



# HONEY WEST



in the case of the  
syndicate of sin

# DIG A DEAD



# DOLL

G. G. FICKLING  
Author of KISS FOR A KILLER

# BETWEEN THE SYNDICATE AND THE SAILOR

The gangsters who chased me into the alley weren't gentlemen enough to let me get my clothes on, so I couldn't blame the sailor for getting the wrong idea.

There were ten of them, close on my heels. I saw a door and, at times like this, who waits for invitations?

I barged through it, into a small bedroom. There was a young American sailor sitting there, waiting. He looked me up and down hungrily and said, "I was getting mad because it's over a half-hour since the woman upstairs took my money and sent me in here. But, oh, baby, you're sure worth waiting for!"

It took me all of a half-second to look at the bed, the gleam in the sailor's eye and figure out what kind of place I'd landed in.

"I'm ready baby," he said, reaching for me.

Now **how** do you start telling an eager gob that you're not that kind of a girl when you're standing in front of him unadorned—and outside the door an angry mob is howling for your blood . . . ?

## G. G. FICKLING

is the pseudonym for two people—Skip and Gloria Fickling, who jointly created Honey West, first lady private eye in the hearts of paperback readers. The scene of the Ficklings' successful teamwork is a modern little cliff-hanging house in Laguna Beach, California. They work at a seven-foot desk against an all-glass wall facing the Pacific Ocean with a typewriter on each side. His is pink—he's the romantic and the fictioneer; hers is gray, "practical and cheap," because she's the sensible one whose forte is facts. DIG A DEAD DOLL is the seventh book about the girl detective with the sleuthmanship of Mike Hammer and the measurements of Marilyn Monroe.

# DIG A DEAD DOLL

G. G. FICKLING



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## **DIG A DEAD DOLL**

*by G. G. Fickling*

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

**TO THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF  
INDEPENDENT WHOLESALERS.**

**AND A SPECIAL HURRAH FOR**

**The Grahams of Baton Rouge, La.**

**The Davinroys of Stockton, Calif.**

**The Sandovals of El Paso, Tex. and Tucson, Ariz.**

**The Jacobs' of San Diego, Calif.**

**The Gingolds of Harrisburg, Pa.**

**The Albums of Vallejo, Calif.**

**The Coopers of Panama City, Fla.**

**The Mannings of Visalia, Calif.**

**The Roufas of New Orleans, La.**

**The Alperns of Wilmington, N. C.**

**The Mortons of McKees Rocks, Pa.**

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# ONE

In the hot airless dark he crawled after me and wound a length of blonde hair around my throat. His body was hard and trembling and sweat streamed down his massive chest.

"Señorita, I am going to kill you, but first—"

Thick hands tore at my dress. I clawed at his swarthy face and kicked until he fell back in the muddy ground next to the arena, groaning.

Rolling, still groggy from my fall, I jumped up, stumbling, toes digging into the soft, foul-smelling earth. Only a wedge of light angled down from a slot above the arena fence and it did little to help me see. I ran smack into a wall, bounced off and fell to my knees.

He was on me in a flash, fingers gouging my back, ripping the dress off my shoulders and exposing me from the waist up. He knocked me over onto the dirt and fell on top of me, pinning my arms.

"You eat fire," he spat. "Fire eater! I like that."

He was a heavy-shouldered man with thick black hair. An obvious would-be *torero*. A member of Zingo's death pack. His breath, hissing from his nostrils and mouth, smelled of cheap tequilla. He rubbed his lips down the side of my cheek rawly.

We were in a narrow, covered corral attached to a training arena for bullfighters, a few miles outside Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico.

His desire to kill me was not something new. There was practically an epidemic going on. This was National Kill Honey West Week in Mexico.

I kicked him in the stomach and his hard eyes softened momentarily.

"I like you to hurt me," he panted, the stubble of his dark beard cutting my face. He reared and slapped me viciously. I stifled a cry. He tore my belt loose and flung it against the arena fence.

"Your skin is so white," he said, taking huge swallows of air as he struggled with me. "So white. I have not seen such white skin since I was a young boy in Mexico City and there was a place where they had only *Americano* women."

He wore tight trousers cut in the Valencia style, a shirt knotted at the waist and a scarf around his neck.

"You are a fool, *señorita*," he growled between his teeth. "You want to know who Zingo is. Zingo pays high for you. Very high."

He had my black sheath dress yanked down to my waist and his dark eyes feasted hungrily. I bit his cheek. Blood spurted from the wound.

"You are like a bad bull," he moaned, backhanding me. "You never stop bucking and twisting and swerving. But I shall plunge the *puntilla* dagger until you scream for mercy."

His name was Juanito and he was a powerful man. Much more powerful than I imagined when I first saw him in the car. His eyes glittered in the faint light. He lifted his body over me, raising his hips and his legs. My right leg doubled under him and the knee caught his full weight as he came down. A sharp cry split his lips, half protest, half pain. He straightened for an instant, mouth twisted; then toppled face first into the dirt, hands clutching his stomach.

I scrambled to my feet and lunged away as he rolled over, one hand reaching for my ankles. He missed and swore loudly, then retched in deep racking wheezes. There seemed to be only one way out of the huge walled corral

and that was on the other side of the arena. Across the arena! I had already been in that sand-covered ring at their invitation. In the huge pale dark there had been nothing but foul odors, the glistening horns and the jarring thump of hoofs racing toward me. I had had to climb the high fence. And fallen. That was when one of them came after me. The one with the thick black hair. They had ordered him to kill me. Only he was planning to do it in his own way, and in his own time.

"Juanito!" a voice cried from across the arena. "Have you killed her? What is all the noise?"

"She dies now!" Juanito returned hoarsely, having recovered enough now to come after me.

He ran with his head down, illuminated in the wedge of light above the fence, a big sweating dark figure, trousers splattered with mud.

I reached the arena gate, gasping for breath, still hurting from the fall. A thought creased my mind as I struggled with the outer lock. If Juanito and his friends caught me again I'd never leave Tijuana alive. They'd dig a nice deep grave and dump me into it. Face first. That was their specialty. How to escape their machine gun was my big problem. They had more firepower than the whole Mexican army.

Somewhere a man called Zingo was no doubt laughing in his teeth because he thought I was already dead. Somewhere my old pal Fred Sims was languishing in a cell, faced with a firing squad and a charge of murder. I had to get out of this.

The lock snapped open and I pushed down the wooden handle which would open the gate into the arena. He was only a few feet behind me, running hard in the soft, evil-smelling dirt.

"Juanito!" the voice cried again from across the arena. "Your throat will be cut if you do not kill her!"



"She dies now!" Juanito roared, catching my bare shoulder with one of his ponderous hands.

I swung the gate into his face hard and he fell back, blood spurting from his nose. The arena was night dark as before, but now my eyes were more adjusted and I could distinguish the bull across the sand-covered surface. I ran into the arena, staying close to the cover of the wall.

Screaming with pain and anger, Juanito followed me inside the arena, hand pressed to his face. The noise he made was all the angry beast needed. Juanito had only enough time to look up. His cry deepened into a horrified protest, but it was all too late. The bull, already infuriated from turpentine thrown on him by Zingo's henchmen, bore into Juanito with a furious burst, hitting the gate at the same time. Both beast and man died almost instantaneously. The black animal hit the heavy door with such a tremendous impact that it flew completely off its iron hinges, toppling over on him. Under it, also, was Juanito, broken and torn.

I waited until they came into the arena from the other side. The lop-eared one, Punta Punta, came first, slowly, testily as if he expected the bull's horns to be thrust into his stomach. His face shone with sweat in the warm night air and the gold charm around his neck sparkled. Then came Luis, the handsome nightclub manager, and Manuel, the *maricón*.

They saw in the pale light the door and the black beast lying on his side in the sand. Each of them issued a sound like the popping of a light bulb on a sidewalk. They did not see me. At least not until they were beyond where I stood in a small circular ring. I made my move as silently as possible, but a slight sound of gravel under my feet brought them around quickly.

"It is the girl!" Manuel cried, in his high-pitched, effeminate voice.

"Get her!" Punta Punta bellowed.

There was not enough time to lock the heavy gate on the side they had entered. Luis was very agile and quick, obviously having developed muscular coordination from his experience in bull fighting. He caught me in the narrow tunnel leading outside the small training stadium. His hands wrapped hard around me and he slammed me against a dirty board wall, white teeth glinting maliciously in his dark mouth.

He laughed bitterly. "You are such a beautiful blue-eyed woman, Honey, it is a shame to kill you. But it is your neck or mine."

His fingers locked around my throat. I looked back in the dim light at the approaching figures of Manuel, a satisfied smile on his squat red face, and Punta Punta, grinning and shaking his head at what he saw.

That's when I thought about Pete Freckle and the day I first saw him fight in the big ring here in Tijuana. It seemed a long way back. Eons. Yet it was only last Sunday. Four days ago. Those days flashed before my eyes with the impact of trampling hoofs thundering over the body of a felled matador. I'd accepted Pete's invitation to watch him fight in a *corrida*. He'd called me at my office in Long Beach and said it was vitally important. But that's all he'd said. I figured something was up. Something more than just a match between man and *toro*. I didn't know the half of it. Then. Now as Luis's fingers tightened around my throat I knew, but it all seemed too late. Pete Freckle's smiling, handsome face swam dizzily in my brain. I'd driven down to see him on that Sunday—along a hundred and twenty mile stretch of Pacific Coast Highway—fronted by rolling blue surf and green trees—through San Diego and across the border. I'd never seen a bullfight before. Never knew the difference between a *banderillero* and a *picador*—or cared. But in that huge, screaming stadium I learned. The hard way. And I watched, open-mouthed, as Pete Freckle, *torero Americano*, fought as he

had never fought before. Then came that last bull of the afternoon. And Pete nearly had him. . . .

## TWO

The bull came out of the gathering shadows into the late afternoon sunlight that streamed over the Western rim of Tijuana Stadium.

He was a massive gray animal and sweat ran down his glistening flanks. The fight was nearly over. This was the *tercio*, or third act. When the matador takes up his *muleta*, a brilliant red cloth folded over a twenty-five inch stick called the *palillo*, and his sword. Holding these in his left hand, he removes his fighting hat, the *montera*, and crosses to the box of the Authority of the stadium, where he requests permission to kill his bull. After this procedure, the fighter then makes his *brindis*, or dedication of the *toro*. This one Pete had dedicated to me, grinning broadly, throwing a kiss in my direction.

Now the bull was near death. Blood ran from angry holes punctured by steel *banderillas* which glinted in his hump. He partially stumbled, hoofs kicking up white sand, as he turned sharply around toward the muscular, dark-haired matador, who stood in the center of the arena.

Señor Vicaro, seated next to me in the Mayor's Box, whispered, "This is the time when the bravery of the bull and the courage of the man receive their greatest test."

Vicaro had been kind enough to explain the terminology and ritual behind the fighting. He was a former mayor of Tijuana and an official of the *plaza de toros*.

A hot breeze blowing in from the *toril* gate, from where the bulls were loosed, ruffled Pete's *muleta*, drawing the

wounded animal's attention. The crowd tensed into ominous silence. A paper wrapper from an *enchilada* whirled silently in the slate blue sky. The smell of sweat and heat and cigar smoke lay heavy in the air.

Pete lifted his sword slowly and cried, "Ea, toro! Eaaaa torooo!"

The ponderous beast lifted his head slightly and pawed the sand, hind legs tensing.

In that infinitesimal space of time the matador, clad in a gold and white costume, suddenly dropped his *muleta*, took an awkward step backward and grimaced.

*Señor* Vicaro issued an oath of warning, but his words were blotted out by the pounding of hoofs and the savage roar that erupted from the crowd.

The bull's right horn caught Pete a little below the stomach and tossed him into the air like a straw dummy. The people in the mammoth circular arena rose in unison, faces wrenched, mouths split. A few fumbling protests lifted. The bull hooked again, raising the matador up-up-up into the sky, a red spray erupting from the horn's puncture.

Pete didn't utter a sound as the angry gray beast threw him to the sand, gashing the matador with sharp hoofs as he backed away from the picador's *varas* which were thrust out.

As the bull's attention was drawn by another torero, three men dashed from behind a *burladero* shield to the crumpled matador. Pete lay on his side, legs and arms askew, gold and white jacket and pants swiftly darkening with blood.

The men lifted him gently and carried him from the ring.

By the time *Señor* Vicaro and I reached the tunnel leading to the dressing rooms deep under the stadium, word was being passed that Pete Freckle was dead.

My heart sank. I'd known Pete since I was a little girl

in rompers. We'd played together in high grassy fields near where we'd been born in Bellflower, California. He'd been the first boy to ever kiss me. A shy clumsy kiss under a tree on the way home from grammar school. It had been raining that day and the grass was wet where we lay. Our romance blossomed in high school. Then Pete went into the Army. When he got out he decided to move to Mexico to live for a while. To find himself. There were no promises made. We just decided to see what might happen. And things happened fast. My father, private investigator Hank West, wound up in a rain-washed alley behind the Paramount Theatre in Los Angeles with a bullet in his back. I took over the detective agency and Pete seemingly vanished in Mexico. That had been four years ago. An urgent, mysterious phone call from Pete had revived our relationship. For one day. We hadn't even had a chance to talk. Now he was gone. In a blaze of flashing hoofs and horns.

"I am sorry, *Señorita* West," Vicaro said sadly, as we stopped outside Pete's dressing room. "He was a good matador. One of the best American *toreros* ever to fight in Tijuana."

I shook my head grimly. Vicaro was gaunt, dark and incredibly immaculate in a blue business suit. He was in his mid-fifties and the flesh of his thin face was beginning to show wear. He ground a cigar stub into the floor and wiped his mouth with a lace-edged handkerchief.

"Did the matador ever tell you about me?" Vicaro asked, surveying a group of Mexicans clustered at the end of the tunnel.

"No," I answered lowly. My mind was retracing the seconds before Pete was hooked by the bull. The strange way he had faltered.

"I invited Pete to perform in Tijuana. You see I am what you *Americanos* call a matchmaker. I am the impresario. I arrange the show here each Sunday."

A man with sullen dark eyes came out of Pete's room, stopped for an instant and studied Vicaro, then spat on the tile floor and moved on.

"Who was that?" I asked, noticing that the man joined a group at the end of the tunnel.

Vicaro smiled thinly. "Carlos Ortega. A would-be *torero*. He was a protege of the matador. Pete has been staying with Carlos in a little house on the outskirts of town." His thin mouth puckered slightly. "I do not like Carlos."

"The feeling seems to be mutual," I said, glancing at the dressing room door. "Is it all right if I see Pete—?"

Vicaro lifted his hand abruptly. "No, I am sorry, *señorita*, but we have a very strong rule against women seeing—" he stammered, "—well, you know what a bull can do. It is not pretty."

I shrugged, regarding the young men in the tunnel. They kept looking our way, faces heavy with scowls. Suddenly, a figure broke through their ranks. He was clad in a matador's costume, silver and gray with red touches on the jacket, a handsome fellow with a deeply dimpled chin and a boyish look in his wide-set blue eyes. He laughed as he passed the group, slapping one of the men on the shoulder. The matador, a rich dress cape slung over his left shoulder, walked with a light airy step and whistled as he approached us. He wore a *montera* pressed firmly to his eyebrows.

"And who is this?" I asked quickly.

"Rafael," Vicaro whispered. "Mexico's top matador. Be careful what you say. He has a quick temper with women."

The *torero's* eyes flashed as he stopped outside Pete's dressing room. "Vicaro," he said angrily, "you were warned not to use the *Americano*, Señor Freckle. He did not have enough experience. His blood is on your hands. Sleep well with it."

"But, matador," Vicaro argued, "you said yourself only

last week that *Señor* Freckle was ready for a match here in the arena."

"I changed my mind," Rafael said, studying me. "What is this woman doing down here?"

"I must apologize, matador," Vicaro stammered, "but this is *Señorita* Honey West. She is an old friend of *Señor* Freckle. I could not refuse her—"

"I see." Rafael fixed cold blue eyes on my face and then let them drift down slowly. My gray sheath, which was cut low in front, got the X-Ray treatment in no uncertain terms.

"You are very pretty, Miss West," Rafael added, after a moment. "Golden hair, eyes like the blue of a warm mountain lake. Take my advice and get out of Mexico. Now!"

The matador winked at me, slapped Vicaro on the shoulder and quickly disappeared down the passageway.

"What was that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Vicaro shrugged. "He is a strange man, Rafael. No one is his true friend. He does not confide in anyone. He lives alone, dines alone, dresses alone. They say he sleeps only with Death."

I looked at Pete's door again as another man came out, shaking his head, eyes downcast. He was an old man with white hair and trembling shoulders. Tears had dried on his withered dark cheeks. When he saw Vicaro he lowered his head further, squashing a dirty *sombrero* over his forehead, and vanishing in the odor of sweat and stale air that filled the tunnel.

A Herculean roar burst from the arena, rattling the beams above our heads.

Vicaro smiled thinly. "The bull that killed *Señor* Pete is finally dead. They will drag him around the ring for fully an hour. The crowd will not go home until he is gone."



"Who was the old fellow who came out of Pete's room—the one with the hat?" I asked. "He had been crying."

"Don Mano. He is a teacher. He, too, once fought the bulls. He taught Pete many things. Perhaps he now wishes he had never met the matador. That is how one feels when a *torero* dies. You wish you did not know him because then it would not hurt so much."

He motioned for us to walk back up to the arena, but I held my ground. Something warned me that all was not right inside that dressing room. Two men had come out, both shooting ugly looks at Vicaro. Pete's actions preceeding the bull's charge rattled in my brain. His performance throughout the afternoon had been superb. Why should he suddenly drop his *muleta* and stagger the way he did? Was this why his phone call had sounded so dire?

I asked Vicaro what he thought about Pete's maneuver just before the bull's charge.

The impresario cleared his throat, then wiped his thin mouth with a lace-edged cloth. "It is simple, *señorita*. Fear got him."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes the new ones, they freeze," he continued, keeping his eyes on the dressing room door. "As he exposes his body more and more to the attack of the horns, the fear mounts. Sometimes, as with *Señor Freckle*, it kills them. Fear, not the bull, is the horn in us all."

I examined his small, deep-set eyes, then said, "I would like to see Pete before notifying his mother of his death. I don't think that's too much to ask."

"I am sorry, *señorita*," Vicaro insisted, shaking his scrawny head. "It is impossible. Perhaps later after he is cleaned up. Even the sight of the room would make you sick, believe me."

I fired another glance down at the group of young men standing in the tunnel. One of them, a well-built youth wearing a brown cashmere jacket, smiled at me.

Then his expression faded as *Señor* Vicaro followed my gaze. Everyone seemed afraid of Vicaro!

I took a cigarette from my purse. "Do you happen to have a light, *Señor*?"

He quickly extracted a lighter from his coat pocket and flicked out a tongue of blue flame. As he touched the tip of the cigarette, I leaned forward so the fire seemed to brush my face. Then I screamed. Long and loud. Vicaro dropped his lighter, eyes widening. The young men whirled in their tracks. But no one came from behind the dressing room door.

I screamed again. This time it must have been heard even in the arena because footsteps began to rattle above us on the heavy timbers.

"*Señorita*!" Vicaro cried. "Please!"

"You burned me!"

"No!"

The young man who had smiled ran up to us, his shoes clattering in the tunnel. "What is the matter?"

I screamed again, throwing my hands to my face.

"She is hysterical!" Vicaro yelled. "Stop her!"

The young man was unable to tell whether my face was hurt or not, and he seemed in a quandary over what to do.

On the fourth scream I hurled myself at Pete's dressing room door, seizing the handle and throwing open the worn panel. A candle burned in one corner of the small space. Above it was a gold crucifix and a sword fastened to the wall. Across from this I saw a dressing table where a photograph of Pete's mother was propped against a matador's hat. On the floor, staining a hooked rug, was a great smear of blood. It ran across into one corner where it had pooled and dried. This was the only evidence that Pete had been in the room. There was a small door to the rear. I crossed to it quickly and threw it open. Another passageway curved around on the other side. Vicaro came

up behind me quickly, eyes lit furiously. He realized he'd been duped.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"Miss West, you have broken our rules, and unhappily I must ask you to leave the plaza at once."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"That's perfectly apparent, *Señor Vicaro*. And just how did he manage to leave?"

"Not on his own two feet, I assure you." Vicaro gestured at the other door. "Now if you would be so kind."

Something *was* definitely wrong. Exactly what, still eluded me. Had Pete really died in the bull ring? Why had he faltered? Could he be alive? The questions jarred me.

I explained to Vicaro that I was a private investigator, working out of my own office in Long Beach, California. He said nothing, but touched the lace-edged handkerchief to his lips lightly. The fact that he didn't register surprise at my occupation aroused new suspicions.

I gestured at the rear door. "Where are they usually taken from here?"

"To a cemetery," Vicaro said.

"What?"

"We bury our dead quickly," he added. "The flies become a problem."

"But you can't bury Pete," I protested. "He's an American citizen. His mother will want the body shipped home."

"I am sorry, Miss West, but this is our custom. A matador as brave as Pete Freckle must be buried in *Villa de Hablo* where others of his rank now rest." He nodded his head sadly. "Now since you do not wish to accompany me, I shall bid you *adiós*. Return to Tijuana again. Soon." He turned and vanished from the dressing room, leaving only the cloying fragrance of his perfume behind.

The young man in the cashmere coat peeked around

the corner at me. I wiggled my finger at him and he entered the room slowly.

"Did you see them bring the matador down from the arena?" I asked.

"Sí, *señorita*."

"What did he look like?"

The young man scratched his swarthy forehead. "He was covered with a blanket. I could not see the wounds."

"Did you see his face?"

"Sí."

"Was he dead?"

"I think so, *señorita*." He stopped and looked around behind him, then swallowed deeply. "I would not believe what Vicaro tells you."

"Why not?"

"He is a *maricón*."

My forehead ridged. "A what?"

The young man's eyes lowered and he swallowed again. "Maricón. You know, one who comes to watch the matadors from the waist down."

"Oh," I said, coloring.

"The matador Freckle and Vicaro were very close," the young man said.

My mouth fell open. "You don't mean that Pete was a—"

His face reddened. "*Señorita*, down here some men must do things they would never do elsewhere. The *Americano* wanted to fight the bulls. He could not do it without Vicaro."

"How do you know all this?" I demanded.

He smiled wearily. "I know, that is all. *Adiós*."

I stopped him in the doorway. "What's your name?"

"Luis."

"Where'd they take him, Luis? Where'd they take the matador?"

He studied my face for a moment, then said, "*Señorita*,

if you have a car you should get into it and drive away from Tijuana now. And I would not come back. I saw Vicaro's face when he left this room. He will not be kind to you if you stay here long."

Luis jogged down the tunnel to where the other young men stood talking. They laughed as he joined them, eyes shifting to me, intent stares fixed on my dress and on the V-shaped shaft of white that tapered down from my throat. One of them whistled loudly, cupping his hands in front of him. They laughed again. A vulgar laugh that rang in the tunnel.

## THREE

It was already growing dark by the time I located a hotel room off the main street in downtown Tijuana. Neon lights were beginning to blink on cabarets and solicitous cab drivers prowled for their evening roundup of tourists to be tempted by dope, prostitutes and dirty movies.

The hotel owner seemed surprised to see me enter alone and without luggage. "You are very pretty to be in this business," he said.

"What business?" I asked, paying him for the room. Then realizing what he meant, I laughed. "Oh, no. You've got it all wrong, pops. I'm not one of those girls."

He was a pleasant looking Mexican with a round face and twinkling eyes. "Then why are you alone here in Tijuana?"

"I—I'm interested in bull fighting," I said.

His eyes lighted. "Oh, you are a *torera*, no? A woman bullfighter?"

The idea had possibilities. I nodded. "Yes, sort of. You

see I've just arrived from Los Angeles and I'm looking for some of the people who fight in the local ring."

"Oh, they are easy to find, *señorita*. Especially on Sunday night after the matches. They go to *Los Toros* and get very drunk. The matadors they get so drunk they forget everything, including the bulls."

I thanked him and walked down to the main street.

I hadn't gone half a block before a slimy looking Mexican stopped me. He chewed on a thin cigar and tobacco drooled from the corners of his mouth.

"Hey lady," he said, "You want to buy a pair of pants?"

"No."

"You got nice hips, lady," he continued. "This pair of pants just right for you."

I tried to push him aside, but he wouldn't budge.

"Real sexy, lady. Here, take a look!"

He extracted a wisp of black lace from his coat pocket and held it up. They were as brief a pair of panties as anyone could manufacture and still stay in business.

"They don't cover much, lady," he said, winking, "but it is what they uncover that counts, eh?"

For some crazy unexplainable reason the panties appealed to me. I guess it was my "next to nature" self crying out. "How much?" I asked.

"For you, lady," he said, grinning, eyes glued to the top of my dress, "only three bucks."

"I'll give you fifty cents."

"Sold," he said, jubilantly.

I gave him a half-dollar and slipped the panties into my purse, then resumed my course along the main street. But my friend wasn't quite finished with his sale.

"Hey, lady, I got an *hombre* to go along with the pants."

"A what?"

"*Hombre*. He comes very cheap. Very clean. He likes those pants very much. He likes also the way you wiggle in the back when you walk. He likes that very much."

"How do you know?" I asked, tongue-in-cheek.

He lifted his eyebrows. "Because I am the *hombre*."

The street peddler was abruptly pushed aside by another man. I recognized tall, husky Luis, now dressed in a gray sports coat and slacks. He took my arm and shoved me into the doorway of a shop that was closed.

"You didn't take my advice, did you?" he said, in a hushed voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw you check in at the Las Tunas Hotel. I warned you to get out of Tijuana."

"Look, Luis," I said, "Pete Freckle was a very old friend of mine. I saw him die this afternoon—or at least I think I did. I've got to be sure before I leave Mexico, do you understand?"

He shook his head futilely, brushing a shock of black hair from his eyes. He had ruggedly handsome features, powerful jaws and a narrow slit of a mouth. His eyes were the color of burnt umber under thick, fleshy lids. He was the Tyrone Power type. Sensitive, but made of steel. I guessed his height as just under six feet. Weight around a hundred and eighty pounds.

"All right," he said, finally. "I think I know where they took him, but it won't be easy, understand?"

I nodded. "Is he alive, Luis?"

He grimaced. "I do not know. One of the picadors, Pedro Valente, said he thought he heard the matador say something as they carried him into the dressing room, but he is not sure."

"What's going on, Luis? Why are they hiding him?"

He wrinkled his nose, but didn't answer my question.

"Have you got a gun?"

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"I heard Vicaro talking to one of his *maricóns*. He said you were an American private detective. The ones I read



about, they carry guns." He reached for my purse and started to open it. "You'd better give it to me."

"Not there, Luis."

His forehead furrowed. "You did not leave it in your room?"

"No. Don't worry. My revolver'll be available if we need one. Where's Pete Freckle?"

Luis flicked his gaze down the street, studying the mute shapes of people milling along the sidewalk. "Do you have a strong stomach?"

I said, "That depends."

He took my hand and we crossed the street, half running in the pale light cast by the neon signs. At the corner a taxi cab was waiting for us.

The drive took about twenty minutes over bumpy, unpaved roads southeast of downtown Tijuana. The cab driver, a surly, bitter-faced youth with a duck-tail haircut and dirty fingernails, never looked around at us once during the entire trip, but he kept his eyes trained on the rear view mirror. I began to feel uneasy when we passed the last remnants of shacks and buildings and were in open, dark country, bouncing and jostling along at a dangerous speed considering the condition of the road.

Luis leaned against me heavily as we took a curve, slipping his arm around my waist and drawing his face close to mine.

He whispered, "One of the picadors told me your name is Honey. Honey West." He pronounced Honey like Boney. West came out Waist.

I laughed a little. "The way you say it makes me sound like some sort of reducing parlor."

"Nothing about you is reduced," he said "You are like that *Americano* advertisement we used to get on radio, 'so round, firm, fully packed.'"

We skidded around a corner and started up a steep

incline. High on a hill above I could make out the dim outline of buildings.

"Luis, what's up there?"

He grimaced. "The slaughter house."

"What?"

"It is where they take the bulls after they are killed in the ring. This is where they are cut up."

I felt a chill run up my spine. "Why are we going there?"

"You wanted to see the matador."

"Yes, but—"

"Trico, a boy who sells flowers outside the plaza said he saw them carry someone out on a stretcher. They put him in the same truck with the already killed bulls."

I winced. "They—they wouldn't do that—"

He laughed in his teeth. "That is what you think."

The taxi jolted to a stop outside a big wood building set back from the edge of the hill and separated from other buildings by fences and corrals. As I stepped from the car the odor that pierced my nostrils was so putrid that I almost retched.

"Holy mackerel!" I gasped.

"Breathe through your mouth," Luis directed. "Pinch your nose closed if you have to."

The driver handed Luis a flashlight, still not uttering a word, and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. Luis flicked a switch, throwing a yellowish cone of light to the ground, and gestured for me to follow. We walked up a cement ramp to a door in the side of the building.

"Luis, this is crazy—"

"Don't talk!" he spat.

He pushed the door open and entered slowly, indicating that I follow. Even with my nasal passages squeezed closed the terrible odor came through. It was in my mouth and nose and eyes. I gagged.

"Luis!"

*"Silencio!"*

He shined the light onto a large table in the center of the room. My eyes bugged. Hunks of raw meat were cut in all assorted sizes and stacked on one end of the counter. Flies swarmed all over them. Above hung the carcasses of two bulls already beheaded and skinned. Blood dripped and pooled on the tile floor. Along one wall were more hooks supporting dead bulls stripped of their hide, flesh coated with insects. Some of them looked half human, legs dangling in the light.

"Luis, this is too much," I pleaded.

"I asked if you had a strong stomach."

"Pete couldn't possibly be here."

Luis moved around the slaughter table to another one at the rear of the room. In the gleam of yellow a white sheet appeared in the corner, spread out over something. I caught my breath.

Under the sheet was a pile of bright, blood-spattered clothing: pink silk stockings, black slippers, heavily embroidered silk fighting pants, a fine linen shirt and a silken sash and tie. Under these garments lay a brightly appointed gold and white jacket. Unmistakably this was the suit of lights worn earlier in the day by Pete Freckle. The initials P.F. were stitched inside the shirt collar.

I whirled, glancing at the center table where the awesome sight of flesh stabbed into view again from Luis's flashlight.

"It—it isn't possible—" I whispered.

Luis moved forward to the table, picked up a peice of the freshly cut meat and examined it closely. Then he said, "Too dark for a human. This is a bull."

"Are you sure?"

"Sí."

"Then—where—?"

He brushed a horde of insects onto the floor and laughed. "That is something you will have to ask Zingo."

"Who?"

He took my arm. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Outside the slaughter house, wind whistled up the slope of the hill and blew hair across my face. Dark clouds were gathering along the ridge of the sky, blotting out part of a full moon. We ran down the ramp to the taxi and climbed inside hurriedly.

"Feels like rain," Luis said. "Hey, where's Pancho Villa?"

"Who?"

"The driver."

Luis leaped from the cab and looked around, holding the flashlight tautly in his fingers. The young man with the duck-tail haircut was nowhere in sight. Luis ran around the building, vanishing on the other side. For a few seconds I could hear his voice calling, "Pancho!" Then it faded away.

I waited for what seemed an interminable length of time. Clouds skidded across the sky, darts of lightning flickered, thunder rumbled distantly. Finally, I got out of the car and cupped my hands to my mouth.

"Luis!"

There was no answer.

Lightning split down through an ebony sky, touching two crooked orange shafts to the ground. Thunder jolted hard.

"Luis!"

I knew something was wrong even before I faced the empty silence that surrounded the grim, dark building. Luis had indicated that there would be danger. Now, for some reason, it seemed to be there, hanging over like the dark clouds, as mysterious as the thunder, as deadly as the lightning.

I bent over and lifted the hem of my dress above my knees. Encircling my right thigh was a pink garter with a small holster attached. In the explosive glare of lightning

I could make out the outline of my pearl-handled, Hi-Standard .22 caliber revolver. I removed it from its silken covering and began a slow circle of the building. Toward the rear were a number of corrals where livestock had been kept at one time. They were empty now. Or at least they seemed empty. Without a flashlight I could see only the upper part of the corrals. What, if anything, hid below the rim of the fences was anybody's guess. I didn't attempt to find out.

That was my mistake.

I crossed between the building and one of the corrals just as another bolt of lightning lit the sky boldly.

On one of the fence posts, glaring down at me with all the ghoulish horror of Hades, was a grim, hideous skull, its eye sockets painted wierdly from behind by the heaven's glow, its mouth grinning hollowly.

I couldn't stifle the scream that split my lips.

But it was more than the skull that made me cry out. A cold, horribly boney hand came up through the mouth cavern and seized me by the throat. And in the next instant, another covered my face with a thick cloth.

## FOUR

I was swinging. Upside down.

Through a bluish-red film that clawed at my eyelids I came awake, blinking into a haze of orange light that wavered in a drenching torrent of rain.

"She's still alive," a voice said distantly.

"Good," another answered. "Let her hang there until morning. Someone will cut her down."

"What if they don't, Zingo?"

"Then she will probably die. Which is what she deserves for meddling. Come, Punta Punta."

They brushed past me, two formless figures wearing dark coats and hats, shuffling toward the orange lights. Then one of them stopped to look back at me.

"She is a formidable woman, Zingo. Exotic body. Mind of steel. Look at how she hangs there. Does it not stir your loins."

The other grunted. "Comel!"

Wind swung me around and I lost sight of them. The sound of car doors clanged. An engine burst into life and wheels dug into gravel. The orange lights swung away and faded as the car disappeared in the night.

Rain streamed down my body, filling my eyelids. Only then, as the curtain of confusion began to part in my fuzzy, cluttered mind, did I sense what had happened. I was tied upside down by my ankles to a tree. In the wet darkness I could see a gnarled leafless branch bowed out from a stubby trunk, a rope twisted from the limb, lashed about my legs. My arms dangled limply, fingertips nearly touching the sloping ground. Blonde hair tangled wetly in the rain and wind. My head pounded.

I lost consciousness again for an instant, felt myself coming back, as blood throbbed in my brain.

Then came the sound of another automobile. Its headlights swept by, an arc of silver-white in the rain, cutting into my eyelids. Brakes squealed, skidding the car to a stop, engine running. A voice erupted.

"Hey, what's the matter with you, Jay?"

Another lifted angrily. "Shut up, Bass. I thought I saw something down in that hollow off the road."

"Saw what?"

"I—I don't know. It looked like a naked dame hanging from a tree."

Laughter broke. "You're drunk. Get back in the car."

"No, Bass, I'm going down there and see what that was."

Laughter again, drunken and twisted. "Jay, they told us naked dames grow on trees down here. What do you want?"

A car door slammed. Shoes crunched on gravel, sliding a little as they came downhill. A figure loomed in the rain, stopped about five feet away and just stood for a second staring. "Bass!"

"What?"

I couldn't distinguish his face, which was partially covered by a hat, but his teeth glinted in the scant glow cast by the headlights. "Something's wrong down here! Something's really wrong!"

More sounds emanated from up on the road. "Oh, all right!"

In a moment, a second man joined the other, a barrel-chested figure in a hat and coat.

"Holy geehosifats!" breathed the newcomer. "It really is a naked dame. And a looker. Is she dead?"

"I can't tell. Get a knife out of the trunk. Quick!"

The man named Bass ran up the gravel path to the road, crunching loudly. The other one stooped beside me and lifted my shoulders. I couldn't speak, the throbbing was so intense. My eyes blinked in the downpour. He could see that I was alive.

"Easy," he said. "Easy, you're going to be all right. Bass! Hurry with that knife!"

Bass came pounding into view, reached up with his huge frame and began cutting through the rope which held me. When I was loose, they carried me up to their car and placed me gently in the rear seat, tossing a blanket over my chilled, wet body.

The one named Jay bent over me and asked, "Are you hurt bad, lady?"

"I don't know," I answered, and passed out again.

A lantern swung over my head, swaying back and forth.



I looked up quickly, shooting a glance toward another light over my right shoulder. Standing over a small stove was the big, heavy-set man, scrambling eggs in a skillet with one hand, clutching a can of beer with the other. He wore a cowboy hat and his thick-cheeked face was unshaven.

"Hey," I said. My voice sounded weak.

"Hey, hey," he echoed, turning toward me. An apron, too small for his large frame, rode clear up under his chin. "We were wondering when you were going to wake up. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hung by my heels. Where's your friend?"

He gestured. "The car. Putting away his medical kit."

"He's a doctor?"

Bass flipped the eggs and laughed. "Yep. One of the best this side of the Mississippi. You were lucky we came along."

I studied the ceiling. It was low and curved sharply at both sides. "Where—where am I?"

"Our trailer," he answered. "We're parked near Rosarito Beach. You know where that is, don't you?"

"I think so."

"About twenty miles south of Tijuana. Or about five miles from where we found you." He scooped up the eggs and slid them onto a dish. "My name's Bass. Bass Summit. I'm a dentist."

"Thanks for extracting me from that tree, Doc."

"No trouble at all. In fact, I kind of enjoyed it—" he caught himself and blushed. "I—I mean—"

I examined the blanket over me. "Was I completely—"

He pursed his lips. "No. You were wearing—I mean *are* wearing—a pair of lace panties."

"Nothing else?"

He shook his head.

"Not even a garter?"

"Nope."

The other man entered the trailer, swinging the door

closed quickly and brushing rain from his face and shoulders. He was a pleasant-looking fellow with butched blond hair and deep, sensitive eyes. He seemed the quiet, well-mannered type of man who usually has offices in an expensive building and plays golf every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon without fail. A deep scar over one eye twitched as he looked at me.

"I'm Jay Hook," he said, linking his fingers together. "How are you feeling?"

I smiled thinly. "Now I know how a lamb feels waiting for the slaughter."

Bass tossed some sliced potatoes into the skillet and took a long draught of his beer. "She just woke up, Jay. Hasn't said anything yet about—"

"I guess you're wondering what I was doing out there," I said. "First, maybe you'll tell me how I stack up medically."

Dr. Hook grinned, wiping a few raindrops from his cheek. "Pretty well. Medically *and* otherwise." He offered me a cigarette, a twinkle in his eyes. "As far as I can see you're in good shape. Except for a couple of raw places on your ankles from the ropes, I'd say you'll live—for quite a long time."

"You wouldn't be willing to guarantee that?" I asked, jokingly.

"Hardly," he said, glancing at Bass. "Not with old Bassingham at the fry pan. This may be your last meal. Hey, what's holding up the grub department? Our patient must be starved."

"Coming right up," Bass said. "How do you like your bacon, hon—say what is your name anyhow?"

"You almost had it!"

"Not Honey?"

"That's right. Honey West."

Jay Hook snapped his fingers. "Hey, I've read about you. You're a private detective."

"Right again."

Bass laughed. "No kidding? I didn't think there was such a thing as a female variety except in paperback books or TV."

The blond doctor drew up a chair near the bunk where I lay, and asked, "Is that why you were strung up in that hollow?"

"Partly," I said. "Mostly, it was curiosity which almost killed this cat."

While Bass finished cooking the bacon, I told them the story of Honey West in Mexico during the past twelve hours: the bullfights, the goring of Pete Freckle, the taxi ride out to the slaughter house, the hand reaching through the skull's mouth. They shook their heads on that last bit.

Big Bass took off his cowboy hat and mopped sweat from his forehead. Then he whistled long and loud. "Honey, if I were you I'd get out of Mexico so fast your head would swim."

I smiled. "Doc, how far can a gal get in a pair of lace panties?"

Rubbing his forehead, Jay Hook said, "What happened to the cab driver and this—this Luis fellow?"

"I have no idea," I said. "They may be hanging by their necks—inside that slaughter house."

Bass touched his throat with thick hands. "These people—whatever they are—don't play ring around the rosie, do they?"

Jay stood up slowly and lit a cigarette, then said, "Just what do you think happened to your friend Pete Freckle—the matador?"

"There again," I said, shaking my head, "is something I can't answer. The bull gored him twice—very violently. What happened after that, I don't know. Luis told me a picador saw Pete talking when they carried him into the dressing room. But why did they dispose of the body so quickly? And in the same truck with the dead bulls?"

Bass scooped bacon on the plate and handed it to me.

"Honey," he said tautly. "Get out of Mexico. I don't know you, or your family, or your friends, or probably anybody you know, but take my advice and get out while you can."

"That makes sense," Jay added. "You sound like you're mixed up in real trouble. I wouldn't fool with it, even if Freckle had been my brother and I was Man Mountain Dean."

"Thanks for the advice," I said, digging into breakfast hungrily. "But there's one other thing to consider."

"What's that?"

"How would I look crossing the border wearing what I'm not wearing?"

"We can fix that," Bass said. "Just tell me your size and I'll drive over to San Diego this morning for anything you need. Where'd you park your car?"

"Across the street from Las Tunas Hotel."

"Okay," Bass said, "after I get some clothes, we'll drive you to your car and then follow until you're safely across the border."

"You're going to an awful lot of trouble," I said, leaning on one elbow. "How will I ever be able to repay you?"

Jay Hook smiled, a quiet smile filled with meaning. "You've already paid us, Honey. We were having a pretty dull time until you came along. Two vacationing bachelors can get mighty tired of a steady diet of beer, bait and badgering."

"You mean you haven't even looked at a woman?"

"Oh, we've looked," Bass said, cleaning out the skillet. "The trouble is they looked back. Some of them are—Well, we lost our appetites after a while."

"That is until we saw you," Jay added. "We ought to apologize, but I'm afraid we couldn't help looking—and to tell you the truth it wasn't entirely professional either."

I shook my head at them as if they were two naughty boys. "That wasn't exactly ethical."

"We're not very ethical guys," Bass said, slipping a

jacket over his large frame. "Listen, it's going on eight o'clock. By the time I get to San Diego the shops ought to be open. What would you like me to get, Honey?"

"I think a blouse and skirt would be the best solution—something simple and unobtrusive. And if you wouldn't mind, I could use a lipstick and comb. A gal has to keep up appearances!"

He winked. "I don't think you have any worries on that score. What size do I ask for?"

I wrapped the blanket closer around me and sat up. "I don't know if they use U.S. sizes down here. Just give the clerk my measurements, thirty-eight, twenty-two, thirty-six. That should do it."

Bass whistled. "That should do it is right! Honey, you're a blonde doll—and not the five-and-ten type either. See you later." He vanished through the trailer door.

After Bass was gone the blond doctor kept studying me, dragging hard on his cigarette, shoulders tensed. He was extremely edgy, the type prone to ulcers and high rent districts.

"Well," I said, breaking the silence, "you know just about everything there is to know about me. Now what about you?"

His expression didn't change. "Specialist in internal medicine, graduate of the University of Southern California, M.D., LL.D., A.D.F.U.C.C."

"Quite a list," I said. "What's that last?"

"A Damned Fool Under Certain Circumstances."

"Aren't we all?" I offered.

"I'm a specialist," he said, crushing out his cigarette. "Like now. If I wasn't such a damned fool I wouldn't be standing here."

"Doc, you wouldn't take advantage of a lady."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

"I'm a judo expert."

"So am I."

"I can run fast."

"I can run faster."

"I'm not kidding, Doc."

"Neither am I."

He moved toward me slowly.

"Now look, Doc!"

"I am looking. I think I'd better test your heart."

"Doc!"

"You might have strained it hanging out there like that."

I gripped the blanket tightly. "I'll report you to the Medical Association!"

"Please do, they've been begging me to make more heart examinations."

"You haven't got an electrocardiograph!"

"Mine is built in."

"I'll bet!"

He stopped. "Okay, I'll make you a deal. Let's go for a swim."

"No! I have no suit."

He reached inside a cabinet under the sink and removed two large hand towels. "Look. A bikini."

"You're not serious?"

"Of course I am. Look, these work perfectly."

He folded one of the towels into a triangle and pinned the corners together diaper-fashion. "Now, slip into this, tie the other towel around the top of you and you've got it made."

"Doc," I said, unable to overcome the smile that edged into my mouth, "that wouldn't begin to cover me."

"Try it for size."

"I'm not Little Lulu."

"Try it!"

He said it appealingly, like a little kid begging his freckle-faced girl friend to go swimming with him. At least, he was providing me with something cooler than a

blanket. And an early morning swim in this heat sounded like a great idea.

"Okay," I said, in that impulsive way that often gets me into more trouble than I need. "Are you going to join me?"

"Of course!" he said, grinning. "There's a beautiful white beach outside and not a soul around for five miles."

He grabbed his swim trunks from a suitcase and vanished out the door. "I'll give you five minutes, then I'm coming in," he warned.

I tried the lower half first. Over the skimpy lace panties they fit none too snugly, but a tighter pinning job secured the ends to my hips. My navel peeked over the fold of the towel. The top part was the real problem. No matter how I arranged the darned thing it still came out lewd as the devil. I finally settled on an arrangement which was about 55-45 in favor of cover over nudity. Whether it would hold for a dip in the ocean was another matter. But it *was* hot and I looked forward to that swim.

By the time I emerged from the trailer the good doctor was already in his suit. He took one look and issued a long gasp. So long I thought sure he was going to collapse.

"Honey, you are the most spectacular creature I have ever met, barring none. And that outfit doesn't damage the illusion one iota."

"Thank you kind sir, she said." I raced down the sand to the water. It was already early-morning-hot, a heat peculiar to Baja California. The kind that moves in off the ocean with quiet deadly ferocity.

The water gave me a wonderful refreshing surge of life as I plunged into the waves. Jay Hook followed me in, but a huge breaker caught him off-guard and whirled him up onto the sand.

While I swam I kept thinking about Luis and the cab driver with the duck-tail haircut. They seemed to vanish into thin air at the slaughter house. Perhaps they had been killed by the two men who left me hanging from that



barren tree. Luis had mentioned a man called Zingo. One of my captors had addressed the other by that name. I pushed through the waves, swimming farther out into the sea. My mind zeroed in on Pete Freckle. Was he really dead? That question *had* to be answered before I could leave Mexico.

About a hundred yards out, I suddenly bumped into something in the water. My arm grazed against it, and when I raised my head and dog-paddled I saw a small float lying almost level in the sea. I lifted myself up onto the canvas-covered block and glanced toward shore. Jay Hook was waving.

I waved back.

He kept waving. It was the way he waved that first disturbed me. Then I heard the sound. The rattle of a fast boat coming fast in the choppy ocean. I whirled and came to a kneeling position on the float. In the next second I saw the barrel of a machine gun poked over the side of the boat.

Then it began to speak.

And I understood the language perfectly.

It was chattering: D-E-A-T-H!

## FIVE

Bullets ripped into the canvas-covered float inches from my knees. They made noises like pebbles being thrown in the water as they cut into the surface. I fell backward into the sea, pretending to be hit and dove as deeply as my arms and legs could power me. Bubbles whirled past my head as I circled in the water, trying to outmaneuver

the boat which sliced viciously nearby, its prow cleaving the dark green.

When my lungs were bursting for air, I surfaced, keeping my head as low as possible in the waves. The boat had swung away from shore and was heading out to sea again, its propellers kicking up a huge spray. Through the mist the words JOY and PORT stood out on the stern. That was all. I couldn't make out any people, or even tell the boat's design. It had come out of nowhere so quickly.

Halfway to shore I ran into Jay. He was as wide-eyed as a night owl and trembling to beat the band.

"Honey, for God's sake what was that?" he demanded, swimming to my side.

"It wasn't any Boy Scout troop, I'll tell you that," I said. "These people really cut up their touches big down here."

"You think this has anything to do with what happened last night?"

"If it hasn't," I said, "I'm running for the position of *Most Unpopular Girl In Town*."

We swam in to shore, heavy breakers pushing us all the way. Once on the sand, I crawled beyond the waterline and sagged forward, breathing heavily from the sudden exertion it had taken to escape the attack. Jay sat down beside me, beads of water running down his muscular face and chest. He dug his hands in the sand and swore.

"They really want you bad, don't they," he said.

"Yeah, I guess so," I whispered.

"Why, Honey?"

"I wish I knew, Jay." I rolled over.

A grin spread on his wet mouth. "Looks like my make-shift suit didn't work out so well."

"What do you mean?"

"You lost half of it."

I jumped to my feet. "Fine time to tell a lady."

"I would have told you sooner, except—"

I ran for the trailer, arms wrapped around my upper torso. "Except what?"

"You were lying on the wrong side."

Bass arrived with clothes about noon. I was wrapped in a towel—sarong-style—when he entered the trailer and Jay was opening a can of beer. We were both perspiring and our faces were red from the heat. Bass got the wrong idea entirely. A knowing smile curved into his mouth, but it didn't last long. His eyeballs lit up like lights on a pinball machine when we described the boat's attack.

"Honey, I told you you'd better get out of Mexico," he said. "You're going to look like a piece of Swiss cheese if you keep this up."

"Maybe," I answered. "What'd you find?"

He handed me a pink box. "Like you asked. Lipstick and comb. Blouse and skirt. I gave the clerk your measurements."

"Thanks. Now if you gentlemen will be so kind as to clear out of here for a second—"

Jay groaned. "Honey, you take all the fun out of things."

I smiled. "And you want to take all the things that are fun. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

They backed out, laughing and shaking their heads. I slipped into the blouse and skirt. They were a lovely soft blue, but apparently Bass liked women's clothes on the sexy side. The neckline of the blouse could more accurately have been described as a waistline. It was a halter top and plunged to hell and gone. The skirt fit like a second skin from waist to hip, where it flounced out rather gaudily. Oh, well, this was modest compared to what I'd worn since last night.

When they came in again Bass gave a low whistle. Jay just stared for a minute, then said, "You'd better go back to the blanket, you were ahead of the game."

"Honey," Bass murmured, "no wonder these guys don't

have any trouble finding you. You'd stand out in a convention hall."

"Okay," I said, my cheeks coloring, "let's cut the electioneering and get going."

We walked outside and climbed into their car. On the way into Tijuana I asked Jay more about the boat. He said he'd only managed a bare glimpse of the craft.

"It was a power launch about thirty feet long."

"Did you see any people?"

"No. Only that machine gun."

I brushed a lock of blonde hair out of my eyes and said, "I got a peek at the stern from a distance. The first or last part of the name must be *Joy*. Like *Oh, Joy* or *Joy Boy*. The origin is port something or other. Maybe Newport Harbor."

Jay nodded. "I didn't see it. I was too busy trying to reach the spot where you went down. I thought sure you caught a bullet."

We stopped at a little roadside stand near the bullfight stadium for sandwiches. While we were there I noticed an old man sitting at a corner table. He was the same one who had left Pete's room just after the goring. I excused myself from Jay and Bass and joined him.

"Pardon me, *señor*, but aren't you Don Mano?"

"Sí." His face was very old and wrinkled and there was a wart on the tip of his nose. "*Sí, señorita.*"

"You were Pete Freckle's instructor, were you not?"

His watery brown eyes smiled thinly. "I teach him many things, *sí.*"

"Don Mano, didn't I see you come out of Pete's room the day he—he died?"

The smiling eyes narrowed. His mouth fell open as if he suddenly recognized me, and his lips began to flutter.

"No—no, *señorita.*"

"I was standing outside Pete's room with *Señor* Vicaro, you remember."

"No—no, *señorita*, I do not."

"But you must," I insisted. "This is very important, Don Mano. Pete Freckle has disappeared. You were in his room when they brought him in from the ring. You must have some idea what happened to him."

His swarthy face became ashen and his hands trembled. He got up from the table and touched the brim of his *sombrero*. "No, *señorita*. It must have been some other *hombre*. You are mistaken. *Adiós!*"

He left the cafe quickly, shuffling along the dusty road, head bent low, one hand to his forehead. I returned to where Jay and Bass sat. They stared at me curiously.

"Now is that nice?" Jay asked. "Accosting an old man when you have two dashing young doctors drooling at your feet."

I bit my lips with the edge of my teeth. "Strangest darned thing," I said, almost to myself. "Nobody wants to talk about it, except me. And every time I open my mouth somebody runs or takes a pot shot at me."

"You speaking about your friend, this matador Pete Freckle?" Bass asked, munching at his sandwich.

I nodded.

"Take my advice, Honey—"

"I know, forget it."

"You'll live longer."

I sighed. "Private eyes have short life spans anyway."

We drove into downtown Tijuana. My car was still parked across from Las Tunas Hotel. Fortunately, I had a spare key taped under the right rear fender.

"We'll follow you to the border," Jay said. "Be sure you're safely on your way."

Since the electrifying incident with the speedboat and the machine gun, I'd decided to take their advice. At least part of it. I was going to leave Mexico for a short time. Long enough to think over my next move. Then I planned

to return and find Pete Freckle if it took a month of Sundays.

Near the border stations, Jay pulled alongside my convertible and yelled, "We'll call you at your office when we get home. Take good care of yourself. And don't take any wooden machine gun bullets." He threw me a kiss and then turned off toward Rosarito Beach.

I drove through the first stop on the Mexican side, after an officer in a khaki suit waved me on. The situation was not the same at the American station. A grinning, red-nosed face stuck itself in my window and said, "Where were you born?"

"California," I answered, disliking the look in his thick-lidded eyes.

He cast a quick glance down the front of my blouse and barked, "How long you been in Mexico?"

"Overnight."

"Buy anything?"

"Nope. Oh, yes, a pair of—" I stopped.

"A pair of what?"

My face reddened. "Lace panties."

Another border officer joined the grinning, red-nosed fellow. He was also grinning.

"Get out of your car," the new man ordered.

"Why?" I asked, not liking his tone or looks, either.

"Because I said so," the border officer snapped.

"Okay." I climbed out.

"Lift the hood," the new man directed his partner.

"Yes, sir."

"Did I hear you say you bought something in Mexico?" The new man had big eyes and a thin mustache.

"A pair of lace panties," I said curtly. "Is there any crime in that?"

"Where are they?" The mustache twitched.

"I have them on."

It twitched again. "Let's see them."

"Now wait a minute," I argued.

He gestured. "Step into the office and remove them. Now!"

"What—what's the matter with you people?" I demanded. "All I want to do is cross the border into the United States. I don't intend putting on a show."

The first man lifted my car's hood and stuck his head underneath. He shouted suddenly, "It's okay, Art, I found the stuff."

The second man laughed slyly. "For a minute there I thought she might be carrying it under her—"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, moving around so I could see under my convertible's hood.

There, taped to the metal, was a little envelope made of clear plastic, and inside was a quantity of white crystalline powder.

"You on the needle, baby?" the one with the mustache barked. "You look like you'd be real hot with this junk boiling around in your veins. Real hot."

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

The first man tore the plastic package loose from its holding and waved it under my nose.

"H, baby. Heroin. There must be enough here to blast the top off six cats your size!"

## SIX

About three hours later, a tall, heavy-jawed man came sauntering into the U.S. Border Station where I was being held. He took one look at me inside the cramped cell and swore. Right out loud.

"Watch your language," I said.

Lieutenant Mark Storm pushed his blue felt hat back with the flat of his hand and said, "What for, there ain't no ladies present?"

"*Ain't* isn't a proper word."

"Neither is heroin."

"I was framed, Mark," I said.

"So was Hitler. He didn't mean to blow up the world. It was a mistake."

"Somebody planted that stuff under my hood."

He surveyed my low-cut blouse. "You can say that again."

"Don't be wise."

"Don't you ever wear a brassière?"

"Mine was stolen."

"That figures." He squatted in a chair near the cell and mopped sweat from his forehead. "Honey, do you have any idea how busy I am?"

"Yes."

"I'm in charge of a very large division of homicide in Los Angeles County."

"Bravo."

"You have heard of the Sheriff's office?" His voice was leadened with sarcasm.

"Unfortunately."

"People are committing mayhem right and left in my communities."

"Goody for you."

"I'm not kidding. I can't come running every time you holler for help."

"I didn't holler. I screamed."

He winced. "I heard you the first time."

"Mark, somebody is trying to put me out of business."

"You ought to be put out of business! I told you that a long time ago."

"A guy named Zingo wants to ventilate me for the summer."



"You're already ventilated. You've got holes in your head." He lifted his six-foot-five-inch frame off the chair and swore again. "When are you going to quit wearing lead garters and start folding diapers?"

"I folded a diaper this morning," I said, half smiling at the grim look on his face. "The only trouble is—it was for me."

"I wouldn't doubt it a bit!"

"Mark, have a heart!"

He had a big one, but he didn't want to admit it. If it hadn't been for Mark Storm I would have been in the soup long ago. He'd pulled me out of a dozen tight spots by the seat of my panties. He had a particular yen for me. And it was far from Chinese.

"Honey, I'm going to let you burn this time," he grunted, crossing his arms like a big ponderous bear. In his ill-fitting, blue sharkskin suit he tipped the scales at twice my weight, which was a hundred and twenty pounds.

"Mark, I came down to Mexico to see a bullfight—"

"That's a lot of bull, Honey!"

"I'm not kidding. Pete Freckle, an old, old friend of mine, took a horn. Twice."

Mark said, "I read about the goring. Tough luck. The papers said he died."

"I don't care what they said. He vanished into thin air right after he was carried down to his dressing room. No one hides a dead man unless there's foul play involved—or—"

"Or what?"

"Or he's still alive."

Mark gripped the bars, squinting down at me. "You in love with this guy?"

"Once. A long time ago. We almost got married."

"Don't tell me."

"Believe me, Lieutenant, under this blouse of cloth there is a heart."

"What, no bullet proof vest?"

"Okay, make jokes."

Mark wiped a pleased expression off his face and said, "You're in serious trouble, Honey."

"I told you, that heroin was a plant."

"Convince the border authorities. They take a dim view of contraband carriers, especially when it involves narcotics."

"Somebody taped that stuff under my hood and then phoned them I was coming through."

Mark lit a cigarette. "That's obvious."

"You believe me?"

"Of course."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" I roared. "Instead of letting me languish here in this cell."

He grinned through the bars. "Your eyes turn sort of green when you get mad."

One of the border patrol officers came into the building, wiping his forehead, clanking a fist full of keys. He opened my cell door and said, "You're free to go. The Lieutenant, here, has vouched for you. He explained the circumstances behind the contraband."

I stared at the big deputy as I left the cell, a chagrined expression etching my mouth. "What color are my eyes now? Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Don't thank me," he said. "Just do me three favors. Stop making investigations. Stay out of Mexico. And buy a brassière."

"I'll do my best to fill one of those promises," I said, winking.

I left Mark at the border and drove back into Mexico. The heroin plant infuriated me. I'd spent three hours in a dingy little cell. It could have been more. Much more. Something like ten to twenty years if they'd proved I was actually smuggling dope across the border.

Once and for all I had to find Pete Freckle. There seemed to be only one strong lead. Carlos Ortega, Pete's protégé. *Señor* Vicaro said Pete lived with Carlos on the edge of town. Furthermore, Carlos was another of the men who had seen the American matador shortly after he was felled in the arena.

There must have been fifty Carlos Ortegas living in Tijuana. The name was about as common as Joe Smith in the U.S. But I was lucky, for a change. I ran onto a Carlos Ortega who lived in a small house North along the Rio Grande. He was described as a great bullfight *aficionado* who never missed a match.

The house nestled along a hill above the river, a squat wooden structure with a corral and horses. I drove up a dusty road to the gate and got out. I hadn't walked more than a dozen yards toward the house when I heard somebody call my name.

"Honey!"

I turned, scanning the hillside, but nothing stirred. Low lying brush suddenly rustled from wind blown across the shallow-banked Rio Grande. The sky was a dusky blue and it was filled with late afternoon heat. I wiped at my forehead.

"Hello!" I called.

I was standing completely in the open, nothing to cover me for at least a hundred or more yards. Recalling the machine gun episode, my blood ran cold. I studied the rutted brown hills. There were a million places where a man might hide with a high-powered rifle.

I resumed walking, slowly, head slightly bent, ready to break into a run if necessary. Being without a gun had distinct disadvantages. I was a sitting duck. The sun blazed on the back of my neck, sending beads of perspiration slithering down my spine.

Carlos came to the front door after I knocked several

times. He had straight black hair and brown eyes and his swarthy cheeks were pitted with acne scars.

"Señor Ortega?"

"Sí."

"Do you speak English?"

"Sí." He put his hand up to shield the sun's bright rays so he could see my face.

"Do you remember me?"

"Sí." He smiled as if recalling something funny.

I glanced across the fenced yard at the distant hillside where I'd heard the voice speak my name.

"May I talk with you?" I asked.

He nodded. "Come in."

The house was smartly furnished in utter contrast to the drab exterior. A white brick fireplace in a corner of the living room was flanked by two cream-colored boucle seating pieces, and a marble coffee table stood between. He offered me a chair and a cigarette, which he lighted, then seated himself at a low, mosaic-topped bar that separated the kitchen from the living room.

"This is quite a surprise," I said, gesturing at the furniture. "When I drove up the road this seemed like the end of the world."

"It was," Carlos said, shaking his head, "until Pete came along. He bought all this and had the other things built in. Of course, the heating and cooking are still by open fire."

Despite its attractive decor, there was something about this place that gave me the creeps, like the slaughter house. Carlos seemed out of character here. So did an old pump faucet that still remained in the kitchen and a black kettle swinging over the modern fireplace.

"Carlos," I began quickly, "when was the last time you saw Pete Freckle?"

He didn't hesitate. "The afternoon he was struck by the bull."

"Was he dead when you saw him?"

"No." He glanced apprehensively about the room, then, "He died while I was in the dressing room."

"You're sure, Carlos?"

"His eyes closed. He did not breathe any more. Don Mano said he was *muerto*."

"But were you certain?"

He hesitated. "No."

"Carlos, has anyone threatened you today?"

"No."

"Don't lie to me, please! I want to help."

"No one has been here, *señorita*, except you."

I stood up and moved to one of the windows. "Who's out there?"

"*Qué?*"

"Someone called my name as I reached your gate."

"There is no one near here that I know of, *señorita*."

I turned slowly, scanning the young man's frightened eyes. "Carlos, is it possible Pete is still alive?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," he stopped quickly and swallowed. "Well, he could not be."

"Why?"

"The holes were so big and deep you could put your fist into them. He took a horn in the belly. You do not live much after that."

"Was Pete in his room when you left?"

"*Sí*."

"Why did they remove him so quickly, Carlos?"

"They must do this, *señorita*, they—" he stopped again, shooting a quick glance at the window.

"Yes, Carlos."

His nostrils flared. He got up from his seat at the bar and moved across the room, the muscles in his face twitching nervously.

"Señorita, you were a friend of Pete."

"Yes."

"He was a strange *hombre*," Carlos continued. His face looked metallic, silver-plated. "He did not live here very much. He had many friends. Bad friends." His voice lowered into a whisper as he stopped half-way across the room. "I will tell you one thing. You find Zingo and you will find Pete."

"Alive?"

"That I cannot say, *señorita*." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Carlos, tell me the truth!"

"Señorita, you do not know what goes on at the plaza. There are many terrible things."

"Such as what?"

"The *toreros*," Carlos said, "they must pay and pay heavily to get the best bulls. If they do not, they may die."

"Who controls this, Carlos?"

"I do not know for sure. They say it is Vicaro. I do not believe them, but they say it is he."

"What about matadors like Rafael?"

"They say they must all pay. The *banderilleros*, the *picadors*, especially the ones who are young and who have only the experience of the county fairs and the little village *corridas*. They give all their pay to be able to fight."

"Sounds like some sort of syndicate."

"Sí, *señorita*, that is what it is—a syndicate. If you do not pay you die."

"Carlos, did Pete pay the price?"

"I do not know. Pedro was a very stubborn *hombre*. I do not think he would. He would die first."

I shrugged my shoulders. "And I guess that's what he did."

"No, *señorita*, the bull did not kill Pete."

"What are you saying?"

Carlos crossed the room to a shelf in the kitchen. He

lifted down a bottle of tequilla and poured himself a shot. He downed this and another before he finally answered.

"It was not the bull, *señorita*. It was the bullet."

## SEVEN

"Carlos, you mean Pete was shot?"

"Sí, *señorita*."

"From the stands?"

"Sí."

"By whom?"

"I do not know for certain, *señorita*. It must be by Zingo's *hombres*. They wait all afternoon for Pete to be gored by that *morucho*, but it does not happen."

"So they made it happen."

"Sí."

"Carlos, did you see the bullet wound?"

"I did, *señorita*. It was very bad. High up in the stomach. Just above one of the horn wounds."

This explained Pete's actions just at the bull's charge when he dropped his *muleta* and staggered clumsily.

"Did Don Mano see the bullet wound?" I asked.

Carlos nodded, eyes flashing with panic. "Do not tell anyone."

"Why?"

"Zingo would kill us. Don Mano knows this. So do I."

"Who is Zingo?"

"I do not know. Don Mano is one of the few *hombres* who has met him. If you really want to know who Zingo is, go to Don Mano."

"I tried to talk with him, but he wouldn't answer."

"Where were you?"

"In a street cafe."

"Get him alone. He can tell you much. Perhaps he knows the answer to Pete."

I thanked Carlos and left the house, cautiously surveying the surrounding hills as I walked up the road to my car. A hot afternoon breeze blew my skirt, whirling it around my legs. I closed the gate behind me, then reached for the door handle on the driver's side. I never got it in my grasp. A hand caught my arm hard and spun me around.

"Rafael!"

The boyish-faced matador stood along the edge of the dirt road, hands cupped defiantly on his hips, legs encased in bright tapered trousers and boots. He wore a gray jacket over a white shirt and his forehead, ridged with dust, was halved by a gaudy orange hat.

"You make me angry, Honey West," he spat, vehemently.

"Why?"

"Rafael does not like to follow and wait for any woman."

"You've been following me?"

He removed his hat and brushed dust from the brim, glaring at me. "Sí."

"You walked all the way out here from town?"

He grinned, showing straight white teeth in a sensitively full-lipped mouth. "I like to walk. It is good for the legs and for the heart. A good matador needs both."

I leaned against the fender of my car and pursed my lips. "Why follow me?"

"Because you will be killed if you do not stop meddling where you do not belong."

"Killed by whom?"

"Zingo."

"Do you know him?" I demanded, hopefully.

"No. Zingo would like to control me," Rafael said,



"but he can not because I am *numero uno*. He would not show his face to me."

The sky was beginning to grow dark along the eastern edge.

Rafael wiped an unpleasant expression off his face and said. "It is growing night. I will ride with you back to town and we shall talk."

I nodded. The matador climbed into the car, swinging his slender legs in under the dashboard. His deep blue eyes flicked a pleased glint at me as I crawled behind the wheel.

On the edge of town Rafael indicated for me to pull over and park in front of a building with a large sign out front. The sign read: LA TITA.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A little roadhouse. I come here often. Let me buy you a drink."

We went inside. Cigarette smoke was thick and blue, and a man in a *sombrero* sat in one corner strumming a guitar. Around the bar, which ran the length of the building on one side, was a group of attractive Mexican women with long black hair. Low-cut blouses and tiny-waisted skirts revealed their shapely young figures. Rafael pulled up two empty stools at the end of the bar and ordered tequilla.

"Now then," he said abruptly, "I suppose you are wondering what happened to *Señor Freckle*."

"You took the words right out of my mouth."

Rafael had stark black hair, handsomely waved and pulled back at the nape of the neck matador fashion. He fluttered those ice blue eyes at me and smiled.

"I, too, am wondering. What did Carlos Ortega tell you?"

"Nothing of importance," I lied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Carlos was close to Pete Freckle. I thought he might know something."

"Rafael, why do *toreros* have to pay for good bulls?"

He sipped at his tequilla, after touching his tongue to a dab of salt on the back of his hand, then glanced casually at the group of Mexican women who stood at the bar. "They do not. Who told you this?"

"Carlos Ortega."

"He is crazy. There is a union in Mexico City for the protection of *toreros*. The union collects dues, but this is all."

"Why would Carlos lie?"

"He is famous for that," Rafael answered. "Wherever Carlos goes he tells people he is a *torero*. He is not. He is an *aficionado*, and that is all."

The sound of the guitar intensified as the man strumming it plucked gaily at the strings. One of the dark-haired women picked up the rhythm and began dancing about the room from table to table, singing, shouting, moaning wierdly through her teeth.

"The floorshow has started," Rafael said.

"This—this is the floorshow?" I asked, peering through the thick smoke at the whirling woman.

She suddenly did a high kick, arms lifting, her colorful skirt swirling away from slim legs. Her toe pointed toward the ceiling, arched high and rigid, revealing a rounded, full-fleshed thigh, tapering up into a harsh curve.

I blinked. "Hey," I said, "she's not wearing—"

"Interesting, no?" Rafael said, huskily. "Her name is Rachel. She is only sixteen, but she is a woman, no? She has a rich full body this one. And that one, too."

As he gestured, another of the women joined in the dance, spinning about the room. She was very buxom under her daring blouse and her breasts strained against the thin cloth. Her tongue darted out, licking over her lips hungrily.

For the first time I noticed that women well outnumbered men in the cafe. They sat in groups, legs crossed carelessly, hands poked under rounded chins, eyes staring.

Many of them wore slick pants and man-tailored shirts. A great majority were American tourists.

About this time the lavender-eyed doll named Rachel came darting behind the bar, hands cupped under her well-turned blouse, heels clicking on the tile floor. She tore off Rafael's orange hat and plunked it on her own head, then kissing him fiercely, she reached over and caressed me. I squirmed back on my stool. The matador came up smiling, wiping lipstick off with the flat of his hand. It was revoltingly red and thick. Rachel continued on with her dance.

"Holy Geronimo," I said. "What kind of a place is this?"

"You watch," Rafael suggested. "You have never seen anything like it before in your whole life. Thrilling, no?"

I didn't answer. The buxom girl was leaning over a table, shaking her shoulders, hands on her narrow waist.

"That one is Maria," Rafael said, simply. "She has a most interesting scar on her buttocks. I believe it was made by a branding iron."

"Somebody branded her?"

The matador nodded. He removed two cigarettes from his jacket pocket and lit both, handing one to me.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Honey?"

"Well," I stammered, "it's not exactly my sort of entertainment."

Maria dropped to her hands and knees and began crawling around the floor on all fours. The view down the opening in her blouse must have choked every male in the place. Except Rafael. He seemed to be watching the other men! Rachel suddenly joined in the fun. She climbed atop Maria's back and rode her around the room like she was a bucking bronco, waving the orange hat, throwing kisses. A button popped open from the action and the contour of two fleshy mounds sprang into view. She didn't bother to close the gap. The crowd cried, "Olé!"

A third woman sprang into the arena, clapping her

hands, leaping into the air, throwing up the hem of her skirt.

Rafael turned to me. "This one is Juanita," he said, pointing at the newcomer. "She is the best of all. Look at the way she dances."

Jaunita did one of those special high kicks directly in front of us and I flinched. She had a picture drawn on the flesh of her stomach and it didn't take much imagination to figure what it meant.

"Rafael," I said, touching his shoulder. "I'd like to get out of here if you don't mind."

"Not yet, Honey. Wait just *uno momento*."

The next moment was what I was afraid of. And it came right on schedule. Maria tore off her blouse, revealing fully the heavy, pointed breasts. She also removed Rachel's blouse and skirt. The customers began to shout and sing. The guitar player plucked wildly at his instrument.

I looked away and grasped my drink, downing the tequilla in one throat-scratching gulp. The onlookers were pounding the tables now, screaming, "Olé! Olé!"

I suddenly felt sick to the pit of my stomach. I put my hands to my face and slid off the stool, stumbling as I did so. My heel caught in a slat of wood and threw me sideways, and before I knew what was happening I fell clumsily to the floor. Right atop the naked women!

A hand grasped me savagely. A roar went up. "Olé!" I felt taut fingers wrap around my waist and roll me over. I screamed, but it didn't seem to do any good. Other screams drowned me out. "Olé!"

I kicked for all I was worth. One of the girls gave, rolling over from the impact. Another fell back, hard. I got a foothold and staggered up, lunging for my stool. I saw Rafael reaching for me, felt my head whirling, the lights in the room whirling, the whole cafe turning upside down and I went right along with it. Kerplunk!

The first one I recognized was Maria, prettiest and most voluptuous of the group. She was leaning over me with a cloth in her hand, placing it on my forehead. I winced and tried to sit up, but she pushed me down again. I saw that she was fully clothed now, makeup all freshened and bright.

"You will be all right now," she said.

"What—where am I?" I asked, shaking my head.

"A back room in La Tita," she said huskily. "You fainted."

"I what?"

"Too much tequilla and smoke," Juanita suggested, bending down, smiling. "You have a very strong kick. Most powerful." She said it in sort of an admiring way.

I swallowed self-consciously and glanced to be sure all my clothes were still on.

Rachel flicked her lavender eyes at me and also smiled. She had not bothered to button her blouse. "You are very pretty."

I stood up. The way they kept their eyes on me was becoming embarrassing. "Do—do you have a floorshow here often?"

"Three times a night," Maria said, flicking the tip of a finger in the corners of her red mouth. She had high cheekbones and delicate eyes. Amber color. It seemed a crime to see such ravishing beauty wasted in this awesome manner.

"We cater to the *maricóns*," Juanita said, arranging her dark hair, stroking the curls with her fingertips. She was the one with the naughty picture painted on her stomach.

"You mean the—the—" I started.

"That's right," Rachel said, smoothing her skirt.

I swallowed again. The way they were looking at me answered my question. They belonged to the same set. There was no doubt.

Rafael came into the room, grinning, walking in that boyish manner that made him look more like a young kid than a famous matador.

"Are you all right, Honey?" He had a gleam in his eyes that I didn't like. I still didn't know what had happened after I fainted.

"I—I think so," I said. "We'd better be going."

Maria touched my arm as the others turned away. She whispered, "I have something for you."

The two other girls walked to the other end of the room with Rafael, chatting between them, hands entwined.

I studied Maria suspiciously. "Something for me?"

"Your name is Honey West, is it not?"

"Yes, but how did you—?"

Her voice softened and she glanced toward the door. "Pedro told me about you. How blonde you are. How beautiful. He showed me your picture."

"Pedro?"

"Pedro Freckle. Pete Freckle."

My shoulders tensed. "You know Pete?"

"Sí." She crossed to a small desk and took out a white envelope. "Pete told me to give this to you."

"But how—?"

"No more questions. They are coming back."

I slipped the envelope into my blouse just as Rafael turned toward me, an expectant smile etched on his pale mouth.

"I'm waiting, Honey."

"Coming."

As we crossed through the main room past the bar, I heard a few cries of "Olé!" from some of the tables and I cringed.

Outside it was dark now, and I had to turn on the headlights of my convertible. Suddenly Rafael snapped his fingers. "*Uno momento*. I forgot my hat."

He jumped from the car and ran inside. This gave me

just enough time to open the envelope and read the scrawled message under the dash light.

The letter read:

*Dear Honey: No matter what happens Sunday, meet me Tuesday morning at Slip 19, Landon's Dock, Shelter Island, San Diego. Make it around 10:30 so I can bring myself back from the dead! Love, Pete.*

Rafael came out of La Tita still smiling, waving his hat in the glow of the headlights.

I tucked the message inside my blouse again.

After he climbed into the car, he patted my shoulder warmly and laughed. "Quite a show, eh?"

"Since I was part of it, I'm hardly a good judge," I said. "What actually happened, Rafael?"

I backed the car out and swung onto the highway, into a blaze of other headlights.

"Well, you fell off your stool—"

"That I remember."

"They tried to remove your clothes, but you got up again."

"You mean I fought my way out, isn't that about it?"

"They liked that," he said, sucking on a cigarette. "They are very masochistic."

"That I can believe. Then what?"

"You fainted. That is all."

"You sure, that's all?"

"Yes."

I squinted at him in the dim light of passing automobiles. "Those girls are all too pretty to be involved in a lewd, indecent show like that. Why do they do it?"

"Parne."

"Parne? What's that?"

"It's a gypsy slang expression for money. They make more than any other entertainers in all of Tijuana."

"Why?"

"Zingo."

"You mean—?"

"He owns La Tita," Rafael said. "It is operated by one of his men, a greasy little pig by the name of Punta Punta. Zingo pays those girls plenty. Of course, as you probably noticed, they enjoy their work."

I nodded. I was thinking about Maria and the note. And about Zingo and Punta Punta. Punta Punta had been the man with Zingo the night they strung me from that tree. I wondered if the message could be a fake. I'd learn that tomorrow. Rafael had a few ideas of his own for tonight.

"How about stopping at my place for a nightcap?" he said, exhaling smoke through his nostrils.

"Maybe."

"No maybe about it." He spoke in a hard dry tone. "I have a proposition to make to you."

"What sort of proposition?"

"One that I am sure you'll enjoy."

"Oh?" There was something strange about this boyish-looking man. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"Where do you live?"

"On the east side of town. You'll like my house."

"I'll bet I will."

Rafael resided in an ultra-spectacular home, on a sloping hillside, amid a grove of poplars and wild flowers. The heavy shingle roof nearly touched the ground in some places, at one point jutting down toward a small stream which curved around the house. He had a Z-shaped swimming pool that zigzagged from a corner of his bedroom, under a wall, and into his master bath. Outdoors, beyond sliding glass doors in the spacious living room, could be seen an oval shaped pool, surrounded by colorful mosaic tiles. The structure of the rambling one-story building was a striking combination of hand-rubbed woods



in an ash-gray finish and satiny steel, both conveying artistic beauty as well as a cool, clean look.

He poured two martinis and then joined me on a divan big enough to accomodate a dozen people at a casual party. He wasn't casual though. Not a bit. He squatted next to me and grasped my hands.

"I notice you do not wear a brassière," he said.

"So?"

"So that shows you are healthy, natural, unrestricted."

"That also shows me what you're after."

His full-lipped mouth twisted into a smile. "You remind me of a good bull, Honey. Always cutting across at the right angles, never deviating."

"And you remind me of a good bullfighter. Never taking a backward step, always holding firm and steady."

Rafael couldn't have been more than a year or two older than my middle-late twenties. He was very handsome, almost pretty, and his curly black hair glistened in the dim light. I got up and walked to a huge block fireplace built in the middle of the living room.

"Your eyes," I said, cautiously, "were more on the men sitting around than on the cavorting threesome at La Tita. Are you a member of the *maricón* crowd?"

He didn't move for an instant, then lifted his martini in a quiet, one-man toast and said, "Perhaps."

"Why play for me, then?"

"You don't understand, Honey."

"What are you, Rafael, ambidexterous?"

"No." He said it so simply I believed him.

"What then?"

"I guess everyone is interested to some degree in sex deviation. Like tonight. The men there at La Tita walked in that show."

"Why?"

"Because it was a group of women. Had it been men

they would have walked out, just as you wanted to when you saw Maria, Rachel and Juanita together."

"It was raw, Rafael."

He laughed lowly. "That was primeval lust. A ritual. A throwback to the Roman era."

I sipped at my martini. "Sometimes you talk as if you were educated in the states."

He shook his head. "Most of my education was in Spain, where I saw rituals that would burn the eyes out of your head. In Europe convention means nothing. Especially in the dirty sections of major cities."

"Rafael, were you ever gored by a bull?"

"Not seriously. A scratch here and there. I have always acted as my own doctor."

"Why?"

"You saw what happened to Pete Freckle. He took the horns. Full. You don't live long that way. But you can live."

"How?"

"You must have great knowledge of the body, Honey. Where the blood supply flows, how best to close off the veins and arteries."

"Do you suppose, Pete might possibly—"

"That's what I want to know, too." He patted my shoulder tenderly. "That is what my proposition is about."

"What do you mean?"

A hurt look came into his eyes. He dropped his hands at his sides and grimaced. "Find Pete Freckle!"

"But that's what I've been trying to do."

He crossed to a desk and scribbled something with a pen, then brought it back to me. My eyes widened. It was a check for five hundred dollars to be drawn against a bank in San Diego, and it was made out in my name.

"What's this for?" I demanded.

"You are a private detective. You will need money."

"But—"

"I want you to remain here in Mexico until Pete is found. I am hiring you to locate him, dead or alive."

"But—"

"Don't ask me any other questions. There will be five hundred more for you if you bring him to me alive." A bitter look of grief seized him and he turned away.

"Rafael—"

"Please go now," he stammered, head bent, shoulders trembling slightly.

I thought about the message tucked in my blouse, thinking too about Maria and those girls sprawled on that dirty floor. Somehow nothing made sense. Not Pete's disappearance. Nor the note. Nor Rafael's sudden interest in the missing matador.

I stared at the *torero's* back for a moment, then turned and walked down a corridor leading to the front door, my heels clattering on slabs of grayish-blue slate. Outside stars shone in a savagely black sky. I crossed a narrow bridge to my car and climbed inside.

## EIGHT

There was a boat waiting for me at Shelter Island the next morning, a sleek-looking cabin cruiser with a white hull and a husky, bare-chested skipper named Link Rafferty.

"Hi, there," he called, as I came down off Langdon's Dock onto Slip 19. "You Honey West?"

I nodded. He introduced himself and said, "I've been waiting all morning, what's kept you?"

"My message said ten-thirty."

"Oh." His forehead ridged. "They didn't give me the

exact time you were expected. I sort of figured you'd want to get started early."

"Started?" I said. "For where?"

"Catalina Island. Those were my instructions."

"From whom?"

He cocked his sailing cap back and said, "The Langdons. They're my agents. When any charter jobs come in they usually steer them my way if I'm available." He gave me a once-over run with his eyes and added, "I'm sure glad I was available this trip."

"Do you have any idea who hired you?"

"Nope."

He climbed into the stern of the boat and began loosening one of the lines. "You check with Mr. Langdon. He's in the main office. My orders are to take you to the Isthmus at Catalina. You're supposed to meet someone there and then be returned to Shelter Island. If we don't get moving soon this'll be an all-night trip."

I checked with Mr. Langdon in the office. He said a man had made the charter over the telephone the day before, refusing to give any name except Honey West. A special messenger had arrived shortly afterward with money covering the trip. On my way back to Slip 19, I argued with myself over the possibility that this was a trick. It wasn't possible Pete Freckle could go to such lengths to effect a meeting with me if he were so badly injured. Then again if Carlos Ortega was the liar Rafael claimed there might not have been a bullet. And maybe Pete's injuries weren't as severe as they appeared from a box high in the stadium. In any event someone was awfully anxious to meet me at the Isthmus at Catalina. If it were Pete Freckle, or one of his friends, I'd be making a big mistake if I didn't go.

We shoved off from Slip 19 by eleven o'clock. The sun was brilliant in a cloudless sky and a warm breeze blew in off the water. We nosed out of the harbor, put the city

of San Diego at our stern and cut around Point Loma into the open sea.

Earlier I'd cashed Rafael's check and purchased a new Hi-standard .22 revolver in National City on my way up from Tijuana. I had also bought a bathing suit, a small handbag and a brassière. The bra and revolver I tucked into the bag. It was such a beautiful day I decided to wear the swim suit under my skirt and blouse.

After we cleared the harbor I stripped off my outer clothing and relaxed near the stern. I wasn't down five minutes before a loud whistle erupted above the roar of the boat's engine. I sat up quickly. Link Rafferty was bent over the wheel, head turned toward me, a knowing smile on his broad lips.

"Hey," he shouted. "How about giving me a hand."

"With what?"

"Steering this tub. It's a long way to Catalina."

"Okay."

I joined him in the wheelhouse. He was a big brute, about six-foot-six, two hundred and fifty pounds. Corn-colored hair slanted from under his cap and beads of perspiration stood out on a well-tanned face and chest.

When I took the wheel, he lit a cigarette and stuck it in my mouth, then lit one for himself.

"What's the mystery all about?" he asked, rubbing his chin.

"What mystery?"

"Well, you seem surprised to be going to Catalina. You apparently don't know who you're meeting there. And you don't seem to know who made this charter for you."

"That's the way my life goes."

"What are you, somebody's long-lost heiress or something?"

"No. I'm a private investigator."

"You're kidding?"

"Sometimes I wish I were. My father was killed in this business. Ever hear of Hank West?"

Link snapped his fingers. "Sure. I remember reading about him in a Sunday supplement one time. He was one of the real old-timers. Used to pack a rod in the handle of his cane."

"That's right."

"He solved over a thousand cases, didn't he?"

"Almost," I said, remembering the fatal night somebody caught Hank West from behind. "There was one he didn't solve. His own murder."

"Yeah, I read about that, too. In an alley, wasn't it?"

I nodded dismally. "Behind a theater in downtown Los Angeles. It was raining that night. He fell in the gutter—"

"So you've taken over the business?"

"Sort of." I rubbed my eyes. "I started out looking for dad's murderer. I've spent five years without any luck. Maybe one of these days though—"

"Perhaps today is the day," Link said, inhaling smoke. "A mysterious charter to Catalina. What could be better?"

I patted his arm and grinned. "Now don't go amateur detective on me, skipper. You're the pilot of this cruise and let's not forget it."

He saluted and said, "Aye, aye sir. Any further orders, sir?"

"Yes, tell me where you got the name Link?"

He smiled broadly, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Well, you see us Raffertys are as Irish as kidney stew. In fact, until I came along there wasn't a blonde or dark-haired one in the bunch. No sir, they were all as red as an Irish sunset. Well, then up popped old Number Six. That's me. And lo and behold, he had blond hair and blue eyes. Well, my father, Joseph O'Leary Murphy Rafferty the Fourth said to his good wife, 'It must be the missing link.' And so it was until this day, Link Rafferty. Of

course, my real name is Joseph O'Leary Murphy Rafferty the Fifth."

"You mean those first five were all girls?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so. Can you imagine growing up with five red-headed sisters, and being the baby of the family."

I scanned his huge frame. "Some baby you wound up being."

He leaned against the bulkhead, brushing against my shoulder. "I'd better warn you, Honey, I've been spoiled rotten. Got everything I've ever wanted."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

Suddenly the engine began missing below us. It popped, sputtered, popped again and then quit completely.

"What the devil?" Link said, lifting up twin floor panels to reveal the motor. "This thing has been running nothing but smooth for the last month and a half. I just had it overhauled."

I didn't suspect sabotage until Link finished his examination, then it struck home hard.

"Some dirty louse poured sand into our gas tank, Honey. It's fouled up the whole works. We're stuck."

"You mean you can't make it work at all?"

"That's right. I'll have to radio for help."

He climbed down into the main cabin to his ship-to-shore receiver and began calling, "Mayday. Hello. Mayday to anyone! Come in, please."

Then Link swore. "Why that dirty son of a—"

"What's the matter?"

"My radio's busted. Somebody's yanked out a whole bunch of wires."

"Don't you keep your cabin locked?"

"Sure. But this morning I found the lock jimmied. Nothing was missing, so I didn't think any more about it. I didn't bother to check the radio. What is this, Honey? What's going on?"

"I don't know, Link. I honestly don't know."

I moved to the stern of the boat and surveyed the water. The land had disappeared behind us and we were in open sea. Nothing moved anywhere, except the rising and dropping waves. Link joined me after a minute.

"Looks like we're going to have to sit this one out," he said, disgruntledly. "You play gin."

"No, but I drink it."

"So do I. You want a shot?"

"Not right now. I'm worried, Link. Really worried."

"What about?"

I told him about the episode at Rosarito Beach when the power launch came out of nowhere spitting machine gun bullets. I told him, too, about Pete Freckle, and the Tijuana bull ring, and the night I was left hanging from a tree."

Link shook his head. "Holy smokes, you mean to tell me you're mixed up with a Mexican bullfight syndicate?"

"Something like that."

His eyes searched the barren sea. "You don't think they'll—?"

"I don't think anything, Link," I said, abruptly. "They went to a lot of trouble to sabotage your boat and get me out here. So what do you think?"

The muscles in his jaws rippled. "You got a gun?"

"Yes. How about you?"

He nodded. "An old Daisy air rifle. It won't do much, except maybe scare somebody."

"These people don't seem to scare easily, Link."

"So I gather."

He stood up slowly, walked to the cabin and returned with a pair of field glasses. "It might be someone else will come along before—"

He placed the glasses to his eyes and made a sweeping arc, covering the water from stern to bow on both sides



of the boat. "Nothing in sight as yet. At least, we should have some warning."

"I'm sorry you had to become mixed up in this, Link."

He grinned out of the side of his mouth. He was itching for a fair fight. Of course, we both realized if a fight came it wasn't going to be anywhere near fair. These people didn't play that way.

We waited two hours. The sun blazed down and the boat rocked gently in a calm sea. A slight breeze came up and began blowing us in a northwesterly direction. We had taken to the deck, huddled in one corner where we were afforded good vision on all sides. Link brought out his air rifle, one of those pump handle B-B guns, and I removed my .22 revolver from the handbag. He poured us each a shot of gin.

"Thank you kindly, sir," I said. "This is better than playing it. Maybe this'll relax my nerves."

He lifted his glass. "Cheers."

The afternoon began to wear on. So did the bottle of gin. The wind became more intense, blowing us farther out to sea.

After about our eighth round, Link mumbled, "Hey, Honey, maybe that was just a prowler, the one who poured the sand in our gas tank."

"Maybe." The horizon was beginning to slip and slide in and out of focus. My nerves were so relaxed I couldn't feel them any more. I blinked. "Hey, Link, you know what?"

"What?"

"I think I'm intoxicated."

"No kidding. You know what?"

"What?"

"I'm drunk."

"What—what are we going to do—if those bogey men show up?"

Link grinned sheepishly. "We'll go 'Bool' and scare 'em

away. Hey, Honey, I like you. You—you're a real man's woman."

"What's that?"

"A woman who's got everything. Brains, body, personality."

"I got a birthmark, too."

"Where?"

"Right here on my—" I stopped for a second. "—Thigh."

Link rubbed his face drunkenly. "Why—why'd you pause like that?"

"'Cause thigh is a—a sexy word."

"If it belongs to you it's sexy. Hey, I see the birthmark."

He peered at my right leg. The mark is on the inside of my thigh. Rather high up and shaped like a crescent moon.

"Say, that—that's real nice," he managed.

I grinned. "You sound like you're appraising a new car or something."

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just—well, what can you say about a birthmark—except—well, it's nice."

"You could have said cute."

"Yeah." He slipped one of his thick arms around me and lifted me onto his lap. "You're cute all over, Honey."

"Easy, Link. How about another drink?"

"No more drinks for me, or I'll be awash. Brother! Next time I wait with you for pirates to raid us, remind me to bring along a straw."

His lips brushed against mine and held there. My whole body went rigid. His hands moved up under my breasts.

"Link!"

"What?"

"Easy."

"That's my middle name."

He lowered one of the straps on my swim suit.

"Link!"

"What?"

"Easy."

"You said that."

He lowered the other one and things began to give a little along the front side. I lifted my arms.

"Hey!" I broke away from him.

"Easy, Honey."

"Easy, hell!" I said.

I broke away and made for the cabin, hiking up the front of the suit. Fun's fun, but no free shows. . . .

That's when I heard it. Overhead. Bearing in our direction.

I swung the straps up over my shoulders and started toward the deck.

"Link!"

I saw him reach for my revolver and straighten up. That's all I saw.

In the next instant, a hail of bullets struck the stern of the boat, puncturing the deck with their force.

## NINE

When I reached the deck, Link Rafferty was lying face down, arms crumpled under him, a trail of blood zig-zagging across the boards.

I looked up. The airplane was circling for another attack. It was a single-engine Beechcraft with pale blue wings and a red stripe down the tail.

"Link!"

He didn't answer. I felt his pulse. It was pounding. I

dragged him across the deck and down the steps into the cabin.

"Link!"

He groaned, but didn't open his eyes.

I rolled him on his back, examining two gaping holes in his right shoulder that had been cut by the bullets. He didn't seem to have any other injuries. I found a first aid kit and dumped sulfa on the wounds.

About that time the plane made its second pass. Bullets smashed into the wheelhouse above my head, shattering window glass. One slug passed through a bulkhead behind me, narrowly missing my right arm. The chatter of the machine gun subsided again as the plane swooped on by, engine groaning.

I dashed up on deck and grabbed my revolver. The .22 seemed like a toy next to the airplane's weapon, but I returned a shot anyway. From my vantage point on deck, I could see two figures inside the Beechcraft; one held a machine gun, its snout partially poked out a window.

I returned to the cabin and taped gauze layers over Link's wounds. He finally opened his eyes, blinked and closed them again.

"What happened?" he asked, through his teeth.

"An airplane," I said. "Beechcraft. They have a machine gun aboard."

"Holy smokes, is that what hit me? It felt like a truck. Knocked the wind right out of me."

"You're lucky," I said. "With all the lead they're throwing you might have wound up a sieve. They did hit you in the shoulder. Twice."

The airplane's engine growled. So did the machine gun. The wheelhouse practically flew apart. Bullets whizzed past my head, ramming into a cabinet. I dropped flat beside Link.

"They're going to sink us," he said softly.

"Could they do that?" I demanded.

"Sure, if they put enough holes below the waterline."

"They seem more anxious to put a few holes in us," I said.

The plane made two more passes. On both occasions bullets narrowly missed us in the cabin. It was a miracle that I escaped unscathed. When we heard no more sound, I ventured out on deck and examined the sky.

"They're gone," I called down the steps to Link. "They must have figured they got us."

"Either that," Link managed, "or they ran out of ammunition. They tossed an awful lot of lead. My boat'll never be the same again."

"Neither will you," I said, "if we don't get you to a doctor."

I scanned the horizon with field glasses, hopefully searching for some smoke or a sail. There was nothing in sight. I didn't tell Link. He was still bleeding pretty badly.

An hour later a small craft noticed the distress flag that Link had run up and came to our rescue. They called the Coast Guard on their radio and inside of another forty minutes a white hull appeared on the horizon, smoke belching from a single stack. They took Link aboard on a stretcher and put a tow rope onto his boat. A doctor on the cutter examined Link's wounds immediately and passed word on to me that they were not overly serious.

We headed for Los Angeles harbor, arriving after dark. On the dock, waiting to greet me, was a familiar figure in a dark blue suit and battered felt hat. Lieutenant Mark Storm.

"Hello, Lieutenant," I said, as I came down off the gangplank.

He grimaced, shook his head and walked toward me. "Honey, as soon as I received the report there was a blonde woman aboard this boat that was shot up, I somehow knew it was you."

I nodded. "I get around, Lieutenant."

He took a whiff of me and said, "Have you been drinking?"

"*Oso Negro*," I said.

"*Oso* what?"

"*Oso Negro*. Black Bear Gin. It's made in Mexico. We had a few drinks while we were dodging bullets."

"I wouldn't doubt it a bit," Mark said.

They put Link Rafferty into an ambulance and took him to a nearby emergency hospital. At Lieutenant Storm's insistence, I accompanied him to Sheriff's headquarters. He didn't waste words when he got me into his office.

"Now then," he began, "who was flying that airplane?"

"Steve Canyon."

"Don't be funny, Honey!"

"How should I know who was flying it?"

He paced around the room a couple of times, fuming silently, punching dents into his hat. Then, jabbing an index finger at me, he roared, "I get you out of a heroin rap one day and the next thing I know you're up to your armpits in trouble again and getting your head shot off on the high seas. What goes with you?"

"Mark, somebody's after my little pink hide. I told you that. They want to nail me to the wall before I can find Pete Freckle."

"Well, is he dead or isn't he?"

I shrugged, adjusting the skirt and blouse I'd changed into aboard the Coast Guard cutter. "That's still the big question. I've been hired by Rafael, Mexico's number one bullfighter, to come up with an answer. I'm liable to come up with a death certificate first—my own."

"What'd the airplane look like?"

"It was a Beechcraft. Fairly new model. Blue wings with a red stripe on the tail."

"Did you get its identification number?"

"Mark, I was lucky to stay alive with all the lead they

were pushing. I had only one glimpse of her and by that time she was too far away to pick out any numbers."

"Do you think the plane was from Mexico?"

"I have a hunch it was. Compliments of Zingo and Company."

"What's your next move?"

"I'm crossing the border again. There's an old *torero* instructor named Don Mano who may have the answer."

Mark groaned. "Next time they'll probably come at you with a tank."

"Or an H-bomb."

"Get out of this, Honey! You're taking far too many chances. Down there in Mexico you haven't a bit of protection. Once they get their hands on you, they can do anything—including—"

"Including what?"

"You know what. They could hang you by your heels and—"

"They've already done that."

"What?"

"My first night in Tijuana. I went looking for Pete and wound up hanging from a tree a few miles from Rosarito Beach. To top it off they'd stripped me of my clothes. All except a brief pair of underpants."

Mark slammed his fist on the desk. "Damn you, Honey! I think you enjoy that sort of thing."

"Don't be silly, Lieutenant!"

"I'm not! You seem to be naked more times than you're clothed. What kind of racket are you running?"

"Sort of a lethal brand of strip poker." I started for the door. "How about a lift to the *Press-Telegram* building. I want to talk to Fred Sims."

"What about?"

"None of your business."

He cast a withering glance at me. Then, belligerently, his chin out, he followed me through the door.

Fred was seated at his desk when I came into his office. He had a fistful of darts and was tossing them at a press photograph of a fat lady bent over tying a shoe lace. He flicked his steel-gray eyes at me and went on about his business of deflating the photograph.

"Well, well," Fred muttered through his teeth. "If it isn't Madame Titanic, the unsinkable private eyeful."

"So, you got the news," I said.

"Madame," Fred continued, planting a dart squarely on the stern of the fat lady, "we get the news first, right and always. And if we don't get it, we make our own."

Fred was a self-styled humorist. The only time he really ever smiled was at a burial or disaster. He had become this way during the war along the front lines at Bastogne. Somebody shot a leg out from under him. He was so mad about it he hobbled six hundred yards through three German machine gun nests, wiping them all out. The word was he laughed every time he pulled the trigger. He'd never laughed since.

"I want you to do me a favor, Fred."

"Anything for the madame, short of murder. And maybe even that if the price is right."

"Do you have any information on a bullfight syndicate operating in Tijuana?"

"Dope, dames and devices, these I know about. The other—this so-called syndicate—I never heard of."

"It could be there's no such thing, but can you find out for me? Through your ingenious channels?"

"Madame—" He tossed another dart squarely into the fat lady's posterior. "I will make every effort to assist you."

"Also will you check out a character named Zingo, owner of a fabulous queer joint on the outskirts of Tijuana."

"Name?"

"La Tita."

"Ah, yes, this joint I am familiar with. They do the



scramble egg treatment on the floor to the delight of all onlookers. This kind of entertainment warms the cockles of my heart."

I nodded. "Also, Rafael, Mexico's top matador."

"Olé!" Fred tossed his last dart and got up, bracing himself on his cane. "I am acquainted with this fellow, too. He has the nerve of steel. The heart of a lion. He looks like a boy and fights like a giant."

"That's the man."

"There are stories he lives in a house with three swimming pools."

"One of those is an over-sized bath tub."

"Have you tried it for size, Honey?" He winked.

"No, but I'm planning to. How about a lift out to my place?"

He brushed at his straight brown hair and said, "Okay, but I'll warn you right now. I expect to drink all your Scotch and sleep the night on your couch."

"It's a deal," I said. "I'll appreciate the company."

It was nearly midnight by the time we arrived at my apartment near Alamitos Bay. Fred parked his car in the alley and we walked around to the front steps.

Suddenly I got the feeling all was not well. I caught Fred's arm and pushed him against a hedge along the side of the building.

"Honey," he quipped, "this is so sudden. I didn't know you cared."

"I don't, you dope. Somebody's on my front balcony."

"How do you know? You can't see up there from here."

"Just have a feeling."

"Where do you get these feelings?"

"Don't make jokes. These guys carry around machine guns like kids with lollipops. You want to be talking out of the other side of your face?"

"Come to think of it, no. Let's spend the night at my place."

I removed the .22 from my handbag and stepped out onto the sidewalk. From there I could catch a view of the balcony. Except for a few harmless shadows, cast by patio furniture, it seemed deserted. I glanced at Fred's thin face.

"I guess I was wrong. Come on."

Fred grunted, picking thorns from the hedge out of his suit. "You and your feelings."

I walked up the steps slowly, still not convinced everything was all right. Fred clanked after me, his cane rattling sharply on the stones. At the front door, I removed my key from its hiding place inside the porch light and inserted it in the lock. Fred poked me on the arm.

"Hey, you have some nasty kids in this neighborhood," he said, gesturing. "Look what they did."

I looked. Scrawled across the door, in white chalk, was the huge letter Z.

"Z for Zorro," Fred laughed.

"That's what you think," I said.

## TEN

Nightmares burst through like blisters on burned skin. They tore at my subconscious, creating hideous warped images out of reddish dark cloth. Trumpets blared. Half-smoked cigarettes lay in a windy tunnel. Curses rose. Noise. A gate cranked open and I strode into an arena, into a fierce blaze of late afternoon sunlight and shadow, into the teeth of screams and laughter. Trumpets howled. Another gate sprang open and out charged a bull, his head up as he snorted challengingly, tail whipping his

flanks. He was a mammoth creature with molten red eyes. His black body gleamed with sweat and his ivory-colored horns glistened evilly. Hoofs pounded, jolted, jarred the earth under me. He hooked with a savage bellowing roar. I felt a horn piercing. Felt it driving deep into me. Deep. Deep. He lunged and hot blue sky flew up into my eyes, splashed with red. I came down on my back, legs kicking up, arms flailing. Then I saw for the first time that I was naked. The bull was goring me, ripping at my flesh, plunging his horns so deep I screamed. . . .

I sat up in bed, perspiration streaming down my face and shoulders. Fred came into the doorway, hair tousled, lurching on his cane.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"I—I had a bad dream," I said, breathing deeply, brushing hair from my face. A strap on my nightie hung loosely. I lifted it back in place.

"Is that all?" Fred groaned. "I thought sure somebody was carving Z's on your chest." He slumped into a chair and yawned. "You sure about this Zingo bit?"

"Positive," I said, sliding my tongue along dry lips. "You saw the warning he left on the front door."

Fred pointed his cane at me and took a one-eye-narrowed sight down the hickory shaft. "Yeah, I saw it. The more I hear about this case the more I like it."

"You want to do a feature for your newspaper?"

"Maybe. Anyway I'd like to go down to Mexico with you and see what gives."

I stretched sleepily. "You'd be taking a chance."

He lowered the cane and rapped it on the floor. "I've taken a few chances in my time. This Zingo character interests me. He owns a bullfight syndicate, a queer joint, a couple of machine guns and a piece of chalk. He spreads himself around good."

"I can't promise any personal interviews," I offered wryly.

"Fair enough."

"Once we're in Mexico," I said, "you'll have to operate pretty much on your own."

"Okay," Fred agreed. "I'll miss your charming company, but there are a couple of places I may frequent that don't allow ladies—at least through the front door."

"Then we're in business," I said, offering my hand.

He grasped it, then winced and drew away. "Wow, you're hot! What in hell have you been dreaming about?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, winked and slipped under the covers, wriggling. "Wouldn't you like to know!"

After eggs, bacon, toast, coffee and orange juice—not necessarily in that order, Fred and I drove into downtown Long Beach the next morning. Headlines on the *Independent* told about a weird ambush at sea, an injured skipper and a local female shamus who took potshots at an attacking airplane. Fred dropped me at the Wilks Building, promising to pick me up after lunch, and continued on to his niche at the *Press-Telegram*.

H. WEST, PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS is on the third floor of the Wilks. It's a quaint little office with a view of an alley, a beer joint and the beach fun zone. I threw up the window and drank in some of that salt air, listening to the rattle of the roller coaster and the merry-go-round's tinkle. My desk had belonged to my father. It was an old-fashioned rolltop steeped with clutter. I brushed a few papers aside and grasped the telephone. A pair of stockings dangled from an ornate screen in the corner. I dialed the Harbor Emergency Hospital and, after a few minutes wait, was allowed to talk to Link Rafferty.

"Hi, sailor," I said, nibbling on a pencil's eraser. "Care for a game of ninety-four proof gin?"

"Hi, Honey," he answered softly. "It's good to hear your voice. When are we going to do it again?"

"Do what?"

"Take another boat ride"

"Not until you're patched up."

"They removed the bullets last night," he protested. "I'll be okay in a couple of days."

"I'll be available."

"Is that a promise?"

"Of course." I rubbed the pencil against the tip of my nose. "Link, I meant to ask you yesterday, are there many boats around San Diego harbor with the word Joy as part of their name?"

I could hear the rhythmic sound of his breath in the earpiece as he stopped to think. "Let's see. There's one I've noticed that anchors in the basin. The Joy Time."

"How big?"

"About sixty-eight feet. A two-masted schooner."

"No good."

"What are you after, Honey?"

"Something about half that big. Without sail. A Chris Craft maybe."

He coughed. "Afraid I can't help you. Listen, the nurse says I have to hang up now. Will you call me tomorrow?"

"I'll try to, Link. Bye."

I replaced the receiver, got up and stretched. Right now, I knew, my chances of locating either the power launch or Beechcraft were slim. A call to Newport Harbor might uncover fifty boats with Joy in their names, any number fitting the basic description of the attacking craft. As for the airplane, without a serial number, locating it would be like digging for a grain of rice in the Sahara desert. Blue wings and red-striped tails were popular marks of identification.

The phone jarred shrilly. On the other end was Charley April, a bashful, rotund guy with a broken-down switchboard and a million-dollar heart. He ran a part-time bookie operation, answering service and advice-to-anyone-who-needs-it service. The last two he provided free to a select

list of friends, one of which I found myself. The other business was wide open. He'd even take a bet from a police commissioner, if he was sure he'd pay off. Charley once wagered five thousand dollars that I had nine freckles on my right knee, a situation that I was not even aware of until I bent over and counted. The man who lost swore there were ten, but the tenth proved to be an elusive dimple.

"Springtime," Charley barked through the receiver. That was his affectionate tag for me. "I been reading where sea air is bad for you. You'd better head for the hills."

"Not a bad idea, Charley. What's with you?"

"Your line has been hotter than a two-dollar pistol for the past twelve hours. Every newspaperman in town's been trying to reach you."

"Any other calls?"

"Yeah, one this morning from a Dr. Jay Hook in Pasadena. Citron five, six-eight-oh-nine."

"Thanks, Charley."

I dialed the operator and in a few seconds was connected to Jay's office.

"Hook-Summit Medical Center," a curt female voice announced.

"May I speak with Dr. Hook, please?"

"I'm sorry he's busy on another line. Would you like to speak with someone else?"

Bass Summit's huge raw-boned face came into my mind's eye bent over that red-hot skillet, the cowboy hat squeezed down over his massive scalp, a can of beer clutched in his thick fingers. "Dr. Summit, please."

The husky dentist came on the line in his roaringly happy manner. "Yes, ma'am!"

"This is a lady who doesn't have any cavities, but you filled her needs a couple of days ago with a skirt and blouse. When are you going to send your bill?"

"Honey?" he blurted. "Gee, it's good to hear your voice. We were worried. Jay called your office this morning."

"So I understand." I reached in one of my desk drawers and removed a spare garter holster.

"Wait, let me get the good doctor on the extension," Bass said. "He's been busting to hear from you."

Jay came on in an instant. His voice was charged with expectancy. "Honey, are you all right? When Bass and I read about you getting shot at again we nearly flipped. We understand you didn't leave Mexico until *yesterday* morning. What happened?"

"Something unexpected came up, Jay."

"Like what?"

"Like a package of heroin stashed under the hood of my car." The garter slipped up over my knee and up onto my thigh. "I nearly wound up in the hoosegow for that."

Bass broke in. "Honey, you'd better take a long vacation or something—and make it quick. Your life doesn't seem to be worth a plugged nickel."

"Bass isn't kidding, Honey," Jay urged. "Why don't you take a cruise to Hawaii or the Orient for a few months. Until this thing blows over."

"Fellas," I said, adjusting the holster on my leg, "if I knew what was supposed to blow over I might take your advice. As it stands now I'm going back to Tijuana this afternoon."

"What?"

"Besides having a client who's also interested," I continued, "I still want to find Pete Freckle. There are a few new leads and I'm planning to follow them up."

"Honey, you're downright crazy," Bass said.

"Please, Honey," Jay begged.

"I just called to thank you again for your help Sunday night, and to say I hope we see each other soon."

"Honey," Jay broke, "you're never going to see anybody, don't you understand? I was in the water with you when

that boat came in. I saw what happened. They were going to cut you to pieces. Please, don't go back."

"I told you, Jay, I have a client now and—"

"Okay, okay, then do us a favor, will you?"

"What's that?"

"Use our trailer. It's still parked near Rosarito Beach where we were before. The key is under a big stone near the front door. We'll be down day after tomorrow to help any way we can."

I couldn't help smiling, the offer was so deeply genuine. "Thanks, Jay. I'll take you up on that. See you both on Friday. Bye."

I'd just hung up when the phone rang again. It was Charley.

"Springtime, I couldn't help listening in—"

"Why, you old eavesdropper." I could picture him bent over his switchboard, a bottle of beer jammed under my key.

"You need any money?"

"No. Hold down the fort, will you, Charley?"

"Will do. Be careful, Springtime, and don't fight any bulls."

I smiled, recalling my nightmare. "Charley, I already did that."

"What?"

"See you soon—I hope."

It was blazingly bright and sunny as Fred and I drove through San Clemente, Oceanside and Del Mar. A few white puffs hung over the ocean like balls of cotton in a sterile jar. We stopped on the way into San Diego at Shelter Island where I picked up my convertible at Langdon's Dock. Rising wind billowed a few sails in the outer harbor and the icy blue water began to chop and white-cap. Fred followed me around Harbor Drive and onto the route south to Tijuana. It was growing dark by the time



we reached the border. Fred pulled alongside and I suggested he park downtown and take a room at Las Tunas Hotel.

"Then we'll have a bite to eat at La Tita," I said.

Fred's eyes lit up. "I've always wanted to eat at that establishment. Lead on."

I waited while he registered with the fat smiling little proprietor of Las Tunas. Then we took my car and drove to the edge of town to Zingo's "nightclub."

The vivacious Juanita greeted us at the door in her low-cut blouse and knee-length skirt.

"Well, look who is here," she said, running a thick red tongue over her lips. "How are you, Miss West?"

"Fine," I said, noticing the place was packed as usual. "We thought we'd sample your food. Is Maria here?"

"Sí. She is getting ready to go on with the act. May I show you to a table?"

"Please."

She put us at a small table, well away from the area where the three women did their performing.

I studied Juanita. "Is Punta Punta in this evening?"

"Sí," she answered quickly. "He is in his office. Do you want me to tell him you are here?"

"No, that won't be necessary," I said, noticing a narrow corridor running off to the right. "Is his office down there?"

"Sí." She moved away toward the bar.

I patted my right thigh and glanced around. "You wait here, Fred. If I'm not back in five minutes, bring your cane and come arunning."

He nodded. "Don't make me miss the floorshow."

"Don't worry."

I walked down the corridor to a door at the end marked *Oficina*, and knocked. A greasy voice told me to come in. A lop-eared Mexican with a scrawny neck and thin shoulders sat at a desk with his back toward me. I lifted

my .22 out of its holster and pressed the snout against his head.

"Okay, *Señor Punta Punta*, stand up—slowly."

"*Qué!*"

He followed my directions, his shoulders and body trembling, legs quaking like he was standing in a vat of ice water.

"Now turn around."

He did, eyes nearly popping out of his skull-shaped face. "*Señorita*, what—what is this—a holdup?"

"Don't be coy, pal," I said. "You recognize me."

His head shook. "No—no, I don't."

I placed the barrel of the gun under his chin and exerted a little pressure. He choked.

"You've got an awfully bad memory, P-P. Don't tell me you've forgotten the night at the slaughter house when you and your pal Zingo slipped me a little nighty-night and then stripped me raw."

"*Señorita*, I know nothing about such a night, believe me."

"Don't lie! After you hung me from that tree I heard Zingo call you by name. I couldn't see your face, but Punta Punta I won't forget. Where's Zingo?"

He gasped from the force of the revolver's snout. "I—I do not know, *señorita*. He contacts me only once in a while."

"What have you done with Pete Freckle?"

"Nothing." Sweat poured down his neck and chest, running over a gold medallion that dangled in his shirt's opening.

I looped my revolver in the medallion's chain and twisted. He gagged, falling back in his chair.

"Tell me," I said, through my teeth, "or so help me I'll split you open like the bull split open Pete Freckle."

His mouth fluttered, eyes bulging. "He—he is *muy muerto*."

"How do you know?" I demanded.

"The bull killed him—"

"You lie!" I spat, twisting the chain more. "Where is he?"

"There—there is a place," Punta Punta managed, face turning bone white.

"What place?"

"Near the slaughter house, he—"

The door opened behind me and a voice broke, "Hey, Honey, you're missing the floorshow and—"

"Fred, get out of here—" I turned a step too far, releasing the chain.

Punta Punta's hand leaped inside a drawer and extracted a .45. He raised it toward my head. I was able to get my elbow around, but that was all. He took the blow on his cheekbone, toppled over a chair and rolled to the floor. The gun came around in his spidery fingers and he squeezed the trigger as he rolled. A bullet sizzled by my ear, grinding into the ceiling. He squeezed again. This time it was too close for comfort, practically clipping my eyelashes. I ducked, whirled, pulling my own trigger. A slug tore past Punta Punta's head, hitting a tin waste basket and sending up a whirl of noise as the piece of lead lifted the can into the air. It bounced against the wall, clattering and banging as it fell.

Fred dodged through the door, grabbing my arm and yanking me with him. I struck the sill, heard another bullet splatter against a steel lock, and found myself in the corridor, running pell-mell toward the front of the nightclub.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Fred yelled, his cane clanking on the tile floor.

I didn't bother to holster my revolver, but kept my legs flying until the corridor was gone and we were inside the main room of La Tita. The little old man was seated in the corner strumming at his guitar, and people were shout-

ing and yelling at the contortions of the three lissome ladies. Apparently nobody had heard the shots coming from the back office.

We were halfway across the main floor, dodging around the naked performers, when Punta Punta came out of the corridor. He issued one loud scathing oath and aimed his .45 at us. I dodged, stumbled and nearly fell atop the squirming ladies again. The bullet hit a hanging lamp and glass exploded into a frenzy of fragments, splintering in all directions.

Now people leaped to their feet and pandemonium raged. Screams, shouts, cries pierced the room as Fred and I hurried toward the front door. Another bullet rammed into a wall near our heads. That's when I turned to take another shot at Punta Punta. But he got his off first. Only this time he didn't miss. A scream rent the air.

I looked back. Beautiful Maria, her white body silhouetted in the bright lights, stumbled forward, clutching her stomach. She turned toward me, mouth open, teeth clenched and then crumpled to the floor.

For a long instant nobody in the nightclub moved. All eyes were on the dark-haired woman, a bubble of dark red welling up over her navel. Then, everybody sprang into action, screams welled, figures jerked.

Fred and I wound up outside the front door, still half-running, my arm around the newsman's shoulder. We reached my convertible and crawled inside, both out of breath. I backed out of the parking lot and onto the highway. We drove for several miles before either of us spoke.

"That poor girl," Fred murmured. "He must have killed her."

I nodded. "We're in big trouble now, Fred."

"Why?"

"Didn't you notice the way she fell?"

"What do you mean, Honey?"

I could hardly get the words out. "It looked like I did it, Fred. It appeared that I was the one who shot Maria."

We stopped at a bar in downtown Tijuana and gulped a shot of whiskey to steady our nerves. The shooting at La Tita had come so quickly and explosively it was hard to believe.

"Do you really think they'll blame you, Honey?" Fred asked, sipping at his second drink.

"Of course, they will," I said. "Punta Punta will tell the police I tried to hold him up. Everybody saw I was carrying a gun. In fact, I'd just aimed at Punta Punta when Maria was hit."

"Ballistics could prove—"

"Ballistics my foot. You know how the police operate down here, Fred. An American doesn't stand a chance."

Carlos Ortega came into the bar, head lowered, eyes downcast. He looked like he was about ready to cry.

"Hey, Carlos," I called.

He walked over to us solemnly, jaw set into a hard ridge. "*Señorita*," he said, "you wanted to talk with Don Mano, no?"

"That's right. Do you have any idea where I can find him?"

"Sí, I can take you to him now."

We followed Carlos out of the cafe.

"Have you a car?" he asked.

"Yes."

I knew from the way Carlos was acting that something was wrong even before we arrived at Don Mano's house. The old man lived in a little adobe house off the Ensenada Road about a half-mile out of town. We parked and walked up onto a rickety wood porch. Don Mano was seated in a rocking chair, an old dog in his lap, weaving back and forth mechanically. He did not acknowledge our arrival, not even so much as a nod of his head.

"There he is," Carlos said. "Talk to him. Ask him about Zingo."

"Don Mano," I said, leaning toward his chair, "it is very important for us to know who this man Zingo really is. If Pete Freckle's dead, Zingo no doubt is responsible in some way. He has tried to kill me twice in a very violent manner. I understand you have met him. That you know his true identity. Please, will you tell us? I promise no harm will come to you."

Carlos suddenly laughed. "That is funny, *señorita*," he said, unable to stop his laughter. It was the kind of sound that makes you hurt just to hear it. It was that pathetic. "You promise no harm shall come to the old man. He does not care. Now."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask him all you want to, he will not answer," Carlos rasped.

"But you said—"

"*Señorita*, ask him to open his mouth."

"What?"

"Ask him to open his mouth!"

I didn't have to ask. In the next moment, the old man's jaws parted. In the yawning dark chasm of decayed gums and rotted teeth there was a hideous void. A dark unbroken hole.

I couldn't help the cry that slammed up into my throat. Don Mano had no tongue. It had been cut out.

## ELEVEN

I stayed the night in Jay and Bass's trailer parked near Rosarito Beach. I didn't sleep well again. The nightmares

came back. Only this time they were worse. Don Mano's wrinkled old face kept appearing, jaws parting slowly, breaking into wild maniacal laughter that kept ringing and ringing and ringing. . . .

I woke up on the floor, struggling with my pillow, hair snarled about my face. After a quick breakfast, which didn't go down too easily, I went into town and picked up Fred at Las Tunas Hotel.

"Where we going?" he asked.

"First to the slaughter house, and then, if you're still breathing, out to Vicaro's ranch."

"Who's Vicaro?"

"He's the impresario of the bull ring. Big shot. Former mayor of Tijuana. Suspicious as hell."

"I'd like to meet *him*."

"You will—after the slaughter house."

We took the old bumpy road south of town until we reached the cut-off. It was a hot morning and with the top down on my convertible, odors began to waft in before we even climbed the hill.

The place hadn't changed much from Sunday night. We parked in front of the main building and walked up the ramp, Fred's cane rattling on stone.

"My Lord," Fred groaned, pressing a coat sleeve against his nostrils. "This is the foulest smelling place in creation."

"Breathe through your mouth," I cautioned.

Inside the building we encountered three men bent over the central table, spattered with blood, hacking away at pieces of meat with heavy handled cleavers. Flies and bugs were thick in the air and crawling on the floor. I gritted my teeth and approached one of the men.

"Do you speak English?"

"Sí. What do you want?"

He glanced at us disdainfully with red-rimmed eyes. He was a surly man with thick shoulders. A scar twisted down the right side of his pitted face. Apparently someone had

taken a cleaver to him at one time or another. His fingers, yellow with nicotine, pinched an incredibly short cigarette butt.

"I'm seeking information concerning the *Americano* matador, *Señor* Freckle," I said.

"He was killed by a bull last Sunday. I saw it happen."

"Where'd they take him afterwards?"

He shrugged with studied casualness, wiping blood from his nose. "I only work in the slaughter house, I—"

"Did they bring him here?"

His ugly mouth split open into a laugh. "*Señorita*, they would not bring him here. This is where they take the dead bulls."

"I was here last Sunday night," I said, gesturing. "His clothes were lying on that table over in the corner."

"You mean his suit of lights? *Señorita*, you must be joking—"

"His initials were stitched inside the silk shirt. Where are those clothes?"

"I have seen nothing, *señorita*. It is possible the doctor took off the matador's suit and by mistake it was put in the truck with the dead bulls."

That sounded like a logical explanation, but I still wasn't buying it. His eyes told me he was lying.

"What is nearby here?" I asked, keeping my mouth covered.

"Nothing for miles, *señorita*." He ran blood-stained fingernails over his mouth, then added, "Oh, there is a new nightclub down on Torrento Road. That is South of here. It is owned by Zingo."

"You know him?"

"Zingo is a very powerful man, *señorita*. I am a peon, working in a slaughter house. How could I know such a man?"

"What is the name of this new nightclub?"



"El Puno. It is a big place. Very expensive. For tourists. Only those with *mucho dinero* go there."

I thanked him and we left the slaughter house as quickly as possible. Fred was turning green. We drove down off the hill and turned south onto Torrento Road.

"I don't care where you're going now," Fred muttered. "Just as long as it's in the direction of fresh air."

"Thought we'd take a peek at this new joint, El Puno," I said. "Then we'll head for Vicaro's ranch. I understand they'll be testing new bulls there this afternoon."

"What does that mean?"

"It means maybe we'll get a first hand view of this bull-fight syndicate in action."

El Puno had an extremely modern exterior for Tijuana. There were no neon lights, but huge white columns ran the length of the building, giving the effect of an old Southern plantation. It was obviously an American tourist trap. Huge placards advertised in English a New York-Paris revue. Fred gaped at the photographs. One revealed a blonde cutie with nothing on but a gorgeous suntan.

At this time of day, the place was closed and locked. A watchman was on duty at the rear of the building.

"You speak English?" I asked.

"Sí. A little."

"What time does El Puno open?"

"Cinco. Five o'clock. You come back then."

"What kind of a floorshow do you have?"

"Muy grande. Singers, dancers, matadors—"

"What do you mean matadors?"

"Last week we have *la fiesta brava*. A *corrida* on the stage. With *toros* and *picadors*—"

"You had real bulls in there?"

The watchman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No. These were cardboard—paper—you know. A new show she begin tonight. You come back."

Wind blew dust in our faces as we walked to the car.

On the way to Vicaro's I glanced at Fred. "I've a feeling Pete Freckle's secret is wrapped up somewhere in El Puno."

"I don't savvy."

"Punta Punta intimated there was a place near the slaughter house where Pete might be found. That could be it."

Fred shook his head dismally. "A bullfighter's gored and disappears before anyone can be certain he's dead. Only one man has a lead and he winds up with his tongue cut out. So tell me, mighty madame, how do you arrive at the conclusion the injured *or* dead matador is locked up inside a classy nightclub?"

"Simple logic," I said, licking dry lips.

"Simple what?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Vicaro's ranch was southeast of town in a small valley, surrounded by rolling purple-saged hills. His main house, a pretentious two-story adobe surrounded by ornate statuary, was about a mile off the main road. A bronze of a bull loomed off to one side of the front steps, his horns lifted, gigantic body poised, every muscle straining.

A gaunt, dark Mexican woman came to the door and announced that Vicaro and several other men were out *en campo*. They were testing bulls in the open country. She pointed out a road for us to follow. This led us around a practice arena where the snorting and bellowing of bulls could be heard behind high wooden walls.

We jogged along silently for several minutes before hearing the cries of two men on horseback. They were chasing a young bull, jabbing him viciously in the flanks with sharp pointed poles. Suddenly the bull tumbled over, hurling up a cloud of dust, legs thrashing. He rolled, stumbled awkwardly and then struggled to his feet with

a snort of pain and disgust. He eyed the two horsemen for an instant as if he feared another attack.

"Torol Ah-haaaaaa!" one of the men yelled.

The bull did not pick up the challenge, but turned and lumbered off toward a small herd roaming the fields.

Señor Vicaro, mounted on a beautiful black stallion, saw us and galloped over to the car. He wore a stiff-brimmed hat and a gold-trimmed jacket and pants. His boots were highly polished and a magenta silk scarf fluttered from the top of one of them. With the wind at his back, blowing across my face, I could smell his heavy cologne. It was almost over-powering.

We climbed from the car and I introduced Fred to the impresario.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Vicaro's dark and penetrating eyes showed he was obviously not pleased to see me. He grunted, "We are testing the two-year-old males for their bravery. This last one you saw was a coward. He would not fight back. We will not be able to use him in a *corrida*."

"How can you be sure he is not brave?" I asked.

"We run him at full speed," Vicaro explained. "Two men carrying *garrochas* tip him over by pushing at his hindquarters. When the beast again stands he should be full of spirit and spoiling for a fight. This last one would not even make an attempt."

"I see."

"You watch. This time you will see a *toro bravo*. One with *casta y poder*, which means charged with breeding and power."

The two *vaqueros* drove another young bull from the herd, pushing him forward with their pointed poles. He fell after running for several hundred yards. This time it was a different story. This animal got up and furiously rammed a picador's horse, crashing his horns into thick padding especially worn for such a charge. The picador

shoved him away with his pole, but the bull wouldn't give up and kept putting his head down and hooking viciously at the horse, finally upsetting both man and beast. The horse floundered, kicking wildly. The two *vaqueros* came to its rescue, driving the bull back with their *garrochas*.

"There is a good bull," Vicaro said, brushing dust from his thin, finely-tapered nose. "Oh, don't worry. The picador is not hurt, and neither is his horse. They take many falls like that. It is all in a day. Now, what can I do for you, Miss West?" His eyelids narrowed.

"We were interested in seeing your ranch, *Señor* Vicaro."

"I am highly flattered, but I can not believe this is the only reason you are here, Miss West."

I nodded. "I haven't been able to locate Pete Freckle, *señor*."

"This is an unfortunate tragedy. I am sorry."

"Who's responsible?"

"He was to have been buried in the sanctuary of El Bosque at Villa de Hablo. What happened to his body, I am humbly at a loss to say."

"Is it possible, *señor*, that he was taken by mistake to the slaughter house?"

"No!" Vicaro cried, turning his horse angrily. "This could not be. My people would not be so stupid! Miss West, you were asked to leave Tijuana last Sunday. Why did you not follow that course?"

"Because I chose to stay."

"You are a foolish woman," the *impresario* said in his throat. Then, apparently thinking he'd spoken too harshly, an apologetic smile cracked his thin lips. "Would you and *Señor* Sims stay to lunch with me?"

I glanced at Fred. The newsman nodded. "Yes, that would be nice," I said. "Thank you."

Vicaro gave a few commands in Spanish to his men and

gestured for us to follow him. His horse sped across the fields toward the big house. He was already there by the time we turned around.

We enjoyed lunch in a large dining room decorated with statuary, most of the pieces representing some phase of bullfighting.

"Have you ever fought the *toro bravo*, *Señor Vicaro*?" I asked.

His head lifted proudly. "*Sí*. I began as a boy in a small village in Spain where my father lived. He had a ranch and he taught me many things from the first day that I can remember. I used to handle a training device for *toreros*. It was made of wood with a wheel on one end and a pair of horns on the other. I would run this around an arena while the young men worked with cape and *muleta*.

"As I grew older," Vicaro continued, "my father moved to Mexico City and it was there, in the largest *plaza de toros* in the world, I fought until I was gored, like your friend Pete Freckle."

"Was the injury severe?"

"*Sí*. In the right thigh. I bled too much and almost died. But that was a long time ago. Now I am too old to even stand up against a calf."

"*Señor Vicaro*, are you acquainted with a man named Zingo?"

He answered sharply. "No!"

"You are certain?"

"Zingo is well known to me, but I have not had the pleasure of meeting him personally, no."

"Are you sure it would be a pleasure?"

"This I can not say. He is a powerful man, this Zingo. He owns two very big nightclubs here in Tijuana. He—" Vicaro stopped.

"He what?"

"Well, he seems to have some sort of influence with the *ganaderos* who furnish the bulls for our *corridas*."

"What sort of influence?"

"I do not know exactly." Vicaro paused again and swallowed some water, his face glazed slightly as if he were somewhat frightened by the turn of the conversation. "It—it could be that Zingo has organized them."

"What do you mean, 'could be,' *Señor* Vicaro? Don't you know? Aren't you the *impresario* at the plaza? Don't you have some idea of the kind of bulls you get for your *toreros*?"

"Sí, but it is not easy to tell if something is wrong with a bull until after he is in the arena. Sometimes they have been caped before and are what we call, 'not clean.' A *berrendo* can kill a *torero* if he is too smart."

"Did Pete Freckle have one of those Sunday?"

Vicaro hesitated, then, "Talk to Manuel Garcia. He is the corral boss. He chose the bulls Sunday. If *Señor* Freckle got a *berrendo* it was Manuel's fault."

"Where can I find this Manuel Garcia?" I asked.

"He hangs out at Los Toros downtown. This is where most of the *toreros* and *vaqueros* who work at the arena get together and talk. I was planning to go there myself later this afternoon. Do you and *Señor* Sims wish to accompany me?"

"We have a busy day ahead of us," I said. "Perhaps we'll see you there later."

We thanked him for lunch and excused ourselves.

In the car, halfway to town, Fred laughed. "I'll bet you my bottom dollar that guy is Zingo."

"You'd better retract that bet, Fred."

"Why?"

"'Cause if he's Zingo we probably haven't got long to live."

"What do you mean, Honey?"

"Did you enjoy your lunch, Fred?"

"Sure, but—" He gagged, hands grasping his throat. "Honey, you don't think—?"

"You're the gambler, Fred. Was the sauce garlic or arsenic?"

## TWELVE

At Los Toros, we asked for Manuel Garcia. The bartender said he'd just left and that we might find him at his house, which was two blocks South of *Calle Rafaelito*. Sun burned our faces as we walked. The streets were dirty and strips of torn newspapers fluttered in the wind. We stopped at the address the bartender had given us. A squat little Mexican with a red face and high-pitched voice answered the door. He was well dressed, and a streak of white on the left side of his head relieved the shiny blackness of his hair. He introduced himself as Manuel Garcia and asked what we wanted.

"Señor Vicaro told us you might be able to answer some questions for us," I said. "We're tourists in town—"

At the mention of Vicaro, Manuel's face lighted up and he threw open the door, inviting us in.

"Vicaro is my very good friend," Manuel said, showing us to a table and sliding a chair under me. His house was tastefully decorated. "What did the impresario suggest you might ask me?"

"Why you give such bad bulls!"

Rolls of fat sagged on Manuel's cheeks. He winced. "Please, I am sick today. Would you return another time?"

"Did you give Pete Freckle a *berrendo*?" I continued, not moving from my chair.

His voice became even more high-pitched. "Now you

leave me alone, do you hear? I only work at the arena. I know nothing—"

"Did Pete refuse to pay Zingo, is that it?"

"*Señorita*, please—"

"No, you please us," I ordered, removing my revolver. I aimed it at his trembling head. "What happened to the matador?"

"He—he was taken away!"

"Where?"

"I—I do not know. Maybe to La Tita." Sweat stood on Manuel's forehead and his knees quaked from fright.

"You mean El Puno."

"Sí."

"Was he dead?"

"No—not when he left the arena. He was bleeding badly. Too badly to live, I think."

"Had he been wounded by a bullet as well as by the horns?"

"Sí," he squeaked, tears streaming down his flabby cheeks.

"Who fired that shot?"

"Punta Punta. He is crazy. I—I do not kill," he babbled, brushing at his tears. He reached into his coat pocket as if searching for a handkerchief and withdrew a small .22 revolver with a black muzzle. Before I could squeeze the trigger, my gun flew out of my hand as a bullet bounced off the barrel.

His lips curled over crooked yellow teeth. "Now you stand up, quickly, both of you!" he snarled.

The fat Mexican moved forward and patted Fred's pockets with his hand, keeping the gun pointed between us. Then he stepped back and laughed. "You fools! You ask too many questions. I will have to kill you."

"Thought you didn't kill people," I said.

"Miss West—"

"Oh, you know my name. How quaint."



He nodded apologetically. "I did not recognize you. From the airplane you were so small."

I felt my fists clench. "So you were the one who shot Link."

"Who?"

"Link Rafferty. The owner of the boat."

"Unfortunate," Manuel said, wiping fingertips across his fleshy lips. "We only planned to get you, Miss West. But now the opportunity has returned, thankfully. A certain person was very angry that I missed before. I thought perhaps he would—"

"Cut your throat?" I interjected. "He should have. The same way you cut Don Mano's tongue out."

Manuel shook his head. "Oh, no, that was not me. That was Punta Punta again. He is very blood-thirsty. It was a horrible sight. I became sick afterwards."

"You are sick," I said. "So sick they couldn't make you right if they got all the doctors in the world together."

"Miss West, I do not like that kind of talk. It disturbs me." He turned toward me, vengefully aiming the revolver at my heart.

"Good," I said, trying to egg him on, keeping Fred in view out of the corner of my eye. "Then you won't mind knowing you're a creep on top of everything else. A full-blooded, one-hundred percent—how do you say it in Mexican—*maricón*."

"I don't like those kind of words," Manuel babbled, moving toward me. "I will kill you for that. I will kill you."

Fred followed through nicely. His cane came down so hard on the fat of Manuel's neck that the cracking sound could have been heard a block away. The squat little man collapsed to the floor. But he wasn't out. Not by any means. He squeezed a shot past my arm as I reached for my gun. I decided to leave the revolver and turned toward the front door. By this time Fred was vanishing out a side entrance, leaving me very much alone with Manuel. I

snatched up a lamp and tossed it at the Mexican, the pottery base shattering against his shoulder. Another shot split the air, puncturing the wall behind me. I threw a small table at him. Then a wooden chair. He drilled another bullet over my head, rolling to free himself of the furniture, groaning. There was a bronze statue of a naked man near the door. I picked it up and threw that, too. This time he didn't retaliate. The statue cracked sickeningly against the side of his head. He screamed, spurting blood, and crumpled over, arms askew.

I picked up my gun and hurried to the door. Sounds were beginning to break in the neighborhood. I heard high-pitched voices, loud cries. I raced down the front steps and didn't stop until I reached my car two blocks away. Fred wasn't waiting. A policeman strode by and glanced at my convertible, then moved on. I backed out and drove up *Calle Rafaelito*, but Fred was nowhere in sight. When a woman dashed out of Manuel's house and stopped dead center in the street, screaming, I decided I couldn't wait for Fred. His hotel was nearby. He'd make it okay.

My next move was to El Puno. I glanced at my watch. It wasn't quite five o'clock yet. The road out toward Rosarito Beach gleamed in the late afternoon sun. I parked behind Jay and Bass's trailer and plodded ankle-deep through white sand to the door. Waves crashed invitingly on the shore and seagulls fluttered in a soft blue sky.

Once inside the trailer I picked out a black sheath that I'd brought along for just such an occasion. I stripped off my blouse and skirt and was climbing into the dress when the door banged open. A dark wry face poked through the opening. Also a pistol.

"Señorita West?"

"What in—?"

A slim figure in a police uniform came into the trailer. "You're under arrest."

"For what?"

"For the murder of Maria Spota. Come along peacefully. There are other men outside."

"Can't you wait until a girl finishes dressing?"

Another man stepped through the door, also clutching a gun, smirking. He stared at me half-in and half-out of the sheath, focusing on my legs and thighs, the way I was hunched forward.

"Bring her along," he spat. "Without the dress. Maybe she will get some idea how it is to be dead!"

## THIRTEEN

Clad only in bra and panties, I was shoved out of the trailer and into a police car. Dusk was moving in over the hills, streaking the sky with its dark fingers of color. At the Tijuana police station three of the arresting officers took me into a back room. They were slimy looking characters with oily black hair and sharp, angular faces, blue in their unshavenness. I sat in a chair, crossed my legs and kept both hands in my lap.

"Señorita West," one of the officers said, a wild stare in his eyes, "we want the truth."

"And I want some clothes."

"Did you kill Maria Spota?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"Punta Punta. If you'll take the time to examine the bullet—"

"Señorita," one of the other men interjected, "the bullet passed *through* Maria's body."

My heart sank. That had been my one hope. If the slug

had lodged in the dancer's body they might have compared it with another fired from Punta Punta's gun.

"Can't you tell by the wound?" I said. "My gun's a small caliber twenty-two. Punta Punta's is twice as large. It would cut a much larger hole."

"The bullet bounced off a rib," the first officer said. "She was too messed up to tell what size the bullet was."

"Just my luck."

"Besides, Punta Punta is one of Tijuana's leading citizens."

"He's a ruthless, cold-blooded killer," I said. "He'd cut his own mother's heart out if he thought it was worth anything."

"*Señorita*, it is bad for you to speak like this. It can only go worse for you at the trial."

They were literally feasting on me with their eyes. I guessed what the next step might be and I tried to figure a way of avoiding it.

"You are a powerfully built woman, *señorita*," the third man said. "Perhaps you have something deadly hidden under your clothing."

"What's hidden is all mine. If you want to search me get a matron."

"Matron?" the first man laughed. "We do not have such things. You *Americanos* are very funny. You come down here to Mexico for a few laughs. But you are what is funny. We watch you as you walk down our streets and we are laughing. You are such suckers. Stand up!" He ran his fingers along my bare shoulders.

"Get your crummy hands off me," I said.

"We must search you, *señorita*, it is the law."

"Just what do you want?"

The first man's eyes gleamed. "We could be lenient with you, *señorita*. Very lenient, if—"

"Would you let me go?"

"*Señorita*, you ask the impossible."

"That's what I thought. Listen to me, your sainted Punta Punta not only killed Maria, but he shot the matador Pete Freckle in your arena last Sunday."

The three men guffawed rudely. One of them grabbed me by the arm. I knew it was now or never. He jerked me to my feet, thick fingers plunging down the front of my bra, grasping. My hands caught his wrist, and pretending to be ticklish I swung around until he was behind me, arm over my shoulder. Then I jerked forward. He issued a quick gasp, which ended in a half-scream, as he went up into the air heels over head, crashing squarely into the two other men. They toppled like bowling pins, swearing, groaning, legs flying.

I tried the first door behind me. It led into a narrow corridor that was dimly-lit and smelled of sweat and stale cigarettes. There had to be a back way! I guessed at the right direction and turned toward another door faintly outlined in the distance. This opened onto a dark alley behind the police station. As I stepped out into the dust and dirt, I heard a cry somewhere in the building behind me.

Realizing I wouldn't get far on the street in under-clothing and high heels without creating some kind of alarm, I dashed across the alley and into the first door I could find. Pale darkness enveloped me. I slammed the door closed and listened. Faint murmurings of two people came distantly. I crept forward slowly, feeling my way along a wall. The voices grew louder. They were hushed, stilted, ominous like whispered gasps from the bottom of a well. I stumbled over some steps, climbed up and grasped what felt like a curtain. A finger of light stabbed through the black, wiggling, undulating in the distance. It became brighter and brighter as I moved in that direction, seeming to emanate from a hole in the dark. The voices intensified.

Suddenly a woman screamed. Then another. A man's guttural tones rose in the inky void. I staggered back as the

light splashed over me, dousing me with its brilliance. Something jerked behind me. I whirled and nearly jumped out of my skin. Two gargantuan figures rose up along what seemed like a straight wall of light. It was a man and woman and they were about six times bigger than lifesize!

Another scream rent the air. Then it struck home. I was in a movie theater. Light twisting down from the projection booth had illuminated me in front of the screen. A man yelled crudely in Spanish creating a tumult of laughter. I could imagine what had been said.

Getting out of the theater was no easy trick. I couldn't find the back door, now thoroughly blinded from the projector's glare, and blundered into curtains and walls until a narrow passage led me into one of the aisles. A match suddenly flared held by a man with a dirty, puffy face. He lunged for me, a hand sliding over my right thigh, as I darted toward the foyer. The chase was on. Four or five Mexicans came hot on my heels as I sprinted through the lobby and onto the neon-splashed sidewalk. A young man in a gray coat and hat spun me around, eyes widening as he drank in my semi-nudity, a whistle forming on his lips. I broke loose, turned a corner and discovered another dirty, trash-littered alley a few feet farther and plunged into it. The wolves were not far behind. I had to find Las Tunas Hotel before they caught up with me or— Their yells and wails drove me through another door, straight into the arms of a white-faced American sailor.

"What the hell!" he rasped.

My hand went over his mouth as I swung the door closed. The pack went by outside, howling. The sailor had pale blue eyes and an aquiline nose. He kissed my fingers, peering down the deep V in the top of my bra. It kept heaving open even wider as I gasped for air. I covered the opening and looked up at him.

"I—I—" My explanation seemed futile. Who would believe a story so fantastic as mine?

"I—I'm ready," he said.

"Ready for what?" I asked, pushing his arms down.

"Ready for—well, you know what," he said, shyly. "I've been waiting for about fifteen minutes. Ever since the lady upstairs took my money and told me to come down here."

I glanced around. In a bare bulb's glare I could see a rumpled bed in the corner. The odor of sweat and sex hung heavy in the low-ceiled room.

"I'm afraid you've got the wrong girl," I said, crossing my arms.

He wasn't about to take no for an answer. Fortunately, at that moment, the right girl arrived on the scene. She was a frothy bleached blonde with sensuous dark eyes. She stopped on the staircase, robe open down the front, and hurled a vehement exclamation in Spanish.

I lunged out the door and into the alley again. What a way to spend an evening, I thought. I break out of jail, fight my way through a movie theater, and wind up in a brothel only to get daggers from the Number One girl. A heck of a way to make a living!

I finally found the back entrance into Las Tunas. The jolly-faced proprietor didn't see me sneak up the stairs, and I made it all the way to Fred's room without encountering anyone. The newsman's eyes widened when he opened the door.

"Honey, what the hell are you doing?"

"Seeing Tijuana in my Maidenform bra."

He crossed to a closet and tossed me a robe. "What happened?"

"What happened to you?" I demanded. "Manuel just about had me on ice. I had to throw everything but the kitchen sink at him."

"I thought you were all right," Fred blurted. "As soon

as I got out that side door, I rushed downtown to the nearest telegraph office and filed a story."

"Great newspaperman!" I said, dropping into a wicker chair. "No doubt you're one of the guys who filed a Dewey victory in 'forty-eight before the polls were closed."

"I didn't mean to run out on you, Honey."

"Look, you probably don't realize it, Fred, but I'm in real trouble. The police arrested me for Maria's murder."

"Who sprung you?"

"I sprung myself. With a small lesson in judo."

"Oh, brother!" Fred sagged on the bed. "Now what do we do?"

"We get Punta Punta. But, first, I have to pay a visit to El Puno before Manuel crawls out from under that bronze statue I belted him with and warns Zingo."

Fred snickered. "You propose to do this in your undies?"

"That's where you come in." I took a cigarette out of a pack near the bed and lit it. "You'd help the cause immensely if you'd drive out to the trailer and bring me back a dress."

"What about the cops?"

"They're looking for a dame in her B.V.D.'s. I doubt if they'll get very far out of town."

Fred shrugged his thin shoulders. "I don't care how far they go. It's us I'm thinking about. We ought to beat it across that border."

"Go ahead!"

"But, Honey, I can't leave you—"

"You said you didn't mind taking a few chances." I blew smoke toward the ceiling. "Well?"

He sank his teeth into a knuckle, then cursed. "Damn you, Honey! You always get me where the hair is short." He stood up, bracing himself with his cane.

"I always thought you were somewhat of a long hair, Fred."

"You know what I mean!"



He limped to the door, firing those wonderful eyes at me that were filled with anger and admiration.

"A black dress, Fred. And a gold purse."

He nodded.

Two hours passed.

The ashtray beside the bed was crammed with lipstick-stained butts by then and my legs were sore from pacing around the room. My watch showed nine o'clock. The trip shouldn't have taken more than an hour at the most. I began wondering whether the police *had* gone out to the trailer. If so, had they arrested Fred as an accomplice to Maria's murder? Ten more minutes dragged by. Then twenty. I went to the window and peered down at the street below. A few cars moved slowly in the darkness. Neon lights blinked. Voices floated up.

Thoughts kept bombarding my mind like raindrops on a tin roof, joltingly, harsh, unceasing. Pete Freckle hung there in the void, a shapeless mass struggling for existence in the fibers of my brain. He kept crying out, the way he'd cried the day he was hit by the truck. We were seven. Two freckle-faced kids playing in the street. Then out of nowhere came the tanker, its huge wheels grinding along the road, its oily black body blotting out the sun. I screamed, but it was too late. Just as I had screamed that day in the stadium as the bull's black body had hurled him into the air. When I reached him he was bleeding from his mouth and nose, a river of red coursing down the side of his thin face. He didn't cry, but he looked at me as I lifted his head and his eyes cried out for me to help him. I rocked him in my arms until help came. I held him and cried like a baby.

I turned away from the window and lit another cigarette, the last one in Fred's battered pack. My eyes stung and I felt sick at the pit of my stomach. Footsteps fell harshly in the corridor outside. I rushed to the door and

flung it open. A hand held out my black sheath and gold purse and behind it was blond, grinning Jay Hook.

"Hi, Honey!" He entered the room casually.

"Jay, what in the world?"

"Bass and I decided to come down tonight instead of tomorrow. We were worried about you."

"Where's Fred? Fred Sims?"

"Jail."

"What?"

"Yeah, the police arrested him at the trailer. About the time we arrived. Seems he was mixed up in some kind of shooting. He confessed right there on the spot."

"Confessed?" I blurted.

"Yeah. Seems he shot some nightclub cutie named Maria Spota. The police thought you did it, but Sims said no, and confessed. Bass is down with him now at headquarters seeing if he can't straighten things out."

I sat on the bed. "The crazy fool. I suppose he figured he was doing me a favor by confessing."

"He saved your neck, Honey. What's been going on?"

"Jay, if I told you, it would take a year and a month of Sundays just to piece together the first day."

He was handsomely dressed in an expensive gray cashmere suit and suède shoes. A large diamond sparkled on the third finger of his right hand.

He pulled the wicker chair up near me, cupping his slender hands on his knees. "Honey, why don't you clear out of this once and for all? It's murder."

"You can say that again. A couple of murders." I took the dress into the bathroom, stripped off Fred's robe and stepped into the sheath.

"Listen, Jay," I called to him. "You can do me a great favor if you'll go to the police station and help Bass pull Fred off the hook."

"I'm afraid there isn't much we can do, Honey. He's already confessed."

"Tell them he's nuts. Throw all your Ph.D's at them. Just get Fred out of there and across the border."

Jay groaned. "That's a mighty tall order, Honey. He's confessed to murder."

"Sure, a murder committed by a slimy little rat named Punta Punta." I rearranged my hair, touched up my lips and walked back into the room. "Look, Jay, if you can't spring Fred with a little medical hocus-pocus, drive out to a place named La Tita on *Calle Valente*. Look around for some .45 slugs that may be buried in the ceiling or walls near the front door."

He swayed forward in his chair, rubbing his neck. "Sure, Honey, anything you say, only don't get us into too much trouble. We want to help, but don't forget—" he shrugged, "we're just a couple of guys on vacation. We can't afford to spend the rest of our lives in Tijuana, Mexico."

"Neither can Fred." I kissed his cheek and moved toward the door. "If you need me I'll be at a place called El Puno. And thanks for the use of your trailer. It was great."

He seized my hand and swung me around into his arms. "The trailer's still yours," he said. "Bass and I'll sleep on the sand. We've got sleeping bags. It'll be plenty warm."

"No, I don't want to put you out—"

"We want to keep our eye on you. We won't help Fred if you don't promise."

"Okay," I said. "See you there later."

"Wait, Honey!"

I didn't wait. I ran down the stairs to the street and flagged a taxi. I had to reach El Puno quickly. Before Zingo had a chance to prepare for my coming.

The taxi was quite a surprise. Behind the wheel sat the duck-tailed Mexican youth who had driven Luis and me to the slaughter house that Sunday night.

"Well, if it isn't Pancho Villa," I said, hunching against the seat. "I thought you were dead."

"Me, *señorita*?" he asked, apparently just as surprised to find me as his fare. "I am okay."

"Where's Luis?"

"Luis?"

"You know who I'm talking about." I removed a five dollar bill from my purse and shoved it into his hand. "Where is he?"

A grin spread on the mouth of the driver. "You mean Luis Chucho? The once great *torero* who lost his courage? The tall, handsome Luis who wears nice clothes and kisses all the *señoritas*?"

"Well?"

The grin faded. "I do not know him."

I shoved another five spot into his dirty palm. The grin reappeared. "You must mean Luis Chucho. The cocky coward who manages El Puno."

I slapped my forehead as the realization struck home. "Of course! It all fits," I said. "Punta Punta at La Tita. Luis at El Puno."

The grin broadened. "You are becoming smart, *señorita*. You had better stay that way, if you wish to live. Do not go to El Puno."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. "But no thanks."

"They will step on you like a cockroach."

"Maybe. I don't squash easily."

He lapsed into silence, hot eyes fixed on me in the rear view mirror. When he pulled up in front of the nightclub, he said, "*Señorita*, have you ever had molasses poured over you and been staked to the ground in the hot sun?"

"No."

"The ants—the big red ones—they crawl on you. And they bite. It would be a shame to see this happen to you."

I nodded and climbed from the cab. When I paid the

fare, I slipped him an extra five. "This is for the ant colony," I said. "Buy 'em a brunette."

The rear entrance into El Puno bore a marked resemblance to stage equipment doors on theaters off Broadway in New York. Huge steel panels mounted on rollers drew back to allow loading and unloading of scenery and fixtures. Now one of them was cracked slightly to allow cool air into the building. I slipped inside, but was hardly through the door when a hand grasped me rudely.

"You're late!" a voice cried.

I glanced around at a tall, gangling Mexican woman who suddenly jerked me into a dressing room where thirty or more half-nude chorines were throwing on costumes.

"This is yours," the Mexican woman said.

I blinked. The costume she tossed me wasn't much more than three pink feathers from a very small bird. I started to tell her she had the wrong girl when a husky, well-built man came striding into the dressing room. He wore a blue suit and a black bow tie and his eyes gleamed brightly as he looked around. It was Luis Chucho. I ducked my head out of sight and unzipped the back of my dress.

"Girls," Luis announced, "this is a big night for El Puno. Our first French-American revue. Do a good job and each of you will receive a special bonus—from me!" He winked and moved in my direction, patting some of the girls on their naked backsides.

I knew discovery now would wreck my plans. A pink-feathered mask went with the costume. I drew this over my eyes and peeled off my dress. He stopped behind me.

"Mady?"

That name struck a bell. The busty blonde doll with the all-over suntan on the billboard out front. Mady Something-or-other. An American chanteuse. Apparently this was her costume. I nodded without looking around.

"I thought you were ill tonight," Luis said. I could see his face reflected in the mirror through the slits in my mask. He held a cigarette in his teeth; an inquisitive smile on his lips.

"Lost my voice," I whispered huskily.

"You have not lost anything else," he said, admiringly. "Do not forget your promise after the show."

"Oh, I won't."

"Good. I will expect you to come to my suite. At the top of the stairs. I will be waiting."

"I can hardly wait," I said.

He swallowed deeply, running his eyes down my torso. "Nor I." He walked on.

The Mexican woman clapped her hands. "Girls, girls, you must hurry. Only ten minutes."

There was a squeal of voices and most of the costumed women rushed from the room. I dabbed at my mouth for a few moments with a lipstick brush until Luis left, then I reached for my dress. The Mexican woman caught my arm again.

"No" she said, decisively.

"Look, dearie," I lifted the mask, "I'm not Mady."

"I know, but Luis thinks that you are. You must go on, or I will lose my job."

"That's better than losing your life," I said, pushing her away.

Her eyelids narrowed. "Then why did you pretend when he talked with you? Huh?"

I didn't answer, but stepped into my dress.

She knew something was fishy and it didn't take her long to figure out what.

"You do not want him to know who you really are!" she exclaimed. "I will tell him, you are not Mady!"

"No! Wait a minute. What do you want me to do?"

"Dance."

"What?"

"It is simple. You can do it as you wish. I will explain to Luis that I changed your number. You have only to do a little strip tease."

"A strip tease?"

"Sí." She held up the costume. "Just remove the feathers. Then the men will carry you from the stage."

"What men?"

She led me to the dressing room door and gestured at a group of dark-haired men standing in the wings of the theater. They were painted bronze. And that wasn't all. Their muscular bodies glistened in the bright lights. They were stark staring naked. I stepped back into the dressing room and gulped.

"No," I said.

"Luis is outside in the corridor—"

"No," I repeated, unzipping my dress again. I tore off my bra and panties and fastened the costume to me. It was the sexiest damned thing since the invention of sin.

Bells began to ring. Music lifted from the orchestra pit. I walked out into the wings feeling positively lewd. My bosom swayed fetchingly, capped by the feathers, and the bronze men stared as I moved. The chorines danced onto the stage, singing, whirling. Some of them were bare from the waist up. Some from the waist down. Others wore masks and gloves and stockings. High heels kicked and tapped merrily as the revue got under way. El Puno was jammed.

Then came my turn. I tried to renege at the last second, but the Mexican choreographer pointed in the wings to Luis and gave me a shove. I spun out onto the stage. Applause exploded and suddenly through the slits in my mask I could see the bright lights, the taut, staring faces, and I froze. Cymbals clanged. Trumpets blared. Chorines fluttered, leaped and spun behind me. But I couldn't move. The bronze men rushed out seizing me in their arms, whirling me in the air. When they stopped, I noticed

one of my feathers was missing. Then I noticed something else. The biggest guy came at me with his hands cupped. He threw me to the floor. That's when all hell broke loose. The choreographer hadn't told me about this. Two of them converged on me. I leaped to my feet and kicked one in the stomach. The other I just kicked. They both crumpled to their knees, screaming. The curtain came down.

So did Luis. He came down on me like an avalanche, tearing off my mask.

## FOURTEEN

"Mady was no lady," I said to Luis, covering the spot where the feather was missing. "No wonder she's sick. Anybody who could go through that routine three times a night and twice on Sunday ought to be in the hospital."

I rushed into the dressing room and threw a robe around my shoulders. Luis followed.

"You've wrecked my show!" he hurled.

I gestured at a couple of the bronzed men. "They were trying to wreck me. So we're even. Now get out of here. I'm going to dress."

"No you're not!" He spun me around.

"Look, Luis, don't try and be tough with me."

"I will be any way I wish. This is my place."

"So I understand. What happened to you Sunday night at the slaughter house?"

"That is my business."

"It happens to be mine, too," I said. "I wound up the fall guy of that little excursion. Where were you when they stripped and tied me to that tree?"

"I—I do not remember."



"Come now, Luis, you can do better than that."

"Leave me alone, Honey!"

"That's what I want you to do for me."

"All right!" he hurled. "But then I want to see you in my office. *Pronto!*"

He strode from the dressing room, fists clenched, chin lifted defiantly. I slipped into my panties and bra, lifted the black sheath over my arms and zipped up the back. I smoothed on fresh makeup, brushed my hair and walked out into the wings of the theater. The curtain was up again revealing a sheet of ice on part of the stage. A curvaceous red-head twirled on silver skates to the music which floated from the orchestra pit. She was nearly nude, except for a thin cape of gauze, and as she whirled her smooth white body glistened in the hot lights.

"Where's the ice come from?" I asked one of the American chorines.

"An elevator in the floor of the stage. They have an ice storage plant downstairs to keep it frozen."

I was about to investigate when the muzzle of a gun pressed against my spine.

A voice whispered, "Keep smiling and head straight for that stairway."

I didn't argue. At the top of the stairs, the gunsel steered me down a corridor to a plush door with a gold handle.

"Open it!" he commanded.

I did. Inside was an exquisitely handsome suite of rooms: a pale sand-colored bedroom, a master bath with huge ivory tiles, an all-electric kitchen and a private little breakfast nook and bar with a rectangular portrait of a matador in a gold and white suit glaring down savage-eyed. Luis waited, a cigarette dangling from his thin lips, a tall drink perched in his right hand. He pushed it toward me and signaled for the gunsel to leave the suite.

"Sorry I have to resort to such a method to bring you up here, Honey, but you are not to be trusted."

"Who told you that," I said.

"My better judgment."

He poured himself a drink and offered me a stool at the bar. I shoved a thigh up and crossed my legs, staring at his swarthy face. Now was the time to play my cards right. One false move might be my last.

"What's with you, Luis?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we first met I thought you were just some nice guy trying to help a lady out. Why'd you trick me?"

"I didn't!"

"I suppose taking me out to the slaughter house was just your way of showing me the town."

"That wasn't my idea," he said, exhaling smoke through his nostrils.

"That's right." I ran my finger around the rim of the drink he'd handed me. "You take orders."

"Not any more."

"Oh?"

"Things have changed."

"Since when?"

He shook his head hopelessly, squeezing the cigarette between his teeth. "You'll never learn, will you?"

"Learn what?"

"To stay out of other people's business." He gestured futilely. "You saw Pete take the horn. You knew he was dead. Why'd you have to stay in Tijuana?"

"Because I like the *enchiladas*."

Luis scowled. "Everything would have been all right if you had gone home."

I scratched the freckles on my knee. "Like what, for instance."

"Like Maria Spota. Like Don Mano—"

"Like *almost* Honey West. What do they want me for?"

"Honey, you have been going around in circles."

"Then straighten me out."

His eyes strayed to the swell of my dress. "It would be a pleasure. But I can not."

"What's the big secret, Luis? Where's Pete?"

He didn't answer.

I continued, "At first, I thought he got it because of a syndicate, but now I'm not so sure. There's something bigger than that. Something bigger than the plaza, this place and La Tita all rolled into one."

"You are better off not knowing, Honey."

"Pete's the key to it, isn't he?"

"He was."

"He knew too much."

"You might say that." Luis crushed out his cigarette, turned and set the ashtray on a shelf behind him.

At that precise moment, I switched our glasses, hoping against hope that he wouldn't discover the change.

"Luis, are you Zingo?"

He revolved back around on his stool and laughed. "No."

"Who is?"

"You would die if you knew."

I lifted the switched glass casually and took a sip. "Isn't that what you have in mind for me anyway?"

"Honey, do not spoil the occasion," he said, joining me in a long draught. "You looked *magnifico* out there on that stage. Even if you did ruin the act."

"It was the feathers. They tickled."

He chuckled, taking another slug. "There's one thing I like about you, besides your delicious body. You have a brain, Honey. Oh, what a brain. Einstein could not have done better."

"Sometimes you talk very American, Luis."

"My mother she was *Americano*, like you. Blonde. Blue eyes. She is dead now. It is too bad. She was a good

woman." He took another swallow and rocked sideways on his stool. His eyes glazed and he grasped the bar. "I want to tell you the truth about Sunday night. You were framed."

"So I gathered."

"Punta Punta was waiting out in the stockyard behind the slaughter house with a rag soaked in chloroform. We thought if we frightened you, you would return home."

"Where do you fit, Luis? Are you the number one man under Zingo? You must be. You have very elegant quarters. You manage the best spot."

He laughed again, rubbing at his eyes. Obviously he was unaware of the switch. "You are going in circles again, Honey. I have your little pearl-handled gun. And the cute garter with the holster—"

He fell off his stool, crumpling to his knees. "Holy God that was a strong drink, I—" He looked up at me, then it came into his eyes. "You—you switched drinks with me—"

"All's fair in love and war, Luis. Last time I took the header, remember?"

He crashed over on his side, mouth open, eyes half-lidded. "Honey, you—you shouldn't have done this—I—" He tried to cry out, but no sound came into his throat.

I bent over him. "Who is he, Luis? Who is Zingo?"

He took a deep breath and rolled over, lips falling open into a snore. I slapped his face several times, but he continued to sleep. In the glow from a small lamp under the bullfighter's portrait, Luis's cheeks looked like well-tanned leather. Beneath his coat nestled a .38 revolver in a button-down holster. Six bullets nestled just as nicely in their respective chambers. I shivered. One of those, for certain, was meant for me. A search of his pockets revealed a set of keys, a box of cigarillos and a wallet stuffed with twenty-dollar bills and peso notes.

My attention centered on the odd-shaped portrait after

I locked the suite door and listened for sounds in the corridor. The bullfighter wore a *montera* pressed low on his forehead and held a *muleta* in his left hand. There was something familiar about his face, although the artist had used his paints generously to create a surrealistic interpretation of the *torero*. A cocky, devil-may-care smile flickered in the delicate features. The eyes gleamed wildly. It was the stare of a madman. Or a fiend about to commit some awesome crime.

Systematically I went through the suite with a fine tooth comb. Under a mirror in the bedroom I found a metal file box which one of Luis's keys unlocked. It contained numerous record books, all with entries in English. An Accounts Receivable ledger listed shipments received over a span of three years. One recent entry specified: Four pounds ten ounces 5/17/60 HOY JOY. The name struck a bell. Very likely this was the boat which had attacked me near Rosarito Beach. Its cargo, no doubt, was illegal drugs. That would explain the heroin stashed under my convertible's hood. That would also explain the big secret operation Luis had hinted at. Entries in the ledger added easily to a million dollars in dope traffic. No wonder they were out to get me with hammer and tongs. The same had apparently applied to Pete Freckle. He had gotten in their way somehow.

In a bottom drawer of a bureau I discovered my silk garter holster and pearl-handled Hi-Standard .22 revolver. I wriggled the band up around my right thigh and plunged the gun into its holder. Now I was ready for the gunsels, for Luis, for Zingo, for anybody. But knowing about the dope was frightening. Men who dealt in that sort of business would go to any lengths to keep their secret.

In the corner of another drawer I came across a photograph of Pete Freckle's mother and father. Also a shirt with Pete's initials monogrammed on the breast pocket. They were crumpled together as if they might have been

picked up somewhere and stuffed there out of sight. That seemed very odd. Pete's mother was an invalid and except for a constant supply of blood she would have been dead years ago. In the photograph she sat in a wheelchair, a genial warm smile on her wrinkled face, her hands interlocking with the gray-haired man who stood beside her. Pete's father had passed on the summer his son left for Mexico. He had been a laborer all his life and wasn't able to leave his family too well fixed. It was Pete's ambition to make a fortune bullfighting in Mexico so that he could support his mother.

Luis was still sleeping when I returned to the bar to use the telephone. It didn't take long to reach the Tijuana police station after placing my call, but getting through to Fred was the real trick. I pretended to be a secretary to the American consul and after much authoritative badgering they finally put the crippled newsman on. Sensing they would monitor the call I continued my ruse even with Fred until he recognized my voice.

Then he asked, "Where are you?"

"You can guess, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Why'd you confess?"

"The *Capitan* knew I was staying at Las Tunas. He planned to take me there with his squad of men. So, to protect a certain party, I spilled the beans. Now I'm going to spill something else if they come through with a firing squad."

"Keep calm," I said, squinting down at Luis. "That certain party you're talking about is on the verge of cracking open the case."

"Good. Don't worry about me. I've got a roof over my head and the cockroaches don't bite."

"That certain party says she's sorry. Were Jay and Bass able to help at all?"

"Not much. They're a couple of right guys though. They

gave it the old college try. Now I understand they've gone to a certain spot to dig for lead."

"It may be more profitable than gold," I said. "I'll get back to you later. Don't go away."

"I won't," Fred answered, and hung up.

The operator dialed La Tita for me. The number rang three times before a deep masculine voice broke in.

"*Hola.*"

"*Hola* to you," I said, gripping the receiver. "Where's Punta Punta?"

"Honey?" the voice demanded. "Is that you?"

"Jay?"

His voice lowered into a whisper. "Brother, am I glad you called. Listen, we're in real trouble. The manager of this place caught Bass and me snooping around and he's called the police. He's outside now arguing with Bass about it. I'm in his office."

"What happened?"

"Well, I was doing what you told me, looking for .45 slugs in the wall near the front door when this character with a skeleton face comes running up and screams that we stole something."

"Did you find anything?"

"No. Where are you, at El Puno?"

"Yes. Listen, get out of there fast. This manager is nobody to fool with. I'll meet you back at the trailer."

"Okay, Honey. Have *you* found anything?"

"I'll tell you when I see you."

I hung up and surveyed the bar and breakfast nook. The portrait of the bullfighter caught my eye again. He smiled down at me, the eyes gleaming wildly.

When I left Luis's suite, the gunsel was waiting outside. His thick eyebrows lifted as I tiptoed from the room, closing the door, but when I placed my finger to my lips he seemed satisfied that everything was all right. I winked

and moved down the stairway. At the bottom I bumped into one of the bronzed Mexicans who had wrestled with me on the stage. He recognized me without the mask.

"*Señorita*," he said, "you are a very good kicker. Did you ever play in the Rose Bowl?"

"No," I laughed. "Tell me, if you were going to hide something around this place—something big—where would be the best spot?"

"You mean like a body?" He thought he was being cute. He didn't know how cute.

"Yeah."

"Well," he pursed his lips, grinning, "I suppose downstairs would be the best. Under the elevated stage."

"You mean in the freezer?"

He shoved an elbow in my ribs. "*Sí*. There is no place better to hide a body, no?" His eyes slid down to my hips. "Speaking of bodies, it is a shame to hide yours."

"Thanks," I said, patting his swarthy cheek. "You're not so bad after all."

"But you are very bad," he said, a sly smile edging around his mouth. "You almost made me into a woman."

A winding stairway led down from a corridor at the rear of the building. Faint lights reached for the plaster ceiling, casting shadows as I moved. The steps carried me to a steel door, and a blatant warning in Spanish not to go beyond was painted glaringly on its face. An icy blast shook me as I stepped through, checking the lock on the other side to see if it would open again. Only a bare green bulb glistened in the ceiling of the room beyond. It was a huge room crammed with machinery, cables and pumps, frosted over and pulsating rhythmically. At the base of another flight of stairs reclined the ice-laden part of the stage which was suspended by two steel claws that lifted and lowered it when needed. It was freezing cold down in the bowels of El Puno. My breath came in icy gasps. My hands nearly froze on the stairway railing.



Cautiously I moved around the machinery which kept the temperature below freezing in the compartment. Particles of frost hung from the ceiling and walls. I climbed over chunks of ice, heels crunching deep into the crystals, being thrown off-balance. This seemed like a futile search. In the faint light it was almost impossible to distinguish anything, much less a body. I started back toward the stairs when my right ankle turned, throwing me down. I fell into a narrow trench in the ice, between two blue-white mounds of frozen moisture. I lay there for a moment trying to catch my breath, wincing from pain. Then I tried to get up.

My fingers dug into one of the mounds. A piece broke off. Under it was an arm.

## FIFTEEN

Lying face down in the ice was a man's body barely discernable in the green bulb's glare.

A hairless part of a forearm lay exposed in the blue-white block where I'd broken a piece off.

I staggered to my feet, looking around for some sort of instrument to chop through the ice. Suddenly a voice lifted behind me, over the *pump-pump-pump* of the machinery, it reverberated in the chamber. I whirled. Standing on the stairway in front of the steel door was Rafael, his pale blue eyes blazing, legs apart.

"Don't be a fool!" he spat.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, shoulders tensing.

"I was watching the show until the masked prima ballerina threw a fit and refused to continue on, then I

came behind the stage. I caught a glimpse of you coming here, so I followed."

His boots crunched in the ice as he moved around the machinery toward me. I didn't like the look on his slender, beardless face. It was full of anger. Fierce anger.

"I think I've found Pete Freckle," I said, fixing my gaze on the faint outline deep in the frozen mound.

Rafael bent over the body and extracted a knife from a trouser pocket. Then he plunged the blade into the exposed forearm. A scream froze on my lips. Instead of flesh and bone being split open by the knife a jagged tear appeared revealing a hole underneath. Rafael quickly sliced a piece off and handed it to me. It was flesh-colored cardboard.

"But—" I stammered.

The matador closed his jackknife and pocketed it again, then he glanced at the steel door. "It is a dummy used last week in the *fiesta* show. It must have fallen from the movable stage. You were a fool to come down here."

"Why?"

"They could kill you easily with no fear of being heard." Vapor spewed from his mouth and nostrils.

I shook my head, digging at the cardboard figure. "I thought sure—"

"Honey, you have a lot to learn. In Mexico we bury things deep so that they can never be found." He caught my hand and pulled me up the stairs. "Be very quiet. We will go out a side door. Keep walking and don't look around."

We crossed backstage around curtains and scenery. The door was unguarded. Apparently Luis still slept. Outside we dashed to Rafael's car, a bright red Mercedes-Benz. Above the distant profile of the mountains, stars glittered like polished brass buttons on a dark suit.

As we drove, some of the anger melted in the matador's

face. He lit a cigarette and said, "I never thought we would leave El Puno alive."

"Why not?"

"I saw you go upstairs—with a gun in your spine. They weren't playing games, were they?"

I hunched down in the seat, feeling the wind in my hair. "Luis Chucho played a game with me. Only he lost."

"Lucky for you."

"Not so much luck as skill," I said. "Ever play the shell game?"

"No."

"Well, you have three little shells and under one of them you place a pea. Then you switch them around until your opponent is too confused to know where the pea is. The real trick is to remove the pea altogether while you're moving the shells about."

"Too clever for me."

I smiled. "I wouldn't say so. Isn't that about what a bullfighter does? Puts himself under a red silk shell to keep his horned opponent from knowing exactly where he is?"

"I guess you're right, Honey."

A miniature waterfall tumbled wildly in front of Rafael's house, running down steep banks and emptying into a narrow river where a bridge crossed from the garage.

We parked in the driveway and entered through a side door where a blue slate corridor led into the living room. The matador poured us each a drink, then beckoned me to join him outside by the pool. He stubbed out his cigarette with the heel of his boot and slumped cross-legged on the stone. A sadness came into his eyes as he glared up at me.

"I don't think we'll ever find Pete," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because, as I said, in Mexico they dig deep. Very deep."

Staring down at this slim-shouldered *torero* I got the feeling again that there was something not quite right about him. Whether it was his looks, his dress or what, I couldn't decide.

"Rafael, you came to El Puno looking for me, didn't you?"

He didn't answer for a second, then said, "Sí."

"How'd you find where I was?"

He dropped a hand in the pool and dabbed some water on his forehead. "I learned this morning about Maria Spota. I also learned about your newspaper writer friend, *Señor Sims*. Another *torero* told me he had been arrested, so I called the police station and talked with him. When I told him who I was he did not hesitate about giving me information."

Crickets scratched their unceasing rhythm in the formless depths of Rafael's yard. A foul odor was in the air. I moved to a deck chair and eased into it.

"Rafael, do you think Vicaro could be—?"

"Zingo?" the matador finished. "This is what I have always wondered, Honey." He drummed his hands on the stone. "Vicaro is a formidable man. He has much more power than he shows on the surface."

"But he seems honest," I said.

"So does a rattlesnake until he strikes. Vicaro is not to be trusted. He and his *maricón* friends are of a special breed. They make me sick. Have you met Manuel Garcia?"

"Briefly. He took several shots at me with a .22 revolver and I creased his fat skull with a piece of statuary. We didn't shake hands if that's what you mean."

"Honey, you are an amazing woman."

"Hardly." I shook my head. "If it hadn't been for me Maria Spota might still be alive."

"No, do not blame yourself. I talked with Rachel and Juanita this afternoon. They were frightened, but I could tell by the way they talked that Punta Punta killed Maria.

I told this to the police *Capitan* before speaking with *Señor Sims*."

I rocked back in the chair. "The night you took me to La Tita, Maria gave me a note supposedly signed by Pete Freckle. It asked me to meet him at the Isthmus on Catalina. This turned out to be a trick. Enroute to the islands we were attacked from the air and nearly sunk."

Rafael ran slender fingers through his curly black hair. "Zingo must be very afraid of you. I wonder why?"

"He knows I'm trying to unmask him—and his operation."

The matador sipped at his drink, then said, "I guess you realize by now that there is some truth in what you said about a bullfight syndicate."

I nodded. "Why did you try and keep that a secret?"

"Because I am ashamed of what is being done. And I am powerless to stop it. I do believe, though, that Vicaro is the leader of the syndicate. Through his position as *impresario* he is able to elicit money from the *toreros* and *ganaderos* for the privilege of appearing in the ring or supplying the bulls. He should be made to face one of his own *berrendos* sometime and have his stomach torn to shreds." He slapped his hands together. "It is a very warm night. Would you like to go for a swim, Honey?"

"I don't have a bathing suit."

"That does not matter. You will feel much cooler with nothing on."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

A look of surprise came into Rafael's eyes, then he said, "Of course, you are not like the other girls." He disappeared inside the house. "I think I have a suit which will fit you."

While he was gone I tried to locate where the penetrating odor was coming from, but I could see little in the moonless night.

He returned with a knitted purple suit that was slashed almost to the navel.

"You can dress in there," he said, indicating the master bedroom.

I hesitated, then shrugged. "Okay, I could use a cool swim, but it will have to be fast. I'm meeting some people out at Rosarito Beach."

Once alone in the bedroom, I closed the door and began a systematic search of the bureau drawers. Gaily colored trousers and sashes, hats, boots, silk shirts and jackets were among the items uncovered. Then I hit a drawer full of lace things: panties, nighties, negligees.

I peeled off my own clothes and shucked into the bathing suit, making no attempt to cover the deep cleft between my breasts, which was an impossibility with this suit anyway. He glanced at me when I came out.

"How about you?" I asked.

"I prefer the indoor pool myself," he said, quietly. "It is not too deep and I am a poor swimmer."

I plunged in, feeling the coolness of the water bubble over me. When I surfaced he was leaning over the side, nonchalantly puffing on a cigarette, fist under his chin. I swam over and flicked water at him. He reared back and laughed.

"Hey, take it easy!"

I lifted myself on the rim, feeling the suit slide back from my breasts. He didn't bother to look.

"I'll make you a deal," I said, enticingly. "Let's both go in together in the indoor pool. In the raw."

His eyes widened. "I thought you said—"

"Can't a girl change her mind?" I patted his cheek and drops splattered on his trousers and sash. He got up.

"Not tonight, Honey," he said, his voice low.

I climbed out and grabbed his sash. "Don't be a party pooper. They do it in Japan all the time."

He tried to stop me, but I was too quick and his sash

came loose. He lunged, whirled and side-stepped as if he were in the bull ring. I got my hands on the top of his trousers and he uttered a cry, turned and ran. I was quick on his heels. He dodged a poplar tree in the dark, raced around a fountain and got a little distance between us. Being unfamiliar with the layout, I grazed the tree and took a different route trying to head him off. That's when the ground gave way under me. I fell headlong, rolled on a mound of dirt and landed on my back in the hole I'd stumbled into. A horrible stench caught my nostrils. I choked and tried to lift myself up, but my fingers sank into something soft and gummy and I fell back. Then I really got a whiff of what was in the hole and I nearly regurgitated. It smelled like the slaughter house, only this odor was more rancid, more putrid, like rotted flesh. I rolled over and felt underneath me. That was when *my* flesh began to crawl! I was lying on a partially decayed dead body.

I screamed.

Rafael bent over me. "What's the matter, Honey?"

"My God," I said. "There—there's—Help me up, quick."

His hands helped raise me from the hole and I fell beside it, quivering in every muscle of my body.

"Get a flashlight!" I ordered.

He ran toward the house, boots crashing against stone. I felt things crawling on me now, and I brushed at my body, jerking down the bathing suit and climbing out of it. I circled the dark hole and plunged into the pool, trying to rid myself of that creepy, crawly feeling that came with my fall. By the time I'd surfaced Rafael came jogging back, a cone of light gleaming in his hand. He bent over the hole and stabbed the beam into the opening, then he let out a sharp gasp.

I climbed from the pool, forgetting I was unclothed,

forgetting everything except what was in that hole. The thought of looking inside turned my stomach, but it had to be done. It was ghastly. In the pale shaft of light a partially eroded head peered up through sightless eyes, teeth grinning in a twisted, shapeless mouth. The body was that of a man. He was stripped naked and his lower abdomen appeared as a sea of torn flesh.

Rafael dropped the flashlight and emitted a low, animal-like moan. Bugs scuttled in and around the hole, crawling on my bare legs again. I stood up and covered my eyes. The search for Pete Freckle was over.

"Oh, my God!" the matador whispered.

"How long since you've been out here?" I said, not looking at anything except the empty dark palm of my hand.

"Several days, but—"

"He's probably been here since Sunday. The rain Sunday night washed most of the top soil away."

"Oh, my God! What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" I felt drained, weighted in my ankles, dizzy. I walked unsteadily to the house and slipped on my clothes. Rafael joined me after a few minutes, his face a white mask, hands trembling.

"He—his eyes," he stammered.

"The grave's not very deep," I said. "Whoever buried him expected he'd be found."

"But, why here?"

I brushed some strands of wet hair from my eyes and poured myself a drink. "How close were you to Pete Freckle?" I asked.

The blue eyes, now limpid and almost moist, stared at me. "We—we were friends."

"What kind of friends?"

"He—" Rafael stopped, chewed on the back of a hand.

"Honey, you don't understand."

"I understand this much," I said, angrily. "Pete Freckle



—or what's left of him—is lying in a shallow grave in your back patio. Did you forget it might rain?"

"You don't think that I—"

"Rafael, you're a very wealthy person. Wealthy enough to own a house with two swimming pools, and perhaps even a couple of nightclubs."

"You mean La Tita and El—"

"Yes."

Fists balled on his hips. "That is ridiculous."

"You're the only one in this area, besides Vicaro, who is big enough to run an operation like Zingo's."

"I wouldn't do such a thing!"

"You took me to La Tita that night. If I hadn't gone I'd have never received that message to go to Catalina."

His face reddened. "But I didn't know Maria had a message for you."

"You knew all about the nightclub. About Punta Punta and the fact that Zingo owns the place."

"This is common knowledge, Honey."

"Is it? And is the fact that Mexico's number one bull-fighter is the only *torero* not bothered by Zingo's influence, also common knowledge?"

"I don't know," Rafael hurled, huskily. "But you can't accuse me of being Zingol!"

"You're hiding something, matador," I said, advancing toward him.

"No!"

"You pretend to love women, but when they are dancing in front of you stripped to the teeth, you look away."

"I told you, Honey—"

"You said you were not a *maricón*, and I believed you, but you were in love with Pete Freckle!"

"I—I—" He took a step backward, trying to avoid my piercing gaze.

"What are you trying to hide, matador?"

He took another uncertain step. The indoor pool lay

behind him and he toppled back into it, sinking almost immediately.

When he came to the surface his face was livid white and his mouth formed frantic syllables of fear.

"Help!" he cried. "Help, Honey!"

He sank again, splashing wildly. When he came up I didn't have to ask any more questions. The top of his shirt had opened in the water and pulled away from his shoulders. Exposed now were two rounded, pink-tipped protuberances.

Rafael was a woman!

## SIXTEEN

I caught an arm and pulled her to the edge of the pool. She floundered, sending up a spray of water, exposing more of her chest. There was no mistaking the soft fullness.

She grasped the tile rim and pulled herself up, breathing deeply, choking from the water, whimpering. She threw herself down on her elbows, hands brushing at her thick black hair.

"So now you know," she whispered, closing the front of her shirt and tucking it into her trousers. "You are the only one in all of Mexico."

"It's amazing," I said. "I never guessed until tonight. How have you been able to keep it a secret all these years?"

"It hasn't been easy. Every time I fought I knew if a bull gored me seriously they would find out. But I have been lucky."

She rolled over and stared up at me, her deep blue eyes shaded by a slender hand. "I lied to you," she continued. "I'm an American. I came down here six years ago after

graduating from college. I tried to get into bullfighting, but at that time there were too many Bette Fords and Pat McCormicks; the field was overcrowded with American girls trying to become *toreras*. So I cut my hair and changed my identity from Patty Robinson, female, to Rafael, male *torero* from Spain. I began to get matches right away. No one ever suspected. Until you came along."

I tossed her a towel and grimaced. "It was the way you acted about Pete Freckle that made me suspicious. Another woman recognizes female ardor when she sees it. Did Pete know you were in love with him?"

Her face grew sad again, drawn about the mouth like a little girl's mouth after it has bitten into something sour. "No. He thought of me as just a fighting companion. We used to drink together. Even wrestle. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"*La Fiesta Brava* is a solemn dedicated ritual to these people. Like Hollywood film stars and baseball players, matadors are made into heroes. The people build shrines to them. They don't like being deceived. To wake up some morning and find your handsome, virile movie star is a spindly-legged dame from the Wabash would cause an explosion. The same applies here. I'm a God to fifty million Mexicans. You can't destroy something like that overnight."

"Patty Robinson," I said, shaking my head. "It's unbelievable. Even the color of your face and hair—"

"I kept myself out in the sun constantly. My hair is naturally black. That helped immensely."

"Has it been worth it all? I mean, being without male affection or companionship?"

She wiped beads of water from her face and smiled. "Bullfighting has always been my first love. Nothing can compare with it, Honey. I was very fond of Pete, but

truthfully he came second. I would die without bull-fighting."

"You may die with it," I said, gesturing toward the back patio. "If Zingo finds out you hired me to stay in Mexico he may have you pegged for next Sunday."

She sat up on the rim of the pool and exhaled audibly. "Possibly. Honey, what are we going to do with—" She winced, glancing toward the patio.

"Cover him over," I said, finding it difficult to say the words. Pete Freckle was dead. The smiling, devil-may-care face swept through my brain like a face in a crazy, side-show mirror all warped out of proportion. All bloody and decayed. "We can't call the police. Not yet anyway. Do you have a shovel?"

"Yes, in the garage."

I found a long-handled spade and, with teeth clamped together, I tossed dirt onto Pete's body. When he was completely covered I returned to the house. The slender, dark-haired woman was changing out of her wet clothes. The curve of her white buttocks gleamed rawly in the faint light cast from the master bathroom as she squirmed into a pair of panties.

She blushed and said, "Have you given up the idea that I'm Zingo?"

"Temporarily." I crossed to a mirror and combed the dampness from my hair, then touched up my lips. "Would you loan me your car tonight?"

"I will if you promise to keep my secret. Please! It means everything to me."

I nodded. "I promise."

She followed me to the side door which led to the garage, her hips swinging in that boyish manner. I was anxious to get back to the trailer and talk to Jay and Bass about their encounter with Punta Punta. I hoped everything was all right.

"Be careful," she said, as I crossed the bridge.

"I'll try," I returned. "You may hear from me later tonight."

I backed her little Mercedes-Benz out onto the road and started toward Rosarito Beach. The memory of a life-long friend flitted across my mind again. I thought of the days when we were kids playing in wide fields near our homes. Pete Freckle. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. I wanted Zingo. But I wanted Punta Punta most of all.

It was nearly midnight when I arrived at the trailer. A car was parked a few feet away, its headlights gleaming. I pulled up behind it and climbed out. Wind off the ocean rustled my hair and spray dampened my face.

Noticing there were no lights in the trailer, I deduced Jay and Bass had just arrived. That was my mistake.

I walked around the rear of the other car and was about to call Jay when a machine gun poked from the rear window into my chest. Then a squat, sweating red face poked out beside it.

"Hello, Manuel," I said, lifting my arms. He had a bandage on his forehead.

"*Señorita*," he said, slowly through his teeth. "It would do me so much pleasure to blow your head off that my finger is itching to death."

"Scratch it," I said, "with a piece of poison ivy."

Skull-faced Punta Punta crawled from the front seat, grinning, shaking his thin body. "*Señorita* West, you are so beautiful it makes me want to cry to think we are going to have to kill you."

"I'll bet you've been filling buckets thinking about it," I said. "Where's Luis?"

"Right here, Honey." The tall, handsome Mexican came around the car from the driver's side. His shirt was open down the front and he clenched his fingers together. "Get her gun!"

Punta Punta bent down and lifted my skirt. That was

his mistake. I kicked him in the Adam's apple and he fell over in the sand, choking. The machine gun rammed against my neck.

"Try that sort of thing one more time, *señorita*," Manuel grunted, "and I will send your pretty head to the moon."

Luis laughed. "You do not think much of your life, do you, Honey?" He pulled my skirt up with his left hand, revealing the garter holster and gun. With his other hand he patted my leg and extracted the revolver.

Punta Punta climbed to his feet, wobbling, still gagging and swore in Spanish. Then he suddenly back-handed me, a savage swipe that nearly knocked me off my feet. I fell back against the car.

"I should cut your heart out," he cried. "Get in the car!"

Manuel opened his door and dragged me inside. A fourth man, a greasy, huge Mexican with big hands, pinioned my arms as Manuel bent toward me.

"Leave her alone!" Luis spat, as he moved behind the wheel.

"She is such a beautiful big woman," Manuel said, "I was just going to touch her in a couple of places. Give her a thrill."

"I'll give you a thrill," I said, through pressure exerted on my ribs. "Give me a knife." I squirmed.

"She is like a wildcat," the man behind me growled.

"Hold her, Juanito," Punta Punta said. "We will be to Vicaro's ranch shortly. Then you can let her go."

There was a quick exchange of Mexican words and they all laughed in their throats. Silence followed, except for the hum of the tires on the asphalt road.

Suddenly I bit Juanito's arm, forcing him to release his hold. I lunged for Manuel, but the fat little *maricón* was ready for me. He brought the machine gun up into my face.

Blood dripped down from a cut on my forehead.

"That is for the hole you made in my head," Manuel said, grinning. "You spoiled my nice rug in the living room. I did not like this. You made it all red in one spot."

"I should have made it red all over," I said.

"Watch her," Luis warned. "She is very tricky. One false move and she could have us lined up alongside the road with holes in our stomachs."

"You were a fool, Luis," Punta Punta growled, "to let her switch drinks on you."

"How big a fool were you," Luis lashed back, "to let her turn your café into a shooting gallery. You even missed and shot the wrong woman."

"You are both fools," Manuel said, covering me with the machine gun. "While you argue she plans something in her clever female mind." His voice lifted into its feminine shrill. "Pay attention to the road and not to your petty quarrelling."

Vicaro's ranch came into view, etched rawly in the night. They drove up a side road, keeping well away from the house, and stopped alongside the training arena.

"Get out!" Manuel ordered, sticking the snout of the machine gun against my chest.

I backed out into the dirt against the building. Punta Punta jammed a cigarillo into his thin mouth and lit it, then he laughed. The medallion glittered on his hairless chest.

"So you want to know who Zingo is, eh?" he demanded, scratching his boney cheeks. "You are in for a big surprise, *señorita*. The surprise of your life. Come!"

He took my arm, as Manuel covered me from behind, and dragged me toward one of the outer gates which led into the arena.

Luis, walking a little ahead, turned to Juanito. "Did you douse him with turpentine?"

"Sí," Juanito replied. "He is so mad he could kill himself if he knew how."

Punta Punta flung open a gate, taking us into a narrow covered tunnel which apparently circled the training arena. Beyond was a wooden wall about twelve feet high with another gate bisecting it. Punta Punta jerked me around against this, placed his fist under my chin and glared at me threateningly.

"You know too much, *señorita*. Far too much."

"You mean like a million dollars worth of dope being transported illegally into the United States?"

Punta Punta's thick-lidded eyes snapped around at Luis. "She did find the records, you fool!"

"It does not make any difference now," Luis said.

Punta Punta blew smoke in my face and laughed again. "It is too bad you found out, *señorita*, because it is a shame to kill a woman as pretty as you, but this time it must be done." He turned to Juanito. "Pull the hinge."

The next move came so quickly I wasn't prepared for the shove which spilled me backward into the arena. Then they slammed the gate closed.

I landed in gritty warm sand, staring up into a sky that was black as pitch and moonless. Icy blue stars winked. Something stirred across the arena. I leaped to my feet and spun around. In the pale dark I saw a huge figure hurtling across the sand at me, head lowered, horns glistening. I lunged quickly to my right, felt the bone hardness of a killing point brush past my arm, felt the short thick neck swollen with rage toppling me forward, felt the rush of sand in my mouth and eyes as I rolled away from him. He snorted furiously, wheeling around, turning on his hoofs. I stumbled to my feet, kicked off my high heels and ran toward the other side of the arena, hoping to find a *burladero* shield. There didn't seem to be any. Or at least I couldn't find one in the dark. The bull charged again like a freight train, pounding across the arena, hoofs flying. My heart leaped into my throat. At the last second he seemed to lose me in the dark, angling



off to the side, banging against a wall and shaking the whole building.

A cry lifted. "He must have got her!"

I blundered into a stubby pole lying on the ground. After a quick appraisal I realized it was wide enough on top for me to stand on if I could climb it. I leaned it against the wall, lifted my skirt and began to shinney. The bull had gone sort of berserk now, running crazily around the walled circle, brushing against the boards, dragging himself on his forelegs, snorting fiercely.

At the top of the pole I found I could reach far enough to climb over the arena wall. Grasping with both hands I pulled myself up and then over, dropping about seven feet in grimy, soft dirt on the other side.

That was when they discovered I'd escaped the bull and entered the corrals, which were blocked off from any access from the front side of the building. The only way they could reach me now was to cross the arena. They decided to send Juanito. I watched his progress through a tiny hole in the wall. He narrowly escaped the bull twice, both times using a cape to ward off the angry beast. When he reached the far gate he broke the lock with the same pole I'd used earlier. Then he came in after me, his face a cruel mask of hate and lust. He caught me in the closed passageway and tore my dress down to my waist.

"*Señorita*, I'm going to kill you, but first—"

The words rang in my ears. I glanced up. Luis's angry face hovered over me, pinning me against the wall inside the training arena tunnel. His fingers were taut around my throat. I suddenly recalled seeing myself escape from Juanito, seeing him burst blindly through the arena gate into the bull's furious charge, which killed them both. I had tried to escape from Luis, Manuel and Punta Punta, but the squat, little *maricón's* cry had brought Luis hot on my trail. He'd caught me in the tunnel and jammed me against the wall.

"You are such a beautiful woman, Honey," he said, half-laughing. "It is a shame to kill you, but it is your neck or mine."

I looked back in the dim light at the approaching figures of Manuel, a satisfied smile on his sweating face, and Punta Punta, grinning and shaking his head happily at what he saw.

Then I lifted my knee as hard as possible and Luis let out a cry, dropping his hands. I ran to the end of the tunnel, pulling up the top of my dress, toes digging into the dirt. I was frantic, knowing Manuel still carried the machine gun. Even as black as the night was I sensed he'd have a clear target when I got out into the open. My only hope was the car, where I remembered seeing Luis drop my revolver in the front seat.

Outside the arena, crickets chirped and bulls in a distant corral snorted. I ran toward the car, legs pounding under me. Luis emerged from the tunnel, pointing, shouting.

"The car," he roared. "She's going for the car."

"Stop her!" Punta Punta yelled.

I heard a burst of machine gun fire and felt the ground spitting up around me, saw my path marked by tracer bullets, but I kept running.

When I reached the car I threw open the front door and dived inside, slamming the handle after me.

"She's got a gun in there," Luis warned. "Get her!"

I fumbled in the seat, feeling the butt of my .22 revolver come into my fingers, swinging it into position. I cocked it over the window sill and took aim at the blurred, running shapes. I squeezed the trigger. One of them fell in the dirt, howling. The other two men stopped and leaped to the ground.

"My hand," Luis cried. "She hit me in the hand."

Manuel came to his knees, machine gun cocked in his

thick hands. A burst shattered the side of the car, bullets puncturing the door, thudding against the metal, the tracers skidding off like metallic sparks in the sky. I pressed my trigger and Manuel fell on his face, apparently unhurt.

"We will never reach her from here," he cried. "We are too much out in the open."

Luis bellowed, "I need a doctor!"

"Help him," Punta Punta ordered. "We'll go back to the arena."

It was difficult to see them in the dark. I saw something moving toward the building, and took a shot at it, but missed. In a short time there was nothing except the rush of wind blowing through the radiator grill.

Luis had taken the car keys with him. I strained for new sounds, but nothing came. Then I thought I heard somebody running behind the car. I whirled frantically trying to look outside, but my vision was blocked by darkness. I knew if Manuel sneaked up on me with that machine gun I'd be sunk. He could poke it through the window and blast me to hell and gone. I cursed the night, and then suddenly realized I was a fool not to take advantage of it myself. If I could get out one of the doors, without being spotted, I could crawl along the ground until I reached the highway.

I wondered what had happened to Jay and Bass. If Punta Punta had been suspicious he might have done something to them. It was strange that they weren't at the trailer when I arrived.

Slowly I inched open the door on the passenger side and wriggled out into the dirt. I kept myself flat on the ground and started for a distant patch of high brush. Every move seemed to create a torrent of noise. I stopped and caught my breath.

I couldn't have been more than thirty feet from the car when I heard a sudden cry behind me.

"Get her, Manuel!"

Then another, "Not so loud, you fool!"

I whirled, but couldn't see anything.

"Look out!" one of them yelled. The machine gun chattered.

Then I saw them as clear as day in a luminous burst of fire. The gas tank on the car exploded, sending up a sheet of flame almost twice as high as the automobile. And in the wild glare I saw all three of them standing behind the car, arms lifted, mouths open, bathed in fire.

I saw Manuel, clutching the machine gun, begin to run, his thick body jogging weirdly. He took three or four clumsy steps and then fell in a pyre of reddish-orange. Punta Punta didn't move. His face just seemed to melt into its skeletal frame and he slumped to his knees and then crashed onto his back. Luis was etched in the fiery curtain. He appeared to see me in the reflected glare and his arms went out, seeking, searching, pleading. Then he fell face down onto the burning earth.

## SEVENTEEN

Three charred mounds lay twisted in the darkness.

As flames licked over the car, shooting up orange geysers, I crept nearer, shielding my eyes from the heat. Manuel had fallen on his side and the fire, ignited by the tracer bullets, had scorched the ground around him until it was as black as coal dust. He still clutched the machine gun, its barrel now a reddish hot stem. Except for the gold medallion on Punta Punta's neck there wasn't enough left to identify him. Luis was in even worse shape, if that

was possible. He'd landed under the tank and the gas had burned him to a crisp.

I started up the dirt road toward Vicaro's house, my shadow slanting across in front of me from the fire's glow. My head ached and my mouth felt like I'd been eating chalk. I'd suffered a lot of punishment at the hands of those men. Enough to last a lifetime. It didn't seem possible they were dead. So much poison eradicated in one dramatic burst of fire. Manuel had taken poor aim in the darkness and hit the gas tank. Poof! They had gone up like Roman candles.

I limped onto Vicaro's front porch and rang the doorbell, my revolver in readiness. Nothing happened. No sound came from within. I banged at the door several times, then tried the knob. It responded to my hand's turn. I entered the house slowly, legs taut, revolver clutched in my fingers.

I found the housekeeper in a back room. She had been strangled and dumped on a bed. Her neck bore the savage imprint of harsh fingers which had gripped until her breath was gone.

Vicaro lay a few feet away, a crimson stain in his nightshirt. The dark-haired impresario had been shot in the back. I rolled him over and examined his mouth. Blood was dried in the corners. He'd been dead for hours.

Unsteadily I went into Vicaro's library, limping on bare feet, and searched through his desk. Light from a small lamp cast grotesque shadows along the walls as I rummaged through the drawers. Finally, I found what I was looking for. Another ledger. This one kept in Spanish. Then I came across something else. A photograph of Pete Freckle in color. He wore his matador's outfit and beneath his *montera* glinted angry fixed eyes. The picture reminded me of the weird painting in Luis's suite at El Puno. I shoved the photo inside the ledger and turned out the light. In Vicaro's room I found a set of keys on his dresser, then continued out a side door to the garage.

Flames still licked a red strip in the night sky near the training arena. I shuddered, climbed inside a black sedan and started the engine. As I drove up the road leading to the main highway, I tried to iron out some of the wrinkles in my thinking mechanism. Vicaro was dead. Pete was dead. Two ledgers. Two separate operations. That was the key. It had to be the only answer.

I turned south at the fork and continued to the turn-off near Rosarito Beach. This time I recognized Jay's car parked near the sand. I pulled up beside it and climbed out, still rocky from the knocking around I'd taken.

I banged on the door until a light sprang on, and Jay came outside, rubbing his eyelids.

"Honey," he said, squinting at my bloody forehead and torn dress, "you're a mess. What happened?"

"Plenty," I said, stepping inside the trailer.

Big Bass got up out of bed, staggering in the aisle, stretching. He wore a long nightgown and it looked ridiculous on his massive frame.

"You're hurt," Bass said, examining me in the bare glow of a candle.

"Not badly," I said, clutching Vicaro's ledger. "Just a scratch. I did sprain my leg tumbling over the arena wall."

"What arena?" barked Jay, eyelids narrowing.

I told them how Luis, Punta Punta and Manuel jumped me at the trailer earlier. How they took me to Vicaro's and locked me in the training ring with a mad bull. How I escaped and Juanito was killed chasing me. And how the other three died when the gas tank exploded.

When I was finished neither man spoke, until Jay slumped into a chair and said, "I can't believe it. Four people dead, including that little pipsqueak Punta Punta, but—"

"Six people," I added. "They must have killed Vicaro and his housekeeper earlier. It was a mess. Vicaro had been shot in the back."

"Why, Honey?"

"Vicaro got it for the same reason Pete did."

"What's that?"

"I'll tell you later," I said. "Did you find a bullet?"

"Sure," Bass answered, crossing to his trousers and extracting a battered piece of lead. He tossed it to me. "We had a helluva time staying alive ourselves. This little joker Punta Punta was loaded for bear. We finally had to run for it."

I accepted a cigarette from Jay and drew smoke into my lungs. "What took you so long getting back to the trailer?"

"We stopped again at the jail to see Fred Sims and tell him about the bullet. He didn't seem too excited about it."

I examined the battered slug. "Chances are pretty slim we can prove anything with it, but we can try. Listen, will you two do me one more favor?"

"What's that, Honey?"

I doused my face with water in the sink, then talked through a towel. "Could you meet me in about an hour at the matador Rafael's house?"

Bass split a beer can open with a knife, took a swig and asked, "What for?"

"I'll need your help."

"Doing what?"

"I've found something that will answer a lot of questions after a medical and dental examination."

"Where are you going in the meantime?" Jay asked.

"As soon as I change clothes I'm stopping off at the jail to see if this bullet won't take Fred off the hook. Also, I want to report what happened out at Vicaro's ranch."

"But they'll arrest you, Honey," Bass said. He glanced at Jay. "We can't let her do that."

"I'll be all right."

The dark-eyed surgeon picked up Vicaro's ledger. "What's this?"

"Part of my *coup de grâce*," I said, straightening my hair. "You'll learn about it at Rafael's."

"Where's he live?" Bass said, with irritation in his voice, apparently not happy with his middle-of-the-night chore.

I gave them the address, then ducked behind a screen and slipped into a fresh skirt and blouse. While I was dressing Jay got his medical bag from the car and touched up the small cut on my forehead.

As I was leaving, Jay caught my arm and said, "Now set us straight. We're to meet you at Rafael's in one hour. That would be three a.m."

"Right," I said. "When you arrive, just park in the driveway with your lights out and wait for me, understand?"

"Why so mysterious?"

I winked, tucked the ledger under my arm and said, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I leaped out the door and jogged through deep sand to Rafael's Mercedes-Benz, which was still parked alongside the road. On the way to town my heart pumped furiously in anticipation of things to come. I could hardly wait to reach Rafael's now. If everything worked out things were going to pop. All over the place.

I parked opposite the police building in downtown Tijuana and walked into the building, limping a little. The red-cheeked man at the desk had a surprise for me when I asked for Fred.

"Señor Sims is not here."

"Where is he?" I said, blinking.

"He left a message for you to meet him at Las Tunas Hotel."

"But—but I don't understand," I stammered.

The Mexican officer grinned. "The two other girls in



that act at La Tita, they come in tonight and they tell the *Capitan* the true story about the shooting. Your friend has been cleared."

"Thanks," I said, dumping the .45 slug on his desk. "Here, give the *Capitan* this with my compliments. And tell him to take a squad of men out to Vicaro's ranch tomorrow morning. I'll explain later."

I left the police station hurriedly and drove around to Las Tunas. Fred was waiting for me in his room.

"Now what?" he said, scanning the cut on my head.

"The dog died," I said.

"What dog?"

"Punta Punta, and his playmates. Vicaro, too. Listen, Fred, have you heard anything tonight from Rafael, the bullfighter?"

"No."

"You're certain? No phone calls, or messages?"

"Of course." His forehead ridged. "Why?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now we have an appointment with an undertaker."

"A what?"

I grabbed his hat and poked it on his head. "Come on!"

We drove the short distance to Rafael's house quickly. Jay and Bass were waiting in their car. Their eyebrows lifted when they saw Fred. I explained about the two girls' appearance at the police station, then we crossed over the bridge to Rafael's front door and rang the bell.

After a minute, a low voice called, "Who's there?"

"It's me," I said. "Honey West. Open up!"

A bolt slid back and Patty Robinson, alias Rafael, appeared in a shallow cast of light wearing a black silk dressing robe and slippers. Her face paled when she saw the others.

"What is this?" she demanded, in that husky, masculine tone.

I shoved my way past her and invited the three men into the house. I could tell Patty was all shook up by the look on her face, but I couldn't slow down now. I took a cigarette from a canister in the living room and lit it, then turned toward the blond surgeon.

"Did you bring your medical kit?"

He nodded.

I glanced toward the pool area, my skin crawling just thinking about that wormy grave.

"You're probably wondering what this is all about," I said, surveying each face carefully. "As you know I've been searching for nearly a week for an elusive man named Zingo. My biggest problem was that he didn't seem to exist. Not as a separate entity. He was two people. One by day and another by night. Or so it seemed."

Patty Robinson's expression darkened.

"I was after him," I continued, exhaling smoke, "but likewise he was after me. Or at least his henchmen were. They assumed I knew something about his operation, which includes vice and dope."

"Dope?" Bass murmured, shooting a glance at Jay.

"Apparently they have been receiving from ten to twenty pounds of heroin a week, if records mean anything. On the open market, say in the United States, that would amount to many thousands and thousands of dollars. Enough to make a small fortune."

Jay whistled.

Patty Robinson leaned over for a cigarette and whispered, "Why are you doing this?"

I didn't answer, but continued, "My interest in Pete Freckle's disappearance stirred them up. First, they tried to warn me off by tying me to a tree. Then they got tough and went after me with a machine gun."

"They were versatile to say the least," Fred cracked.

"You can say that again," I added. "Most disturbing of all was the fact that while I was hunting for Zingo I was

also searching for Pete Freckle. And neither one could be found. That is until tonight."

"What do you mean, Honey?" Jay demanded.

"Just what I said."

"But—"

"We found Pete Freckle."

"Where?"

I gestured. "There's a shovel in the garage, Jay, would you get it for me."

He hesitated, then disappeared out a side door. While he was gone, Patty whispered, "Is this necessary, Honey? This way?"

I nodded.

When Jay returned with the spade, I led them around the swimming pool to the shallow grave. As I suspected, the earth had been moved since I'd last covered the hole. Digging under the illumination of Patty's flashlight, I watched the various faces out of the corner of my eye. They stared, faces white in the glow. They gasped as the corpse was uncovered.

So did I. The face was battered now beyond any possible recognition.

The four of them stood opposite me on the other side of the grave. I removed my revolver and leveled it in their general direction.

"Honey!" Fred blurted. "What are you doing?"

"One of us is Zingo," I said, waving the gun at them. I studied their frozen expressions for a moment. "Is it you, Fred? You're a newspaperman. You get around a lot. Could you possibly have been in contact with hoods in Mexico? No!"

I shifted the gun down the row to Bass. "Is it you, Dr. Summit? You with those big sheepish eyes and grinning face? You have a trailer near Rosarito Beach. You come down to Mexico often. Often enough to deal in drugs and vice."

Bass's cheeks reddened and his fists clenched.

"No," I said, "it isn't you, Bass. You're not clever enough to run such an operation." I turned the snout on Jay. "Or you, Dr. Hook. Are you clever enough? You seem to be. You operate an exclusive clinic in the Valley, and still manage to make Mexico often enough to handle other kinds of business."

"Don't be ridiculous, Honey!" the blond surgeon blurted.

"No, I won't, Jay," I said, softly. "Because you're not Zingo either." I pointed the revolver at the last figure in the row. Rafael. Patty Robinson.

"Don't, Honey!" she pleaded, huskily.

"And how about you, Rafael," I said, harshly. "You live in Mexico. You own a lavish house and an expensive car. You could be Zingo. You could be almost anybody—" I paused. "But you're not!"

"What?" Patty cried, half in relief.

"No," I said, a catch in my voice. "There's only one of us who is—or was Zingo. There were two men missing. Pete Freckle and Zingo. But what I didn't know was—"

My revolver aimed toward the grave.

"Honey!" Fred spat. "You don't mean that—"

"That's right, Fred. Pete was Zingo. He was Zingo all the time."

## EIGHTEEN

We stood over the open grave, peering down in the pale glow at the remains of Pete Freckle.

"He—he was Zingo?" Fred questioned.

I nodded.

"But I don't understand—"

"Pete was a fiercely ambitious young man," I said, searching their faces. "With a very sick mother. It took a lot of money to keep her alive. More than the average man can make. He came to Mexico four years ago with what his father had left him. He apparently bought La Tita, hired some small-time hoods and branched out into dope traffic."

"How'd you figure that, Honey?" Fred demanded.

"I found a ledger hidden behind a wall panel at El Puno. It listed the dates and amounts of drugs received over a period of three years. The entries were all kept in English."

"But that doesn't mean—"

"I found a similar ledger in Vicaro's desk. This one in Spanish. It told a different story. About payments received from *toreros* and *ganaderos*. He apparently ran a lucrative business on the side, using his position as impresario as a wedge. Pete Freckle's name never appeared in that ledger."

"So what?"

"So, Vicaro must have known about Pete and vice versa. They operated independent syndicates, but didn't cross swords."

"Then why were they killed?"

"Somebody decided to muscle in," I said, glancing at Patty Robinson's stunned face. "Somebody wanted more money. And the only way to get it was to knock off the two top men. Pete must have suspected it was coming. That's why he contacted me. But I arrived a little too late to do him any good."

Fred stared up in the cone of light. "Whoever did the muscling must have tried to cool you, Honey."

"That's right," I said, holding the revolver loosely in my palm. "Being afraid I'd discover Pete's other identity and crack the syndicate, he tried to get me out of Mexico. When that didn't work he used unfriendly persuasion."

"Was it Luis, Punta Punta or Manuel?" Fred asked, lifting on his cane, straightening beside me.

"Neither. They just did the dirty work. In exchange they probably got what they wanted. Luis had already moved into Pete's suite at El Puno. Punta Punta was collecting the receipts from La Tita. And Manuel, no doubt, was next in line as the plaza's impresario. They were the small fish."

"You mean there are others, much bigger?" Fred asked.

"Sure. What about the ones who handle the drugs in the United States. They take all the risks and were probably dissatisfied with their cut. So they promised the little fish a larger chunk and got Punta Punta to shoot Pete." I suddenly lifted the revolver at Jay Hook and raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you tell us about it, Doctor?"

"Tell you what?" His mouth sagged a little and he swallowed hard.

"How you and Bass Summit took over in Tijuana."

A chalky look came into his face. "Took over what?"

"The syndicates."

"Are you crazy, Honey!" Bass roared, flexing his ponderous shoulders.

"Not half so crazy as you. Tell me something! How long have you two had that trailer parked near Rosarito Beach?"

Jay's handsome face was white as he answered. "About a year."

"And how long has that float been anchored out in the water?"

"What float?" The surgeon's head jerked like it was on a string.

"The one I was sitting on when the *Hoy Joy* took those pot shots at me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jay said.

"And I suppose you're not aware that that particular boat has been delivering large quantities of heroin for the past year."

"Well, no, I—" Jay stammered. He shot a frantic glance at Bass.

"How many deliveries have been made there to your float? How many hundreds of pounds of heroin have you two smuggled across the border?"

Jay lurched unsteadily on his feet. "You're all mixed up, Honey. We're just a couple of weekend bachelors who come down to Mexico to rest and relax. We don't know about any illegal drugs."

"No? You were the only ones who knew where my car was parked. Bass planted heroin under the hood on his way into San Diego that morning. Then you notified the border authorities."

Bass rubbed his thick neck angrily. "That's ridiculous, Honey!"

"Sure, just about as ridiculous as the night you strung me to that tree, pretending to be Zingo and Punta Punta, and then came back and cut me down a few minutes later. It was a neat scare, but it didn't work."

"Honey," Jay pleaded, "I'm a surgeon, a member of the California Medical Association. Why would I be mixed up in anything like this?"

"You answer that one, Jay," I said, holding the revolver on him. "Money, some queer kind of kicks—I don't care *why*, now. I know *how* and *who*; and that's *you*."

"No!" Jay roared. "That's not true! Look at Bass. He's a practicing dental surgeon, winner of two awards from dental colleges for work in his field. You can't accuse us of this. It would ruin us forever."

"What were you trying to do to me that day on the boat?" I demanded. "It was a neat bit of flying, Jay. You should have been a stunt pilot."

"Honey," he argued, "you have this all wrong."

"The only thing wrong, Jay, was trusting you. I let you plant a package of heroin in my car. I let you scare Maria Spota into giving me that note. I let you fool me into thinking you were going to help me, instead of sending those ghouls with a machine gun. You showed your hand

tonight by opening this grave. You were probably curious, as two medical men would be, about the extent of damage after five days of burial. But only somebody who knew where the grave was could have found it in the dark."

Bass lunged forward, leaping over the grave and knocking the revolver from my fingers. I fell back and rolled with the blow, kicking at him as he slid by, ramming home a heel to his ribs. He crawled to his feet and dodged a vicious swipe of Fred's cane, then flattened the newsman with a hard right.

Patty Robinson dove for my loose gun, but Jay was too fast. He caught her from behind, tearing the robe off her shoulders. The raven-haired *torera* fell forward, stumbling into the open grave, screaming. She was naked under the robe and both Jay and Bass stopped for an instant, open-mouthed when they saw her roll over.

Bass reached for the gun, but I kicked him again and the revolver slithered across the dirt, dropping into the swimming pool.

"Let's get out of here!" Jay yelled, dashing toward the garage. Bass followed after him, stumbling over a chair and sprawling headlong, then springing up and continuing after the other man.

I helped Patty out of the grave and lifted Fred up with the assistance of his cane. They were both wide-eyed. Fred for a different reason. Patty was standing before him stark naked.

"Quick!" I directed. "I need a gun!"

"There's one in the house," Patty said. "A .45, in the desk near the front door."

I grabbed Fred's hand. "Come on, before they get away!"

The crippled newsman fell and picked himself up again as we rushed through the house, stopping only to get the gun in the desk drawer. When we reached the front of the house, Jay and Bass were just pulling their car around



the Mercedes-Benz. They turned on the narrow bridge, almost going over the side.

We were in Patty's automobile by the time they reached the street. We pulled around, wheels kicking up dirt, and started after them. Their tail lights kept us on the trail for a few minutes, then they dwindled in the darkness like dying embers.

"We've lost them," Fred announced.

I braked to a stop at a lonely intersection and read the sign. Wind blew a tumbleweed across the road, and, distantly, a dog howled.

"I'm going to follow a hunch," I said. "We're heading for the airport."

We drove south again, along the old Mexican trail, until we reached the turn-off to the airfield. In the flares lit along the runway, we could see a sleek-looking Beechcraft with blue wings and a red-striped tail. Its propeller was turning angrily, cleaving the night with a fierce howl. I ignored all signs warning automobiles to stay off the field and drove onto a cement apron toward the warming airplane.

They must have spotted us because a burst of machine-gun fire exploded violently, sending a shower of metal across the front of the Mercedes-Benz. The engine stopped.

I leaped out, running toward the plane, the .45 cocked in my right hand. A figure in overalls dove for cover along the apron as I squeezed the trigger. A bullet zinged into the ship's fuselage. At that moment, the racy craft lunged forward, angled around and headed toward the main runway. I crossed a taxi strip, stumbled over some rough ground, and reached the cement artery just as they turned into the wind.

I was about a hundred yards from where the Beechcraft now stood poised, wings trembling, propeller spinning. They suddenly released the brakes and barreled toward me. I aimed Patty's revolver at the moving plane and ripped

a shot dead into its nose. Even from this distance I could recognize big Bass as he stuck the machine gun through a window slot and opened fire. Bullets ricocheted off the cement, screaming from the impact. The plane hurtled toward me like a maddened bull, filling the night with its sound. I pulled the trigger again. Bass's face squeezed together. He lifted his hands to his chest. The prop gnashed the air, almost in my lap. I fired again.

The Beechcraft lifted up, engine howling, wings wobbling. It soared over my head, the wheels missing me by inches. I ducked to the cement and took one last passing shot. Suddenly the plane's arc changed. Its nose dropped sickeningly and smashed into the cement.

## NINETEEN

Men came running from all parts of the field as the plane split open into a bubble of orange flame and burst up into the night sky like a miniature atom bomb. Pieces flew in all directions, some skidding past me on the cement runway.

By the time Fred reached me, some of the men were squirting the remains with fire extinguishers, yelling in Spanish, cursing.

Fred helped me to my feet. "You okay, Honey?"

"I think so."

Things had happened so fast I wasn't sure of anything, except that Jay and Bass were dead. That I was sure of. There was nothing left of the Beechcraft but a molten, battered skeleton.

"Let's get out of here," I said, turning my eyes away from the wreckage.

We walked across the field, Fred limping at my side, to Patty's Mercedes-Benz. The front end was torn from the machine-gun bullets.

"Will she still run?" I asked, studying the holes.

"I think so," Fred returned. "She must have died on you before."

I fired up the engine and backed around until we were on the road to the main highway.

Then Fred asked the question. "Did you get either one of them?"

"I don't know," I said, quietly, remembering how Bass jerked forward in his seat. "I think the engine quit when they tried to lift her into the air too soon."

We found a little all-night café off the main road and turned in. I was still shaking. Fred sat opposite me in a booth and we just stared at each other for a few minutes.

The newsman twisted a fork in his thin fingers. "They seemed like two nice, decent fellows. Why, Honey?"

I groaned. "Don't ask me why, Fred. Why do people take the stuff in the first place?"

"They get hooked."

"Yeah," I said, solemnly, thinking of Pete Freckle, the boy, running through high grass, shouting happily at the top of his lungs, legs thrashing merrily.

"They sure do," I said biting my lips.

It took until Sunday to straighten things out with the Tijuana police. They had so many charred, rotted and battered bodies lying around they didn't know where to begin. A thorough search of Jay and Bass's trailer produced enough evidence to link the two Americans with one of the largest dope syndicates ever uncovered. They also caught the *Hoy Joy* making one of its drops at the float and started a chain of arrests that closed out the entire syndicate from its origin in Mexico City.

Fred drove back to Long Beach Friday morning, but I

stayed on mainly to help Patty Robinson iron out her problems. After many long discussions she decided to shed her male identity. The new impresario of the plaza capitalized on the decision immediately. He ran several hundred posters announcing the most sensational news in the history of bullfighting. The great Rafael was to fight his last match Sunday in the Tijuana ring. They decided Patty should make her announcement at the conclusion of the afternoon.

I didn't stay to see the matches. I couldn't, remembering the Sunday before when Pete Freckle had been gored. As I was driving out of town I passed by the stadium. From over the sun-strewn rim could be heard the wild cry, *Olé! Olé!*"

I drove on down the highway, seeing in my mind's eye the wild crashing of hoofs, the flurry of the cape as the bull thundered by; Patty Robinson standing in the center of the arena with her cap lifted, a smile on her pretty face.

I drove on. The dirty little streets of Tijuana faded behind me. Faded into a dusty hot afternoon.

THE END

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