

NO EASY WAY HOME

Catherine Catlin ignored the view across the grounds of Intercontinental's metallurgical lab and the air field. She put aside local wisdom about moving slowly in Singapore's humidity, and walked briskly toward the woman on the path at right angles to her. They met at the crosswalk.

"Are you Mrs. Clifford Cunningham? Andrea Cunningham?" Catherine's eyes narrowed in the sun. "Dumb question. You're bound to be."

Pepper green eyes met her inquisitive stare. Their owner nodded, smiling slightly. "It's Andra--no 'e.' And you are--?"

"Catherine Catlin. Fellow American. I-- just wanted a good look at you."

"--Any particular reason?"

"Yeah--" Catherine gave a quick one-note laugh. "I might as well be frank. I--"

"Somehow being frank is easier in the shade," Andra said. "I'm on my way to a pitcher of iced tea. Won't you join me?"

Catherine was surprised she accepted. She followed Andra on a narrow trail through wet grass, looking at her hips and bare legs. No one else was on the visitors' center porch scattered

with tables and white wicker chairs. Andra opened a rickety refrigerator and took out a pitcher and two frosty glasses.

"Hope you like it flavored with honey and lemon." She poured the tea, sat down and leaned back. "So be frank, Miss Catlin--or is it Mrs.?"

"I've reclaimed the Miss, thanks." She shook her head in amazement and settled against the pleasant creak of the chair. "This is wild. Late yesterday I was making a big fat pass at your husband in his office. Today I'm having tea with his wife on a veranda like some la-de-dah matron."

Andra blinked once. "Why on earth are you telling?"

"Damned if I know. I made up my mind not to leave until I saw for myself why he turned me down. But I didn't plan to discuss it. Least of all with you." She was suddenly embarrassed. "Being a woman-- you can understand why I wanted to see what you look like. I'm glad you're beautiful. If you were so-so it would smart a lot worse."

Andra studied the stranger more closely. Her smoky beige hair looked natural. Nothing cheap looking about her except possibly her clothes. "I'm sure you've been told you're beautiful yourself," Andra said. "But there are more important things than a person's exterior, aren't there?"

"Oh God, I don't want a Sunday school lesson. Thanks for the tea." She got up. "That's really what it is, isn't it? The Jesus stuff. You're a pair of fanatics, are't you? Some guy in the

commissary told me about the hallelujah sideline you've got going up in the jungle. I mean, it's still true--the fact that a man's got a beautiful wife just means he likes beautiful women. Not that she's the end-all, be-all and all he could ever want. It's the Jesus stuff. That's what's turned a cougar into a house mouser. There for a minute last night he got me thinking there was a real man who was committed to one woman. The perfect marriage. Perfect love did exist. Perfect crap."

Andra looked back levelly. "That's too big a chunk for a single snappy comeback. But when you've got nothing else to do--try wondering why a man like Cliff would waste himself on the Jesus stuff if it were the kitty litter you think."

"Because religion makes people crazy. They just lose all their common sense." She started to turn and leave. "I'll say one thing--you're not all hoity-toity and feverish about it. You're cool as a spritzer. So is he. Tell him good-bye for me." She adjusted her bulky camera case over her shoulder with her purse and caught her watch bracelet on the strap buckle. The catch opened and the safety chain snapped in one motion of her wrist. The timepiece dropped to the porch.

She swore, stooped and stuck it against her ear. She shook it. "My freaking luck! That was going to be my ticket home."

"I'm sorry. Inco has a watch repairman if you--"

"Hell, I'm too damn broke to pay him."

Andra glanced at what appeared to be a press camera. "That

looks like professional equipment. Are you-- by any chance, do you know your way around a darkroom?"

"Yeah, sure-- I used to be a nightclub photog in the states. The regular processor was usually smashed by 11 o'clock so I printed most of-- Why?"

"Sounds like you could use a job. Want a temporary one?"

Catherine sat back down slowly. "I can't type or take dictation. They wouldn't hire me at the commissary because there's so many Chinese on the waiting list. Hell, I'd even mine tin. You're actually offering me a job after what I said? After I flagged your husband?"

"If you can develop film and turn out good glossy prints the size we want, you're on. There's no future after our native genealogy project's done--but it should get you a ticket home."

Catherine looked at Andra narrowly. "Would you dish out a lot of fire and brimstone harangue?"

"I don't have that recipe. You can put cotton in your ears if anybody makes you nervous." She gave her a grin.

All Cliff told Andra was that the Catlin woman arrived with a company surveyor who was shipped home sick. Inco put her up in a room in an unused barracks until she could afford to leave. She was given some filing work but it wasn't enough.

A week later, Catherine emerged dripping wet from the darkroom in the old school building edging the Inco complex. She saw Andra

approaching with a pitcher of lemonade.

"Boy, does that look good. I thought I could finish today but the fan quit in there. I can't take any more."

"I knew it was time you had a break. Don't go back in until we get the fan fixed."

"Thanks. I hate to mention it but the ceiling fan in my bedroom died, too. You think somebody could look at that?"

"Maybe Cliff can."

"You really, really trust your husband, don't you?"

"We're friends now, Cat. I also trust you. However, if you have a heat stroke in the hot box, I've left orders for them to call me to administer the mouth to mouth."

Cat put her glass against her cheek and returned the amused look. They sat down at an umbrella table in a patch of shade.

"Seriously, do you know how?"

"Yes. Cliff and I took advanced first aid courses so we could teach some of the natives we're working with."

"How do you talk to 'em? You said they can't speak English or Malay-- What're they like?"

"A little smaller than Malays. Origins unknown. Attractive. Very intelligent. They're so remote we have to hike in. We're teaching them English and reading and writing. They teach us their language. It'll be a long process. Inco is very cooperative. Cliff's taking off four months this time. We leave next week. He's air dropping medical supplies tomorrow."

"I considered being a nurse," Cat said, crunching her last ice cube. "Then some drunk threw up on me in the club one night and I said, no thanks! Tell me about Charles Lovette. The teddibly British one. He seems to be one of Inco's honchos. He asked me out. I told him I'd let him know."

"Charlie's one of my favorite people-- that glory grin of his--terrific dry wit--one of the most--"

"Oh God, all I want to know is if he's any good in bed."

"--I wouldn't know, Cat." She looked down, then back in the hard gray eyes. "Why can't you just go out with him for pleasant company and a few laughs? See a movie. Go dancing. He's one of the best conversationalists I've ever met."

"Men don't ask me out because they want to talk."

"The thing is--do you really want to casually go to bed or do you feel pressured because you think men expect it?"

"Of course they expect it."

"But you can control their expectations. It's up to you."

"Some control. Last time I refused, it got me two black eyes. I had to ride a bus from Seattle then walk three miles to my room."

"Oh, Cat." She looked at her achingly. "Please don't think all men are like that. Charlie would never harm a woman. --But rather than a sticky situation later in the evening, why not settle any question before you go out with him? I'd be willing to bet he won't withdraw his invitation."

"You mean-- just tell him right out-- no sex? Just like that? Besides--if I can get used to a big mustache, he's-- there's something zingy about him-- what if I want some?" She tilted her head, waiting for dismay to cross the perfection of Andra's features. Disappointed when it didn't, she said, "I've offended your religion again, haven't I?"

"You only offend yourself when you think so little of your body."

"Hell, it's a wee bit late to think of it as pristine."

"Anyone can change if they want to, Cat." Andra got up. "I'll leave the lemonade in case you'd like some more."

Catherine stood up, too. "Why do I always get the feeling you're sticking the gospel to me without ever quoting some stained glass saint or wagging a finger? You've never said squat about my soul. You haven't even pressed any little folded pamphlets in my hand and told me I'm doomed."

"You know where to find scripture any time you want it. I think you've read it before. Maybe you were even interested. Whatever the case-- you don't look very doomed to me." Andra watched her face. Almost imperceptibly something softened.

Even the voice was different for a second. "Whatever the case--you're the only one who ever cared," she said. Cat finished with her usual flippant inflection: "I'm off to the showers. But whatever it is you're rubbing on me--it don't wash off."