

she handed to him and opened the door. Light from the bar spilled into the room for a moment and then was extinguished as the door swung shut. When his eyes became adjusted to the gloom he realized that the room was not in total darkness. The light from an electric sign on a nearby building shone through a single curtainless window. The sign had a long row of yellow bulbs that lighted in sequence, followed by a legend in red and white bulbs. Then there were three seconds of darkness. The sequence began again as Wilson stood inside the door, bathing the room in a yellow glow of increasing intensity, followed by an explosion of red and white.

He walked forward and sat down in a chair fabricated of heavy leather straps interwoven and hung from a solid wooden frame. It was surprisingly comfortable. He put his bottle of beer on the floor between his feet and lit a cigarette. He had finished his beer and was smoking his third cigarette when the door opened and María entered. A wave of warm, fetid air from the bar accompanied her.

"What in hell took you so long?"

"Business before pleasure." She walked across the room and sat down heavily on a day bed. It creaked and swayed under her weight. "Come over here." She slapped a heavy palm flat on the day bed beside her.

Wilson grinned. "What are you pretending to be? Some kind of vampire?"

"It's better than castration, señor."

His smile faded and he got up and sat down beside her. "Why do you hate my guts so? I can't be the only guy that's laid you. You act like a deflowered virgin and you sure as hell weren't. I forget the details, but I remember that. For that matter, I've never had a virgin in Cuba. How about that?"

"Shut up. I don't hate you. If it weren't for me, you would be dead by now."

"Yeah, thanks. You prefer dismemberment."

"Shut up, Wilson. You talk too much. Let's see how virile you are."

A half hour had passed when she lifted herself off his body and sat beside him, slowly combing her hair. "Do you have anything to tell me for the underground?"

"No."

"What did you do today?"

"I stayed in my hotel room. I was worn out."

"Any visitors?"

"Yes."

She stopped combing her hair. "Who?"

"Army G-2."

The hairbrush remained poised in midair.

"What did they want?"

"I had been missing twenty-four hours. They wanted to know why."

"What did you tell them?"

"That you and your boy friends kidnapped me and just before killing me decided to recruit me as an agent to report on my spare-parts sale."

She looked at him in disbelief. "You bastard!"

"They saw me get kidnapped and recognized Jorge and the others. What else could I say?"

"I ought to kill you."

"You have said that before, but they know that I am here and you would just add murder to the other crimes they will book you on, real and imaginary."

"What in hell do you want, Wilson? Whose side are you on? I can't figure you out."

"I'm on no side. I am for Jack Wilson. I want to sell my spare parts and get out of Cuba with the cash

and try hide. They were already on to you and your boy friends, sweetie. I didn't tell them anything they didn't already know. I've given you a reprieve. They are waiting to see what your game is with me before they move in and cut you up."

She looked at him, her eyes dark and empty.

"They know."

"Play along with me, sweetie, and I'll see that you get some of the cash from the spare-parts deal. Maybe, for old times' sake, I can get you out to Miami or Kingston."

She sat silently for a moment, her eyes fixed unseeingly on the electric sign outside the window. The sign ran through its repertoire several times before she spoke, washing her heavy somber face in yellow, red, and white. "I don't hate you, you know," she said slowly in a different voice than he had heard before, "but can I trust you?"

"Sweetie, I'm not asking you to trust me. Just play along with me. I need some elbow room in this set-up very badly. I'll visit you when I can. I'll keep G-2 away from you. When I get the sale fixed, we'll skip this flyblown country. I didn't have to level with you. I didn't have to tell you that G-2 was on to you. Give me credit for that at least."

She nodded. "Yes, I see that."

"O.K., relax. We are both in a hole. We'll work our way out of it together."

She sighed. "All right, *cara*. You'd better leave me now."

"What will you tell the boy friends?"

"That you are working on the spare-parts sale and have compromised a high official in the G-2."

"Good."

"Tomorrow night at eleven?"

"I'll be here."

"How did they learn about me?"

"Whop?"

"G-2."

"Someone talked."

"I have always feared that they would penetrate our organization."

He opened the door into the bar and looked out. A solitary drinker remained. He was hunched over the bar, looking into his drink as if the answer to all of his problems were there. The prostitute and her customer had disappeared.

"*Hasta luego*," he said.

"*Cara*," she said softly. "Remember I have the letter."

THE taxi dropped him in front of the Vedado Hotel. As he walked across the lobby to take the elevator to his room, he was conscious of the interested eyes of the lobby loungers following him. He was tired and disgusted with himself. He really didn't give a damn.

He stepped out on his floor and the elevator door closed behind him. There wasn't a sound. The hallway in both directions was empty. He eyed the rows of closed doors standing before their vacant rooms, shrugged, and walked down to his own door. It was unlocked. Well, why not? What good would a hotel door lock do?

He entered the stuffy room, flicking on the ceiling light as he did so. There was no need to shut the door. He gave it a half-hearted closing kick with one foot in passing, but it remained ajar. He sat on the edge of his bed and lit a cigarette. The atmosphere of the Virtudes bar and María's little backroom still clung to him.

He swore under his breath and got up restlessly. The rum bottle on the dresser had an inch of liquor in it. He tipped it up and drained it. In the upper right drawer he found an unopened bottle. He was about to twist the top off when he decided to go swimming in the pool. Why not? He had slept in this room all day. He couldn't sleep now. At least he wasn't leaving the hotel. That should please G-2. He changed into swimming trunks, slipped on sandals and a robe, and taking the rum bottle, descended in the elevator to the service basement and the passageway to the pool.

Though the pool was still lighted, the swimming pool area was deserted and the dining room was closed. He put the rum bottle on the edge of the pool coping, and shedding his robe and slippers, plunged into the water. He swam along in a cool, blue-white world surrounded by the inky darkness which pressed on the surface of the water above him. The darkness had nothing to do with him. He was a swimmer in a different world, emerging only as necessary for a swallow of rum and new lungfuls of air.

After a time he became a human porpoise, doing a plunging butterfly stroke; the splashing of the water echoing up into the well formed by the hotel and the neighboring apartment house. At length he began a slow crawl back and forth across the pool, a single, black silhouette moving across the lighted blue surface.

The water immediately in front of him spit up into his face, followed almost immediately by the crack of a rifle partially muffled by the sounds of street traffic fired from an elevation above him. He turned in panic and began to swim rapidly toward the near end of the pool. Another rifle shot split the water beside him. As he neared the edge of the pool his empty rum bottle on the coping disintegrated under a third shot. He pulled himself over the edge of the pool and fell headlong into

the landscaping along the pool's edge. He crawled on his hands and knees into the darkest area he could find, his eyes searching the scores of windows above him for the rifle that had fired. He could see nothing but empty windows, most of them dark, five or six lighted. His breath came in rasping gasps and he found that he was trembling uncontrollably. He stayed on his knees, crouched in the shadow of a large tropical fern, listening intently. As his eyes became adjusted to the dark, he noticed a woman lying on a chaise, looking at him with amusement. It was Diana Vogel.

"My hero," she said mockingly.

His pulse began to increase its beat again. "Who shot at me?" he whispered. "Did you see?"

"They were not very good shots, were they?" she said lightly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was watching you swim. You have a beautiful body."

He continued to crouch in the shadows.

"Aren't you coming out? You look rather silly in there."

He got to his feet but stayed in the shadows. "There's nothing silly," he croaked, "about a guy in a pair of bathing trunks getting out of the line of fire of a sniper with a rifle."

She left the chaise and moved close to him. The scent of her perfume touched him, but she stopped an inch away from him. "They can't shoot you now, *liebbling*, unless they wish to shoot me too."

"What is this?" His voice had a slight tremor.

She laughed. "You don't feel anything for me, Jack? You are too frightened?"

He wet his lips. "Look, you bitch. After what your friends did to me in that whorehouse, I wouldn't give you a tumble. Who's doing the shooting. One of yours?"

"Of course. If they had wished to kill you, they would have done so. You are very foolish for an agent, darling. You made a perfect target in that pool."

"Who says I'm an agent?"

"Oh, come. You don't still pretend that you are in the export-import business, do you?"

"No, I guess not."

"The rifleman is still above you, *liebbling*. If you come with me, they will not kill you. If you move away from me, they will shoot to kill and they will not miss."

"I am under the protective custody of the Cuban army G-2, you know."

"And where are they now?" she asked mockingly.

"Pretty close."

"They are not very alert. They think that you are still in your room. You left your little warning device there. Very careless of you."

"You know about that?"

"Of course. Cuba is no place for secrets."

"Whose side are you on, Diana?"

"Come with me and find out."

"I guess that I haven't much choice."

"None at all."

"O.K."

"Come along and put on your robe and slippers. We shall leave the pool together by the staircase and the passageway through the service basement. When we come to the door to the men's steam room, you will enter it."

"What happens then?"

"A few questions."

"Then they kill me?"

"I don't think so. But we are wasting time. You will surely die if I turn away from you and leave you here alone."

"I could grab you and use you as a shield to get

back into the hotel. Your own people wouldn't shoot you."

She smiled. "But I would shoot you if you tried." He looked down and saw the faint glint of a small pistol in her hand. "It is only .22 caliber, a lady's size, but at this distance and into the heart it would kill you."

He wet his lips. "This certainly is a mixed-up way to try to talk with me. Why all the melodrama?"

"It is not melodrama, darling. It is very, very serious. You were foolish enough to go swimming and we had to improvise. It is the best we can do at the moment. We can't stand here any longer. Are you coming?"

"O.K., let's go."

At the men's steam room door he left her.

He entered a locker room about twenty feet square. Before the rows of green metal lockers which lined the walls of the room wooden benches had been placed. A single glass fixture in the ceiling covered with a wire guard lighted the room. Two stocky men with Slavic faces dressed alike in gray tropical-weight suits were waiting for him. They sat side by side on one of the benches, looking like disapproving trainers.

"Sit over there, Mr. Wilson." One of them wearing a blue tie gestured to a bench.

"O.K."

"We want to ask you several questions, Mr. Wilson," Blue Tie said in a soft voice. "We want direct answers. You know that we are capable of violence and won't hesitate to use it. However, if you cooperate, we can complete our business with you quickly and you can return to the security of your room and your Cuban guards." He smiled sardonically, revealing a gold tooth in the front of his lower jaw.

"I'll cooperate. I don't want any trouble."

170

"Very well. Why are you in Cuba?"

"I am here to sell spare parts to the Castro government."

"You no longer pretend to buy and sell trinkets?"

"No."

"What kind of spare parts?"

"Spare parts for old American machinery."

"Where do the spare parts come from?"

"From United States dealers. Most of this stuff is already obsolete in the States. The parts are a drag there. They find their way to Canada, where I buy them up. I will ship them out of Toronto."

The man wearing a red tie, who had been silent, cleared his throat. "We represent the Intelligence Service of the Soviet Union. We have investigated your background in Toronto, Mr. Wilson. You have no great experience in the sale of spare parts. Why do you engage in this risky business?"

"There's a lot of money in it."

"And danger, too."

"I'm just finding that out."

Red Tie pursued his point. "You have partners?"

"I have a source of supply."

"Who?"

"No particular person. If I get the order, I'll go hunting for the parts. I think that I know where to find them."

"Why is Cuban G-2 so interested in you?"

"The Cuban in charge of negotiating for the spare parts tried to get me to give him a bribe. I refused, but it made the Cubans suspicious of me. They have been following me around ever since."

"The Cuban is?"

"Was. Pablo Perez. He's now dead."

"Ah, yes. I have heard rumors to that effect." Red Tie rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin. "Today the

171

G-2 more than doubled their surveillance of you. From whom are they guarding you?"

"A Cuban underground group. They kidnapped me and tried to kill me."

"Then the Cuban government wants your spare parts?"

"I guess so. At least until they make up their minds they are trying to keep me alive."

"And that is getting more difficult every day, my dear Mr. Wilson?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Wilson nervously lit a cigarette from a pack in the pocket of his robe.

"It is a pity. So many people want you dead."

"Yeah, I guess so. Lately."

"We don't want you dead, Mr. Wilson."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it."

"We need your help."

"Look, I'm just a dumb jerk from Toronto. I can't give Soviet Intelligence any help."

"Yes, you can. You can keep us informed about the spare-parts sale."

"Like what?"

"Tell us what the Cubans order, the prices, the specifications."

"Don't the Cubans tell you what you want to know? I thought that Cuba and the Soviet Union were like that." He crossed his fingers.

"We like independent sources of information."

Wilson was silent a moment. "O.K. I'll keep you in the picture. My only interest is in making the sale."

Red Tie took out a toothpick and sucked on it noisily, studying the countenance of the Canadian with crafty, penetrating eyes. "And try to recall more of your business contacts in Canada, Mr. Wilson. I keep feeling that there is something missing here, some element that is not fully explained. It makes me very uncomfortable."

"No, there is nothing more. I just haven't fully worked out that end of the deal yet."

"Think about it, Mr. Wilson. Think about it very carefully, and then tell us about it."

Blue Tie glanced at Red Tie and arose from the bench. "You can go now. We will contact you when we want you."

Wilson turned to go.

"And Mr. Wilson."

"Yes?"

"Forget about Diana Vogel. She is not for you."

Wilson nodded his head. "No strain there."

He took the elevator to his empty room on his empty floor—his private security area, full of holes like any Cuban attempt at security. How had Fidel escaped an assassin's bullet so long? Maybe they loved him after all. But when had love ever saved anyone from the bullet with the right name on it?

He walked into the shower and stripped off his swimming trunks. The hot water and soap felt good. He toweled himself and sat down on the bed in his shorts.

What in hell did he do now? He had them all happy at the moment, but in Cuba everybody penetrated everybody else's organization. It was just a matter of time until someone found out that he was now a triple agent.

Or was it quadruple? Some kind of a goddamned record, in any event. He lit a cigarette. There was no chance to contact "Forbes" now. Jack Wilson was probably the best known foreigner in Cuba, at least among the intelligence types. Could Paco help? Why drag the poor bastard into this? He probably was in trouble with G-2 already for entertaining him.

The thing to do was to cut his losses and run . . . get out of Cuba and get out fast. He turned out the light and lay on his bed staring into the darkness. In the morning he would fly out. He had his return flight ticket and, thank God, he had his Canadian passport.

He slept fitfully. About four A.M. he awoke with a start, got up and stumbled over to his suitcase to search frantically for his air ticket and passport. When he found them in his passport case, his brow was wet with perspiration and his hands were trembling. He shipped the case under his pillow where he could touch it with his fingertips and fell asleep.

Shortly after dawn he called the airline and was told that there were no flights available for a week.

"A week? I have to be in Toronto tomorrow. This is an emergency."

"I am very sorry, señor. This telephone is at the airport. I suggest that you discuss your problem at our main ticket office downtown. It opens at nine A.M."

"Look, buddy, I don't want to discuss my problem with anybody. This is urgent."

"I am very sorry, señor. We are all booked up for today's flight. There is really nothing I can do."

"Could I shipside it if I came out to the airport?"

"No chance, señor. We have a long waiting list. Wilson slammed down the telephone. Steamship lines? Could he get on a ship? Steady, steady, don't panic. Make it seem casual. If they get the idea that you are running for it, they will all close in.

He took a shower and went down to the dining room for breakfast. Shortly after nine o'clock he took a taxi to the airline office. A very pretty mulatto girl with pouting lips and a faraway manner stood behind a small counter sign reading RESERVACIONES. She did not look up when he approached.

"Sì?"

"My name is Wilson, Canadian. I'm ticketed, but I need a flight out of here today, an emergency at home."

The girl slowly raised her eyes to his. "You know," she said without interest, "that you need a

clearance from the Cuban authorities to leave the country."

"No I don't. I am a foreign tourist."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We have no space anyway."

"How about tomorrow?"

"No. Nothing until next week."

"Look," his voice dropped, "this is important to me. I can't discuss it over the counter. How about having a cup of coffee with me?"

She looked at him impassively, slowly chewing a piece of airline gum. "You going to waste my time?"

"No."

"I'll go out for coffee in ten minutes at the café around the corner. If I see you, I'll talk with you."

"Right."

When she came in, he was sitting at an empty table for two in the rear of the café. He casually raised a finger. She sauntered back and sat beside him.

"Coffee?"

"Yes."

He handed her his ticket envelope. With the ticket was a United States fifty-dollar bill.

"You can see that the ticket is valid."

She deftly removed the fifty-dollar bill and handed the ticket back to him. "Yes, I can see that." She sipped her coffee. "There's no chance for today. I can put you at the head of the waiting list for tomorrow. You'll get on. Someone with a reservation always fails to appear or their papers aren't in order, especially if they are Cuban."

"Should I come back into the airline office with you?"

"No need. I'll put your name on the list. Just go to the airport an hour before flight time. Have you a card with your name?"

He handed a Sail Exports card to her. She put it in her purse and arose. "Thank you for the coffee."

"Don't give it a thought."

He had another cup of coffee and a cigarette. Maybe he ought to register at the Canadian Embassy, just in case. Then he shrugged. What good would that do? If he were in real trouble he would be dead. If he were alive, Paco could do more for him than the Canadian Embassy. He took a taxi back to the hotel.

After his experience of the night before he had lost all interest in using the swimming pool. He bought two bottles of rum and a paperback mystery in Spanish to help pass the time.

The next morning he was at the airport two hours before flight time. Thirty minutes before the flight was called, he was paged at the ticket counter.

"Señor Wilson?"

"Yes."

"We have a cancellation. We can accommodate you now. May I see your ticket and passport?"

He was quickly processed and his baggage checked. He returned to his seat and anxiously waited for the plane to be called over the loudspeaker system. Another half-hour and he would be in the air. It seemed so simple. Of course he was in Cuba as a Canadian tourist and he had no police record. No one but G-2 could stop him officially, and that might cause an incident with Canada, one of Cuba's few useful contacts west of the iron curtain. Sometimes the best way was the obvious and simple way. You want to leave Cuba? Just go to the airport and get on an airplane. Cautiously his spirits rose, but he forced his mind away from optimistic thoughts. It was better not to think; better to remain suspended in time with the mind

empty. The remaining minutes would pass. Maybe he would try to buy back the Model Car Racing Center when he got to Toronto.

He heard the loudspeaker system announcing in Spanish the arrival of his airplane. It was fifteen minutes late in reaching Havana. He wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers in an unconscious gesture and lit another cigarette. It was the last in the pack. He walked over to a tobacco counter and bought another pack. With luck, this would be his last purchase of the strong, loosely rolled Cuban cigarette. He'd buy an American brand on the plane.

The flight had been called. He moved into the line of departing passengers filing through the gate. Sometimes it was easier than you expected or even hoped. If the record had listed him as a Cuban, he would have been interrogated and searched as well. As a Canadian tourist, his processing was a matter of routine. He moved up until he was before the airline employee checking the passenger list.

"Señor Jack Wilson?"

"Sí." Wilson extended his boarding envelope.

"Step to one side, please."

Wilson's gaze became fixed and his heart began to pound. "What?" he asked stupidly.

"Step to one side, please."

"But I am booked on this flight. My baggage is already aboard."

"There is some difficulty. I am certain that you will not miss the flight. Please report to our ticket counter."

Wilson stood hesitating.

The airline employee glanced significantly at the armed guard at the gate. "Please, señor, you are delaying the boarding process. Our ticket counter, please." Wilson eyed the guard and capitulated. He hur-



ried to the ticket counter, where he was blocked from the clerks by a throng of passengers checking in for a local flight.

"My name is Wilson," he shouted frantically over the wall of people. "You want to see me?"

A clerk gestured toward a door at the end of the counter. "In immigration. You are wanted in immigration."

He hurried over to the door and opened it. He was in the same small office from which he had entered Cuba. It was empty, but his baggage was sitting accusingly on the floor beside the stained metal desk. His shoulders slumped and he listlessly walked over to a straight chair and sat down. He wasn't going to make his plane.

The time of the airplane's departure passed and still no one appeared. He had been waiting nearly forty minutes when the young army officer he had met on his arrival came briskly through the door.

"Good morning, Señor Wilson." His smile flashed. "I am so sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Don't give it a thought, *amigo*. I missed my plane, that's all."

The officer continued to smile at him happily, his jet black eyes searching his face. "Someone doesn't want you to leave, señor. It is as simple as that."

"Who doesn't want me to leave?"

"Someone. Some big shot. I am only a second lieutenant. I don't ask." He put his feet up on his desk and yawned, looking at Wilson over his shoe tops. "I suppose that you know who that would be, Señor Wilson?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"Of course not."

"Then I can catch any airplane out of here I can find space on. I am a Canadian citizen."

"Exactly. If the airlines will sell space to you, you can try again to leave." A little smile touched the officer's lips.

"I see." Wilson sat silently. "It's nice to be wanted," he added after a moment.

"You are one of Cuba's own, señor."

"I guess I'll get back to the Vedado. That is, if they have room for me. I require an entire floor."

"I understand that they expect you, señor." The lieutenant got to his feet. "A porter will take out your bags, Señor Wilson. I am glad you will stay on with us." Wilson forced a grin. "Well, I like the climate."

HE signed the register of the Vedado Hotel and the clerk wordlessly handed him his room key. His floor was empty and silent as before. Nothing had changed. He did not open his bags, but loosened his tie and sat down on the edge of the bed. His eyes were fixed on his clasping and unclasping hands. The sudden peal of the telephone startled him.

"Wilson," he said in a monotone.

"Chico! This is Paco. Where in hell have you been? I haven't heard from you. I thought you had left Cuba without saying good-bye."

Wilson cleared his throat and tried to match Gomez's buoyant air. "I've been around. It's a long story. I tried to telephone you once or twice."

"The hell you did! I'll have to speak to this crazy guy I got working for me. Now he doesn't even tell me who telephones! Say, Chico, how about coming out to

the house for some dominoes tonight? We'll have some beer and sit around in our bare feet, O.K.?"

"O.K. What time?"

"Eight o'clock. Take a taxi, I can't come in for you tonight. You know where it is."

"Right."

They sat on the patio overlooking the swimming pool. Except for Rita Carlos and the guard stationed as usual outside the house, they were alone. Rita idly watched their play and served them drinks from time to time. When she tired of watching, she sat a short distance away, poised and quiet, doing her nails and languorously brushing her long brown hair.

"She's a nice kid," Gomez said in English. "She'll get us something to eat when we want it. I ran everybody else off the place for tonight."

"Maybe she's too domesticated."

"No. No. She just does like she's told. And she likes men."

"That's the best kind."

Gomez made his play and spoke with his eyes on the table. "Did you get into another fight, Jack?"

"What do you mean?"

"The cut lip. The new bruises."

"Oh, I did a stupid damn thing the other night. I was watching some kids fishing from the rocks on the Malecon and I climbed down to see better, slipped, and fell in. I'm lucky that the tide was out and the sea calm."

"Those usually aren't very good conditions for fishing."

"Yeah, I know."

Gomez raised his eyes to his. "Don't give me that