



Sam Spadefish In...

The Boat That Wouldn't Sink

By Ted West ■ Illustrations by Zohar Lazar

The jangle of the phone startled me out of a not very interesting daydream and an even less interesting ham sandwich.

“Sam, how’d you like a Mexican vacation?”

Sadie's not the kind of dame you want to talk to through a mouthful of ham and cheese. The tone of her voice had me packing my bags and hailing a cab. I never knew a Sadie that I didn't want to know a whole lot better.

"When you call, Sadie," I said, "it's never a vacation."

"Oh, Sam," she said.

"Oh, Sadie," I said right back. She works for Jack Bogner at the marine insurance company. They had a claim they wanted me to snoop. Swell, I had nothing better to do. "Whaddya got?"

"A 72' sportfisher went props up off Cabo Los Muertos. It was supposed to sink, but refused."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Search me, Sam—that's what Jack told me to tell you. I just work here. He says get your tail down there yesterday."

"I'll be on the next flight south, sweetheart."

"Good, have a taco on me."

"I would, if you'd lie still."

She laughed.

"Or is that sexual harassment?"

"Let me think it over."

Waiting for Sadie's e-mail with the facts of the case, I scanned my voluminous mental files for adventures in Mexico. Great place, as long as the palms stay open and don't fold into brass knuckles. I'd had good times and bad down there, all of them my fault, but I'd never been down to Cabo Los Muertos. Cape of Dead Guys. Charming. It was a gringo resort with a big reputation. I'd see. Now, where did I stash the Lomotil?

SADIE'S E-MAIL MADE A GREAT READ on the plane. The sportfisherman that wouldn't sink was named *Cream Puff II*, a 22-year-old Francis-Craft 72. According to the most recent marine survey, it was somewhat the worse for wear. Weren't we all.

But *Cream Puff II* had great bloodlines. Before Francis-Craft Industries went knockers up in the late 1980s, its CEO, Rollins T. Francis himself, had the boat built to his specifications. Belowdecks, it was lined with seamless straight-grain hardwoods. Rolls-Royce-grade Connolly leather upholstery covered everything but the toilet seat. Should something terminal happen to the company's finances, this was RT's lifeboat. When the company went down, I saw it advertised in the back pages of the *Robb Report*. Rumor was, ol' RT walked away with a trainload of cash.

The boat had changed hands twice since launching. The first buyer used it for charters and worked the boat hard. When the present owner, one Augie Blanc, bought it a year ago, according to the survey, its twin Cat diesels had high hours.

And Blanc, so said the e-mail, was in car sales. *Cream Puff*... I get it. Swell.

When I got off the plane in Cabo, the sun beat down on my head like a scorched tortilla hat. I was looking for somebody named Marty Loach, ex-cop from L.A. Sadie said I wouldn't have to find him. He'd find me. He did. He was 70 if he was a day, but his eyes were full of action. He

had a scruffy, white five-day growth, and his sun-trashed straw hat looked like it had been hit at close range by a 12-gauge trench gun. "Sam?" he asked. Before I could nod, he was leading me to the parking lot. We climbed into an ancient Dodge slant-six that seemed to have been hit by the same weapon.

First thing he said after starting the engine was, "You don't have some pesos, by any chance? *Lupita's* about outta gas, and we got some driving to do."

He didn't seem like the kind of guy to give a car a name—on the other hand, who knows what 20 years in

this sun can do to a man's brain. We filled the tank, which toned him up several notches. From the look of things, retirement had not been kind—but he still had that unblinking cop look. He was all right.

He brought me up to date. Augie Blanc showed up in Cabo with *Cream Puff II*

about three weeks ago. And his arrival was anything but subtle. He arrived with 200 cases of motor oil stowed on deck. Made the Mexican authorities perk right up.

"Two hundred cases of oil!"

Loach's eye twinkled. "They thought the same thing. Brought him in to discuss it, but his wallet explained everything. Welcome to Cabo. He put the boat in the marina, went back up to Los Angeles, then came back four days ago and reported it stolen.

"Three days ago, the Mexican navy found it up the coast near Rincon, upside down. Rincon's a scruffy little resort. But a few miles off the beach, it's 1,500 fathoms straight down. Good place for storing unwanted possessions. The navy rolled the thing over and dragged it back to Cabo."

"Okay, let's go."

The Mexican navy was courteous but all business—nobody likes insurance investigators. After identifying myself, Lt. Chavez told us *Cream Puff II* was being held as evidence.

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm here."

"No, as evidence," he repeated as though I hadn't heard correctly. "There was a murder on this boat—three murders, it is said."

I looked at Loach. The look he gave me back said, mind the flying cows.

I nodded back at Chavez. "Who was murdered?"

"We don't know yet."

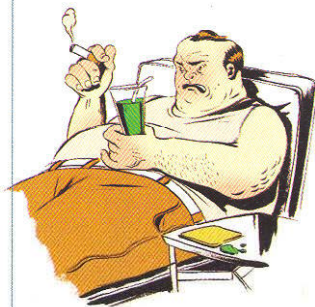
"How do you know there was a murder?"

"We are investigating."

"Can I look anyway?"

"You can look, but you must not go onboard. The boat is evidence."

Cream Puff II had been a fine craft once, but propped up on stands in the yard now, it looked lost and ashamed. To starboard of its keel, about midway back, the hull had been stove in. Going by the gouges, it had run up onto a



rock pretty hard—then backed off again. I snooped and sniffed long enough for Chavez to get thoroughly bored and wander off. Then I climbed aboard.

As I expected, belowdecks I found four cut hoses. A pure scuttle. Everything of value had been stripped out except the high-hours engines and genset. *Cream Puff II* was a boat that was meant to disappear.

So why didn't it sink?

I looked closer. It seems that 22 years ago, Rollins T. Francis had packed in foam everywhere he could—even the laminate. Surprise, Bad Guys! This baby wouldn't sink if it were run over by an aircraft carrier.



I hopped back down to the ground and found the beginnings of barnacle growth. It had been heeled over on that rock for a good while.

Marty and I went back to the office, and I asked Chavez where to find Blanc. As luck—and gringo dollars—would have it, he was staying in my hotel.

Blanc had a deluxe suite. He didn't smile, and he was huge—not in the athletic sense, but in the eats-a-lotta-cream-pie sense. He was drinking something tall and green, and it wasn't his first or his second—or his third. He was pale and had that hunted look a guy gets after 30 years of lemon laws and bait-and-switch. Nothing surprised him anymore.

He told me the whole tragic tale—how he left his darling boat safe and sound in Cabo Los Muertos Marina, came back from L.A. a couple of weeks later and it was gone. He reported it. The navy found it at sea, dragged it in. He shook his head. So much crime in Mexico—nothing was safe.

"So what's this about a triple murder?"

"Search me," he said. "That's just what I heard."

"Where?"

"This guy told me."

"What guy? What did he look like? Where did you see him?"

"I don't know, just a guy. Six feet. Hair. You know."

"Yeah, I know."

No surprises, I'd been in marine fraud too long for that. I left Blanc for a beer at the pool bar where I found Loach. He was drinking Coke.

At last, a surprise.

NEXT MORNING, I WENT TO THE Cabo police station. The cop I spoke to had that dull-eyed, out-of-the-money look that honest guys get in his trade. I liked him. He helped me get a bulletin sent up and down the Lower Baja coast—especially to the cops in Rincon. My offer was \$15,000 and a hearty handshake for information leading to an arrest.

I went back to Chavez to see about getting *Cream Puff II* released so it could be taken to the States and gone over

carefully. No dice. Three people had been murdered, it must be held as evidence...*yada-yada-yada*. I asked if they had any witnesses, any missing persons connected with the boat. Nothing. But I was getting it. The "murders" were Blanc's way of keeping the boat, and evidence that it had been scuttled, out of the insurance company's hands. I explained to Chavez that to be reimbursed for his loss, Blanc must get the boat back to the United States. That broke something loose in Chavez's eyes. Blanc didn't get his insurance dollars, Chavez wasn't going to get his pesos. But he stayed quiet.

So I tried the other side of the slot machine. It was a short ride back to the hotel. Blanc was still drinking something tall and green.

"Mr. Blanc, we have a problem," I said. To him, it wasn't news. "We have to get your boat up to the States before we can release payment for your loss."

"Whyzzat?"

"That's the way it works."

"But you can't do that," he said. "The boat's been seized."

"Oh," I said and let myself smile. "Well, that's not good, then. If you read your policy, you'd know that anytime a boat is seized for legal reasons, it's no longer covered. It's in every policy."

He took a tall green swallow. "I bet I can get them to release it."

"I bet you can. Then, there's no problem."

BY THE NEXT MORNING, BLANC had worked his magic. All it takes is money.

I made arrangements for a salvage tug to come south from San Diego. It would take 18 days all together, at \$1,800 a day, to get *Cream Puff II* stateside. And the Cabo constabulary needed \$54,000 in impound fees to release the boat. All it takes is money.

But I had a long way to go. The hoses had been cut and the boat scuttled, but I still had no solid suspect. In my gut, I knew who it was—but I needed evidence.

A day later I got a call from Officer "Out-of-the-money" down in Cabo. My bulletin had gotten a response. A woman, who baked gringo-style bread for a living, said she recognized the boat. It had been in Rincon for several days. She had sold bread to the three men aboard. The cop started going fast in Spanish, too fast, so I handed the phone to Loach. He translated for me. "They were having a big party," he said. "It went on for five days."

"Ask who 'they' were," I said.

Loach listened a moment. Then grinned. "Politicians, she says—two district attorneys from Santa Rosa." It was a fair-size city down the coast. "They were there for several days and took friends out on the boat every day. Then suddenly, no one was invited anymore."

"Ask where they were anchored," I said.

Loach nodded and waited. "Mostly near the point. They brought all their things ashore the second day, and the next morning, the boat was gone."

Loach was grinning like a forty-niner seeing flash in the pan.

SAM SPADEFISH

“Marty,” I said, “you just earned yourself a steak dinner.”

“That’s *carne asada*, to you,” he said.

A LITTLE MORE legwork led to a positive I.D. of the Santa Rosa D.A.s. It began to look fairly routine. That is, until I got a call from the Santa Rosa police. Two D.A.s, trying to land in the dark on a small airstrip, crashed their Cessna and, incredibly, immediately began trying to cover up the wreckage. But it was spotted by a couple driving past in car. The police arrived, and before anyone could say *caramba*, the D.A.s were arrested for possession of a lot of cocaine.

Senora Constancia, the baker from Rincon, identified my new pal Blanc as a fellow partier. He denied it, of course, just as he denied any connection with the crashed cocaine.

But the two pols, now so far up the creek there wasn’t a paddle big enough in all the world, said, “No way Jose,” the scuttle and cocaine were on Blanc’s dance card, too. He had loaned them the boat for their party, but when it went up on the rocks, he decided it should disappear. The two diesels were nearly useless anyway—both had bad main seals—but like any savvy used-car salesman, Blanc just kept adding oil (thus the mysterious 200 cases of 30 weight). He would say the boat was stolen and claim the \$720,000 of insurance. Why not—with its two massive Cats, the boat should sink like a stone.

But Rollie T. Francis’ foam-filled construction had outsmarted him.

Just for the hell of it, before leaving for the States, I called Sadie. She’d heard all about it, of course. She was impressed.

“Does it help my cause any?” I inquired.

“It could,” she said. “Remember that taco we spoke of? When you get home, come on over and have it on me.”

“Just checking, Sadie, but isn’t that sexual harassment?”

“What do you care, genius,” she purred. †