

Honey in the Flesh

G. G. Fickling



HONEY WEST



**TV'S Private
Eyeful in the
case of the
Bodies
Beautiful**

“The Coroner Has His Eye on You, Honey!”

The Lieutenant slammed his fists on the desk. “Who do you think you are, anyway?”

“West’s the name. Female. Over twenty-one. Occupation: private eye. Call me Honey. Call me any time.”

“Listen to me, Honey,” Lieutenant Mark Storm said. “Don’t go overboard with all this private justice. Or one of these days it won’t be somebody else hanging in your shower, or somebody else clawing through nineteen floors of thin air — it’s going to be you! And nothing’s going to save you. Not that pearl-handled job you carry up under your skirt, or all the judo chops you can lay neck to neck from here to Japan. You’re the one who’s going to get it. And what everybody will call you is — dead!”

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)

HONEY IN THE FLESH

• **G. G. FICKLING**

PYRAMID BOOKS



NEW YORK

TO FOUR NICE GRANDPARENTS:

*For Florence who prayed,
for Margaret who fought,
for Frank who believed,
and for Frosty who had to have a girl*

GOD BLESS YOU FROM US AND HONEY.

HONEY IN THE FLESH

A PYRAMID BOOK

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ONE

WHEN THEY lifted her from the bay, she came up feet first. She was ashen-white. A jagged raised scar twisted down from her navel. Her stomach was bloated almost to the point of bursting and her once shapely arms and legs showed the effects of salt water.

One of the Sheriff's deputies groaned as he helped lay her on the Coast Guard cutter's deck. His superior, Lieutenant Mark Storm of the Homicide detail, glanced grimly at me, then tossed a blanket over the dead girl's body and said, "How long she been in?"

Watkins, the county coroner, shook his head. "Two days. Maybe longer. Maybe less. I won't know until I get her into the lab. Even then, I may only be able to guess."

A squalling sea gull wheeled overhead, climbing into the hot blue sky above Long Beach harbor.

Mark asked, "How about the scar?"

"What scar?" Watkins asked.

"The one on her stomach."

The coroner lifted the blanket. "Looks like some quack had a field day."

"Doing what?" Mark demanded.

"Removing a baby." He lowered the blanket and turned to me. "Wouldn't you say so, Miss West?"

I winced. "How would I know?"

"You're a woman, aren't you?" The county coroner was a cynical man who delighted in making people uncomfortable, including his stiffs. He knew I was a private detective, female gender, and it particularly delighted him to see me squirm. Mark and the other men on deck flashed inquisitive glances in my direction.

"I've never been pregnant, thank you," I said.

Watkins laughed. "Don't thank me, Miss West. Thank God and thank—"

"Cut it!" Mark angrily interrupted. "I didn't ask for a sermon, Watkins. How old was the girl?"

The coroner's fat face reddened. "Hard to tell. Nineteen. Twenty-five. Who knows?" He slammed his hands into his pockets and removed a pack of cigarettes. "If you're trying to get me to say this is the missing girl from the Miss Twentieth Century Pageant then you've got another *get* coming, Lieutenant. Do you recognize her from the photographs you've seen?"

"Of course not. Her face—"

"Sure," Watkins said, stuffing a cigarette in his mouth. "A few fish can do a lot of damage, even to a beauty contestant. Call me tomorrow. Maybe by then I'll have a few answers for you, including whether that abdominal swelling's a few pints of ocean or another—"

"Okay! Okay!" Mark roared. "We'll wait!" He disappeared up some steps to the pilot's cabin.

Watkins exhaled a cloud of smoke and grinned cockily at Mawson Lawrence, the gray-haired producer-director of the international beauty contest. "Looks like you're going to need a replacement."

"For what?" Lawrence straightened up awkwardly and brushed some salt spray from his forehead.

"For our Golden State of California."

The middle-aged producer's hands trembled and a muscle in his cheek twitched nervously. "This isn't Josephine Keller. This is not one of my girls."

"Who said so?" the coroner demanded.

"Perfectly obvious, isn't it?" Mawson Lawrence spoke with a slight British accent.

Watkins laughed, a shrill birdlike sound that shook his short, pudgy frame. "Nothing is ever obvious, isn't that so, Miss West?"

"Leave me out of this." I felt sick at the pit of my stomach for having seen what I had of the dead girl's body. I'd been at the Sheriff's office when the call came in about a nude body in the harbor. There had been nothing official about my joining the search party. Mark had suggested a joy ride to lift me out of my between-cases doldrums. Some joy ride. A trip down the Colorado River in a canoe couldn't have shook me up more.

The coroner joined me at the railing, a devilish gleam in his bloodshot eyes. "Why leave you out, Miss West? You're a beautiful woman. Hair the color of sunlight. Eyes as big and bright as that sea out there. You know, you'd make a dandy beauty queen." He studied the contour of my sweater. "I was wrong, Miss West. There are a couple of things that are obvious in life. And you got 'em. Yes siree, you'd be a first-rate replacement for the—the late Miss California."

"Not interested, thank you."

"You should be," Watkins continued merrily. "The first prize is fifty grand, isn't it? Nice pay for a few hours of spilling out the top of a bathing suit and wiggling a fanny."

My glance told him to stop, but to no avail. He was getting too much pleasure out of embarrassing me.

He added quickly, "That's better'n spilling what you got all over the gutter, like your father did, isn't it, Miss West?"

A thin hickory shaft suddenly brought Watkins' words to a halt, pinning him against the railing. Newspaperman Fred Sims, supporting himself against a bulkhead, held his cane on the coroner's Adam's apple, his steel-gray eyes blazing. Fred had been injured while heroically rushing a German gun emplacement. Now he steadied his cane as if it were aimed at the man who had cut him down during the war.

"You talk too much, Mr. Watkins!" Fred spat. "I came out here on this overgrown water taxi for a big story. A beautiful Miss Twentieth Century Pageant contestant has disappeared mysteriously. Everybody wants to know if she's dead. Everybody's itching to read the gruesome details and wince at the horrible pictures."

The terrified coroner choked on the steel tip embedded in his throat.

Fred continued tautly, "One more word out of you, Mr. Watkins, and I'm going to give my readers a better story. Ten times more gruesome and ten times more interesting. Wouldn't you look great lying on one of your own slabs? Wouldn't the *new* coroner have a delightful time trying to put you back together again?"

Mark Storm came down the steps from the pilot's cabin and snatched Fred's cane loose from Watkins' throat.

After a quick appraisal of the men on deck, he tossed Fred his cane and smiled thinly. "You're not going to get very far walking in that direction, Fred," he warned. "Take my advice."

Fred nodded, shot another piercing glance at Watkins and then shuffled unsteadily toward the cutter's radio room.

Mark steered me forward, the expression on his face stern, but somewhat understanding. "What was that all about, Honey?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Listen, you and Fred and the others looked like you'd just been vulcanized in a tire plant. What the hell did Watkins say?"

I shook my head dismally. In my mind was the image of my father, Hank West, private investigator. He was lying in a dirty alley with a bullet in his back. There was water in that gutter from the rain that poured down and it was red. Almost too red to be believable. I glanced up at Mark and bit my lips.

"Watkins suggested I was in the wrong business, that I'd do better in the Miss Twentieth Century contest."

Mark groaned. "Is that all?"

"He further suggested we Wests have an occupational hazard. Gutters."

The big deputy winced. "Dirty bastard. I've warned him a dozen times to lay off, but it doesn't seem to penetrate his thick skull. I've never known a man who hates private detectives as much as he does."

I studied the waves that bellied up from the cutter's prow. "Watkins was the coroner on my father's murder, wasn't he?"

Mark nodded. "Yeah. He'd just been assigned then. Four years ago. I've been fighting him ever since."

"He knows that's Josephine Keller."

"Maybe. She's in pretty bad shape, Honey. Believe me, I wouldn't want the job he's got."

Mark cocked his hat back. "And of course Lawrence said no."

"That's right."

"I can't figure him, Honey. Lawrence says Josephine Keller's for real, but we haven't been able to dig up any-

thing, except a lot of sexy photographs. No family, no address, no nothing."

"Well, what about the California finals, Mark? Where were they held?"

He groaned again, cupping his hands together. "I don't know. Lawrence is vague on that point. Says he was out of the country at the time."

"That sounds strange," I said.

"You can say that again. I got a hunch Lawrence knows that girl is Josephine Keller and he's shaking in his boots because he knows."

"You don't think he killed her?" I demanded.

"No. Lawrence is treading on very thin ice with his Carstairs-Campbell arrangement. He'd be a fool to chance murder. The publicity of this girl's identification may be enough to kill his Pageant of the Century as it is."

"Mark, what if Watkins doesn't agree that the dead girl is Josephine Keller? Or what if he can't reach a decision for several days?"

The deputy shrugged. "We'd be stymied and Lawrence would get the *break* of the century. But, that isn't going to happen."

"How can you be certain?"

Mark's big six-foot-five-inch frame straightened. "Watkins has got photographs to work with. Fairly detailed photographs of both her face and body. He can't miss."

"You want to bet on that?"

"Look, Honey, Lawrence filed a missing-persons report on his California contestant yesterday. He gave a full description. I'll admit there's not much left to go on, but there's still her height, relative weight, age, coloring, et cetera. The answer is simple."

"Is the answer that simple, Lieutenant? Or is the answer in the county coroner's grubby little hands?"

"What do you mean, Honey?"

"Take a look at those hands sometime, Lieutenant. They have a place where tens and twenties fit very nicely. A lot of tens and twenties. And I've got a feeling our friend Mr. Mawson Lawrence is going to provide just the right amount of greenery to delay Watkins' decision until after his international beauty contest is over."

"You kidding?"

I shook my head. "The contest officially begins tomorrow, right?"

He nodded.

"You heard what Watkins said about not being forced into an immediate decision. That was for Lawrence's benefit, Mark. Our fat little coroner knows the score as well as anybody. The next move will be a telephone call."

"No, Honey, he could be indicted for a thing like that."

"He's too smart to get caught," I said. "They'll make the money exchange when you least expect it. Probably after the contest's over."

Mark protested, "No. I don't like Watkins, it's true. If I could figure an honest way to get him out of this county I would. He's a blundering idiot, but what gives you the idea—" He stopped, eyes widening as he stared toward the stern of the cutter.

I glanced in that direction. Lawrence and Watkins stood together at the rail. Even from this distance their pleased smiles were unmistakable.

TWO

AT MY OFFICE the next morning I received one telephone call and one caller. The first was no surprise. It came from Mark. Watkins still hadn't reached a decision concerning the dead girl's identification. The caller, on the other hand, nearly knocked me out of my chair. Mawson Lawrence didn't waste five seconds getting down to business.

"Miss West, I wish to purchase your services."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Thanks, but I'm in a terrible rush. Rehearsals begin this morning for the American girls. Hectic schedule. Probably kill me before it's over." He crossed to the windows and lifted one of the Venetian-blind slats. "Looks rather like rain. Miserable business. Could ruin our gate tonight. Opening nights are treacherous things. Terribly treacherous."

"What's on your mind, Mr. Lawrence, besides eighty-eight beauty contestants and the possibility of rain?"

He whirled. "You have no idea what I've been through, Miss West. This was all a fantastic dream a year ago. My dream. To find the one truly beautiful girl in all the world. Not just a search that would last a year, but one that would encompass a lifetime."

"Sounds like a large undertaking on your part."

"Oh, it was, Miss West." He crossed the room, hunching his shoulders, flexing his hands, nervous as a cat in a den of wild dogs. "I thought I could achieve what no other man could—absolute perfection in beauty, in poise, in personality and in background."

He retraced his path to the window with deliberate, almost calculating steps that were reminiscent of a tight-rope walker high on a circus wire. "I searched the world, Miss West. From corner to corner. Through fifty below

freezing in Labrador to searing desert cities and even beyond into the teeth of uprisings, gunfire and iron curtains."

"You're lucky to be alive in the face of all that," I said.

"What? Oh, yes. Yes, it was very desperate at times. But I found the cream, Miss West. I took the cream from every city and hamlet and I condensed that cream into the finest, richest strain of womanhood imaginable."

"I've seen a few pictures in the newspapers."

He whirled again and his expression was intense. "Aren't they splendid, Miss West? Each one an absolute gem of perfection." His hands lifted, fingers curved. "Each one vibrant and full. Each one like an untamed filly high on a pinnacle of rock, with the wind in her mane and the muscles of her flanks gleaming in the sunlight. With her head raised high and her entire body tensing to the challenge of the green valleys below."

His hands suddenly fell to his sides, emptily, sickeningly, a look of utter despair filling his eyes. "Where did I fail, Miss West?"

"I don't believe I fully understand, Mr. Lawrence."

He began to tremble. "That girl yesterday. You saw her. Lying there on the deck. You saw her."

"Yes, of course I did, Mr. Lawrence, but—"

"She was not perfection."

"That was obvious, but—"

His shoulders sagged. "*That* could not have been Josephine Keller."

"You don't sound very convinced, Mr. Lawrence."

He staggered, gripped the edge of my desk and placed his hands over his face. "I—I'm not."

"Then you feel the dead girl is Josephine Keller?"

"I don't know what I feel, Miss West. The feeling's gone. My insides seem like a pile of rubbish. That scar on her stomach—I feel it belongs to me. As if I put it there. It's ghastly."

"Mr. Lawrence, where is Josephine Keller's home?"

"I don't know."

"You must have some knowledge of the California finals."

"No. The state contests were staged while I was in Europe. The men responsible have long since left my organization."

I stood slowly. "Mr. Lawrence, you said you wanted to buy my services. In what connection?"

"I—I don't know exactly."

"But you said—"

His shoulders lifted angrily. "I don't know what I said, Miss West. You have no right to quote me. No right at all, do you understand?"

"I wasn't trying to quote you, Mr. Lawrence—"

"Mine has been a task of no equal—" his voice faltered. "And no man has ever done what I have—" His body sank into a chair as if his legs had been cut out from under him. He stared at me, a glassy, empty stare that suddenly filled with the most impossible hate. "Damnit, woman, don't you understand what I'm saying?"

"Mr. Lawrence, I'm sure you're upset—"

"Upset, hell! I'm sick, do you understand, sick! You've got to find them for me!"

"Find *them*?"

"Of course, *them*," he said. "You've got to find those other scars. You've got to find them if it takes you a million years. You've got to ferret out every scar and blemish, every imperfection—"

"Mr. Lawrence, I'm a private detective, not a medical examiner."

He leaped to his feet, voice raging like a typhoon. "I don't care what you are! Find them! Find them all or I'll—!"

"Mr. Lawrence!" I screamed back.

His eyes closed and he gripped my desk again. "I'll pay you. I'll pay you well."

"I don't want your money," I said. "Now please leave."

"I—I don't think you understand—"

"The only thing I don't understand, Mr. Lawrence, is your attitude, despite what you've seemingly been through."

His eyelids remained closed, penitent, voice lowering into a whisper. "I—I've been through too much."

"Perhaps," I said flatly. "Spare me any further details and just leave, quietly."

"I—I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are. Good day, Mr. Lawrence."

He moved toward the door stiffly, contemplated the

knob for an instant, then glanced back at me. "You—you're a very lovely girl, Miss West."

"Thank you."

"Would you mind my asking your dimensions?"

"Yes, I would mind."

"I'd find knowing them a particular honor, Miss West."

"And I would find seeing you outside my office an even greater honor, Mr. Lawrence."

"How does two hundred dollars sound to you?"

"Two hundred dollars sounds fine."

"Then you accept my offer?"

"Just for my measurements?"

"No! To make a private investigation for me."

"I told you, Mr. Lawrence, I specialize in keyholes, not peering underneath ladies' lingerie for unnatural blemishes."

He produced his billfold and deposited a crisp one hundred-dollar bill on my desk. "There's half," he said curtly. "You'll receive the remainder the day after my Twentieth Century Pageant is over."

I examined the smiling countenance of Benjamin Franklin and then smiled myself. "What exactly do you want?"

"Find the real Josephine Keller."

"But, you said—"

"I've told you, Miss West, never mind what I say. I am a mass of contradictions and compounded impulses. If I told you what I'd really like, you'd most certainly throw me out."

"Oh?"

He opened my office door, slicked back his gray hair and said, "It would be exciting to bob for apples with you, Miss West."

Heavy rain began to fall around noon. On downtown sidewalks people scurried for the shelter of awnings and doorways. Horns blared as cars became involved in a midday traffic jam. Fred Sims waited for me inside a small bar at Ocean and Pine. His coat collar was pulled up and beads of rain stood on his face. He didn't say hello, but kept right on sipping beer and staring at a

half-nude statue of a mermaid crammed between the bottles of bourbon.

"What'll you have, doll?" he grunted finally. "You gave indications over the Graham Bell that this girl has been hired."

"She has," I said, brushing rain from my trenchcoat. "Mawson Lawrence just slipped me a C note and suggested I'd be great at a Hallowe'en party."

Fred swallowed more beer and grinned. "He's right. Your curves are an unavoidable asset, party or no. What else did he have on his—mind?"

"Josephine Keller. He wants me to find her."

"Another novel idea. Did you give him the morgue address?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I read your column this morning."

"That's nice. You must have risen mighty early to glimpse that little gem. Did you enjoy it?"

"Is it all true, Fred?"

The crippled newspaperman shrugged. His column had linked the dead girl with a prostitution racket known as Bodies, Incorporated.

"How sure are you that it's the same girl?" I demanded.

"My anonymous source is—how shall we say?—an honorable gentleman, despite his having met Josephine at a Bodies, Incorporated get-together."

"What do you mean, 'get-together'?"

"Just what I said, baby," Fred grunted. "Bodies, Inc., is an expensive call-girl operation. They have no general headquarters and set up their meetings at infrequent intervals. Hotel suites, private homes. Charge plenty. Even demand a bonus arrangement for extra satisfaction."

I shook my head. "Quaint plan. Any other leads on Josephine?"

"Not yet." Fred stood with the aid of his cane. "I have a very important luncheon date with our illustrious coroner. I hope he'll come up with a positive identification, because if he doesn't I'm going to roast his fat little frame."

"Should be delicious," I said.

"Yeah," Fred acknowledged, tossing some change on

the bar. "Let me know how your Hallowe'en party turns out."

A handsome young man with butched red hair and dark eyes entered the place. A four-by-five press camera was slung over his shoulder. He had a broad mouth and heavy brows and his coat was wet from the rain. He advanced on Fred.

"Sorry, I'm late," he said. "Got hung up in a bit that wouldn't keep."

"Anybody I know?" Fred questioned.

"Nothing like that," the young man retorted. "This was a drag from start to finish. Had to shoot some stuff down at the flesh palace."

Fred introduced us. "This is Hank Kirsten, a new cameraman on our staff. He's got a 'beat' vocabulary and an even 'beater' lens. Hank, this is Honey West."

He gave me the once-over heavily and said, "Way out, man! Way out!"

"Yeah." Fred chuckled. "A thirty-eight to be exact. The *way in* measures twenty-two and that goes for both her waistline and a little pearl-handled revolver she keeps strapped to her right thigh. So let's blow before the lady gets with your lingo and becomes insulted."

Hank Kirsten grinned broadly. "I dig this girl the most. She's the coolest."

Fred pushed him toward the door. "Well, let's go dig the coroner. His joint's cooled by refrigeration."

They were suddenly gone before I could say what I'd wanted to say since the first moment Hank Kirsten entered the bar. He was pretty cool himself. In fact, he was so cool the red lipprints around his mouth had seemed almost frozen where some hot dish had planted them.

My next stop was Pier Ninety-Seven at the northern edge of Long Beach harbor. The boat rental shack at the pier's end appeared to be closed, except for an old wooden sign announcing to the contrary: MACGILLI-CUDDY'S IS ALWAYS OPEN!

A balding little man, as old as his sign and twice as weatherbeaten, sat inside the shack. His feet were propped on another chair and his thin lips fluttered as

he slept. There was something else inside that shack. Not so little or weatherbeaten and about as wide awake as a man with chronic insomnia. He pushed back his battered felt hat and grinned when I gaped at him.

"I was wondering when you'd show up, Honey," he said, glancing at his watch. "By my calculations you're about fifteen minutes behind schedule."

"Lieutenant Storm."

"The one and only. Mrs. Storm's obstreperous little boy Marcus." He gestured at the sleeping man. "And this is Mr. Macgillicuddy, owner, operator and proprietor of the largest boat rental establishment in Long Beach harbor."

"So I've surmised," I said. "Your conversation must have been scintillating. How long's he been asleep?"

"Search me. He's been that way since I arrived. I just thought we might as well start even though you're now in the employ of Mawson Lawrence."

I crossed to a partially-open file drawer. "Very thoughtful of you, Lieutenant. And exactly where did you hear of my association with Lawrence?"

"Your client called me after he left your office. He warned me to look out for you. So I'm looking out."

"I'll bet." I pulled the file drawer all the way open. Several manila folders were stained with wet handprints. "You're a real study in dual personalities, Lieutenant. When I'm not on a case of yours you fall all over yourself trying to entertain me, including the old something borrowed, something blue routine."

"Honey, you know I'm serious about marriage."

"Sure, you're so serious that two seconds after I deposit a retainer on a case that has your name on it, you launch bloodhounds on my trail, throw up a cloud of smoke so thick you could walk on it, and start talking like a medicine man about to sell chewing gum to a group of Martians who speak through a tube in their tail bones."

"Honey, you got me all wrong."

"Have I? What'd you find in this drawer?"

Mark stretched, then said, "During the week of August twelfth Macgillicuddy made one hundred sixty-eight small boat rentals amounting to almost a thousand dollars in cold cash."

"Nice business," I said. "No wonder he sleeps so

soundly. Did you run across Josephine Keller's name?"
"Nope."

"What makes you think she was in a rental boat?"

"Macgillicuddy filed a theft report of a five-horse putter three days ago. The same boat was found abandoned a couple of miles from here. A pair of black silk panties were lodged under one of the floorboards."

"I know," I said.

"And just how does Madame know all and see all?"

"I read the newspapers, Lieutenant. That particular item appeared on page five in yesterday's Press-Telegram."

Mark woke Macgillicuddy and, despite the dewy atmosphere outside, the old man practically had us in a boat before the deputy sheriff could flash his badge and a photograph of Josephine Keller.

"Pretty girl," Macgillicuddy muttered, returning to his chair.

"Ever see her before?" Mark demanded.

"Maybe."

"Was she the one who rented your stolen boat?"

Macgillicuddy's eyebrows lifted, then dropped. "That was a man. Gave the name Rozanne. M. Rozanne."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely. He wore a sailor hat with the brim turned way down and—and a letterman's jacket. I put it all in the report I made."

"I know you did," Mark said, "but you also listed two other passengers. Was one of them this girl?"

Macgillicuddy examined the photograph again. "Maybe. We were pretty jammed up that day. It was hotter than the hinges of Hades. Not like today—"

"Study this picture," Mark interrupted. "It's very important."

The old man ran stubby fingers over his sunburned scalp while he focused on the photograph again. "It never rains in August," he muttered. "Never. Must be those H-bombs they're shooting off. Damned fools'll kill us all before they're through."

"The girl, Mr. Macgillicuddy."

"Usually have three or four men working for me." He laughed bitterly. "Yes, this was the redhead all right."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I recollect the other woman had dark hair and was wearing a bathing suit—a purple bathing suit. I think this one had clothes on. A dress or something."

The deputy patted Macgillicuddy's shoulder. "Would you recognize the man or the other woman if you ever saw them again?"

"Maybe."

"Could you drop around to the Sheriff's office later to-day for a look at some more photos?"

Macgillicuddy shrugged. "Maybe. If it's still raining I might."

Outside the boat shack, Mark walked me to my car and climbed inside, shaking rain from his hat. "How about a lift into town? I want to see your client."

"Why?" I lowered the hood of my trench coat.

"You follow the newspapers. Don't tell me you missed Fred Sims' column this morning."

"I read it."

Mark nodded his complacent hands-off-my-case nod that was laced with get-out-of-my-way sarcasm. Despite our closeness there were two very wide lines that separated our thinking. One, he was a cop. Two, I was a private eye.

"Just to keep you abreast of the times," he said, "Bodies, Incorporated is nothing new to us. We had them pegged about a year ago. We were ready to move in when suddenly everything went cold. We wound up in a blind alley and scratching. Josephine Keller is our first hot lead since then."

"Where does my client fit into the picture?"

"Lawrence is a big operator, Honey. This isn't his initial venture into the kingdom of flesh. He's been connected with beauty contests for years both in this country and Europe. During the war he was arrested in England for selling sex by the pound to G.I.'s."

My client's emotional tirade concerning female perfection settled heavily in my mind. So did the fact that he hired me to find Josephine Keller when he knew she was dead. I flicked the ignition key and started the engine. "Lieutenant, are you implying my client is associated with Bodies, Incorporated?"

"I'm not implying anything, I'm saying he's the head of the whole racket. I'm saying his so-called Pageant of the

Century is a cover, that he's using it not only to make money, but to hire new, even more luscious flesh for his call-girl market."

"That's a pretty large accusation, Lieutenant. I'd be careful where and with whom you explode such dynamite. It might just blow up in your face."

His whole body tensed. "What are you talking about, Honey? Wasn't it you who said Watkins was taking money to delay the Keller girl's identification?"

"That was yesterday, before Lawrence came to my office."

"Yeah," Mark spat, "and before he put some crisp tens and twenties into your dainty little mitts. What is this, a double-play? Lawrence to Watkins to West? Or is it a double-cross?"

I swung my car to the side of the road, looked at Mark's angry face and then said what I had to say as carefully and calmly as possible. "Lieutenant, you said you wanted to stay even with me. All right, we're even. Now get out."

"What?" His face fell. "Are you crazy? We're out in the middle of nowhere and it's raining."

I flicked the door handle on his side. "Get out, Lieutenant. From this moment on, you work your side of the street and I'll work mine. Don't expect any favors from me and I won't expect any in return. Fair enough?"

"Now look, Honey. You got this all wrong—"

"Get out, Mark, or I'll call a cop!"

The muscles in his cheeks rippled. He tried to frame a new argument, then turned up his collar and stepped out into the rain. "All right," he said. "Just remember, you asked for it."

"No, Lieutenant, you did."

I watched him in the rear-view mirror until he was out of sight. He stood by the side of the road with his shoulders hunched and his thumb raised. He was going to have a tough time getting a ride in this weather. But even an hour's delay meant a lot to me right now.

THREE

A SIXTY-FOOT REPRODUCTION of the Venus de Milo towered over the entrance to the Miss Twentieth Century Pageant headquarters, her stubbed-off arms glistening eerily in the dark rain, a pathetic smile etched in the full-lipped mouth, her half-nude body pocked by the bolts and rivets that held her together. She seemed a grim reminder of the girl in the bay. A monstrous symbol of her bloated body, her sightless dead eyes.

Stretching up into the murky sky above Venus was the fabulous Carstairs-Campbell building, a sullen, steel-ribbed monster of plate glass and aluminum, recently erected between the Pike and the river at a cost of several million dollars. Its fifteen floors mirrored the folly of its owners, I-beams jutting through an unfinished exterior, cavernous interiors devoid of walls, ceiling fixtures hanging loose on wires, uncompleted elevator shafts. The structure had been planned as West Coast office space for the Carstairs-Campbell Enterprises, a new soap products corporation. That was the plan until their initial venture, an explosive item called the H-Bar, guaranteed to "atomize the dirtiest dirt," was found to contain dangerous amounts of acid dissolved in a fatty base.

The Carstairs-Campbell people recalled fifty million H-Bars, dumped them and frantically revamped their formula, but vicious national publicity which dubbed them, "Soapy Saboteurs" and "Nitro glycniks," had the corporation heading for bankruptcy until the day Mawson Lawrence offered to take over their empty, unfinished West Coast quarters in exchange for free advertising, publicity and good will. C-C Enterprises gratefully snapped at the opportunity. They changed the name of their product to Beautee-Bar and smeared newspaper ads and billboards across the country heralding "The

New Soap of the Century!" . . . "The Soap of the Most Beautiful Girls in the World!" . . . "Beautee-Bar is Miss Twentieth Century's Own Soap!"

They gave Lawrence the keys to the building for thirty days. He was also allowed the use of a lavish, new, shell-shaped amphitheatre which seated ten thousand people and projected out over the water on concrete pillars.

Lawrence's free-rent arrangement received a big play by the wire services and national magazines. One news publication claimed he had made only one mistake. In taking over the building and amphitheatre he had signed away any and all monetary benefits he might have gained from C-C Enterprises' use of his extravaganza. The article said Lawrence deserved more than just free rent for plucking "The Soapy Saboteurs" out of their ashcan.

"He should have demanded a percentage of the corporation," the article insisted, "or at least a vice-president's salary for a reasonable length of time. As it stands, he owns nothing but the two partially-completed structures for thirty days. His profit, if there is to be any, must come from the gate."

I found Lawrence in the amphitheatre surrounded by a group of beautiful, long-limbed girls in bathing suits. He was arguing with the French contestant who had fluffy blonde hair and a large bosom. They were both gesturing, sweating and swearing, an angry mixture of several languages and epithets. When he saw me, he shook his fist at Miss France, stamped his foot and then dragged me off into a room just off the mammoth stage.

"That Gigi Gautraud," he said, "I could kill her! Stupid, stupid girl! She has a pea for a brain!"

I smiled "The rest of her garden seems to be doing all right. What's the trouble?"

"She's trying to run my contest, that's all. She's trying to tell me what to do!" His tone was half anger, half exhaustion. "What have you learned?"

"It's still raining," I said, unbuttoning my coat.

"I'm not paying you for a daily weather report!" he roared. "What about Josephine Keller?"

"She's dead, Mr. Lawrence. No mistake."

He wiped some perspiration from his forehead and scowled. "I don't believe it."

"You do, but you don't want to."

He sneered. "I'll have you know a suitcase of hers arrived a short while ago. She must be alive."

"Who delivered it?"

"Nobody seems to know," Lawrence said. "We discovered it out front on the sidewalk. Her initials are on the side. But, we haven't been able to locate Miss Keller."

"May I see the suitcase?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "Take the backstage tunnel into the building. One elevator is operating. You can't make a mistake. The other shafts are boarded up. Get off at the tenth floor and turn to your right. You'll find we've partitioned the floor into a series of forty-four small bedrooms. The suitcase is in one marked Germany and California."

"Thanks." I started from the room, then stopped. "Did you read Fred Sims' column this morning?"

"Yes."

"What did you think of it?"

"I thought it was absolutely absurd," Lawrence said. "Calling one of my girls a common whore! I'm considering a suit against the newspaper."

"The Sheriff's office found the information interesting."

His face reddened. "I don't care what they find, unless it's Josephine Keller. The same applies to you, Miss West."

I walked out onto the stage again. Several of the girls shot inquisitive glances at me. Miss France ran her eyes down my chassis as if I might be another contestant and possible competition. High on a platform above the stage a group of men clutching musical instruments whistled.

One of musicians said, "Hey, get a load of Miss Gorgeous Body. I'm going ape with all that stuff running loose down there."

The steel and aluminum tunnel that connected the amphitheatre to the Carstairs-Campbell building was dark and cold and my heels clattered on the tile floor. At the end I was greeted by a reception desk, a switchboard and a thickchested guard. He must have figured I was one of the beauty contestants because he winked and waved me on to the elevator. It was self-operating with mahogany-paneled walls and a thick blue carpet. I

pressed a button and was automatically propelled to the tenth floor. The doors slid noiselessly back, revealing a plyboard corridor that separated an endless chain of rooms. Each had a curtain separating it from the corridor and on these were cardboard blocks announcing the origin of the occupants. In most instances, Lawrence had roomed a foreign girl with an American contestant. Some of the cards read, Canada—New Mexico; Japan—Florida; Panama—Oregon; France—Nevada. Halfway down the corridor I found Germany—California. I found something else when I drew back the curtain. A nude woman stood before a full-length mirror admiring her voluptuous figure.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are you Miss Germany?"

She whirled, a delicately pale girl with almond-shaped eyes and an utterly feminine body that was constructed along the lines of a Greek goddess. She had a long torso supported by two shapely legs that were dimpled at the knees. Her face was broad across the cheekbones where color swiftly tinted their ivory paleness.

I said, "Please accept my apologies for interrupting this way. I didn't realize anyone was up here."

She made no move to cover her nudity and held large hazel eyes on my face as if they were riveted.

"Do you speak English?" I asked.

"Ja."

"I was told I might find a suitcase in this room belonging to Josephine Keller, Miss California."

Her poise was flawless, so was her English. "Ja. There. In the corner. Are you from the police?"

"No."

Her gaze followed me as I walked to a piece of luggage squeezed behind one of the single beds. It bore the initials J.I.K. and was still damp from sitting out in the rain. I put the case on a chair and reached for the twin lock buttons when one of her slim white hands stopped me.

"Nein," she said, a tart firmness in her voice.

"Why?"

"It does not belong to you."

"And what gives you that idea?"

"You are not Josephine Keller."

"How do you know?"

"You are blonde with blue eyes. She is red-haired."

"You've met Josephine Keller?"

"*Nein*. I read a description in the newspaper. You are much larger here, also." She touched her own breasts and they trembled.

I nodded. "Suppose I told you I was a private investigator?"

"What are you investigating?"

"I wish I knew."

The locks snapped open easily. Inside was a jumble of sweaters, stockings and underclothing. At the bottom of the heap, a bulky letterman's jacket and a white sailor cap were folded in such a contemptuously neat manner they took my breath away.

Miss Germany slipped into a dressing gown as I searched the side pockets of the suitcase. Her poise hadn't wavered when I made my discovery.

"Why aren't you downstairs with the other girls?" I asked.

"A cold," she said. "The plane from Berlin. I must have caught a draft."

"Don't you think some clothing would help?"

"I wore a scarf in the airplane."

"That must have been interesting. How long have you been here in your room?"

"Since lunch."

"Did Mr. Lawrence bring up the suitcase?"

"*Ja*." She raised her heavily-penciled eyebrows thoughtfully. "I believe about an hour ago."

"Has anyone else been in the room since then?"

"*Ja*. A few girls came in to see how I was."

"Who, for instance?"

"Notoga, the little Japanese girl. Gigi Gautraud, Miss France." She rubbed her forehead. "I think Miss Puerto Rico. Then, there was Miss Sweden, Panama, Yugoslavia—"

"Any American girls?"

"No, they have not had a moment's rest since this morning. Tonight is the beginning of the United States competition." She suddenly coughed badly. It was obvious she was not faking her cold.

I snapped the suitcase closed. "Did any of the girls open this case while you were in the room?"

Her eyes widened. "*Nein.*"

"Did you examine its contents?"

"*Nein.*"

There was an exuberant vitality and sturdiness in her carriage. She exuded Lawrence's desires for perfection to a T.

"What's your name?"

"Freda. Freda Fisher."

"It fits," I said. "Body by—"

"I do not understand."

"Forget it. What part of Germany are you from?"

"I was born in Köln—Cologne—near the cathedral," she said quietly. "My father was a shoemaker."

"Was?"

She coughed again, rather violently. "He was killed during the war. An American bombing raid."

"I—I'm sorry."

"He would not take shelter." She shook her head. "For this he paid with his life." The words came unemotionally from her lips. Her eyes conveyed a different meaning.

"Freda, do you hate Americans for what happened to your father?"

"*Nein.* Would I not be foolish to say so even if I did?"

"Perhaps." I felt I had to level with this woman. "Freda, my father was also killed. Not during the war between nations, but in another kind of war. A small, evil kind of war between people."

"I—I'm sorry to know of this."

"He went down fighting for a cause he believed in, Freda. Perhaps, as your father must have died. Bull-headed, but courageous to the very end."

"Your father, he was also a private investigator?"

"Yes. The police have never found the person who murdered him, Freda. I've been looking for over four years. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You think I seek my father's murderer?"

"Perhaps. Freda, have you ever gone to bed with a man for money?"

Miss Germany pulled her dressing gown tight at her throat. "I was only thirteen when my father was killed. I had to steal and beg. When the Americans crossed the

Rhine I was fourteen. The soldiers gave me enough food to keep my mother and myself alive. I gave them what they wanted in return."

"How did you get into the Miss Twentieth Century contest, Freda?"

"I was in Berlin." Her voice suddenly faltered and she coughed again. "I met Mr. Lawrence. He said I was good for the contest."

"Is that all he said—or did to you in Berlin?"

Freda couldn't answer. In fact, there was good reason why she might never answer that question. Her eyes stared toward the doorway. In that curtain-drawn opening, filling it with all his tempestuous anger, was Mawson Lawrence.

"Miss West," Lawrence said tightly, "your investigation seems to be degenerating into a deplorable mixture of weather predictions and world affairs. I fear your services might be better used by the American Embassy or the U. S. Weather Bureau."

I shook off the comment and started to go past him with Josephine Keller's suitcase. "You've paid for at least five days, Mr. Lawrence, and that's what you're going to get. One way or another."

He blocked my path with his arms. "Drop the suitcase, Miss West!"

I eased back a couple of paces and shot a side glance at Freda Fisher. She was terrified. Her hundred-carat poise was throat-clutchingly near collapse. She coughed, uttering a few words in German.

"Mr. Lawrence, your girls are in danger."

"From what?"

"From the person or persons who killed Josephine Keller."

"She's not dead."

"Of course not," I said. "And she didn't work a call-girl racket named Bodies, Incorporated either."

"Stop making these vile accusations, Miss West, or it will cost you."

"I hope not as much as it's costing you to keep the county coroner quiet, Mr. Lawrence."

"I don't know what you mean." He stammered just enough to make his words a lie.

"What would happen, Mr. Lawrence, if Carstairs-Campbell Enterprises were to learn a contestant's been murdered—and that she was a former call girl?"

"Don't make any trouble, Miss West. Just vacate the premises quietly."

"There's nothing quiet about these premises, Mr. Lawrence. You've got a bomb here bigger than any carload of H-Bars. Any moment you may blow higher than an English kite."

"You wouldn't—"

"Do you want to open tonight?"

"Of course." His arms lowered, slowly at first, then dropping at his sides. "You win. What do you want me to do?"

I put down the suitcase. "Send ten of your most beautiful girls up here right away. Be sure that includes Japan, France, Panama, Puerto Rico, Sweden and Yugoslavia."

When the girls were assembled in Miss Germany's room, I drew the curtain and introduced myself. Besides the six I'd requested, the group included three American contestants, Miss New York, Miss Nevada and Miss Florida, all stately brunettes. Freda Fisher remained at my insistence. The eleventh member was Miss Mexico, Rita Perez, a curvaceous blonde. She stood nearly six feet tall and her dark Latin eyes flashed beneath gracefully arched brows that were as black as pitch.

On the basis of over-all beauty, four of the eleven stood leagues above the others. Miss New York was one of the most outstanding. She was a radiant girl with flashing green eyes. Gigi Gautraud, the fluffy-haired blonde from France, ranked in that group, as did Freda Fisher. But in my opinion, Mexico's strikingly gorgeous entry had them all beat. Despite her height, Rita Perez was poised to perfection; she carried herself like a queen.

I had to admit Lawrence was a master at digging up beauty. What his talents were at burying it was a different matter. If he was head of Bodies, Incorporated he might have killed Josephine Keller because she knew too much.

I asked the eleven contestants about offers from outside sources.

Miss Puerto Rico said, "Man say he give me hundred dollair if I sleep in hees bed."

"Did you get his name?"

"Thees man own furniture store across street. Bed is in front window."

I smiled. "Any other offers?"

"An independent movie producer called me," Miss Nevada said, hesitantly. "He wanted to give me a screen test for a picture he was making about a nudist camp. I said, 'Nuts to you, brother!'"

Miss France laughed. "A college boy ask me to *bitch* party."

"That word is pronounced 'beach,'" Miss Florida corrected.

"Not the way the college boy say it," Gigi Gautraud countered.

I surveyed the girls. "Is that all? No other offers?"

Miss New York swallowed nervously. She was sleek and lean with close-cropped brown hair shaped about her face. In her green eyes was a glint of fear. Her hands fidgeted with the gold banner bearing her state's name.

"How about you?" I said.

"Me? Are you speaking to me?" she stammered.

"That's right. What's your name?"

"October. October Smith. I'm called Toby."

"How'd you get into the contest?"

"I—I was working in a theatre on Forty-eighth Street."

"On the stage?"

"No, in the box office."

"I see."

"Mr. Lawrence saw me and said I'd be the perfect representative from New York."

I scratched my cheek thoughtfully, then glanced at the fluffy-haired French girl. "How about you?"

"Pardon?"

"How did Mr. Lawrence discover you?"

"While I was working he saw me," she said. I was surprised she spoke English so well.

"Where were you working?"

"In a little restaurant off the Champs-Élysées. In the twinkling of an eye he had chosen me for the contest."

Gigi Gautraud had a bosom which nearly filled her

bathing suit to overflowing. An eye didn't have to twinkle too long to see what Miss France had.

"Am I correct," I said, "in assuming that none of you girls went through any county, state or regional contests—that you were all personally picked by Mr. Lawrence?"

They all nodded, except Miss Nevada.

"I was a chorus girl at the Dreamdust Hotel in Vegas," she said, a touch of triumph in her husky voice. "Mr. Lawrence took a vote of the show's director and backstage crew. Out of thirty girls they picked me as the most outstanding."

The show at the Dreamdust was a revue where the girls cavorted nude to the waist. Her pride in the fact was apparent.

"I assume you're all over twenty-one years of age," I said.

This time the nod was unanimous.

"Then I hope what I'm about to say won't offend any of you. Josephine Keller, Miss California, was once connected with a call-girl syndicate, a high-class prostitution racket. This organization pays big fees to beautiful girls like yourselves."

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est fee?*" Miss France asked.

"Money, francs, marks, rubles, dough," I explained. "It's very possible Miss Keller disappeared because she knew too much about the people who run this business."

"What's that got to do with us?" Miss Nevada demanded.

"If my hunch is correct, one or more of you will be contacted by this group," I said. "When this happens I want to know about it immediately. I don't care where or from whom the offer comes, just notify me at once, understand?"

The nod was unanimous again.

In the ensuing silence, Freda Fisher's cough erupted. Miss New York nearly jumped out of her bathing suit.

"Any questions?"

"Ja," Freda said. "What has happened to Josephine Keller?"

I hesitated, then answered, "The police believe she's dead."

The reactions ran the gamut from open-mouthed disbelief to gasps of horror. But, they couldn't compare with

my reaction a second later when the curtain flew open and a trim, lean girl, a typical artist's model with many angular and linear qualities, stepped inside. She wore a beige suit and a warm smile.

"Hi," she said, brushing a few drops of rain from her pretty face. "I'm Miss California. Josephine Keller's the name."

FOUR

MARK STORM spent an hour and twenty-five minutes in his office with Miss California before he emerged, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

I hadn't expected he'd speak to me, but his attitude seemed fiercely in favor of talking to anyone he could get his hands on.

"She's Josephine Keller, all right," he said.

"What?"

He tossed me a cigarette and grimaced. "Your client's a smart cookie. And loaded with luck."

"Mark," I protested, "you've seen photographs. That isn't Josephine Keller."

"You're dead wrong, Honey." He gave me a light and groaned. "She's not only got an irrefutable birth certificate and California driver's license, but she's loaded with every kind of identification card known to man. And they all check out."

"But, the body in the morgue—"

He slapped his forehead. "I've been on the phone for almost an hour. That one in there is from Eureka. Even the Chief of Police vouches for her. He says he didn't know she'd been chosen Miss California in the Miss Twentieth Century contest, but he sure thinks she'll win."

"Holy Geronimo," I said. "We've really been taken."

"You're not kidding! I can smell a frame ten thousand miles long, but how we going to prove it? Your boy friend, Lawrence, must have combed the state." Mark threw his hands in the air. "How could he have dug one up so fast—and with the same name?"

"Did you check on the suitcase, Mark?"

"Yeah." He shook his head dismally. "Belongs to the girl inside. Without a doubt. I also talked to the manager

of the store in Eureka where she bought it last month. He described it in detail, even to the initials."

"What'd she say about the letterman's jacket and the sailor cap?"

"That's our only wedge," Mark said flatly. "She was dumbfounded when I showed them to her. She claims they weren't there when she packed this morning."

"Where'd she stay last night?"

"A cheap hotel near Sixth and Main in Los Angeles. That checked out, too. She's been there for several days, since her arrival from Eureka."

"Did she say why?"

"Of course. She claims she got her dates mixed up. She thought she was not supposed to report to pageant headquarters until today."

I crossed to a window. "Oh, brother, ain't we got fun."

"Yeah," the deputy said. "I figure she came to town to make a name for herself in the movies, read about the missing Josephine Keller and called Lawrence."

"Why did Lawrence come to me?"

Mark hitched his pants angrily. "He knew we'd scream bloody murder when he pulled her out of his sleeve. He figured you'd be a perfect alibi for him when the screaming started. Why do you think he so politely informed me that he'd put you on his payroll?"

"Pretty smart," I said. "His deal with Watkins—if there was one—must have never got off the ground."

"That's for sure," Mark said, unbuttoning his coat. "Fred Sims scared the pants off Watkins. Told him he'd spread his name from here to Timbuktu if he didn't come up with an identification. He came up with one, all right. The girl in the morgue is the same one identified as Miss California in the newspaper photographs."

"What's Mawson Lawrence going to say about this?" I asked.

Just then the gray-haired producer stepped through the outer office door with a grin on his angular face. "I've already said it, Miss West. The girl found in the bay was an imposter." He turned to Mark. "Now, if you'll be good enough to release my Miss California contestant, Lieutenant, we shall resume my show. Otherwise, I shall be forced to sue your department for an unjustifiable delay which may cost me a fortune."

Mark circled the room angrily before he could summon the words to answer Lawrence's threat.

"Lawrence, you're an out-and-out fraud!" the big deputy finally bellowed.

"Let me caution you on your words, Lieutenant. An employee of mine is seated in this room. Her testimony could demolish you in the Sheriff's office."

Mark's hands reached for Lawrence, but I tactfully intervened, pushing the deputy out of the way. I faced my client with clenched fists.

"You'll never get away with this," I said.

"I don't quite understand you, Miss West," Lawrence returned, his voice neatly edged with British politeness. "Wasn't it our understanding that you were to find Josephine Keller?"

"Yes, it was. But that was before two Josephine Kellers entered the picture. At least, two to my knowledge."

He brushed at a fragment of lint on his coat. "Unfortunate circumstance, this imposter. But, as the saying goes, all things ultimately do arrive at a happy conclusion."

My eyes narrowed. "Mr. Lawrence, do you know what you're doing?"

"Of course, my dear girl. I'm creating the finest pageant of beauty in the history of mankind." He pulled a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill from his wallet. "I asked you to find Josephine Keller and you did. A most satisfactory job. As per our agreement here is your final payment."

I knocked the bill from his hand. "Mr. Lawrence, I don't believe you're a murderer, but you're one of the worst liars I've ever met. How do you explain those photographs in the newspapers which don't jibe with your present Miss California?"

"Simple, Miss West, they were forwarded to me by the imposter. How could I know they were not of the true Josephine Keller?"

"Because you picked her yourself," I said, "just as you did all the other girls in your phony contest. You knew those photographs were accurate."

Lawrence stooped mechanically and picked up the hundred-dollar bill, then shrugged his shoulders. "You

have your opinions, Miss West, and I have mine. Try and prove yours and see how far you get."

"You idiot!" I screamed. "Is money more important to you than justice? A girl's been murdered and what you're doing, in effect, is sheltering the murderer. Do you think for one moment that person is going to be satisfied when he reads all about this in the newspapers? No! If he's a maniac he'll go for broke. And maybe next time it'll be you!"

Lawrence smiled thinly. "Miss West, I fear you are the victim of some very bad detective stories. I would suggest you take a course on the subject of private detecting and then, if you still feel the need, pursue your field with a more logical and understanding mind."

This time Mark had to intervene. The top of my head felt as if it might blow off and I shook with fury all the way down to my toes.

"Get out of here, Lawrence!" Mark said. "And take your Miss—misinformed California with you. You'll be hearing from us."

"I hope not," the producer said. "I'll be frightfully busy for the next week trying to recoup the lost time you have inflicted upon my impossibly full schedule."

I found Fred Sims in the bar at Ocean and Pine an hour later. His "beat" cameraman was seated next to him and a number of empty beer glasses told me they'd been there for some time.

"Hi, doll," Fred said. "Meet my friend."

"I've already had the pleasure," I said, still burning from Lawrence's words. "Where's our coroner?"

"Buried." Fred grinned. "We buried him with honors, didn't we, Hank?"

Hank Kirsten nodded.

I laughed grimly. "Well you'd better resurrect him fast, Mr. Sims, because Mawson Lawrence has just turned up a new body with the same name tag. Only this one's got some pretty lively legs, believe me."

"What?" Fred stood, slopping some of his beer on the counter. "You're kidding!"

"If I am, Fred, I just knocked a C note out of my life

for nothing. She's for real. And she's got more affidavits than the Queen of England."

Fred started toward the door. "Get my city editor on the phone, quick!"

"I already got him," I said. "He told me you were here. He also told me you got a ginger-peachy exclusive from Watkins. Something about a locket and a photograph."

"Yeah. Watkins dug it out of her stomach—along with a couple of pints of water. The photo was inside the locket."

"Does Mark know about this?"

"No." Fred shook his head. "Watkins promised to delay that part of his report until we hit the streets. I didn't know about this other girl."

"Nobody knew," I said. "Lawrence just unveiled her. What about the locket?"

"There was an inscription," Fred continued. "'Til death do us part' and the initial K. It's a miniature. She must have swallowed it just before she died."

"How about the photograph?"

"Too damn small," Fred groaned. "We're blowing up a four column repro in our next edition. The guy looks like he just climbed off a raft after fifty days at sea. Thick hair on both his head and face. He's no Yul Brynner, that's for sure."

"What about the scar on her stomach?"

"Watkins guesses the Caesarean was performed about a year ago. What happened to the child is anybody's guess."

I walked out into the swiftly-gathering darkness and drew my coat collar up against new rain that slanted down between buildings. Neon lights blinked on the front of a cafe across the street and beyond, squatting like a morbid sea monster on the sand, was the Pike with its tinny carnival sounds and its exposed colored bulbs gleaming eerily in the mist. On a wire strung across Ocean Avenue was a banner, sagging limply in the wet dusk of the city. It announced, PAGEANT OF THE CENTURY. MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRLS IN THE WORLD.

I fought back an urge to walk to the distant Carstairs-Campbell building and view the last-minute rehearsals in the amphitheatre. Something told me Mawson Law-

rence was suffering some of the worst moments of his life, badgering and pleading with the American contestants for their cooperation. Watching his misery would have been a balm to my aching, angry brain, but I knew there were several more unenjoyable things to be done.

My office, three blocks and three stories up from where I'd found Fred and Hank, seemed dismally cold and uninviting from the outside. I unlocked the door and crossed to a desk lamp. That was when I sensed something else uninvited lurked in the shadows. My hand was on the revolver under my skirt when light suddenly flooded up from the desk lamp. Hank Kirsten's ruggedly handsome face peered down smilingly at the garter holster on my right thigh.

"What nice equipment you have, grandma," he said, lifting his thick eyebrows admiringly.

I dropped my skirt and straightened. "All the better to see *through* you with, Red. What are you riding these days, a rocket?"

The window was open behind him and I figured he must have climbed the fire escape.

He smiled casually. "I have run the mile under four minutes."

"Down back alleys?"

"There are a few in Bakersfield." He ran his fingers through coppery-colored bristles on his scalp. "My greatest run was in the Compton-Bakersfield jay-see game of 1948. They're still talking about it up in Spudville."

"Really," I said, examining the papers on my desk. "Did you score a touchdown?"

"Two of them. One from one hundred four yards out."

"Must have been spectacular," I said. "Tell me, what makes Sammy run tonight?"

"You."

"I'm flattered," I said, not taking my eyes off his face. "How'd you know this was my office?"

"Fred. We talked about you most of the afternoon. He told me about everything I wanted to know."

"I thought you two were viewing a dead body?"

He grimaced. "We were. What he told me about you was a long way from rigor mortis. In fact, I think you're about as live as they come."

He moved around the desk toward me.

"Look, Mr. Kirsten—"

"Hank."

"All right, Hank. I have a feeling you didn't come all the way up here in nine seconds flat to swap old Bakersfield wives' tales—or to attempt a pass into my end zone. Let's have the truth."

He stopped abruptly, wiped big hands across his face and said, "Okay, I dig you."

"You weren't digging me before. And what happened to your beat lingo?"

"I don't always talk that way."

"So I notice. What's it for, effect?"

His jaws tightened and his chin rose angrily. "No, I believe in the philosophy. Maybe you think you're way out, but you're a square if you don't know that."

I smiled thinly. "And here you were telling me I was so round, so fully packed—"

"Don't mock me! I threw away the watches long ago. I don't sail, do you understand? I swim. I swim a thousand miles every day."

"Good for you," I said. "How's Chiang Kai-shek doing lately?"

His head jerked sideways and he stared at me like a turkey who'd just felt the Thanksgiving axe. "Don't dent the circle, baby, cause I'm in the middle and I'm seeing it the most."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

He moved toward the open window. "I thought you were hip, that's all."

"I've got two of them and they match," I said. "That's more than I can say for your personalities. I'm still listening, Red. Under which hood is the phony?"

"I thought you were really there, but you're a drag," he said, climbing out onto the fire escape. "All four wheels on the ground, that's you."

"Thanks," I said, following him to the window. "How soon will I need a lube job, my valves have been getting pretty sticky lately."

His answer fell apart in the night rain that brushed against the building and the fire escape. I quickly dialed the Sheriff's office. One of Mark's assistants told me the deputy had gone to the Miss Twentieth Century contest.

After I hung up I got to thinking about the girl in

the bay—and Hank Kirsten. Was it possible there was a connection between the two? Had he come up to my office to tell me something important and then changed his mind?

My phone rang startlingly beneath my hand.

"Hello, Miss West?"

"Yes."

"This is Rita Perez. Miss *Mejico*. I think you should come here. *Muy pronto*."

"What's happened?"

Her voice was as taut as a G-string. "You said the truth. This man he call. Ask me to work for him."

"When did he contact you?"

"A few minutes ago. He say I make big money easy."

"How, Rita? Are you sure he wasn't representing some furniture store or a local small business?"

"He say Josephine Keller was not smart. He ask if I ever work for Chicaro in Tijuana."

"Who's Chicaro, Rita?"

"He has a place in Tijuana. Big place with many rooms. I know. My friend Chiquita work there once. I tell this man, *si*, I have work for Chicaro."

"Why, Rita?"

"Because I think you would wish me to do this. Now I am *muy* scared. He is to meet with me tonight."

"Where?"

"On the veranda outside the Sky Bar."

"What time?"

"Ten o'clock. Miss West, I cannot go alone. I am too afraid."

"Did he give you his name?"

"No."

"What time are you out of the show, Rita?"

"The foreign girls, we are finished around nine. Tonight we are only introduced."

"All right," I said. "Now listen. Don't mention this to anyone—not even Mr. Lawrence. Get dressed after you're off stage. Act natural and above all don't get excited, understand?"

"I think so."

"Meet me at nine-thirty at the bar on the corner of Ocean and Pine, across from the Sky Hotel."

"What are you going to do, Miss West?"

"Leave the details to me," I said. "Just be there at nine-thirty."

It was still raining at nine-fifteen when I walked to Ocean and Pine and ducked inside Fred's hangout. He wasn't present, but only because he had a front row seat at the beauty pageant. A multitude of cars parked along both streets indicated Mawson Lawrence was not having a bad evening at the box office, despite the weather. Headlines on the evening editions had done him a world of good. BEARDED MYSTERY MAN! MISS CALIFORNIA ALIVE! WHO IS GIRL IN THE MORGUE?

I ordered a martini and waited. The clock over the bar slipped around to nine-thirty, then nine-thirty-five. My mind kept straying to Hank Kirsten's appearance in my office. Had it been just a romantic visit or—

Nine-forty-five. I finished my martini and glanced around the bar. The total count of customers came to four. Two men and two women. Couples. They sat hunched over their drinks, laughing once in a while, paying attention to no one but themselves. The bartender was watching a fight on TV. He hadn't even looked at me when I ordered my drink.

At nine-fifty-five I walked outside, drawing the coat hood up over my hair. Rain spilled down over a dirty awning and splashed on the sidewalk. I wondered if Rita had been too distraught on the phone to get my instructions straight. Then again, I considered the possibility of the show being changed at the last moment. It was not beyond Mawson Lawrence to reverse his field. He might have decided to introduce the foreign girls last.

On the sidewalk, huddled under a wet awning, every minute seemed like an hour. The neon lights across the street flickered and sizzled faintly.

The chimes on the bank tower were ringing ten o'clock when I crossed Ocean Avenue and entered the spacious lobby of the Sky Hotel. I didn't see Rita until I went up to the nineteenth floor. The veranda was located down a dark corridor, tactfully secluded from the Sky Bar itself, and usually many couples sat there, peering intimately at each other and the distant harbor lights. Because of the rain the veranda appeared empty, except for Rita,

who stood pressed against an inside wall, a cigarette dangling from her lips, a black shawl drawn over her head.

"What happened?" I demanded. "I told you to meet me across the street."

She was trembling and her dark eyes stared at me fearfully. "You—you should not have come," she whispered tautly. "He called again. He said I would be killed if I tell anyone."

I glanced at the dark ocean and at the monstrous glow of the Pike which stretched and clattered on the sand far below. "I told you not to worry," I said. "How long have you been here?"

"I don' know. Fifteen, twenty minutes. I don' know. Please, leave, Miss West. We'll both be killed."

"Steady, Rita. He still didn't give you his name?"

"No." She brushed at some raindrops on her cheek and her head nodded sadly. "I never should have got into the contest. I knew I should not have. He insisted."

"Who insisted, Rita? Lawrence?"

"No. No, he did not. It was my father. The pig!"

She jerked her black shawl down around her shoulders and crossed to the wooden, railing that encircled the veranda. Wind blew her hair as she leaned hard against the pointed slats, throwing the weight of her big body forward. For an instant, she seemed perilously near to falling nineteen stories. I grasped her shoulders.

"What are you doing, you silly fool?"

She whirled, all too abruptly, and her hands lifted under my arms. Her face was full of hatred and she bent over me like a canopy of doom. I was halfway over the railing before my right fist struck her face. Rita's head snapped back and she dropped me on the sharp spikes. One cut through my coat. Another gouged my side as I fought to keep myself from pitching over into the wet darkness. Sounds clammered in my ears—breakers crashing hundreds of feet below, the roller coaster on the Pike, Rita's breathing as she tore at me with her hands. I kicked at her stomach and missed. She ripped off one of my shoes and hit me with the heel. Once in the back, again in the cheek. I slipped over the side, my coat hooking on one of the spikes, tearing it open under the right sleeve. My knee struck a narrow cement ledge on the

outer side of the railing and I clung there as she reached over farther with my shoe, swinging viciously.

She must have slipped on the wet surface of the veranda because her swing never seemed to stop. She kept moving higher and farther over the railing until the huge length of her beautiful body was completely over the side. Suddenly she realized what was happening, in a lung-bursting kaleidoscope of horror; she screamed and reached back for one of the wooden spikes. Her fingers couldn't quite touch. The nails scraped sickeningly down the splintery shaft. She hit the cement ledge on my side, legs kicked up, arms flailing. She shot pleading eyes at me as her momentum skidded her over the edge. I tried to stop her, but all my hands could grab was the black scarf that clung to her shoulders. She plunged off into the deep, dismal abyss, the sound of her going piercing the night like a lonely freight train.

FIVE

EVEN BEFORE the horrendous clatter of Rita's fall into the tin-roofed hotel cabañas had melted, stout arms were lifting me over the wooden spikes. A man, supporting himself by one foot on the outer cement ledge, held me to the railing while two others gained a secure grip on my shoulders.

They helped me into the Sky Bar where I sat for a few minutes, shaking violently, staring at the scarf knotted in my fingers. I kept asking myself questions, but all I got back was an unanswerable image of Rita rolling out of the fabric, her passage into darkness, her scream. . . .

A crowd had gathered around the Sky Hotel's swimming pool by the time I arrived on the ground floor. Despite this hushed, mouth-opened throng and a running battle with the hotel manager and house detective, I managed to wedge through to where Rita's body had finally landed after bouncing off two tin roofs and crashing through a third. The severe impact had sheared away most of her clothing. She sat half-upright in the wrecked cabaña. Her dead eyes still held the horror of her fall and her partially open mouth contained the cry that had been snuffed out when she struck the first roof. My shoe was crushed in her fingers.

A doctor was examining me in the manager's office when Mark Storm strode in. I had been bruised, cut and scraped by Rita's fingernails, but Mark couldn't have cared less. His first growl sent the doctor flying. His second hit me even harder.

"Honey, you're under arrest for suspicion of murder. Button up your blouse and let's go."

"What?"

"I said button up your blouse!" His face was livid. "What the hell do you think this is, a peepshow?"

"I've got a cut here under my right arm," I protested.

"Save it for the jury! There's a girl out there with a few cuts that can't be patched! Why'd you push her off the roof?"

"Mark, are you kidding?"

"No! I'm not kidding!"

I could see he wasn't. He was dead serious. More serious than I'd ever seen him. I closed my blouse and sat up.

"She did the pushing," I said. "We both nearly went the distance."

"That isn't what Rita Perez told us."

"What are you talking about, Mark? She's dead."

"She wasn't when she called my office at nine-thirty. She said she was in a phone booth somewhere along Ocean Avenue and that you were out to kill her."

"That—that's ridiculous," I stammered.

"Is it?" Mark pushed his hat back grimly. "She said you'd been following her since she left the amphitheatre at nine o'clock."

"She was lying. I was in my office until almost nine-thirty and the next half hour in a bar across the street from this hotel."

"Prove it! My office called yours at nine-fifteen. Your answering service said you were out."

I blinked. "I—I guess I left earlier than I thought."

"Yeah, say before nine? Before Rita left the amphitheatre?"

"No. I was supposed to meet her in that bar at nine-thirty. I went there directly from my office."

"Any witnesses?"

"Of course. A bartender and two couples. They were—" My voice cranked to a terrified stop. "I think they would remember me—"

"What do you mean *think*?"

"Well, there was a fight going on—"

"What kind of a fight?"

"On TV," I said. "The bartender was watching it. I don't know whether— Mark, this is absurd! You couldn't possibly suspect me. I had no motive—"

"No?" He didn't take his eyes off me, not for a second.

"She told my assistant you had the mistaken idea she was the person who murdered your father."

That remark nearly knocked me out of my chair. I tried to laugh, but nothing came out.

Mark continued quickly, "She also said you based your belief on the fact she was involved in the case your father was working on when he was shot."

"This is all news to me," I said, regaining some of my composure. "Just how was she involved?"

He hunched his shoulders angrily. "She didn't say she *was* involved. She just intimated you thought she was."

I stroked my sore right side. "Get with it, Lieutenant. Isn't it obvious? She was setting you up the same way Lawrence did when he informed you of my assignment."

"I wasn't there when she called," Mark said. "I was at the amphitheatre. I told you my assistant took the call."

"All the better," I said. "You might have asked some questions she couldn't have answered. She must have known you were at the amphitheatre."

"I'd like to believe that, Honey," Mark said grimacing. "Knowing how you've always felt about your father's murder—"

"So what?"

"You swore you'd get that person."

"Look, Mark, a lot of people know about the Hank West bullet-in-the-back case. And what they don't know, they can always look up in a newspaper morgue. Rita Perez was playing it smart. After you picked up my pieces she was going to cop a plea of justifiable homicide."

"It doesn't pan, Honey. Even if she was lying, I don't see any motive for her going after you."

"Open your eyes, Lieutenant. What about the girl in the bay?"

"What about her? We have nothing that connects her with Rita Perez."

"The other woman, Mark. The one in the purple bathing suit."

"Macgillicuddy described her as brunette. Rita's blonde."

I groaned. "How many true blonde Mexicans do you imagine exist, Lieutenant?"

"I—I don't know. What difference does it make? She's six feet tall. Macgillicuddy wouldn't forget that."

"How tall do you look sitting down, Lieutenant?"

Mark stiffened. "You mean you think she was already in the boat when Macgillicuddy saw her?"

"It's possible," I said. "Have you seen her since she fell from the veranda?"

Mark's voice flattened out. "Of course. A few minutes ago. They were just taking her to the morgue."

"Had they pried my shoe out of her hand?"

"No. But, don't get the idea that proves anything. There was a struggle. Who started it is what we want to know."

"What was Rita wearing when you saw her?"

The deputy took off his hat and winced. "Not much of anything. She—"

"Was Rita Perez a blonde, Mark? Was she standing on the dock or seated in the boat when Macgillicuddy actually saw her?"

He pushed his hat back on his head and grasped my hand. "Come on!"

"Where we going?"

A thin smile edged up around his mouth. "You ask so damned many questions I'm going to trade you in for a quiz show."

The Carstairs-Campbell building was crawling with newspapermen and photographers when we arrived, after my making a quick clothes change. The facts about Rita's nineteen-story dive were on everyone's lips, except those of Mawson Lawrence who sat in his office like a mummy resurrected out of an old Egyptian tomb. When he saw us he managed a vague nod and resumed his blank stare at the reporters who circled his desk. Mark cleared the room before they had a chance to swarm on me.

After a moment, Lawrence said, "I'm ruined."

"Tough," Mark said. "Look at me, I'm crying."

"This publicity will kill me with Carstairs-Campbell Enterprises."

Mark cracked his knuckles. "Want to tell us the truth now about this Miss California mess?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars down the drain," Lawrence muttered. "At least that much."

"Who was Rita Perez, Lawrence?"

"A girl," he whispered, head in his hands. "Just a girl I found in Tijuana, that's all."

"You sure you found her in Tijuana, not Los Angeles?"

"Yes. She was dancing in a night club. A beautiful dance. Nothing dirty. She was lovely in every fiber of her body. I really thought she'd win the contest."

"You weren't planning to help her, were you?"

"No!"

"Maybe you got this thing fixed, huh, Lawrence?"

"No!"

"Sure," Mark said. "It adds. Only one prize. Fifty grand. A few payoffs here and there and you're home free."

"No! This contest is legitimate!"

"Not as far as Josephine Keller is concerned."

Lawrence jerked erect, eyes narrowing. "I had nothing to do with that."

"With what?" Mark demanded.

It was a loaded question and Lawrence sensed where the barrel was aimed. "Josephine Keller was an imposter."

"Which one?"

"The first!"

"You going to stick to that story?"

"Yes. Why not? It's the truth."

Fred Sims barged in unannounced, followed by Hank Kirsten. He flicked his cane at me and ordered, "Get a shot of her with her skirt up. Make it look like she's just been pulled off the roof or something."

Mark snapped his thumb toward the door. "Out, Fred, we're having a private confab."

"Is that so?" the newsman said. "Well I was a private once, so you can count me in. Come on, Honey, let's have a long length of some of that flesh—"

The big deputy grabbed Fred by the scruff of his neck and swung him around. "Look, I'm not kidding."

Fred didn't bat an eyelash. "Neither am I, Lieutenant. I've got a deadline in ten minutes. Honey stole the only photo we had of her from our morgue file. Hurry up, Hank."

Kirsten aimed his camera, gesturing for me to lift my skirt. He was between me and the door and I knew I'd never make it. I reached for the hem of my skirt.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Yeah," Kirsten said. "At least give us a little knee."

I obliged swiftly, raising the hem all the way to my eyes before his flashbulb exploded. Mawson Lawrence's teeth almost fell out of his mouth.

"Honey!" Mark roared. "What the holy hell are you doing?"

I was out the door and all the way to the elevator before the puzzled deputy caught up with me.

"Judas Priest!" he roared. "What the devil are you posing for, French books? You just showed that man everything but your driver's license."

"Fred asked for flesh."

"Did you have to give him the whole hundred and twenty pounds?"

Mark flipped his badge at the elevator guard and stepped inside.

I laughed. "I was trapped, Lieutenant. It was the only thing I could think to do."

"My God, the guy's eyeballs practically hit the ceiling!" Mark punched button number ten and the doors slid closed. "Couldn't you have hidden your face with your hands or turned your back to the camera?"

"He'd still have gotten some sort of picture Fred could have printed. This way he hasn't got anything."

Mark shook his head. "No. Just a pink garter, a pearl-handled revolver and—"

The elevator doors parted, revealing the plywood corridor and several beauty contestants, one wearing much less than I was when Kirsten snapped my picture. She gave a small shriek and ran barefoot to her room. Even from the rear I was certain it was Miss Germany. This gal seemed to have a strong aversion to clothes.

Miss New York, clad in a tight-fitting bathing suit and gold ribbon, glanced at Mark and shouted, "Man on ten!"

A few curtains rattled down the corridor. The deputy brushed at his nose embarrassedly as we crossed to the dark-haired girl from Gotham.

"Sorry to break in unannounced," Mark said, fidgeting with his tie. "I'm Lieutenant Storm from Sheriff's office, homicide."

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant," Miss New York purred softly. "Don't let it worry you. We have to do so

much dressing and undressing off-stage that we're used to—male interruptions. Yours was just a new face to Freda, that's all. I'm sure if you'd been Mr. Lawrence or—even Mr. Kerrigan she wouldn't have run the way she did. I'm Toby Smith."

Mark nodded. "And this is Honey West."

Toby's green eyes flicked over me coldly. "We've already met." She forced a smile on her lips as she turned to Miss France. "Gigi Gautraud from Paris."

Abruptly Mark extended his hand and the fluffy-haired blonde leaned way forward to reach it, a deep V scissoring underneath her bathing suit. Mark almost wound up shaking more than he bargained for. His face reddened.

"What—what part of Paris you from?" he asked, trying to cover his embarrassment.

"The left bank." She straightened just in time. "You know it, *oui*?"

"No, I'm afraid not. The only banks I know are along the Los Angeles River."

Gigi Gautraud was obviously aware of her body. More than most women. She moved each muscle knowing full well what it was doing and what it might do under the right circumstances. I got the feeling she was playing with Mark. Like a cat with a trapped mouse. When she pawed him, he squealed. Toby Smith tactfully interrupted this game with another introduction. She gestured at the tiny Japanese contestant, who stood in a robe and sandals behind Miss France.

"Miss Samsi Notoga from Tokyo. She was in Hiroshima when we dropped the first A-bomb."

Mark stared admiringly at the pretty Oriental. "You seem to have survived that ordeal nicely."

Samsi bowed. "Thank you. My brother and sister were not as fortunate. They died."

The big deputy winced. "I—I'm sorry."

"Those are the fortunes of war, Lieutenant," she returned softly. Her English was amazingly natural. "If it had not been for your bomb many others might have died, foolishly."

The harsh silence that followed was broken once more by Toby Smith as she pointed to the one remaining contestant. "Lis Rico from Panama."

The slender, startlingly white-skinned girl from the

Canal City did not move. She cast penetrating eyes at me. Hot, questioning eyes that were filled with contempt and fear. Her hair was jet black and her skin the color of polished ivory. The contrast was heightened by a faint trace of purple lipstick and violet eyes. Lis Rico was an electrifyingly beautiful woman. Mark smiled at her, but it didn't dent the smoldering stare she kept fixed on me.

"Are you a full-blooded Panamanian?" the deputy asked, apparently as curious about her coloring as I was.

"No." Her accent was much broader than most of the foreign girls. "My mother was Americano. She die long ago."

Freda Fisher entered the corridor again, head held high and graceful, shoulders straight, legs swinging easily under the robe I'd seen her wear earlier in the day. She shook Mark's hand warmly after being introduced and even managed a small wink in my direction. The German girl had a freshness the others lacked, a scrubbed look that seemed more than just skin deep.

"Miss Fisher," Mark said, "you room with Miss California, isn't that correct?"

"Ja."

"Is she there now?"

"Nein. I believe the poor girl is still backstage in the amphitheatre."

"Why is that?" Mark asked.

Toby Smith interceded. "We American girls went through the first elimination round tonight. Miss California didn't make the semi-finals. She was pretty broken up."

"I see." The deputy shot a quick look at me, then swung his eyes back to Miss New York. "And do you also know who saw Rita Perez last before she left this building?"

An instant of razored quiet lay in the dimly-lighted corridor again, until Miss France split it with a quick toss of her head. "That is a curious thing, Lieutenant."

"What is?"

"*C'est impossible!*" She placed her hands to her ears and then over her eyes. "How you say, we are the monkeys? We did not hear or see her leave. No one. We have questioned them all. It is *impossible* how she do this thing."

"You forgot a monkey, Miss Gautraud," Mark reminded. He put his hands on his mouth, then drew them away.

"Perhaps there is one among you who can't speak. Who won't tell the truth."

Miss France nodded. "*Oui*. But, if she is here she does not speak. So?"

"I don't want to accuse anyone." The police tone of Mark's voice lifted so that he might be heard in rooms along the corridor. "One of you may be afraid. Still I've got to know what Rita Perez did this afternoon, how she acted, whether she was unduly nervous before the show."

"I can answer that, Lieutenant," Miss Germany said. "She was like the play."

"What play?"

"*Cat on the Hot Clay Roof*."

"Tin," I corrected, then saw the image of Rita buried in the twisted metal and grimaced.

Mark turned on Lis Rico. "Were you and Rita friendly?"

"Si." Her ivory skin and Spanish phrases didn't match.

"Did you room together?"

"No. I am with Miss Oregon." She continued to regard me hotly. "Senor Lawrence mix the Americano girls with us."

Mark took a small gold locket from his coat and snapped it open. "This—this belonged to the woman we found in the bay. Do you any of you recognize this man?"

Miss New York squinted at the photograph inside and shook her head. The others followed suit, all except Lis Rico. She ripped the locket from Mark's hand, expelled an angry oath in Spanish and vanished down the corridor.

"Hey!" the deputy yelled, taking up pursuit.

We found her in a room belonging to Miss New York and the dead Rita Perez. Lis had a suitcase open and was throwing clothes on the floor wildly by the time we caught up with her. She spit in Mark's face as he pinned her against the wall.

"Filthy Americano pig!" she spat, eyes shifting to me. "You kill her! You kill Rita!"

"We didn't kill anybody!" Mark threw her back on one of the beds and pried the locket from her fingers. "You'd better get ahold of yourself, young lady! Why'd you run away? What were you looking for?"

Lis Rico didn't have to answer. My hands dug under another layer of clothes in Rita's suitcase and came up

with a small unframed ID photograph. It was a dark print of a man with thick hair and a beard. I held it beside the one inside the locket. There was no mistake. They were indetical. Even to the inscription.

'Til death do us part. K.

SIX

"ALL RIGHT," Mark said, bending over the struggling Miss Panama. "Who is he?"

"I do not know."

"You recognized the photograph in the locket," the deputy pressed loudly. "You knew this duplicate was in Rita's suitcase. You came here to destroy them both, didn't you?"

"No!"

"You lie, Miss Rico."

"I do not lie," she insisted angrily. "The man I do know, *si*. But, only because Rita show me him yesterday."

"Where did she show him to you?"

"In this room," Lis said. "She let me see this picture."

"I don't buy that," Mark countered. "What'd she say his name was?"

"She call him King."

"King what?"

"Just King. She say she love him *mucho gusto*."

"And that's all she said?"

"*Si*. Rita did not talk much."

Mark whirled toward Miss New York, who had followed us. "You roomed with Rita, is that true?"

"We've been here for five days," Toby said. "I don't believe she spoke more than a dozen words to me in that time."

"She never showed you this photograph?"

Toby Smith's green eyes wavered slightly. "No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Mark straightened, scanning the other faces in the room. "Was Rita Perez a blonde when she arrived from Tijuana?"

Miss New York shot a furtive look at Lis Rico. "No. She bleached her hair."

"When?"

"I—I believe—three days ago," Toby stammered, "wasn't it, Lis?"

The pretty Panamanian contestant nodded, tugging on her bathing suit straps nervously. "She thought she would win with light hair."

"And what did you think, Miss Rico?" Mark demanded.

"She was the favorite. It did not make much difference."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "What gave *anybody* the idea Rita Perez was the favorite?"

"We take vote," Miss Germany said. "Among us. Rita win easily."

The deputy tossed the locket into the air, caught it and then grimaced. "So the favorite never even got out of the starting gate, huh? Pretty lousy race. Who placed second in your voting?"

The girls had to think for a moment, then all eyes turned toward the stately Miss New York. Toby Smith froze, then ran her tongue over trembling lips.

"But, I—I don't even think I'll win the Miss U.S.A. title," she stammered. "I—I don't know why they voted me second."

"You're not second any more, Miss Smith," Mark reminded.

"I—I know."

"Strange that the two girls voted first and second should share the same room, isn't it?"

"I—I never thought about it before."

"Really?" Mark said. "Well, you'd better think about it, Miss Smith. If this contest continues you may win yourself fifty thousand dollars."

A deep male voice snapped our heads around. "That's right, Lieutenant."

Framed in the doorway was ex-private eye Reg Kerigan, a cocky guy with white blonde hair and a sarcastic smile. He'd lost his detective's license for innumerable reasons, one being his involvement in a scandal mag probe. Another, he'd been caught in a D.A.'s bed with the D.A.'s wife in his B.V.D.'s. That one had practically blown the roof off City Hall.

"What are you doing here, Kerrigan?" Mark asked.

"I work here, Lieutenant. I'm stage announcer for the pageant."

The deputy glanced at Toby Smith. "So this is the Kerrigan you were talking about."

Miss New York nodded. Gigi Gautraud smoothed back her blonde hair and smiled winningly at Kerrigan.

"Lawrence sent me to tell you, Lieutenant, that he heard from the Carstairs-Campbell people. They're not worried about Rita Perez. The show goes on."

The girls clapped their hands and shouted gleefully. October Smith didn't join in. She crossed to her own suitcase and flicked it open. She took out a .32 revolver and tossed the weapon to Mark.

"You would have found this eventually, Lieutenant," she said, trembling. "I brought it with me from New York."

Mark examined the weapon, a puzzled look on his face. "Why show this to me, Miss Smith?"

"You would have found it when you searched this room, wouldn't you?"

"Possibly."

"I didn't want you to think I was hiding the gun," Toby explained.

"Why do you carry it, Miss Smith?"

"I can't answer that question."

"Why?"

Toby cast her green eyes at the floor and shrugged dismally. "Because I can't. I'll tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"I have a permit for the gun and even if you arrest me I'll refuse to tell you why I carry it."

It was after midnight when Mark and I left the Carstairs-Campbell building. We had found the purple bathing suit and several other interesting items. One discovery I'd made personally and I wasn't sharing it with anyone.

The rain had stopped and a full moon paled through fleecy white clouds. We walked to the Pike and ordered coffee at an all-night diner. Nearby, the roller coaster

caromed noisely and far across dark sand waves broke. Mark handed me a cigarette and flicked a match.

"What do you think, Honey?"

"I think you'd better dig up a man with a beard."

"Yeah." He groaned. "I have a hunch that isn't going to be so easy." He tossed the small photo on the counter. "Underneath that bush could be Winston Churchill for all we know."

"Why don't you give him a shave and a haircut? Lou Hokey in your criminology lab is an artist, isn't he?"

Mark stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "Lou's good at constructing a face from a description. We have nothing on this guy. How do we know he hasn't got an Andy Gump chin or three chins for that matter?"

"Take a clue from the two dead girls," I said. "They were both young and beautiful. Mr. Bluebeard would have to be halfway good-looking to nail down two such glamorous dolls."

The deputy nodded. "Maybe. Then again he might be ugly as sin and loaded with dough."

"Those aren't ugly eyes, Mark."

"No, I guess not." He scrutinized the photo closely, then slapped it with the back of his hand. "Do you think it might be Kerrigan?"

"Maybe. I wouldn't put it past the rascal." I snapped my fingers. "There's an angle, Lieutenant. Sharpen a pencil and go to work on a batch of photos of clean-shaven suspects, including Kerrigan."

He kissed my forehead. "Honey, you're a genius. An absolute genius."

"That isn't what you were calling me a couple of hours ago in that hotel manager's office."

Mark groaned. "I was so damned mad when I walked in there I felt like knocking down the walls."

"So I noticed. If you'd worn a hair suit you could have passed for Mighty Joe Young."

"Well, you deserved it," he barked. "Leaving me out there in the boondocks in the rain! I knew you were up to no good, but I didn't suspect you'd be sucker enough to meet Rita Perez on a narrow veranda."

"How'd I know she had larceny under that well-turned sweater of hers?"

"What I'd like to know," Mark said grimly, "is where she got that dope about your father."

"Ask Bluebeard—if you find him."

"I found the purple bathing suit under Rita Perez's mattress, didn't I?"

"Sure. Maybe you should have looked under her bed as well."

"Don't be funny, Honey." He tossed some change on the counter and got to his feet. "You want a lift."

"No, thanks. You might drive out to the boondocks and drop me."

He grinned wolfishly. "Let me clue you, Honey. If I ever drive you out to the boondocks, it won't be to drop you."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Don't mention it. Well, I'm off to sharpen a few pencils." He vanished down the glittering neon-lit strand, Bluebeard's photo tucked neatly in his pocket.

When he was gone, I laughed openly. The counterman regarded me suspiciously out of the corner of one eye. I didn't mind. What Mark needed most was to sharpen his head. Obviously he thought he'd pulled Bluebeard's wool over my eyes. Not once had he mentioned Toby Smith and her revolver. Nor Lis Rico and her mysterious race for the photograph.

I laughed again. Who did Mark think he was kidding? He was going to spend the night drawing pictures all right, but not beards on clean-shaven men. He was going to sketch down-turned sailor caps on dark-haired women. First, Toby Smith, then Lis Rico and finally the new Josephine Keller. Then he was going to show his art work to Mr. Macgillicuddy. What Mark didn't know was I *had* looked under Rita Perez' bed. And what I'd found there would have shook Mark's pencil sharpener clean off the wall.

I woke at seven-thirty, showered and dressed hurriedly. The sand-colored shirt that I drew over my shoulders matched my skirt and shoes. I wanted to be inconspicuous this day. As inconspicuous as possible. Even my wide leather belt followed this monochromatic theme.

While I had breakfast, I scanned the morning head-

lines. They talked about clearing weather, possible war in the Far East, new hurricanes off Florida and the sudden death of a beauty contestant from Mexico. Rita's picture was on the front page of the Independent, a smiling head-and-shoulders shot apparently clipped from the pageant publicity brochure. The banner across the top read:

BEAUTY QUEEN FALLS 19 STORIES IN FIGHT
WITH FEM EYE

Miss Mexico Plunges To Death
From Sky Bar Veranda
Blonde Detective Rescued

The reporter's story was overly colored with such phrases as "titanic struggle high in the rain and darkness" and "pitching into the utter oblivion of death." He mentioned my name twice and said I'd clung by one hand fifteen minutes before being pulled to safety. In another column Mawson Lawrence was quoted: "Although this girl, Rita Perez, must have had suicidal tendencies, I feel Miss West was responsible for creating undue alarm among the girls and indirectly causing the Mexican contestant's death." He also denied that he had hired me privately and further intimated that I was attempting to destroy his show.

Fred Sims politely ignored me in his column. He discussed the deadliness of beauty contests, corrupt county officials (aimed, no doubt, at Watkins, but omitting his name), and big-league pimps. In this last category he named names. Mawson Lawrence headed the list. One other caught my eye. Reg Kerrigan, the blacklisted shamus.

I locked my front door and walked downstairs to the street. My convertible was parked in a side alley with the top up. The first thing I saw, after climbing inside, was a camera and a big hairy-backed hand about ready to immortalize me on film. I ducked and swung hard with my fist. Which came first, the wheeze or the bulb's explosion, was anybody's guess, but it was no guess on my part that Hank Kirsten had created both. He fell back in the seat, dropped his camera and clutched his stomach with both hands.

"What are you trying to prove, lady?" he managed, groaning through clenched teeth. "I knew you had good legs, but muscle is something else again. Especially when applied to my guts."

"If you had any guts," I said angrily, "you wouldn't be pussy-footing around inside cars. Get out!"

"You don't understand," he argued. "Fred sent me."

"You've been *sent* since the day you were born. Now scram!"

Despite my surprise and anger, I was pleased to see Hank Kirsten. More pleased than he could possibly imagine. I had a hunch what I'd found under Rita's bed concerned the photographer. Now I decided to prove it—in my own way. There were two keys to my theory: the lipstick smudges on his mouth yesterday morning and his unexpected visit to my office last night. I realized one simple microscopic test could prove what I wanted to know, but I decided on a gamble. A long gamble. As he started to climb from the car, I ran my hands up under his arms and down to his coat pockets.

"Hey!" he protested. "Now what the hell are you doing?"

"Just checking for firearms."

"Why?"

"They don't allow them when you cross the border."

"What border?" Kirsten demanded.

"The one at the Rio Grande," I said. "Before you get to Tijuana."

He swung around, eyes searching mine. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to make a little trip with me."

"To Mexico?" He was suspicious and getting more so every second.

I shrugged. "Okay, scram. It was just an idea. I'm going down on a routine check of Rita's past. There should be a picture story in it. Apparently you're not interested."

He caught my arm as I reached for the ignition key. "Why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't ask."

He rubbed his stomach. "You don't allow much time for questions."

I grinned. "That's my policy. I always hit first. That way nobody gets hurt."

"Nobody, meaning you."

"That's what my father always said. Are you in or out?"

"I'm trying to make up my mind."

"If I'd spent that much time last night you'd have got my picture."

He nodded. "I got your picture, all right, only your tonsils were in the way."

I was pretty certain I'd lost him. Only one avenue remained. "Sell a print to a throat clinic," I said. "Make back some of the money you'll lose not getting this picture story."

"I don't like money."

"Okay, it's your hard luck."

He suddenly closed the door on his side. "No, it's yours. Let's go!"

I started the engine and snapped the automatic into drive. We shot forward, veered around a corner and headed for the highway that would lead to San Diego and Tijuana. Hank Kirsten sat beside me, a thin, pleased smile on his lips. Fortunately, he couldn't see it, but I was smiling, too. Deep inside. The stage was set.

We crossed the border between Mexico and the United States around noon. Hank Kirsten had talked a lot during the trip, mostly about his hopes for the future, beatniks and women. The last two were closely allied in his mind. He believed the "true" beat was one who lived and loved whenever the urge and the companion seemed companionable. He professed many theories, all hinging on "free food, a free bed and free love." He explained that his job with the newspaper was a "bourgeois hiding-place" until he found himself again. Never once did he mention Rita, her death or the Miss Twentieth Century contest.

We parked in downtown Tijuana to the scurrying and shouting of a dozen little boys who promised safety for my car if we followed their directions. I paid their blackmail and quietly pressed an additional quarter into the hands of one dark-eyed youngster who told Hank he had a "seester" who did anything for a dollar.

"Where's Chicaro's?" I demanded.

"He would not like that place, *Señorita*," the boy argued. "Too much *dinero*. My seester—"

I gave him another quarter. "Chicaro's, *Donde, sabe?*"

He flashed a mouthful of teeth and shrugged. "I do not know, *Señorita*."

Hank shook his head, mimicking the boy's dialect. "His seester sounds preetty good to me."

The boy accepted one last quarter before admitting Chicaro's was four blocks away down a side street. He wasn't ready to admit defeat, though. "I still theenk you make big mistake, *Señorita*, my seester—"

We were within two blocks of Chicaro's before Hank got the picture. "Are you crazy, Honey? This joint's a cheap bordello. You're not taking me in there."

"I'm not taking you any place," I said. "You're going in—by yourself. And how do you know what Chicaro's is?"

"I've been to Tijuana before," he said. "And I'm not going in there. It's loaded with bugs as big as Grant's Tomb."

"How big are the ones with two legs?" I said.

"Stop joking, Honey. Even if that kind of love were free I wouldn't take it on a silver platform."

I quickly explained that his job inside Chicaro's was not to sample the merchandise, but to get some information.

"Find out what you can about Rita Perez. Whether she ever worked at Chicaro's and if she has any family here in Tijuana." I handed him five dollars. "Don't spend it all in the same place."

He shrugged. "This may take some time. These girls are quick to give anything but information. Where'll you be in the meantime?"

I pointed to a dilapidated bar on the corner. "I'll wait a half hour. If you're not out by that time I'll be in after you, understand?"

"That would be cute." He was getting suspicious again. "And what would you ask for, a job?"

"I'll tell them I'm your wife. If that doesn't open a few doors, I'll open them myself."

Hank Kirsten scratched the back of his neck thought-

fully. "You know, I believe you're just the girl who could do it." He kissed the five-dollar bill and started toward Chicaro's. "See you in a half hour."

Fifty minutes later, I still hadn't seen hide nor hair of Hank Kirsten. The glass of tequila that squatted on the dirty bar was only one burning sip gone and two ugly characters seated nearby were beginning to give me the kind of once over that meant "look out!" I hadn't expected this. Kirsten's return, his faltering lies were what I'd been waiting for. A coldness settled over me the way it had last night while I waited for Rita Perez. Something was haywire. I was sure of it. Something deadly.

I waited five more minutes and then eased off my stool and through the front door. Hot afternoon sun seared down, blinding me momentarily. The air was filled with the odor of rotten fruit and the buzzing of mosquitoes and flies.

Chicaro's was down a narrow side street, deserted except for an old Mexican woman who stood in an alley near the building, a black mantilla drawn over her wrinkled head. She hummed a sad Spanish song and followed my approach with dark, unwavering eyes. I figured she was either waiting for some foot trade or for her daughter to get off Chicaro's swing shift.

As I passed near her on the narrow sidewalk, she said, "*Buenos dias, Señorita*. Penny for old lady."

"No."

"*Por favor, Señorita*."

"No!"

A gnarled hand spun out from beneath her mantilla. I ignored it, but not for long. Suddenly it lifted behind me. Pain erupted from my arm like a wildcat gusher, spewing its fury through my shoulder and up into my brain with paralyzing swiftness. The near-simultaneous impact of her blow and my brain's acknowledgment of the pain turned me towards her, but not soon enough. A blue steel needle was deep in my flesh and going even deeper as she clamped hard on the hypodermic plunger.

I reached for her, but never quite made the mark. My legs crumpled, pitching me on the sidewalk, the needle still buried in the back of my arm. The old woman stooped grimly to finish her job, then ran. A hot blaze

boiled up under my eyelids. I tried to rise, tried to remove the needle, but couldn't.

Two thick arms lifted me from the pavement, after a moment, and carried me inside Chicaro's.

SEVEN

DURING the next few hours, lying on the outer fringes of consciousness, I watched what was happening to me as a person might observe his own murder through an impossibly small keyhole. I saw that the thick arms which had transported me inside Chicaro's belonged to a man with black hair and gentle smile. When he spoke, his voice was unusually soft and he centered his words toward another person in the room too far away from my keyhole to be distinguishable.

"Is this the girl?"

"Yes," a male voice answered in a faint, stilted manner.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Too bad." The man with the gentle smile was Mexican. "Six months from now she will look like all the rest. Maybe worse."

"Why?"

"The injections. They do terrible things to a woman." He shook his head sadly. "First the mind, then the body. I have seen it before. They become mad. Like a rabid bitch. After the injections take effect they can't live without them. Did you know Rita Perez's sister, Chiquita?"

"No."

"She was not pretty. She was starving when she came to me. A skinny, sexless little waif with a soul. Nothing like Rita. Nothing that would appeal to a man."

"Did you give her the drug, Chicaro?"

"There was nothing else I could do. She filled out. Her breasts became big and beautiful. She had fire in both eyes and body. She was one of my best girls. Then I stopped the injections. I had to stop them. She became so wild one night she almost killed a man."

"What happened to her?"

Chicaro hunched his ponderous shoulders. "She fell to pieces. Her soul came back and it looked at her sex-hungry body and one night she took a gun and shot herself. In the belly. The sight of it was enough to make me sick."

"I can imagine."

"Rita quit me after that. She said I was responsible, but I wasn't. Poor Rita. Her ambitions were even larger than her body. Too bad." He leaned over me intently. "Her eyes are an exciting promise of what lies beneath her clothing."

"Can she hear us, Chicaro?"

"No. The injection the old woman gave her on the street deadens the nerves. Her eyes and ears are open, but her brain sleeps."

"Exquisite," Chicaro said gently, feasting his eyes on the curve of my bosom. "Absolutely exquisite. She must be about twenty-five years old."

"Approximately."

The gentle proprietor of the Tijuana house of prostitution lifted my skirt and removed the pearl-handled revolver from my garter holster and groaned. "Have you ever marveled over the sleek beauty of a rattlesnake, wishing to fondle the creature in your hands, yet knowing full well the deadly consequences of such an act?"

"No."

Chicaro examined the weapon at arm's length, a look of sick revulsion on his thick cheeks. "I deplore violence," he said, dropping the revolver. "As beautiful as they may appear, females are violent. Their rattle is so soft that you sometimes find yourself stroking them, not sensing they mean to destroy you."

"You're a strange man, Chicaro."

Chicaro's eyelids tightened and his look of revulsion twisted in mild anger. "No, I am a practical man. I have made a good living off the vehemence and violent ways of women. Perhaps I should be grateful. But, I despise them because they need to be caged. Sometimes they thrash and scream at the top of their lungs, but they know man is their master. Sometimes they kick and scratch until they draw blood. But they can't escape the cage. They never get loose once they're trapped. Unless they do as Chiquita Perez did."

"Rita got away." His voice was terribly faint.

Chicaro smiled broadly. "Did she? You know better than that, King."

"Yes, I guess I do."

"You're in a lot of trouble, King. That photograph of you in Rita's suitcase could put you in the gas chamber."

"I—I know."

"You were smart coming to me. I can always fix things the easy way." Chicaro glanced at me again. "She has a birthmark on her leg. See it there. Unusual shape and very high. Interesting. She will make a very good girl."

The man behind me asked, "When do you plan to give her the first dose?"

"Now," Chicaro said gently. "This is always the most interesting stage. The first. With some women it only creates a titillating effect. With most it causes a reaction similar to a female dog in heat. They scratch, they squirm, they even growl. Sometimes they rub their bottoms on the floor. Most interesting."

Chicaro moved out of view and returned with a hypodermic syringe. His gentle smile beamed on the glistening needle.

"How long before it takes effect?" the other man demanded. "I wouldn't care to be here."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that," Chicaro replied. "You never seemed squeamish before in the presence of such activity."

"This is different."

Some of the liquid spurted from the needle as Chicaro depressed the plunger slightly. "So, the King of the jungle can be tamed. You must be going soft."

"Not exactly."

Chicaro laughed, lowering the needle to my arm. "This may take an hour and then again maybe only five minutes."

The other man's movements sounded behind me. A door closed. Chicaro laughed again, bent nearer and jabbed the needle into my flesh.

I don't know how long it was before my keyhole on life began to widen. It seemed an eternity. For a long time I'd been alone, I knew that much. And for a much

longer time I'd tried to move my arms and legs. They seemed paralyzed. So was my brain. Thoughts kept bombarding like snow crystals dropping from a frozen roof, but before I could examine them they would melt. I began to imagine this as a horrible nightmare. The ugly old woman had been the wicked witch of the East and Chicaro her fat prime minister. Even the weird, stilted conversation that I had heard broke apart like an ice floe, jamming down my consciousness in splintered confusion.

Sensations came slowly. The tips of my fingers. My toes. The hole in my arm where Chicaro's needle had penetrated. Then it came. The first pangs of his venom. Possibly it was a godsend because it shook me so violently. My legs snapped together as if they'd been stitched and the lower half of my body wrenched for fully two minutes. A flame seemed to shoot up my legs, knifing into me like a hot poker. I fell from the bed, staggered to my feet and fell again hard.

I didn't think I could get up. A reddish, purple-flecked field drew down over my eyes, biting into my lids, spearing into my brain. I came out of this on my knees, arms wrapped around my stomach, forehead bent against the floor. I swayed to my feet and through the door, not knowing where I was going or why. The corridor outside was empty and dark. Somewhere back in Chicaro's flesh mill came the sounds of a woman grunting, the shifting of bodies, the harsh creaking of springs.

I turned in that direction, knowing one thing. My body ached. Ached. I slammed hard against the wall. Who was I kidding? This was a nightmare all right, but it was for real. My fingernails gouged into the wood. I had to get away. If I didn't I'd be a prisoner for the rest of my life, faced with daily injections, with my body on fire and my legs cramping until they broke in half trying to stamp out the fire.

A woman screamed down the corridor. A bestial cry that felt as if it was coming from my throat. I clamped my hands over my ears. How could I get away? My fingers slid down my body. I was naked except for a brief pair of panties.

The dark corridor spun in front of me, new sounds lunging up, a man's voice, deep, pleading, harsh. I turned

into a dimly-lighted room much like the one I'd just left. A man and woman were on a bed together, starkly white, spiderly entwined in their web. A pair of trousers and a shirt were thrown over a chair. I bit my lips and moved rockily toward the clothing when the woman saw me. She lifted her dark head and spat a few angry words in Spanish. I had the shirt on before the man whirled.

"What the hell are you doing there?" he demanded.

The door was hard to find again in the dim light. I struck the wall, bounced off, finally spinning through its opening into the narrow corridor. This was it! There had to be a back way or else— I pitched into the blackness, a new fury igniting my limbs, searing my brain, blotting out everything. The last thing I remember was the tearing, frenzied thought that he'd find me. The man in the dimly-lighted room. He'd been huge when he stood up.

Hank Kirsten's face was as red as a lobster and his breathing pistol-fired in my ears.

"Honey!"

"Where am I?"

"In an alley. Behind Chicaro's. What's happened? Where are your clothes?"

I sat up. Blinding sunlight and a trash-littered alley stretched behind his huge bulk as he leaned over me.

"I—I've been searching for you over three hours," he continued, sweat streaming down his face. "I thought you'd left me behind. Your car's gone."

"What?" He helped me to my feet. "It couldn't be."

"It is, Honey. I left Chicaro's three hours ago. Went to the bar. You weren't there. I've been looking ever since."

"You're lying, Hank."

"I'm not! I came down this alley a few minutes ago. You were lying like you were dead. What'd they do to you, Honey?"

My mind was still an ice floe, cracking and splitting open into fragments. Below my shoulders it was a different climate altogether. My legs snapped. "You've got to get me out of here, Hank. Chicaro gave me an injection. A sex stimulant. It's tearing me to pieces."

"You're kidding!"

I pressed hard against him. "Get a car, Hank. Steal one if you have to. You've got to get me across the border."
"I'd better get the police."

"No!" I could hardly breathe. "The police down here are not to be trusted."

"But I can't just steal a car, Honey. Where would I get the keys?"

"I don't know." Tears welled in my eyes and my fingernails dug frantically at him. "I was lucky to get out of there, Hank. In a few minutes I may be pounding at the door to get back inside."

"That stuff he gave you couldn't be that powerful, Honey!"

"You just don't know," I said through clenched teeth. "Have you ever sat on a hot oven until you thought your bottom would burn off?"

A convertible suddenly swerved into the alley in front of us. It was mine and even through the dusty windshield I could recognize Chicaro's gentle face behind the steering wheel. He slammed the car to a halt a few feet away and the softness of his greasy, round cheeks tightened perceptively. He had the sense to slap the car into reverse, but Hank was too fast for him. The red-haired photographer ripped open the door and applied four very hard knuckles on Chicaro's jaw. The Mexican didn't make a whimper. I watched while Hank dumped him in the alley.

We didn't exchange so much as a glance until we were across the border. As we passed through the inspection stations, I drew a blanket up over my bare legs. The man's shirt I'd stolen was very large and covered my nude upper half. On the American side a suspicious officer, noting heavy perspiration on both our brows, asked us to step from the car. Hank was equal to the situation. He explained his wife was terribly ill from the *turistas* and that he was rushing me to a San Diego hospital. The officer hesitated, then waved us through. In another second I would have been out of the car of my own accord. Every fiber in my body was screaming to go back to Chicaro's. To go back to that little room. To the men I knew would be waiting. To the needle. And to the feverish sounds that filled the dark corridor.

I was doubled over, arms tight around my legs, when Hank finally spoke.

"It won't be long now, Honey. Hold on."

My brain wasn't my own any more and my voice sounded a million miles away in some beautifully translucent tube belonging to a museum of strange vibrations. "Pull over to the side of the road, Hank. I—I can't stand it another minute, do you understand? Pull over, for God's sake!"

"For your sake I won't," he said grimly. "We'll be at a hospital soon. They'll know what to do for you."

"There's nothing anyone can do for me, except—" I swore silently. "Please, Hank, please! Please! Please!"

"No! Keep talking, it'll get your mind off it!"

I lunged for him, but he was ready for the maneuver and his hand slapped me back against the seat. For an instant I saw myself as I really was. Hair twisted about my face, eyes staring, teeth clenched. Suddenly I knew what it was like to be a drug addict. Half-mad, screaming for another dose at the top of my lungs. The fire burned away my senses. I tore at the shirt.

"Don't, Honey!" Hank roared.

My foot went for the brake pedal. We skidded across the highway, barely missed a tree and lurched back over the white line. My arms tore wildly at Hank's neck. The car plunged off the road into a meadow of high grass, shearing a sideways path, metal screaming, dust rising.

I was in Hank's lap when we stopped. He was thrown over on the seat, legs buckled under the steering wheel. Sirens squealed, grew louder and died. Then the car door on my side snapped open. A motorcycle policeman wearing a crash helmet and goggles peered in at us, a deep searching glower in his eyes.

EIGHT

I DIDN'T completely recover from the effects of Chicaro's sex drug until the following morning. Events and images of the hours before seemed like grotesque mutations, warped and bloated all out of proportion. There remained a vague recollection of an ambulance ride, being strapped to an examination table, a lot of kicking, crying, screaming and another shot.

Mark Storm was standing beside my bed when I first opened my eyes. He and the room tilted weirdly, then slid into focus. The window across from me had bars.

I shook my head dazedly. "Mark, where am I?"

"Take it easy, Honey," he said. "You're in the prison section of a San Diego County hospital."

"What—what am I doing here?"

"To make a long story short, you were arrested for being drunk, disorderly, indecently attired, for attempting to corrupt the morals of a public official, for abusive language, resisting arrest, for attempted assault on two other arresting officers, for attempted bribery, for creating a hazard on a state thoroughfare—"

"I—I did all that?"

"So I'm told," Mark said. "There are a half dozen other minor charges not even worth mentioning. How do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"I talked with one of the arresting officers, the one you tried to wrestle into the bushes. He says he never saw a woman act the way you did in his life."

"Oh, Mark," I groaned dismally.

"They finally had to put you in a strait jacket."

"I—I think I do remember that."

Mark reached in his coat pocket. "At least you didn't

shoot anybody. Here." He tossed me my pearl-handled .22 revolver.

I jolted to a sitting position. "Where'd you get that?"

"From your photographer friend, Kirsten. He said he took it off you just before the fireworks started."

My mind fled back to Tijuana, trying to pry open the confused lock on Chicaro's door. I pictured the small room, Chicaro lifting the revolver from my holster, dropping it on the floor. Kirsten couldn't have got that gun unless—

"Where is he, Mark?"

"Kirsten? He was released several hours ago."

"No!"

Mark patted my arm gently. "It's all right, Honey. He explained how you lost your clothes, about the shot Chicaro gave you, the works. All the charges against you have been dropped."

"It's not that, Mark. He's the man."

"What man?"

"The man with the beard!"

Mark sent out an APB on Hank Kirsten after I pieced together my Tijuana story. The clincher came when I had to admit withholding vital evidence. I had discovered some coarse red hairs snagged under a bed leg in Rita's room. Mark smashed his hat to the floor after returning from his phone calls.

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

"Sorry?" the deputy bellowed. "The guy could be a million miles from here by now. You're just lucky he didn't kill you and take your car."

My head was still fogged. "When I found the hairs, Mark, I put them in my skirt pocket—"

"Because I was still dazed from fighting off Rita—and angry at you for suspecting I'd pushed her."

He paced across the hospital room. "Those are two of the poorest excuses I've ever heard for—"

"I was going to turn them over to you yesterday morning."

"But you didn't!"

"No. Kirsten was in my car—"

"So you decided to take a little jaunt to Tijuana to—"

gether to see the bull fights!" He kicked his hat. "That's a lot of—"

"I thought I could trap him into a confession."

"A confession of what? Shaving in Rita's room?" He threw his hands in the air. "What gave you the idea those hairs came from Kirsten in the first place?"

"The hairs seemed too coarse to have been cut from a woman's head," I explained. "Besides, neither Rita Perez or Toby Smith had red hair and they occupied that room."

"That still doesn't mean the hair belongs to Kirsten."

"No," I admitted. "A comparison test will have to prove that. But it's obvious."

"Sure it's obvious," Mark returned hotly. "And thirty-six hours ago when you made the discovery it would have been twice as obvious—if you had turned over the evidence!"

"The trip to Tijuana proved something."

"Yeah! That you're a female. And after a souped-up dose of Spanish fly you act like one!"

"Mark, you're making me mad again!"

He laughed. "I'm making you mad. That's a hot one." He tossed a suitcase on my bed. "When I got the report you were here in the hospital they didn't tell me you'd lost your clothes." His voice was leadened with sarcasm. "But knowing you, I took the liberty to stop by your apartment. Your back door was unlocked—as usual."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"You're a woman," he said. "And the bachelor of the species invariably leaves her back door unlocked—for one reason or another."

"Lieutenant, you just put us on opposite sides of the street again."

He snapped open my suitcase and lifted out some clothes. "Good," he said sharply. "Let me warn you you'd better stay on your side this time. Get dressed!"

Mark drove me back to Long Beach in my convertible. Another deputy followed us in the Sheriff's car. We made one stop at my apartment to pick up the evidence I'd found under Rita's bed. The comparison was made from bristles of red hair I'd apparently dislodged from Hank

Kirsten's head during our struggle in the front seat. They matched.

Then I made a personal call on Fred Sims at his newspaper office.

"Your ace turned out to a joker," I told him.

"So I understand," Fred returned tartly. "I got the detailed story from a friend of mine in San Diego." He tossed me a photograph. "This came off the AP wire this morning. Looks like Kirsten's not the only one who tried to pull the wool over your eyes, sweetheart."

The picture had been taken from a distance and was slightly out of focus, but there was no mistaking the central figure. A blonde, partially draped with a wool blanket wielded by a crash-helmeted policeman, was creasing the cheek of another goggle-eyed officer with her hand.

"Add it to your unprintable collection," I said, returning the photograph. "I want Kirsten."

"I don't blame you. After what he did to you down in Tijuana I'd want his head."

"That's just it, Fred, I don't think he did anything to me, except help me escape."

"Don't kid around with me, Honey." He gestured at his telephone. "I just got your version from Mark."

"It doesn't count, Fred. Nothing counts but the truth. And I don't know the truth—yet."

"But you told Mark—"

"We're not talking. Not any more."

"So the good Lieutenant informed me. I refuse to settle any domestic affairs."

"You don't have to," I said. "I told him there was a man in the room with Chicaro before I got the injection. Mark assumed it was Kirsten."

"Well, wasn't it?"

I shook my head. "I'm not certain."

"Didn't you see him?"

"No."

"You heard his voice, though?"

"Yes. Vaguely. I can't say for sure it was Kirsten."

Fred slapped his desk. "Swell. Now what do we do?"

"Go back to Tijuana," I said.

"What?"

"Are you game?"

"Me?"

"Fred, what if I told you what happened in Tijuana was a big act perpetrated to make me think the other man in the room was Kirsten?"

"I'd say you were crazy." The newspaperman's eyebrows knitted tightly. "I'd say that hundred-proof jazz they pumped into your veins not only made you sexy, but—"

"Fred, the whole business was too cut-and-dried. The initial shot the old lady gave me outside Chicaro's didn't put me to sleep. They knew it. They wanted me to hear their conversation."

"That doesn't make sense, Honey," Fred argued.

"Does it make sense that my room was left unguarded, that Kirsten was waiting out in the alley, that Chicaro came driving up in my car at precisely the right time for our getaway?"

"No."

"Fred, Kirsten does fit into this Tijuana bit somehow—or he couldn't have had my gun."

The reporter groaned. "Either he does or doesn't. Make up your mind."

I sat on the corner of his desk. "That's just it, Fred. He does *and* he doesn't."

"Honey, you'd better see a good psychiatrist. It's been proven that Kirsten's the man with the beard. Why don't you leave it at that?"

"I can't. He got me out of Mexico when I didn't have a Chinaman's chance. I owe him something for that."

"Okay, what's the gimmick?"

"I'll need your help, Fred. I want to prove that Kirsten was not the man in the room with Chicaro."

"That's a large order," Fred protested. "Since we don't know where Kirsten is, I take it you want to squeeze this information out of Chicaro."

"Not exactly," I said. "He mentioned Rita had a sister, supposedly now dead."

"I'm not digging up any bodies, Honey."

"I have a hunch this one's quite warm, Fred. That's where you come in. Through the front door of Chicaro's—after we reach Tijuana."

Fred dug the tip of his cane in the floor. "I—I'm not much of a lover."

"Don't be modest," I said. "I'll be there just in case you need some instruction."

We reached Chicaro's at dusk. Deep shadows lay in the dirty alleys and doorways that bordered the street. Fred's cane clanked on the cement as we walked toward the spot where the old woman had attacked me.

"Now, remember," I said. "Ask for Chiquita Perez. And don't act timid about your leg. All they want is your money. They wouldn't turn you down even if you had to be wheeled in in a basket."

"Thanks for the pep talk, coach. What'll I do if they tell me Chiquita Perez is either dead or home with a sore-throat?"

"I'll wait out here two minutes, then head for the back door. I'll meet you in the corridor."

"Don't be late. I read once where a vice officer was left waiting in a prostitute's room because his squad raided the wrong hotel. The poor guy finally ran out of excuses and went to bed."

I grinned. "Some guys have all the luck. Now get going."

Two minutes passed quickly. Fred didn't appear. I circled the block to the trash-littered alley behind Chicaro's and tried the back door. It opened easily. The dark corridor hadn't changed much. Neither had the rooms which bordered it. They were still filled with creaking beds, shifting bodies and voices that ran the gamut from pleading whispers to passionate wails. Fred had timed his move exactly. He was just entering the corridor, his free arm gnarled around the neck of a pretty, dark-eyed girl, when I pressed my gun at the startled prostitute.

"Where's your room?" I demanded.

She gazed blankly at the gun, knees quivering under her thin dress. "Herel" she whispered, catching her breath.

Her room was much like the others, complete with a rumpled dirty bed that smelled of sex and body odors, and a desk in the corner. Fred guarded the door while I faced the Mexican girl.

"Are you Chiquita?"

"Si."

"Chiquita Perez?"

Her breathing was deep and frightened. "Si."

"Was Rita your sister?"

She managed an anguished nod.

I glanced at Fred. "Was Chicaro outside?"

"Yeah. He acted suspicious when I asked for Chiquita Perez. You'd better make this fast."

The Mexican girl faintly resembled Rita. She was large-boned and extremely well-proportioned.

"What—what have I done?" she asked, trembling.

"Nothing yet," I said. "Do you know a man named Kirsten?"

"Si. He go with my sister. She call him the King."

"The King of what?" I demanded.

"I—I do not know. The jungle, I think."

"What jungle?"

"Someplace in San Francisco, I think."

"Chiquita, have you ever heard the expression *Beatnik*?"

"No."

"Did Rita have any other boy friends besides Kirsten?"

"In the *Estados Unidos*, si. A man—Lawrence—he take her to Long Beach."

"How long ago?"

"Two weeks maybe."

"Any other boy friends?"

"Si. A big handsome one. Very tall."

"Do you know his name?"

She pinched her lips thoughtfully. "I think Rain—or Wind—I am not sure."

Fred whirled. "You don't mean Storm, do you?"

Chiquita's eyes widened. "Si. That is the name—Storm!"

My trigger finger tightened. "Who told you to say that name?"

"No one tell me, except Rita."

"When was this?"

"In a letter she write me last week," Chiquita said, staring at the gun. "She said he is handsome, tall and big and make love to her. He is a policeman, I think."

"Don't pay any attention to her, Honey," Fred barked. "She's lying!"

"No!" Chiquita returned hotly. "I have the letter to prove what I say."

"Where?"

"In that desk drawer."

"Get it!"

She stood slowly, a wall light illuminating her nudity under the thin dress. Her full breasts swayed and the curve of her broad hips rose in the fabric. She crossed to the desk. Fred and I exchanged glances. That was all she needed. Her hand darted inside the drawer and swung an ugly steel snout in our direction. My finger squeezed hard. An electrifying sound filled the small room and the dark-haired girl spun back, eyelids and teeth clenched, a shower of red splattering against the wall around her.

Then a second shot exploded. And a third. And a fourth. The girl's dress ripped open from the impact of the bullets. Her head snapped. Fred lunged at me, knocking the revolver from my grasp.

"Honey!" he screamed. "You're killing her!"

NINE

FRED SIMS received a rude awakening an instant later. So did I. A fifth bullet split the shallow space between us like a saw-toothed knife cleaving through a pat of butter. We both dropped. So did the blood-spattered girl in the corner. The only difference was, she had no alternative. She was dead.

The door to the room slammed and then, for what seemed an impossible length of time, there was absolute silence except for the machine-gun breathing that rattled from Fred's contorted mouth. When other sounds did actually begin, I couldn't measure. All at once there came a torrent of voices, doors and footfalls, building from a microscopic flutter into a tidal wave. The deluge descended on us in one mighty, door-opening jar. I had time to do only one thing. Snap open my gun. One bullet was missing. Then a fully-clothed figure pushed its way between a distorted mass of half-naked bodies and grinned down at Fred and me. The grin had a terribly satisfied edge to it.

"Well, Miss West," Chicaro said gently. "We meet again."

Before they separated us at the Tijuana police building, Fred testified that I hadn't killed Chiquita Perez.

"The first bullet hit her wrist," he told the narrow-eyed policemen. "I saw Miss West fire that shot. She did it in self-defense." He pointed at my gun. "You can see for yourselves. There is only one empty chamber."

"Si," one of the men admitted readily, lifting the weapon, "but how do we know she did not reload this gun?"

"You've got a ballistics department, haven't you?" Fred demanded.

The Tijuana policemen laughed. The one holding my revolver said, "You wish us to compare the bullets in thees gun with the ones in Chiquita Perez?"

"Of course, I do!" Fred roared. "That's the only way you're going to learn the truth."

They laughed again, a hollow sound that rang eerily in the high-ceilinged room.

"You make a big joke, *Señor*," another said, cocking his head like a rooster. "There was an eyewitness to this shooting."

"Who's that?"

"*Señor Chicaro*. He saw the whole thing from the door."

"He's a liar," Fred barked, half rising.

An officer shoved the reporter back into his chair. "You forget you are in Mexico, *Señor*. You speak with the heavy tongue of an American who forgets. We do not like such Americans." His fist waved violently under Fred's nose. "We do not like them at all."

Fred's jaw tightened and he slapped the officer's fist away with the tip of his cane. "Listen, I'm a newspaperman. Either you make a comparison test of those bullets, or I'll—"

"Or you'll do what, *Señor*? Call the American consulate? Our telephones, they are sadly out of order. Or will you hit me with your cane? In that case, we should be forced, even more sadly, to put you out of order, *Señor*."

The policeman grasped Fred's cane and shattered it over his knee, then squinted at the newsman almost eye to eye, tauntingly.

"Fred," I cautioned. "Don't give them any rope. They'll string us to the nearest tree."

"Oh, *Señorita West*, you do have a tongue, *si*? And a very pretty one to match the rest of you, *si*? Is it not a shame that you who are so beautiful should kill two such beautiful sisters?"

"I didn't kill either one of them," I said angrily. "They both tried to kill me."

The officer shrugged complacently. "Isn't that always the way, Miss West. Was it not one of your own poets who said the blameless are few, if not unhappily ex-

ting. The fact remains, Miss West, you are alive and they are dead."

Fred's hide was bristling. "Get off her back!" he roared. "I'm warning you for the last time!"

Fred's jaw took the butt of a fist and it toppled him heavily to the floor. His aggressor wasn't content. He moved over Fred and cocked his foot back, ready to hammer home a kick to the ribs. He never got that off. I caught the rear of his boot and lifted it about three feet. The policeman landed face first on a desk, bits of gleaming white teeth spurting from his mouth like hot buttered popcorn.

The room erupted in a frenzy of shouts and waving arms. One man stooped to help his friend find his teeth.

They put me in a small, single-windowed cell facing toward the lights of town. A horse-drawn cart creaked along the dusty street outside the police building and a guitar strummed distantly in the warm night.

Other sounds were hot in my brain. The explosive kick of a revolver's deadly recoil. The sickening thump of its lead striking flesh and bone. The quick, almost mute gasp of the girl as the bullets, traveling hundreds of miles an hour, rammed her against the wall and tore open her insides.

None of it made sense. Not Chiquita's story about Mark Storm and her sister, nor the sudden appearance of a gun in Chiquita's slim brown hand, nor the four other shots which literally turned Chicaro's brothel into a shooting gallery.

Had Rita Perez told her sister something about the dead girl in the bay? Had she described in some letter or phone call the boat ride out into the harbor? Had Rita revealed the name of the person in the sailor cap and letterman's sweater?

I knew one thing for certain. That last bullet had been labeled for me. Only Fred's frantic lunge moved me out of its path in time. I shook my head. Two very narrow escapes. Once nineteen floors from the ground, dangling by my coat in the rain. Now in one of Chicaro's back rooms. There was no mistake. The killer wanted me bad. So bad he could probably taste my blood.

A jingle of heavy keys turned me away from the window. A man was opening my cell door. Chicaro stood nearby, breathing through partially open lips, his face barren of expression.

"*Cuarenta momentos, Señor,*" the man with the keys said.

"*Si.*" Chicaro moved quickly into the cell, studied the relocking procedure, and the man's passage back down the corridor before casting his eyes on my face.

"Miss West," he said apologetically, "I have made a mistake. I am sorry."

I didn't like the sound of this one bit. It was too much of an about-face for Chicaro. "What's gone wrong? Have the police checked the bullets?"

"No." He rubbed his cheek with the edge of his forefinger. "They will not examine your gun or Chiquita's body. They are very stubborn. I am afraid you have made a very bad impression with them. Especially Jose Hernandez. He looks now like a pumpkin when he smiles."

"He broke a crippled man's cane and knocked him down," I said. "He got exactly what he asked for."

"The cane can be replaced," Chicaro reminded. "Jose's teeth are a different matter."

"Take him to a good dentist."

"I am afraid, Miss West, Jose will need more than a dentist. His mouth resembles a china shop after a revolution has been fought there." He took a cigarette from a mangled pack and shoved it in his mouth, his gentle smile edging around his mouth for the first time. "But that is not why I am here, Miss West."

"You said something about making a mistake."

"*Si.*" He flicked a match and puffed smoke into his lungs. "I must admit I was in error earlier. You did not kill Chiquita."

"Well," I said, still not believing my ears, "what brought you to this earth-shaking conclusion?"

"I am a patient man, Miss West, but I must admit my patience has been exhausted."

"By whom?"

He lifted on the balls of his feet. "You, Miss West. You! I'd expected more really, but you failed me just when I thought you had it."

"Had what?" I demanded.

"The name of the man who forced me to give you that injection."

"Forced you?" I said, bitterly. "Don't give me that, Chicaro. I heard every word of your conversation."

"Of course you did," he acknowledged, puffing new smoke. "I arranged it that way without his knowing. That's why I talked so much. That's why I made up all those lies about Chiquita's suicide, hoping you'd know I was lying. He held a gun on me the whole time."

To believe Chicaro was to believe arsenic was better to serve at a kid's party than chocolate ice cream, but he had me fascinated by his story and even the least bit baffled.

"What'd he look like," I asked, "this man?"

Chicaro moved behind me to a dirty bed anchored by chains in the plaster wall. "He wore a mask," he said simply. "One of those rubber masks that fits down over the head."

"Surely, you don't expect me to swallow this?"

He slumped on the bed, exhaling a gust of smoke, grinning queerly. "As I told you, Miss West, I don't expect anything of you. I had hoped you could tell me this man's name."

There was an edge of mockery in his voice that did not show in his face or in the way he stared at me through the white puffs of smoke.

"Why did you call him King?" I asked.

"Because he insisted I address him by this silly title."

"You know that's Hank Kirsten's nickname!"

Chicaro shrugged. "I do not know this Kirsten. The man with the mask was big. Immense shoulders. Well over six feet tall."

I glanced away, through the barred window at the lights of the town. Chicaro was reading from the same script Chiquita had used. His pacing and inflections were slightly varied, but the basic material was the same. Mark Storm.

"What did he wear," I asked, "besides the mask?"

"A blue suit," Chicaro said. "Too small for him. He came to my private office upstairs. He had this gun. Told me you were on your way to my establishment."

The Mexican took a half-pint of whiskey from his back pocket and up-turned its contents into his mouth. "You

like some, Miss West? Only the very best for Chicaro."

He handed me the bottle. My eyes fixed acidly on his leathery-brown features and his shoulders lifted uneasily from the glower as I walked to a sink in the corner of the cell. In one quick stroke, clutching the bottle's neck, I shattered it on the dirty porcelain and whirled toward the startled man, glittering spikes of glass aimed at his hand-clutched throat.

"His name, *Señor Chicaro!* Quickly!"

His eyes dilated and his lips fell open, disgorging the cigarette. "Listen, Miss West, you don't understand—" The words cut off guillotine-sharp as I advanced slowly. He fell back on the bed, squirming, sweat breaking out on his brown skin.

"His name, *Señor!*"

Chicaro's jaw muscles drew so taut they couldn't open to let his words loose. He had to spit them through his teeth as the bright splinters lowered on him. "No, no, Miss West! I tell the truth! I come here to help, please!"

A piece of glass fell suddenly from the glistening, broken circle and struck Chicaro's cheek, cutting a small gash in his skin. He winced, choked back a scream of horror and shot pleading eyes at me.

"You gave me something the other day, *Señor,*" I said, bending over him. "I think it only fair to return the gift."

"No, no, no," he pleaded. "The injection was not my idea. I came here to apologize—" He trembled so hard the cords in his neck protruded almost an inch, throbbing violently.

"His name, *Señor!*"

"I—I do not know—"

The glass spikes lowered to a fraction above his purple face. "Last chance, *Señor.*"

"Storm," Chicaro whispered, eyes peeled back like two skinned grapes.

"You lie!"

"Storm. Lieutenant Storm. That is the name he gave me."

"You lie!"

"He said I would be doing the American police a favor if I took you out of circulation for a while."

"You're even a bigger liar than Chiquital!"

"No!"

I touched the sharp splinters to his cheek. "All right," he whispered. "He will close me down for telling. He may even kill me, but—"

"His name, Chicarol"

"*Señor* Lawrence."

TEN

ABOUT an hour later, the Tijuana police hesitantly released Fred and me on Chicaro's dry-tongued testimony. His lacerated cheek and trembling fingers evoked much comment from the greasy-faced officers, but Chicaro refused to go back to his original story about my pumping five bullets into Rita's sister. Jose Hernandez sat through the entire proceedings, his eyes framed on me with glazed incomprehension, a soiled red-stained handkerchief hanging from his mouth. I felt sorry for him. For Chicaro my emotions were mixed between sorrow and pity. His sweating, hurt face contained none of the gentleness I'd seen there before. He was sad now, and frightened because he knew Lawrence would find out. Still I couldn't bring myself to believe Lawrence was guilty of murder. Chicaro had finally admitted knowing Kirsten, that Kirsten had come to him the day before pleading for help, asking that Chicaro do something mild to scare me off the case. Lawrence, hidden in Chicaro's office, had overheard the conversation and after Kirsten was gone had overruled any mild tactics. Chicaro froze up at that point in the story, refusing to go any further. It was obvious there was more to this case than murder, but what that was I still didn't know.

Fred and I were met at the border by a red-faced, fist-clenching Mark Storm, who rattled with anger when he talked.

"You two fine citizens ought to be drawn, quartered, hung by your heels and sold by the pound in a Mexican meat market!"

"We almost were," I said.

"Those Mexican flies would have loved us," Fred added, chidingly. "Especially Honey. She's all sweet meat, you know."

"She's so sweet, if she had half the chance, she'd start a revolution in Mexico, a war between the United Nations and litter the floors of blind old ladies' houses with banana skins!"

Fred's back bristled again. "Now, wait a minute, Lieutenant. There's a cop back there in Tijuana with a face full of broken teeth. Honey gave him that as a special present from me. Well, now I'm going to give you a special present from her." He swung at Mark, but without his cane it was a futilely inept swipe that missed the big deputy completely.

Mark continued, "Why didn't you inform me you were planning to blow up Tijuana? I could have got you some TNT, or an obsolete H-bomb!"

My back was up, too. Way up and climbing. I still hadn't erased from my mind the remarks he'd made this morning. "You're wasting our time, Lieutenant. Either arrest us or get out of our way. We're in no mood for jokes."

"You're the one with the jokes!" Mark slammed. "You're both a couple of jokers. What'd you expect down there in Tijuana, a royal reception? A banquet in your honor at Chicaro's? Dancing girls? Champagne?"

"All right," I admitted, "so we made a mistake. So Chiquita Perez is dead. It wasn't our fault exactly."

"Wasn't it?" Mark demanded. "I suppose Chiquita Perez held daily interviews with taffy-headed detectives and daffy-headed, newspaperman. I suppose she was always dodging bullets."

"Of course not. Get to the point, Mark."

"The point is Miss Mary Mixup, I talked to Chiquita Perez by telephone a few minutes before you busted into Chicaro's. She said she was willing to help us if we'd guarantee her safety. We said we would guarantee it as far as humanly possible and she agreed to meet us at the border tonight. What we didn't know was that you two fumbling amateurs had already led our killer across the border. We didn't know you were going to terrorize her to the point of hysteria. Or that our friend Kirsten was going to take full advantage of this emotional crisis to pump Chiquita full of lead."

"You're way out in left field, Lieutenant," I said. "Kirsten isn't our man."

"How do you know?"

"He's left-handed. Those bullets were fired by a right-handed index finger."

"Honey, what the hell are you trying to do, anyway?" Mark asked. "I could understand that business with Rita Perez. But this. This was insanity. Chicaro could have slit both your throats and thrown you in the Rio Grande."

"Oh?" I said. "So you do worry about us, Lieutenant?"

"Will you two do me a favor, please?" he said tautly.

"Sure, Lieutenant," Fred said. "Anything short of murder."

"Stay out of Mexico, unless you want air holes in your stomachs and want to wind up leaking undigested tamales all over the countryside."

"That favor we shall be very happy to accommodate you with, Lieutenant," I said. "By the way how's the Miss Twentieth Century contest coming along?"

"They held the Miss U.S.A. finals tonight."

"Who won?"

"October Smith, Miss New York." Mark straightened, a faint smile on his mouth. "They're saying now that she'll probably go all the way."

I awoke at dawn, memory of a ghastly nightmare terrifying me. Mawson Lawrence and Mark Storm had assumed gargantuan proportions, their cavernous mouths filled with glistening teeth made of jagged brown glass, their eyeballs spitting fire as they chased me across a deep sandy plain. I narrowly escaped across a bridge too small to support their misshapen bodies when, violently frustrated, the two monsters turned on each other, shredding huge chunks of flesh, screaming wildly, first in triumph, then from pain.

I brewed some coffee and tried to steady my nerves. The nightmare, I was sure, had been the result of my feelings of guilt for not telling Mark about Lawrence's participation in the plot against me in Tijuana. Actually there didn't seem to be any sense in confessing what Chicaro had told me. He was a liar. He could have made the whole thing up. Anyway I didn't want Lawrence arrested. A hunch told me the ultimate conclusion of this case hinged on the beauty pageant. Jailing Lawrence and

closing his show would serve only one purpose—to allow the real murderer to escape footloose and fancy-free.

At six-thirty, I dialed Mark's apartment. He gruffly informed me he'd been asleep only two hours and that he wished I'd quietly drop dead. I filled him in on the fact that both Chiquita and Chicaro tried to use him for a fall guy, but he only grunted.

"Wouldn't it be funny, Lieutenant, if you turned out to be the murderer? You have been acting strange lately."

He growled, almost as viciously as he had in my nightmare. "I've good reason for acting strange, Miss West. I haven't had any sleep in over seventy-two hours. There's a female private eye in this city who refuses to let me sleep."

"Too bad," I said. "You should have her license revoked."

"I'm working on it. I've been working on it for four years."

"Did you show Kirsten's photograph to Macgillicuddy?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say?"

"He isn't sure whether Kirsten is the man who rented the boat."

"That's a nice answer."

"It's enough for me," Mark said, yawning. "Now go to bed."

"Why?"

"Because I love you, that's why. You need your rest."

I sighed heavily. "Lieutenant, you make so little sense sometimes I wonder what's really under that battered old hat of yours."

"A hat rack," he said and hung up.

My front-door buzzer sounded. I lowered the receiver and crossed cautiously to a peekhole in the mahogany panel. Hank Kirsten, unshaven and dressed in dirty dungarees, stood on my doorstep, an unlighted cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Well," I said, swinging the door open. "The prodigal son returns."

He grinned. "May I come in?"

"I'm hardly dressed for entertaining royalty."

"You can skip the sarcasm," he said. Kirsten moved

inside, surveyed my sleep-tousled hair and blue robe and then poured himself a drink at my portable bar. "What you mean is you're hardly dressed, period. That's nothing new."

"Where have you been for the past twenty-four hours?"

He gulped down a double Scotch, then said, "That's a military secret. I'll tell you this much. I haven't been sleeping in the gutter."

"You look as if you have."

He glanced at his dungarees and lifted his hands in a token of surrender. "Confession."

"It is good for the soul."

"I've been on a fishing boat. Smelling the top of the sea, hoisting a firm line. With not a worry in the world, except you."

I dodged his hands. "How surprising!"

"What?"

"That you'd carry a thought for me."

He brushed soiled fingers through his cropped red hair and winced. "I'm sorry I left you yesterday. I didn't want to."

"You're going to be twice as sorry when Lieutenant Storm gets you under one of his hot lamps."

Kirsten grasped the bottle of Scotch again. "So they are looking for me."

"That's the understatement of the year, pal." I took the whisky and gestured for him to sit down.

His eyes ran the length of my body and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I had a better idea."

"So I gathered."

"Yesterday you begged me, Honey."

"Yesterday I begged a lot of men, King. But that was yesterday."

"I told you I'd take a raincheck."

"Get serious, Mister. The gas chamber at San Quentin is not the fun house on the Pike. Nobody walks away laughing."

"Who's laughing? They don't really think I pushed Jo in the bay, do they?"

I nodded. "Among other things, including an 'assist' for Rita Perez."

"I wasn't anywhere near that hotel when Rita fell."

"Of course not," I said. "Storm has the idea you sent

her there to get me. Let's begin at the beginning, shall we?"

His mouth made a smacking noise as if he'd bit into a lemon. "Okay. But I'm warning you. You won't like most of it."

I poured him a cup of coffee and after a few sips he started with the girl we found in the harbor.

"I met her about a year ago in Palm Springs. I was on the road, beating up a storm of nothing from nowhere. Like a slow ball pitcher. A big lot of motion with no zip. That was me. I was beat, fagged, blotto." His eyes drifted off into the memory. "She jacked me up from under a table one night and took me home with her. She said she liked me because I was different, and because I needed her and she needed me." A coldness crept into his voice and clung there like a sheet over a dead body.

"She was sure right about that last part. She needed somebody—bad." He paused. "She made her contacts in hotel bars. Usually got around twenty bucks an hour, which wasn't chicken feed even at Palm Springs prices. Only she didn't care about the money. She did it to punish herself. She'd sit alone afterwards, when she got home, and she would cry and press her stomach with her hands and rock back and forth."

"The baby?" I asked.

He nodded grimly. "She never said much about it, but I learned the child died at birth. There were two serious complications. A rotten doctor who was so drunk he could hardly stand on his feet and the fact that Jo had contracted syphilis while working for Bodies, Incorporated."

"Tough break all around."

"Yeah," he said lowly. "She used to stand in front of a mirror and stare at that scar and then all of a sudden she'd hit it, with her fist, so hard you'd think she'd throw up. She didn't, but I did sometimes. It was that sickening."

"How long did you live together?"

"About three months. It wasn't all bad. We had our fun. We shared a Christmas together. Jo took advantage of my beard and dressed me as Santa Claus and we took presents to the children's ward at the hospital. She

cried that day, too, but she was happy. I don't think I ever saw her that happy again."

"Was her name really Josephine Keller?"

"No. She must have assumed Keller for the contest. It was Josephine Bradley then."

"What finally broke you up?"

"I came home one night and she was gone, clothes, everything. She left a note saying I was too good for her, that she would never forget me as long as she lived. She took the locket I'd given her. I never saw her again—until the day Watkins lifted that sheet in the country morgue. I almost flipped. I didn't recognize her face, but that scar—I'd never forget it as long as I live." He wiped stubby fingers over his eyes. "When Watkins pulled that locket out of her stomach—I got so sick I had to run to the bathroom."

"What about Rita Perez?"

"Tijuana. About six months ago. I met Chicaro in a bar. He liked me for some reason. I guess it was the beat lingo and the beard. He hired me to tend the bar in his joint. Rita didn't pay any attention to me at first, then one night she followed me to my room. I couldn't get rid of her after that. She was not only moody and temperamental, but jealous as hell. She warned me once that if she ever caught me with another woman she'd kill us both."

"Nice girl," I said.

"Yeah, that's why I came up to your office that night. To tell you about Rita."

"Why didn't you?"

Hank Kirsten got up slowly, crossed to the bottle of Scotch and poured himself another drink. "I knew Jo's murder had Rita's name written all over it, but I had no proof." He gulped the liquor and stared at me through the empty glass. "I couldn't figure how she knew about Jo and me unless she'd seen the locket. Or unless Jo had seen the photo that Rita had."

"Why did you shave your beard?"

"It was Rita's idea. The day we arrived from Tijuana she slipped me in a back way and upstairs to her room. We weren't there ten minutes before she brought out her razor and started wacking away."

"Did she give any explanation?"

He shrugged. "Only that she was was tired of it."

"Where'd you go from there?"

"Press-Telegram to apply for a job."

"Your home address listed with the paper was phony," I said. "Where have you been staying?"

"I've got some beat friends in Long Beach."

"Is Mawson Lawrence one of them?"

He shook his head. "Are you kidding? I don't even know Lawrence."

"How come?" I said suspiciously. "You were in Tijuana when he picked up Rita, weren't you?"

"Sure, I was. I never met Lawrence. Rita was careful I never met anybody, especially women. After moving in on me down in Tijuana, she retired me from my job at Chicaro's. The first I knew about the beauty contest was when she waltzed in wearing a new dress and a smile. We packed that morning. Arrived in Long Beach the same day."

"Did you meet any of the other contestants that first afternoon?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I accidentally bumped into Miss France when I was coming out of Rita's room."

"Did she say anything?"

"There wasn't much to say. She was wearing a pair of dark glasses."

"So what?"

"That's all she was wearing. Good Lord, what a build."

I got up and lighted a cigarette. "You know, Mr. Kirsten, it sounds to me as if you've had quite a year. Reading, relaxing and living off the fat of two very psychopathic prostitutes, who are now both unemployed and dead. Didn't you find any time in your crowded schedule to squeeze in Rita's sister?"

His eyes widened. "Chiquita? Are you kidding? Rita would have slit my throat so wide I could have passed for the Suez Canal."

"Then you did know her?"

"Of course, I knew Chiquita. She worked at Chicaro's while I was there."

I studied his face carefully. "Why did you say, I *knew* Chiquita? That's past tense."

"Of course," he said simply. "She's dead. That's why I'm here."

"And where'd you get that information?"

"On the radio. Don't tell me you're on Lieutenant Storm's side of the fence?"

"Maybe," I said. "I'm not sure yet. You didn't exactly do me any favors down in Tijuana."

"I got you back across the border, didn't I?"

"Sure, after working out a scheme with Chicaro that backfired in your face."

He groaned. "So you know about that, too!"

"Not as much as I'd like to know," I said. "How about the details?"

Kirsten paced across the room to the fireplace, fists clenched, biting his lips angrily. Suddenly he slammed his knuckles on the mantle, nearly knocking over a miniature grandfather clock. "I must have gone off the deep end or something, Honey. I'm sorry. You had me. You were pressing this beard thing hard. All I wanted to do was scare the pants off you. Get you off my back. I never should have trusted Chicaro!"

"When'd you first realize you'd been double-crossed?"

"Hell, I didn't suspect a thing until you dropped out of nowhere into that alley, half-naked and glassy-eyed." His hands gripped the clock savagely. "That bastard Chicaro, I could have killed him!"

"How'd you get my gun?"

"Chicaro gave it to me after you were inside. Believe me, Honey, I didn't know what he was doing to you. I didn't know a thing about the strip-down or the shots."

"You must have sanctioned the first one the old lady gave me," I insisted.

He pounded the mantle again. "Yes, I did. I was desperate, Honey. But, the rest of it was Chicaro's work."

"According to Chicaro it was Mawson Lawrence's idea."

Kirsten whirled. "Lawrence? You're kidding!"

"Maybe Chicaro's kidding. I'm going to find out."

Abruptly Kirsten shook his head, turned back to the mantle and stared at the ornate hands on the miniature grandfather clock. "What time is it?"

I glanced at my wrist watch. "Seven-thirty. Would you like some breakfast?"

"This clock says nine-thirty. Why don't you set it right?"

"It's broken," I said, heading toward the kitchen. "Has been for years."

He laughed, glaring at me from the corner of his eyes. "Who you trying to kid, Honey? Mawson Lawrence! Clock's broken! All right, maybe I have been a bum this past year. Maybe I have been living off the fat of the land as you said. Maybe I made a big mistake down in Tijuana, but I pulled you out, didn't I?"

I paused long enough to flash a sarcastic smile in his direction. "Sure, you did. I guess I forgot to thank you."

"I've told you before, don't try to make me out an idiot, Honey."

"You've spent so much time reading and relaxing, Mr. Kirsten, I don't think anyone could make anything out of you except an awfully lopsided bookend."

He whirled again. "That's one of the lowest remarks I've heard in a long time. Let me thank *you*—for opening eyes. You not only resort to dirty names, you try to make fools of people."

"Who tried to make a fool out of who in Tijuana?" I demanded.

"How many times do I have to apologize?" He grabbed the clock and ripped it off the mantle. "What time'd you say it was?"

"Don't bother to set it," I said. "I told you it's broken."

"It's ticking."

I wheeled around so quickly, my neck almost snapped. "What did you say?"

"I said it's ticking. Can't you hear it? Or are you deaf in addition to being ill-mannered?"

I crossed to the fireplace and slammed my ear against the glass face. The click-click-click was so audible I could hardly believe it. What really paralyzed me was the knowledge that the workings of my father's old clock had been removed when I was still in high school. Coldness engulfed me. I forced my clenched hands into fingers and lifted the clock away from Kirsten.

"Don't say anything," I whispered. "Just walk into the kitchen and open the back door."

For a long instant he didn't move. His eyes were riveted on the miniature grandfather clock that was ticking so furiously in my hands that it seemed its murderous explosion was only one brief tick away.

ELEVEN

BELOW the back door of my second-story apartment, and beyond an ivy-covered brick wall, sprawled an L-shaped swimming pool belonging to a Texas millionaire who never used it except for wild nocturnal orgies when swimmers went in nude yelling at the tops of their lungs.

As I pushed my legs toward the back door held open by Hank Kirsten, I thought about the many times I'd wished for a bomb to quiet the revelers so I could get some sleep. It was ironic. Now I had that bomb. Only now I hoped there wasn't a soul within shouting distance of the water.

The pool was approximately twenty feet down and away from my narrow back porch. I swung the clock over my shoulder, squinting hard at the target, praying the bomb wouldn't go off before it was released.

"Hit the deck!" Kirsten shouted, as the clock arced out of my fingers. "It might explode on contact!"

We both ducked, hands over our heads, faces expectantly contorted. Five-four-three-two-one—splash! We lowered our arms and stood up slowly. My father's precious old clock was at the bottom of the pool, a faint jiggly silhouette in the dark-blue water.

Kirsten climbed over the wall, dripping from his plunge into the pool and tossed me the clock. Inside we found three sticks of dynamite, a condenser, small coil, two batteries, an alarm clock and some wires. Kirsten admitted working with O.S.S. during the war.

"This is the kind of pop jobs we used to run into frequently," he said, examining the parts. "Amateur, but deadly all the same. Guerrilla warfare stuff."

"How big would this have been if it'd gone off? I asked.

Kirsten smiled faintly. "Big enough to tear that robe clean off your back—and a few layers of flesh as well. According to this clock we only had about ten more minutes."

"Close call," I said. "Guess I owe you an apology."

"That works two ways. Guess you weren't kidding about the clock being broken. Who do you think set this thing, Lawrence?"

"That's a good question." I headed for my bedroom.

"Where you going?"

"Patience, Mr. K. I've got to see a man about a hearse. You stay here until I get back, okay?"

A broad smile creased his mouth. "Okay. But, don't be too long."

Mawson Lawrence was sitting in his office, off the amphitheatre's main stage, when I walked in. The unexpected shock of my entrance spread out over his face like a pool of blood. His first impulse was to reach inside his coat, but my pearl-handled revolver stopped him short. I slammed the door behind me and locked it.

"What—what is this, Miss West?" he stammered. "What are you doing?"

"I'm about to inoculate you, Mr. Lawrence, with the world's greatest serum. It prevents small pox, warts, rabies, the seven-year itch, anything. In fact, I promise you after one injection you'll never even catch another cold."

His lips fluttered before the words came out. "Now—now wait a minute, Miss West. You're making a big mistake."

"Sure," I said. "Almost as big as the one you made in that back room at Chicaro's. You should have killed me while you had the chance."

"I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? I suppose you've never heard of *Señor Chicaro*, or King Kirsten, or Chiquita Perez?"

"No!"

"Or Bodies, Incorporated?"

His cleanly-hewn features grayed almost the color of

his hair and the negative protest he'd been ready to issue froze in his throat. "What—what do you know about that?"

"Not very much," I said grimly. "But you're going to fill me in or—" My revolver leveled at his chest. "—vice versa."

He didn't answer. His eyes stayed hypnotically glued on the gun. Finally he said "All right. I admit I followed you and Kirsten to Tijuana."

"Why?"

"Kirsten lived with both Josephine and Rita. He's the man in the two photographs. And he's your murderer."

"Why didn't you tell me or the police this before instead of staging that little farce down in Mexico?"

He shrugged. "You're no imbecile, Miss West. I discovered that the hard way. You understand my motivation; the reason behind my secrets. Why pretend to the contrary? My position here was and still is delicately unstable with Carstairs-Campbell. If I had revealed my knowledge of Kirsten the floodgates would have burst. Questions would have compounded new questions until—"

"—you and your show would have been proved a fraud."

His chin lifted defiantly. "That's a very unfair word, Miss West."

"You'll have to admit that none of these girls were ever siphoned from any regional or state contests. That some of your so-called *cream* was already sour when you brought it out of the stable."

He nodded bitterly. "Some, but not all, Miss West. The German girl, Gigi Gautraud from Paris, Miss New York, Miss Panama and others, you'll have to admit, are far and above even the most outstanding entrants you'll see in your elimination-type contests."

Lawrence wiped his face with his hands. "Why must this be considered a fraudulent endeavor? Why must I be attacked by you and the newspapers and the police? My judges are college professors, lawyers, doctors. They're honest men!"

"The question remains, Mr. Lawrence, are *you* honest?"

"I—I realize you must know something about my past. I'm not proud of it, believe me."

"Does this include Bodies, Incorporated?"

He didn't answer.

"Wasn't it through Bodies, Inc. that you met Josephine Bradley, Mr. Lawrence?"

He squirmed so uncomfortably he nearly fell from his chair.

"Were you the father of her child, Mr. Lawrence?"

Still no answer.

"You said to me the morning you hired me, Mr. Lawrence, that you felt Josephine's scar belonged to you. As if you'd put it there. You were speaking the truth then, weren't you?"

"Please, don't," he whispered.

"Maybe you didn't kill Josephine Bradley, Mr. Lawrence, but you might as well have. She was dead long before she ever hit the water, long before she ever went on that fateful boat trip, long before she ever met Hank Kirsten."

Tears suddenly flooded into his eyes and his shoulders sagged. "I—I tried to help her."

"Sure you did," I said harshly. "You got her a case of syphilis from one of your big paying customers and a butcher for a doctor. If you were trying to help, why didn't you just give her a nice quiet dose of arsenic?"

"I—I didn't know she had syphilis until it was too late to save the baby."

"And I suppose you didn't know she had a heart either."

He squeezed his forehead with trembling fingers. "I shut down Bodies because of what happened to Josephine. I quit all the rackets. I went legit."

"You mean you took all the money you'd made, Mr. Lawrence, and went on a world cruise to forget your tragic affair with Josephine. That's when you concocted the brilliant idea for a Miss Twentieth Century contest, isn't it? That's when you created your immense Pageant of the Century. It was a sudden idea. Not born from years of careful study and planning as you said."

He held up his hands in a futile shielding gesture. "All right, all right, all right," he repeated. "I still went legit. I'm running an honest contest. I tried to help Josephine. I chose her as Miss California."

"How did you happen to change her name to Keller?"

"I'd met this girl—the one from Eureka—a long time ago."

She wanted to work for me. I sent her home. She was under age. The name stuck in my mind, so I used it."

"When Josephine Bradley didn't show for the registration, you became suspicious."

"Yes."

"You knew she was upset and unstable and you were afraid she might not show up at all, weren't you?"

"Yes," he whispered, brushing at his eyes.

"So, you called Josephine Keller in Eureka and asked her to come to Los Angeles."

He nodded.

"You arranged for her to stay in a hotel near the bus terminal. Then, when we hauled Josephine Bradley's body out of the harbor, you made three quick decisions—one, to buy off Watkins and delay his decision at least for twenty-four hours; two, to hire me to cover for your actions; and three, to wheel in the real Josephine Keller and knock us all for a loop."

He nodded again.

"You're a clever man, Mr. Lawrence, but you made one bad mistake. You never should have come to my office. You didn't really need me, but you thought that would be the ultimate." I shook my head. "That was your one step too many, Mr. Lawrence. Like the one I took out the back door of Chicaro's. Only you're not going to get up from yours."

He looked up slowly, lips contorted, eyes still moist. "What—what do you mean?"

"I mean, I could close you down this very moment. And by all rights that are holy I should. Not only to stop the miserable dollars the customers are pouring into your pocket, but for Josephine Bradley, and all the Josephine Bradleys in the world." I straightened. "Unfortunately, you're going to stay in business, Mr. Lawrence. Until we find the person who murdered Josephine Bradley and Chiquita Perez."

A nervous smile shot to his mouth, cracking open into a sick look of nausea. "Chiquita?"

"You haven't read the morning papers?"

"No, I—"

"Chalk up another assist, Mr. Lawrence. I told you that day in Lieutenant Storm's office that you were play-

ing with fire, but you wouldn't quit. Your magnificent pageant was too important."

"But, how?"

"Shot three times in the stomach, Mr. Lawrence. She never knew what hit her."

He stood, eyes blazing. "I told you it was Kirsten."

"You already said that."

"Kirsten was married to Chiquita."

"What?"

"They were married in Mexico."

"You're lying!"

"No, it's true!" he roared. "Rita knew about it. She took him away from Chiquita."

"Kirsten never told me that."

A triumphant smile edged into Lawrence's lips. "Of course, he wouldn't."

"Neither did Chicarol"

"I thought you were smart, Miss West, but apparently I was wrong. Was it Chicaro who told you I was the one in the room when you were drugged?"

"Yes."

"Did he also tell you I might kill him or close him up, if he revealed my identity?"

"Yes," I stammered.

"You are a fool, Miss West. Do you know Chicaro's last name?"

My revolver lowered slightly. "I always assumed Chicaro was his last name."

"You assumed! You assumed!" Lawrence bellowed. "Let me be the first to inform you, Miss West, that you're a long way from closing me down or anyone else." He moved around the desk, suddenly poised, unafraid of anything, including my gun. Then he said, "Chicaro's last name is Perez, Miss West. Rita and Chiquita's father."

TWELVE

ALL the way back to my apartment I kept hearing Hank Kirsten's well-modulated voice describing his relationships with Josephine Bradley and Rita Perez. Excerpts kept hammering at me as if they'd been clipped from a motion picture sound track and riveted into my brain, "Rita would have slit my throat so wide I could have passed for the Suez Canal" . . . "Of course, I knew Chiquita. She worked at Chicaro's while I was there!" . . . "I know she's dead. That's why I'm here!" . . . "That bastard, I could have killed him!" . . . "Don't try to make me out an idiot, Honey!" . . . "It's ticking!" . . . "Hit the deck! It may explode on contact!" . . . "Big enough to tear that robe clean off your back—and a few layers of flesh as well!"

It was early morning hot and smog lay eye-smartingly thick in the sky as I drove out Seventh Street to my apartment. After swinging into the garage, I cut around behind the building and up the wooden steps to the porch above the millionaire's swimming pool. The back door was ajar. My gun was in my right hand as I entered cautiously, passing through the kitchen and into the living room.

"Hank?"

There was no answer. I moved around into my bedroom. Light slitted under the closed-off bathroom door and the rattle of water on the shower walls dinned faintly.

"Hank?"

I crossed and turned the knob opening the door just a crack.

"Hank?"

I pushed the door completely open. The pink bulb over the sink sprayed the room with raw brilliance and cast a gauntly elongated shadow down the side of the

shower curtain. It seemed to hang suspended in the cubicle, swaying only slightly from the force of the pelting water.

I took one quick step, shutting my gun from right hand to left, and pulled back the curtain.

He was leaning against one of the walls, his tie knotted around the shower nozzle, neck twisted almost backwards, tongue half-severed in a red guillotine of clenched teeth. For a moment, I thought he was still alive. His eyelids fluttered in the blades of water that speared down over his head. Then I saw the big hole in his chest. There was no doubting that. Ex-private eye Reg Kerrigan was as dead as a mackerel.

"Kerrigan!" Mark paced across his office, eyes fixed on me. "Why Kerrigan?"

"I don't know, Lieutenant."

"Why your shower?"

"Pleasant place to hang things," I said. "Stockings, panties—"

"Honest to God, Honey, you come up with more dead bodies than the county morgue."

"I didn't invite him to hang around my bathroom."

"Well, somebody did!" Mark roared. "And you know damned well who that somebody is!"

I shifted uneasily in my chair. I'd been obliged to tell the deputy about Kirsten and the bomb. That bit of news had practically blown his hat off.

"I realize I should have called you, Mark."

"Realizing and doing are as far apart in your vocabulary as a Russian-American peace talk. You're lucky he didn't take the pieces of the bomb with him."

"Mark," I protested, "why would he rig dynamite sticks and then tip me off that they were about to explode? He had plenty of time to get out."

"Maybe the bomb was for Kerrigan," Mark said. "Maybe he'd arranged to meet Kerrigan at your place, not realizing you'd be there. Maybe the dynamite was for both of you, only Kerrigan was late for his appointment and Kirsten knew he couldn't wait any longer."

"Nice speculation," I said, "but it doesn't explain why he wanted to kill Kerrigan—or me."

Mark removed his hat and tossed it on the desk. "An hour ago we got a report from Tijuana police that an automobile registered to Kerrigan was tagged for illegal parking late yesterday afternoon."

"What?"

"It's my guess, Honey, Kerrigan loaned his car to somebody—and that that person drove to Tijuana and shot Chiquita Perez."

"Makes sense," I agreed.

Abruptly a slender, red-faced deputy broke through the door. "We've got a lead on those sticks of dynamite, Lieutenant. They were stolen from a construction shack near the new Ocean Avenue bridge."

"When?" Mark asked.

"Two days ago."

"Anybody witness the theft?"

"Yeah, a watchman. He says he got a fleeting glimpse of the burglar in the dark."

"Any description?"

"Yeah. About five feet six or seven. Blue dungarees, plaid shirt, hat."

"Blue dungarees?" I repeated.

"Yes, ma'am."

Mark said, "Is that all?"

"Not exactly." The deputy cleared his throat. "The thief got snagged in a wire fence trying to escape and ripped open the plaid shirt. The watchman saw the—the chest underneath."

"So, what about the chest?" Mark demanded.

"The watchman says he saw them quite clearly," the deputy stammered.

"Them? I thought you said there was only one burglar?"

"That's correct, Lieutenant."

"Well, what the hell you talking about then?"

The deputy blushed. He cupped his hands, lifted them to his chest and then let them drop a few inches as if they held two invisible lead weights.

Mark and I both blinked.

"You're kidding?"

"No sir, Lieutenant. The watchman says his flashlight was full on them. No mistake."

"Holy mackerel," Mark said. "A woman!"

The foreign contestants were being lined up across the amphitheatre's massive stage as I entered through a side door, dodging around a group of American girls who had already been eliminated. October Smith sat alone at a table in the upper deck of the stadium, one well-shaped leg propped on a chair, the other curled underneath her, green eyes deeply intent on the action below. She acknowledged my presence with a toss of her head.

"Understand you were named Miss U.S.A. last night," I said. "Congratulations."

She didn't answer.

"Some people are of the opinion that you'll win the big crown as well."

Her silence was interrupted by Lawrence's voice from the stage as his temper flared. "Get off this stage, Miss Gautraud! As long as you keep trying to tell me how to run this show, I'll keep you out of rehearsals. You'll be a dumb cluck during the performances, but at least you won't be in my hair!"

I smiled thinly. "Mr. Lawrence has his problems, doesn't he?"

Toby Smith still refused to answer.

"You don't say much for a girl with an axe hanging over her scalp," I observed pointedly.

Her gaze swung around sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"You're the favorite now. Favorites don't seem to last very long in these parts."

"I'm not the favorite. The newspapers say it's between Freda Fisher, Lis Rico and Gigi Gautraud."

"You don't agree with them, do you?"

She didn't lie very convincingly. "Of course. They're beautiful girls." Her breasts lifted and fell hard under her white bathing suit, stretching the gold MISS U.S.A. ribbon taut.

"Let me give you a piece of advice, Miss Smith. You're loaded with equipment. You could win. There's only one thing missing. Your gun."

"What?"

"If I were in your high heels, sweetie, I'd wear that six-shooter around my neck, believe me."

"Are you trying to frighten me, Miss West?"

I smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think you'd better get out of here before I call down to Mr. Lawrence and have you thrown out on your ear." Her voice slipped out of its well-modulated gear into a Brooklyn accent.

"You don't like me, do you?"

"I was Rita Perez's roommate, Miss West. I liked *her* very much."

"I'll bet you did. Especially after learning she had been voted first and you second in the pre-contest balloting."

"That had nothing to do with my feelings one way or the other."

I gestured at the newly-eliminated girls scattered around the amphitheatre. "See those faces down there? Most of them are sad, some are angry, a few resentful and bitter. A lot of jealousy and hate and confusion. Probably more emotional upheaval rages right now under those forty-odd bosoms than there was aboard the *Titanic* just before it sank."

"So what?"

"In contrast observe those girls on the stage. They've still got a chance. There's still a possibility that one of them might win the fifty-thousand-dollar first prize. Their eyes are bright. They smile."

"I'm not blind, Miss West!"

"No? Then tell me, which group hates you the most, Miss Smith? Those solemn-faced American beauties you've already beaten or the glittery-eyed foreign girls who realize to win, they must beat you?"

"They all like me," she said. "Everyone."

I laughed. "Either you're the most naive woman born or just plain stupid. I haven't figured out which yet."

"Get out of here!"

"Not until you produce your gun."

Her body went rigid and the color drained from her cheeks. "You—you've been in my room again."

"That's right," I said. "And don't tell me you're embarrassed to show it to me because a few bullets are missing."

She swayed dizzily. "No, I—"

"Where's the gun?"

"It was stolen."

"When?"

"I don't know. Couple of days ago. After I showed it to you and Lieutenant Storm."

"Why haven't you reported the theft?"

Her face was white. "I've been too afraid."

"Thought you said all the girls liked you?"

"They do." She sagged in her chair.

"You'd better level with me, Toby. Four people are dead. Two of them have got bullets in them. If the Sheriff's office can prove those slugs came from your gun you're as good as dead, believe me."

She began to tremble. "But—but my gun was stolen three days ago."

"That's your story. Lieutenant Storm knows definitely that a woman's involved now. He'll have you on the rack inside of an hour."

She shot a frantic look around the amphitheatre. "You've got to help me, Miss West!"

I shrugged. "Not unless you explain the mystery of the gun and why you brought it from New York."

Toby shook her head. "Oh, please," she protested. "I've tried so hard. You don't know what this contest means to me."

"I'm beginning to realize what it means to a lot of you girls. What's your special ambition? The money?"

"No." Tears welled in her eyes. "I—I'm married."

"What?"

"My—my husband lives here in Long Beach. We've been separated for over a year now."

"Stop me if I'm wrong," I said, "but don't the rules of this contest specify no married or previously wed females allowed?"

"That's right," she stammered.

"Does Lawrence know about your marital status?"

"No. Please, don't tell him."

I groaned. "We don't speak the same language, he and I, so I doubt if I'll have the opportunity. Just fill me in on this husband of yours."

She studied her hands nervously. "He's been threatening me ever since I wrote and told him about the contest. He wants our little boy. Troy's got a violent streak in him. That's why I bought the gun."

"Where's your child now?"

"In New York with an aunt of mine."

"Does your husband know where the boy is?"

"No. He thinks I've got him hidden someplace here in Long Beach." She brushed a tear from her cheek. "I think he's the one who stole my gun. He knows this man the police are looking for."

"What man?"

"Kirsten. Hank Kirsten, the photographer."

She said the words so simply I had to believe her.

"What do you know about Kirsten, Toby?"

"Nothing," she said. "He took some pictures of me last Monday. While we were alone he mentioned Troy. He scared me to death."

"What did he say?"

"Just that he knew Troy. I pretended I didn't know who he was talking about."

I straightened. "Where can I find this husband of yours?"

"He owns a night club. A beat joint." She led me to a window in the upper deck of the amphitheatre that faced onto the harbor. In the graying dusk low fog lay on the water, swiftly closing over a sandy peninsula that extended from the river's mouth into the bay. A car's headlights winked as they pierced out of the wet wall that fanned up over sand and concrete.

"Out that road," Toby said, pointing. "Where you see that car. There's a place at the end called the Sand Pad. If you've ever been inside you wouldn't forget."

"Why?"

"The people are crazy."

Tarred seams in the peninsula road thumped under my convertible's wheels as I steered toward the Sand Pad. Fog piled on the windshield, wedged by the swinging rubber blades and by the dismal woo-wah of the harbor's lighthouse horn.

I wanted to turn back, but couldn't. The burning hope that at road's end I'd find Hank Kirsten kept my foot hard on the accelerator.

Toby Smith's thumbnail sketch of her husband was a little frightening. According to her he was a mass of complexities—sadistic, alcoholic subterranean, a beat-generation delinquent. He was also handsome, cocky, arrogant

and a terrible liar. If I hadn't known better I'd have thought she was describing Hank Kirsten.

This case was swiftly boiling down to three things: fifty thousand dollars, Hank Kirsten and a bare-bosomed wench with a torn plaid shirt. How they all fit together was the big question.

Troy Smith's Sand Pad had been created from the remains of an old World War II shore anti-aircraft battery, long abandoned by the Army. The huge cement bulwark, now stripped of its firepower, served as an unshakable foundation for the modern building that sprawled near the water. Deep beneath the sand was a network of rooms which had once provided living quarters for the gun crews and shelter for ammunition.

I was greeted at the front door by a bearded gentleman with hard blue eyes and a sinister smile. "Man," he said, "don't beat me to death. Exhale, baby, exhale."

I exhaled, but my silk shirt didn't.

"Welcome," he said, "to the synagogue of rebirth and reappraisal. Where'd you park your saucer?"

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my mouth.

He continued, "No more space in our saucer room tonight. A female convention from Mars landed about an hour ago. Of course, they're already half out of their cups in a heated discussion of narcotics, crime and perversion, but if you're willing to climb out of yours we can always fit you in."

His words were roundabout, but his eyes conveyed the meaning. "Man," I said, recalling Kirsten's phrase, "I dig you the most."

"She speaks the language," he said, bowing from the waist. "Dig yourself a hole, cat. The Pad is yours. Spend your own green and don't expect or expectorate on the other patrons."

I moved into a thick maze of gruesome masks, cigarette smoke and jazz, split at odd intervals by more beards, long manes of hair, penciled mustaches and turtle-necked sweaters containing broad and narrow chests and pendulously sagged or flat breasts, whatever the sex or lack of brassiere underneath decreed. The doorman had been wrong about one thing. The beatniks, female gender, were *not* in their cups. They apparently didn't believe in them, just as the males didn't seem to cotton to a decent shave.

The long-maned waitresses who wandered about wore nothing but the traditional loose sweater and the briefest of red panties. They seemed oblivious to the drunken, hairy-backed hands, the bearded man who stood near the band shouting poetry at the top of his lungs, or the pretty brunette who lay on her stomach on one table, kicking and stroking as if she were swimming in Kirsten's thousand-mile sea.

There was only one empty seat at the bar and I squeezed into it, flicking my eyelashes at one of the few men who looked like a true beat and not just one of the maniacal pseudoniks who slugged down drinks from flat-heeled slippers and hung their chins on tables while they discussed sin, sex and Satan. This man wore a shirt rolled to the elbows and his short brown hair was uncombed. He had that searching look of a dog lost somewhere in a big city.

"Hi," I said. "For a minute there I thought you were the King."

He smiled thinly into his glass. "The King of what? I don't cool with royalty."

"I'm with you, man."

"Well, dig a hole someplace else, baby, because I'm not with you. You've got a family smell. Mothballs, cedar chests and laundry baskets."

"Am I that bad?" I asked.

He managed a half-grin and swallowed some of his drink. "You're in orbit, but looping. Too much tail on your kite. You're not going very far."

"Farther than that cat over there," I said, pointing to the female swimmer. "When I said King, I meant Kirsten."

His eyebrows lifted. "You from one of the pads in Frisco?"

"The jungle," I said hopefully.

"What's the deadliest?" He snapped quickly.

Having listened to a lot of Hank Kirsten's lingo and philosophy, I thought I could tackle that question. My mind whirled over a dozen possible answers. Sin was out, so were people, places and things. It had to be something big. So big that an infantile mind couldn't cope with it. There was only one logical answer. "Living," I said.

"What happens when you're so stuck you can't crawl?" he fired back, his searching eyes smack in mine.

This seemed even more obvious. "I walk."

"How far?"

Kirsten had answered this one. "Two inches above the ground," I said. "When I get back to where I started I step up two more and keep going."

He lowered his drink and a knowing smile crept over the cynical one which had been there before. "Where'd you meet King?"

"At Bakersfield jaysee. We went to school together."

"No kidding! What's your full? He never cooled me about you."

"You know King?" I said, suddenly bewildered by his sweeping acknowledgement.

"Do I know him?" he questioned searchingly. "He's my brother."

"What?" I couldn't stop the impact that went with the word.

He laughed. "Not my blood brother, baby. We circulate together. He's the King and I'm his prime minister, that's how it reads. What's the full?"

"What?"

He regarded me suspiciously in the thin light. "You've got a handle, baby. A couple of them to be exact. How do we undress them?"

It penetrated over the shock of his knowing Kirsten so well. "Sally," I said. "Sally—North."

He lifted his glass and flicked his head at the bartender. "I don't care which way you're traveling, baby, you make a mountain look like a molehill. A glass for the lady, Max. And the best. Pour it from the bottle. Slowly."

This had to be Troy Smith. It hardly seemed possible that it was a coincidence. "What's your full?"

He winked. "I'm the Roman Empire, baby, I'm the wooden horse and the siege of a thousand years. I'm Troy. And would you believe it? The King is downstairs, in his counting house. Or didn't you know?"

"Know what?" I managed.

"The King and I own this pad. Lock, stock and burial grounds!"

THIRTEEN

THAT DID IT. I wanted out, but I couldn't make the door. Troy Smith held a firm grip on my arm as he led me down the stairs.

"The King'll flip when he sees you."

I tried to stop him. "Wait a minute. I just remembered my saucer's double-parked."

"Don't worry, our attendant weighs a ton. He'll lift it into an available launching pad. You don't want to keep the King waiting."

Suddenly I knew there'd been a tip-off. It was all too pat. The acceptance of my answers. The empty stool next to Troy Smith. I tampered with the idea of launching my .22, but he had me inside one of the underground rooms before I could make up my mind. Hank Kirsten sat behind a desk, stacks of tens and twenties littered before him, a revolver lying flat near his right hand. That's when I wished I'd made up my mind. Now it was too late.

Troy pushed me toward the desk. "Met a friend of yours at the bar, King. Knew you'd want to dig a few old holes together so I brought her down."

Kirsten's hand fell atop the revolver and he smiled knowingly. "Of course, I want to see any of my old friends, Troy. Where'd she say she's from?"

"Bakersfield," Troy said easily. "She must have seen you run for a touchdown one time. You always were good at that. Remember the Compton game?"

"We got beat that night, Troy."

"I know, but you were still the big hero. Tell us about that game, King, I haven't heard it in some time. I'm sure your friend will go ape."

Something else struck me as obvious. Hank Kirsten was genuinely surprised to see me and his eyes said it

better than his friend's pointedly sarcastic barbs that he had not been tipped off. I decided to play the game, win or lose.

"You remember me, King, Sally North. I was a cheer leader. We met again a couple of years ago in a Frisco pad."

Some of the hidden tautness left Hank Kirsten's face and he smiled. "How could I forget, baby? One dose of you is enough to leave memory impressions for a hundred years."

Troy Smith didn't waver. "Tell her about the game, King. She's probably forgotten your magnificent run. Eighty-five yards, wasn't it?"

"A hundred and four," I corrected. "He practically went into orbit."

Smith backed off and shot a searching glance at Kirsten. "You really know this cat, King?"

"Sure. Sally and I swam together in the jungle, didn't we, Sally?"

I nodded.

"But, I thought—" Smith shook his head, glancing up the stairs. "Guess I blew a tube. Wrong blonde. The description sure fits though."

"What do you mean, Troy?" Kirsten asked.

"I got a call about fifteen minutes ago from a cat. She didn't give me her full. Just said a female policewoman was heading our way. Naturally, knowing the trouble you're in with the fuzz, I—"

"—brought her straight here," Kirsten finished, raking the other man with a hot gaze. "What if this was the blonde you were tipped on? She could arrest me. Or didn't you think of that?"

Troy Smith swiped at his cheek, knowing he was trapped, but scratching for an out. "Gee, King, I guess I didn't think."

"You thought, all right!" Kirsten slammed. "You've been thinking ever since you learned I was in trouble with the fuzz. You've been thinking how nice it would be to own this place all by yourself again. Well, let me tell you something, Troy. I've never trusted you. I bought fifty-one percent of this pad because I wanted control. And I'm going to keep control!" He lifted the revolver from the

desk. "If I catch you trying to double-cross me again, you'll end up in the river. Now get out of herel"

Troy Smith tried to form an argument with his hands, then shrugged, vanishing up the stairs into the jazz and cigarette smoke.

For long moment, Kirsten and I stared at each other, scrutinizingly. When he finally lowered his gun, he tossed me a pack of cigarettes and gestured to a chair.

"Sit down, Honey."

"Why?"

"You look beat."

"I had an early morning visitor."

He smiled. "You mean me?"

"No, I mean the one you left hanging in my shower."

"Quit kidding, Honey."

"Quit lying, Mr. K. You didn't leave my apartment because you ran out of Scotch. There was almost a case under the bar."

"I didn't see it."

"Maybe not, but you did see Kerrigan."

He frowned indecisively. "I swear to you, Honey, he was alive when I left your apartment."

"How'd he get in in the first place?"

"Rang the front-door buzzer. I don't know why I answered. Impulse, I guess. He asked for you and I said you were expected back shortly. He said he had some information for you. I knew he recognized me. I poured him a drink and slipped out the back door."

I fingered the collar of my silk shirt. "You're great at explaining things, aren't you, Mr. K? Like Josephine Bradley's emotional problems and Rita Perez's instability. I'm surprised you never tried to solve Chiquita Kirsten's marital difficulties!"

His shoulders sagged. "Who told you?"

"Lawrence."

"Nice guy. Introduce me to him sometime—in a dark alley."

"He also mentioned what a nice father-in-law you have."

"Yeah," Kirsten said. "Generous, kindly and good with a stiletto. Now you know the real reason why he gave me a job in his bordello. He lost a prostitute, but gained a bartender."

"You sound as if you didn't take too kindly to marriage."

"Are you kidding? What I told you was true. I met Chicaro in a bar. His bar. He took real kindly to me when my back was turned. Knockout drops. When I woke up Chiquita and I were practically on our honeymoon with my signature all over the license."

"If you weren't happy why didn't you cross the border. They couldn't hold you to a Mexican marriage."

"That's what you say, Honey." He stood up and groaned. "I guess there's no sense keeping it a secret any longer. Chiquita's dead." He paced across the room, head tilted back, mouth open. "I'm not the Hank Kirsten I've pretended to be. I've never been the King of any beatnik jungle. I'm no more a subterranean than you are. My family lives on Nob Hill in San Francisco and my father's a multimillionaire."

I guess my reaction wasn't what he'd expected.

"Don't you understand, Honey, I'm Henry Jerome Kirsten the Third?"

My teeth bit into my lips until they hurt. "So they were blackmailing you?"

"Yes."

"And you were going to pay them off."

"Yes!"

"You fool!"

"They knew everything about me. About me and Josephine in Palm Springs. Things I didn't want to get back to my family, including the Mexican marriage to Chiquita. Chicaro threatened to spread it all over the newspapers. He had me against the wall."

"You idiot!"

"I couldn't tell you, Honey!" He ran trembling fingers over his face. "I wanted to, but with Josephine dead it looked like—And then suddenly Rita! My God, the trap kept getting bigger and bigger! And *you* were trying to expose me! I couldn't tell you!"

I couldn't look at him I was so angry. "Why'd you ever leave home in the first place?"

"It was my dad's money. It made me sick. He kept offering jobs in his company—executive vice-president, assistant to the president. I nearly went berserk. All I wanted was a job. I wanted to build my own future—but no!" Sweat streamed down his forehead. "He didn't un-

derstand. He couldn't understand me as a person. He never has!"

"So you walked out."

"Yes! I didn't know I'd run into the likes of Chicaro!"

I slammed my fist on his desk. "Do you honestly believe Chicaro planned this all by himself?"

"Get smart, Hank! If Chicaro knew about your clandestine affair with Josephine Bradley in Palm Springs he must have got it from somebody!"

He whirled, fists clenched. "Who? Not Jo! She didn't know who I was."

"How can you be certain?"

"Because I never told her!"

I laughed grimly. "Don't you suppose she could have found out some other way?"

"She wasn't that kind of woman!"

"Does it take a certain kind of woman to go through a man's wallet when he's asleep?"

He stiffened. "No, but—"

"All right," I said. "Suppose she didn't tell Chicaro. Suppose she told somebody else—innocently. Not realizing this person meant to use the information for purposes of blackmail."

"Who, Honey?"

"Mawson Lawrence."

Kirsten staggered. "Lawrence? But, why would he—"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Hank, but Josephine Bradley knew Lawrence intimately. More intimately than you can imagine. He was the father of her child."

Even the old cement walls of the abandoned gun fortification seemed to tremble as Kirsten moved for his revolver. "I'll kill that bastard!"

I got there first and flicked open the cylinder. Six cartridges nestled in the openings. "I'm only guessing, Hank. You can't kill someone based on that."

"But it makes sense, Honey! I always guessed Chicaro was working with someone, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it was Jo. Of course, it's Lawrence! That's why they waited until I was in the United States before demanding the money."

"How much did they want?"

Kirsten circled the room. "Fifty thousand dollars."

I nodded. "You weren't paying blackmail. You were

going to donate the first prize money to the winning contestant, Rita Perez."

He choked hard. "I couldn't have proved a thing. Rita would have owned the money legitimately."

"Of course. They'd have split up the shares in Mexico and that would have been that—except Rita got killed."

"Yeah," he said harshly. "And that explains who sent her after you."

"I don't think it does, Hank."

"It must have been Lawrence!"

"Why would he take the chance of spoiling his blackmail plan?"

"Because he murdered Jo and he knew you'd catch up to him sooner or later!"

"Sounds good," I said. "But, there's one hitch. Lawrence wasn't in that boat with Josephine Bradley and Rita Perez. If he had been he'd have been identified long ago and in jail."

"Then, who, Honey?"

I got up and shook my head dismally. "I don't honestly know, Hank. Despite the boat owner's uncertainty about you, I—I can't bring myself to believe you'd murder Josephine Bradley—not after the way you talked about her this morning."

He shrugged emptily. "Thanks."

"Kerrigan's out, naturally, although I'm sure he was working for Lawrence as a private investigator."

"You mean—"

"He was keeping tabs on you. That's how Lawrence found out we were on our way to Mexico. He was the one who thought up the idea of giving me the joy juice."

Kirsten exhaled angrily. "How do you like that? I've never been introduced to the bastard, but he's been my worst enemy for almost six months."

"I wouldn't exactly say your worst, Hank. There's somebody running loose who's killed four people. You're going to swing for that quartet unless we find that person—and quick."

He took his revolver from my fingers and laid it on his desk. "Knowing what you know now, how does it figure?"

I ran my hands across the sweat on his forehead. "I told you, I don't know. There's a woman involved. She

stole the dynamite we found in my clock. If she's working this alone, she's got a lot of guts."

"A woman?" Kirsten stammered. "But, how does she fit in the blackmail scheme?"

"She doesn't," I said. "That's just it. Maybe she did before Rita died, but she wasn't working with Lawrence or Chicaro."

"I don't understand, Honey."

"I don't know whether I do myself, Hank. It just seems to me that we've been running around in circles with this case. The blackmail plan was one thing and the murders another. Somewhere along the line they must have crossed."

"How?"

I threw my hands up futilely. "This is another guess, but I have a feeling one of our lovely Miss Twentieth Century contestants is our murderer."

"No!" he protested. "It's impossible!"

"Not as impossible as you might think, Hank." I gestured to his chair. "Sit down. I want to get something off my mind that's been hanging there for the past four days."

He sat down slowly, still trembling slightly and reached for a cigarette. "Okay, I'm listening."

"You never were introduced to Lawrence, right?"

"Right."

"He's a big talker, Hank. I imagine when he gets drunk he could talk a person's leg off."

"So?"

"Being mixed in crooked deals is nothing new to Lawrence. He's fixed beauty contests before. I think he planned to fix this one in favor of Josephine Bradley."

"Why, Honey?"

"Because he's not completely inhuman. Because of what happened to her child. Jo was a beautiful girl, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I told you."

"Beautiful enough to win a contest like this legitimately?"

"Probably."

"No matter the probability," I said, "I think Lawrence was going to fix this contest in her favor. I don't know whether he planned to actually pay her fifty thousand

dollars or not, but that's what I think he inadvertantly told one of the other contestants."

"You're kidding, Honey."

"I wish I were. I'd give a lot more to know where he might have been when he divulged this information. A Tokyo bar, a pub somewhere in Piccadilly Circus—it could have been anywhere. If it happened."

"And if it did?"

"Then Mawson Lawrence signed Josephine Bradley's death certificate."

He shook his head. "I still don't get it."

"I said I was guessing."

"Then guess the rest of it."

"Okay. Our little beauty—whoever she might be—came to California early and looked up Josephine, hoping to get a cut of the fifty thousand dollars."

Kirsten's eyes widened. "Now you're making sense. And the answer was 'no.'"

"Right. In fact, the answer was probably, 'get out or I'll call a cop.' So our beauty got frightened and decided to take Jo on a boat ride."

"But, how could she work a deal like that, Honey?"

"Posing as a man," I said. "Jo did have business going, didn't she?"

"Of course. Where does Rita fit?"

"Your big Tijuana tamale must have caught our murderess changing into costume and was forced to go along."

Kirsten raised his hands. "Wait a minute, Honey. If what you said earlier is true about Rita being picked to win because of Lawrence's blackmail scheme, then this was all a mistake."

"Not a mistake exactly," I said. "Just a change in plans. A change that our murderers didn't know about, probably until Josephine was drowned."

Kirsten seized his forehead with his hands. "Let me get this straight. Rita and Josephine went out in this boat with a woman posing as a man. Jo not knowing the truth and Rita too scared to tell."

"Remember, I'm guessing," I said.

"Sounds reasonable so far. Keep going."

"Okay. I won't try to explain how the locket got in

Jo's stomach, but we know she did go overboard, stripped naked."

"Yes. Go on."

"At this point," I said, "Rita was slated to follow. That's where I believe our two cases cross."

"What do you mean?"

"Fearing she was about to die, Rita pleaded for her life, promising a large hunk of dough in exchange. A piece of the blackmail money."

"It fits, Honey."

"Sure it does. And it fits that she was too afraid to tell Lawrence or her own father, but she had to confide in somebody."

"Chiquita."

"Yes. And after her sister was killed Chiquita didn't know where to turn. By the time she made up her mind she was dead."

Kirsten got up from the desk. "Honey, you've got it."

"Got what?" I asked. "A nice theory with lace around it? Sure. I can even tell you she borrowed Kerrigan's car to get Chiquita. I can tell you whose gun she used. I can tell you where she stole the dynamite. But I can't tell you who she is."

"What about Toby Smith?"

"What about her?"

"She's a weird one. And she's married to one twice as weird."

"She's a possibility," I said. "What about you and her husband?"

"Troy?" Kirsten shrugged. "I met him on a picture assignment from the paper. He talked himself silly about his wife, about everything—after I gave him the phony story about my past. He told me Toby gave him a raw deal, that she was a psycho and had stolen his little boy."

"Did you believe him?"

"I didn't until I met Toby. She's a peculiar girl."

"What about Troy?"

"He's a maniac. You saw what he's like."

I glanced at the stacks of tens and twenties on Kirsten's desk. "How'd you happen to get in business with him?"

He smiled grimly. "The day after Rita died the first blackmail installment arrived from my father. Thirty thousand dollars. Ironical, huh? It was too much to bank

in the face of what had happened, so I decided to invest the money. Troy wanted to sell half his business. I bought fifty-one percent."

"For thirty thousand?" I demanded.

He nodded. "I knew it wasn't worth it. What could I do? You were on the verge of putting my bearded face on every post office wall in the country. Banking thirty thousand dollars isn't easy when there're bloodhounds on your trail."

"Hank, why didn't you just go to the police and tell them the truth?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Honey. You said yourself I'm a sitting duck in this thing." He winced. "Besides, I wanted to protect my father. His ancestors came over on the Mayflower. They fought their way across the United States in covered wagons. They were in Red Cross tents when the earthquake of 1906 struck San Francisco. I couldn't smear all that with blood and blackmail."

"I guess you couldn't."

"That's why I didn't tell you about Chiquita and her father. That's why I tried to pull that crazy stunt in Tijuana. I was desperate, Honey. You'll never know how desperate."

"Okay," I said. "So you invested your money with Troy Smith. I won't even ask why you didn't tear up the check."

"I couldn't do that either. The check was sent to me care of General Delivery, Los Angeles—with the understanding it was for business investment purposes. Dad promised not to investigate, under threat he'd never see me again if he did. If that check hadn't cleared inside a week, he'd have been in L.A. with so many detectives they could have held a convention."

"Sounds to me like you've never given your father much of a chance, Hank."

He took a deep breath. "You're right there, Honey. When this is all over, believe me, I'm moving back up to Nob Hill and I'm going to take a job in his company. Not as vice-president. But as something. And I'm going to work my way up. The same way he did. And by God the first time anybody ever says to me, 'get with it, man, hit the road and live,' I'm going to hit them so hard they won't wake up for a week."

"Hank, I've got to apologize for what I thought when

I came back to my apartment and found Kerrigan. I truthfully lost my faith in you."

He shrugged. "Honey, a lot of people have lost faith in me. And I don't blame them. I've done some foolish things."

I put my arms around his shoulders. I don't know why exactly. Maybe because I suddenly knew what Josephine Bradley had felt, and Rita Perez. There was something about this guy that was pretty nice.

"I'm going to do everything I can to help you, Hank."

His lips pressed down on mine and they felt good. The only thing that didn't feel good was the gun pressed firmly in my ribs.

FOURTEEN

"HEY!" I said.

"You like?"

"What's the gag?"

"No gag, Honey."

Our mouths and eyes were almost touching.

"Jekyll and Hyde."

"Not exactly," he said.

"What would you call yourself?"

"Smart."

"Too smart," I said.

"That's not fair."

"No?"

"You said you'd help me, Honey."

The gun pressed harder.

"I guess I have. What now?"

"Another kiss."

"I've read about guys like you."

"Oh?"

"They get their kicks by squeezing two things at the same time."

"I don't follow you, Honey."

"The second squeeze is on the trigger."

"What trigger?"

"The one you've got buried in my ribs."

"What?"

Hank Kirsten drew back, but the gun didn't. That's when a raw laugh split the room. I glanced down. Troy Smith was on his knees at my side, Kirsten's revolver gripped in one of his meaty hands.

"You're such a lovely couple," he said, rising quickly. "It's a shame to break you up."

"Where'd you drop from?" Kirsten demanded.

"I crawled. You were so wrapped up you didn't notice me, *King!*"

"Well, start crawling back and minus the gun."

Kirsten's move toward his partner was stopped by a brandish of the revolver.

"Oh, no!" Troy Smith blurted. "You're the one who's going to start crawling now, *King*. I heard what you said about me. Maniac? Man, you don't know the half of it!"

"Give me that gun, Troy."

"I'll go you one better if you take another step!"

Kirsten froze. "What's bugging you, Troy?"

"You, that's what's bugging me. You phony! *King* Kirsten. I should have known better when you gave me that jazz about Bakersfield." He laughed again. "So I'm dangerous, am I?"

"Your wife seems to think so."

"Sure she does! Toby thinks every man's dangerous. Her father beat her when she was a kid."

I added, "And you took up where he left off."

"Shut up, lady!"

"You're sick, Troy," Kirsten said.

"Sure I'm sick! Sick of phonies, sick of people like you, *King*. Sick of flies stuck on flypaper. Toby's in the same mire. A skirt with a body. Trying to push it all over heaven and earth. Trying to prove something!"

"What's she trying to prove?" I asked.

Smith recoiled, snapping the revolver at my head. "You know the answer to that. What are all women trying to prove? That they're beautiful! They doll themselves to the teeth trying to prove it. And sometimes they strip right down to the skin for the same reason."

Troy Smith was no maniac. He made too much sense. Even if he was slandering my own sex. "You don't like your wife being in this contest," I said.

"No!"

"Why?"

He faltered for an instant. "She doesn't have to strip down to prove she's beautiful. I've told her she was a million times. I tried to make our marriage work, but no. She wanted more. She had to prove it to the world. Well, she's in for a rude awakening."

"What do you mean?"

"By exposing herself this way she's proved she's no fit mother. I'm going to get my son."

"How?"

"Don't worry, Hankie Pankie, your bourgeois relatives said. 'Just worry yourself and the *King*. Sheriff's deputies will be here shortly.'

"What?" Kirsten demanded.

"Don't worry, Hankie Pankie, your bourgeois relatives on Nob Hill will surely pad the gas chamber with thousand-dollar bills. That way there'll be no sweat, no strain."

"I don't get it," Kirsten said. "You've had plenty of chances to turn me in before. Why now?"

"I told you why. I don't like phonies! And I didn't like what you said to me earlier about winding up in the river. Now where's your big talk, *King*?"

Kirsten shook his head. "I—I'm sorry."

"You ought to be sorry. Sure, I needed your money to keep this pad open. But, you didn't have to grind me in the dirt. You didn't have to resort to Toby's tactics. I've had that kind of stuff up to here."

Smith's anger was subsiding into quiet protest for the wrongs that had been done to him. Despite the menacing presence of Kirsten's gun I knew he'd never use it.

"Mr. Smith, I'm a private detective—"

"So I gathered. What's that make me?"

"A pretty big dope if you don't answer a few questions, honestly—before the Sheriff's deputies arrive."

"I've already given some honest answers, lady. If you don't believe them, read tomorrow's papers."

"I don't have to read the newspapers," I said, "to find out you weren't lying about that phone call you got earlier."

"What phone call?"

"The one that tipped you off I was coming here."

"What about it?"

"You said it was a woman. That she didn't give her name. Did you recognize the voice?"

"No!" he blurted.

"This is important, Mr. Smith. Could it have been your wife disguising her voice?"

"No!"

"You're positive?"

He hesitated. "It's noisy upstairs. Could have been Toby. I wouldn't put it past her. She's that crazy."

"What'd the voice say exactly?"

"That a big blonde with blue eyes was coming from the police."

"I mean the exact words."

"I don't have a tape-recording machine in my brain, lady."

"Well, was the voice foreign?"

"It was to me."

"I mean did she speak with any sort of accent. Spanish or French or—"

"I told you it's noisy upstairs."

There was no sense wasting any more time. Mark Storm was probably already on his way. I reached underneath my skirt.

"What are you doing, lady?"

The revolver I removed from my garter holster answered his question. I leveled the snout at his head. "Drop yours, Mr. Smith. Now!"

He laughed. "Hey, that's craziest. Do it again."

"Last time, Mr. Smith. This wouldn't be the first time I've shot someone. Drop it!"

Smith lowered the gun a notch, his laughter trailing off like an old gramophone machine at the end of its wind. "You're serious."

Putting a bullet in Troy Smith was the farthest thought in my mind. "Of course, I am," I said. All I wanted was to get Kirsten out of there before Mark arrived.

Smith tossed Hank's gun on the desk and shrugged. "Okay, you win. I'm no hero."

Quickly Kirsten threw some clothes into a suitcase, then grabbed his revolver and press camera. "Let's go!"

We started up the stairs when Smith's voice stopped us. "Hey, Kirsten, I'll buy back your fifty-one percent for twenty thousand."

The millionaire's son never even looked around. The offer was ten thousand under what he'd paid originally. "Sold," he said. "You can give me your check next time I see you."

We drove across the river to the amphitheatre, passing

a screeching Sheriff's car along the way. Mammoth floodlights played over the walls of the Carstairs-Campbell building, casting their brilliant cones on the Venus de Milo and over a gold banner announcing, SEMI-FINALS TONIGHT. I double-parked and checked the box office. There wasn't a seat available, not even standing room.

I told Kirsten to find a parking place, stick tight in the car and pick me up in front of the amphitheatre in two hours.

"Why can't I come with you?" he demanded.

"The place'll be loaded with plainclothes cops. You wouldn't stand a chance."

I took his camera from the back seat.

"Hey!" he protested. "What's that for?"

"My ticket into the press section. Now scat!"

"Wait, Honey!"

"Two hours!" I shouted, dashing for the amphitheatre entrance.

The doorman was none too happy with the way I flashed my ID card, covered it with the camera and pushed inside, but the maneuver worked. The press section was to the right of the main runway and fortunately there was an empty seat next to Fred Sims.

"Will wonders never cease?" Fred whispered. "Where'd you pop from?"

"A pad, man," I said, squinting up through the ring of spotlights around the stage. "What's happening?"

"Show's almost over. Judges are wrangling over the ten finalists. We should have a decision any minute."

"Good. I'm just in time then."

"For what?"

"For what?"

"The kill."

"You kidding, Honey?"

The orchestra, high on the massive stage, suddenly creased the whisper-filled amphitheatre with a crescendo of trumpets and rolling drums. Then a man in a swallow-tail tuxedo stepped from the wings, clutching a hand microphone.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Kerrigan's successor," Fred murmured sarcastically. "Or didn't you know he got hung up in some blonde's bathroom this morning?"

The announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, our judges have reached their decision. So now, with your kind indulgence, I would like to bring back to the stage once more our forty-two lovely contestants."

His arm lifted. The orchestra cranked into a melodic rendition of the Miss Twentieth Century Theme Song. Miss England strutted out from behind the curtain. She was followed by forty other long-limbed beauties, including October Smith, her gold Miss U.S.A. banner glistening in the lights, green eyes sparkling with pride.

I nudged Fred. "Somebody's missing. My count stops at forty-one."

"Yeah, mine, too."

An abrupt gesture by the announcer halted the music.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I've been informed that our contestant from Germany, Miss Freda Fisher, will be unable to make an appearance tonight for this, the naming of our ten finalists."

An undercurrent of sound lifted from the audience.

"Unfortunately," the announcer continued, "she was taken ill backstage, but I have been assured that it's nothing serious."

"I'll bet," I said rising.

"Where you going, Honey?" Fred's question was so loud, heads twisted around.

The announcer crossed to the judges' box. "Now then, may I have the white envelope, please."

A big muscular guard blocked the door leading backstage. When I told him I represented the press, he growled, "Listen, sweetheart, I wouldn't care if you were naked, danced on your hands and represented the New York Times. You still couldn't get past me until the show's over. That's Mr. Lawrence's orders."

"Look," I argued. "I work for Mr. Lawrence. I'm a private eye."

"Sure," he said. "Your eye's so private it's tucked right inside that camera. Blow, baby. You know the rules. No pictures allowed anywhere inside this theatre until after the show's through. And that goes for any night, including this one."

I had to get to Freda Fisher before whatever illness she had got to her. The stage door was hidden from the

audience by a thick curtain. I stepped to one side, glancing down.

"Holy smokes," I said. "Is that a gun?"

The guard bent over as I'd hoped he would. My judo chop landed hard on the back of his neck. He kept on bending until he hit the floor. The impact was muffled by sudden applause from behind the curtain. Apparently one of the finalists had been named.

Grasping Hank's camera firmly I stepped over the unconscious guard and cracked the stage door. People were jammed in the wings, eyes riveted on the line of pulchritude that stretched across the stage. I slipped past them unnoticed. Freda Fisher was lying on a cot in Lawrence's office, slim arms folded over her stomach. She was alone.

"Miss Fisher?"

"Yes."

"It's Honey West. Are you all right?"

She lifted herself on one elbow, a startled look in her eyes.

"I understand you were too ill to go out for the naming of the finalists. What's the matter?"

She caught her breath, exhaling audibly. "You frightened me! I thought—"

"You thought what, Freda?"

Tears welled over her eyelids and she covered them with her hands. "I thought he'd come to kill me!"

"What are you saying?"

Her fingers thrust down between her breasts, removing a torn piece of wrapping paper. She gave it to me.

"*Herr* Lawrence was so angry I could not show it to him." She brought her tears to a painful-sounding stop and stared at me through red lids.

I placed Hank Kirsten's camera on Lawrence's desk and unfolded the paper. The light in the room was dim, but the crookedly scrawled letters were not. They read, "You Shall Die."

FIFTEEN

THE VERDICT was in by the time I helped Freda Fisher upstairs to her room. Miss Twentieth Century was to be chosen tomorrow night from ten finalists, one of whom was the brown-haired girl from Germany. The others were Lis Rico, Miss Panama; Gigi Gautraud, Miss France; Samsi Notoga, Miss Japan; Dulce Larsen, Miss Sweden; Pero Gulupe, Miss Puerto Rico; Anne Nobecheck, Miss Yugoslavia; Louise Pulham, Miss England; Gloria Caldwell, Miss Canada; and October Smith, Miss United States.

Mark Storm was waiting for us in Freda's room. He and two other grim-faced deputies clapped me and the shaking Miss Germany into a squad car and drove us to the nearby Sheriff's station. They questioned Freda alone for about forty minutes. When my turn came, Mark shooed the other deputies out, lighted a cigarette and scrutinized me for fully a minute before he spoke.

"Honey, you're going to jail."

"What?"

"I said I'm putting you behind bars for the sole safety and security of this county."

"On what charge?" I demanded.

"Are you kidding?" He shook his head. "We've got enough on you to put you away for a century. Aiding and abetting a known suspect, withholding vital information from the authorities, assault and battery for the dozenth time—"

"Oh, you found Lawrence's guard?"

"Yes, we found him," Mark spat. "He's got a lump on the back of his neck the size of an ostrich egg. What'd you hit him with?"

"My record!" I headed for the door, bluffing so hard

my jaws ached, certain he hadn't found Hank Kirsten—yet.

"Where you going?"

"Home," I said. "Just try to prove any of those charges and you'll be hanging by your bootstraps, and not in my shower."

He raced me to the knob and won by ten fingers. "You listen to me!" he roared. His face was as red as fire. "You're not going to walk out of this office just because you think you're God or somebody!"

"No?"

"Nol"

He was ready to split loose at the seams. I crossed nonchalantly to a chair and sat down. "Okay," I said. "Wheel in the bright lights and blackjacks, I'm ready."

"Where is he?" Mark demanded.

"Who?" I asked. "Santa Claus? He pledged me not to tell."

"Honey, you're stretching my patience!"

"Am I, Lieutenant? Well, you've been stretched out of your suits for years. Why don't you admit to the Sheriff you're still a growing boy and get a larger clothing allowance?"

Mark slammed his fist on his desk. "Who do you think you are anyway?"

"Me? I'm a female. Over twenty-one. Height: five feet five inches. Weight: one hundred and twenty pounds."

"Where is he?"

"Search me, Lieutenant. There's not a *he* on the premises."

His eyes widened. "That's not a bad idea." He snatched the small French purse I carried in a deep pocket of my skirt and dumped the contents on his desk. "Where are your keys?"

"I don't know," I hedged. "Probably left them in my car by accident."

Mark flicked the switch on his interoffice communication box. "Emery, put out an all points. Nineteen-fifty-eight Chrysler convertible. License number AXV five-five-six. Suspect Henry Kirsten in possession. Apprehend with caution." He let up on the switch and turned hard eyes on me. "Okay, we'll wait."

I shrugged. "Okay."

"Listen to me, Honey. You think you're trying to help, but you're not. Your father was the same way. Always with his jaw out. Slugging, ducking, trying to preserve the rights of the individual, whether guilty or innocent."

"A fair country philosophy, Mark. Don't knock it because you've got a badge."

"I'm not knocking it! I'm just telling you you've gone way overboard with your private justice. More than your father ever thought of. At least, he had a line he wouldn't step over. You don't know what a line is."

"I don't believe in lines, Lieutenant. I believe in people. There's a big difference."

"You'll have to prove it to me."

"Give me twenty-four hours and I will."

"I'll give you nothing!"

"Lieutenant, you said you loved me."

His pacing shuddered to a stop. "Always with the jokes, aren't you? Well, let me tell you something, Miss Smartie Pants. One of these fine days it's not going to be somebody else hanging in your shower, or somebody else clawing through nineteen floors of thin air—it's going to be you! And nothing's going to save you. Not that pearl-handled job you carry up under your skirt, or all the judo chops you can lay neck to neck from here to Japan. You're the one who's going to be dead!"

"Shhh," I cautioned, finger to my lips. "Watkins might hear you. He once said he'd love to have me on one of his slabs—dead or alive."

Mark tossed me my purse. "Get out of here!"

"No!" I protested. "You can't throw me out."

The deputy's thick hands brushed over his face wearily. "Now what the hell are you trying to pull?"

"A murderess out of your hat, Lieutenant. Before you make a dunce cap out of it by booking Hank Kirsten."

He slumped into his chair and shrugged miserably. "All right, Orphan Annie. Help me! Only please don't tell me it was Daddy Warbucks!"

"Mark, look," I said. "No matter how you slice this case it still boils down to fifty thousand mighty green hunks of lettuce. Hank Kirsten needs that money like he needs a hole in his head and furthermore—"

"I think he's already got a hole in his head. Sure, we know he's a millionaire's son. And, without your assistance,

we also learned that he bought controlling interest in that beatnik asylum out there by the river and sold it back tonight at a ten-thousand-dollar loss. Add this to his *weird* associations with Josephine Bradley, Rita Perez and her sister and you've got, in my estimation, a guy who's really popped his cork."

"Will you listen to me for five minutes without interrupting?"

"No!"

"I hunched my shoulders. "Okay, but don't say after tomorrow night that I didn't try to set you straight on some obvious facts."

"What's tomorrow night got to do with the price of Hank Kirsten?"

"The Miss Twentieth Century finals, or haven't you heard?"

"I read the papers. And if you're worrying your pretty head about Miss Germany's threat note, don't. We've already arrested the man who gave it to her."

"And who might that be?"

"A crank who works in the Carstairs-Campbell building. Apparently he had a crush on Freda. She didn't pay any attention to him, so he threatened her."

"Is this what he said or what you've put into his mouth?"

Mark gestured at the door. "Out!"

"Okay, I can take a hint. Let me warn you though, Lieutenant, I'm not going to lead you to Hank Kirsten. So save your bird dogs the exercise."

"Thanks for the advice. Don't bother to bill us for it."

At the door, I glanced around. "By the way, what'd you do with Freda Fisher? Lock her up for safety's sake?"

"No, she was returned to pageant headquarters."

"What?"

"She'll be all right now."

"Mark, you know she's one of the favorites!"

"So what?"

"So maybe you just signed her death certificate!"

It was well after midnight by the time I reached the Carstairs-Campbell building again. New rain, an overly cautious cab driver and several attempts to shake Mark's

tail consumed almost an hour. The tail was still wagging behind me as I paid off the taxi and raced down a narrow alley to a side entrance. It was locked. Rain beat on a tin roof that sheltered the door and wind whipped up off the ocean, blowing my skirt furiously. The blue silk shirt I wore was spattered and my hair clung to my forehead, partially blinding me in the downpour.

I dashed to the amphitheatre, trying doors along the way. A frosted-glass panel near the ticket booth responded to my pull, opening onto a corridor, dimly-lit at the end by a shallow triangle of yellow which slanted from a room off the hall. I listened for any sounds of life, but the rain and my tail's footfalls, clattering on the cement outside, obliterated everything, except the pounding of my own breath. I flicked the lock bolt into position and moved down the corridor toward the light.

The room at the end was outfitted with two desks, a typewriter, a mimeograph machine and an odd assortment of file cabinets. A placard on the wall read THIMK. Another, KMIHT—THIMK spelled backward. One wall was decorated with photos of the Miss Twentieth Century contestants. A pile of saddle-stitched booklets were strewn in a corner and the desks littered with others, including a book stuffed to overflowing with press clippings. Fastened to the inside of the door was a chart listing the eighty-eight contestants in alphabetical order, according to country and state. Across the top were dates running back as far as a month ago. In the interlinking slots was such information as: 7/27/58—United Air Lines flight 903, Meeks Field, 8:55 a.m. Meet press at LaGuardia. Change to American Air Lines flight 333, International Airport. 8/5/58—Tokyo Air Lines, Tokyo Air Field, etc.

Quickly I zeroed in on the ten finalists, but the chart was so hashed with date changes and information that it was almost impossible to get them all straight. Panama's Lis Rico had apparently arrived even before the graph was started because her first square was marked, Sky Hotel. The same was true of Dulce Larsen, Miss Sweden, although her start for Long Beach indicated Swedish Air Lines, departing six weeks ago. France's Gigi Gautraud and October Smith, the newly acclaimed Miss U.S.A. had been marked, Arrival Time Unknown. Freda Fisher was checked off as arriving at L.A. International one week

ago, but a line was drawn through the last entry and the word "missed" filled in over the box.

Miss Japan had been one of the few contestants who followed correct flight instructions. The same applied to Pero Gulupe on her trip from Puerto Rico. They were logged in last Sunday. Anne Nobecheck from Yugoslavia, England's Louise Pulham and Gloria Caldwell, Miss Canada, were undecipherable listings. All three had apparently changed dates and flights so often that the pageant chartkeeper had not only given up, but expressed his bewilderment under Arrival Time as "Who's kidding who?"

I opened a copy of the press booklet, lighted a cigarette and drew up a chair. After glancing through some of the material on the ten finalists, I found a pair of scissors and a paste pot and started to work clipping and pasting on a blank sheet of paper. When I was finished, my list read:

Miss Canada—Gloria Caldwell, 23, a resident of Ottawa. Blue-eyed brownette; 5 ft. 6 in., 118 pounds, 34-23-35.

Miss England—Louise Pulham, 25, from Northampton. Red hair and blue eyes; 5 ft. 3½ in., 102 pounds, 34-22-34.

Miss France—Gigi Gautraud, 28, from Paris. Blonde, hazel eyes, 39-25-35½; 5 ft. 8½ in. 129 pounds.

Miss Germany—Freda Fisher, 29, born in Cologne, now residing in Berlin. Amber hair and hazel eyes; 5 ft. 8 in., 116 pounds, 36-24-36.

Miss Japan—Samsi Notoga, 26, of Hiroshima. Black hair, brown eyes; 5 ft. 1 in., 106 pounds, 33-21-35.

Miss Panama—Lis Rico, 21, resident of Panama City. Black hair, violet eyes, 119 pounds; 5 ft. 7½ in., 38-23-35.

Miss Puerto Rico—Pero Gulupe, 22, of San Juan. Brown hair and eyes; 5 ft. 4 in., 110 pounds, 34-22-35.

Miss Sweden—Dulce Larsen, 23, of Stockholm. Blonde hair, blue eyes; 5 ft. 7 in., 121 pounds, 36-25-36.

Miss Yugoslavia—Anne Nobecheck, 27, from Bel-

grade. Brown-eyed, raven hair; 5 ft. 5 in., 130 pounds, 38-23-37.

Miss New York—October Smith, 24, of New York City. Black hair, green eyes; 5 ft. 6½ in., 123 pounds, 38-23-36.

In a large envelope in one of the desks I discovered a maze of notes apparently taken long before the contest began. They divulged such data as: England—father was naval hero, set anti-sub mines in Northampton harbor. France—worked for French underground during war. Big bosom. Big girl. Hit this one hard with pics. Japan—expert in small arms, worked in munitions factory as young girl. Yugoslavia—served with army. Sweden—lovely girl, wants to become an actress. Panama—daughter of once-famous American ballerina who married and retired to Panama. Germany—mother gravely ill in Berlin hospital, may not be able to make contest.

One note read, "Hey, Bob, get this! Louise Pulham might have had a naval hero for a father, but she's the whole show these days. Understand from unimpeachable sources that our fair Miss England now resides in Piccadilly Circus, not Northampton. Between the hours of six p.m. and six a.m. she displays navel maneuvers for anyone who has two pounds and ten shillings. Let's be sure to keep this quiet."

I also found a small registration book which had been signed by the girls upon their arrival at pageant headquarters. This record and the paste-up sheet went into my skirt pocket. Then I headed for the tenth floor.

I took the basement stairs, avoiding the main floor guard. All the way up I kept juggling in my mind some of the facts I'd culled from those notes. Munitions factory! Army! Underground! Now I was beginning to understand the professional excellence of the bomb planted in my clock. Obviously the killer was not only an expert with explosives, but also a crackerjack with a gun, as witness the accuracy of the bullets which had cut down Chiquita Perez.

I knocked gently at Miss Germany's room after tiptoeing down the dark tenth floor corridor. There was no answer. Inside were two empty beds. The one belonging to the California contestant from Eureka was freshly

made. The other was still warm from its occupant, covers thrown carelessly back.

My next stop was October Smith's room. She blinked at me through sleep-rimmed eyes and groaned. "Oh, it's you. What now?"

"Where's Josephine Keller? The girl who rooms with Miss Germany?" I demanded.

"She left for home this afternoon."

"What about Freda Fisher?"

"Isn't she in bed?"

"No."

Toby yawned. "She's probably too excited to sleep. Maybe took a walk. Did you find my gun?"

"No," I said, "but I found your husband thanks to your phone call."

A sardonic smile crossed her lips. "A girl has to protect herself."

"From what?"

"From anything. Now leave me alone!"

I nearly slammed the curtain in her face. "Where would Freda take a walk this time of night?"

"I don't know," Toby said, shaking her head. "The roof maybe. How'd you get past the guard downstairs?"

"I came up through the basement."

"But those doors are supposed to be locked," she protested.

"Somebody left one open," I said, starting down the corridor. "And I'm beginning to believe it was no accident."

October Smith watched me step into the elevator, but she didn't see me punch the button marked 11. When the doors parted on the next floor, I quickly jabbed the control marked Roof and leaped out before the doors slid closed again. I watched the number dial near the ceiling as it swung around to twelve, fourteen, fifteen, the roof of the building. The needle held there for almost a minute, then began to sweep back until it stopped on 10. That's when I moved to the stairwell. I climbed the next four floors as quickly as my legs could carry me. Rain and darkness were thick outside the narrow roof that covered the stairwell. Only a bare light gleamed and this was cast from the elevator, now open and poised under its huge shelter a few yards away. I crept toward it

slowly, hugging the wall between the shaft and stairs. I didn't see them until I was too close, Toby Smith could have reached out and touched me. They were standing under an eave off the elevator shaft and the voluptuous Miss U.S.A. had a coat thrown over her nightgown.

"She got off on eleven," Toby was saying softly. "I heard her get off. She probably thought she'd fool me and search my room again after I came up here."

The man tugged on his hat nervously. "I don't know. She's a smart cookie. Are you certain you've got it all straight?"

"I think so. I'm scared stiff."

"You can still get out, Toby, if you want to."

She nodded, wiping rain from her cheeks. "I'll stick."

"Good girl." The man kissed Toby lightly.

They started toward the elevator. In the small glow of the compartment light, Lieutenant Mark Storm's face glinted as he put his arm around the beautiful Miss Twentieth Century contestant and pushed one of the down buttons.

SIXTEEN

AFTER slipping out of the Carstairs-Campbell building, I spent the next three hours in a cab looking for Hank Kirsten. Along the way I stopped at Macgillicuddy's boat shack. The balding old proprietor, half-asleep and sour as unripened grapes, refused to show me the rental receipt for the murder boat, then finally admitted it had been confiscated by the Sheriff's office.

I found Hank Kirsten when I reached my apartment. There was nothing devious about the discovery. He was in my bed, asleep.

"Nice going, pal," I said, waking him. "It just cost me thirty bucks and my right arm in cab fares looking for you."

He grinned up at me. "If that's all it cost you, Honey, the driver was cheated." He stretched. "Welcome aboard."

"Cut the comedy, Hank. How'd you get here?"

"The same way you did. I left your car in a Pike parking lot. I knew something was haywire when you came out of the building with Lieutenant Storm."

"Everything's haywire," I said gravely, "including Lieutenant Storm. If you were smart you'd be a hundred miles from here and heading for the highest hill."

Kirsten sat up. "You mean Storm still thinks I'm guilty?"

"I don't know what he thinks," I said, "but I know he's got a ticket for you. And it's one-way, all the way."

Kirsten followed me into the kitchen. He listened soberly while I told him what had ensued on the roof of pageant headquarters. Then he scratched his head thoughtfully. "You actually saw him kiss her?"

"I said I did!"

"I thought all cops were honest."

"They're human beings, Hank."

I dialed pageant headquarters. The switchboard finally

answered after an interminable number of rings. When I asked for Freda Fisher, a sleepy voice reminded me it was five-thirty in the morning and that everyone was in bed.

"I'm calling from Germany," I said, assuming a guttural accent. "This is Freda's mother! It is an emergency!"

"Oh?" the voice on the other end faltered, forgetting in his half-drugged mind that an operator would control a call from that distance. "Hold on a moment, please."

A moment passed into five minutes before Freda came on the line. She was obviously terrified by what she'd been told by the pageant operator and her breath was contorted from rushing downstairs.

"Mammal" she blurted in German. "Is everything all right?"

"Ja!" I said, waiting until I could hear the operator closing off his circuit. Then, "Listen, Freda, this is Honey West. I was up to see you about four hours ago. You weren't in your room."

My quick revelation of the truth and my question that wasn't a question left her hanging in mid-air like a corpse hanging from a tree. Finally, taut-voiced, "You have frightened me again, Miss West."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but this is important. You received a threatening note. I was worried. Did Lieutenant Storm come to your room tonight?"

"Nein," she managed. "He talked to me in his office. You were there, outside, I believe."

"That's right. I didn't hear the conversation though. What did he say to you?"

"That everything would be all right." Her voice tightened. "I did not believe him. The other girl moved from my room today. I was afraid to be alone. I moved in with *Fräulein* Gautraud. That is where they found me now."

"Move out!" I said. "Move back into your own room and stay there, understand!"

"Nein," she answered hesitantly.

"You're in danger," I said. "Very grave danger. Now do as I say!"

"All right."

"I'll see you tonight at the finals. Good luck." I hung

up the receiver and stared at Hank Kirsten's inquisitive expression.

"Ten little beauty queens standing in a row," he quipped. "One is a murderess—which one, do you know?"

I glanced out the kitchen window at the purplish streaks of light that were beginning to slice through the dark stormy sky. Then I said, "I've got a pretty good idea. The question is, how do I trap her?"

I expected Mark's arrival all that day, but like the rain, he didn't break. Either he'd changed his mind about arresting Hank or he was working an angle. It was a puzzle either way.

The morning papers had talked about a moon rocket launching at Cape Canaveral and the equally exciting jettison of a beauty queen three thousand miles away in Long Beach. The local Press-Telegram predicted in bold headlines:

MISS USA WILL WIN 20TH CENTURY TITLE TONIGHT.

Even the Los Angeles Herald bannered:

STILL RAINING—BUT IT'S OCTOBER—SMITH!

At five o'clock I called Fred Sims and asked him why all the sudden big push for Miss U.S.A.

"This is a democracy, Honey," he said sarcastically. "I don't ask you why you prefer red heads over me, do I?"

"No," I said, "but I'll ask you who's got the gun at your back? Lieutenant Storm?"

He laughed. "Honey, gal, the last time I had a gun at my back I was with you, remember?"

"Mark's asking for trouble, Fred. And so are you and the rest of your *free* newspapers."

"Hold your horses, Honey! You did me a favor down in Tijuana. All right, here's one in return. Storm's waiting for you—and Kirsten. The first time you step out of that apartment he's going to have you both in Buster Brown shoes with chains attached. I'd leave via the sewer if I were you."

I thanked him for the information and hung up. A glance through the front curtains told me Fred wasn't kidding. The street out front contained two very suspicious cars, both loaded with suspicious characters, trying to act unsuspecting. I peeked out the kitchen windows. The coast was clear in that direction. I faced Kirsten.

"The only way out is over the wall," I said. "Both alleys deadend against it. They're waiting for us out front."

"It'll be a tough climb over in the rain. Why don't we just dive off your porch into the pool?"

"Okay."

I slipped into a bathing suit and tucked my clothes into a paper sack. Kirsten stripped off his shirt and shoes and tossed them over the wall. I followed with my bundle.

He rolled up his trousers and winked at me in the darkening downpour. "If you get me out of this, Honey, I'll buy *you* a swimming pool."

I grinned. "If you're really innocent, I might take you up on that."

"By the way, where's my camera?"

I snapped my fingers. "Left it in Lawrence's office last night. I'm sorry, Hank."

"Thanks." He shook his head. "I only paid five hundred bucks for that sweetheart. Brought it all the way from France after the war. You've probably lost me one of the best damned cameras in the business."

"You'll get it back," I said. "Don't worry."

He made one more soft protest, climbed to the porch railing and dove off. I waited for a few seconds and followed, slicing down through the chill water headfirst. Bubbles swirled around me as I plunged deep, finally kicking my way to the top. I looked for Hank's head, bobbing on the surface. It wasn't there. I dove under again, but my search proved futile. He wasn't in the pool. He was gone.

Crowds of people were already gathering outside the amphitheatre by the time my cab arrived. I'd been delayed by a fruitless search for Hank Kirsten and the necessary switch from bathing suit to clothes that I made in one of my neighbor's cabañas.

I slipped backstage where the ten finalists were being

chastised, cajoled and wooed by a grim-faced Mawson Lawrence, who paced back and forth like a caged wild cat. I kept out of sight.

He suddenly announced, "I love you! Each one of you. Return that love by giving me the performance of your lives tonight. Hold your heads high. Walk proudly. For you are the ten most beautiful women in the world. The judges will select a fourth, third, second and first runner-up, in addition to the queen. Please, don't cry or scream when these selections are revealed by our stage announcer. Let us be dignified, queenly and charming to the very end. Any questions?"

"Yes," Toby Smith asked. "Will the winner receive her fifty thousand dollars tonight?"

"No," Lawrence said, hitching his shoulders. "The queen will receive a check, but it will be blank. The real money comes tomorrow before she leaves for the airport. Any other questions?"

"Ja." Miss Germany raised her hand. She was white-faced and trembling. "May we have some of the photographs to take home. This may be all the memory of the pageant some of us will have."

Lawrence shook his head angrily. "Miss Fisher, I believe you are aware of my feeling concerning pictures. Because of false photographs of Josephine Keller and brutal ones taken of Rita Perez this pageant was almost destroyed. I have been forced, as you know, to take drastic measures—barring cameramen from backstage, not allowing pictures during the pageant production. You are welcome to any and all you can get from the newspapers, but don't bother me with the matter any further."

Lis Rico stood, dark eyes flashing. "Mister Lawrence, I wish to say something about the noise last night."

"What noise?"

"Bang! Bang! None of us sleep hardly."

Lawrence shrugged. "That is unfortunate, Miss Rico. Many of the girls checked out. Late planes, moving of luggage, you understand. I'm sure you'll sleep tonight." He glanced at his watch. "We now have fifty minutes until curtain. As usual you must remain here until that time. Again I must insist that only one of you leave the area at a time. Our publicity director, Mr. Tompkins, will remain to see that this order is carried out to the

letter. No one is allowed to go upstairs. Is this understood?"

The girls nodded.

Fifty minutes. That didn't leave me much time. I took the tunnel to the stairs and climbed to the tenth floor. The man, sitting quite comfortably inside Lis Rico's room, didn't exactly surprise me. But what he held just as comfortably in his right hand did. It was aimed at my head.

SEVENTEEN

"YOU'RE LATE AGAIN, Miss West," he said, grinning. "Only a few minutes, I'll admit, but late." Mark Storm tilted his hat back with the snout of his gun and laughed.

"I was wondering why I had so little trouble getting backstage," I said. "Nice trap you sprung, Lieutenant. You're to be congratulated."

"You've been eluding me all over the place. Early this morning here in this building and then again tonight at your apartment. How'd you and your soulmate get out of there, fly?"

"We took a swan dive into my neighbor's pool," I admitted. "That was hardly so ingenious as the stunt you pulled on the roof with Toby Smith."

"Oh, you were in on that, huh?" He pinched his lips together. "Too bad. I was kind of hoping you weren't."

"Why?"

"Well, it sort of changes my plans." He leveled the gun at me again. "I was going to let you hang around for the fun. Now I can't."

"You don't scare me, Lieutenant."

"Don't I? Let me tell you something that may surprise you, Miss West. I wasn't born yesterday. And I wasn't born a cop. I got this badge after a long grueling period in school during which I was taught to kill and to save with equal dexterity."

Lis Rico's room was in a shambles. It was obvious Mark had been looking for something. "Save the lecture, Lieutenant. Just what do you have in mind?"

"Where's your boy friend?" he snapped.

"He's chatting with the Sheriff," I lied. "Telling him what a bad boy one of his detectives in charge of homicide is. You know, the one who kisses murder suspects on lonely, rain-drenched roofs."

"That was necessary!" he spat.

"No doubt," I said. "And it may be necessary to suspend you from the Sheriff's office as well."

He laughed. "So you think I'm crooked?"

"That was no straight line you were squeezing up there on the roof."

Mark whistled lowly. "You can say that again. She's got some wicked curves I'll tell the world. I enjoyed that little act we put on."

"What do you mean, *act*?"

"We staged that scene for your boy friend and anybody else who might have been around."

"But, I thought—"

"—that I was involved," he finished. "That's what I wanted anybody within ear and eyeshot to think. Toby Smith is working with us. She's taking a long chance and we've got her covered from every angle. Except for your boy friend. Where is he?"

"I don't know. He disappeared after we jumped into the pool. Why didn't you arrest him earlier?"

A nervous smile shot to his lips. "Because what you said yesterday was true. We didn't have any case. No murder weapon, no nothing. It was all circumstantial."

"Did you compare his handwriting with the signature on the boat rental slip?"

"Yeah," Mark said. "They didn't match."

"How about the ten finalists?"

"Same results. Then we compared the handwriting on the threat note given to Miss Germany and the boat rental receipt. They matched.

"What?"

"You'll never guess in a million years who wrote them."

"Who, Mark?"

"Rita Perez."

"I—I don't get it," I stammered.

"Apparently Macgillicuddy's memory was good up to a point. He remembered a purple bathing suit. He recalled a person in a down-turned sailor hat. But he didn't remember who signed the rental receipt. That was Rita Perez."

"But, Mark, how in the world could that threat note have been written by Rita? She's been dead for four days."

"I know," he groaned. "She must have written it before she died. For what reason we'll probably never know. Maybe to frighten Josephine Bradley, maybe even to frighten you. One thing is obvious. The note was never delivered to whoever it was originally intended. It was saved by the killer until last night when he palmed it off on Freda Fisher."

"And when you say *he*, you mean Hank Kirsten."

"I'm afraid so, Honey."

"There's no motive, Mark."

"I'm aware of that fact. Did you know he worked with the OSS during the war—and with high explosives?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you he was seriously wounded? A head injury?"

"No."

"That he was discharged on a Section Eight and spent a year in a San Francisco hospital?"

"Well, no, but—"

"That his father had kept him under medical surveillance until he disappeared?"

"Mark, Hank Kirsten isn't crazy."

"Maybe not, but he's bordering on it. Enough to convince me he's our man."

"But a woman stole those dynamite sticks."

"He's got an accomplice," the deputy said. "One of the ten finalists."

"Ten, but you said—"

"Miss New York's working for us. That's no guarantee she's not the guilty party." He unbuttoned his coat. "Did you see Lawrence downstairs?"

"From a distance."

"He doesn't know it yet but he's under arrest for bribery. Watkins confessed. He also doesn't know that his contest is now under the supervision of the Sheriff's office. The judges have secretly been directed to render a decision in favor of Miss New York."

"What's that going to prove, Mark?"

"One thing," he said sharply. "If she isn't Kirsten's accomplice, if Hank Kirsten isn't our murderer, then somebody's going to take a crack at her."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we'll sweat the truth out of Kirsten the best way we know how."

"Sheer genius," I said, smacking my lips futilely. "That school you went to must have been for numbskulls, not detectives."

"Just what are you getting at now?"

"Your presence in the building early this morning probably fouled up everything. If one of the nine other girls is our murderer you probably wrote her out the biggest, fattest, safest ticket back home that any travel agency could write in a million years."

"I don't get you, Honey."

"The only hope you have, Lieutenant, is that she didn't see you blundering around on the tenth floor this morning, that she didn't observe your romantic kisses on the roof, or your obvious attempts to make yourself look like a crooked cop."

"You bought it."

"Sure I did," I said angrily. "But I've got a blind spot when it concerns you."

He softened. "That goes double for me, Honey. I thought sure you and Kirsten—"

"Mark, I've still got the same telephone number. You can always call me. When I telephone you—during a case—you sound like a big overstuffed bear."

He got up, shaking his head dismally. "You're right. You always are, Honey. That's what makes me mad. This past week my brains have been as green as Toby Smith's eyes." He suddenly took me in his arms and kissed me. When it was over he leaned back and said, "But I still haven't changed my mind about Kirsten."

I shoved him away. "Mark, you're impossible. I'll tell you why I came up here. To look for a torn plaid shirt. The one the dynamite-shack guard described."

"You can forget about that, Honey, and the gun. We've gone through every room on this floor. There's nothing incriminating in any of them, unless it's buried in the cement."

"Then how do you expect any sort of attack on Miss New York? The girls are downstairs in a confined area. Only one can leave at a time. They're wearing skintight bathing suits. No concealed weapons, no concealed anything."

"I know," Mark said flatly. "I don't expect an attack, but I do suspect Miss New York. One, she's an American. She has no foreign accent which might have been detected by Macgillicuddy. Two, she has short hair which would fit under a down-turned sailor cap. Three, she knew Hank Kirsten because he bought into her husband's business. And four, she's a neurotic. Not only based on her husband's testimony, but on the word of a former employer in New York."

"So what?" I said. "First of all, any of the nine other girls could be using her accent as a dodge. Secondly, there are others with hair short enough to fit under a sailor cap. Thirdly, knowing Hank Kirsten is not a prerequisite. And last, neurotics are a dime a dozen among girls who shoot for beauty contest titles."

"All right," he returned hotly, "where's the gun she claims was stolen?"

"I don't know," I said. "But have you run through that addled brain of yours the fact that during the first three days of this contest the foreign girls were as free as birds, while the American contestants were on that stage practically night and day."

"No," he faltered, "I didn't—"

I glanced at my watch and moved toward the doorway. He lifted his pistol at my head again.

"Mark, we're missing the contest."

"Of course," he said. "We're staying right here until it's all over. Somebody's tried to kill you three times in the past week, Honey. I'm not giving them another chance."

"You look as if you're giving yourself a chance," I said.

He glanced at the gun. "This is just to warn you that I'm serious, that's all."

I laughed, edging toward the curtain. "And this is to warn you that I'm more than serious."

I bolted so fast he didn't even have a chance to shout. My heels clattered on the cement floor, ringing against the high ceiling. I went for the stairwell, hoping Mark would take the elevator in an attempt to cut me off. The metal railing burned my hands as I banged down the steps to the basement. I took the corridor to the amphitheatre, raced up another flight of steps and into Lawrence's office. The camera was not on the desk. My heart

stopped and I threw my hands to my face. Kirsten's camera was gone! The information that had been scrawled on the notes and scraps of paper tore through my mind again. Munitions! Army! Underground! That was it. That had to be it! Now I knew what had happened to Toby's gun. I dashed backstage where a multitude of people stood in the wings staring off at the spotlighted stage. Somebody yelled at me as I bumped against him. Somebody else swore, but I heard nothing except the announcer's deep voice blaring through the amphitheatre's loudspeakers.

"The verdict is now in, ladies and gentlemen. I have here in my hand the decision of our judges. Let me first read to you the name of our fourth runner-up—"

EIGHTEEN

I NEARLY knocked the guard down again darting through the stage door that led into the amphitheatre. Yellow cones of light pierced down, bathing the stage and its ten contestants brilliantly. They stood facing the audience, eyes staring into the spots, arms tense at their sides, nervous smiles on their orange mouths.

The announcer's voice boomed joyfully, "Our fourth runner-up is—Miss England! Louise Pulham from Northampton, England!"

Applause resounded in the jam-packed stadium. I pushed past several of Mark's plainclothes detectives as I weaved toward the press section. The deputies' eyes were riveted on the stage. My heart pounded.

Red-haired Louise Pulham stepped back into line again, smile faded, head tilted. She had not won the fifty thousand dollars.

"And now our third runner-up. Miss Panama, Lis Rico!"

The dark-eyed girl from Panama City moved into the spray of lights on the forestage and nodded graciously at the audience. Her bathing suit was so tight on her starkly-white body that when she walked back into line, teetering on her high heels, the smooth flesh of her behind showed where the suit rode up.

Fred Sims was in his usual seat, tie loosened, eyes framed on the ten contestants.

I caught his shoulder. "Fred, have you seen Hank Kirsten?"

He glanced at me. "Yeah."

"Where?"

"Outside. What's wrong, Honey?"

"Plenty. Did he have his camera?"

"Yeah."

I groaned.

Fred continued, "He said everything was okay. That Mark had cleared him. So I asked him to take some pictures for me."

"What sort of pictures?" I demanded.

"The usual. Crowning of the queen."

My eyes searched the semi-darkness of the amphitheatre.

The announcer said, "And now for our second runner-up. Miss France! Gigi Gautraud!"

The heavy-bosomed blonde from Paris stepped toward the footlights, bowed slightly and returned to her place during a thunderous clamor that was heightened by cat-calls and whistles from sailors scattered throughout the audience.

"Fred," I whispered, "You've got to help me. If you see Hank Kirsten, don't ask any questions. Just grab his camera and run like hell, do you understand?"

"No," he said. "And I'll clue you, Honey, I'm a sad run-like-heller. You'd better get yourself another boy. What's the trouble? You working for Lawrence again? You backing up his 'no picture' rule?"

There was no sense answering. Fred couldn't help me. I shoved hurriedly through the press section, bumping against chairs, knocking papers off portable tables. He had to be somewhere near the runway. He had to be!

"And now the name of our first runner-up," the announcer's voice broke. "And here she is—Miss Germany! Freda Fisher—from Berlin!"

A tumultuous rattle banged against the amphitheatre's curved ceiling. Freda smiled nervously, ran her tongue over her lips, but did not come forward on the stage.

My hands fought past seats and people, eyes straining for Hank Kirsten. The orchestra pumped into a triumphant overture which ended in a clatter of drums.

"And now ladies and gentlemen for that big moment we've all been waiting for—the crowning of Miss Twentieth Century—the most beautiful woman in the world!"

The audience knew even before he said the words. They knew, just as I did, that October Smith was about to be crowned. What they didn't know was that she was about to die. Her name was blotted out by a sudden rush of applause. Two men strode from the wings, one

bearing a crown, the other a gold cape. Then, before they could carry out their duties, a third man, Mawson Lawrence, entered from behind a curtain and snatched the microphone from the announcer's hand. The applause dimmed as he lifted his arms.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lawrence boomed, "I have a very grave announcement to make. One that saddens me far more than I hope it will you."

A low, questioning murmur rose.

Lawrence glanced at Toby Smith, then continued, "I have just been informed that our winning contestant from the State of New York is married and under pageant rules must automatically be disqualified."

Protests lifted. Shouts of "No!" "Fraud!" Condemning voices. Lawrence tried to talk above them.

"And so with mixed emotions I crown our first runner-up, Miss Freda Fisher from Germany, as our Miss Twentieth Century!"

The protests became deafening. People stood, shouting, waving fists. Mawson Lawrence moved to the German girl, took the crown and placed it on her amber curls, then lifted the robe over her shoulders. That's when I started to shout, too, at the top of my lungs, but the sound was lost in the tumultuous ring of voices. I pushed past more people, stumbled over a chair, fell, got up and fell again.

I reached the runway near the newly-crowned Miss Twentieth Century, but a man elbowed me back out of the way. Freda Fisher looked far from happy over her sudden victory. The screams and shouts of the angry crowd had her terrified and as Lawrence tried to urge her onto the runway, she shrank back at the panorama of angry gestures that spread through the amphitheatre. The orchestra abruptly added to the clamor. Police flooded down aisles. So did Mark's men, trying to restore order in the chaos that had risen with Lawrence's announcement.

Then it happened. Lawrence took Freda's arm and pushed her onto the runway. The German girl took three faltering steps, suddenly realized she was alone and stared down at the mob, frozen with terror.

Flash bulbs began to pop. Cameramen crowded to the edge of the runway, cameras poised, triggers pressed.

That's when I saw Hank Kirsten. He was about ten feet from me, balanced on the rim of the runway. Freda Fisher must have seen him in the same instant. She staggered back, hands lifted, mouth protesting. I yelled for all I was worth, but to no avail. In the next instant, Hank's finger depressed the camera's trigger. The explosion seemed to split the amphitheatre's frenzy like a jagged knife. Freda Fisher's scream came in the brief second of quiet that followed. It was a low anguished cry of utter remorse, a whimpering protest to the sudden and tragic dissolvment of her dream, her life. She doubled over, her crown pitching to the runway. Then she straightened and in the blistering cone of lights a bubble of red broke under her bathing suit, spreading through the dark hole in her chest. Her hands tried to stop the flow, but failed. Her chin lifted and as she fell, her frenzied, anguished cry split the huge stadium with as much electrifying force as had the gun shot.

Freda Fisher was dead when she hit the runway. Her regal robe still clung to her snow-white shoulders.

NINETEEN

It was still raining when Mark and I left the amphitheatre. We walked silently into the whirling lights and sounds of the Pike and ordered coffee at a hamburger joint where a torn awning provided little cover from the drizzle. Mark removed his coat and placed it over my shoulders.

I glanced at him, shaking my head dismally. "Is there a crown that goes with this?"

"Yeah," he said grimacing, "and I'm wearing it. Remember that dunce cap you predicted?"

I patted his arm. "You saved Toby Smith's life."

"Sure I did," he muttered. "At the cost of another. Why'd she do it, Honey? It was a crazy scheme."

I nodded. "Like the book says, 'Love, hate and fear make imbeciles of us all.' For instance, the two of us suspecting each other."

"Yeah." Mark tilted his hat back and wiped his face with his hands. "People are no damn good. I'm convinced. Take Kirsten. He should have known there was a gun inside his camera. He's handled it enough."

"Maybe," I said. "He was confused. We were all confused."

"Except you, Honey."

I laughed bitterly. "Are you kidding?"

"How in hell did you know Toby Smith's gun was inside that camera?"

"I didn't. I only guessed. When I walked into Lawrence's office and found the camera gone, it just suddenly hit me."

"What hit you?"

"How our killer planned to murder Toby Smith without ever lifting a finger."

"I still don't understand, Honey. How could she be

certain Kirsten, or anyone for that matter, would use the camera?"

"She wasn't certain, Mark. On that she gambled—and lost." I stared up at the roller coaster climbing its rickety rain-swept rails. "It was a desperate plan from start to finish. But an old formula. As old as Adam and Eve. Woman plus money plus ambition equaled murder." I shrugged. "The real tragedy is—I don't think she really ever planned to kill anybody."

"Her plan certainly went haywire."

"Right from the beginning," I said, sipping some coffee. "An early plane from Europe. A quiet apartment somewhere in Los Angeles. Then she looked up Josephine Bradley. When the blackmail scheme failed to work and Jo threatened to turn her over to the police, she bought a sailor cap, a bulky letterman's sweater, made herself up like a man and arranged an illicit date with Josephine. By now she'd moved into pageant headquarters and Rita Perez caught her climbing into the disguise. She threatened to kill Rita if the Mexican girl didn't follow her orders. They took a cab, picked up Josephine and went to the boat dock. After Jo was drowned Rita pleaded for her life, admitting her part in the blackmail scheme of Hank Kirsten and further admitting she was slated by Lawrence to win the contest. Our charming murderess was delighted. They made a deal to split part of the money, tossed the gun in the bay and ditched the boat."

"Then we found Josephine Bradley's body," Mark said.

"Right. This shook the two girls up. Especially when I came prowling around. And when they discovered there was another Josephine, Rita panicked. She put the cap and sweater in the wrong suitcase. She called her sister in Tijuana. Our murderess knew it was time to get rid of Rita, one way or another. She thought up the unsolved Hank West murder case bit and sent big, dumb, beautiful Rita after me."

"Not alone."

"No. She was hidden somewhere on the veranda and when Rita pushed me over the railing, she slipped up behind Rita and gave her the same heave-ho."

"Exit Rita."

"Yes, but not exit Chiquita. True to her black little heart she tried some reverse blackmail after receiving

Rita's phone call. But it didn't work out the way she hoped. Our killer borrowed Reg Kerrigan's car, drove to the border and pumped three bullets into her from Toby Smith's gun."

"Then she planted the bomb."

"Right. She'd already stolen the dynamite and on her way back from Mexico she bought the other parts and hooked them up in my clock. It was a simple task for her considering all the homemade explosives she'd made for the underground."

"She wanted to get two birds with one blast—you and Kerrigan."

I nodded. "Unfortunately, she had the idea I'd seen her push Rita off the veranda. She figured I'd come up with a positive identification sooner or later. With Kerrigan she knew he might draw some hasty conclusions after reading about Chiquita's death and checking his car's speedometer. She telephoned Kerrigan, pretending to be me, and arranged for a meeting at my apartment. Only Kerrigan was late."

"And by the time she returned to investigate you had disposed of the bomb and Kerrigan was alone."

"Yes. It must have been quite a shock to both of them. Kerrigan alive. She with a gun in her lily-white hands. She marched him into my shower, turned on the water nice and loud—and bingo."

"That brings us to the camera," Mark said. "You left it in Lawrence's office."

"She was familiar with this make of camera. In fact, as she just admitted, she once used this identical trick during the war to kill a high-ranking enemy officer. With the search for Toby's gun intensifying she had to have a hiding-place. There was only one bullet left. Seeing the camera in Lawrence's office and guessing it had been confiscated, provided her with the answer. Later, after overhearing part of your conversation with Toby and your assurance of Toby's victory, she returned to Lawrence's office and converted the camera from a hiding-place into a murder weapon."

"Now comes the part I missed when the ambulance arrived," Mark said. "How did she get Freda Fisher to cooperate?"

"She knew Freda's mother was seriously ill in a Berlin

hospital and that she needed money desperately. She also knew Freda had no special love for Americans, so she revealed to Freda that the contest was rigged. She called it 'An American plot against the foreign girls.' Freda was all shook up at the time, frightened from the threat note, by your interrogation, by pressure of the contest. She agreed to split the money with our murderess—if by some lucky chance either one was victorious. Freda didn't even realize that the girl who was now pretending to befriend her had planned to kill her the day before."

"In other words, she first figured to get Miss Germany, then switched to Toby Smith."

I nodded. "The papers predicted Freda would be victorious yesterday. Today, because of your influence, they switched to Miss New York. Our murderess moved the camera from Lawrence's office to the press section, figuring its owner would find it. But, she didn't know about Toby's marriage and that you were planning to have her disqualified at the last second. So, the crown, robe and last bullet went to Miss Germany."

Mark squinted up into the raw neon bulbs strung along the rain-drenched Pike. "Poor kid."

"Yeah," I said.

"I thought sure the way Freda acted at the sight of that camera, that she was the one."

"She wasn't looking at the camera, Mark. She was seeing Kirsten's face. The face she'd seen in the newspapers. The face she thought belonged to the man who really threatened her life." I shrugged dismally. "I can still see her pitching over on that runway."

"So can I."

"Picture that amphitheatre, Mark. Freda lying there. Everyone frozen. Not a sound. Not one sound, except the click of her heels as she stepped out of line and started down that runway."

"She must be insane," Mark said. "To have walked out there like that—with Freda dead. To have done what she did. It was plain crazy."

"But at that point she was the rightful queen, Mark. And when she stooped down and put that crown on her head, you could see it in her face. Sure, she wanted the money. She killed for it. But, more than anything in the world she wanted that crown. She wanted to stand there

the way she did on that runway with her head lifted high."

"She must be psycho, Honey. My God, she just stood there like she owned the whole world. As if nothing mattered more than standing there with that damned crown on her head."

I finished my coffee and slid from the stool. Somewhere a juke box rattled and a pinball machine went *ding-ding-ding* as one of its buzzers sounded. Then I laughed bitterly.

"I guess nothing else did matter, Mark. She'd come a long, long way for that crown. She'd stolen, lied and killed five people for it. I guess it was pretty important."

We walked out into the rain and started for the steps leading up to the street. Mark shook his head again. "I still say she's insane, Honey. I mean standing there with that crown on her head and shouting at the top of her lungs, 'Look at me! The most beautiful girl in the world! Me! Gigi Gautraud! Gigi Gautraud from France!'"

THE END

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