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LEONARD

Djibouti

TRILL

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Djibouti

Elmore Leonard

 HarperCollins e-books

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CHAPTER ONE

XAVIER WATCHED TWO LEGIONNAIRES stroll out from the terminal to wait for the flight: dude soldiers in round white kepis straight on their heads, red epaulets on their shoulders, a wide blue sash around their waist, looking like they from some old-time regiment except for the short pants and assault rifles. Standing there waiting for Air France arriving from Paris, due in Djibouti at 8 A.M.

From the terminal Xavier watched an air force cargo plane land and taxi to the end of the strip where a line of Blackhawk helicopters were parked. By 8:30 the once-a-week Air France was in, the stairway wheeled up and a gang of Arabs and Dara Barr coming off, the Foreign Legion checking out the passengers, seeing could they tell a terrorist they saw one.

Now Dara was coming along talking to an Arab-looking guy, nodding, getting along, maybe sat next to each other on the flight. The man wore a tan suit and striped tie, had a trim Arab beard but looked citified, not the kind rode camels. Now Dara was putting on her shades. She'd be saying how hot it was this early.

Xavier crossed the lobby to wait as they came through customs, Dara taking some time to get her visa; it allowed her to stay six months if she wanted. She'd tell them no, she planned to cruise around and shoot pirates for a film. Now Dara was coming out with the Arab gentleman, saw Xavier and ran into the arms of her six-foot-six black assistant, slim in his faded jeans and T-shirt, Xavier seventy-two, twice Dara's age, Dara squirming, glad to see him, Xavier kissing the crown of her blond hair saying, "You the best thing I've smelled all week," and raised his eyes to the Arab gentleman watching.

The man smiling now. "Dara's told me about you."

This Arab with a Brit sound to his voice.

"I understand you've been through the gulf countless times as a seafarer. Now you come as Mis Barr's cameraman."

"More her grip," Xavier said.

Dara got them shaking hands, introducing Xavier LeBo from New Orleans to Ari Ahmed Sheikh Bakar. "Known as Harry in England," Dara said. "Harry's with IMO, the International Maritime Organization, investigating—you ready?—piracy in the Gulf of Aden."

"Actually," Harry said, "my role is with the Djibouti Code of Conduct people, under the auspices of the IMO."

Dara said, "Tell Xavier what you do."

"Quite simply, I speak to pirates directly, the leaders, about the hopelessness of their venture. They're bringing the navies of the world down on them in their outboard skiffs. I try to convince them there's simply no future in piracy."

"Harry," Dara said, "is the spokesman for what is proper in this African world, or what can be gotten away with, and what is outright improper, hijacking ships and holding them for ransom."

"Dara, as you know," Harry said, "actually sympathizes with the pirates." Harry getting a look of amazement in his smile. He turned to Dara to say it was great fun traveling with her and learning about her films, actually stimulating. "I love your stories," Harry said to her. "You'll call me as soon as you have time, all right? Promise? And I'll introduce you to an actual pirate, sort of a gentleman rogue. Or that's the way he sees himself."

XAVIER WATCHED HARRY GIVE Dara a peck on the cheek and hurry out to step into a Bentley, shining dark green in the morning sun.

“He does all right, huh?”

“He went to Oxford.”

“Learn to talk like that?”

“His mother’s English, his dad’s Saudi. They keep an apartment in London on Sloane Square. His mom says his mom’s hip, at one time ran with the Sloane Rangers. She stayed there on and off while he was at Oxford.”

“He’s for real? The man talks to pirates?”

“We’re meeting him in two weeks at a place called Eyl, a pirate stronghold on the Somali coast.”

“He call it that, a stronghold?”

“It’s a beach town where they’re holding eight hijacked ships. I said in two weeks they might be gone. He said, ‘Or there might be more.’ They’ve had an oil tanker there for three months. There are always ships, Harry said, being held for ransom. Harry plays the patient, understanding good-guy role. You heard him, he called it his *role* with the Djibouti Code of Conduct. Seventeen countries that agree piracy must be stopped. Once in a while they meet in Djibouti. Harry lives in the European quarter, a Saudi working for the improvement of Somalia. If that’s what he’s doing.”

“But you like him,” Xavier said. “Thinkin, Hmmm, I never had an Arab boyfriend.”

“When could I?” Dara said. “Come on, I want to see our boat.”

THEY PICKED UP DARA’S luggage and equipment cases and put them in the rental, a black Toyota sedan. Xavier asking if she’d like to stop at the hotel first and freshen up.

“Have my hair done?”

“You could.”

“Have I ever had my hair done?”

“Once I know of, when we got the Oscar. That’s the best-lookin you ever been.”

“We got the Oscar? You told Harry you were a grip.”

“Bein humble in the presence of the Brit sheikh. You want me to be a grip, I’m your grip. You want me to shoot somethin, I’ll shoot it. And you’ll like my work. I been shootin shrimpers, gettin ’em to act up. I believe I could do the same with these Somali gangbangers, shoot ’em pullin off their acts of piracy, the first big-time acts in three hundred years, believin they got the stuff to do all they want. They cocky. You say you want to put ’em in a movie they gonna wet their pants.”

“I’m counting on them,” Dara said. “But I want to see the boat. How big is it?”

“A thirty-foot trawler. All cleaned up and painted it looks like a boat for gay sailors, a cute little fat-ass boat. Has a beam on her can ride most seas. Or put paravanes on her, stick out to the sides, you want to keep her from rollin too much.”

“She’s ready to go?”

“Stores comin later on. I made a deal with a man supplies hotels. We stockin French table wines and Heinekens, the only beer I could find around here. The Heineken man must have people workin for him carry machine guns. You can’t drink the water. You might even be puttin yourself at risk takin a bath.” Xavier said, “You mention shootin here when we get back—lemme show you what you have you might not want to shoot it. This Djibouti’s a nasty place. Hot, full of open sewers, has rats, dirty kinds of bugs, like that beetle rolls up bat shit bigger’n he is?”

They were following a fairly straight road along the east coast of the city.

“But if you gonna shoot some now”—he paused—“get a feel of what to look for when we back?”

Fine. But don't shoot people lookin at you."

~~Dara took an HD camcorder, a small one, out of her cotton shoulder bag.~~

"They want to be paid?"

"Some even refuse the bribe. Spit in front of you and walk away. I don't know it's their religion the reason. They mostly Sunnis here. The pirates, I hear they somethin else. Okay, we go over a few blocks now and head back south."

Dara lowered her window. "You're starting with the slums?"

"Girl, this is the upscale part of town, where the Europeans live."

Dara, shooting now, said, "Sort of like our French Quarter."

"I was gonna ask if it reminds you."

"It does, a little. Vieux Carré with Moorish doorways and windows."

"Old-time French Colonial built by Arabs. I been through the gulf thirty-seven times. Mostly comin west we'd put in here to refuel."

"You always went ashore?"

"I could be a tour guide, keep you from steppin in the sewers. You don't see none here but you will, we get to the African quarter. Look way over left. That's the U.S. Embassy. How'd you like to be the ambassador to Djibouti? His wife ask him, 'What you gonna do today, dear?' Ambassador say to her, 'You know, I wouldn't mind tryin some of that khat. Suppose to make you feel cool while you doin time in this ghetto.'"

Dara said, "I hear khat is big in San Diego, all the Somalis living there. But why San Diego?"

"See if they any retired pirates there. Now we comin to the Central Market, biggest one in town, the mosque standin over it. Rows and rows of stalls sellin shit—clothes, chickens, all kind of fruit and vegetables. Look at the outfits, the colors on the women. Lookit over here, the table of meat."

Dara was shooting it.

"It's moving."

"That's the flies on the piece of goat loin, all movin around to get a bite. Look at the girl there, holdin branches of leaves, cellophane around the bunch. She sellin khat. Only good two days so you keep it out of the air." Xavier reached over to touch Dara shooting the rows of stalls, the women sitting under umbrellas. "Look at those guys, the wads in their jaws. Suckin on khat, known as the flower of paradise. All day they be chewin and suckin. They fly it in from Ethiopia, deliver ten eleven tons of chew every morning. Keep the men happy."

"The women don't use it?"

"What they can sneak. You in the Muslim world. Women get seconds maybe."

"I got some of that in Bosnia," Dara said.

"Your best one. You know how to shoot women, get in their souls, how you do them. Hey, but you good with men, way you let 'em be theirselves thinkin they hot shit. Listen, you gonna get a chance tonight, see the bad boys up from Somalia in the big city."

"You're sure they come here?"

"Buy a suit of clothes...buy cars and they hardly have any roads down where they live. They come here lookin for French pussy and settle for Ethiopian chicks. They not bad, or the chicks down from Eritrea, they special, have that fine bone structure in their faces. You gonna see the bad boys out clubbin, the first time in their poor-ass lives in the big city cuttin up."

"How do you know they're pirates?"

"They tell you. Let the chicks know they loaded from hijackin ships, makin good pay from it. I talk to a party lady after the boys left or passed out, had some English. She say these Somali desert boys are more fun than the Frenchies. Love to get all the way drunk. And they rich, finally livin their lives."

Dara got out a cigarette and lighter from her shirt pocket, a faded blue work shirt loose and comfortable on her. She said, ~~“They go out in skiffs, take down huge cargo ships and tankers, and make at least a million or so each time.”~~ She snapped her lighter but didn't hold the flame. “I wonder if they're getting help. Tipped off, told what ships look good, easy to board.”

“They gone after a hundred or so and score forty-two times,” Xavier said. “That's like battin over four hundred.”

“Somebody,” Dara said, “could be giving them information for a piece of the action.”

“Who you think's doin it?”

She said, “Maybe we'll find out. I want to see my boat,” and snapped the lighter again.

CHAPTER TWO

XAVIER POINTED TO THE commercial port off to the west, fuel tanks and cranes standing against a glare of sky. They were loading container ships from a framework of steel girders. Dara saw a cruise ship in port, a navy supply ship at anchor in the stream. Xavier said, "The warships must be out tryin to catch pirates. I told a sailor the other night, 'Go to the bars, man, the pirates all in there spendin the loot.'" Xavier drove out a road past land development and across a causeway to follow the pier straight out to a jog, the pier jutting out on an angle to become a wide concrete dock where pleasure boats took on fuel and provisions.

"You see it yet?"

"Not that sailboat."

They were approaching a motor-sailer tied up on their left. "That's *Pegaso*," Xavier said. "Sixty-two feet bow to stern, enclosed wheelhouse. She's made for comfort, but she'll move in a wind."

"What is it, a yawl?"

"A ketch. Like a yawl but with a big mizzen aft, stepped forward some. She'll raise four sheets of canvas in a friendly sea, jib to mizzen."

Dara saw a guy with a girl in a bikini on the stern, the man raising a glass to them as the Toyota rolled past. The girl's hair was red, kind of wild.

"The guy's takin his girl," Xavier said, waving to them, "on a trip round the world. Givin her the test. She don't complain or get seasick he'll think about marryin her."

"You're kidding. The girl agreed to it?"

"Guy's wealthy, has his rules."

"I don't believe it."

"They started out in Nice, a cold wind, a mistral, come blowin down from the Alps. He figured, she become seasick he'd drop her off in Monte Carlo, not have to take her all the way round the world. But she made that part of the trip fine. They come down through the Suez, the Red Sea, now they gettin ready for the Indian Ocean."

"He told you that?"

"The man's chatty. Said his boat will run you thirty-five thousand a foot you want one like it. Full of electronics and power, so he don't have to lift nothin."

"How does he make his money?"

"As I understand, it's in the family, goin way back. It don't sound like he works any."

"Not an overnight millionaire."

"The man likes to talk is all. You ask him about his boat, he tells you. They stayin at the Kempinski, Billy Wynn and Helene. He's close to fifty. I'd put Helene at twentysomethin."

"And a knockout."

"It's how she has the ticket to ride. I been runnin into them different places. Had drinks with Mr. Wynn at the hotel, loves champagne. He said call him Billy."

They were coming to their boat now at the end of the dock. "I told you a trawler," Xavier said. "This one all cleaned up and painted pure white with a pretty orange trim. Lookin gay don't mean she ain't seaworthy."

Xavier pulled up even with the trawler, Dara looking past him at the white hull, the orange trim along the gunnels and around the top of the wheelhouse. She said, "You're right, it's kind of cute, isn't it?"

They stepped aboard, moved from the deck to the wheelhouse to go below, from the galley to the

head and a double mattress wedged into the bow. Behind her Xavier said, "That's yours. I got a nine-foot hammock gonna hang from the foremast to the wheelhouse, while you sweatin below."

"Or I put the mattress under the hammock and stare at your butt till I fall asleep."

"You can take the hammock you want," Xavier said.

"We'll work it out," Dara said. "We've got a fridge, a shower...kind of a bunk in the galley. We get aboard we'll find places that suit us. How much wine did you get?"

"Five cases of red we don't have to chill."

"What if we have company?"

"Muslims don't drink, but I'll get us another case."

"Store them in the head, we'll look like that German U-boat, *Das Boot*. This one have a name?"

"*Buster*."

"You're kidding."

"They call it *Buster 30*, goin by its length, but chubby. The tank's topped off. Saab marine diesel below, but only fifty-six horsepower at twenty-eight hundred rpms, and that's it. We gonna be out cruisin the gulf at six knots. The boat manager called this a power cruiser."

"How much?"

"Man said he wanted two thousand a week, eight for the month. I showed him your piece with the write-ups and pictures. This a Frenchman leases us the boat. I tell him ordinarily the transportation is loaned to us no charge, since we show his company name in the film. I tell him he can even be standing by the sign says DJIBOUTI MARINE DESIGNS—LUXURY ON THE WATER. I tell the man, 'But you not the Salvation Army, you in business, so I'm payin you,' and put a wad of forty hundred-dollar bills in his hand. Now he's holdin the money, can feel it. He says, 'All right.' Says, 'Okay. You come back here four weeks.'"

Dara said, "I have to put him in the film?"

"The man's savin you four grand. Course you put him in the film."

She paused, in the galley again. "Who cooks?"

"I take the helm and keep track of where we at, you do the fish."

"Are we forgetting anything?"

"The food serviceman's seein about gettin me a gun."

Dara stared at him, not saying a word.

It got Xavier to smile. "I do whatever you tell me. Still, situations can rise up you never been in before. We out there among the bad boys with AKs and weapons fire rockets. They drinkin, chewin khat, so they feelin good they go hijack a ship. I said to one of 'em I'm talkin to in a club last night, 'You always high you out to sea?' The man say, 'If we not drunk, what are we doin in a skiff and think we can seize an oil tanker?' They on the sauce gettin millions for their ransom notes. It's funny long as they don't have eyes for *Buster*."

Xavier would drop Dara off at the Kempinski and come back to see the stores put aboard. Get *Buster* loaded, ready to leave in the morning, 0600. This time, driving past the sailboat, there was no sign of anyone aboard.

"Mercedes came and picked 'em up," Xavier said. "You didn't see it? Billy Wynn has a man drives 'em around, he don't have to mess with traffic. He has a driver, you have me, and a suite at the hotel, price of a deluxe room, 'cause you a famous American filmmaker."

"Do I have to shoot the hotel?"

"It won't hurt you. Use Billy you need a model. I bet a dollar he's waitin for you."

"With his girlfriend?"

"I can't speak for Helene, but I know he's dyin to meet you. I told him what we up to."

AT THE DESK SHE said, "Dara Barr. I have a reservation," and turned to look at the Kempinski Palace's five-star Arabian lobby, the fountain outside the entrance, while the desk clerk pressed keys and stared at the screen. Dara told him to look for it under Xavier LeBo, and the Somali's face brightened.

"Yes, of course, Mr. LeBo. You must be his companion."

"I'm his boss," Dara said. "We don't bunk together." She was given the card to open the door and was told her luggage would follow immediately.

The room was nice, sort of French, a settee and a couple of chairs with arms, a carafe of what looked like sherry on the glass table. Dara got a bottle of ice-cold water from the bar compartment and drank it looking out at the swimming pool that seemed to extend into the sea. She saw one, no, two women in lounge chairs, but not together, lying in the African sun and Dara thought, Not today. Check on the cameras before you do anything. She called the desk to say she was still waiting for her luggage. Got "Yes, madam, immediately," and went in the bathroom to wash her hands and fool with her hair for a few minutes, trying to give it some life. The phone rang.

She said, "Yes?" expecting it to be the desk clerk.

"Miss Barr, this is Billy Wynn. I met your cameraman, Xavier LeBo? We got along great talking about seafarin...I had seen you on YouTube being interviewed and showing clips from your films—I couldn't believe you're *here*. The only one of yours I've seen the whole thing of is *Katrina*. I downloaded it and watched it last night. Dara, you nailed that hurricane. Thirty thousand people in New Orleans taken off their roofs?" Telling this with an East Texas sound, not much, but Dara heard it, Billy Wynn delivering his lines in no particular hurry, serious, sure of himself, a playboy—if that was still the word—taking his girlfriend for a ride around the world in his two-million-dollar sailboat.

What he said was, "If you're not too tired, why don't we meet downstairs for a drink?"

"I don't have my luggage," Dara said. "I've been waiting, I called the desk..."

"If I don't have it in your room," Billy said, "in five minutes, I'll owe you a bottle of champagne."

Dara set out two champagne flutes from the bar cabinet and went back to the bathroom to wake up her hair, rubbed it for a while with a towel, gave up and tied a bandana around her natural blond hair, leaving the ends curling out. She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Now she slipped on her sunglasses.

That was better.

But why bother if his girlfriend's with him?

And thought, Why not?

He came to the suite with the bottle of champagne and a bellman pushing a luggage rack. Billy Wynn said, "Damn, but I'm a couple minutes late," and held up the champagne.

"I put the glasses out for you," Dara said, not bothering to watch his reaction. She dug a ring of keys from her jeans and turned to the bellman. "You can leave the trunk and cases here on the floor. The hanging bag goes in the bedroom." She went down on one knee to open the locker and got to her feet as she raised the lid and looked down at her cameras and battery packs snuggled in foam inserts. She said, "It's all there."

Billy looked over as he opened the champagne: a tall guy with a noticeable belly hanging over his low-slung white shorts.

"You worried it wouldn't be?"

His hair was kind of a mess, long and uncombed, but seemed to go with his rich-beachcomber look.

"I don't worry about it," Dara said. "You met Xavier? He brought a camera and the rest of the

equipment.”

“I asked him” — ~~Billy coming over to hand Dara a glass of champagne~~ — “What’re your people, Watusis? I’m six foot and have to look up at him.” Billy said, “Why don’t we sit down while we visit?”

He paid the bellman and came over to take a chair, Dara already on the settee, an ashtray on the end table next to her. Now she lifted a pack of Virginia Slims from her shirt pocket and lighted one and offered the pack to Billy Wynn.

He shook his head. “I smoke cigars.”

“It doesn’t bother Helene?” Dara stepping right in.

“I only smoke ’em at sea.” He grinned at her. “You been talking to Xavier, haven’t you?”

“He mentioned you had your girlfriend along.”

“And if she likes sailing as much as I do, it could mean we’re compatible. We take it from there.”

“Were you ever married?”

“Almost, a couple of times.”

“They got seasick?”

He was grinning at her again.

“Let me explain it to you. I spend a good half the year at sea, sailing all over the world. Do I want to leave my good-looking wife at home for that long if she doesn’t care to sail? Helene says okay, she’ll give it a try.”

“What does she do?”

“You mean does she work? Helene’s a fashion model. I met her in Paris, she’s working a show for one of the houses. I’d watch her come down the runway with her bored-model look, red hair afire, her swarm of freckles subdued... She’d glance in my direction, sitting a couple rows back, and smile.”

“She knew who you were.”

“No. She told me after, she pretends to see people she knows and gives them a quick smile. Shows she’s not aloof.”

Dara hesitated. She said, “If you’re out in your boat half the year...”

“You want to know do I work. My family’s had oil leases in Oklahoma for a hundred years. It was my granddad put us in the shipping business, oil tankers going back and forth between Nigeria and East Texas. This trip, I’m looking into doing business with the Saudis, see how they’re dealing with the pirates” — grinning now — “and I find out you’re making a pirate movie, a documentary, the real stuff. Xavier said you’re gonna sail out to the gulf and talk to ’em, get interviews.”

“I hope to.”

“You think the Somali government’s behind them?”

“I doubt it,” Dara said. “It’s been almost twenty years since they’ve had a government, one that works. The Islamists in Somalia, the straight-arrow Muslims, say they’re against piracy, but who knows.”

“They’re all Muslims,” Billy Wynn said.

“Some more than others,” Dara said. “You know the Somalis hijacked a Saudi tanker.”

“Months ago, the *Sirius Star*,” Billy said. “The last I heard they’re still trying to work out a ransom. I was wondering,” he said now, “if it might be an outfit like al Qaeda financing the pirates. Where’d these fishermen get their guns, AK-47s, RPGs...? I’ve heard they come from Yemen. The government selling weapons is making money while the people go hungry.” He said, “Well, the UN’s taking serious action, finally. You’ll see warships out’n that Gulf of Aden but, man, it’s a mean piece of water.”

Dara listened, sipping her champagne and smoking her cigarette.

“They catch some of the pirates,” Billy said, “what do they do with them? Kenya will take some

throw 'em in prison. But whose laws have they broken? Who tries them?"

"I don't know," Dara said.

He turned on his grin.

"But you can sure get people to talk in your movies. I admire that."

"You like documentaries?"

"I do. Good ones always reveal the truth," Billy said. "I can't wait to hear what the pirates tell you."

CHAPTER THREE

YOU WENT TO A fashion show in Paris to look for a girlfriend,” Dara said. “Is that right?”

“I remember what one it was, Chanel. The guy who runs the house wears the stiff collar and shades? He was there, came out at the end.”

Billy the Kid started to grin.

“I was there to look over the girls. See if I might pick one out. They tend to be skinny, but that’s okay, they all in pretty good shape.”

“Ask her if she wants to go sailing?”

“Not right away. I see a girl for forty-eight hours. In two days you find out all you need to know. She acts intelligent, but she’s busting her ass to pick the right words, uses *I* when she means *me*, and reads the wrong books, if she reads. I don’t want to sound heartless, but we’ll be doing a lot of reading aboard, talking about books. I ask if she’s ever shared a tiny flat with another girl and thrown things at her. Nine out of ten say, ‘No, but I sure wanted to.’”

“She fails the test?”

“Becomes a forty-eighter. I start with looks, get that out of the way. Then brains and personality. I’ll be with this girl a good four months in fairly tight quarters. Now if she’s funny *and* smart, that’s a combination made in heaven.”

“Helene’s funny?”

“Helene’s the goods.”

DARA TOLD XAVIER SHE wanted to have dinner out of the hotel. She’d looked up the Blue Nile on rue d’Éthiopie, a five-star restaurant and it sounded just right.

Xavier said, “Who gave it the five stars, the owner? You want to have a girl wash your right hand? Pours water over your fingers and catches it in a bowl? Then you take a towel off her arm? What if you left-handed?”

“We’re going,” Dara said.

“You want the girl shovin some kind of stew on your Ethiopian flatbread? They call it *injera*, so you know what the girl’s tellin you. Or maybe you go for the *sega wat*, the diced lamb all cut up. These fine women make a show of servin us. Say no to the Queen of Sheba salad. We don’t eat salad in Djibouti. Or get out of the Blue Nile in less than three hours. We be finishin off three different wines at one-fifty a bottle, and that’s house wine.”

“We’re not going,” Dara said.

They went out for the evening with no plan other than meet Billy and Helene later at a club, Dara planning to shoot Djibouti nightlife. Prowl around with her hand on the camera in her bag. Billy had asked them to dinner, but Dara said they’d be working most of the evening. See you later on. He’d told Xavier the name of the club. She would love to find out what he was up to, the generous rich guy interested in her work; once in a while with a hint of East Texas country boy looking for Saudi crude. After a few glasses of wine she might ask him, “Billy, what are you up to out here in your sailboat? What’s your game?” He’d laugh at her and she wouldn’t have time to get him to talk. This evening she was sneak-shooting Djibouti. She wouldn’t mind using it as the title of her documentary. *Djibouti*. She loved saying it.

XAVIER TOOK HER TO the Chez Chalumeau restaurant on the rue de Paris. They sat down at the table and Dara put on her sunglasses wondering why it was so bright in here. Xavier said, “So you can see what they put in front of you. They cook French mostly. The side dishes could be Arab, but good here. Go with the lamb, you won’t get in trouble.”

Dara said to her menu, “Which one’s fish?”

“Their tuna they call a Somali name. They got shark, the fin, octopus they fix in its ink, oysters. The crabs are good if they fresh. Or they can fry up some squid’s tasty.” Xavier said, “Remember, we gonna be eatin fish all the next month.”

They ordered lamb, no salad, and a bottle of red. Xavier ordered another bottle as the floor show came on: four Somali girls shaking their bums to a drum and a guy singing or making sounds, the four dressed in long pink pongee gowns with panels, scarves they swished around their hips as they kept their bums rolling, spinning, bumping...Dara said, “The Blue Nile doesn’t have cooch dancers, does it?”

“I don’t believe they have.”

“I want to know how they do it.”

“Practice,” Xavier said. “We get out on the boat, I’ll beat on something and you try and get your ass up to Somali speed.”

THEY FOLLOWED THE RUE de Paris to the Place Ménélik to sit at a street café. “Have a cup of coffee and watch Djibouti nightlife,” Xavier said. “Cup of coffee and sip some cognac. Watch the tourists cutting up. Off a cruise ship come down through the Suez. They sayin, ‘Ain’t Africa *fun*?’ They could be in Marseilles doin the same thing.” Dara busy working her camcorder over Ménélik Square. “You gettin the Foreign Legionnaires. French boys never seen anything like these slim black chicks givin ’em eyes. Got epaulets on their shoulders, with fringe, and a sash around their waist. Man, this is where to get stationed, if you can stand the heat. Go in the clubs, see the girls rubbin against the boys. You notice they don’t wear that flap off the back of their kepis no more, like Beau Geste? You gettin the action?” Dara was shooting with the camera in plain sight. “What you don’t see, too many American military hangin out. They been warned about the girls. You see some sailors, some Shore Patrol. Look over there. Keep ’em from bringin home any kind of African dose,” Xavier said. “Café Las Vegas, run by a Corsican. That’s where we meetin Billy and the model.”

BILLY SAID, “I CAN’T believe we’re in a French joint on the rue de Paris and they don’t have Perrier-Jouët, Blanc de Blanc ’99?”

Xavier said, “I can’t either. Let’s go talk to the man, see if he has something like it. I never had a beverage cost nine hundred dollars a bottle.”

They left Dara and Helene alone at the table, Dara’s blond hair washed and fluffed out, Helene’s red hair—no stylist in sight—tied back. She said to Dara, “I can feel my face shining.”

Dara said, “You look good.” She hadn’t spoken more than a few words to Helene with Billy Wynn at the table. Now she said, “I can’t imagine sailing all the way around the world,” and waited.

Helene said, “You mean on a boat or with Billy?”

The girls by themselves now, Billy and Xavier checking the wine list at the bar.

Helene said, “I’m actually going to powder my nose,” and got up from the table. After a moment Dara got up and followed her into the restroom.

“I’ll see what I can fix,” Dara said.

Helene was at a mirror brushing something on her cheeks. Dara moved in to look at herself in part of the mirror and Helene edged over a few inches. Dara took out her lipstick.

“I don’t use any unless it’s some kind of occasion.” She looked at Helene in the mirror. “You have a wonderful tan. It brings out your freckles. Makes you look like a kid.”

“I’m thirty-four. Billy thinks I’m in my twenties and I let him.”

Now Helene was staring at Dara’s reflection.

“You know what I keep thinking about, constantly? Going out on that fucking boat again.”

“For four months,” Dara said.

“Or longer. ‘Take in the mains’l. Lay down to the galley and put on some chow.’ ‘Aye, aye, Skipper.’ I sound like an idiot.”

“You don’t get seasick?”

“I get bored.”

“You don’t have to go.”

Helene said, “You don’t know what’s at stake. Billy’s almost twenty years older than I am. We marry and he ever passes away? I’d be something like the thirtieth-richest woman in America.”

“He told you that?”

“An inducement, giving me a goal.”

“It could be a long wait,” Dara said. “He seems in good health. He doesn’t smoke.”

“Cigars,” Helene said. “You think I’m out of my mind?”

“You must like him—”

“I *do*. He’s kind...he’s thoughtful...He’s funny sometimes. He calls Obama ‘that spear-chucker we got in the White House,’ but Billy likes him, I can tell.” She looked at Dara’s reflection again.

“You married?”

“I’ve been too busy,” Dara said, “to think about it.”

“But you’re not, are you, a lesbian? Some of the girls I work with are. They’re nice, not especially bitchy. Sometimes I’ll tell a guy I’m one to shut him down.”

Dara said, “I like guys. But I like whatever I’m doing right now, whatever I want, more. I lived with a lawyer once—he didn’t want to get married either. He’d tell me why we were better off single living together and go through a, b, c, once in a while, d. He’d thought of another reason.”

“What’s c, having sex anytime he wants?”

“He talked constantly. He’d say things he thought were funny. He’d start telling me a fact, anything, about world populations and go on and on. One time I asked him a question about the Supreme Court he could’ve almost answered yes or no. He started talking and I wanted to shoot myself.”

“You were fucked, and you did it to yourself,” Helene said. “Billy tells long stories about investigations—I guess for the government—and makes it sound like he’s in it. Billy goes, ‘Me? No. Takes a swig of champagne. ‘But I know things.’ He’s either a lovable jerkoff or, I don’t know, maybe some kind of CIA guy. But you know what’s weird? Wherever we are, I know somehow he’s going to hand me a glass of champagne.”

“He turns you down, you’re still a runway star with the hair and the body.”

“If I ever get in shape again. You’re the first person I’ve felt I can talk to. You know why I’d marry him, all the bullshit aside, because he’s a fucking honest-to-God billionaire. I knew you’d smile. He doesn’t have to be funny. He can talk all he wants. But why is he always handing me a glass of champagne?”

“I wouldn’t think to get you drunk and seduce you.”

“I’m practically bare-ass on the boat. No top, ever, out of sight of land. He doesn’t want some sneak with binoculars seeing what he’s got.”

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