

WITH THIMBLES, WITH FORKS, AND HOPE

Kate Wilhelm

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Inside the house, the fragrance of soup was tantalizing; there were the odors of wood fires, of onions, of cats— three of them—cedar paneling, and other things he had not been able to identify, leftover things from when the house was built, or from the first seventy years of its occupancy.

"Hello," he called out, but he knew Constance was out. The house felt empty when she was outside. Two of the three cats stalked over to sniff his shoes and legs, checking credentials before they accepted him. The third one, Brutus, glared at him from on top of the upright freezer. It was Charlie's fault, obviously, that the rain had started again. Brutus turned his back and faced the wall.

Charlie went through a narrow hallway, through the utility room, all the time dancing to avoid squashing a cat. He heard the soft plop Brutus made when he left the freezer, and he knew the evil old tiger cat was following along, his tail rigid, daring either of the other two to get in his way. They would keep an eye on him and scamper if he got near. Brutus was a New York cat; he had not, would never approve of country life. In

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near. Brutus was a New York cat; he had not, would never approve of country life. In the kitchen, there was a copper-colored electric range with a stove-top grill, a dishwasher, a disposal that had never been used since they had moved in—meat scraps went to cats, and everything else went on the compost; there were rows of hanging pots and pans, all gleaming copper-bottomed, seldom used. What was used every day for nine or even ten months of the year was a forty-year-old wood cookstove. On it now, there was the iron kettle with soup simmering so low that a bubble broke the surface once every five minutes or so.

The orange cat rubbed against him and

complained about things generally. He rubbed its ears for a moment, then said softly, "She's going to be mad as hell, Candy." Brutus swiped at the gray cat, Ashcan, in passing and settled himself on the rocking chair nearest the stove. His eyes gleamed yellow as he narrowed them in the way that made him look Mephistophelian. Candy went on detailing her awful day, Ashcan licked the place Brutus had nabbed him, and Charlie tried to think of a way to break the news to his wife that he had practically taken on a job for them both. "She will be mad as hell," he said again under his breath, and he put down the briefcase filled with reports that he planned to read that night and have her

read.

On the slope overlooking the house and yard, Constance was on her knees planting daffodils under the half dozen apple trees that made their orchard. Next year, they should start bearing. "Goddamned rain," she muttered, "had to do it now, couldn't wait another fifteen minutes, had to be right now." Rain trickled down her neck, icy fingers that made her skin flinch, trying to turn itself inside out. She plunged the bulb planter into the yielding earth, twisted it viciously, lifted out the plug, and laid it down. With one hand, she scooped up wood ashes and bonemeal and sand and tossed the mixture into the hole; with the other, she groped in her pail for another

bulb and dropped it in, no longer taking the trouble to put it right side up. She returned the column of dirt topped with newly cut grass and jabbed at the ground a scant six inches away to repeat the process. It was impossible now for her to summon the vision of apple trees in bloom on a golden carpet.

She had heard the car and knew that Charlie was home. She had known when Charlie left that morning that when he got home he would hem and haw around for a while and finally blurt out that he had taken the job, that it would be a milk run, nothing to do, nothing dangerous, et cetera, et cetera. Her stomach would churn and her blood would chill, making her fingers cold, and she would nod

silently and try to find words that would tell him she hated it but that she was willing for him to do it because she knew he couldn't just quit the business cold turkey. She knew that now and then he would go see Phil Stearns and come home to tell her that he had agreed to do just this one job, this one last time. "But it isn't fair," she muttered. For twenty-five years, Charlie had worked on the New York City police force, and he had come out scarred but intact, and it wasn't fair to risk everything again.

The worst scars were the ones that could not be seen. Invisible scar tissue had formed, protecting him where he had been hurt too often. In the beginning, he had been possessed by zeal, a sense of

mission, holy justice; over the years, that had become cynicism and simple dedication to sharpening his skills of detection. Then he had become different again, had developed a cold fury because nothing changed, or if there were changes, they were for the worse. His rage at the criminal began to extend to the victim. Constance had known then it was time for him to get out. Surprisingly, he had agreed, and three years ago, at forty-seven, he had retired.

She looked with dismay at the pail, at least twenty more bulbs. The rain was coming down harder; there was a touch of ice in it. Her fingers were red and swollen-looking and her nose had started to run and she couldn't wipe it

without smearing mud across her face. "It isn't fair!" she cried, looking at the house.

By the time she finished the job and put away her equipment, the rain was a downpour and the day was finished, with the gray sky lowering toward the ground. Charlie met her at the back door and drew her inside, pushed her gently into a chair, and brushed a kiss across her nose as he leaned over and pulled off her muddy boots. He helped her out of the sodden jacket and then took both her hands and pulled her across the kitchen, through the hallway, to the bathroom, which was steamy and sweet-smelling from bubble bath.

She sighed and did not tell him she

would have preferred a shower in order to wash her hair also. Since her fingers were stiff with cold, he ended up undressing her and then held her elbow firmly until she was in the tub, only her flushed face and wet hair above water.

Charlie was perplexed about the hair; she was not the image he had anticipated, with mud on her cheek and her hair dripping and clinging to her cheeks and her forehead.

"Be right back," he said, and left, taking her wet clothes with him. As soon as he had vanished, she stood up and pulled a towel from the rack and tied up her hair. It was silly for Charlie to baby her; she was taller than he was, and almost as broad. Her face was wide,

Slavic, her eyes pale blue, her hair almost white, it was so blond. The gray that was already showing here and there blended in, and no one but Charlie knew she was turning. She knew she neither looked nor acted like the kind of woman a man would baby. She sank back into the suds and thought again it was silly for him to go through this to ease his conscience, but she was glad he did. Sometimes he babied her and sometimes she babied him; it worked out.

He came back carrying a tray with two frosted martini glasses, the shaker, a plate of garlic salami, the kind you could get only in a good New York deli, and strips of cheese. He sat down cross-legged on the floor so that his eyes and

hers were level, poured the drinks, handed her a towel and then her drink, and began to tell her about the job. While he talked, he ate the salami and held out pieces for her to bite.

Constance watched him and listened and she thought: He was night to her day, all dark and brooding and secret. His hair was a mop of tight black curls, his eyebrows so heavy, they made his face look out of proportion. There was a gleam of gold in his mouth when he laughed, one gold cap. His teeth were crooked, an orthodontist's nightmare, but they were the whitest teeth Constance had ever seen.

"Lou Bramley," Charlie said, eating cheese, "will be fifty-one November

first. That's Saturday. He's got a wife that he cares for, two good kids, treasurer of Tyler and Sacks, Incorporated, no debts, everything going for him. And Phil's sure as sin that he's going to suicide before the end of the day Saturday. And leave him, Phil, holding a

five-hundred-thousand-dollar insurance policy."

"So why doesn't he just not issue the policy?"

"Because it's too big to piss away without more than an itch to go by. And nothing's come up. He's had his best working on it for the last three weeks and they haven't come up with anything—no motive, no problem, no woman,

nothing."

"Why does Bramley say he wants that kind of insurance?"

"His story was that at a party a screwball astrologer told him the next six months are the most dangerous of his life, that unless he takes extreme care, the odds are good that he will be killed in an accident." Charlie poured the last of the martinis and laughed. "Phil even hired an astrologer to do a horoscope for Bramley. Nothing to it. He's riding a high wave, nothing but good things ahead. Can you imagine Phil going to an astrologer?"

Constance laughed. They had known Phil Stearns since Charlie's college days. Phil believed in nothing but

actuarial tables. "Charlie," she said then, "it's an impasse. In time, a good psychologist or psychiatrist could give Phil his answers, but if his people couldn't find anything in three weeks, what does he think you can do in three days? He has to gamble or cut loose."

Charlie nodded. "I more or less told him the same thing. Midnight Friday, the policy goes through automatically if he doesn't reject it. By midnight Saturday, we both think Mr. Lou Bramley will no longer be with us, and Mrs. Bramley will come into a sizable fortune. Phil is ready to cut him loose, but he wants a backup opinion from a good psychologist. From you."

She shook her head. "I'm retired. And

you are, too, if you'd just remember it from time to time."

"Bramley's gone down to a flossy resort in Florida, in the Fort Myers area. That raises the possibility of a vanishing act instead of suicide. In either case, it has to go down on the books as accidental death for the big payoff. All Phil wants you to do is go down there and observe him, talk to him, and on Friday give Phil a call. He needs something more than an itch to refuse a policy like that."

Constance glared at him. "You can't take jobs for me. I'm not an indentured servant or something."

"I didn't tell him anything definite," Charlie said reproachfully. "I did say

that if we agreed, we'd want a week's vacation at the flossy resort after we finished this little job. On Phil, of course."

She shook her head. "Go stir the soup or something." As soon as he was gone, she opened the drain, pulled the towel from her hair, and turned on the shower. She hated bubble bath; this was a gift from their daughter. Of course, Charlie would be hooked on Lou Bramley—they were the same age. He would never admit it, but the idea of stopping everything now when there was so much to do, time enough finally to do it, that would frighten him. He was not a coward—he had survived too many encounters with near death and had gone

back too many times—but he was cautious. He was not ready. His own unreadiness would make it impossible for him to sidestep Lou Bramley, who evidently was ready. Charlie would have to know why. He would have to stop him if he was stoppable.

Constance had called Charlie late in the afternoon of her first day at the luxurious hotel. She had managed to talk briefly with Lou Bramley, she reported. "He's withdrawing, Charlie," she had said soberly. "Anyone with half an eye could spot it. He's not eating, not sleeping, doesn't finish sentences. He stares and stares without moving, then jumps up and walks furiously on the beach. Nervous energy. He's so

obsessed, he doesn't even realize he's got two women pursuing him."

"Two? What do you mean?"

And she had told him about the woman who was openly stalking Lou Bramley. The bellboys and waiters were betting on when she would land him, it was so obvious.

Charlie did not like having a woman appear. It was possible they planned to skip out together.

He was going to like it even less, she thought. She had learned that the woman was June Oliveira, from Brazil, and Lou Bramley was the first man she had paid any attention to in the week she had been in the hotel. Wherever Lou Bramley went, she was so close that she might as

well have been attached to him. Constance had watched her sit at a table next to his and start edging her chair toward him. When she got within whispering distance, he apparently had become aware of her for the first time, and he had moved out to a beach chair in the sun. His action had been almost absentminded. The woman had continued to watch him intently, and moments later when he jumped up and started to walk, she had followed. It would have been easy to miss, Constance knew. The terrace was usually a busy place, especially during the late-afternoon happy hour. Waiters were rushing back and forth, groups forming, breaking up, re-forming. If she

had not been watching closely, she might not have noticed, partly because the woman was so brazen about it; somehow that screened her intentions even more than secrecy would have done. When she first mentioned the woman to Charlie, Constance had realized she could not describe her beyond the most obvious features—long black hair and slender figure. Her face was smooth and unreadable, expressionless; she wore no jewelry, no makeup, no nail polish. Probably she was in her thirties; she was too self-assured to be younger, but there were no visible signs that she was older.

Up to this point Charlie would be willing to accept her assurance that Lou Bramley and the woman were strangers.

And then she would tell him that last evening the woman had moved to a room next to Bramley's. The bellboy who was willing to sell information had rolled his eyes when he told her that. Later last night, Constance had gone for a walk, and in the shadows of a sea-grape bush, she had stopped and looked back at the hotel, studying it until she found her own room, counting up and over from it to Bramley's. On the balcony next to his, she had made out the dim figure of the woman as close to the joint rail as she could get. Constance remembered the chill that had shaken her, and she felt it edging up her arms now. She looked at her watch; he should be home, she decided, and dialed the number.

Charlie sounded pleased; he was running down a good lead, he said, but the woman continued to worry him. She could be a complication, he admitted.

"I'll see if I can get anything from Bramley about her," Constance said.

"I'm having a drink with him in a few minutes. I doubt that we'll be able to talk, though. That woman will be in his lap practically. Charlie, she ... she really bothers me."

"Okay. Keep your distance from her. Don't get in her way. She's probably got her own little racket going. Just watch the gazebo from a distance. Right?"

She agreed, and in a few minutes they hung up. She had not thought of the gazebo for a long time, but this didn't

feel at all like that. There was something strange and mysterious going on, but she felt no danger; this was not the way she had felt when she had made the workmen move the little structure—hardly bigger than a playhouse. Nine years ago when they were in the country on weekends and part of the summer only, she had looked out the kitchen window one Saturday morning and had felt her skin crawl. I have to move the gazebo, she had said to herself sharply, and without another thought she had gone to the phone and called Willard Orme and had told him to bring someone out to do it. He had protested and tried to arrange a date a week away, and she had said she would get someone else to do it and

remodel the house and build the garage and all the rest of the work he was figuring on doing for them. Reluctantly, he had come out and moved the gazebo. That afternoon, their daughter Jessica and two friends had been sitting in it drinking Cokes and eating hot dogs when a storm had blown down the walnut tree near the barn, and it had fallen on the newly bared spot of earth.

This was nothing like that, she told herself sharply. It was time to go down and meet Lou Bramley, see if they could find a place where she could get him to talk a little, a place where there would be no room for June Oliveira to be at his elbow.

The terrace was very large, and even

though there were forty or more people on it, many tables were vacant. The hotel was between seasons now; after Thanksgiving, through spring, it would be jammed and then it would be impossible to wander out and find a table. She sat down and shook her head at the waiter. She would order when Lou Bramley joined her. She spotted him as soon as he walked from the lobby through the wide doors. He hesitated, looking around, then nodded and started for her table. He had taken perhaps ten steps when he paused, looked past her, and changed his direction to go through the terrace, out to the beach chairs in the sand, where he sat down next to June Oliveira.

"For heaven's sake," Constance muttered to herself. "He's falling for her line." Bramley was facing the Gulf, away from her. June Oliveira was at his left, talking to his profile. Constance watched them for several minutes and then decided not to let Oliveira get away with it so easily. She picked up her purse and put on her sunglasses; it was still very bright out on the sand. She hated going out in the sun because her nose was burned, her cheeks, her chin. She walked across the terrace and down the three steps, turned toward them, and then veered away and headed toward the beach instead. She began to feel the heat of the sun on her nose and cheeks, and abruptly she turned and went back,

without glancing at Lou Bramley and June Oliveira.

In her room again, she began to shiver and started to adjust the air conditioner, but she had turned it off when she arrived and it had not been on since. She went to the balcony to let the late-afternoon sun warm her. She realized that she was cursing under her breath and suddenly she laughed. A tug of war over a man! She had not played games like that since her teens. Now she began to look over the people on the sand below. Finally, she found Lou Bramley and June Oliveira, exactly as before. She stood thinking and then went back inside and dialed Charlie again.

"I just want you to call her and keep

her on the line a few minutes." He didn't like it, he said many times, until she said she would hire a bellboy to do it, and if she paid him ten, that woman would more than likely pay fifteen to learn the identity of the hoaxter.

"And if you get him out of her clutches, then what?"

"I'm going to try to get him drunk enough to sleep tonight. If he doesn't, he just might go through with it, no matter what you tell him. He's desperate for sleep."

Charlie grumbled some more, but he would make the call to Oliveira in five minutes. "Honey," he said before hanging up, "just be damned careful."

Lou Bramley sat in the afternoon sun

with June Oliveira and on her balcony Constance shivered. It was crazy, she told herself sternly; there were fifty people down there, and that many more on the beach, dozens of people swimming or sunbathing. It was a mob scene down there. Almost thirteen years ago, Charlie had given her a present of one year of self-defense classes. He had insisted over her protests, saying further that as soon as Jessica was ten, he was going to enroll her also. Months later, she had come home one afternoon upset and unwilling to continue.

"Charlie, what Kim is teaching us now are lethal blows. I don't like it." He had held her shoulders and regarded her soberly. "If anyone ever lays a hand on

you, hurts you, you'd better kill him. Because if you don't, I will. You'll get off with self-defense, but it will be murder for me." They both knew he meant it.

What her classes had not prepared her to do, she thought decisively, was to stay in her den and shiver when she had agreed to do a job. She waited in the dark, cool bar for the bellboy to summon June Oliveira for her urgent long-distance call. The bar adjoined the terrace; it had ceiling-to-floor smoked-glass windows that let the patrons see out and kept those on the outside from seeing in.

The day the walnut tree fell was the day that Jessica had given up junk food,

had, in fact, become a health-food fanatic. The girls had come running in, talking shrilly, caught up in a nervous reaction to the storm and the crash of the tree, and the realization that they could so easily have been under it. Jessica had stopped at the door and looked at her mother across the kitchen. There had been beads of sweat on her upper lip. Wordlessly, she had crossed the room and hugged Constance very hard, shaking, saying nothing. Strange, Constance thought as she watched, how memories like that one pop up, complete, every detail there, as if it were a little scene one could raise the curtain on at any time. She was glad she had been with her daughter on the day

she learned how short the distance was between life and death.

Presently, June Oliveira appeared, walking fast toward the lobby. Constance left the bar through the terrace door and went straight to Lou Bramley. The woman had left her scarf on the chair; she did not intend to be delayed very long.

"Hi," Constance said. "Want to take a walk?" Bramley jumped up and looked around swiftly. "I certainly do. Let's go." They started for the beach, then he stopped. "It's no good. She'll just tag along."

"I've got a rental car in the lot," Constance said, taking his arm. "Let's go somewhere else to walk."

They went to a flagstone path that wound between the swimming pool area and the tennis courts, up past the terrace, to the street-front parking lot. Not until they were on the busy highway heading south did Lou Bramley relax.

"I really wanted to talk to you professionally, but I'm not quite sure of the etiquette of the situation. And I owe you an apology," he said. "I'm sorry."

Constance laughed. "I'm retired. Any advice I give these days is just that, advice, like you might get from sweet old Aunt Maud." She glanced at him as she spoke; his mouth twisted in an attempt to smile, then settled back into a tight line. His sunglasses were mirrors that completely hid his eyes. She turned

her attention once more to the road. Incredibly busy, she thought; probably many of them were on their way down to the Tamiami Trail, through the swamps over to the east coast. A straggly line of pelicans flew across the road; she admired pelicans more than all the other birds. They were scruffy-looking on land, ungainly, comical, but in flight they were supreme. So little effort seemed to go into it. They just opened their wings and sailed.

"I came down here to think through a problem," Lou Bramley said after the silence had stretched out long enough to be almost unbreakable. "A business problem," he added quickly. He turned his head away, as if afraid that even with

most of his face hidden behind the sunglasses, he might reveal too much. "Lucky, my wife, says that we constantly signal to each other, all people, and that we learn to read the signals as kids and get sharper at it as we grow up. She says that women don't make passes at me because I'm not signaling that I'd be receptive." He paused, waiting for her response.

"That's really very good," Constance said dutifully.

"Yes. And now especially, with this problem, I know I'm not hunting. So why is it that I can't turn around without having that woman at my side?

Earlier, I wanted to have a talk with you and I went to her instead. I don't

even like her. I actively dislike her, more than anyone I've met in a long time. And I can't stay away from her."

"I wonder what she wants," Constance said.

"That's the stumbling block for me, too. There must be some kind of con game that she's going to pull when the time's right."

"She isn't right for a con artist, too blatant, too uncaring about appearances." She spied a good place to leave the highway at a small restaurant with beach access. "Finally, we can take our walk." They walked on the hard-packed wet sand at the edge of the water. Lime green waves rose knee-high before they lost themselves in the froth.

Flocks of sandpipers probed the sand, scattered at their approach, settled again as soon as they passed. Now and then, a large white heron fluttered up out of their way, or a bunch of seagulls screeched at them. Constance did not push the conversation or try to direct it as he talked about the woman, June Oliveira. She got little from it; he was not a good observer, not an attentive listener, not at this time in his life, anyway. They turned back as the sun was setting in a gaudy display of reds, golds, ivory, green.... Offshore, a large yacht was moving south. They watched it.

"I don't swim," Lou Bramley said suddenly.

"My husband doesn't swim very

well," Constance said. "He paddles a little."

"I saw you heading straight out into the Gulf this morning; it gave me a sinking feeling in my stomach when I realized I couldn't see you any longer."

"I don't think June Oliveira swims, either," Constance said. "At least I haven't seen her doing it."

"She thinks it's dangerous. She doesn't do anything dangerous. She thinks people are crazy who do."

He did not break the silence again until they were drawing near the tiny restaurant. "Would you like to have dinner here? I understand almost all the seafood restaurants are pretty good."

They got a booth by a window and she

ordered a martini; they watched the end of the gaudy sunset while they waited for it.

"What happened after you published your articles?" he asked. He had not ordered a drink, and he watched her sip her martini with poorly concealed desire for one just like it.

He was punishing himself, she thought, making himself live through every minute of this week without help of any sort. The hollows under his eyes were alarming.

"I had already quit the hospital when I began to write the articles," she said. "They brought a little pressure on the university. I had tenure and they couldn't have touched me, but it was

uncomfortable. I finished the semester and dropped that, too. It wasn't as if I sacrificed anything," she said easily. "I was busier than ever doing consulting."

"They made it look like a continuation of the old battle between the psychologists who aren't doctors and the psychiatrists who are," he said thoughtfully.

She shrugged. "A plague on both their houses. I'm researching a book right now that will damn the psychologists just as much as those articles damned the holy psychiatrists."

"I'd like to see that," he said almost regretfully, and his eyes went distant as his fingers began to tap on the tabletop. He was back in his own hell.

"It's heady stuff," she said, "taking an opponent that much bigger than you are." His gaze remained fixed. She pulled the menu close to the candle and tried to make out the faint print.

When the waiter came to take their orders she asked to see the wine list and was disappointed by the selection. She did the best she could with it and said firmly, "two glasses." Lou Bramley started to protest, then became silent again. For the first time, he seemed to be uncomfortable with the silence.

"I'm surprised that they're still treating so many people with electroshock," he said.

"Several hundred thousand a year. For a while, they thought they had a better

solution with psychodrugs, but what happened was, they ended up with addicts. Mostly women."

"And the difference in the treatments for men and women. That was shocking, too."

"Shocking," she agreed. "That's the word." Suddenly, he smiled, the first time. "I'm not very good company. I'm sorry. Thanks for rescuing me, though. I'm glad we got out, away from that woman."

He ate little, but he drank the wine, and she kept refilling his glass; when the bottle was low, she signaled the waiter, who immediately brought a new one. The food was delicious. She was sorry he had not eaten.

They both ordered key lime pie and while they waited for it, he said, "I really wanted to talk to you about a favor. You mentioned that your husband is joining you this weekend and you'll be around next week?" She nodded.

He leaned back as the waiter came with their pie. For a minute, Constance was afraid he would reconsider and withdraw again, but as soon as the waiter left, he went on.

"I thought I might miss you tomorrow. I have an important call I have to wait for in my room, and I thought you might have plans to go out. Anyway, that woman has made me jumpy, and I don't want to leave anything in my room. For all I know she might find a key

somewhere, let herself in." He tried to laugh to show that he did not really mean it, but the effort was wasted. "It's something I want kept safe for me. I'm going deep-sea fishing, but I mentioned that already, didn't I?" He knew he had not. The lie evidently made his mouth dry; he had to drink some of the awful water before he could continue. Constance was missing nothing: his sudden thirst, the way his fingers tightened and relaxed, tightened again, the way he avoided her gaze. He was still too dry to go on and he reached for the wine this time.

Constance took a bite of the pie and drew in a deep breath. It was sinfully good, made with real whipped cream,

real lime juice.

"I don't want to leave confidential papers in the hotel safe," Lou Bramley said finally. "I know they have to turn things over to the police in case of accident or anything," he said in a rush.

He stopped again and this time Constance thought he would not go on.

"This has to do with your business problem?"

"Yes. That's it. I would like to know that someone responsible has the papers, just in case."

"I'll be glad to hold anything for you."

"Thanks. And if—I mean there's always a chance that something could happen—and if it does, would you just drop the stuff in a mailbox for me?"

There will be two envelopes ready to mail. Inside a larger envelope." She nodded.

"I can't tell you how that relieves my mind," he said. "I know it must sound crazy, but I've got a hunch that I should make sure that stuff is safe." He put his fork down and looked past her out the window and instantly his face was set in that distant look she had come to know.

"I believe very much in hunches," she said. "I used to wonder why everyone in my profession paid so little attention to intuitions, hunches, things that we all experience and no one wants to talk about. Some of those patients committed to years of institutional life, ordeals of drugs, shock treatments, hours of

psychodrama, group therapies, the works, are there because they couldn't bring themselves to ignore their intuitions. They got out of control. Others, even sicker people on the outside, pretend there is no such thing. There has to be a middle ground; there has to be a handle to it, a way to look into it without being labeled crazy. I haven't found it yet," she admitted. "But I'm convinced that you can't treat neurotics, psychotics, psychopaths, any of them, unless you admit that part of the psyche is still uncharted, unknown, and powerful." She had brought him back; he was regarding her with interest.

"They'll crucify you," he said softly.

"They might try. I'm hammering my

nails as hard and fast as they are hammering theirs."

He smiled with her.

She made a waving motion. "Enough of that. Why is your wife nicknamed Lucky?"

It was a silly story—her father had won a daily double the day she was born—but it started Lou Bramley talking. It was all about his wife and two children now, the trips they had taken, the strange and wonderful things the children had done. Nothing current, nothing about the future, nothing more recent than a couple of years ago. When he paused, she told a story about Jessica, or about Charlie.

They were the only customers still in the restaurant when it closed. He was

yawning widely. At the car, he stopped and looked back at the small dining room, the beach beyond it pale under a new moon. He nodded, then got in.

It was shortly after twelve when they walked into the hotel lobby and saw June Oliveira studying travel folders near the desk. Lou Bramley groaned.

"Jesus Christ!" he muttered. "She's just waiting. She knows and she's waiting."

On Friday, Charlie arrived at the hotel at 6:30 and went straight up to their room, where Constance was waiting for him. He kissed her fervently.

"You had me worried," he said then, holding her at arm's length, studying her. "Have you looked at your nose?" She

had; it was shiny and red as a plum tomato. It was also hot.

"You know what he's running away from?" she asked.

"I think so. He needs to confirm it; I don't have a stitch of proof."

"If he doesn't, we have to kidnap him or something. We can't let him go through with it, Charlie. I like him; he doesn't deserve that."

"And I like his wife a bunch, too. We'll see. Now, what about that mystery woman?"

"I wish I knew. Look, Bramley hasn't left his room all day. He's waiting for that phone call. He was supposed to get a package to me for safekeeping, and he hasn't done that, either. It's that woman.

She's got some kind of control over him. I know, I know ..." Charlie watched her pace to the window, back. He had seen her like this before, but not for a very long time. He tried to pull her to the sofa next to him; she was too restless to sit down.

"Charlie, you'll have to get him out of here to talk to him. Tell him he's insured. Tell him you have to have something to eat, say in the coffee shop, that he has to sign papers and can do it there. She'll follow. In the lobby, I'll distract her, and that's when you have to get him out. There's a place down the road, south, Jake's Fish House. I'll meet you there. You rented a car, didn't you?"

"Yes. You told me to, remember?"

Constance, what is all this? You're nearly hysterical, you know?"

"I'm not hysterical, but there isn't much time. There's an eleven o'clock flight out of Miami and I want him on it. Charlie, he won't talk here! That woman is hanging out on his elbow. Believe me."

He kissed her again and went to the door. "Okay. Jake's Fish House. It'd better be good, sweetie, real good."

He would have recognized Lou Bramley from the photographs, but they had not prepared him for the muddy color of his face. He had blanched when Charlie said he represented the insurance company.

"You have the policy, Mr. Bramley,"

Charlie said. "There are some formalities, of course, a few things to sign."

Bramley sank into a chair, staring at him blankly; very slowly, the mud color changed to a reddish suntan. He moistened his lips. "Something to sign?"

"Yeah. Would you mind going to the coffee shop? I got a lousy headache on that flight down here. Cup of coffee and a couple aspirins, that's what I need. We can get the paperwork done there."

Bramley nodded and stood up. He went to a chest, opened a drawer, and withdrew a manila envelope. "I have to drop this off at the desk," he said, looking at the envelope.

The woman was standing at the

elevators when they arrived. The Dragon Lady, Charlie thought, and nodded to her. At his side, Lou Bramley had gone stiff. He looked straight ahead, as if he had not seen the woman at all. No one spoke.

She got off before them but was walking so slowly that they passed her within a few feet of the recessed elevator bank. They went to the desk, where Bramley handed over his envelope and watched until the clerk deposited it in Constance's box. He took a deep breath.

"The coffee shop's over there," he said dully, turning from the desk. The woman was less than fifteen feet away. Constance appeared and walked

between them, and when the woman stepped aside, Constance brushed against her.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Constance yelled. "She had her hand in my purse!"

June Oliveira started to move away faster; Constance caught her by the arm and turned her around. "I know you did! I saw you and I felt the tug on my purse. It's happened to me before, just like that."

"Let's get the hell out of here," Charlie said, taking Bramley's arm. There was no need to tug; Bramley was already nearly running for the wide entrance doors.

In Jake's Fish House, they took a booth and Charlie ordered.

"One scotch on the rocks," he said, pointing to Bramley.

"One very dry martini for me."

"Your wife said that's your drink," Charlie said easily.

"You saw my wife? Why?"

"Routine."

"You told her about the policy?"

"Nope. Told her I was a headhunter scouting you out for a new job."

"She believed that?"

"She sure was trying hard to believe it. She showed me your computer. Neat, real neat."

Bramley ran his hand over his lips. "Who are you?"

"Actually, I really am doing a bit of headhunting for Jim Hammond."

Bramley looked as if he might faint. The waiter brought their drinks and Charlie said, "Drink up." He sipped his martini and knew he wanted another one very fast. Bramley drank most of his scotch without pausing. They regarded each other. Bramley looked haunted, or maybe treed. Charlie had seen that look on other faces. Sometimes if the person with that look had a gun, he began shooting. If he was on a ledge, he usually jumped.

"If you've done what we think you've done," he said softly, "Jim Hammond wants to hire you, starting now, tonight, or next week, next month, whenever you can arrange it."

"He doesn't even know. No one

knows."

"Five hundred thousand dollars' worth for openers," Charlie said.

"For openers," Bramley said. He finished his scotch.

"Hammond wants you; you can work it out together. You found a glitch in his foolproof gadget. You could even say he needs you." He signaled the waiter to repeat the first round and then leaned back, watching Bramley.

"Of course, it was the dumbest thing you could do, get a policy like that and take off, I mean. Like a neon announcement."

"I never claimed to be smart. I was desperate. It would have worked. Lucky would have paid the money back and

would have collected fifty thousand from Hammond. His offer is still good, isn't it? The reward for anyone who cracked his system? I wrote out exactly what I did to prove ... Oh my God!"

"Now what?"

"I've got to retrieve that envelope from the hotel desk!" He shook his head, then asked, "How did you find out?"

"The old Sherlock Holmes method. If it's all that's left, it's got to be it. Or something like that. We couldn't find anything on you, so I looked up your company. Two years ago, they got a new Hammond computer system. I read about the guarantee and the reward. As soon as I saw that computer setup at your house, I knew."

Their new drinks had arrived before Constance showed up. She came straight to their booth and sat down next to Charlie. Bramley looked completely bewildered by her arrival.

"It's okay," Charlie said to Constance, putting his arm about her shoulders and squeezing slightly. "You put on a good show. How did you get out of it?"

"I apologized and explained many times that I had been robbed in New York by someone who casually brushed against me. She was not happy."

"You two ... ? You're with him?"

"This is my husband," Constance said. "I have your envelope. I suppose you want it back?" She took it from her purse and slid it across the table. He looked

from her to the envelope, back to her. "You've been working these past couple of days?"

She nodded. "I had planned to kidnap you and make you see how unfair you were being, if Charlie hadn't pulled it off."

"It's too easy to make judgments from the outside," Bramley said. "It would have ruined her life, too."

"And what about the load of guilt you were planning to dump on her?"

Wouldn't that have ruined her life? Ruin, despair, humiliation, those were your burdens, but you know she would have shared them. Who would have shared her guilt?"

"She would have grieved, but she

would have gotten over it. It was going to be an accident. Everyone would have accepted that."

"She already knows," Charlie said. "I don't know how, but she does."

"Just as I'd know," Constance said.

"She would have tried to stop me if she suspected," Bramley whispered.

"Maybe she feels she can take the guilt trip better than you could stand the humiliation and ruin from whatever you did. Maybe she wanted to save you from suffering," Constance said coolly.

"Stop it!" His voice broke and he gulped his drink. "You've made the point," he said.

"Lou, there's an eleven o'clock flight out of Miami for New York. You can

take my rental car and turn it in for me at Miami. You have a reservation for that flight."

"This feels like a bum's rush," he said, but his eyes gleamed, and there was a look on his face that she had not seen there: boyish, eager.

"The hotel knows you're going out fishing tonight; they won't think anything of it when you don't come back. Call them from New York tomorrow."

He was nodding. "I really don't have to go back there. I could drive over in a couple, three hours. What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty."

"I'd better get started."

"I got some sandwiches, and a thermos of coffee. They're on the front

seat. Here's the agreement for the car, and the key." Constance handed them to him.

He folded the paper and stuffed it in his pocket and brought out another slip of paper. He looked at it, then let it fall to the table. "My receipt for the fishing trip. Paid in full." Now he stood up. He looked down at Constance. "I don't know yet what I think about you. I owe you a lot. Thanks." Suddenly, he leaned down and kissed her forehead. He reached across her to shake Charlie's hand. "You don't really have anything for me to sign. That was all done a month ago. Right?"

"Right. Good luck, Lou. Hammond's waiting for your call." He hesitated, then asked, "Fill me in on one thing, before

you go. What do you think the Oliveira woman was up to?"

"I think she knew I was going to die and she was hanging around to watch," he said without hesitation. "She'll be disappointed. Keep out of her way," he added, looking at Constance. "She's a ghoul, probably crazy, and I think she's very dangerous."

They watched him leave, then Charlie turned to Constance.

"Okay. What was that all about? He's right—it was the bum's rush. Why?"

"I don't think he would have been able to leave again if he had gone back to the hotel. I don't know how or why, but that woman does have some kind of power over him. I think he's right, Charlie. She

knew. That's what she was waiting for."

Charlie took a deep breath, blew it out again in exasperation. "Tell me," he said.

When she kept it all very objective, as she did now, Constance knew there was nothing frightening about the woman. She repelled and fascinated Lou Bramley, nothing too unusual there; except, she told herself, both she and Lou Bramley knew it was more than that, even if neither of them could ever demonstrate it.

"Now, you tell me. What did he do? He's not a crook."

"Not in the usual sense, anyway. His company got a big multimillion-dollar computer system two years ago,

guaranteed safe against illicit access. And Bramley couldn't resist trying to break into it. It was a game, puzzle solving. And he did it. Eighteen months ago, he got his own computer at home, and it's been like having a mouse in the cheese cupboard ever since. God knows how much money he's diverted, where it is. Hammond, the computer company president, wants to hire him." He shrugged. "I think I got out of the crime business at a good time. I just don't understand things anymore. Hammond said half a dozen companies would hire him if he actually got access to that computer. And I guess he did."

Hours later when Charlie fished for his keys, he felt the receipt for the

charter boat and brought it out also. "Let's do it," he said. "Let's go fishing."

"He's going to take off at high tide, at three or a little after," she said. She thought of the glassy water of the Gulf. "We have to sleep aboard if we're going." They began to hurry, like children rushing to a picnic. For a moment or two, Constance was aware of another feeling, the same one she had felt years ago when she had looked out her kitchen window that Saturday morning. The same, but intensified, and also directionless.

"You know," Charlie said, driving, "this is something I've wanted to do all my life. Never thought the chance would drop into my lap like this. Freezing rain

was falling when I left the city...." Beside him, Constance was caught up in his infectious gaiety; she pushed the intrusive feeling of dread and fear out of her mind. At the docks, she and Charlie went into an all-night diner to ask directions, and they met Dino Skaggs there, one of the brothers who owned *Dinah's Way*. He was a wiry brown man with sun-bleached hair, his face so wrinkled, it was hard to guess his age, which Constance thought was about thirty-five, give or take a few years. Dino scowled when Charlie showed him the receipt. "You sure he isn't coming?" he asked suspiciously, studying the receipt.

"I'm sure," Charlie said. "Look, if

there's an additional charge because there're two of us, we'll pay it."

Dino bit his lip as he studied Charlie, then Constance. "Shit," he said finally. "Hundred per head, in advance. We shove off at three. No checks," he added as Charlie pulled out his checkbook.

"I have cash," Constance said. She counted out the hundred and handed it to Dino, who recounted it.

He stood with the money in his hand, still frowning glumly. "Shit, I guess you won't be eating all that much." He peeled off five tens and thrust the bills back to her. "Don't bother to come aboard until two-thirty, and keep it quiet when you do. We've got a sleeping passenger aboard already." He slouched away.

"Well," Constance said. "You're sure about this?"

"Shit yes," Charlie said, grinning. "Want some coffee?" Dino met them on the dock where *Dinah's Way* was moored. It was too dark to tell much about the boat, except that it looked small, and very pretty, sparkling white, with blue letters, blue trim, gleaming copper rails. It looked less like a fishing boat than Charlie had anticipated.

"You'll want to watch the lights and all, I guess," Dino said morosely.

"I'm going to settle you in the stern and you stay put. When you've had enough, you go on to your stateroom. And no talking in the galley. Inside your room with the door closed, it's okay, just

keep it low. Right?" Charlie said, "Aye, aye," and Dino groaned. Constance felt a stab of impatience with Charlie. He was too eager, too willing to let this pipsqueak boss him around.

"I'll take her out from up on the flybridge," Dino went on. He led them aboard and to the rear. The boat rocked gently. "Grandstand seats," Dino said, pointing to two fighting chairs. "Back through here," he said, motioning them to come to the cabin, "you go down the stairs, and turn right at the bottom. There's a yellow light over the door; that's your room. Light switch on the wall. Head at the far end. Bathroom," he added, glancing at Constance. "You'd better take your seats. I'll see you in the

morning." He waved to a man who was leaning against a piling and vanished around the side of the boat.

Constance leaned toward Charlie.
"What's a flybridge?"

"I don't know."

They sat back in their chairs and watched the gleaming black water laced with ladders and bridges and arcs of lights. The engines started up and Charlie found Constance's hand and held it; lights came on above and around them, running lights, Charlie thought with self-satisfaction, and then they were moving easily, backing away from the dock, out into the bay. Here and there, other boats were moving, small boats with lights hardly above the waterline,

larger fishing boats, a yacht that made everything else look toylike. Charlie sighed with contentment. When they finally went to bed, after all the lights had disappeared in the distance, they shared one of the bunks. Sometime during the night, Charlie moved to the other one and again fell asleep instantly. He woke up first and was amazed to find that it was nearly eight. The motion of the boat was very gentle, nothing like what he had imagined. He had never been on a boat before, except for a rowboat when he was a kid. He thought of the seascapes he had admired, always stormy, threatening. Another time, he decided, and was glad that today the Gulf was like a pond, the boat's motion

hardly noticeable. As soon as he got up and started toward the head, he realized the motion had been effectively concealed while he had been horizontal. He held to the bunk and groped for the door. He had just finished showering when he heard Constance scream.

He flung open the shower door and stopped. Standing in the open doorway to the galley stood June Oliveira, staring at Constance.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Why didn't you tell us she was aboard?" Charlie snapped. They were in the galley, where Dino was making breakfast. June Oliveira had gone forward, he told them.

"I don't recall that you asked me,"

Dino said, breaking eggs, his back to them.

"We have to go back," Constance said.

Now Dino turned. "Lady, get this one thing straight. This is my boat. I'm the skipper. I say when we come out and when we go in. I made a contract with Mr. Bramley, all signed, paid for, everything. You and your husband said you wanted to use that contract. That means we do it my way. And that means we fish until this afternoon. I pick up my brother Petie, and then we go back. That's in the contract, and I'm following it to the letter. You don't want to fish, fine. You can look at scenery. I'll fish."

"When did she come aboard?" Charlie

asked, his voice easy now. His working voice, Constance thought.

"Last night. I was checking things out and there she came. What's this?

What's that? I'm going, too, you know. I'm his guest, you know. He wants to pretend it isn't planned, so just don't say anything to him, so he won't have to lie about it. That's her story. How was I to know anything?" Charlie nodded in sympathy. "I've seen her operate. But you could have mentioned it to us," he added reasonably.

"Yeah. I should have. I was afraid you wouldn't want to go, and I sure as hell didn't want to go out alone with her. She's ... I don't know. Anyway, I had to go out to pick up Petie, and I'm sticking

to the original schedule. Now let's eat." He motioned toward the table, where there was a coffeepot.

"Help yourselves."

The galley was sparkling with copper fixtures, everything so compact and well planned that in an area hardly more than five feet square there were a two-burner stove, a refrigerator, sink, cabinets. The table and a right-angled bench could seat half a dozen people. Behind it, there was a wall separating off another stateroom, and beyond that the pilot's cabin. The boat was moving slowly, on automatic pilot while Dino did the galley chores.

Charlie began to wonder how much it all cost. Opposite the galley was what Dino called the saloon, with three chairs

and a bench-sofa and coffee table. The walls were mellow, rich paneling. Teak? Mahogany? It looked expensive.

Dino served up ham and scrambled eggs and fluffy cinnamon rolls.

"Are you going to call her?" Charlie asked. "She said she'd have coffee a little later. I think she's mad as hell." He looked at Constance, who was eating nothing, just drinking the coffee. "Look, I'm sorry. But the boat's big enough for four people not to get in each other's way. You and Charlie just stay in the stern, do a little fishing. I'll see that she stays forward, or up on the flybridge. I can run the boat from the pilot's bridge down here, or from up there, either way."

He showed them the pilot's bridge. "Dual controls," he said, "for the two diesels. This is clutch; this is throttle. Midway, that's idle, forward for going ahead, back like this to reverse, down all the way to stop. That's all there is to that. And the wheel here, just like a car, only you allow for more time and space for everything to happen. Okay?" He glanced around at the instrument panel. "You won't need more than that. In case Charlie gets a big one, I might have you run us while I help him. Oh, yeah, here's the starter, just in case you need it. Just flip it on." Again, Charlie was struck by the simplicity and the beauty of the boat. He was very much afraid the Skaggs boys were running more than fish out of

the Gulf waters. And he told himself to forget it. He wanted no part of the drug business; he was retired.

Dino got Charlie baited up, urged Constance again to give it a try, then went below. In a few minutes, he said, they'd start trolling. Constance looked at the water, almost too bright to stand; there were long, smooth swells, and now and then there was a soft plop as water broke against the side of the boat. She had grown used to the lesser slaps of water; the larger sounds broke the rhythm. Something splashed out of sight behind her and she wondered, prey or predator? The sea stretched out endlessly, formless, exactly the same everywhere, and yet different under the

lazy swells. It would be terrifying to be out there alone, she thought; they were so small and the sea was so big. Another splash sounded and this time she swiveled to see what it was. She could not even see ripples. Prey or predator? She caught a movement from the corner of her eye and turned farther and looked into the eyes of June Oliveira up on the flybridge. She's frightening because her expression never changes, Constance thought, and abruptly swung back around. She felt cold in the hot sunlight. She should have known that woman would be aboard. It had been easy enough to figure out that Bramley had planned his accident to take place at sea.

"Why didn't you argue with Dino at

least a little?" she asked bitterly.

"Wouldn't have done any good. I'm afraid we're on a drug run, honey. So let's just play it real cool. I'm in the insurance racket and you're a housewife. Period. We don't know from nothing. Right?"

"Oh for heaven's sake!" she muttered helplessly, and stared at the brilliant water until her eyes smarted.

Dino brought her a big floppy straw hat and a long-sleeved shirt.

"You're going to cook," he said. "You're already burning. People as pale as you can get sun poisoning without ever getting warm."

"Thanks," she said, and he ducked away quickly, back to the pilot's bridge.

Soon the boat began to move a little faster through the calm waters. "He's hard to hate," Constance said, tying the ribbon of the hat under her chin.

Charlie nodded, and thought, But he's a drug runner. Sometimes he tried to sort out the criminals he hated most on a scale from one to ten. Usually, he put arsonists first, but he knew that was prejudice. He had had to get transferred from the arson squad when he had started having nightmares, had smelled smoke where there wasn't any, and suspected smoldering rags behind all locked doors. Child molesters came next, then rapists, and drug pushers, murderers. ... But he always changed the order even as he composed it, because

some of them obviously had to be second, and they couldn't all be. He glanced at Constance; her eyes were closed. He woke up with a start. Dino had touched his shoulder.

"Sorry," Charlie muttered. Constance was coming awake also.

"Doesn't matter," Dino said. "If you'd gotten a strike that would have waked you up pretty fast. Just wanted to tell you, might as well reel in. I'm taking us to a place to try some reef fishing. Might get something there. Good place for scuba diving." He looked at Charlie hopefully, shrugged when Charlie shook his head.

Dino sent June Oliveira down from the flybridge, and then the boat stood up

and raced through the water. Charlie nodded at Constance. He had suspected there was a lot more power in the engines than they had witnessed before.

June Oliveira braced herself in the doorway to the galley; she looked terrified. Constance remembered what Lou Bramley had said about her: she did nothing dangerous. Obviously, she thought what they were doing was dangerous. Constance was glad to see that she did have at least one other expression.

When Dino cut the engines and came down, he looked happy, as if this was what he liked to do, open it up and roar, leaving a wide white wake behind them as straight as a highway through a desert.

"Lunchtime," he said cheerfully. "Then you'll get a snapper or two, Charlie. Bet you a ten spot on it."

He would have won. Charlie caught a red snapper within the first fifteen minutes of fishing over the reefs.

"It's a beauty," Dino said. "Catch its mate and that's our supper. Go ashore, build a little fire, roast them on a spit. That's good eating, Charlie. Just you wait and see." He was keeping an eye on the progress of the sun, evidently timing their day carefully. "You've got half an hour." He watched Charlie bait his hook, patted him on the back, and left with the first snapper, to put it on ice. The boat was again on automatic, moving slowly over the shadows of the reefs.

Charlie was excited and pleased with himself, Constance knew, standing close to him, watching the water. The live fish on his line went this way and that, then vanished. Charlie was muttering that it was pulling; maybe he had something—no, it was just the bait fish. Something splashed behind them. Charlie let out more line as his bait fish headed deeper. Constance was watching, looking down, when she caught a glimpse of a larger motion. She jerked her head around and saw Dino in the water behind them.

"Charlie! Look!"

He dropped his rod and grabbed at one of the life preservers clamped in place against the side of the cabin. "Get this thing back there!" he yelled to

Constance as he moved.

She raced through the cabin, through the saloon, to the pilot's bridge. Put it on manual, she thought clearly, and flipped the automatic control off. Pull the control back to reverse. She pulled the lever back, heard a slight click as it passed neutral, and then the engines stopped. She groaned and hit the lever back up to the neutral position, aligned the clutch control. She pushed the starter. Nothing. She repeated it several times before she gave up and ran back to the stern, where Charlie was standing rigidly, staring at the water behind them. Their momentum was pushing them forward slower and slower.

"I killed the engines," Constance said,

tearing off her hat, loosening her sneaker with her other hand.

"What are you doing?" Charlie asked. His voice sounded strange, forced.

"I'm going in after him."

Charlie's hand clamped painfully on her arm. He was still looking at the water. Now Constance looked. There was the life preserver, nearly two hundred feet away, bobbing easily. There was no sign of Dino.

"I almost hit him with it," Charlie said in that strained, thick voice. "He could have reached out and touched it, caught it. He never made a motion toward it. He wasn't even trying to swim."

"I can still get him up," Constance said, jerking her arm, trying to get loose.

"No! He went down like a stone. He's on the bottom, already dead. He wasn't even struggling."

Constance felt her knees threaten to buckle. She turned to look at the flybridge: June Oliveira was standing up there facing the life preserver. Her eyes were closed.

"She did it," Constance whispered. "She killed him."

"Take it easy, honey," Charlie said. "She was up there the whole time." He turned away from the water now. "He must have had a stroke or something, couldn't move, couldn't swim. He didn't even yell. Maybe he was already dying before he fell in."

"You don't just fall overboard,"

Constance said, watching June Oliveira, who hugged herself, opening her eyes. She looked at Constance; her expression was as blank as ever. She moved to the ladder and descended from the flybridge.

"I think I lie down now," she said.

They watched her enter the cabin. "Let's go up there and see if we can get this boat going," Charlie said. He sounded tired. Wordlessly, Constance started up the ladder to the flybridge.

The flybridge was built over the main cabin; the front was enclosed, the rear open, with another fighting chair. There were wraparound windows and a control panel exactly like the one below, the same wheel, dual controls for the

engines, automatic pilot. The same array of dials and indicators that neither of them understood. Charlie sat down behind the wheel and looked at the controls: The automatic was turned to off; it must have moved when Constance turned it below. The dual controls were both at midpoint, in neutral. He turned on the starter. Dead.

"I thought it might be like a car engine," Constance said. "Maybe I flooded it when I moved the throttle too fast." She knelt down and tried to see behind the control panel. It was all enclosed.

"What are you looking for?"

"A wire. She must have pulled a wire loose or something." Charlie shook his

head. "Knock it off, honey. I'm telling you, she was nowhere near him. Let's go find the engines. Maybe we can tell if it's flooded, or if a battery connection is loose."

"See if the radio works," Constance said.

Charlie had no idea what most of the switches and knobs were for, but he did know how to operate a radio. It was dead.

At three, Charlie called June Oliveira to the galley. He had made coffee and was drinking a beer. Constance watched the other woman warily when she drew near to sit at the small table. She said she wanted nothing when Charlie offered her a drink.

"We're in a spot," Charlie said. "I don't think it's especially serious, but still, there it is. I can't make this boat go. I don't know how, and neither does my wife. Do you know how to run it?"

She shook her head. "It is the first time I am on a boat."

"I thought so. Okay. So we have to wait for help. We have no electricity, and that means no lights. Someone may spot us before dark; if not, we'll have to take shifts and keep a watch. I'm afraid we might be run down, or we might miss a passing ship or small boat. I found a flare gun to signal with if we see anything." He poured more coffee for Constance.

"His brother, he is expecting us," June

Oliveira said. "When we do not arrive, he informs the authorities. Yes? They come for us then." Charlie shrugged. He was trying to place her accent. Not Spanish, not anything he had heard before. Portuguese? He did not think so; there had been some Sao Paulo students at the crime lab, eight, nine years ago, and they had not sounded like her. He said, "Eventually, they'll come, but I doubt they'll hear from Petie right away." Little brother, he thought, would have to hide something first, bury it, sink it at sea, do something. Depending on where he was, little brother might have to be rescued also.

"We'd better prepare for an all-night wait, and a daylight search tomorrow."

"If there is more beer . . ." June Oliveira said then. He took one from the refrigerator and handed it to her. Already the ice was melting. They would have to eat before dark, before the butter melted, the other food spoiled.

"If you two will start keeping a watch now," he said, "I'll gather up everything I can think of that we might need during the night. I found one flashlight only, so we'd better have things in one place." He handed a pair of binoculars to Constance. "You take the flybridge. Yell out if you see anything. Miss Oliveira, you go forward and keep an eye open for a ship. Later we'll switch around, choose lots or something. Okay?" Constance watched her go around the

cabin to the forward deck before she started up the ladder to the flybridge. Charlie handed up the coffee and the binoculars to her.

"Be careful," she said softly.

Charlie felt a twinge of impatience with her. He nodded and turned to his task. When Constance got a notion, he thought, she played it to the bitter end, no matter how ridiculous it was. He scanned the water briefly before going back inside. He could no longer see the life preserver and he was glad, even though he could not tell if the boat had drifted or if the wind had simply taken the doughnut away. He was glad it was not there, a constant reminder that he had done nothing at all, and had prevented

Constance from trying to do anything. She swam like a fish; she might have saved him. He did not believe it, but the thought came back over and over. He remembered his own feeling of terror at the idea of letting Constance go over the side after Dino: What if she got out there and just stopped swimming, as he had done? He knew he could not have helped her; he would have watched her look of incomprehension, fear, disbelief. . .

. Angrily he jerked up a life jacket and stood holding it. Where to put things? Not on the table, which they would be using off and on. Not in the saloon; probably they would take turns sleeping on the couch. Finally, he opened the door to the stateroom he and Constance

had shared the night before. He put the life jacket on her bunk and went out to continue his search; a first-aid kit, what else? He was not certain what they might need; he could make no list and then go search. All he could do was collect things he saw that looked useful. He felt the same helplessness now that he had experienced when Constance had said they did not even know what switch to throw to put out an anchor to stop their drift. He did not know where they were, how fast they might be drifting, or in what direction, not necessarily pushed by the wind, although they might be; it was also possible that they were in a current from the Florida Straits. He simply did not know.

Constance made a hurried scan of the horizon in all directions, then a slower search. She saw birds, and she saw porpoises in the distance. A few hours ago, the sight would have thrilled her, seeing them leaping; now it was depressing that only the creatures of the sea were out there. Charlie clearly thought Dino's death was the result of a seizure of some sort; she knew she would not be able to convince him of anything else. Up here, examining the problem logically, she agreed that it had been an accident, but she rejected the logic. She knew June Oliveira had been responsible, even if she did not understand how she had done it. She knew, and accepted, that she would not

have been able to save Dino. It would not have been allowed. She could not see the woman from on the flybridge, and she could not hear Charlie moving about. She bit her lip and strained to hear something, but there was only the slap, slap of water on the side of the boat, and a faraway birdcall. She went down the ladder and met Charlie coming up from the cabin.

"What's wrong? Did you see a ship?"

"No. I just came down for my hat." She had left it in the saloon. She retrieved it and started up again. "Charlie, say something to me now and then, or whistle, or something. Okay?" His nod was perfunctory and absentminded. He was tying a self-

inflating rubber raft to the side rail, out of the way of traffic, but available if they needed it. A second raft was already tied in place. Constance returned to her post and did the entire search again.

The sun was getting lower. A couple more hours of daylight, she thought, and then the long night wondering what Oliveira would do next, if she could do anything as long as Constance was awake and watching her. She leaned over the side of the flybridge and called, "Charlie, is there plenty of water?"

"Yeah, I checked. And plenty of coffee," he added, as if reading her mind. She smiled slightly and looked at the sea.

They should eat something before it

started to get dark, she decided a little later. Oliveira could come up here while she made something; she started down the ladder again. There was only the gentle sloshing sound of water. Charlie was still below, maybe swearing at the engines. She took a step toward the cabin door, paused, and instead went to the side of the cabin and looked forward. June Oliveira was standing at the rail near the pilot's cabin windows, and beyond her, ten feet away, Charlie was swinging one leg over the rail.

Soundlessly, Constance dashed the fifteen feet to the woman and hit her with her shoulder, knocking her flat. She kept going and grabbed Charlie, who was hanging on to the rail, dangling over the

water. She hauled on Charlie's arms and he pulled himself up, got purchase with his foot, and heaved himself back aboard. He was the color of putty. June Oliveira was starting to sit up. "You move another muscle and I'm going to throw you overboard!" Charlie yelled at her. He unfastened the inflatable raft he had secured to the rail and tied the rope to one of the loops on it. Holding it over the side, he pulled the release and then dropped it, keeping the rope in his hand, letting it out as the raft fell and settled.

"Now get up!" he ordered. "Over the side, down the ladder. Move!" She shook her head. "I am hurt! Your wife attacked me! I think my back is broken."

"You'd better be able to swim, lady.

You go down under your own power or I'm going to throw you in and let you swim for the raft. Right now!"

"You are crazy," she said.

"Hold this," Charlie said, handing the end of the rope to Constance, taking a step toward the woman. She was on her knees, and now she scrambled up, clinging to the side of the boat, then to the rail. She looked terrified, the way she had looked when Dino had roared at full speed over the water. "There's the ladder," Charlie said, stopping within reach of her. She backed away, stepped up the two steps to the rail, then over it, down the ladder. Charlie maneuvered the raft closer and she stepped into it, clutching the sides. "Get down low," he

said. "I'm towing you to the other side." He didn't wait for her to crouch down, but yanked on the rope and hauled the raft, bumping and rubbing against the boat hull, around to the other side, where he tied it securely.

"Let's go below," he said to Constance then. "I sure God want a drink." Silently, he poured bourbon for them both, added some shrunken ice cubes, and took a long drink from his.

A long shudder passed over him and his knees felt weak. He sat down and pulled Constance to his side, put his arm around her shoulders, and held her tightly against him.

"Oh, Charlie," she said softly, "I'm afraid we've caught ourselves a

boojum."

He held her tighter. He still saw himself going into the water, not struggling, not trying to swim, going under, down, down. . . .

"I think you're right," he said. His voice was so normal that few people would have detected the difference, the slight huskiness, the almost too-careful spacing of words.

"Do you know what happened to you?" Constance asked. She drank also and welcomed the warmth; she had become icy cold now that the woman was in the raft and she and Charlie were side by side.

"I was going to go over just as if I had decided to do it. I was doing it and I was

watching myself do it. Watching her watching me, pushing me, not even trying not to go, not even trying to resist. I was just doing it." She nodded. Neither of them said, Like Dino. "What are we going to do?"

"Remember when I read *The Hunting of the Snark* to Jessica?"

Remember what she said when I asked what she'd do if she caught a boojum?"

Constance nodded again. Jessica had said the only thing to do was cut it loose and run.

"It might come to that," Charlie said grimly. "It just might." He took the last swallow of his bourbon, then pushed the glass away. He got up and put the

coffeepot on the burner to heat it. "Start with the first time you saw her, the first thing Bramley said about her," he said. "You were right, honey. I should have paid attention. Let's try to make some sense out of it now."

He stopped her when she told again how Lou Bramley had bypassed her to sit at a table with June Oliveira. "Exactly what did he do?"

"You know the wide doors? He stood there looking around until he spotted me and then started toward my table." She closed her eyes, visualizing it. "Then he looked past me and he didn't look at me again. His face changed a little, became set, almost like a sleepwalker, or someone in a trance." She opened her

eyes. "She did it then, too. I was blind not to realize."

"You couldn't have known," Charlie said. "Then what?"

"I waited a minute or two. Then I decided to spoil it for her, to join them. I got up and started toward their table...." She stopped, remembering. "I thought it was my decision to take a walk instead. Oh my God, I wasn't even aware ... I didn't even wonder about it!" Charlie squeezed her shoulder. "Try to remember exactly how it was, honey, I think it may be important. What was he doing when you started to walk?"

"His back was to me. He was staring at the water. I got pretty close to them before I changed my . . . He hadn't

moved, I'm sure. Then I turned right." She stopped, eyes closed. "I think he might have stood up; there was a motion. I just caught it from the corner of my eye, and I was thinking how hot it was on the sand. It was sunny, and I had been trying to avoid the hot sun. I went a little farther and decided I didn't want to walk after all."

"You were thinking it was hot, all that, close to their table?" She nodded. "What is it, Charlie?"

"She couldn't hold both of you," he said. "She got you past the table and lost him, grabbed him back and lost you. What do you think?" She considered it and nodded. "But we can't be certain. We can't count on it."

"No, but it's something." The other thing she had said, that the woman did nothing dangerous, alarmed him. No doubt she thought it was very dangerous out there on the raft with night coming on fast. She might even be right; it could be dangerous. He didn't know.

"I'd better start making sandwiches," Constance said. "We're all going to be hungry eventually."

"Okay, but keep talking. What else was there?" She talked as she rummaged in the refrigerator and the cabinets. When she stopped again, Charlie was staring fixedly at the tabletop, deep in thought. She did not interrupt him, but continued to assemble the sandwiches.

It did not make any sense to him. If

she had that kind of power, to control people like that, why use it in such a perverse way? Murder was so commonplace, never really dull, but not exciting, either; it was always sad, always futile, always the action of ultimate failure. It was the final admission that there was no solution to a problem, no human solution. But no one needed her kind of power to commit murder. A gun, a knife, poison, a brick, a fire ... he had seen them all; death that looked accidental—a fall, car exhaust in a closed garage, a leaky gas stove, overdoses of everything that could be swallowed. All filthy, all irreversible, all committed by ordinary people for ordinary reasons: money, sex, revenge,

greed. . . . All committed without her kind of power. That was the puzzle. Why use such a gift for something so mundane? And why out here in God knew what part of the gulf? She could be knocking people off every day of the week—running them in front of trains, making them jump from high places, forcing them to put bullets through their brains. Who would suspect? Each and every one would go down as accidental, or suicide. He remembered what Lou Bramley had said, that she had known he was going to die and wanted to watch. He nodded.

Constance, seeing the nod, stopped all movement, waiting, but Charlie continued to stare through the tabletop.

Bramley had been broadcasting death and she had picked it up somehow. She had planned to watch for whatever insane pleasure that gave her, and she had been cheated. Again, Charlie nodded. She had had her death through murder, not suicide. And she planned to kill the witnesses. Now he shook his head. No one had witnessed anything. What could he or Constance say that could damage her? She could make a better case against them. Of course, if she was a psychopath, none of the best reasoning in the world would apply to her. He rejected that also. She was the boojum, an *it*, not like other people. He could not fathom her motives in either event—a whacko, or something inhuman.

And, he thought, motives were not the issue. What she might try next was the only issue now. She had tried to kill him, damn near succeeded, and she no doubt would try again.

But she had not come out here to kill, he said to himself, and he held on to that one thought as the only clue he had about her, the only thing he was reasonably certain about. If the original plan had worked, Bramley would be dead now, a legitimate suicide passing for accident, and she and Dino would be back ashore. Their stories would have been accepted: Dino was well known; the insurance would have entered into it. Finis. Dino's death was a different matter. No one would believe he had fallen off his own

boat in a dead calm, in the first place. And it was less plausible to suggest that he had not gotten back aboard, even if he had managed to fall. Although no one could prove anything else, no one would ever believe that story. What if there were others, like her, who would know the story he and Constance could tell was true? His skin prickled all over at the thought that his people would never believe his story, but that this woman's people, if she had people, would.

He was certain she planned to be the sole survivor of a ghastly tragedy. No one knew he and Constance were aboard. If they vanished, no one would know that. The contract would be found with Bramley's name, and he was in

New York, out of it. She could say anything to account for Dino's disappearance, and he was the only one she would have to account for, actually.

Constance froze in the motion of cutting through a sandwich; Charlie lifted his head and listened. June Oliveira was calling them in a shrill, panic-stricken voice.

They went out together, staying close to each other. Constance still carried the butcher knife.

"There is a shark! I saw it! You can not keep me out here! I will stay in the little room. You lock the door. Please, I did not do nothing. You know I did not!"

In the west, a spectacular sunset was blossoming; the light had turned deep

pink, making June Oliveira look flushed, almost ruddy, very normal, ordinary, and very frightened.

"Who are you?" Constance demanded.

"I see him starting to climb over the rail, and I am petrified. I cannot move. I am terrified of water. I cannot to help him or call out or anything. I am coward. I am sorry."

"You don't just watch them die, do you?" Constance said. "You weren't watching Dino. Your eyes were closed. You feel it, experience it. Why?"

Why don't you feel your own people's deaths? Why ours?"

"She crazy," June Oliveira wailed to Charlie. "She crazy!"

"I saw you," Constance said. "You

knew exactly when Dino died. We didn't; we couldn't know, but you did. You planned to experience Lou's death. You come here to feel death without dying yourselves, don't you?

Do your people ever die? Just by accident, don't they? Isn't that why you're so terrified of water, of fire, of anything that might be dangerous?"

"Please give me jacket or sweater. I am cold. So afraid," June Oliveira moaned.

"For God's sake," Charlie said, and turned away. "I'll get her jacket."

"How many of you are there?" Constance asked furiously. "How many murders do you commit? How many accidents do you cause?" The woman

was huddled down, her arms wrapped about herself. Suddenly, Constance realized what she had done; she had separated them. She turned, to see Charlie in the narrow passage between the rail and the cabin, coming toward her, carrying the heavy gaff, the iron hook Dino had said they used on the big ones.

Constance put the knife to the rope tethering the raft. "Let him go or I'll cut you loose! You'll drift away. He can't bring you back; he doesn't know how." She began to cut.

She stopped the sawing motion and watched as if from a great distance as the knife turned in her hand, began to move toward her midsection. In the

stomach, she thought, so death wouldn't be too fast. There would be time to feel it all, to know it was happening ...

Charlie leapt at her, grabbed the knife, and threw it out into the water. His hand dripped blood.

Constance sagged, then straightened. "My God, oh my God! You're hurt!

Let's go fix it." Neither of them looked at the woman in the raft as they hurried away, back inside the cabin.

"What are we going to do?" Constance whispered. "Charlie, what can we do? We can't even cut her loose!"

"Get the first-aid kit," Charlie said calmly. "You'll need the flashlight. The kit's on your bed. Bring a clean towel,

too."

Constance snatched up the flashlight and ran to the stateroom for the kit and towel. When she returned, Charlie was washing the blood from his hand. She dried and bandaged it and neither spoke until she was done.

"I'm going to kill her," Charlie said. He reached out and gently touched the shirt Constance had on. There was a slash in it; she had not even noticed, had not realized how close it had been.

This was why some people murdered, Charlie thought, because there really was no solution, no human solution. How easy it was to step across that line. He felt as if he had always known that, had denied knowing it, had pretended it

was not true when of course it had been true from the beginning. When he had transferred from the arson squad, it had been because he had dreamed too many times that he was the one arranging the materials, pouring the oil or the gasoline, setting the match. The thrill of the pursuer, the thrill of the pursued, who could tell how different they were? Now that he had crossed that imaginary line, that arbitrary line that each cop drew for himself, he knew the thrill was the same, the desperation the same, the fear, it was all the same.

"We can't cut her loose," he said in that deceptively calm voice, "so we cut ourselves loose. We have to go out in the other raft, get the hell away from her.

She'll try again, maybe soon. Before it gets much darker." He glanced about the galley. "Start packing up everything you think we might need for tonight and tomorrow. We might not be picked up for hours, maybe a couple of days. Fill whatever you can find with water." Thank God she didn't argue, he thought, going into the stateroom. She knew their chances of escaping as well as he did, knew their only chance was in getting distance between them and June Oliveira. He lifted the mattress of his bunk. Foam, he thought with disgust. There was a plywood board, and beneath it there were cabinets with linens. He nodded. It would do. He cut a circle out of the foam mattress with his

pocketknife and tucked the extra piece under the pillow on the other bed. He had seen a can of charcoal starter in a cabinet in the galley; he went out to get it. He took the flashlight back with the can. He soaked the plywood board and let it air out before he replaced the mattress. In the hole, he now put a folded towel and then added a layer of crumpled toilet paper, then another towel, this one folded in such a way that the paper was exposed in the center of it. He studied it for a minute and sighed. The fumes were gone, the odor so faint that he might not have noticed it if he was not sniffing. He had seen cigarettes somewhere, in one of the cabinets in the saloon. Dino did not smoke, but maybe

Petie did, or their guests. He went to the saloon and found the new package and opened it, lighted a cigarette with the flame from the stove. Constance was filling a plastic water bottle, a collapsible gallon jug. There were two at the bottom of the stairs, already filled. She looked startled at the cigarette, but she still asked no questions.

"About ready?" Charlie asked.

She nodded. "It's getting dark fast."

"Yes. Come on, let's tell her our plans."

"Charlie ..." She stopped; there was not enough time to spell it out. She followed him to the door.

Charlie went to the corner of the cabin and yelled, "You, you can have the

goddamn boat! We're taking off in the other raft. Before we go, I'm going to toss the portable ladder over your side so you can climb aboard. Just leave us alone and let us take off. Is it a deal?" He puffed the cigarette hard. It was not yet dark, but within half an hour it would be. Already the water looked solid, impenetrable, and there were two stars in the deep violet sky. She must be calculating her chances of getting one of them before dark, making the other bring her aboard. He was not even sure she could make someone do anything as complicated as that; she was not a telepath. Her power was cruder, a total assault, a complete takeover. She cannot read our thoughts, he said to himself,

praying it was true.

"If you leave the flashlight. Put it on the flybridge, turned on, so I can see it." She sounded calmer and was controlling her accent and syntax better, but her voice was still tremulous.

He let out his breath. "Okay. We're taking provisions with us, water and stuff. It'll take us a few minutes, ten maybe."

He nodded to Constance. "Let's get the life jackets and other stuff over by the ladder."

As Constance began to carry things from the cabin to the railing, Charlie entered the stateroom again. He lighted a second cigarette from the first and then put them both very carefully on top of the

paper in the hole in the mattress. He pulled the sheet over it, and the bedspread, with ripples in it for air to pass through easily. For years, he had known how easy it would be, how well he would be able to do it. He put the extra life jackets on that bed, and then he was through. He left the stateroom door open when he went into the cabin. One last thing he had to get, he thought, almost leisurely, and he went to the drawer where he had seen an assortment of thread and needles. He chose the largest needle, a darning needle, or a sail-mending needle; it was four inches long and only slightly less thick than an ice pick. He stuck it through his shirt. Constance returned for the last of the

items she had put aside, the bag of sandwiches.

"Listen," he said to her softly. "We'll put the raft out, make sure the paddles are in it, and then load. While you're putting the flashlight on the flybridge, I'm going to swim around the boat. The last thing you do is hang the ladder over the side, make sure it's secure and everything. We don't want her to get suspicious now. Then you get in the raft and start paddling to the front end of the boat. You pick me up there and we paddle like hell."

"What are you going to do?"

He pointed to the needle. "Puncture her escape route." Constance shook her head and began to strip. "That's my

department," she said. "You'd never make it in time, and you splash like a puppy. Same plan, different performers.

"No!" He saw her, arms crossed over her chest, sinking, sinking. . . .

"Yes! Let's move!" She was making a bundle of her clothes. She had on only her bra. Now she reached out and took the needle and put it through the top of the bra. "You know the only way it'll work is if I do that part. You know that. We don't dare have her out in the water alive. We have no idea how far she can reach."

He pulled her to him and kissed her hard, and then they hurried to get the raft into the water, get it loaded. Only one quadrant of the sky was still light now;

to the east, the sky and sea merged in blackness.

"Arrange it any way you can," Charlie said, nodding to her, when they were through. She slipped from the raft soundlessly and vanished into the dark water. "That looks good enough for now. When I get in, we can shift things around some. I'll put the flashlight up there and then give her the ladder. You okay?"

It was all taking much longer than he had realized it would, he thought bleakly. What if smoke began to pour from the cabin? What if she got suspicious, caught Constance down there in the water? What if she took this as her last chance to get them both? He climbed to the flybridge and put the flashlight

down, shining toward the stern, away from where Constance might be surfacing. What if there really had been a shark? He felt weak with fear; his hands were trembling so hard, he could scarcely hold the rail as he left the flybridge to get the ladder. Constance surfaced at the prow of the boat and waited. There was the ladder, and Charlie was running away to the other side. June Oliveira had to haul herself in hand over hand to reach the ladder; she started to climb. As soon as she started up, Constance sank below the surface again and swam to the raft. She lifted her face only enough to get air, then went under and pulled out the needle and stuck it into the raft. The raft bobbed and

she stopped moving, afraid the woman would be alarmed, turn around. She stuck the needle in three more times before she had to surface for air. The next time she went under, she began to swim toward the prow of the boat, praying that Charlie would be there by now. When Charlie first started to paddle, he found himself moving away from the boat at right angles. Frantically, he pulled with one paddle until he bumped the boat. Keeping against the hull, using one paddle only, he finally got to the front end. Where was she? She should be here by now, he thought with despair, and she appeared at the side of the raft. He grabbed her arm and hauled her in, and she began to pull on her

clothes as fast as she could. She was shivering hard from the cold water, the chill night air. Before she got her shirt buttoned, Charlie was putting the life jacket on her. He was wearing his already. As soon as she had the life jacket tied, she took her place by him, took up the paddle, and they both began to row hard. The raft did not move through the water easily; it seemed to be mired in tar. But gradually, they pulled away from the boat, and now Charlie could see the light from the flash bobbing in the windows of the cabin, then the pilot's cabin, stern. She was checking it out, as he had thought she might. She went to the fly-bridge and in a minute or two the boat's engines

started up. Constance groaned and pulled harder on her paddle. It was no use, she thought dully. She would run them down, watch them die anyway, feel them die.

"We have to stay behind the boat," Charlie said. "You know how to turn these things?"

"You push; I pull," Constance said, knowing it was no use. They could dodge for a while, but eventually they would tire, or she would make one of them stop paddling, or something.

Slowly, they made the raft go astern. The boat was not moving yet; the engines were idling. Now the lights came on. Constance blinked as the light hit them. "Charlie, she can back up!" she

whispered. "Christ!" He had forgotten.

The boat began to move forward, not very fast; the wake shook the small raft, tilting it high to one side. The boat left them behind, then started to turn. Like steering a car, Charlie remembered. It was just like steering a car, except you need more room. She turned too wide and came out of it far to the right of the raft. She had switched on a searchlight now, was playing it back and forth, looking for them. She seemed not to realize how wide her turn had been; the light came nowhere near them. It stopped moving.

Constance watched fearfully. The boat looked so close. The engines were so loud. She felt herself go blank, felt

sleep-heavy, immobilized. When it passed, in a second or two, the light began to move again, this time swinging around to focus on them.

"She reached me," Constance said tonelessly. "We can't hide from her." Why didn't the damn boat start burning? He knew it had to burn. He visualized the fire that had to be smoldering along the bed board, in the cabinet under the bed. The towels should be blazing by now. The boat was turning slowly; she was being careful. She had all the time in the world, she seemed to be telling them, keeping them pinned by the blinding light, keeping them waiting for her next move. Charlie wondered if she laughed. If she ever laughed.

She was steering with one hand, holding the light with the other, not letting either go to increase her speed. The throb of the engines did not change, only grew louder.

Constance began to pull on her paddle. "At least let's make her work for it," she said grimly. Charlie pulled hard, sending them on the beginning of another circle. Then suddenly, the light made an arc, swung wildly away, up, down, off to the other side.

"I'll be damned," he said, pleased. Smoke was rolling from the cabin windows. He began to pull on the paddle again, harder now. "We should try to get some more distance from it," he said.

Silently, they rowed, not making very much gain, and they watched the boat. The smoke had lessened. Constance was afraid June Oliveira had put the fire out already. Charlie felt almost smug; he knew the smoldering had turned into blazing; there would be less smoke, more heat, more fire. When the first flame showed on the side of the boat, he said, "I think we should get down in the bottom of this thing, as flat as we can." It would blow, he knew, and he did not know how much of an explosion there would be, what kind of shock there would be, if they were too close. He hoped June Oliveira was tossing water on the flames, that she had not thought of the beautiful fire equipment on board, or

of abandoning the boat. He had not seen her since the powerful spotlight had come on. He and Constance curled up in the bottom of the raft. "Try to keep your ears covered," he said. He raised himself enough to continue to watch, his hands cupped over his ears. Flames were shooting out every window now, licking up around the flybridge. When the explosion came, it was not as loud or as violent as he had thought it would be. A fireball formed, then vanished almost instantly, and the boat erupted in a shower of fiery objects; the lights went off, and now there was only a low fire that was being extinguished very fast as the boat settled, began to slide under the water. They could hear a furious

bubbling, then nothing, and the fire was gone. The sea was inky black.

Constance was on her knees, clutching the side of the raft. She shuddered and Charlie put his arm about her, held her close. "Did she get off?" she whispered.

"I don't know yet."

They waited in silence as their eyes adapted to the darkness. Charlie could see nothing out there; he could hardly even see Constance. She was little more than a pale shadow. He strained to hear.

When it came, it sounded so close, he felt he could reach out and touch the woman. She sounded as if she was weeping. "Why do you do that?"

Why? Now we all die in the sea!"

He could not tell her direction,

distance, anything at all. The voice seemed close, all around him.

Constance put her head down, pressing her forehead against the rounded side of the raft. "We should have slashed the other raft, scuttled it."

He had been afraid that if she had not believed she had an escape at hand, she might have used the impressive fire-fighting equipment. She might have been able to put out the fire with it. She might have known about the emergency hatch in the tiny engine room with the simple instructions: *Open in case of fire*. It would have flooded the engines and the fuel tanks with seawater; the boat would have been immobilized, but it would be afloat. Worse, he had feared that if she

had been trapped, she might have reached out and killed them both instantly. She had been in the raft, knew it was comparatively safe; she had to trust it again. How long would it take for the air to leak out enough? He did not know. He could hear a paddle splashing awkwardly.

"Do you remember where we put the flare gun?" he asked in a whisper. One to light up the scene, he thought; the next one aimed at her. Constance began to grope for the gun. There was a loud splash close by. June Oliveira screamed shrilly.

"Sharks!" Constance yelled. She knew sharks did not make splashes, did not leap from the water. Perhaps the

porpoises had come to investigate the explosion. Maybe a seabird had dived. Her hand closed on the gun and she handed it to Charlie.

"First, Charlie," the woman called out. "Constance stay with me until morning. You are good swimmer. I saw you in water. Is possible I need you to swim for me."

She was talking to still her terror of the water, the sharks she believed to be circling her, to break the silence. Constance recognized that shrillness, the clipped words; Oliveira was panic-stricken.

"Sometimes they come up under you and graze the boat," Constance yelled. "They're so rough, they puncture the

rubber, and you don't even know it until too late. You can feel the sides of the raft getting soft, the top sinking in a little..."

Charlie was searching for the extra packet of flares. One was in the gun; he wanted a second to jam in and fire quickly before the light faded, while she was still dazed from the sudden glare.

"I've got it," he whispered finally. "Shield your eyes." He fired straight up, then scanned the water. She was several hundred feet away, kneeling in the other raft, holding the paddle with both hands, stilled by the unexpected light. He rammed the second flare into the gun, then pitched forward, dropping the gun, not unconscious, but without muscle

tone, unable to move.

Constance snatched up the paddle and started to row as hard as she could. She was stronger than the other woman; at least she could outdistance her.

"Stop!" Oliveira called. "Stop or I kill him now. I do not like it at this distance, but I do it."

Constance put the paddle down. The light had faded already; again there was only darkness, now even deeper, blacker. Charlie lay huddled in the bottom of the raft, unmoving.

"Stay very still," the woman said. "I come to your little boat. You are right about many things. During the night you explain to me how you know, what makes you guess, so I tell my people."

"Why Bramley? People are dying all the time. Why him?"

"Because I know him. We seldom know them, the people who are dying. It is more interesting to know him."

The water remained quiet around them; there were only the splashes of her paddle. She was so inept, it would take her a long time to cross the distance separating them. Constance nudged Charlie with her toe. He did not respond.

"Why don't you just hang around hospitals? People die there every hour, every day."

"They are drugged. Sometimes it is good." Her voice was getting firmer, losing its fearful note, as she narrowed

the space between them, and the water remained still.

Constance nudged Charlie again. Move, she thought at him, please move, get up. "You come here and murder, kill people. Watch them suffer for your own amusement. Do you torture them to death to drag it out?"

"We are not uncivilized," the woman said sharply. "We do not kill; we participate. It does no harm."

"You killed Dino!"

There was silence; her paddle slapped the water, then again. "I expect the other one. I have only until Sunday. I will be forgiven." Constance shuddered. She reached out and touched Charlie's face. She wanted to lie down by him,

gather him in her arms, just hold him. The paddle hit, lifted, hit. And then it suddenly splashed very hard, and the woman screamed hoarsely. "My raft getting soft! It is punctured!" Charlie stiffened even more under Constance's hand. *She* was using him as a beacon, homing in on him.

Constance picked up one of the water jugs and heaved it out toward the other raft. It made a loud noise when it hit the water.

"Sharks are all around us!" she yelled. The other paddle stopped and there was no sound. Constance groped for something else to throw, something heavy enough to make a noise, light enough to lift and heave. Her hand

closed over the paddle. She lifted it silently and brought it down hard on the water. She screamed. "They're hitting our raft! Charlie, do something!"

Charlie began to stir; he pulled himself to his knees cautiously; the woman was letting go. Her terror was so great, she could no longer hold him. From the other raft, there were sounds of panicky rowing; she was simply beating the water with the paddle. Charlie and Constance began to row, saying nothing, trying to slip the plastic paddles into the water without a sound, pulling hard.

"It is sinking!" the woman screamed. "Help me!" Constance screamed also, trying for the same note of terror. She screamed again, then listened. The other

woman was incoherent, screaming, screeching words that were not human language. Soon it all stopped.

For a long time, they sat holding each other without speaking. Now and then, something splashed, now close to them, now farther away. They could see nothing.

In a little while, Charlie thought, he would fire the flare gun again, then periodically repeat it through the night. Someone would see. Maybe someone had seen the fire, was on the way already. He would have to think of a story to tell them—a fire at sea, Dino's going back after getting them into the raft. . . . He could handle that part. He had heard enough stories essentially like

his, lies, excuses, reasonably enough put together to fool most people. He could do that. And Constance was thinking: There would come a day when one or the other of them would start to doubt what had happened. What that one would remember was that they, together, had killed a crazy woman.

"She wasn't human," Charlie said, breaking the silence. And Constance knew he would be the one who would come awake at night and stare at the ceiling and wonder about what they had done. She would have to be watchful for the signs, make him remember it exactly the way it had happened. And one day, she thought, one of them would say what neither had voiced yet: That woman had

not been alone. There were others. Now Charlie thought: They would live with this, knowing what they had done, that there were others out there, maybe not as murderous as this one had been, or maybe just like her. They could tell no one; no one would ever believe. Constance had her proof of that uncharted part of the psyche and could not even use it.

"I think I dislocated my shoulder when I threw that jug out," Constance said, shifting in his arms. "I'm aching all over." And he knew his hand was bleeding through the bandage; it was throbbing painfully suddenly. He had forgotten about it. "In just a minute, I'll see if there's a sling in the first-aid kit. I

need a new bandage, too." He felt her nod against his shoulder.

"Poor, little, miserable, helpless, vulnerable, hurt people," she sighed.

"That's us. Adrift on an endless ocean as dark as hell. With a terminal case of life. But I wouldn't trade with them." Knowing you were gambling eternity, you wouldn't dare risk your life for someone you loved, she thought, trying to ignore the pain in her shoulder, down into her arm. You wouldn't dare love, she thought. You wouldn't dare. Period. Not far away, something splashed.

Neither of them moved yet. It was enough for now to rest, to feel the solidity of the other, to renew the strength the last several hours had taken

from them. Quietly, they drifted on the dark sea.

The End