

# A Gun for Honey

G. G. Fickling



# HONEY WEST



TV'S Private  
Eyeful in the  
case of the  
Kissing  
Killer



*“I’m going to kiss you like you’ve never been kissed before...”*

The windswept beach was dark and deserted. It wouldn't do me any good to scream. I reached for my revolver, but he wrapped his sinewy arms around me and pushed his face toward my mouth. In an instant, his lips were crushing against mine. Was I caught in the embrace of the kissing killer? Could this be the man whose kiss meant death?

**Honey West, private eye, is hotter than a pistol in her exciting new adventure of a date with murder.**

**THE ADVENTURES OF  
HONEY WEST**



THIS GIRL FOR HIRE  
A GUN FOR HONEY  
GIRL ON THE LOOSE  
HONEY IN THE FLESH  
GIRL ON THE PROWL  
KISS FOR A KILLER  
DIG A DEAD DOLL  
BLOOD AND HONEY  
BOMBSHELL

**ANGEL FROM HELL (in preparation)**

**A GUN  
FOR  
HONEY**

**G. G. FICKLING**

**PYRAMID BOOKS • NEW YORK**



For Christopher West  
who was and always will be  
a Honey.  
And for the two Mikes  
all rolled into one Big M.

## **A GUN FOR HONEY**

**A PYRAMID BOOK**

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This book is fiction. No resemblance is intended  
between any character herein and any person, living  
or dead; any such resemblance is purely coincidental.

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## ONE

LIGHTNING flashed down over the dark sea, illuminating the figure of a man standing at the rocky edge of the cliff. Thunder creased the night and then subsided in the inky sky over Shark Beach.

I climbed from my car, tugged at the low neckline of my gown and listened for a moment to the sound of the breakers.

"Are you all right?" I called over the surf's din. "Hey, where are you? What's the matter?"

I took the .32 revolver from my purse and moved toward the edge of the cliff, strands of hair clinging to my forehead as the rain began.

"Are you in trouble?" I called, wishing I'd thought to swing my car's headlights onto the cliff edge.

As I crept nearer to the precipice, one of my heels snagged in a rut and threw me off balance. Suddenly two strong arms caught me from behind, locked tight around my breasts and sent my gun sprawling.

Lightning bit into the sky again, explosively plunging its crooked blade into the sea. A man bent down for my revolver. In the brief flash of light he looked like a silhouette cut from luminous paper. He had curved horns and a red cape swirled up from around his shoulders in the wet wind.

I fought to break loose, but the arms held me like steel rods.

A voice said, "This one's a wildcat, Hel. What'll I do with her? She's liable to kick something loose in a second!"

The red man moved nearer in the darkness. "Tear off her clothes," he roared, "and throw her into the sea!"

"Look," the man behind me protested, "fun's fun, but—"

"Wait a minute!" Satan interrupted. "This feels like a real gun. Reed, hand me your flashlight."

A third figure moved toward the red-caped Satan, casting a yellow glow onto the barrel of my revolver. One of the men whistled as he clicked open the cylinder.

"Holy Geronimo, this doll plays for keeps. Gimme that flashlight!"

The beam was raised to my face and slowly lowered over my bare shoulders and down the clinging gown I'd worn for the New Year's Eve party. The whistle was repeated. This time it was long and low with a bend in the middle.

"Man alive, if it isn't the Dragon Lady with peach parfait piled on top of her head. Are you a blonde all over, baby?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know." Satan chuckled. "It might be interesting to find out. What's with the artillery?"

"What's with the judo lessons?" I asked. "Don't you keep office hours around these parts?"

"Baby, with parts like yours we don't keep any kind of special hours. What are you doing here on the Collier's road?"

"Attending a party," I said. "I didn't expect to be greeted by the devil and two of his henchmen."

The arms around my chest relaxed. One of the men laughed. "Who were you expecting, baby? The kissing killer?"

I hesitated. "Perhaps."



The New Year's Eve electrical storm, a rarity along California shores, lit up Shark Beach's rocky cliffs once more and revealed a smile on Satan's thick mouth. He tossed the revolver into my hands.

"Smart girl," he muttered. "So that's why you carry the rod! Afraid you might be his third victim?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe, nothing." He laughed. "I've never seen you around Shark Beach. Where you from anyway?"

"L.A. I know Rote Collier from the days he directed horror movies," I said, stretching the truth a little. "I'm sure you three are not with the police."

"Nope," Satan said. "I'm a magazine photographer. Name's Helmet Gandy. Better known to my friends as just plain Hel." The flashlight beam flickered over to a tall, lean-faced man wearing a Buck Rogers outfit. "This is Reed Walker. Captain, United States Marine Corps. Jet pilot extraordinaire. And the muscleman behind you is Wolf Larson famed for his exploits at thirty fathoms and fathomless bedrooms. He won't admit it, naturally, but we're all convinced he's the kissing killer."

The man with steel-band arms stepped in front of the light. "That isn't funny, Hel. I ought to bust you one for that."

"Speaking of bust," Hel said, "don't you gentlemen agree that our fair captive has a generous amount of same? What do you do in your spare time, baby? If it's what I think, you can count me in any time."

"You're counted in, Mr. Gandy," I said, touching the neckline of my gown. "I'm a model. A photographer's model. Name's Honey West. Ever hear of me?"

I was hoping he hadn't. A private detective, especially a female of the species, did hit the front pages once in a while. In my business, sometimes once was too many.

"Don't recall the name," Hel said. "But, I'm sure

I've seen you in some magazine. Maybe one of the nudie books, huh?"

"Perhaps," I said, with a hint more *yes* than *no*. "Why don't we adjourn to the party and talk more about it there?"

The jet pilot winked. "Good idea. I'm tired of standing out here trying to scare all the single dames that come along. This was a rotten idea from the start, Hel."

I crossed the road to my convertible. "Why don't you three ride with me? There's plenty of room. How far is Rote's house from here?"

Hel laughed in his devilish sort of way. "You mean you can't hear the screams and music? It's just up the road. You've never been to one of Rote Collier's fabulous New Year's Eve parties before?"

"No, I've never had the pleasure."

Hel Gandy and the jet pilot climbed in beside me. Wolf Larson vaulted into the back. He was as strong as an ox and dressed in nothing but a loin cloth.

"You're going to love this party, baby," Hel said, squeezing in tightly. "Of course, a lot of my pictures have to be censored before they hit the magazines. You know what artists' balls are like!"

"I can imagine."

"Just keep that gun handy, baby. You may have to shoot your way out." He laughed raucously. "Are you in for some surprises! Watch out for the vaults!"

"The what?"

"Shut up, Hel," Wolf said. "You're always spoiling the fun. Maybe she'll like the vaults. Do you swim, Honey?"

Loud and sensual rhythm swelled up from a massive, spiral-topped castle at the end of the road.

I drew the car to a stop. "Sure, I swim, but I didn't bring a bathing suit."

Reed Walker brushed my bare shoulder accidentally with his hand. It felt warm, almost too warm. "We'll dig you up a suit," he said.

"That's what I'm worried about," I said, getting out of the car. "You mean one with cement sleeves? Come on, now, let's have the truth. Which one of you is the kissing killer?"

"That's for you to figure out, baby," Hel answered, following out my side. "Just be careful who you pucker up with. Right, Wolf?"

Wolf didn't answer. He took my arm and walked me down a steep dark staircase to the front door of the Collier mansion.

"This place looks at least a hundred years old," I said, glancing at Wolf's face. He was ruggedly handsome, the Marlon Brando type with sensitive deep-set eyes and a broad nose that was slightly flattened at the tip where he'd apparently taken one too many punches. His mouth was thin and hard with a trace of bitterness chiseled in the corners. He suddenly smiled and the change was quietly disturbing. On each side of his mouth Wolf had two fangs that seemed almost fake in their needle-sharp perfection. Now I knew what had inspired his name.

Hel stepped around us and banged on the oak door. "Open up! The Devil's here, you filthy sinners!"

In an instant, an old bronze handle turned and we were staring into a strangely half-lit madhouse. The living room could have passed for a small amphitheatre with its domed ceiling and ornate balustrades. Colored streamers fluttered weirdly in the semi-darkness, like hungry tentacles of an octopus, touching the costumed figures and making them thrash with abandon. In the center of the huge room, bathed in a purple spotlight, was an elevated platform with two pillars rising almost to the ceiling. It was difficult to see through the smoke and colored ribbons, but the grimly spectacular structure seemed reminiscent of the sacrificial altar used in the old movie, King Kong.

Wolf pushed me into the room. The music stopped. It was almost as if everything suddenly and brutally

froze as the figures stared at us, their bodies stiffly caught in the rhythm of their fantastic dance. Even the thick smoke seemed to pall at the interruption. The ribbons hung limp and lifeless in this soundless vacuum. Hel stepped forward and raised his arms high in a garish salute.

"She has come!" Hel's voice was a thundering roar in the huge room. "Out of the dark night! Out of the empty deathless regions of time, a blonde princess has come to light the sacrificial fire of the New Year. All hail!"

The masked figures, seemingly supported by a myriad of hidden strings, fell forward on their knees and, arms raised, they echoed, "All hail!"

"Bring the torch!" Hel bellowed. "Bring the torch!" The crowd picked up the chant.

A bent and horribly disfigured man got to his feet. His huge misshapen head was formed in the image of the famed Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Slowly, he dragged his legs across the room to a lighted torch flickering in an earthenware urn in the corner.

"What is this?" I whispered to Wolf. "Maybe I'm at the wrong party!"

The hunchback brought the torch to me. I shook my head, but Hel shoved the flaming stick into my hands. Wolf pushed me toward the sacrificial altar. The weird figures moved back, prostrate on their knees, creating a path across the deathly silent room.

"Courage, baby," Hel whispered as we reached the bottom step leading up to the pillars. "She won't feel a thing."

"Who won't?" I asked, peering through the semi-darkness at the red-suited Satan, wondering when the joke was going to end and how. I trembled from the grisly realism they were injecting into this rite.

Hel pointed up to the sacrificial altar. My eyes followed his gesture. Chained to the pillars was a nude

woman, her head hunched forward, dark hair dangling limply over her eyes, body slumped into unconsciousness. Splintered pieces of wood were piled under her body.

I dropped the torch and screamed. I screamed so loud the rafters caught the sound and hurled it back in a wild, unreasoning echo. Wolf caught me as I started up the steps toward the altar. The prostrate figures leaped to their feet. The music began to roar. The screams and laughter of a hundred throats joined in mine. The ribbons rose into the air as the crescendo of sound reached a defying pitch. Then it stopped as quickly as it had begun. Quasimodo limped to me and tore off his grisly headpiece. It was Rote Collier!

"Happy New Year, Honey!" Rote said, wrapping his warped arms around my shoulders. "I'm so glad you could make it!"

I gestured futilely at the nude figure chained to the altar.

"A dummy, baby," Hel said, grinning. "Rote pulls this gag on all his first-time New Year's Eve guests. What do you think we were doing out on the road? This was planned, baby, planned. We were your reception committee."

I shook my head dismally. "Leave it to the master of horror. I should have known, but it was all so—"

"—realistic," Rote finished. "Listen, Honey, maybe my directing days are over but I can still create a pretty convincing scene."

Rote Collier was a femininely handsome man in his early fifties. His costume was a strange contrast to his well-groomed features: finely-trimmed mustache, pink cheeks, delicate blue eyes. He ran his rubber-covered fingers through his thinning gray hair and laughed. "I always did have a yearning to play the Hunchback. Silly quirk, I guess. Gee, it's good to see you, Honey." He squeezed me again, then leaped onto the steps. "Everybody!" he roared. "I want you to meet Honey

West. The prettiest gal to come along the pike in a long, long while—except my wife, Helena, naturally.” Rote’s exception came out too flat and he knew it. “Have fun, everybody,” he added with more enthusiasm. “The night is yours!”

Wolf Larson reached around my waist and squeezed tightly. “How about that swim? Rote’s got a pool down on the water. You’ll love it.”

“I bet she’ll love it,” Rote interrupted. “But later, Wolf. Honey and I have something to talk about. Privately.”

“Okay,” Wolf said, his fangs bared slightly, “I can take the hint. I’ll see what I can do about digging up a bathing suit. Don’t be too long—and don’t get caught in a vault, get me?”

“I got you,” I said. “Just be sure to come back with a bathing suit.”

Wolf shook his head and disappeared in the myriad of dancing, costumed shapes. Rote steered me into his study. It was another tremendous room tinged with the weird flavor of his old movies. He offered me a chair and a cigarette.

“What’s your problem, Rote?” I said. “You didn’t really say much over the telephone.”

“I think you know, Honey.” Rote walked to the window. “Two women have been murdered in Shark Beach during the past six months. Two beautiful women. They were smothered. Or, as the police and newspapers call it—kissed to death.”

“Fantastic,” I said, using his favorite word.

“Yeah, fantastic is right.” Rote turned and looked at me. “I couldn’t have thought up a better idea for a picture of mine. That’s what bothers me. The whole business has been too close to home. The police have called me in for questioning several times. Luckily I’ve managed to keep it out of the papers. They claim the bizarre method of murder is too reminiscent of a movie script.

"Is that really what bothers you, the fact that you've been suspected?"

Rote slumped into a chair and wiped twisted fingers across his pink forehead. "No, of course not, Honey. That's only added a little flavor to a dull winter down here. What I'm worried about is my wife—and Fawn."

"Fawn?"

"Yes—a child—from my first marriage. I don't think you've ever met Fawn." Rote got up, grinning sheepishly. "But of course you've never met Helena either. They're the same age."

"What?"

"Fawn's the same age as my wife Helena," Rote continued in an embarrassed tone. "In fact, Fawn's a few months older. As you can imagine that's somewhat of a conversation piece in this small town."

"How old are they, Rote?"

"Twenty-three."

"I thought you had a son, too, about the same age."

"I—I did have. But, unfortunately, he was killed, in Korea."

"I—I'm sorry."

"Me, too. But, now I have Fawn—and Helena. And a fear. A cold sort of fear, Honey, like in the old days when I started in pictures. This kissing killer is going to strike again soon. Perhaps even tonight here at this party."

"Sounds like a story conference for one of your movies, Rote. Are the police worried at all?"

"Sure they are. But, in a small town they're not equipped for this sort of thing. They asked me to call off the party. What could I do? It's been an annual event here in Shark Beach for the last five years. Fawn and Helena wouldn't hear of a cancellation. So, here we are. A couple of policemen in costume have been mingling with the crowd." He shook his head. "I doubt if they can prevent anything from happening, if it's going to happen. The killer's after

a woman. Knowing we're on guard he's going to take particular caution—and that'll be that."

I stood up and crossed to an old Egyptian mummy case that lay flat on a table in the middle of the room. "In other words, Rote, you want me to prevent our osculating friend from using his talents on Fawn or Helena."

"Right. They're both beautiful. Exceptionally beautiful. And, I might add, very gullible."

The mummy case lid raised easily. It was empty and smelled of mothballs. "Gullible to what extent, Rote?"

"Well," Rote said hesitantly, "Helena's extremely naïve, easily taken in by people, if you know what I mean."

"Are you trying to say your wife's been straying a little?"

He grimaced. "I—I don't know. It's possible. She's young, impulsive, beautiful. Men go crazy for her." Rote frowned and he stopped to stare at new flashes of lightning out over the sea. "It's possible she might be lured into a compromising situation. But, I'd say that was true of almost any young woman at a New Year's Eve party, wouldn't you?"

I moved to a gun case and peered through the glass at a collection of old-fashioned revolvers. "Considering I'm a female, and over twenty-one myself, I don't think I should answer that question." I smiled. "What about Fawn?"

Rote shook his head. "Dangerously familiar with people. Just too damned friendly for her own good. Fawn's the sort of person who gets mixed up in something and then doesn't know how to get out. Weak, impulsive, unconventional. That's Fawn. Worries the hell out of me."

I lifted a long-barrelled .45 out of the cabinet. "I take it, then, you want me to lure the killer over to my side of the parlor."



"Right. As I said over the phone, you're my old friend Hank West's daughter, down for a brief holiday in Shark Beach as my house guest. You're a model, an actress—anything but a private detective. You're beautiful—"

"Thank you."

"Well you are, Honey. You saw how Wolf Larson was acting out there—and Hel Gandy and Reed Walker and all the rest. I don't blame them. You've got 'em drooling." Rote put his rubbery hands on my bare shoulders. "Look at you. Blue eyes, taffy-colored hair, a real baby bottom complexion. You're gorgeous." He moved in closer, touching the tip of my nose with his own.

"Rote," I said carefully, "this isn't getting my spiderweb spun."

"That's what you think. I'm stuck already."

His pink mouth lowered toward my lips, but before he made contact a low, husky voice bounced Rote Collier back on his heels harder than I was planning to myself.

"Dad!"

Inside the study door stood a figure in black mesh stockings, an old-fashioned black corset and a mask with long, sweeping, false eyelashes.

"Fawn!" Rote stammered. "I—I thought you were down at the pool with Doctor Erik." He glanced at me still holding the .45 and laughed nervously. "Fawn, this is our house guest, Honey West. She's a model and an actress. In fact, when you came in we were just going through a scene from one of my old pictures—for fun."

"It did look like fun," Fawn said knowingly, moving toward Rote. "I'll bet Helena would have loved seeing it."

Fawn Collier had slim, well-rounded legs that swung in long, sexy strides when she walked. She

kept the lower part of her body forward and held her shoulders back in an effort to emphasize to the fullest extent, her small breasts. That part of her face which showed from under the mask was astonishingly like Rote's—full-tapered mouth and pink rounded chin with a slight dimple.

Rote glanced at the clock on his desk. "It'll be midnight soon. What do you say we all get back to the party?"

"What party?" Fawn laughed huskily. "Everybody's either passed out drunk or down in the vaults doing what comes naturally."

"That isn't possible," Rote said, moving to the door. "They were dancing a few minutes ago. You two get acquainted. I'll be right back."

After Rote was gone, Fawn looked at me for an instant through curved eyeslits, then smiled and removed her mask. She had green eyes almost the color of jade and short black hair tumbled carelessly about her head like tiny whirlpools. She took a lipstick from her purse and touched the red tip to her mouth.

"Stuff wears off in no time at a party like this," Fawn said, smiling slyly, "Don't you find it so?"

"Sometimes," I answered, replacing the .45 in the cabinet. "Depends upon the party. Have you seen Helena around?"

Fawn's eyes hardened. "Are you kidding? She's probably exhibiting herself before one of her boy-friends. She's an expert at that, don't you know? Or maybe you do know since you're a friend of hers and a model."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You don't have to play games with me, sister," Fawn said angrily. "I know your type. Helena's exactly the same. Cheap and aggressive. You get what

you want one way or another, don't you? Like with Father a moment ago."

"Look, that was nothing more than a brief New Year's Eve flourish. If your father hadn't been drinking and having fun he'd never have tried it, I'm sure. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm supposed to join someone down at the pool."

"Of course," Fawn said, surveying my evening gown. "But, I'm warning you, darling, you'd better hang onto your pantie girdle because it's mighty rough down there. Mighty rough. Especially if you run into Doctor Erik Ford."

I told Fawn I would watch my step and walked out of the study. The high-domed living room was now ominously dark. Even the purple light was turned out over the sacrificial altar. Someone brushed against me.

"Honey?"

"Yes."

"Wolf Larson. I have that bathing suit for you."

"Really? What happened to the rest of the party?"

"Coffee break. Come on, let's go."

I resisted his big hands. "No, I'm serious, Wolf. There could be a murderer loose in this house. These lights shouldn't be out."

"Have you still got your gun?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"You're safe. Come on!"

He pulled me toward a faint glow at the far end of the living room. Ribbons fluttered in the darkness, touching my face and twisting around my body.

"Where are we going?" I asked, breaking free from one entrapment only to be caught in another.

We reached a long spiral staircase that seemed to go down into the very depths of Hell. Wolf backed me up under a pale light that illuminated the top of the stairwell.

"I'm going to kiss you," he said, baring his fangs. "I'm going to kiss you like you've never been kissed before."

My heart leaped up into my throat. I reached for my revolver, but he wrapped his sinewy arms around me and pushed my face toward his mouth. In an instant, his lips were crushing against mine.

## TWO

A NOT-SO-OLD ADAGE with the punch line "relax and enjoy it" raced through my mind, but I couldn't make myself believe this particular moment was going to end up in any sort of enjoyable state. Wolf Larson was crushing the very life out of me. Footsteps suddenly clanged on the metal treads below the platform.

"Hey, you two up there!" a voice blared. "We need some more drinking material down at the pool. How about helping us out?"

Wolf pulled back angrily. "Get it yourself! Who was your barmaid last year?"

"You were, Larson. What the devil are you doing anyway?"

The footsteps moved nearer. Wolf released his hold and bent over the railing while I caught my breath.

"Oh, it's you, Erik," Wolf said in a more pleasant tone. "Sure, I'll bring it down in a second. Just breaking in the new girl."

The man below laughed and started back down into the stairwell. "Take your time. We're not going to die."

Wolf whirled around and looked at me, a triumphant grin on his lipstick-smearred mouth. "Not bad, huh?"

"Not good," I said, disgust heavy in my voice. My

face hurt where he had ground his against it. "Don't try that again, Wolf."

"What are you talking about?" he demanded, drawing strong arms across his bare chest. He chuckled. "I suppose you think I was trying to kill you. Well, maybe I was. Can you think of a better way to die?"

I touched my mouth with the back of my hand and it stung. "I'm not laughing, Wolf. You're drunk and having a hilarious time, okay. Let's leave it at that."

"Ah, come on. I was only trying to scare you a little, Honey. Can't you take a joke?"

I started down the staircase. "No, I'm sorry, Wolf—"

"But, the boys and I just cooked this up because we knew you were from out-of-town," Wolf argued, following on my heels. "There's nothing to this kissing killer business, believe me. The newspapers only coined the word because it sounded sensational. We know who the murderer is."

I stopped and stared up at his huge bulk. "Now, what are *you* talking about?"

Wolf hunched his shoulders complacently. "The police don't believe it, but we do. There was an old character living here in town named Butler. He was as ugly as sin and a little nuts to boot. He was a gardener. Used to work at all the big homes along the cliffs. And when he got drunk down at the Booby Hatch he'd talk about these beautiful dames he'd like to smother with kisses. Well, two of those dames he worked for were smothered. So, you take it from there."

"Where is this old character now, Wolf?"

"He's dead. Got drunk one night, walked out on the Pleasure Pier and fell in. We found his body the next morning. There hasn't been another murder since."

"No, just a near miss," I said, feeling my lips again. "Have you seen Helena Collier in the last hour?"

"Sure. She was lying where I left her—in a pool of kisses."

"Very funny."

"Naturally, I'm a very funny guy." He blew me a kiss. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll go murder somebody else. Good night." He disappeared into the dark living room.

Before I walked down to the pool, I thought for a moment about his story of the old man. If my mouth hadn't been hurt so badly I might have believed it, but there was that one big difference.

Rote Collier's swimming pool was carved out of rock against the edge of the sea. Mountainous waves maintained it with salt water at high tide, which happened to be the height of the sea on this New Year's Eve. A full moon winked hazily through scattered clouds in the still, lightning-lit sky.

At the edge of the pool, a masked, dark-haired woman in a black cat costume bumped into me. She was drunk and her outfit was open at the top exposing the raw edge of one starkly flushed bosom. "What's the password?" she asked.

"You got me," I said. "Are you Helena?"

She shook her head. "Are you kidding? I wish I was. That Helena's really something. The men go gaga over her. She was around here a little while ago. Swimming in the nude! Dancing! Doing just about everything. And, boy, does that gal know how to do it." The catwoman staggered past me into the stairwell.

I scanned the swimming pool area. Costumed figures were huddled and strewn in various and sundry clumps. Glasses and bottles were spaced in between like way stations on a local bus line. Two shapes—sans anything—were in the pool, deathly white in the semi-darkness. I started toward them when a familiar voice stopped me.

"Going somewhere?"

A man with coppery red hair stood up and touched my arm. He was wearing the tattered remains of a fantastic half-man, half-woman costume.

"You're Erik," I said.

"That's right. How'd you know?"

"We sort of met indirectly on the staircase a few minutes ago."

"Oh, yes, with old Fang Larson. Did he bite you?"

"Almost," I said. "Is he poisonous?"

Erik nodded. "Deadly. If I were a woman I wouldn't go near him with asbestos underwear."

I smiled, enjoying his unsubtle humor. Erik Ford seemed pleasant, fairly young and easy-going.

"You're a doctor."

"Right again. You've got me pegged. Now how about a rundown on yourself?"

"Weren't you upstairs when I came in?"

"No," he said frowning. "I didn't have the pleasure. I was what you might say—out on a call."

"Was her name Helena?"

Erik exhaled. "Wrong again. But, I'll have to admit you're close."

"Fawn?"

"Uncanny," he said. "You must be psychic. I bow to your powers. Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"We mix some fancy cocktails around these parts."

"So I've noticed," I said, glancing at one of the more intimate huddles. "You haven't seen Helena, then, in a while?"

"My dear, I have not only seen Helena Collier in a while, I have seen her after a while. Which is just about the state of her physical condition at the present time. That's *she* in the pool. Would you care to converse with her?"

I studied the two white beings in the water. "No, thanks. I can wait until another time."

"Why wait?" Erik said. He crossed to the pool and



bent over the edge. "Hey, you two, break it up! This is Dr. Erik Ford. I want to examine the female of the species."

One of the swimmers laughed in a high-pitched feminine way, rolled over on her stomach and moved to the metal ladder. She was thin-faced and bosomy with stringy blonde hair clinging to her back. She raised her dripping face up to Erik, lips puckered, eyes half-closed. The doctor got to his feet, leaving the woman unkissed and slightly bewildered.

"Wrong female," he said to me. "That isn't Helena. Funny, I'm sure she was in the pool not too long ago."

"Have you seen Rote?"

"That, my dear, is a good question. I hope I haven't. At least, not while Helena's prancing around in the nude. He doesn't go that route a bit. He'd tear the hell out of everybody if he ever caught her, I'll tell you that."

I scanned the shoreline south of the pool. Steep rocky cliffs rose up out of the sea forebodingly.

"What's down in that direction?" I asked.

"A few caves. One is sort of a lover's nest, if you know what I mean?"

"Could Helena have gone that way?"

"Sure. Want to take a look?"

"Would we be intruding?"

Erik grinned. "Probably. But, that's the fun of it. Helena wouldn't mind."

"Why do you say that?"

The doctor winked and slipped his arm around my waist. "That's one thing you'll learn about Helena Collier. She's ambidextrous as hell."

As we crawled over jagged rocks on the way to one of the caves, I tried to create a composite picture of Helena out of four amazingly varied descriptions. Rote had said she was beautiful and naïve. Fawn branded her stepmother as cheap and aggressive.

The catwoman was envious of her romantic abilities with the male sex, while Erik claimed she worked the same kind of racket on the other side of the fence. All in all Helena Collier was some strange conglomeration of womanhood.

Erik helped me down a slippery bed of moss into the opening of a cave. Behind us the ocean struck against the rocks, shooting up a cold biting spray.

"That was close," I yelled to Erik over the roar of the breakers. "The tide seems to be building. Sure this is safe?"

The doctor nodded. His face wasn't exactly handsome, but it had a certain pleasing appeal that radiated from his warm brown eyes. He took my hand and led me into the cave. Drops slithered down from the ceiling. It was cold and impossibly dark. This didn't seem a likely spot for lovers.

"Are you certain we're in the right place?" I said, my voice reverberating hollowly.

"Of course. I've been here many times. They call this Collier's Cave. Rote used to shoot a lot of his horror scenes here."

"I can believe that."

A misstep almost sent me sprawling until his arms caught me from behind. I regained my footing and lifted his hands away from where they had rooted on the top of my gown.

"You're a very large girl," he said quietly, backing me against the side of the cave.

"And you're a very large faker," I added. "There's nobody down here. Why'd you do this?"

"Because I like you, Honey, and because I was bored with the company back there."

"How'd you know my name?"

"I didn't. Is your name Honey? How convenient."

What he was saying didn't sound convincing any more. The naturalness in his voice had tightened. I was sure that business about my name was a lie.

"Let's go back," I said.

"Not on your life."

"Okay, I'll find my own way."

His hands stiffened on my bare shoulders. "Not before you answer a few questions."

"All right, Erik."

"Why are you so desperately anxious to find Helena Collier?"

I winced. "Because she's an old friend of mine and I wanted to see her before going back to L.A."

"That's a lie," Erik said. "You just met recently."

"How do you know this?"

"Because she told me. Helena's a patient of mine. She happened to let your name slip yesterday during a visit to my office. Now tell me the truth."

"I don't have to tell you anything."

His hands squeezed even tighter, this time nearer to my throat.

"You won't get away with it, do you understand? You and Helena think you're pretty smart, but you're not. You can only go so far with your little scheme. And I've had it, do you understand! I've had it up to here!"

His fingers clamped on my windpipe. I tried to kick him loose, but my gown was too tight and we fell over into a pool of water. His hands broke free.

"I'll get you! I'll get you both if it's the last thing I do!" Erik said, half screaming.

He leaped for me and missed in the darkness. I got to my feet and staggered toward a faint strip of sky when a wave crested over the rock ledge into the cave. It struck chest-high and flung me over into whirling foam, choking my nostrils and dragging me down into jagged rocks. By the time I reached the surface, the sea rose again stabbing brutally through the black cavity with another mountainous breaker.

Over the rush of the sea, Erik called, "This way, Honey, this way! You'll never make it to the ledge!"

Thinking this might be another trick, I fought even harder to reach the mouth of the cave. Then the third breaker convinced me it was impossible, as it hurled me against a wall. Erik came through the dark foam. He caught my arm and dragged me up onto a rock.

"Quick!" he yelled. "The next one may hit the ceiling!"

We climbed hurriedly to a cement retaining wall. The fourth wave was stupendous. It struck with awesome fury forcing us to crawl to another ledge and up a flight of block steps into the warm night. The spray hissed its anger below.

We found ourselves in a small garden only a few yards from Rote Collier's spiral-topped castle. Erik fell to his knees, coughing violently, his costume ripped down both sides. My evening gown was in far worse shape. There was just enough left to cover the important parts. We both looked as if we'd been through an atomic war.

Erik rolled over and groaned. "You know we almost had it down there. Another minute—"

"You mean another second—for me," I interrupted, touching my throat. "You tried to kill me down there. Why?"

The doctor wiped the spray from his face clumsily. "That's not true! You—you misunderstood."

I bent over Erik and examined several cuts on his chest where he had scraped on the rocks. "Listen, mister, you did your best to put me out of commission. Now either you give and give fast or I'm yelling for a cop. There are several on the premises, you know."

"No, I didn't know. What are they doing here?"

"Don't be naïve."

"No, I'm serious. You've got to believe me. I didn't mean you any harm."

"Save it for a police court."

I got up and walked to a lower side door leading into the Collier mansion. He ran after me.

"You're not serious, Honey?"

"What do you think?"

He followed me up a stairway into the still darkened living room. "It was a joke, Honey. I was only trying to scare you."

"That's what Wolf Larson said. One of these days you people will joke your way right into the gas chamber."

Rote Collier appeared out of the gloom, sweat beading on his pink forehead, breathing loud. "Honey, I've been looking for you everywhere. I can't find Helena. Have you seen her, Erik? What—what in the world's happened to you two?"

"We ran into a tidal wave," I said tightly. "Rote, where do you turn on the lights in this room?"

"Over there," he directed.

I crossed to a switch and flicked it on. The huge room sprang to life. The sacrificial altar was almost obliterated by the jungle of colored ribbons, its pillar-chained nude figure barely visible.

"Who thought up the altar bit, Rote?" I asked.

"I did. It was my idea. Just another gimmick to add some color. Why?" Rote stammered.

I traced my nails thoughtfully around my ears, trying to untangle some matted curls. "Have you checked the dummy lately?"

"What?" Rote Collier's eyes widened. "What are you talking about? What is this?"

"Is Helena's hair long and black?" I asked.

"Yes, but—"

"As far as I can tell, Rote, nobody's seen Helena in quite a while. You take it from there."

Slowly the ex-movie director turned and stared up at the sacrificial altar. The white, nude figure hung from the chains, weirdly lifelike with its face concealed by long black hair.

"You—you don't think—" Rote began.

"Around this place I've stopped thinking," I said, glancing at Erik's expressionless face. "Why don't you go look?"

Rote Collier, still garbed in his warped Quasimodo costume, seemed like a man on his last walk to the guillotine as he moved up the long flight of steps to the altar. Finally, he reached the white figure, hesitated a brief instant and then lifted her hair. The glassy, bulging eyes that peered down at us were horribly real. Rote dropped the black strands, grasped his heart and staggered back on the altar.

"Honey," he stammered. "Don't ever do that to me again. Of course, it's a mannikin. What did you expect?" He walked down the steps, slowly and unsteadily.

I glanced at Erik. He was deathly pale.

Rote joined us again. "Come on, let's all have a drink," he said, clapping his costumed hands together. "Hell, it's well after midnight. We've got some celebrating to do. Helena'll show up pretty soon. She probably drove downtown for more liquor."

Erik shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rote, but I'd better bow out. I've really had it." He glanced at me. "I'm going home to get some sleep, if you don't mind?"

"Of course we mind, Erik," Rote said. "And Helena would be very disappointed. Come on, one for the road, at least."

He pushed Erik and me into the study where Captain Reed Walker lay sprawled asleep on a couch in the corner.

Rote laughed. "Well, even old Buck Rogers ran out of space juice. The party's falling apart at the seams. This calls for a shot of my hundred-year-old Scotch."

He went to a cabinet and lifted out a bottle of liquor. Erik stood inside the door, his face growing whiter by the second.

I took three glasses from another cabinet and placed them on top of the mummy case. They didn't set very level. I peered down and noticed the lid was not fully closed.

Rote raised the bottle and shouted, "Happy New Year everybody!"

I raised the mummy case lid a little. The wind of fear whistled through me like a lance. A nude woman with long black hair was lifelessly crumpled inside.

## THREE

THE GLASSES crashed to the floor as I swung the lid open far enough for Rote and Erik to see the contents.

For a long moment, neither man moved. Then Rote set his bottle of hundred-year-old Scotch on the desk, and moved trance-like to the mummy case.

"Helena," he said, staring at the dead woman. "Helena, my God, I knew it couldn't last. I knew it." Tears began to squeeze out of his eyes, rolling down his pink cheeks in pathetic ribbons.

I closed the lid and went to the telephone. "I'm sorry, Rote. Believe me, I'm sorry. Erik, would you ask the people down at the pool to come up to the house, please?"

There was no answer. I glanced toward the door. Doctor Erik Ford was gone.

Shark Beach police and several men from the sheriff's office arrived thirty minutes later. Rote's mansion was considered to be on the city line and came under joint jurisdiction of both law enforcement agencies. One member of the group was a massive, broad-shouldered deputy in a battered felt hat and a blue suit too small for his large frame. His squarish, handsome face wore a scowl three inches thick and this ex-



pression deepened even more after he cornered me alone in a room just off the study.

"I'm Detective Lieutenant Mark Storm, sheriff's office, homicide," he said, squinting at the tattered remains of my gown. "I'm confused. Are you the old or new year?"

"You're the third funny man I've met tonight. One more and we'll have a quartet of jokers for the burial."

Mark cocked his hat, opened the button on his coat and groaned. "I should've known *you'd* be here, Honey. Nowadays in this county we spell murder H-O-N-E-Y. Who did it?"

I slumped into a chair in the corner. "The mummy, naturally, who else? Any other questions?"

"Yeah. How did you get counted in on this deal?"

"I was invited."

"Why?"

"Because I've got a birthmark inside my right thigh. You want to see?"

"I've already had the pleasure," Mark said, pacing around the room. "Now will you, please, get down to facts."

"How factual can you get, *ma'am*," I kidded. "Oh, come on, Mark, the gal's dead. You know as much as I do. She was smothered to death, right?"

"I'm not the coroner."

"What are you, Lieutenant?"

Mark groaned again. "I'm a tired old man called out of a warm bed on a hot New Year's Eve. Now, make something out of that."

"Well, speaking of tired old men, did you ever know one named Butler here in Shark Beach?"

"Sure. Hospital report was DOA. Three weeks ago. Drowning. Why?"

"No reason."

"I'll bet." Mark opened the top button of his shirt

and loosened his tie. "Don't kid me! You're not down here for your health."

"That's for sure," I said, fingering the remains of my expensive gown. "A couple of characters named Wolf Larson and Erik Ford have seen to that."

"I met Larson in the study. Who's Ford?"

"A doctor of sorts," I said. "He disappeared after I found the body. Helena was a patient of his."

Mark grunted. "Fine time to run out on a client. What do you make of the Marine officer, Reed Walker?"

"Very young, very nice and very drunk. I don't think he killed her."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a hunch."

"You're slipping, Honey." He took a pair of tin wings from his pocket and held them up. "Interplanetary Space Pilot, Commander."

"Where'd you get those?"

"In the mummy case. *Under* Helena Collier's body."

"So what?"

Mark hunched his shoulders. "So, your very young, very nice jet jockey probably dropped them when he tossed her body into the case. Several people have already identified them as belonging to Captain Walker's costume."

"I can corroborate that testimony. He was wearing them when I met him earlier."

"That's all I wanted to hear." Mark walked to the door.

"What are you going to do?"

"Arrest Walker on suspicion of murder."

"I wouldn't do that, Lieutenant."

"Why not?"

"Yours truly dropped those wings in the mummy case," I said, trying to cover the lie with a smile. "He pinned them on me during the evening for meritorious service under fire."

Mark's eyes hardened. "You're either drunk or lying, which is it?"

I crossed my legs and lighted a cigarette. "Ask the captain if you don't believe me."

Mark took his hat off and scowled. "You must be drunk. This doesn't sound like you, Honey. Do you realize what you're saying? Not only could this implicate you in the murder, but—"

"—make me into a bad girl."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to," I said. "A girl can't be good all the time. It gets monotonous. Especially on New Year's Eve."

He grabbed me by the wrists and jerked me to my feet. "You dizzy dame, I ought to—"

I turned my face defiantly toward his. "What's holding you back, Lieutenant? You don't like female private eyes anyway. Now's your chance. Start the New Year out right."

He hurled me back into the chair. "Why you ever got into this business, I'll never know. Just because your father was a damned smart detective doesn't put you at the head of the class by any means. You'll never be able to fill his shoes! And don't think your body will ever open any doors—unless they're bedroom doors! You're just one flight up from the street as far as I'm concerned. Even a prostitute's got more pride in her profession than you have in yours!" Mark hammered his fist on the desk. "Oh, you give me a big, fat bellyache!"

"Okay, Lieutenant, why don't you arrest me and get rid of the pain?" I demanded, knowing he was so mad he hardly knew what he was saying.

"How did those wings get into that case, Honey?"

"They flew in."

Mark crushed his hat angrily. "Now who's being funny? I want a straight answer, do you understand?"

"All right," I said. "At one point in the evening I

was in the study with Rote Collier. A mummy case, as you will admit, isn't a usual fixture in most American homes, so I took a peek inside for curiosity's sake. Is that straight enough?"

"Where was the mummy?"

"Out at the bar getting stiff." I grinned. "Mark, you're making much too much out of nothing."

"Yeah, I don't know who was making much too much out of who around here this evening, but I do know there was plenty of it going on. We ought to arrest the whole bunch of you."

"You have no holiday spirit, Lieutenant," I said, hating myself for acting this way. I was stooping pretty low to deceive a guy who'd plucked me out of a dozen tight spots during my detecting career. But it had to be done.

"Tell me just one thing," Mark said, grinding his hat back over rumpled black hair. "Who's the bigger liar, you or Fawn Collier?"

"I don't get you."

"Fawn claims she spent most of the evening with Reed Walker—until he passed out."

I nibbled on my bottom lip. "That, my friend, is for you to find out."

Mark tossed the tin wings into my lap. "Okay, you earned 'em, Commander. They're yours. But I'm warning you to keep your eyes open because I'm just liable to shoot Buck Rogers' space ship right out from under him."

New Year's morning I awakened in one of Rote's funeral-like guest rooms wondering why I'd stopped Mark from arresting Reed Walker. My reasons had seemed important the night before. But now, examined under daylight, they appeared as empty and shallow as the massive swimming pool beneath my windows, drained almost dry by low tide. I still felt the tin wings were an obvious plant. Or were they? What possible

motive would a handsome Marine Captain have for murdering Helena Collier? I shook my head dismally. Maybe Mark was right about getting out of the detecting business. My female spotting system had gone completely haywire at Reed Walker's first blip on my sensitive radar screen.

After a quick shower, I slipped into a sweater and skirt, painted my mouth and hurried downstairs. The dummy was still chained to her sacrificial pillars, reeking of the same sickening mothball odor that permeated the mummy case. At the altar's base, partially covered by scattered pieces of papier-mâché was a shiny black slide from a four by five camera.

I showed this to Rote at breakfast.

"Must belong to Hel Gandy," he said. "He was taking pictures last night and probably left it behind after we found—"

"I—I'm sorry I couldn't have been more help, Rote."

He touched my arm, a warm expression in his moist blue eyes. "You did help, Honey. At least, you saved Fawn."

"What do you mean?"

"You said something to Fawn which really upset her last night while you two were alone in the study." Rote sipped nervously at his coffee. "She left the party afterwards and didn't come back until just about the time we discovered Helena. I think the killer was really out for Fawn."

"Why, Rote?"

"Just—just a feeling I have. That's why I want you to stay on here for a while, Honey. I *don't* want to lose Fawn."

His emphasis was poorly placed. It sounded too much as if he hadn't minded losing Helena.

"Rote," I said, "Fawn told the sheriff's detectives she spent the evening with Reed Walker, but never mentioned leaving the party. Did she take the Marine Captain with her?"

"I—I haven't the slightest idea."

Fawn, her short black hair combed into frothy bangs, whirled onto the breakfast porch in a filmy, expensive negligee. Her full lips were red around the edges where they apparently had been bruised by too many hard kisses. I wondered when she had had time to run up against Wolf Larson.

Fawn pecked her father on his pink forehead and glanced at me. "How nice you look this morning, Miss West. Like a bright picture *torn* out of a magazine."

Rote winced. "Fawn, you'll catch your death of cold in that ridiculous outfit. Go put some clothes on."

"Father, I feel very light and gay this morning." Fawn laughed. "This is the beginning of a new year. Let's bare our souls to the sunlight."

Rote got up from the table, anger searing his red-rimmed eyes. "Need I remind you, Fawn, that Helena is dead. This is no time for frivolities."

"On the contrary, Father," Fawn said lightly, slipping into a chair. "This is the happiest day of my life. I'm glad she's dead. Aren't you?"

"Fawn! Fawn, we have a guest!"

The dark-haired woman flashed green eyes in my direction. "Guest—pest! Why don't you go home, Miss West? You rhyme so delightfully."

"Fawn!" Rote emitted an anguished roar, stepped around the table and slapped his daughter hard on the cheek. "Either you'll learn some better manners or else I'll—"

"Or you'll what, dear Father?" Fawn rose slowly, a hand covering her flushed, dimpled cheek. "Kill me? Why don't you say it. You've always wanted to."

Rote Collier began to tremble, tears springing into his wide, hurt eyes. "Get out!" he whispered. "Get out, you—"

"—darling," Fawn finished, glancing at me. "If I didn't know better I'd say Father killed Helena. And with good reason. With very good reason." She crossed

the porch, hips swinging loosely under her negligee, and vanished into the house.

Rote slumped into his chair, head in his hands. "I must apologize for Fawn, Honey. She's terribly upset. We all are."

I examined my fork absently. "Rote, if you want me to work for you, you've got to work for me."

"Of course, Honey, of course. But, don't pay any attention to Fawn. She's exactly what I said last night. Irresponsible, irrepressible, irrational. I—I love Fawn and I've never had any reason to want to kill Helena." It sounded forced and tinged with insincerity. "Now does that answer your questions?"

"Almost," I said. "Was there ever a real mummy in that case, Rote?"

"Not to my knowledge. The case and the mannikin came together. I borrowed them from a friend of mine at the studio."

"Okay, that'll do for now. I'll see you later." I patted him on the cheek and went into the house.

During a search of the living room, I discovered a narrow staircase leading to a lower level where several doors opened into dark dingy rooms with bunk beds built along the walls. Undoubtedly, these were the vaults I'd been warned about. Below this floor was a large, high-ceilinged chamber with fixed theatre seats and a wide movie screen. Numerous film cases were racked and labeled on a special shelf. I recognized some of the titles; horror pictures made by Rote Collier in his heyday. One case, stuck obscurely at the bottom, was labeled: HELENA. I removed the metal disc and lifted the cover. It was empty.

The room was suddenly plunged into darkness and the rush of a projection machine whirled over my head. From a square slot near the ceiling a stream of yellowish light fanned down. I went for the door, but it was now bolted from the other side. Music filled the room—light, airy music with woodwinds and flutes—

and color splashed across the white beaded surface of the movie screen revealing a forest with green trees and low hanging branches. In the background, a dark-haired woman astride a sleek gray horse rode into view, her well-developed body starkly naked, a sensuous smile creasing her painted mouth. Sunlight cascaded down through the trees casting twisted shadows on her pink-tipped breasts. I was startled to discover it was Helena. She climbed from the animal and moved languidly nearer, slim legs taking long sexy steps, hands cupped under marble-white breasts, moistened lips curled back over straight, gleaming teeth. She came into such a tight close-up that the skin texture of her rounded stomach revealed a tiny mole near her navel. The image blacked out, only to lighten again as Helena moved on, her dimpled bottom jutting out below a curvaceous sloping back. She fell into an exotic dance which carried her from tree to tree, fingers stretching hungrily for branches high on gnarled trunks. The music pounded and Helena's body throbbed fantastically to the rhythm. When it was over, she lay exhausted in the forest, her body covered with beads of perspiration, gasping for breath, tongue pushed through her lips.

The scene changed abruptly, darkening into a close-up of a partially opened door that gradually focused onto a weird bedroom through the narrow opening. Black mesh curtains hung from the ceiling of the room, halfway encircling an elevated slab of slate, creating an eerie frame for two naked bodies that were sprawled passionately on a bare black mattress suspended on the rock. I couldn't immediately identify either of the thrashing figures until the woman sat up seizing her long black hair and piling it on top of her head. It was Helena again, but the man's face was turned away from the obviously-hidden camera. His back was broad and sinewy and sweat streamed down his sun-tanned flanks.



A startled voice from the projection booth drew my attention away from the screen. "My God, what's going on here?"

The clicking hum of the projector died, eating up the yellowish beam and erasing its lurid image. New light sprang from a fluorescent tube in the ceiling as Rote Collier's pink face glowered down at me in angry judgment.

"Honey, are you responsible for this?" he demanded.

"For what, Rote?"

He gestured over his head. "For this machine being turned on. It's a very expensive piece of equipment and shouldn't be tampered with by an amateur."

I smiled thinly. "The entire performance was at someone else's insistence. I'm locked in from the other side."

Rote's face paled. "How much did you see?"

"Enough to reveal you didn't give me the straight dope on Helena. She was hardly naïve, Rote."

"I ought to kill Fawn for this. No one was ever supposed to see that film. I should have burned it long ago."

"But you didn't," I said. "Who was the man with Helena?"

"I—I don't know. I mean—I can't tell you. It has nothing to do with her murder," Rote stammered.

"Let me be the judge of that."

"I can't, Honey! This is just one of those things you'll have to take my word for. That footage was shot a long time before I even met Helena. It has nothing to do with what happened last night."

"You'd better be telling the truth, Rote, because this film provides you with a sizeable motive for Helena's murder."

"Yes, yes, I know. That's what's so awful. Believe me, Honey, I'm innocent."

"You intimated last night Helena was straying a little, but you didn't say with whom."

"That was New Year's Eve talk. I even made a play for you, didn't I?"

"Rote, you're hiding something or somebody. Now which is it?"

"All right, if you must know, I—I'm hiding Helena. Her past. She was a bad girl until I met her. She modeled in the nude, acted in pornographic movies, even participated at closed stag parties where the women did absolutely everything. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I met her at one of those parties."

"Then why'd you give me all that business about naïveté?"

"Because she *was* naïve. That's why I married her, despite what I knew about her background. She had a very sensitive nature, was easily swayed, men were always taking advantage of her." Rote stopped and ran his tongue over dry lips. "I knew she was swimming in the nude last night. But, she was drunk. She never would have done that otherwise."

"Tell me something truthfully, Rote. Did Helena like other women?"

"Of course. She had a very friendly nature."

"No," I said, hesitating. "I mean—physically."

Rote's face hardened in the dull yellowish light. "Who said that about Helena?"

"Doctor Erik Ford. He didn't come right out and actually accuse her, but he hinted at it strongly."

"That dirty bastard. She did a lot of things in her life, but Helena wasn't *that* kind. There wasn't an abnormal bone in her beautiful body. Thank God!"

"It's a known fact that a large queer element does exist in Shark Beach."

"Of course. That's why I worry about Fawn. Just drop by the Gay Blade here in town sometime. It's very modern, exquisite, with gorgeous men parading around like a bunch of bronzed fairies. They're deadly, Honey!" Rote drummed his fist on the ledge above.

"Every one of them psychologically twisted into a knot, touching each other, rubbing baby oil on each other. They seem so quiet and demure. But they're not! They're capable of anything—even murder!" He paused. "Whatever drove them into this abnormal niche can just as easily push them farther. They're frightened, Honey. And when a man's frightened—no matter what kind of man he is—he can kill so easily it isn't even funny."

"Rote," I said quietly, "you must suspect someone. Who?"

"I—I don't really know. Everyone. No one. I can't fathom why Helena was murdered in the first place. Obviously someone's crazy. You've got to help me find out who that is before he gets to Fawn."

"You said a moment ago that you thought Fawn locked me in here and turned on the film. Why?"

Rote shook his head. "Because Fawn hated Helena. I told you they were the same age. It was hard for Fawn to accept Helena. There was always a great deal of animosity on Fawn's part. Attempts to discredit Helena were always being made. I'm sure this was one of those attempts. I think you can understand why. Fawn did see us together last night."

"Yes, I know. But, one thing I don't understand, Rote, is why you've kept this film, why you never burned it."

"That I can't answer," Rote said sadly. "Not truthfully anyway. Just remember I'm in my fifties and Helena was not even twenty-five. I guess there's a bit of abnormality in us all. Does that answer your question?"

I nodded. "Now would you be so kind as to come down and unlock this door?"

He hesitated just long enough to make me wonder if he'd ever planned to let me out. I would have been a sitting duck from his vantage point. Who could say

for certain Rote Collier hadn't been the one who bolted the door? Or that he wasn't in the projection booth the entire time? The film had stopped at a strangely crucial moment. In another second the face of Helena's lover most certainly would have been revealed.

## FOUR

MARK STORM was propped up at a desk watching the Rose Bowl game on television when I walked into his temporary office in Shark Beach.

"Is this how you solve murders?" I asked.

"This is New Year's Day," he said gruffly. "People don't solve murders. They watch football games. Go away."

I took a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and lighted one. "What's the score?"

"Fourteen to fourteen. We're down on State's three yard line with twenty seconds to play."

"I mean the score on Helena Collier. What'd the coroner say?"

"Oh," the big lieutenant groaned. "Time of death about one hour before discovery. Cause—suffocation. Bruises around her mouth. No violation of the lower regions except her fanny was red as if she'd been spanked. Final score—nothing-nothing. Now scam."

"Is that any way to talk to a lady," I said, blowing smoke in his face.

"You were no lady last night. Our engagement's off."

"Who ever said we were engaged?"

"I did. But, I've made a New Year's resolution."

"Oh, drop dead," I said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Can't," Mark said, "even if I'd like to oblige. Got to see the end of this game."

Grim-faced helmeted men lined up against each other across the TV screen, then rammed together brutally. I picked up the coroner's report from Mark's desk and scanned the neatly typed page. One line really threw me for a loss, almost as abruptly as the West team was hurled back by the dark-uniformed players from the Big Ten Conference.

"Hey," I said. "It says here Helena was pregnant."

"That's right."

"I thought you said the score was nothing-nothing?"

"Oh, yeah," Mark muttered, his eyes glued to the television screen. "There was a field goal made before the game even started. The coroner guesses it was scored about two months ago. Maybe a little more. I called Dr. Ford but he claims he didn't know a thing about her pregnancy."

"Do you believe him?"

"Of course," Mark said. "It's possible Helena Collier didn't even know herself."

"Oh, come off it," I roared. "You know better than that."

"I beg your pardon," Mark said. "I've never been pregnant."

"Well, if you get any closer to that television set you'll have a pretty good idea. You're liable to swallow the football."

"That," Mark bellowed, "would be a refreshing idea. At least, I could carry that damned ball over for a touchdown, even if those pip-squeaks can't. Come on, team!"

"What time is it?" I asked, reaching for the telephone.

"Eight seconds. They'll never make it."

I shrugged my shoulders and dialed Erik Ford's home phone number. He answered instantly.

"I can't talk now, you idiot! They've only got five seconds to play!"

"You've got even less than that, Doc," I said. "This is Honey West. Meet me at the Gay Blade in twenty minutes."

The crowd went berserk in the Rose Bowl, blotting out the doctor's faint argument. A big fullback bolted around right end, evaded three tacklers, became trapped along the sidelines, reversed his field and with the mammoth stadium erupting into pandemonium, raced into the end zone standing up.

"I'll be there," Erik said finally. "The game's over."

"You can say that again," I said and hung up.

Mark had his arms around the TV set and was hugging it for dear life. I walked out into the faint warmth of a late Shark Beach afternoon. The sea crashed awesomely in the distance. So awesomely that it made me wince as I crossed Forest Avenue on my way toward Pacific Coast highway.

The Gay Blade was known as a "queer" joint to the outside world. It squatted on the sand, wedged in by two rocky cliffs, the highway and a turbulent sea that smashed at its thick plate windows. The fancy restaurant-bar itself was about as queer as the word could indicate. Magnifying glass across the front created an unusually frightening sensation. When a wave began to gather along the rim of the water it was optically enlarged into a tidal wave sweeping vengefully toward the cafe. The bar curved around in front of these windows and each stool tapered up into two electrically-controlled steel pods. These were called "love-

seats" and could be lowered or raised according to the two patrons' desires by a flick of a switch.

Doctor Erik and I shared one of these stools. He ordered two dry martinis and then grinned at me nervously.

"We won twenty to fourteen," he said. "I suppose you know."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose you know Helena was pregnant."

"The police told me this morning. I didn't know until then."

"You told me you examined her last week."

Erik sipped at his martini. "My examination was—not for pregnancy. Helena had a kidney ailment. She drank too much."

"Is that so? Why'd you disappear last night after I discovered the body?"

"It—it shook me up—badly. I couldn't stand to see her that way."

"You're a doctor. I presume you've been around corpses before. Why did seeing Helena bother you?"

Erik downed his drink and ordered another round. "I'd never seen Helena that way. Never visualized her in that condition. I—I couldn't take the shock."

"You don't sound convincing."

"Well, dammit, I'm telling the truth. I wouldn't expect a lady lawyer to believe anything I say, naturally. Especially one hired by Helena."

His statement rocked me back. Since when was I a lady lawyer? I tried to conceal my surprise with a quick sip of my drink. Now I was beginning to understand a little more why he went berserk down in the ocean cave.

"What did you expect?" I asked. "For me to dump my whole case into your lap?"



"Why not?" Erik said, grimacing. "There's no overtime in a football game. You're dead! Helena's dead and you're dead and that's that. Period."

"Not exactly. I can still take my case to court."

Erik laughed grimly. "Not in a million years. It's a hung jury. You'll never bring in a verdict now."

I took a wild stab in the dark. "You did make her pregnant, didn't you, Erik?"

"Are you crazy?" he demanded. "I knew nothing about Helena having a baby. I'm not an obstetrician."

"No," I said, "but you're a man—or are you?"

"Very funny." He downed most of his new drink in one gulp. "And very aptly said in the *Gay Blade*. Do you see those fine-feathered gentlemen over there?"

I nodded.

"They're about as odd as a couple of ducks in a flock of ostriches. See those two doors marked *ladies*? Well, one of them, as you might notice, is spelled with a capital L. Don't ever go in there unless you want to be as embarrassed as hell."

"Which one do you use?" I asked, angry because I'd lost my hold on the conversation.

"That's for you to answer, counselor," Erik said, finishing the dregs of his second drink. "But if you're really interested in your former client, why don't you ask Hel Gandy a few questions. He's the one who killed her."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he's a lousy skunk, that's why. He'd choke his own mother for a spare buck. He sits up there on top of that hill in a fancy studio shooting pictures of naked women. He ought to be shot himself!"

"You sound jealous, Doctor. Would you like to trade professions?"

"Are you joking?" Erik said, gripping his glass.

"Sure, he makes a lot of money selling smut. But do you want to know how he does it? He takes these young rosy-chested girls just off the farm. Some of them aren't even eighteen when he gets his hands on them. They're cute girls out here alone, looking for a break in the movies or television. They've probably never had a drink or smoked a cigarette or taken their clothes off in front of a man before. Then they meet Hel Gandy. Before long Miss Country Bumpkin is posing in bra and panties, and not long after that, after one drink too many, she winds up with everything hanging out and Hel shooting pictures of her in every perverted pose known—and a few that aren't. The gal is stunned. Hel shows her some of the prints, offers her another drink, and from then on she never stops taking—or giving—for the rest of her life. End of story."

"Not very pretty," I said.

"That's right. So, now you know what kind of a man Helmet Gandy really is. He started Helena Collier out the same way five years ago. She was Helena Warren then. A real sweet dark-eyed Susan right off the pickle boat from Lincoln, Nebraska. Last night you saw the last stop on Hel Gandy's twisted trolley car to ruin. He killed her all right. He kills them all, eventually, some way or another." Erik got up from his half of the stool. "Now if you don't mind, the defense would like to rest its case. I'll see you around."

I stopped him near the door on his way out. "Erik, I—I want to apologize for the way I acted last night. I really thought you were going to—"

The doctor smiled. "Strangle you? No, I was only trying to describe how high up the anger was inside of me for what you and Helena were doing." His hands

encircled his own throat. "You know the old expression, 'I've had it up to here.'"

"Of course." I drew close to him and fingered the lapel of his coat. "You wanted to kiss me last night, didn't you?"

"Sure I did, but—"

"No one can see us now," I whispered. "Do it now, Erik. I want you to kiss me."

His arms went around my shoulders quickly squeezing me tight against his chest. His lips were tender and restless on my mouth. My hands were a little restless, too, but not so tender. One of them slipped inside his coat pocket lifting out a ring of keys. I tucked them, unnoticed, into my purse and then pulled away.

"Thank you, Erik," I whispered.

"Honey, you're wonderful, let's go someplace—"

"I've got another appointment, but I'd like to take a raincheck," I hedged.

"It's a deal. You know my phone number. I'll be home all evening." He glanced at my sweater and skirt and the way my hair was mussed. "I thought Helena had it. You've really got it."

"You're sweet," I said, visualizing his rage if he knew I'd lifted his keys. "Now, go home."

"Okay." He started for the door.

"Erik!"

"Yes?"

I tried to say it as casually as possible. "Did you know Hel Gandy took flash pictures last night at the party?"

"No," he said, and then after an instant, "Yes, I guess I did. Why?"

"Nothing. I just wondered if he took one of you in that crazy half and half costume. I'd love to have a print if he got anything of you."

He grinned, tossed me a kiss and vanished onto the sidewalk. I waited about fifteen minutes in the Gay Blade, dawdling over a martini, to be certain he hadn't guessed I'd tricked him when he missed his keys. He didn't return.

The telephone directory listed his office as opposite the Pleasure Pier in the Muldrup Building. As I strolled along the boardwalk, my mind pincered in on two distinct possibilities concerning Erik Ford's mistaking me for a lawyer. Either Helena had threatened him with a court action concerning her unborn child or else she'd gained information implicating Erik in the two earlier Shark Beach murders. The first thought seemed the most practical. If she'd had any real evidence of his guilt as a killer, she'd have gone to the police. Or would she? There was always the possibility of blackmail. Helena Collier didn't seem above such measures.

A shirt-sleeved, cotton dress crowd, clutching impish kids and ice cream cones, streamed monotonously along the boardwalk. At the foot of the Pleasure Pier, a rickety, wooden roller coaster trellis sprawled aimlessly on the sand, climbing at one point to a perilous height of almost a hundred feet. Screams and terrified laughter rode with the steel cars as they zoomed around the banked tracks screaming back their own fear of the slender rails that seemed hardly able to control the hurtling hunks of flesh and metal. A huge sign on the pier announced: The Most Chilling Experience of a Lifetime! Don't Miss It! WOLF LARSON'S BATHYSPHERE. I smiled. They had forgotten to mention one other chilling experience. WOLF LARSON'S KISS.

A hand suddenly caught my arm. "Well, fancy meeting you here."

I glanced around at a neatly-pressed Marine officer's uniform. The handsome, sun-tanned face above belonged to Captain Reed Walker.

"Hi," I said, feeling a warm glow rush through me. "Happy New Year."

"The same to you," he said, squeezing my arm, "and that goes double." He had big brown puppy-dog eyes that sort of devoured you with their affection. "Say," he continued awkwardly, "how about an ice cream cone or something, huh?"

"Sure," then remembering, "but I'm in a hurry to get somewhere—"

"And this is the somewhere," he finished. "I've been lonesome wandering around this darned pier by myself. Come on."

He led me to an ice cream stand and ordered two vanilla cones without asking my preference. It didn't really matter. I felt too warm inside to care about anything, including the search I'd planned of Dr. Ford's office. We walked onto the pier in the gathering, fog-tinged dusk.

"You ever been to Shark Beach before?" he asked.

"Once or twice. I—I don't remember exactly."

"You a California girl?"

"Uh-huh."

"Me, too. I mean, I'm a native son myself. Where you from?"

"Long Beach."

"Great town. Real great town. I'm from Frisco."

His small talk didn't seem insincere or boring, in the least. I bit down on the ice cream cone and shook my head. Get a hold of yourself, Honey, I thought. You're a big girl. This sort of thing is for the tourist trade. Besides, those Buck Rogers wings weren't in the case courtesy of the mummy.

We passed Wolf Larson's Bathysphere, but the diving bell was submerged in a frothy pool of green. Apparently, the muscleman was down inside describing his wonders of the deep.

"You're a model," Reed said, repeating what I'd told him last night. "Does it ever get sort of rough in your business?"

"Sure," I kidded, "almost as rough as it gets for a jet pilot when his after-burner blows."

He laughed and I was suddenly glad I'd lied to Mark Storm about the wings. This guy, as far as I was concerned, was definitely not a murderer. I was willing to stake my life on it.

We reached the end of the pier and Reed peered silently at the waves breaking over the pilings, arms braced on the wooden railing. Finally, he said, "Why'd you tell the police I pinned my wings on you?"

"Because you didn't kill Helena Collier."

"What makes you think so?"

I rubbed my bare arms from the chill of the fog rolling up off the water. He slipped his hand around my waist.

"I just have a feeling, that's all," I said, after a moment.

His grip tightened warmly. "You're crazy, you know that? Just plumb crazy."

"Reed, how *did* those wings get into the mummy case? Do you have any idea?"

"No, the evening got too drunk for me."

"So I noticed. Don't you remember anything?"

His face drew so near that I could count the tiny wrinkles around his eyes. "I remember you, Honey. I remember you out on that cliff with the lightning

I felt his lips and they were even warmer than his and—"

eyes. They moved up from my mouth, across my cheek and down again. I suddenly realized my arms were around his waist and my legs felt like a couple of those ribbons after the New Year's Eve party was over. I pulled back slightly to catch my breath.

"Reed, believe me, I—I've got to go someplace."

"Sure." He kissed me again. "My place."

"No—no, you don't understand."

His lips felt like molten lava pouring down the side of my face. "I—I have a real nice house. On the side of the hill. Big stone fireplace. We could build a fire. You're cold."

"Are you kidding?" I whispered, the heat in my limbs practically choking off my words. "I—I can't, Reed. I just can't."

His arms closed me against his body. "I never heard of that word," he said faintly.

"You want to know something?" I said, still trying to get my breath. "Neither have I."

The huge gold wings over Reed's fireplace were hewn out of wood in an exact replica of those he wore over his heart. He poured two very *very* dry martinis and led me to a persimmon-colored couch that lay almost on the floor beneath fifty feet of windows framing Shark Beach's sea of neon lights below.

Reed placed his warm hands on my cheeks and smiled. "I hope you don't think I'm just another Marine out for a good time."

I shook my head. "And I hope you don't think I'm just another girl out for a good Marine. Call me old-fashioned if you want to, Reed, but I like things to develop slowly."

"Honey," he protested, "I'm a jet pilot!"

"I know," I said. "But we're not at thirty thousand feet. Not yet. I—I want to ask you a question."

"Fire away."

"Were you with Fawn Collier last night?"

"If I say 'yes' will you be jealous?"

"I don't know. Were you?"

Reed took his hands away and wiped them over his broad forehead. "Yes. For a while. Until I passed out."

"Did you give her your wings?"

"No! Hell, no. I wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole. She may look good, but she's funny. You can't get close to her. I've tried."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, you know how people get sometimes when they're drunk," Reed said.

"How do you get?"

He smiled and his fingers touched the top of my sweater where several open buttons revealed a deep white cleft. "How old are you, Honey?"

"Twenty-eight."

"I'm thirty-two. Have you ever been married?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Funny, isn't it? Two people as old as we are having never fallen in love."

"We're not that old, Reed."

His face hardened in the faint light. "I guess not. My mother got married when she was fifteen. She was a beautiful woman—but she married a lush."

"Your father?"

"Yeah, he drank them both into a grave by the time they were thirty. First with lousy prohibition gin. Dad made it in a bathtub. Then he bought the cheapest junk he could find."

"What happened to you, Reed?"

"I—I was fourteen when my mother died. I knocked around for a few years and then went into the Marines. Been in ever since. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Not so crazy," I said softly. "My mother died when



I was born. I lived most of my life with my father."

"Where's he now?"

"He was shot and killed in a back alley behind the Paramount Theatre in L.A. four years ago. He was a private detective."

Reed stiffened. "Who did it?"

"Nobody knows. It was raining. All they ever found was a diamond-studded tie clip lying in the gutter."

He shook his head, poured a new round of martinis and joined me again on the couch. Then he said, "A couple of damned orphans, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Honey," Reed paused for an instant before confessing, "I—I know you're not a model."

"What?"

"You're a private detective like your father. I know because I checked."

"How did you—"

"The Marine Corps has its ways. I went in to the base this morning. It didn't take long."

"But why, Reed?"

"You lied to protect me. I had to find out the reason. Now I know."

"That's what you think."

"You believe in me, don't you, Honey? A private detective wouldn't lie otherwise."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, touching his mouth with my hand. "You're still under suspicion and don't you forget that."

"Yeah," he said. "From the police, maybe, but not from you. I can feel it."

"All right, Reed, you've convinced me. So what?"

"But that's where you're wrong, Honey," he said simply. "I did kill her. I killed Helena."

## FIVE

"Now who's talking crazy?" I said.

"No, it's true, Honey." Reed got to his feet. "I didn't actually commit the crime, but I might as well have. Helena was in love with me."

"What does that mean?"

"She didn't love Rote. She told me that at least a hundred times." He whirled around angrily. "She was always after me! What was I supposed to do? I'm only human!"

I set my martini on the floor and got up. "You're trying to tell me something, Reed. You don't have to pull any punches."

He crossed to the windows, glowering down at neon lights and dark sea. "All right," he said, "I went to bed with her. What could I do. She'd come up here and take off her clothes and dance. My God, she was a woman. A beautiful woman."

"You knew she was pregnant, didn't you, Reed?"

"Yes."

"She accused you of being the father."

"Yes." It was hardly audible.

"Were you?"

"I—I don't know. I guess so."

"Are you certain?"

"No. I was drunk. I don't remember a thing that happened. The next morning I woke up and she was curled around me like a kitten. How certain can you get?"

I nodded.

"That was the only time," Reed said, not looking at me. "I had enough chances, but she was married and Rote Collier was a friend of mine. You want to know something real crazy?"

"What?"

"She used to actually beg me. I couldn't figure it out. There are a dozen guys in this town who would have jumped at the opportunity. Helena didn't want them."

"How do you know?"

"She told me."

"And you believed her, Reed?"

"Why shouldn't I. She never lied to me. At least, I don't think she did."

I patted his arm. "Reed Walker, you are either the most naïve Marine I've ever met in my life or the most egotistical. I don't know which. Where's your bedroom?"

"What?" His mouth fell open.

"I'm not going to beg you," I said, fluttering my eyelashes.

"Honey, you said you were an old-fashioned girl."

"See what I mean." I took his hand. "You even believed *me*."

The bedroom was down a narrow hall. It had a conventional double bed, plain striped wallpaper and a shelf crammed with model airplanes. There were no signs of black mesh curtains, slate rock or an uncovered mattress.

"Okay," I said. "Have you got a car?"

"Honey, you confuse the devil out of me. Of course, I've got a car."

"Good. I'd like to borrow it for about an hour. I want to confuse the devil out of somebody else."

"Who?"

"Helmet Gandy. His satanic costume last night couldn't have been more appropriate. In fact, he ought to wear it all the time."

"Honey, you can't leave now," Reed protested. "We were just beginning to—"

I kissed his cheek. "I'll be back in an hour. Then we'll have some real fun."

His eyes widened again.

"We'll break into an office building," I finished. "That should be a ball."

The path leading down to Hel Gandy's photography studio-home created an illusion of immense grandeur. The small, sparkling stones embedded in the cement walk appeared to be diamonds and the grandiose structure at the top of the road a solid gold miniature of the Eiffel Tower. The building itself, which was set perilously close to the edge of the hill, was extremely modern and constructed of aluminum and glass. It seemed the perfect setting for a bedroom with black mesh curtains draped around a slab of slate rock.

Hel was a long time coming to the door. He was dripping with perspiration and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"Hello," he said, a disturbed note in his voice. "And to what do I attribute this unexpected visit?"

"I told you I was a model, Mr. Gandy. I thought perhaps—"

He didn't move, not one hair. The half-opened door was blocked by his large bulk. "You want to pose, huh?" His eyes were locked on the front of my sweater.

"That's right, I'd—"

"Come back tomorrow at three." He tried to swing the door closed in my face.

I stopped it with my shoulder. "I'm going home tomorrow. I won't have another chance—with you."

A knowing smile gathered in the corners of his mouth. "I've got a girl posing at the moment. Can you wait a half hour?"

"Sure. Why not?"

The door pressed against my shoulder as he tried to close me out once again.

I wet my lips with the tip of my tongue. "Why don't I wait inside? I won't get in the way. I promise."

He hesitated just long enough for me to push against his shirt provocatively with my chest. The door slipped from his fingers and I stepped around him into a garish hallway lined with numerous photographs of naked women, none retouched.

He whirled around, brow wrinkled in anger and gestured toward the living room. "Wait in there. You'll find liquor in a cabinet next to the fireplace. Pour yourself a drink."

When he was gone, I singled out a door leading off the hallway and tried the knob. It wasn't a bedroom, as I'd hoped, but it had a desk, six filing cabinets and a rack of books on *How To Take Pictures* in every language except Greek. I went after the cabinets. The first three didn't furnish a thing except thousands of routine pictures of nude women. Then I hit the pornographic drawer. It was bitter! The positions and angles were brutal and numberless. In almost every case the girls involved seemed pathetically young, half-closed eyes peering from white, horrified faces. They looked like a bunch of lipstick-smearred zombies unable to compre-

hend the acts being perpetrated upon them. Hel Gandy was noticeably present in several of the poses.

I gritted my teeth and went on until I found a thick file on Helena Collier. Her earliest poses hardly resembled the woman I'd discovered in the mummy case. This Helena was lithe and vital with long jet-black hair swept back in a pony tail. Her partially clad body reclined in youthful abandon on a leopard skin. The remaining photos told a different story. They degenerated into a stock lewdness which was stamped indelibly into the fibre of each licentious figure. Helena had stopped at nothing, including a wickedly harsh scene involving two other women. I slammed the file closed and tried another door. This one led me, all too unexpectedly, into Hel's studio.

The girl before the camera ranked in Hel's "breaking in" class. She was one of those rosy-chested types Erik had described; all bosom and hips with apple cheeks and electric blue eyes that were still unmarked by Hel's rigorous processing. She colored with embarrassment, trying to cover herself, when she discovered my presence.

Hel, on the other hand, nearly hit the ceiling. "Miss West, I thought I told you to wait in the living room! Dammit, get out of here!"

I slammed the door closed fast and was almost out of his office before he caught me. His grip on my arm was vicious as he backed me against the wall.

"You had no right to do that!" he roared. "You've embarrassed that girl to death!"

"I—I'm sorry," I stammered, trying to drum up a good explanation. "The—ah—liquor cabinet was jammed. I couldn't open it."

"You're lying," he spat. "It doesn't have any doors."

"Oh," I countered. "I must have been trying the

wrong cabinet. You see, I'm just dying for a good belt. I guess I got excited. I—I get that way when I need a drink. I shake something terrible.”

He stepped back and hunched his big shoulders. “You must have been trying the one on the other side of the fireplace. It's locked.”

“Yeah, I guess that's what happened. Please, couldn't I have a drink?” My hands began to tremble.

He wiped sweat from his forehead and nodded, seemingly convinced that my mistake was one of a frenzied alcoholic in search of a bottle. This pleased him immensely and he smiled. “Drink all you want, baby. I'm going to send Lois home. We'll have a little New Year's party. Just the two of us, okay?”

I wet my lips and winked. “Sure, sweetie.”

While Lois dressed behind closed studio doors, Hel followed me into the living room, watching eagerly as I filled a water glass to the one-third mark with bourbon. My hands continued to tremble the way I knew hands were expected to shake under such circumstances. He scrutinized each movement closely. My throat seemed to catch fire as I swallowed half the drink in one paralyzing gulp. I stifled a choking sensation with the back of my hand, laughing as the last few drops ran sickeningly down my chin.

“Now I can live for a few minutes,” I said. I'd never felt more like dying in my life.

Hel raised the bottle. “Have another, baby. Really get you on your feet.”

“Oh, no!” I pressed my fingers on his lips. “I've got a big head start. I'll fix you.”

And I did. I fixed him with a shot that would have choked a small horse and thirteen ponies. His eyes widened as many notches and his Adam's apple

quivered. Lois slipped out the front door and vanished in the night.

Hel picked up the glass and winced. "This would kill me. You drink it."

I didn't have to pretend very hard at intoxication. My words lost their crispness like a bowl of corn flakes soaking in milk. I pressed the glass against his sweaty chest. "I thought you were a man. I guess maybe I was wrong."

His eyes showed his anger. He didn't hesitate a second, draining the glass before I could take a deep breath. He choked, blinked several times and quickly poured another drink. He should have been flat on his back, but his eyes weren't even glazed. His guts must have been made out of steel.

"Your turn," he said, handing me the glass.

I threw up my hands as a signal of surrender. "No—no," I stammered. "I quit! I'm sick, where's your bathroom?"

He led me through his studio to another door. Once alone, I tried a knob on the other side of a brightly-tiled sunken bathtub. It led me into a large, high-ceilinged room with charcoal colored walls. In the center hung black mesh curtains partially concealing an elevated slab of blue slate rock.

Hel came through a door on the other side of the room.

"Take off your clothes," he said. "You're not sick."

"That's what you think," I answered. "And I don't want to pose, thank you."

"You haven't any choice," he threatened. "Take off your clothes!"

"How long ago did you pose in that movie with Helena Collier?"

"What movie?"



"Must bring in a lot of change from pornographic-minded home movie owners!"

"You must be an alcoholic," he said, advancing toward me. "You talk like one."

"Was she blackmailing you, too, Hel? Did she accuse you of being the father of her unborn child?"

He stopped dead in his tracks. "Just who are you anyway?"

"A friend," I said tightly. "A friend to just about anybody, but you. I don't think you've got any friends. You're rotten. Rotten clean through. Why'd you kill her, Hel? Because she was going to expose you? Because she couldn't stand your sickening filthy racket any longer?"

"Get out of here!"

"Sure," I said drunkenly, "I'll be glad to oblige—*after* I see your darkroom."

His lips pulled back over crooked yellow teeth and a hollow laugh escaped through the ugly opening. "I thought so. You're just a cheap drunk like all the rest of them. Helena was like you. Bitchy and fiery and mean. But she still wanted it. She wanted it in the worst way. Sure, I'll be glad to show you my darkroom. I got a bed in there just big enough for the two of us."

He came after me fast, but I got the door partially closed before his hand clamped over my arm. He groaned as I sank my teeth into him, still he wouldn't let loose. His other fist came out of nowhere against the side of my head, spinning me across the bathroom. He got the door open and leaped for me. That was his one mistake. I drew my leg back and the heel of my shoe caught him squarely in the stomach evoking a screaming howl that didn't stop until his head struck the edge of the sunken tub. For a long moment, he

didn't move or utter a sound. Then he rolled over, without using either his arms or legs, as if he were tied up in a burlap bag. He tried to get to his knees, lost all sense of balance and toppled over in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the sunken tub.

Half-stunned from Hel's savage blow to my head, I staggered through the studio, stumbling around furniture, falling once and barely managing to make the darkroom. Several metal hangers of negatives hung inside a rubber tank and were being washed in the sink. I grasped one of the wet four by five sheets and held it up to the green safe light. The image of a naked woman on a diving board glinted into view. Another negative revealed a group of costumed figures chaining a dummy to two awesomely tall pillars. I reached for a third, but never got it. Hel Gandy stood in the doorway, a stream of blood slanting down his forehead.

"What are you doing?" he growled. "I ought to kill you."

This time there was no way out. He pinned me against the sink and tore my sweater all the way down to my waist. His beady red eyes gaped down at me.

"You—you don't wear a brassiere," he said. "My God, you're beautiful."

I caught his stomach flush with my fist; a driving low blow that doubled him over.

I was halfway across his studio when he yelled. And the bullet squashed into the steel catwalk over my head.

## SIX

HEL GANDY aimed a German Luger at the gaping hole in my sweater. His gun hand trembled and blood still streamed down from a cut on his forehead.

"You don't scare me," he whispered. "You don't scare me one bit. What were you looking for in my darkroom?"

"A self portrait of a murderer," I said, staring at the muzzle of the gun. "You like to take pictures of yourself, don't you, Hel? Is that how you really get your kicks? Admiring yourself after a conquest? Where's your file on murder?"

"You—you think I killed Helena?"

"You're getting the idea."

His finger tightened on the trigger. "Why, I ought to—"

"—add me to the list," I finished. "Not this trip. Too many people know where I am. Put down the gun."

He wavered for an instant, then raised the barrel to my eyes. "Get out of here! Get out of here while you still got a chance! I never killed nobody, but I'm liable to right now!"

Another bullet bounced off the metal platform where Hel's overhead lights were rigged. I backed

toward the door. He began to tremble again as sweat ran down his cheeks.

"Sure," he whispered, I knew Helena was pregnant. But I didn't get her that way, even if she said I did." He lurched toward me slowly. "You're right on another count. She *was* blackmailing me. Not for the reason you think. She was bleeding me for every rotten cent she could get and I'm glad she's dead."

He wiped some blood from his forehead and sneered. "Find me the murderer and I'll pin a medal on him, do you understand? Now get out of here before I tear the rest of your clothes off and—"

"Why was she blackmailing you, Hel? What'd you ever do wrong—besides running this crummy racket—that you wanted to keep a secret?"

His eyes deepened into two fiery bits of black glitter. "Look!" he spat. "I ain't no queer, understand. I don't care what anybody ever says about me, but that's one thing I'm not and never will be. And nobody's ever going to accuse me of that! Nobody!"

"Why did she call you a queer?" I demanded. "What'd she have on you, Hel?"

"Nothing! Get out of here! I'm warning you for the last time!"

I could see his finger tighten on the trigger. I backed out the door into the hall, grasped my purse and ran up the path to Reed's car. The night air felt bitterly cold through the hole in my sweater. Pinkish-blue goose pimples began popping out all over and, under the dashboard light, I noticed a deep scratch across one bosom. Now, how was I going to explain all this to Reed Walker?

I wrapped a car blanket around my shoulders and

drove straight to Reed's place. He met me on the front steps.

"What happened to your promise of an hour?" he said. "You've been gone nearly three."

"I'm sorry, but I was held up. And that's no joke."

We went into the living room where flames licked over a eucalyptus log in the fireplace. I bent down to warm myself.

"What's with the blanket?" he asked.

"Hel Gandy got a little rough in the clinches. My sweater's torn."

"That dirty so and so." Reed touched a corner of the blanket. "Maybe we can mend the tear. Let's see the damage."

I caught his hand. "There's nothing to see! I—I mean—"

"Well, *what do you mean?*"

"Just take my word for it. I'm going to have to go back to the Collier place and get some other clothes. The tear is pretty severe."

He hunched down beside me and grinned. "I've got something in the closet that might fit you. My sister left a sweater behind the last time she visited me."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"You don't know a lot of things about me." He went into the bedroom. "She's about your size. Real big bosom." His voice continued above the sound of drawers being yanked open. "She's a bachelor girl. Like you. Nice kid. She tells me all her secrets and I tell her most of mine."

Bits of glitter, reflected by a lamp, suddenly caught my eye. I crawled over and discovered lots of gold sequins scattered on the carpet near the coffee table. I shrugged my shoulders and returned to the fire-

place before the realization hit me. Incredulous, I looked toward the bedroom.

"Reed?"

"Yes, Honey." His voice still carried over the sound of his movements.

"Didn't someone tell me Helena wore a bathing suit as her costume for the party?"

"That's right. Not a very novel idea, but the suit did emphasize Helena's best features. She was well-stacked in the upper story."

"I wonder what happened to that suit. The police couldn't find it anywhere."

"Probably got washed away by the tide while she was swimming in the nude."

I examined some of the sequins. "What did the bathing suit look like, Reed?"

"A real hot number," Reed shouted back. "Must have been specially designed for her. Slashed all the way down to the waist. I'll never be able to figure out how she stayed in the damned thing. Of course, when you come right down to it, she didn't stay in the suit, did she?"

"No," I murmured, then louder, "what color was it?"

"White." Then he added, "With little gold sequins running all over. A sensational outfit with her long black hair. Hurray! I found the sweater."

Before he reached the living room, I scooped up a few of the shiny gold discs and crouched by the fire again. He tossed me a fluffy grey cashmere sweater and grinned. "Go ahead, try it on."

I turned my back toward him, lowered the blanket and slipped into the cardigan sweater. Before I had a chance to close the first button, his arms moved around me from behind.

"Honey," he said, in a half-whisper. "You're not wearing a bra! Am I seeing things?"

I whirled around, my palm open revealing the gold sequins. "I don't know, Reed. Am I?"

He stared at the bits of glitter for a long moment, then slowly his arms came loose from around my waist. "Where'd you find those?"

"On the floor near that table."

Reed made a gesture of futility and sat down. "I should have known you'd find out somehow. Okay, if you must know the truth, I've got the bathing suit."

"And just how did you get possession of such an interesting item?"

"After the police left last night, I circled around the house and went down into one of the vaults through a side entrance. I found her suit shoved under one of the mattresses. The material was torn over the left breast."

"Why?"

"Those tin wings. I pinned them on Helena not long after your arrival at the party. The murderer apparently ripped them off her suit."

"And it's your contention that he planted them in the mummy case with the body, right?"

Reed nodded. "Your lie actually put both of us in a helluva spot. If the police'd found her suit first we would have wound up behind bars before you could have batted an eyelash."

"If I hadn't lied you would have been there anyway. Alone. Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

He got to his feet and moved toward me. His body was lean and quick, almost cat-like. Reed was the human version of one of his jet planes; sleek, well-balanced and extremely powerful. He grasped me in his arms. "Honey, you're beautiful."

"You're the second person to say that to me today. Be careful, I'm liable to get a complex."

"You? Hardly." He kissed the tip of my nose. "Why did you lie for me, Honey?"

I took a deep breath and suddenly realized I'd forgotten all about the buttons. "I—I like you, Reed. You know that's the reason. Now, let's get out of here."

Our lips touched lightly. Rain began to caress the windows in the same manner. His hand reached down to my sweater.

"Reed, I told you—"

"I'm only going to button the sweater. You'll catch cold."

"Reed, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

His hand didn't keep its promise. I tried to pull back, but couldn't. Suddenly he knew I was a big girl in more ways than one and his fingers trembled from the realization.

The telephone rang. Then again.

"You'd better answer, Reed."

"Tomorrow."

The bell rang again, grating insistently.

"Reed, it might be important."

"No." His fingers slipped under the top of my skirt and touched my stomach.

I broke loose and picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Who's this? Honey? Is that you? What the hell are you doing there?"

"Mark, I—"

"Don't tell me you're investigating the Collier case," he said angrily, "because you don't know which end is up. But I'm sure your boy friend does."

I glanced at Reed. "What are you talking about?"

"Fawn Collier that's *who* I'm talking about—and



your handsome Marine? They were seen together about two hours ago at the Booby Hatch—a local bar down here on the beach. They had an argument. A big one. And then walked out. Rote Collier just called me. Fawn was supposed to have been home more than an hour ago, but she hasn't shown. Now what gives? If she turns up dead, Honey, you're going to be dead, too, believe me."

My hand tightened on the receiver. I stared down at the glittering gold sequins scattered on the carpet. Reed followed my line of sight and his face tightened.

"I'll call you back."

"No you won't!" Mark said. "I got a feeling something's going to happen, if it hasn't already. I don't want you involved, do you understand?"

"You're a nice guy."

"You're damned right I am," he said in that gruff tone that never really hid his warm interior. "And besides that I'm charming. Now get out of there and leave Buck Rogers to me. It's just possible he's polished off Fawn Collier. You might be next."

"All right," I said faintly, trying to close the conversation without making Reed suspicious. "I'll take care of the situation."

I hung up and buttoned the sweater. Reed studied each movement carefully.

"What was that?" he asked finally.

"I've got an appointment, Reed. I told you that long ago."

"I know, but you didn't leave. What's changed your mind?"

"Nothing."

"You're lying to me, Honey, and I don't like people who lie when it isn't necessary."

I started for the front door. He blocked my path.

"Please, get out of my way, Reed."

"No! I told you not to answer that phone. We were doing fine until that thing rang."

"Were we?"

"I thought so. You were so warm and receptive. A telephone call can't make that much difference. Please, don't go!"

"Is that what you said to Fawn Collier two hours ago?"

"I guessed as much!" His fists tightened. "Why do women always do this to me? Why do they always have to make me mad?"

## SEVEN

"So WOMEN make you mad, do they, Reed?"

"You're damned right!" He tossed a new log on the fire and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fawn Collier called me after you left for Hel's studio. She asked me to meet her at the Booby Hatch. I said no, but she said it concerned you and was very important, so I went. What she told me really made me blow my stack."

"Go on."

He hesitated, then continued, "Fawn accused you of making time with her father. She said you were planning to take up where Helena left off. She even claimed she caught you two in an intimate situation last night."

"How intimate?"

"You know what I mean."

"That isn't true, Reed. He tried to kiss me, that's all."

"I guessed as much." His face reddened. "Well, I damned near knocked her out of her chair. Accused her of having a filthy imagination, a father complex, a split personality, sex problems, men problems, money problems—"

"What then?"

Reed smacked a fist into his palm. "She threatened to expose your lie about the wings to the police."

She said you were nothing but a high-class pro working every angle you could manage. She threatened to stop you from moving in on her father, even if it meant sending you to jail."

I shook my head. "How'd she know about the wings?"

"She saw me pin them on Helena." Reed walked to the fireplace and stared into the flames. "I told her she'd never be able to prove Helena had those wings and, furthermore, she was all wrong about you. She said the pictures Hel took at the party would verify her point about the wings. So, I dropped my bomb and blew her higher than a kite!"

"What bomb was that?"

"I told her you were a private detective."

"Reed, you shouldn't have done that!"

"Yes—I know. I was so mad the whole business just slipped out before I realized what I'd said. I wanted to tear her apart I was so burned up."

"That was Lieutenant Storm on the phone. Fawn's disappeared."

"Well, don't look at me," Reed said. "I don't know where she is. She got into her car and drove away—alone."

I studied Reed's tense face and saw more than a little apprehension. Reed Walker just didn't add up. His story about Helena's bathing suit sounded phoney. The bit about the tin wings didn't jibe and, to top it all off, he had obviously lied to avoid any further questions about the scattered sequins. He was definitely hiding something, but what? I hoped it wasn't murder.

I thanked him for the loan of his car and the sweater and walked downtown. Light rain fell softly and felt cool on my flushed cheeks.

Things had quieted considerably on the Pleasure Pier. A few neon lights still burned, but they were faint and hardly recognizable in the dark mist. Wolf

Larson's concession was locked tighter than a drum. So was the Muldrup Building. One of Dr. Erik Ford's keys solved that problem. His office was on the second floor toward the rear. It was spacious, modern and had a strong antiseptic odor.

I went after the file cabinet in the outer office. The folders were monotonously dull, stuffed with lengthy descriptions and prescribed treatment for every kind of ailment down to the South African wrist itch. In a bottom drawer I found a medical history on Helena Collier which covered two years. Besides numerous penicillin shots for virus infections, she had been treated for a broken arm, severe sunburn, an earache and had received minor surgery for a growth on her left breast. Nothing was mentioned about a kidney ailment. Her recent visits, dating back three months prior to her death, were listed as "minor checkups." These increased in frequency from once a week to every other day during the week preceding New Year's Eve. It was possible she'd developed kidney trouble during this period and her visits for this ailment had been listed in such a manner, but I seriously doubted it.

Erik Ford's private office was handsomely furnished, indicating prestige, wealth and honor. His polished mahogany walls were lined with plaques naming him such things as Doctor of the Year, Great Humanitarian and Distinguished Medical Scholar.

His desk drawers provided no further data on Helena Collier. They did yield further proof of his feats in the field of medicine, including a citation from a New York Hospital lauding him on a brain operation performed successfully in the face of impossible odds. The patient had been the five-year-old son of poor immigrants. Erik had refused to accept a penny for his twelve long grueling hours at the operating table. Instead, he had provided the youth with an annuity for his future college education.

After reading that citation, I didn't feel like going any farther in my search. This man was obviously a great healer. Why should I investigate him for murder? The bottom drawer of Erik's desk was locked. I fingered the ring of keys indecisively. Five men had figured prominently in Helena's last years of life: Rote Collier, Helmet Gandy, Wolf Larson, Reed Walker and Erik Ford. Which one of them had hated her enough to commit murder? I knew I had to find the answer to that question no matter how low I stooped.

I inserted the correct key into the lock and opened the drawer. My relief at discovering a stack of medical books was short-lived. Underneath was a brown folder stained with fingermarks. I flipped open the cover. Inside were at least a dozen newspaper clippings concerning the murder of two prominent Shark Beach women. At the bottom of the pile was a slip of paper with the scrawled words: Dr. J. Smith, WEBster-9-34855, Helena.

The operator got the number for me immediately. It rang five times before a small, hesitant man's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Dr. Smith?"

"No, I'm sorry, I'm afraid you have the wrong—"

I pressed dire intensity into my voice. "Please, wait! I know your real name isn't Smith, but that doesn't matter, does it? I'm in trouble—terrible trouble—and you've got to help me, please!"

There was a long empty silence through which his deep nervous breathing penetrated like bursts of machine-gun fire. Finally he asked vaguely, "Smith? Where did you get that name?"

"I'm going to have a baby," I whispered tightly. "Don't you understand? I can't have another child. I'll die if I do."

"You may die if you don't," he said. "Do you realize what you're asking?"

"Yes, yes! But I'm two and a half months pregnant. I know it's dangerous, but I'll take my chances. If my husband ever found out—"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't perform such operations. It's against the law."

"I know that. I've got money!" I pleaded. "I'll pay you a thousand dollars, only, please, please, help me!"

"I—"

"I'll sign papers! I'll do anything! Oh, please say you'll perform the operation on me!"

The silence was longer this time. The breathing deeper and more constricted. Finally, "Who's calling, please?"

"Mrs.—Mrs. Arnold Kenilworth."

The name sounded like it might belong to a prominent society woman. I counted on his thinking he'd read it somewhere in the newspapers.

"What's your telephone number, Mrs. Kenilworth? I'll call you back in a few minutes."

I hadn't counted on that.

"No! No, wait, I can't!" My voice lowered into a frightened whisper. "My husband's downstairs. He'll answer the phone. I—I can't take the chance."

"Did—did you say a thousand dollars?"

"Yes, yes. I'll pay before the operation. Oh, please!"

The silence became unbearable this time. I even wondered if he was having my number checked.

Then, "I can't guarantee anything, Mrs. Kenilworth."

"I know that. Will you perform the operation?"

"I'll call you tomorrow when your husband is not at home. What is your number?"

"Dr. Smith, I must have an answer now! *Will you perform the operation?*"

His answer was still evasive, not legally incriminating, but satisfactory as far as I was concerned.

"I believe you can count on me, Mrs. Kenilworth."

"Thank you," I sighed relievedly. "I'll call you tomorrow and make an appointment."

"But, I thought—"

"Good-bye, Dr. Smith."

I hung up and stared at the file of newspaper clippings spread out on Erik's desk. My eyes moved to the citation. One of the neatly typed lines sprang up boldly:

*No man has ever done more for the cause of good in the history of the world. For what more can any man do, but to save a life.*

I read it over again slowly. Then I looked again at the newspaper clippings and at the tiny sheet of paper which contained the fictitious name and telephone number of an abortionist. But the thing I really saw was ten times more frightening. A huge shadow twisted across the desk. The shadow of a man standing in the doorway.



## EIGHT

DOCTOR ERIK FORD was dripping wet from the rain, his coppery red hair glittered in the light reflected from the outer office.

"You sneaking little thief! You stole my keys. I'm going to call the police." He started for the phone.

"Good idea," I said. "And while they're here you can show them your newspaper file. What happened? Haven't you had a chance to add Helena's clips to the group yet?"

He stopped abruptly and stared at the material spread out on his desk. Apparently he hadn't noticed the clippings before.

"You—you've been in my bottom drawer," he stammered. "You had no right to do that."

"And I had no right to call Dr. J. Smith either, Erik, but I did."

His face turned bone white. He staggered for an instant and then caught the edge of his desk. "You—you couldn't have—"

"I made an appointment for an abortion, Erik. He said he thought he could fit me in."

"But, why? Helena's dead. You can't— You had nothing to gain—"

"Except a murderer, Erik. I'm not a lawyer, I'm a private detective hired by Rote Collier."

He fell back into a chair in the corner and his

shoulders trembled. A plaque hung over his head. Great Humanitarian. Now I remembered two other folders filed under his list of clients in the office cabinet. They had belonged to the two other prominent women recently murdered in Shark Beach. Lorraine Reynolds and Joan Lacey.

"I've been reading your citation, Erik, for that brain operation you performed on a five-year-old boy. I almost cried."

"Stop it!"

"What are you, Erik, the modern Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?"

He shook violently, hands crushed over his eyes. They still couldn't hold back the wetness that trickled down his cheeks. "You—you don't understand."

"What don't I understand, Erik? That you knew Helena was pregnant and was arranging for an abortion? That you were the father? That she wouldn't consent to the operation? That she was blackmailing you and threatening to ruin your magnificent career? That the two other murdered women were also former clients of yours?"

"It's all true," he broke. "It's all true. I—I admit it. But I didn't kill them. I didn't kill Helena."

I glanced at the newspaper clippings and got to my feet. "Erik, you don't sound very convincing."

"I don't care," he groaned. "I tried to arrange an illegal operation for Helena. I admit my guilt on that charge."

"And what about these newspaper clippings? A man just doesn't save and hide this sort of thing for fun."

"They *were* clients of mine," he admitted, still unable to look at me. "If—if you must know the truth they were more than clients. I was in love with—with both Lorraine Reynolds and Joan Lacey. I was in love with Helena—once. You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Yes—in a way," I said quietly. "Tell me something, Erik. Have you ever been married?"

"Don't! Don't, please!"

"You want me to call the police, Erik? Believe me, they won't be so easy with their questions."

"No, Honey, listen—" He stopped and glanced at me. His face was twisted almost beyond belief. "I—I'll answer anything, but don't—"

I surveyed the wall plaques again. "All right, Erik."

"I've been married. Once. A long time ago. She was a student nurse."

"What happened to her?"

He couldn't answer. His lips moved, but nothing came out. Then, he managed, "She died."

"What was the cause?"

It was hardly audible. "Negligence. I—I was the doctor. I killed her. I didn't mean to, but I didn't know—"

"What didn't you know, Erik?"

Tears streamed down from his nostrils and he tried to wipe them away with the back of his hand. "I didn't know enough about childbirth. I was only nineteen. She was going to have a baby. She—she had a placenta previa. We lived out in the middle of the desert. A hundred miles away from the nearest doctor. I tried to save her, but I couldn't. They both died."

I opened a humidor on the desk and placed a cigarette in his mouth. "What has that got to do with Helena—or these two other women?"

"You asked the question," he murmured, drawing hard on the flame I held up. "Now I'm forty-one. I spent seven years in medical schools trying to learn why she had to die. And I still don't know. I still don't know why anyone has to die. Or why anyone has to kill. It—it doesn't make sense to me."

"Are you trying to say that's why you've kept these newspaper clippings?"

"Yes." The word was an interminable whisper.

I shook my head, pushing back a few wet curls from my forehead. "How much was Helena blackmailing you for?"

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"How do you know you were the father?"

His face sagged again. "I—I don't, but it didn't make any difference. I'd been to bed with her. She even had a movie to prove the fact."

I froze in my tracks. "What kind of a movie?"

He almost choked on the words they were so bitter. "Oh, you know the type. She must have had a camera rigged in the closet."

"Erik, did this episode take place in Hel Gandy's bedroom?"

"No, no, of course not," he managed. "At her house. Rote was gone for the week. He still has big holdings in several motion picture companies. I—I never should have done it, I know, but—"

"You actually saw the film?"

"A print," he said angrily. "The original she kept safely tucked away where nobody could find it."

"Did you ever try to get the original or that print?"

"Yes, once." He gripped the arms of his chair. "I couldn't stand it any longer. I knew I had to do something—had to find that film. Rote was in L.A. overnight. I went to her house. I reasoned with her, pleaded, but she laughed. She laughed in my face. So I started looking. I tore that house apart from one end to the other." He shook his head. "But, it wasn't there. Or, at least, I couldn't find it."

"What did you do then?"

"She—she was standing at the top of those steps. You know the ones that lead down to the swimming pool. She laughed at me again. Something snapped inside my head and I hit her. She fell almost all the way to the bottom. I—I thought she was dead when I reached her, but she'd only broken her arm."

"Erik, you had every motive in the world to kill Helena."

"I know. Perhaps, subconsciously, I was trying to murder her that night when— Believe me, Honey, I didn't try again last night."

"Last night was more than a try, Erik."

"I—I know. I had a feeling she was going to die. That's why I wanted to get out of there. I've never done a wrong thing in my life, Honey. Except, possibly to love. I've always loved too much. I can't seem to stop myself."

"You really were in love with Helena?"

"Once—yes. But, I swear to you I didn't kill her. Killing—just isn't my business."

My eyes fell on the note on Erik's desk. "You tried to arrange an abortion for her. Why?"

"To save Rote. To save me. To save anyone who might have been caught in Helena's deadly web."

"Why did you say you thought Hel Gandy killed her?"

"If it hadn't been for Hel Gandy she never would have died—not that way. Did you know Hel was secretly photographing Lorraine and Joan in the nude before they were murdered?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, he was. Their husbands—a couple of immature Marine officers like Reed Walker—were in the dark, I'm sure. If they'd known they probably would have strung him up on the nearest tree."

"They didn't know about you?"

"No."

"You think your association with them was any different?"

"I wasn't trying to expose them on film for a bunch of pornographic magazines."

"What were you trying to do, Erik?"

"I—I told you I was in love with them!" he nearly shouted. "I couldn't help myself. Every attractive

woman I meet looks like Marie—talks like Marie—even you, Honey. It's some kind of horrible fixation that I just can't seem to escape."

"And I can't seem to escape the fact, Erik, that you fit the murderer's shoes exactly. You were in love with three women. And now they're all dead. It almost couldn't be a coincidence."

He got to his feet shakily. "I'm glad you said, 'almost'. Please, give me a chance to prove I'm innocent."

"How?"

"I—I don't know. When I was a little boy and my mother was about to whip me for something I didn't do, I used to say, 'The executioner always hangs himself first.'"

"You must have been a pretty grown up boy to spout that sort of philosophy."

"I was. Uncomfortably so. I lived with my mother—alone. My father left us when I was ten. She was always afraid I would emerge in his image."

"And have you?"

Erik seemed lost in a grave reflection. "Funny, isn't it? You think you grow up. You get a few more lines and lose a little hair, but things never really change, do they? You still wake up facing the same realities, asking the same questions, hearing the same answers."

I flipped the file closed on his desk and rubbed my forehead. "Okay, what's the answer to this one? Why didn't you pay her the blackmail? You seem to have enough money."

"I may appear wealthy," he said. "That's the mistake Helena made. Do you want to see something?"

"Yeah," I said softly, "anything but a gun."

"I don't own a gun," he said, crossing to his desk. "You've been through my drawers. You didn't find one, did you?"

"No."

"See this?"

He handed me a letter which I'd overlooked. It read:

My dear Erik:

It is beyond human bounds to thank you enough for your interest in our research foundation. Your check for \$20,000 (twenty thousand dollars), which has just been received, will help save hundreds and thousands of lives. This is a fantastic amount of money considering your previous gifts. There are tears of gratitude in my eyes. Of course, there have been tears in my eyes for many, many years.

Best always,  
F.

"Who's 'F', Erik?"

"My father," the doctor said. "He's been the head of a cancer research foundation for the past twenty years. We never see each other. I always receive a letter *after* I've sent in a contribution. That's been the extent of our association. Funny, isn't it."

"No!" I said, circling his desk angrily. "There's something wrong with you, Erik. You know it and I know it. Now what goes?"

"He left us, Honey," Erik continued, not hearing my words. "Thirty-two years ago. He left my mother and me—flat. Now he's trying to make up for his mistake. Okay, so I contribute. Every time I get a few spare dollars I contribute. Why? Not because of all the poor suffering people, but because I feel sorry for him and because I hate his guts!"

"I suppose that's how you felt about that five-year-old boy when you operated on him?"

Erik Ford's eyes deepened into two infinitesimal pools of despair. "No—no, I loved that boy. He was almost like a son. He didn't ask for anything and I didn't give him anything more than he deserved."

"Do you ever correspond with him?"

His face furrowed perceptibly. "No. He writes to me—often. I don't know why he does. I didn't really help him at all. He would have been all right."

"That isn't how this citation reads."

"Well, he would have been!" Erik growled. "People don't need doctors. They can take care of themselves! Ninety-five per cent of my patients are a bunch of hypochondriacs. They don't have a thing wrong with them!"

"Like Helena?"

"Yes. I told you she had a kidney infection. She didn't. All she had was an ache—a basic elementary ache that bothers about thirty million American women daily. I treated Helena. What a mistake that was."

"Erik, you're sounding more like a murderer every second."

"All right," he said, sliding into a chair. "What are you going to do?"

"I've got a basic ache, too," I said, "but, at the moment, it's not the kind you've described. Mine's curiosity. Come on, let's go!"

"Where?"

"Helmet Gandy's studio. I want to take another look at some of his negatives."

Rain and darkness obliterated the reproduction of the Eiffel Tower as we stumbled down the polished path to Hel's front door. Erik held my arm and his heels clattered on the wet cement.

I knocked several times and then tried the knob. The door swung open revealing a picture frame twisted and broken on the entryway floor. Bits of glass were ground into the carpet where someone had crushed them through the photograph in an effort to blot out a nude figure.

Erik picked up the remains of the picture and



glanced at the blank space on the wall where it had once hung.

"Helena," he said. "Hel took the photo about four years ago. The wind must have broken the wire on the back of the frame and sent the whole works crashing."

I examined the remains of Helena's picture. A piece of glass had gashed a hole in her stomach. "And I suppose the wind jumped on this afterwards with two big muddy feet just to confuse us into thinking Kilroy was here." The entry was tracked with crusty red clay impressions left from a pair of flat-soled shoes.

"Hel must have stepped on the picture accidentally—" Erik started.

"Hel my foot," I said. "Look at this place!"

The office door stood ajar. File drawers and photographs were strewn from one end of the floor to the other. I dashed for the darkroom, dodging around overturned flood lamps and scenery that created a shadowed frightening jungle of Hel's once immaculately-arranged studio. The faint green bulb still burned over the darkroom sink. I searched for the negatives, but found only an empty rubber developing tank and a few wire hangers mashed into the wooden-slatted floor.

Erik stood framed in the door. "What a mess. I wonder if Hel knows about this?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"He isn't here."

"How do you know?" I demanded. "Did you call for him?"

"Well, no, but—"

"How do you know he isn't in the bedroom or outside someplace?"

"I don't. I just imagined—"

"You imagined what, Erik? He wasn't here when you came after the negatives, so it's fairly easy to

imagine he wouldn't be here when you came back. Is that it?"

"You—you think I did this?"

"What do you think, Erik?"

"How could I, Honey?" he argued. "Even if I'd wanted to—and God knows for what reason—how would I have gotten here? You had all my keys."

"You have a second set, Erik. Your car was parked out in front of the Muldrup Building when we came out of your office. It wasn't there when I went in."

The doctor shook his head. "You're crazy. You just didn't notice. I parked there this afternoon before I met you at the Gay Blade."

"I'm afraid not, Erik. Let me tell you how I think it was. You discovered your original set of keys were missing when you got home. Fortunately, for me, you'd walked downtown. The possibility that I'd lifted the keys from your pocket didn't cross your mind. You were too concerned with what I'd told you about Hel Gandy taking pictures at the party. You wondered if it was possible he'd taken a shot of you and Helena in—shall we say—an unflattering pose. One that might have given the police the *wrong* idea. Finally, you couldn't stand it any longer. You dialed Hel's number, but there was no answer. So, you drove up here. It was raining and dark. A perfect opportunity. You tore the place apart, found the negatives and left—destroying Helena's picture on your way out. Then, it suddenly struck you what had happened to your keys."

"No, Honey, you're way off, believe me."

"I don't think so, Erik. Let me look at the soles of your shoes."

Erik's face flushed as bright as his coppery hair and he swallowed hard. "No. I told you I didn't do this. Now let's get out of here."

"You have metal clips on your heels," I said. "I heard them clatter outside on the walk. You should

be more careful, Erik, when you break into someone's house. You left some magnificent footprints in that entryway, indicating a metal clip in each impression. Now, what do you say?"

Erik's pale eyes pinched down. "All right," he said. "All right, I *was* here. You guessed right to a certain point. I did worry about Hel's pictures after you mentioned them. Helena was unusually nice to me last night. I thought maybe she had changed her mind about a law suit. We—we wound up down in one of the vaults—early—while Hel was wandering around shooting some of his filthy pictures. She was being so nice—until I realized she hadn't changed. Not one bit! And I—I got mad. Almost as mad as the night I pushed her down the staircase. Then something popped like a flashbulb. I don't know if it really was a flashbulb or just my own brain bursting from anger. I remembered that incident when I got home today after talking to you. I realized any such picture in the hands of the police would make me a prime suspect for Helena's murder. So, I called Hel Gandy. You're wrong on that count. Somebody did answer."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Hel probably. There was a dead silence on the other end and then he hung up. Probably had one of his pictorial prostitutes all lined up for a shot. I was only going to ask him if I could see the negatives."

"Go on."

"I was furious when he hung up on me like that. Certainly I'd planned to destroy any damaging pictures if there were any, but the darkroom was cleaned out just as it is now. Same state of upheaval all over the house. I must have stepped into a mud puddle and tracked that red clay into the hall without realizing."

I leaned an elbow on the sink and examined his

face as a mother might investigate her tiny son's dirt-smudged features after he'd promised to stay clean for church. "You're an amateur, Erik. That's obvious. Some amateurs can be awfully smart. I don't know what to think about you."

"What do you mean, Honey?"

"I didn't see any identifying marks in those footprints out in the entryway. I said that just to trick you into an admission."

"You're very clever."

"Yeah," I groaned miserably. "So clever I can't even begin to explain how you might have placed Helena's body in the mummy case and still mingled with guests at the swimming pool all at the same time. That case was empty ten minutes before you called up to Wolf Larson and me on Rote's spiral staircase. To have achieved that feat you would have needed Mandrake the Magician or a—a jet plane."

He tried to smile. "And there were neither in the vicinity. Honey, I'm glad you've finally added two and two together."

"Have I, Erik? I was never much good at arithmetic." I walked past him into the studio. "Who would have had more reason to tear this place apart, than you?"

"Ask Hel Gandy," he said, still standing in the faintly-lighted doorway, his coppery hair all a-bristle, his hands, so deft and gentle over an operating table, now clenched into big hard knots. "I told you Hel Gandy was the one who murdered Helena. He framed this whole business just to throw suspicion on someone else. You ask Hel Gandy."

Something splattered against my cheek. I wiped it away and my fingers felt sticky from the thick substance. I looked up at the dark metal platform which supported Hel's overhead floods.

"Turn on the lights, Erik."

"I—I don't know where the switch is, Honey."

I lifted one of the fallen light standards, pointed it toward the platform and flicked the button. A bright yellow beam lunged up toward the ceiling.

There was no sense asking Hel Gandy anything. He was slumped over the platform railing and beads of crimson ran down into his wide, sightless eyes from a hole in the center of his forehead.

## NINE

DOCTOR ERIK FORD peered up at Hel's dead body like a man peering at a ten-ton piano plummeting at him from the top story of the Empire State building. He tried to put his warning into words and the warped fragments of his fear barely escaped his trembling lips.

Hel Gandy's lantern jaw twisted around on its thick neck and his eyes seemed to roll with the motion of his body. He tipped forward on the platform railing, hung there for a long instant, arms pinioned back like a puppet with his strings all tangled. When he fell, arms flailing limply, he missed Erik by inches, plunging head-first into a mass of jumbled scenery.

I don't know who screamed the loudest. Erik's throaty cry was like a big bird's bewildered squall as a hunter's bullet pierces its chest. He staggered back, gaping at the tangled remains of Hel Gandy and at my blood-smearred cheek and hand. He whirled and ran for the door, but never quite made it. Mark Storm, grasping Hel's Luger in a handkerchief, blocked Erik's way.

"I wondered how long he was going to hang there like that, didn't you?" Mark snapped handcuffs on Erik's trembling wrists. Then he held up a folder

filled with newspaper clippings. "You left your morgue file behind, Doc. That's all right, though, when you take up residence in San Quentin's death row you can subscribe to a clipping service." Mark jerked the ashen-faced surgeon toward the door. "Come on, Doc, we don't want to keep the gas chamber waiting."

I argued with Mark until almost midnight about Erik Ford's arrest, but the deputy wouldn't budge an inch toward turning the key on the doctor's cell. He just kept drumming a pencil on his desk and staring at the distant lights of the new hospital where Hel Gandy lay quietly dead in an air-conditioned morgue.

"It's physically impossible, Mark," I repeated for about the fifteenth time.

He grinned suddenly. "You mean sex between two porcupines? That I agree."

"You know exactly what I mean!" I blurted angrily. "Erik couldn't have murdered Helena. He didn't have enough time to put her body in that mummy case!"

Mark nodded. "Okay. Okay. He did have time to put a bullet in Hel Gandy and his lips on the mouths of those two other dames. Now, why don't you go home?"

"Why would he shoot Hel Gandy if he hadn't murdered Helena? There's no logical reason."

The detective lunged to his feet, seizing me by the shoulders. "There's no logical reason for you hanging around this town either, but you do, don't you? All right, you lied your Marine friend out of being arrested last night, but you're not going to pull the same gag twice in a row."

"Why, Mark Storm, I actually think you're jealous."

"Well, what if I am?" he said, swinging his gaze back to the hospital lights. "Now get out of here. And put on a brassiere! You can see right through that damned sweater!"

"I—I'm sorry," I stammered. "I forgot to bring any bras along on the trip and all the stores were closed today. What can a girl do under those circumstances?"

"Wear a raccoon coat!"

Fawn Collier entered Mark's office, winked at me and tossed a paper on his desk. "Is that what you wanted, Lieutenant?"

"Yes," he said, examining the paper. "In complaints of this sort we need a fairly comprehensive statement from the missing person. Your father's had this department in quite an uproar."

"I'll bet," Fawn said, tucking back some of her dark curls. "I've told Father over and over again not to worry about me, but he doesn't seem to understand that I've grown up. Silly sending half the sheriff's office after me when you've got so many other important things to do." She wet her lips with her tongue and smiled. "Gee, can't a girl take a moonlight walk on the beach alone without creating a national emergency?"

Mark scanned her slim figure which was partially hidden in an expensive-looking orange silk sack dress. "There was no moon, Miss Collier. It was dark and it was raining. We're after a vicious killer and you're not helping one damned bit by pulling a barren-beach-Garbo like you did tonight."

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Okay." Mark got to his feet. "Would you mind giving Miss West a lift since you're both heading for the same destination?"



"Not at all," Fawn purred graciously. "I'd be glad to."

I flashed Mark a perturbed look and started for the door.

"Oh, and Miss Collier," Mark added, "would you do me another big favor?"

"Why, of course, Lieutenant."

"Loan Miss West one of your brassieres, will you?"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind," he grunted, forcing back a snicker. "Wouldn't fit anyway. Just go home and get some sleep. Both of you. And don't stop anywhere on the way. Fog's starting to roll in."

We got as far as the Booby Hatch when a billowing white wall forced us off the highway and isolated Fawn's convertible in its misty wet grip.

Fawn switched off the ignition and shook her head. "Now what do we do? Father will probably have federal troops with bayonets looking for me. I know. Let's have a drink. Maybe the fog'll lift in a few minutes."

We climbed from Fawn's car, stumbling over a shrouded curb. Even the bright neon tubes spelling out BOOBY HATCH could barely be seen as we groped along shop fronts. On one side of the big sign was the word BAR and on the other the last two letters were transposed to spell out BRA.

"What's the gag," I asked, pointing up at the transposition. "If I didn't know better I'd suspect Lieutenant Mark Storm worked with the local sign company."

"No gag," Fawn said. "That's just Jules Cadillac's way of promoting a 24-hour-a-day gold mine. From eight until five this place is the most fabulous bra shop you ever dreamed existed. By five-thirty the display

cases are neatly converted into tables and a sixty-foot bar. White mannikins are stripped of their lacy underthings and glisten under faint lights like gorgeous pieces of nude statuary just shipped in from the Louvre Museum. It's absolutely fabulous."

Fawn was so right. The interior of Jules Cadillac's Booby Hatch was a quaint blend of ultra-modern and bizarre. In the corner of the massive, smoky room were the remains of an old schooner's bow with a naked, fish-tailed sea nymph fastened to the hull. She was noticeably a shade lighter around her bosom where a brassiere had kept out the sun and dust during her daytime shift.

We found a table and ordered two martinis. Fawn sipped her drink for a moment and then said, "I owe you an apology, Honey. I've been a real bitch and I'm sorry."

"Reed Walker told you why I'm here in Shark Beach, didn't he?"

"Yes." She placed her hand on mine. "I had you pegged for a gold digger. Another Helena. How stupid can one person get?"

"You know about Hel Gandy?"

"Yes, that, too. Word got around pretty fast at the sheriff's office. I can't believe that Erik would—"

"I don't think he did. At least, not to Helena. Tell me something honestly, Fawn. Were you in the projection booth this morning?"

"No—no, of course not." She wet her lips nervously. "What would I have been doing there?"

"How do you know what projection booth I'm talking about?" I asked suspiciously.

"Well, I don't, but I assume you're referring to the one at home. Father was a motion picture director, you

know. I've been exposed to a home projection booth all my life."

"I thought Rote said you lived with your mother up until five years ago."

"That's right. But I used to visit him a lot during the summers. What's this all about anyway?"

"Do you know your father has a lewd movie film with Helena as the principal subject?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever seen it?"

Fawn took a quick sip of her drink and said, "No, I haven't. Father usually keeps the film under lock and key."

"Do you happen to know where it comes from? Who shot the reel?"

"I believe Hel Gandy made the film several years ago. About the time I came to live with father. What difference does it make?"

"As far as I'm concerned this case'll never be closed until I see that film in its entirety."

Fawn leaned forward intently. "Have you seen part of the reel?"

"Up to a point," I said. "A very crucial point. Do you think—if your father hasn't burned the film—you could help me find where it's hidden?"

"Of course. We'd have to break into a wall safe. I don't really believe that's possible." Her green eyes flashed suddenly. "Father would be furious if we were successful."

"So what? You two certainly weren't on the best of terms this morning."

Fawn regarded me for a moment. "You sound as if you might suspect my father. I don't understand. Aren't you working for him?"

"Of course," I said. "He hired me to keep you alive

and that's exactly what I'm trying to do. One way or another."

A faint smile sliced into her overly-painted mouth. "I didn't know. Now isn't that crazy? He never told me. Is that really why you're here?"

I nodded. "Why did you call Reed Walker early this evening?"

She drew an imaginary R on the table with her fingernail. "I wanted to see him. I was worried about him and wanted to be sure he was all right."

"What made you think he wasn't?"

"The police last night. They were going to arrest him until you lied about those wings. Why did you do that?"

"Just a hunch," I said. "Now I'm not so sure about our handsomely-naïve Marine Captain."

Fawn lighted a cigarette and pushed the pack toward me. "He's a prince, Honey, believe me. Even if we did have a terrible argument this evening."

"Is that why you took your stroll on the beach?"

"Yes. Reed doesn't go for me. I don't know why. He was almost like a maniac this evening while I was accusing you of— I'm sorry. He had every right to get angry. You're in love with him, aren't you, Honey?"

"No."

"You're lying. You ought to see your face when his name is mentioned. Have you gone all the way with him yet?"

I sipped my drink, ignoring the question.

"You must have!" Fawn exclaimed delightedly. "Reed likes women with big breasts. Like Helena. He was crazy about her. I saw them together one time."

"When?" I demanded.

"Not too long ago," she said, eyes glazing in retrospect. "Father had gone to Los Angeles. They thought

I went with him. Helena took Reed into her room and made love to him! It was sickening!"

"How long ago was this?"

"Two months. Maybe longer. Helena was vicious. She'd resort to almost anything in the book for a thrill."

I tried to make my next question as casual as possible. "Did she ever approach you, Fawn?"

"What do you mean?" It sounded disturbed and contorted.

I probed the wound quickly. "Did she like you? Did she ever make a play for you?"

Fawn's heavily made-up eyes narrowed. "Are you kidding? She hated my guts. And the feeling was mutual. She played my father for a sucker for years. I tried to tell him over and over again. He wouldn't believe me. I am glad she's dead, Honey. She was the most wicked woman I've ever known."

"And Hel Gandy?"

"The cruelest man. They both deserved to die. So did those two other women. All four of them were living miserable, treacherous lives. I only hope they bring up that fact at Erik's trial."

"I don't think he'll ever go to trial, Fawn."

"I hope not."

"Has Erik ever treated you for anything?"

"No. I guess this balmy Shark Beach climate really agrees with me. I've been unbelievably healthy for the past five years. He's an excellent doctor, though. Won numerous awards."

"So I noticed at his office. I also discovered Helena was pregnant. Did you know that?"

"No!" Fawn said eagerly. "Was she really? I should have guessed as much."

"Who do you imagine was the father? Rote?"

"Hardly. He's been sterile for ten years. The result of an accident. That's one of the reasons why Helena liked my father—besides his money."

"Who do you think was the father?"

"Reed perhaps. He was the only one I ever saw with her. I know there *were* others. Erik for instance. Helena had a horrible case of nymphomania."

"What about Wolf Larson and Helena?"

"I don't know. He has a bed in his Bathysphere. He took me down alone one time."

"What happened?"

"Let's not talk about the dirty— All I can say is he's crude. Terribly crude. Let's leave him at that."

"Okay," I said. "We'd better be getting home. Your father's going to have the National Guard after us for sure."

Fawn grinned. She had a nice smile. "If the fog hasn't lifted, what do you say we curl up in the car and the hell with everybody? No sense endangering our necks just to satisfy a whim of my father's."

We walked outside. The mist had cleared enough to see the other side of the street, but it still lay heavy over the lamp posts and the hills behind Shark Beach. The seats were wet when we climbed into Fawn's white convertible. She shook her head and put up the top.

"I should have known better," she said, starting up the engine. "This weather's murder on the upholstery."

Fawn swung the car around in a wide U-turn and headed toward the south end of town.

"Making a U-turn on the coast highway in this kind of soup is murderous, too," I said. "We might have been hit broadside."

She nodded. "I don't know what's the matter with me. I just didn't think."

Fog began to pile up on the windshield, erasing everything but the faint double line down the center of the road. Fawn didn't slow her speed a bit.

"What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

I glanced at my watch under the glow of the speedometer. "One thirty-five a.m. Much later than you think, Fawn," I said, kiddingly. "Hadn't you better let up on that accelerator?"

"Sure," she murmured, relaxing her grip on the wheel. "I guess I should admit the truth, Honey. Something you said's been bothering me."

"What's that?"

"You said Father hired you to protect my life. Do you really believe anyone would want to murder me?"

"That's your father's feeling."

"What's yours?"

"Anything's possible. Three women have been murdered in a town with a population of six thousand. Those are pretty good odds. Why do you ask?"

"Because I felt like I was being followed tonight on the beach. I didn't tell the police or Lieutenant Storm. There was no positive proof. Just a feeling I had. A little while ago, before we went into the Booby Hatch, I got that same feeling!"

"How about right now?"

Fawn peered into the rear view mirror. "I don't know. This fog's so pea thick I can't see through the window. I do have a strange sick sensation in my stomach. Like maybe something is going to happen. That's why I was going so fast. Honey, you don't believe—"

"Steady," I said, lifting the .32 from my purse. "Let's not take any chances. I still don't see Erik Ford as a murderer. Let's pull over to the side, Fawn!"

She glanced down at my gun and her eyes widened

with terror. "No—no, I'm afraid! Really afraid, Honey! I've never felt like this before. It's horrible!"

Fawn jammed down the accelerator. The needle leaped toward seventy.

"You're going to pass the turn-in," I said. "Slow down!"

"I—I can't! You're right, he is after me. He does want to kill me!"

"Who, Fawn, who?"

"Reed! He would have finished me this afternoon, but there were too many people. And this evening on the beach—I ran! I ran, Honey. I ran until I thought I'd drop! Until I reached that police car!"

Angry tires, whirling under the convertible's frame, clawed at wet pavement as we skidded around a slight curve.

"Listen to me, Fawn! Get a hold of yourself! Slow down or we'll both be killed!"

"All right! All right, Honey! But, please protect me! Please, save me from him!"

She braked suddenly and jerked the wheel into a sharp left turn. We screeched across the highway, striking a dark embankment at a severely sharp angle and slid off in a searing, metal-bending roar that carried us up a small rise before Fawn could brake us to a full stop. She was thrown over the steering wheel, while I landed in a crumpled, skirt-over-my-head heap on the floor.

I located my revolver and got up fast. Fog was piled thicker than ever on the windows and the car's engine throbbed achingly.

"Are you all right?" I asked, bending over Fawn's slumped shoulders as I drew her back from the steering wheel. She had a crimson slash in the corner of



her mouth where she'd apparently struck the push-button controls in the center of the driving shaft.

"Yes—yes, I think so." She lifted her head and groaned. "What in the world happened?"

"I don't know exactly," I said, still clutching my revolver. "We hit something. I'd better check the damage."

She stopped me before I could climb from the car. "No, wait a minute! Don't leave me! I know he's outside somewhere! Please, don't leave me!"

"Fawn," I said, trying to quiet her hysteria, "you just made one of the sharpest turns in automotive history. Nobody could have followed us. Not even Henry Ford."

"Don't make jokes, please!"

"I wasn't trying to." A roar pierced the foggy night. "What's that?"

"I—I don't know—" Fawn whispered. She flipped open the door on her side and lunged into the night.

"Wait you crazy fool!" I yelled.

The roar increased in fury, ripping the night in three shrill wailing shrieks. I clamped down on my door handle and stepped out into the fog. Then I heard another sound.

*ding ding ding*

A crossing bell!

The train's brilliantly-ominous eye pierced out of the fog and caught me flush in the face.

I was too terrified to move.

## TEN

THE TRAIN curved out of the mist, its steel plates gnashing ruthlessly into the narrow space between me and death. My nervous system erupted like an H-bomb as I tried to move from the tracks. The glistening monster bellowed at the top of its metallic lungs, looming off my shoulder, veering toward my body with such a violent roar that it splintered my eardrums and scattered the embers into a hideous, boiling cauldron of sound.

Mark's resonant voice, as if squeezed through a narrow tube, reached me first and forced me to open my eyes to his face, which was circled by a bright field of lights beyond.

"Honey, can you hear me?" he said, his voice a distant echo from an impossibly deep well. "She must be able to hear me. Her eyes are open. Honey, say something, please!"

What do you want me to say? I thought dazedly.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," another voice said in that same aggravating whisper. "She doesn't respond. Her nervous system seems paralyzed from the severe shock of the accident."

"But she wasn't hit by the train," Mark argued. "You

said you were absolutely certain of that when we found her in this gully an hour ago."

"Yes, I know. But do you have any idea, Lieutenant, what you'd do if you looked up to find a train coming at you at thirty or forty miles per hour?"

"I'd probably jump clean out of my skin," Mark said.

"And that's apparently what Miss West tried to do. She jumped. The train missed her, but she was still standing on those tracks. At least, that's what her brain thought. The impact of that image, hinged with the terrible sound of the train striking the automobile, probably stopped her nervous system like a clock."

You're kidding, I thought. You must be kidding! I can hear you! I can see you! My nervous system is all right. Here, I'll show you!

I tried to move my lips, but nothing happened. The words, formed on the blackboard of my mind, just hung there.

"Somebody bring another blanket!" Mark yelled angrily at a rim of faces that glittered weirdly in the fog-dimmed lights.

Now I could hear other sounds. The wet slap of tires as they rolled along the distant highway, the shudder of a diesel engine warming up, the creak of chains and wheels and the noisy voices of the men who ran them.

Another figure moved into the gully. He was short and his pinkish forehead was beaded with moisture. I realized it was Rote. He handed a blanket to Mark.

"Is she any better?" Rote asked.

"Can't tell yet."

"Don't you think she ought to be moved?"

"No!"

Mark! I yelled soundlessly. Look at me! I'll wink at

you! I know I can do that. That should be easy. You watch!

The big detective stared at me. I pushed every ounce of available energy into my right cheek muscle. His expression didn't change.

"How's your daughter doing, Mr. Collier?" Mark asked. "Has she explained what happened yet?"

Rote gestured dismally. "Confusion created by the fog, I guess. They made a wrong turn and stopped on the tracks. You know the rest."

"Funny neither one of them heard the warning bell."

I heard it, Mark, I protested wordlessly. Why can't you hear me? Didn't Fawn say she thought we were being followed?

The doctor bent nearer. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"Her right cheek. I think it moved."

Mark pressed his hand to my face. "I—I don't feel anything."

His fingers were freezing cold and wet. The shock ran the length of my body and, before I knew what was happening, my teeth sank into his flesh.

"Ow!" Mark yelped. "Honey, you're all right!"

My mouth relaxed, releasing his finger. "I—I think so," I announced, glad to hear the sound of my own voice again. "Help me up."

"You had a close call, Honey, you'd better—"

I stumbled to my feet. "How long have I been here in this gully?"

"Almost two hours. They're pulling the wreckage loose from the engine now. How come you didn't hear the warning signal?"

"Car engine was idling too loud," I said. "Windows were rolled up. Where's Fawn?"

Mark gestured toward the top of the bank. "She's

all right. Been bawling ever since we arrived. She thinks you're dead."

Rote and Mark assisted me up a soft, muddy slope to the railroad crossing. Police and sheriffs' cars were parked in all directions. An ambulance waited near the highway.

"You take Fawn in your car, Mr. Collier," Mark said. "I'm going to run Honey by the hospital for a check-up and then—"

"I'm all right, Mark," I insisted.

"Okay, if you say so. We'll follow you, Mr. Collier."

Rote nodded. He walked toward the front of the train where a massive crane worked in the spectral light of arc lamps, clearing the remains of Fawn's expensive convertible. Mark helped me into his car.

While we waited for Rote and Fawn, Mark said, "I'd appreciate the complete story, Honey. Fawn hasn't been able to put two words together."

"We were being followed," I explained. "At least, that's what Fawn imagined. She got excited and swerved off the highway."

Mark scratched his forehead. "That's funny."

"What do you mean?"

"Rote Collier was actually the first person on the scene."

"Well, that explains everything," I said. "Rote became worried when the fog rolled in. He went out searching for Fawn, spotted her car and followed us to the railroad crossing."

"Yeah," Mark said. "You're probably right." He took my revolver from his coat pocket and tossed it into my lap. "Your purse was found in the wreckage, but this wasn't inside."

"I know. Fawn got excited and started babbling about Reed Walker trying to kill her. I had the gun

in my hand when I got out of the car. Where'd you find it?"

"In the gully. That isn't where you dropped it, though."

I shrugged. "I suppose the gun crawled down from the road."

"Nope. According to one of the conductors aboard the train, Rote Collier picked up your revolver near the crossing only a few minutes after the collision and then tossed it into the gully."

"That is *funny*," I mused.

"Yeah, but the funniest part of this bit comes in between the picking up and the tossing. The conductor claims that Fawn was thrown into a ditch on the other side of the road. She must have landed on her head and was unconscious for a few minutes. Anyway, long enough for Rote to aim your gun directly at her."

"You're not serious, Mark?"

"The conductor swears by his statement. He claims Rote probably would have pulled the trigger if it hadn't been for a car turning off from the highway."

"That's ridiculous! Rote idolizes that girl."

Mark nodded. "That's what I thought, too, Honey. I'll tell you something else maybe you don't know."

"What's that?"

"Fawn Collier isn't really Rote's daughter!"

Mark explained his startling allegation as we followed Collier's black Cadillac through the thinning fog. "Erik Ford tipped me off. He said Fawn sort of sprang out of nowhere about four years ago."

"Of course. She'd been living with her mother."

"Rote's first wife has been dead for over ten years. That, I personally verified. Also, we haven't been able

to locate a birth registration for a Fawn Collier either in New York State or California."

"She could have been born in any one of forty-six other states, or Canada."

"On the form we had her fill out she listed place-of-birth as New York City. On the missing persons report Rote Collier wrote Glendale, California. Now, one of them's lying. Why?"

"That's idiotic," I murmured. "Especially that business with the gun."

"All right, how idiotic does this theory sound?" Mark demanded. "Fawn arrives in Shark Beach, a frivolous young nineteen-year-old seeking a rich millionaire. She meets Rote Collier who's over fifty and loaded. He moves her in with him and to prevent any embarrassment they assume the daughter-come-home-to-father situation. This continues until Rote meets Helena. Then, tired of an older man, Fawn urges him into marriage, still clinging to her daughter role for obvious financial reasons."

"Sounds too fantastic, Mark."

"Sure, until you fit this into the theory. Helena discovers the truth about Fawn and threatens to expose Rote, so he kills her. He's forced to shoot Hel Gandy because of an incriminating photograph. Then he realizes Fawn may catch on, so—"

"And what about the two other kissing murders? How do you fit those into your theory?"

Mark frowned. "I don't know. Rote might have decided to capitalize on them for his crime. That old geezer, Butler—even dead—still isn't in the clear for the first two murders."

"Not a very clear deduction, Mr. Watson, especially in the light of Rote hiring me to prevent anything from happening to either Fawn or Helena."

"Don't you see, Honey, you were Collier's ace-in-the-hole to throw off any possible element of suspicion. And, too, he didn't know, any more than we did, who the kissing killer really was."

"Maybe," I said. "Still too many loose ends. One very important one which I'm sure you haven't considered."

"What's that?"

"Fawn Collier looks enough like her old man to be his twin."

Dawn was folding purple streaks into the hills above Shark Beach when we arrived at the Collier mansion. Rote made some coffee while Fawn and I showered, changed our clothes and freshened our makeup.

She met me on the stairs on the way down to join Rote and Mark. "Honey," Fawn said, "I can't tell you how sorry I am about what happened at the railroad crossing. It was a terrible blunder on my part." She was wearing a white satin tunic over tight red velvet trousers.

"Nothing serious resulted," I said, "except the loss of an expensive automobile. Hope you'll still help me find that movie film."

"I will. I promise."

We found Rote and Mark in the kitchen bent over half empty cups and looking at baby pictures. They were obviously of Fawn. There was no doubt of that fact.

"This one was taken when Fawn was three," Rote said, holding up a faded, hand-colored print of a raven-haired, green-eyed child in a pale green dress. "Fawn was always very photogenic. Her mother was constantly having pictures taken."

"Oh, Father, will you please stop. I'm sure the



lieutenant has more important things to do than look at old pictures of me."

Rote took another photo from his album. His face sagged slightly and he started to replace the picture when Mark grabbed the glossy print from him.

"That's my son, Frank," the ex-director said sadly. "I guess you know he was—killed in Korea."

Mark nodded. The photo revealed a handsome, pink-cheeked boy in his early teens astride a white palomino. He wore a dark polo uniform and a jaunty helmet was pushed back triumphantly on his young head.

"He always loved polo before he went into the service," Rote said, grimacing. "The day that picture was taken he and his team had won an important match with—" Tears sprang into Rote's eyes. He pulled the picture from Mark's hands, clumsily pushed it into the album and stood up. "Well, anyway, you asked about my family in their younger days, Lieutenant. Now you've seen them and, if you don't mind, I'd like to be excused. I'm very tired. It's been a long night."

"Of course, Mr. Collier." Mark glanced at me, a chagrined expression on his face. "I guess we could all use some sleep."

Rote nodded, wiped his eyes and strode from the room, his chin raised as high as possible, the album clutched tightly under his arm.

Fawn went to the stove and picked up the coffee pot. "Father's such a sentimentalist," she said, refilling Mark's cup. "He's never quite got over losing Frank."

Mark stirred in some sugar, then asked, "Has he demonstrated as much remorse over the loss of Helena?"

I shook my head angrily. "Mark, that isn't nice!"

Fawn took two more cups from the cabinet and

smiled thinly. "That's all right, Honey. The lieutenant has a job to perform. It isn't easy—for anybody."

"I'll tell you the truth, Miss Collier," Mark continued, "an hour ago I didn't believe you were his daughter."

Fawn nearly dropped the cups. "You—you're joking!"

"No, I'm not. A couple of things happened before and after your accident which created a reasonable doubt—at least in my mind. That's why I asked your father to show me those photographs."

"What—what happened, Lieutenant?"

"Well, for one thing you and your father gave different states as the location of your birth. And for another—"

"Mark," I interrupted, "you're not going to place any real importance on a conductor's opinion based on a view from the inside of a train following a collision. That's insane!"

Fawn drew up a chair and sat down. "Just what are you trying to get at anyway?"

Mark scowled. "All right, Miss Collier, where were you born? Neither New York State nor California has any record of your birth."

"Is that it?" Fawn laughed. "Father's missing person's report. In his anxiety he must have given you Frank's place of birth, Glendale. And as far as my report is concerned, I was born on a train enroute to New York. I've never known for sure how they listed it on my birth certificate, but I've always assumed, since my first stop was in a New York hospital, that Gotham was it. Does that satisfy you?"

Mark's chagrined expression deepened. "Yes, I guess so."

"Now what was this other business about *after* the accident?" Fawn asked.

"Well," Mark stammered, "one of the conductors on the train saw something which he thought was rather odd. But I guess maybe he was a little cock-eyed at the time."

"What did he see?"

"Nothing important."

"It sounded important the way Miss West came back at you," Fawn said. "I'd like to know, even if it was an error."

"Well," Mark stammered again, "as Honey says, it's rather inconclusive and quite improbable, so let's just forget it, okay?"

Fawn nodded half-heartedly. Then she said, "If you're talking about father picking up Miss West's gun, that's nothing important because I saw him."

"You—" Mark faltered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't had a chance. Anyway, as I said, it wasn't important. He didn't actually aim the gun at me if that's what you think."

"That's what he thought all right," I said. "The conductor claims he saw Rote through a train window."

Fawn poured the coffee, her hand trembling enough to spill some of the hot liquid. "He should have had the view I had. For a minute I wondered myself. But then he tossed the gun away."

"Why, Miss Collier?" Mark demanded. "Why should your father pick up a gun and then throw the weapon down again? It just doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it, Lieutenant?" Fawn said. "Have you ever been in a position to pick up a strange gun and then suddenly realize the implications and suspicions that go along with such an act? No. Of course, *you*

haven't because you're the law. On the other side of the fence it's a shaky proposition."

"I guess so," Mark said. "Let's just say I was barking up the wrong tree. I apologize for my suspicions."

Fawn smiled. "Lieutenant, let me say one more thing. My father is not a murderer. He may be guilty of many wrongs, but not murder. I'm afraid Miss West heard a very bitter conversation New Year's morning. At that time, I angrily accused my father of wanting to kill me and of doing away with Helena. Believe me, this was merely a spoiled child's way of demonstrating wrath. I'm sorry for what I said."

Mark got up from the table and squashed his hat on his head. "I hate to admit this, but you make sense, Miss Collier. And in a case of this type, believe me, it's genuinely refreshing. Good night."

After Mark was gone, we sipped our coffee in silence. The sea battered distantly against the rocks and the sky lightened to a tawny gray streaked with crimson.

Finally Fawn looked at me. "You know something, Honey," she said, "Lieutenant Storm was right."

"Right about what?"

"Father really did aim your gun at me. If that car hadn't come up the road when it did I'd be dead now. Deader than a doornail."

## ELEVEN

I TOOK a long swallow of coffee and felt fire all the way down. "Fawn, you couldn't mean that?"

"Couldn't I? Do you think I enjoy accusing my own father? He hates me, Honey. He hates me with a vengeance because I wrecked his marriage."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it? You don't know how I resented Helena. How I tried to upset her in every way possible. How do you think you'd feel having a stepmother younger than yourself?"

"I don't know. That's still no reason for your father to aim at you—"

"That's where you're wrong. He worshipped the ground she walked on. I wouldn't even be surprised if he suspected I killed her."

"You? Fawn, that's impossible."

"Is it? I hated her enough, believe me. Father knows I would have liked to have killed her if I'd had the chance. He's convicted me for my thoughts if nothing more."

"I still don't see—"

"Then maybe this will clarify it. I was the one who took those movies of Helena in Hel's bedroom."

"You—?" I stammered. "Then you lied before."

"Yes. You wanted to know who the man was with her? Wolf Larson."

"Are you sure, Fawn?"

"I held the camera, I ought to be sure. Hel loaned Wolf his house. He knew about Wolf's plans with Helena and tipped me off. I hid in the closet. The details of the get-together, as you might imagine, are rather gruesome."

"Wolf Larson, of course. I wondered where I'd seen that broad sun-tanned back before."

"What?"

"Nothing. Fawn, do you know much about Wolf Larson? What he does in his spare time? Where he goes?"

"Sure. I already told you. He's exactly the way he looks and acts. A crude, rough, egotistical beach-comber. He operates a diving bell down on the pier and spends most of his time there. In fact, I believe he lives on the damned thing."

"You said before you thought Reed made Helena pregnant. Do you still agree with that theory?"

"I don't know," Fawn said thoughtfully. "I took pictures of her and Wolf together. And I imagine there were dozens of similar situations with other men I might have filmed—given the opportunity."

"Why did you shoot that particular sequence?"

"To teach my father a lesson. And to ruin Helena. But the whole deal boomeranged on me."

"How?"

"Father added the film to his collection of pornography featuring Helena. I think he almost thought of it as a triumph."

"Then why should he want to harm you?"

"Don't you see, Honey? Having that film was a shot in the arm to father's dwindling virility. Realizing I

was the one who filmed the sequence sort of spoiled his fun. He highly resented the idea. Almost to the point of—of insanity.”

“Do you think he’s insane, Fawn?”

“He’s my father. Of course, I can’t allow myself to think that.” She paused, then added, “He’s always been a very peculiar man. I hate to say this, Honey, but more than a little effeminate, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I noticed. Still that doesn’t seem to change his feeling toward women.”

“Nor toward men,” Fawn said. “I’ve always been somewhat suspicious of his association with Hel Gandy.”

“In what respect?”

“I can’t tell you exactly. It’s only something a—a daughter might feel—or sense. A feeling of great—comradeship.”

I sipped at my coffee again. “That is odd when you consider Hel Gandy was the man who led Helena astray to begin with. Hel did tell me he couldn’t stand being called a ‘queer’.”

“Naturally,” Fawn said. “Because *they* can’t live with that word. But he was one of *them*. A very twisted sort. Do you know why he photographed nude women? Why he got them into horrible pornographic situations? To ruin them! He hated women. His only pleasure in life was to smash them, to show up their weaknesses. He liked men. That’s why he let Wolf Larson use his house that weekend. That’s why he told me of the meeting and even loaned me the camera. He hoped to crush Helena, especially since she’d married my father. I think he hoped to show him what she was like once and for all. Father liked Hel Gandy. I think

even more than he cares for me. That's why I'm sure he didn't murder Hel Gandy."

"But, Fawn, you said—"

"That he nearly pulled the trigger on me? Yes, I know. But he didn't. And, I don't believe he ever will now. He had that brief opportunity we probably all have once in a lifetime—to murder someone we love in a blinding fit of rage. He had his one chance and he failed. I don't believe the same opportunity will ever present itself again in his lifetime. Nor, do I think he'll ever have the same desire. Once you reach that ultimate goal—gun in hand—sight aimed—you realize—afterwards—what a horrible moment it was. I don't believe Father will ever feel that way again."

I got up and peered out the window at the new day that was carving its image on the gray horizon. "You don't believe he killed Helena?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"You said you knew the two other women who were murdered. What were they like?"

"Social climbers. Snobs. Lorraine Reynolds was constantly inviting me to her home for afternoon cocktails. She was a beautiful woman with more body than brains. Joan Lacey was a bleached-out little blonde who couldn't resist booze and beach bums—the strong boys with muscles and volley ball fever."

"Do you know if they ever posed for Hel Gandy—in their birthday suits?"

"No. I wouldn't be surprised, though. He tried to get them all, especially those with a little prestige, too much vanity and money. They were a real conquest."

"Did you ever pose for him, Fawn?"

The way she answered gave me the feeling she was lying. Her "No!" was too positive, too resentful, too filled with anger.



We finished our coffee and went to bed. I didn't sleep too well, though. I dreamt about Wolf Larson and his Bathysphere. The fish that swam by the tiny portholes kept puckering up. Wolf Larson called them kissing fish. Then a mermaid swam by. She looked like Helena with full red lips curled back passionately. The tip of her tongue protruded slightly between her teeth. Suddenly her mouth exploded into a billion pieces. And Wolf Larson stood at the top of a watery staircase laughing his fool head off.

I didn't wake up until after three in the afternoon. Every muscle in my body ached from my tumble into the gully and my head was still sore from Hel's punch.

The castle was deathly quiet. I listened. Only a consistent crash of breakers cut the ugly silence. I grabbed a blue cardigan and matching skirt and stiffly dressed.

Then I checked Fawn's room. She was snuggled peacefully under a silken quilt. Her breathing was as regular as the quaint French clock on her dresser. Rote's room was a mess. His album of pictures was scattered wrathfully across the floor and he lay slumped in a chair, a pile of old newspaper clippings at his feet. His breathing was harsh, distorted and uneven. Most important it was loud. The newspaper clippings told a heroic story of a handful of American men in Korea who fought in a war nobody cared about. An article from a local newspaper mentioned one of these heroes—Private Frank J. Collier.

I didn't arrive at the Pleasure Pier until almost five o'clock. Wolf Larson was already in the front booth tallying his day's take. It seemed extremely lean.

I nudged against the window and grinned like a little

girl embarrassed by the size of the world. "Gee," I said sadly, "I guess it's too late to see all those beautiful fish."

He didn't waste two seconds vaulting out of his glass chamber. "Honey! Honey, am I glad to see you!" He wrapped two big arms around me and his grip was at its usual rib-cracking best. "I've been thinking about you all day."

"Why?" I asked, trying to untangle my diaphragm.

"I read about you in the newspaper. You were almost creamed by a train. You and Fawn Collier. How do you like that?"

"I don't. And I'm talking about your strength, Wolf. You should farm yourself out as a machine. You'd work wonders in a nut cracking factory."

He stepped back and grinned. "Oh, Honey, you'd make me mad if I didn't know you were kidding. Listen, you've got a body that just screams to be hugged."

"Yeah," I said. "Polar bears go crazy over me. How's business in your part of the world?"

Wolf glanced at his diving bell, still glistening from a recent dip in the blue Pacific. "Not bad, not good. You know how the winters are in this neck of the woods. People starve with more humility than a Christmas goose in the middle of July. Come aboard."

He led me out onto a steel shelf which supported the Bathysphere on three curved I-beams. A heavy water-tight door was swung open revealing the inner chamber of the ball-shaped undersea elevator.

"Works on a newly-developed principle for undersea operations," Wolf said proudly, "called static compression. She travels up and down on that steel rod in the middle."

I stepped inside. "It's much larger than I imagined."

"Biggest in the world. Weighs seventy-eight tons. Carries thirty passengers. I even live aboard her. Some people call her Larson's Lair." He laughed, showing his white fangs. "Other beach bums on the pier have their own name for it. Wolf's Wombat. Only they pronounce it like zoom. Get it?"

"Vaguely," I said, with a sarcastic note in my voice. "The bell-bottom trousered bachelor's boudoir. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yeah," Wolf said. "I knew you'd come up with something better."

He drew the watertight door closed and whirled the wheel lock. "Well, now, let's have a look-see," he said, turning around and planting his eyes on the roundness inside my sweater.

"Down, Rover!"

"Down, that's what I'm talking about. Don't you want to take a dip? It's on the house."

"Didn't I see you in the *Hound of the Baskervilles*?"

"Quit kidding, Honey."

He strode to a panel of wheels and switches and turned on an overhead light. A motor began to hum under the floor. The Bathysphere trembled. I looked out one of the portholes. Greenish bubbles swirled up over the glass thrashing quickly into a thick inky blue. Air hissed down through a narrow vent in the ceiling as the chamber continued to descend.

Wolf finally turned another wheel and said, "This is it. Main floor. Starfish, sharks, seashells and shucks."

"Shucks?"

"Yeah," he said, moving toward me. "Shucks, you're beautiful, Honey. You've got more cleavage than the Suez Canal."

I shook my head, unable to force back a grin.

"Thanks, pal, and here I always imagined myself in the Panama class."

"You're in a class all by yourself."

"Oh, I bet you say that to all your canals."

"Stop joking. I'm serious."

"As serious as you were with Helena?"

He flinched noticeably. "Why do you always have to bring her into the conversation?"

"She's dead, Wolf."

"I know she's dead. So's Hel Gandy. So what?"

"New Year's Eve you said you'd just left her in a pool of kisses, remember?"

"That was a bad joke."

"It sure was," I said, "on Helena."

"Okay. Tell it to Erik Ford. He's the one who killed her."

"What makes you think so?"

"The police arrested him, didn't they?"

"That doesn't mean he's guilty."

Wolf bared his fangs angrily. "What does it mean? I suppose he's been chosen treasurer of the Policeman's Ball."

I crossed to the bed Fawn had described. "Ever bring Helena in here?"

"Will you stop that kind of talk!"

"Or were these quarters too cramped for your scale of operations?"

"I never had a thing to do with Helena—not that way—and that's the truth."

"I saw a film yesterday morning which makes you about as truthful as George Washington before he cut down the cherry tree."

Wolf snarled, "George Washington was always truthful. Now you're making me mad. I don't like smart dames making with smart talk that adds up to zero."

"This adds up to Hel Gandy's bedroom. Ever been there?"

"I wouldn't be caught dead in the stinking place. Mesh curtains, bare black mattress. That stuff's for the fairies."

"You looked perfectly normal in this picture."

"What picture?" Wolf demanded, clenching his fists.

"Fawn Collier shot the reel from Hel's bedroom closet. You and Helena were on the bed together and you weren't playing charades."

"What were we playing, parchese?"

"You tell me."

"I'll tell you nothing," Wolf snarled. "I know you're a private eye. It's all over town."

"News travels fast."

"In Shark Beach news doesn't travel. It's shot out of guns like puffed wheat and filled with just about as much air. Like the stuff you're firing at me."

"I saw the film, Wolf. This didn't come via Battle Creek, Michigan."

"You saw my face?"

"Not exactly."

"How do you know it was me?"

"A few other things were showing."

"Yeah, I'll bet," Wolf said. "Helena was a very curious doll."

"Then you admit it was you?"

"Hell, no, it wasn't me. Did Fawn say so?"

"Yes."

"Well, she's a liar. I always thought so. Now I'm convinced."

"Take off your shirt, Wolf."

His forehead ridged deeply and his eyes brightened. "Now you're beginning to make sense, Honey. Your

type always goes for me. I knew that was just a lot of talk New Year's Eve."

"Take off your shirt and turn around."

"What?"

"I want to see your back."

"My back? Say, what kind of a nut are you?"

"That's one of the parts of you I saw in the film."

"I can show you others," he said.

"No doubt!"

"The odds are with you."

"The odds are never with me. Take off your shirt!"

"I'll be damned if I will. You take off your sweater."

"That wouldn't be fair," I said, reclining on the bed.

"I'm not wearing a bra."

"Me neither. So we're even. You take off your sweater and I'll take off my shirt."

"You drive a pretty hard bargain, Mr. Larson."

"I'm known for that. Is it a deal?"

"I don't trust you," I said.

"And I don't trust you. So we're still even. But, I'll tell you what I'll do with you. I'll take off my shirt if you just unbutton your sweater."

"Still no bargain, Wolf."

"We're twenty feet below the surface, Honey. You haven't got much bargaining power when you analyze it. Now, have you?"

"I guess not."

"All right. Start unbuttoning."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Nope, I'm just appealing to your better judgment."

"What if I asked you to take this thing to the surface and let me out right now?"

Wolf grinned wolfishly. "I'd say I can't. The mechanism is busted and we're stranded here. It happens, you know. The police would have to believe me because I

could foul things up pretty easily. Anyway, you still want to see my back."

"Not that badly."

"All right, so you unbutton. I still couldn't see anything, right?"

"I'm not Little Lord Fauntleroy."

"You can say that again. I guess something's got to give. That's what I'm gambling on."

"You flatter me, Wolf," I said, still grinning inside at his naïve, schoolboy tactics. "You could be disappointed."

"That deep groove is at least a promise. I'll still stand pat."

"Do you think my seeing your back is that important?"

"It seems like it. This is fun. Now don't spoil it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, every doll I bring down here can't seem to get her clothes off fast enough. This is a refreshing change."

"I'll bet."

Wolf laughed. "The pari-mutual windows are still open. Put your money where your mouth is."

"All right," I said, throwing up my hands. "But, don't expect anything. This doesn't work like a jack-in-the-box, you know."

"I can dream, can't I?"

He said it in such a way that I couldn't help laughing. Suddenly I wasn't afraid of this big burly guy any more. He seemed real now. Real and terribly human. He was a man, a rather attractive man, with the same compulsions and boyish cravings that were born in the male animal. Somehow it was impossible to get angry at his earthy remarks. They were too logical and, in a way, somewhat flattering. I pulled open the first

button. Maybe he was the man in the movie wrapped in pornographic wrath with Helena Collier. Before long I'd know for certain. Until then I was still a female. And, truthfully, the gambling spirit behind our little game created a funny warmth down the middle of my spine. He sensed he wasn't going to see everything, but he still wanted me to unbutton those buttons. That sort of challenge was about as human as human could get. And I knew for sure, it was ten times more exhilarating than Hel Gandy's savage exposure of my upper anatomy.

"I'll go you one better," Wolf said. "I'll dim the lights."

"That's not necessary, Mr. Larson. I'm the one who needs clear vision, not you."

"Are you kidding?"

I opened the second button and things began to give a little. In fact, more than a little. His eyes widened a notch. My hand tried to stem the tide.

"I—I'm waiting," he said expectantly.

"So am I. Maybe this isn't such a good bargain. Let's look at the fish instead."

"I'm sick to death of fish. Honey, you're really a nice gal. It's obvious. Real obvious. And it's nice. I—I mean," his tongue got all tied up, "I don't mean what you think I mean, but I mean every word. How mixed up can you get?"

"I think I know what you *mean*, Wolf." I grinned, then sobered. "You were a prize fighter once, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I took one too many punches and then decided to quit and go into this business. You don't make much money, but who cares?"

"You were a heavyweight, naturally!"

"Yeah. I might have gone all the way if I'd stuck



with the dirty rotten business. There were just too many shysters telling me what to do."

"You don't like taking orders, do you, Wolf?"

"Who does? Maybe a nincompoop. There are plenty of those in the fight racket. They look like they're tough, but they're just a bunch of panty-waists. I began to feel like Hannibal."

"Who?"

"Hannibal. You know the old story. Hannibal was the strong guy with the elephants. People said he could never conquer Rome. He knew that was bunk. He could have done it with one finger, but the challenge was too easy. So, he decided to forget about Rome and go someplace else. That was the way I felt. I was the white man scheduled to lower the boom on the dark supremacy of the heavyweight crown."

"Hannibal was a Nubian," I said, "from a dark race. He was supposed to conquer the white."

"Yeah, I know. The story's a little twisted, but it still adds up to the same thing. I was supposed to be a conqueror and then all the guys behind me were supposed to be my army. But, they weren't. And I was no conqueror. I didn't want to take Rome. Not the way they wanted me to take it. So, I took a different route. I'm not the heavyweight champion of the world, but who cares?"

"They say Amytis was the one who stalled Hannibal."

"Who's he?"

"She," I said. "The Roman emperor's wife. She stole into Hannibal's camp and made love to him. Is that what happened to you, Wolf?"

"Maybe. Hey, what's happened to our bargain?"

"I got bogged down with the Nubian army."

"That was over two thousand years ago, Honey. There were no pari-mutuals in those days."

"You're not so dumb, are you, Wolf?"

"I read a little. Thomas Wolfe—because of the name. Theodore Dreiser because he makes a lot of sense. Ernest Hemingway, Faulkner."

I glanced around the bare steel walls of the Bathy-sphere. "I'd never guess! Where do you hide your books?"

"Naturally, under the mattress. Where else?"

I tucked my hand under Wolf's mattress, but didn't come up with any thick volumes of fiction. Instead, my fingers closed over a piece of fabric. When I brought it out in the open, Wolf's eyes opened wide.

"Is this your deep-sea outfit?" I demanded.

"No, of course not," he returned quickly. "It belongs to a friend of mine. Maybe to Amytis."

"Hannibal," I said flatly, "you've got your Alps crossed. This bathing suit belonged to Helena. And I don't mean the Greek goddess Helena. She wore it New Year's Eve."

"You're wrong, Honey. The last time I saw her she wasn't wearing a thing."

"That's right, Wolf. Helena wasn't wearing a stitch when the murderer tucked her into that mummy case."

## TWELVE

WOLF LARSON snatched the bathing suit from my grasp and hurled it savagely to the floor. Gold sequins flew loose in all directions.

"All right," he admitted, "so it's Helena's swim suit, so what? Is there any crime in the fact that she left the thing here?"

"When?"

"New Year's Eve."

I picked up the suit again. It was practically in shreds. "You say she left it here?"

"If you must know," Wolf growled, "I—I tore it off her. We had an argument."

"What about?"

"Nothing important."

"The police might not think it was nothing important if they saw the condition of this bathing suit."

"They're not going to see it. Our argument had nothing to do with her murder."

I closed one of the buttons on the front of my sweater. "They might imagine you ripped off the suit in some secluded spot at the party while you were smothering her."

Wolf banged his fist against the watertight door. "I didn't kill her. She was trying to blackmail me. Sure, I wanted to kill her, but I didn't have the nerve."

"What was she blackmailing you for?"

"She said she was pregnant. She threatened to tell Rote I was the father if I didn't pay off. New Year's Eve was H-hour for my payment."

"Were you the father, Wolf?"

"Hell, no! I told you before, I never had a thing to do with Helena Collier."

"Well, then, what did you have to worry about?"

Wolf ran his big hands across his face and they were trembling when he drew them away. "Rote and I are partners in this business. He owns the largest share. She figured he'd force me out if she told him."

"So that's it. How much was she asking?"

"Three thousand dollars! Ever hear of anything so ridiculous? She knew I didn't have that kind of money."

"Where did she expect you to get it, Wolf?"

"From Rote. Now doesn't that take the cake? Borrow money from my partner to pay his wife to keep her from telling him about an incident that I had nothing to do with. How screwed-up can life get?"

I stared at him skeptically. The scattered gold sequins on Reed Walker's carpet kept flickering across my mind. "Where'd this little argument of yours take place?"

"Right here. She was waiting for me when I got back from the party."

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. I didn't look at my watch. I'd say about fifteen minutes after I left you on the staircase."

"Go on."

"She had a sickening smile on her face. She put out her hand and I slapped it down. She knew I hadn't asked Rote for the money, and she just wanted to goad me, but I wasn't about to let her. I grabbed the front of her bathing suit. The damned thing was cut so low in front that it practically fell apart in my hands."

"I'll bet."

"You're still on," Wolf countered. "Sure, I was

drunk and mad as hell and I could have killed her right then and there, but that isn't the way it went."

"You just tore off her bathing suit."

"That's right. Helena was a spoiled, ruthless little brat, so I turned her over my knee and spanked her bare bottom until it was raw. When I finally let her up, she dashed out the door stark naked and dove into the water."

"Then what?"

"I started after her, but it was too dark because of the storm. She'd left her car keys and a cigarette case behind, so I ran down to the pier parking lot, found her red Thunderbird and tore out along the shore road. Helena was like a fish in water. I knew she could easily swim the distance back to her place under normal circumstances. New Year's Eve the sea was at its worst. Breakers were topping eleven feet and busting hell out of everything. I never saw Helena again. When I reached the Collier place I parked her car in the garage, left the keys in the ignition, the cigarette case on the seat and walked on back to the pier."

"Exciting story," I said.

"It's the truth, Honey, every word."

"Is there anyone who can corroborate that business about Helena diving into the water?"

"I don't know. There were a lot of people on the pier that night. Maybe one of them saw her."

"Maybe," I said, re-examining the torn suit. "Maybe not."

"What are you going to do, Honey?"

"I don't know. The medical examiners did say Helena had a red fanny, as if she'd been spanked. I still want to see your back."

"And I still want to see your front," he said.

"The game's off, Wolf. Called on account of a misplaced sequin. Take off your shirt and turn around!"

"No."

"You were the man in the film, weren't you, Wolf?"

"No!"

"Then why do you refuse to take off your shirt?"

"Because I'm a stubborn Swede."

"Fawn's testimony in court could almost hang you, Wolf. And if we found the film—"

"I don't care what you find," he said, eyes narrowing.

"You'll never be able to prove a thing."

I got to my feet, buttoned the last button and shrugged my shoulders. "Okay, Captain, let's surface and find out."

He gripped me savagely around the middle. "Honey, don't let this damned bathing suit spoil everything, please."

"I'm warning you, Wolf, let go of me!"

"You're the only woman I ever really wanted. Dames are always hanging around here, but I'm not interested. Helena was one of those. She had beautiful white hips and big breasts that turned up, but—"

"Like Lorraine Reynolds?"

"Yeah, but neither one of them could have competed with you—" He fell back awkwardly, his face contorted. "You—you tricked me."

"Lorraine Reynolds was one of the murdered women, wasn't she, Wolf?"

"You tricked me."

"How many times did she come down here, Wolf? As often as Joan Lacey?"

"You—you tricked me," he stammered. "You shouldn't have done that."

"Why'd you kill them, Wolf?"

He slumped against the side of the Bathysphere. "I didn't. I knew them, that's all. A lot of guys were living off Lorraine and Joannie. I was no different."

"Except for the fact that you were apparently the last person to have seen Helena alive. That makes you different, Wolf. Very different." I moved to the control panel.

"Don't touch anything!" he roared, coming after me.

I flipped two switches, but nothing happened. Then I whirled one of the small wheels. Water shot through a vent in the ceiling.

"You crazy fool!" he shouted, hurling me back. "You'll sink us to the bottom!"

The Bathysphere shook violently and began to descend. Wolf fell, tried to get up, but was knocked galley west as the diving bell jolted viciously. Sea boiled on the floor of the steel chamber. I picked myself up and waded to the panel. The switches clicked back into their original position easily. The wheel wouldn't budge.

"Don't release the brake!" Wolf wailed, trying to rise. "We'll blow higher than a kite!"

He stumbled to his knees, then lunged up and grabbed an axe fastened to the wall as the Bathysphere ground to a stop. He glanced at me with wild eyes that were blown open worse than a pop-eyed fish fleeing from a shark. The axe gleamed in his hands. "You know what I ought to do with this, don't you?"

I darted back as he slashed the blade into the raised wooden floor. After a dozen hard strikes through the rapidly rising sea, he tossed the axe aside and plunged his head and shoulders under the water. In a moment, the Bathysphere began to rise, a howling roar searing the steel plates angrily. White bubbles boiled around the portholes and the overhead light flickered.

When Wolf's face broke through the water we had stopped again. "This—is—as—far—as—we—go," he said, gasping for air. "We're—we're still down about fifteen feet. We'll have to wait until she fills up and then I'll open the main door. Why'd you do this, Honey?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

"You—you'll probably never believe this now, but I'm not a murderer. You ask Reed Walker, he knows."

The water swirled around my shoulders. "What does he know, Wolf?"

"That film you were talking about. He knows all about it—more than he'll ever admit. Get up on the bed!"

I took his advice as the overhead opening spilled new water almost to the ceiling. "Wolf, what do we do now?"

"Take a deep breath and pray I can get this door open. Then follow me. You jammed the escape hatch when you fooled with that emergency switch. The pressure is—"

His voice was swallowed up in the bubbling sound that overtook the Bathysphere as the water rose up over our heads. The light went out and we were plunged into an inky blackness. Then, faintly, the movement of Wolf's hands on the steel door glinted through the dark green bubbles. I swam toward the glimmer, bumped against something solid and reached out. My fingers closed over a rounded edge. I swung myself underneath and felt the cold icy touch of the open sea. The surface never looked or felt so good. Stars winked in a soft darkness overhead like tiny beads of fire in black tissue paper. My hands grasped one of the mossy pier pilings and my mouth sucked in fresh air hungrily. Then I looked around for Wolf Larson. The sea was calm, unusually calm, its surface traced faintly by the pier lights. He was nowhere in sight.

Mark didn't say much after two handsome deputies brought me wet and bedraggled into his office. He asked only one sterling question. "Honey, what keeps you alive?"

"My built-in waterwings, Lieutenant. Where were you when the lights went out five fathoms deep?"

"I was watching a Sputnik. At least, they say those babies send out signals."



"My Indian blanket wasn't handy," I said. "Helena's bathing suit was. Only trouble, it didn't send up big enough bubbles."

"Okay," he groaned. "Spell it out for me, Miss detective."

I told him the story of Wolf's Bathysphere and the events which led to the flooded chamber. He flinched when I mentioned my discovery of the gold sequined outfit.

"Will you, please, stop digging up suspects," Mark pleaded. "This joint's getting to be like Grand Central Station. We had to release Erik Ford this afternoon—under special guard—to perform an emergency operation."

I took a cigarette from the detective's pocket and lighted it. "You'd better get a man after Wolf Larson."

"We're way ahead of you. Those two deputies weren't down on the pier just to watch your swimming exploits. We dusted Helena's car this afternoon. His prints were all over the steering wheel, her cigarette case and keys. Incidentally, he's been on trial."

"What for?" I asked, drying my hair with a towel. "Speeding in his diving bell?"

"Murder. He was acquitted in Seattle in 1947 on lack of sufficient evidence. A girl friend of his was found dead in her waterfront apartment."

"Cause of death?"

"What do you think?" Mark said grimly. "Suffocation. Could be compared with Helena's murder in every respect except this dame didn't have bruises on her mouth."

"Well, what do you know," I said, stubbing out my cigarette. "I guess Mr. Larson didn't take me down to see fish after all. What are your plans now for Erik Ford?"

"Continue to hold him. I'm still not convinced he didn't take care of Hel Gandy. He's a very peculiar man, Honey."

"There are a lot of peculiar men in this town, Lieutenant, not excepting present company. Is it all right if I use your phone?"

Mark grinned. "Go ahead, but if you're calling Buck Rogers, I'll save you the time. He's out."

"Out where?"

"The Marine Corps calls the assignment a night instrument flight. Perhaps to the moon, who knows."

"Very funny. You ought to write dialogue for Buster Keaton!"

"He's dead."

"That's what I mean."

The telephone jangled on Mark's desk. He lifted the receiver, still smiling. When he put it down again, his mouth was twisted into an angry scowl. "That was one of my men at the hospital. Erik Ford's escaped."

"How, Mark?"

The big detective lunged to his feet. "Ford added a new gimmick to the old shell game. He had two other doctors assisting in the operating room. They all wore masks, naturally. My men had Ford spotted as number two in the lineup, but he must have switched positions while they were wheeling the patient out of the room. He calmly waltzed out a side door while the deputies were handcuffing the wrong man."

I patted Mark consolingly on the shoulder. "That's all right, Lieutenant, I know where he's gone."

"Where?"

"After some instruments. Get it? He's on a night instrument flight—to the moon."

Mark didn't look back as he banged out of the office door. I waited five minutes and then started up the hill to Reed Walker's house.

Fog was beginning to drift in over Shark Beach when I reached the cantilevered structure at the end of Hilledge Drive. There weren't any cars in the drive-

way and the lights were out. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled.

I crept down the stairway to the front door and found it locked. A sliding glass panel facing onto the patio was a different story. A curtain fluttered through the opening, wafted gently by a slight breeze that continued to lift new fog up off the sea.

Reed's living room was unchanged from the previous evening, except that the thick wall-to-wall carpeting seemed freshly vacuumed. No more gold sequins glittered near the coffee table. Dirty dishes were piled in the kitchen sink. A glass on the drainboard still bore the imprints of orange-painted lips.

I went into Reed's bedroom. A book lay on the nightstand. The title was, *MURDER IS EASY*, an autobiography smuggled from the San Quentin death-house. One of the pages had been badly dog-eared and a paragraph circled in blue read:

"My seventh murder was the easiest. Perhaps, the symbolism behind the number had something to do with the ease, but I doubt this highly. She was a wealthy woman as in the first and fifth instances. Specifically, I had nothing to gain monetarily from this crime; however there was a financial element involved. She had been blackmailing me for suspicions she held on my sixth misdeed. It is unfortunate that such underhanded individuals exist. Their felonious endeavors often far surpass the crime of murder. For theirs is a crime of no-equal upon society. Blood thirsty and beyond reason are their demands. Why did she seek more money when she was already wealthy beyond any means? The answer was in the warped desire to possess more than she could possibly attain. This is seen in life and more viciously in business. Every day big men work brutally to squash the small in their efforts to

attain more power. It is unending and horribly treacherous. For this reason I decided to put her out of her misery. I sealed our bargain with a kiss. A kiss which never ended for her. By a shutting off of both the mouth and nasal passage, she died of suffocation. To conceal the mode of murder from the police I placed her body in a bathtub and filled water to the brim. With her head submerged, I applied artificial respiration. Thus, later, the police autopsy report showed water in the stomach and lungs with foamy mucous in the trachea. The blood chlorides on the left side of the heart were thirty per cent lower than those on the right. This revealed positive drowning in fresh water. Afterwards, I was sorry I had concealed the method because the police stupidly called her death—suicide.”

I closed the book and glanced around Reed's neatly-arranged bachelor bedroom. Other books were racked on a small shelf near the window. Their titles ran the gamut from science-fiction to aeronautical engineering. I couldn't find a murder-mystery or crime-detection book in the group. A pair of Reed's shoes were tossed carelessly in a corner, completely out of place in the extreme orderliness of the room. Their soles were covered with thick mud which had dried into a hard red crust.

In the night outside, the dog howled again, the sound dulled even more by the swiftly gathering fog. This time it seemed faintly mournful as if the animal were cold and alone. I shivered and opened Reed's closet. Two crisp Marine officer's uniforms hung neatly on hangers. Next to these were his civilian clothes: a brown suit with a white carnation wilted in its lapel, a gray wool sports coat with a slight red check woven into the material.

My attention strayed to a dresser built into the

closet. One of the drawers was partially open and a white military glove protruded, the fingertips soiled with reddish clay.

This didn't startle me as much as the black, slightly bent negatives stuffed under the gloves.

I held one of them up to the light. A nude woman poised on a diving board sprang unmistakably into view.

## THIRTEEN

THE NEGATIVES still smelled of developing fluid and were lacerated along one edge where they'd been ripped from Hel Gandy's metal hangers.

A car door slammed rudely outside the house. Footsteps thudded on wet asphalt and then vanished, creating a happy clamor from the once-mournful canine. Reed's next door neighbors must have arrived home.

I held a second negative up to the light showing costumed figures chaining a white mannikin to Rote's sacrificial altar. The third was badly over-exposed. Faint images could be seen enveloped in a panorama of ribbons. The last was a poolside tableau. Dr. Ford clasped a woman in a cat costume. One of his hands was stuffed inside her blouse and the raw edge that I'd seen on New Year's Eve projected starkly. They were surrounded by bottles, bodies and black sea that foamed over the edge of the rocky seacliff in ominous white folds.

That was the extent of the negatives. It wasn't the extent of Reed Walker. He stood inside the bedroom door with a pistol barrel cocked straight at my forehead.

"I didn't expect you—yet," I said, lowering the negatives.

"That goes double," he said, examining my wet outfit. "I saw the lights and went down the neighbors' stairway under the house."

"That explains the dog," I continued. "He knows you."

"You're so right," Reed said flatly. "He used to be mine until I couldn't keep him any longer. What are you doing here, Honey?"

I couldn't think of a better answer. "Looking at old photographs. Very boring."

"Is that right? Where'd you find them?"

"In this drawer. You ought to keep such things in your photo album. They wouldn't be so obvious."

"I don't have a photo album," he said. "They look like negatives. Big negatives."

"They are," I said. "A little too big for you, I'm afraid, Reed."

"Where they from?"

"Hel Gandy's darkroom. Ever been there?"

"Not in a long time. What'd you bring them here for, Honey?"

"I didn't. Let's not play games, Reed. You're the one with the gun. Mine's still down in Wolf's Bathysphere."

"You still talk in riddles, don't you? This is my house. You're the one who's broken in. Now let's get to the point."

"The point is, Captain, somebody shot Hel Gandy to get these negatives. Now, let's skip the formalities. They were in your bureau."

"I never saw them before in my life."

"And I suppose you never clapped your big brown

eyes on this before either." I tossed him the book on murder.

He nodded. "That's exactly right. Say, what's been going on here anyway?"

Reed Walker seemed genuinely puzzled. He lowered the pistol and opened his bureau drawer where I'd found the negatives. His soiled gloves fell to the floor.

He picked them up and said, "Now how did these get here? I put them in the dirty clothes hamper this morning. And those shoes! They were out on the patio."

"And Helena's bathing suit, Reed, where'd you leave that?"

"I—I don't know," he stammered. "I guess I burned it."

"Where?"

"In—in the fireplace."

"Now you know that's a lie."

"I don't know what you mean, Honey."

"Sure, you do. I found Helena's swimsuit in Wolf's Bathysphere where he admits he ripped it off her New Year's Eve."

Reed dropped his pistol into a bureau drawer and jammed it closed. "I'm a damned fool," he whispered. "I should have known I couldn't get away with that story. I should have realized her suit would turn up sometime."

"I have a weird feeling you're going to say Helena was blackmailing you, Reed."

His eyes narrowed. "How'd you know?"

"It's par for the course. How much was she after, three thousand?"

"No, five."

I whistled. "She had your number, but good."



When were you supposed to pay off, New Year's Eve?"

Reed's head swung up sharply as if he'd been clipped with a hard uppercut. "That's right. She came up here just before the party. She was drunk and mean as hell." He gestured toward the living room. "She fell over the coffee table and almost knocked herself unconscious."

"You're sure that's what happened?"

"Of course, I'm sure. That's how those gold sequins got littered all over the floor. I told you that other story about finding the suit down in the vault because I couldn't tell you the truth."

"Why, Reed?"

He loosened his tie and groaned. "Honey, I just can't tell you. It would ruin me. I'd lose my commission. Go to jail."

"If you *don't* tell me you may go to the gas chamber. This is serious business, Reed. At the moment you're like a man walking a tight rope over Niagara Falls. The evidence in this room alone might be enough to convict you of murder."

"I can't understand how all this got here, I swear."

"You lied before, Reed. How can I be certain you're telling the truth now?"

He took out a cigarette and pushed it between his dry lips and lit it. He moved mechanically to a bottom drawer in his bureau, lifting a pile of freshly laundered military shirts and took out a folded white paper.

"Read this," he said, handing it to me. "No one's ever known. You'll be the first. I suppose this means the end of my Marine career."

I opened the paper and read the printed script at the top: MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE. Below were the words: State of Nevada, County of Clark.

"Reed," I stammered, "you—you're not married?"

"I was," he mumbled, sitting on the edge of the bed.

The remaining words on the license were half-printed, half-written:

*This is to certify that the undersigned Robert L. Williams did on the 21st day of May A.D. 1957 join in lawful wedlock Reed Samuel Walker of Shark Beach, State of California, and Helena Warren of Shark Beach, State of California, with their mutual consent in the presence of—*

I threw down the marriage license and glowered at Reed. "So, you married Helena six months ago in Las Vegas."

"Yes," he mumbled faintly. "I don't even remember the ceremony. In fact, I don't even remember the trip across the desert. She drove all the way. I was drunk. Drunker than a skunk. I guess this adds up to bigamy or something, doesn't it?"

"Are you crazy, this document isn't worth the paper it's printed on. It never has been."

Reed lunged to his feet. "What are you talking about?"

"You were both residents of the State of California. Helena was already married to Rote Collier. She gave her maiden name which was false. Thus, the marriage, in this state where you're a legal resident, was automatically null and void and not worth the money you paid for it."

Reed bent down slowly and picked up the paper. "She—she cheated me," he said, almost to himself. "She lied. She—she said I'd be ruined if this ever came to the attention of the Marine Corps."

"You are naïve, Captain," I said, shaking my head.

"Even if the marriage had been valid, Helena was the one guilty of a crime, not you. She was the one who committed bigamy."

He seemed to freeze like the horrible shapes at Rote's party the night I arrived. "I admit I'm not very smart. In fact, I must be a one hundred per cent dope. I paid Helena that five thousand dollars New Year's Eve."

"Reed, you didn't!"

"I did. I had to. She had a copy of this marriage license. She said she'd send it to Headquarters Washington if I didn't pay up. She said no matter what happened there'd be a scandal."

"You crazy fool."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, you can say that again. Whoever killed her probably got that money. It was every cent I'd saved for the last ten years."

"How'd you pay her, Reed?"

"Five twenty dollar bundles. She wouldn't accept a check. You can look at my bank book if you want to. It's all there in black and white. A one hundred and twenty dollar balance. What a crummy lousy break."

I studied the Marine Captain in his freshly pressed uniform and shook my head. "You could have drawn the money out and still not paid her, Reed."

He peered at me and his face was ashen white. "Yeah, that's right. I thought about that when she was here. I thought about blackmail and how it never really stops." He paused and his eyes lowered to his hands. "I even thought about killing her, but I didn't have the guts. When the police found my Buck Rogers wings in that mummy case, I nearly flipped. It seemed almost as if Helena were still trying to ruin me even after she was dead. Then you told your

little white lie. That's why I checked on you. The whole business didn't total. I even suspected you were the murderer until I found out your profession."

"Listen, Reed, you're not as dumb as you make out. I admit the wings in the mummy case were probably a plant, but this stuff—I *just don't know!*"

"Honey, I didn't kill Helena and I wasn't anywhere near Hel Gandy's place last night. You probably think the mud on my shoes—"

"How'd you know there was mud tracked into Hel's studio?"

"I—I read about the footprints in the newspaper."

"You've got an answer for everything, don't you? And your answer to the big question is: I'm being framed!"

"Of course," he said angrily. "What else could this mean?"

I mixed a couple of wet curls around on my forehead and said, "As far as I know there's been only one person to cast suspicion in your direction."

"Who's that?"

"Fawn Collier."

"That bitch!" Reed said. "She'd say anything to get me in trouble."

"She claims she saw you in bed with Helena once."

He exhaled sharply. "Maybe she did. I don't know. Since that trip to Las Vegas I've been drunk so many times you couldn't count them on the legs of a centipede."

"Then that one-time business with Helena wasn't the truth," I said.

"I don't know, Honey. I really don't know. The time I told you about was when I woke up in Las Vegas. If there were any others I was too far gone to remember."

"Fawn says she thinks you were following her on the beach early last evening. Were you?"

"No!" He got up and slapped his hands together. "I've got a lot more important things to do besides follow that dame. She's crazy. In fact, I think she's a dike."

"A what?"

"A dike. A female who goes for women. A lesbian. She's all twisted around. Sure, I'll admit she's attractive. Guys make passes at her all the time. I never go near her. She was pretty friendly with those two other gals who were murdered. Almost too friendly, if you know what I mean?"

"No, I don't know."

"Oh, what difference does it make?" He paced across the room. "Maybe she isn't what I think she is at all. Who am I to call the kettle black?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He shook his head dismally. "I don't know. I lied about having a sister, too. Maybe you guessed. That sweater you're wearing belonged to Helena."

"This isn't the same sweater you loaned me, Reed."

He froze again. "But—it looks like the same. Buttons down the front—"

"The other sweater was gray, Reed. This one is blue."

He slumped down on the bed again. "I guess I didn't notice. I just assumed—"

"Okay," I said, "we'll skip it for the moment. Did you know Erik Ford had been arrested by the police?"

"Yes, I read that in the paper, too. So what?"

"He's escaped. I'd like to find him, Reed. I'd also like to dig up Wolf Larson. Do you have any ideas on the subject?"

I filled Reed in on the details of Erik's escape from the hospital and Wolf's disappearance in the night sea. Ten minutes later we were in the Booby Hatch. The fancy restaurant-bar looked the same as it had the night before except for the sea nymph. Somebody had forgotten to remove her bra. Fawn was seated at a corner table hunched over two tall drinks. She was alone. Reed and I pulled up two chairs and sat down.

"Hello, hello," she said, coldly drunk, a flat impersonal tone to her voice. "I'm celebrating, good-bye."

"What's the occasion?" I asked.

"Helena's two days dead," Fawn said. "Two days, two drinks each round, get it?"

"Get this, Fawn," Reed said. "You told Honey something I want straightened out right now. What gives you the bright idea I was following you on the beach last night?"

"Oh, that," Fawn said, sipping at her straws. "Well, weren't you?"

"You know better than that!" Reed nearly knocked her drinks off the table. "I don't even know what beach you were walking on or why and I couldn't care less if you were stone cold dead and hung by your heels in the middle of Times Square. Now, does that answer your question?"

"Perfectly, darling." Tears suddenly sprang into Fawn's wide green eyes. "I don't think you killed Helena if that's what you think I think. Go away will you, please? Please!"

I placed my hand on her shoulder. "Fawn, we're not here to upset you. Reed didn't mean what he said. We're looking for Erik and Wolf Larson. Have you seen either one of them?"

She wiped at her eyes with a silk handkerchief. "No. No, I haven't. Please, leave me alone."

"Fawn, did you know your father is a part owner in Wolf Larson's business?" I asked.

She looked at me. "No. Is he?"

"That's what Wolf Larson claims."

"I don't understand. Father couldn't be in business with Larson. You know what I told you about Wolf and Helena."

"Yes," I said, glancing at Reed. "That's not important now. Finding Wolf Larson is."

"Fawn," Reed said, "you told Honey you saw me in bed with Helena once. When was that?"

"I—I don't remember," she answered faintly. "Whatever you've done, Reed Walker, doesn't concern me, understand?"

"Certainly it concerns you if you tell people about it!" Reed's eyes lit up. "Now when did you see us?"

"About two months ago. Now leave me alone!"

"No, I won't!" Reed said. "You've set me up for the kill—and I don't like it! Not one bit!"

Fawn tried to rise, but fell back in her chair. She was too drunk to make her legs work. "Don't you say that to me, Reed Walker! You never looked at me once, did you? No! You were too crazy about Helena. You were too fascinated by her big breasts and big hips to see me! All right, so I don't have big curves! I couldn't give you as big a time, could I? No!" She crumpled over the table. "You—you dirty louse!"

Reed didn't move. He seemed completely baffled by Fawn's outburst. So were a few other people within earshot. I put my arm around her shoulders again. This time I wasn't as tender.

"You're coming with us, Fawn," I said. "You've had enough. More than enough."

"Where—where we going?"

"I want to see that film in its entirety." I studied Reed Walker. "I want to compare backs, or faces, or what have you."

Fawn staggered to her feet. "Father's probably burned the reel by now. We'll never find it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," she said, "he opened his wall safe this afternoon. He took out everything, including a gun."

It was nearly midnight when we arrived at the Collier castle. Thick fog shrouded the old mansion and waves beat below the cliff.

"Good night for a murder," I said. "Glad you two are still on your feet."

Fawn got out of the car and fell headlong on the road.

Reed snickered. "One down and two to go."

We picked her up and half carried her down the steps to the front door. It was slightly ajar. The living room was dark and smelled faintly of orange blossoms.

"Rote!" I called. "Are you home?"

"Sure, he's home," Fawn said, her words slurred. "He's always home. The sandman bites him about eleven-thirty. After he's watched Fu Manchu or some other idiotic mystery melodrama on TV. Why don't you two leave me alone?"

"Not until we see that film," I said. "And what's this business about your father taking a gun out of his safe?"

"I don't know," she said, staring up at me. "He owns one. Don't we all?"

"Do you, Fawn?" I asked.



"No, but you do, Honey. And he does. I've seen it. A pistol. A .38. We live in a world of artillery. God save the bullets and the bastards," she screamed and collapsed on the staircase.

Reed carried Fawn into her bedroom. "She's out like a light," he said, putting her down on the bed. "Maybe she's right. Maybe we ought to go home and call it a night."

"Not until I find that film, Reed. If you want to leave, go ahead."

He shook his head and squeezed my hand. "I want to see those pictures as much as you do. Lead the way."

We walked down the hall to the staircase. Something brought me to a quick stop. A bottle of cologne had been spilled on the top step. I picked up the ornate bottle. It smelled of orange blossoms.

"Something's haywire, Reed," I said. "Something's really haywire."

"What gives you that idea?"

I didn't answer his question. Two doors down from the staircase was Rote Collier's bedroom. He was seated at his desk, staring straight at us, his pink cheeks rosier than ever. In fact, they were too rosy. They were covered with blood.

## FOURTEEN

ROTE COLLIER had been shot through the right temple at extremely close range.

"My God!" Reed whispered.

"Don't touch anything," I managed to say trying to catch my breath. "Give me your handkerchief."

Reed didn't move. The sea rumbled in the distance and an old clock ticked in the corner of the room. After a moment, he fumbled in his pocket and handed me a neatly-folded handkerchief.

I bent down beside Rote's chair and found a .38 revolver lying near his right foot. The snout of the weapon smelled like firecrackers after they had been exploded.

"He—he must have shot himself," Reed said.

I flipped open the cartridge cylinder. One empty case fell to the rug. An envelope addressed to Honey West lay on the desk. I opened it and found a check for one thousand dollars made out in my name and signed by Rote, and a terse, disquieting letter. It read:

Dear Honey:

We never discussed your fee, so I hope the enclosed will cover everything. You're probably wondering why a man who loved life as much as I did would ever commit suicide. To tell you the truth I couldn't stand the shame any longer.

By now you know what I mean. I should have confessed the truth long ago, at least to you, but how does one put this sort of thing into words. I never could before and I still find it impossible. Helena was as much in the dark as anyone. I shall never forgive myself for her death. It was all my fault. If I'd had any real courage I would have exposed the whole terrible business long ago, but I never realized how treacherous it was—or how far it would go. You can add the two other women and Helmet Gandy to my erroneous blunderings, too.

For all this, please forgive me.

Rote.

"So, he was the murderer," Reed said, over my shoulder. "I can't believe it."

"That makes two of us," I said.

Fawn appeared in the doorway. She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. Horror was etched so deeply in her eyes that they seemed like two monstrous green holes drilled in her ashen-white face. She staggered into the room screaming at the top of her lungs and pitched over on her face.

Lieutenant Mark Storm came out of Fawn's bedroom well after midnight. Rote's body had already been examined by the coroner and removed to the morgue. Mark looked like a corpse himself, his face haggard and unshaven. He sagged against the stairway banister and offered me a cigarette.

"Doctor had to give Fawn a shot," he said, as he fumbled for a match. "Damn near out of her mind. Who wouldn't be? Poor kid!"

I drew on the flame until smoke filled my mouth, then I exhaled slowly. "Mark, do you really believe he committed suicide?"

"Is there any doubt, Honey?" he asked sadly. "I know it's a shock to you. Even to me."

"Nothing adds up," I said. "The note for instance. He doesn't actually confess to any of the murders."

"He said, and I quote," Mark said, "'I should have confessed the truth long ago, but how does one put this sort of thing into words.'"

"I know that's what he said—"

"We checked the handwriting."

"I know that, too—"

"The bullet penetrated the lower right temple at close range. He obviously held the gun. A paraffin test will be just a formality."

"You don't understand," I argued. "I believe he shot himself. I even agree that he wrote the letter—without any intimidation on anyone's part, but—"

"It still doesn't add up," Mark finished for me. "Look, we've talked about this before, Honey. Murder never adds up. That's why we have detectives instead of accountants handling homicide."

"But, Mark—"

"The case is over, Honey, you might as well face it. You were wrong—I was right, partially. My suspicions about Rote after the train accident bore fruit—a little too late."

"But, Mark, he said—"

"I know what he said, Honey. I've got every word memorized. The case is closed. You've got your money. Now, take my advice. Go home and forget Rote Collier, Shark Beach, Buck Rogers, the whole shooting match. I'll call you tomorrow."

I shrugged. "The fog's too thick. I'll wait until morning. Maybe a good night's sleep will snap me out of the doldrums."

"Okay," he said. "Good idea if somebody does stay with Fawn. She's pretty broken up."

"So am I."

He kissed my cheek and started down the stairway,

then stopped and forced a grin on his wide mouth. "Why don't you quit this damned foolishness and get married? I can be had—very easily."

I smiled. "Thanks, Lieutenant. I'll keep your name on file. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. "I'll be around when you're ready. Do me one favor, though, will you?"

"What's that, Lieutenant?"

"Don't wait until I'm in a wheelchair. You can't make much love in the darned contraptions."

I grasped his outstretched hand. "You can make love anywhere, Lieutenant—with me."

He groaned. "Honey, you're fabulous. I wish I were anything but a detective."

"Why, Mark?"

"Because maybe, then, I could figure you out." He walked down the stairs with his head hunched forward and his battered hat pulled tightly to his eyes.

I went into Rote's bedroom, not even realizing why. His chair was drawn away from the desk and red stains still gleamed on the polished dark wood. On the wall near his bed was a photograph of Helena. Her shoulders were naked and the stark cleft of her breasts gouged down into the frame. She was smiling and black hair curled around her face like dark strands of velvet. I wondered who took the photograph and how long ago. She was obviously in her teens and the fresh sparkle of her eyes was as bright as diamonds. Under the portrait, on a narrow shelf, was a bronze cup with the inscription: MISS BLOCK-BUSTER, 1952, *Helena Warren*.

Footsteps sounded on the staircase. The doctor was almost to the front door before I stopped him.

"How is she?"

He frowned. "She's tough, I'll tell you that, Miss West. That injection still hasn't knocked her out—completely. She's fighting it like a Trojan. I'd suggest you look in on her as often as possible."

I nodded, let him out the door and then crossed into the kitchen. Ten seconds later, Fawn was in the doorway, her dress wrinkled, face stained from tears.

"You ought to be in bed," I suggested.

"I know," she mumbled. "I just wanted to count heads. I suspected yours would be present and accounted for."

"I'm sorry about your father, Fawn. Believe me, I feel more deeply than you could imagine."

"You've got your money," she said, clutching the door frame. "What more do you want?"

"Nothing," I said, putting the coffee pot on the stove. "I haven't earned my salary yet."

"You mean your nursemaid's fee?"

"You might call it that—until tomorrow morning."

"Get out of here!"

"You don't mean that," I said.

"Oh, don't I?" She shook her head dazedly and nearly toppled over. "He's dead. It's all over, Miss West. The film business, the New Year's Eve parties, the little presents with his name scrawled on the packages, everything. It's all over now. So you can go home. And I can go home."

"You're mixed up, Miss Collier." I started toward her. "Your home is upstairs—in bed. Now let's move in that direction, shall we?"

She swung at me viciously and missed. Her fist struck the wall and a dish clattered off a shelf and crashed into a million pieces on the linoleum floor. She didn't utter a sound. Her eyes stared at me as if they were caught in a steel vise.

"You killed him," she whispered. "You killed him. If you'd never come here—"

I caught her arm as she went limp. The trip up the staircase was arduous. Fawn sprawled several times before I could get her into her second-story bedroom. A noise downstairs jolted me to a stop as I was unbuckling her belt. I tossed a blanket over her and

headed for the kitchen. Erik Ford met me halfway. He still wore his green operating costume and his red hair was wet and matted.

"Where is he?" Erik demanded.

"The morgue," I said. "He had something no doctor could ever plug up. Where have you been?"

"Walking," Erik said, "on the beach. I finally went back to the police station and turned myself in. They told me what happened."

"Want a cup of coffee?"

"I guess so," he said. "I don't know what I want any more. I feel as though I'm shell-shocked."

"That's exactly the way Rote Collier felt," I said, going into the kitchen. "Except the bullet didn't give him much of a chance to feel anything, did it?"

"You're horrible," he said, following me. "I came here to tell you that. Now you know."

I wet my lips. "See, it's true. Even your best friends won't tell you. I'm glad you had the courage."

"You're despicable," he continued. "You open people up and you feed on their insides like some damned vulture."

"That's right," I said, pouring two cups of coffee. "You might say I'm like a doctor. Only I don't sew my patients up after the operation. Most of the time they're too dead to sew up."

His eyes blazed fiercely. "You tried to ruin me just as Helena did. Except you did a better job. You got me arrested. My name in the headlines."

"That happens, Doctor. When murder raises its bloody head no one's considered innocent. You won't believe this, but I argued for your release."

Erik's fists tightened. "You stole my keys. You broke into my office. You accused me of Hel Gandy's murder!"

"Right on two counts, wrong on the third," I said, pushing a chair in his direction. "You're upset. Sit down and cool off."

"You're damned right I'm upset. Do you have any idea how many years I've worked to establish myself in the medical profession—"

"Sit down, Doctor! I don't care how many years you've worked to do anything! You're no saint!" I swallowed hard, touched by his anguished expression. "All right, sure I care! I care about a lot of things, but they don't seem very big right now. And what you're telling me is even smaller! Now, sit down and drink your coffee or get out of here!"

Tears ran down my cheeks and dropped into the folds of my skirt. He sighed heavily and slumped into a chair.

"Lousy damned women!" he whispered harshly. "Always got an answer for everything. And it's always a moist answer. Heavily saturated with mascara and nonsense."

My eyes sprang to his face. "What'd you say?"

"It doesn't matter."

"What'd you say, Erik? 'Heavily saturated with mascara,' is that what you said?"

"That's what I said. So what?"

I rose and wiped at my face clumsily. "You said 'heavily saturated with mascara.'"

"Are you crazy?" he said. "I'm beginning to believe you are."

"I think you've hit something, Erik!"

"Hit what?"

I dashed for the staircase. The stain from the spilled cologne still clung wetly to the carpeting. I sniffed closely to be sure. Orange blossoms. Erik followed me up the staircase.

"Honey," he said. "You'd better see a good psychiatrist."

I glanced at him and the smile that dented my cheeks was the warmest expression to touch my face in hours.

"You can say that again, Doc. I should have seen



one two days ago, but I couldn't see the forest for the trees."

"And what does that mean?"

"I don't know exactly," I said. "But one thing's certain."

"And what's that?"

"Rote Collier wasn't a murderer!"

## FIFTEEN

DAWN touched my bedroom curtains, slanted through and blew its icy breath on my stomach bringing me fully awake from a bad dream about nude men and orange blossoms. My bedcovers were strewn all over and I was shivering where the cold had crept under my hip-long nightie. I rose slowly in the dim light, rubbing my hands over my chilled legs to stir some life back into them. Below my window the sea lay ominously quiet in a white foggy shroud. I slipped a one-piece bathing suit over my goose-pimpled body and went downstairs to the kitchen.

After a hurried cup of coffee and a slice of toast, I put on one of Rote's old jackets and walked out onto the cliff top. A sea gull squalled bitterly in the mist and a cool wind tangled my hair.

An old-fashioned stone incinerator squatted in a smoke-seared hollow near the opening into the sea caves. I lifted the metal lid and dug down into the ashes. My fingers came up with a few scorched fragments of movie film. Under a bright light inside the house, the salvaged frames revealed a naked Helena prancing passionately in the forest. I went outside again and dug further. Nothing could be found of the scene in Hel Gandy's bedroom.

Mark sounded as if he were chewing on old wet rags when I got him on the phone.

"Take the receiver out of your mouth, Lieutenant," I said. "Then maybe you'll make sense."

"Who makes sense at six o'clock in the morning," he groaned sleepily. "For heaven's sake go to bed."

"I've been to bed. I dreamt about naked men and orange blossoms."

"Great. Go back to bed and dream about naked women and me. I'll try and tune in on your wave length. Good-bye."

"Wait, Mark! What'd you do with the cologne bottle we found on the staircase?"

"Sent it to the lab. Why?"

"Did you notice the fragrance?"

"Sure. Orange blossoms. It was Helena's favorite. We found two or three more bottles on her vanity."

"What do you think it was doing on the staircase?"

Mark laughed. "Having a conversation with the banister, what else?"

"Listen, smart guy, Rote Collier didn't murder anybody but himself. That spilled bottle of cologne proves it."

"Proves what? All you managed to establish last night was the fact that the cologne bottle was dropped after Fawn left the house for the Booby Hatch. What difference does it make? Rote probably penned his letter to you, then, feeling heartsick he went into Helena's room, picked up a bottle of her cologne and broke into tears. He staggered out onto the landing and, in a moment of bereavement, the bottle slipped from his fingers."

"That bottle didn't slip, Mark. It was thrown."

"What gives you that bright idea?"

"Some of the cologne splattered as far as the landing and on the floor below the steps. A few drops even sprayed all the way to the wall leading into the kitchen."

"All right," Mark said. "So, he threw the bottle. He probably felt a moment of panic as he stood outside

her bedroom door. She was dead. He had killed her and his brain pounded with morbid anger."

I shook my head. "Music up. Curtain. For my money your production stinks. It'll never make Broadway."

"That's what you think. For the last time, the case is closed. Go home!"

I told him to mind his own business and hung up.

The old house creaked from new winds off the sea as I went upstairs to Fawn's room. Her bed was empty. The dress she'd worn the night before was thrown over a chair. It smelled faintly of orange blossoms.

Fawn wasn't in her bathroom either. I glanced out the window. The fog had lifted slightly over a calm sea and a solitary swimmer cleaved the blue surface, kicking up a soft white spray that concealed his identity.

I raced downstairs to the spiral steps. My heels clanged on the metal treads as I hurried to reach the bottom before the swimmer disappeared. The door leading out to the rock shelf was jammed. I heaved my shoulder against it several times before the panel gave. Wind ruffled my hair and stung my eyes as I stepped out near the pool. The figure in the water was gone.

Now a small fishing boat drifted about fifty feet offshore. Its foamy trail lay in the water like a strip of heated popcorn and a broad hairy-chested man stood in the bow. He waved to me.

"Hi, Honey! Come on out!"

"Wolf! What are you doing here?"

"Guess you didn't know I owned a fishing boat. I been out all night. I want to talk to you about something very important."

"The police have been looking for you."

"Yeah, I know," he returned. "They caught up with me this morning down in Newport Harbor. I

heard about Rote. Come on out. I want to talk to you."

"I've learned my lesson, Wolf. This is about the right distance for a conversation with you. Go ahead."

"Can't shout it over the clifftops," he said, shaking his shoulders. Beads of water ran off down his chest. He obviously was just out of the flat sea. "I'll come ashore."

"I've a better idea. Meet me tonight at Hel's studio. Seven o'clock. All right?"

"I don't get it," he shouted.

"You will," I said huskily, winking. "You will—tonight."

He grinned. "Okay, I'll be there."

Wolf swung his boat around and vanished in the fog. I looked up at the house. A figure moved back from one of the windows, rustling a curtain. I counted the number of windows from the balcony. My room!

I rushed back upstairs and scoured the house thoroughly, but found nothing out of the ordinary except a few drops of dried blood on the kitchen floor.

I called Mark again.

"Fawn's missing."

"Are we going to go all through this again, Honey?"

"I found blood on the kitchen floor."

"Sure it isn't orange blossom cologne?"

"You better find her, Mark."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"I'll find her," I said. "You may not like my methods, but I'll find her, Mark."

I spent the greater part of the morning going through Rote's important files which were hidden in one of the vaults. One document spelled out the legal percentage arrangement of a business called Bathyspheres, Inc., which was operated under the joint

partnership of Wolf Larson and Rote Collier. The ex-movie director held two-thirds of the stock. One clause specified that upon the death of either partner the entire profits, stock and holdings of the business would revert to the survivor.

Something else caught my eye. It was a Shark Beach newspaper clipping, dated January 22, 1954. The two-column headline read: RETIRED MOVIE DIRECTOR'S LIFE SAVED BY EMERGENCY OPERATION. In the second paragraph of the story the doctor who performed the brilliant piece of surgery on Rote Collier was named. Erik Ford.

Two marriage licenses were filed in a folder marked *personal*. The first was a soiled document dated June 15, 1928 which revealed the wedlock of Rote to his deceased wife, Mary, in the First Methodist Church of Los Angeles.

The other license was a photostat of an original filed in Clark County, Nevada. Helena Warren's name was typed neatly on the transcript. Rote Collier's wasn't. My eyes widened. This was a copy of the marriage document Reed Walker had taken from the bottom drawer of his bureau. This last transcript could mean only one thing. Rote had known all the time about Helena's elopement to Las Vegas with the handsome Marine Captain. It also meant, in all probability, that Rote Collier and Helena had never exchanged vows.

After lunch I made three phone calls. Doctor Erik Ford's receptionist put him on the wire immediately. When I asked him to meet me at Hel Gandy's studio at seven his voice changed.

"No, thanks," he said. "Enough's enough, Miss West. My bones have been picked clean already."

"I told you last night, Erik, something new has developed. You still owe me a favor for that wres-

ting match you put me through New Year's Eve. Now I'm asking you nicely, please."

He hesitated for a long instant, then said, "All right. But, I'm warning you, don't pull any fast ones."

"I won't keep any promises," I said. "Tell me, Erik, you weren't by any chance out swimming in the ocean early this morning, were you?"

"No, of course not! The water's freezing this time of year. Why?"

"Nothing. One more question. What's the fishing like close to shore around Shark Beach?"

"I don't know!" he snarled. "Call the Chamber of Commerce! I'm busy!" He hung up in my ear.

My second call took twice as long, but was worth every moment of waiting. A cracker-voiced operator at the Marine Base had to track Reed Walker down at the "ready room" where he was preparing for a flight. His abrupt tone warmed instantly when he realized who was at the other end of the line.

"Honey, I've been meaning to call you all morning. I've been worried about you."

"Why, Reed?"

"Well, you took Rote's death pretty hard last night. I'd never seen you cry before. It made me feel awful bad. I couldn't sleep."

"Reed, did you go for a swim around daylight?"

His pause was electric. "How'd you know? Yeah, I went for a dip this morning. Funny, you should ask. My nerves were all tied in knots. The swim sort of loosened me up."

"Were you anywhere near the Collier place?"

"No. I didn't go near the ocean. Too cold right now. I climbed over the fence at the high school. Went swimming in the pool. It was wonderful."

"How's the fishing in these parts, Reed?"

"Not bad. Lot of yellowtail right now in deep water."

"How about the shallow areas, close to the shore?"

"I never cast off the rocks. The surf's usually too high to fool with."

His voice seemed to tighten with each word of this conversation. When I asked him to meet me at Hel Gandy's studio at seven, he choked audibly.

"What for, Honey?"

"I want to give you something, Reed," I whispered. "Something you want more than anything else in this world."

"Well," he stammered, "why not my place?"

"At seven, Reed," I said. "I'll be waiting, so don't be late."

This time I hung up first. I waited for a few moments to see if he might call back, but he didn't. I dialed the Chamber of Commerce in Shark Beach. A crisp male voice answered my questions about fishing in shallow waters. He practically repeated Reed's statements verbatim except for one minor addition.

"Lobster fishing is very good this time of year," the man said. "Some people have pots, you know."

"Have what?" I asked.

"Lobster pots."

"What are these lobster pots? How do they work?"

The man's voice warmed with my interest. "They're wire cages anchored in the water. They trap the lobsters and keep them alive until the pot owners show up for the kill. Personally, the lack of sport involved is what makes me against them and besides—"

"How deep in the water are they usually anchored?" I interrupted.

"Oh, just a foot or so beneath the surface. Sometimes during an extremely low tide you can see them from shore."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks very much."

"Happy lobster hunting," he said.

He had no idea how happy my hunt was going to be. I walked down to the rock shelf again and



plunged into the cool water. It was still calm, but now, fog lay on the surface like cotton candy pressed to the face of a little child. The sound of my arms cleaving the water seemed unusually loud.

After a few minutes, I lost sight of shore and the gentle swells grew colder and wider apart. The odds of my finding a lobster pot in this kind of weather were terribly slim, but I persisted in my course out into the bay. I tried to recall the path traced by the swimmer earlier. The fog mixed me up as it thickened into a filmy cloak that was dense as pea soup.

I finally turned around, heard something slapping gently in the swell and tried to locate the sound. The square, wooden-frame box with chicken wire tacked over its sides was half out of water and filled with huge lobsters that flashed beaded, frightened eyes in my direction.

The prospect was not to my liking, but I lifted the lid of the cage and reached in after one of the hard-shelled creatures, trying to keep my fingers well back on its body. The claws snapped, sending a shudder through my whole arm. I managed to escape the pincers and tossed the lobster into the sea. The others scuttled against each other as I reached for a second, their backs snapping and fluttering like a rattler's tail.

In all there were six. Only three had to be removed before I saw a tin box wedged in the corner of the cage. An ugly, partially-broken pincer snipped at my hand as I lifted out the box and opened its spring-lock. Under the battered corroded cover were five wet bundles of twenty dollar bills.

Here, at last, was Reed Walker's missing five thousand dollars.

## SIXTEEN

ERIK FORD was the first to arrive at Hel Gandy's studio. He was fifteen minutes early and sweat beaded his forehead as we stood in the dark entryway.

He removed his topcoat and asked, "What's the new development?"

I led him into the studio where the furniture and lamps were still in disarray. We straightened up two chairs and sat down. He offered me a cigarette.

"I drove over to your house late this afternoon," I said. "You weren't home."

His body snapped rigidly. "Of course, I wasn't. You know I was at my office. Don't tell me you broke in?"

"No, that wasn't necessary. Your clothesline was as far as I had to go."

"My clothesline?"

"I found a pair of bathing trunks hanging there with your initials stitched on the pocket. They were still wet from that swim you took this morning."

"You're crazy!" he slammed, getting to his feet. "They were still wet from the fog. They've been out there for the last three days."

"Your neighbors say you left the house early this morning, Erik. Even before daybreak. The lady next door woke up when you started your car."

"It was an emergency call, I—"

"I checked, Erik. You had no emergency calls today at any time. Want to tell me about it?"

He slumped into the chair and winced. "I—I went driving down to San Clemente."

"Why?"

"I was disturbed by what you said last night. About Rote Collier not being a murderer."

"Why should that disturb you?"

"Because I feel the same way. I knew the murderer was still at large and might kill again."

"Who do you think's the killer, Erik?"

"Wolf Larson."

A huge shadow filled the door. Wolf Larson entered the studio, his fangs glistening in the bare light. "And I figure you picked up the tab, Doc, so what do you think of that?"

"What are you doing here?" Erik asked, shooting a side glance at me.

"I was just going to ask you the same question," Wolf said. "This party is supposed to be exclusively in my honor."

I smiled. "That may be truer than you think, Mr. Larson. Pull up a chair and sit down."

After Wolf was settled comfortably I handed him the business contracts on Bathyspheres, Inc., with the death clause circled in red. He straightened.

"So help me, you're barking up the wrong tree," Wolf said. "He committed suicide. The police proved that."

"Sure they did. But you know, Wolf, I just found out something very interesting about you. You're a rich man."

"What are you talking about?"

"Rote's will," I said. "His lawyer allowed me to read that illustrious document only an hour ago. You not only get Bathyspheres, Incorporated, but Rote Collier divided his entire estate between you and Fawn."

"You—you're joking!"

"He speaks of you very warmly. Refers to you as having been like a son to him. The son he lost during the Korean war."

Wolf Larson bit his lips, then said, "How do you like that? I didn't know he felt that way about me. I always wondered why he backed me so quickly in that business. He *was* friendly, but—"

"Do you think he ever had any reason to feel ashamed of you, Wolf?"

"Ashamed?"

"Don't you think he knew about you and Helena?" I demanded sharply.

His face reddened. "I told you before there was never anything between Helena and me! Rote was too nice a guy!"

"Rote had a movie of Helena and—"

"I know! You told me! But, whoever it was—it wasn't Wolf Larson!"

The doorbell jangled. I went into the hall and returned to the studio with Reed Walker. He was carrying a bottle of champagne and his expression changed when he saw the two other men.

"Honey," Reed groaned, "I thought you told me—"

"This is what you call the triple-cross, my friend," Wolf said, setting up another chair for him. "We've been had—but good. Take your place of execution."

"So that's it!" Reed said to me. "A quiet little wake! Or is it a purge?"

"Sit down, Reed."

"Sure," he said. "Sit down, Reed. Cool off, Reed. Boy, did I have you figured wrong, sister. You're nothing but a damned machine stamping out the crest of justice on every hunk of humanity you get your hands on. Here!" He handed me the bottle of champagne. "Why don't you launch us all into San Francisco bay and float us to San Quentin."

Erik Ford got to his feet. "I've had enough of this. I'm leaving."

I pulled a revolver from my purse and leveled it at the doctor. "Sit down, Erik. You, too, Reed. You're all staying here until I'm finished saying what I have to say, understand?"

The three men stiffened.

"Honey, you'll go to jail for this," Erik said.

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," I said. "I'll have to take that chance. Now, sit down."

The doctor slid back into his chair. Reed Walker shrugged his shoulders and followed suit.

I sat on the edge of a table a few feet away, the gun lying close by my side. "Now," I began, "for one reason or another each one of you fine gentlemen had a warm niche in the heart of Rote Collier. You, Doctor, because you saved his life four years ago when you operated on him. I'm sure Rote respected you more than anyone else in this world."

Erik frowned. "Well, if he did he was a damned fool. A doctor just tries to do his job the best way he knows how. With Rote Collier I was successful. With one or two others," his voice faltered and his hands brushed together, "I wasn't so lucky."

"Yes, I know," I said quietly. "But, with Rote Collier you *were* successful. He must have been proud of you, Erik. Do you know of any reason why he might, also, have been ashamed of you?"

The surgeon's face turned ashen white and his hands began to tremble. "No, why should I? I never did anything—"

"You had relations with his wife."

"He didn't know anything about that!"

"How do you know—for sure?"

"I—I don't. I just—"

"Would he have been ashamed of you if he thought you'd murdered Helena—and two other women?"

Erik bolted for the door, but my gun stopped him.

"Let me out of here!"

"Sit down, Doctor," I said, waving the .32 toward his chair.

Hesitantly, he resumed his seat. I glanced at Wolf Larson.

"And you, friend. What did Rote Collier think of you? He thought of you as a son. He was so proud of you he could bust. In fact, when everything popped you were left with nearly a million dollars. Do you think he would have been ashamed if he thought you were the murderer?"

Wolf picked up the bottle of champagne and tore off the wrapper. "Sure, I guess he would have been ashamed. But, if he thought that, he was wrong—dead wrong. Now, let's all have a glass of champagne and go home."

I took the copy of the Las Vegas marriage license from my purse and tossed it to Reed Walker.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"It's a photostat," I said, "of a little certificate awarded six months ago for valor above and beyond the call of duty."

Reed scanned the document and his eyes widened. "Where'd you get this?"

"In Rote's private personal file. It indicates to me that he knew you were married to Helena."

Wolf and Erik reacted as if they'd been struck in the back with pitchforks.

"Reed!" Wolf looked astonished. "You were married to Helena?"

"Yeah," Reed said, after a moment. "I was drunk. She poured me into a car one night, six months ago, and drove me to Las Vegas. Fortunately, the ceremony wasn't legal. Helena gave the wrong last name."

"That's where you're wrong, pal," I said. "Did any of you gentlemen attend Rote and Helena's wedding?" One by one they shook their heads.

"I'll tell you why none of you were ever invited," I

said. "Because it's my guess there never was a wedding, or a ceremony, or anything. Rote Collier was just living with Helena. That's why she doesn't even get an honorable mention in a will which was drawn up more than a year ago."

Reed's face fell thirty thousand feet in a straight, headlong dive. "You—you mean Helena was actually my wife after all?"

"That's right, Captain. She gave her right name and for good reason. The handwriting was already on the wall. She was on the verge of being ousted from the Collier castle. In fact, in desperation she stooped to blackmail, intimidation and subterfuge. She pitted herself against the world—people against each other. She even went so far as to smash you in Rote's eyes."

"What do you mean?" Reed asked.

"You were in Rote's will, very prominently, one year ago. He thought of you as a heroic officer of the United States Marine Air Corps. He knew you'd fought in Korea. He considered you a son up until six months ago when you eloped with Helena. That's when he crossed you out of his will in heavy black ink. But, I have a feeling he never crossed you out of his heart."

"That—that's absurd," Reed stammered. "Rote didn't like me—he couldn't have liked me if he knew."

"He knew all right," I said. "He was still proud of you—for your war record, at least. I wonder how much shame there was in his heart, Reed, the night he committed suicide?"

Reed said, "You—you make this out like it was a war, don't you? With two or three sides not knowing which way to go. Not knowing what's right and what's wrong. You can't do this, you know, Honey. You can't take three men or three armies and bend them to the point of busting wide open. Because they'll revolt on you, do you understand? They'll tear you to pieces. Some things in life are sacred—and a man's insides are one of them. You can't just cleave him open and leave

him dripping, because he'll tear you to bits before he dies. I—I'm warning you! You'd better stop this right now!"

"He's right, Honey," Erik said, hands clenched on the arms of his chair. "You may kill one of us or possibly two at the most, but there's bound to be one left to take you. And you'll be the person who'll have to answer then. Put down that gun because we're leaving—now—and there's not a thing you can do about stopping us."

"I'm afraid there is, Erik," I said, pointing the gun at his head. "Murder is a pretty rough business. Maybe all three of you have wondered why I'm in it—clear up to the armpits."

"Breasts would be a better word," Wolf interjected. "Lord, have you been endowed, Honey."

"All right," I said, "however you want to put it! I don't like murder or murderers, understand? You sort of get that fixation when you find your own father lying in a gutter with his head torn open by a bullet. And you get that way when you discover three people as self-centered as you three, *gentlemen*. None of you really knew how Rote Collier felt about you. You never took the time to find out what he was, how he lived, or what Helena really meant to him. Sure, he was no angel—who is? And Helena was one of the worst. She was blackmailing all three of you. And you want to know why? Because New Year's Eve was a deadline for her, too. The party was her swan song. Rote was turning her out the next day. That's why he cried so bitterly when we found her dead. He felt guilty. More than that, he knew who the killer really was and he felt so ashamed that he finally took his own life because he couldn't face the prospect of life any longer—with that shame hanging on his shoulders."

The three men stiffened, almost in unison, as if they'd been welded together in some fantastic triple-birth.



"The murderer went to the Collier place last night," I continued, "and Rote told him what he knew. The killer was obviously a sensitive man. He wanted to kill Rote, but couldn't. Instead, he promised to turn himself in to the police and left the house. Accepting the killer at his word, Rote penned a note admitting his shame and then took his own life."

A champagne cork exploded against the ceiling and pale amber wine followed after it like the gust of a roman candle ignited on the Fourth of July. Wolf put his finger over the opening and stopped the foamy liquid. The plastic cork had missed me by inches.

I aimed the gun at Wolf's ponderous head. "You're not a very good shot, Mr. Larson," I said, wiping away some of the wine that had gushed over my skirt. "Another inch one way or the other and you might have been ahead in this game."

"You know," he said, a sardonic smile creasing his thick mouth, "I believe you're right, Miss West. When you suddenly come into a million dollars, one inch can make a lot of difference. Especially if that measurement belongs to the nose of a horse and your million is riding on his proboscis."

"Stand up," I said to the three men, gesturing with the gun.

They rose slowly, their knees bent slightly, their backs as stiff as boards.

"One thing the killer didn't know," I said, after a moment, "is that Hel Gandy did take a picture New Year's Eve which showed the murderer in all his glory. Hel didn't realize this fact until the next morning when he developed the negatives. Once he knew, he wasn't beyond a little blackmail himself. He called the murderer and revealed what he had—or at least, what he thought he had. Perhaps, to Hel Gandy it wasn't incriminating evidence at all. That's why he didn't call the police. The murderer knew different. He came up here and gave Hel a bullet instead of money. Un-

fortunately for him, though, he couldn't find a negative anywhere which proved him anything more than just another gay figure at a wild New Year's Eve party. So the murderer wrote off Hel's phone call as a novice attempt at blackmail. He'd faced more convincing attempts on the part of Helena. That was where he was wrong!"

"What do you mean?" Wolf demanded.

"Hel really did have a negative which would have convicted the killer. He knew a lot about blackmail, too. Helena had been giving him the same kind of business. Isn't that funny? Everyone was being blackmailed by Helena, and nobody else knew about the other."

"What did Gandy do with that negative?" Erik asked, his breath tight in his throat.

"He hid it in a place he figured no one would ever think of looking."

"Where?" Reed Walker demanded.

I smiled. "I hoped one of you might be able to answer that question."

Wolf Larson rose, flexing his big biceps. "I'm getting out of here!"

"That's Erik's line," I said, leveling the revolver at him. "Surely you can come up with something better."

"I came here for a party," Reed said. "This is a poor excuse."

This was the moment I'd been waiting for. The three men stood staring at me. I snapped my fingers. "I've got it! His waste basket—in the darkroom! No one would ever think to look in there!"

I went after a cardboard box under the sink, dumping its contents on the darkroom's slate floor. Spoiled negatives, cigarette butts, trash, and discarded prints spilled out. I placed my revolver on the edge of the sink and poured through the debris. The three men stood outside the darkroom door, staring at me in-

tently. Then, for a brief second, my attention strayed as I picked up a discarded negative and held it up to the green light.

"I've found it!" I shouted.

There was no reason for my yelling so loud. The lights went out in the studio and my shout only dulled my own eardrums to the sound of bodies jostling in the darkness. One thing that wasn't dulled was the thud of a heavy instrument slamming on my skull. In fact, that sound just seemed to take off for the moon. Then, it hung there for the briefest of seconds until it exploded.

And when it did, my head couldn't have cared less.

## SEVENTEEN

WHEN MY EYES OPENED, Wolf Larson was wiping my face with a damp cloth and Fawn Collier stood in the faint greenish pallor of the sink light freshening her makeup.

She peered down at me and smiled, "How you feeling?"

"Terrible," I said. "Where'd you come from?"

"Sheriff's office. Lieutenant Storm and I just arrived."

Wolf spread the cloth over my forehead. "You've been out for about twenty minutes. That was some wallop you took. It raised a lump the size of an ostrich egg."

Mark bent over me. "You're right, I *don't* like your methods. Was this a personal or private inquest you were staging here tonight? I feel very disappointed I wasn't invited."

I tried to sit up. "Where are Reed and Erik?"

"They got away," Wolf said.

"I guess they didn't appreciate your *séance*," Mark said. "They've been picked up, though, and are being brought back for the finale. I assume you do have a closing number in this show."

I looked at Fawn. She wore white gloves and a gray

suit with a faint red stripe running through the weave.

"Where have you been all day, Fawn?" I asked.

"San Diego. I left very early this morning."

Mark helped me to my feet. "She dropped by my office about fifteen minutes ago to tell me you might be in trouble."

I studied the green-eyed woman for an instant. My head still throbbed from the blow. "What gave you that idea, Fawn? And how did you know where to find me?"

"I was upstairs in my room this morning," she announced, "when I heard you ask Wolf to meet you at Hel's studio. I knew there might be trouble, so as soon as I got back from Dago I went to Lieutenant Storm's office."

"That was nice of you," I said, going unsteadily into the studio. "Too bad you weren't more prompt. You might have saved me from getting my brains knocked out. Where's that bottle of champagne?"

"I'm sorry, Honey," Wolf said. "It got broken in the scuffle."

"Too bad," I said, studying his face. "I wanted to drink a toast to the murderer's one last mistake."

"What was that?" Wolf asked, hesitantly.

"He didn't hit me hard enough to kill me."

Two sheriff's deputies brought Reed and Erik into the studio a few minutes after I finished explaining to Mark what had happened earlier. Both men were white-faced and trembling. Reed had a slight cut under his right eye.

"All right," Mark demanded, "which one of you jokers pulled this stunt?"

Neither man answered. Mark bent over Erik's chair.

"So they found you at your office, Doc? What were

you doing, filing that negative you took from Honey in your bottom drawer with all the rest of your mementos?"

He flinched, but didn't say a word. Mark whirled on Reed. "And what about you, Walker? What were you doing down on the beach near the Collier place? Did you dig a nice deep hole?"

I put my hand on Mark's shoulder. "It doesn't matter about the negative, Lieutenant. That was just a hoax to bring the killer out from under his shell. The only thing visible on the piece of film was a side view of plump buttocks belonging to a model named Lois."

"You mean that was just a trick?" the doctor said, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

"That's right, Erik," I said. "It's a shame you didn't stick around. The negative was much clearer under good light."

I took five packages of twenty dollar bills from my purse and tossed them onto the Marine officer's lap.

"There's your money, Reed," I said.

Mark cut in before the captain had a chance to examine the bills. "What money?"

I answered, "Helena put the blackmail bite on our war hero for five thousand smackers. He paid off on New Year's Eve, but the murderer wound up with the dough."

"Where'd you find it?"

"In a lobster pot," I said. "The killer hid it there when he realized he might get caught with a big bundle of marked money if we ever made an extensive search."

"What do you mean *marked* money?" Mark demanded.

"You'll notice a tiny R has been scratched in India ink in the lower left hand corner of each bill," I said.

"Did you mark this money, Walker?" Mark asked. Reed pinched his lips together. "Yes. I know it sounds crazy, but I thought she'd demand more money later, so I marked the bills as a possible jail threat."

"Sounds flimsy, Captain," I said. "She could have spent it all before she asked for more. Tell me, what color is Fawn's suit?"

The Marine officer said, "Gray with a red stripe."

"Then you're not color blind?"

"Of course not," Reed growled. "I'm a jet pilot. We take tests all the time. Now what are you driving at?"

"Nothing," I said, turning again to Mark. "Around daybreak this morning the murderer swam to a lobster pot stationed out in Collier Bay and deposited Reed's money in a metal case inside the wire cage. I saw him from an upper story window. Not his face exactly—but his back. I believe it might be the same one I saw in a movie film not too long ago. Mark, I'm positive I'd recognize that man's back if I saw it again."

"Okay," Lieutenant Storm said, "rise and shine, gentlemen. Off with your shirts and turn around."

Wolf Larson sat rigid. The other two men, after some protest, got to their feet.

"What's the matter with you, Larson?" Mark demanded. "Rigor mortis set in?"

"You don't mean me, too, do you?" he said, tapping his chest with his fingers. "I didn't run away. I stayed here with Honey."

"Yeah," Mark said. "Maybe you stayed behind so you could finish her off. Stand up!"

Erik Ford removed his shirt first. His shoulders were much bonier than I imagined and a wide scar ran jaggedly across his white skin.

Reed Walker followed suit. The freckles on his broad shoulders were so prominent that even from a hundred

yards in a hazy sea they would have been noticeable.

Wolf Larson, moving at a deliberately slow pace, glowered at me as he opened his buttons. "You cheated," he said. "I don't like cheaters. You were supposed to take yours off first."

His back was broad and deeply sun-tanned. Now there was no doubt in my mind that Wolf had been the man in the movie with Helena. He wasn't the man I'd seen in the water.

I turned to Fawn. "Okay, let's see yours?"

"What?" she choked.

"Take off your blouse and let's see your back," I said.

"Honey!" Mark started toward me. "Are you out of your mind?"

I ignored the Lieutenant. "Take off your blouse, Fawn, or I'll take it off for you."

Her green eyes widened with horror and she backed against the wall, arms raised in defense.

My fist plowed into her stomach viciously, turning her cheeks the color of her eyes. Fawn doubled over and I tore at her blouse, ripping the buttons loose, then reached inside to the white silk fabric underneath. One hard yank was all it took to send two rounded rubber pads flying.

Fawn opened her mouth to scream, but what came out was more like the huskily contorted howl of an animal driven mad by the scissoring grip of a heavy trap.

She got by me, thrashing her arms wildly, and ran toward a glass door leading out onto Hel's front balcony. She seemed caught in a blind panic. We started after her, but the sound of her body striking the hard surface caught us all completely off-stride. For a terrifying instant, we froze in grotesque positions



of movement as Fawn Collier kept on going, vanishing in a cloud of jagged glitter that seemed to tear her image into shreds.

When we reached her she was still breathing, very faintly. She had plunged sixty feet down the side of a hill and her face and throat were slashed almost beyond recognition. One part of her body that was recognizable through the tears in her clothing brought instantaneous gasps from the men. Even under the harsh glare of Mark's flashlight it was impossible for them to comprehend.

Fawn *wasn't* a she.

Fawn Collier was a man!

## EIGHTEEN

MARK met me outside the morgue after the medical examination. We walked silently for a long while through faintly-lighted corridors, our heels creating the only sound, except for a rhythmic buzzing of doctor's numbers flashing on numerous overhead call boards. Finally, we turned onto a small balcony near the edge of the dark sea.

"Honey," Mark said suddenly, "when did you first suspect Fawn was really *Frank Collier*?"

"I don't know," I said, shivering from the chill air. "Maybe the night of the train accident when you said you didn't believe Rote had a real daughter. And, then again, maybe not until two seconds before I ripped out those rubber pads. It was such an intangible theory, Mark. The thought gnawed at the back of my mind and yet, as a woman, I couldn't accept it. I guess Rote's suicide note convinced me I should at least try to investigate the situation—no matter how absurd it seemed."

"That's why you held the private inquest at Hel Gandy's place."

"Yes. I was pretty sure Fawn had heard me make a date to meet Wolf Larson and I guessed, if she were guilty, she'd be there someplace near enough to see

what I was up to. When I pulled that ruse with the negative she—I mean he—was able to flick a light switch, hit me over the head and escape with the film. I'm certain he never even examined the negative and just destroyed it, driving straight to your office hoping to create an iron-clad alibi in case I'd become suspicious."

Mark shook his head. "It's fantastic. Fifteen minutes ago a couple of our men found an old diary stuffed in the back of a bookcase in his bedroom. The memos inside were for the year 1953 and traced his movements and emotions from his last days in the Marine Corps as Frank, through his return to the United States and finally to his arrival in Shark Beach as the beautiful Fawn."

Mark glared at his hands. "He says somewhere in this diary that one reason he took the role of a woman was because he couldn't stand the possibility of ever being drawn into any more war and violence. If I'd only had the sense to check with Washington for confirmation of Frank Collier's death."

"Don't get mad at yourself, Mark. Fawn's lived in this town for four years and apparently no one's been suspicious on that count."

"But, Rote knew."

"Sure, Rote knew from the very beginning. Of course! But he was a man with deep strange emotions himself. He had no way of knowing how Frank's masquerade would turn out. At first it must have shocked him horribly, but what could the poor man do? He'd expected a son to come home a war hero, a conqueror and got a daughter instead. Another man might have rebelled immediately, but not Rote. That boy meant everything to him. He never let the secret out. Between the two of them they even managed to keep the truth

from Helena. Having a gorgeous big-bosomed woman living in the house was probably the straw that broke Frank's female back."

"What do you mean, Honey?"

"I don't think Frank Collier had any sexual irregularities; they were all psychological. A real woman prancing around in her birthday suit must have aroused some strongly imbedded male instincts in him."

"I can imagine," Mark said. "Helena was an exotic woman even lying on a slab."

"You can imagine what she was like in the living flesh. Suddenly Frank needed an outlet. Enter Lorraine Reynolds and Joan Lacey. They became friendly with Fawn. Lorraine began inviting Fawn over for cocktails in the afternoon. She was a buxom redhead with a passion for men and money. They probably spent a lot of time lolling around Lorraine's expensive Three Arch Bay home, sipping martinis and swapping stories. Lorraine wasn't shy in the least. She probably told Fawn all the gory details of her affairs and sex life. No doubt, she dressed and even occasionally bathed in Fawn's presence. Then, one fine day, Frank Collier couldn't stand the pressure any longer and exploded from under all his makeup and mascara. He pinned two strong arms around her naked waist and grappled her to the floor. Lorraine was strong, too, and Frank had to use both arms to hold her down while *he* tried to get his *own* dress up. Lorraine must have gone mad at this point. She screamed and Frank crushed his lips over her mouth to shut out the sound. You know the rest."

"Yeah," Mark said. "Same business with Joan Lacey, only she was small and blonde and not so strong."

"He got Joan down on the beach one moonlit night

when her husband was on duty and suggested they go for a nude swim together. Frank went wild when he saw Joan's body, but Joan went even wilder when she saw Frank's."

"Exit Joan," Mark said.

"And enter Helena. Frank discovered his father was about to dump the dark-haired goddess. He also knew about Helena's marriage to Reed Walker. He hated them both with a vengeance, so with two murders already on his conscience it didn't seem too terrible to get Reed drunk and interest Helena in a New Year's Eve ride. They took Helena's car and wound up at the Pleasure Pier before Frank could make his move. Helena got out, probably said she'd walk home and pinned Reed's wings on Frank's—or Fawn's—costume in a gracious gesture of turning Reed over to her stepdaughter. Frank waited, saw Helena leap off the pier and followed her on foot along the beach. She must have come out of the water somewhere near the Collier house where Frank was waiting with a blanket. He took her up the lower side staircase to the study, removed the blanket and—"

"—Helena ended up in the mummy case. But, why, Honey? This time there doesn't seem to be any motive—any real motive."

I rubbed back the goose pimples on my arms. "Frank Collier really loved his father. That was obvious. He would have killed him otherwise. I'm sure Frank knew Helena had hurt Rote deeply with her elopement to Reed. He wanted to get back at them both for what they'd done. That's why he left Reed's wings in the mummy case."

"Honey, when do you think Rote first suspected Fawn was the murderer?"

"The night of the so-called accident at the train

crossing. He picked up our trail when we left the Booby Hatch. Frank knew he was being followed. He thought also that we were getting a lot warmer than we actually were, that perhaps it was the police and not his father or anyone else who was hot on our heels. He sensed I was going to unmask him sooner or later. After asking the time and figuring a train was about due, he drove recklessly onto the tracks."

"Wasn't that taking a helluva chance?"

"Sure. He'd taken plenty before. He took a chance swimming out to that pot this morning. He got nipped by one of the lobsters and bled enough to leave those drops I told you about on the kitchen floor. That's probably why he was wearing gloves tonight. He took even a greater chance in Hel Gandy's studio. The truth of the matter is that Hel had taken a picture of Helena and Fawn together, but the negative was so badly fogged that all it showed were two very faint figures. The night he went to see Hel, Frank probably made the mistake of trying to buy the negatives and when Hel became suspicious, Frank shot him after Hel, panic-stricken, climbed up to the overhead platform."

"So Rote suspected Frank of Hel's murder, too?"

I nodded. "When Rote found my revolver near the tracks, he aimed it at his son and probably would have shot him right then and there if that car hadn't turned onto the road. Last night he faced Frank with the truth. Rote was obviously mad and very ashamed. He ordered Frank to turn himself in and Frank, torn to pieces by his father's accusations, agreed to do so. As he walked down the staircase, Rote angrily grabbed a bottle of Helena's cologne and threw it at this son of his dressed in female clothes. When Frank was gone, Rote wrote the note confessing his shame and then quietly shot himself."

"But Frank didn't turn himself in."

"Nope. He didn't have the courage. Instead, he stopped at the Booby Hatch and got drunk. He probably sat there and thought about his clever plan and how it had all blown to pieces. He'd even carried his attempts to incriminate Reed Walker to the point of marking a book on murder and planting this, along with the stolen negatives, in Reed's bedroom. It had all been very carefully thought out—everything except his own father's reaction. Frank was so drunk by the time Reed and I arrived at the Booby Hatch that he'd even drowned the fear of his father exposing him to the police. He had to be practically carried home. Unfortunately, he fell on the staircase as we tried to get him up to his room. If that incident hadn't happened I would have known this morning that he was the murderer because his dress smelled faintly from the cologne where he'd been struck by the bottle."

Mark took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lighted two of them and handed me one.

"You know, you are pretty clever, Honey," he said. "Frank Collier spelled it out exactly the same way just before he died."

I glowered up at him. "Well, why didn't you tell me before? Why'd you let me ramble on like this?"

He smiled. "Because I like to hear you talk and anyway, I wanted to know if you really had figured the case out to the last letter."

"Figure this one out, Lieutenant, I'm cold."

He put his big arms around me and drew me tight against him. "How's this feel?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Not bad. Tell me something, Lieutenant. How can I be sure you're a male?"

His grip intensified. "Well, for that matter, I don't know that you're really a female."

"Lieutenant Storm! You make the silliest statements."

"And Miss West," he said softly, "you ask the craziest questions."

"Lieutenant, I don't have the slightest idea what you mean by that."

"Oh, don't you?" he said, squeezing me until I could hardly breathe. "Give me forty years and I'll prove it."

I looked at him and his mouth reached down for mine. "Lieutenant, I'll give you forty seconds and then—"

He kissed me and my toes felt so warm they tingled.

"Then what, Miss West?"

I didn't answer. He was a man all right. And I was a woman. And I was glad someone thought up this wonderful idea. It beat anything else. Hands down.

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