

THE LASH OF LUST

HODGE EVENS

LETHA lived by it...
MARGO loved by it...
MARILEE sought it...
SHELLY endured it...

...Was it cruelty
for its own sake
that intrigued these
warped women?
Or did each
have a reason
to hunger for
this forbidden
practice?



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A NOVEL WHICH DARES TO FOCUS ATTENTION
ON A SUBJECT SOCIETY HAS TABOOED!

IN COMMAND

Now Shelly was backed against the wall. The leather thongs ripped at her shoulder. She screamed with pain. Again Margo swung, whipping Shelly's dress into ribbons. Margo was the stronger, but suddenly Shelly got hold of the quirt with both hands and desperately pulled. Margo lurched, went down. Now Shelly had the whip.

She lashed mightily at Margo, who flung up her arm to ward off the thongs. The leather descended time and again as Shelly's arm flailed. But Margo grabbed for Shelly's legs, toppled her, seized the whip, and again was mercilessly beating the girl. Margo's eyes were strangely gleaming. Her bosom heaved with her ragged breath. She was wildly excited, seemed somehow exalted. Under the blows, the weakened Shelly cowered. "Please—please, Margo!"

"All right. Now you do as I wish. Exactly as I wish, understand?"



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Hodge Evens



this is a BEACON BOOK

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work are fictional*

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One

ON their last night together, Shelly Reed opened her eyes and lay rigid on the big double bed in the Peaceful Motel. At first she thought it was the rumble of the streamliner hurtling along the tracks behind the motel that had wakened her. Now she knew it was premonition.

She saw the back of Ken's head and his slender shoulders in the glow of a single lamp. He was seated at the small desk. He was writing.

That day she had gone into San Carlos after the afternoon performance at the fairgrounds and had bought a sheer nylon nightgown, blue. Why, she wondered now, had she thought that a garment, no matter how enticing, could make any difference?

Ken rose and propped up an envelope on the desk. Written on the envelope in his precise hand was her name—*Miss Shelly Reed*. How formal, she thought. For eight months they had meant everything to each other, shared the same living quarters. You would think just *Shelly* would be enough.

He turned then, and his narrow face tightened. In the early darkness he didn't look so much the perennial sophomore. His brown hair was crew-cut and he wore his new dark suit and a green bowtie.

He said thickly, "I thought you were asleep." His eyes traveled the length of her figure and added, "You'll catch cold."

Something stung her blue eyes. God, don't let me cry, she prayed silently. With an angry gesture, she pulled down her nightgown, covering her legs. "You were going out for cigarettes," she said. "Then you were going to sleep. What happened?"

He ran a pointed tongue over his lips. Then he picked

up the envelope and slowly tore it to bits. "Maybe it's better this way."

She rose on an elbow, long red hair framing her face.

"Is that it? You were going to leave me a note and then sneak out."

He started to say something. Then his lips clamped shut.

She reached for a black robe at the foot of the bed. "We're through, is that it?" she said. She picked up a pack of cigarettes and shook one loose. She put it between her lips and made three tries before she could get a match going with her trembling fingers.

"I don't want to do this," he said hoarsely. Then a new desperation seemed to grip him and the words poured from his tight mouth. "I'm in love. We're flying to Reno tonight—to be married." Sweat beaded his forehead.

Shelly bit the inside of her mouth and said, "And her name is Marilee."

He gasped. "How did you know?"

"Last night when I needed you most, you came home drunk. And you called me Marilee."

Ken Brighton sank into a chair and held his head in his hands. His lean chest shook. A year ago she had found him on a carnival midway, broke and discouraged, still limping from the broken ankle that had forced his retirement from a touring ballet company. He had a strong body and he was not afraid of height, so she taught him her act. On the desk was a photograph taken of them last summer on top of a slender pole that rose sixty-five feet into the air above the fairgrounds. Dressed in their new tights. Ken had wanted her to discard the black webbed stockings, the velvet panties she'd always worn. "You've got a beautiful body," he had said "And it's all mine. Think I want those yokels getting fired up just looking at you? Black stockings do something to a guy."

Now it was funny. She wanted to laugh but the laughter couldn't get past her dry throat. She said, "You don't look much like a happy bridegroom."

Slowly he shook his head. "I—I don't want to marry her. But I've got to. She's a kid. She's under age."

Shelly said, "And somebody caught you together."

"The law's tough in this state," he said tonelessly. "It's called statutory rape if they're under age. I could get fifty years in prison."

"Why did you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Wasn't I enough for you?"

He began to sob, and now he reached for her hands, clinging to them. Tears streamed down his face. Once she had thought him good-looking. Now she knew he was weak. It showed in the small, nervous mouth. As he peered at her helplessly she saw the edge of fear in his brown eyes. He rose suddenly and put his arms around her and began to run his hands down over the smooth blue nylon she had purchased especially for him. She pushed him away.

"Please, Shelly," he begged her.

Deftly she sidestepped him when he tried to pin her to him. In that moment whatever love she might still have held for him died quickly.

"It wouldn't be right," she said, trying to make her tone cutting. "You'd be cheating on your bride."

"But I want you. Just this one last time—"

She stepped to the dresser and, picking up a comb, began to run it through her red hair. She was twenty-two. All her life she had sidestepped men. Until she had met Ken. Eight months ago they had decided to share the same accommodations. They had wanted to save money so they could be married in the Spring. That was the biggest laugh of all.

She felt him come up behind her. Even a quarter of an hour before, the pressure of his hard, slim body against her own would have sent a flame through her. Now it left her strangely unmoved. When his hands reached around her, she turned quickly. With the flat of her hand she shoved him back.

"Get out of here, Ken," she warned him, "before I do something foolish."

She had picked up a letter opener from the desk. Now she held it like a sword, the point touching the front of his shirt.

He breathed sharply. "You wouldn't—"

"Oh, no?"

Dazed, he crossed the room. He opened the door. He looked back for a moment and she had never seen such misery on a face. Then he was gone.

Then she flung herself across the bed.

"Yellow," she muttered. "Yellow, clear to his socks."

It was the last night of the San Carlos County Fair and already Margo Minter had ordered her canvas boss to start tearing down the cookhouse. She owned the Greater Shows, playing the carnival midway. Usually she wore slacks and a turtleneck sweater, but tonight she looked truly feminine. A statuesque blonde in her early thirties, she arranged thick yellow hair atop her head instead of her usual severe knot at the back of the head. Her full breasts were barely concealed by the boned front of her clinging black dress. She ran her carnival like a man, bossing the crew, cussing out the ride men when they failed to set up their equipment on the lot to her liking.

She left her office wagon and moved down the glittering, noisy midway toward the official parking area behind the girl-show tent. Whenever she wore high heels as she did tonight, she seemed to glide, her tall buxom figure swaying slightly as if to a secret rhythm. A sensuous melody a hundred pit orchestras had played when she had been in the business of taking off her clothes on burlesque runways. Once she had married, and well. It had lasted long enough for her to get a settlement which had enabled her to buy this show.

She always liked to play the San Carlos Fair. San Carlos was her home. Her father had been a two-bit prune rancher on the other side of town. Margo was fourteen when a combination of falling prices and a mortal blow to his pride had caused him to commit suicide. She didn't like to think about that. But she still

had friends here. Like Letha Kelleray. Letha's husband Rod was the brains behind this Fair.

Now, as she stared down the Fair midway, she saw the slender steel pole that rose sixty-five feet into the air under the glow of a powerful searchlight. Propped against one of the guy wires was a sign: Brighton & Reed. And the usual scare descriptions: death-defying, hair-raising—see them risk their lives twice daily. And it's free. Courtesy of the San Carlos County Fair Association—

She saw huge Burt Lenshaw near a hot dog concession. He was talking to a pretty kid in a plaid shirt and denims. No more than sixteen. Goddamn men, Margo said to herself.

She called to him but when Lenshaw didn't move, she forgot for a moment that she was dressed like a lady and grabbed his arm and jerked him away from the girl. It took some doing to pull Burt Lenshaw aside. Once he had worked an athletic show, offering five hundred dollars to anyone who could stay five minutes with him in a wrestling ring. She couldn't remember anybody ever collecting the money. Now he managed her rides, but he still carried the scars of his bruiser days—a broken nose and a cauliflower ear.

"Can't you stay away from the kids?" she asked angrily, jerking her head at the girl in jeans who was hurrying off. "Some day those quail will get you a fifty-year jolt."

He gave her a lazy grin. He had small yellow eyes. He wore a faded windbreaker, tan slacks and dirty sneakers. He cracked his thick knuckles. "You ought to know about such things as quail," he drawled.

"What kind of crack is that?" she said, her gaze gray and cool. Of all the men in the world, she feared only him. He knew too much about her.

Burt Lenshaw said, "You rigged it so that cute little gal would hook Ken Brighton. What's her name? Oh, yeah. Marilee."

Her handsome face flushed. Gossip had a way of traveling around a fairground. She hadn't realized anyone would know. Ken had probably talked.

She pointed down the midway at the swaypole. "Change the billing. Shelly won't need Brighton on the billing any more. She's working single from now on."

Burt Lenshaw frowned. "She works for the Fair. I ain't got anything to do with that. Let Kelleray change the billing."

"Will you do what I ask?"

"Sure, boss." He gave her a mock salute. "But a lot of people are beginning to wonder about things."

"What things?"

"This Marilee. Two weeks ago she shows up out of nowhere and you keep her under wraps. Then she starts running around with Ken. You better think up a good story."

"I don't need to. They're going to Reno tonight."

She watched his bulky figure move off down the crowded midway.

Marilee was waiting in Margo's Caddy in the parking lot. She was small and petulant—a well-formed little blonde with pale, knowing eyes. Margo had asked her to stay in the car. She didn't want her loose. There were too many Burt Lenshaws around a fairground.

Marilee said, "Where's Ken?"

On the rear seat were two packed suitcases. New, expensive luggage. Margo had purchased it yesterday in San Carlos.

"Ken will meet us at the plane." She climbed into the big gray convertible and drove it off the fairgrounds along a narrow road, past a sign that said: *San Carlos Airport, 5 miles.*

Marilee said, "Are you sure Ken will be there?"

"He'd better be."

To their left lay the dark silent hills with the bright squares and oblongs of fancy houses where San Francisco commuters lived.

Margo said, "You understand why I did this. I want you safe. Now you'll have a husband. His name will protect you."

"You sure you want us to go back east?"

Margo nodded. "I've given Ken a letter to Max Gelman of the A-1 Shows. Max will keep him working."

"Do you think Ken will miss that redhead?"

"Keep him interested and he won't. You've got a body. I hope you know what to do with it."

Marilee giggled. Then she said seriously, "But a redhead. They're supposed to be so terrific—you know!"

"Where did you learn that kind of talk?"

"In school. The very best schools. Don't you remember? I've been away eight years."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No, Margo." But she was.

At the airport, Ken Brighton paced up and down the waiting room. Twice he had made up his mind to run. Not that Marilee wasn't desirable. She was. Young and cute. And she had a figure. At first it was fun, sneaking off when he and Shelly had finished their act for the night. Margo had taken an apartment in town the first week of the fair. She had invited Ken over to meet a friend. The friend was Marilee. The second week, Margo bought some liquor and left it for Ken. Then she went back to the fairgrounds. At least, she said she was going back. Ken got very drunk and very reckless. And Marilee didn't put up much resistance.

Margo came home unexpectedly.

The three of them had a quiet talk. It concerned either marriage or . . . In California you didn't fool around with kids like Marilee. Because when you got out of San Quentin you'd have a gray beard way down to here. And Margo, to clinch the deal, spoke of photographs taken with infra-red light.

Ken saw them come into the waiting room—Marilee small and bubbling, Margo tall and regal.

Marilee was the type photographers choose for June-bride soap ads. She'd be a bride, an October bride. In Reno. All that was missing was the shotgun . . .

Just before the plane took off, Margo gave Marilee a roll of green bound with a rubber band.

"A wedding present, kids," Margo said. "There's more where that came from until Ken gets started—back east."

On the plane, Marilee slipped off the rubber band. Ten hundred-dollar bills made a green fan in her small soft hands. "Isn't Margo wonderful?" she gushed. "We'll be so happy."

Ken swallowed. The plane was flying over the fairgrounds. Below, he could pick out the ferris wheel and the searchlight tilted along a sixty-five foot length of steel tubing that rose into the dark and noisy sky. He said thickly, "Yeah. We'll be happy."

Marilee said, "I've lived in the east eight years. I'm tired of it. I like California."

"So do I."

Marilee giggled and patted his hand. "We'll see what we can do about that."

When Margo returned to the fairgrounds, she went immediately to her office wagon behind the midway. She locked the door behind her. Then she kneeled to open a safe at the far end of the double bunk. She unlocked a compartment inside and drew out a photograph album. She flipped through the pages quickly, hardly seeing the photos of a girl in various stages of growth—first year in boarding school, the first party dress, a gawky boy friend on a slim arm. Among the photographs were a few old press clippings.

With the album under her arm, she stepped to a built-in bar and poured herself a drink. She lifted the shot-glass and stared at her reflection in the mirror. "Here's to Margo Minter," she said aloud. "The past is dead, forgotten." She downed the drink.

Outside, she crossed the parking area to a large incinerator. She lifted its lid and threw the album into it. Then she struck a match and lighted the refuse at the bottom of the wire enclosure. In a moment the flames were spreading. Satisfied, she strode back to the midway.

Burt Lenshaw had seen her come out of her office. Her actions seemed odd, so he trailed along in the

darkness. He lived by his wits and they had been good to him. Snoop around, was his philosophy, keep your ears open. It might mean a buck some day.

He fished out the burning photograph album, cursing a burned finger. He threw the album on the ground and stamped out the flames.

Carrying the black book to a fan of light behind the cookhouse, he slowly turned the pages. The snapshots didn't interest him but after a minute his eye was drawn to a newspaper photo and he stared at it thoughtfully.

It showed a blonde in jodhpurs. The caption said: POLICE QUESTION HOUSE-GUEST WITNESS TO ARNIE ROSS TRAGEDY. The clipping that had apparently accompanied the photo had been torn out.

Carrying the album to his coupe in the parking lot, Burt Lenshaw locked it up in the rear deck. For a long moment he stood jingling his key chain. Then he told himself, grinning a little, hell, I'm liable to end up a rich man. Think of that. Burt Lenshaw with diamonds in his ears!

There was a queer feeling in the pit of Shelly Reed's stomach as she parked her station wagon and walked along the midway. Thank God this was the last night of the Fair. The last Fair of the season. One more performance. Just one more. Tomorrow she could start worrying about next season. The annual convention of Western Fair Managers would begin tomorrow at the Del Rio Hotel in San Carlos. There she would get her bookings set for the coming year. She and Ken had planned the four-day meet as a holiday. All season they had lived in places like the Peaceful Motel. They had made a reservation at the Del Rio. They had splurged. Now she would be alone. She winced in spite of herself.

Two more years they had given themselves for their hazardous profession. Then, with their savings, they would get into some other line of business. That's the way they had figured it out.

It was a laugh. A great big laugh. But the laugh

wouldn't come out. Her blue eyes were stinging again. "Damn," she said under her breath.

Then she heard Rod Kelleray's voice in her ear and felt his hand on her arm.

"I'm glad you came," he said lamely. "I thought maybe, after Ken—"

"You know about Ken?" When he nodded, she said, "Where have I been? I guess everybody knew how things were but me." She tried to laugh again. "But it wasn't any shock. Those things happen."

Kelleray's handsome, dissipated face was angry. "Women like Margo should never have been born."

"What's Margo got to do with it?"

"She introduced Ken to Marilee. I'm sorry it happened that way. But I'm glad you're rid of the guy."

As they moved along the midway, she said, "He's gone and that's that."

"You've been crying," he said softly.

"It's hay fever. I always get it when I play your Fair."

Kelleray said, "Remember the first time? Two years ago?"

She remembered, all right. The last night of the Fair. Just like tonight. Her first year on the coast. And he had been so nice to her. The manager of one of the best Fairs in the state. He was so smooth and polished. They had gone to a roadhouse called *Italian Gardens*. Kelleray had talked about Mexico and Paris. He had finally got around to the subject of some cabins behind the cafe in a poplar grove. The liquor had been good and Shelly had felt at ease with him. And when he had kissed her in the dim barroom, she had liked it. Maybe, if things had gone right, she would have walked with him through the poplar grove. But a friend of Kelleray's, who had come in for a drink at the bar, had walked over to their table and had said, "I just saw Letha at the airport."

Kelleray had seemed to freeze. It was the first time Shelly had been aware that he had a wife. Letha had been in New York and had returned unexpectedly.

Now Kelleray said, "I was a heel that night. I should have told you I was married."

"It's in the past," she said lightly, smiling at him.

"Is it?" He increased the pressure of his fingers on her arm. "I'd saw off my right leg if you and I could . . . I've got some money stashed away. In Mexico we could be happy. It's been done, you know."

She was desperate enough to toy with the idea. Acapulco, perhaps. Warm surf and sunshine. No more risking your neck for the yokels who came secretly hoping you'd splatter yourself on the ground so they could see blood.

In Kelleray's lapel was the pin he had received for being voted the best fair manager in the circuit for the past year. His achievements seemed to have dug new grooves in his face. Something was constantly driving him. Each time she saw him, he seemed more harassed. Yet, not yet thirty, he looked young and vigorous. And nice.

They reached her rigging. She laid aside her coat. Two months ago she and Ken had bought the new rigging. The old was in storage.

Kelleray stared at her and said, "I'd forgotten how beautiful you were."

She stood before him clad in black velvet bra and high-cut velvet pants.

The bra barely concealed her large, creamy breasts. Her long red hair was caught at the back of her neck with a silver clip. He could see the ripple of muscles beneath her smooth skin, the flat abdomen above the waistband of the tight-fitting pants. Her long legs and thighs were encased in black webbed stockings.

To spite Ken, she had discarded the white tights she had worn when they did their act together, had gone back to her old costume. And it secretly pleased her to see Kelleray's admiring glance. A crowd was drifting up, forming a loose circle around the sway pole.

"Shelly—can't we do something about us?" Kelleray whispered hoarsely.

Shelly said, "What would you do with Letha? Throw her in a lime pit?"

"Maybe it wouldn't be the first time," he said, "that murder has been done in our clean little town."

Something in his tone shocked her. He sounded almost serious.

Just then a messenger appeared and said that Kelleray was wanted in the office. He excused himself and went off.

A cannon thundered close to the rigging. High in the air above the slender steel pole, red, green and white stars burst in a glowing shower, then faded as quickly, disappearing in the dusk.

She swallowed, her throat dry. Next year she really shouldn't play this Fair. She didn't want to see Kelleray again. But she knew she had to. Now that she was on her own, she would need the twelve hundred dollars he paid. Playing his Fair was a plum, anyway. He got the best acts and they, in turn, drew capacity crowds. It helped him, of course, to have a wealthy wife whose bank account could be stretched to pay a bonus not allocated in the Fair Board's budget. No wonder he won awards!

She turned as Burt Lenshaw came up to her. "I changed the billing," he said, jerking a big thumb at the sign. It was her old poster, the one she had used before she met Ken. Instead of *Brighton & Reed*, it read: *Shelly Reed, Queen of the Air*.

"Thanks," she said coldly. Once, when her father had been alive, they had played a season with Lenshaw in an eastern show. Even though only fifteen, she had been forced to be constantly on guard so that he would not grab her.

"Don't worry about that jerk Ken," he said. "Burt will look out for you."

She was chalking the soles of her slippers. "I'll look out for myself," she told him curtly.

"Don't be too sure," he drawled. "Margo's got her eye on you."

Something tightened in Shelly as it always did when she thought of Margo Minter. "I can also handle that situation," she said.

As she climbed the slender pole she was aware that Leshaw was smiling.

When Shelly reached the small platform at the top of the pole, she looked down at the upturned faces far below. Jaws were moving as the onlookers chewed popcorn, nibbled at candy apples. Old people shook their heads, saying what a crazy way to make a living.

She stood up on one foot, spreading her arms wide, bending low as if she were a skater gliding across a frozen pond. Applause drifted up to her.

Carefully she hooked her right leg into an iron ring on the end of a bar that projected three feet above the platform. She lurched suddenly to one side and the slender pole swung her far out into space.

"Ah-ah-ah—" The mutter of the crowd grew loud. A girl shrieked. A man laughed nervously. The pole swayed far to the other side, whipping like a giant trout rod. Wind tore at Shelly's red hair, clawed at her thighs. In the distance she could see the lights of San Carlos. Kelleray's words hammered at her—"Maybe it isn't the first time murder has been done in our clean little town."

When she had righted the pole, she put an arm through the ring that had held her leg. Slowly she came to a handstand, her fingers clutching the edge of the small metal platform. Again, with the leverage of her slender body she started the pole swaying.

She heard the screams, the applause. She surged far out over the frightened, upturned faces, then back into the darkness beyond the spotlight beam.

Ken should be right below her now, she thought, one foot in the slender loop under the platform. Hanging headfirst. Instead he was off on his honeymoon with a doll named Marilee!

Suddenly the strength seemed to go out of her arms. Perspiration was cold on her skin as she finally got the pole righted. When the crowd applauded, she suddenly hated them. They had come for one reason, hoping to see the slender pole snap and send her hurtling to the ground.

"To hell with them," she said aloud, tears hot against her cheeks. Although her act was not finished, she began to descend the pole.

When she reached her station wagon, Margo Minter was waiting for her. In the glow of the overhead lights, Margo's eyes surveyed her coolly.

"Now that you'll be alone next season, I've got a deal for you," Margo said with a smile. "You won't need to attend the convention. I'm going to carry a free act with the show next season—and it's you."

Shelly forced herself to look at the ferris wheel in the distance. She had known Margo Minter for two years and during all that time had been trying to keep away from her.

Without looking up, Shelly said, "I don't know how or why you forced Ken to marry that girl. But I'm going to find out."

Margo laughed shortly and said, "It wasn't my fault. The two kids just went for each other, that's all."

"I'll just bet they did," Shelly said furiously.

"Don't get smart. It's different when a dame's married and her husband cuts out. But when she's just been keeping house with a guy and they split, then the wolves begin to howl. You'll see what I mean soon enough."

When Shelly tried to turn away, Margo's powerful fingers caught her by the arm. "If you don't come in with me, every contract you get will mean letting some character get to third base with you."

"I'm going to have a talk with Rod Kelleray," Shelly told her bluntly. "Maybe your show won't play his Fair next year."

She gave Shelly a patient smile. "I'll play it," she said, "as long as he's married to Letha." Her voice hardened. "And don't forget this, if you get any fancy ideas about him. He isn't the first husband Letha's had. The other one also had a weakness for red-headed women. And one day an oak tree hit him right on top of his beautiful head."

Shelly tried to knock Margo's hand from her arm but Margo grabbed it with both hands and began to shake

the girl. Shelly's long red hair fell loosely about her face. "Let me go!" Shelly cried.

Margo bared her teeth. "I've gone to a lot of pains to keep you with my show next season. You're not going to spoil it!"

Shelly wrenched out of Margo's grip and fumbled at the doorknob, but Margo pulled her away. And when Shelly tried to rake her face with her nails, Margo lashed out. The flat of her large hand caught one cheek, jerking back Shelly's head. She fell heavily against the car and sank to her knees.

Then an excited male voice said, "What the hell's going on, Margo? Are you crazy?"

Rod Kelleray stepped toward them briskly, his collar-ad face tight with anger.

"I was giving Shelly some advice," Margo said coolly. "I told her to stay away from you. Unless she wants you to wake up one morning with your brains spread out on the pillow."

Margo stalked off down the midway. Light briefly touched the piled-high blonde hair, then she was gone.

Kelleray picked up Shelly and set her down in the station wagon. He put her coat around her shoulders and slid in under the wheel. "I'll drive you home."

She huddled silently in a corner of the seat.

Two

KELLERAY took Shelly's key from her and unlocked the motel door. Then he carried her inside and dropped her on the bed. She lay with her coat open, staring at the ceiling.

Kelleray searched the room and found a glass and a bottle of rye. He poured her a drink.

Then, putting an arm around her, he drew her to a sitting position and put the glass to her lips. She finished the drink at a gulp.

She lay back again. "Why did Margo do it? She framed Ken. I know it. But why?"

Kelleray studied her a moment, then said bitterly, "When Margo wants something, she'll stop at nothing to get it." He added, "Still, if Ken was foolish enough to run off with Marilee, you're lucky to be rid of him."

"I suppose so." She put an arm over her eyes. Every nerve in her throbbed.

Suddenly she was alert as Kelleray switched off the light.

"No, Rod. Please—" His mouth found hers and the protest was drowned in a roaring fire that swept through her. And with it came a new and deadly fear. Was it going to be just any man with her from now on? For as long as she could remember she had seen the way men looked at her and had overheard the things they said. She was a redhead. She needed love, they said. The fear grew in her. Perhaps it wasn't Ken. It was only the fact that he had been the first. Maybe all she needed was not a particular man but any man. At the moment it was Rod Kelleray. Who would be next?

Kelleray said, "We'll go to Mexico together."

She touched his face, trying to see his eyes in the darkness. "Who was Letha's first husband?"

"Why?"

"Just curiosity."

For a moment Kelleray hesitated. Then he said, "Arnie Ross. Older than Letha." He added bitterly, "And Arnie was rich. Very rich."

"Margo said an oak tree hit him on top of the head. What did she mean?"

"Don't talk about Margo. Or Letha. Just us—" His fingers closed roughly on her shoulders.

She said, "All right. Just give me a minute."

She rose and went to the dresser. Then she stepped into the bathroom and undressed. She slipped the blue nightgown over her head. "All right, Ken," she said in a whisper to the wall. "I bought it for you. But there's no sense spoiling a good idea."

Her lips were trembling as she groped her way back into the front room. She fought down the tears. Then she felt his hands reaching for her in the darkness.

They were knowing, educated hands. And they were followed by knowing, educated lips. First the hands lightly caressed Shelly's hair, her cheeks. Then Rod's hands did the same. Rod's hands went to her heaving breasts, lovely mounds of white perfection tipped by dark circles. Under Rod's fingers, the nipples rose eagerly. And then he applied those lips of his, and his flicking tongue. With practiced deftness, he had worked the blue nightgown downward from her shoulders, so that the full glory of her breasts was accessible to him. As for Shelly, his ministrations had aroused her to fever pitch.

Gladly and eagerly she responded to the touch of his hands, his seeking lips. She knew well enough that it was wicked, it was wrong, thus to let this man make free with her. But the heat in her loins drove her to forget everything but the presence of this—this male. Whether or not he needed her, she needed him. She, too, began the routine of touch and kiss. Her fingers stroked his ears, his neck, his chest. Her lips sought his, then left a trail of liquid fire across his body. Her hands sank lower, and so did his, and the two clutched each other, unable now to maintain restraint. As her hips rose to meet his strain-

ing body, he launched his final, full assault on her soft and supple womanhood.

How sweet and warm and soft her treasures, he told himself. More than a man could bear. He lunged like a rutting bull, then again, and once again . . . and she caught his virile rhythm, swayed and moved in the dance of his lust and her own. Locked like wrestlers, they moaned and mewed as flesh met flesh, rubbed, rammed, rocked—and in a mutual agony of wild pleasure convulsed into piercing fulfillment.

"Christ," groaned Rod Kelleray, and it was more a prayer than an oath, a supplication rather than an expletive. "Shelly, you're wonderful. You—"

He broke off. Something solid, like a fist, was smashing against the door. A harsh voice was calling, "Open up in there. It's the law!"

And from a window, another voice yelled, "Don't try this way out. We've got you covered."

Shelly jumped from the bed, wrapped herself in her robe. A key turned in the lock and the door swung open. A large blue-clad figure holding a gun pushed his way in. Lights were flicked on. Behind the uniformed officer was another man in plainclothes. Behind the two men came the graying motel manager, Milo Zelkins, his suspenders hooked up over his undershirt.

The uniformed cop looked at Kelleray who stood behind the bed clad only in his trousers. The cop lowered his gun. Rod Kelleray, boss of the County Fair, was a big wheel. His wife was old family around here. Lots of money. Political connections.

The plainclothesman and Kelleray stared wordlessly at each other.

The manager said, "She rented this place with a fella named Brighton." He jerked a thumb at Kelleray. "Now she's with this guy. But I want you boys to know I ain't running no joy house."

Sergeant Chico McAdam finally tore his eyes away from Kelleray. He said to the uniformed man, "You and your partner get out of here. I'll handle this."

When the black-and-white prowler car had pulled out

of the driveway, the motel manager, his eyes hungrily fastened on the tall red-headed girl in the nightgown, said, "If she's a hustler, Sergeant—listen, "I sure didn't know it."

Chico McAdam dismissed him and closed the door. He looked at the girl. A real beauty. These days they were younger and prettier. She looked vaguely familiar. Probably he had seen her soliciting down on Alapabasa Street.

Mechanically, Shelly picked up her black robe and slipped into it. Her thighs were trembling.

Kelleray buttoned his shirt. "Hello, Chico," he said.

McAdam said, "Of all people! I didn't expect to find you here!"

From his face, you could read nothing. His skin was a dark olive hue and his hair and eyes were Spanish black. On his mother's side of the family were the Mendozas. Once his grandfather had run sheep and cattle over what was now the town of San Carlos. But he was not bitter that his grandfather had lacked the foresight to die a rich man. McAdam was a philosophical sort.

He sniffed the air. "Doesn't smell like weed here."

Kelleray's face tightened. "You think I've been smoking marihuana?"

Chico McAdam looked sad. Rod Kelleray was a nice guy. He had come to town three years before and had done all right. They used to shoot pool together. But since Kelleray's marriage, there was a million dollars between them. Money made a difference.

Chico McAdam said, "We got a complaint. Somebody said there was a reefer party going on here."

"I wouldn't be on a deal like that," Kelleray said.

At that moment he was thinking he was sorry he hadn't kept up his friendship with the sergeant. They'd had fun together. He wished Letha were different. He felt bad that they had never invited Chico to the house.

McAdam jerked his head and Kelleray followed him outside. The only thing Mexican about Chico was his fondness for thin black cigars. He took one now from his breast pocket and lit it.

"Who's the girl?" he asked, blowing out a match.

Kelleray told him.

Chico McAdam frowned. So that's where he had seen her. At the Fair. "The girl risks her neck enough as it is," McAdam said. "Don't put her in double jeopardy."

"What do you mean?" And when McAdam gave him a tight smile, Kelleray sagged. "I know," he said dismally, "Letha."

McAdam bit down on his *cigarillo*. "It was a woman who phoned in the complaint about the reefer party."

Kelleray stiffened. "Letha didn't know I was here."

McAdam shrugged. He wore a neat dark suit and a white shirt and a tie with a small pattern.

"I didn't say it was Letha," McAdam drawled. "But some woman wanted you found with that girl." He put a hand on Kelleray's shoulder. "I saw Letha mourn one husband. She looks good in black."

Kelleray's mouth hung open.

McAdam turned to his black sedan in the drive. "I'll try to keep this quiet, Rod."

Kelleray's mouth was dry. "Thanks, Chico. Maybe we can shoot some pool one of these days."

McAdam waved and drove off down the highway.

When Kelleray turned back to the motel door he found it locked. "Shelly," he called. She didn't answer. After a moment he said, "See you tomorrow. At the convention."

Then he walked to a phone booth in the manager's office and called a cab.

IN the morning, Burt Lenshaw was supervising the dismantling of the ferris wheel when he saw Hoke Deeson in his flashy coupe on the deserted midway. Deeson's clothes, like his car, were loud. He claimed his suits were a protection—that he was the only man who could cross Market Street in a 'Frisco fog without being run over. He was in his late forties, a short, bald man who wore diamond rings on both hands. He owned the concessions in Margo Minter's show.

Deeson braked his car and waved and Lenshaw

strolled over and leaned against the door. Lenshaw talked for a minute about the lousy take. Then he rubbed his jaw and said, "You played this Fair a long time. Remember a guy around here named Arnie Ross?"

Hoke Deeson peered at Lenshaw closely. "Yeah. Why?"

"Heard somebody talkin' about him yesterday," Lenshaw lied. "They said Margo had her picture in the paper on account of him dying."

"That's a lot of crap, them tryin' to tie Margo in on it. Nothin' but an accident. Ross got his neck busted."

"Tell me about it," Lenshaw said.

Deeson shrugged. "Ross liked to fly his own plane. One day he gets loaded, kisses Letha, climbs into his plane and does a nose-dive into an oak tree. There wasn't enough left of him to scrape up."

Lenshaw's small bright eyes shone briefly. "And Margo seen him pile up his plane, huh?"

"Yeah. She just happened to be at the house that day." Deeson removed his horn-rimmed glasses and polished them with a piece of tissue. "But Letha ain't a widow very long. Now she's married to Rod Kelleray."

"Yeah, I know."

Hoke Deeson shrugged. "I never could understand what Kelleray sees in her. He got drunk one night and let down his hair. He claims she keeps him on a strict ration—only once a month."

"She must be screwy. Or he is."

"Letha Kelleray is stacked like a Chinese chimney," Hoke Deeson said, "but she's colder'n my bald head on a windy day." He chuckled. "Ain't that a hell of a note? A married man with a set of house rules on the bedroom wall?"

Lenshaw nodded, then asked carefully, "If you was tryin' to get something unstuck how would you go about it?"

"Come again?"

"Well, I pasted something in a book and I want to get it out," Lenshaw explained.

Deeson shook his head. "All you got to do is steam it

off. Use a tea kettle." He laughed. "That's the trouble with you muscle men. Dumb. It's a wonder they let you out alone at night."

Lenshaw's small eyes didn't echo his easy smile. "Some day I'm goin' to use your fat head for pounding stakes."

He didn't wait to hear Deeson's retort but hurried away, fingering the key to the rear deck of his coupe.

Early in the morning Letha Kelleray finished her daily five-mile ride on Queenie. She was a tall, graceful woman who believed the four hours a day she devoted to keeping young were not wasted. Her friends said she didn't look a day over twenty-five. Her mirror agreed. It was nice to appear ten years younger than one's actual age. And it was important when you had a husband six years your junior.

Dismounting, she turned Queenie over to the groom, and paused beside the whitewashed barn to let her gaze sweep the valley below. It gave her a sense of power to realize that her holdings extended clear to a distant ridge of purple hills. Once all the land had been owned by a man named Mendoza—*Rancho de los Amigos*. But in the early days her grandfather had been one of a handful of shrewd Yankees. If the Mexicans were stupid enough to allow their lands to be stolen, it was their own fault. Now the Mexicans in San Carlos ran quaint little cafes or did odd jobs. And they were much happier, Letha had rationalized long ago, than they had been as *rancheros*.

There was Chico McAdam, of course. But he had some excuse for being in a position of authority. His father was an Anglo-Saxon. She and Rod occasionally argued about him. Rod always wanted to invite him to dinner or something.

In the big warm adobe ranch house she proceeded to the second round of grim business to which her life was devoted—a hundred sit-ups on the slanting board that stood in a corner of the room she called her "work room." Stripped down, Letha had a young woman's body. Her

abdomen was flat. Her breasts were solid and extraordinarily large, and her hips gently rounded. She liked the new shade of her hair. This time it was red. It excited her to stand as she was now, in front of a full-length mirror, studying her nude reflection.

Annette put her frowsy head through the doorway. "Phone, Mrs. Kelleray."

Letha slipped into a green silk robe. She remembered the interested look on Rod's face the day Annette had been hired. "I've got a new maid," Letha had told him. "Her name is Annette."

Rod's eyes had brightened. "She must be French."

"You'll see." Letha had smiled maliciously. Annette weighed two hundred pounds.

It was good to keep a man restrained, her mother had always said. "Keep them at arm's length," had been her advice. "Once a month is enough."

When Letha had been eight years old, her father had signed over all his money to Letha's mother. It was some years later that she learned her father had run off with a red-headed waitress from the *Bon Ton Cafe*. After a while, he had contracted a fever in Mexico and died there. Letha's mother had said it served him right. Letha agreed.

Letha's mother had arranged things nicely. Letha had married Arnie Ross when she was twenty-one. It was nice to have *Rancho de los Amigos*. It was also nice to have a million dollars to do with. She had been supremely happy until one day someone had whispered a name in her ear. She had gone down to Alapabasa Street, had met the mistress Ross had been keeping for eleven years. There had been a terrible fight. The woman had lost the sight of one eye as a result. But Letha had paid off and Chief of Police Homer Milfont had given the mistress twenty-four hours to get out of town. The whole matter had been quietly hushed up.

But from that moment until the day he died, six months later, Arnie Ross never forgave his wife, or spoke to her again . . .

Letha came out and took the phone from Annette. "Who is it?"

Annette answered, "Margo Minter."

Letha's hand hesitated over the phone. Ordinarily, she avoided Margo. When the carnival season ended, Margo spent her leisure time at her place across the hills in Carmel. Not that Letha didn't like Margo—but there were some things about her she couldn't understand. They had gone to school together. Margo seemed to breed scandal. Her father had shot himself. And there were business dealings between Arnie and Margo. Letha had never been quite sure what it was all about but Arnie had always welcomed Margo to the house.

Letha picked up the phone and Margo's cool voice came over the wire. Letha listened and her face paled. Mechanically, she replaced the phone. Then she sent Annette to check the grocery list with the cook for the party that night.

Letha waited until Annette had ambled off out of ear-shot. Then she dialed a number. A man's voice said, "Peaceful Motel."

"Was there some trouble at your place last night?" Letha asked. "A redhead found in bed with a man?"

The voice said cautiously, "Who is this?"

"Never mind. Just answer my question."

"Reckon there was some trouble all right."

"Who was the woman?"

"Shelly Reed."

"And the man?" Letha snapped.

"Search me. I'm new around here—"

She slammed down the receiver.

That same morning, Shelly dressed in a pale green suit and a white blouse. She tied her hair with a green ribbon. Then she drove to the Del Rio Hotel. The lobby was jammed with troupers and Fair representatives and concessionaires and everyone else concerned with getting contracts for the next season.

Much confusion, the harried desk clerk told Shelly.

Another convention was just checking out and the County Fair crowd had shown up earlier than expected. There wasn't a bellboy available to carry her luggage. Shelly said she didn't mind. The clerk was volubly grateful for her understanding and gave her the key.

She crossed the lobby, conscious at once of Margo Minter's cool gray eyes on her. Margo walked up to her, looking surprised to see her there.

"Have fun last night?" she said.

Shelly glared at her. Last night had been folly.

Then Margo's voice softened. "I'm sorry I struck you. But forget it, will you? I want you with my show. Strictly business. A good-looking girl like you will pull the customers—"

"Once and for all," Shelly said angrily, "the answer is no."

As she marched off she glanced back and saw Margo walking stiffly to a phone booth.

It took Shelly nearly half an hour to make her way to the elevators. Everyone, it seemed, had heard about Ken. They were all sorry. Ken was a stinker, they told her. She never knew she had so many friends.

Her room was on the fifth floor. The Fair convention was a time for business but it was also a time for fun. You could let down your hair after a long hard season. The fifth-floor corridor was crowded and there were sounds of a piano and singing from behind a door bearing the sign: *Bascom County Fair Headquarters*.

In her room, the bed had not been made but fresh sheets had been laid on it. From the window she could see the wing of the hotel where the Bascom County bunch were whooping it up. On a firescape at an angle to her window, a brunette with liquor stains on her dress was kissing a fat man. In a minute they broke their clinch and went inside.

From somewhere nearby she heard the sound of running water. It reminded her that she wanted to shower. She sat down on the bed and began to undress.

In the shower, Matt Devore let the cold water spray over his dark head. He gasped and jumped up and down

on the tile flooring of the stall. He felt lucky. He had come up from L.A. to get contracts. It was the first time he had gone after Fair business. He owned the *Artcraft Equipment Company*. He would supply goodly amounts of varied accessories to half the West's County Fairs next season or his name wasn't Matt Devore. Just as soon as the bellhop brought up his bags, he would put on his new suit, then go down to the lobby and slap some backs. The world was just great.

His curly dark hair was matted on his head. He was big and he had football muscles left over from college. Last summer's tan still clung to his chest and thighs. He was twenty-five and he was going to set his County Fair convention on its ear.

He had just turned off the shower and was reaching for a towel when the bathroom door opened. He blinked his eyes and nearly lost his balance. Was he dreaming?

The girl was tall and her hair was long and red and fell loosely about her shoulders. He stared at her feet. She had red toenails. His fascinated gaze lifted. She had gently rounded hips. And she had beautifully curved full breasts. She had a face to match the rest of her, too. Wide blue eyes and a full-lipped mouth, opened now in surprise.

He said the first thing that came to mind. "I was just taking a shower!"

His voice seemed to shock her into action. Suddenly she grabbed for a towel, held it before her and screamed, "Get out of here!"

Then she slammed the door. He could hear her on the house phone, yelling for the desk to send somebody up fast. Lord, he thought, this will ruin me! That damned chambermaid! She had been making up the room, and through the open door he had asked her if it was 602, and she had said it was. After she had left, he had gone into the shower.

Not waiting to dry himself, he jammed his damp legs into blue jeans, slipped into a blue sweater and shoved his feet into canvas sneakers.

Desperately resigned to telling a quick, believable

story, he stepped into the room. He got an eyeful of two suitcases in the center of the floor and a pair of the widest shoulders he had even seen. It's her husband, he thought. And he began to perspire.

The big guy had his back to Matt and was saying to the girl, "I seen the bellhop with your bags. S.R. on them suitcases mean Shelly Reed, I says. And it cost me ten bucks to get the bellhop to open the door."

The girl looked frightened as she said, "Get out of here, Burt. You're drunk!"

Neither the big guy nor the girl had noticed Matt Devore. He stood wondering whether to interfere or to get out quickly while he still had the chance. But the big guy was cornering her and she was frantically trying to hold the towel in front of her and not doing a very good job.

She slashed at big guy's face, but he ducked.

Now his voice was ugly. "Think you're a virgin or somethin'? You spend all year with a pretty-boy, and now when he walks out you get fancy. Hell, I been trying to get you since you was a kid. Remember the year you and your old man was with the A-1 Shows? Well, I do. I used to lay awake nights just thinkin' about you—"

"Burt, don't—"

"You be nice to me. Burt Lenshaw's got contacts. You'll be booked solid with every Fair that's worth a damn. But if you yell, I'll say you got me up here, then changed your mind. It won't do you no good, Shelly, so you better—"

Shelly recalled the man she had found in the bathroom. She turned.

Matt Devore saw the girl's frightened eyes on him. "Please," she said hoarsely, "help me."

As Devore leaped, the big guy threw out an arm—too late. He went over backward. But he was on his feet again in a moment and moving in. This big guy called Burt was half drunk and he had a nice roll of fat around his wide middle. Matt Devore tested it. The roll was fat, all right. His fist sank deep. And when the big guy

bent over, Matt Devore took great pleasure in straightening him up with a hard right. The big guy dropped and didn't move.

The rest of it Devore was never sure of. Through the window he caught a movement on the fire escape. The girl, he saw, was staring into a mirror above the dresser. Suddenly there was a sharp, cracking sound and the mirror disintegrated. A deep furrow appeared in the wall. Plaster fell to the rug.

Then the fire escape was empty and Devore saw a spreading red stain on the girl's left shoulder. The girl screamed when she saw the blood. The sheet slipped from her body and she crumpled to the floor. Devore picked her up and laid her down on the bed and pulled the sheet over her. In the hall there was a sudden commotion and somebody began to pound at the door.

He opened the door and the crowd poured into the room. "Get a doctor!" somebody shouted.

Three

SERGEANT Chico McAdam got the story from a young man named Matt Devore. The other man—the fellow with a lump on his jaw—wouldn't talk. His name was Burt Lenshaw. McAdam had seen him around the fairgrounds. A doctor was bandaging the girl's shoulder. Nothing serious, just a cut from a piece of flying glass.

In nervous tones, Devore explained about the mix-up in rooms, and about Burt Lenshaw trying to attack the girl. Yes, there had been a shot. It came from the fire escape but Devore hadn't seen who was there.

Chico McAdam had been downstairs in the lobby when the clerk had shouted something about a shooting on the fifth floor. McAdam had learned a long time ago to try to prevent trouble before it happened. That was why he had strolled into the Del Rio. If any of the celebrants was bent on raising too much hell, he figured, his presence might help to keep things under control.

By this time he had posted uniformed men in the hall and cleared out the girl's room save for Devore and Lenshaw. Shelly lay on the bed, her face white as the sheet that covered her. From the way the sheet clung to her, McAdam knew she wore nothing underneath. He was surprised and a little disappointed in her. That business last night with Kelleray he had dismissed as just one of those things.

With the blade of a pocket knife McAdam dug a small chunk of flattened lead from the wall. This he dropped into his pocket. There had been no witnesses to the shooting.

McAdam turned his black eyes coldly on Burt Lenshaw. Then he looked at the girl. "We can hold him for attempted rape." He added, "If you sign a complaint."

"I don't want any trouble," the girl said tonelessly.

McAdam sighed and turned on Lenshaw. "Maybe you don't know how lucky you are." He jerked his head toward the door.

Lenshaw left, rubbing his jaw. Devore followed him out after assuring the sergeant he wasn't going to leave town. In Lenshaw's case, McAdam entertained a secret hope that the man would try to run. It would furnish an excuse to pick him up. Sometimes McAdam regretted that he tried to be an intelligent cop. At the moment he'd enjoy getting Lenshaw under a bright light and beating the hell out of him.

McAdam said to the girl, "Last night I found you wearing a nightgown. Today it's a sheet. Either you're a victim of circumstances or you're a—"

Shelly was holding her injured shoulder. "Go ahead. Say it. You think I'm a tramp."

Chico McAdam shrugged. "We'll see."

Downstairs he found Rod Kelleray rushing across the lobby to the elevators. McAdam caught him by the arm and drew him into a corner behind a potted palm.

"I just heard about Shelly," Kelleray gasped. "Is she—"

"She's all right. Shoulder cut by a piece of glass."

Kelleray stared at him. "I thought it was a shooting."

McAdam explained. "Some drunk firing a gun." He watched Kelleray's face. "Maybe."

That noon when McAdam went home for lunch, his plump wife Mildred frowned at the look of preoccupation on her husband's dark face. "You worry too much, Chico," she said softly, kissing him on the forehead.

His lean figure slouched in the chair, his food untouched. "I was thinking about Arnie Ross."

Mildred bit her lip. "It's over and done with. Three years you've worried about that." She touched him on the arm. "Please, Chico. Consider the kids, if not me or yourself. You'll be up for lieutenant when Karns retires. But if you go poking around that Ross mess, Chief Milfont will have your badge."

He scowled at her.

She tried to laugh. "Can't you ever forget that you're a Mendoza? That Letha's grandfather was a thief?"

"You know me better than that. Her grandfather outsmarted mine." He shrugged. "So what?"

"Then why—"

He slammed a dark fist on the table. "I just hate dirty money. And the things it can buy."

When Shelly dressed and went downstairs, she was still a little dizzy. Therefore, she wasn't quite up to her second shock of the day. As she stepped out of the elevator on the main floor she saw Ken coming toward her. A small well-formed blonde clung to his arm.

There were dark smudges under Ken's brown eyes. His face was unusually pale. With his crew haircut, he looked like an aging sophomore. When he saw Shelly he stiffened and looked miserable. There was nothing to do but introduce the two women. "Shelly—my wife, Marilee."

Marilee smiled prettily and said, "I've heard so much about you. And after all, we have something in common." Her fingers tightened on Ken's arm. "Or rather, we did have something in common."

Shelly's legs felt strangely hollow and the cut on her shoulder seemed on fire.

Marilee said, "Ask her, Ken. Now's your chance."

Ken gulped. "I was wondering if I could have the old rigging. As long as I helped pay for the new one—"

"Sort of like community property," Marilee giggled. "If you'd been married, of course."

Shelly wanted to hit her. Instead she forced a smile. She said Ken could have the old rigging and welcome. If he wanted to be a competitor, it was all right with her.

Marilee said, "I knew you'd be gracious about it. Because you must be a wonderful person. You're a woman of the world and you've given Ken so much experience. Believe me, as a bride I do appreciate it."

Shelly felt her cheeks flush. She forced herself to count to ten as Marilee dragged Ken off to the elevator.

Hoke Deeson came up just then, wearing one of his

loud suits. "If I had muscles, I'd beat Ken's head off. He done you dirt, honey." He peered at her through his horn-rimmed glasses. "But you still got old Hoke. I'd treat you right."

She smiled and patted Deeson on the arm and got away from him as fast as she could.

Matt Devore strolled over to Deeson.

He said, "She's a good-looking girl."

Deeson was staring after Shelly's departing figure. "Yeah. And it's a damn shame. Before this shindig is over, the carpet in front of her door is goin' to be worn mighty thin. Either that—or she won't work next season." He moved off with a shake of his head.

Matt Devore felt a little quickening of his pulse at the sudden thought that there might be a little fun mixed with business on this trip. If it seemed fated that she would be signing her contracts in a bedroom, he might as well try his luck too. He didn't have a contract for her—but what the hell, it was worth a try.

He found her near the cigar stand. He told her he was sorry about what had happened upstairs. To Shelly he seemed a little shy. Nice looking, too. Not handsome—but a face you wouldn't tire of quickly.

He nodded at her gray dress, caught at her slender waist with a hammered copper belt. "You look good with your clothes on."

For a moment she frowned, then broke into a grin. "So do you," she said.

"Buy you a drink?" he asked.

She regarded him carefully, aware that something was beginning to stir deep inside her. It was a good feeling. She took his arm. It was a strong arm. As he led her into the crowded Rancho Room her heart began to beat a little faster. She needed something desperately. Maybe it was Matt Devore.

Devore noted the movement of her hips under the tight-fitting gray dress as she led the way to a table. He crossed his fingers. He noticed that everybody was watching her. Especially the men. She walked erect, her

head tilted a little to one side as she smiled at various acquaintances.

They had their drinks. Liquor did not seem to help Shelly especially. Too much had happened. Worst of all was the realization that this day someone had tried to kill her.

Devore said, "Letha Kelleray's giving a party tonight. I'm invited. How about going with me?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to refuse. But instead she said, "Yes. Why not?"

They touched glasses and she began to feel a little better.

At *Rancho de los Amigos*, Letha Kelleray lay on the massage table while her plump masseuse Martha pounded and kneaded. Letha scanned her guest list for the cocktail party that night. She enjoyed Rod's work even though she didn't care for many of his associates. The party would be for a chosen few.

Martha, purveyor of health and gossip, said, "I hear there was a shooting at the Del Rio this morning."

"That so? Put a little extra work on my thighs, Martha. I thought I detected a slight bulge."

"Yes, Mrs. Kelleray."

"Higher, Martha. And more gently."

"Yes, Mrs. Kelleray." The huge woman was breathing harder as she worked. She stared at Letha's body as if fascinated. She licked her thick lips.

"All right. That's a good girl. I think I'm ready now. Are you?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Kelleray."

"Then come here, you fat slob. You fat ugly slob." Letha held up her lonely arms.

With a hoarse gasp, the obese Martha fell to the massage table. In a moment the two women were writhing as if in agony.

"Feel better?" Letha said, after a while.

"You know I do," Martha said. "But what I still can't understand is why you bother with a thing like me—

when you can have Margo. She's lonely. She's almost as lonely as you are."

"She was the one who taught me to be this way," Letha said. "It was wonderful while it lasted. But we tired of each other—and there's no one else I could trust, except you."

"Why me?"

"First, because you love me like a faithful dog. Second, because you're dependent on me for large fees. Third, because if you tried to expose me or blackmail me, nobody would take your word against mine."

After a while, Martha left.

Letha heard Rod in the hall. Slipping into a green robe, she went to meet him.

He seemed unusually harassed. "Came home for some papers I forgot," he explained, kissing her on the cheek. "You look lovely. Throw a good party tonight, dear. We want to impress these people."

Letha watched him closely and loosened the belt of her robe, revealing the soft white swell of bosom. "If you were to ask me real nice," she said, "maybe we could—"

"Not now, darling. It would only tire you."

She caught his hand and noticed that his fingers were icy. "It's nice of you to cooperate," she said a little irritably, "but if you want to—just say so."

His smile seemed a little frozen. "Once a month is good enough for me. Let's keep it that way."

Ordinarily she might have patted his cheek and told him she appreciated his feeling for her—a woman didn't want to be constantly mauled. But today something sharp and insidious nagged at her mind.

She fluffed out her hair. "Like the color?"

"Very nice," he said.

"It's red."

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes. "Yes, I noticed. It's becoming." Then he changed the subject, telling her his bank account was overdrawn. "I hate to mention it, but expenses have been pretty high."

"Will three thousand be enough?"

"Make it five and we'll be sure."

She smoothed her robe over her full thighs. "I hear there was trouble at the Del Rio this morning. Somebody took a shot at that redhead who works your Fair." She snapped her fingers. "Shelly Reed—that's her name."

He looked a little drawn around the mouth. "Let's invite Chico McAdam and his wife to the party tonight."

She frowned at his abrupt change of subject but said only, "Chico isn't our kind of people, darling."

"Just because he's part Mexican?" Rod said angrily. "After all, you owe him something. If it weren't for the Mendozas—"

She regarded him narrowly. "Don't forget, if it weren't for the Mendozas I might now be living down Alfabasa Street. I might be somebody's mistress."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You mean I'm not the type to be hotly desired?" she snapped.

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it." She smiled coldly. "I offered myself to you and you turned me down. Just for that you can have only three thousand for the Valley Bank and Trust account."

He said, "Sure, Letha," and started down the circular stairway. Then he turned back. "Were you in town this morning?"

Her shoulders stirred under the green robe. She knew this was what he had come out here to ask her. "I might have been," she said. "Why?"

"Just wondered." He flashed her his boyish smile. Today it was a little forced.

He walked out to the car and sat there waiting until Martha lumbered through the doorway, carrying her portable massage table. Kelleray called her over.

He glanced nervously toward the house, then asked, "Did you tell Mrs. Kelleray about the trouble down at the Del Rio?"

Martha put a plump arm against the car window. "I said there was a shooting. Mrs. Kelleray changed the subject. Guess things like that disturb her."

Rod Kelleray licked his lips. "Did you mention any names? I mean did you tell her who was shot?"

Martha's eyes widened. "How could I? I don't know myself. I just heard some dame was wrestling with a guy when a gun went off. It'll be in the papers tonight, I guess."

When Martha had gone, Kelleray stared through the windshield. Beyond the whitewashed fence a half dozen colts frolicked in the pasture. Once that pasture had been used as a landing strip by Arnie Ross. Three times a week he commuted to San Francisco in his private plane. One day he didn't quite make it. The scarred oak tree where his plane had crashed was still standing at the far end of the pasture. Several times Kelleray had been on the point of suggesting to Letha that she have it removed. But he had never got around to it. Now he wished he had. He hadn't known Ross. Everybody said Arnie Ross had been a nice guy. A lush, maybe, but nice.

Thoughtfully Kelleray drove the five miles back to San Carlos. Before going to the Del Rio, where he would have to look brisk and efficient, he stopped off at a neighborhood bar. Three drinks later he noticed that his hands no longer trembled.

Four

IMPATIENTLY Margo awaited her opportunity to get Marilee alone. The Rancho Room at the Del Rio was crowded. Marilee had consumed four martinis. Now a wisp of her blonde hair fell across her face and she blew it aside. Margo saw Ken get up and walk into the men's room, and she moved quickly between the tables.

She smiled at Marilee. "Phone call for you, honey."

She took Marilee by the arm and jerked her up out of the chair and marched her away from the table where she had been sitting with some of Ken's friends.

When they were outside, Marilee said, "I thought you said somebody was on the phone—"

Margo walked her down the steps to the street. "Why did you come back? I gave you money. I told you to keep going."

"I've got a right to live my own life," Marilee said angrily, trying to pull free of Margo's fingers. But the older woman gripped all the harder. Her eyes blazed angrily.

"Whose idea was it?" Margo snapped. "Yours or Ken's?"

"Mine. He can make big money doing his act. I talked him into coming back here and getting booked up for next year."

Margo's mouth grew tight. "I gave Ken a letter to Max Gelman. He could work all year for Max."

"I'm tired of living back east. All those years in school were enough." She glared at Margo. "We're living in California whether you like it or not."

Suddenly Margo backed the small blonde into an alleyway. "I got you married so you'd be safe. I didn't want you playing around with everybody. You're a pretty kid and I—"

Marilee smiled wickedly. "What makes you think Ken's the first?"

"I don't care about that. You're safe now. That's all that counts. You're married."

Marilee said, "I want to live my own life." She started to cry.

"And I want to live my life," Margo snapped.

"Your life," Marilee said, her lips curling. She took a backward step, nearly tripping over some rubbish. "Maybe you think I don't know about you, but I do. At school I majored in psychology. Do you know why?" Her voice rose. "Because I wanted to find out about you!"

Margo's face turned white. "Shut up!"

Marilee's mouth trembled. "But now I know all about you!" She turned and fled down the alley. For a long moment Margo just stared at her retreating form.

Meanwhile, inside the Rancho Room, Shelly had not wholly missed the incident.

As she sat in a far corner with Matt, she saw the misery on Ken's face. He sat alone at a table, running his hand nervously through his hair, his eyes on the door through which Marilee had disappeared ten minutes ago.

Matt's voice brought her back to her surroundings.

Matt said, "Let's get out of here."

Without giving her a chance to decline, he pulled back her chair. She didn't know where he intended to take her. She didn't care. Outside he explained he had ridden up from L. A. with a friend and didn't have his car. Shelly smiled and gave him the keys to her station wagon as they crossed the street to the parking lot.

His face reddened. "I wasn't hinting for us to use your car."

She climbed into the right-hand seat and said, "You drive." She laid her head back and watched the blue sky.

It would be a relief to find some quiet place away from the confusion of the Del Rio. Too much had happened in the past few hours. Her nerves were completely shot. First, Ken's admission that he was to get married, then her scene with Margo, the deal with Rod Kelleray at the hotel when she had wildly given in to him. That had

been a madness. For Kelleray had charm, there was no denying that. And she admitted to herself that she had reveled recklessly giving him what he had wanted—what she had wanted. There was something about being on the rebound, she knew, that made a girl vulnerable.

She turned her head to study Matt Devore. He had a good profile. Not perfect, but there was a certain ruggedness she admired in a man. Looking back, she wondered how she had once found Ken so attractive. Then she thought it must have been a maternal instinct. When she had first met Ken he had been suffering from a shattered ankle and was embittered because he could no longer do ballet. She had given new meaning to his life, taught him to act. What a laugh. Now Ken intended to be her competitor. She knew it was Marilee's doing. Ken wasn't emotionally geared to risk his neck twice daily for a whole season, not without an experienced trouper like herself on hand to buoy him up.

Matt noticed her thoughtfulness. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head. She seemed to be peering intently at the hills that rose steep and green on either side of the road as they left San Carlos behind.

She said, "Let's find a quiet spot."

He was aware of a tremor of excitement along his nerves. Here was this beautiful redhead looking for a quiet spot. He remembered what Hoke Deeson had told him. Well, he was going to get there first, if at all possible.

He said, "I have to be back in time for Letha Kelleray's party."

"You'll be back in plenty of time," she said coolly. "If you're worried, we can turn back now."

"No, I didn't mean it that way." He swore silently. Redheads were too tempermental.

"It's business—"

He tromped down on the gas pedal and the station wagon leaped ahead. For several miles they drove in silence and every moment of the way he was remembering how she had looked in the bathroom doorway.

He turned into a narrow graveled road that led off into the hills. "Let's see where this goes," he said.

He braked the car in a grove of cypress trees. To one side they could see the sparkling blue ocean and the toy village of Carmel nestling in the hills below.

He was debating his next action, when she decided it for them. She stepped out of the car and began to walk down a steep trail that led to the deserted beach. The sea breeze whipped her peasant skirt around her, pressed it tight against the curve of thigh and hip.

She turned and called, "Are you coming?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued her descent.

He had to run to catch up with her. He caught her by a bare arm and he felt her tremble and draw away at his touch. He frowned, not knowing how to take her. One moment she acted as if she liked him, the next minute she avoided his hand as if she couldn't stand him.

When she reached the sand she put out a hand to steady herself, holding him by the arm. She took off her sandals and carried them. In a little cove where the trees were thick and sand was piled high on either side, she suddenly sank down. Drawing her legs up under her, she began to pick up handfuls of sand. She let the grains dribble through her fingers.

He sat down beside her. "You're beautiful, Shelly."

As she turned to look at him he saw that her blue eyes were strangely bright. She said, "I wish I'd worn a bathing suit."

"The water's cold this time of year."

"Maybe, but I'd still like it."

"Let's go swimming anyway," he said.

She watched him a moment, then with a long forefinger, traced the pattern of his mouth. He kissed her finger and gently bit the end of it. She withdrew her hand. "We couldn't swim that way. Somebody might see us."

"So what?"

Her lips curved in a faint smile. "You think I want to end up in jail? We'd be a fine pair. Arrested for bathing in the nude."

"It wouldn't exactly be in the nude. I'm wearing shorts and I suppose you—"

"I don't think it would be a good idea."

Sitting with her on the sand, he felt like a schoolboy. He'd always felt at ease with women before. But something about her made him nervous, unsure of himself. He vainly fought for words that would lead up to the subject foremost in his mind. But he seemed tongue-tied.

She helped him out. "I must have looked awful standing there in the bathroom. But you surprised me so." She let her eyes flick to his reddening face.

"You were the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Were?" She laughed. "Don't I look as good with my clothes on?"

He grinned and wiped a hand across his moist forehead. Then he remembered Hoke Deeson saying it was a pity that she'd have to fool around with so many guys before the convention was over. Matt swallowed. You stupid fool, he told himself. Do something!

He caught her by the shoulders and kissed her.

After a moment she drew away and put her head on his chest. She said, "I—I was wondering when you were going to get around to kissing me."

She lay down on her stomach in the sand, her long legs poking out of her loose skirt with an artless grace that made Matt gulp.

When he suddenly passed his arm under her and drew her against him, she pulled away and said, "Damn."

He looked at a narrow strip of white ribbon that had fallen loosely across the front of her low-necked blouse.

"I broke a strap," she said smiling. Still watching him, she put a hand to her other shoulder and jerked the remaining strap loose from its moorings. "I don't care," she whispered. She turned her back on him. "It's useless now. Can you undo it, Matt? It's got three hooks."

Clumsily he worked the hooks loose. "There," he said, trying to grin as he drew out the bra.

Then her hands disappeared and in a moment she was kicking something pink and sheer from around her ankles. Then she lay back on the sand, her red toenails

winking at him in the sunlight. She put a bare forearm across her eyes to shield them from the sun. But in a moment it was no longer necessary to block out the sun with her arm. Something threw a shadow across her face. And then she was reaching for the shadow, whispering, "Matt—Matt—"

He was beside himself with raging desire. This wonderful lovely girl. This beauty. All this! His lips found one of her superb breasts, tasted of rosy crown. Then he crushed his mouth to hers, tasting the fragrance of her, savoring the lashing tip of her wet, sweet tongue. Her hands, like trickling electricity, sent delightful shocks along his spine, his hips, the backs of his legs. He lowered his own fingers and clutched her silky thighs, caressing and stroking her, loving her. At the same time, her soft lips were exploring on his chest, driving him to a new height of excitement.

And then there was entreaty in her murmurings. She could stand the love play no longer. Enough of preliminaries. She lay tense on her back, mouth and eyes eager, legs long and lithe and inviting. With a sigh of pure delight, he raised himself, poised on his knees, and then plunged for the velvety mystery of her, the secret cup of her intoxicating womanhood.

In a convulsion like an earthquake, the two bodies, male and female, met and locked. In the soft arms of Shelly, Matt soared on satin wings to a wild ecstasy beyond any he had ever known . . .

She smoked a cigarette, carefully watching his face. The sun had nearly disappeared by now and a wind had come up. She drew her legs under her and tightened the skirt around her ankles.

"What's the matter, Matt?"

"Nothing."

"But there is." She put out her cigarette in the sand, then held her hands out to him. He made no attempt to take them.

After a moment he said, "When did you decide that you'd—I mean—"

Her brows arched above her blue eyes. "Is that so important?"

"No, I guess it isn't."

"If it will make you feel better, I made up my mind as we were driving out here." She turned to look at the sea. The sun was gone. Purple shadows lay deep across the water. "I had to prove something, Matt," she said. "Does that make me so brazen?"

"What did you have to prove?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I know," he said unexpectedly. "You wanted to prove you weren't still carrying that torch for that guy who left you. That's it."

She gave him a weary smile. "I see you've heard the whole story."

"Well, what about it?"

She picked up a handful of sand, released it and watched the breeze whip it away. "I don't love him any more. You demonstrated that to me conclusively, Matt. That's what I wanted to find out."

"And you'd have found it out with any man. I just happened to be around!"

She narrowed her blue eyes. "I don't expect you to have much of an opinion of my virtue. But that was an unkind thing to say."

"I'm sorry." He stood up and put out a hand and pulled her to her feet. He forced a grin. "Well, anyhow, save a little for me, will you?"

She brushed sand from her skirt. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Forget it. I'm always speaking out of turn."

She caught him by the arm and looked up into his troubled face. "Do you think I'd do this with anyone else, Matt?"

"Well, wouldn't you?"

"No. Not anyone. I—I felt you were different."

They turned to climb the steep path back to the car. On the ride back he tried to forget Hoke Deeson and

what Hoke had said in the Del Rio lobby. "I know you'll be busy. But maybe you can find a little time for me." With a vicious tug at the wheel, he turned the station wagon onto the main highway. "Hope you get some good contracts for next year."

"If I don't, I won't eat."

Her words sobered him somewhat. "Yeah, I guess it is pretty tough on a girl, trying to make it alone."

They didn't speak again until he had parked the station wagon in the lot across the street from the Del Rio. He helped her out and gave her the keys. "You still want to go to the Kelleray party?"

She peered up at his shadowed face. "Are you angry with me?"

"No, why?"

"You've acted so strangely since we—since we were on the beach."

He walked across the street with her and, on the hotel steps, he said, "I'll pick you up at eight."

She went into the hotel alone, feeling dirty and cheap. In her room she looked at her reflection in the mirror. "You've made a mess of things, Shelly Reed," she told herself. "A big fat mess."

That afternoon when Rod left for town, Letha suddenly was aware of the tension he had been under. It had been communicated to her by the way he watched her, the tight springs of tension in his voice and his manner. When Martha left some minutes later, something had prompted Letha to glance through her bedroom window. All she could see of Martha was her plump rear. Martha had her head stuck in the window of Rod's coupe. They seemed to be in earnest conversation, for the faint hum of their voices drifted up to her. In a moment, Martha plodded down the steep driveway to her own ancient sedan and drove off. And Rod sent his coupe roaring down the road to San Carlos, with even more speed and less caution than usual.

The topic of Rod's conversation with Martha was a

thorn in Letha's mind. She'd try to pump Rod when he came home to dress for the party. If he seemed evasive or flatly refused to divulge the nature of the discussion, then she'd get it out of Martha. She could trick Martha into revealing almost anything if she kept at it long enough.

A commotion in the yard drew her to the window again. She saw a truck pulling into the yard, a burly man at the wheel. The groom was yelling that this was a private road, no trucks allowed. The driver shouted an obscenity, nearly ran down the slight, bowlegged groom, then drove the truck to the top of the steep grade above the garages and braked it. He leaped out of the truck and began to wave a meaty fist at the groom.

Letha threw a cotton dress over her head and stormed downstairs. She was zippering the dress as she reached the yard.

The groom saw her coming and his thin face showed relief. "Ma'am, this man—"

The big stranger turned to glare at Letha.

"Who are you?" he asked belligerently.

Letha ignored him. It was plain by his rough clothes and brutal manner that he was a common person.

The stranger went on, "I'm bringin' stuff for the party."

"What do you mean by stuff?" Letha asked coldly.

The big man had a broken nose and a cauliflower ear. He said, "I was sent over here as a committee of one. Your husband figured it would be a good idea to have signs hangin' all over the joint to advertise the Fairs. I brung the signs. Now where do you want 'em?"

"Put them anywhere you care to." She went into the house and dressed for town. She wore a new suit and hat and gloves. She told the groom she would take the convertible. She was walking down the steep drive when somebody yelled.

She whirled, staring. One of the bigger, heavier signs propped against a tree by Burt had begun to slip and threatened to topple over on her. She stood rigid with fright.

"Jump!" a voice yelled. But she couldn't jump. She was frozen.

Then she was suddenly caught up in a flurry of arms. She was hurled flat in the soft dirt of the petunia bed alongside the house. There was a crash of splintering wood and glass.

She was certain her back was broken. She couldn't move. Opening her eyes, she saw the coarse angry face of the stranger above her own. The face with the swollen jaw. And in that instant she was aware that his arms were tight about her. And it was the weight of his huge body that pinned her to the ground. Something delicious and tingling sped through her body. She closed her eyes and it seemed to her that she sank deep into the soft warm earth. She hated the man-sweat odor of him. His arms were crushing her and she wanted to faint. She was aware of cold air on her thighs but she made no effort to pull down her skirt.

Then he was standing up and he put out a hand and jerked her roughly to her feet.

"You didn't jump when I yelled," he snarled at her. "You might have got your fool neck busted!"

Shaken, she stared at the splintered debris, turned her eyes to the acres that stretched as far as she could see. This was her ranch. She was a power in this community. And the stranger had treated her like a common . . . She didn't finish the thought.

Trembling, she brushed dirt from her skirt. "I'll send you a bill for the flower bed," she told him furiously.

He leered at her. "Why don't you take it out in trade, sweetheart?" She gasped, completely stunned at his vile suggestion. He said, "I save your damn head from getting busted and you want to send me a bill!"

The groom stood by as if petrified, his mouth open.

Letha Kelleray said, "What is your name?"

"Burt Lenshaw."

"I'm going to report this to my husband, Mr. Lenshaw. He'll take the proper steps!"

Burt Lenshaw regarded her. She was tall, with a good body. He had felt its strength under him on the ground

together. Not a young one, but completely desirable. And there was heat in her. He had felt it through her clothing in that moment. Now anger stirred in her eyes, but there was something else in their depths. He had seen that look in menagerie cats when they had been too long without a mate.

She turned and went into the house because she was unable to think of anything incisive enough to say to him. Her mind seemed blank. She threw off her dirtied clothes and showered. But even five minutes under an arctic needle-sharp spray did not ease the tautness in her chest. Naked, her beautiful body glistening, Letha stepped into her bedroom. She decided not to go into town after all. She would take a nap. One hour, with an eye shade.

She toweled and lay down on the bed. She turned restlessly on her side, aware that her upper right arm was sore. She stared at it, seeing the black and blue imprint of fingers. Suddenly the mark seemed red hot. She clenched her arm with her left hand. Gradually her breathing quieted. She got up and threw on a robe. Then she went to the phone and dialed her husband's office. When Rod came on the wire she said, "I want you to invite Burt Lenshaw to the party."

"But, darling, he's one of the people you wouldn't like—"

"I was horrid to him today. I want you to invite him."

"But why?"

"It's my way of making amends." She replaced the receiver, aware that she was hardly breathing at all.

Five

THAT night the main tiled-roofed house of *Rancho de los Amigos* in the San Carlos hills was ablaze with light. Since a little past sundown, a steady stream of cars had been climbing the narrow road leading to the estate. Around the grounds were signs advertising the various fairs—Bascom County Fair, Tri-County Fair, Owens County Fair. Letha had engaged the five-piece band from the hotel for the evening. Their music was danceable enough. And Letha had dressed up Henry, the groom, in a butler's outfit and made him tend bar.

When Shelly and Matt Devore made their entrance, the musicians were playing their final chorus of *Dinah*. Their eyes went to Shelly and their expressions said they appreciated what they saw.

Matt took Shelly by the arm and moved her through the crowd. She nodded at familiar faces. They came to the bar. There Henry, his thick hair plastered down, was just mixing a double screwdriver for the boss. He poured two slugs of vodka into a glass, then added orange juice.

"What a horrible concoction," Shelly said, wrinkling her nose.

"Doesn't smell on the breath," Rod Kelleray said in her ear. "That is, not much." He grinned. But a moment later he seemed strangely reserved when Shelly introduced him to Matt Devore.

Kelleray said, "Glad you could come, Shelly," and didn't look at Matt.

Shelly's cheeks burned at Kelleray's rudeness. She put a hand on Matt's arm. "Matt is here to drum up business for his equipment firm," she told Kelleray. "You ought to give him a shot at your fair, Rod."

Kelleray smiled. "If you'd like me to give the guy a

break, maybe I will." He gave Matt a brief nod and disappeared into the crowd.

Matt looked at Shelly angrily. "I can drum up my own business!"

"I'm sorry. I thought I was doing you a favor."

"I don't have to get my business—the way you get yours."

She looked at him sharply. "Just what was that supposed to mean?"

Instead of answering, he ordered a bourbon for himself and a Tom Collins for Shelly.

Shelly held the cold glass in her hands and said thoughtfully, "You haven't been very nice to me, Matt."

"Haven't I?"

"Let's forget what happened today. I can see I made a mistake. But we're at the party now, so let's enjoy ourselves."

Carrying her drink, she crossed the big room with its huge windows that overlooked the valley. Matt started to follow her, then changed his mind.

Marilee danced by in Ken's arms. She greeted Shelly like a long lost friend. "I'm so glad you're here Shelly," she said, putting her hands on Shelly's arms. She seemed to be having a hard time focusing her eyes.

Shelly thought, she's loaded. Poor Ken.

Faces were turned their way. Eyes were watching. Hoke Deeson was dancing with Margo. The soft overhead lights caught the reflection of the diamonds on his fingers. He was wearing one of his loud suits, a two-tone green job. He clenched a cigar in one corner of his mouth. He danced up close and said. "Save a dance for me, Shelly." Then he added, "You got a lot of friends here, Shelly."

Margo's eyes remained a frosty gray.

Marilee giggled and said, "I swear, Shelly, everybody is looking out for you. And to think I was worried!"

Shelly sipped her drink and thought it was suddenly very sour.

Marilee bubbled, "I'm so relieved. You see, I felt sort of responsible for you. You being a redhead and all. And

I've heard how redheads are so terrific when they—well, you know. And you being left suddenly without a man—”

“If I didn't want to make a scene,” Shelly said through her teeth, “I'd slap your face.”

Ken said miserably, “Marilee!”

But Marilee seemed not to hear. “I saw you come in with a man. He's nice looking, all right, so that relieves me. I felt so guilty, taking Ken from you. But I hope your new boy friend is as good as Ken.” She hugged Ken's arm. Ken's face was flaming. Marilee said, “And Ken is very good—thanks to all you taught him.”

Rod Kelleray overheard the last part of it. He gave Ken a hard stare and said, “Your wife needs some fresh air.” Then he took Shelly's glass and set it down. “This is the dance you've been saving for me,” he told her.

They danced off and Shelly whispered, “Thanks, Rod. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life. In another minute I'd have killed her.”

“Ken had better wake up to the fact that he's going to have his hands full with that chick.” As they passed Matt, Kelleray said, “How about that guy? Is it serious?”

Shelly bit her lower lip. “No, it isn't serious.” She stared at Matt. He was sipping a drink and watching her. He looked angry but she was the one who should be angry. She had given herself to him on the beach—and he had been acting strangely ever since. Well, she'd been a fool. She guessed some men still had old-fashioned ideas about a girl's virginity. She had tried to make Matt understand. But she knew what he thought of her. She was a tramp. Well, maybe he was right. She had lived with Ken. And last night she had been with Rod Kelleray. And today at Carmel—yes, according to convention, she decided, she was a tramp. Well, the hell with convention.

Kelleray went on, “I'm glad you're not serious about that guy, because I've got plans for us.”

Shelly said, “Your plans had better include Letha. She's keeping tabs on you.”

And she was. Letha Kelleray stood at the bar, glaring across the room. She wore a green dress that was almost

a duplicate of Shelly's. She had worn it to compliment her new hair. Now she was furious.

Margo glided over to Letha and gave her a malicious grin. "You look wonderful tonight, darling."

Letha caught the sarcasm in her voice. "And so do you. Much better than in those turtleneck sweaters you usually wear."

Margo didn't lose her grin. She lifted a hand to tuck in a strand of loose blond hair. "Green is so becoming to you red-headed women. You and Shelly. It was wise to dye your hair again. Rod has a weakness for red-heads—"

Letha stalked out of the room. She had deliberately not invited Shelly to the party and it had surprised her to come downstairs and find her dancing with Rod.

Outside it was cool. A new moon hung over the eastern hills.

Letha lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. She had met Shelly Reed only once or twice out at the fairgrounds. But she had heard all about the girl. In Letha's opinion, Rod was showing poor taste to dance with her.

A sound at her elbow caused her to turn. A huge shadowy shape stood beside her. At the moment she couldn't place the broad, brutal features. Then she remembered. But he looked so different.

Burt Lenshaw said, trying to soften his usually harsh voice, "Sure is a pretty night, ain't it, Mrs. Kelleray?"

It had surprised him when Rod Kelleray had flagged him down at the Del Rio and told him he was invited to the party. In the whole world, Lenshaw had respect for only money—and the people who had it. To him, a party at the Kellerays meant soup and fish. He had looked up a rental agency that catered to the college crowd. He had a hard time finding a formal to fit.

Letha said coolly, "You look just like a waiter."

Lenshaw scowled, inclining his head to see if she were kidding him. But she looked regal, so calm and cool. In that green dress she was a dish, all right. Not a kid, but really stacked.

"You like the tux, huh?" he said.

Letha said, "Where did you get the idea this party was formal?" She laughed, trying to find in this ridiculous figure a whipping boy upon which to vent her anger and bitterness. "You're the only one in evening clothes."

"Well, I just wanted to make a good impression."

She looked up into the misshapen features. "I don't know who in the world you think you could impress, Mr. Lenshaw."

"Well, I—" he dug a thick finger into the space between his red neck and his collar band. He didn't know how to tie a bowtie and the man at the rental shop had given him a ready-tied job, but the elastic was too tight.

Letha started to step around him to return to the house but he thrust out an arm to block her. She ran into it. It was solid.

She said coolly, "Let me by."

He didn't lower his arm. Something began to simmer in the back of his mind. "I figured it was you that wanted me out here."

"And why would I want you?" she asked scornfully.

He let his gaze drift to the flower bed beside the house, only a faint blur now in the shadows.

He grinned. "You and me had a little fun today."

"Did you by any chance imagine that I—that I—" She seemed at a loss for words. Now the very idea of his touch seemed appalling. She threw back her head and laughed. The laughter had a sharp edge to it.

He said, "I got something to talk over with you." He was choosing his words. She was class, he had decided, and so he would have to be a little classy himself if he wanted to get anywhere.

Again she started for the house and this time she evaded his clawing fingers. "If you ever," she said furiously, "put a hand on me again, I'll have you arrested."

"Charging me with what?" he sneered.

"Never mind. I have power in this community. The chief of police is a friend of mine."

He watched her as she stormed across the wide porch into the house.

"The crazy goddamn bitch!" he said violently under his breath. He reached for his tie and jerked it off roughly, hurling it into the shadows.

Henry was in a sweat mixing drinks when Letha re-entered the house. Before tonight she had always enjoyed these parties and didn't mind the expense. It gave her a feeling of superiority to think that because of her husband all the people had jobs. She was generous and her money had allowed Rod to win the coveted award for having the best Fair in the state last year. He might get it again this year. But now she didn't care.

Letha stalked across the crowded room. She tried to smile at her guests, but inwardly she was boiling. That oaf in those evening clothes. How positively ridiculous he looked. How could she have been so stupid as to invite him?

Letha marched upstairs. She'd be damned if she was going to wear this rag of a green dress. Not when Shelly Reed was wearing an almost exact duplicate. Letha had paid a hundred dollars for her dress in San Francisco. The Reed girl had probably spent no more than twenty. A copy of an expensive model. It was an insult to one's taste. It was getting so that money meant less and less. When a swaypole artist could dress as well as Letha Kellera, then the world was surely upside down.

Upstairs in her spacious, scented bedroom she stared at herself in the full-length mirror beside her dressing table. She was pale. She needed more rouge. Scenes such as the one tonight would age her. They'd put lines in her lovely face and all her work would be for naught—all those hours of riding and sitting up on her slanting board, and all the expensive creams and lotions and—when she thought of Martha her anger increased. She would demand that Rod tell her what they were talking about.

She lifted a hand to the neckline of her new green dress. With a downward sweep she ripped it clear to the waist. She stepped out of it and kicked it under the

bed. Crossing the room in her slip, she slid open the doors of the wardrobe closet that took up one whole wall of the room. She took out a sheer black dress, stepped into it, zippered it up and walked to her dressing table. She was fumbling for the rouge container when she saw the newspaper clipping.

Her blood froze as she spied it. It was weighted down by her powder box. It was a picture of Margo in jodhpurs. The caption said: *Police Question House Guest In Ross Tragedy*. The story had been torn away and only the photograph and caption had been preserved. Letha sank to the bench in front of the dressing table.

"No!" she said aloud. Her breathing was heavy as she stared at three words written in heavy black pencil across the photograph: *What about this?*

She picked up the phone on the dressing table and dialed a number. A voice said, "San Carlos Police."

"This is Letha Kelleray. I want to speak to Chief Milfont."

"Sorry, he isn't here, Mrs. Kelleray."

"Can I reach him at home? It's quite important."

"He's at a Crime Commission meeting."

She put down the phone. She opened a drawer and hid the newspaper clipping under a stack of nylon slips. Then she closed the drawer.

When she went back downstairs, the party had become a disgusting brawl. Or it seemed so to her. The lights had been turned down. Only the piano player remained at his post. The other four musicians were dancing with guests. Hoke Deeson had removed his coat. He was doing one-arm push-ups in the center of the room as the crowd danced around him, laughing.

"You're only up to six, Hoke," Rod Kelleray said. "Keep going."

"I'll make it ten," Deeson gasped. "I used to do twenty—"

Suddenly he collapsed and rolled over on his back to the great delight of the crowd. "Somebody gimme a drink," he panted.

"Here's a drink for you, bright-eyes," Marilee said, emptying her martini glass in his face.

Deeson scrambled to his feet, face dripping. He caught Marilee around the waist and pulled her to a chair. He sat down and drew her across his lap, face down. Holding her in place with one hand, he lifted her dress with the other. She wore flimsy blue panties. He began to whack her backside with the flat of his hand. Marilee squealed and kicked her feet. One of her stockings came unfastened and crawled down her thigh.

Rod Kelleray stood at the edge of the whooping crowd, his eyes on Marilee's legs. He clutched his tall drink. His eyes were glassy and his mouth hung open. "Atta boy, Hoke," he said hoarsely. "If you get tired, I'll take over." He waved his glass enthusiastically.

Ken elbowed his way through the crowd. "That's enough, Hoke!"

Hoke looked up at him, blinking his eyes. "She might have blinded me with that martini." Then he grinned. "But I'm only teachin' her a lesson. I'm not sore."

He gave Marilee an extra swat for good luck and she jumped off his lap and pulled down her dress. She rubbed her bottom and made an exaggerated grimace of pain.

Margo, who had been watching, said, "You liked it."

Marilee grinned. "It was fun." She staggered a little and caught Ken by the lapels of his jacket. "Don't be mad," she giggled. "I must be a masochist. I enjoy having people beat me." She looked over her shoulder at Margo. "Guess I'm odd, like some other people I know."

Margo's eyes hated her but the woman made no reply.

Ken walked stiffly to the bar.

Even now Shelly could not help feeling sorry for him. Marilee was going to be hard to handle. She was headstrong and had the moral restraint of a rabbit. She was sitting on a chair and had pulled up her dress again, revealing her tempting legs to the thighs, and was fastening her garters.

The piano player started on *Stardust*. Kelleray came up and asked Shelly to dance. "Remember that number?"

She shook her head.

"I played it that night at Italian Gardens. On the juke box. We were all set to have fun that night—"

"If it hadn't been for your wife."

"What about his wife?"

Letha's voice cut through the talk and noise around them. Shelly turned. Letha was smiling her perfect-hostess smile. She had changed her dress. But she couldn't change her hair. Not until she went to the beauty parlor. She held out her arms, saying to Shelly, "Mind if I dance with my husband?"

A sudden hush settled over the room and Hoke Deeson sounded loud and drunk. "Watch out, Shelly. She's got claws."

Letha showed her teeth in that smile again. "You're so witty, Mr. Deeson."

Kelleray looked a little sick around the mouth as he danced his wife across the floor.

Shelly had had only one drink. Now she walked over to the bar and smiled at Henry. "Screwdriver, please."

She had just taken a sip when she found Matt at her elbow. His face was dark and angry and she knew he was a little tight.

"I don't blame Mrs. Kelleray for being sore," he said thickly. A lock of hair fell across his forehead and he made a half-hearted effort to brush it aside. "The way Kelleray keeps looking at you, I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't true."

She set down her glass. "If what isn't true, Matt?"

"I hear what people say. They say Kelleray's sweet on you. And I can't help wondering how many times you and he . . ."

She left him standing there. She got her coat and crossed the wide porch to where a line of taxis waited. She heard him call after her but she got into the nearest cab and said, "Del Rio Hotel. And hurry, please."

Even before the cab was out of the drive she was crying.

The San Carlos Police Station was adobe-walled out front with grilled iron windows that were meant to sug-

gest the Spanish atmosphere of the town. But whatever aspect of comfort and hospitality the Mexican *rancheros* had bequeathed the countryside was missing from the building's interior. Chief of Police Homer Milfont snapped the button on his intercom and yelled for Chico McAdam.

One word described Chief Milfont. He overflowed. His plump arms overflowed from the sleeves of his jacket, his beefy neck overflowed from the topside, pushing his small round head up where it could get the air and the light and be looked at. Since becoming chief, Milfont had instituted a tough policy toward fellow townsfolk. Townsfolk from the wrong side of town, that is. The Mexicans and the laboring whites were on the bottom rung of the ladder, the tradesmen a notch above them. But the group to be catered to were those from the pioneer families. Such as Letha Kelleray. No matter how the original settlers had made their money, their descendants were rich and in the eyes of Homer Milfont a fat checkbook was the only authority. He liked money. Before he was through with his job, he hoped to be able to retire to a comfortable hilltop layout.

Chico McAdams entered the office, his dark face expressionless. "You wanted me?"

Even though it was early in the morning, Milfont had started to perspire. He stuffed a white handkerchief into the band of his collar.

"Good morning, Sergeant."

Chico McAdam removed a thin black cigar from his breast pocket and started to light it. The chief had called him sergeant. That meant the chief was angry, disturbed or both.

Chief Milfont said, "Do you have to smoke them damn things?"

McAdam dropped the burned match and flicked the cigar into an ashtray.

Milfont squirmed in his swivel chair and the springs groaned. McAdam's cool manner irritated him. He thoroughly hated McAdam, but needed him. Only McAdam seemed able to persuade the Mexican populace

that the police department wasn't carrying on a vendetta against them. Last year two Mexicans and a white prune picker had died in the jail. They had fallen out of the top bunks in the drunk tank to the stone floor, the official report to the investigating grand jury said. As a result, the Mexicans were none too cooperative when arrested subsequently by the local constabulary. That was when McAdam was needed. He spoke Spanish and he was one of them. He could convince them they would get a fair trial. And they always did, when McAdam was on the case.

In his quiet way McAdam had managed to put through a few reforms of his own. Now when a Mexican was arrested, his nationality wasn't stated on the booking slip. McAdam had patiently explained to his chief that these people were in actuality Americans. They'd been here a good many years before the Yankees, in fact.

Chief Milfont lit one of his own cigars. "Letha Kelleray phoned."

McAdam leaned against the door and folded his arms. "So?"

Red crawled up Milfont's thick neck. He was obviously nettled at his sergeant's calm in the face of what was to be considered a crisis. He slammed a fat fist on the desk. "You were snooping around the Kelleray place early this morning. Why?"

McAdam shrugged. "Letha's father left one of the finest gun collections in this part of the country. I just wanted to have a look at it."

Milfont rose from his chair and glared at McAdam. "Are you trying to insinuate that Letha Kelleray took a shot at that dame in the hotel yesterday?"

"I just wanted to see if any of the guns were missing." His gaze remained steady. "Or if any of them had been fired recently."

Milfont studied McAdam's face. "You mean to tell me you think Letha Kelleray is the kind of woman who'd go downtown in broad daylight and shoot a gun through a hotel window?"

"It's possible."

"A woman would have to be nuts to do a thing like that."

"Somebody did it," McAdam reminded him. He took a piece of flattened lead from his pocket and flipped it a couple of times in his hand. "I dug this out of the wall in Shelly Reed's room."

Milfont removed the cigar from his mouth and stared at the smoke seeping between his fat fingers. "You match it up?"

McAdam waited a moment before he answered, letting the chief sweat it out. "Ballistics couldn't do anything with it. Too misshapen."

With obvious relief Milfont sank back into his swivel chair. "Then you lay off Mrs. Kelleray, you understand?" He jerked open a drawer and laid a strip of newsprint on the desk. "Ever see this before?"

McAdam crossed to the desk and looked at a photograph of Margo taken at the time of Arnie Ross's death. "I remember it," he said. "I questioned Margo myself. What's this got to do with the Reed shooting?"

Still watching McAdam, Milfont pointed to the words printed across the face of the photograph: *What about this?*

McAdam shrugged. "I'll say the same thing. What about it?"

Chief Milfont said, "Letha Kelleray sent it over this morning. She tried to contact me last night, but I was out." Milfont's small eyes were watchful as he added, "Somebody's trying to blackmail Mrs. Kelleray, that's my guess."

"Maybe. She's probably got enough in her past to tempt a blackmailer. Wouldn't you agree?"

"What's that crack supposed to mean?"

"Arnie Ross."

The chief jumped to his feet and began to hammer his desk. "You got an assignment!" he bellowed. "Right now. You're going to spend all your time trying to find out who's putting the bite on Mrs. Kelleray."

"Is that an order?"

"You're damn right that's an order!" The chief swung

around the desk and jabbed McAdam in the chest with his thumb. "You try and stir up that Ross mess again and I'll have you checking traffic on a three-wheeler!"

McAdam said quietly, "Sure, Chief."

Six

McADAM walked out, closing the office door behind him. He stood in the hallway a moment and the heavy smell of disinfectant in the air sickened him. Sometimes he almost hated his grandfather for allowing Letha's grandfather to get the best of things. It galled a man to think he might have been rich and able to give his wife and kids something in this world—instead of being subject to the whims of a neuropathic grafter like Chief Homer Milfont.

McAdam took a deep breath when he thought of the three-wheeled motorcycle he had broken in on when he joined the force. Would he be back at that again soon? Riding down the streets in the business district with a piece of red chalk at the end of a long stick. Marking tires for overtime parking. Taking a cut in salary, forgetting about summer camp for the kids, or college. All because Letha Kelleray was able to buy a puppet named Milfont and could pull the strings whenever she desired.

Once his grandfather had had a sheep camp where the San Carlos Police Station now stood.

Then he remembered his grandfather in his last years. Riding his white horse Blanco with the silver-mounted saddle in the parade every year during Fiesta Week. It was his one day a year when again he was the *ranchero*. Once again he owned this land and he gave away his money—what there was of it. But Blanco was just a different white horse every year, for the original Blanco had died long before Chico's own mother had married. And the silver-mounted saddle was borrowed from the museum. Grandfather Mendoza's mind had gone back to the gentle days of his youth.

It was four years ago at the Fiesta that Grandfather

Mendoza had thrown down his sombrero in the roped-off street. And he had danced while the crowd of tourists and townspeople cheered. And when it was over and he was breathing heavily, Letha Kelleray, standing at the edge of the crowd, had said loudly, "Imagine an old man like that making such a complete fool of himself."

There had been a hush. And in that moment Grandfather Mendoza had looked at her and his mind had returned from the sunny memories and entered the winter of his body. He had picked up his sombrero and bowed to her grandly, his thin back and shoulders still straight.

"Yes, señora," he said softly. "I am a fool."

He had put on his hat and walked through the crowd. In the morning he had not awakened. And they had summoned the priest and the doctor. The priest had stayed. It had been too late for the doctor. Rafael Jesus Mendoza's pride had suffered its final blow in a world he could no longer understand.

And it was for this too that Chico McAdam hated Letha Kelleray. For removing the last shred of dignity from a harmless old man.

As the day progressed Shelly Reed grew painfully aware of her situation. She was getting contracts, all right, but it was a constant battle. For instance, the manager of the Bascom County Fair asked her to come up to the Fair headquarters on the fifth floor. When she arrived, the manager was alone. He was drinking, still hung over from last night. He was a little man named Jed Franklin. She wanted to discuss a contract for next year. But he said, "Later." He wanted her to drank and dance with him. She turned down both ideas.

When they sat down on the sofa to go over the contract, he tried to slide his hand along her leg and she slapped him.

He cursed her. "From what I hear, you weren't so fussy with that Ken Brighton—" He tore the contract

into small pieces and let them flutter out the window. "You won't play my Fair. Now or ever!"

He didn't even turn around to look at her as she left.

She had had a few similar experiences that morning and she could stand it no longer. She went into the Rancho Room, ordered an old-fashioned. Hoke Deeson sat down at her table, twisted one of his diamond rings thoughtfully as he asked, "You having a rough time, kid?"

Shelly nodded. She felt humiliated after her experiences that morning. Deliberately she had worn a conservative gray suit and a white blouse and shoes with medium heels, wanting to appear businesslike. But clothes didn't seem to matter. She told Hoke about the Bascom County Fair manager.

Hoke rubbed his balding dome and said, "I'd like to punch his face."

"That wouldn't do any good," Shelly sipped her drink. "It's because of Ken. I suppose you can't blame them. They think because Ken and I were together all year that I'm an easy mark."

"A punch in the face ain't what I'd like to give Ken," Hoke Deeson said grimly. "I never did like the guy."

"Well, it's all over. I want to forget it."

Hoke was drinking beer out of a bottle. His attire today was loud as usual—checked jacket and plaid shirt, brown trousers and brown and white shoes. But he was one guy a girl could trust. He made plenty every year as owner of the concessions in Margo's show. He gave a lot of it away. Shelly knew of troupers down on their luck who ate regularly only because of Hoke's generosity. He was crude and a show-off, but under it all he was more genuine than most of the people with polished exteriors that thronged the Rancho Room.

"Look, kid," Hoke Deeson said. "There's one way you could get over the hump."

"Tell me, Hoke. I'll jump at anything."

Hoke squirmed in his chair. "When me and my wife busted up I swore I'd never get hooked again." He

hesitated, obviously embarrassed. "But if you was Mrs. Hoke Deeson everybody would leave you alone."

She felt her shoulders stiffen. "Hoke, that's so generous of you—"

"Don't be silly. A good-looking wife would help me in my business."

She shook her head. "Even if I wanted to, it wouldn't work."

"I know. I'm not such a romantic guy."

"It isn't that. It's Margo. If I married you, I'd have to travel with her show."

"Margo loves a lot of things," Hoke Deeson said soberly, "but mostly she loves a dollar. She makes money off me." He leaned forward. "I'd buy you a six-thousand-buck trailer. You'd live in that while the show is on the road. You'd be the free act with the show. And I'll guarantee one thing, kid. You wouldn't have to worry about Margo."

"It's very sweet of you."

He went on, "You'd be booked solid for the whole season. No worries about how to get contracts. We'd stay married as long as you wanted to. If you found somebody else, you could check out any time. And no hard feelings."

Shelly bit her lip. "Let me think it over, Hoke." She stood up and gave him her hand, then turned and went out into the crowded lobby. When she started for the street door, Matt blocked her. He looked very serious.

"I've got to talk to you, Shelly. About last night."

"Go ahead and talk."

"You're sore."

She looked at him. "Shouldn't I be? You accused me of having an affair with Rod Kelleray." She walked on.

"I was jealous." He swung in beside her, gripping her arm. "Don't you understand that?"

She knocked his hand aside. "Why are you trying to be nice to me?"

"You're a good kid."

"You didn't think so last night. I believe you're trying to softsoap me. You'd like a little more of what we had

on the beach together." She felt malicious. "I must have been pretty good."

They were on the steps now, the autumn wind in their faces. He looked upset. "You make it sound like—"

"I've worked around men all my life. I know how they talk about girls." She started down the steps. "You thought I was a tramp because I let you—" She made an angry gesture. "Oh, what's the use!"

She left him standing on the street and strolled down to the business district, then back again. By that time she had made up her mind. In order to survive, she would have to be mercenary. Two years of marriage to Hoke Deeson. Two years, then she would have enough saved to go away somewhere and start over in some new field. And Hoke had said he wouldn't hold her to the pact if she wanted out.

Now that she had made up her mind, she had to hurry and tell Hoke. If she put it off she might not find the nerve to go through with it. She found him in the Rancho Room sitting over another bottle of beer. He followed her out toward the bank of elevators where she stopped and, unusually pale and earnest, clasped her hands and quickly told him she would marry him.

Hoke didn't seem too happy. "My divorce won't be final for a month."

"We can wait, Hoke."

"I won't believe it till we—" He looked away, embarrassed.

She took one deep breath. One thing about Hoke. If he gave you his word, he would keep it.

Her voice seemed strangely hushed in her own ears when she said, "Any ideas, Hoke?"

For a moment he didn't answer. Then he said, "I can use a place over in Carmel. I—I—"

"You want me to go over there with you?"

"You don't have to. Only—"

She swallowed and her throat seemed hot and dry. Even as she made her decision, she knew it would be a relief. She could relax and enjoy herself for the rest of the convention. In a month she would be married to

Hoke. No more worries about bookings. And she believed Hoke when he said he could keep Margo away from her. And it might be fun living in a trailer.

"I'm ready, Hoke," she said.

He glanced at his expensive watch. "How about midnight? I got to go to a Fair Manager's stag in Monterey first. I'll try and get away early." He scribbled an address on the inside of a matchbook cover, then handed it to her.

She put it in her purse, then held out her hand. "See you, Hoke."

He clung to her hand a moment, then worked loose one of his diamond rings. But she shook her head. "Wait until—later."

He put the ring back and said, "You're a good kid, Shelly. I'm sorry life is so rough on you that you've got to marry an old bastard like me for protection."

She put a finger to his lips. He kissed the finger. She said, "Don't talk foolish, Hoke."

She left him and went up to her room, her heart hammering. Then the telephone rang. The operator told her a Mr. Matt Devore was trying to reach her. "Tell him I'm not in," Shelly said. At least Hoke wouldn't treat her as Matt had—wouldn't satisfy himself on her, then accuse her of being a tramp.

Seven

SHELLY left the hotel early so she could take her time driving over to Carmel. Her own tranquility seemed odd to her. She might almost be driving somewhere to discuss the manufacture of a new rigging for her act, so dispassionate was she. Instead, she was going to try to prove to a man that she would keep her bargain and marry him. Prove it with her body. She was certain of Hoke, but she was uncertain of herself. But once she gave in to him, she knew the pact would be sealed. In a month they could slip away quietly to Las Vegas and be married, once Hoke's divorce was final. It was as simple as that. No fuss, no hysterics. Just a cold business proposition. And it was odd, when you thought about it, Margo would also gain a partial triumph. She had wanted Shelly with her show. She would have the act, now—but of course she wouldn't have Shelly. Shelly would belong to the owner of Margo's concessions. Shelly smiled, her lips curving softly.

As she turned into the Carmel road, however, she felt a tautness in her chest. This was where she had driven with Matt. Matt was such a fool when it came to women.

The station wagon nosed up a grade, then down. Below, she could see the ocean glittering in the moonlight. Fall was the perfect season for Carmel. No fog. Balmy. It was a time for romance—that is, if you believed in it. Shelly didn't. Not any more. Not since Matt. Yet one side of her mind cried out for Matt. Why couldn't it be Matt she was meeting tonight instead of Hoke Deeson? They might have had a lot of fun together. Matt had a sense of humor—at least, until he let sex enter the picture. Then he was rigidly solemn and serious as a frigid wife. And when her thoughts took that turn she remembered Letha Kelleray. She had heard

the men around the fairgrounds talk about Letha and the word "frigid" was synonymous with Letha in their vocabulary. Men gossiped as much as women. Shelly had heard more than one of them say that Letha rationed her love. That was a new notion to Shelly. She couldn't imagine any woman putting a husband on a diet. No wonder Rod Kelleray was always trying to proposition the first woman at hand. Shelly was under no illusion that she was anything too special in Kelleray's eyes. Just a good-looking redhead.

Oh, he thought a lot of her, even respected her, she was pretty sure. For that matter, she liked him well enough. But any attraction which had existed between them had been essentially physical. The call of the wild, she thought grimly. The sex hunger.

She had a small map of Carmel the desk clerk had given her. Now she stopped the car and studied the map. She found the street she wanted and turned toward the ocean. The address was that of a garage apartment set back from the road. A faint light showed through a curtained front window. The downstairs garage doors were closed. If Hoke had preceded her, as she supposed he had, he had locked up his car. That was smart. No use advertising their clandestine meeting. Two cars in the drive overnight might cause gossip.

As she pulled into the driveway, she honked the horn lightly and braked the wagon. No one came to the door. She decided Hoke hadn't heard her. She started to lock the car, then thought better of it. After all, it might be a wrong address.

The stairway was narrow, sheltered from the ocean wind by a canvas wall. She found a knocker, a replica of a mission bell. She started to lift it, then noticed the door was open a crack. She stepped into a long room. On her right the wall was filled by a huge rough-brick fireplace and bookshelves. Across the far wall was a breakfront. The windows, facing the bay, were covered with heavy red drapes. In the center of the room was a large coffee table.

She said, "Hoke!"

A door leading from the next room opened suddenly. Margo came out and smiled at her. She clutched a highball glass and was dressed in a dark blue turtleneck sweater and gray slacks and sneakers. Her long blonde hair was pulled back severely from her temples and tied with a black ribbon.

Shelly's face went white. "Where's Hoke?"

Instead of replying, Margo came toward her swiftly. As Shelly tried to open the door, Margo's strong hand shoved her aside and slid a heavy bolt into place.

Margo sipped her drink, a devilish smile on her lips.

Shelly was aware of her heart, pounding louder than the surf outside. She said, "What are you doing here, Margo?"

Margo finished her drink, her pupils large and dark. She weaved a little as she stepped away from the door.

"I own this joint, baby," she said.

Shelly swallowed, a numbing fear spreading through her body. Was it possible, she asked herself, that Hoke Deeson had deliberately tricked her? Had Hoke, wanting to keep on the good side of Margo, lured her here? Shelly wanted to laugh. But the laughter stuck in her throat.

Margo said, "When Hoke asked me for the key I began to wonder about things. Then this afternoon Hoke got a little tight in the Rancho Room. He gave me the big news." She finished her drink, her lips smiling over the rim of the glass. "Congratulations, honey. You're moving up in the world. From Ken to Hoke Deeson." She threw back her head and laughed.

Shelly again turned for the door and tried to reach the heavy bolt. Margo knocked her away. Shelly backed up against the coffee table. It held a bowl of ice cubes and a fifth of whisky and some soda. Play it out, she told herself. Turning, she poured whisky into a glass. Her hand trembled so that the bottle clattered against the glass.

Margo said, "I'm not good enough for you."

"I never said that, Margo."

"No? You did everything but say it. You turned me

down cold. Yet you'll go to a bum like Hoke Deeson!"

Shelly raised the glass to her lips. The scotch almost gagged her. But she managed to sip it.

Suddenly Margo hurled her own glass across the room. It shattered against the wall and fell in gleaming shards. "Not good enough for you!" she shouted.

She lowered her blonde head and started toward Shelly, her eyes wicked. Shelly turned and tried to make her movements appear unhurried. She picked a poker from its rack beside the fireplace. "Don't come any closer," she said, lifting the poker over her head.

"All right." Margo sagged back against the door. "I'm sorry. I've lived in hell since I hit you the other night. Believe me, baby—"

"Don't call me baby. Coming from you it sounds disgusting."

Margo pulled something from the pocket of her slacks. A revolver with a sawed-off barrel. Detectives carried guns like that, and gangsters. They were called belly guns.

A grim notion occurred to her. "You took that shot at me the other day."

Margo gave her a hard smile. "Just because I've got a gun?"

"No. Not that alone. You hate me. And it would take somebody full of hate to try to kill a person."

Margo shook her head slowly from side to side. "I couldn't hate you. Honest, baby."

"I told you before. Don't call me that!"

Margo's eyes were ugly. "Why not?"

Shelly tried to laugh again. Maybe, she thought, she could anger Margo enough to make her get away from the door. Just one minute away from the door. "Baby sounds very odd when you say it," she told Margo.

"And why is that?" Margo asked softly.

"Because you could never have one, that's why. You're hardly the type."

"You mean the type for having kids? Is that it?" Margo's voice had taken on a new quality. It frightened Shelly, for some reason, more than her rage had. Margo

cocked the revolver with her thumb. Out of the frozen white mask of her face her eyes burned with unconcealed hatred.

"You think I don't know about motherhood! Why, you little bitch, I know more than you'll ever know. I was thirteen and I had on a new white dress. A bunch of kids caught me in the woods!" She threw back her head, her laughter a ghastly sound in the room. She glared at Shelly. "Take my advice. Don't ever lay down in a meadow in the Spring. Not in a white dress. Because you'll get grass stains all over it. I've still got the dress. Sometimes I get drunk and take it out of the trunk and just look at it. That's when I'm glad I am what I am. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry, Margo. I—I didn't know." Margo's revelation had shocked Shelly deeply. It seemed incredible that Margo would become so irrational at the mere mention of motherhood. It had never occurred to Shelly that the woman had more than a passing interest in the term. Shelly pressed her shoulders against the wall. Margo's eyes were still wild but she seemed to be calming down a little. She let down the hammer of the revolver but did not return the weapon to her pocket.

Margo stepped to the coffee table and picked up the fifth of whisky. She upended the bottle and took a long drink. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, watching Shelly all the while. Then she set the bottle down on the table.

"I was afraid to tell my father what had happened in the woods," she said, her voice losing some of its venom. "When it was too late, instead of helping me, he put a gun in his mouth and blew out his brains." Her lips curled. "He was a sensitive soul. He couldn't stand disgrace."

With those words, Margo seemed to reach a sudden decision. She pocketed her gun and reached for an Indian bridle and quirt that hung on the wall. She snatched the whip, her mouth tight and cruel. "I gave you a chance," she whispered, "but you turned me down."

"Margo, stay away from me or I'll brain you!" Shelly raised the poker.

Margo lifted the quirt and the leather thong struck the poker. The thong tightened and the poker was torn from Shelly's grasp. It clattered to the floor.

Margo's white teeth glistened. "You learn a lot of tricks around a carnival. Never can tell when they'll come in handy."

Terror gripped Shelly. "Please listen to me, Margo." She spoke as if to an angry child. "If you hit me, I'll scream."

"Go ahead. Maybe you didn't notice when you drove up, but the nearest neighbor is a quarter of a mile away."

"Use your head, Margo. This won't get you anything!"

"Maybe not." She drew the quirt through her hands. "But I'll have some satisfaction."

"But why, Margo. Why?"

"I gave you a chance. You turned me down. I told you. And now you're going to shack up with Hoke Deeson."

"We're going to be married. That makes it different." Shelly licked dry lips.

"Your marrying Hoke is the laugh of the century."

"Hoke keeps his word." Shelly spread her hands. "Don't you see, Margo? I was trying to get out from under."

"Out from under what?"

"The disgrace of living with Ken. I didn't realize what I had done until I came to the convention." She began to move slowly toward the door. Inching her feet, one small step at a time, forcing Margo to look at her eyes instead of her feet. Oh, God, give me a chance, she prayed silently.

Margo flicked the quirt against her leg and said, "I'm going to whip off your dress. Then I'm going to cut your underthings. I'm going to make you come crawling to me on your hands and knees. A whipping hurts." She smiled. "I've kept this whip on purpose. My father used to beat me just so I wouldn't do anything bad. It was

preventive medicine, he said. But it didn't prevent those kids from raping me!"

"Listen, Margo—"

Suddenly Margo lifted the whip. "I'm going to teach you that men are no goddamn good. They're out to ruin you. I'm going to teach you right now. And when I'm through, you'll be glad I did!"

Shelly's growing panic suddenly congealed into one single terrifying realization. Margo was demented. When she was drunk as she obviously was now, she went off her rocker.

Shelly sprang for the door. Before she had taken half a dozen steps, the quirt struck her across the shoulders, its thongs cutting through the thin fabric of her dress. Again the whip lashed out, this time catching her across the thighs and again across the legs, tearing her nylons.

"Margo! No!"

Suddenly she ducked and Margo's lunge carried her against the wall. And when Margo turned, Shelly was on the other side of the coffee table. Margo started around the table, whip poised. Shelly's moist fingers gripped the edge of the table. She suddenly upended it, pinning Margo to the floor.

Shelly ran to the door. But Margo had locked it and had hidden the key. Aghast, Shelly turned back as Margo rolled from under the table. She got to her feet. Obviously, she was hurt, for she limped as she resumed the chase—but she was still holding the whip.

Now Shelly was backed against the wall. The leather thongs ripped at her shoulder. She screamed with pain. Then again and again Margo swung the quirt, whipping Shelly's dress into ribbons and her shoulder and back into a quivering, bleeding mass of abrasions. All through it, Shelly tried to fight back. Margo was the stronger, but suddenly Shelly got hold of the quirt with both hands and desperately pulled. Margo lurched, went down. Now Shelly had the whip.

She lashed mightily at Margo, who flung up her arm to ward off the thongs. The leather descended time and again as Shelly's arm flailed. But Margo grabbed for

Shelly's legs, toppled her, seized the whip, and again was mercilessly beating the girl. Margo's eyes were strangely gleaming. Her bosom heaved with her ragged breath. She was wildly excited, seemed somehow exalted. Under the blows, the weakened Shelly cowered to the floor. "Please—please, Margo!"

"All right. Now you do as I wish. Exactly as I wish, understand?"

Margo flung away the quirt, tore off her few garments. She kneeled beside Shelly, removed what was left of Shelly's dress. In a moment Margo was recklessly and brutally poking at the redhead. Then, as her passion mounted, she began to croon tender love words. At the same time, her fingers caressed and fondled and cleverly probed.

Despite herself, Shelly found she was responding. She did not have the strength of will or body to resist. A fire seemed to mount in her loins. Now Margo's lips were busy, and Shelly was being kissed as she had never been kissed before, and the fire in Shelly leaped high.

Margo forced Shelly to lie flat on the floor. Hungrily the older woman crowned Shelly's body with her own. There was a first moment of almost unbearable pleasure and then Shelly came to her senses. She bucked and struggled to escape Margo.

Margo laughed. "All right. Then I'll do it by force!" Now Shelly was helpless under Margo's weight and powerful grip. She had no choice but to receive these hot and evil advances. It was horrible, degrading, warped—yet that fire in Shelly was raging. Guiltily she yielded herself to it. She had no choice, anyway. With a convulsive tremor, she surrendered herself to the warmth, the galvanizing delight, the mighty ascent to forbidden ecstasy.

Then Margo let go of her.

"I've always wanted you," Margo panted. "Now I've had you. I'm sorry I had to beat you to get you. But I'll never speak of it to you or anyone—if you don't, that is. Now get out of here."

Shelly wrapped the remains of her clothing around herself.

Then she flew down the stairway and across the shadowed yard. In the car, her fingers fumbled with the keys. Then the cough of the motor and the spin of rear wheels on gravel. Full of terror and disgust, she drove at top speed all the way back to the hotel.

Eight

IN the hotel parking lot, she tore off her ripped stockings. There were dull red burning marks on her legs. She went directly to Hoke Deeson's room. She knocked at the door and when she couldn't rouse him, she got the bellboy to let her in, saying she was worried about Mr. Deeson. Hoke was stretched out on the bed, fully clothed. His breathing was heavy. A half-filled glass was on the floor beside the bed. The bellboy picked up the glass and sniffed at it. He shook his head and grimaced.

"Knockout drops," he said. "Somebody sure put him to sleep."

Shelly opened the window and loosened Hoke's tie. Now as she stared down at his sleeping figure, she knew it had been sheer panic that had allowed her to think, even for a minute, that they could live as man and wife. She had been brought to her senses, late as it might be.

She stepped into the hall and closed the door. As she moved down the corridor to her own room, a door suddenly opened ahead of her and a small figure backed out into the hallway. But two masculine hands caught it by the shoulders and pulled it back. A man's voice said, "See you tomorrow, honey."

Shelly caught a glimpse of two faces together in the doorway—the faces of a man and a girl. The man was Jed Franklin, manager of the Bascom County Fair, attired only in a pair of shorts. The girl was Marilee.

At that moment, Franklin noticed Shelly and said, "Oh, oh! We've got company."

Marilee whirled. When she saw who it was, her face flamed. She went flying down the hall, her heels clattering. Then a door slammed and quiet settled over the hall.

Shelly went on to her own room. She carefully

scrubbed herself clean in the shower. It took her a long time to get to sleep.

She awoke early, with a fuzzy feeling in her head. She dressed and went downstairs to the coffee shop, settling at a corner table where she tried to read the morning paper. But she was unable to digest what her eyes read.

Hearing a step, she glanced up. It was Ken. He looked ten years older.

"Mind if I sit down?"

She shrugged, folded the newspaper and put it down beside her. Ken sat down and ordered coffee when the waitress brought Shelly's waffles. At length he said, "Are you lining up plenty of business?"

"Not bad."

"I've managed to get a few dates," he told her uneasily. He sipped his coffee and went on, "Last night I went to a stag party. When I came home Marilee was crying. She said she'd had a row with you out in the hall and that you had threatened to accuse her of some awful thing."

"Like what?"

"Like sleeping with the wrong people," he replied.

Shelly looked away, wondering how this man who sat across from her now could once have been so important in her life. He seemed a complete stranger. "Marilee has a vivid imagination," she said. "We had no quarrel. We saw each other, but didn't exchange one word."

Ken tried to catch her hands but she withdrew them quickly. "I don't blame you for feeling as you do," he said.

She was exasperated and her tone conveyed it as she said, "I'm not feeling anything. We're through and that's all there is to it."

He looked at her, his face narrow and harassed. She knew another man who had the same look in his eyes. Rod Kelleray. They both had wives.

"I made a mistake, Shelly," he said gravely. "I know it now. I was weak to let them force me into marriage."

Sometimes I think Marilee is laughing at me. Margo, too, for that matter."

It was with a sense of relief that she saw Matt Devore coming toward her. He seemed to be wearing a chastened look today. He was the lesser of two evils at the moment. She was weary of Ken's talking about his mistakes. The two men knew each other. When Shelly invited Matt to sit down, Ken looked annoyed. But he soon masked his emotions sufficiently to ask a favor of her.

"There isn't much use for two riggings to be set up for the show tomorrow," he told her. "Besides, there's hardly room. So if it's all right with you, I'll have your new rigging set up and we can both work on it."

Shelly shrugged her shoulders. Tomorrow night all the acts attending the convention were to show their wares before the Fair delegates at the rodeo grounds. It would be an important night. But she had little interest in it.

"You attend to it, Ken," she said, without looking at him. "It's all right with me."

He took her hint and rose to go, after muttering a good-by to Matt.

When he had gone, Shelly sipped her coffee and thought Matt seemed extremely uneasy. He was clenching and unclenching his hands nervously. "I was in the lobby and saw you come in here," he said lamely.

"You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep."

"Maybe you should try sleeping pills." She tried to make her tone light.

He caught her hands and held them. She sat stiffly in her chair, glaring at him. He said, "Do you know why I couldn't sleep?"

"Should I be interested?" she asked.

"I was wondering where you were—and with whom. From my window, I saw you pull in last night. It was very late and I—"

"And I suppose you were pleased to find that I was alone—"

"Shelly! Do you have to talk like that?"

"It's the truth!" Angrily she jerked her hands free of his grasp. "It's what you were thinking. You know it is."

He looked down at the table. "I'll admit that our first date I regarded as a—conquest," he said slowly.

"That sounds like a line from a soap opera."

"Well, it's the truth. Now I know better. I ought to have my head beat off for thinking you were like the others."

"What others?" she asked thinly. "Women you have known, I suppose. If you made time with them the first night out then you were so shocked you discarded them."

His face turned red. "In most cases it's true. You know it yourself." He looked uncomfortable. "But with you it was—well—" Desperately he groped for the right words. "Well, I realize now that it wasn't just a vulgar interlude."

"Oh, Lord—"

"Shelly, believe me!"

She frowned at him, trying to be angry. "Well, for your information your diagnosis is true. I was drawn to you and I didn't consider it something cheap or vulgar."

"You make it sound like it's in the past. As if you don't care any more. Well, I care."

She regarded him a moment, then said, "It's a subject that will require a great deal of thought." Although his admission that he still cared was warming, she wasn't going to allow him to regard her show of affection so lightly. After all, she had pride. She decided to let him steam for a while. She finished her coffee and picked up her check.

He said, "Let me buy your breakfast."

"Another time maybe," she said, smiling a little at his dejection. "After all, you've been harboring some pretty terrible thoughts about me. I can't forgive you so easily. You can understand—"

"But, Shelly—" His face reddened again. "Anyhow, let me explain."

She glanced at her watch. "I'm late." She saw his mouth open and added, "A business appointment."

She didn't have any appointment but she wanted to

get away before she made a fool of herself again. Just looking at him sent a quivery feeling through her. She didn't want to do something foolish again today. And if she were to stay alone with him, she knew what the outcome would be. They would take another ride in the station wagon.

She left him and crossed the lobby, her head high, her arms swinging at her sides. She walked outside, made her way to the park nearby and sat on a bench and breathed the crisp October air. For the first time in weeks she actually felt light-hearted. Shoving her hands in the pockets of her tweed jacket, she did a very unladylike thing. She stuck her legs straight out before her and slid down to the end of her spine on the bench. From this angle she could watch the sky. It was very blue.

At the moment, she thought, she could almost bless Margo Minter. If it hadn't been for Margo, she'd be Hoke Deeson's woman today. She wouldn't have gone back on her bargain. Not even for Matt Devore. There were certain obligations in the world. And besides, Matt wouldn't want her if he knew about her rendezvous with Hoke Deeson at the Carmel apartment. But Matt never need know now. Because there had been no rendezvous.

To Chico McAdam, as to any good officer, police work was often dull routine. Deduction brainstorming was all right in their place but it was usually the drudgery of countless interviews, ringing of doorbells, and questioning of witnesses or suspects that began to form a pattern. This was the way it was shaping up on the Letha Kelleray blackmail angle. Since Chief Milfont had given him the assignment, he had narrowed his list of suspects. One of them was Burt Lenshaw. Roustabouts with the Margo Minter Show and workers at the fairgrounds the last night of the Fair had agreed on one thing. Lenshaw was making a play for a chick. A kid. If anything had happened, that chick would know about it.

McAdam located her at last in a flat set in the rear of a dingy rooming-house. In his grandfather's day, the big

house had belonged to a rancher. But the town had spread out and the house had cheapened with the neighborhood. It was badly in need of paint. Most of the fancy gingerbread on the long porch had disappeared. Once there had been a lawn out front but now the yard was hard-packed dirt. A curly-haired little girl with a dirty face sat in a play pen.

And they think only Mexicans live in squalor, McAdam thought, as he moved along the walk that ran between the rooming-house and a highboard fence marking the boundary of a wrecking yard next door.

There were four flats crowded into the narrow building behind. It was newer than the front house but it also lacked paint.

He knocked at the door of 1812-A. A fat woman with uncombed black hair came to the door, wiping her hands on an apron. Chico removed his hat. "Is this the Bishop residence?"

The woman stared at him through a rusted screen door. "I know you," she said shrilly. "You can't fool me none by takin' off your hat. You're a cop."

"I'm looking for—"

"I know!" she cried. "It's Max. He's done something again, ain't he? Why can't he never leave the gin alone?"

Chico McAdams only speculated for a moment on how the woman knew he was a cop. It was something about the eyes, he had been told. Too much looking at faces until you develop a hardened stare.

He said, "Does Emily Bishop live here?"

The woman's small eyes were suddenly sharp. "What you want with Em?"

"I'd just like to talk to her."

"Well, she ain't here." The woman came close to the door, pressing her nose against the screen. "Has Em gone and got herself in trouble with some boy? If she has, I'll beat her, so help me!"

Now that he could see the woman closer, he recognized her. He seldom forgot a face, once he had it catalogued in his mind. This face belonged in Domestic Relations Court with a small wiry little man wearing a bandage on

his head. The neighbors had called the law when they found the woman hitting him over the head with a skillet. The arresting officers had said there was blood all over the living room and enough empty gin bottles to fill a washtub. And there were two kids. The one playing in the front yard, probably. And a frightened, defiant girl of uncertain age.

McAdam said, "Your daughter hasn't done anything. I just want to talk to her."

"About what?" The woman flipped up the hook on the door and came bustling out to the porch, her hands on her fat hips. She smelled faintly of gin.

"It was something that happened at the fairgrounds."

"Aha!" the woman shrilled. "I knew it. She hung around them fairgrounds every day and night. She ditched school. I tell you this, Mister Cop, by God my kid's goin' to be decent. You hear?" She shook a fist under McAdam's nose. "She's goin' to be decent or I'll kill her. I ain't standing for no sinful carrying-on in my house."

Footsteps sounded on the gravel walk, then stopped. McAdam turned and saw a thin dark-haired girl in jeans and a heavy wool sweater with a large SCH on it. San Carlos High.

The woman yelled, "Em! Come 'ere. You an' your carrying-on has got the law. You're a disgrace to your poor mother an' your father."

McAdam moved back along the walk. The girl was obviously frightened. Her face was pale—paler than it should have been even in fright.

When Mrs. Bishop started after him, McAdam blocked her with his body. "Please let me handle this."

"Ain't nobody goin' to handle it if she's been messin' with some boy—"

"McAdam tried to shut her up but she screamed, "She ain't my kid! Max had another wife and she was no good. Emily's just like her."

McAdam said, trying to keep his voice level, "Either you let me talk to the girl—alone—or we'll all go down to the station. Now take your choice."

"You sure her trouble ain't some man?" The small crafty eyes watched him.

Adroitly McAdam evaded the question. "Just let me take care of it."

He walked toward where the frightened girl stood rigidly, on her toes, poised for instant flight. McAdam smiled.

"I need your help, Em," he said, taking her gently by the arm. "Just a few questions. Nothing more."

He walked with her across the yard where the baby in the play pen watched solemnly. He helped Em into his black sedan and drove slowly down the street.

She said bitterly, "You're going to send me away?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Curfew. I violate it nearly every night."

"Because you hate to go home?"

"Maybe."

His throat tightened. It was easy for the City Council to say that every kid under eighteen had to be home by nine-thirty. It was something they hadn't thought of, trying to provide a home for some of the kids to go to. He considered Letha Kelleray and her money. Why didn't she help kids like this one?

He said, "You know a man named Burt Lenshaw?"

The girl didn't answer but from the corner of his eye he could see her thin hands gripping her knees.

"I understand you and Lenshaw were together the last night of the Fair. I'd like to have you tell me if you noticed anything unusual about him. About his actions, I mean. And did he say anything?"

"I don't remember."

A small wet spot appeared on the denim that covered her thigh. The spot grew larger. He lifted his gaze. The tears were real. No fakery. He braked the car in a clump of poplar trees.

"Did he hurt you?"

"Of course not."

"I mean did he—"

When she twisted around in the seat her eyes hated

him. "Don't think you can get anything out of me. Because you can't. Even if you beat me."

"Nobody's going to beat you."

"Police beat people. Mom says so."

He said, "You can trust me. I want to be your friend. Will you believe that?"

"So what?"

McAdam frowned and drummed his nails on the rim of the steering wheel. "How old are you?" When she didn't answer, he said, "I can look up your school record easily enough."

"I'm sixteen."

He said, "Do you know what I think of a man Burt Lenshaw's age who'll go around with a kid like you? I think he's the lowest thing that ever walked on two legs." McAdam drew a deep breath. "I've got a daughter. She's younger than you, Em. I don't want her to get mixed up with a man like Lenshaw some day. You can help me if you tell me what you know."

"There's nothing to tell." She wiped her eyes.

He said, "We've got a social group in this town that gets jobs for girls like you, Em. You could work in a nice home and go to school and have a room of your own. Just help a woman around the house and look after her kids. Lots of women have more than they can handle. They like a little help."

Em's eyes brightened a moment, then she said bitterly, "Mom would never let me leave home."

"These jobs pay a little money."

The girl straightened in the seat. "You mean I could send some money home?"

"I don't see why not."

"Then maybe she'd let me. If there was money in it." She studied his face a moment, then said, "You're lying to me. You're trying to trick me into telling you about Burt and me."

"I'm not trying to trick you. If you like, I'll see what I can do about that job."

She still looked at him but now some of the defiance left her eyes. Her lower lip began to quiver. "It would

be nice to get away from a place where everybody's always yelling and throwing things. What do you want to know about Burt?"

"The last night of the Fair."

"I hate him. I want you to know that." She gripped her knees again. "But he didn't do anything to me. He—he kissed me. I thought it was fun. But when he tried . . . Well, I got scared and ran."

"Tell me everything. What he did, how he acted."

She told him how Lenshaw had walked with her around the fairgrounds and how some big blonde named Margo had bawled him out for running around with a kid. Em explained she had followed Lenshaw around because she was tired of looking at the exhibits and watching the crowd at the carnival. She had attended the Fair every day and night. And she didn't want to go home. She said the blonde woman threw something in an incinerator. In a few minutes Lenshaw went to the incinerator and took whatever it was the woman had thrown in, and stamped out the flames. Then he had locked the thing up in the trunk of his car.

"Later I asked him what it was," Em said, "but he seemed angry that I'd seen him do it. Then he laughed and said it was worth a lot of money. He said he'd tell me about it if I went for a walk with him. It was the last night of the Fair and he told me he'd give me some money. That's when I got scared."

Chico McAdam smiled grimly. New links in the chain. He had already interviewed a man named Hoke Deeson about Lenshaw's movements that night and the following morning. Deeson said Lenshaw had been interested in learning how to unstick something that had been pasted. Maybe in a book. A press book? Deeson said Lenshaw was thick in the head. Why didn't the fool just use a pair of scissors and cut it out instead of steaming it?

McAdam drove back and parked outside the rooming-house. He said, smiling, "Thanks, Em. And I meant it about that job. There'll be a woman around to talk to your mother in a few days."

For the first time, he saw the girl smile. Then she turned and walked off toward the house.

McAdam drove to the station and made some notes, then took them down to a gray-haired woman in Social Welfare. The woman shook her head when she glanced at the report.

"The Bishop family again," she said. "There's nothing we can do there, Chico. The man and woman are absolutely impossible."

"I'm not worried about them. It's their oldest daughter, Emily. See what you can do about getting her into a home."

The welfare worker, Mrs. Tidings, filed the paper away in her desk. "Is this a special project?"

He nodded. "I don't ask many favors around here. But this is one time I'm asking."

"I'll take care of your project personally."

"Thanks." He walked back to his own office, convinced that there was still some goodness in the world.

Nine

RANCHO DE LOS AMIGOS lay nestled against the brown hills, the tile roof of the main house a dull red in the sunlight. A truck moved slowly along the San Carlos pike, then swung south and began to climb the twisting road until it entered a white gate and nosed up beside the house.

The big place seemed strangely silent. Whenever he thought of the party he felt his cheeks burn. He'd made a damned fool of himself, all because of the woman. As he looked back on it, he realized she had made fun of him because of the rented clothes. How was he to know? He had assumed that when rich people like the Kellerays threw a party it naturally called for soup and fish. Well, the tux had cost him eight bucks and it was eight bucks shot to hell.

Parked beside the garage was an ancient sedan. He hated to face the Kelleray woman. But her husband had appointed him a committee of one to come out and take down the signs he had put up. He had wanted to refuse but Margo had told him he sure as hell had better do what Kelleray wished. She wanted to play his Fair next year.

He couldn't figure Margo. She acted like she'd really hung one on last night. And when he had seen her a little while ago at the hotel, she had been limping. He had asked if she'd sprained her ankle, but she had only glared at him and told him to get out to the Kelleray place right away.

Silently Lenshaw had cursed her, but had done as he was told. Now was not the time to kick over the traces. As he looked at the big adobe house, though, he felt a sudden return of his old bravado. He knew how to handle women. And if this Kelleray chick got flip with

him today, he'd fix her clock. He crossed the steep driveway and looked down into the valley. What would it be like, he asked himself, to stand here and know that you owned everything for as far as you could see? It gave him a heady feeling just to think about it. A side door to the house was open. He walked in and closed the door behind him. He could hear the maid puttering around in the kitchen. From upstairs came the drone of voices.

The living room had been cleaned up after the party. But someone had burned a big hole in the carpet and one of the drapes was ripped. Quite a party. He wished now that he had stayed instead of rushing back to town like a sorehead schoolboy. If that Kelleray woman had got enough drinks under her belt, maybe she would have changed her mind about him. To hell with her, he thought. He started to take down a sign in the living room. But now he became more aware than before of the female voices upstairs and went out to the big curving stairway and climbed up. The voices were coming from behind a closed door to his right. He listened intently. The flat sound of hands pounding flesh reached his ears. Too many times he had heard that sound around gyms not to know what it was.

Cautiously he tried the door. It opened at his touch. He stepped into a big room with pink curtains at the windows. A woman lay flat on her back, smoking a cigarette. A long supple body, the skin white and flawless. The scarlet nails of one hand rested against a bare thigh. Even if he hadn't known before, he knew now that her red hair wasn't natural.

A plump woman in a white uniform was kneading Letha Kelleray's shoulder muscles.

Letha said, "Now I want a straight answer, Martha, and no more evasion."

"But I told you," Martha said wearily.

"I want the truth."

"Mr. Kelleray only asked me how come you knew who was shot. He asked me if I had told you and I said I hadn't. All I had heard was that there was some trouble and a dame got shot. I never did know who it was."

"It seems to me you were talking to my husband quite a while . . ." Letha changed her tone suddenly and sharply. "Martha, I feel a draft!"

Martha swung her gaze from Letha's shoulders. The eyes widened. "What are you doing here?"

She grabbed a sheet and started to fling it over Letha. But at that moment Letha sat up. She dropped her cigarette and fumbled for the sheet but missed it. The sheet and cigarette fell to the floor. Her face turned deathly pale for a moment, then a flush started at her breasts and spread upward to her face. She crossed her arms over her lovely, large breasts. Then she rolled off the table, picked up the sheet and threw it over her shoulders. When she turned, she saw that Martha was pushing Lenshaw out of the room.

Martha locked the door and came back. She removed the sheet and drew Letha to the table. Letha lay down on her back, stared at the rose-colored ceiling.

Martha said, "He had his nerve." When Letha didn't answer, Martha ran the palms of her hands along Letha's thighs. "My goodness, ma'am. You feel like you got a fever. Your skin's so hot. Sure you feel all right?"

Letha sat up and stared at her long, supple toenails. "You can go now, Martha."

Martha looked at her closely, a secret smile touching her lips. Then she said, "I'll set out your slanting board." She waddled across the room and lifted the board that rested against the wall. It was fashioned of plywood with a thin leather cover and loops at the top for the ankles. "You've got to keep your tummy flat," Martha said. "Do your sit-ups. Want me to count for you?"

"Not today, Martha." Letha turned and walked out, going down the hall to the scented bedroom. She could hear Lenshaw, downstairs, taking down the signs. When she thought of how boldly he had walked into the exercise room, it began to infuriate her. She pulled a dress over her head and stuck her feet into mules and descended by the main staircase. She heard Martha's old sedan screech out of the driveway. In the den she found him. He looked vile and uncouth to her in his rough

work shirt and pants and his leather jacket. He had helped himself to a drink and now he had opened her father's gun case and was looking over the prize collection of rifles and hand weapons.

"You certainly make yourself at home," she snapped. "My whiskey, my guns. Who told you to come in here?"

He laid aside the rifle he had been examining. He swallowed his drink, his small eyes running insolently over her figure. "You looked better when I seen you upstairs."

Despite her wish to hate him, she couldn't keep the flush from her face. And she felt so peculiar in the knees. It was like the feeling she had had at that moment when he had thrown her into the flower bed.

Knuckles rapped timidly. Letha opened the door. Annette, looking fat and foolish as usual, said, "I was wonderin', ma'am, if you'll be home for lunch."

Letha was about to tell her, "Of course I'll be home, you dolt." Then she heard the rattle of ice cubes in Lenshaw's glass. It seemed strangely intimate to her. She said, without looking at Annette, "Go into town and pick up my new dress at Marcine's."

"But, ma'am, it won't be ready."

"I said go in and pick it up. Can't you understand orders?"

Annette made a frightened exit.

Lenshaw said, "Too bad this gun collection belongs to a woman. Shooting is a man's game."

"I don't know about that," Letha said.

"Does your husband shoot?"

"A little." She stood with her hands clenched behind her back, her fingers twisting and interlocking. "He's not much of a marksman."

"And I suppose you are?"

"Yes. I'm pretty good." She flung out a hand at a line of silver cups on a shelf above a bookcase. "Those are mine. I won them."

He gave them a cursory glance. "Don't mean a thing. They always give a pretty woman all the breaks."

Something in a far and forgotten corner of her mind made her say, "You think I'm a pretty woman?"

"Yeah. With your clothes on or off. It don't make much difference."

She stood rigid, feeling the tremor along her thighs. She hated him. Never had she allowed anyone to talk to her like that. And he had seen her nude. The idea! Yet instead of berating him, she said, "I suppose you consider yourself an authority on guns as well as women?"

"I do all right with both."

His tone irritated her. His bravado. She snatched a rifle from the case. "I'll show you how to shoot. If you've got the nerve."

"I got nerve for anything." He picked up the rifle he had been examining and followed her along a carpeted hall and down a flight of steep steps. She flicked a wall switch. He watched her hips move under the skimpy cotton dress.

The basement had been set up as a target range. At the far end of the gallery, sandbags were stacked to stop the bullets. Targets were on wires that could bring each one in for close inspection simply by pulling a lever. Against the wall was a large davenport and some overstuffed chairs from which spectators could watch the shooting. And there was a large hi-fi combination. Most people would be glad enough to call this home, Lenshaw thought. And all it was used for was shooting off a few guns.

Letha said, "My father built this. He loved guns. One thing I wanted to do in my life was outshoot him."

"Did you?"

"No. He died before I got good enough."

Lenshaw came up to stand at her side. She felt the slight pressure of his arm against her breast. She moved aside.

He gave her an intimate stare. "No fun shooting for nothing."

"You name it," she said, peering up into his coarse, battered face.

He swung his head, looking around the big room. "If I win, I get anything in this room. How about it?" He looked at her again.

She felt the blood rush to her cheeks but she did not lower her eyes. Of one thing she was supremely confident. "I can outshoot any man," she said proudly. Only with a gun could she humiliate him completely, destroy his arrogance. She gave him a fierce smile. "It won't do you any good—what you're thinking."

He grinned. The swelling had gone down on his jaw. But he still looked ugly to her. Loathsome was a better word, she thought.

He said, "If you win what do you want as a prize?"

"The privilege of telling you exactly what I think of your disgusting attitude."

Lenshaw shrugged a heavy shoulder. "Ladies first. Go ahead and shoot."

She stepped up to the railing that was used as a foul line. For the first time in her life, she felt her hands moist against the hard blue metal. And there was an unfamiliar tension in her arms. She began to shoot. When she pulled the overhead lever and her target came in on the pulley, she studied it carefully. It wasn't as good as she could do. But it certainly wasn't bad. She had scored one bull's-eye. He would have to go some to beat that. And the rest of her shots were in the second circle.

Lenshaw stepped up to the rail, smiling faintly. He emptied the rifle almost as fast as he could jerk the trigger. As he pulled in his target, she could feel the perspiration sweep over her. Only one glance was necessary to tell her that all his shots but two had scored in the bull's-eye.

He put his rifle on a rack beside the railing. "I forgot to tell you," he said, watching her closely. "I used to shill for a carnival shooting gallery."

Never had she felt so completely humiliated. "You come back again," she said stoutly. "I'll show you. I'm a little unnerved today. The party was a strain."

She started briskly for the door but he caught her

roughly by the arm and jerked her back. "What about the prize?"

His fingers hurt her arm. She wanted to slap his face but for some reason she had no strength. She forced her eyes away from him. "You can have anything in this room. That was the agreement. The targets are valueless, of course. And I doubt whether you'd want the sofa or the chairs. The rifles are worth money. Take them."

Instead of releasing her, he swung her around and against him, both hands gripping her bare arms. "We both know what I want," he said.

She tried to struggle, then gave it up. His face was ugly. He was an animal. His clothing was dirty. Pick out his faults, she kept telling herself. Basic psychology. Find a weakness in your adversary, then you will no longer fear him.

Her heart began to pound. Fire seemed to be leaping along her nerves. She still could not bring herself to look at him. He must have sensed her thoughts, for he released her. As if in a daze, she crossed the room and dropped to the davenport. For a moment she sat stiffly, staring at the discarded targets on the tile floor. Then she said hoarsely, "Lock the door!"

He did. And as he ran to her, she was shedding her clothing. The sight revealed to him stopped him in his tracks. Beautiful white flesh faintly tinged with rose. Her breasts were magnificent—large, warm, alive. Her belly, slightly concave, moved as she breathed. Her long legs stirred impatiently.

He let out a guttural exclamation and swooped down on her. There was no play, no wooing, no hesitation. His giant hands seized her by her soft, rounded hips, lifted her to meet his overwhelming desire.

She did not have to help him, or did not have to move. He twisted and turned her as he would, conforming her to the hard surge of his lust. It was like mating with a bull . . .

That morning, for the second year in a row, the convention delegates voted Rod Kelleray the best Fair

manager west of Kansas City. He accepted the pin, gave a brisk speech of thanks and then left the convention hall. He knew Letha's schedule well enough to be aware that Martha should be giving her the daily stint on the massage table at that time. After all, he thought suddenly, it was Letha's money that made it possible for him to produce such an outstanding Fair. If he had to stick to the budget set up by the Board of Directors, the San Carlos Fair would finish far down the list. Therefore, he reasoned, Letha should be the first to know about his latest award.

Since that scene with Shelly Reed the other night, Kelleray had sensed a new reserve on the part of his wife. It seemed almost as if she really knew what had taken place at the Peaceful Motel. But reason told him that was impossible. How could she know?

He found Burt Lenshaw's truck in the driveway next to the garage and remembered he had sent him up to remove the signs. He let himself into the house and went upstairs. Martha wasn't around. Neither was Letha. He descended the stairs to the kitchen. Annette didn't seem to be around, either. The big house was strangely silent. He took a look in the den and found an empty highball glass. Two rifles were missing from their pegs in the gun case.

He walked down the basement steps but the door at the bottom was locked. He pounded at the door. "Letha?"

Letha had heard his footsteps. Instead of becoming panic-stricken, she calmly shoved Lenshaw aside. She got up and hastily arranged her dress as Rod began to hammer at the door.

She found Lenshaw's ear and kissed it. Then she whispered, "Hide behind the target rack. I'll get rid of him."

She put her hands against his big chest and shoved. When he had disappeared she picked up one of the rifles and unlocked the door.

Kelleray stepped into the room, his eyes shifting from

his wife to the sofa, the chairs, and the rifles. His wife's scent filled the room.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked, staring at her.

"What does it look like?" she snapped. She had never felt so thoroughly irritated with him before. Of all the days to come home! "I was target-shooting. There's a meet at San Jose in two weeks. I intend to enter."

His gaze drifted from the weapon she held under her arm to the one that lay on the shelf. "You practice with two rifles?"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

His handsome face seemed pale today. And the lines at the corners of his mouth were deeper. He crossed the room and picked up the rifle and aimed it at the target.

Her heart caught in her throat and she had a momentary vision of Burt Lenshaw's body pitching out from behind the rack, a bullet in the heart.

Deliberately she walked over to him and took the rifle from his hands. "I've been using it all morning," she said irritably. "I want to give it a chance to cool off."

"Doesn't feel hot to me," he said, watching her.

"What do you know about guns?" she snapped. Then she saw the shiny new button in his coat lapel. "Oh, Rod, you've won again! Come upstairs and tell me about it." She put down the rifle. Her hand gripped his arm as she urged him up the stairs.

When they reached the den, he said, "I've never known you to drink this early." He picked up the highball glass and sniffed at it.

"I had a headache."

"But you always said that alcohol and guns don't mix. You've never taken a drink before when you were shooting."

She glared at him, teetering forward on her toes so that her body strained against her dress. "Can't a person change her mind?"

Kelleray gave her a queer look. "I saw Lenshaw's truck in the driveway when I came in."

"I wish you'd tell him to stay away from here. It makes me ill just to look at him."

"I thought you liked him."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"It was your idea to invite him to the party."

"It was only done in payment for saving my neck in the yard." She was regaining her self-control. There had been a few bad moments. Now she tucked a strand of hair into the knot at the back of her neck. She felt strangely exhilarated. She wished Rod would go. She wanted him to leave so she could lose her eyes and remember. Remember everything.

Lenshaw's rough voice from the doorway said, "I come to take down them signs, Mrs. Kelleray. Ah, hello, Mr. Kelleray."

"Hello, Burt," Kelleray said. "Have a nice hike? You've been gone long enough."

"Hike, my foot," Lenshaw said easily. "I dropped a kit of tools out of the truck when I come up the grade. I went back to look for 'em."

"On foot?"

"Easier than turnin' that damn truck around in the narrow road." He cracked his heavy knuckles. "I'll tend to them signs, Mrs. Kelleray. Reckon you want to get your place cleaned up."

When he had gone, color returned to Letha's face and she sank to the arm of the davenport. "Mix me a drink, Rod."

"Haven't time. I just dashed out to tell you the good news about winning the award."

"You could have phoned."

"I wanted to tell you in person."

She said, "I was mean to you the other day. You can have five thousand for the Valley Bank account." She smiled at him and stood up. "I'll take care of it, darling."

He crossed the room and took her hands. "You should try some of that indelible lipstick."

She didn't even blink her eyes, but lifted a finger to her mouth. She shrugged her shoulders. "I always bite my lips when I shoot. A silly habit."

For a long moment he looked at her thoughtfully. "I've never seen you look so completely relaxed."

She beamed at him. "That was nice of you to say."

"Martha must have learned a new technique."

"I'll have to give her an extra five dollars this month."

When he had gone she stepped into the hall and stared at her reflection in a narrow wall mirror. She did look relaxed. She lifted the hem of her dress and carefully wiped lipstick from her chin.

Shelly had a phone call from Matt late in the afternoon. It was the fourth time he had called that day. When he heard her voice he said, "At last! I've been trying to reach you for hours."

She had just come out of the shower and she felt cool and comfortable. But the sound of his voice stirred up the old excitement in her.

"I've been busy," she told him. And it was true.

That morning she had attended the meeting at which Kelleray had again been voted best fair manager of the year. She had been standing against the wall when Kelleray had stepped down from the speaker's platform, trying to show a little of his old boyish enthusiasm. But something had been missing.

Taking her by the arm, he had steered her into the lobby. "I'm glad you won," Shelly had told him. "I know it means a lot to you."

"It doesn't mean a thing." He had pinned her against the wall with his two hands. "What about Mexico? You and me. A couple of weeks at LaPaz. It would make a new woman out of you."

She had tried to smile. She had wanted to employ the right light touch. If she angered him, it could hurt her professionally. And she couldn't afford that, now that she was strictly on her own. And she was, even though in the back of her mind she had considered accepting Matt's apology.

"Let me think it over, Rod. That's a big decision, you know."

"You'd look good in Mexico. A red-headed Mexican."

"Don't be silly!" She had tried to duck out from under his arm, but he had refused to let her go.

"I'm sorry we were interrupted the other night in the motel."

"I wasn't myself that night, Rod."

"And I'll never forget how you looked in that blue nightgown."

"Rod, please. You're embarrassing me." This time she had forcibly brushed past him.

"All right," he had said. "I'll wait for your answer."

She had looked up to see Hoke Deeson standing across the hall. Before, he had always seemed friendly, but now he only glared at her. That morning she had told him she'd changed her mind. She couldn't marry him. He had tried to explain about the night before. It was Margo. She had doped his drink and, like a fool, he had fallen for the oldest gag in the world. Shelly had told him they both owed Margo a vote of thanks. It had saved them a lot of unhappiness.

Hoke crossed the hall toward her, weaving a little. He looked as if he had been drinking pretty heavily, although the day was still young.

He said hoarsely, "Funny thing. I make you a decent proposition. Marry me, I say. You say okay. Then you get a better offer. But this other deal don't have anything to do with marriage."

Shelly's cheeks flamed. "Stop it, Hoke."

"You got a proposition, all right. But what's Kelleray's wife goin' to say? I hear she's got a temper worse'n a she-cat with cubs. She'll follow you clean to Mexico and cut your beautiful throat and enjoy every minute of it."

"I have no intention of going anywhere with Rod Kelleray."

"Don't hand me that," he said. "I heard you tell him to give you a chance to think it over."

There was no use arguing with Hoke when he was in such condition. She would catch him when he was sober and explain the whole thing. Putting her bag under her

arm, she left him standing there and went outside, where she got into a cab and went back to the hotel. She lined up two contracts that did not entail any personal favors. But they were with small-time Fairs and paid little. She decided to wait a little before signing. When she went to pick up her key, she found the phone messages from Matt Devore.

Now Matt's voice on the phone made her feel suddenly gay.

Matt said, "They're honoring Kelleray with a dinner tonight at the hotel."

"I know."

"I'd like you to go with me."

"No." She still wasn't quite ready to forgive him. But not ready to fully cut him off, either. "Maybe you could buy me a drink after the dinner. It shouldn't last too long."

He sounded disappointed. "Okay, if that's the best I can do." Then he added, "Are you still sore?"

"Why should I be sore?"

"You're acting just like a woman."

"And just how should I act?"

She hung up and decided to dress. She took a beige frock from the closet and removed white underthings and stockings from a drawer. She sat on the bed and rolled sheer hose up over her legs. As she hooked on garters, she tried to think where she had made her mistakes. Of course, it was obvious if she wanted to force herself to be objective. She should never have lived with Ken. If she loved him she should have forced him to marry her before setting up housekeeping. But looking back on it, she realized she had been unsure of herself. She was old-fashioned enough to want her marriage to last. It was one thing to have an affair with a man and then break it off. It was quite another to marry him. That called for permanence. And she wanted to be sure, very sure. But the world regarded it differently. Had she been a divorcee, it would have caused her no particular hardship. But because she had been a man's mistress, they looked on her as fair game and would give nothing until

she gave something in return. It made her position untenable unless she really wanted to become a tramp. But she had too much pride for that—even if some of her associates had already labeled her as such.

Even Matt. That was the greatest blow of all. She didn't blame Hoke Deeson for feeling as he did. After all, he had offered to marry her. She had agreed at first, then she had turned him down. But Matt—she had expected him to be different. He was intelligent. He should have understood. Well, he was just like the rest of them, she decided, as she dropped a white slip over her head. He'd have to do a lot of crawling on his hands and knees before she gave him another opportunity to insult her.

Ten

IT was sheer coincidence that Letha happened to be placed next to Hoke Deeson at the awards dinner that evening. She would have much preferred to stay home, and ordinarily would have. But she knew the dinner would bring out everyone connected with the Fairs. That included Burt Lenshaw. She hadn't seen Lenshaw since their interlude in the target room. And now, when she did see him sitting at one of the tables, she gave him a discreet smile. He hadn't even brushed his unruly thatch of hair. Tonight he was Burt Lenshaw, uncouth, brash, overconfident. At the party he had been so ill at ease, out of his element—but here, for some reason, he seemed to feel fully at home.

Letha saw Shelly come in and nod at various people. Shelly carefully avoided looking at Letha.

The usual banquet speeches began with the consomme and continued through the baked Alaska. Letha suffered through it all. The speeches were boring enough and so was the thick-necked man who sat next to her and seemed to be trying to drink himself into a stupor. He kept one waiter fairly busy refilling his glass. She knew his name was Hoke Deeson and that he did something or other with Margo's show. He was disgusting to watch.

Her husband was on the speaker's platform. He looked very handsome, she thought. Handsome, but a little worried. She wondered why.

Hoke Deeson nudged her below as they introduced the various acts that would perform the following evening at the rodeo grounds. Shelly Reed was on her feet, bowing.

"You better watch out f' tha' dame," Hoke Deeson sputtered confidentially. "Me'n her was goin' get married. She changed her mind. She goin' to Meshico."

Letha's brows lifted. "You mean Mexico?" Hoke nodded in the affirmative. Letha said, "That's good news indeed."

"Ain' good news for you, baby," Hoke Deeson told her. "If she go to Meshico, she go with your husband."

Letha's back stiffened. She reached for the wine goblet at her place and drained it. It took her a moment to get hold of herself. She said finally, "How do you know?"

He blinked his eyes. "I seen 'em and I heard 'em. Right in th' hall this morning. Right after Kelleray got the award again—"

The waiter had refilled Letha's wine glass. This time she sipped the drink slowly. Something began to tick in a remote corner of her mind. She saw Shelly watching her and glared at the girl. Letha's eyes said, *You dirty bitch.*

Shelly must have read the violence in that gaze for she hurriedly looked away, her face flaming. The action convinced Letha. Guilt. Shelly looked guilty as hell. Trying to steal my husband, Letha thought angrily. Then her eyes shifted and she saw Burt Lenshaw and a new emotion stirred in her. Lenshaw was moving his head slightly toward the door. She nodded and smiled secretly.

Only for an instant did her conscience bother her when the parallel of Rod's action and hers struck her. Whatever she did with Burt Lenshaw she kept strictly to herself. But with Rod it was different. He was careless. He would be found out and there would be scandal. She was above reproach. Who in this valley would dare to accuse her of infidelity? Even the thought made her smile. She had a reputation as a cold woman. Now it was convenient. She would allow the reputation to stand. She could hear her friends—"You mean Letha Kelleray? No, it couldn't be. Any other woman, but not Letha. And a person like Burt Lenshaw? Never!"

The speeches were over. The last baked Alaska had melted into soggy crumbs. Tables were pushed back, and the orchestra from the Rancho Room came in to play for dancing.

As Kelleray left the speaker's platform, he caught

Shelly by the wrist. She tried to pull away. "Just a dance for luck," he said, his eyes shining. And as he swung her across the floor, he said one word: "Mexico."

Then Shelly was aware of a sharp voice in her ear. Letha said, "It's customary for a husband to claim the first dance with his wife."

Kelleray's face flamed. "I'm sorry. I'd forgotten you were here."

It was the worst thing he could have said. Letha smiled coldly at Shelly and lifted her arms to Rod. "My first husband had a red-haired mistress. It seems to run in the family."

Matt had been coming toward them and he was in time to catch the last remark. He touched Shelly on the arm and said quietly, "Let's get out of here."

As they left, Letha finished the dance with her husband. Then she complained of a headache. Rod seemed relieved when she said she was going home. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him where she was really going. She would enjoy the shocked disbelief on his face. But that would be foolish. She had no intention of giving Rod a club to hold over her head. That had been narrow enough an escape out at the house when he had almost caught her with Burt.

She went to the parking lot and had barely slipped in under the wheel when Lenshaw's huge figure moved toward her.

"Follow me," he said quickly. She waited until he had climbed into his car, then swung in behind him.

She trailed him through the south end of town into the hills. The pavement ended and they were on dirt roads. Letha remembered the section well. She had often ridden Queenie up here. Lenshaw pulled into an oak grove and climbed out. He came over to her car, opened the door and caught Letha roughly by the arm. Somehow, the pressure of his thick fingers on her flesh excited her. Always men had been gentle with her. Arnie Ross and Rod.

"Where are you taking me?" she said, trying to struggle just a bit so he wouldn't think she was too eager.

"Some place where we can lie down." He laughed harshly, pushing his big face close to hers. "Or would you like it here—right here in the car? Anything you say, baby."

"How do you think I'd know? You're teaching me, remember?" She put a hand to his face, feeling the bristles on his cheek. She would have been furious with Rod—Arnie too, for that matter—had either of them come to her without first shaving.

He led her deeper into the oak grove. Below, in the rodeo arena, they could see work lights as a crew set up the rigging and the portable stage for the next night's show.

Lenshaw let his hands slide over her. "You like it, don't you?"

"Do I have to answer that?" She stood rigid, her arms tight at her sides, wondering what he was going to do next. She could see the white flash of his teeth in the darkness.

"Take off your clothes!"

"That wouldn't be wise. People come here."

"How do you know?" He was laughing at her.

Suddenly she hated him again. She had stepped below her station and she was paying for it. She had allowed him to get her into a compromising position. She started back to her car, walking with a long-legged stride. He caught her and spun her around. His two hands were at the neckline of her dress.

"Take it off or I'll tear it off."

A shudder wracked her body. "All right, Burt," she whispered. "All right." She turned. "The zipper's in back. You can find it."

His hands moved. She stepped out of the gray evening gown. Then she stepped out of everything else and in a moment stood before him, her body gleaming faintly in the reflection of the lights from the arena below. Then he pulled her to him roughly and she was aware only of the hot flame of excitement that coursed through her body. His hairy, swarthy frame enveloped her soft flesh. His fingers clutched her outraged hips, and together they sank to the earth . . .

It was much later when she kissed him and asked for a cigarette. For the first time since she could remember, her hands didn't tremble. She felt strangely lighthearted. He lit the cigarette for her. "I've missed so much, Burt. I never realized it until tonight."

He was sitting with his back against an oak stump. She leaned back in his lap, smoking, looking at the stars, hazy through the branches above them. It was pure animal pleasure and it had shocked her deeply to learn her own capacity for love. And suddenly she knew why so many of her women friends spent countless hours on an analyst's couch. They didn't need psychiatry. What they needed was a man. Not a considerate piece of flesh labeled "husband." Oh, she knew well enough that she and her friends were responsible for their husbands' lack of interest. No wonder their men would risk anything for a smile from a strange woman. Even as her own father had, when he ran off with the waitress from the *Bon Ton Cafe*. And Arnie Ross and his red-haired mistress.

Thinking of red hair reminded her of Shelly Reed. Well, that thing between Rod and the girl must never be allowed to blossom. Even though she enjoyed these moments with Burt, she had a certain position to maintain. Although Burt held a great physical attraction for her, she must remain married. She must never let Rod go. There must be two sides to her life from now on. Her social life and this—this love or whatever you wanted to call it. This thing that rocked her and made her cry out in pain, enjoying the pain, and being frightened of it and never wanting it to end and then knowing the piercing, wonderful moment before complete exhaustion.

And she had thought she was frigid to men. She had thought she needed strange, odd avenues to find sensual relief—avenues down which she had been led by such as Margo. What a laugh! All she, Letha, had needed was a real man, a prime specimen of the male animal—in short, a rutting brute like Burt Lenshaw.

She turned and looked up at Burt. He caught her face and kissed her. She struggled. "I've got to get some clothes on. Do you want me to freeze?"

He sat relaxed, his legs outstretched, and grinned. He

caught her under the arms and lifted her easily. For a moment he held her, then he put her down.

She shut eyes, and it was then that she said, "What do you think of Shelly Reed?"

Lenshaw drew back his head and peered at her. "A hell of a time to be asking me about Shelly Reed!"

Something in his tone prompted her to say, "You don't like her, do you?"

He laughed harshly. He was thinking of that scene in Shelly's room at the hotel. Sure, he'd been drunk—but she needn't have raised such a stink about it. And that gunshot. Somebody had tried to shoot one of them. He still didn't know whether the intended victim was Shelly or himself.

Lenshaw said, "I hope she chokes."

Letha smiled, snuggled close to him. "How would you like to earn five thousand dollars?"

"Yeah. I'd like that. You tell me about it—later."

His huge hands tweaked her large, soft breasts, then crushed them as if he were squeezing melons. She would have cried out from the pain of it, except that the leaping excitement in her veins inundated any sensation of suffering with a tide of wild delight. Returning his uncouth love-making in kind, she kissed his animal lips, bearing down with her teeth until she drew blood.

He only laughed, and hugged her closer to him in a grip of iron.

Then his muscles, clothed in lust and hairy skin, bunched for the foray that would breach the depths of her womanhood. Like a hammer, like a battering ram, his brutish manhood walloped and pounded to the heart of her, his bone-breaking grip bending her to his lust-maddened will. Nude under the stars, Letha's breasts heaved. Her creamy torso rolled and strained. Her thighs and her hips rode shafts of fire. For the second time that night, she felt a matchless bliss literally splitting her asunder.

"You big bastard," she breathed. "You wonderful big bastard . . ."

Eleven

ROD KELLERAY felt more frustrated than at any time in his life. Letha was acting so oddly. And that business of the shooting the other day worried him. He knew Letha had left the banquet hours ago. Probably home now. Asleep. But somehow he just couldn't believe that was so. In some inexplicable manner, she had changed. He did not like her in her new role. The personality wasn't becoming and it frightened him a little. More than ever he was determined to get away from San Carlos, even for a few weeks. He realized that any chance he might have had with Shelly was gone. Anyway, she had left the hotel with Matt Devore. He could see that there was something between them.

He was standing in the banquet hall with a drink in his hand when he heard a soft voice at his elbow. "I think it's simply wonderful, Mr. Kelleray, that you won the award again."

He turned his head. It was Marilee, Ken's new wife. She looked small and demure in a pink evening gown. She leaned forward a little to peer up at him intimately and he could see the V revealed by her low neckline. It took him a moment to bring his eyes back to her face. She offered him a soft warm hand and tilted her blonde head to one side to smile at him.

"I want to congratulate you," she said.

They shook hands. He felt something fizz through him. Now that he thought of it, she had been watching him for a long time. Yesterday in the Rancho Room and tonight at the banquet. Whenever he looked up she had been smiling.

He fiddled with his drink. "You and Ken having a good time?"

"I don't know about Ken, but I am. Ken's passed out." She waved a hand toward the men's room.

Kelleray took a deep breath and put down his glass. "This place is driving me nuts. How about me buying you a drink somewhere else?" He grinned at her. "What do you say?"

"I'd love it."

Still he hesitated. "You sure Ken won't mind?"

"Of course not. He told me to have fun." She giggled, pressing a handkerchief to her lips. "But he's having enough fun for both of us." She looked pensive. "He's drinking an awful lot. I don't understand it."

Rod Kelleray patted her hand. "Well, this is the time of year for having fun. I'm glad you have a broadminded husband."

They went out to his car and drove north out of town. Marilee made no objection when the city lights faded behind them. When he finally drove through a poplar grove and a red neon spelled out *Italian Gardens*, she sat up straight and said, "How romantic!"

Inside there were booths and dim lights and a juke box. Marilee seemed entranced with the place. They had antipasto and pizza bubbling with hot cheese and anchovies. They had had wine with the food and after finishing they drank a couple of highballs.

Their knees were tight together under the table.

Kelleray said, "You're a lovely kid."

Marilee tilted her head prettily. "It's nice to hear compliments from a man. Ken doesn't seem to realize that a woman thrives on them." She lowered her eyes demurely as she added softly, "I guess Shelly Reed doesn't need compliments. All men just naturally seem to go for red-heads."

Kelleray had a sudden acute memory. The juke box, the dim lights, the bar. Sitting here with Shelly two years before. And then someone had to come in and tell him Letha had returned unexpectedly from New York. It was unnerving to remember what might have happened otherwise.

Marilee said, "You seem preoccupied."

"It's just the switch from wine to whisky. It always leaves me a little befuddled. But it'll pass." Suddenly Kelleray felt an unaccustomed boldness. "I'm going to take a holiday. I'd like you to come with me. To Mexico."

He sat stiffly, watching the small face. She might throw a sugar bowl at him. She might scream or sulk. She did none of these things. She said, "Mexico would be loads of fun."

"We'd meet in Tiajuana. Fly down to La Paz."

She stared at him through the fringes of her lashes. "Sure I'm not second choice?"

"Of course not," he said indignantly.

She toyed with her drink. "I saw you talking to Shelly tonight. I'm wondering if you didn't ask her and she turned you down."

His laughter was forced but he thought it sounded genuine enough. "We were only discussing her contract for next year."

"That's something I'd also like to discuss with you. She and Ken are competitors, you know."

For the first time Rod Kelleray felt uneasy. Had he walked into something? He had assumed that Marilee was only a cute kid without an eye for business.

Somebody dropped coins in the juke box. Strings played *Stardust*. Kelleray felt the tension of the past few days fall away from him. Forgotten were Letha and Shelly. Across from him was a small blonde named Marilee. She was another man's wife. So what? Ken had given Shelly a dirty deal. He deserved whatever he got. When Kelleray took the next sip of his drink, he was completely satisfied with his rationalization. He had expected a conquest tonight—but not this easily.

Marilee stuck the tip of a finger in her mouth as if in deep thought. She seemed so young, so innocent. He was quite drunk. He was happy. Letha Kelleray was somewhere beyond the moon.

Marilee said, "Ken doesn't know anything about my family. I could say that my aunt's ill in New York and I have to fly east."

"Sure. I've got a friend in New York. You could mail

letters from La Paz enclosed in a big envelope. My friend could re-mail them to Ken."

They giggled, delighted by the idea. Two conspirators. They touched glasses. Kelleray said, "It's stuffy in here. They have cabins in the back. And each cabin has a television set. Do you like television?"

She smiled knowingly. "I love it."

It was very late when they walked into the Del Rio Hotel lobby. Kelleray saw Ken slouched low in an easy chair. Ken looked hung over, dejected and angry.

Kelleray whispered, "I'll see you tomorrow."

She leaned against him. "Don't forget the plane tickets."

"I won't."

She weaved as she crossed the lobby and Ken stood up, his face tight. "Where have you been?" he demanded hoarsely.

She smiled and led the way to the elevators. "You shouldn't have waited up for me."

He caught her roughly by the arm. "It's after three o'clock. What were you doing with Kelleray?"

"Darling, you sound angry."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

They rode up in the elevator and when they were in their room, she opened her purse and took out a pack of cigarettes. She didn't bother to close the purse. "Light, Ken."

He struck a match. It was while he was holding the light for her that he glanced at her open purse. The match flame wavered and she had to catch his wrist and hold it. Then she took a drag on the cigarette and followed his gaze. She stiffened.

"Don't let your imagination run away with you," she snapped. "I just bought them, if you remember. The elastic is too tight. I took them off before I even left the hotel tonight."

He didn't seem to hear her. His hand dipped into

the purse, his fingers pulled out a wad of filmy nylon edged with lace.

"Since when do you carry your pants around in your purse?" he demanded.

"I told you the reason."

He flung the panties on the bed and turned on her furiously. His right hand was drawn back, and he started it swinging toward her face. It landed high on her rosy cheek, turning it even rosier.

Instead of cringing, crying out, she calmly looked him in the eye, smoke from the cigarette drifting between them.

The lack of reaction infuriated Ken. The cold bitch, he thought. This time when he swung, it was with his fist.

The blow staggered her. She went reeling backward, dropping her cigarette, and wound up on the bed. Calmly he stepped on the cigarette, followed her to the bed, and saw that Marilee was smiling. "I'll wipe that off your face," he swore. He proceeded methodically to pummel every part of her. "If I had the guts," he shouted, smacking and whacking her, "I'll kill you and then shoot myself!"

"Ken," she retorted breathlessly. "Oh, Ken, you're wonderful. Go ahead. Punish me. Punish me the way I deserve. Then use me. Use me, Ken . . ." She was wriggling out of her dress.

He kept on beating her. But the sight of that lovely expanse of smooth pink flesh was too much for him. He seized her by her quivering hips, and vented his passion as if she were some cheap streetwalker rather than his wife.

And all the time she was gasping, "Oh . . . Oh, Ken . . . Oh, you sweet Ken . . ."

When it had ended, he was ashamed.

He went over to the window and in a moment she joined him there, and spoke to him with a strange tenderness. "It was business tonight. Kelleray wanted me to meet some friends of his. Members of the Board. You had passed out so I went alone."

He swung around to her, trying to read the truth or the lie in her pale blue eyes.

"I did it for you, Ken." She lifted a hand to his cheek. "Don't be surprised if you play Kelleray's Fair next season instead of Shelly Reed."

"But—"

"And another thing. I'm almost sure I've got you a contract to play the Bascom County Fair. Mr. Franklin was so considerate when I told him how much we wanted to stay in California."

He watched her. "Was that the night you claimed Shelly said she'd accuse you of—sleeping with somebody?"

Marilee pouted. "Yes. Mr. Franklin was standing in the hall, talking to me. Shelly was so angry to think you might get the contract she said she'd fix me good."

Just before he kissed her, he said, "After this, let me handle the bookings."

Twelve

HOKE DEESON awoke the next morning with a heavy head and the realization that he had made a fool of himself. Not a fool exactly, he corrected, as he lay in bed. An s.o.b. was more like it. Shelly was a nice kid and burned up by her refusal or not, he shouldn't have tried to make trouble for her. He squinted his eyes, trying to remember what and how much he had told Letha Kelleray. But the previous night was just an alcoholic blur to him. Then, recalling he had a job to do today, he hastily rolled out of bed and dressed.

He drove to the rodeo grounds where he was to be in charge of erecting the rigging for the high acts in tonight's show.

The first Shelly saw of him that day was when he came charging across the hotel lobby shortly after noon. He was on his way to the elevators when he spotted her. His face was unusually grave.

She had expected Hoke to berate her but instead he said, "I just looked over your new rigging. I—well, it seems—"

She clenched her fists. Her life depended on her rigging. "Is something wrong, Hoke?"

Obviously he was trying to cover up something. He forced a grin. "Looks like it's got a flaw. You'd better get hold of Ken and have him get the old rigging out so I can set it up. I understand he's got it with him. Isn't that so?"

"You've found something," she accused. "What is it?"

He glanced away as he said, "Any kind of steel sometimes gets a flaw in it. Lucky I found this one in time."

He turned and hurried away. When he was out of sight, Shelly rushed out to her station wagon and drove away from the hotel to the other side of town. Ahead she

could see the rodeo grounds laid out in a natural bowl. Green hills topped with live oaks rose on the west side. But the beauty of the scene left her cold. She wheeled the station wagon through the gate and climbed out. All was confusion. A high wire was being set up. In the center of the grounds she saw her spot, her rigging on the ground where it had been taken from the packing case before being assembled.

She found a roustabout who worked for Margo's show. He was helping set up safety nets under a trapeze.

"Deeson said there's a flaw in my rigging," she told him. "Do you know where it is?"

"The middle section," he said, pointing a grimy finger at the jumble of cable and steel poles.

A finger of fear touched her as she carefully examined the section the roustabout had pointed out. There was a flaw in it all right—but it was man-made. The center section of the sixty-five foot pole had been cut nearly through with a hacksaw blade.

She stood rigid, her face drained of color. Whoever climbed that pole and started to sway would plunge to the ground when the slender steel snapped in two.

As she climbed back into the station wagon her knees were trembling. She sat there a full minute in order to think and regain her self-control. Even then she didn't consider the obvious sabotage a plot against her own life. Someone wanted Ken out of the way. But who—and why? The uncertainty increased her panic. Somewhere, somehow, Ken had made an enemy and that person wanted him dead. As she drove to town she forced her thoughts into a rational pattern. There was the shooting at the hotel, of course. But she had discounted that as a threat to her own life. Some drunk in the hotel had got hold of a gun and fired it. Only pure coincidence, she had decided, had directed the bullet to her window. And she did not for one moment consider herself so important that someone would want to kill her. No, it was Ken. There was no connection between the gunshot and the damaged center section of the rigging. Perhaps,

there was some woman Ken had led on. Perhaps an irate husband or brother of such a woman.

At the hotel she phoned Ken's room.

She didn't tell him about the saw cut in the steel pole, for that would worry him. She just said the pole had developed a flaw.

"I'd appreciate it if you would set up the old rigging, Ken." She paused, waiting for him to speak. But there was only silence at the other end of the wire. "Will you do that, Ken? Turn it over to Hoke Deesen. He'll see that it's set up properly."

"Okay," he muttered. Then he added, "Will you have lunch with me?"

"Sorry, Ken. I have a business appointment."

"I doubt that," he snapped. "You've got a date with some man."

"What if I have? Would it concern you?"

"Maybe I'm jealous—"

She was angered. "Listen, Ken, let's get one thing straight. You walked out on me. You married another woman. You've no claim on me."

"But, Shelly, I told you I made a mistake. I—"

"Let's not discuss it again. Please."

Then he said a thing that seemed very strange to her. "You'd better watch out. I've got a hunch my wife is beating your time with Rod Kelleray."

The line clicked dead.

Shelly frowned and replaced the phone. No, it wasn't possible. Marilee might be flighty but surely she wouldn't make a play for Rod. Not with Letha in the background.

Her conversation with Ken disturbed her more than she realized. When someone knocked, the sound startled her. She went to open the door and found Matt Devore there, a tight smile on his lips.

"May I come in?"

She shrugged her shoulders and stepped back into the room. She sat down on the bed and waved him to a chair. He shook two cigarettes from his pack. In the adjoining wing, the Bascom County headquarters was

strangely silent. The pace had been killing. Now the convention was almost over. Thank God.

Matt lit the cigarettes and handed her one.

"I've got a proposition," he said lamely.

"You, too?"

He stared at the smoke spiraling up from his cigarette. "I know it's been rough on you."

"I've got exactly three contracts for next season. It seems that I'm now in the same category as a prostitute."

"Shelly!"

"I mean it. This business is strictly reciprocal. I do a favor and a favor is done for me."

"How about the three contracts you did get?"

She smiled, arching her brows. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you, Matt?"

"Forget it. I'm sorry."

"Well, for your information the three contracts were from managers who brought their wives along. It was business—strictly business. If it hadn't been for the wives, I probably wouldn't even have got those."

"Sometimes I'm ashamed of the whole male sex."

"I doubt that," she said. She finished her cigarette and punched it out in a glass ashtray. "But I tell you one thing. If I've got to get ahead in the world that way, I won't risk my neck on steel poles. I'll get myself a plush apartment and go into the business right."

He rose quickly and clasped her hands, for she had begun to cry. But she turned away from him.

She lay on the bed, facing the wall, listening to the buzz of traffic drifting up from the street below. Suddenly she felt his weight beside her. But she didn't turn around.

His breath was soft against the back of her neck as he whispered, "I came up here today for one thing."

"I'll just bet you did," she said bitterly, and drew her legs up under her and tucked the bottom of her skirt around her ankles.

"I've done real well. More business than I expected. I've been working night and day turning out ideas for different managers." He caught her by the chin and tried to turn her face around but she resisted him. She

let the hand stay where it was and covered it with her own.

"What I'm trying to say is this," Matt went on. "I want you to forget about gambling your life on that swaypole."

"It's the only way I know to make a living." She laughed, her voice sharp with a touch of hysteria. "Unless I move into that plush apartment."

Angered, he caught her roughly by the shoulders and pinned her flat. His face above hers was very serious and for a moment she was in doubt as to whether he would strike her or kiss her. He kissed her. She was aware of a swimmingly delicious feeling. And she tried to fight it, but it engulfed her and she no longer cared about anything. Next year could take care of itself. All that mattered was the present.

He drew back, looking down at her flushed face. Some of her lipstick was smeared over his chin. He said, "I want to marry you. I want you to be my wife."

Her lips parted. He saw her smile.

"Oh, Matt!" She locked her fingers around his neck and pulled him to her. "I should say something appropriate like 'you've made me the happiest woman in the world.' But I can't. All I can say is—I guess I've loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you."

She heard him laugh. He pressed his mouth against the full white curve of her throat.

"Funny, but the first time we met we were both in our birthday suits," he whispered.

"I remember, Matt. How could I ever forget? I was so embarrassed. And I just kept standing there in the bathroom with my mouth open."

"Did I look good?"

"Very good."

"And you looked good, Shelly."

They both laughed. Then he said, "Do you know something?"

"What, Matt?"

"I'd like to see you that way again."

She looked up at him and her eyes were shining and

her lips were red and moist. She said, "We could fix that, Matt."

"Sure we could."

"But I hate to waste a minute. These moments are precious."

He agreed. Time was all they had. They made the most of it.

Letha Kelleray wheeled her air-conditioned hardtop through the date at the rodeo grounds just as Shelly drove off that morning. But Letha didn't see Shelly. She coasted across the arena and braked the car. In a moment Burt Lenshaw's massive figure detached itself from a group of roustabouts near the entertainers' platform. He walked over to her, his big shoes kicking up spurts of dust.

He leaned a thick arm on the door. "I did my part," he told her. "It ain't my fault that Hoke Deeson snooped around."

The corners of her mouth tightened. "Then it's all off, is that it?"

"I won't get a chance to do it again. They're setting up the old rigging and Deeson has set a couple of his boys to watch it."

"Too bad it didn't work," she said, her hand at the ignition switch.

"You still owe me five grand," he said softly.

Her cheeks paled. For the first time, seeing his direct gaze, the brutal face in the clear morning air, she realized she had allowed her emotions to trap her.

In that moment she hated him again. But he let his big hand slip through the open window and his fingers gripped her arm. The strength suddenly went out of her and she slumped back against the seat. "Why do you hurt me, Burt?" she breathed.

"It's the only way to handle a dame like you," he said roughly.

Then he removed his hand and she sat up straight, aware of her pounding heart. "You'll get your money."

"When'll I see you?"

She tried to appear calm. "I'll get a message to you."

"You'd better make it soon."

"I will, Burt. Of course I will."

"Can't be too soon for me," he said, as she stepped on the starter.

From a short distance away, Sergeant Chico McAdam watched Letha's car swing out through the main gate. He waited until Burt Lenshaw joined the roustabouts on the entertainer's platform, then unobtrusively slipped through the gate to the parking area. He identified Lenshaw's car by its license number. He had to make half a dozen tries with his ring of skeletons before he got the rear deck open. Buried under a gunnysack full of tools was a black, half-burned photograph album. He thumbed through the book, then locked the deck.

With the book under his arm he entered the arena, moving quickly to a display booth Margo Minter was having erected to advertise her Greater Shows that night.

He leaned against the counter of the booth and said, "Hello, Margo."

His voice startled her. She had been in a foul mood since that scene at Carmel the other night. Hung over and worse. Her right leg still pained where Shelly had pinned her to the floor with the heavy coffee table.

Although they had never moved in the same social circles, she had known McAdam ever since she could remember.

"What's up, Chico? One of my boys try to jimmy some dame's bedroom window?"

He called her aside and showed her the album.

A sickly pallor spread across her handsome face. She put out a hand, grasping a two-by-four that supported the roof of the display booth.

Slowly he turned the pages, letting her see the photographs of a girl in various stages of growth.

Margo stepped back, fury darkening her gray eyes. "All right. Now you know. So what?"

"Don't get the idea I'm trying to persecute you," McAdam said softly. "It's your business if you want to keep

it quiet. Although I can't see why. I'm proud of my kids."

Her shoulders slumped. "Maybe I did wrong, I dunno. But I never wanted anybody to know Marilee was my daughter. I kept her under wraps as long as I could. When she finished school I wanted her out of my hair so I picked a likely jerk to marry her. Ken Brighton. I gave them money to go east, but she double-crossed me." Margo laughed bitterly. "Don't ask me who Marilee's father was. I don't know. There were six possibilities. I've got a white dress with grass stains on it. Some day I'll show it to you."

In his profession McAdam wasn't easily surprised. But it astounded him to learn that the tough, mannish Margo Minter was a mother.

From his coat pocket he removed a newspaper clipping and fitted it over the page in the album from which it had been removed by steaming. The clipping matched a torn piece of paper that had remained pasted to the page.

"This is what I'm interested in," McAdam said gravely. "Not your daughter. You were a witness to Arnie Ross' death."

"What about it?"

"This clipping was found on Letha Kelleray's dressing table."

Margo stared at the penciled words across the face of the newspaper photograph: *What about this?*

McAdam watched the play of emotions on Margo's face. She seemed suddenly older and the defiance went out of her eyes.

McAdam said, "It sounds to me like blackmail. Any ideas?"

"Look, McAdam. Maybe I haven't been exactly an outstanding citizen, but I don't blackmail"

His shoulders stirred. "I was a rookie cop the day Ross got into his plane. I was one of the first at the scene of the accident—"

"Arnie was drunk that day. That's why he cracked up."

McAdam gave her a tired smile. "I inspected the wreckage. Somebody had used a hacksaw on the fuel line. Just a small cut—but enough. When Ross took off,

his motor conked out and he crashed into an oak tree."

She said tensely, "You tell a good story, McAdam."

"I reported the incident to my chief. But when we went to look at the plane again, the fuel line was gone." He gave her a wry smile. "The following month I was made sergeant. It was the same month that Chief Milfont took a trip to Europe, all expenses paid."

"You're not very smart, telling me all this about Milfont. I could go to him—tell him you're spreading nasty rumors . . ."

"There are no witnesses," McAdam reminded her. "You'd have to prove it."

Margo seemed not to breathe as she said, "You're trying to make out that I had something to do with that cut fuel line."

He snapped the book closed and put it under his arm. "If you get any ideas, call me at the station."

He walked off, leaving her staring after him.

Letha was on the slanting board doing her sit-ups when she heard Annette talking to someone at the side door. Hurriedly Letha threw on a robe, after putting her head out the window and seeing a boy in uniform on a motorcycle. Something feathery light touched the pit of her stomach as she descended the stairs. Perhaps Burt Lenshaw was sending her a message. She didn't want Annette to get hold of it. Annette was stupid, but she had a tongue.

"I'll take it, Annette." She walked briskly to the freckle-faced messenger who held out a book for her signature.

Annette had an envelope which she handed to Letha. Letha's hands began to tremble as she saw the bold printing across the envelope—*Regal Airways*.

She jerked open the envelope. Inside were two tickets. "Tiajuana to La Paz" was stamped across them.

The boy shifted nervously and asked her to sign the book because he had more tickets to deliver.

Letha was unaware of the ringing of the phone. But as Annette bustled in from the kitchen, Letha suddenly

picked up the hall extension. It was the airline office. The clerk was frantically apologetic. "Mr. Kelleray gave explicit instructions that he'd pick up the tickets at the office in person. I'm so sorry a mistake has been made. I'll have someone on the carpet for this. Will you be kind enough to return the tickets to the messenger if he's still there? I imagine Mr. Kelleray will be quite put out about this—"

"Yes. I imagine he will."

"I—er—suppose this trip was to be a surprise for you, Mrs. Kelleray. I hope you won't say anything about it to your husband."

Letha hung up. She flung the tickets at the startled messenger, then climbed the stairs. In her room she threw herself down on the bed. She lay rigid, hardly breathing. A horrible picture suddenly flashed across her mind. Her place in this community would be shattered. Scandal! Her husband was running off to Mexico with Shelly Reed.

She remembered Rod at the breakfast table that morning. He had calmly announced that at the close of the convention he was going off on a fishing trip.

"I don't believe you'll mind, dear," he had said smugly. "After all, you'll have your target practice to keep you amused."

Quickly, she made up her mind. In her husband's bedroom she pawed through some papers on his desk. Finally she found what she was looking for—a program of the acts to be presented at the rodeo grounds that night.

She ran her finger down the list. A name leaped out at her. Shelly was opening the show with her swaypole act. Then, following some dance acts, a trapeze turn and a trampoline number, Ken Brighton would close the show.

Crumpling the program in her hand, Letha dropped it into a wastebasket. A terrible smile was on her lips as she returned to her own room.

Shelly arrived at the rodeo grounds early. Matt rode out with her. She was nervous. A premonition of disaster

had been dark and ugly in her mind all afternoon. But she tried to hide it from Matt. She wore a long coat over her costume.

When they arrived at the arena her fear increased, for a fog was rolling in from the coast. She moved quickly to her rigging. She felt momentary relief when she saw Hoke Deeson guarding it personally.

She ran a hand over the rigging. It was wet from the fog. "I don't like this," she told Deeson.

"Neither do I. It's too late in the season for outdoor acts."

The stands were filling up and a band played on the platform. Above the arena loomed the dark, silent hills. Wisps of fog drifted under the floodlights.

All day Matt had tried to talk her out of going on that night. But she wouldn't back down. It was to be her final performance. Despite her troubles, she still had a lot of friends, fans and admirers in the business. She had promised to perform and she wouldn't let them down. She begged him to understand. But he didn't. It seemed crazy to him that she should risk her neck—and for nothing. She was going to marry him. Swaypoles would be only a memory. But she was adamant.

When she saw Ken walking slowly across the grounds, she crossed to meet him. Her coat hung open and he saw that she wore a costume identical to his own—white tights, spangled shorts and tight-fitting bejeweled cap. It seemed incongruous to her now that she and Ken had bubbled with enthusiasm when they had had the outfits made. How quickly things change, she thought. Now he was married to someone else and she was promised to Matt Devore.

Ken said, looking at her, "How come no black stockings? I hear you wore the old costume the last night of the Fair."

She smiled and touched his arm. Although he had deserted her and she should hate him, she still felt a certain responsibility for his safety. She had taught him the dangerous act. And she wouldn't let him down. Not now. Not while it was within her power to prevent it.

"The rigging is wet," she told him. "And it'll be a lot wetter before the show closes."

He shrugged. "So what?"

"So I want to change spots with you."

Anger touched his eyes. "I can take care of myself." But something in his voice told her that a small fear ticked somewhere in the back of his mind.

"You open the show in my place, Ken. I'll close it."

He licked his lips. His face was haggard. "But it'll be dangerous for you," he argued half-heartedly.

"Listen, boy. I've grown up on that pole. I can do the act in a snowstorm." She was supremely confident of her own ability. But with Ken, it was different. He had learned the act late in life. He didn't have her self-assurance.

Ken nodded and tried to smile. "Thanks, Shelly. I'll tell the emcee to announce the change."

Shelly walked back to Matt and in a few moments a circle of spotlights above the stands was suddenly dimmed. A single spot touched the slender steel pole that rose into the moist night sky.

Ken stepped into the pool of light at the base of the pole. A fanfare from the band, then Ken bowed low and began to climb the steel.

Watching him, Shelly suddenly clutched Matt Devore's arm. "He's frightened," she breathed.

"He'll be all right," Matt assured her.

But she knew from the faltering way Ken skinned up the pole that something was wrong. Suddenly she realized what it was. Always before she had been up there with him, her presence lending him confidence. For the first time he was alone.

She saw him reach the tiny platform and stand on one foot and bow. The crowd applauded.

Shelly clenched her hands. "Don't look down, Ken. Don't look down."

But he did. And in the spotlight his face was agonized. The pole trembled and she knew it was from his quivering muscles. Still looking down, he grasped the edge of the platform and slowly lifted his feet into the air. When

he reached a handstand, applause roared across the arena. Shelly stood rigid, forgetting to breathe.

In that moment as his feet straightened up into the air, she saw him waver. "He's going too far!" she screamed. His body began to swing off center. Something had disturbed his balance. Suddenly he collapsed, his arms no longer able to support his weight.

There was an instant of shocked silence as his body seemed to float gracefully outward from the platform. Then Shelly was rushing forward, trying to gauge the spot where he would land. If she could only break his fall with her own body—

But she was too late. She saw his body turn slowly in the air. It brushed a guy wire, flipped once, then struck the ground heavily. Out of the stunned silence came the scream of a woman in the stands.

When Shelly tried to reach him, Matt held her back. "It won't do any good to look at him," Matt said.

The ambulance that had been parked near the entrance for just such an emergency came roaring in, siren blasting.

An interne said professionally, "He's still alive. Both legs broken—"

Then a thought leaped into Shelly's mind. "His wife! Where's Marilee?"

They searched the grounds but Marilee was nowhere to be found. "She should be with him," Shelly gasped numbly.

Hoke Deeson said he remembered seeing Marilee in the Rancho Room when he had left for the arena. But when Shelly and Matt arrived at the hotel, Marilee wasn't there. A bellboy remembered Marilee had walked out of the hotel with Rod Kelleray. They had said something about *Italian Gardens*.

In the station wagon, Matt said, "Do you think it's wise to go out there and try to find them?"

"Ken needs her," Shelly said firmly. "The least I can do is see that she gets to the hospital in time."

Shelly didn't realize then how shaken she was. As she wheeled the wagon out to the road, she was sobbing.

Ever since she had been able to walk, she had lived in fear that one day she would be involved in an accident such as she had witnessed tonight. In a way, she blamed herself. If she hadn't taught Ken the act he would never have fallen.

When she voiced her guilt to Matt, he shook his head. "He's old enough to know the risk he was running." He touched her hand on the wheel. "I'm only glad it wasn't you."

"But I can't understand it," Shelly said. "What made him lose his balance? Was it fear—or something else?"

"He was scared white. I saw men do all kinds of unreasonable things in the war."

"Something happened to make him fall. Even when he started to drop he was in a position to grab the platform."

"Maybe he can tell us."

"If he regains consciousness," she said bitterly. "Damn Marileel! Why did he have to marry a tramp?"

"I saw her come out of a man's room the other night. The man was in his shorts."

"You told Ken?"

"Of course not." Matt looked straight ahead. "I'm wondering if you still like the guy."

She shook her head. "Just a feeling of responsibility. If I'd been up there with him, he wouldn't have fallen. I'm sure of it."

Italian Gardens was on the old canyon road to San Francisco, a collection of Swiss-type buildings set in front of a grove. In the darkness of the poplar grove were individual chalets. The main buildings housed the bar and dining room. Beside each chalet was a doorless garage. Lights glowed in some of the windows. Others were dark.

As they cut in to the driveway Shelly said, "If they're here, they'll be in a cabin."

She felt guilty again, remembering the night two years ago when she had almost succumbed to Kelleray's charm, only to learn just in time that he had a wife.

"There's his car," Shelly said, braking the wagon under

the trees. The rear deck of Kelleray's Caddy protruded from the garage.

"Let me go," Matt said, but Shelly shook her head.

"We'll both go," she said.

Thirteen

MARILEE curled up in bed, wearing only a slip cut low enough to afford a full view of her breasts. She clutched the martini glass the waiter had brought in from the bar. It was a wonderful idea coming here. Nobody would miss them in the crowd at the rodeo grounds. But Rod seemed strangely preoccupied. He had taken a shower and now sat in a chair before the smoke-blackened fireplace with nothing but a blanket over his shoulders. He nursed a highball and kept staring at the Indian rug on the floor.

"We came here for fun." Marilee pouted.

"We'll have fun."

She stared at him, her blonde hair loose about her oval face. "Do you like my slip?"

"It's pretty."

"Come here and feel it. It's nylon."

"Wait till I finish my drink." He felt suddenly old and wretched. And in him was a deep despair. He hadn't thought much about it when he had picked up the tickets at the airline office. But the manager had seemed overly solicitous. "I'm sorry about the mistake," the manager had said humbly.

Now Kelleray began to wonder. What mistake? In the inside pocket of his jacket were the tickets. It had seemed like a great idea at the time.

Marilee said, "What did you think about when Hoke Deeson spanked me at the party the other night?"

"I envied him."

"Funny thing about pain. My mother used to whip me. I hated it. But after a while I liked it."

He peered at her. She sat cross-legged on the bed, the lacy edge of the slip draped above her knees.

He said, "You need a psychiatrist. And I need one."

He put his head back against the chair. God, he was tired! He hated himself, hated the life he led. What was money? Money was only a column of figures in a bank-book. In his youth, he'd had ideas. Live in Paris, write a novel. He remembered a girl. Maggie. They'd planned to be married but he had left her. He had wanted money. Now he had money. A faint hope stirred in him. Somewhere in this world Maggie still lived. To have her, to forget this senseless whirl. Fifty dollars a week and Maggie. For that, he'd trade everything he had at the moment.

Marilee said, "I like to be hurt." Her eyes glowed strangely. "When I'm in pain I do crazy things."

He stirred from his chair. Maggie and the good life fled. It was behind him, in the one bright corner of his mind.

Oh, well, if Marilee wanted it that way. It took all kinds. He had never tried this rough stuff, but maybe it would revive his seriously flagging interest in her—and at least it would have the merit of making her happy. He walked over to her, stood contemplatively over her pink-and-white body stretched languorously on the bed. She smiled up at him invitingly.

He lifted his hand and slapped her face.

Her mouth fell open. He slapped her again, on the other cheek.

He sat down on the bed. "Come here, you little tramp," he said. He caught her by her kicking legs and spread her across his lap. Then methodically he began to slap first one hip and then the other, interrupting himself only to deliver an occasional vigorous pinch to the same portions of her swiftly reddening anatomy.

Marilee squirmed and wriggled and cried out—but not in protest. Her gasps of pain were punctuated by pleased giggles and cries of encouragement. "You darling man! More. Harder!"

Rod Kelleray felt faint stirrings of arousal, but only from the proximity and availability of her lovely little body. The blows he was delivering were distinctly unpleasant to him, disgusting. Still, if she wanted them

. . . He clenched a fist and rammed it into a tender portion. Her flesh shook and quaked. The quivers passing now through himself were of a different sort. He was becoming interested, definitely. No, not in punishing her. In loving her. But first he would help her along a little more, the poor twisted kid. Experimentally, in a cold spirit of investigation, he yanked hard at her luxurious blonde hair.

It pulled her head back sharply, and he saw that her face wore a grimace—not of pain, but of desire. Amazing he thought. He let go of her hair and buried her lips with his mouth. He felt her tongue eagerly darting to meet his. He stretched himself beside her on the bed. He was full of passion now, and Marilee's unabashed lust was driving him wild. He rolled her over, lifted himself and drove down at her with all the ardor he could muster. Now ecstasy awaited them both. As she kicked and squealed joyfully, he lunged . . .

He turned.

Someone knocked at the door.

Marilee said, "The waiter with more drinks."

He opened the door. Shelly Reed and Matt stood framed in the doorway.

Marilee sobbed as she went into the bathroom and dressed. Kelleray looked sick around the mouth.

Shelly said, "I want you to know that neither Matt nor I will ever reveal what we've seen here tonight."

Kelleray had dressed. He said, "We don't deserve it." Suddenly he pulled the award button from his lapel and hurled it into the fireplace. Then he strode out of the cabin.

When they arrived at the hospital, Shelly was surprised to find a police guard outside of Ken's room. Marilee told them who she was and slipped quietly inside.

One of the men on guard, a tall, red-faced cop, said that Ken's two legs were broken. But when he had struck the guy wire, it broke his fall enough to save his life.

"Then why the police?" Matt asked, surprised.

"He's got a bullet wound in his shoulder. Somebody shot him with a rifle."

Late that afternoon Burt Lenshaw had decided he had no interest in the show at the rodeo grounds and thought he would use the opportunity to see Letha. Just as he swung off the highway to begin the steep climb to the ranch, he saw Letha's coupe come hurtling down the twisting road. He shouted at her but his voice was lost in the roar of the powerful motor.

Quickly he made a U-turn and started in pursuit. It was still twilight and he had no difficulty in following her. At first he thought she might be going to the show, for it was due to start shortly. But he couldn't quite visualize Letha sitting through a bill of vaudeville and circus acts unless forced to do so for her husband's sake.

Although the past few hours had unnerved him, he still felt reasonably confident of the ultimate success of his plan. Seeing Sergeant McAdam snooping around the rodeo grounds had given him a start. And he had overheard Margo say that the cop was interested in a blackmail angle. But with Letha's money behind him, he felt comparatively safe from the law.

In the excitement of her new experiences, Letha had talked. Lenshaw hadn't been too surprised at what he had learned during their passionate moments together and he was shrewd enough to trick her into revealing most of the story. He was sure of one thing—Letha had murdered her first husband.

Now as he drove, keeping the tail lights of her coupe always in view, he carefully reviewed all she had told him.

It had started when Letha inadvertently learned that Arnie Ross had a mistress. In a fit of rage, Letha had cornered the woman in the apartment Ross had been maintaining for her, and had beaten her half to death. Shocked at what she had done, Letha immediately laid plans to protect herself. After a conference with Chief

Milfont, Letha had sworn out a complaint against the woman she had beaten, reversing the facts and charging her with assault. To avoid persecution, the woman had left town. All this had been made possible by Letha's generous contribution to the safety deposit box which Milfont maintained under another name.

But even though Letha had had her revenge against the mistress, she still brooded over the fact that her husband had deceived her. For six months she and Ross had not spoken. Then one day, as he was getting ready to commute to San Francisco in his private plane, Letha had taken a hacksaw from his tool chest and cut the fuel line.

There was one loophole Lenshaw hadn't as yet been able to fill. What part had Margo played in the affair? And why in those days had she been such a frequent visitor to the ranch? But all that seemed unimportant. The main thing was that he could pin Letha to the wall any time he pleased. Awakened passion seemed to invoke in her a terrific desire to cleanse her conscience. Lenshaw was glad he was her confessor. Even if she refused to string along with him, he could always go to McAdam . . .

His nerves tightened as he saw Letha turn her car into the dirt road where he had taken her not too many hours ago. It was dark now. He cut his lights and followed her. Knowing the road was a dead end and that she would have to return this way, he drove under a tree and parked. Then he cautiously climbed the hill on foot. In a clearing, he saw her silhouetted against the lights that glowed from the rodeo grounds below.

Puzzled, he crept closer. She was up to something. But what? She struck a match to light a cigarette. It was then he saw the rifle under her left arm.

From below, the muted voices of the crowd drifted up, the strains of a band playing *Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight*. Then the lights dimmed. The emcee was making an announcement over the p.a. system but the message was drowned under the blast of band music.

As Lenshaw watched he saw a slender white-clad figure wearing a small white cap begin to climb a sway-

pole, barely visible through the wisps of fog that drifted in from the coast.

Tension mounted in Lenshaw as he saw Letha raise the rifle to her shoulder. For a moment he almost called out to her. But he restrained himself, knowing that if he were silent now, he'd really have her. Too bad it had to be a looker like Shelly Reed—but that was the way it happened sometimes.

A spurt of orange flame, a crackling sound. Below, the figure on top of the pole wavered for an instant. Then it began to topple earthward. Then there was a crowd converging on the crumpled figure and the red lights of an ambulance, and a loud wailing siren.

Letha stood motionless, staring down into the arena. The ambulance pulled away. The band was quiet and the stands were strangely hushed. A voice said clearly over the loudspeaker that the show would be resumed as scheduled, following the unfortunate accident to Ken Brighton. A report on his condition would be given out just as soon as it was received from the hospital.

Letha seemed to sway.

Burt Lenshaw said, "Lousy shooting. You got Brighton instead of Shelly."

Letha whirled, startled. She started to lift the rifle muzzle but he grabbed it and twisted the weapon out of her hands.

"How could I be wrong?" she said numbly. "It was on the program. Shelly opened the show."

He smiled and laid the rifle on the ground at his feet. "You shot him."

"I only meant to frighten her—him. I thought a close shot would throw Shelly off balance. She would fall—"

"We're in business, Letha."

"What do you mean?"

He ticked off the points on his thick fingertips. "You murdered your first husband. I know why and how. And even if that wasn't enough, I saw what you just did with that rifle."

Letha wore low-heeled shoes. Now she wasn't very tall, the top of her head coming just to his shoulder. She tilted

her head back to peer up at him. It was very quiet on the hilltop. Below, the band was playing. The show, it seemed, must go on.

She said, "What am I going to do, Burt?"

"How much do you think it'll take to buy off Rod Kelleray? Twenty thousand? That ought to be enough to get him in the right mood for a divorce."

Her voice was strangely cool. "What then, Burt?"

"Then you and me are getting married. I always wanted the easy life. Now I've got it."

The toe of Letha's shoe touched the rifle on the ground. Never in her life had she wanted to kill as much as she wanted to now. Wanted to point the rifle at his face and watch the smirk and the confident eyes disintegrate. To stomp him with her feet as he lay broken and bleeding on the ground. The dirty scum, a voice raged in her mind. Does he really think I would marry a common, dirty, conniving roustabout? Me—Letha Kelleray! Parade a husband like him?

Fourteen

IN the faint glow of light that reached the lonely hilltop, Letha Kelleray appeared to be smiling. It seemed that in a few seconds she had realized her position and was attempting to make the best of it. To Lenshaw, her smile seemed inviting. She took his two hands and placed them against her.

"All right, Burt," she said in a husky voice. "I'll buy Rod off. Then there'll be only the two of us."

He watched her a moment, wishing he could see her eyes. But it was too dark. He didn't think she would dare just to lead him on, not after all he had on her. But you couldn't be sure.

She said, "I need your love now, Burt. Please—"

"We'd better get out of here."

"Only a minute, Burt." He saw her in the faint light, drawing his hands to the soft places of her body. Her grip on his wrists was strong. He felt her warmth through the thin dress. Whatever suspicion he might have had was lost in his sudden uncontrollable desire.

They sank to the dark earth together.

"Love me, Burt."

He whispered. "Relax. That's what I been telling you. It's no good if you're all wound up. Talk, that helps."

"I've talked too much already. That's why you know about Arnie—but I don't mind." Her fingers caressed his neck. "Love me, Burt. Love me. Love me hard."

"I'm going to make something out of you, baby. You're going to be a hard combination to beat."

"Am I, Burt?"

"A million bucks in the bank and a bundle of lovin' at home. Hell, you can't beat that."

"No, you can't beat that, Burt." She dropped her right

hand to the ground, brushing it lightly over the damp earth. It inched down alongside his straining body. Her fingers touched the cold muzzle of the rifle. She grasped it, drawing it carefully across the ground until she had her forefinger in the trigger guard.

He panted, "Love me, baby?"

"Of course, Burt."

"Then relax, baby. Relax. You're tight as a new clock. Easy, baby."

She made herself sigh and gasp.

Carefully she maneuvered the rifle, turning it so the muzzle was only an inch from his left ear.

Suddenly headlights swept them and she raised her head to peer over his shoulder. Frightened, she watched a battered old car pull off the road, a man and woman seen briefly in the dashlight glow. Then the headlights were cut. The motor died. She watched the jalopy for the space of half a dozen seconds. Nobody got out.

He whispered against her throat, "Do you think they seen us?"

"I don't think so. But lie still, Burt, until we make sure."

She pressed the trigger. And above the roar of the weapon, she heard his groan. Then she was squirming away from his slack weight on her, screaming hysterically, "Rapel! Rapel!"

As she scrambled to her feet, she ripped hard at her dress. The couple in the battered car sat transfixed as she stumbled toward them.

The man said in a quavering voice, "Who got shot?"

The girl in the car, a chubby little brunette in a carhop's uniform, said, "We better get her to a hospital, Sam." And when they had Letha between them, sobbing and covering her eyes with her hands, the brunette said, "That's what I always been scared of. Some maniac jumpin' at you out of the brush."

Sergeant McAdam moved fast after the call reached the police.

Letha seemed to have quieted by the time he arrived

at the hospital. One of the nurses had pinned up the front of her dress. Letha's hair was wild. Never had she looked so old. She seemed to have aged ten years since the last time he had seen her. There was a look of complete bewilderment in her eyes. She stared at McAdam as if she had never seen him before. But her version of the attack was stated in a flat, dry voice. She had gone for a walk in the hills as she often did at night, carrying her rifle for protection. A man jumped her and raped her. When she saw her chance she got the rifle and shot him in the head. His body was out in the hills.

McAdam closed his notebook and put away his pencil. He had just come from the place Letha said she had been raped. There was no body. A lot of blood and two spent rifle shells. According to Letha, she had fired the rifle twice. The first shot had gone wild. He sensed what she was planting—if planting it was. She wanted everybody to think that the stray bullet had accidentally struck Ken in the arena below.

Some interesting facets were beginning to develop and McAdam could not help but believe that they were tied in with Chief Milfont's original premise. Someone was trying to blackmail Letha Kelleray.

After leaving Letha, he went down the hall to see Doc Taylor.

The doctor, gray and wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, shrugged at McAdam's question. "You can't fake that sort of thing, Sergeant. I examined Mrs. Kelleray. She's had recent contact with a male. That's for certain."

"Can I talk to her again?"

The doctor advised against further questioning and said Letha was in a state of shock and should remain at the hospital.

Well, she would keep there.

McAdam went outside into the chill darkness. It was possible that some sex maniac had decided to prey upon the couples who frequented that Lover's Lane. But he still couldn't discard his original theory. Somehow the shooting of Ken and this rape story of Letha's tied together. But how?

The answer would come.

After leaving the hospital, Shelly drove the station wagon back to the hotel. She was utterly shaken.

Matt patted her knee and said, "Don't take it so hard."

A horrible thought had been inching into her mind. "Whoever did the shooting thought it was me on the swaypole."

"Nonsense," he said too quickly.

"I mean it, Matt. No one knew about the program change except those in the arena. And the police think the shot came from somewhere outside the arena. From the hills, probably. Don't you see—whatever it was wanted to kill me—not Ken!"

Matt licked his lips. "I've thought of that, too," he admitted. "I was hoping the idea wouldn't occur to you." He tried to smile. "You need a drink. Come on, we'll close up the Rancho Room tonight."

But when she tried to get out of the seat, her legs seemed strangely weak. She sank back. A complete inertia gripped her. For the first time in her life she was truly frightened.

Matt climbed out of the station wagon. "You sit tight. I'll bring you a drink."

As he walked across the street to the hotel, Shelly put her head on the steering wheel and closed her eyes.

Margo was just crossing the parking lot when she saw Matt get out of the station wagon and leave Shelly behind the wheel. That afternoon, Hoke Deeson's car had developed motor trouble and had had to be towed in. Margo had lent him her convertible. She had just toured the lot looking for him but he hadn't returned.

Tonight she was in a foul mood, and frightened. Since McAdam had practically flung that half-burned photograph album in her face, she had been brooding over the implications. To have the news get out that she was Marilee's mother was bad enough. But the other was much worse and could be damaging to her future. Somebody had taken the newspaper photo out of the album and planted it at Letha's house. Nobody but Burt Lenshaw would have enough facts and background to make a blackmail pitch on this deal. She hadn't asked

McAdam where he had got the album and he hadn't volunteered the information. But she figured that somehow Burt Lenshaw had trailed her the night she had sent Marilee away with Ken. And Burt had fished it out of the incinerator. But to her it went deeper than blackmail. She believed Letha was trying to take the heat off herself—was trying to make Margo the goat in the Ross deal. Somebody had stirred up the mess again and Letha was scared.

Margo jerked open the station wagon door and slid into the seat. "Drive me out to the Kelleray place," she ordered a startled Shelly.

"But Matt will be back in a minute," Shelly protested, a note of desperation in her voice.

"Forget it, you little bitch," Margo said. "I need transportation and you're it."

"But—"

Margo took a revolver from her slacks and pressed the muzzle against Shelly's ribs. "I hate to be corny about this and use a gun, but I'm in no mood to fool around. Now get going."

After taking one frantic look at the hotel, hoping to see Matt emerge, Shelly put the station wagon in gear.

Margo said bitterly, "You might as well be in on the finish. None of this would have happened if you had come in with me when I asked you."

"You know why I wouldn't sign with you."

"Yeah, I know." Margo laughed. "But you wouldn't stay away from Kelleray."

"It was the other way around. He wouldn't stay away from me."

"That's a hot one. I hear the cops found you two in your motel."

"You're the one who tipped off the police that night!" Shelly said suddenly.

Margo gave her a thin smile. "Sure, just a morals deal wouldn't rouse them, I figured. So I told them there was a reefer party going on." She leaned forward, holding the gun. "Tell me, how did you ever get out of that mess? I thought you and Kelleray would wind up in the can."

"I remembered how surprised you seemed when you saw me in the hotel the next morning. If one of the policemen hadn't been a friend of Rod's, you probably wouldn't have seen me at all."

Margo said, after a moment, "I still hate you. You've loused me up." She took a deep breath. "But I am sorry for making such an ass out of myself at Carmel the other night. Sometimes when I get to drinking and figuring everybody is against me I go a little nuts."

"And tell me, was it you who took a pop shot at me in the hotel?"

"Sure, I shot your way—but I wasn't trying to hit you. I just wanted to scare you. I wanted to do things to break you down, to make things difficult and scary—so you would agree to come with my show." Margo shrugged. "My feelings toward you are strange. On the one hand I want you, I want to make love to you, I want you near me and in my power just so I can love you. On the other hand, I hate your guts. I want to see you busted and crawling. I want to beat you till you scream." She shook her head sadly. "I'm truly sorry, though, for what I've done to you. You can believe that."

On the hilltop ahead, *Rancho de los Amigos* was ablaze with light.

"It's a little late for apologies."

"Well, I just wanted you to know in case—"

"In case what?"

"Nothing." Margo peered up the road at the ranch house. "Cut the lights. I want to take our little friend by surprise."

They coasted in beside the garage.

Margo opened the door. "You're coming in with me," she whispered. "I may need a witness. And you're going to be it."

They walked to the side door. It was open. They found Letha in the den. She was sprawled in an overstuffed chair beside the gun case. Her hair was loose. The front of her dress had been torn and pinned up. She looked at them as if they were strangers. Beside the chair was a fifth of gin and a glass.

Margo pointed the gun at the woman. "Scared, Letha, dear?" she mocked.

Letha squinted at her. "Get out!" she said. Even her voice had lost its polish.

Shelly backed up against the wall.

Margo said, "I'll get out when I'm damned good and ready. But first you're going to listen to me. And I've got Shelly as a witness."

Letha's fingers gripped the arms of the chair. She swung her head to look at Shelly. "Red hair," Letha said thickly. "Real red hair."

Shelly felt a finger of fear touch her heart.

Margo took a step toward the chair and shoved the short barrel of the gun almost under Letha's nose. "You're in with Burt Lenshaw on a shakedown. I've seen you two look at each other. I know what's going on. And so will Rod, if he's got any sense."

Letha looked down at the carpeted floor, her face old and twisted. "Rod's left me," she said in a dead voice. "Gone to Mexico. There was a note here when I got home."

She stood up, brushing Margo's gun hand aside. She stood rigid a moment, staring at the wall.

"I can't stand scandal," she said. "Rod's gone and I've killed Burt. There'll be nothing but scandal."

"So what?" Margo snapped.

"My place in this community—"

"Oh, nuts!" Margo said. "You weren't thinking of your place in this damned community when you murdered Arnie Ross. And now McAdam must be breathing down the back of your neck—so you figured to frame me for it."

Letha's eyes were strangely bright and a smile froze on her lips. "Maybe you did kill him. You were here that day. You were always hanging around."

Margo's grip tightened on the gun and Shelly thought the weapon would send a bullet ripping into Letha's body. But Margo controlled herself. She said, "I'll tell you why I was always welcome here while you were married to Arnie. He was afraid of me!"

Letha stared at the tall blonde woman. "Arnie—afraid of you?" She laughed. "Did you have something on him?"

Margo said, "You're damn right. Everybody thinks I was married once. But I wasn't. It was Arnie—not some imaginary husband—who gave me enough money to buy the carnival."

Letha's eyes widened. "Why would he do that?"

"It was the one decent thing he ever did. I just happened to drive up here the day he took off in his plane. I didn't think so then but I know now that you killed him. And if McAdam has any brains he knows it too."

Letha said in a strangely quiet voice, "Don't tell me you were Arnie's mistress, too. Wasn't one hussy enough for him?"

Margo shook her head. The violence seemed to have run its course in her. She dropped the revolver back into her coat pocket. "You know what I am," Margo said, "and so does everybody else. I'm a queer, that's what I am. I'm a goddamn queer, and proud of it. So I wasn't his mistress. It goes back a long time before that. To a day when six boys caught me in the woods. Arnie Ross was one of them. Maybe he was Marilee's father. I don't know. I'll never know. But much as I hated him, he was the only one who ever did anything for me. He accepted full responsibility—"

Suddenly Letha whirled for the gun case and got her hand on a small automatic before Margo grabbed her and threw her halfway across the room. The gun clattered against the wall. Letha rose to her knees, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

Margo's features paled as she jerked Letha to her feet. "I've got a white dress," she shouted, "with grass stains all over it! The day they put you in the gas chamber I'm going to burn it. Because you killed Arnie. I know it just as sure as I'm alive and breathing!"

Shelly had been standing motionless. Now she saw Margo, obviously shaken by her own tirade, press a hand to her forehead and close her eyes. And in that moment, Letha's well-disciplined body reacted instantly to her

command. She scooped up the fallen automatic. She pointed the gun and said, "Margo."

When Margo looked up, Letha pressed the trigger. She kept pressing it as the room rocked with concussion and Shelly's shrill screams and Letha's strident laughter. Only when Margo had crumpled lifeless to the floor did Letha lower the gun.

In that moment Shelly managed to snatch up the phone extension that rested on a small table. As Letha swung the gun, Shelly got the point of a forefinger into the circle marked "O". The operator's voice came over and Shelly screamed, "Police! Kelleray Ranch—"

Letha was aiming at her and jerking the trigger. But there was no concussion—no flame—no smash of a bullet. Only a click-click-click. Empty. The gun was empty.

Letha threw the gun. Shelly ducked, dropping the phone. She fell to her knees. She could hear the operator's excited voice saying, "Will you repeat that, please?"

Shelly huddled on the floor. All Letha had to do was turn and snatch a loaded weapon from the case behind her.

But Letha was standing transfixed, her eyes wide with terror. A corner of her scarlet mouth jerked. Carefully turning her head, Shelly peered over her shoulder. She froze. Burt Lenshaw stood in the doorway, one side of his face covered with blood, an ugly wound ranging along one side of his face.

"Burt!" Letha said hoarsely.

Lenshaw took a step into the room. Behind him Shelly could see a stairway that evidently led down to the basement. He had not seen her. She began to pray. He took another step toward Letha, moving as if in a vise of pain. His breath came in hoarse gasps. He gripped a rifle in his fist.

Letha put a hand against her mouth.

Lenshaw said, "You tried to kill me." He wiped blood from his face with his hand, then gripped the rifle tighter. "Your aim was lousy. Just pinked me, that's all. I got away before the cops came. I been hiding, Letha."

"Rod's gone. He's left me. I'll divorce him."

"Oh, no," he panted. "You're giving me the twenty thousand. Not Rod Kelleray, like we planned. You're writing a check, then you're going with me in the morning to your bank—"

Shelly picked up a heavy lamp from an end table, causing the shadows in the room to jump.

Lenshaw turned and his eyes brightened. "Look what I got," he said. "A bonus." He took one dragging step toward her. "Throw that," he said, "and I'll shoot out your pretty guts."

Then, turned that way, for the first time he saw Margo's body on the floor. The sight of it seemed momentarily to hypnotize him. Before he could lift his eyes, Shelly had torn the lamp from its moorings. She flung it straight and true. It struck Lenshaw on the forehead. The blow was not forceful enough to knock him out. But it staggered him, in his weakened condition. He dropped the rifle.

Letha ran screaming from the room. She screamed along the hallway and out into the yard. Shelly could hear the clatter of her high-heeled shoes in the driveway.

Then a new scream. A wail. A siren and the roar of a motor throbbing on the grade. And the welcome screech of tires.

Fifteen

CHICO McADAM had gone to the Del Rio Hotel to see if he could find Burt Lenshaw. Learning Lenshaw was not in his room, McAdam left and was about to cross the street when he saw a commotion in the parking lot. When he drew closer, he saw Matt Devore holding the attendant by the arms, yelling, "Why'd you let her go? Why did you?"

McAdam said, "What's the beef?"

Devore looked at him. Shelly had been sitting in the station wagon, he said. Margo Minter had made her drive off—to the Kelleray ranch, the attendant claimed. It sounded as if Margo had forced Shelly, threatened her.

McAdam had already decided to pay a visit to the Kelleray ranch, having had a radio call just a few minutes ago saying that Letha Kelleray had defied doctor's orders and gone home.

"Come on," he told Matt. "We'll go out and see what's going on."

They rode along at a spanking clip, with Matt sitting on the edge of the seat, dry-washing his hands. He'd gone into the hotel to get Shelly a drink, he said. When he had come out, she'd been gone. "If Margo's hurt her—"

"Kind of like the girl?" McAdam said.

"Like her! We're going to be married."

A crisp voice with a lot of static behind it came over the police radio. A telephone operator had reported trouble at the Kelleray ranch.

"Oh, God!" Matt breathed.

McAdam switched on the red lights and the siren and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

When they came sliding into the Kelleray drive, they saw a beautiful woman running aimlessly in the pasture

beyond the garages. She was screaming. The two men leaped over the whitewashed fence. A half dozen frightened colts swept around them and broke for the far side of the pasture. McAdam flashed his light on the screaming woman. It was Letha Kelleray. Her head was thrown back and tears streamed down her cheeks. She kept on emitting long ghastly screams.

McAdam slapped her hard across the face. She stopped screaming but in the beam of the flashlight, her eyes seemed dead. She stood with her arms rigid against her sides. Another squad car pulled in and two uniformed officers came pounding across the pasture.

"Take her to the hospital," McAdam ordered.

And when they had led the woman at a stumbling gait to the car, McAdam said to Matt, "Let's go find your girl."

Inside the house, Burt Lenshaw had picked up his rifle and rammed the muzzle against Shelly's back. The police were in the yard outside. She had heard the siren, and so had Lenshaw. He led her up the wide stairway and along a hall. Then he opened a door and shoved her through it into a room with parallel bars and mats scattered around the floor.

"Letha won't do no more work in here," Lenshaw snarled. He looked at Shelly. Her face was dead white. Her mouth trembled. "Margo's dead and Letha's got enough dough to pin it on me. She's got the Chief of Police in her hind pocket. She told me—"

"Let me go, Burt."

He was gritting his teeth, trying to bear the pain of his wounded head. "You're my insurance. Letha ain't going to railroad me."

"I'll tell how it was, Burt. I'll tell everything I know."

"We're going out of here together. You in front. You're going to stand out there and tell them cops the straight of it."

"Sure, Burt. Why shouldn't I?"

Her heartbeat was not quite so wild now.

Still gripping the rifle in his left hand, he put out his

right, catching her around the waist. He drew her against him.

She could hear men shouting outside. A car started down the driveway, siren screaming. Then the shouts again. Matt's voice! Hope leaped up in her.

She put a hand to the back of his neck. His collar was wet with his blood. She said, "Don't do anything reckless, Burt."

"Reckless, hell. I'm goin' out there."

"Put down your rifle. What if you accidentally shoot somebody?"

"If I shoot anybody, it won't be accidental. You can bet on that."

In her mind's eye, she saw Matt trying to rush Lenshaw, ignoring the rifle. Then Matt lying twisted as Margo was lying downstairs.

"You've always liked me, Burt." She steeled herself, pressing her breasts against his chest. She saw his eyes waver. His right hand slid down from her waist to her hip. "If we stay quietly here, Burt, they won't find us."

His breathing was heavy. "I never locked the door."

"Tend to it, Burt," she said, trying to make her voice sound inviting, trying to keep the deadly fear out of it.

If he'd just turn for the door. Maybe she could pick up something. Hit him.

He said, "One dame got me cozy tonight and tried to blow my brains out. And you threw that lamp at me." He bared his teeth. "I wouldn't trust you no farther than I could—"

Something crashed against the door. It swung inward and simultaneously a panel splintered. In the doorway stood Chico McAdam, a Mexican cigar clenched in a corner of his mouth, his service revolver in his hand. Behind him was Matt.

McAdam shouted, "Get away from him!"

And Shelly leaped, hurling her body, rolling across the floor, thankful for all her athletic years on the sway-pole. She heard the roar of Lenshaw's rifle, saw McAdam swerve as the bullet splintered the edge of the door.

Then Lenshaw was leaping into a corner of the room

where Letha's slanting board rested against the wall. He ducked behind the plywood shelter with its leather padding.

McAdam shouted, "Come out. "With your hands up!"

Lenshaw fired again, shoving the rifle muzzle around the edge of the slanting board.

From where she lay on the floor Shelly saw four small holes appear in the padded leather surface of the board. When Matt tried to dash into the room, McAdam blocked him, saying, "Wait and see if I got him."

Lenshaw's hands gripped the edge of the board. His body swung out, he looked at them and then he fell with a heavy thud.

Matt Devore picked up Shelly and carried her from the room. McAdam walked over to look down at Lenshaw. The man was dead. Too much greed for one man, too much desire.

Then McAdam threw open the window and gazed out across the valley that lay dark and silent below. "It looks," he said softly, "as if the Mendozas have had revenge. At last."

McAdam told the whole story to his wife at four o'clock that same morning when they sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee. Letha had talked, telling in detail how she had murdered Arnie Ross.

Mildred McAdam's face paled. "I'm sorry for her."

"So am I. Doc Taylor says he doubts if she'll ever serve time in prison." He tapped a forefinger against his skull. "She's off up here some place. She'll talk of nothing but Ross. She doesn't recognize anybody. She's in a state of complete shock. Some day they may cure her and then she'll stand trial. But prison or an institution for the insane—it all adds up to a wasted life."

"A pity," his wife said softly.

He sipped his coffee. "She doesn't even remember shooting Margo."

"I didn't know Margo, but I've heard enough about

her." Mildred McAdam sighed. "And to think she had a daughter! That's the greatest surprise of all."

"I remember Margo's father when I was a kid. An idealist. A lot of pride. The wrong kind. Instead of helping his daughter when she needed him, he killed himself. Margo grew up to hate men. And the hatred tainted her daughter. But I think the kid has sobered up. The death of her mother was a great shock. She cried. She cried an awful lot."

"She's married, isn't she?"

McAdam nodded. "She's promised to stick with him. He'll pull out of his accident. May be long time before he can walk. But the gunshot wound isn't serious and they'll get along on the money from the sale of Margo's show. Hoke Deeson bought it. Some of his friends say he paid a lot more than it is worth."

"Maybe the kids will be happy."

"It's up to Marilee. Maybe she'll change. They say it's never too late. But I don't know—"

Mildred McAdam looked down at her folded hands. "What will all of this do to us, Chico? I mean—" She looked at him. "Chief Milfont!"

He grinned. "I was saving that. That bird is in our jail. Nice and comfortable. And it'll be a long time before he's back in circulation again. If we can't get him on bribery on the Ross thing, the Internal Revenue boys will nail him for not reporting the money he got from Letha. Anyway, he's out."

"Anyway, you're still sergeant."

"Maybe not for long." He stroked her chin. "And not back to a three-wheeler. The City Council is holding a meeting tomorrow. They're going to name a new chief!"

"Oh, Chico!"

"Don't be overconfident," he grinned. "Just keep your fingers crossed."

She filled his cup from the coffee pot and bent over to kiss him for luck.

After they passed the fifth "No Vacancy" sign on a motel on Highway 101 Matt said, "This is a disgusting situation. A guy with a pretty girl and no place to take

her." He stepped on the gas. "We'll try one more."

Although the Fair convention had ended on a somber note, Matt had more business than he could handle for the next season. But Shelly had told him to quit worrying about making so much money. She didn't want a rich husband with an ulcer. She just wanted a husband.

The next motel "No Vacancy" sign brought a curse from Matt's lips. Shelly was snuggled up against him. She opened one eye and peeped up at him.

"What do we care?" she murmured.

"What do you mean, what do we care?"

She laughed softly. "We've got a house on wheels."

He looked at her, smiled and put his eyes back on the road. When they came to a dirt road, they angled off the highway. Matt brought the station wagon to rest under a pepper tree.

For the next five minutes he was busy. He opened up the rear of the wagon, pulled out the back seat and laid it on the ground. Then he folded down the small seat behind the driver's seat which made a solid platform in the rear of the car.

Shelly peered over the top of the seat at him. Matt looked dubious. "It's going to be a hard bed, Mrs. Devore but interesting."

Shelly climbed over the seat and dropped to the platform. Looking up at him, she said, "Prove it, Mr. Devore."

THE END

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