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Girl on the Prowl

G. G. Fickling



HONEY WEST



**TV'S Private
Eyeful in the
case of the
deadly three
twins**



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HONEY IN HOT WATER

Not that the swimming pool was overheated—but her host certainly was, and Honey had her hands full fighting him off.

She dived into the pool to escape—and when she came to the surface, her pursuer was there, too . . . with a fishing spear squarely through his chest!

Honey West's new caper takes the nervy, curvy private eye into her most astonishing adventures yet!

THE ADVENTURES OF HONEY WEST

THIS GIRL FOR HIRE

A GUN FOR HONEY

GIRL ON THE LOOSE

HONEY IN THE FLESH

GIRL ON THE PROWL

KISS FOR A KILLER

DIG A DEAD DOLL

BLOOD AND HONEY

BOMBSHELL

ANGEL FROM HELL (*in preparation*)

GIRL ON THE PROWL

G. G. FICKLING



PYRAMID BOOKS • NEW YORK

TO THE ARTHUR J. ADDEOS
OF BROOKLYN, U.S.A.

Artie, Lee, Marie, Barbara,
Little Artie, Betty, Mom,
Duffy and Madeline
FOR KEEPING HONEY OUT
OF THE RAIN.

GIRL ON THE PROWL

A PYRAMID BOOK

First Printing, November 1959

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

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one

BIKINI BATHING SUITS are fun, daring, sexy, eye-catching, pulse-lifting and just plain hell on girls over thirty-six. Age has nothing to do with it. What's under the bra does. I'm a thirty-eight!

Bikinis come in two pieces and are named after a Pacific atoll scientists tried to blow to smithereens. What remained was made into swim suits.

My bikini lasted just long enough for me to plunge into the warm Malibu, California, surf. Then blewee! The bra fell apart like it had been hit with radiation. And the bottom half flipped a couple of stitches and vanished in the water. That left me exactly nothing but a birthmark inside my right thigh and a blush that rose all the way from my sunburnt knees to the lids of my baby blue eyes.

Malibu isn't exactly a Coney Island on a flesh-searing Sunday, but it does get busy in summer when the surf-riders come to play. Busy enough to make it embarrassing when a gal loses her bathing suit. My first impulse was to head for deep water and ask assistance of another swimmer with my kind of equipment. That big heavy-crested sea had other ideas. A noisy, powerful wave broke over my head, spinning me upside down and straight into the arms of a bronzed adonis on a surfboard.

He was shoulder high in the water, one muscular arm slung over his board, trying to pull it out of the wave's tow. He noticed I was in trouble and grabbed a piece of me as I went past. I yelped because the piece he chose wasn't exactly muscle.

"Hey!" he yelled. "You're naked!"

"That's very observant!" I called back, "but please let go, that hurts!"

His handsome sunburnt face brightened as he grinned and released me into the swirling foam of the wave.

"I—I'm sorry!" he shouted again over the surf's rumble. "But I thought you were drowning!"

His sleek, highly-polished board skidded suddenly in the water, throwing him hard against me.

"Look out!" he warned, and we went under, pushed by his strong arms, barely escaping the board's slicing roll aimed at our heads.

When we came up, he had one arm around my waist, the other under him against the sand. We were in water so shallow that not even the white foam could hide my nudity.

I slipped from his grasp and under his sand-wedged board, poking my head up on the other side.

"Thanks for the buggy ride," I said, trying not to smile at the ridiculous expression on his face. "Now what do I do?"

He sat up in the water, rubbing sand from the corners of his eyes, as a new wave crested over him.

"Well," he said, observantly, "I wouldn't call for a lifeguard. It is against the law to go swimming like that." His grin was filled with mischief, but nicely filled. His body had the same mischievous look about it, sleek, strong and ready for anything.

"I lost my bathing suit," I said, hugging the board for all I was worth.

"Likely story," he returned, brushing a shock of brown hair from his forehead. "A mermaid told me the same tale one time but I didn't believe her."

"Well believe this," I said, projecting a leg above the edge of his surfboard. "I'm no mermaid. And I'm in trouble. Now how about a helping hand?"

"I already gave you one, but you said, 'Ouch!'" He rolled over, obstinately, resting his head on the sand. "I'm no errand boy."

He was right about one thing. He was no boy. Faint wrinkles around his eyes told me he was about thirty. I glanced past him at the crowded beach. Fortunately no one had noticed my plight. Yet. Sunglasses and squinted lids were focused on the sea, jockeying with the surf-riders as they rode a new wave in toward the beach.

"Please," I said. "Get me a towel. I put mine down in front of that tall, gray house to the right. The one with the heavy slate roof."

He lifted his chin until it rested on the opposite side of the board, obviously delighted with my predicament. "Say, pretty please, with brown sugar on it, and maybe I will."

"There'll be a lot of big brown *men* here in a minute," I said, staring out to sea. "Make your choice now before I make mine."

He got up suddenly, his powerful body rising nearly six feet above me, beads of water glistening on his bronzed skin.

"Okay," he said. "How will I know which towel is yours?"

"It's candy-striped. Has my name embroidered on one end. Honey."

That mischievous Clark Gable-like glint slid into his mouth and eyes again. "Is that your name, or are you just getting a little appreciative?"

"What do you think?" I said, fighting a new wave which was wresting the board from my grasp.

I finally had to throw a leg over it to keep my balance and he got the message. He ran up the white sand, grabbed a towel and hurried back with it.

"This should do the trick," he said. "It's mine."

I sank back in the water, released his surfboard and wrapped the towel around me. When I stood up, he whistled lowly.

"Believe me, Honey, you were ahead of the game down there." He grasped my hand. "Come on, I'd better

get you off this beach before somebody signs you for Minsky's, or yells for a cop."

Before I could argue, we were churning through the sand, his towel sliding and slipping in all directions, eyes turning, widening.

When we wound up outside the front door of the big gray house, I was winded, but laughing.

"I said I parked my towel in front of this place, not inside."

"That's a pleasant coincidence," he said, "because I just happen to live here. That makes you a trespasser. In the olden days I could have enslaved you for that crime."

"Now look, Mr.—"

"Tempest," he said, extracting a key from a pocket in his tight boxer trunks. "Kirk Tempest. You live around here, Honey?"

"Long Beach," I answered, brushing wet hair from my forehead and straightening the towel. A thirty-eight-inch bosom creates all sorts of problems. "I think I'd better find my car and go home."

He opened the door. "Did you bring any clothes with you?"

"No."

"Then I wouldn't suggest you go looking for your car." He gestured for me to enter. "My sister's about your size. At least, in some departments. She'll have something you can wear."

I stepped inside, drawing a deep breath at the sight of the interior which sprawled on three immense split levels. The living room was spectacular. Curving lazily in its mosaic tile floor was a kidney-shaped indoor swimming pool. To the right of this, suspended on black steel rods, hovered a huge orange-carpeted platform, equipped with floodlights and gauzy drapes. Above and beyond, spanning a full thirty or more feet, and decked out like something from a Cinemascope movie, was a lavish bedroom with black wrought iron furnishings, a

double king-size bed covered in turquoise silk and set-off by orange wallpaper and a gaudy pink mirror.

"You live here," I said, "or do you run the place?"

He slammed the door and laughed. "God-awful, isn't it? We affectionately refer to this joint as The Jewel Box."

"What?"

"After my sister," he said. "Jewel Tempest. Ever heard of her?"

"No."

He gestured toward a painting of a semi-nude, masked woman which hung near the swimming pool. "She's generally referred to as a terpsichorean tease. In plain English that means she strips."

"For a living?" I asked.

"Mostly," he said, grimly. "Jewel is money mad. She doesn't do anything unless it's got a dollar sign in front of it."

He maneuvered me to a kidney-shaped bar on the other side of the swimming pool. He extracted a bottle of whiskey from one of its shelves and two glasses.

"How about a drink, Miss—"

"I already told you it's Honey. Honey West."

He examined me again, pouring two tall ones. Both the upturned bottle and his X-ray glance told me this was going to be trouble. His gaze had fingers.

I turned mine up at the painting of his sister. She wore an Egyptian-looking gold mask that completely covered her face and a glistening gold helmet fashioned after the head of the Sphinx. To say the effect was fascinating is an understatement. Jewel's eyes were the only part of her face visible, tragically peering through two elongated diamond-shaped slits in the mask. The same feeling of tragedy was in the symmetrically planed mouth and the single tear-drop ruby set between curved, upturned brows. Her abbreviated costume was nothing more than a gold-fringed G-string and a golden serpent, its head coiled over one breast, its tail over the other.

A brilliant, fire-red background gave her the look of an Egyptian slave performing a ceremonial dance before being sacrificed to the gods.

Tempest handed me a drink and toasted, "Here's to the unmasking of all our inhibitions. What do you think of the *great* Jewel Tempest?"

"Why the mask?" I asked. "Is that part of her act?"

"Of course. Everybody's got a G-string. Jewel's unique. And very popular. There's a sensual psychological reason for this. Like a nudist who's banned from camp for corrupting morals because she walked around with nothing but a sack over her head."

I took a sip of the whiskey and lifted my eyebrows. "You should fasten little gold masks around your drinks. This one is liable to corrupt me."

He laughed. "Isn't that the best reason for liquor? How come we've never met?"

"Probably because I've never lost a bathing suit before."

His eyes looked toward the pool, then quickly returned to my towel. "You should lose them more often. You're not built for privacy."

"Funny you should say that," I said. "I'm a private investigator."

He straightened, nearly dropping his glass. "No fooling?"

"Female, Class of twenty-two," I said, hoping this might straighten a few ideas he had as well as his posture. "I usually carry a Hi-Standard of that gauge in a garter holster. But neither wear well with a bikini."

He circled the bar slowly, his bronzed shoulders tense, eyelids narrowed. "Who sent you here?"

"A wave," I said. "Who did you have in mind?"

"Jewel." His fists clenched. "Or my stupid brother. Don't lie to me, Honey!"

I glanced up at the double king-sized bed and smiled. "I thought lying was what you had in mind."

He suddenly stopped, placed his drink on the bar and wiped both hands over his hairless, muscular chest.

"This is a coincidence," he said. "We're in the same business. I always do all my investigating in private, too. Like now. Why don't you take off that towel and make yourself comfortable?"

His mischievous personality had flicked off and on again so quickly he seemed like two people wearing the same body. His other self had been angry and afraid. This one was cocky and over-bearing. He gave my towel a gentle tug.

"What's bugging you, Mr. Tempest?"

"You," he said, happily. "I have a fetish for naked women. It runs in the family."

He pulled me into his arms, lowering the towel as far as possible, crushing my flesh against his. It felt good. Too good. I pushed him back, shaking my head.

"Look, I came to Malibu for a swim," I said, "not—"

He pressed his mouth down on mine, pushing me into a chair. My legs bent under the pressure, towel slipping even lower. I fell against the seat cushion, rolling out from under him, onto the concrete pool apron. He kept the towel.

I lowered myself into the pool, allowing only my head and arms to protrude. "Come on," I said, staring up at the sweat on his forehead, "we're both over twenty-one. Let's cut the kid stuff."

He suddenly turned chameleon again, a deep scowl spreading on his face. He tossed me the towel, staring at the water.

"Okay. Okay, I quit," he said, reaching a hand for me. "Now come out of there before you drown."

He lifted me onto the apron, helped readjust my towel, then stalked off to the bar.

I stared after him, disappointed with his reaction. He was a very appealing man, but complex as the devil. He apparently didn't know the secret of where to start or when not to stop with a woman. The formula was

simple. Start at the beginning and stop at the end. He was too abrupt on both counts.

"Do you mind if I use your telephone?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, avoiding my eyes. "But if you're planning to call the police don't bother. I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole."

"I'm not worried about ten-foot poles," I said. "My office is in Long Beach. Just wanted to check with the answering service."

He gestured at a phone on the bar, then flicked that grin at me. "Honey, you're impossibly beautiful, do you know that?"

"No," I said. "But you're impossibly impossible. That's for sure." I dialed my Hemlock number. "Where are those clothes you promised?"

Tempest stirred his ice with the tip of his finger thoughtfully, then said, "Okay, if that's what you want." He crossed to the steps leading up to the mammoth bedroom. "Jewel's a big girl. Nearly six foot. You may have trouble."

I nodded, watching him move effortlessly to the platform. He hurtled a low railing with one hand, a weightless acrobatic grace in his powerful arms and legs.

My phone's ring was suddenly cut-off by a gruff hoarse voice, "H. West, private investigations, she ain't in."

"She ain't?"

The voice softened apologetically. "That you Springtime?"

My answering service is run by a rotund loveable guy named Charley April, a cross between a Damon Runyon character and Wallace Beery playing Pancho Villa. His old-fashioned switchboard accommodates numerous low-rent subscribers, plus a small clientele of horse players who resent the long trek to Hollywood or Santa Anita. The fact that Charley runs a bookie operation on the side doesn't bother anybody but the police. And even the law has a difficult time trying to peg Charley. He has a

heart as big as a race track grandstand. Springtime is his affectionate tag for me.

"Charley, when are you going to learn to say isn't instead of ain't?"

"Well, now," he stammered, "I think that's up to that fella Webster. He never told me no different."

"Charley, Webster's dead."

"Oh, that's too bad. I didn't even know he was sick, Springtime. Now I guess I'll never learn."

I couldn't help smiling. "Any calls for me?"

"Nope. But I got a hot tip in the seventh at Hollywood. It's easy money, Springtime."

"Thanks, Charley," I said, keeping my eyes on Tempest as he rummaged through a bureau up in the bedroom. "I'll stick to the hard money. Listen, if you need me I'll be at Malibu five thousand, okay?"

"You're covered, Springtime."

I glanced down at my towel. "That's what you think, Charley. Bye."

I hung up slowly. Tempest bounded down the steps carrying a dress, a pair of black panties and a bra. He tossed them to me and laughed when I nearly lost my towel making the catch.

"You're a sadist, Mr. Tempest," I said quietly, my eyes sliding down to his boxer trunks which had two red-striped seams tautly traced down his slim hips.

"And you're a fool, Miss West," he said, hunching his shoulders. "You know you don't want to put on those clothes."

"Who says so?"

"I do. You're a woman, Honey. I know what women want. Most women."

I didn't move. At least not outwardly. A seed was stirring in my brain. A seed of dislike for this man. He was extremely complex. A dual personality. One that you hated one instant and loved the next. His bad side was showing again.

"Why did you get angry," I said, "when you thought I'd been hired by your sister or brother?"

"Does it matter now?" he asked, reaching for me.

"Yes."

He stopped, glanced at the pool and shook his head. "You'd be suspicious, too, if you lived with Jewel."

"Why?"

He groaned, rubbing his sun-tanned forehead. "She's deadly. I told you she lives by the dollar sign. She kneels to it, grinds to it, bumps to it, throws her belly in their faces for it. What more do you want me to say?"

"What about your brother?"

"He's a fop."

"What have they got against you?"

He straightened awkwardly. "Nothing."

"You don't act like you sound, Mr. Tempest."

His slender hands gripped me tightly. "I'm acting the way I feel." He gave my towel another yank, but this time I didn't appreciate his abrupt manner.

I spun sideways, lost my balance and fell backward into the pool. This time he followed, swiftly jerking me to the surface, hands fumbling for my breasts. This lasted one hand-grabbing second before I sent him to the bottom with a rib-rattling kick.

By the time I climbed from the water, he was still under and huge bubbles were spewing to the surface where he'd gone down. I picked up the bra and was about to slip into it when a dark red smear erupted from the inky bottom. Kirk Tempest wasn't breathing when I finally got him out of the pool. In fact, he was quite dead. A fishing spear protruded from his bronzed chest.

two

LIEUTENANT MARK STORM of Sheriff's homicide bureau has an incredibly huge temper that often raises the blood vessels in his square-jawed face until it is as darkly purple as Kirk Tempest's chest after I'd hauled him from the swimming pool.

Standing halfway between six and seven feet in height, Mark is a fireball of a man when crossed or mad. Especially when I'm involved. His radioactive mushroom didn't burst until after his deputies had photographed and wrapped Tempest in a rubber sheet and carried the body to a waiting ambulance.

Then he erupted, "Dammit to hell, Honey! Don't you realize you can see right through that towel you're wearing?"

I hadn't had time to dress, what with phone calls and a quick investigation of the pool.

"Does it really matter, Lieutenant?" I said, grimly. "With the spear removed you could see through Tempest, too. So what?"

The big deputy cocked his battered felt hat back, straight white teeth gritting beneath his lips. "How many times have I told you to get out of this racket? Who was he, one of your cockeyed clients?"

"No. Just a friendly guy who helped me out of an embarrassing situation."

Mark sneered. "A likely story."

"He was a likely guy," I said. "The spear must have been at the bottom of the pool in an upright position. He fell on it accidentally."

The deputy tucked a cigaret in his mouth and exhaled

smoke after touching a stick match to the end. "You sure there was nobody else around?"

"Positive. I checked the pool immediately after I brought him up. It must be fifteen feet at that end, and dark. I couldn't find anyone."

"Did you leave this area at any time?"

"No."

"All right, let's have the details."

"He got romantic. I fell in the pool. He followed. I kicked him. Boom! He was dead."

"You ought to trim your toenails."

"That's a bad joke, Lieutenant."

"Not half as bad as the position you're in. You're the only witness."

I watched his hard eyes pierce through me angrily. "What should I say, Lieutenant? That there was a spearfisherman's convention going on down there? The guy died accidentally. That's all he wrote."

Mark tossed his cigaret in the pool and grimaced. "Not by a damn sight. I was on my way here when your report of Tempest's death came in over the radio."

I got up slowly. "Well?"

"We got a package in the mail this morning. A flat narrow tie box containing a G-string."

"A G-string?"

"That's right." His jaw tightened. "Do you know what a G-string looks like close up, Honey?"

I glanced at the painting near the swimming pool. The sensuous figure wore a gold-fringed piece of fabric that curved tautly between her legs, crudely molding the flesh underneath.

"They vary," I said. "Some are net over linen or silk. Others are just plain cotton and as sheer as the law allows."

"That's right. This one was gold with a fringe."

I gestured at the painting. "Like that?"

"Yeah. It had a narrow inner lining. We tore that out. There was a message underneath."

"What kind of message, Mark?"

"It said, 'I'm going to die. Please help me.' and it was signed Q Tempest. We had a helluva time tracing it down."

"That's odd," I said. "He said his name was Kirk."

"Could be his middle initial."

"Maybe."

"Anyway he's dead," Mark blurted. "Does that sound accidental when a man sends a plea for help the day before he's killed?"

"No." I tucked a finger under a wet curl and twisted it into place. "He didn't mention dying to me. In fact, he acted like he was just beginning to live."

The deputy scrutinized my towel. "Dressed the way you are, I can understand that. Why'd you push him into the pool, Honey?"

"I didn't, Lieutenant. He was measuring me for a brassiere with his own chest. I slipped."

Mark's face grayed jealously and he wiped his hands together. "You're a smart dame, aren't you, Honey? Your father gets bumped off in a dirty alley, so you have to go melodramatic. You have to hang a sign on your sack. Private Eyeful. Well, you named it sister. Nothing's private about you except your bed. And don't take any bets from your bookie operator that it's got clean sheets!"

I saw red. The next thing I knew Mark was toppling backward into the pool. He sank like a rock, hat and all.

Then I saw double. The front door swung open and a man with a muscular sun-tanned body and boxer trunks came striding in with two rubber swim fins slung over his shoulder. He took one look at me and my towel and Mark splashing to the surface and a mischievous grin slid across his handsome mouth.

"Hey," he said. "Nobody told me there was a party going on. What gives? And if you're giving, baby, send some to me. I'll be happy to pay the postage."

Mark looked at the man in the doorway and his face

squeezed together like he'd just bit into a sour lemon. Kirk Tempest was standing there as big as life in his tight trunks with the red stripes curving down each seam. He was standing and grinning at us like he didn't care whether we dropped dead or took a flying leap at the moon.

Mark climbed from the pool and stammered, "Are—aren't you Kirk Tempest?"

"That's right," the man in the boxer trunks said lightly. He tossed his swim fins in a corner, brushed some water from his wavy black hair and then crossed to the bar.

"But—but you couldn't be," I said faintly.

He laughed. "That's what my mother said thirty years ago, but here I am. Still defying the laws of nature. What's your pleasure, blondie?"

"You're dead," I insisted.

"Now that's not a very nice pleasure," he said, pouring himself a drink. "Whatever gave you such a ridiculous idea?"

Mark fished his hat from the pool and headed for a telephone. "I don't know what the joke is, Tempest, but two of my men just carted you out of here in a rubber sheet."

"What are you talking about?" His eyes narrowed. "You people crazy or something?"

"Maybe," Mark said, lifting the receiver. "I'm calling the morgue to find out."

I stopped the deputy before he could dial. "Wait a minute, Mark. Don't you get it? He must be a twin."

"That's right," the man in the boxer trunks said. "You're not referring to my brother Kirk, are you?"

"But you said you were Kirk!" Mark blurted, wiping wet hands over his dripping, puzzled features.

"I am, but my name's spelled K-I-R-Q. My brother's K-I-R-K. He—he's not dead, is he?"

Mark nodded slowly.

"But that's impossible!" His voice grew desperate. "I

saw him only an hour ago in the water. He was surfing with his board."

I explained what had happened. It was weird telling the story to an exact duplicate of the dead man. They were identical twins. Same eyes, hair, smile, walk. Even a dimple I had noticed in Kirk's cheek was matched in Kirq's face.

When I was finished, he brushed at his eyes. "I knew it was going to happen sometime. Kirk was accident prone. He was always rubbing elbows with tragedy. I almost believe he wanted to die."

Mark glanced at me. I knew what he was thinking. The death message on the G-string had been signed Q Tempest.

"Do most people call you Q?" the deputy asked.

Tempest nodded dismally. "Since both our names are phonetically the same Dad started calling us by the last initials. Q for me. K for my brother."

"Has your life been threatened recently?"

His head snapped toward Mark. "No."

"You're sure."

"Of course, I'm sure. Why would anyone want to harm me?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Mark said. "Why would a fishing spear be in the pool, Mr. Tempest?"

"Kirk was cracked on spear fishing. He was always experimenting with new equipment. He'd just bought an Italian Arbalete gun with an anodized aluminum spear."

The deputy picked up the death weapon. It was bent and smeared with blood. Tempest winced.

"Is this it?" Mark asked.

"I—I think so," Tempest said. "He tested it yesterday in the pool. The line apparently snapped on him." He glanced at the pool grimly. "It's so deep and dark down there he probably couldn't find the spear after it broke loose."

Mark tossed the spear on the bar. "Well, he found it today, that's for sure."

"Yeah." Tempest exhaled slowly.

I said, "Don't you think you'd better notify your sister?"

He quickly downed a shot of whiskey. His hand trembled as he lowered the glass. "Not me."

"Why not?"

"Didn't Kirk tell you anything about Jewel?"

"Only that she's a strip-tease dancer," I said, "and that the bedroom up there beyond the platform belongs to her."

Tempest's voice was suddenly heavy with hate. "Everything belongs to her. Even the air you breathe in here belongs to Jewel. If I were you two I wouldn't be caught dead in here without an engraved invitation."

"You sound as if you're afraid of your sister," Mark observed. "Why?"

Tempest gestured at the painting near the pool. "See that mask. She's never without it. I don't even know what she looks like underneath."

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

"Doesn't it? Jewel was burned in a fire ten years ago—a fire that cost the lives of both our parents. The doctors said her face was ruined. While she was in the hospital she disappeared. Eighteen months later she showed up with the mask. She's worn it ever since."

"You mean she even wears it on the street?"

"She never goes out, except to a performance," Tempest said, grimly staring at the painting. "She's either here or on a stage somewhere doing her act. Right now she's in Hollywood rehearsing for a TV show."

Mark and I traded glances.

"What'd she look like before the fire?" I asked.

Tempest regarded the painting bitterly, then said, "Jewel was one of those medical impossibilities that happens once every hundred years. She was born from a separate egg between two identical twins. First Kirk, then Jewel, then me. But we all looked identical."

"Fantastic," Mark muttered.

"Yeah," Tempest continued. "In Sioux Falls we were considered the Eighth Wonder of the World. My mother used to dress us in identical clothes. Jewel didn't wear a dress until she was thirteen. Nobody could tell which one was the girl until Jewel suddenly started to sprout wings under her shirts."

Mark put a cigarette in his mouth and groaned. "I've encountered some weird cases in my time, Tempest, but this one takes the prize." He picked up the phone. "Where can I reach your sister?"

"You can't if she's in rehearsal," Tempest said, pouring himself another drink. "Jewel's appearing on Milo Gold's personality-interview show tomorrow night. She opens in Las Vegas on Saturday."

"Gold's show is released locally on KBRC, isn't it?" Mark asked, dialing information.

"I think so, but you're making a big mistake."

"Why?"

"Kirk and Jewel were very close. I wouldn't tell her over the phone that Kirk's dead. She's liable to do something drastic."

"Such as what?"

Tempest picked up the bent spear and then dropped it when he felt dried blood under his fingers. "You asked if someone was threatening my life. Well I'll tell you one thing. Jewel's mad. Insane. She does crazy things." He stopped, biting his lips. "No, I don't mean that."

"What do you mean?" Mark demanded.

"I don't know."

"Look, Tempest, we got a strange message in the mail this morning with your name signed to it. Can you explain it?"

His eyes widened. "No. I don't even know what you're talking about."

Mark shrugged, picking up the death weapon again. "Okay. Miss West is our only witness. She claims there was no one in or around the pool at the time your

brother fell, except herself. Are you willing to accept this?"

Tempest shifted his eyes to me. "Of course. Why should she want to hurt Kirk? It must have been an accident just as she says."

Mark nodded, scanning the weirdly-designed, triple-level house. "There'll be an inquest tomorrow morning. You may appear if you wish. There'll be no need for you to testify."

Tempest gulped down his new drink and then laughed sickeningly. "Funny isn't it? Now I'm the only one left."

"What does that mean, Tempest?"

He fixed glazed eyes on Mark and said, "Once there were three kids who looked so much alike they even got themselves confused. Then Jewel was burned. Now Kirk's dead. So, for the first time in my life I don't look like anybody, except me."

He laughed again, a deep hurt laugh that made my skin crawl just to hear it.

three

THE NEXT MORNING I testified at a brief inquest into the death of Kirk Tempest. Watkins, the county coroner, followed me to the stand. His statements corroborated mine in that Tempest had died from the spear's penetration of his heart. He further stated the corpse had reddish marks on both face and back which he believed were caused by the rim of the pool while I was struggling to get Tempest out of the water.

Lieutenant Storm presented a diagram attesting to the pool's depth and dimension. He also testified that a harmless chlorinated dye had been added to the water

recently as a decorative feature for a swimming party. The color had dissipated into an opaque gray, leaving the water so cloudy that it had been impossible for me to actually see the accident occur.

The verdict of accidental death was rendered without further testimony. Neither Jewel nor Kirq Tempest appeared at the inquest. Just before leaving the courthouse I checked with Charley April for any phone messages. He said a dame had called earlier, but refused to leave her name.

"She sounded weird, Springtime. Like maybe she was talking with a handkerchief over her mouth."

Or a mask, I thought.

Jewel Tempest was waiting for me in the shadowed corridor outside my third-story office. Her voluptuously tall frame leaned impatiently against a wall, arms folded under deeply curved breasts, exotic gold leotard sleekly tapered from her throat all the way to her ankles. I was prepared for the mask and sphinx-like helmet, but when she lifted her face into the light and the diamond-shaped slits in the metallic cloth revealed her dark, piercing eyes, I couldn't help the start in my voice.

"Miss Tempest?"

"Miss West!" Her voice was husky, almost harsh. She straightened, towering on gold thong sandals, a cigarette jutting from the mouth slit of her mask.

"I—I wasn't expecting you," I said, fumbling for my key. "You should have phoned first."

"I did," she said, flatly irritated. "Your answering service said you'd be in by eleven. I've been waiting for almost an hour."

"I'm sorry. The inquest was longer than I expected."

I unlocked my office door and waved her inside. She hesitated before entering, then whirled, gliding as effortlessly as a snake, her slim boyish hips revealing the line of a girdle as she walked. Her leotard was slashed to the waistline in back over smooth bronzed skin. I

followed, quickly removing a pair of panties from a chair before gesturing for her to sit down.

I tossed the underwear behind a screen in the corner, smiling apologetically. "Please excuse the untidiness. I sort of work out of my hat if you know what I mean."

"Is that what that was?" she said, exhaling smoke through two small triangular openings in the nose.

I ignored the remark, regarding the sarcasm as more of her impatient mood. "I do have an apartment, but often I don't get home for two or three days at a time."

"You should be in burlesque, Miss West. Living out of a G-string is much more fun."

"I can imagine."

I lowered uncomfortably into another chair and crossed my legs. She followed my movements through the eye slits carefully, microscopically as if I were something on a slide about to be analyzed. To return her stare was as difficult as touching a left wrist with the same hand.

She stubbed out her cigarette and asked, "What was the verdict, Miss West?"

"Your brother's death was classified as a freak accident."

Tapered hands jerked suddenly to the brow of her gold headpiece, tugging at it awkwardly. It was cut low over the forehead, somewhat like bangs, and curved downward over her ears continuing low around the back of her head.

"Brought on by what freak?" she demanded, straightening in her chair.

"I beg your pardon."

She laughed hollowly. "Kirk did not die accidentally, Miss West. You know that."

"I was the only witness, Miss Tempest. He impaled himself on the spear after he—he fell in the water."

"He didn't impale himself," she said angrily. "Kirk was stabbed."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Someone else was in the pool."

"That's impossible. I was there the whole time."

"Nothing's impossible, Miss West. My pool is over fifteen feet deep. K's killer was waiting at the bottom."

"I searched the pool, Miss Tempest. There was no one in or around the area except your brother and me."

"You did go into the pool then?" she said, voice muted by the mask.

"Yes."

"Did you notice a steel plate on the deep end wall?"

"Well, no, I—the water was cloudy from the dye."

"Are you familiar with oxygen equipment used by skin divers?"

"To some degree, yes."

She rose slowly, gripping the edge of my desk. "Someone wore a portable tank. He was waiting for K."

I shook my head. "That's absurd, Miss Tempest. Your brother's entry into the pool was completely accidental. No killer in the world could have planned on that. And I told you I searched thoroughly. I even checked the possibility that someone might have climbed from the pool while I was below. There wasn't a trace of a water trail."

Jewel moved to a mirror and examined herself through the gold framed eyeslits. She was at least six feet tall in heels.

Then very calmly, she said, "Q killed K."

I exhaled audibly, overwhelmed by the ridiculous import behind her accusation. "You couldn't possibly suspect your own brother of murdering his twin."

She flicked microscopic eyes at me again. "Of course, I do. That's why I'm here, Miss West. I'm hiring you to find evidence that will convict my brother."

"Look, Miss Tempest, I just testified as the only eyewitness to an accidental death. I swore under oath that what I saw was true before God. Do you expect me to perjure myself? Make myself out a liar?"

"You are a liar!"

I got up and gestured at the door. "That's the way out, Miss Tempest!"

"Thanks, but I'm not leaving."

"I think you are."

She stopped me before I'd gone two steps. The revolver she leveled had been drawn from her purse and it was aimed squarely between my eyes.

"I wouldn't want to mess up that pretty face of yours, Miss West, but you see I'm serious about your being a liar."

"What you mean," I said, "is you believe I killed your brother."

A smile glinted in her mouth slit. "You're wrong again, Miss West. You're a liar because you stubbornly refuse to learn the true facts."

"All right," I said. "I'll listen if you'll put away that gun."

She tucked the revolver back into her purse. "Have you got a car?"

"Yes."

"Then follow me to my house in Malibu." She started for the door. "I'm going to teach you a lesson in skin diving that you'll never forget."

Her car was parked illegally outside the back stairway with a ticket in the window. She crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it to me.

"Tell City Hall they'll have a tough time pinning anything on Jewel Tempest, except a G-string." She climbed inside. "See you in Malibu."

It took twenty minutes to get my convertible out of Buffum's parking lot and swing over to Pacific Coast highway. The day was bright and hot, but not as hot as the steam under my high-collared blouse. Jewel Tempest had set as well with me as a pint of arsenic on an empty stomach. That business about messing up my face smacked of angry retribution. Still I couldn't convince myself that a twisted, fire-blackened face lay

beneath her mask. The outline of the mouth that I'd seen was normal. So was her gaze into the mirror, despite the mask which shielded her features. I had a feeling Jewel Tempest was out for more than her brother's blood. Possibly there was a pint or two of mine in the offing.

My mind shifted to the G-string containing the fear-of-death message signed Q Tempest. Was it possible, I asked myself, that the accident was purposeful? That the wrong brother died?

Before reaching Malibu I examined my revolver, a Hi-Standard .22, pearl-handled, which I carry in a garter holster strapped to my right thigh. All six chambers were ready. So was I. Just in case Jewel Tempest wanted to match draws again. One thing I planned to do for certain. Match faces. Mine against Jewels.

Her car was already parked in the garage when I arrived. So was a racy foreign sports convertible. The registration on the steering wheel was made out to Kirk and Kirq Tempest. I tried a door at the back of the garage, but it was locked. On my way around to the front walk I noticed a face peering at me from a second-story window in the house next door. It quickly vanished behind a curtain, a hand remaining on the open sill. I stopped and surveyed the distance between the two houses. About fifteen feet of sand and a low grape stake fence separated them. Warm wind off the ocean rustled my skirt. The second-story curtain blew back against the person still watching me and the hand disappeared.

I continued up the walk slowly to the Tempest front door, glancing at other curtained windows, my arms tautly swinging, heels clicking rhythmically on the concrete. Empty champagne bottles were littered in a patch of ice plant near the porch. The door was ajar.

I didn't bother to knock, but once inside, standing in the vast hollow contours of the living room-pool area, I wished I had. The silence was deafening.

"Miss Tempest!" My voice echoed, then died somewhere in the lavish reaches of the triple-decked house.

Then something crashed beneath my feet. I whirled. An empty champagne bottle careened down the steps toward the pool, splintering on the colorful mosaic, breaking into a thousand noisy fragments and clinking glassily against other empties lined along the concrete apron.

After catching my breath, I crossed to the bar, circling the pool where Kirk Tempest had died, cautiously avoiding other bottles and glasses and tasseled silk pillows. The party's debris extended beyond the platform and up into Jewel's bedroom where one of her weird Egyptian masks lay askew atop a pyramid of champagne glasses.

Suddenly I got the feeling of being watched again. Quiet lay like a misfired H-bomb waiting to be disarmed, powerfully silent in its desert tower, a malfunction leadened with disaster.

I removed my revolver from the garter holster, framing my eyes on the distant, low-tide sea that stirred faintly beyond a row of windows high above the living room. The sand was gleaming white in the sun's glare, now devoid of its weekend color, its people, its noise.

I glanced around at Jewel's huge bed which was as wide as it was long. An orange satin spread was thrown back over thick turquoise blankets. It had apparently not been slept in, but the imprint of use starkly remained. A pair of black silk panties lay twisted across one pillow. So did the stain of a drink, its odor heavily sour in the low-ceiled room. An ashtray on a nearby nightstand told the rest of the story. Cigarette butts were mashed together, various brands and lipstick shades. Half bore the dried, dark stain of male mouths, most of these broken or half-smoked in obvious anxiety to be extinguished.

The black beamed ceiling jutted so low I had to stoop to enter the glass-walled bathroom that curved behind the bed. I felt uncomfortable inside because there were

no drapes or curtains. A fishbowl would have allowed more privacy. An oblong sunken tub ran the length of one wall and beyond, through waist-high windows, could be seen rolling Malibu hills and the busy Coast highway.

The bathroom wallpaper was a confused maze of pink and black malevolent eyes peering through mask slits. No wonder I'd felt I was being watched!

I laughed, replacing my revolver, but the reassurance of the painted eyes didn't last long. I was hardly down the two flights of steps before the feeling returned. Piercing. Studied. Microscopic.

"Jewel?" My voice rattled. Its desperation was frightening. "Your car's in the garage. So's Kirq's. Now let's not play hide-and-seek."

If the quiet had been irritating before, now it loomed over me like a sinister head.

I discovered a narrow, dark corridor behind the bar. This led to a series of rooms built under the two raised levels of the house. At one point I found a light switch and a strange room crammed with toys and dolls and rocking-horses. On one wall were photographs of three children, each identical to the other. Each smiling youthfully in pre-school innocence. The pictures were sealed in glass and heavy oak frames, ornately pretentious, and coated with dust. I removed a handkerchief from one of my skirt pockets and wiped them clean. There was no way in the world to tell the three faces apart, except for a gold-leafed nameplate fixed to each frame. KIRK. JEWEL. KIRQ. I examined the second photograph carefully in the room's light. Jewel had the same dimple, the same brown eyes, the same heavy brows. Her hair was cut like a boy's. Her smile had a mischievous curve, and the lips were full and pretty like her brother's. It was utterly fantastic.

Accidentally I bumped against a child's desk, knocking a clown-shaped music box to the floor. Its grinning head began to turn, filling the low-ceilinged room with the brassy strains of *Auld Lang Syne*.

I froze, eyes fastened on the turning, clicking mechanism, eardrums shattered by the unexpected sound. Frozen even harder by the impish faces in the photographs, hearing a laughter in their immobile mouths more piercing than the jangle of the music box.

I bolted from the room, down the dark corridor to a door at the far end. It was locked. This, I guessed, was the door connecting to the garage. Behind me the clawing, weird tinkle of the music box continued, unbelievably loud in the eerie quiet of the house. A door to my right led to another room, sprayed yellow by an exposed overhead bulb, already lit. There was a clammy dampness in the air and a smell of sea and fish. On a wall rack hung a black skin-diver suit, three sets of fins and a rubber headpiece. Nearby, on a table, lay a face plate, aqua lungs and twin air tanks. A spear gun, labeled *Arbalete*, with a severed line was pushed inside a cabinet above the table.

I crossed to the air tanks and examined their oxygen indicators. Both registered nearly zero. Jewel's words about portable tanks *registered* in my brain. Something else did, too. A trap door in the wood-slatted floor. It was partially covered by a thick rubber mat, but so obviously obvious that I guessed it had been left that way for my benefit. Possibly by Jewel.

After lifting the door, I climbed down into a dark, icy-cold space, its walls wet to the touch. I finally located a light switch, plunging a concrete passage with bluish yellow that illuminated the swimming pool's filter system. The sound of its pumps drummed ominously, blotting out the distant tinkle of the music box.

Cautiously I moved down the passageway noticing other high-powered electrical equipment that did not belong to the filter unit. Special cables were welded to the ceiling, leading to a reinforced steel wall about a hundred feet beyond the trap door.

I guessed this was part of the deep end swimming pool wall. What I couldn't figure was the circular door sta-

tioned mid-center in the ribbed structure. It was similar to photographs I'd seen of submarine hatches. Even to the four-pronged handle and curved lid.

I tested the handle, pulling down hard. Something clicked and a hissing sound filled the passageway. This really froze me. If the door opened directly into the pool I risked flooding Jewel's underground room and possibly trapping myself.

Only a meter indicating air pressure being equalized behind the door held any promise that this would not happen. Then the hissing stopped and the wheel lock under my hand clicked again, springing its metal door open automatically.

Water splashed on my legs, icily, jerking me backward. The door kept on swinging out until I could see what was behind it. A cylindrical opening gleamed in the bluish light cast along the passageway, its steel sides shedding beads of water into a shallow trough that now trickled at my feet. The tube, obviously a type of air lock, was about five feet long and three feet in diameter. At the far end loomed a metal door similar to the one I'd just opened.

So this was what Jewel had wanted me to see. Another way into the pool. Another way out. Below the waterline.

I climbed into the chamber so that I could read the words stamped in the other door.

WATERTIGHT. WARNING! SELF-LOCKING UNIT EQUAL TO POUNDS PER SQUARE INCH WATER PRESSURE!

Suddenly the door behind me clanged closed, its lock clicking sharply in the dark tube.

"Hey!" I cried. "Somebody's in here!"

Joltingly the sound of my own voice reverberated against my eardrums. I threw my hands up, rearing wildly in the chamber and my forehead struck something sharp, spinning me back as blood gushed from the wound.

I fell on my side in the shallow trough, rolling over, hardly conscious of a new hissing sound.

Then the water beneath me began to bubble, rising slowly.

four

BEING SEALED in an airtight tube is a cruel way to die. But when you push the panic button and start shipping water, it's time to turn in the old Brownie Button for sure.

Dazedly I sat up in the blinding, water-pumping darkness, the taste of blood and chlorine in my mouth, hands groping for the sharp object that had cut me. A raised steel plate slid under my trembling fingers, the tips touching a button in the center. I pressed hard several time with no results.

In my frenzy, I'd apparently struck the water intake control, an automatic valve which obviously wouldn't reset until after the chamber was flooded. The warning engraved on the watertight door had been explicit. Once the operation commenced, with both doors closed, neither lock would open until the pounds per square inch on either side were equal. That left me between the devil and the deep blue pool. Whoever had locked me in knew I didn't have an air tank. He, or she, must have figured I'd discover the intake control and drown, or gradually die from lack of oxygen. There wasn't much choice.

A third possibility struck me. Why not jam up the mechanism by stopping the water. Make the person outside think I'd drowned, then wait for an investigation by my would-be killer.

I tore off my panties and stuffed them into one of

the bubbling holes in the chamber floor. Next came my skirt and bra, ripped into as many pieces as I could manage. Still the water continued, rising over my breasts and shoulders. There seemed to be too many openings and not enough time or clothing to fill them all.

Only one slim hope remained. Jamming my face against the ceiling of the tube, I waited until I was tasting water. Then, inhaling what little oxygen was left, I moved to the four-pronged handle controlling the watertight door. Now it became a question of lung power versus automatic controls.

Finally the self-locking unit clicked under my fingers. Seconds passed. Long, excruciating seconds. Then the handle turned and the door swung open into the pool.

I was already swallowing water when I hit the surface. Light scissored painfully into my eyes, cutting them with its glare. I fell back, choking, blinded, half-screaming.

Strong fingers caught mine, jerking me upward, my blouse and skin tearing on the pool's hard apron as I was lifted.

"Honey!" a voice drilled angrily. "For Lord's sake!"

I rolled to a sitting position, coughing, gasping for air. Kirq Tempest bent over me, his eyes red-rimmed and frightened.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Look at you!"

I looked. The torn blouse was all that remained of my clothing. A drop of blood spilled from my forehead, landing on my stomach and tracing a zig-zag course that was crazy. So crazy I couldn't follow it all the way.

When I awakened, the light was less glaring and a hot compress partially shielded my eyes. I was comfortably tucked between Jewel's gaudy turquoise blankets and Kirq sat on the bed beside me, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"I must have pumped a gallon of water out of you," he said, grinning mischievously. "Feeling better?"

I tried to sit up. "Not exactly. My back hurts."

His face colored. "I—I had to press you pretty hard."

"I guess you did. Who pressed me into the air lock?"

He shook his head. "You got me. I didn't even know you were here. I came in from the beach and there you were. Scratching for the surface. I nearly flipped."

"You and me both," I said, removing the compress from my forehead. "Thanks for the assist."

"Don't mention it. I'd just like to know what happened."

"Guess I got too curious for my own good." I leaned forward so I could see the pool, clutching Jewel's blanket to my bare bosom. "Who was in the submarine command?"

"Both Kirk and I." He winced. "I never cared for it to tell you the truth. K was cracked on subs. You should have seen him at the training school in New London. He was like a little kid with his first toy."

He threw his head back and the cords in his neck swelled beneath bronzed flesh. "Kirk had that damned air lock installed when we built here in Malibu. I told him he was crazy."

"I don't blame you. Seems like a mighty dangerous thing to have in one's cellar. Apropos of *Little Orphan Annie* or Edgar Allan Poe."

Kirk laughed bitterly. "That's nothing. He had a shark in the pool once."

"What?"

"Yeah. He pumped in salt water and spent two weeks stalking the poor creature with a spear gun."

"What happened?"

"The shark damn near killed him. But he still didn't learn. The next week it was a giant stingaree." He paused, looking quickly at me. "You've changed your mind about Kirk's death, haven't you Honey?"

"Accidents are like lightning, Mr. Tempest. They don't usually occur twice in the same place."

He got up, stubbed out his cigarette and tore the wrap-

per from a Band Aid. "They don't *usually*," he said, bending over me again. "But it is possible."

His thumb pressed the tape against my forehead, stretching the cloth piece over the cut. The pressure pushed me back on the pillow. Our eyes locked.

"Anything's possible, Mr. Tempest," I said lowly. "Including someone hiding at the bottom of the pool with a spear gun."

His tongue darted between dry lips, licking them. "Who gave you that idea?"

"Jewel."

"I thought so." His hands dropped to my naked shoulders, and lowered toward the curve under the blanket. "You've got a pretty bad scratch under—"

I stopped him short. "Don't change the subject."

He grinned crookedly and got up from the bed. "All right. What do you want me to say? That Jewel closed you in the air lock? I wouldn't put it past her."

"Where is she?"

Kirk hitched nervously at his boxer trunks, then said, "I haven't seen her since last night."

I studied the butt-cluttered ashtray. "You mean at the party."

"Yeah."

"Who's idea was that?"

"Mine."

"Odd time for a celebration."

He lifted the gold mask from its perch atop the pyramid of champagne glasses and laughed. "Kirk would have wanted that. He always said if he ever died to cover him with wine instead of flowers."

"I like that," I said.

"Do you, Honey?"

"Yes. It's a little crazy, but it's nice."

"You would have loved him," Kirk said with admiration heavy in his voice. "He was a dancer and a choreographer. One of the best. In a class with Kelly and Kidd."

"I didn't know that."

He tossed the mask into a corner. "Few people did. His name didn't appear in bright lights. But he was great all the same. Jewel would have been nothing without K."

"Did he ever dance with her?"

"Years ago when they were younger. Before—before the fire." He paced restlessly across the room, his head thrown back. "There'll never be another like him."

"That's a strange thing for a twin to say."

He stopped, a wry grin forming on his mouth. "Is it, Honey? I never had any talent. K was a feverishly ambitious man. I wasn't. He was great with the women. Not me." He shook his head. "I was an 'also ran' from the very beginning. The kind of a guy who finishes third in a two horse race."

I pushed myself upright, wrapping Jewel's blanket around me. Suddenly his words were sounding like a reverse psychology sales talk. Hurrah for K! Boo on me! He was obviously trying to gain sympathy, but it didn't ring true.

"Kirk, in Biblical days Cain slew his brother Abel. If I'd been on the case, jealousy would have been the motive. How would you have scored it?"

He lit a fresh cigarette, peering at me through a curtain of smoke. "Cain and Abel were not twins, Honey."

"That point's never been proved to my knowledge."

He nodded, sweat beading on his forehead. "Nor has it been proved there ever was a man named Cain or a brother named Abel."

"The Bible says so."

He laughed lowly. "The Bible says it took God six days to create this earth. Science says it took six million years. Who can prove what?"

"I can prove your brother was murdered."

His muscular shoulders tensed. He moved to the bureau, opened a drawer and removed my .22 revolver.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked tautly.

"Apparently you dropped it climbing into the air lock," he said, staring at the pearl handle. "I found it downstairs."

"Kirk, you're not frightening me."

"I'm not trying to. You made a statement. A blunt statement about my brother's death. Now I've made one just as blunt about the discovery of your revolver. Who's trying to frighten who?"

"I haven't accused you," I said.

He aimed the gun at the glass wall behind me. "Let's not kid ourselves, Honey. That Cain and Abel story is great for the soothsayers. Your new version will never make the Bible, but it's a cinch for every front page in the country. Adding up to a lot of damage and no salvation."

"Damage to whom?"

He squinted his left eye down the revolver's barrel. "Cain."

I studied the steel snout. "Don't go melodramatic on me, Kirk. There is no proof and you know it. Besides I've already testified as the only eye-witness."

His right index finger slid into the triggered guard. "Are you begging, Honey?"

"No! I'm telling you the truth. The air lock does create a potential. But there's still the accidental circumstances behind Kirk's leap into the pool. My kick which sent him to the bottom—"

"So he *was* trying to make time with you?"

"Of course, he was," I said. "You said he was good with the women. Well, he almost sold me."

Kirk's mouth split into a wide, triumphant grin. The gun, still leveled a fraction above my head, began to waver slightly. "What'd I tell you? The son-of-a-gun was on the make every second. A gal like you must have driven him out of his mind."

"I drove him to his death if that's what you mean."

That cut him just about as deep as the spear had cleaved Kirk's chest. He moved toward me angrily. "No—"

body killed K. When are you going to get that through your head, Honey?"

I stood slowly. "When you stop threatening me."

"You're threatening me!" he cried. "You're so beautiful, but so violent, you make my flesh crawl. If you believe in the Bible don't damn Cain. Damn Adam who gave his rib to make the likes of you!"

"That's not very appreciative talk, Mr. Tempest, for the woman who gave you birth."

"Don't twist my words, Honey!" Sweat now dripped from his face. "You're out to hurt me. I know it. You know it. There's no who, whom or which about that. Is there?"

I shook my head. "Maybe you're no dancer, Mr. Tempest, but you're one hell of an actor. I would have probably drowned if you hadn't grabbed me. If you're Cain, I'm Medusa, with snakes coiling in my hair. We ought to play that pair together on Broadway."

His lips tightened over straight white teeth. "Yeah, let's do that!" he roared. "And we'll call it, 'The American Sucker' or 'The Twin Brother Who Always Ran Last'!"

I suddenly realized he was still half-drunk from the night before. He probably hadn't slept a wink. His belligerence was fuzzy around the edges, so were his words.

"Let's just call it quits," I said, moving a step in his direction. "Let's ring down the curtain, fold up the scenery and go home. I'm retiring you as Cain. No press notices. No fanfare." I gestured at the stack of empty champagne glasses. "Just a quiet farewell amidst empty wine bottles."

His head cocked back for one of his full-throated laughs. I didn't wait for the sound. Jewel's turquoise blanket went over him like a fish net over a run of minnow. He fell back, staggering on the steps leading down to the platform. I gave him a knee to speed up the action. He gave me something in return. A bullet

tore past my left ear, ramming harshly into the beamed ceiling.

That was when Mark Storm's big six foot five inch frame came sprinting onto the scene. He took a long look at my fully uncovered body, then leaped on Kirq Tempest.

The deputy said only a few words. But it was a certain tag if I've ever heard one.

"Honey, your slip's showing again!"

Twenty minutes later one of Jewel's slips was showing, but not on her. I'd rummaged through a closet while Mark and another deputy took Kirq to a squad car, and found virtually nothing that fit. Everything was too long waisted and tight around the hips. I finally settled on a loosely-woven one-piece bathing suit and a sweater. The suit was cut so high along the thighs that it almost looked like I wasn't wearing anything under Jewel's sweater.

Mark had plenty to say about that when he came back into the house. "My God, Honey, you're the most lewd woman I've ever met."

"Can I help it if I'm always losing clothes?" I protested.

He groaned. "Honey, if you'd lived in the days of iron chastity belts you would have made Houdini look sick."

"Maybe so," I said, smiling. "I got out of a steel air lock."

"So I understand."

"Did Tempest tell you?"

"Yeah. Jewel Tempest."

"What?"

"She called my office about an hour ago," Mark said. "Told us her brother had you sealed in a pressure tube at the bottom of the pool. She kindly suggested we remove you before the coroner did."

"Where was she calling from?"

"She said she was at KBRC-TV in Hollywood."

"But that's impossible, Mark!"

"That's what I thought, too. So I called back. She wasn't at the studio. In fact, nobody's seen her for several days."

"But what about the rehearsal Kirq talked about yesterday?"

The deputy removed his hat tiredly. "They don't rehearse the Milo Gold show. I got this from the program director, Jerry Carter. He says they film before a live audience with only a two hour briefing beforehand."

I sagged into a canvas chair near the swimming pool, shaking my head. "What'd Kirq Tempest say about that?"

"Nothing. You heard the answers he gave. You attacked him. The gun went off accidentally. And that's it."

"Are you going to book him?"

"You kidding, Honey? I sent him down to the station with Joe just to throw a scare in him. We'll be lucky if we can hold him more than two or three hours."

"Look, Mark, that tour through the air lock was no joke. Somebody tried to murder me."

Mark folded thick arms across his chest. "Okay. But how are you going to prove it."

"Jewel was waiting outside my office after the inquest. She pointed her finger at Kirq for murdering his own brother. I laughed then. I wasn't laughing in the air lock."

He stooped and picked up an empty champagne bottle. "You make about as much sense as this thing does without bubbles. We haven't got a murder case. But I may have one if you don't stop parading around in your birthday suit."

I got up. "Okay, have it your way, Lieutenant. But if I were you I'd start looking for Jewel Tempest."

"Why?"

"I followed her to Malibu. Her car's in the garage, as you can plainly see. But where's Jewel?"

He shrugged complacently. "Maybe she went for a walk on the beach."

"Wearing a helmet and a sphinx-like gold mask? Believe me it's weird, Mark. You'd hear screams from here to Pismo Beach."

"All right. Maybe she removed them. We don't know for certain she's scarred."

"Now you're talking sense," I said. "Suppose her face was corrected by surgery? Suppose the mask is just a dramatic crutch first used to gain sympathy and then kept to heighten her burlesque career?"

He nodded. "So what?"

"So we don't really know what she looks like, do we? Except that she once resembled her twin brothers."

Mark peered at me through the bottle. "It's your nickel. Go ahead."

"What if she's the one who shut me in the air lock? What if she was waiting at the bottom of the pool yesterday when Kirk *accidentally* got a spear in his chest?"

The big deputy crushed his hat back on his head and laughed. "Speaking about chests, your imagination's just about as big as yours. You ought to write mystery stories, Honey. About a blonde private eye with more 'what if's' and equipment than brains."

My shoulders stiffened. "You're making me mad, Lieutenant."

He was suddenly the cop and I was the private detective, and never the twain shall meet. At least, not during business hours. His lips puckered sourly. "Who asked you to stick your nose into this?"

"Jewel Tempest."

"Did she give you a retainer?"

"No, but—"

"Then head for that door, *Springtime*. And tell that bookie answering man of yours we're going to put

something on his nose one of these days. And it won't be two dollars. It'll be more like two years."

"This is a free country, Lieutenant. What Charley April does in his spare time is his own business. And if I want to work for nothing, I will!"

His face flushed hotly. "Well, let me tell you something. If you *had* any brains you'd have married me long ago, instead of running around half-cocked and half-naked!"

"Lieutenant, I wasn't half-cocked or half-naked when you came in!"

"You can say that again!" he slammed. "You never do anything halfway!"

Suddenly a female figure in a daring, skintight bathing suit filled the front door opening. She had curly black hair, startling brown eyes, and a shape that was so boyish around the fanny that the voluptuously curved upper half seemed almost unbelievable, except for the fact that her deeply bronzed skin faded into a pinkish pallor which was barely hidden at the curves' swell.

"Excuse me," she said apologetically, "I was wondering if Q Tempest was around?"

Mark's eyes widened, a stunned expression on his face.

She smiled, a dimple deepening in her cheek. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. My name's—Ruth—Ruth Smith. I'm new in the neighborhood. Just moved in next door. Q very graciously invited me to his party last night. I just stopped in to thank him."

I wasn't certain whether Mark was looking at what I was looking at, but neither one of us could spit out an answer. The shape in the doorway was nearly six feet tall. And it was obvious her nose had undergone some sort of plastic surgery.

five

"RUTH-SMITH?" Mark stammered.

"That's right," she said sweetly, in an affected baby voice, obscuring the pink pallor with a tug at her strapless suit. "I don't believe I met either of you last night at the party." She laughed and things began to spill again. "I don't think I did. Did I? There was so much champagne."

Mark's laughter told me he was not looking at the same things I was. He flicked off his hat and got that foolish 'look at me, no hands, ma' expression that men get when they're looking at something they shouldn't.

"No, I don't believe we have met," the deputy said, rather helplessly. "I'm Lieutenant Storm with Sheriff's homicide."

Her eyelids fluttered like he was something out of Muscle Beach, untouched by human *female* hands. "Of course. I saw your picture in the newspaper this morning." Her eyes darted to me, strangely fastening on my bare legs, almost hungrily in their stare. "And you must be Honey West. I read about you. You were here when Q's brother died."

"That's correct," I said, trying to fathom whether I'd ever met this woman before. "Do you know Q's sister?"

She was very poised. Her gaze lifted slowly to my face, an acid intensity in its glare. Rather hostile, but intimate, as if we *had* met sometime, somewhere and she was challenging my memory.

"Jewel and I have met," she said simply, the little-girl, grown-up tone broadening, but not giving an inch.

"Last night at the party. I—I was a little startled by her mask. Does she wear that often?"

"We're not too sure—how often," I said, wishing I could slap a mask on *her* face, along with a Sphinx helmet and leotards.

Mark was grinning at her like he couldn't have cared less what she was wearing. He pulled a pen from his coat pocket and a piece of paper. "I'd appreciate your telephone number, Miss Smith. In case my department might want to get in touch with you."

She shivered coyly, those *things* doing all sorts of contortions. "Now what would your big old department want with little old me?"

That was almost too obvious, even for big old Marcus Storm, who was feasting his little old eyes on her little old bathing suit, and getting a big old thrill out of the whole business.

"We may need more information on last night's party," the deputy said. "You'll be available if we need you?"

"I'm always available," she said, glancing at me. "I told you I live next door. The number's Malibu 44710. Call me if you need me."

She slithered out the door, before Mark could unstop his cork. He swore loudly, whirling on me. "Dammit, Honey, will you stop with this nonsense!"

"What nonsense?"

"I know what you were thinking," he said suspiciously. "So what if she's almost six feet tall. So what if she's built like Jewel Tempest? She's only a neighbor!"

"Did you notice her nose?"

"Yes! That and a couple of other features. So what?"

"She could be Jewel Tempest," I said.

"So could a thousand other tall, big-bosomed dames!" he roared, angry because he knew I knew he went for her and it bothered him. "You want me to haul 'em all in?" He crumpled the crown of his hat with his fist. "Hell, we don't have any proof there was a crime com-

mitted here. If I can't get anything out of Kirq Tempest, I'm going to forget the whole thing."

I smiled knowingly. "I'll bet you won't forget Ruth Smith."

He seized my arm. "Once and for all, lay off, Honey. I'm warning you!"

"And I'm warning you, Lieutenant. I'm going to unmask Jewel Tempest."

His eyes narrowed. "Wherever you go, Honey, you brew trouble like Chase and Sanborn brews coffee. Why don't you take a vacation? Go to Cuba. Fidel Castro and you could make beautiful music together."

I chucked him under the chin. "I don't need Castro to start my fireworks. Keep your eyes glued to your TV set tonight, Lieutenant. You may see something."

"Yeah," he said, moving toward the door. "The Milo Gold Show, *not* starring Jewel Tempest."

"Oh, she'll be there all right."

"What makes you think so?" he asked, jerking his head inquisitively.

I flicked my eyelashes in Ruth Smith's girlish way. "Just a hunch. See you around, Lieutenant."

From Jewel's bathroom window I watched the big deputy climb into his car and drive away. Then I crossed to the gold mask Kirq had thrown in the corner.

Peering through the eyeslits at my own reflection was startling. When I lowered one of her deep helmets over my blonde hair the illusion was complete.

From my office I called KBRC-TV at four-thirty and asked what time Jewel Tempest was expected for her pre-show briefing. The operator switched me unexpectedly to Milo Gold's private line.

"Yes?" His voice was cross and unpleasant.

"Ah—this is Jewel Tempest—"

"Don't go formal on me, baby," he snapped, voice

flattening into a half whisper. "There's nobody here. Why haven't you called me?"

I did a double-take, then coughed huskily. "I caught a cold, Milo—"

"*You* caught a cold? My God, I nearly died last night I was wheezing so much. They were going to replace me until an hour ago."

A stab in the dark was called for and I gave him one point blank. "Was the pool too much for you?"

"You ought to know the answer to that," he said sharply. "Get down here as soon as you can."

"But, Milo—"

"I'm not kidding, baby. You can play Blind Man's Bluff all you want, but it's killing me. I've got to talk to you before Carter starts the briefing."

Biting off too much usually chokes a person, and I was so choked I could hardly think. Milo Gold apparently knew Jewel Tempest intimately. But his voice contained a stiffness that belied his words. He talked like a man reading from a carefully prepared script. Or with a gun at his back.

This could be a trap. One even more permanent than the air lock. I had to take that chance. "Be there as soon as I can, Milo."

"Good girl. And bring a G-string."

"What?"

"I said bring a G-string. One of my writers has a gimmick that'll slay you."

And with that he hung up, quickly. I dialed the operator and asked for Malibu 4-4710. After five long rings, Ruth Smith's baby voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Jewel?"

She hesitated, then said, "Gee, I'm afraid you have the wrong number. Is this—you—Miss West?"

I could have swallowed my tongue for not disguising my voice. "Oh, Miss Smith, I must have mixed up your number with the Tempest's. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," she purred. "Lieutenant Storm called me a few minutes ago. He made the same mistake. Q's number is Malibu 5000."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it," she said triumphantly. "I'm glad for the mistake. At least, in Lieutenant Storm's case. We have a date for this evening."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I told him I'm a model, and he's awfully anxious to look at my scrapbook. Isn't that cute?"

I said, "Yes" and slammed the receiver down. Good for old Marcus Storm, I thought. He was already chawing at the bit. The big question still lay unanswered. Was she or wasn't she Jewel Tempest? And if she wasn't, who was? I picked up the gold mask and slapped it over my face. Me?

Around six o'clock I drove into the artist's lot at KBRC-TV and parked my car before donning Jewel's weird mask and headpiece. To increase my height I'd fixed a swirling feather to the helmet, and was wearing extra high heels. In between was a harem-draped gold lame dress that Mark would have tagged "lewd". It didn't show anything, but it was guaranteed to keep men's eyes on curves rather than height.

Milo Gold was a thick-set man with thinning gray hair and a cigar. This much I knew from watching his television show. I recognized him immediately in the corridor outside Studio One.

He didn't have to recognize me. The mask and headpiece were enough. "Baby," he said, glancing around. "Let's go into my dressing room. We can talk there."

So far so good, I thought. No look of surprise on his face. No other woman wearing a mask.

Once inside the dressing room, he locked the door and faced me, trembling. "Okay, you can take it off now, baby."

"What?"

"The mask, baby."

He reached for me, but I dodged.

"No, Milo."

He was in his early sixties and wore thick horn-rimmed glasses. He caught my arm.

"Don't deny me, baby."

I jerked loose, trying to keep up the pretense, still worried about a trap.

"Milo, I told you before—"

"—That your face is scarred," he finished, a cocky gleam behind his glasses. "I know you're lying, baby. I touched your face in the dark last night. It's as smooth as glass."

Bingo! One question answered. Jewel Tempest's face was presentable. But where did we go from there? Milo Gold answered that one, too. He jerked off the mask before I could stop him.

Then he stepped back, almost too dramatically, mouth wide. "Why—you—you're beautiful!"

I snatched the mask from his hand. "Milo, you shouldn't have done that!"

"But, why?" he demanded, shaking his head. "Why do you hide such a lovely face?"

"That's my business, Milo."

He knew I wasn't Jewel Tempest. His mouth had a contemptuous knowing look.

"But, your eyes," he said. "They're blue. Mediterranean blue. Under the mask they always looked brown."

Someone knocked at the door. I fit the mask over my face.

"Mr. Gold, is Jewel Tempest with you?" A man's voice asked.

"Yes, Carter," Milo said, winking at me slyly. "But we're busy at the moment."

"I'm sorry," Carter continued, "we've got to have her now. Lou Conklin's here with her script. She'll have to be briefed on the G-string bit. That'll take time."

Milo frowned, chewing on his cigar nervously. Then

he leaned toward me and whispered, "I'm taking you home after the show, understand? We've got to straighten this thing out about K once and for all."

He snapped the lock and Carter came in, a small, effeminate looking man in his early thirties. The director placed puzzled dark eyes on me and said, "Miss Tempest?"

"Yes."

"You remembered a G-string, I hope."

"Of course."

"May we see it, please?"

I shrugged nonchalantly, lifting my dress above my hips. Gold and Carter nearly dropped their teeth.

"Take that off!" Gold roared. "This instant!"

I stared at him blankly. "You mean, now?"

"This instant!" Gold repeated, his voice fierce with rage.

"Now wait a minute," I countered. "These things don't come with spare parts underneath. I'd be stark naked."

Carter's forehead ridged. "I—I don't believe we're talking about the same thing, Miss Tempest. Mr. Gold is referring to the gun."

I dropped my hem like it was a hot potato. I had intended to leave my revolver and garter holster in the car.

"Oh, that," I said, trying to cover over the mistake. "Just part of one of my strip routines. It's a funny bit."

Milo scowled. "I'm not laughing. If we hadn't caught that, I might have lost a sponsor. He has a particular dislike for firearms."

"I—I'm sorry," I apologized, sensing Milo Gold's wrath as another indication of his awareness that I was a fake. "I'll leave it in my dressing room."

"Oh, no," Milo said. "You'd better leave the responsibility with me."

He shoved thick hands under my dress, sliding the garter off my leg.

Then he straightened, smiling, crooked teeth glinting in his cigar-stained mouth. "You can go with Carter. I'll see you during the show. Good luck."

I nodded. I had a hunch I'd need more than luck. The look in Gold's eyes told me there were a number of surprises ahead. If I'd known how many I might have taken Mark Storm's advice and joined Castro.

The first surprise came quickly. A hideous creature was sitting in a corner of the briefing room. He was a cross between the Wolf Man and Frankenstein's monster and his warped makeup and fanged teeth made me cringe. Carter introduced us.

"This is Billy Wild, Miss Tempest. He'll be your partner during the interview with Mr. Gold."

The monster jerked stiffly to his feet, extending a gloved hand which resembled a hunk of torn flesh. It felt as clammy as death warmed over.

"Hi," I said, trying to be friendly. "How are things in the cemetery these days?"

Wild grunted.

"He can't talk, Miss Tempest," Carter explained. "Rammed a wood spike down his throat two years ago while shooting a Dracula remake. Wrecked his voice-box completely."

"Tough break," I said to Wild.

"You'll be a startling pair before the TV cameras," Carter said, laughing faintly. "This should be our biggest show."

Wild grunted again through his grotesque makeup. Another man barged into the briefing room carrying a script. His smile faded at the sight of the monster and me.

"Beauty and the Beast!" the newcomer exclaimed, glancing triumphantly at Carter. "This'll knock 'em dead."

He was introduced as Lou Conklin, a writer. As we went over the script, Wild's twisted eyelids turned toward me, staring ghoulishly, grunting often. When

we reached the dress-lifting bit, Conklin gestured at me with a cigarette.

"The stage lights'll dim at this point, Miss Tempest. Since this will be on film, we may have to do some cutting, but we'll keep as much as the network censor will allow."

"Thanks," I said, trying to shake off the monster's eyes.

"Now," Conklin continued, "when your dress hem reaches your thighs it'll be pretty dark, understand? But, you just keep on going no matter how black it becomes. There'll be a live audience in the studio. They won't see much. It's what our cameras get that counts."

I nodded dismally. If it hadn't been for Milo Gold's mention of K Tempest, I would undoubtedly have called everything to a screeching halt right there and then.

Conklin interrupted my thoughts. "At this point, Miss Tempest, you'll be at half-mast. That's when Billy will start making love to you."

"Oh, no!" I interjected flatly.

"But, Miss Tempest, this is a gem of an idea. It took me two weeks to think it up."

"Well, you can take two seconds to forget it," I said. "My mask is not to be removed under any circumstances. And this dress is far too valuable to endanger with his greasy makeup."

"He won't be touching your mask or the dress," the writer argued. "Your legs are what he'll be after."

When I continued to protest, Carter brought in Milo Gold. The comedian peered at me scathingly.

"You already agreed to this stunt, *Miss Tempest!* What's changed your mind?"

I had to back down. The water around me was coming to a boil. "Okay. No offense meant, Billy, but in that get-up you're enough to scare the pants off a scarecrow."

He nodded, smiling in that twisted way monsters smile in pictures after they've torn somebody's throat out by the roots.

Milo gripped my shoulder hard. "You'll be all right once you're before an audience. Old troopers never die, huh, *Miss Tempest*?"

I shook my head sickeningly. Somebody was going to die.

The nationally televised Milo Gold show began promptly at eight o'clock before five cameras and an overly-anxious studio audience. After several flat jokes between Milo and his announcer, the monster and I were ushered before twin microphones. A few people gasped. Even the cameramen did double takes.

Milo started our interview by saying we were the handsomest couple he'd met in a long time.

"So you're a strip tease dancer, Jewel?" he continued. "Well, why don't you begin by taking off your mask?"

"I will," I said, "if you'll take yours off first."

The audience laughed. Milo didn't. My line hadn't been according to the script.

His jaw tightened angrily. "You—ah—you're a smart girl. Too bad you can't show your brains instead of your body."

"If I hang around here very long," I quipped, glancing at the monster, "that may be possible."

The audience broke up. Milo did, too. Only he was so mad he almost choked. There was murder in his eyes when he continued. I decided to stick with the script. Then we reached the G-string bit and things began to pop fast.

"So you're the Terpsichorean Tease, Jewel?" Milo said, peering owlishly through his glasses. "What does your partner have to say about that?"

"He doesn't talk, remember?" I blurted, hating the lines because they must have been offensive to Wild. "He only growls."

The monster growled angrily. My flesh began to crawl.

"Hey," Milo said. "Our fiend—I mean our friend—

doesn't like your comments. You'd better try and soothe him, Miss Tempest."

"How?" I asked. This was the line that started everything. I wished I'd never said it.

"Music is supposed to soothe the savage beast." Milo wore a grin two thousand miles wide. He was loving this. Every second. "Can you play any instrument, Miss Tempest?"

"No," I said, following the script. "Can the orchestra?"

Boom! A drum banged hard. Then another. And another. My dress began to lift. Slowly at first. Milo whistled. The monster grunted. Again it was too realistic. In the fading light, Wild seemed to be drooling through his fanged teeth.

The hem reached my knees and Wild bent toward me, his warped, glove-covered fingers glistening in the lengthening shadows. I kept on yanking according to Conklin's instructions, but I should have stood in bed.

Suddenly it was as dark as pitch and somebody screamed. I didn't realize it was me until Wild's ugly hands were fastened on my G-string. One quick yank removed it from my hips.

Then it seemed like everybody in the world was screaming. And above the sound, came the singularly unpleasant roar of a gunshot.

six

THE SHOT spun me around in the screaming dark bedlam. It sounded as if it came from somewhere on stage. Suddenly lights burst on. Milo Gold was gone from his chair. Missing, too, were my G-string and Billy Wild.

Lou Conklin burst from behind the set, a broken cigarette in his teeth. "Miss Tempest, are you all right?"

"I think so," I said, checking to see if my mask was still intact. "What is this a shooting gallery?"

"You got me!" He began waving at the standing, wide-eyed crowd. "That's our show for tonight, folks! Hope we didn't frighten anyone, but that's Milo Gold for you! Always something new!" His attempt at laughter failed miserably. "And don't forget to buy those explosive little nuggets of corn which we shoot out of cannons at Battle Creek—"

I found the heavy-set comedian in his dressing room. He was white-faced and trembling. And for a good reason. A gun was leveled at his thick chest. Behind the trigger end was God's gift to the Sheriff's department, Lieutenant Mark Storm.

"Sorry, wrong pew," I said, whirling.

"No, wrong shrew," Mark spat. "Get in here, Honey, and fast!"

The jig was definitely up. I entered Milo's dressing room and closed the door.

"What ill wind blew you in, Lieutenant?" I asked, removing Jewel's mask. "I thought you had a date with Miss Model of 1960."

Mark flicked knowing eyes on my low-cut dress and smiled. "I decided to take your advice and watch the Gold show instead. From backstage. You were pretty good. In fact, you may win an Emmy for Best Performance by an Actress in a Continuing G-string."

"Don't tell anyone," I said, "but I fit in the Discontinued category as of three minutes and one hairy hand ago."

"What?"

"Wild took off with my G-string. The guy must be nuts. He puts pantie poachers to shame."

Mark tossed me my revolver. I clicked open the cylinder. Another bullet was missing and the barrel smelled like fireworks.

"You're lucky," the deputy said. "This guy took a shot at you."

Milo growled, "This is a frame-up! I'll have you swinging from the D.A.'s chandelier, copper!"

"After the lights went out," Mark continued, "this character bumped into me backstage. I followed him in here. He had your gun in his hand."

"Somebody shoved it in my pocket," Milo argued. "I think it was Billy Wild."

"Where is Wild, Honey?"

"How should I know? He took off as if that G-string was made up of thousand dollar bills."

Mark's eyes lighted. "You may have something on that score. Let's find him."

We left Milo in his dressing room and sprinted back into Studio One. The monster couldn't be found, either there or on any of the other sound stages in KBRC's rambling, three-story television headquarters. We tried dressing rooms, business offices, rest rooms. Even Gold was gone when we got back downstairs.

"Have you got your car, Honey?" Mark demanded, jerking me toward the parking lot.

"Sure, where we going?"

"The monster must have a castle. Let's go rattle a few skeletons. Or knock on a few coffins."

"I'm with you!"

We half-ran, laughing, through the warm summer night. At my car, I glanced at the sky. A full moon gleamed above the Strip's neon-lit towers.

"Hey," I said, gesturing. "In horror movies a full moon symbolizes death."

"Yeah," Mark said, climbing into the car. "And in adventure films it means a good night to go looking for the hidden treasure."

"What hidden treasure?"

Before heading out onto Vine Street, Mark stopped at a phone booth to get Billy Wild's address.

"You realize," he said, directing my car toward Hollywood Blvd., "that this is unofficial as hell, but we'll just

say I'm commandeering a private vehicle for purposes of special investigation."

"Special investigation of what?" I asked. "My stolen G-string? Is that the hidden treasure you were mumbling about?"

"Maybe. Was yours one of Jewel's G-strings?"

"No. I borrowed that from a friend of mine who works in a strip joint in Long Beach. Why?"

Mark rubbed his jaw, squinting into oncoming headlights. "We gave your friend, Q Tempest, a real workout this afternoon. We even tossed the death threat G-string into his lap. And for a few seconds he got about as green as a Martian after eating sour apples."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing. But he tore into the lining like a hungry man ripping into a steak. We thought he was looking for the note, but he wasn't."

"Don't tell me he was searching for your hidden treasure?"

"Possibly," the deputy said, gripping the wheel. "After releasing Tempest, we checked his handwriting against the note we'd found in the G-string. He had told us the truth. They didn't match."

"So what are you after, Mark?"

"I'm not sure. A Fed dropped in later. From the tax bureau. He was trying to locate Jewel. He claims she's made over a quarter of a million dollars in the past five years, and has never paid a dime to the government."

"Well, what do you know," I said. "A motive rears its ugly head."

"Yeah. The agent admitted they've had a tough time tracking her down. Apparently she's never invested or banked a cent."

"That's a lot of dough, Mark. She couldn't have spent the whole thing on that house. Or could she?"

He shook his head, cocking his hat back with his hand. "No, the agent said that house was built from money left by the father. They've investigated the case

thoroughly. The boys are both clean, although their income has been abnormally low during these years."

"When did the internal revenue people start checking into Jewel's whereabouts?"

"Last week. I'm surprised one of them wasn't waiting for you at the studio tonight."

I reached underneath my gold lame dress and adjusted the garter holster. "You think most of that quarter of a million's hidden somewhere?"

The deputy shrugged his ponderous shoulders. "We went back to the Malibu house and tore it apart from stem to stern. Tempest complained bitterly, but we had a search warrant. We didn't find enough in change to buy a five-cent cigar."

"So where does that leave you?"

"With Billy Wild," he said, glancing at my lower half, "And your G-string. As far as the internal revenue department is concerned Jewel Tempest is a pirate. What do pirates usually do when they bury treasure, Honey?"

"Holy smokes," I said. "A map sewn into a G-string? Captain Kidd would roll over in his grave."

Mark frowned. "If that shot had been accurate tonight, you might have joined him. Why don't you get out while you're ahead, Honey?"

"I am ahead, Lieutenant. Even ahead of you. Although I'm not proud of it, you've been so nice in the past twenty minutes."

He licked his lips angrily. "Don't tell me you've found a map already."

"No, but I heard something almost as interesting."

"What's that?"

"Billy Wild's voice."

"You couldn't have, he's a mute."

"Maybe so," I said. "But the person who snatched my G-string could talk. Quite clearly."

"How do you know?" the deputy demanded.

"When he touched me, it wasn't his gloved hands

that made me scream. It was what he said. Three very crystal clear words. 'Damn you, Honey!'"

We reached Wild's small, cliff-hanging house, set above the jaded lights of Hollywood, around midnight. We didn't have any trouble locating him this time. A light burned in the kitchen. He was crumpled on the floor in a thick pool of blood. A G-string had been drawn so tight around his throat that its jeweled cord had cut through his makeup and skin, and across the veins and arteries underneath.

Mark swore.

I didn't blame him. This was undoubtedly Billy Wild. But it wasn't the same man who'd been on the stage with me at KBRC. His monster costume and makeup were entirely different.

seven

"So the masquerade goes on," Mark said faintly, bending over the dead man. "Poor bastard. Somebody caught him from behind. Is this your G-string, Honey?"

"No. It looks like one of Jewel's."

"That's what I thought. He's been dead for a number of hours." The deputy removed his pistol from an underarm holster and went into the living room. I followed.

Music drifted from a record machine in the corner. It was a sad melody, the kind they play at funerals. I looked back at Billy Wild. One dead eye peered at me from the side of his twisted face. It was wide and frightened. So was his mouth. His tongue protruded between his teeth, half chewed. I covered my face.

Mark picked up the phone and dialed his office. "This

is Storm. I'm not giving you a weather report, baby. Connect me with homicide."

I didn't wait to hear his report. The balcony door was open. I walked outside onto a narrow porch. Crickets chirped, and the sound of after-midnight traffic rose above the city like fingernails being dragged along a blackboard. The tiered Capitol Records building glowed brightly. So did the huge moon above it, resting on the sounds and the heat of the night.

I leaned against the balcony railing, trying to pick up the pieces of a dead man and put them back together. Obviously someone had killed Wild just before he was to leave for the telecast. Then the murderer had put on makeup and a monster costume and taken Billy's place. But why? Was Mark's suggestion of a secret map really possible?

He joined me after a few minutes, shoulders bent, hat cocked over one eye. "Deputy coroner'll be here soon. I called Milo Gold, but he wasn't home. Same response at Ruth Smith's."

"How about next door?"

"That number, too. Kirq answered. Said he's been alone all evening. Watching television. Still no sign of Jewel."

I shook my head, a sick feeling at the pit of my stomach. "This is my fault, isn't it, Mark? If I hadn't masqueraded as Jewel, Wild probably would still be alive."

He patted the back of his thick neck, wincing thoughtfully. "You didn't pull the string on that, Honey. Wild was killed before the telecast, not after. His murderer was probably as surprised as you are to find he'd been matched with a phony. That would explain the 'damn you, Honey,' just before the gunshot."

"Mark, the voice was husky, mannish. It could have been Jewel."

"I doubt that, Honey, unless my theory's correct, and she's lost track of the right G-string." He straightened,

and in the soft gleam of light projected up from the city his face looked sick and twisted. "Still it wouldn't make sense. If she buried the money, she ought to remember where without having to consult a map."

"Mark, if Captain Kidd had lost one of his maps, don't you think he would have gone through hell and high water to retrieve it?"

"I suppose so."

Suddenly even his voice sounded sick, like it had years ago when he'd gone to pieces during another murder case. At the time, a county psychiatrist had said he was in the wrong vocation. That he was building up for a breakdown. He looked on the verge of one now.

"I don't feel so good," he said, brushing clumsily at his eyes. "I haven't had much sleep lately."

"Mark, why don't you take my car and go home? I'll wait for the coroner."

His shoulders stiffened. "Now how would that look? I've got a job to perform, Honey, whether you think so or not. And any time you get the idea you can fill that job, applications are always available, understand?"

"I—I was just trying to help—"

He jerked toward the balcony door angrily. "Well, don't do me any favors!"

I followed slowly, regarding the sudden anger as part of his temperament, but not convinced it had been an ordinary explosion.

We searched the rest of Wild's bachelor haven, discovering a number of interesting facts. One of the bedrooms was furnished with a frilly canopy bed, pink wallpaper and a bureau crammed with revealing nightgowns, scanty black bras and panties, garter belts and net stockings. A walk-in closet contained photographic equipment—lights, tripods, movie cameras, a four by five, even a sink and developer.

"This smells like a pornographic setup," Mark ob-

served, surveying the closet. "Wild might have been running a little business on the side."

A drawer under the sink produced several albums of pictures. Female flesh, all sizes, shapes and colors, stretched rawly on the pages. Most of the girls wore nothing more than black mesh stockings and garter belts. A few were posed in sheer nighties, deep vivid lines arching underneath the fabric, harshly shadowed areas blown out of proportion by camera angle and focus, hands naughtily indicating them. Wild apparently preferred the posterior view and had dedicated one full album to such poses.

An eight by ten showed one girl in a crudely cramped position, upside down on her hands and knees, head bent forward, huge breasts partially covering her face. She wore only a G-string that was loosened specifically to show what it was designed to cover.

We recognized the subject simultaneously.

"Ruth Smith," I said.

Mark grabbed the album. "Why, that dirty—"

"What's the matter, Lieutenant? She said she was a model. You were invited to *see* her collection."

"She's wearing a G-string!"

"She was," I pointed out, "until somebody unfastened the hook. Now, I ask you again, Lieutenant, *is* Jewel Tempest missing?"

Mark tossed down the album, face still frighteningly sick and white. "If your theory is correct, Honey, this case is busted."

I glanced down at the smiling, upside-down face that peered between large, pink-tipped breasts. "Busted is the word all right, Lieutenant."

The deputy coroner didn't add much to what we already knew about Billy Wild's death. He'd been dead about six hours and the G-string had severed his jugular vein. What did surprise us was the sudden appearance of Milo Gold.

His tie was undone. So was his face when he stared at the bloody remains of Billy Wild.

"My God, he couldn't be dead," the comedian mumbled.

Mark really lost control at the sight of Gold's pasty fat face. His fists knotted. "Doesn't a person usually die when his throat's cut! What are you doing here, big shot?"

Milo stabbed a cigar between his lips to stop their quavering. "I came here to chew him out because he wrecked my show. I—I don't know anything about this."

"Who said you did?"

"Nobody—that is," Milo stammered futilely, "that is—"

"That is *what*?" Mark spat. "Did you kill him or didn't you?"

"No! My God, officer, what are you trying to hang on me?"

The big deputy bellied up to the comedian, eyes blazing. "What happened to the D.A.'s chandelier you were going to hang me from, fat boy? And who gave you permission to leave the TV studio?"

"Nobody, I—I—please, officer, I haven't done anything."

"Who said you had?"

"You," Milo said, trembling noticeably.

This wasn't like Mark. His nostrils were widely flared now, face almost purple with rage.

"Simmer down, Lieutenant," I said. "You're blowing your top for no reason."

Mark whirled, eyes fierce with hate, lips twisting. "You see that man lying there dead, Miss West?" He gestured threateningly. "What kind of reasoning is that? He didn't want to die!"

"Nobody wants to die, Mark!" I returned. "You're not responsible, so get down off that guillotine and quit trying to chop off heads!"

The Walls of Jericho tumbled over on Mark Storm. His head jerked sideways, eyes torn, flat, empty, contemptuously wide, right shoulder lifting. His fist came up into my face, cutting my cheek against my teeth as it glanced off my jaw. I fell back over a chair, hardly realizing for a long instant what had hit me. My head struck the floor. The gold lame dress ballooned around me, legs kicking over as I somersaulted backward.

By the time I was up on my knees, wobbling dazedly, two of Mark's assistants had him by the arms. His breakdown was just beginning. Mark's left buried deep into one deputy's stomach spinning him across the room. The other man took a grazing right, fainted Mark off-balance and drove home a jaw-snapping uppercut. The powerfully-built lieutenant fell wordlessly, landing atop Billy Wild's crumpled body.

It took three men to carry Mark to a squad car. His blue suit was spattered with Wild's blood. And for the protection of the deputies riding with him, they tied his hands behind his back. Hitting me was one thing, chopping down one of his own men another. If he didn't make the psychiatric ward at the county hospital, he was a cinch for suspension. Probably both.

After removing Wild's body, and treating my lacerated chin, the Sheriff's deputies and assistant county coroner strategically withdrew, apologizing as they went, like a group of grinning explorers surrounded by unfriendly natives.

It smacked heavily of practiced melodrama. The village scene from *King Kong*. Bruce Cabot, Fay Wray and company backing away from the huge wall, and the gleaming-eyed high priest, and the gorilla-suited dancers. Darryl F. Zanuck, in charge of production.

When they were gone, Milo Gold straightened his tie and threatened, "I should sue you for impersonating Jewel Tempest!"

"Don't make me laugh," I said, massaging my sore jaw. "You knew who I was all the time."

"That's absurd."

"Maybe." My eyes drifted to the dark stain on the kitchen floor. "What was all that talk about K Tempest?"

He lit a cigar and grinned sardonically. "I'm afraid you were hearing things, my dear. I'm not acquainted with such a person. Nor have I ever met Jewel Tempest."

I staggered as I got up. "You're a big fat liar. Believe me, if you had anything to do with Billy Wild's death—or K Tempest—you'd better steer clear of all chandeliers because I'll hang you myself, high and hard, understand?"

He aimed his cigar at me threateningly. "You leave me alone. You're all the same. A bunch of nuts who ought to be in a booby hatch, instead of wearing badges and carrying private licenses." He whirled toward the front door.

I caught his arm and shoved the album containing Ruth Smith's photograph under his nose. "Before you go, I'd like to see if you're interested in art?"

"What kind of art?" he demanded hotly.

"The kind that makes red-blooded men get red-blooded ideas." I flipped to Ruth's picture. "What do you think of that, Mr. Gold, twenty carat?"

His reaction, though slow in coming, was enough to convince me he knew Ruth Smith.

"What is this?" he blurted, shock spreading across his massive face.

"It's a fanny, Mr. Gold. A big one. Recognize it?"

He ripped her picture from the album. "Who took this filthy thing?"

"Billy Wild. He has quite a spread on this girl. Didn't you know?"

"He couldn't!" Milo blurted, trembling with rage. "She doesn't do this sort of thing."

"Ruth Smith?"

He choked for an instant, then said, "Ruth Smith, hell! Jewel Tempest!"

eight

MIL0 GOLD weighed over two hundred pounds, but he was fast on his feet. And matched against a gal who was still dazed from four very hard knuckles, he was a cinch to win any race. Especially the one he ran to his white Cadillac convertible, clutching the photograph. He pulled away before I even reached the curb.

I went back to the house, and then dialed my office on the phone in the living room. April intercepted after a half dozen rings.

"H. West, detective service," he said sleepily. "She ain't in."

"You're not just whistling Dixie, pal," I returned. "About an hour ago she was really out. Cold. What have you got for me, Charley?"

"Plenty, Springtime. You're phone's been jumping all evening. I'm going to have to raise my rates. A doll named Smith has been on the hook three times."

"What'd she want, Charley?"

"You natch. The last call came about midnight. She was frothing at the bit. Like she was going to blow her brains out or something."

"Maybe somebody plans to help her."

"Where you heading, Springtime?"

"Malibu, Charley. Listen, do me a favor, will you?"

"Sure. Only don't get yourself killed before you can return it. I like working for you, Springtime."

"Thanks, Charley. Now listen," I continued, "Mark

Storm's in trouble. He punched a couple of people to-night. Me included."

"Why that dirty, low-down, bookie-breaking bastard. He's been on my back for years, but you— I thought he was in love with you, Springtime?"

"He is," I said. "That's part of the trouble. Between me keeping him on the hook, and being chained to his office twenty-four hours a day, he was ready for a flip. This one may cost him his job."

"That's tough. But you won't find me shedding any weight over it."

"Now look, Charley," I said, angrily. "Mark's a cop. He's on one side of the fence. Sometimes you're on the other side. That doesn't mean he's right all the time, or that you're wrong. When you got a badge, Charley, you wear it like it's riveted to you."

"You're too damned philosophical tonight, Springtime. I don't like that. You always wind up in trouble when you talk this way."

I couldn't help smiling. "I'm the guy in the middle, Charley. The one sitting on top the fence. Believe me, it's a lousy place to be. You have to get philosophical once in a while."

"Not at three-thirty in the morning—*and* on my time," he said, in that wonderful way that meant, *be careful*. "What do you want me to do?"

"Call Mark's office. Pretend you're an uncle just in from Chicago. Insist you have to talk to him."

"The bastard couldn't have any relatives. He was probably spawned in the Sheriff's laboratory."

"Push it hard, Charley. You know what I mean. Either get him on the phone or find out why they won't let him talk. Phone me the details as soon as you have them."

He groaned unpleasantly. "Where'll I reach you?"

"Try Malibu 44710 first. Then Malibu 5000."

"That's long distance, you know. I'll have to put it on your bill."

I laughed. "You haven't sent me a bill for three months."

I could see him sitting in that old wirebasket chair, hunched over his board, a bottle of stale beer jammed under the broken key which connected him to my line. He was probably grimacing about now because he hated to be told what a soft-hearted rascal he really was.

"You're just lucky," he returned sharply, the edge gilted with a sweet sort of goodness in him that he just couldn't hide, even when he tried. "My secretary's been out sick. When she gets back I'm going to hit you with the biggest bill since that Prince Rainer picked up his wedding tab."

"Okay," I said, "that's a deal. Now get rid of that bottle of beer and get to work."

Charley uttered a few soft protests and hung up.

The moon was gone now, leaving a sky full of icy stars. It was that awful period before dawn when everything seems to squeeze in resentfully, darkly. On the outskirts of Malibu the road narrowed and I didn't see any more cars. I began to feel as if I were in a strange closet and the whole world was behind me, pushing the door closed and locking it.

After parking down the block from Ruth Smith's house I slipped on my trenchcoat, lifted the hood over my head and climbed out into the chill darkness. There aren't any sidewalks in that section of Malibu and sand drifted under my shoes as I walked, half-crouched, behind the swanky homes that were banked along the sea. A dog barked once behind a tall fence. My eyes didn't shift from the street, or the row of cars lined along each side. There were no lights anywhere, but one automobile stuck out plainly in the dark. It was a white Cadillac convertible, nosed in awkwardly at the curb. Obviously Milo Gold had been in a big hurry when he parked.

I lifted my revolver from its garter holster and crept

toward Ruth Smith's back door. Wind off the sea blew sand in my face, whipping at my trenchcoat, clawing under the gold lame dress and raising goose bumps.

Ruth's back door was unlocked and creaked open under my hand's pressure. In the kitchen I blundered into a refrigerator, then into two very strong arms. My revolver struck raw flesh and buried itself deep.

"Don't move," I said.

"Ruth?"

"You're getting warm. Step back and lift your hands."

My fingers slid along a wall next to the refrigerator until they found a light switch. Kirq Tempest rose out of the dark, clad in only a striped pajama bottom, his curly black hair tousled on his forehead.

He squinted at me for an instant, then said, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was just about to ask you the same question. Aren't you in the wrong house?"

Kirq shook his head, surveying the modern, low-ceilinged kitchen. "I heard a banging noise a few minutes ago. It woke me up. I decided to come over and see what the devil was going on."

I didn't lower my revolver, unable to forget the bullet he squeezed past my ear earlier. "What'd you find?"

He shrugged his powerful bronzed shoulders. "I just got here. The back door was open. It was swinging in the wind. That must have been the noise. Would you mind pointing that thing somewhere else?"

"Not until you tell me why you didn't just close the door and go back to bed."

He frowned. He had a habit of doing that. "I wondered why Ruth hadn't heard the noise. It was loud enough to wake the dead. So I came inside to see if everything was all right."

"And is everything all right?"

"I haven't had a chance to check yet."

"What did you expect to find with the lights out?"

His face reddened. "Look, Miss Private Eyeball, you've had me on the carpet ever since my brother died. It wasn't enough you had me dragged down to the Sheriff's office. Now you're at it again."

"You keep my interest up, Mr. Tempest."

He frowned again. "You're the most impossible female I've ever met. Don't you ever take time out for love?"

"What kind of love?"

He nodded. "There you go again. Always with the questions. I'll bet you even ask men why they put their hands on you."

"I do when they're around my throat or where you had yours yesterday after hauling me from the pool."

"My hands were—" He stopped, face screwing into a resentful glower. "Hell, I saved your life, didn't I?"

"Sure, but you wound up an Indian Giver."

"That was an accident, Honey."

My gun hand dropped. "All right, I'll buy that. For the moment. Now let's find Ruth Smith."

His forehead ridged. "There's nobody home. That's obvious."

He followed me into the living room.

"Nobody," I said. "But that doesn't mean *no body*."

"There you go again." He laughed, throwing open a bedroom door. "Any dead people here? Come out, come out, wherever you're buried."

Kirk's laugh froze on his face as light splashed on an upturned bed and clothes strewn on the floor.

"Hey, you weren't kidding, Honey!"

Billy Wild's pornographic photo of Ruth Smith lay crumpled in a corner, partially torn. Kirk Tempest blinked when I showed him the picture.

"Holy smokes, Honey, what does all this mean?"

"Maybe murder. Where's your sister, Mr. Tempest?"

"How the hell should I know? Las Vegas probably. She's supposed to open there tomorrow night."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

He wiped slender hands over his hairless chest and

groaned. "Not questions again! For Lord's sake, Honey, you're not a cop. You haven't been hired by anybody. What's your stake in this?"

"Two men have died in the past twenty-four hours, Mr. Tempest. One accidentally, maybe. One on purpose. If you want to know the truth, your sister hired me."

"You're lying!"

"What makes you think so? She came to my office yesterday morning."

"I don't believe it. Jewel wouldn't have any reason—"

"Well, believe this," I said. "She thinks you killed your brother."

He staggered, gripping a bureau. "So that's what that business was all about at the Sheriff's office. How ridiculous can you be? Why would I murder K? He was my twin."

"There's a quarter of a million dollars missing, Mr. Tempest. Money is sometimes thicker than blood."

He grinned sardonically. "All right, there is a lot of money. Someplace. And it belongs to Jewel. And I couldn't care less where it is. So where does that leave you?"

"With Ruth Smith," I said. "Milo Gold says Ruth is posing as your sister."

"That's ridiculous!"

Kirq removed a black purse from the bureau top, flicked open to a wallet and produced a driver's license. The vital statistics read:

Ruth Vianne Smith

222 Seacoast Rd.

Malibu, California

Color eyes: brown, Color hair, black, date of birth:
April 16, 1931, Height 5-10, Weight 132, Sex F

"Interesting," I said "but it doesn't prove anything one way or the other."

"But, Honey," Kirq argued. "She just moved in yesterday. And besides that she doesn't look anything like Jewel."

"You said you haven't seen Jewel's face since the fire."

"That's true, but—" He stopped, hands gesturing dismally.

"Gold sounded very positive, Kirq, when I showed him that photograph."

"What the hell would he know?"

I surveyed the room again. "That's what I want to find out. Come on."

We searched the two-story house thoroughly. Except for Ruth's upturned bedroom everything else seemed in order. Hanging in one bathroom was a vividly sadistic painting of a nude woman being lashed across the thighs by two naked men clutching whips. I pointed this out to Kirq.

"What would a psychiatrist say about that?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. An art dealer would say it was bad composition. What's your opinion?"

"With the smile she's got on her face I'd say it was painted by a masochist or owned by one. Ruth was at your party. What's she like?"

"She didn't beat anybody if that's what you mean."

"Maybe she likes taking punishment."

"Maybe." He tugged at his pajama trousers nervously. "The only thing punished at my party was fifteen cases of champagne."

"Really. Jewel's sanctimonious bed looked and smelled like a battleground to me. If ashtrays mean anything I'd guess *fifteen* or more gladiators were paired off in some sort of combat."

He grinned. "That wasn't punishment, Honey. That was pure pleasure. Now let's get out of here and go next door for a drink, what do you say to that?"

I whirled angrily. "I say you don't add up, Mr. Tempest."

"Who does, unless it's a calculating machine?" He placed his hands on my shoulders gently, a niceness in

him leaking into me. "Hey, speaking about punishment, you've been taking a lot lately. Now, who's clipped you on the chin."

"A friend," I said.

"You ought to have more enemies. You'd live longer."

I couldn't help smiling. He was so much like his brother. Almost too nice when he wanted to be. We walked outside into the chill dawn. Gold's convertible was still nosed into the curb. I checked, but it was empty. Kirq stood waiting for me when I came back, his black hair blowing in the wind, muscular chest bared brazenly. He had that don't give-a-damn look on his face, which was typically Tempest. I let his arm slide around me, let his lips brush against my cheek. That made me even more angry.

"If you want to kiss me," I said, head thrown back. "Kiss me, don't fool around."

"Honey, God dammit, you don't add up worth a darn."

"Add me," I whispered, lifting up to him.

The wind blew sand in our faces, but we didn't taste anything but each other. With our mouths still clinging he lifted me into his arms and carried me inside his house.

He kicked the door shut with the heel of his foot, one hand opening the front of my coat.

"Honey, you ought to see a psychiatrist," he breathed lowly.

"If you keep digging," I said, "you're going to see something, and it won't be a psychiatrist."

He carried me to a couch near the swimming pool. A gray haze was beginning to settle in the high glass windows above us, a faint crease in the darkness. He unbuttoned my trenchcoat and laid it open around me. I began to tremble. Maybe because I was tired, and maybe because I was—

"I'm not going to touch you, Honey," he said suddenly, so abruptly that I reared in the shallow darkness.

"What are you talking about, Kirq?"

His face darkened. "You're trying to prove something. Don't do that with me."

"What am I trying to prove?"

He straightened. "I don't know. What were you trying to prove yesterday when you jumped me in Jewel's bedroom?"

"Nothing, Kirq. It was a mistake just as you said."

"It wasn't a mistake," he returned, the niceness drained out of him. "You wanted to prove I was the one who pushed you into the air lock. Be honest."

I sat up. "I am being honest," I said. "A second ago I didn't care whether school kept or not. What do you want, a lie detector test?"

"No, just the truth!"

"All right," I said. "I'll lay it open, if that's what you want. I'm a woman. Despite the license, the gun, despite anything, I'm a woman. We're all built principally about the same. We get the same notions, the same urges. I got one a minute ago. A big one. Now do you want to make a case out of it, or what?"

The telephone next to the couch jarred sharply. Kirq groaned, then answered. He handed the receiver to me, an irritated expression etched on his mouth. "A man."

"Thanks." I gathered my coat up around me and leaned into the mouthpiece, staring at the husky man next to me, just as irritated at the interruption.

Charley April's gruff voice split through into my ear. "You all right, Honey?" He never called me by my name unless he was worried.

"I think so, Charley. What have you got?"

"Storm's in the soup like you said. They weren't going to let me talk to him until I raised about a furlough of dust."

"What'd he say?"

"This guy's really flipped a stirrup, Springtime. He acted like I really was his uncle. Told me to climb on

the next plane and get the hell out of Los Angeles. Go to Vegas, he said."

"Vegas?" I glanced at Kirq. His eyelids tightened, then he looked away.

"He said there's a lot of green stuff there. That he'd need some to bail him out of hock. That's when he hung up."

"Charley, he must have recognized your voice."

"If he did, he didn't lay any money on my nose. It was win, place and show, Springtime. I was his uncle all the way. What next?"

I bit my lips. Mark must have been wise. He didn't have an uncle. His message, plainly decoded, read, GO TO VEGAS. JEWEL'S MONEY HIDDEN THERE. I wondered if the Sheriff's office had discovered something else in the death threat G-string. Possibly a map. Maybe Mark's salvation hung on my breaking the case for him.

"Thanks, Charley, you're a doll."

"Me?" he groaned. "Are you kidding? The last time anybody called me that I was four years old. I was nice in those days."

"You're still nice," I said. "I'll be at this number for a while if you need me."

"Well, what if you need me?" he blurted. "A funny thing happened when I called that first number. I didn't like the sound of it."

I straightened. "What do you mean, Charley?"

"I called Malibu 44710," he said. "A dame answered. For a second I thought it was you. She moaned like she was dying or something. Then she hung up."

I didn't bother to moan or hang up. Kirq Tempest must have thought I'd been shot out of a gun, the way I sailed through his front door. Gray haze was deep in the morning sky as I sprinted between houses. I found her in the living room, sprawled face down beside the telephone. Her hip-length nightie was ripped to shreds.

nine

I ROLLED HER OVER, wincing at the sight of her breasts laid bare in the torn fabric. Long purple welts criss-crossed them, tunneling rawly in the flesh, streaking down over her ribs and stomach, and lower where a dark stain of blood had dried and matted.

She groaned, eyelids flicking lightly.

"What happened, Ruth?"

She started to answer, but Kirq came into the room and bent over us, swearing softly. Her hands instinctively tried to cover her nudity, eyes widening with start.

"No, please," she whispered. "I'll be all right. Please."

"She's been whipped raw," I said. "Get a pan of water and a soft cloth. Then phone for an ambulance."

"No!" she protested, half rising, one arm cradling her lacerated breasts. Her dark hair was matted around her face and her torn nightie was wet. She'd obviously been in the surf. A trail of water led to the back door.

"Look, girl, you're hurt," I said. "You're going to need a doctor."

Her eyes darted to Kirq, tears bursting into their lids. "Leave me alone! Just leave me alone, please!"

"Where's Milo Gold?" I demanded.

Her head snapped around fearfully. "I don't know."

"Did he do this?"

"No!"

"Don't lie."

"I'm not!"

"Then how'd you get hurt?"

She stood slowly, covering herself with a towel that I found on a chair. Her actions indicated she apparently

wasn't hurt seriously. Her skin was soft and delicate. The bruises were deceiving. She even managed to squeeze that fake baby tone into her voice and dry her tears.

"This was an accident," she said.

"They seem to run rampant in this neighborhood," I returned, glancing at Kirq's glowering face. "Don't tell me you ran into an octopus while taking a middle-of-the-night swim."

"Something like that," she said. "I had a nightmare."

"Named Milo Gold?"

"Why—why do you keep referring to him?"

I crossed into her bedroom and returned with the pornographic picture from Billy Wild's album. "Gold's car is parked behind your house. He thought you were very photogenic. In fact, I think he drove all this distance just to tell you so. With a belt!"

She seemed genuinely surprised when I held the picture up. "That's not me!"

"Don't tell me *you've* got a twin, too," I said. "Let's stop playing games. There's no mistaking the—the face in this picture."

Her eyes darted to Kirq again, fearfully. "All right, so it's me. So what? I was drunk at the time. I didn't even know there was any film in the camera."

I smiled. "That's the excuse that made Hollywood famous. Couldn't you come up with something a little more original?"

She nodded sadly. "I—I was trying to break into show business. Billy had a lot of contacts. He said this would get me a part in a picture."

"Sure," I said. "One called 'Bottoms Up.' I'll bet every pornographic house in the country's got a print of this. You're probably number one at the box office."

"Honey, that's vicious," Kirq interjected. "So she made a mistake. Don't crucify her."

"She's already crucified," I said. "You saw the wounds, Mr. Tempest. Maybe you'd like to explain what happened."

His powerful shoulders tensed. "You're always shooting fish in a rain barrel, Honey. Why don't you take your finger off the trigger?"

"Because I've got a feeling you're mixed up in this, Mr. Tempest. Like the proverbial teapot you make the wrong kind of noises."

Ruth Smith sagged into a chair. "I guess there's no sense in pretending any longer. Milo came in about an hour ago. Raging. Swearing. He knocked me out of bed, pushed the photograph in my face, and then took off his belt." She groaned dismally. "He's a vicious man. I ran down to the beach, but—but he caught me."

I shook my head, sensing a phoniness to her story, even though the facts meshed. "What's your relationship with Milo Gold?"

She shuddered, head bowed, arms clutching the towel. "He's got a wife and five kids. I'm the other woman."

"How long's this been going on?"

"Too long." Her brown eyes lifted to my face, a penetrating stare in them. "He would have killed me, but I got away from him. He'll try again, Miss West, believe me."

"Why?"

"Because I know too much." Her eyes turned toward Kirk Tempest. "I—I could ruin his career. Now, please, leave me alone. Please."

I tossed the photograph on a table and shrugged. "Okay, it's your funeral. My advice is to call the Sheriff's office. You'll live longer."

Kirk followed me outside. Dawn was scattering its cool image in the face of the mountains and rooftops. Milo Gold's convertible was gone.

On my way home from Malibu, I stopped at the *Press-Telegram* office in Long Beach. It was shortly after eight o'clock a.m. and Fred Sims was already at his desk, his cane propped against a drawer. He looked

and smelled of whiskey, and the thick-lidded squint he fixed on me was anything but friendly.

"Well," he said loosely, "if it isn't the Mata Hari of television. Pull up a G-string and squat."

"It ain't funny, McSims," I said wearily, sliding a thigh over the edge of his desk. "I've had a rough night."

"Compared to mine, fair lady, it wouldn't raise a pimple on a kumquat."

"Have you heard from Mark, Fred?"

"He's being suspended. That's official from the Sheriff himself."

"Is that all?"

Fred groaned. "What do you want for a sock on the chin? The gas chamber?"

"No," I said, gesturing futilely. "I meant, haven't you heard from Mark directly?"

The reporter flicked his cane under his crippled leg and stood up angrily. Fred had been a hero on a snowy ridge in Germany. He had a Congressional Medal of Honor and half a leg to prove it. Now he was trying to prove something else in that gruff, undenyng way of his.

"Honey, who asked you to masquerade as Jewel Tempest on the Milo Gold show?"

I withered. "Nobody. That was my idea. I thought—"

"That's the trouble! You think too much!"

"Now wait a minute, Fred!"

He cocked his cane at me. "No, you wait. Wait until they've hung Mark by his toes. Then tell me you haven't been interfering where you don't belong."

"Fred, I'm a licensed private investigator. Don't tell me where I belong!"

His steel-gray eyes hardened on me. "All right, I won't. Just do me the big favor and leave. Quietly."

"But, Fred," I protested, "I only wanted to ask you—"

He winced. "Don't ask me anything. Just get out. Now!"

I backed off like a little child who'd unexpectedly been slapped on the mouth, hard. This wasn't Fred Sims. At least, not the Fred Sims I'd known for the past five years.

I blundered out onto Pine Avenue, confused by Fred's anger, seared by the sun's early morning brilliance blindingly reflected off the sidewalk. My office building was at the corner of Third, and I threaded my way there automatically through shoppers and stopped cars. All the way I kept asking myself why Fred blamed me for Mark's suspension. It didn't make sense.

My key was hardly turned in its lock when the phone jangled. Charley April came on the line with such a roar I didn't recognize his voice.

"This is your answering service!"

"What?"

"This is your telephone answering service."

"Cut it out, Charley. Your formality is killing me."

"I'm scratching your entry," he said bluntly. "I can't afford to carry your weight any longer."

"What are you talking about, Charley?"

Beyond what he was saying there was a tautness in his voice that didn't jibe. "You're too slow in the stretch, Springtime. You've lost too many races. I'm closing your stable."

"Stop the mumbo jumbo, Charley, and just say it in plain English."

"I'm jerking your connection," he said flatly. "You'll have to buy another service."

"Who's on your back, Charley?"

"Nobody! You're three months behind. I—I can't cut that kind of mustard."

"But you haven't sent me any bills," I argued.

"I—I'm sorry," he said regretfully, trying not to show his regret, but failing. "It's the best I can do."

"Charley, what's the matter?"

"I told you!"

"Okay," I said sadly. "Thanks for your best. Maybe I can do the same for you some time."

His switch clicked me off into a receiver full of heavy silence. I hung up, staring blankly at the window behind my desk. Going without sleep for thirty-six hours had knocked me for a loop. I was too tired to argue with anyone, including Fred Sims or Charley April, but I couldn't ignore the sadness that swelled in me, or the anger. Who did they think they were kidding? Somebody was on their backs. Somebody was pushing Hate-Honey pills. And they were working. It was practically an epidemic. First Mark, then Fred, and finally Charley. The three men in my life.

I went behind a screen, peeled off my gold lame dress and stretched out on a sofa. It was too hot for a blanket and I lay there naked staring at the ceiling, trying to fathom who was passing out the poison. What had I done that was so wrong? Distant sounds lulled beyond the window. Lulled and lingered until I was asleep, and dreaming. A sheet of darkness spread out, lit intermittently by the flare of cigarettes. I was in a nightclub, but I couldn't see the people sitting at the tables. There was only one person visible, and she was very tall and straight, etched against a flaming background. She wore a helmet and a sphinx-like mask and a gleaming gold G-string. Drums began to bang. Trumpets lifted blaringly. She moved toward me, thrusting out her hips, stroking her thighs, head thrown back. I reached for her mask, gripping it with all my might, tearing it off. She screamed, but so did I. Underneath was still another mask and another and another and another, until finally there was nothing left of her head, except empty dark throbbing space. And spitting out from this ethereal nothing came eerie, chilling laughter. I tried to stop it, but I couldn't. The sound reverberated, clanged, smashed against my eardrums until I thought they would split.

I flung myself upright, suddenly realizing the sound

was not laughter, but the ring of my telephone. My office was dark now, sprayed only by a faint neon glow from a nightclub across the alley. I staggered across the room, lifting the receiver.

"Hullo."

"Miss West, this is Jewel Tempest."

There were sounds of laughter and gaiety in the background. "I'm in Newport Beach," she continued importantly. "At the Newport Bay Club. I just thought you'd like to know I've cancelled my engagement in Las Vegas. Thanks for filling in for me on the Milo Gold show."

I jammed the coolness of the receiver against my forehead and whirled, one hand pressing against my naked chest. Was I really awake? My eyes flicked about the office, fastening on things I knew to be real. My father's old gun case, file cabinets, the window and neon lights.

"Where have you been for the past two days?" I demanded guardedly.

"Staying with a friend," she answered, laughter in her husky voice. "I must apologize for vanishing the way I did yesterday, but he was waiting for me when I arrived in Malibu. I didn't have time to leave a note or a check. You are working for me, aren't you?"

There was too much background noise to clearly establish the voice as the one I'd heard yesterday.

"Look, Miss Tempest, you've had me on quite a whirligig since I met you. What are you after anyway?"

"I told you," she said simply, "my brother's conviction. You've heard the expression, 'an eye for an eye.'"

"Yes," I returned angrily, "and there's also, 'a tooth for a tooth.' That's from the Bible, Miss Tempest. What about, 'a G-string for a G-string?' That's from Billy Wild's Album."

She paused. The rattle of laughter and clinking glasses intensified. "If you're referring to last night's

show, Miss West, I can only say I'm sorry. Billy was an old friend of mine."

"How old, Miss Tempest?"

"I don't appreciate your innuendo, Miss West. You may consider my original offer cancelled as of now."

I laughed. "That's all right, Miss Tempest. That's par for the course. I'm running a streak of cancellations today. Maybe I'd better change my brand of toothpaste."

"Take my advice, Miss West, and change something," she retorted, "because before you know it somebody may be changing your way of living."

I laughed again, certain this was not the same person who had come to my office wearing the mask and leotard. "You know that's one thing I like about you, *Miss Tempest*. We've talked only twice, but both times you've mentioned that something about me might be changed. First it was my face, now it's my way of living. How are you doing behind that mask of yours?"

"You're insulting, Miss West!"

"That goes double for you, *Miss Tempest*, in G-strings."

She hung up in my ear. Neon lights from across the alley splashed across me, chilling my body with their brilliance. I rummaged in my top desk drawer, found a cigarette and lit it. Then I sat in my big overstuffed chair, nakedly contemplating the lights and the city beyond. Against the evening skyline was the Pike's High Tower and the harbor of Long Beach, its naval ships twinkling in the dark. I blew smoke over the scene and let it drift away. It was obvious, I thought. Somebody was using me for a sounding board. Bouncing everything but the kitchen sink against my thighs and cranking up their ears to the reverberations. Something told me this honor came from being the only witness to Kirk Tempest's death. But something else told me I was part and parcel of two very fantastic plans. One, to find Jewel's money. The second, to prove Jewel did

exist, apart from Ruth Smith or anyone else who might vaguely fit her description.

The part that confused me most was whether I'd ever met the *real* Jewel Tempest or not. Did she truthfully exist? There was only one real shred of evidence. A photograph of a smiling eight- or nine-year-old with a nameplate attached. Was this enough proof when all three faces were identical? I wondered if Jewel could be a fantastic figment of two brothers' warped imaginations. Jewel might have died at birth and been resurrected from the dead, purely by the powers of photographic reproduction. This then would explain Q's comments about his brother's dancing abilities. How fantastic was it to assume K Tempest had been Jewel on the stage?

I stubbed out my cigarette angrily. No! A man couldn't possibly strip to the degree that Jewel Tempest did without being recognized as a fraud. Or could he? Some female impersonators were utterly unbelievable.

I found a pair of panties and a bra in a bottom drawer and slipped them on. Then I dug in my office closet for a sweater and skirt. Halfway into the sweater, my phone rang again. I fished an arm out the first available opening and answered hoping it might be Charley or Fred offering an apology.

"Hello, Honey, this is Kirq Tempest." The sound of waves drummed in the background. "I just heard from Jewel. She's in Newport Beach. She cancelled her Vegas engagement."

"Now isn't that interesting news," I said flatly, jerking the sweater over my head. "Why'd she do that?"

"She says she's got a better deal cooking in Ensenada."

"Where?"

"Ensenada. Mexico. You know, Lower California. She says she going to perform in a nightclub down there over the weekend."

"What's the occasion?" I asked.

"The Ensenada race," Kirq said. "Each year a couple of hundred yachts compete for prizes. They sail from

Newport tomorrow, arriving at Ensenada on Friday or Saturday depending upon wind and sailing speed. You want to go along?"

"Me?"

"I don't mean your pearl-handled revolver. Can you meet me at the Newport Bay Club in about an hour?"

"Look Kirq, I'm dropping this case."

"You're what?"

"I said I'm getting out. Now. While the getting's good. Your brother's death has cost me nothing but money, prestige and a lot of friends. I couldn't afford another day of it, much less a long weekend in Ensenada."

"All right," he said, after a moment. "Then work for me. I'll pay you a hundred a day, plus expenses. How's that?"

My forehead ridged. "Where are you going to get that kind of money?"

"Don't worry, I'll get it."

"I'm not worried," I said. "Maybe I should rephrase my question. Why are you willing to pay me that kind of money?"

His pause was electric. So quiet I could hear the drum of breakers in the background. Finally, he said, "You interest me, Honey."

"With that much money," I said, "you could get better interest from a bank."

"Maybe. But I'm willing to bank on you. Let's say it's an investment to prove I didn't kill my brother."

This was a real switch. First Jewel—or a reasonable facsimile—had tried to hire me to prove Kirq *was* a killer, and now the brother had his wallet out to prove he *wasn't*.

"Okay," I said, "you've got yourself a private investigator. But let me remind you that's all you're buying."

He laughed. It sounded so much like his brother that I winced. "It's a deal. Bring along a suitcase full of bathing suits and fun clothes just for appearance's sake."

We'll be aboard *The Teleprompter*, a ninety-seven foot schooner that has everything but dancing girls, so I'm told."

"Who owns the boat, Kirq?"

"Some TV director. I only met him once and that was through Jewel. His name's Carter."

"Jerry Carter?"

"That's right. Do you know him, Honey?"

"He's the director of the Milo Gold show. How'd you happen to get this invite, Kirq?"

"He called me this afternoon. Asked if I'd like to come along and bring a girl friend. I didn't give any answer because he was drunk when he phoned. After Jewel hung up I thought about you, so I dialed Carter at the club. The invite's still open. How about it?"

I glanced at the neon lights flickering across the alley. Something was definitely wrong. Especially in view of Jewel's switch in plans. Ensenada smelled like a red herring considering Mark's weird comments to Charley April about Las Vegas.

"Is Jewel going aboard the same yacht?" I asked.

"No," Kirq said quickly. "She told me she's driving to Ensenada. Has to be there early to set up her G-strings and stuff."

I was about to refuse when my hand brushed against something under the top of my desk.

"Is Jewel planning to drive alone, Kirq?"

"No," he answered. "That's why I called you. She said she's going with Milo Gold."

I lowered my head. In the faint neon gleam I was able to distinguish a metal instrument and wires. My telephone was tapped! Somebody was electronically tuned to my wave-length and getting a real earful. I straightened.

"Okay, Kirq, I'll be there as soon as I can. Say about midnight."

"That's my girl. I'll be looking for you."

I hung up and then dialed the operator.

"Hello," I said, "I'd like Webster 4-8000, please."

After a moment a cheery voice told me I had the Western Airlines reservation desk.

"Do you have a seat available on your next flight to Las Vegas?" I asked.

"Yes, Ma'm."

The voice crisply told me Flight 419, leaving from International Airport, was still open. Baggage to be checked in two hours. Takeoff forty minutes later. I gave my name and dropped the receiver back into its cradle. The "bug" glistened in the neon's reflection as I bent underneath again. I reached to tear it loose, then withdrew my hand. The Sheriff's office was in for a big surprise. The next bounce was not going to be on me!

ten

THE NEWPORT BAY CLUB stretches along a narrow channel of water forty miles south of Los Angeles. Across from it, on a piece of flat sand that once was the litter ground for paper plates and empty beer bottles, is fabulous Lido Isle, land of two hundred thousand dollar homes, minks, yachts and fancy-label booze.

As I drove down from Newport Heights, I could see the lights of Lido and the four-mile-long bay winking feverishly in the warm night. Along the waterfront were the sleek masts of tomorrow's racing fleet, rising from the dark water like glistening candy sticks, swaying slightly from the bay's stir, mainsail bulbs winking brightly.

Kirk Tempest was waiting outside the club's main entrance. He took my suitcase and grinned.

"Hey, this is heavy," he said. "Didn't I tell you only fun clothes and swim suits."

I shrugged, winking. "Brought along a few bricks just in case a certain party gets the idea this voyage is for fun only."

He checked my suitcase at the desk and led me into the bar. People were jammed elbow to elbow, some laughing, some shouting, all clutching a glass, or an arm, or a mink. Male apparel ran the gamut from tuxedos to white duck English-style sailor suits. Elegant cocktail dresses and glittering jewels for the female set, or lavish cashmere sweaters and expensive tailored skirts. There wasn't a gold mask or Egyptian helmet in sight.

"Where's Jewel?" I asked.

Kirq's thick brows lifted contemptuously. "She's here, don't worry. Sister and I were having a toe-to-toe chat just a minute ago. She found out about Sheriff's deputies searching the house and she's fit to be tied."

"I'll bet," I said, bumping against a handsome man with thick shoulders and silver-streaked black hair. He was even taller than Kirq and his face bore the sallow whiteness of too much after-shave talc. "Excuse me!"

He scanned the front of my blue linen sheath with obvious admiration, then looked into my eyes. "The pleasure's all mine, Ma'm. Where I come from they call this a fortuitous acquaintanceship. Allow me to introduce myself. The name is Greg—"

"Not now, friend," Kirq interrupted. "Can't you see we're in a hurry to join our party?"

The huge man flicked his eyes on Kirq witheringly. "Down where I come from, *sir*, a gentleman don't interrupt another's conversation. Where's your manners?"

Kirq ignored the question, resuming his push on my arm. He got no more than an inch before one of the big man's thick hands had him in a vise.

"I asked you a question, *sir*," he said quietly through his teeth. "Now are you going to answer politely or am I going to ask you to step outside?"

Kirq whirled, face whitening as he stared up at the other man. Suddenly his hand slipped from my arm,

jerking upward into the stomach opposite, a clean powerful stroke that sank knuckle-deep into the tuxedo coat and flesh underneath, a blow so short and swift that only the three of us knew that a punch had been thrown.

The big man didn't budge an inch, but grimaced as he said, "That was hardly the answer I expected from a gentleman." He didn't lift a finger to retaliate. "My name's Greg Ballintine. I'm from Mississippi. And where I come from we don't use fisticuffs in the presence of ladies."

Kirk's face became a livid angry mask. "Where I come from, Mr. Ballintine, we don't peer down ladies dresses, nor do we speak unless spoken to. Get me?"

Ballintine's eyes shifted to me again. "I'd rather get your gorgeous companion, but if you insist." He winked. "Why don't we resume this conversation in Ensenada? You're all going, I trust."

"We'll be aboard *The Teleprompter*," Kirk said quietly. "I'll see you in Mexico if that's what you want."

The big man laughed, not taking his eyes off me. "It's not what I want, sir. It's what your lady friend wishes. She's part of the bargain. Aren't you, my dear?"

Kirk's brows knitted. "I told you to leave her out of this!"

People were beginning to glance our way for the first time. I nodded, pushing Kirk away. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Ballintine. I'm sure we'll see each other in Ensenada."

"Splendid," Ballintine said, eyeing my dress again. "I'm looking forward to that opportunity, Miss West."

I'd pushed Kirk beyond several people before the mention of my name hit me. I whirled. Greg Ballintine was already at the door, his thick shoulders towering in the glass-clutched frenzy.

I leaned against Kirk. "How come he knew my name?"

"How the hell should I know! The bastard! I should have chopped him in two!"

I nodded. "That would take some pretty good chopping."

Greg Ballintine had reacted to Kirq's fist like a shiny nose to a powder puff. Now I was more anxious for the trip than ever. I had a hunch Ballintine and I were going to renew our *fortuituous acquaintanceship* on a more personal basis. Sans Kirq Tempest.

The Carter party was jammed into a corner of the club's lavish bar, and consuming more space and liquor than Carter had pills. The little director needed the pills more obviously at that point, than alcohol. He was swacked and green. His wife was the only sober one in the group. Lisa Carter had that supercilious, *nouveaux-riche* look about her, a lushly-built, obviously-dyed redhead, the type that made men drool and woman urp. She sneered when we were introduced.

"Are you a burlesque dancer, Miss West?" she demanded. "You look like a burlesque dancer."

"No—I'm not," I said, icily.

"I just thought I'd ask," Lisa said, sucking on a cigarette. "You look like you ought to be naked, and I always feel people *are* what they resemble, like prostitutes if you know what I mean. You can always tell a prostitute because they sit like they've got sore—"

Kirq stopped her bluntly. "Honey's not a stripper, Lisa. She's a private eye."

Carter's wife laughed gaily. "That's very cute. But you can do better than that, Q. Why don't you just admit it's your eye which is on her privates!"

"That isn't funny, Lisa!" Kirq erupted.

I should have slapped her grinning face, but the joy ride to Ensenada was more important. She was trying hard to provoke me. The same way Ballintine had been goading Kirq. There was something familiar about both of them, but I couldn't quite put my finger on the reason.

One member of the party bent over Lisa, a disgustingly nice smile on his broad mouth. He was blond and had a deep dimple in his chin.

"Mrs. Carter," he said pointedly. "Your humor ought to be wrapped in a neat little package and mailed to Krushchev. I'm sure he'd die laughing."

She fixed a burning glance on him, then kissed his cheek sweetly. "You're a bad boy, Rex, even if I do love you."

Rex grinned sheepishly. "You'd better not let your husband hear this or he's liable to leave you, Lisa. And penniless."

She placed her mouth full on his and it was sickeningly sloppy and French. When they broke, Lisa whispered, "Don't worry, Rex darling, my husband's queer." She glanced at Carter who was head-hung drunk. "Aren't you, Jerry sweet, aren't you queer?"

Everybody laughed, except Kirq and me. A drunken laugh that rolled eerily in the drunken loud room.

Kirq dragged me off to the side. Lisa followed quickly, swinging her hips as she walked, bumping people out of the way like they were ten pins. She squeezed between us, teeth bared in her thick-lipped mouth.

"Q," she said angrily, "I want to talk to you alone."

"I'm busy, Lisa. Leave me alone!"

"You're going to make Jerry very jealous, Q," she said, stubbing her cigarette on the wall. "Now quit trying to pretend to the dear lady you're something you're not, and get back to the party!"

Kirq's cheeks reddened. "I—leave me alone, Lisa!"

She flicked her head toward me. "He's all yours, darling, but don't be surprised if he turns out all *her*!"

Hip-swingingly she vanished in the crowd. I studied Kirq's face for an instant, then said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

He bit his lips, flexing his powerful shoulders. "She's got the idea I'm some kind of strange fruit."

"Are you, Kirq?"

"Do I act like I am?"

"No."

His eyes glared at the distant Carter table. "Just wait until we get aboard that yacht, I'll prove a thing or two to her."

"Like what, for instance?"

His gaze shifted to me and it was mischievous again. So mischievous it made me tingle.

"This morning I said I wouldn't touch you, Honey. Not with a ten-foot pole. I've changed my mind."

I straightened. "What's wrought this change, Kirq? Don't forget, Cain was from the Bible. Medusa from mythology. The two never met as far as history's concerned."

His face tightened. "Damn history, Honey! I told you, they've never proved Cain existed. Or Medusa for that matter. But we exist!" He ran his hands down my sides. "I'm going to prove that. Once and for all!"

"Oh?"

"Just you wait, baby," he whispered. "Just you wait."

At dawn, we climbed aboard *The Teleprompter*, a luxurious sailing ship with six private staterooms. True to Kirq's words, we wound up in one of them together. Just the two of us.

After a long kiss, I drew back and asked, "What happened to your sister, Kirq?"

"I don't know," he breathed, holding me close, one hand fumbling at the buttons on my dress. "Who cares at this point?"

"I didn't see her in the bar."

"She doesn't frequent the bar. Jewel has her own special niche."

"Don't we all?" I said softly, stroking his dark hair. "When I was a little girl, I had a cave."

"You did?"

"It was in a vacant lot behind our house. I used it mostly to hide from boys."

He lowered my bra strap on one side and I felt the softness of his hands on me. They were almost too soft for a man, I thought, slipping out from under him and getting up.

"Hiding again?" he asked, peering at me in the half-light.

"Not exactly!" I said, lifting my strap. "Patience is a rewarding virtue, Mr. Tempest."

He rolled over on the narrow berth and accepted the cigarette I extended. When he tried for more, I drew back.

"I've never had a reputation for patience," he said, centering his eyes on my partially bared chest.

"Nor discretion, obviously. That wasn't very clever, telling those people I'm a private investigator."

"It slipped out, Honey. They didn't believe it, anyway."

"Mrs. Carter did, I'm afraid. She's a clever woman, Kirk."

"Maybe."

"When you called me, I got the impression you didn't know Jerry Carter."

"I told you, Honey, I'd met him once before. Briefly. Kirk introduced us."

"To hear Lisa talk, you'd think you and Carter were old buddies."

"She must have me confused with K." He blew smoke up at a porthole above his head. "You know, I miss my brother. I didn't think I would."

"That's an odd thing to say."

He nodded, eyes framed on shadows being etched across the salt-stained glass. His reflection grimaced. "Has something to do with self-imagery, I guess. When Kirk died, he took some of me along with him."

"I had the feeling you didn't particularly care for

your brother, despite some flattering comments you made about his virility.

He kept his eyes riveted on the porthole. "After you left this morning, Honey, I went into a room where we kept mementos of our childhood. I looked at Kirk's picture and thought about all the fun we'd had as kids. And I cried. Honestly cried. Like a baby."

I studied him thoughtfully. "What was Jewel like as a child, Kirq?"

"A notorious tomboy. Constantly in trouble. She was only eight when she made her first conquest. In the rumble seat of my father's old Model-T."

"Kirq, are you absolutely certain you've never seen Jewel's face since—"

"Not in ten years, Honey," he cut in flatly, his gaze shifting to me. "It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Yes, especially since her bedroom is so wide-open."

"Don't kid yourself. There are shutter doors on both sides. They draw across and lock. She's never neglected that ritual."

I leaned against a bulkhead, scrutinizing his every move. "Have you thought any more about Milo Gold's contention that Ruth Smith is posing as your sister?"

"Yes. In fact, I spent some time with Ruth this afternoon. It's absurd, Honey. But, I will agree that someone is masquerading as Jewel."

"You mean currently?"

"I mean for the past eight years. I've always been suspicious. The only trouble is, she's got all the answers."

"What do you mean?"

He rubbed his forehead. "I mean she knows everything. Facts about the fire and all the years before. The smallest incident. In detail. The peculiar way my father used to wind his watch before going to bed. That seduction she effected in the rumble seat. The way the three of us used to walk to church every Sunday, skipping every third step, picking violets for Mom in a field just

beyond the house. A million intimate secrets. She knows them all."

"Then what's made you suspicious, Kirq?"

He sat up. His shirt was open down the front and his hairless bronzed chest glistened in the dawn light's reflection. "There was something going on between my brother and Jewel. Something *strange*, Honey."

"Do you think he'd ever seen her face?"

"I'm positive of it. He was with her more than I was. He designed her mask and costume. Taught her routines. They were very close."

"Are you trying to say there was a sexual relationship between Kirk and Jewel?"

His jaw hardened. "There's no doubt in my mind."

"Then it's possible," I said, "that a breech developed in that relationship prior to Kirk's death."

His whole face seemed to squeeze together. "That's why I've hired you, Honey. I don't care about the money that's missing. All I want is for Jewel to be unmasked. Once and for all."

He got up, moving toward me, stripping off his shirt, grasping my body seductively. His hands were so cold I flinched. "Careful. Easy does it, Mr. Tempest!"

"You've been asking for this for a long time, Honey."

He carried me to the berth and opened my dress.

"Before you make any mistakes, I'd like to ask one more question." I studied his face. "Who was the boy Jewel ravished when she was eight?"

His head snapped. "What are you driving at?"

"Were you the boy, Kirq?"

The anger was unmistakable. "No, dammit! It was my brother!"

"Did you watch what happened, Kirq?"

He got up again, shoulders tensed, head erect, eyes glassy. He seemed to be talking to an unseen being, reliving the moment. "So what if I did watch? It was sordid. Sister and brother. My God, you couldn't tell who was who half the time."

I pulled my dress together, lifting myself on one elbow. "But you knew who was who, didn't you, Kirq?"

His eyes bit into me savagely. "Yes!"

"Did you care?"

"Yes, I cared!"

"For which one?"

"For Jewel!"

"You said she was the one who did the seducing! Tell me the truth, Kirq!"

He almost choked on the words. "All right. Kirk! Is that what you want to hear? Kirk!" Tears welled hopelessly in his eyes. "I loved him. I loved my own brother. Is that so terrible?"

"It all depends," I said.

"On what?" he demanded, fists clenched. "Are you trying to say I'm queer? That I'm not a man?"

"Let's say you're half a man, Kirq. When you're angry, like now or earlier with Greg Ballintine, you're a man. A few minutes ago here on this bed, you were a woman. Your hands felt like a woman's hands."

"I'm not built like a woman!" he slammed, a desperation in his voice.

"I wouldn't know."

"You want proof?"

"I'm not lying here for my health," I said, goadingly. "If you want to prove something, go ahead and prove it. I'm on the payroll."

He jerked back from the impact. "You don't deserve me, Honey. You know that. You don't deserve me!"

"Who does, Kirq?"

"My brother. He deserved me. I gave him everything he wanted."

"That sounds weird, Kirq. Even more than that. Warped."

"All right. You want the truth. I'll give it to you. My brother and I were very close. I won't deny that."

"I didn't ask you to," I said. "Just how close?"

"He was in love with me!" Kirq snapped. "Is that so terrible? My sister was the only woman he ever had."

"But you said Kirk was a ladies man."

His hands shot to his face. "Dammit, don't confuse me, Honey!"

"You act like you're already confused, Kirq. Lisa Carter obviously wasn't talking through her hat when she mentioned homosexual tendencies. Who was in love with whom?"

His whole body trembled when he answered. "All right, I was in love with Kirk."

"Have you ever loved a woman?"

"No!" He rocked back for an instant, then spat, "Yes, my mother. She was a wonderful woman."

"Not Jewel?"

"I hated Jewel, until—"

"Until when, Kirq?"

"Until the fire." He sagged against a bulkhead. "I got there shortly afterward. Mom and Dad were already dead. Jewel was lying on the front lawn wrapped in a blanket. Her face was black—"

"You remember that day vividly, don't you, Kirq?"

"It was night," he went on. "There was snow on the ground. And the fire had made it melt. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

"Who's behind the mask, Kirq?"

"I told you, I don't know!"

"Could it really be your sister?"

"No!"

"Could you hate her because of her relationship with Kirk? A relationship which never stopped even after childhood?"

"No!"

"You couldn't live in the same house and not have some idea who she is!"

"For God's sake leave me alone, Honey!"

I got up slowly and buttoned up my dress. "I'll be on deck if you want me."

I was halfway through the door when he caught my arm. "Honey, I'm not what you think I am."

I grimaced sadly. "Kirq, you don't have to pretend with me. I'm the gal who was there, remember?"

He tried to smile. "There'll be other times. Wait'll we get to Ensenada. There'll be so much drinking and music and laughter—"

I ran my fingers down his bare chest. "Kirq, with me it doesn't take a lot of drinking and music, or laughter. I like it quiet. Very quiet. Good night."

He let me go, just as I knew he would. I closed the cabin door and walked up to the bow. A chill dawn haze was lighting the hills and the bay and it made me cold again. Desperately cold. I turned at the sudden pressure of warm hands around my waist. Rex, the handsome blond compatriot of Lisa Carter, had me in his strong grip.

"So, what's so private about you?" he asked, a knowing smile on his mouth.

"Nothing," I said. "Where's Lisa?"

"She—ah—passed out. Too much booze, I guess. What's your excuse?"

"I haven't had enough," I purred, recalling that Lisa had been stone sober when we came aboard. "Where's the most convenient bottle?"

He produced a pint of whiskey from under his coat. "I've got a quiet cabin all to myself. Shall we liven it a little?"

I shrugged, taking his hand. Lisa Carter was still a mystery. Perhaps Flexie Rexie could cast some light in that direction. It was worth a try.

Three seconds after we entered his cabin he had me against a bulkhead. My dress was lowered so fast a flag would have shuddered from the same impact.

"Now look, sailor," I protested, "I agreed to a drink, not a ship's inspection. I've already gone through this routine, thank you."

"You need this," he said, throwing me on his berth. "Every woman needs it."

"Needs what?" I squirmed to free myself from his hands.

"Me," he returned, eyes fiercely hot. "You don't realize what you've been missing."

I struggled to my feet. "Thanks for proving you're a man. I needed that. But that's all I need."

"Honey, we can make beautiful music together."

"Somebody said that about me and Fidel Castro. So grow a beard and try me again some time, in Havana."

He threw his head back and laughed. "I told her you'd be this way, but she wouldn't believe me."

"Who wouldn't believe what?" I asked, pulling my dress back into place.

"Lisa," he said. "She insisted you were an easy mark. Lisa doesn't have a soul. You do."

"Thanks. I didn't realize it was showing."

"Oh, it shows all right. You're a sensitive woman, Honey. Very sensitive."

"Thanks again. Flattery is liable to get you somewhere, so you'd better stop while my soul is still taking bows."

He needed a shave and his hair was messed in that careless sort of way that indicated an untamed deviltry. He extended his hand.

"I'm Rex Murray. Guess we haven't met formally."

"No," I said. "We've met just about as informally as any two people could. What do you do for a living, Rex?"

"Nothing. Bit parts in movies once in a while." He tipped the bottle over his mouth, and brought it away smiling. "I'm the creator of the Murray four-step. Three away from work and one back. It's pushing Cha-Cha off the map."

"I can believe it," I said. "Where does Lisa fit in this routine?"

He lifted the bottle, a wry glint in his eyes. "We're

thinking about robbing a couple of banks and running away to the moon together. Care to come along?"

"Maybe. What do you plan to do with Carter?"

He laughed, throwing himself back on his berth. "Ever read *The Postman Always Rings Twice*? Of course, you did. His books are required reading in every private detective's correspondence course, aren't they?"

He was pretending to be drunk. His eyes were sharply sober.

I smiled. "Are you trying to pull my leg—again—Mr. Murray?"

"With legs as lovely as yours, beautiful, it is a positive pleasure. No, I'm serious, unfortunately."

"Why?"

He set the bottle on the deck where it swayed perilously for an instant from a gentle roll of the schooner. Then he said, "I was just wondering why a certain blonde private eye is aboard a certain sailing vessel, carrying a pearl-handled revolver."

"Why is another certain party so curious?" I asked.

"Because," he said carefully, "I don't trust Lisa. It would be her kind of foul trick to hire you."

"To do what?"

"Bird dog me," he answered tightly. "Peg me in case anything happened to Carter."

"What did you have in mind, Mr. Murray?"

"Don't be clever with me, Honey. You know a lot more than you pretend. The husband in Cain's novel was murdered."

"So?"

"So don't let Lisa con you, Honey. I haven't any such ambitious plans. She does."

"Really?"

"Are—aren't you surprised?" he stammered.

"Why should I be?" I said. "You apparently know why I'm aboard. Has it ever crossed your mind that Carter might be paying my fee?"

He stood up, eyes narrowing. "Now you are being clever. How much does he know?"

He knew I was flying blind, but for some weird reason he wanted to keep it going, he wanted to keep feeding me this information. A connection began to swell in my mind between Lisa Carter and Jewel Tempest. Rex Murray knew something valuable and he wanted to give me the information without having to come out and say it in so many words.

"Carter isn't worried," I said.

"He ought to be. He'll never make it to Ensenada, alive."

"What's going to stop him?"

"Lisa," he said tautly.

"You said that."

"Maybe I've said too much."

"Not if you're not involved. How long have you known Lisa?"

He shook his head. "A month. Too long for my money."

"Maybe money's your problem, Mr. Murray." I glanced around at the lavish stateroom. "Lisa would come into a lot if Carter—died."

"Maybe. And maybe not." He picked up the bottle. "Keep your eyes on Lisa. Not on me. I don't want any part of it."

"Mr. Murray, if I recall Cain's novel correctly, both lovers were willing to let the other hang for the crime, when the chips were down."

He swallowed some of the whiskey, then lowered the bottle. "As I mentioned, you're a sensitive woman, Honey. I don't think you believe that in this case."

There was something about this man I liked. Very much. He was honest, to a point. Few people went beyond that. At least, he was trying.

"Thanks for the—drink," I said, "and I'll keep my eyes on Lisa. Although I'd rather keep them on you."

He grinned nicely. "Someday when this is all over,

Honey, let's go to the South Seas together. On a raft. What do you say?"

"I say you're kind of crazy, Mr. Murray, but I consider the invitation very flattering."

"No one has to flatter you, Honey. Everything you've got is built in."

I turned for the door. "And as far as Cain's novel is concerned, the crime hasn't been committed yet and—" I stopped. "Or has it?"

He didn't move. "Lisa left here almost an hour ago, heading for her own cabin."

I bolted on deck, thoughts splintering in my mind. Jerry Carter apparently knew Q Tempest intimately, a fact Tempest denied. Lisa was a big woman, like Ruth Smith. Her hair was black at the roots. It was fantastic, but possible.

Lisa answered my insistent knock after a few minutes, a heavy glower on her thickly painted mouth. She was wearing a negligee and a cigarette dangled from her lips.

"What do you want?" she asked haughtily.

"I—I wondered how your husband was doing."

"He's doing plain lousy," she returned, blowing smoke in my face. "Now go away."

She tried to close the door, but I wedged my foot deep in the opening. "I'd like to see him if you don't mind."

"I do mind, so take your cotton-picking toes out of my door!"

She kicked at me. I forged on until I was inside. Jerry Carter was lying on the floor, arms thrown out, legs crumpled under him.

"He fell," Lisa said, sneeringly. "The little bastard."

Carter was breathing normally. His forehead was bruised where he'd hit the deck. I got up and glanced at Lisa.

"You're lucky," I said.

"Why?" She flung herself on a berth, her negligee opening over bronzed, finely tapered legs.

"He might have been hurt bad," I said, "falling that way."

"So what?" she retorted, flicking ashes on the crumpled man. "He's not worth a damn anyway. Since when are you so concerned over my husband?"

"I'm not," I lied. "I heard him fall. That's why I came."

She flashed her drippingly sweet smile and said, "You came so nicely, Miss West, like a puppy dog in heat. Now why don't you heel and march right out of here just as obligingly."

That was when I noticed the mask. Lisa was lying on it as if she was trying to hide its presence. In the dawn's antiseptic light the gold cloth glittered weirdly under her negligee. My eyes flicked to her face.

I wondered what Mark Storm would say about this. Jewel Tempest was still missing. Or was she?

eleven

AT TWELVE NOON a countdown over the schooner's radio transmitter signaled the start of the Ensenada race. Hundreds of sailing sloops reared at *zero*, nosed into the brisk wind and plunged across the mile-wide, buoy-marked line, sails snapping, keels low in the heavy sea. Their razored bows turned south toward the promised Mexican harbor where the victor's spoils waited hungrily in a town that waited with equal hunger to empty a thousand-odd American wallets with drink, dames and, possibly, disaster.

We were courting a little of all three aboard the ninety-seven-foot Carter yacht. We were hardly under-

way before the stubby TV director cracked a case of champagne.

"Here's to victory," he shouted, above the bleating of horns and rolling waves.

Lisa withered him with one of her daggered glares. Champagne spilled all over the deck, blowing in her heavily made-up face. Carter laughed drunkenly.

Kirq Tempest was the only member of the party, aside from the crew, who didn't join us. He crawled up near the bowsprit and stretched out, his bronzed body gleaming in the day's brilliant sun. I joined him, pushing a half-filled glass in his direction.

"No, thanks," he said gingerly, face reddening. "I know when I've had enough."

"You haven't had any champagne," I said.

"I've had plenty, believe me, Honey. I—"

"Forget what happened this morning, Kirq," I said, smiling, half-shouting against the whirl of the sea. "You're a man. Any psychologist will tell you sexuality is a degree of the mind. You're like a kid who never saw water. Naturally, he's frightened the first time he plunges in."

He grimaced, flinging the glass overboard. "Thanks for the simile, Honey. You don't have to be kind."

"I'm working for you, aren't I?"

He shrugged. "Kindness is not in the contract. You know what I am now, so why pretend?"

"I'm not pretending, Kirq! You haven't given yourself a chance. You're strong. Well built. You're not afraid to fight."

"So what?"

"That's where you separate the men from *the boys*, Kirq. Now let's just forget about this morning, shall we?"

He suddenly smiled, gripping my arm. "Okay, you're the doctor."

Behind us could be seen the Newport jetty and a spray dappled field of trembling masts and hulls and

sails. A wave smashed over the bow, drenching Kirq and me, streaming back over the champagne party. The schooner pitched wildly, heaving bottles to the deck, scattering the revelers. Jerry Carter staggered on the wet deck, falling to one knee, sliding to the port railing. He nearly went overboard before Rex Murray caught his arm. Lisa was the only other person near enough to help, but she didn't move. A crew member finally leaped down from a snarled rigging and aided Carter below.

Kirq groaned. "They'd better watch that guy or he'll be in the drink before this trip's over."

I held him tightly as the ship rolled. "Why do you say that?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? He's drunk all the time."

"Is he always this way?"

His shoulders tensed again. "Dammit, Honey, why do you keep hammering at me?"

"Because something's happened in the last few hours," I yelled, above the drum of the waves.

"What?" His wet face peered at me intently.

Another deep roll sprayed us again.

"Are you friendly with Jerry Carter?" I demanded.

"I—I guess I am," he answered, brushing at his eyes.

"How long have you known Lisa?"

"I told you! I met her once before. Briefly!"

"You're sure?"

"Dammit, yes!"

"There's nothing about her that's familiar?"

"No!"

"Did you introduce Jewel to Lisa last night?"

He cocked his head around, black hair glistening wetly. "I told you, Honey, Jewel wouldn't go into the bar. They've never met to my knowledge. Why?"

"Did Lisa ever leave the bar while you were there, Kirq?"

The schooner hove into a deep sea trench, splitting a wave angrily.

"Of course she left. Several times. What do you think she's got, cast-iron kidneys?"

"Where was Lisa when you returned to the bar after talking with Jewel?"

He hesitated, then said, "She was gone. I remember because Murray asked me if I'd seen her. What difference does it make?"

I got up, grasping a bow line. "I'll let you know the answer later. Meanwhile keep your eyes sharp for Carter and his wife. If they come on deck again maneuver them into a conversation. I don't care what you say, but keep them here, understand?"

He lifted puzzled eyes on me. "For how long?"

"Until you see me again."

"But, Honey—"

I staggered toward the stern, my gaze framed on the thick sea of white sails behind us, my mind centered on the gold mask I'd seen under Lisa's negligee. The race was only an hour underway, but already we were out-distancing the field of boats. Now it was up to me to out-distance Lisa. If I could.

The passageway was frighteningly narrow and dark below deck. Beams creaked and the schooner pitched badly while I waited for Carter and Lisa to emerge from their stateroom. Each second I kept reminding myself how ridiculous this situation was. A mystery woman in a fantastic gold mask. Two murders—an identical twin, and a poor mute who played monster roles in motion pictures. They were tied together, but how? Was it the money? A quarter of a million dollars! It had to be. But why was Jewel Tempest so elusive. The answer apparently lay in Ensenada. Perhaps buried, like Captain Kidd's fabled treasure.

Carter came out first, staggering drunkenly, clutching a bottle of champagne. He didn't turn toward the steps leading to the deck. Instead, he caromed off a bulkhead and bounced smack into me.

"Well," he said, "fancy meeting you, kiddo. Haven't we met before?"

"Sure," I said, taking advantage of the situation. "At Q's party, the night Kirk died, remember?"

His eyelids narrowed. "Was I at that party?"

"Sure you were," I insisted. "You and Lisa. You and Q had a big time."

His eyes glazed. "Did we, I don't remember. He's changed since his brother died. Too bad."

I grabbed him as he tottered backward in the passageway. "I was at your wedding, too."

"Wedding? What wedding?" he slurred drunkenly.

"You and Lisa," I said. "I'll never forget the day."

He laughed contemptuously. "Night, kiddo. Night. That's how she got me. She was invisible."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes," he said, falling into my arms, champagne spilling down my swim suit. "Like the poet said, 'All woman invisible, no liberty and no justice for all!'"

"Do you know what you're talking about, Mr. Carter?"

"No, but I'm having fun. Are you?"

"Sure. When was your wedding? I've forgotten."

He exhaled sadly, heavy-lidded eyes sagging almost closed from the weight of his drinks. "Last month. Twenty miserable days to be exact. Let's get drunk, what you say, kiddo?"

"Where'd you meet Lisa, Mr. Carter?"

He grinned drunkenly up at me. He was only about five feet tall. Lisa practically made two of him.

"Who knows," he said miserably. "Ask Caesar where he met Cleopatra. Ask Al Capone where he got syphilis. Ask any man why he dies. The answer will always be the same. Woman. No matter the era."

That was when Lisa came out of her cabin. At least, I thought it was Lisa. She was wearing Jewel's gold mask and the figure under her black swim suit was obviously the same one I'd seen on deck earlier. She

glanced at us for an instant, then whirled, disappearing up the steps.

I followed as quickly as I could, but Carter and the narrow passageway were almost too difficult to navigate. I finally had to knock him down and step over his dazed body before I could make the steps. By then Lisa Carter was nowhere in sight. The sea was pitching heavily across the bow and spray littered the deck, rocking me against a bulkhead.

I found Kirq on the port side, staring aft toward the wave-bellied stern, like he'd seen an apparition. I staggered along the rail to a stocky crew member clutching the wheel. His face and clothes were drenched from the sea and his hands were taut and red on the helm. He squinted at me when I asked about Lisa Carter.

"Ain't seen her, Ma'm!" he bellowed. "We've got a helluva breeze blowing off our starboard. You'd better go below!"

I searched the whitecaps and blue trenches that stretched behind the schooner. Kirq came toward us, slowly, bronzed chest glistening from salt and sea. His eyes were bulged in their sockets.

"My God!" he yelled viciously. "She went over!"

"What?" the helmsman demanded.

"She went overboard!" Kirq blared. "Turn around, quick, for God's sake!"

The stock crew member grimaced. "I can't turn in this wind, sir! Not with the sail up. We'd capsize!"

"Turn, you idiot!" Kirq surged, grabbing the wheel.

The stocky youth at the helm shoved Tempest and the schooner veered sharply in its course, shirring a wave, and slamming it back over us. Kirq and I were thrown on the deck, skidding in a foamy torrent, and being washed to the side. We hung there for a long savage instant as the yacht's powerful hull rolled along the sea's angry crest, then we both dropped sickeningly into the waves.

I lunged for Kirq's hand as the icy sea swung up into

our faces. All I came away with was a metallic piece of cloth that had been crushed in his fingers. The gold mask!

twelve

THE PACIFIC OCEAN on a windy day is a scissoring mass of white-capped peaks and trembling green vallies, erupting and boiling violently, heightened now by the schooner's frenzied wake as its hull swung past.

By the time I managed to surface, *The Teleprompter* was a hundred yards away, white sails belled tautly, stern deep in the water from the push of wind and sea.

Kirk Tempest was a dark-haired cork in the swell, near enough for me to touch as I kicked through a wave that separated us.

"Are you all right, Honey?"

"Yes!" I managed, swallowing some of the frothy brine.

I searched the horizon as a crest lifted us, a hundred prows and sails were bearing hard in our direction.

"Kirk, the other ships!"

"They'll see us! Don't worry!"

A heavily-belled schooner ripped into our path, missing us by only a few yards, its wash stirring the sea. We yelled, but it seemed futile. No one was on deck except the helmsman, and he was swathed in a heavy slicker and hat and his eyes were fixed on the starboard side away from us.

The force of its wash slammed over us, choking me. Kirk threw an arm around my waist.

"Don't panic, Honey, you're a good swimmer! We'll get help in a minute!"

I rolled, trying to free myself from his arm. It wasn't helping me a bit.

"What happened to Lisa?" I yelled, regaining my stride in the water.

"She went over before we did! The schooner took a helluva roll! Do you see her anywhere?"

"No!"

All I saw were white caps and sails. Then a steel-hulled power yacht, triple-decked and belching smoke from its stack, hove into view. It sliced toward us, faces peering over the bow anxiously. Kirq waved.

"One of the committee boats!" he bellowed. "They must have got a message from *The Teleprompter*!"

The yacht veered dangerously in front of the line of sails as one of its spotters gestured at our position in the wind-tossed sea. They pulled alongside us quickly, a few sloops behind the yacht, dropping sail, veering to avoid a collision. They lowered a ladder and Kirq helped me onto the first rungs, waves pitching us against the hull.

The first hand to catch mine was wet, but very warm. I peered up into the hook-nosed handsome face of Greg Ballintine.

"Well, fancy this," he barked happily. "If we don't have the most fortuitous acquaintanceship of all time. What are you all trying to do to me, Miss West?"

"Whatever it is, Mr. Ballintine," I said, breathing heavily, "right now it's a pleasure. Thank you."

Kirq came up the ladder under his own power, grimacing when he saw Ballintine.

"You mean, Miss West, that this rascalion is still with you?" Ballintine demanded. "Well I'll hang. You two must be tied together or something."

Kirq wiped some water from his face and said, "What are you doing here on this ship, Ballintine?"

The big man's mouth curved into a deep smile. "I'm one of the honorary judges, Mr. Tempest. Now you

know, you're still no gentleman. You interrupted me. I was speaking with the lady."

The captain of the committee yacht came on deck. There was someone behind him. Someone in a tight-fitting black bathing suit, still toweling her bronzed body, a sickening sweet smile on her face.

After radioing *The Teleprompter* that Lisa, Kirq and I were safe, it was decided to keep us aboard the spacious committee yacht until we reached Ensenada. Carter's schooner had widened its marginal lead and was threatening to shatter the record time in its class.

I didn't mind the switch in transportation. Greg Ballintine made all the difference in the world. But dripping-sweet Lisa had a few ideas of her own. She was the kind of female who pitched her curves high and hard. And on the inside corner. Greg Ballintine tried to back away, but Lisa was determined to clip him. After dinner they vanished on deck.

I cornered Kirq. "Where'd Lisa get that mask?"

He shook his head. "I was just going to ask you the same question. She scared hell out of me when she came on deck." He glanced cautiously at the men sitting around the table. "To tell you the truth it was my fault she went overboard."

"What happened?"

"I—I tore the mask from her face. She fell. I couldn't catch her in time."

I fumbled with the buttons on the white shirt one of the committee members had loaned me to wear over my swim suit. "She obviously pulled that stunt for a reason," I said. "What was she trying to prove?"

"Honey, you don't think—"

"That Lisa's our masquerader? You should be a better judge of that, Kirq."

He brushed a slim hand across his face. "I don't know. I never considered Lisa. Seems impossible, but—"

"She's the same build," I said. "Hair's dark at the roots. Similar eyes."

"But she's married to Carter."

"Twenty days," I said. "Long enough to establish an iron-clad alibi, but not too long for a woman as crafty as Jewel seems to be."

"I'll have to look at her hands," Kirq said, hesitantly. "Jewel has very finely tapered fingers."

"Like yours?"

"Yes," he answered, slowly. "My father was a concert pianist. We didn't inherit his musical talent, but his hands, yes."

Kirq still didn't know, at least to my knowledge, that I had masqueraded as Jewel on the Milo Gold show. After Mark had exposed me, I'd left the mask in Milo's dressing room at KBRC. It was just possible Carter had picked it up later and given it to Lisa. That was one possible explanation for her possession of the mask, if she wasn't Jewel Tempest.

I took Kirq up on deck and told him we were going to do some private investigating together.

"Lisa's up here somewhere with Ballintine," I told him. "We're going to separate them. You take Lisa and I'll take Greg."

"Take her where?" Kirq demanded.

"To the engine room if you have to," I said. "Any place where you can get a good look at her hands."

We found Ballintine and Lisa bent over the stern railing. From the rear she looked much like Jewel Tempest. Almost too much.

"Well," Ballintine roared, flashing that big smile of his, "fancy meeting you folks back here. Is he still tied to your apron strings, Miss West?"

"Afraid so," I said. "Why don't we change partners for a while. I just adore Mississippi."

Lisa spread that sweet smile on her full lips and laughed. "It's the mud she likes, Mr. Ballintine. Miss

West has spent a lot of time in mud, haven't you, Miss West?"

"You ought to know, Mrs. Carter, I gave you my hip boots as a wedding present."

She whirled angrily.

Ballintine put his big hands between us. "Now, now, ladies, this ain't nice. Down where I come from ladies don't fight. They just lie in hammocks sipping sweet mint juleps, swapping lies and swatting flies."

"I'm going to swat her one," Lisa said, "if she doesn't shut her big mouth."

Ballintine pushed me back. "'Pears to me, Mrs. Carter, you started all this. Now that ain't nice." He gripped my arm. "Ah don't cotton to unniceness, Mrs. Carter. Good evening."

He led me away quickly. Almost too quickly. I was seething from Lisa's remarks. She was the same goading type as the woman who had come to my office wearing the mask. I was all set to call her hand when Ballintine tore me away.

We wound up in his cabin. He offered me a chair and poured us each a drink, very gentlemanly.

"Miss West," he said, lifting his glass in a toast. "Here's to you. You've got spark. Yes sir, you've got more spark than a Mississippi hog scratching for wet ground."

"Thanks," I said. "The next time I'm lying in a hammock, swapping lies and swatting flies, I'll remember that sweet compliment."

His forehead ridged. "I didn't mean to be uncomplimentary. Perhaps, I should have said, 'more spark than a Mississippi mule heading for a patch of barley'."

"Why not figure you were ahead the first time, Mr. Ballintine, and forget it."

"No, Ma'm," he broke, "I'm not the kind of man to forget nothing."

"I'm sure you're not."

"If I've insulted you, I want to know it. That's the Code of The Hills."

"I didn't think there were any famous hills in Mississippi, Mr. Ballintine."

He shook his head, wryly. "There ain't. I was talking about Tennessee. I lived there for a while, too. Tell you the truth, I'm an old Southern hillbilly. Born and raised on the highest piece of land in the Ozarks, yessiree. They used to have to bring us oxygen masks in the winter when the air got thin."

I took a long sip of my drink. This was almost too much. Again I got the feeling I knew this man, but it seemed about as ridiculous as some of Ballintine's poetic praise.

"What—what do you do for a living, Mr. Ballintine?"

"Me, Ma'm? You can call me Greg. Back home they refer to me as the River Boat King. Ah own about three hundred of them as of the last count."

"Is that right?"

"You don't think I'd lie to you, do you?" He winked slyly. "Why, back home they say there wouldn't be no New Orleans if it hadn't been for my boats."

"Then you know a lot about boats?"

"Ma'm, I was born on a river boat."

"You just said you were born on the highest hill in the Ozarks."

He grimaced. "Did I say that? Well, I swan. To tell you the truth, I don't know where I was born exactly. My mother was frightened by a bull frog when she was a baby. She was always hopping from one place to another. You know how that is."

"Mr. Ballintine, you're tickling my funny bone."

He studied me carefully. "I wish I could, Miss West, but you're too far away and I'm too much of a gentleman to change all that."

I got up slowly. There was something about his face that was awesomely familiar. Everything, that is, but his nose. It was very broad and hooked near the bridge.

In the cabin's light, his heavily-powdered cheeks looked like putty. I moved close to him.

"Half your problem has been solved, Mr. Ballintine. Now what does a Southern gentleman do under these circumstances?"

He smiled wanly. "Well, where I come from, Miss West, a gentleman doesn't accept unlady-like advances. It ain't nice."

My fingers dug at his nose. He lunged back, but not quickly enough. The hook came loose in my fingers. So did a few layers of makeup.

thirteen

"MARK STORM!"

He tore the piece of makeup-covered plastic from my hand and clamped it back over the bridge of his nose.

"Honey, you're always interfering!"

I could hardly believe my eyes. "Talk about swapping lies and swatting flies! You big overgrown insect! You framed this whole thing. You faked that blow-up at Billy Wild's house, didn't you?"

He shrugged. "I had to do it, Honey. Gold was throwing us a curve. I figured the only way to get at him was through a masquerade of my own."

"So you used me for a set-up," I said. "Even tried to steer me to Las Vegas."

"Honey, I warned you to get out of my way, but you wouldn't listen. When we found Wild dead, I knew I had to move fast. Your chin was the most opportune target. Gold was convinced."

I felt my chin. "So was I. You might have broken my jaw."

"I'm sorry. I tried to pull my punch, but you were moving the wrong way."

"With you, Lieutenant, that's generally the direction I travel."

Mark groaned. "I love you, Honey. You know that."

"You sure have funny ways of showing it. Thanks, too, for bugging my office."

"That was necessary, Honey. You were in close communication with several suspects. We had a feeling Jewel Tempest would be contacting you again."

I sagged into a chair. "I suppose you're also responsible for Fred's nasty attitude and Charley quitting me?"

"I'm sorry, Honey, but you kept getting in deeper. We tipped Fred and April that you were on dangerous ground. They were only trying to help."

"Some help," I said. "The three of you ought to be horsewhipped. I felt like the last soul alive on earth yesterday. It's no fun being the fall guy, Mark."

"That's better than being a dead doll!"

"Maybe," I said. "Just what do you know that I don't?"

"Plenty, but it's not for publication."

"I'm not printing a newspaper, Lieutenant. It just so happens I'm now on this case officially. Kirq Tempest hired me."

He grimaced. "That's what I was afraid of. All right, you've dealt yourself in. I guess there's not much we can do about it until we reach Ensenada."

"You might try tapping me on the jaw again, Lieutenant. But maybe down where you come from, that ain't gentlemanly."

"Cut the comedy, Honey. This is serious. Gold pulled a fast one on me. He was supposed to have been on this boat."

"How come?"

"He was asked to be an honorary committee member through our insistence," Mark said. "We had a meeting last night at the club. Afterward Gold and I got friendly."

We wound up at his bay front apartment playing cards until ten o'clock this morning."

"Where was Jewel all that time?"

The deputy shrugged. "I don't know. She was seen earlier before you arrived, but conveniently disappeared when we tried to close in on her."

"She's a smart cookie, Mark. Burlesque obviously taught her how to make a quick change in more ways than one. She can even vanish into thin air."

"That's what's giving me fits, Honey. She's too elusive. Once that mask's off, she's somebody else. But, who, dammit, who?"

I grinned. "Come on, Mr. Ballintine, surely an old Southern gentleman like yourself must have the answer."

Mark moved to a mirror and patted more talc over his makeup. "When'd you guess I wasn't Ballintine?"

"I didn't. You make a pretty convincing Southern playboy, but I'd suggest you drop your river boats in favor of oil."

"They don't have much of that in Mississippi," he said with his accent. "You don't know the South, do you, Ma'm?"

"Enough to know Lisa Carter is sold on your ham hocks and big brown eyes. You'd better watch yourself or she's liable to suggest you do a little drilling. Seems she's powerful anxious to knock off her husband."

Mark whirled. "Where'd you get that?"

"From a handsome blond dog who laps at her heels every time she snaps her lily-white fingers. Name's Rex Murray. He says she plans to put Carter on ice."

His glance merged into a scowl. "Murray's already been to our office with the same story. We've had a tail on Lisa Carter for the past twenty-four hours."

I stood slowly. "You mean you've got a man aboard *The Teleprompter*?"

"Of course. You don't think I'd let you go sailing off into the wild blue yonder without somebody close by?"

"But, who, Mark?"

"One of the crew. He was on the bowsprit when you, Kirq and Lisa went overboard. He radioed immediately."

"Has he had a chance to search Lisa Carter's cabin?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

The deputy yawned. "He found some clothes hanging in her closet with the initials JT stitched inside the collar. He also found a G-string. I have a hunch it's the one snatched off you during the Gold show."

"Does that answer your question about Jewel Tempest?"

He stuck a cigarette between his lips and shook his head. "Not quite. Lisa's slipped through our fingers several times during the past twenty four hours, but we've kept in pretty close contact. Close enough to convince us the clothes and G-string were planted in her closet by someone else."

"Who, for instance?"

"Milo Gold."

"You think Gold might be aboard *The Teleprompter*, Mark?"

"Hardly. He's too big a target to hide on a ninety seven-foot schooner. But it's possible he planted those things earlier—before our card game—or before the race started."

I told Mark about the incident with Milo Gold and the pornographic photo, and how Ruth Smith wound up looking like the woman in the masochistic painting in her bathroom.

The deputy nodded grimly. "We got a report yesterday morning from the Malibu physician who treated her. It didn't take too much investigating on our part to uncover Gold. I was planning to break him down during this trip."

"But he threw another curve."

"Damn right he did," Mark slammed. "Now Ruth Smith's disappeared. It's just possible, Honey, that your

theory's been correct all the time, and that she and Gold are in Ensenada right now, digging for the real thing."

A knock at the stateroom door brought us both rigidly upright. "Radio message for you, Lieutenant," a hushed voice insisted.

Mark cracked the door and accepted a piece of paper shoved through to him. After a quick glance, he handed it to me.

The message read:

BODY RETRIEVED TWO HOURS AGO FROM BALBOA BAY HAS BEEN POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED AS THAT OF RUTH VIANNE SMITH OF MALIBU. FOUND NAKED WITH MULTIPLE WOUNDS ON HEAD AND BODY. DEAD APPROXIMATELY TWENTY FOUR HOURS. ADVISE.

The deputy swore loudly.

"Mark," I said quickly, "maybe those clothes were planted in Lisa's closet, and maybe they weren't. Lisa had one of Jewel's masks on just before the three of us went overboard."

"What?"

"I don't know what she was trying to pull, but it might have been a lure to get me on deck—and into the water."

Mark tore off his plastic nosepiece and wiped his face clean of makeup. "It's high time we ended this masquerade party once and for all," he said, taking my hand. "Come on, let's go talk to Lisa Carter."

We found her still bent over the railing, hair blowing in the wind, face lit by the stern lights. She was alone.

"Where's Kirq Tempest, Mrs. Carter?" the deputy demanded.

She flinched when she saw Mark's remodeled face. "Greg? Greg Ballintine?"

"Alias Lieutenant Storm," I said, "of Sheriff's homi-

cide. Once you get to know him he's very two-faced. How about you, Mrs. Carter?"

"I—I don't know what you mean," she stammered, brushing nervously at her hair.

"Honey tells me you were wearing a mask this afternoon aboard *The Teleprompter*," the deputy said. "Where'd you get it?"

A relieved smile crossed her heavily-painted lips. "Is that what this is about? I didn't steal it if that's what you're inferring. Jewel Tempest left it at the television station. My husband brought the crazy thing home to me as a gag."

I studied her face carefully. "What sort of gag were you pulling when you wore it on deck this afternoon?"

She laughed giddily. "I just put it on to stir up the party." Her eyelids narrowed. "But that fool Kirq Tempest took me seriously. Talk to him. He tried to kill me."

Mark surveyed the wind dark deck. "Where is he?"

She hunched her shoulders. "How should I know? He complained about being cold and stalked off."

Mark and I glanced at each other. We searched the committee yacht. Three times. Kirq Tempest could not be found.

By the time we came back up on deck, the lights of San Diego and Point Loma had slid away behind us in the inky darkness. Waves rolled harshly beneath our bow.

"I've put in a search call to the Coast Guard," Mark said softly, staring at the sea. "They'll cover the area behind us when it gets light."

"What are you going to do about Lisa Carter?" I asked.

"Nothing, yet."

"Mark, she's just about as innocent as a blueberry pie with TNT filling. As big as she is she could have hit Kirq on the back of the head and pushed him over easy."

The deputy brushed some spray from his face and

groaned. "I know that, Honey, but there's no evidence. And there's still a quarter of a million dollars to be found."

"You don't believe after what's happened she's going to lead you to it, do you?"

"If I leave her alone, maybe she will."

fourteen

UNDER FULL STEAM, and disregarding the escort committee's protests, we pulled into Ensenada the next morning, five hours ahead of *The Teleprompter's* predicted arrival. Carter's huge schooner had increased its marginal lead during the night, but a slackened wind had cut its sailing speed to less than eight knots.

Ensenada took the race as seriously as a little kid waiting for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. The docks and streets of the once sleepy little Mexican town were decked with banners and ribbons. They fired a cannon as we entered Todas Santos Bay and the breakwater, its roar blistering across the water, echoing of sloping Chapultepec Hills. Serape-clad dancers whirled on the pier. Guitars were being strummed. People sang gaily.

One old Mexican carried a blackboard on his back which blared in chalky streaks. EL TELEPROMPTER QUARANTA KILOMETRAJE!

Another man walked behind him with earphones and a walkie-talkie, apparently receiving minute-by-minute reports which he relayed to the waiting citizens via the mobile billboard.

Mark told one of his men to keep his eye on Lisa Carter—from a safe distance. We took a taxi to the neon-lit El Tostados where Jewel Tempest was scheduled to perform during the three-day celebration. A huge

sign out front heralded her coming. Inside we met the police chief of the city, a swarthy, heavy-set man, wearing a darkly-stained khaki uniform with immense stripes of red and yellow circling the sleeves. Mark flashed his badge and credentials, then asked about Jewel Tempest.

"She has not shown up yet, *Señor*," the police chief said awkwardly. "I have men at all entrances."

Mark surveyed the nightclub's gloomy, old-fashioned interior. Paintings of naked women were on the walls, wood chairs were stacked on tables, a few well-dressed Mexicans sat at the bar. His eyes flicked back to the policeman.

"I'm afraid *Señorita* Tempest will not appear, Captain Vargas," the deputy said. "Not now or ever."

The fat grinning face above the uniform folded slightly, and a thick hand brushed at a layer of sweat. "Oh, that is too bad. We here in Ensenada have been looking very forward to her arrival, despite the unfortunate demand by your police government to detain her." He shrugged. "We also have had no report on your *Señor* Milo Gold. But if he is in Baja California we will find him."

"I hope so," Mark said, glancing at me. "There's a hotel upstairs, Honey. Why don't you get yourself a room. I'll meet you back here at one o'clock for lunch. Okay?"

"Where you all going, Mr. Ballintine?" I kidded. "Looking for a mint julep?"

He grinned. "Not exactly." He pressed a twenty dollar bill in my hand. "Here. Go buy yourself a dress. You look terrible in pants."

"I beg your pardon," I said.

"Long pants," he corrected slyly, disappearing onto the hot, gaily decorated street.

The police captain wiped sweaty hands down the front of his uniform and grinned. "You with the Americano police, too, *Señorita*?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Tell me, Captain, are the banks open today?"

"Si, until three o'clock."

"How many are there in Ensenada?"

"Many, I think. Perhaps, *cinco* or *seis*, I am not sure. They are branches of *bancos* in *Mejico City*."

"Thanks."

I walked into the drab hotel lobby and registered. The Mexican behind the desk examined my baggy pants and man's shirt skeptically, then handed me my key.

"Up the stairs," he said.

My room was at the end of a very long dark hall and smelled as foul as a stale tamale. I flung open a window and stared down at the street. The man with the blackboard stood below, his walkie-talkie-carrying assistant hurriedly erasing *The Teleprompter's* last report and chalking in a new one. There wasn't much time left. Only a few hours.

After washing my face in a yellow-stained sink, I straightened my hair and went downstairs again. My first stop was not the dress shop Mark suggested. The nearest bank was a two-story building with plate-glass doors. Across the front were the words, BANCO COMERCIAL DE LA REPUBLICA, S.A., *Institucion de deposito y ahorro*.

A grim-faced swarthy clerk came to one of the windows after I rapped on the counter.

"What can I do for you, *Señorita*?"

"My name is Jewel Tempest," I lied. "I'm an American and just arrived on a race escort yacht. We hit some foul weather and all my clothing and identification was swept overboard."

"That is too bad, *Señorita*, but—"

"This is rather embarrassing, but I was wondering if I brought your police captain, Señor Vargas, here to properly identify me, whether I could draw a draft against my personal account?"

His forehead ridged. "You have an account with us, *Señorita*?"

"I believe so, yes," I said.

He hesitated, then said, "Let me check."

He disappeared into another room. Perhaps to call Captain Vargas. He had not asked that I repeat my name again, which seemed odd. In a moment he returned, a wide smile on his mouth.

"*Si, Señorita* Tempest, you do have an account with us. Our manager said you may return with *Señor* Vargas if you wish."

"Thank you, I shall," I said, trying to hide the excitement in my voice.

At the next bank, two blocks away, the same ruse worked. The clerk not only had a wide grin, but told me I was one of their best depositors, having never made a withdrawal since the account was opened six years ago. I didn't bother with the other *bancos*. The answer seemed obvious. Jewel Tempest had not buried her money. She had deposited it in Mexico.

I stopped at a small shop near the waterfront and bought a colorful cotton dress, off-shoulder style with sequins sprinkled over the swirling skirt. The salesman wore a wide grin, too, but for a different reason. After I'd changed he told me why he smiled so broadly.

"You *Americanos*," he said, shaking his head. "You have so much fun here in Ensenada when you come. You dance, you sing, you drink. Some, I think they drink too much."

"You're probably right about that," I said.

"Thees *señorita*; she come in a little while ago," he continued. "She must be preety drunk or crazy I don't know which."

"Was she having fun?"

"Fon? She ees crazy with the heat, I think. She was wearing a very fonny mask, all gold, with little slits for the eyes."

"What?" I straightened.

"I say to her, 'Why you wear the mask?' and she say, 'To keel somebody.'" He laughed.

"What'd she want?" I demanded.

"A gon," the salesman said, still smiling. "We also carry gons. It is a good business. I sell more gons than I do dresses."

"A gun?"

"Si, a gon."

"What'd she look like?"

"I tole you she was wearing the mask. I could not see her face."

"No, I mean her clothes, her size."

"She was a beeg one," he said, pinching his lips together. "Much taller than me. She was wearing a black coat and shoes with very beeg heels."

"Did she buy any bullets?"

"Si. No one buys a gon without the bullets. This is like a tortilla without the beans."

"Did you see which way she went when she left?"

He gestured toward the hotel. "Si, up the street. She was limping a little. I notice that, too."

I paid him for the dress and walked back to the nightclub. Mark was waiting for me in the bar.

"Well, that's an improvement," he said, scanning my figure. "What kept you? I've been waiting half an hour."

I quickly told Mark the story about the masked woman in the dress shop.

The deputy groaned, then ordered a shot of tequila. "When is this damned masquerade going to end?" he demanded.

"Where's Lisa Carter, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"I don't know. She got away from my man after they left the escort boat." He gulped down the tequila and choked. "I'd better get Vargas on this right away." He started for a phone.

That was when she came in the front door as big as life, the weird mask fitted to her face, Egyptian helmet

jammed down over her head. She took one look at Mark and me, and then ran like hell.

Mark bolted into the street after her. I decided to try a different route, through a side door and into a narrow alley beside the nightclub. My hunch proved right. She was abreast of the door when I came out, but moving too fast for me. I lunged, fingernails grazing her dress, and tumbled into a pile of ash cans. By the time I got to my feet, she was fully fifty yards away and literally flying, legs kicking high beneath her dress, bare feet slapping on brick.

I followed for several blocks, losing ground all the way, my unshod feet being torn by rough stones and gravel that littered the alleys. She finally vanished in a dirty old section of adobe houses. I walked up a dirt street, examining garbage-littered crevices between buildings, peering at half-open doors. Wind blew dust in my face as I moved, caking on the perspiration that streamed down my forehead. Except for an old newspaper cart-wheeling past me, nothing moved along the street. When the wind died it was deathly quiet, as if everyone in the houses might be dead.

A door behind me suddenly banged open. I whirled. A skinny, greasy-faced Mexican leaned against the jamb, a thin cigar protruding from his stained mouth.

"Hey, seester, you look for somebody, no?" he said quietly. "Come here!"

"What is this, Deadville?" I asked, not moving. "Where is everybody?"

"The noon siesta," he said. "I watch you come up the street. Come here!"

I surveyed the hot empty street that stretched ahead and behind me. Mark Storm was probably a mile away in the opposite direction.

"I'm looking for an American woman," I said, after turning my eyes on him again. "She came this way wearing a gold mask. We were going to a party together."

He blew a ring of smoke through the doorway and grinned. "You are from the Americano race, no? You are very preety."

I hesitated, not liking the sound of his voice. In Mexico it's unwise to talk to strangers, especially outside the main part of a town.

"Have you seen my friend?" I asked.

He spit on the porch, lips curled back over crooked white teeth. "Of course. She is inside, but it will cost you some *dinero* to see her."

I was crazy to believe him since his cocky, gaunt smile belied his words, but anything is possible below the border. I had to gamble.

"How much do you want?"

"How much you got?"

"A couple of dollars. That's all."

He extended a greasy dirty hand. "Okay, geeve it to me."

Now I was more skeptical than ever, but in an area like this, it seemed better to spend a few dollars and walk out safely, than to be ambushed down an alley. I crumpled up the bills and tossed them to him. He counted them quickly, then scowled.

"Is thees all you got?"

"Yes. Now quit stalling and bring her out."

"He's much too tired," he said, stuffing the money in his pocket. "You better come in and get him."

"Him?" I blurted.

"Si, thees one is a hombre. I guess I make mistake, seester, too bad."

He laughed, blew a cloud of smoke and turned back inside. I was on the porch and through the door so fast he hardly knew what hit him. But that went double for me. I barely had time to focus my eyes on a dirty, paper-littered room and a weezened old man slumped asleep in the corner, before the shake-down artist tried to focus his fist on the back of my head.

I caught him arm over my shoulder, spun sideways

and snapped him around. He was screaming by the time I'd pushed his wrist halfway up the middle of his back.

"*Caramba!*" he bellowed. "You are breaking it!"

"You lied to me," I said. "There's no one with a mask here."

"*Si!*" he insisted, gritting his teeth painfully. "The old man he has a face like a mask. I did not lie. I give you back your money."

The old man woke up and looked at us, surprise etched in his weathered face. I let go of the Mexican's arm and moved toward the door. They were apparently very poor. There wasn't a stick of furniture in the room.

"Keep the money," I said. "Only don't try that trick again. You might wind up in jail."

He followed me outside, rubbing his arm, shaking his head. "Hey, *Señorita*, you are pretty strong for a gurl. I like you. Maybe I can help you find thees one with the mask."

"I don't think so," I said.

"I know thees town preety good." He took the money from his pocket and held it up. "I weel earn thees *dinero*."

I stopped and studied his half-grinning face. The idea had possibilities, but I still wasn't sure I could trust him.

"Thees is a very bad town, *Señorita*. I know. I work for some hombres once. They wait in dark alleys for preety Americano *señoritas*. Some they steal from. Others they take to a place in the hills. They take off all their clothes and shoot peektures of them weeth a camera. Then they do bad things weeth the preety ones."

"A blackmail racket, is that it?"

"*Si*. The rich ones play plenty *dinero*. They don't wish their husbands to find out."

"What's your name?"

"Pedro. I live here all my life. I know this town. It is a bad one."

I shrugged. "Okay, Pedro. But if you pull another

fast one on me I'll turn you over to Captain Vargas of the Ensenada police so fast your sombrero will swim."

"I do not own a sombrero, *Señorita*."

He had the greasiest, most-crooked smile I've ever seen, but for some reason I decided to trust him. We walked into town. From the winding street that fronted the Bay we could see the distant sails of the Newport-to-Ensenada fleet belled against the sea.

"They will be here soon," Pedro said. "That big one there is already inside Punta Banda."

"That must be *The Teleprompter*," I said. "Can you get a small boat?"

"You mean steal one, *Señorita*?"

"No, Pedro!"

He shrugged dismally. "I'm sorry. I keep forgetting. *Si*. A friend of mine owns one. Perhaps, he weel loan it to me."

I patted his shoulder. "Good. Now you keep your eyes on that big yacht. As soon as it drops anchor I want you to go out there and get my clothes and suitcase and bring them back to El Tostados. I've got a room in the hotel upstairs."

"But what if they won't give them to me, *Señorita*?"

"There'll be a man aboard named Murray. Rex Murray. Tell him Honey West sent you. Bring him back with you if you can."

"Okay," Pedro said, grinning again. "But this weel cost you a little more money."

"I thought you were going to say that. I'll settle with you at the hotel when you get back."

He rubbed his hands together vigorously, then his smile faded. "But how do I know I can trust you?"

I laughed. "Pedro, the longer I know you the better I like you. You'd make a good private eye. I'll bet you don't even trust yourself sometimes."

His eyelids widened. "*Si, Señorita*, most all the time. You know, once my right hand stole from my left hand pocket. That is the truth, so help me."

"I believe it," I said, "but do me a favor and don't steal anything while you're aboard *The Teleprompter*, please."

He shrugged again. "*Señorita*, you make it very tough for me. But, for you, I promise."

He walked toward the waterfront piers slowly, eyes framed on the distant sea. Ahead of him, beyond the breakwater, were the dacron sails of *The Teleprompter*, its razored bow glistening in the sunlight, jutting high in the blue water.

I returned to El Tostados, but couldn't find Mark or Captain Vargas anywhere. Now the bar was crowded and growing more so each second. The fervor of the race fleet's arrival was mounting for the citizens of Ensenada and the Americans who had already arrived by car. Soon the crews and boat owners would begin to stream in off the yachts, then everything would pop. It was going to be a wild night.

A clock inside the Mexican *Nacional* Bank branch indicated two-forty p.m. when I crossed to the window where the same clerk I'd talked to earlier stood. He took one look at me and things got wild even before I expected they would. He spat a few oaths in Spanish and two strong arms grabbed me from behind. They were attached to police uniforms and drawn guns.

There was a crowd gathered inside Captain Vargas' office when they led me in. The shouts, yells, threats and swearing stopped as all heads swung in my direction. The head I noticed most belonged to Mark Storm.

"Where the hell have you been, Honey?" he demanded.

I smiled sarcastically. "Out gathering nuts in May. What's your excuse, Lieutenant, did you break a leg?"

"What are you talking about?" he blared. "I caught her!"

He stepped back to reveal Lisa Carter sitting defiantly erect in a chair, legs crossed like two hunks of bronzed

mink, her dark dress unbuttoned far enough in front to show the curve of two starkly white bosoms.

"Hello, Miss West," she purred sweetly. "Where'd the police pick you up, in some local house of prostitution?"

"You can cut that kind of talk, Mrs. Carter!" Mark drilled. He glanced at the two men still gripping me. "What's the trouble?"

"The clerk at the *Nacional*, *Señor*," one of the men returned, "he says thees is the one who came earlier about the *dinero*."

"What?" the deputy demanded. He grabbed my arm and led me into another room, then fixed hot eyes on me. "What is this, Honey? Interfering again?"

I shrugged. "I never got a chance to tell you, Mark. I checked the banks around noon. At least two of them had accounts under the name Jewel Tempest."

"We know that!" he broke angrily.

"For how long?" I asked. "Those two gentleman with the fat hands and fat guns didn't bother me earlier."

Mark crossed to a window and looked out at the street, shoulders flexing under his suit. "We pegged it after I caught Lisa Carter going into the *Nacional*. She was loaded with all sorts of identification to prove she was Jewel Tempest."

"Was she wearing a mask?"

"No. She must have dumped that somewhere between El Tostados and the bank."

"How soon did you catch up with her?"

He whirled, forehead ridged. "About a minute. Why?"

I shook my head. "It couldn't have been the same person, Mark. I followed Jewel Tempest for fully five minutes through the back alleys of Ensenada, in the other direction."

He groaned. "I had a hunch you were going to say that. We found a pair of high heel shoes in the alley next

to El Tostados, but Lisa Carter was wearing shoes when I caught her."

"Well, what does she say about Jewel's identification cards?"

"Nothing!" He threw his hands up. "She claims they were planted on her when she bought the dress. It's got a pocket in front. I didn't actually catch her at a bank window, so how can I prove it?"

"You can't," I said. "Besides the stuff she was carrying is probably phony."

"It is. The papers and cards were made right here in Ensenada. Vargas already has a lead on the man who printed them."

"So where does that leave you?" I asked.

"In a great big hole. Gold hasn't shown up. There's been no report yet on Kirq Tempest from the Coast Guard. I'm ready to slit my throat."

"Down where you come from, Mr. Ballintine, that ain't very gentlemanly."

"Quit the comedy, Honey!"

"All right, why don't you play the straight man and let Lisa gag herself."

"What do you mean?"

"Let her go. You did it before."

"You crazy or something? The woman was on the verge of committing a felony."

"So what?" I said. "Give her more rope. Maybe she'll hang herself."

"Like how?"

"Like lead us to the character who ran me a foot race around Ensenada. The salesman at that dress shop said his masked woman walked with a limp. The one I chased had the most agile legs since Mel Patton broke the hundred dash record. Now figure that one."

He scowled. "I can't. I'll tell you one thing, though. Lisa Carter hasn't got a limp. She walks like she owns the ground under her."

"Maybe she does," I said. "Give her a little walking room and find out."

"She's too damned smart," Mark said. "She knows what we're after. From now on she'll walk like she's wearing tight underpants."

"That I would like to see. Did you check with the other banks?"

The deputy nodded. "Yeah. Five banks. Five separate accounts all under the same name. What knocks me for a loop is the fact they don't amount to much. Around a thousand dollars all told."

"What? But, Mark, that doesn't make sense! Where's the quarter of a million?"

He threw his head back dismally. "I don't know. We contacted the main branches in Mexico City. Asked them to run tracers on other branches. They all drew a blank."

"When were these deposits made locally, Mark?"

"That's another thing that baffles me, Honey. They were all made periodically over a span of nine years. Never more than twenty dollars at a time. All by mail. And never any withdrawals."

I nodded. "Baffling's hardly the word."

"You can say that again. Every one of the bank employees I questioned said they recalled to the best of their memories that the letters were postmarked Ensenada."

I rubbed my forehead dismally. "Nine years. All local postmarks. Somebody must be—" I snapped my fingers. "Mark, what about a strong box, or a safety deposit box?"

He whirled. "I never thought of that!"

"You know what I mean," I said hopefully. "A place where people keep valuables. They'd have to have them in Mexico."

He snatched up a phone and quickly dialed the *Nacional* branch. The call brought disappointing results. There was nothing under the name Jewel Tempest. Then

he tried the *Comercial*. This time he hung up grinning.

"You're right, Honey. The *Comercial's* got a box under Jewel's name. They don't know how long it's been there, or who actually made the rental, but they're bringing it over right away."

An armed guard and a clerk from the *Comercial* arrived ten minutes later. With Captain Vargas' permission the lock was broken and the small steel case opened.

There was only one thing inside.

A gold beaded G-string.

Mark tore open the inside lining. A small piece of paper fluttered to the floor. On it were written three very small words, *Behind your picture*.

fifteen

"BEHIND WHOSE PICTURE?" Mark bellowed. "Where? What?"

I snatched the scrap of paper from his trembling hands, realization thudding in my brain, almost unable to believe the simplicity of the answer.

"Mark," I said, "there's a small room below Jewel's in Malibu. They've kept all their childhood belongings there. Toys, clothes, an old music box. On the wall are three photographs, you probably saw them."

"Of course," the big deputy said. "All three identical, except for inscriptions on the frames. Kirk, Jewel, Kirq."

"There could be a safe behind one of them, Mark."

The deputy shook his head. "No, Honey. We searched that joint from top to bottom. Took all the pictures down and tapped the walls. There was nothing in that room."

I studied the three words again. *Behind your picture.* "Mark, I'll bet you didn't strip the backing off those photographs."

"No—no, we didn't."

"Maybe that's the answer," I said. "As I recall, the photos are eight by ten's mounted inside heavy oak frames with very wide liners. It would take a considerably large piece of cardboard to back a frame that size."

His eyelids tightened.

"Mark, this paper says, 'behind your picture.' Two hundred and fifty thousand dollar bills would do very nicely in the absence of cardboard."

The deupty ripped up the phone again. "Hello, operator, can you speak English? All right, I want you to place a rush call to the Sheriff's station, Malibu, California. The number is Malibu 41122, do you understand? Good. Malibu 41122 and hurry!"

While Mark was waiting to make connections, I walked back inside Captain Vargas' office where Lisa Carter still sat with her legs crossed defiantly. She flicked her "drop dead" smile on me and quipped, "How many men have enjoyed a roll in bed with Honey?"

I smiled. "I'm on the breakfast menu at all the better hotels, Mrs. Carter. Just what menu were you and Rex Murray reading when you decided to order Jewel's box?"

She straightened, legs flying apart like they'd been hit with a meat cleaver. "Jewel's what?"

"It's no secret any more, Mrs. Carter," I said. "What's inside the safety deposit box is. You and Rex could have bought a lot of breakfasts with two hundred and fifty G's. Even caviar on your toast."

Her face whitened under the thick makeup. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course, you do," I said. "Because if you don't you'll probably wind up talking to yourself in a gas chamber."

She grasped her throat, eyes wide with fear. "I—I haven't done anything. It was all Rex's idea."

"Really?" I said. "And I suppose it was Rex who wanted to murder your husband, too."

"Did he tell you that?" She almost choked on the words. "That was a bad joke. I was kidding at the time. My husband's broke. I didn't know that when I married him. That's why I made the remark."

"*The Teleprompter's* an expensive piece of spruce, Mrs. Carter. Don't tell me he got it with Green Stamps."

"His creditors will be waiting for him when he returns from Ensenada," she confessed, pleadingly. "He had money once, but he spent it all on his queer friends. He's not only busted, he's lost his job, too."

"When did that happen?" I asked.

"The night of the last show. The night you—" She stopped, terror growing in her mascara-rimmed eyes.

"The night I what?" I demanded.

She leaned down on her legs, full breasts almost spilling from the top of her dress. "The night you masqueraded as Jewel Tempest. Jerry brought home the mask. He was roaring drunk and crying like a baby. He said Gold fired everyone connected with the show."

"How'd he know I wasn't Jewel Tempest?"

"He said he knew from the very beginning. He said Jewel wasn't expected to appear."

"What gave him that idea?"

"I don't know."

"Was your husband the one who told you about the safety deposit box, Mrs. Carter?"

"I don't know anything about a safety deposit box, I swear!"

"But you knew about the two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

Her lips twisted. "Yes! Jerry told me. When he came home that night he was so blind drunk he didn't realize what he was doing, what he was saying. He told me then about the money. Even about the Mexican printer

here in Ensenada who had the false papers and cards."

"Where'd he get this information?"

"He didn't say." She shook her head sadly. "All I know is that I was at the party at Q's house the night his brother was killed. I met Q and a woman wearing a mask who was introduced as Jewel." She lifted desperate eyes on me. "The night Jerry came home from the show he told me the woman in the mask was not really Jewel. He said Jewel Tempest had died ten years ago."

"Did he say who was behind the mask?"

"Yes," she managed. "A burlesque dancer named Ruth Smith. He said she and K Tempest had been masquerading as Jewel ever since Jewel died in a fire."

"How do you mean, masquerading?"

"Jerry said K Tempest had done a dancing act with his sister before she died. After her death he found Ruth Smith. He put a mask on her and developed the act into a burlesque routine."

"You mean they danced together?"

"Not exactly," Lisa said, in a constricted whisper. "Jerry said K wore a mask, too. He was an excellent dancer. Wearing falsies and layers of gauzy material K did an interpretative opening. Then he vanished behind a curtain. That's when this Ruth took over. She had the body. Jerry said they fooled everyone, including the people backstage. They were spectacular."

"Maybe they were," I said. "But now they're both dead."

Her head snapped. "I made a mistake listening to Jerry that night—and then today going to the bank—I wanted that money more than life itself, but I haven't killed anybody!"

"What about Q Tempest?"

"I told you the truth. He disappeared while I was on deck!"

"How does Rex Murray fit into this?"

She straightened. "He knew about the money. He's a nice guy, but he's broke, too. He said it would be

worth trying for, especially if we got to Ensenada first. *The Teleprompter* was a cinch to win the race."

"Don't you imagine your husband had a similar idea, since he's in a financial hole himself, and knew about the faked papers and cards?"

She laughed lowly. "Stupid, queer, little Jerry. I suppose that's what he had at the back of his mind. It was my job to keep him liquored up. But then I fell overboard."

"What were you trying to accomplish when you wore the mask, Mrs. Carter?"

"I guess I'd had a little too much to drink myself."

"You hadn't had a drop," I said.

"Okay," she said flatly. "It was to throw you off guard. And Rex. If you think I was planning to split the money with him, you're crazy."

"You're the one who's crazy, Mrs. Carter."

She squinted at me evilly. "You think so? Listen, I discovered some of Jewel's clothes in my wardrobe aboard the yacht. Don't you think I knew who planted them there? My husband! Stupidly clever little Jerry. He knew I'd be after the money, so he rigged it with you, and with the clothes. Maybe you've got me, Miss West, on attempted grand theft, but you'll never hang me with murder."

I smiled gingerly. "Mrs. Carter, your husband never hired me."

"What?"

"In fact, I wouldn't have been along on your husband's yacht if Q Tempest hadn't invited me, as a guest!"

Her face reddened violently. "You're lying!"

"Believe me, at this moment, I wish I were."

Mark entered the room suddenly, followed by the fat sweating figure of Captain Vargas.

The deputy said, "You were right, Honey. The money was behind Jewel's photo."

I said, "You'd better book Mrs. Carter, Lieutenant.

She's admitted to attempted grand theft. I'll testify if you need me." I started for the door. "See you."

"Where you going now?" Mark boomed, blinking.

"I've got to meet a little man who used to own a boat," I said. "Then I'm going back to El Tostados and see a show."

"What show?" the deputy demanded.

I lifted my eyebrows dramatically. "The one starring Jewel Tempest. You'd better be there, Lieutenant. I've a hunch it's going to be a pip of a strip."

Pedro was waiting outside the hotel lobby with my suitcase and clothes. He had two other articles with him. Both red-faced and wearing wet yachting clothes. Rex Murray and Jerry Carter. Pedro had them pinned against a wall under the quiet surveillance of a knife.

"Hey, *Señorita*," he said, when he saw me, "Thees is going to cost you *mucho dinero*. Thees two hombres give me plenty trouble."

"Pedro," I said, "you're a regular vigilante. I only asked for my bag and Murray."

Pedro laughed. "Thees other guy, he's too beeg for his serape. So I take him, too."

Carter was still drunk, eyelids nearly closed on his squat, squarish face. The knuckles of his hands were clenched white, and he swayed belligerently.

"Who's responsible for this?" he slurred.

"You are, Mr. Carter." I picked up my clothes and suitcase and gestured toward the hotel door. "Come on. I want to talk to you up in my room."

"Me, too?" Murray asked, winking.

I nodded. "Pedro, you cover them from behind. I'll lead the way."

"*Si*," Pedro said, grinning. "Thees should be fun. Four in one room."

"This isn't to be a party, Pedro. I'm going to question these men."

He groaned disgustedly. "Oh, *Señorita*, you always spoil the fun."

We mounted the stairs to the second floor, Carter stumbling once and falling to his knees. I helped him the rest of the way, my hand heavy on his arm. I was determined to ring out of him the answer to the mystery woman with the limp.

We stopped outside my door while I inserted the key. Then I shoved Carter inside, remaining in the corridor with Murray and Pedro.

I gestured at the opening. "After you, gentlemen."

Under threat of Pedro's knife, Rex Murray stepped forward. The door suddenly whirled closed in his face, smashing against his forehead and shoulder, jolting him back against Pedro viciously. Both men fell in the dimly-lit hall, landing hard on the wood floor. The lock bolt on the other side of my door slid closed.

The greasy-faced Mexican rolled over, groaning, and got up. Murray didn't. Pedro's knife was buried hilt-deep in his back.

sixteen

I BENT over Rex Murray's crumpled body.

"*Caramba!*" Pedro blared, his thick-lidded eyes taut with fear. "He's dead."

He was still breathing, but rackingly hard, the way a man breathes when he's been hurt seriously. He sounded as if one of his lungs had been punctured.

Behind my door came the sounds of furniture being knocked over as Carter drunkenly moved toward the fire escape outside my window.

An ever-widening perimeter of blood spread in Murray's shirt where the knife protruded. My eyes lifted to the trembling Mexican.

"Pedro, go downstairs, quick! Get an ambulance, or doctor!"

"But, *Señorita*—

"Move!"

"*Señorita*, in thees country they put you against the wall and shoot you for thees."

"It wasn't your fault! Now do as I say!"

He shook his head, starting down the hallway. "Thees is what I get for trying to make an honest dollar." He disappeared on the staircase.

It was quiet now in my room. Carter had apparently made the fire escape, but in his condition he couldn't go far. Rex Murray's eyelids rolled open suddenly, painfully. He groaned, staring into my face, teeth clenched tightly.

"I—I can't breathe, Honey."

"Don't talk. You'll have help soon."

"I—I always was afraid of knives. Must—must have been a premonition. Is it bad, Honey?"

I nodded, hesitantly.

"If—if only I'd met somebody—like you—instead of Lisa."

I gripped his hand. "Don't talk."

"You—you found out about Lisa and the money, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't going to go through with it, Honey. Believe me."

His blood was staining the wood floor, soaking into cracks and crevices.

"Rex, you never should have listened to her. You're too nice a guy."

He grimaced, then smiled thinly. "Don't kid yourself, Honey. I never won any prizes. I—I guess this kind of wrecks our trip—to the South Seas. I—was looking forward to that."

"Rex, you're not going to die!"

He choked.

Tears burst into my eyes. "Rex?"

His fingertips touched my cheek. "Did—didn't I tell you—you were sensitive. Once—a long, long, time ago—I knew a girl like you." His head slumped in my arms. "I—I didn't have enough sense to—to marry her."

"Rex, stop it!"

Blood welled in the corners of his mouth. His eyes stared up at me emptily.

"Rex?"

I lifted his head. A crimson line zagged down my arm from his mouth. Rex Murray was dead. Lying in that dirty Mexican hotel hallway he was dead. And suddenly I was rocking him like a baby, breathing the way he'd been breathing a minute before. And I was so blind and deaf and hurt that I didn't even feel Mark's hand on my shoulder as he knelt beside us.

It was dark by the time they carried him down an old rickety back stairway to a waiting ambulance. His hands hung limply beneath a crimson-smeared sheet and his smiling dead eyes still smiled in their fleshy sockets. Mark drew the sheet over his face as they lifted him inside the ambulance. Then the deputy walked me around the corner to El Tostados and ordered us a couple of shots of whiskey.

Somebody threw lighted firecrackers into the air behind us, and I whirled as they exploded. The racing fleet's revelers laughed raucously, pointing at my livid face, pumping hands, flicking paper money at greasy-faced bartenders, crudely grabbing and slapping each other drunkenly. I shouted at them angrily and a few jeered back until Mark pushed me out of range into a corner.

He wiped my eyes with his handkerchief and said, "Honey, don't try and lick the world. Forget what happened up there."

"Forget what?" I demanded, shaking my head. "For-

get he was a nice guy who didn't deserve what he got?"

Mark's forehead ridged. "Honey, I've told you before, don't take the responsibility for something that doesn't belong to you!"

My head snapped around, eyes riveting on his. "Don't tell me what I'm responsible for, Lieutenant!"

He knew I was hurt, but he couldn't help the anger that was in him for the mistake that I'd made. "Dammit all, Honey! When are you going to learn people are people, and not just toys with keys in their backs!"

I began to tremble because I knew he was right. I did wind people. Sometimes until their springs broke.

I blurted, "You don't have to give me lecture number four hundred and twelve, Lieutenant! I know what people are. I know that men are men, and women are women. And that the only thing women are good for, according to Lieutenant Marcus H. Storm, is warming up a cold sheet!"

"Honey, that's dirty!"

"Sure, it's dirty, Mark," I said. "Look at some of these saintly *people* you're talking about. Drunk, disorderly, don't-give-a-damn-for-nothing. What do you think most of them came here to Ensenada for?"

"It's a race, Honey!"

"Sure it's a race, Lieutenant. A race against time, against morals, against ego, against themselves. What are they looking for, Mark?"

His eyes shifted over the wild crowd. "The same things you're looking for, Honey, only they get mixed up sometimes. Everybody does, including you—and me. So don't get on a high horse over nothing. Drink your drink and shut up!"

My head sagged dismally and I bit my lips. "I—I'm sorry."

"You ought to be." He tossed part of his drink down his throat. "Murray's death was accidental. Sure, it wouldn't have happened if you and that Mexican hadn't

taken Murray and Carter up to your room. So you made a mistake. So, what? I've made plenty of them."

"I doubt that," I said lowly.

He laughed grimly. "You kidding, Honey? If it hadn't been for you, I'd have been riding a squad car years ago."

"What do you mean, Mark?"

His eyes squinted from the thick cigarette smoke. "I mean you've pulled me out of plenty of holes. They get pretty deep in this business sometimes. You know that."

I forced a smile on my mouth. "Mark, are you trying to say you're human?"

"Something like that, I guess." He squeezed a cigarette between his lips and struck a match. "Hell, Honey, why do you think I tried that Ballintine routine? To fool Gold? No. I did it to stick close to you, because I knew you knew what you were doing."

He suddenly laughed, a sad heavy kind of laugh that sounded almost too melodramatic. "How do you think I feel, Honey, when those wise guys down at the office tell me I'd be nothing without Honey West?"

"Mark, I said I was sorry."

His voice was beginning to sound as phony as a nine-dollar bill. "Honey, you don't know how nice it would be to come home to you—and tell you about a case I solved. But, I guess I'm just a big dumb deputy sheriff who needs a doll like you with a gold-leafed sign on her door, instead of my name on her mailbox."

I was really suspicious now. "Don't milk it, Mark. I said I was sorry."

He shrugged, downing the rest of his drink. "Well, I guess we might as well wrap this up, and go home."

That cut it. This was the old routine to get me out of the way. The big dumb deputy sheriff was about as smart as the rain in Spain. And about as gentle.

"Who are you arresting?" I asked, trying to cover over my suspicions.

"Lisa Carter," he said bluntly. "You were right about

her all the time. She admitted pushing Kirk Tempest overboard."

"You're lying, Mark!"

He winced. "Why should I lie. You won again. So what? There'll be another day."

"Yeah, like today," I said. "How many men have you got looking for Jerry Carter?"

"None," he said, innocently. "Why should I? Murray's death was accidental. You said so yourself."

"Sure," I agreed. "But why'd Carter run? The race was over. He didn't have sails on his back."

He shifted those big brown innocent, but-looking-so-hard-for-an-answer eyes on me, and said, "You tell me."

"You're too anxious, Lieutenant."

"I told you the case is closed," he insisted. "Lisa Carter confessed."

"To what?" I asked. "To not wearing tight underpants? Or to not wearing any pants at all?"

Mark slammed his glass down on the bar. "Honey, you make me very mad!"

I smiled again, a little thankful for his lifting me out of my void, but still aware that the race was on. The race between Marcus Hellion Storm and myself. The unending race. There was only one way he wanted it to end. At an altar. But right now I was a long way from "Oh, Promise Me." And he was a long way from the truth.

I got up from the bar. "Lieutenant, you're a fraud."

"What?"

"You know Lisa Carter didn't confess to anything, except an overabundant appetite for money. You also know she couldn't have been the person I chased half way to Tiajuana and back. And she doesn't walk with a limp. So where does that leave you? On third base with three outs?"

His eyes hardened. "Honey, you can't do this to me. It—it isn't fair."

"It's a fair race, Lieutenant. We've got the same wind

at our sails. And despite what you might think, I haven't broken the seal on my engine. So wipe that glower off your puss and get back at your wheel. Rex Murray said I was sensitive and I guess he's right. But in a storm, Lieutenant, I don't intend to capsize. How's your rigging?"

He grinned, shaking his head half in anger, and half because he knew he wasn't kidding me anymore. "All right," he said, "I'll race you to the finish this time, Honey, but by God if you get there first I'm going to buy myself a sombrero, find a nice shady spot and stay here permanently. I couldn't go back."

"You're a defeatist, Lieutenant," I said.

"Who wouldn't be, working against you?" He got up. "See you later, alligator."

"Is this a call from the wild?"

He patted my cheek. "It's a call from the wind at my sails."

Mark squeezed away from the bar, through ranks and rows of jostling people. He wasn't gone a minute before Captain Vargas came through the door. He stopped me and pushed his way to my side, asking for Mark.

"He just left," I said. "Can I help you, Captain?"

The Mexican police officer wedged new sweat from his brow and shook his head. "We just received a phone call from a *Señorita* who said she is Jewel Tempest."

"What?" I drew him into a corner. "What'd she say?"

"It was very strange, *Señorita*. She said tonight she would be dancing for the last time—here at El Tostados. She asked that none of the backstage entrances be guarded. She also said she must have absolute darkness, except for one spotlight. And this is not to be turned on until exactly nine-thirty when she will appear."

I glanced at a wall clock. Eight-thirty-two. Less than one hour. The masquerade would soon be over.

seventeen

AT A QUARTER TO NINE the entertainment began on the stage at El Tostados. To the screaming, whistling delight of its customers, a number of scantily-clad Mexican girls romped out and kicked up their legs, singing, "We're glad you made it you Americanos, so feex your beeg red, white and blue eyes upon us—and smile!"

Mark returned at nine. He had Vargas with him and it was obvious from the look on his face, he wasn't at all pleased that the Mexican had told me about the telephone call.

"We found Gold," the deputy said, grudgingly, moving in behind me and surveying the crowd.

"Where?" I asked.

"Aboard *The Teleprompter*."

"Don't snow me, Lieutenant!"

He shrugged, keeping his eyes framed on the stage where a Mexican Tamale was in the middle of a torrid bump and grind routine that was hot enough to melt the hair off a bear's back. "Go on over to headquarters and talk to him yourself if you don't believe me."

"And leave you here alone with Jewel Tempest?" I said. "Oh, no!"

"Jewel Tempest is dead. That was just some crank trying to stir up more trouble."

"Sure," I said. "What'd Gold have to say?"

"Ask him."

I studied the wall clock. There were still twenty-five minutes left. "Okay, I will."

Moving through the wall of bodies was almost impossible, but I finally made the street, despite deterring hands along the way that rubbed and fingered my dress.

Milo Gold was sitting erect in a small cell down the

corridor from Captain Vargas' office. He was wearing a brown suit and a scowl an inch thick.

"Go away!" he ordered. "I'm in enough trouble as it is!"

"What kind of trouble, Mr. Gold?"

"You ought to know," he returned hotly. "You put me here."

"How?"

"When you showed me that dirty picture of Ruth. I'd have never gone to her house that night if you hadn't done that."

"So, you *were* the one who beat her up?"

"Hell, no! She probably worked herself over. Ruth was a mess sexually. She thrived on masochistic brutality."

"Don't tell me you never got into the act?"

His face flushed. "Sure, I did. So what? In bed my wife acts like a dead fish in a delicatessen. I like it rough. But so help me, I didn't touch Ruth the night you're talking about."

I leaned against the bars, fixing my eyes on his flabby round face. "Look, Mr. Gold, your car was parked outside Ruth's place when I arrived. She was gone. Where were you?"

"Out looking for her. Ruth goes on perverted tangents sometimes. When I saw her room—the bed overturned—I knew she was on one of them."

"You talk like she's still alive, Mr. Gold."

He exhaled audibly. "I know. To me she still is. I was really in love with her."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you, Mr. Gold. When you saw that nude photo of her at Wild's house you acted genuinely surprised. As if you thought she was pure as the driven snow. But you knew differently, didn't you?"

He grimaced. "I knew she had sex problems. I didn't know she had posed for that kind of stuff."

"But you did know she posed as Jewel Tempest in a burlesque act with K Tempest."

He grunted. "Of course, I knew that. She's been doing it for years."

"Then you also knew I was a fraud the moment I walked in KBRC?"

"Yes. Ruth begged me for a long time to put her on the show. When K died she cancelled out, naturally."

"Why, naturally?"

"She suspected there was something haywire about his death. She told me so the night of that grisly party after K died. She said she suspected the brother."

"Q?"

"Yes. She said she'd expose him if she could."

"He may also be dead, Mr. Gold."

"So I understand. Too bad. He was a very entertaining fellow. I didn't agree with Ruth's theory."

"Why not?"

He lifted his hand futilely. "It didn't make sense. Frankly, I was more suspicious of Ruth. She was a violent person. I'm sure there was something going on between her and K."

"His brother had the same feeling," I said. "Is that what all the mystery was about that night at the studio?"

"I suspected you were a policewoman," he answered lowly. "What I said was just to try and make you realize I knew something of interest. Later, I decided to clam up."

"That was a mistake on your part, Mr. Gold."

He shook his head dismally. "I realize that now. Even at the Newport Bay Club, the night before the race, I had a feeling that wasn't Ruth wearing the mask, but I was too afraid to say anything."

"The authorities now believe Ruth was dead then, Mr. Gold."

"So I understand," he said grimly. "Storm told me.

You and the lieutenant ought to do an act together. He really had me going with that Ballintine routine."

"Well, that wasn't me at the club, Mr. Gold."

He blinked. "It—it wasn't?"

"No."

"But, I—I even kidded around that it was you," he stammered. "I talked about the television show and—"

"You never should have done that," I said.

"But—but I didn't realize. I knew it wasn't Ruth, and—"

"Why'd you go out to *The Teleprompter*?" I asked hurriedly, glancing at a wall clock down the corridor. It was nine-twenty-five.

"I went out to apologize to Carter. Hire him back on the show. He's a damn good director, even if he is a lousy drunken pimp half the time."

"He's worse than that," I said, walking back down the corridor.

The streets were crowded and hot. I ran most of the way, dodging fireworks, yachting caps and sombreros. I didn't bother with the front entrance to El Tostados, but took the back alley to the stage door. For an instant, I thought it was locked; then it gave under a vicious yank.

A trough of heavy darkness spilled through the opening, swallowing me inside. Even from where I stood it was obvious every light was out, both in the nightclub and backstage.

Then drums began to rumble and a deep Mexican voice spilt over the p.a. system.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, El Tostados is proud to present the one, the only—Jewel Tempest!"

Boom! Bang! Aroom! Drums exploded.

A trumpet joined searingly high and frantic.

I wedged between half-naked chorines to where Mark stood, his face illuminated by a tiny light above an electrical switchboard.

"Is she here?" I whispered.

"We're not sure," the deputy said. "Someone's on stage, but it's too dark to tell who. Another thirty seconds and I'll cut in the main spot. Then we'll know."

He lifted his hand to a switch, eyes framed on his watch's sweep toward nine thirty. Drums rolled. The trumpet blared sensuously. Out front the crowd was noisier than ever in the dark, clapping, shouting. Mark's fingers slammed downward. A cone of yellow buried itself on the stage, splattering over a huge cape-covered figure in a brilliant gold mask. Long black gloves encased her arms almost to the shoulders, and they lifted now, fingers curling seductively, spreading. Legs spreading, too, beneath the cape, one flicking out, a gleaming white thigh curving into the light, then flicking back.

Ba-room! The drums slammed.

Her other leg shot forward, knee bent slightly, flesh taut and white, three-inch heels clicking under her. She dragged her right leg a trifle, favoring it. She covered the limp with a sudden high kick which split open her cape, and nearly threw the already frenzied El Tostados into pandemonium.

She was absolutely stone white naked underneath!

Huge pink-tipped breasts swayed impishly. Smoothly-tapered hips V'd down into muscular thighs that spread wide as she bent down, twisting her buttocks under the cape, widening and lowering until suddenly she thrust her abdomen forward.

Wham! went the drums.

"Christmas!" Mark roared, eyes frozen on the dancer.

"You can talk plainer than that," I said. "Did you see what I saw?"

"You kidding?"

"I mean the limp."

"Yeah, that along with several other things. Good God, what a body!"

The huge masked woman straightened, peeled open her cape again, and fired another hip-snapping bolt at the front row tables, screaming at the top of her lungs.

One man fell out of his chair. Several others got up, eyes wide from the impact of flesh that had almost landed in their faces.

Mark moved toward the stage. "I'd better stop this. She's going too far."

Before the deputy could reach the burlesque dancer she ripped off her cape and hurled it into his face. Then she peeled off her mask, lifting her arms into the spotlight's piercing glare, tilting her face up into it.

There was dead silence for a long horrifying instant. Then came a choking sound, a fumbling protest. Someone gasped. A woman screamed.

Jewel Tempest stood unmoving, superbly naked, arms lifted triumphantly, a weird grin on her face.

She was hideous.

Her mouth was just one of many holes burned in her face.

eighteen

THE OLD TAXICAB jogged up Chapultepec Hills slowly in the warm night, steam geysering from its radiator, the driver swearing softly in Spanish.

Mark sat beside me, thick hands folded in his lap, square jaw set grimly. We were on our way to a house high on Granada street where Jewel had lived for the past ten years.

"What'll they do to her, Mark, when you get her back home?" I asked.

"Put her in a booby hatch, I suppose," he said, wincing from the memory of Jewel Tempest standing in the circle of light, her grotesque face lifted into the glare.

"She's not insane, Mark."

"Honey, when a person confesses to murder, scream-

ing and laughing all at the same time, stark naked, and with a face like hers, there's got to be something psychopathically wrong."

"Sure, she's psychopathic," I admitted. "Who wouldn't be under the circumstances?"

He nodded.

"She was deathly afraid of surgery," I continued. "That's why she ran away from that hospital after the fire. For ten years she's been hiding in Ensenada from a plastic surgeon's knife."

The big deputy whirled in his seat. "But, Honey, why would she murder her own brother?"

"She had to," I said simply. "If you want to blame anyone, blame K Tempest. If he hadn't hidden all that money, if he hadn't closeted the secret of its hiding place inside that safety deposit box, none of this would have ever happened."

"I—I can't believe that," he growled.

I laughed lowly. "Then you really don't believe her story at all."

"No."

"You're getting way off course, Lieutenant. I thought you were going to win this one."

"I have won it," he said. "The Coast Guard'll find Kirq Tempest's body and that'll wrap everything up neatly."

"Sure," I said. "Just about as neat as Jewel Tempest's face. Mark, when are you going to wake up to the fact that K Tempest was murdered principally because he'd done a horrible wrong."

"What wrong?" Mark blared. "He sent money to his disfigured sister, didn't he?"

"Sure he did," I said. "But wouldn't you do the same if it had been your fault her face was burned?"

Mark's eyelids narrowed. "You mean K Tempest started that fire?"

"Not intentionally, Lieutenant. I'd guess he was drunk at the time. Probably dropped a cigarette."

"Go on."

"He kept the secret for ten years, Mark. Even from his own brother. During that time he formed a dancing team with Ruth Smith, developing a unique burlesque routine where both played the same part, except in different stages of undress. The money rolled in. More than he'd ever expected. He paid Ruth a small salary, sent Jewel a few dollars and hid the balance, knowing when the day came for a reckoning with the income tax people, he'd burn his mask and retire. Knowing, too, they'd never find the real Jewel Tempest."

Mark shrugged dismally. "I don't know where you got all this, Honey, but go on."

"The day of reckoning finally came. The income tax people paid the Tempest residence a visit. Unfortunately for K he wasn't home. He was preparing for his Las Vegas engagement, and arranging to move Ruth in next door. The Feds talked with Q instead. And this was probably the first time Q had any conception of the money K had been making with his burlesque masquerade. So Q had a nice long chat with his brother. A discussion which must have wound up with K not only admitting to his fabulous wealth, *and* the hidden G-string, but also confessing to his part in the fateful fire that killed their mother and father."

The old taxi bumped over some ruts in the road, jarring Mark's head against the ceiling. "Why would he make such a stupid confession, Honey?"

"Maybe because he was drunk again," I said. "And maybe he just had to tell because it had been burning in him for so long. Anyway that confession lead to murder."

"Three murders," Mark said numbly.

"Four," I said.

"I won't believe that until we get to Jewel's house," he said angrily.

The taxi drew up before an old hacienda perched on the hill above Todos Santos Bay. It was an adobe

structure separated from any other houses by almost a mile of trees and wild grass.

"Thees ees it, *Señor*," the taxi driver said. "I know thees place. A friend of mine work for thees lady for many years. He did all the marketing and gardening, but he say she was a very funny lady. In all that time he never saw her face."

Mark climbed from the cab and paid the driver. "Tell your friend he was lucky."

The driver shrugged. "*Si Señor*, I will. But I will tell you one more thing. Thees noon I picked up a lady near the wharf. I do not know what she looked like because she was wearing a mask. She said she was going to a masquerade party. I brought her here. That car over there was parked here at the time."

Mark thanked the driver and the taxi pulled away, its engine still geysering steam.

We crossed to a foreign sports car parked near the house. Under bright moonlight, the car's registration read: Kirk and Kirq Tempest.

I opened the trunk. It was spattered with blood.

Then we went inside. There was a candle burning in the living room, casting flickering shadows over a maze of old furniture. On one wall hung a large photograph of a man and woman and three identical children. On another was a painting of a beautiful woman wearing a flimsy burlesque costume, a painting similar to the one near the swimming pool in the Malibu Tempest home. There was only one major difference. This face did not wear a mask. Long brunette hair framed the finely chiseled features, deep set brown eyes, dimpled cheek.

"So that's what she looked like before the fire that—" Mark stopped abruptly at the expression on my face.

Sprawled in a corner, face down, he lay on the carpet, a circle of dried blood under his body. Mark rolled him over and the mask slid from his face. Under Jewel's dress, he still wore his swimsuit and the T-shirt he'd borrowed aboard the committee boat. A single bullet

hole was cleanly hewn in his chest. A gun lay on a table across the room.

Mark stood up, shaking his head. "You win, Honey. Q Tempest. Jewel shot her own brother."

"Look again, Mark," I said.

"What?"

"Look again," I repeated. "Jewel shot her own brother, all right. But, not Q. She killed the one who caused all her grief, all her suffering." I stared down at the dead man. "That's K, Mark. It's been K all the time."

nineteen

THE PARTY at El Tostados was at its peak by the time we got back. The screams and protests that had come with Jewel's hideous unmasking were now drowned in a thousand glasses of tequila and whiskey. We wedged our way to the bar. Mark's face was so twisted he looked like he'd seen a ghost. A positive identification had just come through from Los Angeles. The body reposing in the county morgue was Q Tempest.

The big deputy painfully ordered us a round and then said, "Honey, how could you possibly have known there was a switch in brothers?"

"It's been all piecemeal, Mark. I think the time he pushed me in the pressure chamber and then yanked me out of the pool planted the seed in my mind."

"What do you mean?"

"He was amorous that day. In fact, maybe a little too amorous before I woke up."

"You mean he—?"

"I don't know," I said softly. "I wouldn't swear to it, but let's say he wasn't one of the *boys*, and leave it at that."

"All right," the deputy said, face reddening angrily. "So he wasn't queer. What does that prove?"

"Plenty," I said. "Q was queer, K wasn't. He knew he'd slipped up that day beside the pool. He tried repeatedly to rectify that slip, but he wasn't at all convincing. In fact, his inability to stay consistent, to hold down his manliness gave him away completely."

"Honey, how do you know Q was queer?"

"Carter," I said. "He's one of the worst. Apparently sometime after K's admission of his wealth and safety deposit box, Q divulged this information to his fruity little pal, Jerry Carter. And Carter in turn told his wife."

"All right," Mark groaned, staring at the madness inside El Tostados. "Let's go back to the beginning. To the day you lost your bathing suit. Which brother brought you in the house?"

"K," I said.

"But it couldn't have been, Honey!"

"That's the amazing part, Mark. That's what threw me from the very beginning. I never met Q. Until after he was dead."

"Then how did K work the switch, Honey?"

"Q was a nut on spear fishing. But he was afraid to do it in the ocean. So he spent most of his time in the pool. Even had it filled with live fish at various times. On that particular morning Q must have been at the bottom of the pool with a spear and an oxygen tank. K knew this. After meeting me he decided on a daring scheme: to get into the pool, plunge to the bottom, stab Q, remove his gear and exit out the air lock, leaving Q to float to the surface. And leaving me as a perfect witness."

"It makes sense," Mark said, thoughtfully.

"Of course it does. Same exact bathing trunks. Same suntan. Identical bodies. Q floated up and I thought it was K naturally."

"The coroner admitted there were reddish marks on the victim's face and back."

"Caused," I explained, "by the face plate and air tank straps he'd been wearing just before he was stabbed."

"So by the time I got there," Mark mused, "K came waltzing in, said he was Q and the dye was cast."

"Almost," I said. "There was only one problem. Ruth Smith. She suspected foul play. But she didn't know, any more than we, that the wrong brother had died. She got the bright idea of coming to my office—as Jewel—and steering me onto the air lock, trying to expose Tempest. But, K caught me in the act."

"And locked you in the chamber."

"Yes, and after I escaped he discovered who did the steering. Sensing he couldn't trust Ruth, K devised what he thought would be another perfect murder. He decided to masquerade as Billy Wild, kill Ruth at the TV studio, and leave the police mystified as to whether Wild, Gold or Carter committed the crime."

"But he killed Wild."

I nodded. "Accidentally. Caught from behind, Wild struggled too hard. K was forced to use every ounce of strength to overpower him—and so severed Wild's jugular vein."

Mark grinned faintly. "I'll bet K Tempest never expected you'd turn up masquerading as Jewel at the TV interview."

"Of course not. But he played it smart. With talk of a mysterious G-string—and knowing of Milo Gold's association with Ruth Smith—he decided to throw suspicion on the comedian. He grabbed my G-string, took a wild shot at me and slipped the gun in Gold's pocket. Then he drove to Malibu to get Ruth. He knocked her out of bed, dragged her onto the beach and beat the living daylights out of her, finally tossing her into the water for dead. But Ruth had a lot of stamina. She crawled home and, in the face of severe pain, my questions and

K's threatening eyes, she lied and claimed Milo Gold had been her assailant."

"And that was the end of Ruth Smith," Mark said.

"Practically. She did manage to see a doctor, but when she got home again, K was waiting for her. He finished his job, dumped her into the trunk of his car and drove to Balboa Bay where he tossed the body in the water. Then he went to the Newport Club, donned the mask and costume and masqueraded briefly as his sister, even calling me from one of the pay phones and faking his voice."

"Why do you suppose he went to all that trouble?"

"Once again he needed me as a witness to substantiate his whereabouts. He also knew you were after Gold. Masquerading as Jewel and in the company of Gold, K figured you might be convinced Gold was guilty of murdering Billy Wild and Ruth Smith."

Mark shook his head. "He was a smart guy. Real smart.

"Sure he was, but he didn't figure on Lisa Carter's private masquerade, or being separated from his clothes. When he saw the lights of Point Loma and San Diego, he decided on a risky, but vital move. He excused himself from Lisa, found a lonely spot on deck and jumped overboard."

"Then hitched his way back to Malibu, got his car and drove here to Ensenada," Mark finished.

"Right. Only he had no mask or helmet, so when he reached Ensenada he was forced to visit his sister and borrow a mask and some of her clothes. Jewel became suspicious and asked K if she might accompany him downtown. There she saw the sign announcing her appearance and demanded an explanation. K admitted murdering Q, probably planning the same fate for Jewel, but she leaped from the car and escaped. Then she bought a gun."

"Meanwhile K was looking for her and bumped into us."

"Yes, and bingo came the wild chase. K had an acrobatic, powerful body—too fast for me. He drove back to Jewel's house. When he started to attack her, she pumped a bullet into him, then called Vargas." I shook my head. "And so the real Jewel Tempest performed for the last time exactly as promised."

Mark looked around at the vast drunken crowd and groaned. "She performed, all right. And what a performance. I don't think I'll ever forget it as long as I live."

I took a long sip of my drink, thinking about K and Q Tempest, thinking about Billy Wild, thinking about Ruth Smith and Rex Murray. Their faces were in my mind so glaring and so huge that they seemed suspended there in one hideous boiling mass.

"I know one thing, Mark," I said faintly.

"What's that?"

"I don't think Jewel Tempest will ever forget that performance either. And neither will her brother."

"Which one?"

I lifted my glass in a hollow toast amidst the yammering wail of El Tostados. "I don't think it makes any difference. Now."

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