

She arose and took his arm. "I would not like that . . . no father . . . no brother."

He patted her arm as they walked toward the Libre's nightclub. "That's the way I'll play it, *chica*, and it won't be hard to do, believe me." They took a table near the dance floor. Wilson ordered the drinks and took Rita out on the floor. "You dance very well."

"Thank you. You said that at the party."

"Oh, did I?"

"You have forgotten already. You told me that I was the most beautiful girl you had ever seen."

"All true, so help me God."

"You are sweet, Juanito."

"Yeah, people notice that."

"And you are a good friend of Francisco's."

"Right."

"I like Francisco very much. He is very good to me."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I can't do much. I don't know anything. But he likes to have me around."

"It figures."

"Do you mind?"

"Hell, no. Why should I mind?"

She pouted. "I thought you would want me for yourself."

"I've got you for myself."

"Because Francisco says so."

"That's O.K. Otherwise, I couldn't afford the upkeep."

"You don't love me."

"Let's get something to eat."

They returned to the table and Wilson ordered a little supper. It had just been served when the waiter murmured in Wilson's ear. "You are wanted on the telephone, señor."

Wilson took the call on one of a bank of white house telephones near the reception desk.

"Wilson."

"Please leave the girl. Go to a telephone booth without a switchboard and dial 28-9781."

"Who is this?"

"Just make the call. Do it immediately—28-9781." The line clicked and went dead.

He returned to the table and finished his drink thoughtfully, then he turned to Rita. "Baby, we'll finish this some other time. I've got to send you home."

"Oh, Juanito, you are angry because I tease you about Francisco."

"No, no," he said impatiently, "I've got to go. It has nothing to do with you."

He sent her home in a taxi and returned to the Vedado. He lit a cigarette and sat down in a chair in the lobby. When the lobby was momentarily empty, he took the self-service elevator to the basement and walked through the deserted kitchens into an alley. The alley led to Calle 23. He stepped into a telephone booth near an all-night coffee shop and dialed the number.

"This is Wilson."

"Good. Take a taxicab to the corner of Calle 21 and K. Walk up Twenty-first away from the ocean on the right side of the street."

"Why should I?"

"If you don't know why, *chico*, don't do it." The connection was broken. He stood in the hot, stuffy phone booth for a moment, the soft purr of the disconnected line in his ear; then he shrugged, stepped into the street, and hailed a passing taxi. He got out at 21st and K and walked slowly up 21st Street. It was nearly one a.m. The street was deserted. The trees along the sidewalk cast the sidewalk into an intense darkness the occasional street lights, hooded by the tree

leaves, did not illuminate. A black sedan, its engine barely audible in the stillness, approached him from the rear. He walked on, avoiding the breaks in the sidewalk, his heels echoing in the quiet night. The sedan drew abreast of him at a spot where the shadows were particularly dark. Its rear door opened toward him. "Get in!" a voice hissed.

Wilson stepped to the curbing and in two strides jumped into the slowly moving car. It accelerated and swung down a side street. The driver was the only other person in the car. He did not speak but concentrated on the tortuous route he was driving.

Wilson guessed that they were going in circles, but he soon lost all sense of direction. After about ten minutes the driver put out his lights and turned into a shipyard for small boats. Moving slowly over the echoing planking of a short dock, he pulled up beside a forty-foot sloop moored at the end. It was a clear, starlit night. The white hull of the sloop loomed ghostlike in the darkness. The deck and the unlighted deckhouse were in shadow. The driver nodded toward a narrow gangplank. "Go aboard. I'll be back in one-half hour." He backed the automobile off the dock and disappeared.

Wilson stood for a moment at the foot of the gangway and listened. There was no sound except an occasional faint squeak as the sloop rubbed against the manila fenders thrown between it and the dock. As his eyes grew more adjusted to the darkness he became aware that the sloop was in poor condition and had lost most of its rigging. When he felt that his vision was at its maximum he walked up the creaking gangway and stepped on deck. He stood silently for a moment, listening, then moved toward the deckhouse. A hand reached out and firmly grasped his forearm. "This way, Señor Wilson."

He was guided into the cabin. There was the sound of a curtain being drawn, the scratch of a match, and a kerosene lamp flared. In the yellow, flickering light Pablo Perez stood smiling at Wilson. "Sit down, Mr. Wilson. Sit down. Please pardon the overtones of melodrama, but this is a melodramatic age in which we live." He spoke in English.

Wilson slowly exhaled. "Now why in hell, Perez, did you bring me here?" he asked angrily.

"I can as well ask, 'Why did you come?'" Perez answered urbane.

"That's a good question and I wish I knew the answer. Anything I have to discuss with you, we can discuss at the INRA building in your office, or out fishing with Rodriguez. I'm sure as hell not going to risk trouble having post-midnight rendezvous with government officials."

"Perhaps you thought you were going to meet someone else?"

"I didn't think anything. That's my trouble sometimes. I do stupid things. This is one of them. I'm going to leave right now."

"Since you are here, however much you may regret it, don't you want to hear what I have to say?"

"I know what you have to say."

"Am I that transparent? I hope not."

"So long, Perez. I'll see you in church." Wilson turned to go.

"Don't leave, Mr. Wilson." There was an edge to Perez's voice. "You would regret it."

Wilson turned and saw the glint of a pistol in Perez's hand.

"You're pulling a gun on me?" he asked incredulously.

"So it seems. So it seems. Now sit down, please." The gun gestured toward a dusty chair.

Wilson dropped into it. "This sure as hell isn't going to get you anything."

"It has given me your undivided attention, Mr. Wilson. That is all I require for the moment." Perez eased his body onto a bench against the cabin's forward bulkhead. "I'm sorry for the condition of my yacht, Mr. Wilson, but this is not the era for private yachts in Cuba. They are considered symbols of capitalistic decadence and, more practically, as a possible means of escape to Florida. For that reason the sails and rigging as well as the auxiliary engine have been removed. I would hate to lose her, and in a dismantled and dilapidated state she creates no suspicion. She fits unobtrusively into the atmosphere of the new Cuba. Don't you think so?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Ever the diplomat. No matter. It serves as an excellent place for tête-à-têtes such as this one."

Wilson remained silent.

"I will come to the point, Mr. Wilson. You wish to sell your spare parts to Cuba. You will never do so unless you agree to place five per cent of the invoice total in an account in my name in Toronto. This can be done at the time we inspect the parts and as a condition precedent to their acceptance. If you agree, I am certain that you can negotiate your sale, with a slight invoice price reduction for the sake of appearances."

"Can I light a cigarette?" Wilson asked.

"By all means."

Wilson lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. "So it's the same old Cuba?" he said, exhaling as he spoke. "Cuba is ageless, Mr. Wilson. Regimes come and go."

There was a silence.

"What is your answer?"

"No."

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"You do not really care if you sell your spare parts or not?"

"I care, but I'm no damn fool. This is a straight deal, no more. Nothing under the table."

"But you did come here?"

"That was a mistake. I've said that."

Perez studied Wilson for a moment. "Very well, but think it over."

"The answer is 'no.'"

"I won't take 'no' for an answer," Perez said softly. The answer must be 'yes.' I will give you forty-eight hours. Think it over. Your success, your future, depends upon it."

"Is that a threat?"

"Of course not. It is a simple statement of your rather vulnerable position."

Wilson pushed out his cigarette. "Can I go now?"

"Certainly, the car will be waiting."

"You didn't have to draw that gun on me. I'm unarmed."

Perez beamed. "I knew that; otherwise I would not have drawn my gun. The odds must always be acceptable, you see."

"I like a hundred to one?"

"Precisely. You see, you are having intelligent second thoughts already."

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Wilson stepped into the back of the sedan, which was waiting on the dock. It rolled slowly across the planks of the dock, over the graveled surface of the shipyard, and into the street before the driver turned on the headlights. They had traveled about three city blocks and had entered a tree-lined residential area when a marked police car swung in behind them with a flashing red light. Its siren gave a low, warning growl.

The driver of the sedan glanced into the rear-view mirror and shoved the accelerator to the floor. The car lurched forward. Its tires screamed as the driver took it around a corner without braking. Wilson was thrown to the side of the car and onto the floor as a burst of submachine-gun fire shattered the left front window and windshield of the sedan and riddled the driver. The car careened down the street out of control, chopped along a thick hedge, and came to rest against an ornamental iron fence. Wilson, prone on the floor of

the back seat, was badly shaken. The grotesque, doll-like form of the driver was sprawled across the steering wheel, his bloody head pushed half through a gaping, ragged hole in the windshield. The back door of the car was wrenched open and Wilson roughly dragged out. "He's unhurt," a voice said. "Take him down to security headquarters. We'll take care of the car and the body of the driver."

Wilson was shoved into the back seat of the squad car between two tough-looking police officers. The siren wailed through rising and falling notes as the car raced toward the inner city. On a narrow street near Havana harbor they stopped in front of a rococo fortreslike building, gray with age and the effects of tropical dampness and sun. Taking Wilson by both arms, they propelled him up a flight of dingy stone stairs into a lobby which had been designed in the grand manner by the architect, utilizing a vaulted ceiling and allegorical stone carvings. It had been reduced to the nondescript by the introduction of plywood partitions, fling cabinets, and unshaded light bulbs hanging from cords, which threw spots of white light beneath them and left the rest of the room in shadow.

His captors exchanged a few words with a police officer at a cluttered desk and then took Wilson down a dimly lighted hallway and through a heavy door into an interrogation room. The room was harshly lit by ceiling lights of great intensity which threw no shadows. It contained only a small table and four straight chairs. Wilson was motioned toward a chair. One of the police officers took another chair and propping it against the wall, sat on it, facing Wilson. His eyes were coldly alert in an indifferent, cruel face. His automatic weapon lay across his lap. The second police officer left the room and locked the door behind him.

Wilson's head was throbbing and a slight trickle

of blood from a superficial head wound rolled slowly down one cheek. He felt a sense of rising panic. Why had he answered an anonymous summons from a small-time operator like Perez? He knew the answer. He had assumed that it was the contact from Jane Forbes's brother. But how could he explain his answer to the police? He chest felt constricted with apprehension and his palms were clammy.

"Can I light a cigarette?"

The policeman, balanced on his chair, nodded, shifting his gun slightly as he intently watched every move Wilson made. Wilson lit the cigarette with slow, cautiously deliberate movements. He didn't want to give his guard an excuse for using his weapon. He looked as if he would enjoy doing it. He inhaled the cigarette gratefully and as some measure of calm returned, made up his mind. He was going to play this one straight. Perez could look out for himself.

There was a movement at the door and three men entered. Wilson's heart sank. "Jesus," he thought, "they must think that I am pretty important." One visitor was in a police uniform, another in an army uniform, and a third in civilian clothes. The man in civilian clothes looked down at Wilson. Very light blue eyes protruded in a sallow, thin face. His bloodless lips were slightly parted in a meaningless smile.

"You are in serious difficulties, Señor Wilson. I suggest that you answer our questions freely and without reservations."

"I'll be glad to cooperate."

"Good." His visitor sat down at the table and clasped his hands together. His companions remained standing. "What were you doing in that automobile?"

"It took me to see Señor Pablo Perez at a nearby dock."

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"Why?"

"Perez offered me a bribe."

"A bribe to do what?"

"I am a Canadian. I have come to Havana to sell spare parts for Cuba's American machinery bought during the tyranny. I talked to Perez at the INRA building about it recently and made a definite offer. A Señor Rodriguez and a Señor Castillo were present. Tonight Perez offered to buy the spare parts if I would pay him a bribe of five per cent of the invoice value."

"And?"

"I refused."

"You are an honest man, so you refused?"

"Yes, I am an honest man. I am also smart enough to know that a game like Perez's is dangerous."

"So it seems. Are you willing to make a signed statement to that effect?"

"Yes."

"Very good. Very good. I appreciate your cooperation, Señor Wilson. I am prepared to believe you because we monitored your conversation with Señor Perez. You can be thankful for the marvels of the electronic age. You behaved as an honest visitor to Revolutionary Cuba should behave. In the situation in which we find ourselves our electronic friend is your best witness—unbiased, irrefutable. I have only one further question, a question that also interested Señor Perez. If you had no intention of accepting an offer such as Señor Perez made to you, why did you agree to visit him under such unusual circumstances?"

"I didn't know that it was Señor Perez I was going to visit."

"Whom did you think you were going to visit?"

"I didn't know."

His inquisitor leaned forward, "Isn't that rather

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unusual? A mysterious telephone call, a drive in the night, a rendezvous on a deserted yacht, and you do not know why?"

"I know I sound stupid. I can't explain it. I fought with Fidel in the hills. I have a lot of old buddies in Cuba. I guess I thought it was one of them and that I would play along."

"So you left an uneaten supper and a beautiful girl, tried to avoid your surveillance—because I regret to inform you, Señor Wilson, you are under surveillance—and kept this mysterious rendezvous because you wanted to play along with a joke by persons unknown to you?"

"Yes, sir, that's the way it was. I guess I am too curious and I guess I still seek thrills."

"Is that why you fought for Cuba in the revolution?" the army officer said.

"Yes, and I didn't like Batista."

"That is to your credit."

The man in civilian clothes resumed. "Your conduct is not illegal, Señor Wilson. You have committed no crime, but your conduct is unaccountable in a mature man. You justify too much of it as unreasoning impulse. I can't think of you as a romantic juvenile." He arose from behind the table. "We wish you to make an identification, then you will dictate and sign a statement about this matter. After that you will be free to go, but I must ask you to leave Cuba within forty-eight hours. After that length of time, if you are still within the national territory, you will be arrested as a security risk."

The army officer stepped over to the man in plain clothes and spoke to him earnestly for some minutes in a low voice. The man in civilian clothes asked several questions, nodded his head, and turned to Wilson. "Señor Wilson, your military service on behalf of

the revolution has not been forgotten. Captain Muñoz represents the Army Intelligence Service, or G-2. He has requested that you be paroled to him and to G-2. I have agreed to do this. The army will investigate this proposed sale of spare parts you mentioned. Your stay in Cuba, your freedom for that matter, is at their discretion."

Wilson nodded, glancing at Muñoz. "Now please come with me for a moment," the man in civilian clothes said. The group left the room and walked down a corridor that seemed ill-lit after the glare of the interrogation room. It led to a staircase descending to a subterranean level.

"Have you ever visited a morgue, Señor Wilson?"

"Once or twice."

"Then this morgue will not seem totally unfamiliar. They all, alas, have a similar simple function."

They entered a long room in which a number of figures shrouded in white on stone slabs formed a mournful row. Walking directly to slab number eleven, Wilson's interrogator motioned him over and lifted the sheet. "You can identify this man?"

Wilson looked down at the gray, distorted face.

The left temple had a large clot of dried blood where a bullet had entered the brain. "That is Pablo Perez."

"With whom you spoke tonight?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. We will take your statement and then you are free to return to your hotel. Do you have instructions for Señor Wilson, Captain Muñoz?"

The captain looked at Wilson somberly. "Not at this time."

It was nearly dawn when Wilson returned to the Vedado Hotel and fell exhausted on his bed. He lay

across the coverlet in his street clothes and stared at the wall with unseeing eyes, cursing himself for his stupidity. He had known that he was being watched ever since he had landed at the airport. Why had he gone to meet Perez and tried to escape his surveillance by a stupid dash through the hotel kitchen? He should have known that "Forbes" wouldn't have taken such a risk. Now he had acted suspiciously and was under a G-2 parole. They had him where they wanted him. It was just a matter of time before he was told the price of his freedom. You never got something for nothing . . . not in Cuba. His thoughts went around in profitless circles until he fell into a troubled sleep.

The ringing of the telephone beside his bed awakened him. Thin bars of sunlight fell through the venetian blinds onto the marble floor. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his wristwatch. It was ten o'clock. He cleared his throat and reached groggily for the telephone. "Lo."

"Jack, this is Paco. I'm in the lobby. Can I come up?"

"I just woke up. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll meet you in the dining room. We can talk while I have breakfast."

"I'll wait."

Wilson showered, shaved, and slipped into a pair of dark blue slacks with a plain white sport shirt. Paco was sitting at their table by the window reading a newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee. A middle-aged woman with a small child seated at the other side of the room were the only other occupants.

Paco looked seriously at Wilson as he slipped into his chair. "You shouldn't have run out on Rita, Chico. You hurt her feelings."

"That isn't all I hurt," Wilson said bitterly, looking over a menu.

"Something went wrong?"

"Yeah, I nearly got thrown out of the country." He told Paco all that had happened the night before. Paco shook his head. "So old Pablo Perez finally overreached himself. I was wrong. That cat had seven lives, not nine."

Wilson drove a fist into a palm. "I don't know why I fell for that telephone call and visited Perez. It was so damn stupid."

Paco looked thoughtful. "It may turn out O.K. If Rodriguez really wants the spare parts, he'll keep in touch."

"I think I am going to have to put another condition on that deal. They pay cash and they take delivery after I'm out of the country."

Paco grinned. "You're beginning to think like a Cuban, Chico. I thought of that twist before last night, so maybe your visit to Perez wasn't wasted. I've seen the profits of more than one deal used up in ransom."

"How are these G-2 guys, reasonable?"

"They are tough. They get what they want."

Wilson sighed. "I suppose the plain-clothes guy was political intelligence. I notice that he did what the G-2 captain asked."

"Sometimes it works that way. Sometimes it is the other way around."

"Maybe I'd better play it their way."

Paco grinned. "You can be damned sure that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police aren't going to help you, so my advice is to keep both of your hands on the top of the table at all times."

Wilson gave his breakfast order to a waiter who had drifted in from the kitchen. "That's good advice. If I had followed it last night I would have spent the night in bed with Rita rather than in a police station and a morgue."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Not a damn thing. I'm not even going to think. Maybe if I spend a few days sunning myself around the pool, they'll decide that I am just a harmless parts peddler."

Gomez looked at him seriously. "Are you? Because if you aren't, I'd better stop hanging around. You are beginning to attract attention."

"How could a guy no brighter than me be anything but harmless? Except maybe to himself?"

Paco grinned. "That's the way it's worked out so far, Chico. I'll admit that's the way it's worked out so far." He arose and stretched, scratching his chest as Wilson began to fork scrambled eggs into his mouth. "I'll see you around. Take it easy. If they want your spare parts, they'll come to you."

Wilson swallowed some coffee. "I see it that way too. Easy does it."

TWELVE

Wilson waited, spending his time sunning and swimming at the Vedado pool, but he could not relax and sleep long hours as he usually did when he had nothing to do. A vague sense of foreboding and unease hung over him. For the first time he felt vulnerable and apprehensive. He telephoned Paco Gomez several times, hoping that he would join him to the one on, but Paco was not at his house and did not return the calls. He began to wonder if Paco had dropped him.

On the afternoon of the third day the telephone rang in his room. Wilson, unshaven, was lying on his bed in his underwear shorts, smoking. "Mr. Wilson?" The male voice spoke in unaccented English.

"Yes, this is Wilson."

"My name is Eugene Cano. Mr. Rodriguez suggested that I telephone you. I believe that you met Mr. Rodriguez at INRA a few days ago."

"Yes. We are also old fishing buddies."

"I would like to speak with you. Could you join me at luncheon at the American Club tomorrow?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Noon. I shall meet you in the bar. There will be no difficulty. I shall recognize you."

"I'll wear the usual rose in my hair."

"Good-bye, Mr. Wilson."

In the late morning of the following day Wilson took a taxi down the Malecon and up the Prado toward the old Capitol. He paid off the driver a few blocks from the American Club and walked slowly up the mosaic sidewalk of the Prado's center promenade. The heavy foliage of the trees closed overhead, and though it was a clear day with the tropical sun nearing its zenith, he walked in an intense shade, cooled by the trade winds blowing from the ocean.

The ornate, gray facade of the American Club was unchanged by the revolution. A uniformed Negro doorman politely opened the glass doors off the street and discreetly asked his name. "Yes, Señor Wilson. Señor Cano expects you. He is in the barroom."

Wilson walked through the foyer and reading room and pushed open the paneled doors of the barroom at the rear of the building. There were eight or ten men standing at the long mahogany bar. A group of five was rolling poker dice, pounding the heavy dice cups on the bar between rolls and laughing uproariously. A smiling dark-haired man in a neat blue business suit wearing tortoise-shell glasses left the bar and came toward Wilson.

"Mr. Wilson, I am Cano. You are so prompt. Please join me for a drink."

After they had ordered, Wilson hunched over the bar and looked at Cano quizzically. "I never expected a Castro government official to invite me to

lunch at the American Club. I thought it was closed or off limits."

Cano raised a finger. "It is the *American Club*, Mr. Wilson, not the North American Club or the Yankee Club. I am a Cuban and have belonged to the club for twenty years, as did my father before me. We also have Canadian and British members. We only use the first floor now, as we have a smaller and more exclusive membership, but otherwise we carry on, happy clubmen in the new Cuba."

Wilson glanced around the English-style barroom with its heavy tables and comfortable leather chairs. "It's a nice place. I was never here in the old days."

"That is to your credit. It was a nest of intrigue against the Cuban people. The militaristic American Legion met here. The American Chamber of Commerce plotted the commercial subjugation of the Cuban people here. It was shameful. There were even CIA agents and saboteurs among the membership. Fidel showed great forbearance in allowing the club to remain open." Cano gestured toward a doorway. "Let us have our lunch, Mr. Wilson. Those days are happily over."

Cano chatted easily through luncheon. He had traveled widely in Canada and asked Wilson many questions about the country and about Toronto. When they had lighted cigars over coffee, he took a familiar-looking sheaf of papers out of an inside coat pocket and carefully smoothed them out on the table top with his fingertips. A heavily worked gold ring reflected a shaft of sunlight coming through the window. He very methodically removed his glasses, placed them in a case, and took out another pair with black rims. "I need these for reading, Mr. Wilson. I should wear bifocals, I am told, but I am a little vain. Now, let us see. . . ."

He went slowly down the list, pausing from time to time to ask Wilson questions concerning the quality and the specifications of the spare parts listed.

"I am no expert, Mr. Cano; I am just a salesman. But you put in the contract any specifications you want and either they will be met or we'll drop the item from the sale. I am asking honest prices and I don't want you to pay for anything that you can't use."

"That is fair. We shall do that, and our Toronto agent will have the responsibility of seeing that all specifications are met."

"As soon as we have a deal, I'll go back to Toronto and see that everything goes smoothly."

Cano sipped his coffee and finished writing a note on a margin of the list before replying. "I am afraid that is impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"You are on parole to the army's Intelligence Service."

Wilson wet his lips. "Yes, but they have no reason to hold me in Cuba."

"Perhaps not, but that is another matter and does not concern me. In any event, we cannot count on your being in Toronto at the time the sale is completed. Now, let us discuss the price."

Wilson looked at Cano warily. "The price is in the right-hand column. It is firm. I told that to the late, lamented Perez and to Rodriguez the fisherman."

"Surely not."

"Surely yes," Wilson growled.

"Prices are always negotiable."

"These aren't."

Cano took off his glasses and polished them carefully. He held them dangling in one hand and let his eyes roll slowly up toward the ceiling. "Mr. Wilson, you were arrested the other night in connection with an

attempted bribery. You are on parole. Surely you recognize that your bargaining position has changed?"

"Your police recorded my entire conversation with Perez. They know that I refused to pay a bribe."

"Yes, they know it. You know it. Even I know it, but it is not publicly known. If the recording of the conversation were mislaid, you would have some difficulty proving your innocence at a trial."

Wilson's teeth clamped down on his cigar. "I see."

"I am sure that you do."

Wilson squared his shoulders and took his cigar out of his mouth. He jabbed it in the air at Cano several times before he began to speak. "I get the picture, Cano, but let's understand something right now. We wouldn't be sitting here if you didn't want those spare parts. You will only get them if I leave Cuba with a profit jingling in my pocket. You know damn well that I can be jailed any time, but if I am jailed, no spare parts. My basic terms are a safe passage and a profit. Now"—Wilson paused and relit his cigar—"we might be able to haggle over price. I'll think it over, but this is no goddamned fire sale and I don't bluff worth a damn either."

Cano's face suffused with red and he spread his hands. "We only wish a fair price."

"I'll think it over."

"Very well, Mr. Wilson. You are a hard bargainer. I like that, but don't press your luck too far."

"I'll think it over."

"That is all we ask."

Wilson took a taxi back to the Vedado and stopped in the bar for a drink. He took a long pull and ran a hand through his hair. What a hell of a notel! This spare-parts gambit was getting out of hand. The way things were breaking, part of the deal had to be a safe