound mysterious and romantic. I’m not.” He looked around, dropped his voice. “Some people I know got the idea they could set up a base in Barbados to operate from. I came down to look it over—” He shrugged. “It wouldn’t have worked out.”

Ingrid looked thoughtful. “You make it sound almost shady.” She eyed him, waited for an answer. When he passed it up, there was a new interest in her glance. “You’re not very communicative. Usually when I turn my charm on a passenger he falls all over himself telling me what a big wheel he is and how important he is.”

“That’s the curse of living a dull life.” Liddell grinned.

“I’ll bet.” She managed to look unhappy. “Allen is going to be very disappointed in me.”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t believe anybody would be disappointed in you. I’d be willing to risk it.”

“Well, thanks.” She drained her glass, set it back on the bar. “I promised to drop by for a nightcap and that’s it.”

“You can’t fly on one wing.”

The blonde shook her head. “I do have to get my beauty sleep.” As she slid off the stool, she brushed against him. He had the impression of a firm, rounded breast; the scent she wore filled his nostrils.

“I’ll take you back to your room.”

Ingrid shook her head. “I can find my way, thanks.” She turned, headed for the companionway. Liddell watched the play of her rounded hips against the tight fabric of her skirt, sighed.

A waiter materialized at his side. “Mr. Eldridge would like you to join his party, sir,” he told Liddell.

Johnny spun on his stool, looked over to where the white-haired man was beckoning to him. He nodded, dropped a bill on the bar and slid off his stool. He threaded his way through the tables to where Eldridge sat with Robin Lewis and Lew Herrick.

“Tough luck, old boy,” the writer greeted him with a grin. “We were rooting for you.”

Liddell slid into the chair opposite Robin Harris. “You over-rate me. I never stood a chance.”

“Cost me a round of drinks,” the white-haired man complained. “I’ve been waiting ever since we left New York to see someone waltz out of here wearing that Scandinavian on his arm. From the progress you’ve been making since you came aboard, I figured you might be the one.”

“I think you’re all a bunch of lechers,” the actress scolded smilingly. “I’m sure Ingrid is above that. Besides, you make me horribly self-conscious about walking out with anybody. Do you suppose they’re speculating about me like that?”

“Definitely, my dear,” Herrick assured her. “You should hear the stories that are going around about us. Very flattering, I assure you. My steward makes it a point to keep me informed.”

“Nasty-minded people. All of them.”

The waiter deposited a round of drinks on the table, drifted off.

“A lot of speculation going on about you, too, old fellow.” The writer turned to Liddell. “Understanding is that it’s extremely rare to pick up a passenger so late in the cruise.”

Liddell grinned. “I’ve got influence.”

“Lucky thing for you that Landers fellow got himself washed overboard, wasn’t it?” Eldridge asked casually. “We filled the last available cabins in Antigua. Real convenient of him to vacate one for you.”

“Wasn’t it?” Liddell grunted. He checked his watch. “I guess I’ll make this one the nightcap and get some sack time, if you don’t mind.” He drained the glass, set it back on the table.

“Would you mind very much walking me back to my room, Johnny?” the actress asked. She grinned at the surprised look on the writer’s face, the speculation in the white-haired man’s eyes. “If they’re doing so much talking about us, darling,” she told the writer, “don’t you think it would be fun to really confuse them?”

Herrick tried for a smile, didn’t quite make it. “Of course.” He nodded to Liddell. “Be my guest.”

Carson Eldridge leaned back in his chair, shook his head. “Like I said this afternoon, you sure don’t waste much time. Monopolizing the Scandinavian and Robin Lewis, both in the same evening—” He shook his head again. “I’d love to see what you do for an encore.”

The cool breeze on the promenade deck felt good after the closeness of the bar. Robin Lewis tucked her hand under Liddell’s arm.

“It seems a shame to go in this early. There are so few nights like this before we’ll be back in the slush and sleet.” The actress sighed. “Mind if we

walk a little?”

“And talk?”

The woman adjusted her stride to Liddell’s, shrugged. “If you want to.” They started down the length of the carefully holystoned deck toward the stern of the ship. “You see, Liddell, I know who you are. What I’m not sure of is what you’re after. That’s what I’d like to know.”

Liddell grinned glumly. “You’d make a good poker player, Robin.”

“I’m not bluffing, Johnny.” She led the way to the rail, released his arm, pulled her scarf closer around her shoulders. “When I first heard your name, it struck a familiar chord with me. You know how it is?” she asked. “You fumble around, try to tie the familiar name in with something or somebody. All I could come up with for you was Hollywood.”

“You’ve already mentioned the fact that you were in the movies,” Liddell told her coolly.

“We were talking about you. When I saw you, your face wasn’t as familiar as your name. It was tantalizing, trying to remember where I heard that name and under what circumstances. It bugged me all evening.” She smiled at him. “It only came to me while I was sitting there at the table with Carson and Lewis.”

“What came to you?”

The smile was broader. “I was in Hollywood a couple of years ago when you broke the Dirk Messner killing out there. Your name was all over the papers. The reason your face wasn’t equally as familiar is because there were very few pictures of you in the papers.”

Liddell groaned. “Mention this to anybody?”

The actress shook her head. “Not yet. It just came to me. Besides, there might be a good reason for all this cloak-and-dagger stuff.”

“So I’m a private detective. Can’t private detectives want to take a rest like anybody else?”

Robin stared out over the water, her eyes following the luminous path that capped the waves, drew a line out to where a pumpkin-colored moon nestled in the blue-black of the sky. Below her, a mist rose from the foaming sea, created a ghostly effect in the light from the portholes.

“You heard what Carson Eldridge said. You couldn’t have known that Landers’s cabin would be available by the time the ship reached Barbados.”

“So?”

“So your being aboard is no accident. When word reached New York that something had happened to Landers, you flew to Barbados, waited for the *Queen* to arrive and took up where he left off.”

Liddell sighed lugubriously. “And here all along I’ve been thinking it was my charm that caused you to get me out here alone.”

“Is that why you’re on board? To finish what Landers started?”

Liddell considered for a moment. “What had Landers started?”

“You won’t tell me what you’re doing on board, then?”

“I thought it was obvious. I’m taking a cruise.”

The actress shook her head. “I think you’re going to be very sorry, Mr. Detective.”

“That so? Why?”

“Because I’m going right to the captain, tell him who you are and what you’re here for. My guess is that tomorrow when we leave Grenada you and your baggage will be sitting on the dock.” She swung around, hightailed it toward the aft companionway.

Liddell leaned an elbow on the rail, fumbled through his pockets, brought up a cigarette. It was one of those thousand-to-one shots that scored against him for her to recognize him. If it were only the captain that Robin Lewis intended to alert, it could still work out, but there was no way he could be sure.

Liddell scratched a match, touched it to his cigarette, watched the few sparks that flew into the black void and quickly extinguished themselves.

A couple rounded the end of the deck, arm in arm. The girl’s giggle was shrill and unmusical as they passed Liddell, engrossed in each other. They headed for the companionway, disappeared.

The door to the forward companionway opened, spilled a yellow geometric shape onto the darkened deck. A couple crossed the deck to the rail, stood gazing at the stars. Liddell recognized the lankiness of the man and buxomness of the woman as the honeymooners.

Their name was on Landers’s list, but it was painfully apparent that this was their first cruise. Since most of the passengers tapped to sit at the

captain's table or the cruise director's were old-timers on the run, he decided it was their winning the contest that drew them the coveted table booking.

Liddell leaned his elbows on the rail, stared down at the lace-capped waves that were rushing by the ship's side. Mentally he reviewed the findings of his first day, admitted glumly to himself that they were something less than spectacular.

Landers must have pinpointed the people who were smuggling in the diamonds. He must have had some idea of where the delivery was to be made and to whom. Otherwise how could he have been so confident that he could smash the ring the minute the *Queen* returned to New York? From what happened to him, he must have been right, Liddell conceded sourly, but characteristically Landers had left no hint of what he had found, what he suspected or what he intended to do.

Liddell swore softly under his breath, mentally counted the days left to him. The diamond syndicate in New York, alerted that the shipment would probably be smuggled in by the *Queen*, would see to it that the ship was searched from stem to stern. Liddell had the uneasy conviction that no matter how carefully it was searched, there would be no trace of contraband diamonds. The mob behind the smuggling wasn't made up of amateurs.

He flipped the cigarette over the rail, watched the pinpoint of light until it drowned itself in the water below. The only thing he had to go by was the fact that of all the addresses in Landers's book, only one related to a stop on the cruise. The probability was that the diamonds would be brought aboard in Curaçao. The captain's guess that it would be easier to make the transaction in a free port than in another South American port made sense. Liddell toyed with the idea of asking the captain to have every passenger searched on his return from the shore visit, realized how ridiculous it would sound.

He debated the advisability of another cigarette and a nightcap, knew no amount of liquor would shake him out of the mood he was in, voted it down. The honeymooners were still merged into one shadow at the other end of the deck. The occasional couples who had been making their pre-bedtime circuit of the deck had given up. Liddell headed for the aft companionway, rode the elevator down to B deck.

He was heading for 321 when he saw the tall, broad-shouldered crew cut figure of the third officer tapping discreetly at a doorway at the far end of the companionway near the ship's beauty shop. The three gold bars on the sleeve of Weston's formal jacket glinted metallicly in the subdued light.

The door to the stateroom opened, Liddell could vaguely make out the features of the redhead he had noticed coming out of the beauty shop earlier in the day. The door opened wider, the third officer slipped past the redhead, the door closed behind him.

So much for young love, Liddell grumbled. Crew Cut had put in his time with Fran Eldridge, and now that he had safely tucked her away for the night, he could turn the meter off. The rest of the night could be spent wiping Fran's eager amateurish kisses off his lips, blocking out the sound of her shrill giggle from his ears, forgetting the vision of her boniness in the ample curves of the redhead.

Liddell sighed. He wondered if he was getting old. He wasn't even taking the morning papers to bed with him.

CHAPTER 11

Johnny Liddell lay flat on his back, sprawled across the bunk in his stateroom, fully clothed. His mouth was open, he was snoring lightly. The door opened, Henrik, his cabin steward, stood in the doorway, stared at him with a worried expression that etched a V between his brows. He checked his wristwatch, the frown deepened. Finally, as though reaching a decision, he walked over to the side of the bunk, caught Liddell by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

“You all right, mister?” he asked. He shook again. “You all right?”

Liddell shrugged off the hand, twisted onto his side. A thin stream of saliva glistened on the side of his mouth, made a damp spot on the pillow.

“You wake up now, please?” The steward shook him again.

Liddell opened sticky eyes, was aware of a throbbing headache and a mouth full of cotton. He groaned softly, rolled onto his back, tried to focus his eyes on the man bending over him. After a moment, he recognized the steward, tried to nod. He regretted the impulse, groaned and closed his eyes again. “I’m okay, I’m okay,” he grunted thickly.

“I don’t know what to do,” the steward apologized. “I think maybe you just take a nap, catch a late tender, but now the last tender from shore is back and you still sleeping.” Henrik shrugged elaborately. “I start to worry.”

“What time is it?” Liddell wanted to know.

“Almost three. We getting ready to sail.” He studied Liddell’s face with concern. “You sure you okay? You want some tea or coffee, maybe?”

“I’ll be all right,” Liddell assured him. He swung his legs over the side of the bunk, felt a surge of dizziness. He wondered if it would help if he put his head down between his knees, vetoed the idea. He was afraid his eyeballs would fall out. After a moment, the giddiness passed, he was able to straighten up.

“Must have been something I ate.” He grinned weakly, pulled himself to his feet, tottered to the lavatory. He held his head under the tap until the cobwebs in his brain cleared.

He towed his wet head, took a look at himself in the mirror. He wondered if he'd dare let the red-eyed apparition that stared back at him get close enough to him with a razor to shave. He walked out into the cabin where Henrik stood waiting.

"I think I'll take you up on that coffee, Henrik," Liddell told him. "I may be going to live after all."

The steward flashed a relieved smile, backed out of the cabin, closed the door after him.

Liddell dropped into a chair, raked his fingers through his damp hair. He tried to recall what had happened the night before. Piece by piece he put the night together—the session in Maurie Handel's cabin, the drink with Ingrid in the bar at the Midnight Sun, the drink at Carson Eldridge's table and the conversation with Robin Lewis just before he had come down to his stateroom.

It had been a long time since he tasted one, but Liddell knew the feel of a Mickey Finn when he got one. And last night, someone had fed him a Mickey, with highly effective results.

He felt through his pockets, brought out his wallet, riffled through it. He couldn't tell whether anyone had gone through it, but if they had the question of who he was no longer was a secret. His license and credentials were prominently displayed behind the cellophane covers. From his breast pocket, he brought the envelope with the penciled name and address in Curaçao that he had copied from Landers's address book. He swore softly, pulled himself to his feet, walked unsteadily over to the dresser. He pulled out the bottom drawer, checked to make sure his .45 was still in its holster, nestled under some sport shirts.

He tugged the gun loose from its holster, took it over to the porthole, examined it. He breathed on its polished surface, held it up to the light. There was no indication of any fingerprints on it—his or anybody else's. He snapped the magazine out, examined the bullets one by one. The first three bullets in the magazine had had the lead nose removed, had been rendered useless. Liddell swore again, snapped the shell out of the gun's chamber. It, too, had been turned into a blank cartridge. It meant that if it came to a showdown, Liddell would be spotting his opponents four free shots. The chances were that he'd never reach the fifth one.

It also meant that someone had prowled his stateroom, did know his identity, and had taken into consideration the possibility that it might be

necessary to deal with him.

He removed the blanks from the magazine, replaced them with fresh shells. He slid the gun back into its holster, replaced it in the drawer.

There was a discreet knock at the door, Henrik came in with a tray and a pot of coffee. He set it down on the table under the porthole. "This make you feel better," he assured Liddell. He filled the cup with the steaming liquid.

"You see me come to the cabin last night, Henrik?"

The steward shook his head. "I put your bed down around midnight. You not back by then."

"Then you wouldn't know if I had company?"

The steward grinned lewdly. "I don't see anybody." He indicated the coffee. "You drink while it's hot. It much better."

Liddell nodded, walked over to the table, dropped into the chair. He picked up the cup, warmed the palms of his hands with its sides. Something about the whole picture bothered him. A mickey strong enough to put him out for twelve hours should have worked a lot faster. The last drink he'd had was at Eldridge's table. After that, he had walked on the deck with Robin, stayed and smoked for a while after she left. He could remember seeing Weston, the third officer, going into the redhead's cabin, then coming to his own.

He took a sip of the coffee, automatically reached for a piece of fruit in the bowl on the table. He stopped with his hand halfway to the bowl, scowled.

"Henrik, did you clean this table off any time today?" he snapped.

The steward frowned. "Just the ash tray. And the waste basket."

Liddell indicated the two bananas, the tangerine and the apple in the bowl. "Wasn't there an apple core in it?"

Henrik concentrated for a minute, then nodded. "Yes. Some cigarettes and an apple core." He frowned. "Something?"

"Who sent me that fruit, Henrik?"

The frown was back. The steward shook his head. "I did not bring it in." He stared at it curiously. "I do not remember it being here yesterday." The frown deepened. "I did not see it before."

Liddell picked up a banana from the bowl, examined it closely. He tossed it aside, examined the rest of the fruit in the dish. The only thing he could distinguish with his naked eye was a slight bruise on the side of the apple. He set it aside thoughtfully, picked up his cup of coffee.

“There is something wrong with the fruit?” Henrik wanted to know. His eyes hopped from the apple to Liddell’s face and back.

“No,” Liddell assured him. “I was just wondering who sent it to me.” He took a deep swallow from his cup, burned his tongue, swore under his breath.

Henrik worked at a smile, but worry still clouded his eyes. “You want something else?”

“This is fine, Henrik. I’ll drink this, then get up on deck and get a little air. Give me fifteen or twenty minutes to change then you can make it up. Okay?”

“Sure thing.” The steward turned, hustled out of the cabin.

Liddell waited until he had closed the door behind him, picked up the apple, walked into the lavatory. He cut the apple in two at the point of the bruise, smelled it. It gave off a pungent odor, not completely disguised by the smell of the apple. He touched the tip of his finger to it, touched it to the tip of his tongue. The taste was so faint as to be undiscernible if he had not been looking for it.

The taste and smell told the story of how the mickey had been administered. The fruit was loaded with enough chloral hydrate to knock out any two men. And whoever had sent it had gambled that he’d eat a piece before he went to bed. The suspicion he’d formed that the people he was dealing with were no amateurs was now a conviction. Now that they knew who he was, and what he was doing on board, the gloves would be off. He was on the same spot Harry Landers had been on, but with one exception. Liddell knew how far the diamond smugglers would go to protect their racket. Landers had to learn the hard way.

Carson Eldridge was perched on a stool watching the clotted group of women milling about the counters of the ship stores which sold duty-free watches and jewelry, perfumes and other free port bargains. He hailed Johnny Liddell as he was working his way through the crowd toward the purser’s office.

“What’s going on?” Liddell wanted to know.

“You mean you’ve never watched this scramble? Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He used his cigar as a pointer. “Soon as we leave a port, the stores open up and they’re jammed like this every day. We call it the *Queen Alexandra* runs. They run between the purser’s office and the counters like a bunch of magpies buying up everything that glitters.” He returned the cigar to between his teeth. “There’s one old gal who’s really worth watching. Gets out there on the sun deck, oils herself up like a broiling chicken. Soon’s the stores open she’s in here, working her way in through the crowd. Goes in all oiled up, comes out slick and clean. Nobody seems to notice.”

Liddell stood and watched for a few minutes. “You mean it goes on like this every day?”

Eldridge bobbed his head. “Every day. You’d think they’d buy themselves out. Just you wait until you hit Willemsted in Curaçao. You’ll see the same gang jamming Spritzer and Fuhrmann and all the other shops. Some people are compulsive drinkers, they’re compulsive buyers.”

Liddell shook his head. “Better them than me when it comes time to bring the stuff through customs.”

The white-haired man grinned crookedly. “It’s not that tough,” he said cryptically. “It’s like the ‘Purloined Letter.’ You stick it right under their noses and they never see it.”

Liddell studied the older man’s face, could read nothing in it. Eldridge had returned his attention to the milling mob of women.

“Well, I’d better get to the purser’s office before he closes.” Liddell consulted his watch. “I guess I was more tired than I thought. I slept right through the stop-over at Grenada.”

“You didn’t miss anything,” Eldridge told him. “If you’ve seen one old fort with cannons and dungeons, you’ve seen them all.”

“I guess so,” Liddell agreed. He nodded, turned and headed for the purser’s office.

The little fat, perspiring assistant purser who had greeted him upon arrival on board waddled over to the railing. His smile dimmed somewhat when he recognized Liddell. “Yes, sir? Can I help you?”

“I’d like to have a check cashed,” Liddell told him. He brought a folded square of paper from his pocket, slid it across the counter.

The fat man picked it up, managed to look unhappy. “This is for one hundred dollars, sir,” he told him morosely.

“I know it,” Liddell told him. “That’s what I want. A hundred dollars.”

The assistant purser laid the check on the counter, folded his hands in front of him. “I’m afraid you’ll have to get the check okayed, sir,” he told him. There were dimples where his knuckles should have been. “If you can wait until tomorrow, the purser will be able to—”

“I don’t want to wait until tomorrow,” Liddell snapped. “I want it now.”

The perspiration gleamed on the fat man’s face. His eyes darted from side to side, avoiding Liddell’s angry glance. He shrugged helplessly. “I’m sorry, sir. I can’t cash it without an okay. And I can’t disturb the purser. I have my orders, sir,” he apologized.

“Who else can okay it?” Liddell stormed. Several people at the counter, writing out checks, looked up at the angry note in Liddell’s voice.

“Just the purser, sir. The captain, of course, could but—”

“I want to see the captain then,” Liddell stormed. “I don’t see anybody else having this kind of trouble.”

“But you must understand, sir. Most of the passengers embarked in New York, had established credit. But you, sir, you came aboard at Barbados—” He shrugged. “We had no opportunity to establish credit.”

“I want to see the captain,” Liddell growled.

“Certainly, sir.” The man behind the counter lifted the receiver of his telephone, dialed with short flicks of his sausage-shaped index finger. His voice was low, there was a pained expression on his face as he murmured the explanation for the call. The perspiration glinted in tiny globules along his hairline and on his upper lip as he talked. He listened for a moment, bobbed his head. He dropped the receiver on its hook. “The captain will see you, sir.” He snapped a finger at a uniformed page. “This gentleman is to see Captain Rose.”

Without a word, Liddell turned, followed the page toward the elevator. The assistant purser brought a balled handkerchief from his hip pocket, swabbed at his face. Jack Allen, the cruise director, walked over to him, turned, his eyes following Liddell’s back out of sight.

“What’s with him?” the cruise director wanted to know.

The fat man shook his head. “He’s got no credit, nothing. Orders are that he can’t cash a check for more than fifty dollars until we get some kind of a rating on him. He insists on seeing the captain.” He swabbed at his face again. “Better him than me.”

“How’d he get aboard anyhow? I never knew of Captain Rose picking up passengers with the cruise half finished.”

The assistant purser shrugged his shoulders, replaced the handkerchief in his hip pocket. “Captain didn’t like it a bit. Orders came from the home office. Seems like he has some friend, a vice president or something. We had an empty cabin.” He shrugged again. “So here he is.”

“Funny thing. If the captain didn’t like it—”

The fat man shook his head. “He didn’t. Gave me orders that the minute the new passenger sets foot on board he’s to see him.” He looked around and dropped his voice. “He also gave orders that we weren’t to stow the passenger’s gear until the captain gave an okay. He’ll never know how close he came to staying in Barbados.”

CHAPTER 12

Captain Delmar Rose paced nervously back and forth, puffed nervously on his pipe, exhaled thick clouds of blue-gray smoke. He stopped pacing at the rap on his door, locked his hands behind him.

“Come in.”

The door opened, Emil, his personal steward, ushered Johnny Liddell into the room, stepped out and closed the door after him. The captain favored Liddell with a jaundiced look, stalked over to his desk chair, dropped into it.

“Seems like you’ve been a real busy fellow,” he complained. “I suppose you know that two of our passengers, the Keens, quit the cruise bag and baggage in Grenada?”

Liddell sauntered over to a chair, sat down. He dredged his pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “How would I know that?”

“It was because of you that they left.”

Liddell stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. “How do you know that?”

“Because it’s my job to know things. You went into the Keens’s cabin last night after dinner. When you left, there was a big row in there. What about?”

Liddell lit the cigarette. “His name wasn’t Keen. His name was Maurie Handel. He’s not a very desirable character.”

The captain leaned forward on his desk, his hands clasped as if in prayer as he visibly controlled his impatience. “I don’t care who he was or what he was. I’m running a cruise ship, not a Sunday School. As long as he doesn’t ___”

“Interfere with the operation of your ship,” Liddell filled in. “But suppose he was getting ready to?”

The captain broke off, leaned back. He rattled the juice in his pipe-stem, tried to regain his composure. “How?”

“For one thing he pulled a gun on me. A man could get real narrow-minded at a thing like that and pull a gun of his own.”

“Do you have a gun?”

Liddell nodded his head. “And a license for it.”

“On my ship, I decide who can carry a gun and who can’t. You will turn it in, I’ll return it when we reach New York,” the man behind the desk snapped. He drummed on the edge of his desk with powerful fingers. “That’s understood?”

Liddell shrugged. “This is your home grounds. You write the rules.” He took the cigarette from between his lips, flicked a thin collar of ash from the glowing end. “But somebody’s going to be awfully disappointed.”

“Who?”

Liddell shook his head. “I can’t give you any names yet. But somebody cased my cabin last night, fixed it so the first four slugs in my gun are blanks.”

The captain leaned back in his chair, his eyes wide. “You’re sure of this?” He accepted Liddell’s nod. “But how?”

Liddell reached into his pocket, brought out a banana. He tossed it onto the desk top. “Somebody sent me a basket of fruit. Only thing is, they first loaded it with chloral hydrate. Put me out for over twelve hours and even then my steward practically had to give me artificial respiration to get me on my feet.”

The captain stared at him, reached for the banana. He examined it carefully, peeled it, smelled it. When he looked up at Liddell, his eyes were thoughtful. “How?”

Liddell shrugged. “It’s only a guess, but I’d say they probably filled a hypodermic full of the stuff, squirted it into the fruit until it wouldn’t take any more. It’s loaded with it.”

“It takes some people longer to make themselves hated than others. You’re breaking the track record. Somebody feeds you a mickey, one of the passengers pulls a gun on you.” He studied Liddell thoughtfully. “You think the same man could have done both?”

“Maurie Handel?”

The captain nodded.

“I doubt it. Maurie thought the boys in the mob put me on board to finger him for a hit—”

“Why?”

Liddell shrugged. “He was a mouthpiece for the mob who turned state’s evidence, and sang like a stage-struck canary. The boys get narrow-minded about things like that. That’s why he pulled the gun. But why should he doctor the fruit? He already knew who I was.”

“Maybe he wanted to make sure you didn’t get in the way of his getaway.”

Liddell considered it, shook his head. “I doubt it. I think whoever sent the fruit was suspicious of me and wanted a chance to find out who I was and what I was after. And I think they made it.”

“Then you think the smugglers are on to you?”

“Looks like it. They’ve probably suspected it right along. Now they’re sure.”

The captain looked worried. “There was no leak from this end.”

Liddell nodded. “It was just a bad break that tipped my hand. There were no empty cabins after the ship left Antigua according to your passenger list. Then I pop up in Barbados knowing that one of the cabins had been emptied by Landers’s disappearance. For the kind of people we’re dealing with, that was a little too pat.”

The captain discovered he had allowed his pipe to go out. He scratched a wooden match on the underside of his desk, held it to the pipe, sucked the flame down into the bowl. “And we don’t know anything more about them than the day you came aboard.” He shook out the match, dropped it into the ash tray. “Looks like they’re scoring all the points.”

Liddell scratched at his chin. “Looks like that right now.”

“But?”

“I have a couple of ideas. Nothing I could prove or that would stand up without more proof than I have, but something could develop from them.”

Captain Rose blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling, squinted through it. “You’re thinking that it’s a member of my staff. That it?”

“Either that, or somebody who makes the trip fairly regularly. It’s not just hit-and-run, that’s for sure.” Liddell scowled thoughtfully. “My guess is

that the stones are processed and the smugglers are notified when a shipment is ready. It might not be every trip. They only have to make a half dozen or so good killings a year with a racket like this. You can bring in an awful lot of diamonds in a pretty small space.”

The captain nodded. “I’m aware that many of the names on Landers’s list have taken several cruises on the *Queen*. But remember that he listed two tables at which repeaters get first consideration.”

“This Robin Lewis. What do you know about her?”

The captain busied himself with his pipe for a moment. “I think you can safely leave her out of your thinking. I’ll vouch for her.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows. “Like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like that Courvoisier on the bar. Private stock?”

The captain pulled his pipe from between his teeth, stabbed it at Liddell. “That’s insolent, mister. I don’t take insolence on my ship.”

Liddell held his hands up, palms out. “What you do and who you do it with is your business. My business is to find out who’s smuggling diamonds into the United States.” He shrugged. “I’ve got to eliminate a few of these suspects. To do it, I have to ask questions.”

The captain returned the pipe to his mouth. “Robin Lewis has nothing to do with it.”

“She got all upset when she recognized me as a private detective and tied me in with Landers. If she’s so innocent why should she be worried?”

The captain got up out of his chair, started pacing back and forth, puffing at his pipe, locking his hands behind him. Finally, as if reaching a decision, he stopped in front of Liddell.

“Five or six years ago, Robin Lewis took her first cruise on board my ship. You might not believe it, but every unattached female on a ship like this decides to help the captain forget his loneliness. Robin wasn’t like that. She was class, desirable and beautiful.” He rattled the juice in his pipe-stem, took his time selecting the words. “She accepted my invitation to have dinner and cocktails up here several times and we found we had a lot in common. Since then, whenever she travels, she travels on my ship.”

Liddell nodded. “That why she panicked when she recognized me?”

The captain bobbed his head. “She thought you were hired by my wife to get evidence of some kind against us.” He sucked at his pipe, found it had gone out, walked to the desk and knocked out the dottle. “I was furious the night I found out Landers was a private detective and blurted it out to her. She jumped to the conclusion that he was on board to trap us.” He grinned humorlessly. “I couldn’t tell her he was after diamond smugglers, so I just laughed it off. Then last night she put two and two together and got six. She came tearing in to warn me that you were flown from New York to meet the ship at Barbados. Know why?”

Liddell shook his head.

“Because she had it figured that I had Landers killed so he couldn’t report back to my wife. And your job was to nail me for it.” He sighed, shook his head. “Such an imagination, that one. It must be all those bad movies she made.”

Liddell grinned. “I hope you convinced her you didn’t kill Landers?”

Captain Rose smiled glumly. “I think she was disappointed. It would be more romantic that way. I finally convinced her that you were sent here by an insurance company to find out if Landers committed suicide. She seemed satisfied.”

“I had it figured from one look at Herrick that she was too much woman for him.”

The captain shrugged. “He has been very attentive. And I have been very busy.”

Liddell nodded. “How about your other repeaters? Carson Eldridge, for instance?”

The short squat man considered. “Been aboard several times. First time for the girl, though. Not much to know about him. Seems to be well fixed, likes his liquor and his cards.” He brought the tobacco pouch out of his pocket, started loading his pipe. “One of my junior officers has been seeing to it that the kid doesn’t hang around the old man’s neck too much.”

“You have to be versatile to skipper a cruise ship, don’t you?”

“Everything from a glorified bar operator to a hotel room clerk and house dick combined. Running the ship is the least of my worries.” The smile dimmed. “I don’t think Eldridge is your man. For that matter, I can’t see any of the others involved.”

“Landers didn’t die of old age,” Liddell pointed out. “Somebody helped him over the side.”

The captain tabulated on spatulate fingers. “There’s the Conways. He’s so henpecked, I can’t see him having the nerve. McDowell?” He thought about it for a minute, shook his head. “An old windbag. The honeymooners? Herrick? First trip for both of them. Hilda Phelps?” He shrugged. “She could be a criminal master mind in disguise, but I doubt it. And the Sands couple are too busy wearing a path between the two cabins to have anything else on their minds. That leaves the Keens, and you took real good care of them.”

“Well, we’ve got to hope that Acme comes up with something on one of them. When do we get to Curaçao?”

“La Guaira tomorrow morning, then Caracas Bay, Curaçao the next morning.”

“Then we’ll see what we see.”

“If you’re in any condition to see anything.” The captain stuck his pipe between his teeth, scratched a wooden match on the sole of his shoe, held it over the bowl of his pipe, sucked the flame down into it. “If I were you, I’d stay off poorly lighted promenades and dark decks. Now that they know who you are, they may try for you like they did for Landers.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time somebody’s tried for me. Lots of others who did try didn’t stay around long enough to find out how it came out. Anyway, thanks for worrying about me.”

“Who’s worrying about you?” Captain Rose exhaled a thick cloud of blue-gray smoke, followed it ceilingward with his eyes. “It’s not going to help my reputation to lose two passengers on the same run.” He brought his eyes down to Liddell’s face. “Besides, it doesn’t matter how many times it’s been tried. It only takes the one time that doesn’t miss.”

“For your sake, I’ll try to see to it that nothing happens to me,” Liddell assured him.

“Do that,” the captain warned. “And about that gun of yours. I’ve changed my mind. Maybe you’d better hang onto it. You may be needing it worse than we do.” He ground his teeth on the pipe-stem. “Just try not to shoot up a lot of innocent passengers.”

CHAPTER 13

The afternoon tea dance beside the swimming pool was already in full swing by the time Johnny Liddell walked out onto the sports deck. He stood in the doorway to the aft veranda, squinted into the slanting sunlight.

Overhead the sky was studded with lazy, fat, cottony clouds. The white line of the wake arched gracefully behind them in the turquoise water, and with Grenada out of sight there was nothing to mar the perfect circle of the horizon.

On the postage-stamp-sized dance floor, a dozen or more couples were whirling to the rhythms of the small ensemble. Harry and Belle Doyle were sitting at a table at the side of the pool, they caught his attention, waved him down. He threaded through the tables to where they sat.

“We missed you at breakfast and on the island,” the raw-boned man greeted him. “Thought maybe you were sick. Had a tough time talking Belle out of sending tea and toast to your cabin.”

“I guess my first night at sea tired me out more than I realized. I slept right through.” The music stopped, the couples on the floor started drifting back to their tables.

Jack Allen, the cruise director, crossed the floor to the microphone. “May I have your attention for just one moment, ladies and gentlemen? This will take just a moment.” He waited for them to get seated and for the hum of conversation to die down.

Liddell slid into a chair at the Doyles’s table.

“I’m sure we all had a wonderful time on Grenada this afternoon,” the cruise director blasted into the microphone. “Those of you who went up to the Hotel Santa Maria got one of the best views in the islands from its terrace. Those of you who went to Grand Anse Beach saw one of the prettiest beaches anywhere. Let’s hear it. Everybody have a good time?”

He cupped his ears, listened for the scattered hand clapping and beamed. It reminded Liddell of the captain’s description of a cruise director—an over age cheer leader. Allen raised his hands to cut off the dwindling applause.

“Tomorrow it’s another port, a great one. We dock around seven, but we can’t debark until we’re cleared by the Venezuelan officials. Please don’t forget to carry your cruise membership card with you when you leave the ship.” There was a low hum of conversation. Allen raised his hands for attention. “This is important, ladies and gentlemen. Very important.” He paused, then, “Ladies and gentlemen are urged not to go ashore in shorts. Ladies are urged not to wear slacks at any time and gentlemen will be required to wear coats and ties while going through churches or public buildings or when having lunch.”

There was a rumble of annoyed comment. Allen shrugged, held his hands out, palms up. “We don’t make the rules, ladies and gentlemen. The Venezuelans do. I don’t have to remind you that there’s some anti-American feeling around Caracas—”

“Some anti-American feeling?” McDowell, the oil man from the captain’s table snorted. “Look what they did to Dick Nixon when he came down here!”

“Maybe they’re critics. They saw him on television,” came the retort from a table in the rear. There was a scattering of applause, some laughter. The oil man’s face turned a murky color, he started to rise in his chair, permitted the cruise director to wave him down.

“I just want to remind you these people are very sensitive and they don’t like us. Let’s not have any unpleasant incidents if we can help it.” He turned, signaled to the ensemble. “I’ve taken up enough of your time. How about some music, professor?”

The ensemble broke into a tortured rendition of the “Tea for Two Cha-Cha.” The Arthur Murray alumni promptly got to their feet, led their partners out onto the floor. In a moment, hips were swinging, heads were snapping from right to left in time to the music.

Jack Allen walked across to where McDowell was sputtering indignantly to his wife, punctuating his remarks by pounding on the edge of his table. The cruise director slid into a chair across from him, smilingly attempted to placate him.

“I don’t blame the Venezuelan people,” Belle Doyle spoke up. “I think it’s disgraceful the way some of these people dress.” She looked around disapprovingly. “I’m sure they wouldn’t think of being seen going around in their home towns dressed like they are when they go on shore.”

Her husband grinned. “They sure wouldn’t if they lived in Three Rivers.” He turned to Liddell. “That’s where we live mister. Three Rivers, Wisconsin. Got forty acres back there. And to tell you the truth I can’t hardly wait to get back to them.”

Liddell brought a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, offered them, drew no takers. “The cruise isn’t living up to your expectations?”

The big-boned farmer scratched his head, considered. “Tell the truth, I don’t know what I expected.” He looked up at the clear blue of the sky, the fluffy white clouds. “The day we left Three Rivers, there was slush and snow underfoot, the sky was gray-black and getting ready to dump a couple more inches on us. Nobody can’t fault the weather. And everybody else seems to be having a good time. So I guess it’s me.”

“It is not you, Harry, and you know it,” Belle put in. “Take a look at them. They’re not enjoying it any more than we are. They’re just working harder at making believe they do.” She turned to Liddell. “I don’t want you to go thinking I don’t like the people or anything like that. It’s just that I make strange with them. I’ve never been more than a couple of hundred miles away from Three Rivers before and this business of going from one island to another, day after day, with all of them looking alike—” She broke off, shrugged. “I’d rather stay home.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that, Belle,” Harry put in. “You said yourself the Mill Reef Club in Antigua was the prettiest place you ever saw. And in Barbados—”

“They’re pretty, sure. But every time we go ashore, the people who live there—the whites and the blacks—they stand around staring at us. I got the feeling they’re laughing at us and to tell you the truth I don’t blame them. All these fat women wearing shorts and slacks a couple of sizes too small. The crazy colors they wear. And the halters—” She shook her head. “Some of them are disgraceful.”

“Well, that’s women for you. They—”

“Never mind about the women. How about the men? They wear Bermudas with their fat stomachs hanging out. They carry two or three cameras hung around their necks and they think nobody can tell they’re bald because they wear those silly hats—”

“Better be careful what you say, Belle. Tomorrow morning Mr. Liddell might turn out in orange pants and a green baseball cap like that fellow on the tender this morning.”

Belle eyed Liddell shrewdly, grinned at the picture her husband painted. “He’s not the type. Besides, outside of you he’s the only man I’ve seen on board who might look good in Bermudas.” She colored slightly. “I guess you think I’m pretty outspoken. My daddy always did say my tongue is only hinged on one end.”

Liddell chuckled. “After some of the sophisticated chitchat you hear around, a little candor is welcome.” He leaned back in his chair, watched the hips of the dancers shaking with a Jello-like consistency. “I imagine that seeing some of these tourists for the first time could be a sobering experience.”

“Did you know we lost two people from our table? That Mr. and Mrs. Keen. They got off, bag and baggage in Grenada,” Harry Doyle put in. “Struck me as an odd kind of couple, anyhow. Didn’t seem to mix at all.”

“I didn’t get much of a chance to know them,” Liddell countered.

“Didn’t seem like the cruise type,” Belle put in. “You know, none of the crazy clothes or cameras and stuff.”

“Kept pretty much to themselves,” the lanky man said. “Not stuck-up, more standoffish like.”

“Being a lawyer sometimes does that to people,” Liddell commented.

The woman eyed him shrewdly. “Is that what he was, a lawyer?” She turned to her husband. “Did you know he was a lawyer, Harry?”

Harry Doyle shook his head. “Don’t think I ever heard it mentioned what he did.”

Liddell cursed himself silently for the slip. “It must have been something he said last night at dinner. Before you folks came down to the table,” he explained lamely. He looked around for an excuse to leave, saw no one he knew. “Just like nobody mentioned you were newlyweds, but I sort of got the impression.”

The woman grinned, dropped her eyes, studied her big-knuckled fingers. “I guess you’re the only one on board that hasn’t heard about it, then. They sure teased us about it enough the first few days.”

“And this is your honeymoon?” Liddell pursued the subject, glad to get off the subject of the Keens.

“Courtesy of the Three Rivers *Sun*. That’s our hometown newspaper,” Harry explained. “It was some sort of a circulation contest with this cruise

and some luggage and stuff as first prize. We won.”

Belle studied her husband’s face admiringly. “I always knew Harry was smart. All the way back when we were kids together. But I must admit I was sure surprised when they notified us that we won first prize.” She looked around. “Guess we wouldn’t ever be seeing anything like this if we didn’t.”

“Not with a house full of kids we wouldn’t,” Harry told her.

Belle blushed. “You cut that out, Harry.” She appealed to Liddell. “Married less than a month and already he’s got a house full of kids. No sense rushing things, is there, mister?”

“I’m with him,” Liddell told her. He crushed out his cigarette. “You folks going ashore at La Guaira tomorrow?”

The woman looked faintly worried. “Is it true that they hate Americans as much as everyone says?”

Liddell shrugged. “We’re not winning any popularity contests any place down here these days. But I noticed that they have a Cook’s Tour leaving right from the dock. They’ll see to it that you won’t have any trouble.” He got to his feet as the cha-cha was finished and the perspiring exhibitionists were drifting back to their tables. “I think I’d better get inside before they start another number.”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Liddell?” Belle wanted to know. “Don’t you like music?”

He grinned at her. “That’s just the trouble. I do.” He winked at her, turned and headed back through the veranda to the French Quarter Bar.

Robin Lewis was standing at the bar, talking to Lew Herrick, as Johnny Liddell walked in. He walked down to the far end of the bar, slid onto a stool, waited while the bartender shuffled smilingly down to where he sat.

“Afternoon, Mr. Liddell. Enjoy Grenada?”

“I didn’t go ashore, Cyril,” Liddell told him. “I developed my thirst out on the fantail.”

The bartender nodded understandingly, reached to the backbar for a scotch bottle. From under the bar he brought up a glass filled to the brim with ice, doused the ice down with the scotch. His hand reached out for the small water pitcher tentatively.

Liddell shook his head. “Don’t drown it.” He reached over, picked up the glass, took a deep swallow, nodded his satisfaction. “Just what the doctor

ordered.”

The bartender swabbed at the bar with a rag that left damp circles. He dropped his voice. “Looks like you’re going to have company. Just yell if you want anything.” He deposited the rag into the well, headed for the other end of the bar.

Liddell looked up into the backbar mirror, saw Robin Lewis making her way down to where he sat. Lew Herrick was watching her with a sulky expression. Her eyes met Liddell’s in the backbar mirror, she smiled.

“Are you talking to me today?” She asked as she stopped behind him.

He swung around on the stool, indicated the one alongside him, waited while she clambered onto it. “Why not?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Seems to me I did all the talking the last time we were together.” She glanced down at her glass, swirled the liquor around its sides. “I guess I owe you some sort of an apology.”

“For what? For recognizing me? I should be flattered.”

She looked up into his face. “I told Delmar—Captain Rose, that is—who you are and what I thought you were doing on board—”

“And what was I doing on board?”

“I thought you were spying on him—and me.” She took a swallow from the glass. “When I found out that Landers was a private detective and that there was a chance he might have been murdered—” She dropped her voice, satisfied herself no one was paying them any particular attention. “I was afraid maybe—”

“The captain had him killed and I was sent to pin it on him?”

A faint flush rose from the actress’s neck. “It does sound stupid when you say it like that, doesn’t it?” She dropped her eyes. “I was particularly anxious that there should be no trouble, no scandal. Captain Rose will be retiring in two more years—” She looked up. “A scandal now could ruin him. I’d do anything to prevent that. I—I’m very fond of Captain Rose.”

Liddell considered it, nodded his head. “But?”

“Must there be a but?”

Liddell grinned. “There usually is.” He turned, glanced down the bar to where Lewis Herrick was nursing a drink.

The actress's eyes followed his, she looked from Herrick to Liddell and back. "You can't be serious. Herrick? And me? I wouldn't admit this to everyone, but I'm closer to being his mother than his sweetheart."

Liddell shook his head. "Not Herrick and you. Carson and you."

The actress stared at him slack jawed. It took her a moment to recover and the disdainful smile she worked on didn't come off. "How did you ever arrive at that ridiculous conclusion?"

"The fact that you and Herrick belong together like vinegar and cream, yet you're apparently inseparable. And the added fact that there's usually a third person bringing up the rear. It's an old institution, the beard."

"I don't know what you're talking about. What's a beard?"

Liddell grinned at her. "That good an actress you're not, Robin. The beard has been a respected Hollywood and Broadway institution for too many years for you not to know what it is. But just to refresh your memory, it's like this—a guy is hung up on a girl and for one reason or another he can't advertise it. So he makes sure never to be seen alone with her, always with another guy. Everybody's supposed to believe that it's the other guy who's making the play. He's the beard."

Robin Lewis smiled ruefully. "I might have known we couldn't fool somebody like you." Her eyes searched his face. "You don't think Fran has seen through it, do you?"

Liddell shook his head. "She doesn't have the benefit of my suspicious nature."

"She's the reason for it, of course. Carson hasn't seen much of her in the past few years and his conscience is hurting. He wants to be sure everything is all right with her."

"You knew Eldridge before now?"

"Casually. He's sailed on the *Queen* several times that I've been on her, but we never really got to know each other until this trip. We're both at the captain's table this time. Other times he preferred to stay by himself." She drained her glass, set it down.

"Can I get you a refill?" Without waiting for an answer, Johnny flagged down Cyril, indicated the empty glass. The bartender nodded his understanding, started building a drink at the other end of the bar.

Robin brought a cigarette from her bag, screwed it into her holder. Cyril shuffled down the bar, set her drink in front of her, offered her a light. He seemed well repaid with her smile, backed away out of earshot.

Robin dropped her voice. “You can understand why I was so determined there would be no scandal connecting me with Delmar. The girl never understands.”

“Understands what?”

The actress looked uncomfortable. “She mightn’t understand her father being hung up, as you say, on a Robin Lewis. She might think it was an insult to the memory of her mother. That’s why I need time to kind of win her respect and affection.”

Liddell nodded his understanding. “And the captain?”

Robin filled her lungs with smoke, blew a feathery stream ceilingward. “Delmar would never do anything that would interfere with my happiness. But I was terrified at the thought of some unscrupulous private detective digging up dirt that would ruin everything.”

“You think Carson would walk away from it if he thought there was ever anything between you and Captain Rose. That it?”

Robin crushed out her cigarette in an ash tray, stared at the wisp of smoke that rose from the flattened butt. “I don’t think it will make any difference. I haven’t discussed it with him yet, but I will.” She looked up at Liddell, worked at a smile that didn’t quite come off. “It’s the girl I’m most concerned about right now. I’m sure that when the time comes and Carson and I talk things over that he’s a man of the world enough to understand.” The smile grew wistful, she studied Liddell’s face. “Don’t you?”

Liddell considered it. “I don’t know how much of a man of the world you’d have to be to have the woman you’re going to marry admit that she’d been playing house for years with a mutual acquaintance. Some men find it hard to understand.”

Robin took a swallow of her drink. “He knows how many years I spent in Hollywood. He can’t be naïve enough to expect me to be a virgin.”

She had often wondered how many people who had never been through the Hollywood casting-couch routine could understand. In a town filled with girls who were sixteen, looked twenty-one and acted like thirty, who were ready, willing and anxious to jump into the arms of anyone who could help them get that “big break,” competition could get deadly. Beauty was so

common that it was no longer a marketable commodity and the criterion of a newcomer's ability was her versatility in bed or her ability to read her lines from the star's dressing room ceiling during "rehearsals."

Robin Lewis had been thrown into the Hollywood mill fresh from drama classes at the University of Southern Cal. The play had been a success, so had Robin. When she returned to her sorority house that night, the message was waiting for her. They wanted her in Hollywood. How soon could she get there?

After she had signed the standard starlet contract they held out to her that first day at the studio, she found out that starlets are creatures paid to look beautiful, be available and give visiting bigwigs something to remember the town by. The only pictures they get to make are the ones in the girlie magazines that are banned from their hometown newsstands.

She had met Pete House at one of the parties she was expected to attend to earn her \$75 a week. Pete was an agent and he had connections. But he had the same idea about what makes a star that everybody else had. Looks, ability, were a must—but to get her name up on the marquee, a girl needed a certain something more. He introduced Robin around to a coterie of producers and directors and briefed her before each party how she was to act and for whom. But at the crucial moment, she had always backed out.

Pete had even found her a roommate, a veteran starlet who had worked the Hollywoods for years with no visible progress aside from a few seminude shots in man magazines. As the weeks stretched into months and Robin's fund dwindled with her opportunities, Marla Quinn, her roommate, started staking her. Robin always protested that she would pay her back, but the weekly \$75 never seemed enough for more than wardrobe and taxi fares.

One night, returning from a late date, Robin started to enter the apartment when the door was opened from the inside. A fat old man, white bristles glistening on his unshaven chin and jowls, walked out. He looked her over appreciatively, turned back to Marla who stood inside the door, her housecoat held together by her hands. "This is your roommate, huh?" His eyes traveled from the top of Robin's head to her toes. "You've been holding out on me." He twisted his slack lips into a grin at Robin, "We should know each other better, doll. I'm your landlord."

Robin stepped into the apartment, closed the door behind her. She stared at her roommate, who shrugged. "It's better than getting put out into the street. We owe a couple month's rent." She turned, walked over to the small bar against the wall, held a bottle up to the light, found it empty. From two

other bottles, she managed to scrape up the makings of a drink. Then she turned to face Robin. “Well, go ahead and say it.”

Robin shook her head. “I didn’t know. I can’t let you do things like that for me, Marla.”

Marla drained the glass, set it down. She smiled glumly. “I wasn’t doing it for you, kid. I was doing it for myself. I get allergic to sleeping in doorways. But just so you shouldn’t feel too bad about it, next time he comes to collect, it’s on you.” She turned, headed into her room and closed the door.

Robin walked to the phone, dialed Pete’s number. His sleepy voice answered, demanded if the caller knew what time it was, permitted himself to be placated by the news it was Robin.

“That Marc Jerome you were talking about. The big producer. When can I meet him, Pete?”

Pete sighed. “Look, honey, I can’t keep setting these things up. Sure, once it’s good for a laugh—a real honest-to-God Hollywood virgin. But these guys, they want a laugh, they tune in Bob Hope. From you they want a little action.”

“Jerome can get me some parts?”

There was a pause at the other end. “He’s a big wheel right now. He says you work, you work. But you got to co-operate, kid.” There was an apologetic note in his voice. “I don’t make the rules. It’s his studio, he makes them.”

“I want to meet him. As soon as possible.”

“Okay. But, kid—Jerome is real big. Big enough to get away with a lot of things in this town. You hang him up”—she could visualize the shrug—“he might play real rough.”

“I won’t hang him up. You make the date.” She dropped the receiver on its hook, turned to find Marla standing in the doorway to her room, leaning against the jamb.

“Now you’re making sense, kid,” she approved. “Maybe it’s not the way they do things back where you came from, but out here it’s not what you can do but who you can do it for that counts.” She looked down at herself, flattened the robe against her thickening midsection. “Me, I guess I never had it. I never got past assistant directors and a couple of publicity men.”

She rolled her eyes up to Robin. “You work on that slob, Jerome, and work on him good, honey. This is your big chance. Make it pay.”

Marc Jerome had been what Robin Lewis had expected. Free with promises, fumbling in his performance, demanding. When he handed her the twenty “for cab fare” that night, he promised to get in touch with her again.

But for days she heard nothing. When she tried to reach him on the phone, he was never in. Pete was apologetic, but helpless. As an agent, he couldn’t take on one of the biggest producers in town. He offered to introduce her to other producers, directors or even assistant directors, all of whom were in a position to give her work from time to time. On the advice of the more experienced Marla Quinn, Robin held out for Marc Jerome.

It was Marla Quinn who finally broke the impasse. Two weeks after Robin’s date with Jerome, Marla picked up the telephone, dialed Magna Studios and asked for Marc Jerome. The icy voice of his secretary came across the wire, informed her that Mr. Jerome was unavailable and expected to be tied up in the foreseeable future.

“That’s too bad,” Marla cooed in an approximation of Robin’s voice. “I wanted to invite him to my birthday party. My eighteenth birthday. My lawyer and a lot of other people will be so disappointed not to be able to meet him socially.”

“I’m sorry, but Mr. Jerome doesn’t—” The icy voice broke off. “Your what?”

“My eighteenth birthday. I’ll be eighteen in a couple of weeks.”

There was a stricken note in the secretary’s voice. “I’ll try to get your message to Mr. Jerome,” she promised.

Marla dropped the receiver back on its hook, grinned at Robin.

“I’m almost twenty-one and you know it,” Robin told her.

“I know it and you know it,” the roommate told her. “But Jerome doesn’t. And he can’t take any chances. If it did turn out that you were San Quentin quail—”

“You don’t think he’ll fall for it?”

Marla checked her wristwatch. “It’s 10:30 now. You’ll hear from him before lunch.”

It was exactly 11:47 when the phone rang.

“Robin?” Marc Jerome’s voice was wheezy, as though choked by the fat of his jowls. “This is Marc Jerome.”

“I’ve been trying to reach you,” Robin told him.

“I know, kid, I know. But I’ve been busy trying to get some things lined up for you. Big things.”

“Such as?”

“A test, for one thing. Can you be at the studio on Monday at nine? I think I have just the part to get you under way.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good.” The producer worked on sounding enthusiastic. “And about that party, kid. You’ll understand why I can’t make it? You won’t need any lawyer doing business with Magna. I’ll be watching out for your interests. Okay, kid?”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Jerome.”

The screen test was successful, and so was Robin over a period of years. But then came the day when options weren’t picked up, a couple of bad Broadway plays and a television series that never got beyond a pilot, and Robin Lewis faded from the Hollywood scene.

She had met Delmar Rose, captain of the *Queen Alexandra*, on the cruise she had taken to forget Hollywood. He had been easy to be with, found her company exciting and had invited her to his cabin.

After the fiascoes she had encountered in Hollywood bedrooms, the maleness of the captain had appealed to her. There were no apologies, no self-abasement. The captain was all man and made her feel like a woman. There were no strings attached, no empty protestations of love. It was a man and woman who understood each other and enjoyed each other. On that basis, it became a semiannual event for Robin Lewis to book passage on the *Queen*.

“You’re a man of the world, Johnny. So is Delmar Rose and so is Carson Eldridge. Would my past matter that much to you?”

Liddell considered, shrugged. “What a woman did before she knew me wouldn’t count. What would count is how she handled herself after she met me.”

Robin Lewis looked relieved. “I think most real men would feel like that.”

“You can’t judge how one man will react by the way others do,” he warned. “Eldridge and I travel in different social circles. And I don’t have a daughter whose opinion has suddenly become very important to me. But I’m not worried about you, Robin. You’ll land on your feet.”

The actress nodded. “I always have.” She studied Liddell’s face. “I’m not worried about me either, but I am worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Delmar told me you’re investigating Landers’s death. To find out if it was suicide. I’m sure it wasn’t. Landers wasn’t the kind of a man to kill himself. You only had to talk to him for a few minutes to find that out.”

“I don’t think he was either.”

Robin nodded her head. “That’s why you must be very careful. If it wasn’t suicide, it might have been murder. And if it was, whoever did it won’t hesitate to murder again.”

Liddell sighed. “It’s practically unanimous that I’m going to walk back from this cruise with an anchor tied around my neck. And to think I always had the impression that a sea voyage was good for the health.”

CHAPTER 14

In the presidential suite, Alvin McDowell was still waxing indignant over the affront to Richard Nixon at the tea dance.

“Damn parlor pinks, that’s what they are,” he sputtered. “How do they expect these spies or anyone else to have any respect for the vice president of the United States if they don’t have?”

Myra McDowell sat in front of the make-up mirror over the dressing table, jabbed with the tips of carefully manicured fingers at the shellacked waves in her blue-white hair. “Ex.”

McDowell, temporarily sidetracked, turned to her. “Ex what?”

“Ex vice president.”

“Just a technicality. He was the vice president when they spit at him, wasn’t he? He’d have been president now if he didn’t make an ass of himself on that idiot box, wouldn’t he? It’s the principle of the thing. In the old days, we would have sent a couple of companies of Marines in there—”

“That was in the old days, Alvin. Now stop getting your blood pressure up. You know what the doctor told you about getting into political arguments.” Myra leaned forward, examined her face in the slight magnification of the make-up mirror. She reached for a pair of tweezers, plucked out a coarse hair that was sprouting from a mole on her chin. “And for goodness sake, don’t let Conway needle you into an argument at the table tonight. I think the captain’s getting a little sick of you two bickering back and forth.”

“The man’s an ass,” McDowell blurted. “Him and his crazy theories. He’s supposed to be a businessman, but if he had his way we’d go bankrupt giving money away to a lot of spic nations that hate our guts. If he hadn’t married into the Garrett Agency, he couldn’t be a ribbon clerk. That’s the trouble with these gigolos who marry money. If he had to work twenty hours a day since he was fifteen like I did—”

Myra sighed. “Please, Alvin, not again. I’ve heard that story at breakfast, dinner and supper for the past fifteen years.”

“Well, it’s true. I made mine the hard way so I know the value of a dollar. He got his the easy way—”

“Marrying her is the easy way?” The woman sniffed. “That upstart! Actually thought the captain would move us out of here to make room for them. Where did she ever get the idea, I wonder?”

“Purser tells me the Garrett Company does a lot of business with the line and—”

Myra tilted her head to the side, studied the effect of the bluing on her hair. “Do you think they put a little bit too much blue in it at the beauty parlor today, Alvin?”

McDowell paused in his search for his ready tied bow tie, favored the deep blue of his wife’s hair with a jaundiced eye. “Never could figure out why women spend so much time in beauty parlors. Most times when they come out they look like they didn’t get waited on.”

“Where else could you catch up on all the news? Did you know that new passenger we picked up in Barbados is a detective?”

McDowell eyed his wife for a moment. “Who says so?”

Myra shrugged elaborately. “I don’t know who says so. I just heard some of the people in the shop discussing it. Now why do you suppose a detective would be on board?”

“Probably checking up on some of the mister and missuses. There’s plenty of them look to me like they never saw a parson. Not together, leastways.”

“You’re always suspecting someone or somebody, Alvin. My guess is he’s trying to find out what happened to that poor man who went overboard during the storm.”

“Seems pretty damn obvious to me what happened to him. He drowned. Unless he was half fish,” McDowell growled.

“That Eldridge girl was in there today. From the looks of things she was getting the whole works.”

“She doesn’t need a beauty parlor. She needs a miracle.”

“I don’t know. She has that handsome young officer dancing attendance every night.”

“That’s a real love affair, that is. Between Weston and the old man’s dough. If I was Eldridge I’d run that young gigolo off, but good.”

“Maybe you would and maybe you wouldn’t. Eldridge isn’t going to find it easy to get that girl off his hands unless it’s somebody like the Weston boy,” Myra told him. She stood up, twisted and turned in front of the mirror, examined her corseted figure from all angles. “When we get home, we’re sure going to have to go on a diet.”

“What do you mean we?” McDowell snorted. “You put on the fat and I get put on the diet. What the hell kind of sense does that make?”

In the stateroom on B deck, two doors removed from the now closed beauty salon, Third Officer Lawrence Weston was straightening his tie, examining his appearance in the lavatory mirror. He flattened his hair over his right ear with the palm of his hand, nodded his satisfaction with the overall effect.

He walked out into the stateroom where Meg Corbett lay sprawled on her bunk. She watched him from under heavy-lidded, carefully made-up eyes; a cigarette dangled from her full lips, a thin spiral of smoke twisting toward the half-opened porthole. She wore a silk slip that made no attempt to underemphasize her assets; her feet and legs were bare, her red hair a metallic tangle on the pillow.

“My, don’t we look pretty?” She took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the carmined end. “Now we spend the rest of the evening running around after the Eldridge kid like a pet poodle in heat. And I’m supposed to hang around this hot box waiting until you get her tucked in bed. Right?” She rolled her eyes up from the cigarette to his face. “You want to know something? I’m getting pretty damn sick of this bit.”

Weston sighed. “You knew the score on this thing right from the beginning, Meg. We decided to play it this way. You wouldn’t want me to back away from it now?”

“And what if I do?”

The third officer shook his head. “It wouldn’t make sense. Her old man has money he hasn’t even folded and he’s ripe for somebody to take it away from him. Why not us?” He walked over, sat on the edge of the bunk, ran his fingers through her hair. “You don’t think I like it, do you?”

“You sure could fool me, going back for more every night.” She pushed his hand away. “Maybe her old man does have money, but I don’t know if this routine is worth it. We’re doing all right. A couple of more cruises and we can quit.”

“And do what? You run a beauty parlor on the side and we live in a flat some place?” He shook his head, hit his chest with the side of his hand. “Sorry, baby, that’s not for me. Look, don’t be crazy—”

“Don’t you be crazy.” There was a new, hard note in her voice. “And that’s what you would be if you figured you could give me the brush.”

“What’s getting into you anyway, Meg? Whoever said anything about giving you the brush? All I’m asking is for you to string along for a couple of months. Just long enough for me to make her so miserable her old man will be willing to pay anything to get rid of me.”

“I still think we can get along without the old man’s loot.” She took a last, deep drag on her cigarette, rolled over to crush it. She rolled back onto her back, looked up at him, oblivious to the fact that her slip had hiked up, baring an expanse of thigh. She made a halfhearted effort to pull it down, gave it up. “You want to get your hands on some of his money the hard way, that’s up to you. Just as long as you remember that we’re partners.”

She got up off the bunk, walked over to the lavatory door, giving her hips a little more wiggle than was necessary. She turned with her hand on the knob. “You won’t mind letting yourself out. My hair needs washing.” She walked into the lavatory, closed the door behind her.

Weston stood for a moment, staring at the closed door, wondering why he had let himself get as deeply involved as he was. Although her red hair palpably came out of a bottle, she had the kind of temper that made him quail.

In the beginning, Meg Corbett had set her sights higher than a third officer and for most of her first voyage on the *Queen* she had ignored him completely. This had made Larry Weston all the more eager and anxious. When it became obvious to Meg that Jack Allen, the cruise director, was willing to play house, but laughed at her when she tried to move in, she explored other pastures. The purser, with his fat sweaty hands, with his organized efficiency and his uncanny habit of always being right, frightened her off. The second officer had a wife at home and was forever flashing pictures of his brood of children.

Although Weston was only third, and was fairly low on the totem pole in prospects, he had youth, a refusal to be rebuffed and unfailing good humor. When she finally decided realistically that he was her best bet, she reversed her field and to his delighted astonishment literally opened the door for him to walk in. It wasn't until he was in too deep to back away that he realized how possessive she was, how violent a temper she had and how dangerous she could be. But even then, weighing these faults against the assets which filled her slip, fore and aft, he had continued to mount the pursuit, getting in deeper and deeper.

Yet this wasn't what Larry Weston was after. He had entered the Merchant Marine Academy with the conviction that he would like life at sea, that it would provide unlimited opportunities for romantic interludes with rich and generous beauties, maybe even a chance to parlay his snappy uniform into a profitable marriage.

But the stern reality was that uniform or no uniform he was considered little more than a flunky by the passengers. Instead of being sought out by rich and beautiful women he was more often than not assigned to keep a basket case company and to make her cruise a memorable one. And the worst part of it was that they weren't even rich, but were, for the most part, stenographers and file clerks realizing a lifetime ambition by shooting their entire savings on one fling.

At least that's the way it was until now. Fran Eldridge was certainly no beauty, but there was no doubt that she was rich. And she was crazy about him. He was probably the first man ever to give her a rush, and while he had to close his eyes and hold his breath when he did, he was sure that he was the first man ever to kiss her. With the exertion of a little effort, he could turn her into a slave for life, so grateful for a few pats on the head that she'd lick his hand. It could work out surprisingly well—if it weren't for the complication of the involvement with Meg.

He walked to the door, opened it a crack, satisfied himself that the companionway was empty. He let himself out, closed the door behind him.

Meg walked out of the lavatory, toweling her damp hair. She was wondering how far she could push Weston with safety. Ever since he had started making time with the Eldridge kid, she had been worried that he was slipping out of her grasp. She balled the towel, threw it into the lavatory, walked over to a small desk built into the wall.

She found some stationery and an envelope in the top drawer, sat down and started to write. When she had filled the sheet with a large, childish

scrawl, she leaned back, read it and nodded her satisfaction. Then she folded it and stuck it into the envelope and scribbled *Miss F. Eldridge* on it and sealed the envelope.

Tom Conway sat slumped in the armchair in cabin de luxe 69 on the lower promenade deck and listened to his wife on her favorite subject.

“You know I had my heart set on the presidential suite. We’ve had it before and there’s no reason why we shouldn’t have it now.”

Conway sighed. “The McDowells got their reservations in first. You couldn’t expect them—”

“The McDowells.” The sniff that accompanied the two words expressed its own opinions. “Giving it to them was adding insult to injury. I wouldn’t mind if it was somebody important, but that grease monkey and that awful woman of his! Just sitting there, lording it over me. I don’t know how much longer I can put up with it.”

“I don’t think she’s so bad. But he’ll drive me crazy if he doesn’t stop telling the story of his life.” He reached to the table for a cigarette. “However, since there’s nothing we can do about it, why don’t we drop the subject?”

The thin waspish woman whirled on him. “I don’t intend to drop the subject. I intend to take it up with the officials of the steamship line when we get home. I also intend to let them know that we got no co-operation whatsoever from the captain.”

“What the hell do you expect him to do? He didn’t make the reservations; he don’t like McDowell any better than I do. He’s got us sitting at his table, hasn’t he?”

“That’s the least he could do. Considering all the business we give this line we’re entitled to more consideration. And I intend to get it.”

Conway stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked, touched a match to it. “The Britannia Line won’t go out of business if we pull away from them. What the hell do we give them? We run twelve contests a year, send the winners on a fifteen-day cruise and write it off as advertising and promotion. You and I take two or three cruises a year. You think the line’s getting rich on that?”

“That’s ten or twelve more passages than the McDowells pay for. If McDowell was paying for anybody’s passage like we are for the Doyles, he’d be bragging about it all over the trip. But us, we—”

Conway winced. “You want to have the Doyles around our necks for the rest of the trip? It’s been gruesome enough as it is.”

“I know, I know. You’d rather be in Las Vegas where you could be ogling a lot of half-naked girls. What’s the matter, isn’t the attention you’ve been getting from that Polack hostess enough for you?”

“She’s not a Polack, she’s a Swede.”

“Whatever she is, she’s out for trouble. And if I catch you sniffing around her, I’ll see that she gets plenty of it. And you, too.” She eyed him hostilely. “My mother always warned me that you were marrying me for my money. And she was right.”

Conway leaned the back of his neck on the chair, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling.

“Well, wasn’t she?” the woman demanded.

The man reluctantly brought his eyes down from the ceiling to meet her glances. “If I did, I’ve earned every dollar of it.”

The thin woman’s eyes flashed. “Don’t you get smart with me, Tom Conway. Everything you have, you owe to me and I won’t have you forgetting it.”

“I never get a chance to,” the man conceded.

“You’ve been getting pretty flippant lately,” Laura Conway snapped. “I hope you don’t think you got that vice presidency because you’re such a hot-shot advertising man. You know why you got that vice presidency.”

Tom Conway bobbed his head resignedly. “Because you inherited the stock from your father.”

“That’s right. And as easily as I made you vice president, that’s how easy I can throw you out.” She frowned at the lack of concern on his face. “You understand that, don’t you?”

The man pursed his lips, nodded his head again. “Sometimes I think that might be the nicest thing you could do for me. Life was a lot simpler when I was working the cityside on the *Dispatch*.”

“You didn’t think so then.”

“Didn’t know then what I know now.” He pulled himself out of his chair, crushed out the cigarette. “I’ll meet you in the bar. I just have time to grab a

drink before dinner. And I'm not up to facing that motley crew without a drink."

"You sure you're not going up there to meet that Swede?"

"I hadn't thought of it, but it sounds like a good idea." He crossed to the door, slammed it behind him before she could retort.

Aggravation etched deep lines in Conway's forehead, accentuated the lines that ran from his nostrils to make a triangle with the thin line of his mouth. She was wrong—he didn't get the vice presidency because she controlled the stock. He got it because his honeymoon contest promotion had been one of the hottest gimmicks the Garrett Advertising Service had come up with and now, in its fifth year, the contest was still going strong. But she was right about the other thing—with her stock control, she could have him thrown out.

CHAPTER 15

Tom Conway stood at the bar in the French Quarter Salon and contemplated the changes ten years had made in his life. What would he have done that afternoon in 1952 when he walked into the city room of the *Dispatch* if he could see what lay ahead of him?

The city room was on the ground floor of the old Globe Building on Park Row. It was a huge room with desks scattered around in organized confusion. Scraps of paper, crumpled newspapers that had been clipped, then tossed at oversized wastebaskets and had missed their mark, lay on the floor where they fell.

Tom Conway picked his way through the welter of desks to the unpainted one that had been his base of operations since he returned to civilian life after five exciting years as managing editor of an overseas newspaper. He flipped through the telephone messages that had been taken by the switchboard, tore one off, reread it curiously.

It merely said: *Mr. Lucien Garrett, chairman of the Board of Garrett Advertising Service would like to see you in his office at 6 p.m. tonight.* It was signed by Letty, the chief operator.

Conway walked over to the glass enclosure that housed the switchboard, waited while Letty took an incoming call. Finally she looked up, grinned. "Hi, Tom. How's the demon reporter?"

"Good." He shoved the penciled notation under her nose. "You take this call?"

The girl nodded.

"This is what he said?" Conway wanted to know. "He wants me in his office at six, or he wants me to call him. Which?"

Letty shrugged. "I didn't talk to him. I talked to his secretary. She didn't ask to talk to you or anything. Just left the message and hung up."

Conway tapped the paper on his thumbnail for a moment. "Get him on the phone for me, will you, Letty?"

The girl at the switchboard nodded, reached for the directory. Conway walked back to his desk, dropped into his chair, laced his fingers at the back

of his neck. He started slightly as the telephone on his desk shrilled.

“This is Mr. Garrett’s office,” a cool voice informed him.

“Tom Conway of the *Dispatch*. Mr. Garrett called me?”

There was no hesitation on the part of the girl at the other end. “Yes. We’re expecting you here at 6 p.m., Mr. Conway.”

“Could I talk to Mr. Garrett? Today is a pretty bad day and—”

The voice on the other end was unruffled. “Mr. Garrett never accepts telephone calls. He’s leaving town in the morning. I’m afraid tonight at six is the only time he can see you.” She wasn’t curt. Just final.

Conway considered. Garrett had the reputation of being a crackpot and a dictator. He was also chairman of the board of an advertising agency that placed hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions, of dollars’ worth of business with the *Dispatch*. “I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Mr. Conway.” The receiver clicked as the connection was broken at the other end.

Lucien Garrett had the penthouse on the 54th floor of the building that housed Garrett Advertising Service. A thick, wheat-colored broadloom stretched from the elevator doors to the double, ground-glass doors that bore the gold inscription: *Lucien Garrett, Private*.

Tom Conway pushed open the doors, walked into the outer office of the suite. A cool-looking blonde in a black knit dress sat behind the desk. She glanced up with no change of expression as Conway walked in.

“Conway of the *Dispatch*. I have a six o’clock appointment.”

Her deep blue eyes flicked over him impersonally. “I’ll tell Mr. Garrett you’re here.” She flicked the key on the intercom, whispered into it, flicked the key off. “He’ll see you now.” When she stood up, she was taller than he expected. She walked to an inner door, held it open.

It was a large room with a beamed ceiling. There was a peculiar absence of sound, almost like a vacuum. The floor was covered with a thick, gray-green carpeting, the leather furniture was polished to a soft gleam. One side of the room was given over to a huge bookcase, and in the center, facing the door, a highly polished desk dominated the room.

The man behind the desk was very short, very wrinkled, very gray. His hair was flattened across the dome of his skull, his eyes were sharp,

piercing; his nose thin and pinched. He made no effort to rise as Conway walked into the room, but waved the reporter to a chair.

“Glad you could come.” His voice was nasal, he bit his words off in a staccato manner. “I’m leaving tomorrow for two months in Europe. Want to settle this matter before I leave.” He leaned back, laced his hands across his midsection. “Mr. Conway, what do they pay you at the *Dispatch*?”

Conway stared for a moment. “Now, just a minute—”

The gray-haired man waved him down impatiently. “In your job, you ask impertinent questions of other people. Why shouldn’t anybody ask them of you?”

“Because it’s nobody’s business how much they pay me.”

“I intend to make it my business. I’m considering offering you a job. I’d like an answer to my question, please.”

“I didn’t apply for any job. As it happens—”

“I intend to pay you well enough so that you will. Your present salary?”

Conway started to get up, decided to hear the proposition through. “I get \$8,000 a year, a \$500 bonus at Christmas and three weeks’ vacation.”

The man behind the desk dug into his pocket, brought out a folded square of paper. His eyes flicked over the scribbled notes on it, he looked up. “That’s exactly right.” He nodded his approval.

Conway got to his feet. “You mean you knew what I was getting? That you were checking me?”

Garrett returned the folded sheet to his pocket, looked impatient. “Please. No dramatics. Of course I was checking you. I wouldn’t have a man working for me who was a liar. Please sit down.” There was a snap in his voice.

Conway surprised himself by dropping into his chair.

“That’s better. I can’t stand talking to a man towering over me.” His fingers drummed on the arm of his desk chair, giving the impression of a man who couldn’t stand repose, a man who thought as he acted. “I’m offering you \$25,000 a year, roughly triple what you’re making. There will be the usual fringe benefits, the share of the executive bonus—which I can assure you will be substantially more than \$500,” he inserted dryly, “and vacation.”

Conway's jaw sagged. "What would I have to do for that kind of money? Kill somebody?"

"Hardly. I'd want you to organize a public relations department. And head it." He leaned back again. "I feel that many of our accounts could do with some public relations advice and help. A man with your background should be extremely helpful. Well?"

Conway shook his head as though to clear it. "This is pretty sudden."

"Not with us. I've had you carefully investigated. I've read and analyzed all of the articles and special features you've done for the *Dispatch* over the past few years. They show the background and grasp of subject I consider invaluable."

"But I'm a reporter, not a public relations man."

"Where does one stop and the other begin?" He glanced at his watch, frowned his impatience. "I can't spend much more time with you. Do you want the job," he rolled his eyes up to Conway's face, "or not?"

"A contract?"

Garrett bobbed his head impatiently. "Of course."

"You've got yourself a boy."

The gray man looked at his watch again. "I never had any doubts. If you'll call tomorrow, speak to our Mr. Latimer in the legal department, he'll arrange everything." His tone signified that Conway had been dismissed. "When I return from Europe, I'll expect that your department will be fully organized and functioning."

Tom Conway found adjustment to his new affluence both easy and pleasant. An unlimited expense account, an end to the daily battle with deadlines and a three-hour lunch hour offered no hardships.

Lucien Garrett's two-month trip to Europe was lengthened to a nine-month stay by a coronary he suffered in Rome. By the time he returned to the States, Tom Conway had difficulty remembering how it had been possible to exist on the salary the *Dispatch* had paid him in the pre-Garrett days.

And when Garrett did return, something had been added. Laura Garrett had been studying abroad. Now the old man felt it was time for her to come home and start building a dynasty.

Conway met her the first week the Garretts were home. She was about twenty-eight, short, thin. Her eyes were too closely spaced, her nose a trifle too long to be called beautiful. But the eyes were a good color, her thinness was not to the extreme of gauntness. She was standing at the window, her coat thrown back over her shoulders when Conway walked into the old man's office.

If Garrett had been gray before his trip, he was ashen now. He performed the introductions, nodded Conway to a chair, then turned to the girl. "If you don't mind, Laura, I'd like to talk to Conway. Then we can get on home."

Laura smiled at Conway, obediently headed out of the office. When the door closed behind her, Garrett closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them. They were the only live thing in his face. "Things are going to change around here, Conway," he told him. "I'm going to have to give up active control of the company. Doctor's order."

Conway felt the chill finger of apprehension down his spine. "I'm sorry, sir."

The old man nodded. "So am I. Thompson will be acting chairman as well as president. I suppose you know he has opposed the new department right along?"

The premonition was now a fact. Conway had encountered the company president's open hostility to him and his staff many times during the past nine months. He had counted on the old man's support to stave off any actual calamity. Now that could no longer be counted on.

"What about my contract?"

The old man sighed. "It was for a one-year period renewable at our option," the old man told him. "Thompson has indicated to me that he will not pick up the option." He shrugged his thin shoulders. "I thought you ought to know."

Conway slumped in his chair. The thought of going back to a reporter's salary after nine months of living on an expense account was almost unthinkable. He did some fast figuring, realized that his salary at the *Dispatch* wouldn't pay the rent on his new apartment, the payments on his car and furniture.

"But surely, Mr. Garrett, you'll still be able to—"

The old man shook his head. "I still own controlling stock in the company. But I'm not up to a fight with Thompson, Conway. I'm sorry, but

that's the way it is.”

Conway shook his head like a punch-drunk fighter, got to his feet. “It was nice while it lasted,” he grunted. He walked to the door, tugged it open.

Laura Garrett was sitting in a chair in the outer office, leafing through a magazine. She looked up as Conway walked out, smiled.

The thin face, the too-close eyes and the pinched nose dissolved in front of his eyes and in their place he saw the old man's stock control of the company. He smiled back and in that moment, his future was decided.

After a whirlwind courtship, Tom Conway and Laura Garrett were married in time for her to give him the power of attorney on her late father's stock. With it he was able to persuade the acting chairman of the board to reverse his stand and pick up Tom Conway's option.

Conway wondered what he would do if he had it to do all over again. He looked up to see the amused eyes of Ingrid Sorenson on him. She walked over, took up a position alongside him.

“My, you look serious tonight, Mr. Conway. Serious and grim. A cruise is no place to look like that. You're supposed to be having fun. You can be serious and grim at home.” She glanced idly around, satisfied herself that no one was within earshot. “Anything wrong?”

“The usual. My wife.”

The blonde made a moue of distaste. “She's been giving me dirty looks all day, too. You think she suspects something?”

“I've given up caring. After this trip, I'm walking out.”

“We'd better talk that over,” Ingrid murmured. “Can you get away from her tonight? Around midnight?”

Conway masked his lips with his glass. “Your cabin?”

The blonde considered, shook her head. “Too dangerous. Your wife has already tried to bribe my stewardess to keep an eye on us.”

“But you said you could trust the stewardess.”

“That's one stewardess. Suppose your wife tries to bribe a couple of them?” She looked around as if bored by the desultory conversation. “You know where the crew's infirmary is?”

“No.”

“Sun deck forward.”

“Near the gymnasium?”

“No. All the way forward. In the crew section of the ship.”

“I’ll find it, I guess. But suppose someone—”

The blonde shook her head. “There’s no one in it and I have the only key. No one will disturb us.”

Conway considered, nodded. “I’ll be there around midnight.” He looked past her to the entrance to the bar. Laura Conway stood in the doorway glaring at them with slitted eyes. “You better run along. My keeper just put in an appearance.”

CHAPTER 16

Dinner that night started out to be uneventful.

Martin Sands was already at the table when Johnny Liddell walked in. Harry and Belle Doyle were in their seats for a change and were carrying on an animated conversation with Hilda Phelps. Jack Allen, the cruise director, obviously relieved at the diversion of the old woman's attention, was carrying on a desultory conversation with Sands. He looked up as Liddell slid into his chair.

"Well, Mr. Liddell. We missed you this morning. Get over to the island at all?" he asked.

Liddell shook his head. "I slept in. Guess I was more tired than I realized." He broke off as Martin Sands's "niece" came to the table. Her eyes were red and puffy. She avoided the eyes of the others as she took her seat, busied herself with her napkin.

"Guess you heard we lost a couple of our table-mates?" Allen indicated the empty chairs where the Keens had been the night before. "Decided to stay at Grenada for a couple of days instead of continuing the cruise."

Hilda Phelps broke off her conversation with the Doyles, turned to Liddell. "Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous? Can you imagine any white person in his right mind wanting to stay there?" She shook her head.

"I thought it was a very pretty island," Belle Doyle volunteered. "That view of the harbor from the hotel took my breath away."

"But the people. All Negroes," Mrs. Phelps argued.

"Well, they do have a right to be there. After all, they're natives—" Belle Doyle pointed out.

"Not actually," Jack Allen told her. "When Columbus discovered the island on his second voyage, the natives were a people called Caribs. The white men exterminated them by working them to death. That's when they imported African Negroes as slaves to work the spice and cocoa plantations. Today, nine persons out of ten in the Windward Islands are Negroes."

"Slaves? Like the ones we had down south?" Martin Sands entered the discussion.

Allen bobbed his head. “But they got around to emancipating them before we did. In 1837. And with less of a fuss.”

“I didn’t know Grenada was one of the Windward Islands,” Harry Doyle put in.

“The capital of the Windwards. The governor of all four islands lives in St. George’s.” Allen was obviously warming up to his subject, and Liddell was beginning to wish the subject hadn’t been brought up. “Did you know how they got the name, the Windward Islands?” He looked around, didn’t wait for an answer. “Because they are more exposed to the trade winds than the other group called the Leeward Islands and—”

They could hear rather than see the Eldridges’ entrance into the dining room. There was a momentary break in the conversation at the captain’s table. The men stared, the women stared, then whispered.

Fran Eldridge was still too thin and bony, but a high-necked dress did not advertise the fact the way her other clothes had. Her hair was still mousy colored, but it was set in a fashionable bouffant style, and the magic of expertly applied make-up had transformed her normally plain face into one that was more than passably attractive.

Her new appearance had done something to her posture. She walked alongside her father, head high in contrast to the hunched forward shuffle they associated with her. She was slightly flushed, pleasantly aware of the stir she was creating.

The white-haired man held his daughter’s chair, apologized to the captain for their tardiness, was rewarded with one of Delmar Rose’s rare smiles. His eyes flicked from the girl’s face to Robin Lewis and back, reflected his approval. He said something to the girl that brought a flush of pleasure and a shy smile instead of the giggle with which she had responded to everything.

The silence at the table dissolved and there was a chatter of excited conversation and compliments. Carson Eldridge sat back in his chair, beamed. Lew Herrick, sitting at the other side of the girl, hadn’t spoken more than a dozen words to her at any meal, suddenly discovered they had many interests in common.

At Jack Allen’s table, Hilda Phelps sniffed. “Looks like a freshly painted billboard,” she snapped somewhat illogically in view of the hennaed hair and outlandish make-up.

“I think she looks lovely,” Belle Doyle disagreed. “All she needed was someone to show her how to dress and make up. I’d like to see that sailor boy’s eyes when he sees her now.”

Jack Allen was thinking something along the same line. He had figured that Larry Weston would be earning anything in the way of a dowry he could get from old man Eldridge. But now it could be that he was really getting a break. The old man’s money and a girl that wasn’t hard to take, and one that hadn’t learned any bad habits. Put a little fat on her bones, break her in the right way, and with her father’s money, she mightn’t be too bad.

Johnny Liddell watched the expressions on the faces of the people at the captain’s table. Herrick’s sudden interest in the girl was being lost on nobody. The captain seemed amused, Carson Eldridge was pleased, Fran Eldridge was verging on delirium. Robin Lewis watched with approval while the expressions of the other two women ranged from the amazement of Laura Conway to the surprise of Myra McDowell. Only Tom Conway seemed unaffected as he moodily ate his dinner with the absorption of a man who had problems on his mind. Alvin McDowell was wondering if they could do so much for that ugly duckling, why did they find it so impossible to make any improvement in his wife. His eyes rolled over to Tom Conway, and he wondered how Conway was making out with the blonde Ingrid with whom he had seen him with heads together. He wondered if he was too old to have one last fling, decided regretfully that he might find it embarrassing at best and disastrous at worst. He sighed, started to eat his dinner.

As Liddell watched, the girl reluctantly tore her attention away from Lew Herrick, leaned across the table to talk to Robin Lewis, jabbing with her fingertips at the unfamiliar feel of the hair spray as she talked. From her expression, one thing looked pretty sure. Any reservations the girl might have had about the actress were washed away in the flood of her gratitude. Liddell had told Robin that he was sure she could handle herself and land on her feet. He couldn’t have been more prophetic.

Tonight the theater had been converted from its nightly movie to a live performance. *The Ship’s News* described it as a “Concert of Musical Comedy Hits” with the Alexandra Concert Ensemble providing the musical background and Lauri Michel and Frank Green appearing as guest stars.

Johnny Liddell wandered into the theater, winced at what the Alexandra Concert Ensemble was doing to a still recognizable musical comedy tune, listened to the assist given the ensemble by Lauri Michel in its melodic mayhem and retreated toward the smoking room.

Fran Eldridge was sitting at a corner table with Larry Weston, listening to him with half an ear. It was obvious from the annoyed expression on the third officer's face that he wasn't used to having Fran listen with half an ear and had no intention of getting used to it. He caught the girl's arm, turned her around to face him.

Fran jerked her arm free of the third officer's grip, opened her bag, brought out a folded envelope. She threw it on the table in front of him, got to her feet. Before he could stop her, she stalked away from the table, headed for the promenade.

Weston stared after her for a moment, then he picked up the envelope, lifted a folded sheet from it. He read it slowly, then balled the note and the envelope, jammed both into his pocket. He got up, followed Fran out onto the deck.

Chalk up another first for Fran, Liddell told himself. Probably her first lover's quarrel where the man followed her in an attempt to patch the rift. He wandered on in the smoking room, flagged down a steward, was about to order a drink when he discovered that in changing his clothes he had neglected to change his wallet from his slacks. He debated the advisability of having the steward let him sign a chit, decided he could use the exercise.

He headed for the staircase to the lower decks.

On B deck, he headed for his cabin, noted absently that the steward was off duty, apparently having his dinner. He let himself into his cabin, transferred his wallet to his pocket. Then he walked out into the companionway, closed his cabin door behind him.

Down the corridor, he could see Third Officer Weston pounding on the door to the redhead's cabin. Liddell checked his watch, surmised that the lover's quarrel hadn't been patched up. He was about to head for the elevator when the door opened, the redhead stood framed in it. As he watched, the third officer reached out, pushed her back into the cabin and followed her in.

Liddell frowned, reversed his direction, headed for the redhead's door. He could hear the sharp smack of a slap, a muffled cry. He tried the door, pushed it open.

Inside the cabin, Weston stood with his back to the door. His open hand described a short arc that caught the redhead across the side of the face, knocked her head to the side. He backhanded it into position, knocked her

sprawling to her knees. He had buried his fingers in her hair, was pulling her to her feet when Liddell caught him by the arm and spun him around.

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” Liddell growled.

“Go back where you belong, mister. You’re asking for trouble. Real trouble,” Crew Cut spat at him. He tugged his arm loose from Liddell’s grasp.

“You don’t know what trouble is, junior.” He ignored the raging third officer, turned to Meg Corbett. “You want me to throw him out?”

The redhead stood massaging the side of her face with the tips of her fingers. “Yes. Throw him out,” she begged.

“You heard the lady, tough guy. Out. Or I throw you out.”

Weston went into a crouch, hands high, chin tucked behind his shoulder. He slowly circled Liddell, got between him and the door. “Just for the record, mister, anybody gets thrown out, it’s you. Then I’m going to drag you to the captain’s office and tell him you broke in here and roughed her up.”

“And what will she be doing all this time?”

“What I tell her to.”

Liddell watched Crew Cut shuffling toward him, then the younger man made his move. He threw a rock-hard fist at Liddell’s head, took a sharp right to the midsection in return. Crew Cut grunted like a stung bear, started moving in again. He caught Liddell on the side of the head with a solid blow that started bells ringing in Johnny’s head. Sensing his advantage, the third officer threw caution to the winds and moved in, fists flailing, to finish Liddell off.

Johnny started back-pedaling, sidestepped Weston’s rush. He caught the third officer under the ear with a blow that carried his full strength. Weston staggered, a dazed expression on his face. Liddell planted his right to the elbow in Crew Cut’s midsection. There was a strangled gasp, Weston’s eye glazed. He tumbled to the floor, a tangle of arms and legs. Liddell stood over him, wiped his mouth with the side of his hand.

The redhead stood looking from Liddell to the man on the floor and back. “You’re pretty good. Larry was heavyweight champ of the Merchant Marine Academy in 1956.”

Liddell explored the spot where the third officer's fist had caught him on the side of the head with cautious fingers, winced. "He was outclassed. I was fleaweight champion of P.S. 64 in 1930," he growled. With his toe, he turned the unconscious man over onto his back. "Why the shellacking? Or doesn't he need a reason?"

The redhead massaged her cheek. "That's the first time he's ever hit me. And it'll be the last time."

"Why?"

The redhead's jaw was set stubbornly. "That's our business. His and mine."

Liddell shrugged. "Maybe the captain will think it's his business that his third officer tried to beat you up."

The girl shook her head. "No, you can't do that. The captain would throw him into the brig for the rest of the trip and he'd never get another ship." She grabbed Liddell's arm. "Don't do that to him." She glanced down at the man on the floor. "You've done enough to him."

"Then why did he tee off on you?"

The redhead licked at her lips. "I—I had it coming. He had a good deal set up to make a killing on this trip. I spoiled it for him."

Liddell's eyes narrowed. "Did Curaçao have anything to do with it?"

The girl's eyes widened, she backed away. "How did you know?" She shook her head. "He wouldn't have gone through with it, mister. He just liked to talk big."

"Where and when?"

The redhead searched his face for some sign of mercy, found none. "I—I don't know. I—"

"Where and when?"

"There's a small hotel, just outside Willemstad. It's called the Rotterdam Haus. He knows the owner."

"How does he bring it in?"

A look of honest bewilderment clouded the girl's face. "What are you talking about?"

"How does he bring them in?"

The redhead stared at him, her lips framing his words. “How does he bring what in?” She seemed to be seeing Liddell clearly for the first time.

“What’s he’s going to pick up at the hotel.” He watched the play of emotions on the girl’s face. “Look, a minute ago you were being smart. But if you’ve decided to change your mind—”

Her eyes hopscotched around his face seeking evidence that he was toying with her. When she failed to find it, her nails cut into his arm. “You think he’s going to pick something up at the hotel?” She shook her head. “He’s taking the girl there. The Eldridge girl. He’s going to get her into bed with him so she’ll have to marry him.”

Liddell’s jaw dropped. “You’re leveling?”

The redhead’s head bobbed. “I loused it up by sending her a letter telling her what the score was. She showed it to him tonight and told him to get lost. That’s why he was so sore.”

Liddell raked his fingers through his hair, swore softly. “I guess I see too many television shows,” he growled.

“You’re not going to—to make any trouble?”

Liddell shook his head. “I’m willing to forget what happened if he is.” He glanced down at where the third officer was beginning to moan his way back to consciousness. “But you’d better convince him to leave the Eldridge girl alone. My guess is that her father would not be as broad-minded.” He stepped over the fallen man’s legs, opened the door and stepped into the companionway. The room steward, who had just returned from dinner, peered at him, shook his head. The redhead didn’t like passengers. He’d never seen one make it into her room. He sighed philosophically at the realization that there’s always a first time for everything.

CHAPTER 17

Johnny Liddell sat disconsolately at a corner table in the Midnight Sun bar, nursed a scotch on the rocks. In his mind, he was checking out the names on the list found in Harry Landers's belongings.

Maurie Handel and his wife, traveling as the Keens, had eliminated themselves to all intents and purposes when they jumped ship at Grenada. Besides, knowing Handel's fear of discovery by the organization, Liddell was inclined to discount the possibility of the disbarred lawyer being involved in anything that might concern the underworld.

He was ready to scratch Martin Sands and his "niece" but decided to withhold judgment pending the report from Acme. Traveling as a married couple without benefit of clergy could be an effective cover-up.

He found a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it. He gazed over to the table occupied each night by Carson Eldridge and his party.

Tonight there was no attempt being made to cover the fact that Carson and Robin Lewis were engrossed in each other. Both had been frequent passengers on the *Queen* in the past, both were in an ideal position to be the smuggler. His daughter's obvious frumpiness during the early days of the cruise, the use of Lewis Herrick as a beard to disguise Carson Eldridge's interest in Robin Lewis, all could have been part of an elaborate misdirection, like a magician calling attention to what he was doing with his right hand while he set the trick up with his left.

His eyes continued their circuit of the smoky barroom. Harry and Belle Doyle were sitting where they had sat the night before, heads together, oblivious of the other passengers. It seemed highly improbable that they could be good enough actors to play the parts of such out-and-out farmers on a first cruise. That was a point that could be easily checked when the report came in. He'd be surprised if they were anything but what they appeared, two young people from Three Rivers, Wisconsin, on the first trip away from home and anxious to get back.

Mrs. Hilda Phelps, with her preoccupation with young men, her henna hair and bad make-up, had made enough trips on the *Queen* to qualify. But

there was the question of Harry Landers's murder and the improbability that she could have been responsible for his going over the side.

That left the Conways and the McDowells, both of whom had been passengers on previous cruises. Liddell found the "I" trouble of the oil man increasingly annoying, and was able to sympathize with the henpecked Conway. The two men appeared to dislike each other and the two women seemed to have trouble hiding the fact that they loathed each other. This, too, could be a bit of legerdemain to conceal the fact that they were working in concert. It would be interesting to see if their paths had ever crossed before this trip.

Liddell sighed, balanced his cigarette on the edge of an ash tray, lifted his glass to his lips, took a deep swallow. The evening had begun to drag. He debated the advisability of getting some sack time. Ingrid hadn't shown at the Midnight Sun tonight and by now, the fourth night out, the oil and water among the passengers had separated, little cliques had formed. He had consciously avoided getting entangled too closely with any group, had preferred to stay on the perimeter as an objective observer.

A uniformed page entered the bar, walked over, whispered to the bartender. The man in the white jacket pointed to where Liddell was sitting. The boy worked his way through the tables.

"Mr. Liddell?"

Johnny nodded.

"There's a radio telephone call for you in the radio shack, sir. Can you take it?"

"Be right with you." Liddell drained his glass, set it on the table, dropped a bill alongside it. He nodded to the page, got up and followed him to the door leading out onto the deck. He slid his hand under his jacket, felt the reassuring touch of the butt of the gun he had tucked in his waistband. He followed the page down the deserted deck, his eyes searching the shadows, his ears attuned for any sound.

The boy pushed open the door to the aft companionway, stepped through. Liddell followed him to the waiting elevator cage. The boy pushed a button, the doors closed noiselessly, the cage whooshed gently to the upper promenade deck. When the doors slid open, the boy pointed to a closed door on which was stenciled *Radio Telegraph*. He accepted the folded bill Liddell handed him, waited until Johnny had pushed open the door to the radio shack before he took the cage down.

Inside the room there was a small waiting area, a glass partition behind which a man sat with a green eyeshade on his forehead. He looked up from the sheaf of telegraph blanks he was checking as Liddell closed the door behind him.

“My name’s Liddell. You have a call for me?”

The man with the eyeshade looked back to where two engineers were fussing with dials, trying for a level. He turned back to Liddell, nodded. “Yes, sir. But we’re having a little trouble with transmission. An awful lot of static tonight.” He used a pencil to point at a closed door. “If you’ll wait in there, sir, we’ll put the call through as soon as we can clear some of the static.” His eyes dismissed Liddell, he went back to his sheaf of blanks.

Johnny walked to the door, opened it. The room beyond was soundproof, empty. Two telephones were visible in two partitioned booths, there was no window in the room. Liddell stepped in, closed the door behind him. He took up a position against the wall where he could cover the door, waited. It seemed he was waiting hours, but it couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes when the buzzer in one of the booths sounded. He started at the unexpected sound, then backed into the booth, kept the door covered as he lifted the receiver off its hook.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, sir. We have your call now,” the disinterested, metallic voice of the operator came through.

“Liddell?” a familiar voice greeted him. “Red Daniels at Acme.”

Some of the tension drained out of Johnny. “You scared me half to death. What’s the idea of phoning at this hour of the night?”

“I got lonesome sitting here with your secretary on my knee,” the Acme operative told him. “Besides, you’re paying for it.”

“That’s what’s got me scared half to death. How you coming with the report?”

There was a screeching and yowling of static that made the other man’s voice inaudible. When it died away, “What was that?”

“Static. I didn’t get a word you said. How about the report?”

“On its way. Should be in Curaçao by morning.”

Liddell nodded his satisfaction. “Good. Anything interesting?”

The static was back. It reached for a high note, died away. Red Daniels’s voice was back. “Sounds like a real dull bunch. Why you’d leave something

like Pinky here for them—” In the background. Liddell could hear a girl giggling.

“Cut that out. This is costing money. I’d better hang up. See you when I get back. If I get back.”

“Even you wouldn’t go to that extreme? Getting yourself killed just to stiff us out of our bill.”

“Tell Pinky if she thinks I’m paying her overtime to sit holding your hand this hour of the night, she’s crazy. So long.” He dropped the receiver on its hook, stepped out of the booth. He walked to the door, opened it a crack.

The anteroom beyond was empty, the man behind the partition was still working on his forms, the engineers fiddling with their knobs.

The man with the eyeshade looked up as Liddell walked out into the anteroom.

“Everything okay, sir?”

Liddell nodded. “A little noisy. But okay.”

The man behind the partition shrugged. “Must be a storm between here and New York. Been like that all night. The boys haven’t been able to clear it up completely.”

“It was okay.”

Liddell walked out of the radio shack, out onto the darkened deck. He debated the advisability of making a few circuits of the deck, remembered the captain’s warning.

He decided to head for his cabin, get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow could be a big day.

The crew’s infirmary on the *Queen Alexandra* is high in the bow of the ship. Tom Conway contemplated the three-story walk-up, decided it would be safer than to risk meeting some junior officer in the elevator who might later start wondering what he was doing so far from the passenger area.

This portion of the ship was a startling contrast to the luxury of the passenger area. It was spotlessly clean, but no effort had been wasted to make it attractive. There was no carpeting on the iron stairs, the walls were

painted a battleship gray rather than the highly decorative colors of the salons, companionways and smoking rooms of the rest of the ship.

By the time Conway knocked at the door marked *Infirmary* he felt as if he could use one. Ingrid opened the door, smiled at him, motioned him in. There were four neatly made beds inside, two treatment tables against the wall, a door leading into a lavatory.

“Those three flights of stairs are quite a gimmick,” Conway panted. “More effective than a chastity belt.”

“But not as permanent,” the blonde assured him. She closed the door behind him, turned the key in the lock. “It’s Conway,” she raised her voice.

The door to the lavatory opened. Jack Allen, the cruise director, stepped out. He shoved his hand out at Conway, got a halfhearted grip in return.

“Glad you could make it.”

Conway grunted. “I nearly didn’t. Gave my wife the slip at the buffet. She’s going to be as sore as a boil. I thought we were supposed to give each other a wide berth?”

Allen’s quick, trained smile cut white trenches in the tan of his face, his teeth gleamed whitely. “No one will see us together here. A few things have come up that I think we ought to talk about.” He indicated one of the beds. “Why don’t you sit down? You look bushed.”

Conway walked to one of the beds, dropped down on the side of it. Ingrid crawled onto the bed facing him, jackknifed her legs up under her.

“Anything wrong?” Conway asked anxiously.

The cruise director considered, shook his head. “Nothing to worry about.” He turned to Ingrid. “Have you told him about the new passenger?”

The blonde shook her head.

Allen turned back to the man on the bed. “This Liddell, the guy who joined the cruise at Barbados, is a detective. He’s picking up where the other one left off.”

Conway started to rise from the bed, permitted himself to be waved down. “You’re sure?”

Allen nodded. “We had a look through his things last night. He’s a private detective, licensed in New York. He had Hans Reyder’s name written

on the back of an envelope. He wouldn't have that if he wasn't working on the same case as Landers."

Conway dug a handkerchief from his breast pocket, patted at the thin film of perspiration that gleamed at his hairline. "You think Landers had a chance to pass along what he knew?"

Allen shook his head. "Landers sent no messages back, either by phone or cable. Besides, according to the boys States-side who fingered him for us, Landers was a loner. He didn't like to share credit, so he kept everything he knew to himself." He smiled, tapped his head. "He kept it all up here. Liddell couldn't know what he knew unless he can use a Ouija board."

"But Liddell has Reyder's name."

"Landers had more than a name. Look at all the good it did him. It's one thing having a name, and another thing talking to the man whose name it is. I don't think Liddell is going to make it."

The perspiration was forming in tiny bubbles on Conway's jowls and upper lip. He swabbed at it. "Not another one, Allen. I'm not up to it. Smuggling—that's one thing. Murder—that's another."

The cruise director shrugged. "They can only hang you once." He shook his head. "But you don't have to worry about this one. This one will be on the house. We'll have the most perfect alibi in the world for it. No one could point a finger at us."

The handkerchief in Conway's hand made a circuit of his face. "This is it, for me, Allen. I'm cutting out after this trip."

Allen shrugged. "That's not for me to say. Or for you either. We're just errand boys. Maybe the boys in New York won't accept your resignation."

"Why not? Like you said, we're just errand boys. They can get other errand boys—"

"Not one with your peculiar qualifications. Besides you'd be walking around knowing a lot of things that could give them an awful headache."

"I wouldn't talk. You know that. I'm in no position to."

Allen bobbed his head. "I know that. Me, I trust you. I have to, just like you have to trust me. But with them it's different. They're not that sure they can trust either of us. They'll tell us when we can quit. We won't tell them."

Ingrid stirred impatiently on the bed. "Let's not worry about what's going to happen in the future. We've got enough worrying about right now."

What's the program? Do we go through with it or forget it for this trip?"

Allen scowled at her. "You crazy? We go through with it. Nothing's changed. So a man got washed overboard. Prove something different. So they suspect somebody's bringing diamonds in. That's not new." He turned to Conway. "We don't change a thing. It's worked without a hitch in the past, it'll work again. As often as we want it to."

"I don't know. I got a funny feeling this time."

Allen flashed a look at the blonde, she nodded imperceptibly. She unfolded her legs, got to her feet, walked over to where Conway sat, dropped down alongside him. "Allen's right, Tom. Nothing's changed. Landers stumbled on what we were doing accidentally. He's gone. Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place. Liddell will never figure out in a couple of days what it took Landers a year to." She watched the indecision on the man's face. "Besides, our share of this trip added to what's already coming to us will put us on easy street. You'll be your own boss, not living off that wife of yours. That's not living. That's just existing. You said so yourself."

"But where's it going to end?"

The blonde reached up, ran her fingers through his hair. "The men we're working for aren't fools. They know it can't last forever. Just a few more big takes and they'll be ready to walk away. Then we can, too." She looked over to where Allen stood. "The chief steward may start wondering why neither of us are at the buffet, Jack. Why don't you go on down, be seen around?"

Allen started to argue, interpreted the signal in her eyes. He grunted, headed for the door, unlocked it and stalked out. The blonde walked over, turned the key in the lock. She walked back to where Conway still sat staring at the far wall.

"You're worrying too much, Tom. Big people have a lot at stake in this. They're not going to let anything go wrong." She sat down alongside him on the bed, kissed him on the side of his mouth. "Put your head down. Relax."

Conway swung his legs up onto the bed, laid his head in her lap. She loosened his tie, opened the buttons on his shirt. "Stop worrying," she told him softly. She leaned down, covered his mouth with hers. After a moment, she straightened up, stuck her hand inside his shirt, massaged his chest with the flat of her hand.

"Want to stay here with me for a while?" she asked.

He grinned glumly. "I might as well. I'll get hell when I get home anyway."

CHAPTER 18

The following morning Johnny Liddell stood at the rail on the promenade deck, watched the passengers streaming down the gangplank from the main deck forward down onto the pier where the automobiles were lined up, waiting to take them on a day's tour of the capital with its Oval Hall, the National Pantheon with the tomb of Simon Bolívar, the University City and the fabulous Officers' Club.

Liddell had other plans. At ten o'clock a car would pick him up at the pier, transport him to the airport outside of town where he would charter a plane to put him into Willemstad, Curaçao, a day before his fellow passengers.

Down on the dock, the representatives of Thomas Cook & Sons were handling the details of the all-day trip, accepting Jack Allen's suggestions for the most amicable seating arrangements. The McDowells were placed in the car with Carson Eldridge and his party, much to the white-haired man's disgust. The Conways were assigned to ride with the newlyweds and Martin Sands and his niece.

Third Officer Larry Weston stood on the side lines with Allen and Ingrid Sorenson, watched glumly as Fran Eldridge took her place in the car with Lewis Herrick, refused to waste even a glance in his direction. As the car pulled off, Allen grinned at the crew cut officer.

"You could have fooled me." He grinned. "I thought she preferred the physical type."

Weston scowled. "Better him than me. I couldn't care less about having to look at something like that across the breakfast table every morning." But his voice lacked conviction. The scowl deepened as he recognized the full-blown figure of the redheaded beauty operator coming down the gangplank. "You and Ingrid riding out to the Tamanaco?"

Allen turned to the blonde, raised his eyebrows. She nodded. "Might as well. They don't pay us for hanging around here. And we don't get to go ashore at Curaçao."

"Mind if Meg and I ride up to the hotel with you?"

“Be my guest.” He watched with appreciation the effect the redhead’s bouncy walk had on her façade. “You’re a pretty lucky guy, Third. All that and shore leave in Curaçao. Got any plans for tomorrow?” he asked with transparent innocence.

“Yeah. I’m going to curl up with a good book,” Weston grunted.

The redhead joined them, showed by her smile that she hadn’t resented the inventory the cruise director had taken of her obvious assets. “Hi, Mr. Allen. Hi, Ingrid.” She turned to Weston. “Been waiting long, honey?”

He favored her with a scowl, turned to Allen. “We’re ready any time you are.”

The cruise director turned, signaled to one of the private cars for hire, waited until it pulled up alongside them. The driver swung in his seat, stared impudently at the two women as they got into the back seat, turned to the men with a surly expression. “Where you go?”

“Tamanaco Hotel.”

“Forty dollar round trip,” he told them.

Allen snapped back at him in his native tongue, motioned for the girls to get out of the car.

“Okay, okay,” the driver growled. “I thought you were a pig of a tourist.” He turned, spat out the window. “Norteamericanos!” The way he said it was a message in itself. “Okay, get in. For you twenty dollar round trip.”

“Charming if McDowell happened to be along,” Ingrid commented as Jack Allen slid in alongside her. “Think what a wonderful couple he and Laughing Boy would have made.”

Allen grinned at the picture it conjured up. “I’d love to have the moving picture rights when his car gets down around the capitol and the mob starts banging on the windows and slamming the hood. With all his talk, I’ll bet he spends most of the day on his knees.”

Conversation dwindled as the driver swung into a U-turn on the pier and headed for the hotel in the hills.

When they reached the Tamanaco, Weston and the two girls headed for the patio to reserve a table before the members of the tours sewed them all up, while Allen remained behind to make arrangements with the driver to pick them up after lunch.

Then, instead of joining the group directly, the cruise director headed for the radio-telegraph office in the lobby, gave the operator a Willemstad number in Curaçao and settled down to wait.

Johnny Liddell stared out through the windows of the chartered plane, watched the island of Curaçao taking form in the distance. First there was the sparkling blue of the tropical waters with the sunlight glinting off the waves. Then the coral reefs that lined the island tinted the waters with pastel colors of unbelievable beauty and myriad shades. Finally, as they reached the island itself, he could see the deeply indented natural harbors, the ships at anchor in St. Anna's and the cluster of buildings that were Willemstad.

After a moment they were over the city itself with its neatly arranged rows of squat buildings, their tiered, orange-colored roofs making it a miniature Amsterdam.

The pilot pointed down to the channel that intersects the city, where the huge floating causeway was folded back to admit one of the 8,000 ships that steam through annually into the Schottegat.

"The Queen Emma," the pilot explained. "All traffic stops, the bridge is swung open for every ship that sails up the Waaigat." He pointed into the inner harbor where half a dozen ships swung at anchor. "That is the Schottegat. In the old days those forts around it made it one of the safest harbors in the Caribbean. Today—" He grinned and shrugged.

Liddell stared down at the square stone buildings which once were so impregnable, but which now looked so absurdly inadequate in an era of Strategic Air Command bombers and guided missiles.

The pilot eased the plane into a lazy bank, pointed out the clearly defined landing area in the flatlands just outside the city. "Coming in now, Mr. Liddell. You won't have any trouble getting a car. Always a half dozen around."

At the airport, Liddell made the transfer from the plane to a car without delay, gave the driver the address of Hans Reyder.

"25 Vervoort?" The driver tugged the greasy chauffeur's cap from his head, wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "D'other side vum d'Queen Emma. Nein?" His voice was thick with a heavy Dutch accent.

"I don't know," Liddell told him. "All I have is the address."

The driver bobbed his head. “Yah. D’other side vum d’causeway.” He waited until Liddell had slid into the back seat, put the car into gear.

Liddell relaxed against the cushions, watched the breath-taking beauty of the landscape as it flashed by en-route to the city. In the heart of Willemstad, he marveled at the faithful attention to detail in the reproduction of the architecture of Amsterdam that lined the far side of the Waagat.

The Queen Emma had now swung back into place and heavy automobile and pedestrian traffic was swarming across it. For all its storybook appearance, it was obvious that Willemstad was a city of business. Liddell could only guess how much even this fast tempo would be stepped up tomorrow when the *Queen Alexandra* vomited its more than 1,000 passengers and part of its 700 crew ashore for a day of shopping and touring.

Twenty-five Vervoort turned out to be a small shop in one of the outlying districts of the city. Johnny Liddell paid the driver off, walked over, tried the knob, pushed the door open. Some place deep in the rear a bell tinkled. Liddell stood inside the dim shop, looked around. It was lined on either side by glass showcases containing what appeared to be curios and souvenirs. The windows in the cases were dusty and grimy. The entire shop had about it an air of decay and lack of care.

Liddell waited a moment, then, when no one appeared from behind the curtain that closed off the rear of the shop, he opened and closed the door again. The bell tinkled, but still no one appeared.

“Hello?” Liddell called out.

There was no sign of life from behind the curtain. Liddell walked to the back of the store, stopped outside the curtain. “Hello?” he repeated.

This time when there was no answer, he pulled the curtain aside.

Hans Reyder had the heavy square face of the Dutch. His sparse, white hair was disarrayed, his normally ruddy face was gray. His eyes bulged at the doorway, his jaw hung open. He must have been a little over five feet four, and his feet were a few inches from the floor, bringing him to Liddell’s height. The rope around his neck was attached to an exposed pipe that ran across the ceiling. The body was swaying slowly from side to side.

Liddell’s eyes took in the room at a glance. An over-turned chair lay at the dead man’s feet, there was little evidence of a struggle.

He started into the room, was alerted by the slight scuffing of a shoe. He threw himself to the side, saw the flash of the blade as the man standing behind the door slashed at him. He hit the floor, rolled over, reached under his coat for his .45. As it cleared into the open, the man with the knife was on top of him. The toe of his shoe caught Liddell's wrist, sent the gun skidding across the floor.

Liddell had a brief glimpse of the man before he rolled out of another kick aimed at his head. He was heavy-set, dark. His teeth were bared in a ferocious snarl, glistened whitely against the darkness of his complexion, the unshaven jaw and jowls. His hair was thick, matted, pushed back from his face from a hairline that was inches from his thick eyebrows.

Liddell rolled until he felt the wall at his back, braced himself against it, pushed himself to his feet. The man with the knife took his time stalking him. He shuffled in, knife held waist high, point upward, ready for a thrust that could rip Liddell from belt to collar.

The only sound in the room was the heavy breathing of the man with the knife. Liddell could feel the perspiration running down the back of his shirt as he waited. The other man seemed to be enjoying stretching it out.

Suddenly he started to close the distance. Liddell kicked out with his heel, had the momentary satisfaction of hearing the other man yelp with pain as the heel connected with his shin. Then the knife slashed out. Liddell twisted away from it, felt the bite of the steel as the blade tore through his sleeve, dug a thin furrow up the side of his arm.

The lunge drove the man past him and Liddell aimed a punch at his neck. The punch carried only half power because Liddell was off balance and the man swung back on him with a roar. This time, when he slashed at Liddell, Johnny was set. He caught the man's knife hand with both his and twisted with all his strength.

The other man's feet left the ground, he slammed against the wall with a thud that shook the building. The knife clattered to the floor. Both men dived for it, struggled. The dark man managed to get his hands on it, rolled over on his back with a victorious grunt.

Liddell grabbed at the wrist of the hand holding the knife, tried to force it back where he could smash the knuckles against the floor. Perspiration beaded his forehead, ran down into his eyes and blinded him. He could smell the sour breath of the other man as he sucked in air in gasping sobs. With his free hand he was trying to reach Liddell's eyes to claw him.

Liddell had to relax his pressure on the knife hand to protect his eyes, his fingers on the other man's wrist grew slippery and wet.

Seizing his momentary advantage, the other man threw his entire weight into an effort to dislodge Johnny and succeeded in throwing him off.

He got to his knees and Liddell struggled to his feet. As the man with the knife started to move in for the kill, Liddell threw himself forward, shouldered him back against the wall, his hand straining to keep the point of the blade away from his body. They wrestled there for a moment, panting and thrashing. The grunting and gasping grew louder.

Suddenly the other man's foot landed on Liddell's gun on the floor. It flew out from under him and clattered across the room. Both men crashed to the floor, Liddell on top.

The man with the knife twitched uncontrollably for a moment, then lay still. Liddell struggled painfully to his feet. The other man lay on his back, leg folded under him. He stared up at Liddell with wide open eyes. The small, white teeth were still bared in a baleful snarl, a thin dark red stream glistened from the corner of his mouth to the point of his chin. The handle of the knife projected from just below his breastbone like an obscene horn. Surrounding it, a spreading stain was dyeing the front of his shirt a dark red.

Liddell pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at the perspiration on his face. He stepped across the dead man, walked over to where his gun lay against the wall. He had just picked it up, was about to replace it in his waistband when a voice barked.

“Put the gun on the floor.”

He turned at the sound of the voice, saw the man in the olive drab uniform leveling his service revolver. He dropped the gun, straightened up.

“Don't move,” the uniformed man advised him. The officer's eyes took in the hanging man, the dead man on the floor. “Who are you, what are you doing here?” he snapped.

“My name's Liddell. I'm a private detective from the United States. I came here to see Reyder.” His eyes sought out the contorted features of the hanged man. “This man was hanging here when I came in. I must have walked in on him”—he nodded to the dead man on the floor—“while he was setting it up to look like a suicide. He jumped me, we struggled—” He shrugged. “He tried to swallow the knife and didn't make it.”

The officer kept his eyes on Liddell, walked over to the man on the floor, dropped his eyes to the man's face. "Gruder." His eyes flashed upward. "You know this man?"

Liddell shook his head. "We didn't have time to be introduced."

The man in khaki ignored the remark. "This man is Erich Gruder. He is well known to us. Have you had dealings with him before?"

Liddell shook his head. "I am a passenger on the *Queen Alexandra* and ___"

"The *Queen Alexandra* will not be here until tomorrow," the officer cut him off coldly.

"I know. She's docked in La Guaira. I flew over here by private plane, arrived less than a half hour ago. A car brought me here from the airport. You can check all that."

Doubt clouded the officer's eyes. "You have identification?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "My cruise membership card, my private detective's license."

The officer's finger whitened on the trigger. "Let me see them. Only remember this—anything but a wallet comes out of your pocket and you're a dead man. Bring it out with two fingers."

Liddell reached into his breast pocket, caught his wallet with thumb and forefinger, lifted it out. He flipped through it until he came to the facsimile of his license, held it out to the officer. The man in uniform nodded. "Now the cruise card."

Liddell brought it out of his pocket, held it out. Some of the doubt dissolved in the officer's eyes. His finger relaxed on the trigger, his eyes sought out the hanging body. "Reyder was like that when you came in?"

"If that's Reyder."

The officer nodded. "It's Reyder."

"The body was swinging a little. It didn't occur to me then, but your friend here must have brushed against it when he flattened himself against the wall." He snapped his wallet shut, returned it to his pocket. "How come you made like the U. S. Marines?"

The officer frowned. "Please?"

"Showing up here right at the crucial moment," Liddell interpreted.

“Neighbors reported a fight going on in here.” He considered for a moment. “I’d better call this in.” He waved the muzzle of his service revolver at the .45 near Liddell’s foot. “Kick your gun over this way, please.” He waited while Liddell sent the gun skidding across to him, then bent down, picked it up. He weighed it in the palm of his hand, nodded appreciatively. “That’s a lot of gun.”

“I never send a boy to do a man’s job,” Liddell told him.

The officer stuck the .45 in his waistband. “You’ll have to tell your story to the superintendent, of course.”

Johnny nodded. “Ask him to notify the American consulate that I’m in his office. The boys at the consulate are expecting me.”

The officer nodded. He crossed to the telephone on the wall. He dialed police headquarters, turned to stare at Hans Reyder’s contorted features as the phone started ringing at the other end.

CHAPTER 19

Johnny Liddell squirmed uncomfortably on the hard bench in the anteroom of the police superintendent's office. He sat sprawled, his legs extended out in front of him, his hands balled in his jacket pockets. He was engaged in a fruitless study of the toes of his shoes when a man in a blue silk suit, wearing white shoes and a panama hat walked into the room. He walked over to where Liddell sat.

"Are you Mr. Liddell?" His voice retained traces of a Boston nasal accent.

Liddell nodded.

"Sorry if you've been inconvenienced," the man in the blue suit apologized. "I'm Nat Simons of the consulate. We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"I flew in by private plane from La Guaira. As it turns out, I might just as well have stayed with the ship." Liddell got to his feet, offered the man his hand, received a firm handshake in return.

"I just heard about Reyder." Simons shook his head.

"He almost had company. The guy who strung him up was tidying things up when I arrived. He almost fixed it for Reyder to have a gin partner. Me," Liddell grunted. "It didn't work out quite that way, but Reyder's got company just the same."

Simons bobbed his head. "So I understand. Let's go in and meet the superintendent and get this all cleared up." He walked over to a uniformed clerk sitting at a desk, spoke to him for a moment. The clerk bared big, square teeth in a smile. He pointed to a door with the stub of the pencil he was using.

Simons walked to the closed door, stuck his head inside. He turned, motioned for Liddell to join him.

Superintendent Hans Gervaert looked as if he had been jammed into the oversized chair behind the desk. He made no effort to get up as the two men entered the room, studied them from expressionless disks that were half hidden by heavily veined, discolored eyelids. His yellowish white hair

matched the thick eyebrows and the drooping mustache, his complexion was a bright red tinged with gray. The left breast pocket of his tunic was decorated with three rows of brightly colored campaign ribbons, his heavy jowls almost obscured his collar.

He motioned to two chairs across the desk from his with thick beefy paws.

“Sorry to be so long, Superintendent,” Simons told him. “My office didn’t know where to reach me as I had a couple of stops on my way in.” He turned to Liddell. “This is Superintendent Gervaert of the Antilles Police, Mr. Liddell,” he turned back to the fat man. “This is Johnny Liddell, Superintendent, a New York private detective.”

The superintendent favored Liddell with a jaundiced look, turned to Simons. “We do not like visitors abusing our hospitality, Mr. Simons. Your office assured me it could explain all this.” His voice was guttural, hoarse. “I’m listening.”

Simons turned to Liddell. “Would you explain to the superintendent why you’re here and what happened, Mr. Liddell?”

“I have been hired by the diamond syndicate in New York to uncover a ring smuggling Brazilian diamonds into the United States. We had reason to believe Hans Reyder might be a member of that ring—”

“Why?”

Liddell considered. “I was put on the case after another private detective disappeared from the *Queen Alexandra* during a storm. He had assured his clients that he would expose the smuggling ring upon his return from this cruise.” He shrugged. “He didn’t make it.”

The superintendent made a face as if he had a sour taste in his mouth. “Where does Reyder enter into it?”

“In the private detective’s address book, there was only one name from any of the ports the ship was due to hit. Hans Reyder in Willemstad.” He pursed his lips. “It was a thin clue, granted. But a clue.” He turned to Simons. “I had a New York agency check out some people for me. They called me to tell me you’d have the material by today, so I decided to fly over and spend the day here checking things out before the *Queen* got here.”

The consulate man lifted his briefcase, opened it and brought out a large manila envelope. “This came late last night.” He tossed the envelope on the desk.

The superintendent leaned forward, read the return address. “Acme Agency?” He rolled his expressionless eyes up to Liddell’s face. “These are the reports?”

Liddell nodded.

The superintendent leaned back. Some of the hostility seemed to have drained out of him. “Go ahead.”

“I decided to have a talk with Reyder, drove directly there from the airport.” He shrugged. “He was dead when I got there. I stepped into the room and this guy with the shiv jumped me. I was lucky and he wasn’t.”

The fat man in the uniform touched the tips of his fingers together, blew bubbles between his pouty lips. He turned to Simons. “We have checked his story. The captain of the *Queen Alexandra* verifies that he left the ship this morning; we have found the man who drove him to 25 Vervoort.” The discolored lids hid the eyes for a moment. He seemed almost to have gone to sleep. He opened his eyes. “You verify the fact that a package was awaiting him here.” He sighed. “I have no other alternative but to believe the rest of his story.”

Simons managed to look relieved. “Thank you, Superintendent.”

The superintendent turned to Liddell. “You’re a pretty lucky man, Mr. Liddell.”

“You said yourself everything checked out—”

A brief flash of annoyance clouded the fat man’s face. “Not that. Erich Gruder—the man you killed. He was not exactly an amateur.” He sighed at the need for movement, pulled himself up in his chair, reached for a folder in his basket. “We know him very well.” He flipped open the folder, ran a stubby index finger down the typewritten page. “He is a known hired killer. He came here from the Netherlands in 1956. We were warned to keep an eye on him, but we have never been able to prove he was responsible for several unsolved murders.” He flipped the folder closed. “Suspect, yes. But witnesses had a habit of developing bad memories when we tried to prove anything.” He tossed the folder at his basket, leaned back. “We won’t have that trouble any more.”

“And Reyder? Do you have anything on him?”

The fat man pursed his lips. “He, too, came to the Antilles from the Netherlands. He was a diamond cutter in Amsterdam. Since he has been here

he has posed as a curio dealer. He spends much of his time on Herren and Breede streets—”

“The main jewelry and shopping center,” Simons put in. He looked thoughtful. “You think that ties in with the diamond smuggling?”

The superintendent shrugged, displaced his jowls. “This is the first I hear of the diamond smuggling,” he grunted gutturally. He eyed Liddell with no show of enthusiasm. “Your principals, why did they not contact the Antilles Police? Did they think we couldn’t handle it without bringing in an outside detective?”

“We weren’t aware of the tie between Willemstad and the smugglers until Landers stumbled on it. He didn’t pass the information along and the only way I got onto it was the notation in his address book.”

The fat man seemed mollified. “If Reyder was connected with the gang, it was as a cutter. The diamonds probably come in here in a raw state and an expert like Reyder would be needed to give them the proper cut. But why would they eliminate one of their most valuable men?”

Liddell shrugged. “Maybe they were afraid he would talk.”

The superintendent considered it, bobbed his head. “That could be,” he conceded. “Reyder was a weakling. He might have talked so they made it look like he had committed suicide. There would be no suspicion. This is the kind of a thing that might be expected of a professional like Gruder.” He massaged the side of his jowl with a pudgy hand. “You have no clue to the others involved?”

“I have a couple of ideas,” Liddell conceded. He picked up the envelope containing the reports from Acme. “I’m hoping that what’s in here will give me what I need to prove them.”

The fat man nodded. “If the smuggler is on your ship, you will make him talk?” he asked.

“I think he’ll be singing like a stage-struck canary.”

“Good. Then you will notify us and we will take care of the others at this end.”

Liddell got to his feet. “A pleasure to be doing business with you Superintendent. I’ll be in touch.” He looked from the fat man to Simons and back. “I’m free to go now?”

“Why not? The only fingerprints on the knife belonged to Gruder. Reyder was dead before you got there. There is no reason to inconvenience you further, Mr. Liddell.” He blinked owlishly. “You will be staying in Willemstad until the *Queen Alexandra* leaves tomorrow night?”

“We’ve arranged lodging for Mr. Liddell, Superintendent,” Simons put in.

The fat man bobbed his head. “I ask for only one reason. Gruder may have had friends, associates even. They may resent what happened to him.” He shrugged. “There is no accounting for tastes. Violence is not good for the tourist business. You understand?”

Liddell grinned glumly. “I understand. If I’m going to get myself murdered, please do it some place else. That it?”

Gervaert considered, nodded. “Rather bluntly put. But that’s the general idea,” he conceded.

Jack Allen and his assistant, Ingrid Sorenson, sat on the Lido Deck, watched the day dying. From where they sat, they could see the thin trickle of passengers who had returned to the ship to change clothes for an evening of pub-crawling, piling into cars on the pier. Allen stretched, shook his head. “They never get enough. They paid their money for this port and they’re going to get their last dollar’s worth. You hear what that Gobbler told me last night at the buffet?”

The blonde shook her head.

“She says to me ‘I never ate so much in all my life, and all of it bad.’ Can you imagine?”

“Seems real nice and peaceful with them all ashore.” The girl nodded and glanced idly out across the water. “I didn’t see Liddell on any of the tours today.”

Allen frowned. “Come to think of it, neither did I. Haven’t seen him aboard since we’ve been back, either.” The frown deepened. “I wonder if he’s been sending any messages? Sparks told me he got a call from New York last night.” He managed to look a little worried. “You know, it could be we’re underestimating this guy.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to find out if he has sent any messages. Why don’t we just ask?”

Allen considered it, nodded his head. He checked his watch. “The day operator is just about going off. What say we pick up a bottle and pay him a

visit?”

Ralph Rogers, day operator in the radio shack, had just stepped out of a shower, was sprawled on his bunk in his robe. His head was cradled on his arm, he was staring at the ceiling, when the knock came at the door.

“It’s open,” he called out.

His eyes widened when the door opened and Jack Allen stepped in, Ingrid Sorenson following him. He sat up. “Well, to what do I owe the honor?” He managed to look even more pleased when Allen produced the bottle of scotch, set it down on the table.

“Ever feel that if you had to talk to one more passenger you’d throw up?” Allen wanted to know. “That’s us. We’ve had it. We feel like doing a little drinking, but by ourselves.”

“Why here?”

The blonde grinned at him. “They go looking for us to entertain the passengers, where do they look? My cabin or his cabin. They’d never look for us here. Of course, if you’re too tired or—”

The radioman jumped out of the bunk. “Not a bit.” He disappeared into the lavatory, came back with three paper cups. “Never too tired for a blonde and a bottle.” He eyed Ingrid appreciatively while Allen opened the scotch. “You know something, doll? I had the feeling you didn’t like me.”

“What gave you that idea?”

Rogers shrugged. “You never gave me the right time. I had it figured you had no time for anybody but the passengers.”

The blonde grinned. “I’m not the demonstrative type. Passengers? You can have them. I’ve had them up to here.” She held the flat of her hand under her chin.

Allen poured a stiff slug into each of the glasses. “Want a little water in these?”

“Not mine,” the radioman told him. “It’s against my religion to drink waterlogged scotch.”

“Better put some in mine,” Ingrid told the cruise director.

“I guess I’m a sissy too,” Allen grunted. He walked into the lavatory, out of sight of the couple in the cabin, spilled most of the scotch down the sink, filled the cups with water.

Rogers held his cup up in a toast, downed the whole drink with a swallow. He made no effort to resist when Allen poured him another stiff slug.

By the time the cruise director and the blonde had finished their watered drink, Rogers had downed three stiff slugs and was working on his fourth.

His eyes were beginning to glaze slightly, his speech was slurred, and he was having difficulty pronouncing his words. Allen poured some more scotch into his own glass and the girl's, signaled to her with his eyes as he took the two glasses into the lavatory. Here, he again spilled half the drinks down the sink, filling the cups with water. When he walked out, Ingrid was tilting the half-empty bottle over the radioman's cup.

She looked up as Allen handed her her cup. "Say, I think I'll have to run. I've got to find Liddell—"

Rogers had difficulty focusing his eyes on the blonde. "Who?"

"Liddell. The passenger we picked up in Barbados. He was going to call New York this afternoon and get me some information."

The radioman considered it drunkenly for a moment, frowned. "Liddell, Liddell." He dredged in his memory. "What about Liddell?" He set his glass down, rubbed his face in his hands, suddenly looked up. A big grin split his face. "I remember." He shook his head. "He didn't call New York today—"

"You're sure?" Ingrid prompted.

"Positive. He's in Curaçao. In jail."

Allen's jaw dropped. "In Curaçao?"

Rogers bobbed his head with drunken solemnity. "Superintendent of Antilles Police called the captain. Something about Liddell and some murder. The captain guessed I was on the line, told me to cut out." He winked. "But I heard what I heard. Liddell was in Curaçao, mixed up in some murder."

"How awful." Ingrid looked to Allen. "Maybe there's something we can do. We'd better check in with the captain."

Allen nodded. "We'd better."

The radioman looked hurt. "You're not going to leave me, are you?"

"We'd better, Ralph," Ingrid told him. "We're responsible for the passengers and—"

“We’re going to leave the bottle,” Allen broke in.

The radioman eyed him owlshly for a moment, then nodded. “Oh, that’s different.”

After the door closed behind the cruise director and his assistant, Rogers filled his cup with scotch again and tossed it off. He stared at the closed door, tried to remember what it was that caused them to run away so suddenly, couldn’t quite remember. He shrugged, threw the paper cup at the wastebasket, grabbed the scotch bottle by the neck and lay down on his bunk.

CHAPTER 20

The following morning Johnny Liddell stood at the window of the Holland Haus, stared out over the shimmering waters of the Bay. Six miles away, the *Queen Alexandra* was docked at the pier in Caracas Bay, its passengers were already jamming the shops along Herren and Breede nosing out duty-free bargains.

Liddell had spent most of the night studying the reports Red Daniels had sent from Acme. With the short space of time available to him, the redhead had outdone himself. There was enough data on each of the names on Harry Landers's list to give some insight into the people involved.

And by and large it was disappointing.

Martin Sands and his niece were exactly what he had suspected. The name Sands was a phony, so the assumption was that the niece was also a phony. The reservation for the Sands couple had been made through the Midtown Travel Agency on 59th Street and a well-placed sawbuck had revealed that the reservation had been made by the secretary for Martin Ritter, vice president of Lorelei Fabrics which had offices on Park Avenue and 56th Street. Discreet inquiries at Lorelei Fabrics had disclosed that Martin Ritter was on a business trip and that his secretary, Helen Burns, had taken her vacation about the same time. The description of Martin Ritter provided by the agency fitted that of Martin Sands. Helen Burns could not have looked more like Helen Sands from the description.

He had been right about Belle and Harry Doyle, too. They could not be acting the part of uprooted farmers that well. Inquiries in Three Rivers, Wisconsin, had disclosed that both had been born and bred in the town, that their honeymoon had been provided by the local newspaper as a prize in a circulation contest. The contest had been bought as a circulation drive package from Garrett Advertising Service in Philadelphia.

He walked back to the table, picked up the sheaf of reports. That was the only thing that puzzled him. According to the report on the Conways, Laura Conway had been Laura Garrett. Her husband, Tom Conway, was a vice president of the Garrett Advertising Service. To the best of his knowledge, he had never seen the Conways address the Doyles or vice versa. Yet,

directly or indirectly, the Conways were footing the bill for the Doyles' honeymoon.

He leafed through the reports, reread the one on Conway. A former newspaperman, he had joined the Garrett Service almost ten years before and had married the boss's daughter. That could account for the henpecked air he had. The Garrett Service combined advertising and promotion, serviced newspapers throughout the country in many ways. The contest, tied in with a circulation drive, was a package sold to small-town newspapers. There were apparently twelve such contests a year with the winners receiving cruises, luggage and a weekend in New York as prizes. The contests were aimed at soon-to-be-married couples.

Liddell reached for a cigarette, got it going. He was fumbling for some connection between the Doyles and the Conways, dismissed the idea when he convinced himself that the Doyles, transparently honest as they were, could not have successfully disguised the fact if they had known the Conways, had had previous contact with them. And as for the Conways, socially conscious as they were, it was understandable why they should avoid letting a rural couple like the Doyles attach themselves for the duration of the trip.

Lewis Herrick was even less promising. A former magazine writer, who had branched into screenplays via a syndicated, low-budget television program, he had hit the jackpot with a serious novel that had become an almost permanent fixture on the best-seller list. His follow-up "second novel" had been a disappointment to his publishers who had suggested a rest before he tackled the job of a complete rewrite. One of the editors of the publishing house had expressed the opinion "off the record, of course" that Herrick was a "one-book phenomenon" and that the publishers would postpone publication of the follow-up until the last possible sale had been nursed from the best-seller.

Carson Eldridge's background indicated that he had been badly set back by the sudden death of his wife. His in-laws, who had raised Fran, described him as a man trying to run away. He had traveled extensively, worked abroad for years as a representative of American companies, tried to blot out his memories. The girl hadn't seen him in almost ten years when he showed up at the ranch six months ago. He had insisted that she take the cruise on the *Alexandra* as the first step in polishing her up. The grandparents were not completely approving of the way he had deserted his daughter and evaded his responsibilities to her over the years.

There was less detail on the McDowells, but what there was left no doubt that Alvin McDowell was two things he claimed to be—an oil millionaire and a Texas Republican. Most of the material available in the various newspaper morgues in Dallas and Houston concerned themselves with McDowell's involvement in the 1960 unpleasantness which resulted in his political enemy's elevation from the Senate to the Vice Presidency and his vow to become an expatriate Texan if the process were repeated in 1964.

The reports on Mrs. Hilda Phelps and Robin Lewis were more general, contained little or nothing that was of value.

All in all, it added up to little more than nothing.

Liddell walked back to the window, smoked in short, thoughtful puffs. So much for the passengers. That left the crew. Mentally he checked them out, scowled at the result. Captain Delmar Rose had too much at stake, had been at sea too long to become involved in a smuggling ring in the twilight years of his career. Yet even captains need money to retire on, and despite the glamour of his job, being captain of a cruise ship isn't the fastest way to become independently wealthy.

Jack Allen was obviously coming toward the end of his career as a cruise director. His smile was growing more tired, his enthusiasm more forced. He was in an ideal position to feather his nest by bringing in the diamonds, but Liddell knew that the customs men, the diamond syndicate and all other interested parties would be watching a man like Allen too closely for him to be able to smuggle in diamonds in the quantity the syndicate had indicated.

The same would seem to apply to Ingrid Sorenson or to the third officer and his redhead girl friend. There had been stories about how beauty operators on ships had brought contraband into the country in rolled-up hairdos, in jars of beauty cream and cold cream and in other feminine paraphernalia. But it was, at best, an impractical fictional device.

Liddell took a last drag on the cigarette, crushed it out. He scowled out across the water.

The customs would be on the alert for any gimmick like that, as well. He massaged the side of his jaw with the flat of his hand. He fingered the bristles thoughtfully, decided a few hours' sleep might give him a new perspective.

When Nat Simons looked in on him at noon, Liddell was sprawled on the leather couch in the room, fast asleep.

At four o'clock, a freshly shaven, refreshed Johnny Liddell stepped out of a cab on the pier at Caracas Bay. The *Queen Alexandra* loomed majestically overhead, a gangplank ran to B deck forward. Members of the crew, taking a temporary breather, were leaning on the rails in the crew area watching the activity on the pier.

Johnny Liddell walked up the gangplank, was greeted by the purser at B deck. "Good afternoon, sir. You're back early. We don't sail until ten tonight."

Liddell nodded. "I'd like to see the captain."

A pained expression crossed the purser's face. "Sir, I'm afraid I can't disturb the captain. He came off the bridge at about seven and we'll be sailing at ten, so—"

"Why don't you try him and see if he'll see me?"

The purser looked unhappy about it, crossed to a phone in the companionway. He muttered a few instructions to the switchboard operator, waited, then nodded his head. He walked back to Liddell, looked vaguely surprised. "He'll see you, sir."

Captain Delmar Rose had a half-finished drink in his hand when Johnny Liddell was ushered in by Emil, the captain's personal steward.

The captain dismissed the steward with a nod, turned to Liddell. "Well?"

"Thanks for the testimonial to the Antilles Police," Liddell said with a smile. "Came in very handy."

Captain Rose nodded his head, motioned toward the liquor. "Make yourself a drink." He watched Liddell walk over to the table, spill some scotch over ice. "You get your report?"

Liddell took a swallow from his glass, nodded. "I got it."

"Help any?"

Liddell held his glass up to the light from the glass wall, admired the amber color of his drink. "Helped eliminate some of them." He walked to the desk, leaned a hip against the corner of it. "Sands and his niece, for instance. Like we suspected, she's his secretary and they're playing house. When a man's really trying that doesn't leave much time for smuggling. You know?"

The captain nodded dourly.

“Herrick’s pretty much what he seems to be. So’s Robin Lewis and the Phelps woman. Scratch them.”

“I told you Robin was okay.” The captain took a deep drag from his glass. “Looks like Carson Eldridge thinks so, too. He’s getting a lot of woman if he gets her.” He walked over to the desk, picked up his pipe. “Daughter check out, too?”

“Far as we can figure,” Liddell said. “I wouldn’t peg her as the smuggler, anyway. A front, maybe, but with Carson, Herrick and Robin all apparently in the clear, I’d say she was, too.”

The captain stuck his pipe between his teeth. “That leaves the Conways and the McDowells.”

“And the Doyles.”

The captain snorted. “Those dirt farmers? You’re not going to tell me you suspect them?”

Liddell shook his head. “Nope. I don’t suspect them.” Johnny fumbled through his pockets, brought up a cigarette and some matches. “If you remember, I said it had to be someone who had frequent if not constant opportunity to bring stuff in.” He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it.

The captain managed to get his pipe going with the aid of an old-fashioned wooden match. He held the burning match up in front of his face, blew it out with a stream of smoke. “You’re back to my crew. That it?” He raised his eyes to meet Liddell’s. “Me, maybe?”

Liddell considered it, shrugged. “Why should I settle for you?”

“My name was on Landers’s list along with the passengers. Remember?”

Liddell nodded. “I remember. So was Jack Allen’s.”

The captain took a mouthful of smoke, blew it out in a blue-gray cloud. He pulled the pipe from between his teeth, jabbed it at Liddell. “There’s just one thing you’re forgetting. Neither Allen nor I went ashore in Curaçao. Neither did Ingrid or the third officer. And they’re the only members of my crew who’ve had anything to do with the people on Landers’s list.”

“So?”

“So how could they bring the stuff on board?”

Liddell considered, sighed. "I've been worrying about the same thing." He picked up his glass, took a deep swallow.

"And we were all in La Guaira when Reyder died." The captain returned his pipe to between his teeth, puffed noisily on it. "How do you explain that?"

Liddell grunted irritably. "That was easy. We know that whoever fed me the mickey got Reyder's name from my pocket. There are still telephones and the smugglers must have some people in Curaçao. All our shipboard contact had to do was alert the Curaçao people that the heat was on Reyder. They hand Gruder a contract and sit by sipping cocktails on the fantail while Gruder gets rid of a possible weak link."

"Then you have no idea of who the smuggler is or how they're getting the diamonds into the country?" the captain snapped.

Liddell considered. "I wouldn't say that. Matter of fact, I've got a pretty good idea on both scores. Proving it might be a little more difficult."

Captain Rose paused with the pipe-stem halfway to his mouth. "But you intend to try? When?"

Liddell checked his watch. "We sail at ten?" He raised his eyes inquiringly. The captain nodded. "What's the entertainment for the passengers tonight?"

The captain walked around the deck, picked up a schedule. "A movie. We try to give them something restful after a big day ashore."

Liddell nodded. "In that case, I think we'll make our pitch around midnight. Will you be available?"

The captain studied Liddell's face through narrowed eyes. "I'll be available, mister," he told him in a cold voice.

The doors to the theater opened at 11:30, the audience poured out, headed for the nightly buffet. Captain Delmar Rose stood in the lobby of the smoking room where the array of hors d'oeuvres and snacks was on display. There was a grimness in his expression, his jaw was set, with little muscles bunched along the chin line. His eyes were darting from face to face in the milling crowd that was lining up for its midnight meal. He didn't see Liddell until Johnny came up behind him, tapped him on the arm. The captain started slightly, turned.

“Ready, Captain?”

Captain Rose gave him a curt nod, followed him as Johnny turned, started to shoulder his way through the crowd toward the staircase. At the head of the stairs, the captain caught his arm.

“Where are we heading?”

“On this deck. Cabin 142.”

The captain’s brow darkened. He started to argue, clamped his lips shut, followed Liddell. The cabin steward was just coming out of an adjoining cabin after putting the bunk down.

“Do you have the keys to cabin 142?” Liddell asked him.

The steward’s eyes went from Liddell to the captain, who nodded grimly. “Open 142,” he snapped.

The steward shuffled back to the door marked *142*, unlocked it and stood aside. Liddell walked in, looked around. The captain followed, stood with his hands on his hips, feet planted apart. “Cabin 142 belongs to the Doyles. What kind of insanity are you up to?” he demanded.

“None. You asked me if I knew how the diamonds were smuggled into the country. I told you I had an idea. It is now a certainty. The diamonds are to be smuggled in by the Doyles.”

The captain’s jaw dropped. “You told me you were convinced they were not involved.”

Liddell shrugged. “You can’t win them all.” He walked over to a large wardrobe trunk; pulled it open. It was empty. From his pocket, he brought a tape measure, proceeded to measure the trunk on the outside, then on the inside. He looked up. “This trunk has a false bottom. There’s a two-inch disparity.” He straightened up, stowed the tape measure in his pocket. “Two inches of diamonds on a base that big could add up to one helluva lot of diamonds.”

Captain Rose looked from Liddell to the trunk and back. He walked over, tapped the sides and the bottom. There was no sound of hollowness. He looked up, squinted. “You sure of this?”

Liddell nodded.

The captain failed to look impressed. “If you’re wrong, this could mean a pip of a lawsuit for the line. And for your clients.”

“Not if it’s handled right,” Liddell countered. “Nobody could sue if you were to have a little cocktail party in your cabin and invited a small select list of people. I think I might be able to uncover the whole operation.”

Captain Rose scowled. “And the guest list?”

“The Conways, the Doyles, Jack Allen and Ingrid Sorenson, me and you.” He considered for a moment. “I’d also like you to have the third officer on tap.”

“Weston?” The captain frowned at Liddell, nodded. “All right. I’ll play along. I’ll have them in my cabin at one o’clock.” He turned, started to go, turned back. “And, Liddell—this is your show. It better be good.”

Belle Doyle was sitting in one of the armchairs in the captain’s cabin, her husband was perched on the arm. Jack Allen was making drinks for Tom and Laura Conway, Captain Rose and Ingrid Sorenson were deep in conversation when the door opened and Johnny Liddell walked in.

He nodded to the captain. “Hope I’m not late.”

Captain Rose shook his head. “No, but it is getting late. And I promised some of our guests that we wouldn’t keep them too late. Maybe you’d like to explain what this is all about.”

Liddell walked to the center of the cabin, looked around. “Some of you know that I’m a private detective from New York. What you may not know is why I’m aboard the *Queen*. I have been retained by a group of diamond merchants to uncover a ring smuggling thousands of dollars’ worth of diamonds into the United States every year. Harry Landers, who went overboard during the storm, was also on the case.”

Belle Doyle gasped loudly, squeezed her husband’s hand.

“One of the biggest hurdles we had to get over is how the diamonds were being smuggled past customs. I think I now know how it has been done.” He turned to Harry Doyle. “In the secret compartment of your trunk, there are thousands of dollars worth of diamonds. Your function is to get them past customs. Nobody would ever think of checking the trunk of a honeymooner on his first trip for secret compartments.”

Harry Doyle was on his feet, his face black with anger. “Nobody can accuse me of—” He started for Liddell, stopped cold at the sight of the .45 in Liddell’s hand.

“I said your function was to bring them in.” He waved Doyle to the side of the room where Tom Conway and Jack Allen stood staring. “Have you

ever met Tom Conway? His company awarded you the prize—the honeymoon trip, the luggage, the night on the town in New York.”

The color drained from Conway’s face, he dug a handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at his face. “We’ve awarded almost a hundred prizes like that and—”

“And in every case, there was a false bottom to the trunk.”

Doyle stared from Liddell to Conway and back. “He tried to frame us?” He jumped at the advertising man, reached for his throat.

“Cut it out, Doyle.”

Belle Doyle was out of her chair, across the room to her husband. She tore him off Conway. “Don’t dirty your hands on him, Harry. The law will take care of him.”

“Is everybody crazy?” Laura Conway screeched. “My lawyers will hear about this—”

“I hope so. Your husband’s going to need all the legal help he can get. Unless, of course, he co-operates—”

Captain Rose stared at Liddell. “Conway was behind the smuggling? But he’s a wealthy man—”

“His wife is wealthy. That’s a different thing,” Liddell snapped. “But he had to have help. He needed someone who would be on every cruise, whether he was on it or not. Someone like Ingrid.”

Laura Conway let out an anguished yelp, the blonde shook her head. “You’re crazy. You’re really crazy.”

“No. You left a trail a mile wide, Ingrid. First, there was the business of doping the fruit. It had to be someone who had access to a hypodermic, and you’d been working in the infirmary. Second, it had to be a woman. My steward would get curious about a man leaving my cabin late at night, but he’d be real discreet about tattling on a lady.”

“You’re reaching pretty far,” the blonde taunted.

“No further than to point out that it was a woman who called Harry Landers to his death that night. And it had to be someone who knew 126 was vacant and where the key was kept.”

“You can’t prove it was a woman who called. You’re guessing.”

“I’m not saying you killed Landers. You had an alibi. You were in the dispensary that night. Besides you couldn’t have handled his body alone—”

“Wait a minute. Captain, this has gone far enough,” Jack Allen protested. “Are you going to stand there and let this irresponsible idiot make accusations like that? Landers wasn’t murdered. He was washed overboard—”

“Can you prove that?” Liddell asked.

“Can you prove he wasn’t?” Allen started toward Liddell. “Maybe the rest are going to listen, but not me.”

Liddell pulled back the ejector, a .45 shell bounced out, landed at Allen’s feet. “You didn’t let me finish. Doyle was afraid of my gun, so were the others. But you weren’t. The man who prowled my room after Ingrid fed me the mickey would think my gun was loaded with blanks. That same man got Reyder’s name and address out of my pocket and arranged for him to be killed.” He turned to Conway. “I know you weren’t in on that. Co-operate and I’ll see that you get a break. You can’t beat the smuggling rap, I’ve got you cold—”

Allen swung on the advertising man. “You open your mouth and there won’t be any place for you to hide.”

Conway ignored him. “You promise me I’ll get a break.”

“All I want is names, dates and places—”

“Why, you rat—” Allen threw himself at Conway, hands going for his throat.

Liddell moved faster, laid the side of the barrel across the cruise director’s head, knocking him into a sprawling heap. “One good headache deserves another. And that stuff you fed me gave me a king-size one.” He looked at the blonde. The color had drained from her face, leaving her make-up as garish blotches. “You, too, doll. You’ve got a king-sized headache coming up. Now’s the time to get off the merry-go-round. The ride’s over.”

Ingrid grabbed Liddell’s arm. “Give me a break. I’ll talk. I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

The captain walked to his desk, picked up the phone. “Send in the third officer and the armed detail.” He dropped the receiver on its hook. “I’ll keep them under armed guard until we reach New York.”

Laura Conway licked at her lips. “You don’t mean—you don’t mean that Tom will go to jail?”

Liddell nodded. “But not for as long as if he didn’t co-operate. You see, Allen and the girl made a big thing about not going on shore at Curaçao. Your husband brought the diamonds on board. If he voluntarily testifies where they were going, where they came from, I think he might make himself a deal.”

“He’ll tell,” the woman said grimly.

“How about us, Mr. Liddell? We didn’t know anything about it,” Belle Doyle pleaded. “They can’t put us in jail if we didn’t do anything, can they?”

“You’re in the clear. They just used you, like they used all the other winners.”

“But the diamonds—if they were in our trunk, how would they get them?”

“Remember the third part of the prize? A night on the town when you arrived in New York? While you were being entertained, they’d come calling and remove the diamonds from the false bottom. This time, when they come calling, there’ll be a reception committee waiting for them.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *Crime of Their Life* by Frank Kane]