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G. G. Fickling

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**ON LAND,  
IN THE AIR,  
AND UNDER THE SEA,**

the mysterious organization known as MAD sent its agents after Honey West. In a storm-buffed plane high above France a lover was murdered in her arms . . . in a plush Manhattan hotel, a notorious film director starred her in a bedroom scene that would have been banned from any screen . . . in a giant secret city below the English Channel, a brilliant, warped scientist prepared to use her as a human guinea pig in a strange and horrifying experiment. . . .

Honey had been in tight places before, and had always wiggled free. But now her enemies swarmed around her like bees homing in on a hive—and each one carried a deadly sting. . . .



# **HONEY ON HER TAIL**

**G. G. FICKLING**



**PYRAMID BOOKS  
NEW YORK**

*For Al Plaine and Matt Huttner.*

Together you have made a million people happy, including your kooky daughter, Honey, *who loves you dearly.*

And, her five feverish offspring who love you even more. God Bless.

## **HONEY ON HER TAIL**

### **A PYRAMID BOOK**

First printing, February 1971

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# 1

## Storm.

Lightning pricked a dark tissue-paper sky. The giant BOAC 707 slid between arteries, needling through spidery legs of fire, evading one after another cinderous explosion by only a few yards. Shock waves caught the fuselage with the vengeance of a cat-o'-nine-tails, lashing, twisting the aircraft as if it were a paper missile tossed skyward by a child on a windy day.

Light rain had been drifting over the hangars and runways at Orly Airport for several hours when Flight 76 to Washington, D. C., finally received clearance and shook off murky low clouds over Paris, slicing up into a regimental sky dotted with brass-button thunderheads sewn ominously into its vast blue coat.

Now, four hours later, barricaded within the jet's aluminum and steel sheath, one hundred and twelve passengers and crew clung, sweat and prayed as the heavens about us sizzled with electricity.

I rode the storm in an aisle seat in the first-class compartment, my honey-blonde hair crushed against a pillow I'd bought earlier at Aux Trois Quartiers before boarding the flight. My mouth pinched at each new impact. I kept my eyelids closed and tried not to concentrate on the impossibility of sleep or the important meeting at Langley, Virginia.

My name: Honey West. I was a full-time private detective once. Until the government got its hands on

me. Now I'm known as an international eye-spy, which is a provocative title for a dirty business.

The aircraft reared, bucked, dropped. I tried to swing my thoughts back a few hours to when I was listening to the muted strains of Dufy's Orchestra playing in the fashionable dining room of the Savoy Hotel in Chamonix. The sun had been shining then. Not a cloud in the sky. A martini, chilled and glistening in a stemmed glass, created a miniature foreground for the towering icy peaks of Mont Blanc which loomed beyond the hotel's windows. It was a world impossible to believe. Carved out of winter's last raging lust and spring's hopeful butterfly kiss. Somewhere between my martini and the mountain I had searched for a secret far more deadly, possibly, than any ever faced by mankind. So far I had failed to find the key. In fact no one belonging to free-world organizations had apparently unraveled the puzzle. And time was running out. Grain after grain after grain.

The jet's multiple engines groaned me back to the dark, lightning-stabbed Atlantic Ocean sky. I turned and gazed down the aisle. Constricted, curious-looking figures sat belted in their seats, framed, emblazoned, etched in the weird mechanical arrow that encompassed them.

"Excuse me!" a voice next to me whispered contortedly. "What—what are we to do if we crash—into the sea?"

I peered at a thin man to my left, blinking into a fluorescent bubble which exploded outside the jet's windows. He wore rimless glasses, hauntingly empty, reflecting my own terrified expression.

He was bald and a deep scar furrowed his forehead, plunging as erratically across his skull as the lightning creasing the night. His accent was Italian, reminiscent of the Lake Como area and Milan.

"I don't believe you should worry," I said.

A patient smile flicked across his lips. "You are

young and hopeful. When you become old you lose all of this wonderful faith and then death closes in. It seizes you and you must stop painting sunsets and face reality. My wife and I—she is much afraid—so what do we do?”

The pilot's voice, still hushed, but not as twisted and ominous as in the hours before, rose from a speaker high in the compartment's ceiling.

*“Ladies and gentlemen, I hope we now have cause to relax. The nasty pressure system which grew unexpectedly into a high-altitude tempest has simmered somewhat. This type of storm is peculiar to this area—impossible to predict and often times far more difficult to escape—but usually more controllable than what we just encountered. I am terribly sorry for your discomfort. Our sea and shore stations tell us we should have better luck from here on into Washington D. C. Thank you.”*

The little old man nodded sweetly at me and turned to his wife apparently to translate the pilot's report. I listened to the loud sighs and whispered words of thanks that swept through the compartment. I couldn't help wishing my own personal search of the Continent had turned out as satisfactorily. There had been two months of probing West Germany, particularly along the Rhine; Spain, the Costa Brava, investigating out of the Hostal de la Gavina in S'Araro; Switzerland, Zermatt and the Matterhorn, in the dead of winter, cold, lifeless, the leads and the hope as dismal as the weather. Even the South of France, its rugged hills and silver-topped olive groves, its lavender fields and pink-roofed houses, the smell of pine needles and the chant of crickets in the late afternoon. The elegant, intimate towns. Still no leads.

Somewhere on the European Continent lurked a mad witch, technically referred to as the Black Widow. She was known to be far more bizarre and dangerous than even Adolf Hitler, and presently threatened the

lives of every man, woman and child on earth. Her identity and base of operation remained the major investigative problem of allied police and spy agencies throughout the world. As a female American "illegal," operating with the Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, they had tried to shoot the gap with me. Bait the hook, so to speak. But no nibbles thus far.

"Miss West—?"

I peered up to a pale round face above me. "Yes." A stewardess bent down, a slight smile cutting through thin lips, BOAC cap askew on her frothy dark head. "Didn't mean to startle you, but—"

"That's all right," I said, sitting up. "What is it?"

"I have a message for you," the stewardess said, extending a slim hand. Between lacquered fingertips she clutched a slip of paper. She glanced toward the tourist compartment. "A gentleman asked me to deliver this. He didn't give me his name—"

I extracted the paper from her hand and nodded. "Thank you."

The brunette vanished into the bowels of the aircraft, her trim figure disappearing behind the compartment curtain. I quickly examined the communication. It had been torn from the corner of a magazine. An edge contained the jagged remains of printed words shorn off. I unfolded the scrap and studied a series of penciled letters scrawled inside. They read: U SOP RIC MAD SII CBD

The little old man in the adjoining seat peeked around at me, his myopic stare glinting in the thick glasses. I palmed the note.

"My wife, she sleeps now," he said proudly.

"I'm glad."

"We appreciate your kindness of listening to me."

"Think nothing of it," I said, waiting for his head to vanish around the seat before returning my attention to the scrap of paper. When he was gone, I mentally

diciphered the simple code: *U* (are) *Sitting Opposite Potential. (be) Ready In Case. Mord Aterrorizer Dominar (MAD). Suspect Identification Impossible. Could Be Dangerous.*

I eased my head onto the pillow, trying to assume the pose of sleep, and peered through slitted eyelids at a startling figure seated across the aisle. I had noticed him when we boarded the jet at Orly. A last-minute arrival, hurrying into his seat, quickly burying himself behind an edition of *France-Libre*. I had tried to avert my gaze from him until receiving this note.

The man had worn a slouched gray hat aboard the plane in an attempt to hide a cruel overlap of surgical gauze which completely engulfed his head. The thickness of cloth was indicative of immense facial injuries or surgery. He wore domed dark glasses taped to the bandages, a heavy tweed coat with an upturned collar buttoned up around the gauze layers and pigskin gloves.

In the window seats adjacent to the man were two small children, now comfortably asleep despite the cantankerous atmospheric storm. Several times, a frail, mousey woman had attended to the youngsters, leaning over the bandaged man, conversing with him and the preschool tots in whispered French. I had not paid attention to what was said, assuming this was the man's wife and the children's mother.

The decoded message was explicit. *Opposite. Not near. SOP placed a suspect in close proximity. There was only one other possibility. I wondered if the agent who sent the message might have become confused and meant Opposite as Near To.* I turned and squinted through the pale night lights at the thin bespectacled man seated to my immediate left. His arms were entwined around the wrinkled Dresden form of a woman in a red wool shawl. They both seemed consoled in stiff-armed sleep.

*"Pardóne!"*

My head swung around. The bandaged passenger was leaning over an armrest. His domed glasses peered at me eerily as if the invisible eyeballs behind them belonged to another world.

"Yes, what is it?" I said, trying to hide my start.

"I—I did not mean to frighten you," he said, the gauze moving with his words, but not revealing his mouth. "I was wondering if you might have an aspirin. I have a very severe headache. Probably brought on by the storm. I cannot seem to catch the attention of a stewardess."

His pigskin gloves had buttoned tops. One hand bulged inside a pocket of his tweed coat.

"You might try the buzzer," I said. "There was a stewardess here a moment ago."

Muffled words rolled beneath the bandages. "I do not wish to bother the children." He leaned nearer. "Now if you will be so kind as to give me what I seek, Miss West, I shall bother you no further."

I froze. A lightning bolt dug crooked fingers into the night miles away, fainting lightly, a window crack of electrical fury far behind.

"I don't believe I understand you," I said, trying not to show in my voice that I was afraid I did.

The dome-shaped glasses glinted in the faint illumination. "Simple, Miss West." He lifted the gloved hand from inside its niche in his coat, revealing a silencer-mounted .38 revolver. This he quickly covered with a folded newspaper. "You have a capsule, Miss West, containing a certain ingredient which I desire. If you give it to me—for my headache—we shall remain friends throughout the remainder of this flight. Otherwise, you will suffer all sorts of fatal aches."

He was probably heavy-set, but the gauze and bulky coat made this hard to discern.

"I don't carry any capsules."

He exploded a crude laugh. It was obvious he had no fear of being overheard in the growling cavern of

the huge jet. He had an accent, hard to detect through the cloth, possibly Spanish or Portuguese.

"Miss West, our organization is fully aware of your inept investigations." He pushed the chill muzzle of the silencer against my arm. "We are also aware of a bad link in our chain named Hans Becker, who apparently sold you a bottle of capsules from his *apotheker* in Baden-Baden."

I had not been in Baden-Baden for more than a year. Never, to my knowledge, met a man named Hans Becker, nor ever purchased a bottle of capsules in Germany.

"You've made a mistake." My voice was a laborious whisper.

"Unfortunately for you, no," he returned, the cloth rippling weirdly with his words. "Your description is exact." His unencumbered gloved hand reached across the aisle. "The bottle, Miss West, otherwise I shall exercise the perceptive value of this silencer. It will not be heard by anyone—but you."

I tried to piece my way back several days to find out how this "bogie" got on my trail. There was that trip in a rented Alfa Romeo between Cannes and Nice. I was certain no one followed. A contact at Cap d'Antibes, quartered in a swank room at the Eden Roc, had handed me a decoded message from CIA Central clocked in from Casablanca. This particular contact, an "illegal" trained specifically by the FBI, was a bull-shouldered redhead who resembled Richard Burton and had the suave sophistication of an Errol Flynn. He had been too honest to be a faked replacement for the real agent. He spent an hour briefing me on my route to Chamonix, filling me in on their failures to find the "Black Widow of MAD" and angrily reminding me that the Joint Intelligence Staff of NATO regarded the U.S. "illegals" as renegades, targets, a suicide squad. He ordered a bottle of Cognac from room service and spent the next hour trying to prove

that NATO was absolutely correct in their evaluation of USIF. As he put it, his philosophy was "life, love and longevity for the L of it."

Neither of us had had much sleep recently and with all the pressures and turbulence the Cognac really took its toll. I vaguely recalled later dancing around the room with a second bottle balanced on my head, of walking to a secluded cove in the moonlight, slipping out of my clothes and feeling the chill Mediterranean waters sweep over my body, feeling his hands on me as we swam, and afterward when he carried me up onto the sand, giggling, laughing, singing, God knows. I was a day late arriving in Chamonix, and ultimately way behind schedule taking Flight 76 to Washington, D. C. How anyone could have followed that elusively delightful frolic was more than a mystery. He must have witnessed a lot more than he bargained for.

Staring now into the domed glasses and molded white face of this apparition aboard Flight 76, I guessed he must have been waiting for me at Orly. He apparently bided his time until I made my appearance and then at the last moment boarded the plane. What he sought was not in my possession, but possibly in the hands of another agent somewhere in the tourist section.

"Look, you have this all wrong," I argued futilely. An abrupt gouge of the revolver's silencer stopped my words.

"No, Miss West," the muffled voice hissed. "You are the person. Twenty-eight years of age, five foot five, voluptuously constructed, honey-colored hair that surrounds your face like it is making love to it, hauntingly different eyes so brilliantly blue that a Northern light could not portray what they show in their immense depth—"

"You flatter me."

"One so beautiful should be flattered every moment,

Miss West. Now may I have the capsule—please. It would be a shame to—”

The jet was climbing, obviously trying to move over another storm area or attempting to regain its normal flight level. Vibration swept through the compartment, electrifying quieted passengers. The revolver recoiled slightly, releasing its weight on my chest. I stood suddenly, shaking off my red velveteen coat.

“Excuse me!” I said loudly.

“Don’t!” the bandaged man ordered.

A few passengers glanced around. The wizened man in the adjacent seat turned his head in our direction. I forced my way into the aisle, brushing the gun aside, pushing it with my hip as I turned toward the curtained tourist section. With every step I expected to hear the muted snap of the silencer and feel the impact of a bullet. I flicked the curtain open and stepped into the other compartment. Rows of seats fanned out ahead, faces, taut bodies, cardboard reality. It stirred an old memory. John Wayne in “The High and The Mighty.” An airplane in serious trouble over the ocean. Dozens of passengers caught in a hungry vise of fear and unknowing. Wasn’t this life? The constant unwavering threat? One hand on the emergency cord and a foot on the throttle?

I jerked a paper cup from the water cabinet cylinder and pretended to fill it. A stewardess moved forward hurriedly.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but you’ll have to return to your seat. The warning signal is still on—”

I ignored the protesting order and brushed by the young uniformed woman, staggering down the aisle, searching hopefully for the agent who sent me the message. Seats, faces, bodies caromed past as I moved. But no one attempted to pass me a sign of recognition. I came abreast of a door. A plate read: UNOCCUPIED. I flicked the handle and thrust the panel open. A huge man with fiery red hair filled the tiny compartment.

He glanced around at me, a hand to his mouth, swallowing contortedly.

"You!" I managed.

He slammed the door, wrenching me against him hard. I peered wordlessly at his lean hard face, fierce craggy mouth, explosive brown eyes. I hadn't seen him since Cap d'Antibes, since our late-late-late cognac-swim party. Then he had seemed so full of hell. Now he resembled a man about to be seated in an electric chair.

"Honey, where's your little .22 revolver?"

"I didn't know you were aboard."

"Answer me! Where's your gun?"

Usually I carry a tiny pearl-handled .22 revolver in a garter holster but because of the cramped conditions with flight travel I packed it at Chamonix.

"In my luggage," I said.

"Here!" He pushed a small Beretta into my hands. "I saw what happened through the curtains."

"Why didn't you help me?"

"I couldn't," he said evasively, shifting his gaze to the door.

I blinked. "You mean—all of those lovely moments—at Cap d'Antibes were a dodge—faked?"

"No! We had to pawn you off. I couldn't tell you at the time. A deal was in progress in Baden-Baden. We didn't want to sacrifice you—at that time. We dubbed in a girl. Your measurements, coloring, size—" he glanced down—"even proportions. Ident etcetera. We got what we wanted, we think. The kook up front is after a capsule gleaned from that knock-off."

"Who has the capsule now?"

"I can't tell you! If you knew you might screw things up!"

"So you were going to let him finish me and that would have been that."

"I tried to warn you. If you'd made the earlier plane he would have got you and I would have made it

through. I delayed you in Cap d'Antibes partly for that reason and partly because—" He studied my eyes. "Honey, I—"

"Don't apologize. You had a job to do and you did it."

"It was my idea, the delay," he said tersely. "I was told to send you through, but I couldn't. Then later on I felt altogether differently about it—after we—"

"I don't even know your name."

"What's in a name?" he said. "Is yours really Honey?"

"Yes."

A shock of red hair slanted down his rugged forehead. "That was no pretense back there on the Continent, Honey. For the first time in my life I didn't want to go back to reality. I wanted to stay there in that intimate, regal, Alice-in-Wonderland world that held us—" He drew me tight against him. "People do live. But sometimes maybe only one hour in an entire lifetime is for real."

The door throbbed with heavy impacts. The red-haired agent thrust me against the sink and extracted a pistol from inside a shoulder holster. Suddenly the lights winked out.

"If anything happens," he said, "keep your gun handy. Remember that, Honey. And don't ever let me go."

"Where is the capsule—?"

The door flew open from an immense blow, ramming me between it and the sink. I slumped sideways, heard the red-haired agent's cry of anger and dismay, and the sound of bullets screaming lightning bolts deep into him.

## 2

Dawn.

Hauntingly thick April fog rimmed Washington's Dulles International as Flight 76 fishtailed in for a landing. An ambulance waited in the grim pallor beneath a telescopic docking device. They removed the agent's body quickly through the tourist-class exit while three federal men boarded the jet to question passengers.

Johnny Doom seized me as I came through the tunnel behind the stretcher. His face bore the grimness of worry and fear on its craggy handsome features.

"Honey, in here."

He jerked me into a lounge-restaurant where low-key lighting allowed us to be swallowed in a dark corner.

"Did any reporters see you?" he demanded.

"I don't believe so."

"There's a mob of them out there. The Central Committee says not one word, understand? We're going to smuggle you out of here if it's possible."

Johnny Doom, like myself, works for the government. Most countries call us "illegals," troubleshooters serving strictly without embassy cover and wide open to international punishment under "spying clauses." We are the kind of spies nobody believes exist, not even old-line CIA "field" men. When one of us is caught and executed, the United States government must deny any affiliation. That's the name of the game.

"I was at Langley when word came in about Bill Arno," Johnny whispered lowly.

"So that was his name."

He nodded. "What the hell happened, Honey? How could a man be murdered aboard an airliner and his killer vanish into thin air?"

"I wish I knew," I said, trying to ease the soreness where the water closet door had struck me in the ribs. "I never caught a look at the man who did the shooting. Nobody did. That's what's really weird."

I quickly reviewed the situation for Johnny Doom, going step by step through my late arrival in Chamonix—catching the wrong plane at Orly, my meeting with the bandaged man and his demands for an elusive capsule. I told Johnny that I searched the plane after Arno was shot and could find no one even remotely resembling the man who had threatened me.

"We found layers of gauze, a tweed coat, hat, pigskin gloves and a gun," I said. "And the other remnants of his clothing, but for him—" My hands lifted in an empty gesture of futility. "Poof!"

"That's impossible," Doom grunted. "He had to either find a hiding place or make a quick change into another identity."

I groaned, pushing some wayward strands from my forehead. "That's what I said. With four hours of flight remaining we had plenty of time to investigate every nook and cranny, check and recheck the flight roster. We wound up against a blank wall, Johnny. And I mean a *blank* wall. There was only one passenger strictly unaccounted for and that was the man with the wrap-around face."

"Could he have bailed out?"

"No. All of the emergency exits were still sealed."

"Then the only answer could be he's a quick-change artist and played two roles. One of the passengers or crew members has to be Arno's killer."

"That's the only *plausible* answer," I said. "But—"

Doom snorted balefully. "Honey, you're making this into a Hitchcock melodrama. I understand the cabin lights went out a minute or two before the murder, and stayed out for a while afterward. Plenty of time for him to commit the crime *and* make his changes." He suddenly gripped my arm. "Now listen. Knock off the unanswerable questions and start formulating some questionable answers. You're in the driver's seat, baby!"

I could tell by the tone of his voice he meant "hot" seat. "How does that read, Johnny?"

He exhaled heavily. "As an illegal the government can't front for you, you know that. Arno's death cannot be treated as an international situation. He was an illegal, too. This has to be treated with kid gloves. We can't afford to let news of MAD's existence out to anybody. Certainly not to the press."

"Where does that leave me?"

"Right in the middle, baby. Right on burner number one. The commanding officer of Flight 76 filed his own report while you were still in the air. After making a study of the evidence he has named you as the only possible responsible party."

I could hardly get it out. "He thinks I killed Arno?"

"What else? No one witnessed the murder. You were with him at the time the crime was committed. Under the circumstances we can't hold these people aboard that plane any longer than forty-five minutes to an hour. Then we must let them go."

"And if nothing concrete turns up?"

"Those who seem one bit suspicious will be watched, naturally, but— Dammit, why did you have to get caught with him?"

"Johnny, you can't just walk away from a man who's been shot—when you're not even certain he's dead!"

"Honey, when you're working as an out-and-out spy you walk away or you don't walk anywhere again."

I stared up into the faint lights of the lounge-

restaurant that was now, at six-thirty, beginning to stir with prospective clients for today's flights.

"I don't play that kind of game, Johnny. I never have. Maybe I'm wrong. Bill Arno confessed to me I was up for grabs one way or another. Is *that* what the game is all about?"

"No!" Doom roared. "You're not a sacrifice. This is no Fay Wray-King Kong bit. Arno must have been crazy when he said that. We're not a nation of savages."

I peered at his face in the dull gloom of the restaurant. "You're an illegal, Johnny. How would you testify if I were tried for Arno's murder?"

"How could I testify? I wasn't there."

"As a character witness, Johnny," I said, without covering the hurt that was in my voice. "You could say I was a good girl. Or something like that."

He hammered his fist on the table. "Don't go female on me, Honey. I've only been warning you about what could happen. Not what will happen."

I got up and started for the door. "Thanks for the advice, *friend*."

"Honey, don't—"

Two men were waiting for me at the door. I tried to brush past one of them but he blocked me with his pin-striped bulk. He wore a pork-pie hat and an authoritative look that should have been imprinted on thousand-dollar certificates.

"Miss West?" His voice was questioning, his hand no.

"Mata Hari," I said.

"You'll have to come along with us."

"And who are you," I said, "Daddy Warbucks?"

"Very funny," he said, flashing a wallet full of credit cards. "We're with the FBI."

They took me by federal car, via a private exit from the airport, across the Potomac River to the Central Intelligence headquarters near Langley, Virginia, lo-

cated only a few minutes from Washington, D. C. Past all the monuments and statues, waterfalls and public buildings, and over the noble river which once contained our naval force during the early years of these United States. The fog had lifted, except along the river, and its imprint towered in the early morning light like an impossible enemy refusing to yield to any governments or worlds, good or bad.

The CIA's concrete headquarters is an architectural diadem set in bucolic splendor amid a vast area of trees. They waved our car past the guardhouse and around the 500-seat domed auditorium which lends an almost Martian atmosphere to the grounds.

They ushered me through a side door into what is CenSac, headquarters for the CIA's main division. I didn't go through the working offices, which were not fully operational at this hour anyway. Instead they joggled me into a small ancient elevator that buzzed and rattled us down two flights into what was obviously an antiquated bomb shelter, long since discarded in the bustle of long-range planning and economy cuts, but still used for secret meetings, etc. What happened on Flight 76 suddenly seemed world-shaking. Johnny Doom's words had warned me and yet I felt like a lamb being led to slaughter and I resented the feeling. Whether Bill Arno was right didn't matter now. I was fighting mad.

They took me into a dark place at the end of a corridor. It was dank and alive with cigarette smoke, and I detected the cloying smell of stale masculine sweat. With a down-turned flashlight they propelled me to a stool. I climbed up on it. Then the guide and his beam disappeared and it was strangely quiet, except for the sound of faint breathing. Darts of cigarette tips.

A spotlight exploded above me, cutting into my uplifted eyelids, bathing me like a statue being unveiled before a crowd of invisible onlookers. The lineup. I

was on view. But nobody else in the room could be seen. I held up my hand, trying to block out the paralyzing gleam.

"Miss West!" It stabbed out of the dark.

I lowered my hand, searching for the voice. "Yes?"

"How long have you worked with the CIA as an illegal?"

I couldn't help saying the words. "Too long, I'm beginning to think."

"That's an impertinent answer, Miss West!"

"What do you want me to say?" He was approximately twenty to thirty feet away. His voice reverberated the same way mine did under an apparent low ceiling.

"What is this?" I demanded. "An interrogation or a trial?"

"An interrogation."

I laughed cynically. "If you want to hang me you don't have to turn the lights out. Unless you're embarrassed."

"Miss West, we're not here to joke."

"Then what are you here for?" I demanded.

"Facts!"

"How about truth? Is that important?"

"You are being impertinent *again*, Miss West!"

"Then what do you want?"

"Explain to us your position on the Continent of Europe for the past three months."

I exhaled slowly. "I have been seeking a foreign power which controls an element detrimental to this country and its allies."

"What happened aboard Flight 76?"

"You probably know more about that than I do."

"Miss West, you are out of order!"

"I am out of sorts, not order," I said angrily.

A buzz of voices erupted around the room. Another man interceded pleadingly.

"Miss West, we appreciate your tattered feelings,

but you must answer the questions. We are not trying to intimidate you. This is a very important meeting. There are men here who head our highest governmental levels. Our highest, may I say. What we learn today may mean a tomorrow or no tomorrow for the entire world."

I nodded. "Turn down the light, please."

The globe over my head dimmed into a circle of gray.

"What occurred at Cap d'Antibes, Miss West? Why were you delayed?"

"Mr. Arno deliberately caused my delay. He said I would have been killed."

"Did you believe him?"

"I had no reason not to."

"What would you say if we told you Arno was a double agent?"

"I can't believe that."

"What if we prove he was a double agent? What if we further prove he meant for you to be killed? That he was using you?"

"Then he must have changed his mind. He protected me in the last minute. If the bullet was for me, he took it. There is no denying *that fact*."

"What were the last words he spoke to you, Miss West?"

I tried to think back over the strangely pathetic moments just before Bill Arno was murdered. "He said, 'don't ever let me go.' Then he was shot."

"What do you think he meant, Miss West?"

"There was the question of a capsule. Arno must have had it in his possession. But it was not found on his body."

"Do you have any idea what happened to this—this capsule, Miss West?"

"Yes, I believe just moments before he was killed, he swallowed it."

A voice in the dark cried, "My God!"

Another said, "Dr. Haller, is that possible? Could it have been that small?"

"Yes," Haller answered. "As I have told you, gentlemen, micronization is one of the prime factors. It is hard to believe, though, that anything so lethal could be condensed to that size."

A furor of voices suddenly rose. One man shrieked, "Mr. President, I ask for your permission to have the body of agent Arno immediately airlifted out over the ocean and jettisoned for reasons of national safety."

Someone banged on a table for order. The voices subsided. Dr. Haller's calm, rhythmic tone intervened. "Gentlemen, I don't believe there is any reason for hysteria. If a micronized bomb was swallowed by agent Arno— How long ago, Miss West, was it you observed this act?"

"About five hours," I said.

"Obviously the act of passing this—this weapon through his throat and into his stomach did not arm it—assuming it is a micronized hydrogen bomb. Otherwise it would have detonated while the plane was still in flight."

"But how do we know, Dr. Haller, that moving the body from the aircraft didn't arm the weapon? That even right now it could be on the verge of destroying the capitol city of the United States?"

Haller answered, "We don't, Mr. Secretary. But certain principles must be assumed if logic is to prevail. Unless the miniaturizing of nuclear devices has managed to also change black to white, a weapon of this size would be more a radioactive threat than an explosive power. Agent Arno's body itself might be sufficient to contain the capsule's total force output. Perhaps he knew this when he swallowed it."

"But this is pure theory, not logic," came a fierce retort. "I say that an autopsy must be conducted immediately at a safe distance either in the air over the Atlantic or on the sea. I demand this, Mr. President!"

"I agree," another man chimed in. "But gentlemen we are predicating all of these theories and fears on several assumptions. One, that agent Arno did take a capsule. Isn't it correct, Miss West, you said you believe—not that you actually saw him swallow anything?"

"Yes, sir."

"Two, that the capsule actually is a miniaturized nuclear device. Testing equipment taken aboard the aircraft after it landed showed no evidence of radioactivity."

"But, Mr. President, how can you explain away the presence of the man who accosted Miss West while the plane was en route. We here listened to a direct report, Miss West, as you talked with agent Doom earlier via a hidden device. You did say the man garbed in bandages demanded this capsule from you, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then I believe there is no further reason for discussion."

"I agree. That will be all, Miss West."

I slithered down from the stool. A hand reached through the opaque curtain and led me back to the elevator. I was still blinking from straining my eyes in the darkness when I realized my courier was Johnny Doom.

"Well, if it isn't old Candid Microphone himself," I said. "Why didn't you warn me? At least I could have tested my voice level before spouting off."

"Hell, even I didn't know, Honey," Doom spat, pushing me into the elevator. "Do you think I would have said what I did?"

The doors closed and we started up. I glanced at Johnny's downcast eyes. "Was that really *the* President?"

"Yes!"

The old cage rumbled, rattled.

"So I'm involved in something *really* serious again, huh?"

"Damn serious! I tried to warn you."

"Did they believe what I said, Johnny?"

His gaze riveted on me, burning. "If Arno was a double agent, what do you think?"

"I could have made up the whole story, killed Arno and secreted the capsule. Is that what you're getting at?"

He glanced at the doors as they parted. "You said it, not me."

We stepped out into a strange panorama of agents, pieces of clothing being passed around, Geiger counters. I recognized a bit of black lace lingerie being torn apart by one man.

"Hey!" I shouted. "That looks exactly like an expensive negligee I just bought in Paris!"

The agent whirled, examined me from head to toe for a brief moment, and then said, "How about that. It would have been much more fun taking it apart with you in it, baby."

# 3

Rain.

Explosive gusts pouring down through tree limbs outside CenSec. This is what greeted me as I raced out and climbed inside Johnny Doom's Mustang convertible. He carried my twin suitcases and shoved them in the trunk. Then he came around and crawled in beside me.

His face was coated with moisture and a touch of grim anger. "I'm sorry about what happened in there," he said, studying my wet eyelids. "You're cute as hell, you know that?"

I smiled faintly. "I'm afraid to answer on the grounds my Nielsen rating might be unduly affected. I do think, though, the female agent who gave me the physical exam ought to be watched herself. She's got problems."

"They had to be thorough, Honey."

"That thorough?"

"Honey, you can imagine what'll happen if this—this capsule is a micronized nuclear bomb and millions of them are manufactured and smuggled into this country?"

"Yes," I said, staring at the rain. "End of destruction-annihilation, beginning of pure annihilation. No more big bomb of Hiroshima. Only little bomb of ingurgitation."

"They know where we live. A world filled with pill addicts. Pep, nutritional, vitamin, narcotics. Name 'em,

we take 'em. In twenty-four hours they could knock out half the world population."

"Without destroying one building or stand of wheat."

"Right."

I exhaled sharply. "No more military aircraft. No more rockets to intercept."

He added, "We may wind up afraid of anything we put in our mouths."

"Or even the lips we kiss. The clothes we wear. What we spray on our faces or put on our nails. It's frightening, Johnny."

"Damn right!"

"Then why are they letting me go?"

"I had a chance to talk to some of the big boys while you were being searched. They opened up because they're scared and they trust me."

I nodded. "But they don't trust me."

He fumbled for the words. "Well—you're a woman. It's a man's world—"

I laughed lowly. "Is it, Johnny? Okay, so they don't trust me. Out of the government service and just out period. Why? With what I know now they must realize I'm even more dangerous than ever."

"They trust you, but they don't. Let's put it that way."

"Another male prerogative?"

"It's not my decision, Honey. They lost sight of you somewhere outside Cap d'Antibes. When you reappeared four days had gone. For them now four days is a lifetime."

"So I was being watched. Even before going to Cap d'Antibes."

"Yes."

I couldn't help the cynicism in my voice. "How many agents does it take to watch an agent? This has got to be nutsville, U.S.A. The only dishonest act I've ever committed was stealing a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint gum to get a mask of Little Orphan Annie."

He turned his eyes away, peering hard into the unyielding rain which cascaded down outside the Mustang. "There was a report you were in Baden-Baden, Germany. That you picked up the capsule and took it to Arno. That you—"

"You know that isn't true, Johnny!"

"Do I?" He didn't move. Not one muscle. His face reflected in the glass showed the pain he felt.

I exhaled slowly. "So a banished agent drives off in another agent's car on a dreary dark day toward New York City. How screwy can things get? Where's the microphone this time, Mr. Funt?"

His head whirled around. "I told you I didn't know about that business at the airport!"

"We just happened to sit in the right corner by mere chance."

"They planted a bug on me."

"How convenient," I said. "But who believes *who* these days." I thrust down the door handle on his side. "Good-bye, *friend*."

"Honey, don't—"

"Next time I need a few enemies I'll call you. Don't call me."

He climbed out into the rain, shoulders narrowing against the downpour.

I smiled sweetly. "I'll send your car back with everything intact, including the recording system." I slammed the door closed, fired up the engine and backed around. He was still standing there, a wet shivering hulk, as I drove around the stadium and out the gate.

Washington, D. C., to New York City is a historic route. Once grossly traveled by the ox carts of tailsmen from Ireland with their blarney stones and cockle shells, and by the uniformed regiments of the King's army with their shiny blunderbusses, and by the painted bodies of the tempestuous Sioux tribe, and by

bearded gentlemen who came to this country in sailing vessels to raise flags on this brave new world.

While I drove through the forboding storm that lashed the throughway ahead of me, I couldn't help thinking about those men—and women—who traveled this way in the years and centuries before. They had fought and died for what they believed in. Some of them creating the framework for a nation of fifty magnificent states. Now it was a new decade, after many, and we were still struggling to survive, still trying to preserve freedom.

What was happening to me had to be a political move. They let me off because they couldn't explain me. It wasn't they didn't trust me. They couldn't take the chance. I was too close to a Bunker Hill, a Pearl Harbor, a Nagasaki. I had to be all the way in, or all the way out. They chose the latter. But they were not going to let me out of their sight. Oh, no. Rain kept the highway behind me so obliterated I couldn't tell whether they were in close chase, or just playing it cool, waiting for me to return to my apartment in New York and then pick up the game like a playful cat with a knowing mouse.

Flickering tongues of red scissored through the day's wet grimness. Distantly. At first like a tiny flame being viewed through a crack, then splintering the hole with its brilliance in awesome reddish-orange thrusts.

I braked and pulled over onto a concrete shoulder where, apparently, seconds earlier a car had skidded over a grassy knoll flanking the throughway and slammed into a concrete culvert under an access road. From my vantage point, about a hundred yards away, it was obvious the automobile's gasoline tank had exploded, and the fire, shielded by the culvert's arch, raced along a canvas convertible top.

Cars whizzed by, none of them stopping to investigate. I clambered out on the passenger side of the Mustang and ran up the knoll, ankle deep in mud,

trying to keep my balance and shielding my eyes from the savage blustery rain. The downside of the hill had been brutally gouged by the car's spinning trajectory and water was already filling the dual wounds cut into its grassy flanks.

Several yards from the burning automobile a man lay twisted face-down in earthen muck that half covered his arms and legs. Despite the torrent I could feel the ferocity of the fire as it licked under the culvert's ceiling. I bent down and turned him over. Rain unmasked closed eyelids, a lean tanned face, thin mouth grimaced into a twisted muddy niche.

"Hey!" I yelled, shaking him. "Are you all right? Is there anybody else in that car?"

He groaned, tried to sit up, then fell back. But the impact seemed to propel him upward again like a jack-in-the-box, spinning him to his feet. Without uttering a word he stumbled toward the incendiary mass under the culvert, arms lifted against the heat, waving them frantically as if trying to put out the fire.

I managed to grab his coat and partially restrain him despite his strength and size. His convertible was now an impenetrable wall of flame.

His arms slowly dropped to his sides in a gesture of utter defeat. "My paintings," he said faintly.

"No other people?" I demanded.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "My paintings, my clothes, everything that was important to me. Who could care about people?" His voice had the deep throaty accent of a Charles Boyer. He said he'd lost control in the rain.

Three men came down the slope offering assistance and agreed to alert a highway patrol office up the road. The flames died into a hissing, red-hot framework of rubble. Then the driver and I walked back to the Mustang to await the arrival of police. He let me in on the passenger side and closed the door. He got in behind the wheel. Before I knew what was hap-

pening he fired up the engine and pulled out into the throughway traffic, tromping heavily on the accelerator.

"What are you doing?" I cried.

"We must get away," he said, peering through the windshield, wiping rain from his tanned cheeks.

"It's against the law to leave the scene of an accident."

He flashed a grim smile. "You think I do not know this? For this reason we must escape any police involvement."

"Who are you?"

His grin broadened cockily. "Do you not recognize me?"

He had blond wavy hair, a deceptively stocky build under his rain-soaked clothing. His face bore the handsome cut of an actor, a rogue, a hell-on-wheels guy who might live on top of some make-believe world teetering on the brink of nowhere. The oncoming headlights eroded a chiseled Barrymore nose, a cleft chin, twinkly blue eyes.

"You're French," I said, tensing.

"*Ouí.*"

"Are you a painter?"

"No!"

"Actor?"

"No. But you are close to the flame." He winked slyly. "Ah, I shall save you further embarrassment. I am Jacques Auberge, the famous motion-picture producer-director."

"The man who discovered Karol Kardinal?"

He swelled from the recognition. "The Kontinental Kitten. That is correct. We did ten pictures together. The only mistake I ever make was to marry her."

"Is this why you are running from the police?"

"*Ouí.*" He chuckled lowly. "The Kitten's claws are deep into me. Since we have been in America making a new picture she has filed for divorce and is serving

a million-dollar suit against me to halt production. A stop at a local gendarme establishment might allow her bloodhounds to extract their pound of flesh, so to speak." He glanced at me suddenly. "I hope you did not think I was kidnapping you."

"No. Strange men jump behind the wheel of my car and drive away with me almost every day."

"Now you make a joke of me—of which I do not blame. I will turn off into the next village and get out."

"Where were you headed before the accident?"

"New York. I am giving up this American picture and returning to Paris as soon as possible."

I studied his handsome face. He appeared to be in his early thirties. "I just came in from Paris this morning."

"How was the weather?" he asked, gripping the wheel.

"Beautiful. Except last night it was raining when we left Orly."

We both fell silent for a moment. The tires spanked the wet pavement, shooting up spray. I thought about the hound dogs behind me and what they might conjecture about this. No doubt wheels were spinning right at this very moment, both on the road and in a few perplexed heads.

Finally I said, "Since we're both heading for the same destination why don't we ride it out together?"

A concerned look came into his eyes. "As a gentleman, I could not ask that."

"I've seen a few of your filmatic masterpieces, Monsieur Auberge. Including 'Nude in a Nightmare.' I've yet to see a *gentleman* in any of them."

He shrugged. "My characters, they are real. A gentleman is not one who tears a lady's clothes from her, but who ultimately achieves the same end by having her remove them herself because she urgently wishes to do so."

"In other words, you are saying 'no' when you actually mean 'yes.' "

"Precisely." He made a quick sidelong study of me. There was a devilish twinkle in his stare. "You are very, very beautiful. Do I know you?"

"Maybe. I'm an exotic dancer. They call me Honey West."

"Is that name for real?"

"Of course not. Who would ever have a name like that?"

He shrugged, laughing. "A homosexual cowboy?"

The rain turned to sleet on the outskirts of New York City and by the time we crossed the George Washington Bridge it was apparent from the wind and blinding afternoon darkness that we were in for an all-night blizzard.

I directed Auberge to West 77th Street where I had leased a penthouse on the Hudson River. He argued when I asked him to come up and dry his clothes and insisted he should take a taxi to a hotel. I wouldn't hear of it. Of course, his protests were more of his tongue in cheek "no, no, no" when he meant, "yes, yes, yes." I could just see CIA blood vessels bursting as we drove into the apartment's underground garage.

Auberge parked and turned off the ignition, then said, "Remember what I told you about gentlemen. The same applies to ladies. What if I refuse to remove my clothing?"

I winked. "Did I say I was a lady?"

"You are not really a stripper."

"What makes you think so?"

"I have spent a great deal of time studying the female animal." He nodded thoughtfully. "And this she is. You have the look of a classical animal. Beautifully cast of creamy flesh." He touched my face. "With this deep, sensuous mouth, this elegant nose, these almond-shaped blue eyes. Your blond hair is alive,

like your body and the hungry curve of you would make a camera vibrate. Who are you? What are you beyond woman?"

"Would you believe a foreign spy?"

"Hardly," he laughed, letting me out of the car and removing my suitcases from the trunk.

We took the elevator up twenty-seven floors to my penthouse perched in the dark blustery night. Auberge was positively shaking from cold by the time I found my key and let us in.

"*Extraordinaire!*" he shouted as slotted ceiling lights blazed down on the foyer and living room. The apartment was unusually spectacular, with an indoor waterfall, circular fireplace in the middle of a spacious central area, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over Manhattan to the East and the George Washington Bridge to the West. No furniture, only bright, gaily colored pillows tossed around on thick wool carpeting. He removed his shoes and put a match to the logs in the fireplace.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

"Like it?" he bellowed with his French accent. "Now I believe you actually are a foreign spy. In a legitimate business one could not afford all this."

"I warned you. Would you like me to fix you a hot drink while you're getting out of those wet things?"

He swung me around into his arms as I crossed toward the bar. "Is it really Honey?"

"Yes. Honey West. No nickname. No middle name. My father was a stickler for sweetness and brevity."

His gaze fell on my sweater. "Sweetness, *Oui*. Brevity, no!"

I tweaked his nose. "Monsieur Auberge, don't forget you are not auditioning me for one of your films."

"Ah, but what a plot this would make. Hero, almost killed in auto crash, is rescued by luscious blonde who spirits him to her magnificent penthouse during a furious storm and strips him of his clothing."

"You do have an imagination, *monsieur*." I removed myself from his grasp. The rattle of sleet on the windows and the howl of chill winds increased as visibility dwindled into whirling flakes in the inky dark.

While he took a hot shower I draped his clothing around the fireplace to dry. Then I made a thorough search of his pockets. His passport seemed authentic enough, placing his age at 33, his birthplace as Marseilles, France. His wallet had a section filled with francs and another containing American bills. A photo of Karol Kardinal, a voluptuous full-nude candid shot, was in another compartment, along with a dozen or more cards signifying his membership in film leagues, both international and French; a Diner's card, Hilton Hotel card, and a reminder to attend this year's Cannes Film Festival in May. Everything seemed in order. I replaced his wallet and passport and was mixing a hot toddy when the phone rang.

"Yes."

"Johnny Doom."

"Have they found the capsule?"

"No! Listen, Honey, get rid of him, quickly!"

"What?"

"I think it's a trap. But CenSec believes you planned the auto wreck in order to pass off the capsule."

"They went through everything I've got," I whispered, cupping the mouthpiece. "And I mean everything. "They know I don't have it."

"They're not convinced, Honey. Who's the man?"

"Jacques Auberge, a French motion picture producer-director. His personal papers seem to be in order. What was I supposed to do, leave him for dead by the roadside?"

"Evidence at the moment seems to indicate the crash was deliberate, and not accidental."

I glanced at the bedroom door. The sound of shower water dinned faintly. "What evidence?"

"They say his tire tracks are too perfectly aligned

for the distance he travelled. Also there was too much fire for the size of his car." Doom paused. "And why the hell did the two of you suddenly dash away from the scene of the accident?"

"Auberge claims he trying to avoid a lawsuit with his wife."

"Karol Kardinal?"

"Right."

Doom grunted wearily. "Your discovery of the accident could be circumstantial, but I'm going to check out the lawsuit bit—and the whereabouts of Auberge. Meanwhile, I'd suggest you jettison the subject matter."

The wind's force whiplashed the windows, shaking my penthouse with its fury. "There's a blizzard blowing here. Where are you, Johnny?"

"Camden, New Jersey. We're getting half sleet, half rain. It looks bad, I'll admit, but where you stand personally is far worse. This atomic bomb capsule business is stirring a governmental tempest that could explode at any moment. Honey, if this man is affiliated with MAD, and is after that capsule, he might cut your heart out for it."

"Don't be stupid—"

"Honey, if they suspect *you* swallowed the capsule—"

My bedroom door opened. Jacques Auberge, with a gun in his right hand, moved into the living room. He wore a towel wrapped around his waist and a grim sardonic smile that was about as friendly as a radioactive shower.

# 4

Boom!

My stomach leaped as if I *had* swallowed an explosive capsule.

"Put down that receiver, Honey," Auberge demanded.

I let it slip into the cradle and stood up. "You forgot to call me to wash your back."

His gaze was fierce. Beads of water ran down his face, neck and back. His chest was deeply tanned and muscular. "I was too busy going through your suitcase," he said. "So, you really are a spy."

"What gives you that crazy idea?"

"This." He opened his gun palm to reveal he was holding my tiny pearl-handled .22. "Plus an attache case filled with smoke bombs, listening devices—other weapons. Hardly the average American girl's typical makeup kit."

"Times are tough, *monsieur*."

"What country do you work for?"

"Transylvania. I'm a secret agent for Doctor Frankenstein."

The cords in his neck tightened. "Don't be smart!"

I was confused. If Auberge wasn't a spy himself why had he gone through my suitcase? And if he was an enemy why was he divulging the fact he knew the truth about me?

"All right, Jacques, I confess," I said. "I'm an Amer-

ican private investigator handling special assignments for the CIA."

His gun wavered. "Truth?"

I nodded. He hesitated, then tossed me the gun, smiling sheepishly, clutching the towel to him.

"I must apologize for going through your things," he said. "But I became very suspicious when we arrived here at your penthouse apartment. This appeared to be a cover up of some kind."

"I think you're the one who needs a cover up at the moment." I smiled. "There's a robe hanging in my closet that should fit you."

"How very convenient," he joked. "Left by some poor unwary foreign counterspy no doubt."

"How'd you guess?" I said. "I ate him one morning for breakfast—after he confessed all his secrets in his sleep."

"Hmmm." Auberge breathed lowly. He crossed to me, placing his arms around my waist. "I'll confess everything."

"Later, alligator. Now be a good boy and try on a robe."

Sleet raked the windows like big cat's claws on the glass. The penthouse virtually shook from the wind's anger. He backed away slowly.

"All right," he said. "I'll make you a deal. *I'll* wear a robe if *you* wear a robe also."

"You drive a hard bargain."

After a moment of sly nods by Auberge, I said, "I suppose that's only fair."

"Fair is fair."

"After all it might prove embarrassing for you to be in a robe and me fully dressed."

"Horribly embarrassing."

"But then, what would I say if someone came to the door?" I asked.

"Who would be out in weather like this?"

"I suppose you're right."

"I am always right. So why not slip inside now and into your robe. Quick like the bunny."

"You first."

"Ladies first." he said.

"Not always."

"You have heard the expression 'women and children first'?"

"That's into lifeboats, not into robes," I countered.

"Makes no difference. I will prepare the fire and the champagne while you are changing."

"Who said there's any champagne?"

"There has to be!"

I patted his cheek. There were a lot of questions needed answering by *Monsieur* Jacques Auberge. Maybe the champagne and robe routine would help loosen his tongue. It was a cinch he couldn't stand around all evening in a towel.

Nodding, I said teasingly, "Okay, but there is to be no unfair advantage taken of a lady."

"Unfair is unfair."

"How do you mean that?"

"There is to be no unfair advantage taken of a gentleman."

"And what if you are not a gentleman?"

He shrugged slyly. "Then you have a perfect right to take advantage of me."

The storm had increased in fury by the time we were settled before the fireplace. Jacques was wearing a blue satin robe once belonging to my father. And I was in a hot-pink quilted affair cut in a mid-thigh mini-length. When the blond French movie director saw it he slapped his forehead in feigned shock.

"I told you this was probably not a good idea," I said.

"It is the best one I have come up with in I don't know how long," he said, handing me a glass of champagne.

"Thank you."

*"A votre santé."*

We sipped. The penthouse took several howling bursts of wind that even made the candles flicker. Auberge had thought of everything. The living room was filled with undulating shadows, romantic music and the fragrance of incense.

I decided I'd better get right down to cases before he did. "You never told me what caused your accident, Jacques."

He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then said, "Oh, that. Some stupid animal. A dog or cat. I am not certain. I applied the brakes, but the road was too slick and I went out of control. The next thing I knew you were bending over me. I must have been thrown out."

"You were fortunate."

"Perhaps so, perhaps, no. There are those who utterly despise me, including Karol."

"Why?"

"Because of my pictures. Because of my attitudes. They say I am too hard with people."

"Are you?"

"The hardest."

"You said that once tonight already."

He touched the back of my hands with his fingertips. "Perhaps if I say it for a third time it will be a charm. What were you doing in Paris?"

"That is a secret."

"Let me guess. Aaah! The government has discovered French cognac is being watered down."

"Hardly."

"French bread is being baked by Italians."

"Naturally."

"French books are being published in Mexico."

"Since the beginning of man—and woman."

He suddenly grinned, running his hands up my arms. "I like you, Honey. Even if you are a spy."

I pulled from his grasp. "And I like you, Jacques. Even if you are a director of sex films."

"Now, wait a minute. My pictures are not sex films. They are realistic pieces of art. Gems created by a master genius. They portray life for what it really is. Grimy and base. Sympathetic but hard."

"There's that word again."

"My favorite. Do you know where Karol Kardinal came from? She was a dirty little street urchin named Monsic Boullet begging for money along the Seine. I washed her face, bought her some clothes and then discovered she was twenty instead of fourteen. I starred her in her first picture five months later."

"She should have been deeply appreciative."

"She wasn't. This girl wants the world and she is not going to be satisfied until she gets it."

"Jacques, let me tell you something. While you were showering I received a call from an agent. You interrupted. They believe your accident was faked."

His face took on an incredulous expression. "What is this?"

"They claim the tire tracks were too perfectly aligned. That there was too much incendiary fire for the size of your car."

He stood up, slamming a cigarette into his mouth. "That's insane. Are you insinuating I am also a spy?"

"It's possible. While you were going through my things I was going through your wallet and examining your passport and papers. They seem to be in order—but most anything can be cleverly falsified today."

"How do I know you are who you claim to be?"

"You don't," I said, taking another sip of champagne. "Jacques, there is an organization working throughout the world we call MAD—which stands for Mord Aterrorizer Dominar. A translation from languages meaning death, terror and domination."

"Positively James Bondish," Auberge laughed.

"I kid you not, Jacques. These people mean to do

a great deal of harm to the world. They have already created a weapon which might put us out of reach any day."

"What sort of weapon?"

"Again a secret—unless—"

"I am involved?"

"Are you?"

He crossed the room, staring at white flecks drifting outside the penthouse windows. "That is rather a naive question, would you not say?"

"Maybe. If you planned that accident and *if* you are an enemy agent, then you expected I would stop and the course of events would take us here."

He whirled, shaking his head. "Is that not a lot of ifs strung together by too many maybes?"

I decided it was time to apply a little pressure. "No." I leveled my .22 revolver at him. "Let's have the truth."

He hesitated, then said, "All right. I was forced off the road."

"By whom?"

"I do not know. Perhaps by the group you speak of."

I stared at him suspiciously. "Why would they be after you?"

Jacques peered into his champagne glass nostalgically. "Honey, you are killing a beautiful evening."

The gun drew tighter in my fingers. "Not if I get some straight answers."

He exhaled slowly, spread his hands out. "I work with DOMINO."

"What's that?"

"Defence of Mid-International Nations. A special secretive force working in behalf of ten European countries."

"Sounds terribly romantic, but not very authentic," I said. "Where are your headquarters?"

"Paris. We have about a hundred people. Men like

myself who are in the arts and allied industries who travel the world for our own interests and keep an eye on what is going on politically and internationally for our combined countries."

"How did the accident actually occur?"

"A car came up from behind. So fast I hardly saw it in the rain. It veered in front of me. I suddenly lost control in the slick and went into a spin. The next thing—as I told you—you were helping me to my feet."

"What sort of car was it?"

"A black sedan. I did not recognize the make—nor the passengers."

I studied him down the steel barrel of my .22 revolver. A scythe of blond hair curved down his forehead. His eyes blinked innocently at me. "Honey, if I were out to harm you would I not have done it when I had the opportunity?"

If it were suspected by enemy forces that I had the elusive capsule they would certainly keep me alive until they got what they wanted. The only way I could prove anything on Jacques Auberge was to give him enough rope and see what he might do with it. I lowered the gun. "All right. I believe you."

He gripped my arm. "Good girl. Now what do you say we have some more champagne?"

I winked. "Why not?"

The phone rang. I patted his hand. "You do the honors. I'll take it in my bedroom. Be right back."

He laughed. "If it's one of your wolf pack tell him the only problem I have is I'm crazy for blue-eyed blondes who stock pink champagne. Is that a federal case?"

It was Johnny Doom again. His voice was gruff as the storm. "What's going on, Honey?"

"Nothing."

"Why did you cut me off so suddenly?"

I quickly explained. "So far he seems to add up, Johnny."

"We checked out his wife. She's also in New York. She doesn't know where he is. She'd like to know. Got a process server looking for him."

I glanced at the sleet-clouded windows. "That process server won't get far tonight."

"And neither will Auberge. That's what worries me. With this storm going the way it is, it's obvious you're stuck with him for the night."

"I'm a big girl, Johnny, remember? I can take care of myself."

"Not if he's after that capsule."

"If he is he's in for a big disappointment."

"Not if he places you into a compromising situation."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just keep your eye on him."

Johnny gave me the number where he could be reached in New Jersey and hung up. As I walked back into the living room Auberge whirled from the window, a puzzled expression knitting his brows.

"That is strange," he said. "I could have sworn someone was just peering through the glass."

"What?"

"Weirdest thing!"

"Was it a man or woman?"

He scratched his head. "That is what is totally peculiar. I could not tell. The face seemed to be all covered with some sort of mask."

I grabbed my revolver and headed for the front door. Icy wind and sleet cut into me like frosted darts as I stepped onto the veranda. From this vantage point it was impossible to see the narrow catwalk which cut sharply around the front of my penthouse. Visibility was only about two or three feet even with the outside lights on. I started forward, keeping my balance

by holding onto potted trees and plants. The revolver was poised hip high in my right hand.

"Honey!"

"Go back, Jacques!"

"You will be blown over the side!" he warned.

Suddenly I was against the railing he was cautioning me about, but the wind was blowing in from the Hudson and I could keep my balance. Looking down the catwalk I tried to make out something distinguishable in the tempestuous storm. I moved forward by inches. My hands seemed almost frozen to the iron rail that I tenaciously held to keep from being hurled twenty-seven floors to the street below.

"Honey, you are out of your mind! Get back in here!" Auberge roared.

A faint image began to materialize, then disintegrated in the white fury. I took another step. My knees quaked. Gun shook. Toes felt like ice cubes. The wind tangled my hair. The robe was wet and almost frozen to my skin. I reached the end of the catwalk where a wall jutted out at the end of the windows. Something seemed to brush past me. I wiped at my eyelids, whirled, peered through the storm. When I looked back at the empty space in front of me a bulked object caught my eye. I bent down and lifted a knitted snow mask in my chilled fingers. Under it was a knit helmet, goggles, a heavy coat and boots. I picked them up. Jacques Auberge came up behind me, one hand angled to keep sleet from his eyes, the other grasping my shoulder.

"Are you crazy?!" he roared.

I held up the articles of clothing. "I'm beginning to think so." I answered.

"Invisibility!" Auberge swore angrily.

I nodded, tossing the articles of clothing down near the fireplace. My gaze swept around the living room.

"He might even have come in here while we were outside."

"But that is a ridiculous premise. Invisibility has never been proved possible."

"Jacques, something was out there. I felt it move past me on the catwalk." I picked up the knit snow mask. "Here's part of the proof."

Auberge slapped his hands together. "Then that might explain it!"

"What?"

"I thought I was going mad. The car which forced me from the road. It appeared to have no driver."

"Our 'invisible man' was on the airplane with me coming in from Paris. He apparently killed one of our agents."

The Frenchman shifted his gaze nervously about the room. "What is it they are after?"

"Something I have," I lied. The ruffles on a pillow near the fireplace moved slightly as if someone brushed against them. It could have been caused by air coming up from a heat vent. I laughed mockingly. "You're probably right. We've been having hallucinations. Ha! Invisible men!"

"But I thought you said—"

I threw my arms around his shoulders and kissed him passionately. "I thought you were offering more champagne?"

He sensed I was trying to tell him something.

"Hmmm, *cherie*, I am offering more than champagne." His hands slipped inside my robe, under the swell of my breasts.

I drew away with an enticing wiggle. "Let's try more champagne for starters. Maybe I'll test for one of your pictures after a while."

He groaned lowly. "On film you would be magnificent. In the flesh—"

Auberge refilled our glasses. Then blew out several candles, creating deep flickering shadows. I watched

for any sort of movement to my right. The invisible being, *if* he actually existed, could be in the penthouse. The only way of proving or disproving this theory was to try and smoke him out.

I took the glass Auberge offered me, winked cutely and knelt beside one of the cushions. "I suppose I should tell you the truth."

"You're a man in disguise," he joked.

"Hardly. A Myra Breckinridge, no way."

His laughter was a little too tense. "What is the truth, Honey?"

"These people who are after us. I hid what they want here in my apartment."

He was on the game. "Where?"

"Guess."

He scratched his forehead. "How large is it?"

"Small enough to choke on. Large enough to destroy the civilized world."

Auberge whistled. "Are they loading peanut shells with TNT?"

"Close."

"Bubble gum with arsenic?"

"Nope."

He leaned nearer. "Where are you hiding it?"

I whispered, "Ceramic angel in the bathroom."

A curtain moved across the room as if a slight breeze had caught it. I figured it would take an average person in a hurry ten steps from there to the door leading into the bathroom. I picked up my gun and counted. Six-seven-eight-nine-ten, and squeezed the trigger. The room erupted from the shot.

Somebody cried out piteously.

Jacques Auberge and I stared at the darkened doorway as suddenly the faint image of a naked man began to take form before our very eyes. It was a weird shimmering apparition to start, then slowly, very slowly, the framework of his huge body fell into place. He was about six feet tall and weighed around

two hundred pounds. The bullet had struck him in the chest, but had not dropped him.

He was bent over as if he were trying to hide the wound, blood erupting around his hands. His face was pudgy and white. He had thick black hair, and a bulbous red nose with flaring nostrils.

"You tricked me!" he screamed, staggering toward us. It was the voice of the bandaged man on the airplane. Jacques struck him with his right fist and the big man faltered across the room, mouth wide, a soundless cry on his lips. He reached the front door, fumbled for the knob, and yanked open the panel. A gust of wind blew him against the sill. A river of blood was now running through his cross-thatched fingers and down the hairy mat of his fat stomach.

"Don't let him get away!" I cried.

The Frenchman knocked over a lamp as he lunged for the door, but the other man gained his way outside into the whirling blizzard. I followed. The next thing I saw was Auberge and his adversary struggling on the porch. Suddenly one of them went over the railing, screaming through the night as he fell. I couldn't make out which one it was.

Then the remaining figure moved toward me. Flakes hid his face. He stopped when he saw my gun leveled.

"I'm sorry, Honey," Auberge yelled, wiping at his eyelids. "I could not keep him from going over. He—he jumped."

# 5

"Ridiculous!"

"No kidding, Johnny. He was actually invisible—until—"

It was almost daylight. The storm had dwindled to a pale saltshaker drift incredibly weird at twenty-seven stories. Especially after the eerie moments earlier.

"Our investigators have found no evidence on the ground beneath you." Johnny Doom gave a reluctant grunt at the other end of the telephone.

"What did they expect, the carnage of Pompeii?" I roared. "Of course, MAD had people in the area. His body was obviously picked up. The snow covered any other evidence."

"Honey, you have flipped, baby. Micronized bombs are one thing—but invisible men? Come off it!"

I lowered the phone and glanced at Jacques Auberge. The handsome Frenchman was asleep on the floor before the fireplace. His robe lay open exposing a massive hairy chest. We had spent the last several hours discussing the invisible man. Although Auberge had actually seen him materialize, even he refused to believe his own eyes.

"Okay, Johnny, you people accept what you want to accept. You chucked me out so why not leave me alone?"

"That's exactly what we're trying to do," Doom said flatly. "The autopsy on Arno proved absolutely

negative. We're wondering now if the whole business wasn't a hoax."

"Arno was murdered," I reminded him.

"Negative again. Arno's alive."

I blinked. "But—that's not possible. You just said—"

"There was no doctor aboard the airplane, baby. A thorough examination in Washington by government medicos proved he was very much alive."

"But that's a lie!"

Doom's voice cracked, "Not according to this morning's early editions just now off the presses. You lucked it out, sweetheart. He wasn't even wounded. Just a mild heart attack for a Mr. Roderick P. Jones, an industrialist, aboard Flight 76 from Orly. A backpage story."

"You people would sell old cars as new to the blind, wouldn't you?"

"Before we believed that invisible man story, we would. Listen, Honey, Auberge checks out. Spend some time with him. Walk around Central Park. Take in Grant's Tomb. You deserve some time off."

"How long? Twenty years?"

He allowed a trace of sympathy to enter his voice. "Don't be silly. We'll be in touch with you soon."

Johnny Doom clicked off. Too suddenly. I dropped the receiver into its cradle and walked into the bedroom where I had placed the knitted hood and other paraphernalia belonging to the invisible man. Dawn was carving a faint slit in the horizon. George Washington bridge and the distant outline of snowplows on the steel roadbed looked like tiny black widows on a giant ethereal spider web.

So it had reached the point I would receive no more truth from the CIA than would the general public. Arno was dead. There was no doubt about that fact. They were obviously protecting themselves. Not me. What the autopsy proved was now totally government

business. Probably even Johnny Doom didn't know the truth. They told him what to say to me and he said it. As far as the government was concerned a passenger named Honey West had made an erroneous report to the crew of Flight 76. Period.

"Honey?"

I dropped the knitted mask and whirled. Jacques Auberge stood in the bedroom doorway. His blond hair tousled.

"You seem perplexed," he said softly.

"Not really." I smiled.

He waved a hand awkwardly. "I have been thinking about this *thing* we saw. Perhaps it was a motion picture cleverly projected."

"You would know more about whether that was possible than I."

Auberge exhaled lowly. "There must be some logical explanation."

"Wait a minute," I said, my eyes riveted on a wall at the far end of the room. I crawled over the bed and examined a bullet hole in the woodwork. I sighted back across the bedroom through the door to a spot near the living room fireplace.

"What is it?" Auberge asked.

I used a beer can opener to remove the slug. Then held it before Auberge. "That's very weird. The bullet seems to have passed right through our friend without making any deviation. The trajectory is almost as straight as a string. As if I hadn't even hit him."

"Honey," the Frenchman argued, "he was bleeding like a pig. You cleaned it up."

"I know," I said, running my hands along the lining of the coat I'd found out on my terrace. I suddenly felt a slight bulge and cut the fabric open with a pair of scissors. A passport fell to the floor. It had been issued in France to a Henri La Bouche. The photograph was extremely poor, possibly to allow others with

similar looks and builds to make their way through customs using this same identification paper.

"Now what do you think?" I asked Auberge.

He shook his head. "Puzzling. Perhaps it was an optical illusion, Honey. This man La Bouche may have been hiding in the room and it just seemed he appeared out of nowhere."

I gave a curt laugh. "That's a funny way to run around—in your birthday suit."

A glint of devilment crept into his blue eyes. "Some people find this to be quite enjoyable."

"Really?" I said, teasing.

"I have been to parties where everyone takes his clothes off and chases one another around." He drew me into his arms.

"Jacques, when do you plan to return to Paris?"

He kissed the tip of my nose. "Sometime."

"How would you like a traveling companion?"

He forced me against him hard. "I would love it," he whispered into my ear.

"Careful. Don't bruise the merchandise."

"I shall treat it with utmost care."

He parted my robe.

"You—you're hands have other ideas," I whispered back.

"Honey, do you like *crepes suzettes* for breakfast?"

"Love them."

His fingertips traced goose-pimpling circles around my breasts. "And what else?"

"That depends on the occasion."

"Oh?"

His body was hot, turgid, perspiring. He opened my robe farther.

"We better get dressed," I said, feeling one hand drift downward over my stomach, touching my belly button, circling it, probing his finger into the opening.

"Honey, you are miraculous."

I groaned lowly, my legs quivering. "So are you, Jacques. In more ways than one."

"Then you do trust in me?"

"In—in the United States it's only in God we trust," I said lightly. "Jacques, you—you mustn't do that."

"Why?"

My breath was terribly low in my throat. "Because—because I may want something I shouldn't. I—I'm a very selfish girl. I always get what I want. And—you're a very persuasive salesman."

"Am I?" He kissed my cheek, some locks of twisted blonde hair, my ear. His tongue darted inside.

"Jacques!"

He pushed the robe over my shoulders. It fell to the floor. His hands reached lower.

"How persuasive is this?" he demanded lowly.

"Too—too persuasive."

"You're a very poor spy, Honey."

"Oh?"

"You should have known."

My whole body trembled uncontrollably. "I—I suspected."

"You were peeking," he admonished, as if he were chastising a small child.

"Only a little—That champagne—"

"Honey—"

"Don't, Jacques—"

"Honey, what is fair is fair. You are a fabulously beautiful woman. I cannot help myself."

He lowered me on a clump of pillows.

"I told you I was a selfish girl," I whispered.

"Be as selfish as you like," he said.

A new wind rattled the windows furiously. Snow brushed against the glass. George Washington bridge and the snowplows vanished. So did the dawn. And the light. And just about everything. Except Jacques Auberge.

Three hours later we were in the elevator at the twentieth floor on our way to catch a plane to Paris when it happened. We had already sent my luggage ahead. The cage banged to a stop and dangled there for about two minutes. The cables above vibrated angrily from some sort of mechanical difficulty. Jacques punched the emergency button. Nothing happened.

"Strange," he murmured. His face was cold and blank. I didn't like it. Something unpleasant was about to break like last night's blizzard. An elevator incident in Cap d'Antibes had plunged me six floors into the cellar of a building two weeks earlier. Luckily a tangled cable stopped the car from smashing into a concrete anchorage at the last second. That was explained as an unfortunate accident. This didn't strike me as being any more accidental than the other. Lightning is far more fickle than generally believed.

Jacques examined the ceiling and then, using the instrument panel for a foothold, he reached up and tore loose a false plate. It bounced off the carpet near my handbag.

"Aha!" he exclaimed. "We shall make our plane flight after all." He took my hand. "Let me lift you up. Then I shall join you. We can remove ourselves through one of the other floors."

The cables rattled ominously in the dark space above the elevator ceiling.

I peered up. "Jacques, this might be a trap."

"Nonsense. Elevators jam all the time these days. Upsy daisy."

With cupped hands he raised my right foot until my head protruded through the escape hatch. It was musty in the dimly lit shaft and smelled like burning diesel oil. I grasped the cage roof and swung one leg up. For a moment I was caught.

Auberge sighed from below. "Now that—is a very very pretty picture."

"I was wondering why you wanted me to go first," I remarked sagely pulling myself out of his view.

"These mini-skirts are enough to make a man—"

I peered down at him as he hooked a foot on the instrument panel and crawled up beside me. "Make a man what?" I asked cutely.

He winked, kissing the tip of my nose again. "Wish he were two feet tall."

The elevator suddenly shot downward and came to such a blistering stop I was nearly thrown into a narrow space between the cage and the shaft wall. Auberge caught my arm and whirled me against him.

"Whew!" I breathed hard, peering down. "Dropping in there would be like falling into a big meat grinder." My voice echoed up the shaft. Chains clanked monstrously in the darkness over our heads.

The Frenchman reached over my shoulders and tried to separate a pair of outer doors behind me. "Once they close," he said, grunting from the strain, "they are plain hell to open. Have you anything with you we might use to pry them?"

I opened my travel bag and handed him a nail file. "Too flimsy," Auberge said.

A lipstick tube.

"Too fat."

My .22 caliber pearl-handed Hi-Standard revolver.

His eyelids narrowed. "Now you are talking with turkey."

He raised the gun over his head and squeezed the trigger. The reverberation practically knocked us off our feet. My eardrums bounced from the impact. The elevator began a swift downward plunge again. It dropped five or six stories and jerked to a brutally hard stop. We were now about twelve floors from the ground.

"Jacques, I think someone is trying to shake us off this thing. Either that or—"

The French movie producer quickly fired a second

bullet into a pair of doors opposite us. They sprang back with an electric bang. Auberge shoved me through the opening with a brutal push on my bottom and then leaped after me. The decision came none too soon. With a teeth-rattling roar the cage fell out of sight. Before I could even pick myself up from where I'd landed, an explosion shook the entire building. Suddenly a plume of boiling smoke and a reddish ball of flame turned the elevator shaft into an eight-foot square, twenty-seven story H-bomb.

## 6

Daisies.

We came so close to pushing them up that when Jacques and I were finally in a cab heading for New York International we were still shaking from the impact of the elevator's destruction.

"Incredible," Auberge said.

"More like death defying. We might become a team."

He looked at me sharply. "Why did you not take your Mustang?"

"Several reasons. One, it isn't mine. Two, we didn't attend role call in the basement for the elevator's requiem. And three, like your accident yesterday, we aren't about to have a bunch of gendarmes asking stupid questions when we don't even have any *stupid* answers."

The Frenchman shook his head dismally as he studied the snow-plowed banks along Manhattan's Upper Fifties. "They are no doubt after something, Honey. These—people. But what is it they want? Obviously, *I* have nothing."

"Maybe they want Karol Kardinale," I said, kidding. "That wouldn't surprise me."

He winced. "They can have her with my compliments. I would even pay to have them give *her* an elevator ride. Honey, what is it they want from you?"

"I told you that's a secret, Jacques."

"But haven't I proved that I am loyal? That I am on your side?"

"That isn't the question," I said, checking my watch. We were barely going to make the plane. My luggage was hopefully already aboard.

"Did you bring what they want with you?"

I turned and looked fully at him. "Why do you ask that, Jacques?"

Mid-morning sunlight, the first I'd seen since my arrival home to the U.S., reflected rawly through the cab's windows, bouncing harshly off bone-white snow-drifts.

Auberge stammered, "If—if that invisible *thing* was real and not an apparition, Honey, should I not be apprized so that I might be prepared for any and all eventualities?"

I nodded. "He was after it. So were the people banging us around in that elevator shaft. If you want to get off this roller coaster right now, Jacques, be my guest. I won't blame you."

The Frenchman's nostrils distended angrily. "Honey, how can I abandon you now? You saved my life."

"Not exactly," I said huskily. "But you did save mine."

He flashed a wintry smile. "Then do you not feel you owe me the right to the knowledge of what it is *they* are after—and where you keep it?"

I stubbornly shook my head. "No."

We lapsed into silence as the cab's chains clanked rhythmically against the mushy wet pavement leading to International Airfield. Many areas along the way were deeply mired in snow. Cars buried. Front yards nothing but glaring white panoramas dotted by leafless, barren trees. I kept trying to analyze the events of the past thirty-six hours. Phil Arno's death aboard the plane. Jacques Auberge's unusual accident. Johnny Doom's obvious attempts to put me down—and out of the CIA. The micronized bomb. The invisible man. Weird. Wild. A bubbling test tube of science fiction and a bag full of Edgar Allan Poe. It didn't even add.

Why was MAD so anxious to retrieve that *one* capsule—when perhaps hundreds—maybe millions—of the miniaturized bombs were already being manufactured? Why did they think I had it? Had U.S. officials actually put me on the plank while I was in Europe?

I was determined to go back to the Continent and find the answers for myself. The hell with Johnny Doom's parroted sing-song and the CIA's obvious attempts to put me on ice. I had a few contacts in Paris. Principally Lance Towbridge. I planned to start with him and keep my ear to the ground—until somebody stepped on it—or I found the lead I couldn't locate before.

We were on the outskirts of the airfield when it started snowing again. The cabbie slowed, apologized, then glanced at Jacques. The driver wore a black tammy, a heavy tweed coat and horn-rimmed glasses. I had noticed his eyes riveted on us several times since leaving my apartment building. Now he turned in his seat, as we were stopped at a light, and asked, "Ain't you Jacques Auberge?" His Brooklyn accent made it sound like "Ain't you Jack Bridge?"

Auberge nodded. I gripped his arm, but it was too late. The driver suddenly reached inside his coat and jammed something back at the startled Frenchman. It was a folded piece of paper.

"Would you be so kind as to autograph this, Mr. Auberge? You are my favorite man—my favorite producer—you make the greatest movies in the world."

Auberge grinned broadly at these words, took the paper and reached for a pen. Then he saw what it was. He unfolded the pages and read the top lines:

*"Know ye to all people, the State of New York wishes to inform you—"*

"My God," Auberge stammered. "What is this? Have I been drafted?"

"No," the cab driver said joyfully. "You have just

been subpoenaed by your wife. Don't attempt to leave the continental United States for any reason. *Or you will be arrested and thrown into jail—without bond.*"

Auberge snarled, "I ought to kill you!"

"Be my guest," said the process server as he pulled the cab up before the airlines terminal. "The murder of a servant under law is a major felony and is liable to life imprisonment or the electric chair—or both."

"Or both?" the Frenchman bellowed.

I got out and dragged Jacques with me. He was trembling with fury. One second more and he was going to throttle the server-cab driver.

The man behind the wheel tipped his cap cockily and said, "This trip was on your wife, Mr. Auberge. Five hundred bucks. Quite a *tip*, huh?"

Auberge jammed his face against the cabbie's window, but the sedan pulled away into the snow-banked roads surrounding the airfield. He swore in French.

I coaxed him inside the terminal and into a cocktail lounge before he blew a gasket. Our flight had luckily been delayed a half hour.

He ordered a Scotch on the rocks, a double, and downed it quickly. Then growled, "Dirty bitch! I should have known she would find me."

"How could she?" I was as baffled as the handsome Frenchman.

"I have no idea. She sniffs the ground—the air like a bird dog. She is unbelievably psychic. Now I am stuck here. Until a trial."

"Maybe not," I said.

"What do you mean, Honey?" He searched my face hesitantly.

"We could smuggle you aboard the plane."

"How?"

I leaned forward and whispered, "How are you today, Henri?"

"Henri?"

"La Bouche."

"Who?" Auberge glanced around at the mid-morning bar crowd waiting for their respective flights. His gaze came back to me. "You mean—"

I nodded. "Our invisible man. I brought his passport. It's a bad picture. You could pass for him."

Auberge groaned. "No, they would never let me through."

"It's worth trying, isn't it? Tell them you shaved your mustache."

He hesitated, ordered another double and then said, "*Oui*. Anything is worth—escaping from that—witch!"

Flight 92, en route to Paris from New York International, was one hour from lift off before Jacques Auberge leaned over and kissed my forehead.

"You are a miracle worker," he said. "That fainting spell at the inspection window had everyone so upset even a seven-toed giraffe could have gotten through."

"You're home free, Jacques. At Orly show your own papers. You're a French citizen—and a famous one. They'll surely let you through."

Auberge grinned broadly. "Now you're one up on me, Honey. I will have to repay you for this in no uncertain terms."

I studied the shadowed window of the Boeing 707. Below was a cloud-covered wintry Atlantic Ocean. "You could help me in Paris."

"How?"

"I'll be trying to contact a man named Lance Towbridge, an Englishman working as a reporter for the London Times and based presently in Paris."

"I am familiar with this one," Auberge grunted. "He has served in the past with DOMINO."

Buttons clicked in my head. Lance Towbridge had failed to meet me at Orly two days ago. Could this as-

sociation with me—and DOMINO—have been the reason?

"Do you know Towbridge personally, Jacques?"

"No."

"He might be dead."

"Why?"

"Another question I can't answer," I said.

Auberge licked his lips thoughtfully, then turned and ordered two martinis from a stewardess. "I just don't understand," he said, after a moment. "People have been attacking you, me. But we have been lucky, no? This must be very big, Honey."

"It is—but still top secret. Even if I am on my own time."

His blue eyes widened. "You mean the United States government is not behind you? You are operating alone?"

"I usually do," I said. "But generally I'm on the payroll. This trip is for—whatever you want to call it—peace, hope, world unity. Get out the book of hymns and we'll sing the fifth verse, twenty-ninth psalm together."

He blinked incredulously. "You are an angel, Honey."

"Perhaps." I patted his cheek. "Do me a favor and contact your DOMINO people after we reach Paris. Find out if they have a lead on Lance Towbridge."

"If you make one promise," Auberge said.

"What's that?"

"That you prove to me what an outrageously selfish little girl you really are. One more time."

I smiled devilishly. "How many more times?"

Flight 92 landed eight hours later at Orly. Jacques slept most of the way, while I sat in my window seat contemplating the mission ahead on the Continent. I was determined to accomplish two major objectives: One, find out for certain if I'd been aimed for the

wolves my last trip. Two, smoke out the "black widow" and stop her madness.

A cold, dreary rain drifted like wet beads under the lights at Orly and we had to scramble for a taxi. Jacques had no trouble getting through customs with his own passport.

"How about a drink, Honey?" the Frenchman suggested, directing the cabbie to a nightclub across the Seine.

I shook my head. "I'd love to—but this is where we part company, Jacques. For a brief time."

"Not so soon," he protested.

"Sooner," I said, using my coat to shield me as I slipped out of the mini and into another outfit. I told the cab driver to swing abruptly into an alley near the Village Suisse. I climbed out and pulled my coat collar up to protect me from the rain. I peered back at the handsome film producer. "Jacques, do you really want to help me?"

"But of course," he grunted angrily.

"Then take my bags to the Hotel Château Loire at Place de la Concorde. Check me into a nice room, lock the door, leave the key and your phone number at the desk."

He stared at me wonderingly. "That is all?"

"*Ouï monsieur.*" I kissed his cheek. "Good night, sweet prince, parting is such sweet sorrow. Until we meet on the morrow?"

He winked. "Don't be a selfish girl—and be careful."

The taxi pulled away, spraying the narrow alley with muddy water. It disappeared in the darkness, tail lights slowly disintegrating. I waited for a moment, then crossed to a boarded-up building across from the Flea Market.

As I walked I could hear the insistent clamor of raindrops pouring off eaves and plunging erratically to the cobblestones. I was still not properly dressed for

this kind of weather. My mini coat hardly began to cover a pair of gold lamé bell-bottom hip huggers and a matching ruffled blouse tied pirate style across my navel. My hair was stringy and drenched by the time I found the door I was looking for and knocked. It was after midnight Paris time and there were no lights anywhere along the alley. I waited. Banged again. The rain shimmered and suddenly a reflected image of the Eiffel Tower slanted crookedly overhead on a passing cloud. This happens in Paris sometimes. The illusion can scare the hell out of you. It looks like a grotesque monster looming up out of the night. I instinctively backed against the building.

Suddenly the door behind me yanked open and I tumbled a few steps into a candle-lit room, sprawling full on my back. Countless bottles lined the walls on one side from floor to ceiling and on the other were dozens of crossed swords from a period in history that must have belonged to Charlemagne and the Dark Ages. It appeared to be an old French wine cellar.

A burly young man with long curly hair, a beard and thick mutton-chops picked me off the floor and squinted at my face in the weird flickering light.

"Who are you?" he demanded in French.

"Little Red Riding Hood."

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*"

"Would you believe Little Blonde Bombshell?"

He whirled me around and ran a fast take on my blouse and gold pants. Then his eyes strayed back to where they started and he grunted in English, "Boob-shell, baby. Boobshell." His gaze fastened rigidly on the swell of my breasts. "Never has so much been tucked into so little," he added admiringly. His hands formed immense finger-spread cups that were about to clamp onto me when I pushed him away.

He shrugged, dropping his arms. "*C'est la guerre!*" He staggered to a table drunkenly and picked up a cup filled with red wine.

"Are—are you an American?" I asked.

He swung around, cocking a squinted eye at me. "Englishman, ma'm. Englishman. From the white cliffs of Dover and all that sort of rot. The heart of humanity's World War Two teary-eyed plea for blue birds and salvation."

"English?"

"Praise the Lord." He lifted his cup. "And pass the ammunition. Or roll me over in the clover, lay me down and do it again!"

I looked at him suspiciously. "You *sound* more like west Texas."

He laughed, stroking his beard mirthfully. "Now ex-President Johnson wouldn't take that very kindly if he knew. What right has a Texan to be living in a quaint Parisian ghetto when he should be picking barbed wire and cactus out of his behind and singing 'The Yellow Rose' instead of *Allons enfants de la patria*—?"

He was wearing dirty trousers that were too tight on his huge frame, a torn shirt open all the way to a blubbery waist, medallions around his neck, grimy old thongs, and had bright, wicked brown eyes.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Peace. I. Wantum Peace. Old Indian name."

"Seriously."

"Who cares?" he roared, rocking back against the racks of wine bottles. "Call me *Un Grand Amour*. That means 'Big Love' in French. Once in El Paso it was raining like this and all of a sudden out of the darkness came this big hurricane. Wet, wild, impossible." He tilted the cup to his mouth and let the wine tumble down his throat and trickle through the hairs of his beard. "No wonder they call hurricanes by female names," he laughed drunkenly. "You are a big one, booby. Would you like a belt of vino?"

"No thanks. You a friend of Lance Towbridge?"

He nearly dropped his glass, straightened slowly, casting a taut, quizzical glower at me. "Who's asking?"

"Does it matter?"

I was suddenly peering down the barrel of a blue-nosed Russian Tokarew he yanked from under his belt. "Damn right it matters!" he said coldly.

"You serve your wine in funny-looking glasses," I said, appraising the electric tautness that had stiffened this young man like rigor mortis does a dead body.

"More's the better to look at you, ma'm," he returned, a touch of cynical laughter in his voice. "Now I'd better ask *your* name."

"Honey West."

His face darkened. "Nice try. Honey West left hurriedly for Washington three days ago."

"Can't a girl make a *hurried* triumphant return?"

He brushed a hand across his mouth, wiping the lips nervously. He thrust the gun into his left hand and lifted a candle so he could see me better. "I personally saw her get on the plane. Take off—"

"You must have been the cheer leader. Apparently everyone was there."

"Your hair's different," he said, coming a little closer.

"No thanks to Paris rain."

"You're prettier and more voluptuous," he insisted.

I nodded. "But usually beauty treatments and silicone shots do take more than three days."

He pursed his lips. "Toss me your passport."

I rummaged in my handbag, fingers gliding over the .22 revolver, then bypassed it. I tossed him the blue folder.

He squinted at the picture, then said, "If you're Honey West, I'm Lance Towbridge."

"If that's so, why didn't you show yourself at the airport three days ago?"

He gave me back the passport. "Ma'm where I come from only rattlesnakes and horse thieves get shot. I've seen too much blood running down Paris gutters."

I studied his face, gun, then shrugged. "Lance Towbridge had something important he wanted to tell me."

He chuckled grimly. "Did I tell you to call me Big Love? No, make it Big *Mouth*. Sometimes, I get a couple of bottles of this belly wash down me and I start clucking like a mother hen. But if I don't learn to keep my mouth shut, I'll wind up looking like a turkey on a Thanksgiving platter."

"Put the gun away, please."

"Who's side are you really on, Miss West?"

"I'm not a double agent, if that's what you mean."

He hesitated for a long moment, then tucked the gun back into his belt. "All right, I'm a sucker. Born and raised in Odessa, Texas, where the tallest, biggest and most renowned suckers come from. Our high school alma mater should have been:

There ain't no trees, there ain't no grass.

Odessa, Odessa, you ain't even got no class!

I circled the wine cellar slowly, brushing rain drops from my hair. "Why didn't you show yourself at Orly?"

"I told you," he growled. "I ain't the *All-American* boy. Maybe when I'm boozed up I think I am. Otherwise, I'm the original cartoon version of Tiny Tim crawling between the legs of cowards."

"I was almost killed on that flight to Washington. Another agent named Arno was not that fortunate."

His face sagged in the faint light. "Phil Arno?"

"Yes."

"My God," he said in a strangled murmur. He poured a glass of wine and handed it to me. He finally said, "I'm not Lance Towbridge."

"I knew that."

His lips curled back from the teeth. "If I'd had a handle like that I would have been run out of Odessa before I finished the first grade. My name's Starr.

Burt Starr. I shoulda been a sheriff with a gold badge. Instead of a tin-horn worthless go-between."

"Where is Towbridge?" I demanded.

Starr sipped thoughtfully at his rosé. "I think somebody croaked him."

"Why?"

"Like yourself he was supposed to meet me at the airport—but never showed. I haven't heard one word since."

"You said you watched me board the plane. How did you know who I was?"

"I had an M.O. on you."

"Where did you get that?"

"He stared impassively across the room at me. "Where do I get anything, ma'm? Sometimes things come to me right out of the air. Maybe it's a hand sticking out between buildings in an alley. Or a piece of trash floating down the river. A kid's balloon blowing loose in a park. I told you. I'm a go-between. I work for anybody for a buck and no questions asked."

"What were your dealings with Lance Towbridge?"

"Answers cost money, ma'm."

"Whose side are *you* on?"

His smile had the contemptuous arrogance of a wild bull. "I told you I don't take sides. I don't care if they're black, green, gold, blue or purple. Communist, Fascist or homosexual. If they have cashable loot, baby, I deal."

"I haven't any money, Mr. Starr."

He cackled loudly. "Did the *U*-nited States go broke?"

"I don't work for them anymore. They put me out to pasture."

His jaw took a suspicious slant. "Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"Looking for answers."

"What kind?"

"If I could find Lance Towbridge I might have some idea."

Starr studied me for a moment. "How'd you know to come here?"

"Towbridge gave me this address just in case something went wrong."

He grabbed me viciously by the front of my coat. "Do you have any idea, Miss West, what *they* might do to me if they thought I was working for your government?"

"It's your government, too, isn't it?" I tore his hands away.

"Not anymore!" he snarled drunkenly, yanking his gun back into view. "You made a big mistake coming here, Miss West!"

"What do you know about the micronized bomb?"

"Pleanty!" Starr hissed. "Within six months Mord Aterrorizer Dominar will rule the world."

"And who will be Prime Minister of Texas?"

He grimaced. "The world works in funny ways, ma'm. You got to stick with the winners if you want to survive." His gun hand clenched, index finger curling around the trigger.

A small hole suddenly opened in Burt Starr's forehead. It seemed to appear out of nowhere, widening with reddish fury as he staggered backward from some sort of invisible impact. His eyelids, mouth, nostrils gaped. His Russian pistol slithered to the floor and was dappled by Starr's bloody scream as he toppled down a flight of steps.

# 7

Dead.

Burt Starr lay at the bottom of the steps, a twisted hulk, the impact of dying turning his eye sockets into pools of red.

I started down toward him when the cold steel of a gun rammed against the nape of my neck.

"Steady, Miss West!" The voice was male, deep French accent, taut.

A gloved hand ripped my purse to the floor. I could hear the sound of it being kicked across the room. Somebody behind me grunted an unintelligible oath.

The man holding the gun said quietly, "I want you to listen to me very carefully, *mademoiselle*. For these words may be the last you ever hear on this earth. We are tired of playing games with you. Understand? We want that capsule. Now!"

I could see the shadow of him on the wall, twisting down the staircase to where Burt Starr lay.

"I—I haven't got it," I said.

"Don't lie to us, Miss West! Your government's autopsy of agent Arno proved negative. The capsule was not found aboard the plane. Therefore, only one person in this entire world could be in possession of this treasured article. And that would be you."

"That adds up," I agreed. But the only trouble is, the answer comes out zero."

The muzzle of the gun sank deeper. The sharpness

of the steel told me it was mounted with a silencer. Beads of water ran down my back from its snout.

"All right," he said contemptuously. "If that's the way you want to play. Then we shall play it your way. About face, Miss West!"

I turned slowly. What greeted my eyes was enough to make me want to jump out of my skin. In the candlelight, clutching a small Japanese M-14 pistol, stood a being clad entirely in white, including a hood with large round goggles strapped to the headpiece. He resembled some sort of weird space creature with spotless white gloves, white jumpsuit and boots. It was utterly impossible to identify who was under the covering. Behind him were two other men garbed in identical outfits, both clutching guns.

I tried not to show my start. "Hi! On your way to the moon?"

"You may wish so—before we are finished with you, *mademoiselle*." He gestured. "Josef, Miss West's suit please."

One of the other men stepped forward. He held a package that he pushed into my hands. "*Ouí*, Alex!"

The man nearest to me said, "All right, Miss West. If it is a party you want. You shall have it."

I unfolded the plastic wrapper, revealing another white suit, hood, glasses, boots. "You want me to wear this?" I questioned.

"*Ouí*!"

The outfit was a small size and appeared to have been tailor-made for me. I stepped into the suit and zipped it to my throat. Then pulled the boots over my own shoes. While I dressed, several thoughts ran through my mind. Number one: If Burt Starr was working for MAD why had these men killed him, assuming they were with the same organization? The man called Alex had apparently shot Starr from behind me at fairly close range. But why? Number two: If they were still searching for the capsule, and Starr obviously

knew about the micronized bomb, what was so vitally important about this particular miniaturized weapon? They acted as if the capsule's recovery was a major factor in their organization's plans. As long as I kept up a pretense of knowing its whereabouts there seemed a good chance they would keep me alive.

"The hood, Miss West!" Alex ordered.

I slipped the muslin headpiece over my head. Then one of the men fitted the round, owl-like glasses to my face. They pushed me out the door of Burt Starr's flea market cellar. It was still raining. Now even harder than before. The sky seemed inky black, swept by chill wind, and traced with distant rumblings of thunder. There were no lights along the alley. Only a single lamp burned far away on a corner post and this winked faintly in the hard downpour. A small sedan was parked at the curb. They pushed me into the back seat. I was joined by Alex and his silencer-fixed pistol. The other two climbed into the front. One of them had picked up my purse.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To a costume party," Alex growled.

The car sprang forward. We left the Village Suisse and turned down Rue de la Convention. The sedan skidded on the wet street as it turned left onto Rue Vaugirard.

Obviously we were not headed for a party. At least not what you might call a "festive occasion." This celebration had the aura of awesome finality. Especially after what happened to Burt Starr. We passed a major park southeast of the city and turned toward the Place de la Concorde, where I had asked Jacques Auberge to check me into the Hotel Château Loire. Just before reaching the Seine, the sedan turned to the left again and I could make out the massive rain-shrouded silhouette of the Eiffel Tower. The car quickly skirted around the tower's frontage road and into a

private parking area near one of the huge iron legs of the monument.

A sharp burst of thunder ripped across the sky above Paris, shaking the air like cannon blasts. High over the Seine's banks a twisted barb of lightning pricked its way, illuminating the bulbous crown of the tower, flicking its crooked tongues hungrily through dark clouds surrounding the lofty structure.

The sedan pulled to a stop and I was ordered out. Through the goggles I studied the three other figures as they emerged in the rain, shaking their muslin-covered heads against the hard drops that pelted down. Alex moved to me, shoved his gun against my behind, and directed me toward a masonry pier supporting one of the arched columns.

I had visited the tower several times while I was in Paris during the past year. It was an epic creation. Probably one of the most unusual structures ever built. Ranking with the Seven Wonders of the World, the Eiffel had been originally erected in the late 1880's for a world's fair. Ultimately, the tower remained, not only as a reminder of that year-long event, but as a symbol of a major nation bordered by more peoples and lands than any other European country.

The three men pushed me forward. Lightning split across the sky, followed by a furious burst of thunder. It was long after midnight now. There are elevator shafts in all four of the tower's iron columns. We were heading for one of them when out of the wet darkness stepped a uniformed security guard carrying a rifle. In authoritative French he ordered us to halt and explain our presence.

The man called Josef moved to him, explaining quickly that we were the painting crew and despite the hour and weather conditions we were behind schedule and had to finish interior work in the tower's cupola before morning tourists arrived. The guard shrugged, chuckled lowly, and ushered us into an elevator. Alex

snapped the door shut and we started upward. I could hear the hum of giant cables and thought again of the elevator incidents in New York and Cap d'Antibes. We reached the first platform about two hundred feet above the ground. There was a large open-air restaurant at this level. Now all of the tables and chairs were pushed to the sides and the platform itself ran with rain. They stopped the elevator and walked me out to the railing where lights of the city winked faintly in the storm's grip.

"Miss West," Alex said deliberately. "You may think we are joking, but we are not. This is deadly serious business. I would hate to see you killed just because you are being stubborn about our demands."

Another flicker of lightning stabbed down north of the river, illuminating the stone bridges of Boulevard St. Germain and de Sebastopol. There was very little neon now. Hardly any light. Paris seemed like a dark sleeping animal. Huge, forboding, restless.

"I wish I could say I was putting you on," I said. "But this isn't true."

"Miss West, in New York City we lost a key man, Henri La Bouche. He joined you on the airplane at Orly. He followed you to your apartment in Manhattan. And he still did not gain what we are after. You admitted then that you had the capsule."

"Not exactly. What's so important about it anyway?"

"You know its importance!"

"Do I?"

His hood shook angrily. "I am tired of this, Miss West. Abominably tired! All right—"

They shoved me back into the elevator. The whirl of the motor erupted and the cage started upward again, jerking unsteadily inside the arched column. I'd read somewhere that Gustave Eiffel had used seven thousand tons of iron to build his monstrous epic. It felt now

as if that much weight and more was bearing on me as we ascended into the stormy night.

The rain tapered off by the time we reached the second platform, the girders masking more lightning far to the South toward the Pyrenees. We ran head-on into a second guard. This one was not about to be as complacent. He demanded to know what we were doing up there.

Josef gave him the same story. The uniformed man wiped rain from his stubbled face and crossed to a telephone. Alex nodded. One of the men circled behind the guard and dropped him with a vicious blow at the back of his head with a gun butt. The man sagged unconscious to the deck. They shoved him into a security room and locked the door. Then they moved into another elevator on the South side of the tower. It was smaller and we headed up toward the cupola which capped the structure's 984-foot height. Girder sections swayed by as we rose higher and higher, the city flattening out like a misty blanket under us. The Seine glittered weirdly as clouds parted for an instant and moonlight flickered through. The bridge over the Place de Trocadero was a white-striped no-man's-land, empty of cars. Beyond was the Place de l'Etoile and the dark, brooding Arc de Triomphe. A few headlights flickered on the Grands Boulevards and the Avenue des Champs Élysées, and near the river could be seen the shimmering flower beds of the Jardins des Tuileries. The elevator continued to climb and these colorful scenes faded as clouds closed in again.

Finally we bumped to a stop and a gun was placed against my spine. I was directed toward a spiral staircase which led up to the cupola.

Lightning struck a steel rod capping the very top of the Eiffel and the explosive clap of thunder that followed nearly deafened me, despite the muslin covering. The tower swayed violently as if we were on a small leaf at the top of a giant tree. I was guided up

the staircase, the clatter of our boots sounding grimly harsh on the iron treads. We finally emerged onto the balcony, where they shoved me against a low railing.

Alex tore off my goggles and hood and threw them to the platform floor.

"All right, Miss West, this is your last chance! If you confess the truth and give us the capsule we promise to set you free."

"You mean free *fall*," I said, glancing over the side. "All the way to the ground."

"No! We have been told that you were dismissed from the United States service. If you produce the capsule we shall let you go. Or—we will take you with us."

"Take me—where?"

"Join our organization, Miss West, and we take you to the Hotel Sacron in Luchon. There we meet with *Señor* Batavia on Saturday evening." His gloved hands raised slowly. "But—if you do not give us what we seek then you shall share the fate of La Bouche."

I stared at the weird trio as wind whipped at their muslin coverings. They seemed about as real as a couple of weirdos out of an old Flash Gordon movie. It was impossible to perceive what was behind those ghoulish green globes they wore for glasses. They were obviously planning to murder me whether I produced the capsule or not.

"Okay," I said, trying to bargain for time. "The capsule is in my luggage at the Hotel Château Loire."

Alex grunted through his nose. "No. Your luggage has already been thoroughly searched. There is nothing of value."

If my belongings had been given a going over, where was Jacques Auberge? Had they killed him, too?

I nodded complacently. "I realize you are very thorough, *monsieur*. But there are hiding places you could not possibly find."

"No!" Alex said firmly.

Lightning skip-roped across the sky, ripped a hole in the clouds, splintering its thunderclap against the Eiffel Tower, sending it swaying precariously. Wind smashed across the platform, impaling me on the railing. The three men rocked, staggered, grasped for support. I now had only one desperate chance.

I yelled against the wind. "If you tell me the truth behind the capsule, I will turn it over to you without another moment's hesitation."

"No!" Alex cried.

"Then you'll never find it."

He waved his arms angrily. "No, *mademoiselle!* No!" he repeated. "You will give it to us without any explanation on our part!"

"I can't!" I laid it on like a sob-sister. "I've been abandoned by my own government. I have fought and almost died for this cause. I refuse to give up now. You'll have to kill me!"

Alex glanced around at his confederates. Slowly they all three nodded simultaneously.

"All right. Your capsule contains a key ingredient we have needed in the testing of this weapon."

"What ingredient?"

"That I cannot divulge. I will tell you this much. We will do *anything* to regain the capsule. Final tests of the weapon were not made before this one was stolen out of our hands. We cannot go ahead. We cannot complete all phases of our plan without it."

"Well, what do you know? Fate does play funny tricks, does it not?"

"All right, Miss West—tell us where the capsule is. Or you shall take the final whip."

I peered over the side of the Eiffel Tower. Thunder roared, crackled across the dark sea of Paris. Clouds rushed madly overhead. Pushed by the wind. It seemed as if we were in the eye of a hurricane and that everything about us was throbbing and moving and be-

coming more frantic each second as the storm continued to build. I was pinned against the railing.

"Miss West, I will give you five seconds and that is all! We shall find the capsule without you, if necessary."

"What were your boys doing in New York City in the elevator shaft?"

"We had hoped to frighten you into a confession, but this seems hopeless now! We have men waiting on the ground. We hoped we might gain the capsule while you were alive, Miss West." He moved toward me. "You have probably ingested it."

"Right!" I said, patting my tummy. "If you toss me over—this thing'll go off and blow you and the Eiffel Tower sky high."

"The capsule is not that potent!" Alex hissed.

I grinned cynically. "Oh, no. Well, it just so happens I lied about my disassociation with my country. We have greatly enhanced the bomb's strength—just in case you might try this."

One of the men roared, "Could this be true?"

"No!" Alex returned angrily.

I said, "That's what you hope, gentlemen. But you can't be positive, can you?"

The rain slowed. They stood in their tracks. Drops coursing down their muslin suits. Goggles stained by the downpour.

Alex turned. "I know she lies. It is impossible to supplant the capsule's power. We have spent years developing this bomb. They are completely in the dark regarding it's capabilities. If she had the power to destroy this structure she would not do it!"

"Oh, no?" I said, keeping the ruse going. "Just you come close to me and I'll prove what the capsule's capabilities are."

The three men hesitated. Lightning flickered across the sky. So near, I could actually hear it sizzling through the air. Alex suddenly reached inside his

suit and extracted a long, gleaming jack knife. He flicked out the blade and held it up.

He bellowed angrily, advancing. "I shall test you, Miss West! I shall prove you are wrong. We shall *conquer* the world!"

One man grabbed at his arm, wrestling with Alex for control of the weapon. A power struggle ensued, brought on by fears of a dynamic explosion.

Suddenly, as they grappled, the knife flashing above the six struggling arms, a jagged dart raced across the dark rainy sky ramming its savagery into the steel blade. The three hooded figures stiffened. Their bodies flew apart. One was hurled against the railing. Another thrown all the way to the staircase. The third tumbled on the platform at my feet. A monstrous rumble tore the Paris sky. Then it suddenly grew very quiet. Even the rain stopped.

I crossed to the man named Alex and looked down. He seemed to be nothing but a shattered, smoldering pile of cloth. I lifted the hood and gasped.

Inside was the burned, twisted face of Henri La Bouche!

## 8

“Honey!”

I whirled. Behind me in the lightning-scissored night stood Jacques Auberge, raindrops coursing down his lined face. For a moment I didn't recognize him. He was clad in a bulky trenchcoat with a brown helmet strapped under his chin similar to those worn by fliers of the Charles Lindbergh era. He moved to me, taking my trembling shoulders in his powerful arms.

I could hardly speak. “Jacques! How did you find me?”

“I have been following you for the last thirty minutes.” He glanced around at the twisted suits of muslin. “What has happened here?”

“They were struck by a lightning bolt—”

Auberge continued, “I was worried ever since you got out in that alley in the Flea Market. I took your things to the Château Loire—as you instructed. Then I got my car and returned. I saw you being kidnapped and I followed. Who are they? Are—are they dead?”

I knelt, lifted La Bouche's hood and tossed it on the tower platform. Then I zipped down the front of his suit and laid the cloth open. Auberge spat a low oath, looked around futilely. He crossed to one of the other suits and ripped it open. The body inside was burned almost to a crisp. So was the third. He returned and grasped my arm savagely.

“What—what happened to them?”

I brushed at my forehead, searching the now rain-

less sky above the Eiffel Tower. If I hadn't actually seen the crash of lightning, hadn't watched them being hurled across the platform—

"They were struggling over a knife," I said. "Electricity struck the blade."

"Isn't that one—La Bouche?" he demanded, gesturing.

I nodded.

"But I saw him jump from your terrace—"

Thunder rumbled across Paris, shaking the tower, exploding ominously toward the South of France and Marseille. A furious rend in the darkness.

"That was a long jump," I said, "New York to Paris."

"Could they have all been invisible under those suits?" Auberge stammered. "And the lightning—?"

"I don't know, Jacques. They were either trying to hide something or scare the hell out of me—or both. I guess we won't know until somebody makes an autopsy."

He shook his head. "And will we even know then?"

I tried to steady myself. "Was there any problem at the hotel?"

"No." Auberge suddenly dug in a coat pocket. "Oh, a message from Towbridge. It sounds very urgent. You are supposed to meet him at the Château Gaillard."

"Where's that?"

"About fifty kilometers. North along the Seine River."

He handed me a slip of paper. It read:

*Miss West: Sorry I missed you at the airport. I now have that vital information you are seeking. It is important that you come to the Château Gaillard this very night. I shall be waiting. Go first to St. Germain-en-Laye. Then to Mantes, Bonnières and Vernon. This will take you approximately two hours by car. I shall wait until daybreak. Do not fail me! Lance Towbridge.*

I glanced at Auberge. "Where did you get this?"

"The hotel desk clerk." The Frenchman grimaced. "Is it a phoney?"

Hair whipped across my face in the wind. "Why do you ask that?"

He gestured at the shattered remains of the three men.

I shook my head. "They'd have to be working overtime and double shifts to top that. How can I get to this Château Gaillard?"

Auberge's voice was testy. "I—I could drive you there."

"No!" I studied his face. "You've done enough."

"Otherwise, you will have to walk all the way."

"No buses, trains, helicopters—?"

"No, Honey."

After a moment, I shrugged faintly. "I guess I really am a selfish girl. I accept."

It was grisly. Jacques Auberge had to don one of the muslin suits. Also a hood and goggles.

I replaced mine and nodded. "Let's go."

We got into the elevator. A weird feeling passed through me. Could I have just witnessed a supernatural phenomenon? La Bouche had seemingly survived a bullet that had passed right through his body and a 27-story leap from my terrace. But now he *was* dead. Blackened, twisted, gruesome.

At ground level we encountered the first guard. He jovially asked how it was going. We nodded and passed on. I found the other car and retrieved my purse. My .22 Hi-Standard was still nicely entrenched. Auberge had a small Porsche. After climbing inside we removed our outer gear and drove across the Seine to the Avenue des Champs Élysées. We stopped for a moment while I called a local precinct and anonymously reported the Eiffel Tower incident, and the guard who was locked in his sentry station.

From there we continued beneath the massive dark *Arc de Triomphe*, which still shed raindrops from the night's heavy downpour, and turned down the Avenue Victor Hugo. Few cars were on the road and we left Paris quickly, plunging into a misty darkness leading toward the coast of Normandy.

As we drove, I leaned my head back on the cushioned seat and tried to analyze the impossible moments at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Obviously MAD agents had been following and observing me for several weeks. Now suddenly they were really swooping down. La Bouche on the plane and a reprise at my penthouse in New York. Now again in Paris—with two others! Hopefully the lightning bolt had severed the chase. Hearing from Lance Towbridge was my first real break. If he had the vital information I needed I might not have to stick my neck out farther and be forced to go on to Luchon to check out this *Señor Batavia*.

In a short time we reached the little village of St. Germain-en-Laye tucked along the twisting banks of the Seine. It was here years ago that American infantrymen prepared for their historic World War II entry into Paris.

Dawn was beginning to peek over the rock-strewn hills around Mantes and its glow touched the cathedral tower casting a saintly light on the bells and steeple.

As we neared Bonnières, Jacques said, "The Château is only a few miles farther. Honey, this is a strange place for a meeting."

I had met Lance Towbridge only once. That during equally unusual weather, a few miles from Marseilles at Aix-en-Provence, a southern inland city which often experiences intense thunder showers along with part of the *possie du midi*. At that time, Lance and I were caught in a mistral, a powerful eerie wind which sweeps down the Rhône Valley blowing dust in circles

like furious whirlpools, and at the same time we had had to run for cover from a drenching rain.

Laughing and thoroughly wet we sought shelter in a small cafe. Lance immediately introduced himself as a writer for the London Times. He was a bearded young Englishman with mod sideburns, thinning brown hair and hot blue eyes. He was wirey, fairly good-looking and wore smokey unrimmed glasses which gave him a psuedo-hippie look. He was far from it. Lance came from a family of English Lords, all peers of the Empire, members of Parliament, the cream of Britain's society. The eccentric journalist was as aristocratic as Buckingham Palace.

We spent a few days at the same hotel. Lance was working on an article involving a group of 2000 chemists assembled for a week-long convention at Provence. I was there for the same reason, except my writings were being formulated for the CIA. The United States wanted information on two men. A German scientist named Ludwig Rhinau, and Nebel Berne, the famed Swiss chemist. Both were authorities on what the world had come to know as the "chemical chamber of horrors"—napalm, defoliants and herbicides. Both men were Nobel Prize winners and each one working on "highly secret" chemical compounds. Berne made a statement during the convention, "There is now no weapon and no means of war that our world is not prepared to use. There are no restraints on the grounds of human existence or sparing of people that guides any major nation."

A sharp turn in the road rattled me back to a wet dawn road outside Vernon, France. I glanced at Jacques Auberge at the wheel of his Porsche. "What did you say about the Château?"

"I said it is a peculiar place for a meeting. In early times it was a fortress. It is high on that hill over there above the river and the valley. It was built in the late eleven hundreds by "Richard the Lion-

Hearted" to prevent the French from coming down the Seine to seize Normandy."

"Sounds like a great site for a Richard Burton-Elizabeth Taylor spectacular."

Auberge gestured. "There it is now. See for yourself."

I peered through the rain-streaked windshield and caught a glimmer of towering white walls in the swiftly gathering light. They rose high on a rock-encrusted bluff above the road, looming against a cloudless morning sky like the alabaster wings of a mammoth angel. The central portion, a round turret-shaped building called the *donjon*, had sheer sides apparently to hold back the enemy. This battlement towered at least a hundred feet high and peered down, not only on a broad valley, but on a feudal castle adjoining, and on a ruined *châtelet* at the other end of the plateau which marked the southern boundary of the fortified hill.

We drove up a winding road marked the Allée du Roi de Rome and pulled to a stop at the edge of the bluff. White birds fluttered across the sky and far in the distance could be heard the chimes of a church marking the hour of the day's beginning. Below the craggy cliffs spiraled the lazy Seine, deep in its placid niche, winding its way toward the English Channel.

As we walked down a narrow path toward the Château, I could see the sun's reflection peering over the hills behind us. Its rays glinted on narrow slits in the fortress walls where once Norman soldiers shot spears down on French troops scaling the treacherous cliffs.

At the gate into the *donjon*, Jacques frowned at a large sign barring the way. In both French and English it warned: CHÂTEAU CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE! KEEP OUT!

There was a narrow hole torn in the wire large enough for a person to crawl through. I tried it for

size and said, "Come on, let's look inside. Lance said he would stay until daybreak. He couldn't have left yet."

The ball of sunlight glowed fiercely as it rose, almost burning us with its intensity after the all-night rain. Drops trickled down the shattered fortress walls. We entered a door on the other side of the gate. Instantly the dankness of age caught us as weird holes leaked faint light and air. We were in chill half-darkness and the clank of our footsteps on the hard stone floor brought us to a sudden stop.

Auberge whispered, "Far below us are hollowed-out chambers in the soft rock. Two queens charged with adultery were imprisoned there. One of them, Marguerite de Bourgogne, strangled on her own hair."

"Keep the good news coming," I said apprehensively. "We'll give you Gabriel Heatter's old radio spot."

Cautiously we moved down a staircase to a lower floor in the Château. It grew darker and Auberge was forced to light matches to illuminate our path. The cavernous depths seemed to swallow our movements and conveyed an ominous Frankensteinian quality to our search for Lance Towbridge.

"Hello, anyone here!" Auberge called. His voice echoed explosively through the unlit chambers, rolling like claps of distant thunder.

"Jacques, I have a bad feeling again that something's haywire. Let's get out of here."

He yelped as a match burned his fingers and faded, plunging us back into darkness. The producer swore, then growled, "If ghosts of the slaughtered past do haunt these drafty ruins, let us hope at least they have the courtesy not to appear while we are here."

The flicker of a candle appeared distantly along a corridor.

"Lance?" I demanded.

No answer.

The flame grew in intensity until we could see behind

its bright glow a large figure wearing a medieval costume with full headpiece similar to the one worn by Louis Hayward in "The Man In The Iron Mask."

"You spoke too soon," I said to Auberge, reaching for my .22 revolver.

Cold steel suddenly nestled between my shoulder blades. I automatically dropped my purse when I saw Auberge straighten and lift his arms. There was another one behind us. Dressed in the same kind of Victorian outfit. They were covered from head to toe: grotesque helmets, chest plates, knee guards, leggings, leather gauntlets.

"Miss West," the man in front of us hissed, "come with me!" His accent was guttural. It sounded German—harsh, bitter phrasing. I thought I'd heard it before. But I wasn't sure.

"Leave her alone!" Auberge roared. A sharp blow to the back of his head buckled his knees. He fell unconscious to the stone floor.

I found myself being hurriedly directed along a corridor and down another flight of steps. They left Auberge where he dropped. The two men pushed me into a high-ceilinged room where I caught the glint of chains dangling from one wall. The candlelight also illuminated a flat iron torture rack, about six feet long by three feet wide. Manacled chains hung from each end.

They shoved me against a wall and clamped metal cuffs around my wrists, then stepped back. The candle's brilliance seared my eyes. I thrashed violently, but the chains allowed barely a few inches of movement. They turned and vanished, leaving only slitted daylight high above me.

Then I heard it. A whimper across the room. A soft animal-like cry of misery.

"Who's there?" I demanded.

"Towbridge. Lance Towbridge."

"Are you hurt?"

"My bloody pride mostly," Towbridge groaned. "I feel terrible that I got you into this, Miss West. If they don't come into possession of that capsule shortly we shall be in the bag."

"What do you know about the capsule?"

He lowered his voice to a strident whisper. "Too much. Remember when we were in Provence? Dr. Berne discussed it privately with me then. I thought he was joking."

"Discussed what?"

His words became flat, unemotional. "Invisibility. He claimed he had discovered the chemical formula whereby specific living atoms could be made transparent. He said he had already tested the principle in an ultra-sophisticated laboratory off the coast of Normandy."

A wild, fleeting, nauseating thought splintered through me. Why hadn't I been aware of Towbridge's presence when they brought me into this room?

I said testily. "I guess we both know he wasn't joking."

"Yes," the Englishman murmured. "Too bad he couldn't have given us the formula *months* before he was murdered."

"Berne—is dead?"

"More than a week ago. Baden-Baden. Outside an *apotheker*. His murder has been a well-kept international secret."

"How did you find out?"

His voice was cold and blank. "Through channels here on the Continent," he answered lowly. "That was one of the pieces of data I planned to convey to you at the airport. But they nabbed me. If you're wondering why that particular capsule is so valuable, the explanation is simple. Several weeks ago Berne decided to defect from MAD. He micronized his chemical formula and inserted the blighter into one of the

miniaturized bombs. MAD found out, but not before they could stop Berne from passing it on to you."

"Me?" I blurted.

"You in turn gave it to Arno."

I hesitated a second before answering. "Then why do they think I have it?"

His voice was thin, dangerous. "Because Arno gave it back to you."

"Why would he do that—and when?"

"At Cap d'Antibes," Towbridge said faintly.

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

"Arno knew one of you would be killed. He gambled on which one it would be. His pretense aboard the plane was sheerly marvelous hocus-pocus. Pretending to swallow the capsule and then your extensive search of the plane almost fooled us—"

His last word seemed to dangle like a corpse on the end of a rope.

"Us?" I asked, after a moment.

"I—I mean—"

"You know more about what I've been doing, Mr. Towbridge, than I do."

He announced sharply, "Okay, the cat's out of the bloody bag. I've joined them, Miss West. It was either join or have my brains blown out. I would advise you to follow suit."

"Blow it out *your* bloody bag!" I snarled.

"No sense in pretending any longer. They have ascertained where the capsule is actually hidden."

"Tell me and we'll all know!"

His voice was cold as ice. "I personally believe you when you say you have no idea of its whereabouts. But they believe you are lying. It is my theory that Arno just didn't *hand* it back to you."

"He threw it," I said sarcastically.

Towbridge continued, "The two of you had a rollicking champagne party that night at Cap d'Antibes. You went swimming in the nude together. You danced and

pranced on the sand. Really got yourselves snookered. When you returned to his apartment, you, Miss West, passed out."

"Must have been all that salt air!"

"And shortly thereafter," Towbridge added, "Mr. Arno performed minor surgery on you."

"He what?"

"He secreted the capsule somewhere on your physical body."

"You have got to be out of your cotton-picking—"

A glint of artificial light caught the corner of my eye. The two men in medieval costumes appeared accompanied by another in a white surgeon's outfit. He, also, was covered from head to foot. They tossed a sheet over the rusted torture rack and placed several sharp instruments on the white surface. They began to disrobe me.

Lance Towbridge was now visible in the unsteady candle glow. He stood in one corner, sweat pouring down his bearded face. His eyes were masked by his huge smokey glasses, but I thought I caught a dart of glee in them as they untied my ruffly blouse and flung it down.

I struggled and kicked in vain. A gloved hand reached between my breasts, literally tearing away my lace bra.

"You dirty, lousy traitor!" I hurled at Towbridge.

My breasts swayed adamantly in the flickering light, the nipples hard, dark, angry.

Towbridge feasted his eyes on them hungrily. "Now I'm jealous of a dead man, Miss West. It should have been me in Cap d'Antibes with you—instead of Arno!"

They stripped off the remainder of my clothing and harshly spread-eagled me on the makeshift operating table. I nearly went berserk when they fitted the manacles to my wrists and ankles. I was a human naked X ready for the carving.

"Please!" I pleaded. "Wouldn't I know if the capsule were on my body?"

The white-masked butcher selected a knife and bent over my wriggling thighs. Suddenly the gleaming instrument swung through the air in a weird, wobbly arc and plunged into *his* chest. He staggered back, gasping, his own fingers clutching the crimson handle with trembling disbelief. He crumpled slowly to the floor. The two medieval warriors bent over the fallen man and before I could see what had happened they were also slumped dead on the stone. The clasps on my manacles snapped free and Lance Towbridge lifted me to my feet.

"Don't ask any questions!" he spat tremblingly. "Find the capsule and give it to Jacques Auberge. He'll know what to do. Now get out of here!"

I reached for my clothes, but he swung me around into his arms. "You—you're the most delectably wrought woman of all time. That week in Provence I died a little each moment I looked at you." His eyelids narrowed. "I set one of their bombs!" He whirled me, spanked my bare bottom and pushed me through the door. "Run! Dammit!"

I ran because I thought he planned to escape with me. I ran because the candles had fallen on the dead men, revealing pitiless twisted faces as their masks and costumes burned. I found my purse on an upper staircase, grabbed it and kept running until I emerged into the morning sunlight. I ran down the pathway to Jacques Auberge's car before remembering he had also been taken prisoner. I turned back toward the white walls of the Château Gaillard when suddenly the immense turret buckled from a tremendous impact, bowing out like a pregnant woman, and with an explosive scream that must have equaled all its murderous outcries of eight infamous centuries, its stone face crumpled down the hillside. Like a small

avalanche. Some piece of its timeless glory tumbled into the river Seine sending up a roar that would have even made "Richard the Lion-Hearted" quake with fear.

# 9

Naked.

Standing high on a bluff overlooking a valley nestling at the foot of the once-proud Château Gaillard, I stared at the ruins. The face of the fortress was broken like the mouth of a fighter after a killing punch. Lance Towbridge's bomb had literally blown the guts out of the ancient walls. I ran back along the path. Then I saw a figure stagger up out of the turret's shattered doorway.

He was tall, sandy-haired, blue-eyed. Blood streamed from a cut on his mouth and his clothing was torn and dusty. He seized my hand.

"Honey!"

"Jacques!"

"Who did it?" he demanded.

"Lance Towbridge. He not only saved my life—but my sanity. They were going to dissect me! Where were you?"

He wiped at his face. "I—I was locked in a cell. Then pouf! I climbed up through a small hole."

"Did you see Towbridge?"

The Frenchman shook his head futilely. "No one. The *donjon* is buried. They must all be dead." He suddenly realized I was naked, ripped off his tattered trench coat and tossed it around my shoulders. "Come! We must get out of here! They will think we did it. There will be more people here in fifteen minutes than you could shake that fortress with!"

"It's shook," I said.

He nodded, grabbed my hand and we ran to his Porsche and climbed inside. He fired up the engine and turned down the Allée du Roi de Rome. I looked back. Above the Château Gaillard an atomic-like mushroom was lifting in the sky. Dust and debris blotted out the morning sun and the new day.

As we drove toward Paris through more rain, I asked myself, how ridiculous and idiotic could life be? If I hadn't known better I would believe this was a script from a mad melodrama starring the ghosts of Karloff and Lugosi, filmed in garish color by American International. Or a nightmare brought on by too many liverwurst sandwiches at four o'clock in the morning. But I knew better. Or did I? Where does imagination stop and reality begin? How far apart is truth and the magician's magical box of tricks? Now you see it, now you don't! Could the invisible hoopla have been an optical illusion played very cleverly upon a person who had had only a few hours rest in more than seventy some hours? I wanted to believe that. Lance Towbridge's bomb had torn a blunt hole in any mystical skullduggery. And who but God could have conceived a lightning bolt powerful enough to shake the Eiffel Tower almost to its foundations? And yet— Why had they gone to such weird lengths with the appearance and disappearance of La Bouche in my penthouse in New York? The mystical white matching suits in Paris? The medieval torture-chamber outfits at Château Gaillard? All three incidents had ended in overtly dramatic macabre flourishes. Admittedly the naked candlelight operation about to be performed on a thousand year-old torture rack was as bizarre as you could get. So was the thousand-foot threatened pitch from the top of the Eiffel Tower.

I pretended to be asleep as the car bumped through a storm-clouded countryside outside Paris. But my

slitted eyes were turned toward Jacques Auberge, studying him as he sat at the wheel. His lean face, still bloodied from the explosion, held a searching glower on the road. The mystical part of this mission had all begun with him. He had been involved in all three major incidents, either directly or he had been in the immediate vicinity.

Had all these mystical wonderments been planned and executed by a man well-versed in motion picture artistry and production? A man noted for his photographic techniques and electrifying ingenuity? An Academy Award winner?

Now that I was analyzing it so deeply I found myself doubting the credibility of my own thoughts. Could I have had a series of visions? Unrelated to facts? A modern LSD trip, triggered by some fanciful dreams of world salvation? Had I patterned myself as a 1970's Joan of Arc, atop a high white horse, leading her armies into victory? Several miles from here in Rouen, Saint Joan had been tried, condemned and burned at the stake in 1491. I thought about the present-day lightning, the candles, the Château, the medieval costumes, the explosion. Had I somehow created an unbelievable bridge to her past? I suddenly remembered her fateful words, etched in bronze in the marketplace at Rouen:

*Saint Michel,  
Sainte Catherine,  
Rouen, Rouen, are you to be  
my tomb; is it here  
that I must die?*

We were on the Grands Boulevards when Jacques nudged me awake. A gloomy downpour had turned the French capitol into a stilted maze of umbrellas, drab coats, honking automobiles and angry puddles.

He grinned down at me, dried blood caked across

his chin. "You slept, Honey. Finally. You did need that."

I sat up, wrapping his trenchcoat around me. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon. I am taking you to my house."

"Why?" I asked.

"Honey, these madmen have tried to kill you twice in New York. Once on the Eiffel. Then at the Château. They will go to any lengths."

He drove along the Rue La Fayette and turned up into the hills. In a matter of minutes we were on a majestic driveway approaching a huge concrete and steel home with floor to ceiling glass walls overlooking Paris and the Seine River.

"And I thought I had a nice place," I said.

"You do," he murmured, leading me inside. "For a selfish little girl."

There were even windows in the ceiling dappled by midday rain. And a swimming pool that jutted out over the cliff. Below in drifting spring rain lay Paris and Le Bourget Airport. There was only one thing wrong with it. A statuesque brunette, with a dimpled chin and blazing brown eyes, stormed out of a back bedroom, a see-through knit dress revealing that she was stark naked underneath and stacked to boot.

"Monsic!" Auberge blared angrily. "What are you doing here?"

She cocked her head haughtily, glaring at me through slitted eyelids. Her makeup was thickly drawn around her eyes and mouth, accentuating hungry full lips, high cheekbones, a dash of freckles across her right cheek. She wriggled into the room like a live snake fastened to a flaming skewer.

"So, you found one you like better than me. hmmm?" she hurled, striding across the room. "*This* is what you went after in New York?"

I recognized her from her motion pictures, advertisements, theater art. It was Karol Kardinale. She was

quite different from what I'd expected. Her films had shown her as a warm, fragile slip of a woman. Half-naked and half-beautiful. A symbol. A legend. Screaming for hope and dying for the privilege of living. Obviously, as he had said, she was a Jacques Auberge creation. A woman possessed with her own desires, drives, ambitions.

She staggered to the bar, waving her arm profusely. "Then take her, Jacques. You are frightened by my presence?"

"Monsic!" Auberge roared.

She laughed wryly, pouring whiskey into a tall glass. "Oh, you are embarrassed, no? Because I tried to stop you from leaving New York? No?" She chuckled lowly in her throat. She crossed to me and tore open Jacques's trenchcoat. "As I thought," she hissed, staring at my nude body. "A woman is a woman in any language. No, *monsieur* producer?"

I stepped back, thrusting her hand away.

"We have had some problems," he said, gesturing at his bloodied face.

"Oh!" She grimaced sarcastically. "The French Army had such problems in World War One. There was a shortage of underclothing and some of our men had to fight with only trenchcoats." She tottered to the bar. "When the Bosche killed them they were thought to be homosexuals and consequently buried in unmarked graves. Hitler thought the same thing of us when he took Paris." She laughed lowly, pouring another drink. "A country without underpants, he said, is a country waiting to be raped. *And*, we were."

"Monsic!" Auberge protested. "You are drinking too much! May I please speak to you?"

She straightened, her brown eyes examining her husband fully. "I am divorcing you, Jacques. You are a miserable, contemptible bastard." Her gaze turned to me. "You would make love to anything with two

legs, two breasts and a—" She suddenly toppled to the floor.

He moved quickly to her, lifting her into his arms. "I am sorry," he apologized. "She never drinks—"

He returned in a few minutes, his face scrubbed clean. "I must apologize again—"

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he said, pouring us each a drink, "Monsic is, as I told you, uncontrollable. A beautiful dragonfly quaffing the dregs of her own life. Killing herself with her own selfish desires."

We sipped silently for a moment, rain pattering on the glass above. I asked myself how Jacques Auberge could be a fraud now that I was actually on his stomping ground and had met his internationally famous wife? At the back of my mind nibbled the comment made by La Bouche concerning a *Señor* Batavia and an important meeting at Luchon. Could this be just another mystical rendezvous patterned solely for my entertainment? And if so, why were they leading me so pointedly by the nose in such bizarre fashion? The capsule? If Lance Towbridge was for real, I could be a walking bomb, *and* possess a formula worth billions to an alien power. At that price they could afford to keep the hi-jinks going for quite a while.

"Would you care to freshen up, Honey?" Auberge asked, smiling mischievously.

"You forgot, Jacques, I have no clothes," I reminded him.

He threw a door open with a grandiose flourish. "*Voilà!*"

My three suitcases were stacked very neatly on a bed.

"How—?"

He laughed devilishly. "I did not check you into the Hotel Château Loire. I had other ideas. Am I forgiven?"

I kissed him on both cheeks. "If I were a French general I would give you a medal. Maybe two."

He opened the trenchcoat. His hands reached inside. I slipped away.

"I said *if* I were a French general."

While I was in the shower I made a clumsy search to prove Lance Towbridge was wrong. Not certain how large, or small, the capsule might be I was truthfully shadow-feeling in the dark. Sometimes people's lymph glands swell, or they develop moles, warts, pimples, blemishes. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The water felt warm, tingly, and sort of woke me up after the long night's journey into Normandy. Jacques tossed me a towel through the door and then I slipped into a crisp minidress with twisting strawberry stripes on white linen. And donned a little all-strawberry-colored jockey's cap.

When I came out Jacques was half through the bottle of cognac. He refilled my glass.

"You are a strawberry parfait," he said toasting me.

"'Thank you, kind sir,' she said." I curtsied. "How is your wife doing?"

"She's gone," he said darkly.

"No kidding!"

"I have been talking to my studio," he said after a moment. "And they wish me to check on some scenes on a new picture we are doing. Would you care to join me?"

"I'll make you a deal. I'll join you if you join me."

"Join you where, Honey?"

I sat on a bar stool and glanced out at the wet face of Paris. It was gray, drab and unhappy. "I have to go to the Pyrenees—to Luchon. I thought I would take a night train."

"Oh, Honey," Auberge groaned. "Are you going to keep this going forever."

"There is a meeting at the Sacron Hotel tomorrow night—with some of our friends from—"

"MAD!" Auberge crossed to the bar and poured himself another shot. "*You* are the one who is mad, Honey. How many rabbit's feet do you own? They cannot last forever."

I patted his cheek. "I told you, Jacques, you can get off the bus anytime you wish."

He groped futilely at his forehead. "What bus?"

"It's an American joke."

He groaned. "American jokes are someday going to kill the world!"

Jacques Auberge's film studio was farther out on the Rue La Fayette, beyond Le Bourget Airport. It was not Hollywood. Not by a long shot. There were only two sound stages. In one we encountered the shooting of a motion picture Jacques called "*Embrassez-moi quand vous voudrez!*" which literally translated means "Kiss Me Wherever You Want!" There seems to be no holds barred in today's films and on Jacques's set there were less clothes and censorship than you might find at a friendly orgy. A curvaceous blonde writhed on a king-sized bed under the grueling glare of about five or six kleigs and two cameras, one on a high crane. Beside her were two men: a dark-haired Frenchman, the other a blond American. They were both handsomely decked out with hairy chests, pearly smiles and all the rest of the well-built equipment that goes along with these X-rated pictures. They even tossed in a third male. A Spaniard with bull-shoulders, straight black hair and a Pepsodent smile. He, too, was clad in nothing but a skin suit.

As we entered the sound stage, I noticed the Frenchman had painted toenails. He was complaining bitterly about a scene that had just been shot between the Spaniard and the blonde. Jacques told me the Frenchman wanted to play the same scene with the

robust Spaniard. At this point they cut the action, tossed a few robes to the naked foursome and Jacques Auberge walked onto the set. He looked around, smiled a few times, waved at several people, shook his finger naughtily at the blonde who was still lying on the bed, and then took my hand and quickly left the set.

Outside, I said, "And that's how you run a studio?"

He crowded me against a wall away from the rain. "In this business," he said, "it is not too good for an executive to try and tell someone else too much. I have my ways of doing things. They have their ways. I do not like rushes. Nor do I look at rough cuts. I look at the finished product. Then I scream, then I cut, then I add, then I redo. That is the way I work."

I glanced back at the stage door. "Who's the blonde?"

"You did not recognize her? The famous BB? She is finally doing a film for me. This will be a smash hit. Perhaps make millions. But if I hang around too long with you, Honey, I will never live long enough to spend a franc of it. No?"

"Jacques, perhaps I shouldn't involve you. Your wife is here—"

He touched my lips with his fingers. "You heard her say she is divorcing me. She is a big girl, Honey. She can take care of herself. I made a promise to you that I shall follow. But from now on I shall be prepared."

He opened his coat and produced a 9 mm. Luger. He snapped down the cartridge and showed me the gun's bullets and then slid it back in place. "No more elevators. No more Eiffel Towers. No more Chateaus. I am ready for them."

I put my arms around him. "Suddenly I trust you more than anyone else in the world."

He grinned down at me. "I thought it was only in God you selfish little girls trusted."

"Try me on the train," I whispered.

"I shall," he said, drawing me to him. "We have connecting rooms."

I jerked back. "When *and*—how did you manage that?"

"While you were so minutely examining the hairy-chested Spaniard."

"I was not—"

"You were not looking at BB."

"Of course, I wasn't—"

He kissed me. Hard. Pulling away, he said, "Monsic said France was raped by Hitler. Have you ever been raped?"

"No."

"A scientific report states every woman desires to be raped once in her lifetime."

I nuzzled his cheek. "Have you ever been raped?"

"No!"

"A scientific report that I read states every man desires to be raped once in his lifetime."

"Honey—"

"Is there a lock between our connecting rooms?"

"Usually there is."

"Okay," I grinned mischievously. "I'll flip you for the key."

Before we caught the train, Jacques took us to an intimate restaurant near the railway station. We had champagne and supper by candlelight.

Suddenly he said, "Honey, there are things you are not telling me that I should know. How can I protect and help you if I am a fish out of water. If I am floundering and dying and not able to understand why?"

"All right, Jacques."

I told him what I knew about the capsule and what Lance Towbridge had blurted out shortly before the explosion at the Château Gaillard. I was pleased by his complete surprise and confusion.

"You mean, Honey, that this—this capsule could actually be embedded in your flesh?"

"That seems to be the essence of what *they* believe."

"But this is not possible, is it?"

I took his hand in mine. "Not that I have been able to discover."

He stared at me, eyes blazing. "Honey, this is ridiculous! The whole thing. Faked invisible men. Capsuled bombs!"

"They're after something," I said. "Unless Jack L. Warner is back in charge of production."

"This must be a hoax—of some sort!"

"I would like to believe that," I said.

"All right," Auberge said, drumming his knuckles on the table. "I have stuck with you this far. But I think this is what they call a red herring. A phony trick to lure you on to their lines. To hook you."

"We'll know when we reach Luchon," I said.

We took a cab to the railway station. Two Paris police cars were waiting in the street near the passenger entrance. As soon as I stepped from the taxi two plainclothesmen approached me, one grabbing my arm as I tried to wriggle by.

"*Mademoiselle West?*" the other blurted.

"*Pardone-mé?*" I questioned angrily, trying to break free.

"May we see your passport, please?" the one restraining me ordered.

I glanced around. Jacques Auberge darted out of the cab and disappeared into the train station crowd. No one seemed in a hurry to stop him. I wiped rain from my cheeks and said, "What have I done? Robbed a piggy bank?"

The man holding my wrist grinned. He was a mulatto, a handsome dark-haired man, wearing a brushed Tyrolean hat and a slim gray worsted suit. "Far worse," he muttered. "Two piggy banks. You are Honey West, are you not?"

"Yes," I admitted. "How now, brown cow?"

He had straight white teeth and a warm smile. "Gentlemen always prefer blondes, *oui*? Would you kindly accompany us, *merci*?" He shoved me into one of the police cars. Then, sliding in beside me, he added, "We will hold your train."

Five minutes later I was on the tenth floor of the Paris division of Interpol. Situated high above the Seine, it was a busy world of teletype machines, television monitors and white-shirted men scurrying from office to office. They took me into a room where there was a spectacular view of the city, a lone desk and a bear of a man seated with his back to me. They left me alone with him. He wore a sweaty white shirt and an exposed shoulder holster with a .45 tucked in its grimy compartment. When he finally turned and looked at me, I couldn't help the exclamation in my voice.

"Mark!"

"*Bonjour, mademoiselle*," he said, in purposefully bad French. "Honey, what the living hell are you up to now?"

"Mark Storm!" I roared.

"Honey West!" he snapped back. "The last time? Three years ago? I asked you to marry me. And you said no—as always. Then I heard you joined the CIA. So, I joined Interpol just to be near you—and wound up here!"

"You are the biggest—"

"Liar?" He groaned lowly. "With you I had always hoped I might lie—permanently." He threw up his hands. "Now see what you've got me sleeping with? A desk!"

Mark Storm was a six-foot six-inch giant, once the young gray-haired wonder of the Hollywood homicide bureau during my days as a private investigator. He had been in the area when my father was ambushed and murdered in a back alley behind the old Para-

mount Theater in downtown Los Angeles. Mark had been part of an era. The Black Dahlia, the Mafia-led crime syndicates, the Bugsy Siegal days of bullets, brawn and bombshells.

His forehead ridged. "Still the same old Honey, hmmmm?" He picked up a report on his desk. "I understand you blew up a castle this morning."

"A château," I managed.

He grunted. "And the Eiffel Tower last night."

I slumped into a chair. "Mark, you mean—I'm not really alone?"

He got up and put an arm around me. "Hey, you're breaking up on me. This isn't the Honey West I was trying to make time with for so many years? Have you ever really been alone, Honey?"

"Are they really invisible, Mark?"

"No. Autopsies show they are just as human as we are, including La Bouche. Thanks partly to that idiot Lance Towbridge."

"Is he alive?"

"Who knows," Mark snarled. "He's a will o' the wisp. Working one side, then the other. He's waiting to find out which side'll win."

"Is it really that serious, Mark?"

He crossed the room to the rain-drenched windows. After a moment he turned and looked at me and said quietly. "Yes."

"No joke?"

He ran his fingers through his shaggy gray hair. "No joke, Honey."

"Then why the invisible hocus-pocus?"

Mark studied me for a moment, then said, "Apparently, Berne did come up with a formula. Whether it works or not, God only knows. He did place it in a capsule and Arno eventually inherited it. The capsule is deadly. You saw what happened at the Château Gaillard."

"But Lance Towbridge claims I've got it. That the capsule is secreted somewhere on my body."

Mark exhaled lowly. "You know he's daft. They looked you over pretty cleanly in Washington, after the plane flight. Would we let you walk around if you had an H-bomb on your person?"

"So what's on the menu?"

"*Bouillabaisse*. Sacron Hotel. Luchon."

"Could this be another ruse?"

"Possible," Mark issued lowly. "We have a feeling this *Señor* Batavia is a move in the right direction. It might be a hit or a miss. Play it cool and play it smart."

"What about Jacques Auberge?"

"Good man." Mark winked. "But keep your underpants locked." He turned his back on me, framed in the window. "Now give me a judo chop and run, you stupid blonde."

"What?"

"On the back of the neck. Then scamper the hell out of here. Go down the back stairway. Nobody'll stop you. They may try, but you'll get through, understand?"

"Mark, I have a million questions I want to ask you!"

"There's no time, Honey. We can't hold that train any longer. Just do as I tell you. They're watching us through this window!"

I gave him a sharp bladed hand just above the shoulders. He toppled to the floor, rolled over, groaning. "You didn't have to make it *that* realistic!"

# 10

## Running.

Breathlessly. Somehow I managed to make it out of the Interpol building. They stopped me once in the lobby. Two men. I took Mark's advice and just squirmed loose. They followed me to the street. I hailed a cab and went straight to the train station. Rain was still filtering down. I ran through the gate, past a protesting ticket checker and up a flight of stairs.

Jacques was on the platform near the train, standing half out of a phone booth, a receiver clamped to his ear.

"Where the hell have you been?" he roared, leaving the phone dangling.

A whistle ear-piercingly erupted from the engine as it jerked forward, rattling its cars as we climbed aboard. He led me to our private compartment. Sweat streamed down his lean cheeks. The train lurched, passing over a railroad bridge above the Seine and I was thrown against Jacques.

"I thought you would never make it," he said.

"Neither did I," I groaned, trying to catch my breath.

In a matter of minutes we were in the dingy outskirts of Paris and being swiftly swallowed by another stormy night.

Jacques tore off his coat and heaved down on one of the seats, moaning, "Honey, you will be the death of me yet. What did the police want of you?"

I removed my strawberry cap and brushed rain from my hair. "They gave me the keys to the city."

"Seriously."

I glanced out the window. Smoke swirled past creating a weird mosaic of faint lights meshed in the wet darkness. "They warned me about you."

He straightened. "What?"

I grinned. "They warned me you are an inveterate panty poacher."

His eyes blazed angrily. "Honey, are you absolutely certain you do not know where this—this capsule is?"

"Would I be on this train if I did?"

He threw his hands in the air. "You absolutely confound me. Your arrest outside the station was another hoax, no?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"They held the train for you."

I studied him for a moment. "And if they did—what difference does that make—to you, Jacques?"

He rubbed nervously at his mouth. "All right. My people are curious, too. I am with you partly because of DOMINO. Not entirely," he added. "This is mostly my decision. To be with you. But there is a cloud over the Continent. A dark cloud. My organization, my people, are worried, too."

"So that's who you were on the phone with at the train station?"

He nodded. "*Ouí*. I was informed your arrest was faked and that actually you were taken to the offices of Interpol."

"News travels fast these days," I said, stretching out on the seat opposite Jacques. "What else were you told?"

His forehead ridged. "That you still have the capsule."

I laughed lowly. "If that's true why didn't I give it to Interpol and get the monkey off my back?"

Jacques bent over me. "My people believe you might be dealing for higher stakes."

"Interesting theory," I said. "In other words, I may be willing to sell what I have for a price?"

He slapped his knee and sat next to me. "That is their theory. Not mine. You did say, 'what I have.' not 'what I don't have,' did you not?"

I got up. "Jacques, you are a terribly naïve amateur detective. I trust you *and* I have been almost completely honest with you. But you're shadow boxing and, suddenly, I don't like it. If you think I know where the capsule is and I'm looking for a fat price then you'd better get off at the next stop and go back to producing sexy movies."

He wagged a naughty finger at me, the way he did with BB on his sound stage. "Honey, why should you be divorced by your own country and still be wedded to their ideals? You are too smart for that."

"I told you, Jacques. I'm a strange kind of cat. I love people, life, love, the world. Does DOMINO want to buy me? Is that what you're trying to say?"

His face swelled with anger. "No! DOMINO has been through two bloody wars. Dictators. Anxiety. Fear. We want no more of that. We want peace throughout the world. But, apparently, you hold a key to that priceless treasure, Honey. And every peaceful agency in the universe has its eye on you."

I shrugged. "And a few *un-peaceful* agencies? Jacques, at the moment I feel like the proverbial person who has two buttons to control. One turns out the lights. The other blows up the world. But for me the room where the buttons are located is dark, and I am fumbling. And yet I can't believe I'm really that important."

He shook his head dismally. "Then why is the United States government, Interpol, DOMINO *and* MAD so interested in your activities?"

"Are they?" I questioned.

"Honey, they once held trains out of Paris for only two reasons. De Gaulle or a broken-down engine. We now have a new President and many new engines. My people also claim you faked a break out of the Interpol offices. Is this true?"

I studied him for a moment. "All right, it *was* faked, Jacques," I admitted.

"Why?"

"I can't give you the details. The plan was obvious. We threw a curve when they were expecting a fast ball."

"A curve?"

"Baseball," I said. "The kind of thing your wife threw at you at International Airfield just before we took off."

"Then you *are* working with your government."

I didn't like the way he said the words. "What difference does it make?"

He jerked his head sadly. "Only because suddenly I do not trust *you*, Honey. What can I tell my people? A government agent who is suspected of being untrustworthy is a gamble to begin with. But when she fakes an interlude with Interpol—an agency *we* do not trust—then we are frightened."

"Why don't you trust Interpol?" I demanded.

Jacques waved a hand impatiently. "It is an international police force, guided by political interests, with no national control, and with little European influence. It is a British and American creation to counteract Russian imperialism. But it won't work. It hasn't worked. Your contact today, Honey, bothers us—more than you have any idea."

If I hadn't been given the "all-clear" signal by Mark Storm I would have begun wondering again about the bombastic Frenchman. Suddenly he put his arms around me.

"I am sorry, Honey. Forgive me. I am a heat head. I do not mean half what I say."

"You are forgiven." I kissed the tip of his nose.

"Honey," Auberge stammered, "would you think it unreasonable if I asked you a favor?"

"If we're flipping for the key, we'll use my coin."

"No." He swallowed nervously. "I want you to let me—examine you medically."

"Jacques!"

"I am serious," he said. "If Towbridge is correct then you could be in grave danger."

"I have already examined myself!" I blurted.

"How thoroughly?"

"Thoroughly enough!" My eyes blazed. "Now, if you don't mind—I'm very tired."

He shrugged, turned and walked stiffly from the room. "Good night, Honey."

I sat up for a while, staring at wet, muted impressions wrought in the French night landscape. Then I made the bed, flopping over both sides of the facing seats so they joined in the center. Bad day at hard rock! Wow! The old cattle cars to Tucson had better accommodations for the cows. I stripped off my strawberry mini, bra and panties and wrapped myself in a couple of blankets. A semi-soft pillow helped cushion my head. It was going to be a long night.

Stars began to glitter through the grimy smoke-smeared window. A crazy kind of damp half-moon slithered from behind some clouds. I couldn't help thinking about the capsule. Where in God's green Earth had Arno put it? I listed the possibilities: (1) On me? Answer: no. (2) With personal belongings? Answer: no. (3) On the airplane? Answer: no. He would have told me. (4) On himself? Answer: maybe. But the autopsy said no. Then where? That infinitesimal, ridiculous object began spinning around in my head, bouncing back and forth like a ping-pong ball. Smoke obliterated the stars and moon. The can-

tankorous old train wheezed, lulled, wheezed and finally put me to sleep.

Waking was not what I expected. I thought it would be morning and I would look out upon lush, tall leafy trees, gabled towers rising along the railroad tracks, low-lying houses, green fields. The train clanking toward the Pyrenees.

But what I woke to was not that at all. It was pitch dark. I could not see a solitary thing. But what I felt was something else. A moist hand was over my mouth and another in a place I don't allow hands unless I agree to it. I thrust myself up. A hard slap flattened me. I squirmed, rolled, struggled to free myself. Suddenly he lost control of me. I kicked him in the face and he flew back against a wall of my compartment. In the dazed hostile dark I saw his shadow rise up as he flung himself again. A knife flashed through the air, piercing the blankets and almost cutting my stomach. I floundered against the compartment window, felt the chill of the glass on my shoulders, and kicked again. This time I missed and he caught my leg, bending the knee against my face. He shoved me hard on the bed and lifted the knife. A bead of light slammed through the window from a railroad track beacon and illuminated the contours of his savage face. It was Jacques Auberge. A hand on my throat. My breasts bared under his knee. The knife poised threateningly above me.

"Jacques!" I stammered, "What—?"

"Honey, we have reached the time—"

He straddled me with his legs, pinning my arms.

"Jacques?"

"*Ouï!* You have led me a long way. And I have been patient. Too patient. Too long. Where is it, Honey? The clock has run out. There are no more games, no more polite questions, no more fencing. No more kisses. No more tricks."

I stared up at his shadowed bulk. "So you staged the whole show?"

"*Naturellement*," he hissed, clawing at me. "La Bouch had been a fabulous magician and escape artist. We used one of my lay-over projection techniques to make him appear to be coming out of an invisible state at your penthouse. Actually, he had been hiding in the bedroom. When you fired and the transmission began, he stepped out into a projected slow-motion image. That was chicken blood squeezed from a plastic bag he had in his hands. He faked his jump off your terrace by landing on a ledge beneath the penthouse and crawling inside through a fire escape door."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Why? To frighten, confuse, entice you to confess. But, no. I even tried to top myself in Paris, but apparently one of the men became frightened by what you said about blowing up the tower and the lightning bolt took him, La Bouche and the other man."

"What happened at the Château?"

"Towbridge double-crossed us."

"Actually I burped up your capsule," I said.

"We wondered for a while if that might be true. But you wouldn't be on your way to Luchon if that were so, *oui*?"

"You seem to have all the answers, Jacques."

"We were doubly certain of this when Interpol stupidly picked you up. An agent of theirs even talked to me while you were gone. They hoped I'd keep an eye on you. I promised I would." He dug his knees into my stomach. "And I will keep my promise—to the end. Where is it, Honey? Where is the capsule?"

"I can't believe this," I said.

"I can't believe it either," he said sharply. "I have spent three days. I have gone through every piece of luggage, every item of clothing, even over your body, Honey. I have searched your apartment. I have not missed one inch of you—or your belongings—"

I tried to catch my breath.

"They will kill me if I do not have it when we arrive in Luchon."

"And how do I arrive?" I asked, thrusting against his ponderous bulk. "In a barrel or a basket?"

"That is up to you, *cherie*. We are only trying to do the right thing for mankind."

"Like putting us out of our misery?"

"Someone with unusual power has to be in command. The world is faltering."

I kicked, but he wouldn't give. "What's wrong with the world?" I demanded.

"The wrong people in charge. And there are too many people. We'll be so overcrowded in ten years that we shall all be dashed to pieces. Doctor Rhinau—one of the finest scientists in the world—tells us where to go."

"To hell in a wagon?"

"Contained in that capsule is Doctor Berne's total theory of atomic principles. Do you have *any* conception what you are in possession of?"

I couldn't answer.

"The secret of man's very existence! Life, death, dimensional properties. Invisibility—as Berne discovered—is only the angle to which you turn the atoms. Like looking at a mirror from its oblique edge." His voice was a seething cauldron. "Berne's formula can stop hurricanes, put man on distant planets in a matter of seconds, totally eliminate harmful bacterial cultures, even part seas!"

"Amazing," I managed. "You might even put *God* out of business."

"That capsule contains the formulas and data we need to control the entire universe. The micronized bomb is only one of the many atomic secrets discovered by Berne." His voice became a brittle scythe. "But all of this immense wonderment was passed on to you, Honey. Now! *Once—and for all—where?*"

"Would you believe, I actually don't know."

"Honey," he moaned. "I don't want to kill you. But you have forced us into the last tiny minute corner. You can still be a part of the new era, Honey, if you tell me where that capsule is."

"I can't—"

"Imagine, Honey, what it might be like to solve the entire mystery of man's existence. Space, time, the whole ball of wax. We own an island that doesn't even exist! An island worth a million times more than the crown jewels!"

"I don't have the capsule!"

He moaned lowly. "Honey, you disappoint me." He brought the knife close to my throat. So near I could feel its chillness.

"Jacques!"

He brought his knee up tight between my legs. "They gave me my final orders a short time ago. I have until midnight. It is five minutes before that hour." He rammed himself hard against me. "Where, Honey?"

I winced from the pain. "I don't know."

The knife touched my throat, the edge cutting lightly, poised in his rigid fist.

"One last chance, Honey!" he snarled. "Where?"

Another shadow loomed in the compartment doorway. Huge. Grotesque. The knife was torn from Auberge's hand with a deft quick movement keeping it from cutting any deeper into my neck. The weapon hurled against a wall, the blade sinking into the old polished wood, handle quivering. Auberge whirled and leaped on the intruder, flying across the compartment like an enraged tiger. I sat up, shivering from fear and from the night air that touched my naked body. The two men toppled to the floor at the end of the bed. I could hear awesome impacts of fists striking bone, flesh, groans, thrashing of legs. Auberge crashed against the compartment door, sprang to his feet and kicked wildly at the other downed figure. Blood spurted in the air.

Despite the furious attack, the intruder managed to pull himself up and grab Auberge by the throat. The film producer kicked again and his assailant fell back, hands clutching his stomach. Auberge reached for the knife, loosened it from the wall and spun around. But it was too late. He was suddenly lifted into the air, as he flailed helplessly with the weapon and hurtled across the compartment.

I flattened on the bed.

Auberge sailed over my head and struck the window with such an explosive impact he disappeared in a cloud of jagged glitter that seemed to rend his image into impossible shreds.

# 11

Screaming!

The train's whistle, a contorted wail, like the cry of a thousand banshees, swallowed Auberge's jigsaw puzzle of flesh and sound as the engine dragged its thundering cars into a mountain tunnel.

Dark talons laden with the odor of smoke clawed over the compartment, forcing its fumes through the smashed window and choking me as I lay under fragments of glass on the bed.

*Clickety-clack*, the wheels clanked loudly in the tunnel. I felt the harsh grip of my benefactor's hands on my arms. He lifted me up, pulling my nude body tight to him in the grinding darkness.

"*Señorita West!*" he growled in my ear. "About ten kilometers—on the other side of the tunnel—is Tours. There is an automobile waiting for us. Can you be ready?" His Spanish accent was guttural and hard to understand.

Icy wind cut savagely into my back as we broke out of the tunnel.

His face glinted outlines of shadowed angles cast from a moonlit sky. "*Señor Storm* says the plan has been changed. *Señor Batavia* will be at the Hotel La Mer Plage on Mont-Saint-Michel." He had a thick black mustache which swept to the corners of his full mouth. "I shall wait for you outside."

He vanished through the compartment door. I slipped into my strawberry dress and tossed a coat

around my shoulders. The train was already approaching the station at Tours, crossing over a train bridge above the Loire River, and passing by the stately Cathedral Sain-Gatien. The old clock atop the city's tower was just striking midnight when the stocky Spaniard and I stepped from the car into the faded depot lights. He carried my suitcases under his ponderous arms.

It was not until we had walked down a ramp and into the station's antiquated caverns that I finally got a clear look at his face. He had straight black hair, as dark as sin, and a demonically boyish smile to go with it. He was quite bronzed, with immense brown eyes that were also full of the devil. He flashed a set of white teeth and said, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Juan Madrid Sebastian Alvarez Sandoval Sanchez."

There were a few deep cuts on his face from his struggle with Jacques Auberge and they added to his rugged features. He wore a sleeved dark turtle-neck shirt, and ribbed button-front sweater, tight-fitting black pants and shoes on his six-five frame. He nibbled embarrassedly at his mustache as he found me studying him so minutely, and he turned away, gesturing at the station's front doors and the street beyond.

"Follow me, please, *señorita*."

He led me to a racy red XKE Jaguar with white stripes parked outside the station. The car and I matched. Sanchez unlocked the trunk, neatly tucked away my luggage and let me inside. It began raining again as he turned the Jag toward Le Mans. We were on the outskirts of Tours, headlights winking eerily past the vast wet hedgerows, before the handsome Spaniard offered any explanation.

"I am with Interpol," he said casually.

"You work for them full-time?"

"No." He smiled slyly. "I am a matador. I live in San Sebastian. I fight most of my corridas in Madrid."

"That was some corrida you fought on the train."

His forehead ridged uphappily. "He was much stronger than he appeared. I meant to throw him against the wall, but I missed. I am sorry."

"So am I," I said. "Not for his sake, but for ours. Was he actually Jacques Auberge?"

"Sí," Sanchez said. "That is what tossed Interpol, like the bull. He became inflamed with international politics. Rabid. Like a crazed dog. But he was a well-liked man. Respected in France and Spain. We had no reason to believe his allegiance was still not with DOMINO, and the free world."

"Then what prompted Interpol to follow me?"

He glanced at me, the lights of the dashboard reflected in his large eyes. "You were not being followed. It was what you call—a fluke? I was only a passenger on the train. I had spent a few days in Paris and was returning to San Sabastian. My car had been left at the Tours station by a friend who was attending the Le Mans racing trials." He studied the wet road ahead. "At Chartres, while the train took on passengers, I routinely called Interpol and was immediately connected with *Señor* Storm. He asked me to give you and Auberge a very important message. That *Señor* Batavia was going to La Mer Plage on Mont-Saint-Michel instead of Luchon. I was ordered to drive you both there."

"Oh, wow," I said. "*This* is hard to believe."

"Sí. I spent several hours trying to locate you on the train. When I finally did, Auberge had a knife to your throat. So—"

Suddenly I was deeply suspicious. "Then why didn't you call *Señor* Storm at the Tours train station and inform him what had happened?"

He didn't answer for a moment. The countryside became more remote, desolate, dark. The XKE screeched around a curve, skidding perilously. Finally, he said,

"There is a car following us. Since we left the station. I did not want to alarm you then, but several people were observing us as we walked from the train."

I glanced around. The dual headlights of another car darted along the road behind us in the stormy darkness, moving as swiftly as we were and seemingly gaining as Sanchez plied the narrow, twisting two-lane stretch of asphalt.

I snapped my fingers. "I'll bet Auberge got off the train at Chartres also. He must have received the same message about Batavia. He said midnight was the final deadline. That was our arrival time in Tours."

Sanchez floored the accelerator, sending the Jag into a roaring spurt down the hilly roadway. "These people—then they must have been waiting for Auberge—and possibly for you. The knife could have been—a bull without horns. To frighten you."

I felt the tiny slash mark on my throat. "This bull *had* horns. How far to Le Mans?"

"Several kilometers," he said, fighting the steering wheel. "On a dry road I could outdistance them easily, but this car is hard to handle on a wet track."

We careened over another hill, plunging off the road as a sudden curve brought the Spaniard hard on the brakes and we skidded around a grove of low-lying trees and back onto the asphalt.

Sanchez exhaled angrily. "They have a heavier car and they are gaining. I am not familiar with this road and the rain is making it almost impossible. If they do not catch us before reaching Le Mans we may be climbing the trees."

I kept my eyes on the beads of light. The husky Spaniard was correct. They were gaining. Something thumped hard beneath my seat. Then the rear window splintered into a spiderweb of jagged glass as a bullet rammed into the roof above our heads.

"They're shooting at us," I said.

He nodded despairingly. "We have a full load of petrol. If they hit our tanks we may blow like a bomb." He tore at the wheel, trying to keep us on the road. "And if we do not blow they will have us anyway. Slowed like a bull with the swords in his mount. They will pick us off one by one."

Suddenly I caught the harsh, cloying odor of gasoline. "Smell that?" I hurled.

*Sí.* He glanced at the instrument panel. "They must have opened us badly. The indicator is dropping very fast."

I studied the road ahead. There was a long straight stretch out in front of us. "I've got an idea," I said. "It just might work. Is there a cigarette lighter in this car?"

*¡Sí!* he growled. "But what is that going to do?" "Light it!"

He followed my instructions as I tore off my coat. Then I rolled up a magazine and knocked out the fragmented window. He handed me the gleaming, fiery bead enclosed in its metal container. I touched this to the silk inner lining of my coat and the fabric ignited swiftly into long, tapering tongues of flame. I held on just long enough for the coat to swell into a monstrous orange ball, then I hurled the garment over the trunk of the Jag and down onto the road behind us. The asphalt seemed to explode in a reddish burst. The flaming gasoline, erratically racing along the surface of the rain water, streaked back at the oncoming jets of light. They wavered, careened and suddenly plunged off the road in swaying, uncontrollable bouncing jolts. A stream of fire spumed up through the night, then another. A hard explosive pyre of orange followed like the launching of a dozen sky-rockets and then the plume of a massive detonation filled the sky behind us. Juan Sanchez turned his head and glanced around. When he looked back at the road, the rain had stopped and trees alongside were gleaming

in a patch of moonlight. He slowed the Jag and exhaled lowly.

"Where did you learn that trick?" he said.

"From Joan of Arc," I said quietly, tossing a blanket around my chilled shoulders and legs. "Only this time the *bad guys* got it."

We limped into Le Mans a short time later. Its ancient cathedral loomed in the misty night. We found an all-night garage on the north side of town, near the famed racetrack, and while the gas tank was being repaired, Juan Sanchez made a telephone call. After he talked for a few minutes he turned the receiver over to me. Mark Storm was on the other end.

He grunted cheerily, although it was after two o'clock in the morning. "Honey, I understand from Juan that you have been trying to blow up the *rest* of France. Keep up the good work."

"Mark, don't you think it is about time I know what you know?"

"Honey, gal, this is not a picnic. If it were I'd have lunch in a tree."

"So would I. But the ants would still get to me. What do you have on Batavia? And how did you find out he was going to Mont-Saint-Michel?"

Mark exhaled deeply, then said, "We do have a few things going for us."

"Damn few," I said angrily. "MAD smelled out your meeting with me in Paris. *And* was waiting in Tours. You thoroughly lucked this one out."

"I agree," Mark said. "We haven't played this too cleverly. We trusted Auberge."

I glanced around at the handsome Spaniard, who was out of earshot, standing near his raised Jag. "Can you trust Sanchez?"

Mark laughed lowly. "I hope so. I've been told we might not be able to trust you."

"That's a sick sickie, *Señor Storm!*"

His voice became very grave. "Honey, in today's climate you can't even trust yourself. What these people did to Auberge, God only knows. I would have trusted this man with my right arm four weeks ago. They are apparently experimenting with chemicals and scientific materials never tried before. You've seen some of it with your own eyes. If I were in your boots I'd get out. Fast."

"What about your boots, Mark?"

He hesitated, then said, "I'd go to Mont-Saint-Michel and lock horns with Batavia."

"Who is Batavia, Mark?"

"I have a hunch he's Ludwig Rhinau."

"That's what I figured."

"As you probably know Rhinau worked closely with Berne on the micronized bomb. But Berne obviously kept other technical secrets to himself. Otherwise they wouldn't have been after Arno and you so tenaciously."

"But I don't have the capsule, Mark."

"Whether you do or you don't won't necessarily keep you alive. If you walked out now they'd still hunt you down to the ends of the earth. You might as well climb right out on that limb you got yourself on. We'll do everything we can to catch you."

"And if you miss?"

"Like your father in that blind alley, baby, you'll never know how it feels if we don't."

"Thanks a bunch."

"The important thing is to save the tree."

I looked impassively across at some chill raindrops sliding down the half-open garage door, and I murmured into the receiver, "Saint-Michel, Sainte-Catherine—"

"What?" Mark demanded.

"—Rouen, Rouen, are you to be—"

He groaned. "Honey, have you flipped?"

“—My tomb; is it here, that I shall die?”

“Okay, Saint Joan, I get the message. Juan Sanchez will stay with you all the way.”

“Hey, Mark, where do old elephants really go?”

# 12

Spectacular.

A shrine. A pinnacle of rock rising majestically above the sea, capped by a huge Gothic abbey founded in the days of Richard I, Duke of Normandy, more than a thousand years ago.

From the outskirts of Avranches, where General Patton launched his most murderous strikes against the Nazis, the cathedral tower seems to jut right out of the marshy waters like a sword carried by a Norman soldier centuries before Adolf Hitler was ever born.

It was dawn. A faint swash of pastel on the Normandy countryside, a scattering of pale blue across the inlet that surrounds the historic monument and the old town that rings its conical heights. The tide was extremely low and the causeway leading to Mont-Saint-Michel gleamed like a rope of flaming stones. We drove out and parked beneath the stalwart walls. Once this had been partially an island, where every twelve hours the sea moved in silently over the sandy lowlands. Now the causeway was elevated high enough to escape the tides, and tourists flocked there. But this particular morning in Early Spring there were few cars, no people and it seemed returned to its medieval heritage. Huge white gulls wheeled in the sky, screeching, sweeping above the towering old Abbey like happy angels taking flight.

Juan Sanchez walked with me up the steps to the town. He had driven most of the night and was des-

perately tired. So was I. The narrow, winding uphill street led us to Mère Poulard's restaurant, famed for its hospitality as well as its *omelettes*. They were just opening for the day and the smell of hot bakery goods wafted from the kitchen.

We were halfway through breakfast before either one of us could utter a word.

"Have you ever been to the Mont?" Juan asked.

I nodded. "When I was a little girl. My father brought me here from America, shortly after my mother died. I can remember sitting in this restaurant, probably at this very same table. It hasn't changed one iota."

"The town has, though. It has become overpublicized and sadly commercialized." He glanced around. "What is our next move?"

"We could check into La Mer Plage as man and wife, but that might scare them away. Better if we play it straight. I'll sign under my own name and try and get something on the first floor facing the sea. You follow and ask for the same type accommodations."

He flashed that adorable grin. "I like your first idea better."

I touched up my lipstick, patted his cheek and started for the street. "Patience, matador."

Being the tail end of the slack season, they were able to fill my request. I got exactly what I wanted. La Mer Plage was right on the sand and partially surrounded by water when the tide came in. My room had a balcony above the beach. It brought back more memories from my childhood.

About a half hour after I'd checked in, Juan Sanchez appeared with my luggage and a broad grin on his bronzed face.

"I have the room next to yours," he said, licking his lips. "We have connecting doors."

"That sounds familiar," I said drily. "When things get slow we can play ring around the bullfighter."

He chuckled lowly. "Honey, I think you put the kid on me. But I like it."

I gazed out the balcony doors at the glistening water far out on the flat, unmoved English Channel. Sunlight flickered on its surface, making it sparkle like a bed of jewels. It reminded me of the comment Jacques Auberge had made on the train about an island that didn't even exist "worth a million times more than the crown jewels of England!" Something clicked in my head. Wait a minute! What had Towbridge said about Berne testing out his invisibility formula? Wasn't it: "He had already tried out the invisibility principle in an ultra-sophisticated laboratory off the coast of Normandy"? I studied the far-distant horizon. Off the coast of Normandy! An island that doesn't exist!

I whirled on the muscular matador. "Juan could we rent a boat?"

"What kind of boat?"

"Something fast."

"My friend has a small cruiser anchored at Saint Malo."

"How far is that?"

Sanchez shrugged. "A few kilometers. I even have a key to the boat."

"Juan, when I was here many years ago my father took me out on a large sailing vessel. We toured the Channel Islands and the coastline of Normandy. Along the way he pointed out an island that wasn't an island, except for a few hours a day. The tides cover it most of the time and so does a thick blanket of fog."

Sanchez nodded. "That is beyond Saint Malo. Between there and Ile de Jersey. Quite a long way out and *mu*y dangerous. No boats go near there. It is like the Sargasso Sea. Death for trespassers."

"Doesn't anyone go there?"

"No. There is a patrol boat to warn people away."

"Patrol boat?"

"Sí. About a year ago it began stopping tourists—like your father—so that they do not flounder on the sand bars. Some say an old British dowager bought the area, sight unseen, and that now she is saddled with protecting the rights of other citizens."

I slipped on a polka-dotted captain's hat, a bikini bathing suit and a heavy coat. "Let's go take a look. Are you game?"

He glanced at his watch. "Honey, it will take us all day—and most of the night. What about—?"

"They're looking for me. We're looking for them." I winked. "Maybe we'll *find them* first."

"Qui?"

I took his arm. "How many cabins aboard that cruiser?"

"Two."

"Like here. Connecting doors?"

He ruffled fingers through his dark hair, shaking his head. "No. No doors."

I guided him out of my room and locked the door. "See, you're already ahead of the game. Come on!"

We reached the docks at St. Malo an hour later. The sky was apple-pie bright now, but there was a hint of a new storm gnarled distantly in the morning sky. Juan's friend had a sparkling white Portuguese-made sixty-footer with a flying bridge, a stocked galley and even a small dining room. The handsome Spaniard argued about making the trip, gesturing at the dark horizon, finally angrily casting off lines and guiding us out of the harbor. A red flag whipped in the rising breeze as we passed the last point of land. Juan indicated with a hand to his throat that the red banner was a warning. I had checked at a shore station before we left. The prediction was for extreme low tide around sundown, high winds and rain. I didn't bother to tell Juan. He would have throttled me.

A light downpour struck late in the afternoon and the Channel waters ahead of us began to resemble a giant dark washboard. An hour of sharp buffeting ensued until Juan was on the verge of turning back, when a crazy thing happened. The water flattened and we found ourselves in some sort of huge rain-pelted lagoon. Even the wind died and the air felt almost warm.

Juan swore in Spanish. He hurriedly checked his charts. Then said, "We must be near the sand bars. Much nearer than I thought. We can see nothing in this kind of weather. We must return, Honey. This is strange. Like the eye of a hurricane."

A faint distant glow pierced through the curtain of rain. Winking, fading and appearing again.

"What's that?" I demanded.

Juan wiped at his eyelids. "Possibly it is the patrol boat—or a warning light on one of the banks. What difference does it make?"

"Plenty," I looked at him sharply. "Head straight for it."

"Honey, you are mad. My friend would kill me if I wrecked his boat. We are going about."

He whirled the wheel. The cruiser lurched, turned and suddenly rolled perilously. I was thrown hard against the rear bulkhead and wound up on the deck as the boat stopped abruptly, listing hard to the port side. The engines choked, sputtering angrily like swimmers floundering in deep water, and then coughed out a baleful sigh and died. We were tilted at a sharp 45-degree angle and with the engines stilled the rain drummed a fierce cadence on the cruiser's hull. Juan pulled himself off the wheel and vaulted out onto the deck. I could hear him fumbling for exterior illumination.

"Don't turn on any more lights!" I yelled, picking myself up.

"*Quoi?*" he questioned distantly.

I staggered to the cruiser's instrument panel and flicked out all our running lights. The Spaniard scrambled inside and grabbed me savagely with his huge hands.

"We are on a sandbar, Honey!"

I placed quieting fingers on his mouth. "Jump over and check our position. If we're safe we'll stay here until the tide floats us loose. Can you drop a forward anchor?"

"Honey!" he protested.

"Maybe I'm crazy," I said lowly. "If I am, I'll explain later. Please check our position."

He struggled momentarily, then shrugged under my urging and climbed out onto the deck. After a moment, I could hear him splashing in the water. He returned shortly and said, "We are not too deep in the sand. Safe for now. I have dropped anchor. But—"

I studied the distant light through the darkened pilot's window. It continued to wink on and off in the growing night rain.

"Are you a good swimmer?" I asked.

"Sí. But, Honey—"

"How far is that light, would you estimate?"

He glanced around. "Half a kilometer. Maybe a little more."

I stripped quickly to my bikini. He grudgingly followed suit, peeling off his shirt, pants and shoes. We climbed up to the deck and slipped over the side, wading across the sandbar and into warm, rain-stipled water beyond. The tide was very low and we practically walked from one sand bar to another, swimming at brief intervals as we zeroed in on the elusive light. Juan led the way, now seemingly sensing what we were after.

We were only a few yards from the weird beacon when we struck a definite rise in the sandy area. This particular bar seemed capped by the winking amber

illumination. We crawled toward it, our bellies squirming through slimy fauna that hugged the wet sand.

Suddenly Juan stopped abruptly, holding me back with his hands.

"What's the matter?" I whispered.

"There is a metal railing here." He fumbled around. "With deep notches. Feels like ribbed steel."

Ahead of us and to the right the light flicked on and off brightly. I crawled past Juan until I was almost beneath it. Looking up I felt a queasy stir in my stomach. The beacon seemed to be encased in a giant plastic bubble about the size of an average car. There were bucket seats inside bolted to a flat metal floor. The entire mechanism, whatever it was, appeared to be hooked to two ribbing railings that were spaced about ten feet apart. Juan touched my back and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"What is it, Honey?" he asked softly, glaring up at the strange monstrosity.

"God only knows," I whispered. "If I didn't know better I'd think monsters had landed from a foreign planet."

"It looks like a modern elevator car," Juan said. "The tracks go down into the water. Is this possible?"

I shook my head, staring up at the unbelievable contraption. "I think we've seen enough. Let's go!"

The rain became more intense as we slithered back down the sandy knoll. Suddenly a cry stopped us.

"Hugo!"

The voice stabbed through the dark like a gun shot.

"*Ouí!*"

"Have you seen any lights?"

"No!" the other voice yelled. "The radar must be fouled by the storm!"

"Either that or if it was a boat—it sank," returned the first man. "I am drenched to the skin. We should go back."

The footsteps, slogging through wet sand, came nearer. Juan's hands gripped me tightly.

The second man snarled. "*She* will be very angry."

"What can we do?" the other answered. "There is nothing to indicate a boat was even near here. It could have been a whale or a large shark. Nothing human has been observed."

Their footsteps came so close, I could see the shadow of one man. He answered, "*Ouí*. I will bear you out, Hans."

The crunch of their movements bore directly toward us, then veered as they headed in the direction of the glass cubicle. Sand flicked in my face. After a moment, we heard the two men climb into the strange machine and then, with a click and a soft whirl, the winking light slowly faded into the rainy darkness. When there was no more sound, except the patter of raindrops, Juan leaped up. He ran across the sand.

When he came back, he lifted me up and said, "The tracks are gone, too!"

"Figures," I said.

Juan pulled me against him. "Honey—"

I felt his massive hairy chest, his huge arms, his powerful legs. Then I realized another amazing thing. He was stark naked.

I looked up at him in the steady downpour. "Easy, baby, they're liable to pick *you* up on radar."

After reaching port, we stopped at a small cafe in Cancole. Juan ordered two black coffees. They were so hot all we could do was stare at the steam rising from the ornate cups. The rain had followed us all the way to shore. Now it pattered harshly on the roof. Through the windows we could see the shore below lit like tiny Christmas trees.

Juan finally said guardedly, "Honey, I am twenty-seven—old enough to have fought the best bulls. I have felt and tasted blood—even my own." His hands

gestured awkwardly. "But that—that thing out there. I have never seen or dreamt of such a thing in my wildest dreams."

"Stick with me, *Señor Sanchez*, and you may see your wildest nightmares come true."

He sipped at his cup. "I can believe that. What was it, Honey?"

"Alice-in-Wonderland's Looking Glass."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Alice-in—?"

"A fairy tale, Juan. Except nowadays fairy tales often come true."

He groaned lowly. "Like a man from Mars or the Lochness Monster?" The handsome Spaniard shook his head. "Honey, I have been told that a woman could rule the world. But I say there is no woman who can do this."

"Juan, you forget Cleopatra, Queen Anne and Queen Elizabeth. There have been women who almost possessed the world. Given another time and place—they might have."

He stared at me, then said, "If she is real, who could she be? The devil's own daughter?"

"Everything I've learned about her indicates she is French, fairly young and with an immense power. Power enough to destroy mankind."

Juan Sanchez blurted angrily, "I refuse to believe it!"

I shrugged. "How many millions refused to believe Hitler was angling to rule the world? Or that Mussolini was nothing more than a cardboard Italian mouthing a bunch of gibberish?"

The husky Spaniard got up. "We had better call *Señor Storm*."

I agreed. Juan phoned, but the hectic weather had disrupted the telephone lines from here to Paris. I suggested we place the call again from La Mer Plage.

We reached Mont-Saint-Michel long after midnight. The rain had softened into a bitter mist. We walked

into the hotel cautiously. There was no one at the desk. Juan plucked our keys from their respective boxes and we mounted the steps. I should have known better. Juan followed me into my room, switching on the light. The balcony door was open. My suitcases were thrown on the floor. Clothes strewn about the room.

Juan swore, stepped around me and started toward the balcony. I put my hands up, but it was too late. A gun butt struck him behind the right ear and he toppled to the floor. He got up slowly.

Several men with guns seemed to emerge out of the woodwork. One in particular stood out. He had a broad grin and a pathetically sad stare behind his smoky glasses.

"You'll never learn, Honey," Lance Towbridge said. "We could blow up the Taj Mahal, but you'd still be the same bloody beautiful bombshell walking off into the sunset." He grimaced. "Well, sweetheart, there *ain't* going to be *no more* sunsets for you."

# 13

Weird.

Lance Towbridge was alive and well and making noises like a superspy again. I could only hope he was still working for our side.

"Who's that?" Towbridge demanded, gesturing at Juan Sanchez.

"King Kong," I said.

"He looks more like a large version of the Spanish Fly." Towbridge snickered. "At what bar did you pick him up?"

"A sandbar off Saint Malo!"

The British journalist belched. "You bloody idiots! You are the ones!"

I added sarcastically, "The drinks were watered down, so we left."

Towbridge seized my arm and snarled at his confederates to keep Sanchez covered. He hauled me out onto the balcony, out of earshot of the others, and placed his 9 mm. Luger under my chin.

"You're overplaying your part," I said. "The director's liable to fire you."

"Act frightened, dammit!" he spat lowly. "Did you find the capsule?"

"No!"

"You're lying, Honey. You can tell me. I'm your friend."

"So was Auberge. He almost cut my throat."

"Where is Auberge?" the Englishman demanded.

"He was in a hurry to get off a train. Mistook a window for a door."

The Luger's muzzle jammed against my throat. "My God! She'll kill us all."

"Lance, I have a strange feeling you're *not* fooling."

His eyes glazed behind the glasses. "Honey, Arno gave you that capsule at Cap d'Antibes. She has been patient with you. Utterly and unbelievably patient. But now there is no more tomorrow."

I sagged against the balcony railing. "So you are with them."

He nodded sadly. "Now. But not before. I've learned, Honey. Living is of far more value than dying. When I helped you at Château Gaillard I tried to impress you with that fact. But you refused to take my advice. I had a hard time lying my way out of what happened there."

"So, where do we go from here, Lance?"

"Honey, you hold the trump card, but she has all the aces. If you don't come up with the capsule she'll throw the bloody deck at you."

I braced myself solidly on the railing and kicked Towbridge hard in the stomach. He toppled to the deck, a distorted cry slithering from his mouth. His gun spun across the wet surface and banged against the door. The men inside whirled, two of them coming after me. I caught one of them full in the face with a heel. He dropped, screaming, to his knees. The other man struck a glancing blow on my cheek and the force of his fist hurled me over the railing. For a brief moment I was half-conscious, spinning like a wounded spider, legs thrashing helplessly, until I hit shallow water. The chill impact rattled every bone in my body. I floundered like a mackerel on the end of a hook, and then sank under the surface. A bullet, slowed by the water, skidded across my scalp. I lifted my head, took a long gasp of air and went under again. Once I

felt the sandy bottom, I kicked off my shoes and tried to propel myself away from where I had fallen. The water felt impossibly heavy. Like a liquid wall. Another bullet grazed past my shoulder. I recoiled. The curtain seemed to suddenly part and I was swimming. Then running, half in and half out of tidal pools, on my knees, feet, stumbling, staggering badly. I fell on the sand, and dragged myself several yards, clawing my way. Rain hammered down. The night became a huge liquid bubble, dragging me into its depths, stifling the air, the light. I choked, reaching for help, my fingers extended, groping, pleading, reaching out desperately—

“Easy, baby, easy!”

The voice seemed to explode out of a long dark tunnel. Writhing. Like the tentacles of an impossibly huge octopus.

“Juan?” I demanded.

“Juan?” the voice questioned.

A face appeared above me, struggling up out of a sea of dark strands. I felt my fingers running along unshaven contours. Slowly, very hazily, the features came into focus.

“I love you,” I whispered faintly.

“I love you, too, baby,” the voice answered. “For a sea nymph you really come on strong.”

I sat up. The bow of a sleek sailing vessel lunged into view. Above me a huge white sail buffeted laboriously, belled out against a bright blue sky. A light breeze touched my face. A dark-haired man in white dungarees sat at my side, faint flecks of gray at his temples, a wry smile on his mouth. He was in his late fifties.

“Where—where am I?” I asked. There was a blanket over me. I sagged back and felt the hard pitch of the ocean vessel as it rose and fell on the wind-blown water.

After a non-committal glance down at me, the man looked out across the water. “By all calculations you

are about twenty miles off the English coast south of Southampton. Who are you and where did you come from?"

"I—I don't know," I said dazedly.

"Lady, I just plucked you off a rubber life raft. You were lying face up—and naked as a jaybird. I thought you were dead."

"English coast?" I asked, sitting up again. "England?"

"You say it like it sounds foreign to you. Are you an American?"

"I—I think so," I said blindly, groping through an intense haze that held me.

"You think so?"

He quickly introduced himself. Tod Mitchell, American aircraft manufacturer, bachelor, vacationing, in Europe. He had that rugged Clark Gable look, a dimpled smile, thick brows and twinkly eyes. "Look, baby," he asked, "have you got amnesia or something?"

"I hope not," I said, rubbing my forehead.

"Well, could you have been on a boat that sank, or an airplane that crashed?"

"Possibly," I stammered. "The only vision that comes to mind is being on an elevator."

"An elevator? Out in the middle of the sea?"

I exhaled lowly. "An elevator that goes down—into the water."

He shook his head. "I've heard of staircases to heaven—but—"

"I'm serious," I persisted.

He said obstinately, "Young lady, either you're putting me on or you're a nude Channel swimmer looking for some pretty wild publicity."

"Do you have a map of this area?" I asked.

"Of course." He got up, then gestured at a pile of clothes near my feet. "There's a pair of dungarees and a shirt that belong to a girl friend of mine. They look about your size. I'll be back in a moment."

He disappeared down a hatch and left me just enough time to scramble into the outfit before popping up again. I noticed the inside of my right elbow was darkly bruised. He bent down and indicated our position on a map showing the southern portions of England, the English Channel and the northern parts of France.

"We are here," he said, tracing a fingertip to a spot northwest of the Channel Islands. "About midway between Portsmouth and Cherbourg. Now does any of this ring any bells?"

"No." I examined the map carefully.

A sailor in a white uniform brought me a sandwich and a cup of hot soup. I sipped and nibbled silently while my eyes drifted down the Normandy coast. "Wait a minute," I whispered thoughtfully.

"What?" Mitchell asked.

"Mont-Saint-Michel—"

"A huge old abbey situated on a craggy hill above the sea," he said. "A lot of creaky doors and musty staircases, but no elevators."

I pursed my lips, glancing at him. "Could you take me there?"

"Now I know you're crazy."

"Why?"

"The water's extremely shallow in that area. The fin alone on this sailboat is fourteen feet. We'd hook on a sandbar as sure as spit."

Buttons clicked on in my head. "Sandbar," I repeated. "That rings a bell!"

Mitchell nodded. "At least, we're making some headway." He checked off what I had recalled up to now. "Juan, elevator, Mont-Saint-Michel, sandbar. Who's Juan?"

"I—I don't remember."

"You said you loved him."

"I don't think I really meant that," I admitted rue-

fully. "He has something to do with the other memories, but I just can't put them together."

After a moment Mitchell grimaced, then said, "Okay! We have plenty of food and water on board, and I have no particular plans. So we'll go past the Channel Islands toward the abbey and see if you recall anything more. I picked you up, so I guess I'm stuck with you." He suddenly grinned. "Anyway, maybe you really are a sea nymph and that elevator of yours leads to the lost city of Atlantis—and tons of gold!"

Suddenly his eyes took on a glaze of inscrutable shock, staring over my shoulder toward the horizon. His mouth dropped open into a twisted crack of disbelief.

I whirled.

Behind the sloop's stern, about three miles away, the sea had given birth to an immense shaft of light that ravenously expanded over the surface into a huge greenish-white bubble. Then the skin burst and a rumbling explosion ripped across the English Channel. A small, whirling mushroom blossomed A-bomb fashion out over the water.

"Holy catfish!" Mitchell yelled, grabbing a pair of binoculars.

The sea rolled under the sailboat. A sailor at the helm nearly fell overboard. The cloud rose several hundred feet and then slowly disintegrated.

Finally Mitchell lowered the glasses and looked at me with a helpless inquiring glare.

"What was that?" I asked.

He stared back at the distant wisps of smoke and said faintly, "It was the life raft I found you on—"

A sharp breeze rode us past the Channel Islands. The huge mainsail belled and snapping briskly. I sat out on deck while Mitchell took a turn at the wheel. For a long while we were too dazed to talk about the

bomb explosion. Finally the conversation centered on it after he mentioned he lived in Seattle near his aircraft factory.

"You're a long way from home," I said.

"Not as far as you would have been if that bomb had gone off earlier. Somebody wants to kill you bad, baby, Real bad. Who?"

I shook my head, still unable to remember.

"Juan?" Mitchell demanded.

"No."

He grasped the sloop's wheel tenaciously, wind whipping his hair. "What exactly does Mont-Saint-Michel mean to you?"

"I—I went there looking for someone."

"Who?"

"A—a doctor."

"Were you ill?"

I rubbed clumsily at my eyes. "I—I don't believe so."

"Try and remember!"

I looked around wildly. "I am!" Then another light turned on in my mind. "Wait a minute! Doctor—Doctor Rhinau!"

Mitchell blinked into the salt spray coming off the bow. "Doctor Ludwig Rhinau, the Noble Prize-winning chemist?"

"That's the one. The elevator—and Doctor Rhinau—there is a connection."

"Are *you* a chemist?"

"No."

"A scientist?"

Another spurt of recall surged through me. "Rhinau belongs to a group called Mord Aterrorizar Dominar."

He stated with obvious candor. "I take it that's not the name of a Sunday school choir. Nor do they make doughnuts on the side for the needy."

"They make bombs," I said.

Mitchell grunted, a flash of anger in his eyes. "Now

we're getting somewhere. You're obviously not on very good speaking terms with these people. Is it coming back?" He studied my face.

"I—I think so. As near as I can recall Rhinau and a Doctor Berne used their atomic theories to create miniature hydrogen bombs."

"How miniature?" Mitchell blurted, swinging the sloop's wheel. The afternoon had faded now into ominous twilight, a stormy dark pallor growing again in the western Channel skies.

"The size of a vitamin capsule."

He groaned, then said in a brittle voice. "You mean that thing back there was a bomb *that* small—? Oh, my God!"

It all came back in a blinding flash—like the bomb. The trip to Paris with Jacques Auberge, the lightning bolt at the top of the Eiffel Tower, the dynamic explosion at the old battlement in Normandy, the death of Auberge aboard the train, and the ensuing car chase and fire, plus the discovery of the mid-Channel elevator. After that things became hazy again. I could remember being knocked over the balcony railing of my apartment at La Mer Plage. But how I wound up stark naked on a life raft with a ticking bomb was something else.

The glare of a searchlight caught our faces, searing out of the growing night like a blinding orange knife. The roar of a fairly large boat's engines sputtered distantly as the craft maneuvered off our starboard side.

A husky voice, magnified by a bull horn, demanded in French that Tod Mitchell reveal his boat's home port.

"Southampton, England!" Mitchell returned.

"Ahoy!" came the answer. "You are in a restricted area, both dangerous and private! Bring yourself around and either return on the same course or bypass by way of the Islands! Is that clear?"

Mitchell cupped hands to his mouth to shout his

reply, when I caught his arms. "These are some of the people!"

"What people?" he demanded huskily.

"The ones who planted the bomb!"

The aircraft manufacturer studied me in the glaring light, his boat rocking gently in the now fairly calm waters. "Are you serious?"

"Almost total recall," I said. "My name's Honey West. I'm an American agent for the CIA. Tell them, okay, you'll follow their orders."

Mitchell relayed the message and brought the sloop around. "Now what?"

"Head for the nearest port. They might have recognized me on deck. Is there a radio aboard?"

"Of course."

"We'll have to take a chance they don't pick it up. I must get a message to *Monsieur* M. Storm of Paris Interpol. Perhaps a lighthouse station in the area could relay the message."

Heading back into the wind increased the sloop's pitch and we were being bounced around heavily by the time Tod Mitchell got in contact with the nearest land station. There was considerable static and the relay extremely poor. On top of this, rain began to pitch down hard making the station's answer almost a blur.

The response was coming in from Cherbourg, but as Mitchell put it, "If we can't hear them, how in hell can they hear us?"

The sky began kicking up its heels, jousting and feinting at us with barbs of lightning and heavy thunder. One shot practically knocked us out of the water. A crew member gave us a report a moment later.

"It was a cannon sir," the sailor reported. "That boat we encountered earlier is following us. The shell struck our stern above the waterline, and we're shipping water from the high waves."

Another hard impact jarred Mitchell's sloop, sending us reeling against a bulkhead.

"They must have recognized me—or picked up our message," I said. "They're going to sink us!"

"The hell they are!" Mitchell roared. "Jergens, break out that case of hand grenades we brought along for emergencies."

A harsh voice, riddled by static, crashed through Mitchell's radio speaker. "Ahoy, Southampton, drop your sail and lay to or we'll blow you out of the water. Repeat—"

Tod Mitchell grabbed the mike. "This is Southampton. We read you and are following orders, over." He repeated the message, then snapped off the power switch and gestured at the sailor. "Drop the main, then get those grenades."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The wind and rain simmered after we went up on deck and within minutes the cruiser's running lights approached swiftly on our stern.

Mitchell tossed a heavy pea coat over my shoulders and asked, "What do you think they have in mind?"

"They can't afford to let any of us go. Either they'll try and take me aboard, then finish you and your crew and sink the boat or they'll line us up on the deck and pick us off one by one."

Mitchell shoved a grenade in each pocket of the pea coat. "Have you ever used these?"

I nodded.

"Then it may be up to you, baby. The sea's too rough for them to tie up to us. If they want you they'll have to pull in close and ask you to swim for it. Get the picture?"

Night wind whipped at my cheeks, tangling my hair. "And what if they just line us up?"

He stared at the advancing lights. "I'll get their attention somehow. Then you follow through, Honey.

You'll probably have only one chance. So make it a strike."

The cruiser's hull loomed along our port side, cutting her power and drifting toward us in the buffeting wind. When she was about a dozen yards away, a voice, amplified through a bull horn, blared, "Miss West, have the captain of the vessel and his crew line up on deck, hands above their heads!"

Mitchell and his two crewmen reluctantly followed the order. They flicked a spotlight on us and edged nearer. I stood to the side, hands in my pockets tight on the grenades, and hoping they would now ask me to swim to their boat. We weren't that lucky.

"You, too, Miss West!" the voice growled over the horn. "I was one of the men in your hotel room at Mont-Saint-Michel. The one who knocked you over the balcony. You are not to be trusted!"

I hesitantly joined the three men. The cruiser maneuvered to within four or five yards, keeping her engines in readiness for any emergency. A bulky figure stepped out on the forward deck, partially in front of the spotlight, and we could see he held a machine gun tucked against the crook of his right arm. It was obvious what he was about to do. He lifted the muzzle in our direction, steadied himself as the cruiser rocked once, twice. He was having trouble aiming.

Suddenly Tod Mitchell made his move. He went over the sloop's railing in a perfect head-down dive. The machine gun spat darts of orange at the disappearing man. The tracer bullets punctured the side of the boat and ripped the surface of the water, sending up tiny geysers on the swirling surface. The gunman swore, took better aim and swept the area of Mitchell's entry into the water with a hail of bullets.

That's when I made my move. I stepped out of line, produced a grenade and yanked its arming pin out with my teeth.

The man inside the cruiser with the bull horn blurted, "You idiot! Get the woman!"

The chattering gun swung in my direction, but a sharp roll of the sloop made him miss. I caught my balance, took two quick steps to the railing and let the grenade fly. It sailed beautifully through the air, arcing high and far into the wind. For an instant, though, I thought it wouldn't make it. But the pineapple-shaped object fell on the cruiser's deck with a hard bang. The man dropped his gun, made a screaming protest that was swallowed up in the grenade's own monstrous sound. *Kaboom!* An entire section of the cruiser's starboard side split open as if a giant can opener had been forced into the steel. The gunman seemed to literally disintegrate in the immense blast, disappearing in the water.

Two other men ran out on deck. One of them picked up the machine gun and resumed firing wildly. I pulled the pin on the second grenade, as the cruiser spun stern end toward us, and lobbed the weapon skywards. I flattened next to Mitchell's crewmen. The next thing I heard were two separate reports. The first was the grenade, followed by a thunderous roar that shook the sloop and rained debris down on us and the deck.

When I looked up there was nothing in the water where the cruiser had been except a jigsaw of flaming wreckage, and the angry snake-like hiss of burning gasoline.

# 14

Mitchell.

We found him floating face down a few yards from the sloop's stern, an ugly crimson slash across the side of his head. A blazing labyrinth of gasoline had encircled him and burned his hair almost to the roots.

When the two seamen lifted him aboard, his eyelids fluttered open and he stared up at me. A shaft of moonlight caught the hurt that was buried beneath the singed slits. The sailors bundled Mitchell in blankets and tried to get him to go below. He adamantly refused.

He studied the eddying flames fading behind us, and said, "Honey, you pull rabbits out of your hat almost as well as the New York Mets."

I couldn't help the admiration in my voice as I daubed medication on his wound. "Those weren't rabbits, Mr. Mitchell."

"If I didn't know better I'd accuse you of being Gil Hodges's genie."

"And if I didn't know better," I teased, "I'd accuse you of being a hero. That took a lot of guts, mister."

"Yeah?" he snorted. "Well, by the time I got up enough courage to do anything, that nut with the gun was just a second away from disemboweling us all." He smiled thinly. "I got a lucky wave—like the surfers say."

We poured some sulfanilamide on the wound and fastened a small bandage. His head and face had the

scorched look of a man who had worked in a blast furnace without a helmet or mask. But Tod Mitchell had amazing physical stamina. Minutes later he was examining the hull damage and weighing our chances of making shore.

"We're at least thirty miles from the Isle of Jersey," he said calmly. "We're taking way too much water and our radio's been wrecked by machine-gun bullets." He spread his hands out in a sad, empty gesture of defeat. "We can't possibly save the boat."

I asked, "If you put her on a sandbar, could she be salvaged?"

"Possibly," he said with a grim shrug. "But where exactly are we going to find one?"

"Near where we first encountered that cruiser."

While we turned and headed south, now under engine power, I tried to explain to Tod Mitchell some of the circumstances surrounding the mysterious mid-sea elevator. All the while he studied me with a peculiar expression in his narrowed eyes which I guessed was either wonderment or suspicion.

After I finished, I said, "You do believe me, don't you?"

"Sure," he chuckled, patting my hand gently. "After what happened a short time ago, I would believe a fifty-story Hilton hotel rising right up out of the water with a topless *Sand Bar* featuring naked Eskimo girls passing out Scotch-soaked snowballs."

We were suddenly pitched to the deck. Mitchell's sloop groaned from a sharp impact, rolling abruptly to the port side. Cabin lights faded to a skeletal whisper, then brightened as the generator responded. We scrambled to the deck, climbing a canted stairway and pulled ourselves out by the starboard railing which angled straight up at a star-sprinkled sky. One of the crew members had been thrown from the helm and landed unhurt on the sandbar. The other was found unconscious in the engine room where he had been struggling

to keep sea water off the electrical components. He had a bruised forehead.

Mitchell checked the sloop's position on the bar and called it, "Excellent. The fin is apparently unhurt." He chuckled happily. "The hull is far enough up on the sand to hopefully protect her from rising tides later on. Now all we have to do is make contact with the mainland."

I suggested we launch the sloop's small boat and send Mitchell's crewmen for help. We detached a small five-horse putter from the boat's stern and fifteen minutes later they were on their way with plenty of gasoline to make the all-night journey to the French coast. Carrying a small compass, they aimed for Granville, a seaside resort about forty miles away. The Channel was now glassy-calm and lit by a full moon and there seemed to be no reason they would not make it by early morning.

The air around the area felt unusually tepid as it had the night before when Juan and I had run aground. Tod Mitchell set up a couple of deck chairs on the sand, climbed aboard the sloop and returned with a bottle of Scotch, ice and two glasses.

He winked at me as he poured. "No fifty-story hotel or topless Eskimo girls, but I prefer this—and you." He fixed us two tall drinks, then said, "How far away would you guess it is, Honey?"

"The elevator?"

"Yes."

I shrugged dismally. "Perhaps, ten feet—maybe miles. The rails are retractable. Without some method of visual sighting we're dead."

Mitchell sipped thoughtfully at his Scotch. "I was in submarines during the war. In the Atlantic. We had reports Hitler had a plan for submerged battle stations constructed under sandbars all the way to the British coast. They were never built."

"Why?"

"The young scientist who proposed the project was later claimed to be mad by some high-ranking Nazis. The scientist's name was Ludwig Rhinau."

I blinked incredulously. "*The Ludwig Rhinau?*"

Mitchell issued a curt laugh. "Yes. Small world, isn't it? If Rhinau helped create this miniaturized bomb, he could have moved a long way with his other plan, right? What do you say we nose around a bit?"

"What about your head?"

"The hell with it!" he roared, flinging his glass into the sand. "I've had enough of war, Honey. I create the kind of planes that kill people. Maybe it's about time I did something to help stop killing!"

I caught his arm. "Tod, don't make this into a one-man crusade. I tried it and you saw what they almost did to me."

He whirled, eyes glinting angrily. "Total truth. Why are they so anxious to kill you, Honey?"

I hesitated, then said, "All of Berne's atomic formulas were micronized and secreted into one of the capsule-size miniaturized bombs. Apparently until last night—or early this morning—they believed I had that capsule."

"And do you?" he asked, looking at me strangely.

"Not unless it's buried in one of my wisdom teeth," I kidded. "Obviously, they either found it or they finally gave up on me."

Tod Mitchell grinned, cocking an eyebrow at me. "Let's find that elevator, Honey. I'm dying to meet more of these people. Especially Doctor Rhinau."

"I'm game," I said, tossing my glass aside giddily. I flung myself into the water. He followed a moment later, toting a bundle of green cloth over his head.

"What's that?" I asked.

He laughed lowly. "Your pea coat. In one pocket are a couple of more messages to Garcia. In the other is the bottle of Scotch!"

We swam from sandbar to sandbar until dawn, sipping, swimming, talking, giggling, getting bombed. I lost my shirt, literally, along the way. One thing we didn't lose was the pea coat and the bottle of Scotch. We finally fell exhausted on a fauna-covered mound of sand, lying with our feet in the water. Suddenly I got the horrible feeling I was really drunk.

"Tod, we shouldn't be fooling around like this. There—there's too much at stake."

He placed the pea coat under me and draped the sleeves over my naked breasts. "Honey," he grunted lowly, "they'd have to be madmen to want to kill you. You have the most deliciously shaped body God ever created."

"Be serious," I whispered, feeling so numb I could hardly move.

"I am serious," Tod continued. "When I first saw you on the raft, I really thought I'd found a sea nymph. Your skin is so white and beautiful."

Large birds circled above us, swooping low, their wings flapping noiselessly in the quiet dawn. I sat up unsteadily, staring at them.

"Is it very shallow here?" I asked, brushing at my eyelids.

"Yes," Mitchell said, kicking at the water.

"How far is your sloop?"

"About a mile," he said. "We can't see it from here. There's too much fog. Why?"

I glanced around. The new light was casting weird shadows on the fauna-covered sand. I got up unsteadily and walked to the edge of the water. Something with a gnarled greenish cast was floating a few feet out. I knelt down.

"What was in that Scotch, Tod?" I asked, pretending to throw water on my face as I reached for the bobbing object.

"A bomb, baby," he answered distantly. "Like you. My God. You're like a Mount Vesuvius in Pompeii,

or the tidal wave that swept Tokyo in 1923. You are earthquaking, soul-wrecking, dynamiting—”

I whirled, staggering to my feet, clutching what I'd plucked from the water in one hand. "What did you say was in the Scotch, Tod?"

His body stiffened. He reached for the pea coat.

"I wouldn't if I were you," I said tautly, gripping the grenade's pin. "Remember what happened to the men on that other boat!"

"Honey—" he breathed lowly, stilling his hands.

"You people will go to any lengths, won't you?" I said, trying to control the shaking that was in my body. "We swam in circles all night. Right back to where we started." I indicated deep wounds in the sand at the water's edge. "This is exactly where your boat went aground, right, *Mister Mitchell*? But it isn't here anymore is it?"

"Honey, you don't understand—"

"I'll just bet your two sailors came back with another boat, and some men patched the hull and pulled it off the bar. After they *absentmindedly* neglected to notify the authorities!" My head seemed to be filling with haze. I staggered in the sand. "You made another big mistake. You didn't give me enough of your joy juice."

He grimaced, a flash of arrogance showing in his eyes. "Our biggest mistake was going along with you from the very beginning. I was against it every step of the way. But *she* thought it would work. We used fear tactics, sex, drugs, hypnosis, sodium pentathol, everything. Consequently, we lost men on the Eiffel and at the Château, *and* we lost Auberge!"

I lurched back into the water, barely catching my balance. "Who were the men who died on the other boat? Don't tell me you got your wires crossed again?"

"A band of renegades formed by Lance Towbridge. He turned out to be a traitor not only for your side, but for us, too. Night before last these men, some of whom had worked with us at MAD, attacked you at

Mont-Saint-Michel. You escaped, but we managed to catch you and Towbridge. The others got away. They were looking for us last night. Only they didn't recognize the sloop. They must have seen you on deck and then came after us."

I placed an arm across my bared breasts, still clutching the grenade pin. "So I wound up doing your dirty work!"

He nodded. "Thankfully."

I blinked, trying to keep him in focus. "And why did you pull that bit with the life raft?"

"We tried a new amnesia treatment, hoping you would blurt out your knowledge of the capsule as your memory returned. The bomb was supposed to create a total recall bridge to the capsule—but it failed."

I sagged to my knees, fumbling with the grenade. "Who are you?" He swam in my eyes.

"The Scotch contained a strong sedative to keep you in a semi-somnambulistic state—and talkative. But obviously *it* hasn't worked either." He shook his head regretfully. "Where is the capsule, Honey?"

I slumped forward in the sand.

"Where is the capsule!"

I rolled over, pulled the pin and hurled the grenade. After a moment, he bent over me.

"You're not so fortunate this time, *fräulein*. That one was a fizzle. Waterlogged."

The sky spun above me in a bluish haze. His face blotted out the morning sun. The orange ball rose out of the sea, a huge blob of matter seemingly afloat like protoplasm on a microscopic slide.

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

"No?" he said. "As far as the CIA and Interpol are concerned you are dead. They found your body this morning beneath the balcony of your apartment at La Mer Plage. They will have a difficult time recognizing

you, but she is wearing your clothing. She posed as you once in Baden-Baben."

"You—you killed that girl?"

He smiled bitterly. "We had to, Miss West. If they suspect you are still alive they would remain in the area and might eventually find us here. With faked notes left by you we have misled them to Portugal.

I groaned, "Wh—who are you—?"

"You know who I am, Miss West. You met me in Provence. Many many months ago. We wiped your memory clean of that memory two nights ago." He grinned at me, and somehow his face looked evil beyond words. "I am the man who could have won the war for Hitler and the Reichland. The man who knows more about space and time and matter than Bergdorf, Lemming or Berne. I am Ludwig Rhinaul!"

# 15

## Elevator

I felt myself being lifted into the plastic-domed chamber and seeing the water-tight door locked. Suddenly there was a whirl and bubbles broke around the sleek machine. I felt very little motion as it descended into the depths.

How long it took before the machine stopped, I couldn't fathom. I did realize one thing. I had been here before. My mind was deeply clouded by what Rhinau had given me earlier, but I was awake and possibly much more aware than they realized.

When the elevator finally stopped they carried me into a room. At first, it appeared small, but as my brain cleared the ceiling seemed to fade into eternity, washed by a subtle glaze of blue. Far up I could discern a gigantic replica of a white dove bearing the leaves of peace in its beak. I suddenly got the feeling I was lying inside some huge immaculate tomb. It was that quiet, that unending, that mystical. A mammoth statue of Christ rose at my feet, towering ten or twelve feet tall, his eyes staring down at me. I rose on my elbows, blinking imperceptively into the pale cast of light. I was still clad in nothing but wet dungarees.

"Miss West!" A voice stabbed distantly. "You are at war with the world, are you not?"

I sagged back on the chill slab beneath me "At war with what world?" I asked.

"Any world. This world. All worlds!" the voice

drummed. "You are not at peace with yourself—or with any human being."

"That's not true!" I managed.

The voice continued, "You have no sense of balance, no true feelings for your fellow men."

"I believe in God," I said, staring up at the towering statue above me.

"Yes, you said in only God you trust," the voice added. "But do you trust the sanctuaries of God? And in his true workers?"

I suddenly realized the voice belonged to a woman. A voice I'd heard before, but where?

"Do you realize the heartaches and mistrust which are rampant in our civilization, Miss West? Our young of today are revolting against the tyrannies of yesterday. They understand the follies of our mistakes and cry for a new tomorrow. Should we not give them what they seek?"

I clawed at my eyelids. "Is that freedom, or a new kind of tyranny?"

"You have the answer to that, Miss West. Solely. Completely. Dynamically. Doctor Berne's formulas are the answer to the days of tomorrow." The strange female voice paused. "They can be beautiful—or they can be terrifying."

"By beautiful, you mean the last two men on earth slugging it out toe to toe. One black and one white."

"No!" the voice hurled. "I hate war. But I will not stand for a civilization that is weak, sick and impotent."

"What sort of woman *are* you?" I demanded.

The voice hissed. "You people call me the Black Widow. Truthfully, I am an angel born from heaven. And upon your deathbed I shall prove that to you."

"An angel from *hell*!" I said. "You'll never be a Joan of Arc."

"You shall die, Miss West," the voice blared. "Perhaps not as brilliantly as Saint Joan, but as completely for your heretical beliefs. Where is the capsule?"

"What do I gain if I give it to you?"

"Your life!" the voice cried.

"Drop dead," I said.

There followed a long moment of grating silence, then the voice boomed. "Miss West, if you respect Saint Joan so highly then, on second thought, perhaps we should flatter you with some of her honors. Where is the capsule?"

"In Rouen," I said.

"Then you will die as you wish," the voice retorted angrily. "But first I shall introduce myself—for the last time. Sit up, Miss West!"

I straightened, cradling my breasts. The darkened room tilted crazily. From behind a pale-blue screen, a figure appeared wearing an ornate Cleopatra head-piece a shimmering long-sleeved gold gown that swished along the floor as she walked. Her face was heavily painted and studded with bright jewels. Her fingers were long and tipped with luminescent polish. She glided toward me like some sort of silent movie queen, head erect, arms extended, reminiscent of a scene out of *"Sunset Boulevard,"* Gloria Swanson, and her last dramatic entrance. Her face glowed eerily, eyes like ashen holes burned in rich silk. She stopped several feet away, swaying back and forth like a distraught child, glaring at me through those fiery painted holes. I couldn't help the startled expression that must have come on my face.

Her lips appeared dead in her jaw, as she said, "So, you see, Miss West. I needed Doctor Berne's formulas more than anyone in the world. For richer or poorer, in sickness or in health. I was wedded to the man's creative principles." Her head shook dismally. "But he divorced me in the prime of my life. We would all like to play God. Walk on water. Rule the universe. The back streets of every city in the world are filled with those who dream of immortality."

She apparently could sense I was about to spring on

her, and she added. "I would do nothing rash, Miss West. Naturally, there are those here prepared to stop you. Furthermore, a move on your part now might totally destroy your mind. We have forced you through every emotional stage possible via drugs and visual hallucinatory images. Most of what you have experienced was real, largely created by us to break down your inner conscience. Hopefully we tried to release the secret which is there and which you seemingly refuse to acknowledge."

Her eyes puzzled me. I couldn't figure out whether it was the lighting or my imagination. I could see absolutely nothing in the two dark openings in her face.

After a moment, she continued. "We used every conceivable method to persuade you to confess where the capsule is hidden. But you steadfastly have circumvented our attempts and at times made us look like rank amateurs." Her voice rose, but the mouth did not move. "We are *not* amateurs, Miss West! Doctor Rhinau is a great scientist— *and*, as you discovered, a highly skilled actor. Even his last effort, performance failed—miserably." She gestured awkwardly. "You leave us with only one irrefutable way to go. We must assume the invisibility formula is lost. So are all the other amazing Berne theories of tomorrow. But we have the micronized bomb, and with it we may still save the world."

"Save?" I blurted.

"We thought for a while your government had found the capsule and sent you out as a decoy to confound us. But we readily discovered this was not true. Still we did sacrifice Jacques Auberge and many important agents because of you. You have been our Achilles' heel, Miss West." Her hands drew into tight fists. "You have not only confounded, but murdered, and even raped us. And left me—" She tore off her gold-braided helmet.

I gasped.

She peeled her jeweled face away from the burned holes and tossed it on the floor. Her mocking laughter thundered across the room as she zipped down her gown and kicked its glittering sequins toward the ceiling. All that was left of her were two grotesque hands fluttering before me.

"So you see, Miss West!" her voice rattled wildly. "I was the guinea pig! *I* was the one Berne tested with his invisible process! The *only* one. His other notes could have saved me. Brought me permanently back to the living. But you, Miss West—you—" One of those weird hands slapped me hard across the cheek, nearly knocking me to the floor. A fingernail tore loose and flew across the room. "—You have deprived me of that treasured dream. Total immortality!" She laughed derisively, the gloved hands spinning crazily in the air. "And you, Miss West, shall pay for this crime. You! Not the world! Only you!"

# 16

## Invisible.

I was screaming at the top of my lungs when I woke. A pair of controlled hands were trying to contain me. My eyes ripped open upon the frenzied face of Lance Towbridge. He was silently pleading for me to still myself.

I glanced frantically around. We were in a small room with one door and no windows. I was lying on a cot, still half naked. He was on his knees next to me and his distraught expression behind the smoky glasses suddenly froze me.

"Can—you—read—lips?" he asked, forming the words, without uttering a sound.

I nodded, after a moment.

He continued, slowly, working his mouth into silent sentences. "This room—is bugged. We are—both—prisoners. They are going—to kill us. But—they—hope—we may—still tell them—where the capsule is."

"How can I believe you—you lousy traitor!" I snapped audibly. His hands stifled my words.

"Believe what you like, Miss West," he said aloud angrily, then resumed his mouthings. "I—saved you—once—at the Château. Actually—twice—again at Mont-Saint-Michel. They—had given up on you—but I convinced them—that you—do have the capsule." His head rolled dismally as he removed his hands. "I—am—positive now—that I know where the capsule—actually is. But we must bargain for safety."

"How?" I demanded silently.

"By—working together—and outwitting them."

"How—do we do that?" I formed.

"Remain—angry," his lips said. "Ask questions—and—I will lead you—by sign language—and with my mouth." He got up and slammed a fist against the wall. Towbridge growled savagely, "All right, Miss West! We both know where it is. Must we bloody well die for it?"

"Did you tell them?" I roared, going along with his act.

"No! But I'm not going to remain locked up in this foul underwater prison any longer just to save your hide." He winked, then mouthed, "Where—is—Juan Sanchez?"

"Where is Juan Sanchez?" I repeated aloud.

"He's alive." Towbridge nodded positively. "The last I knew. So what? Your attempted escape at Mont-Saint-Michel was clumsy. Even after I tried to help you." His lips told me what to say next.

"You didn't help me!" I returned his silent words. "You stole the capsule!"

"Don't you tell them that!" he roared.

His following mouthings were so brutal I could hardly get them out. "I'd like to kill you—with my own gun!"

Towbridge removed his glasses and waved them triumphantly. "You wouldn't have the guts!" he hissed.

The door to the room suddenly popped open and Ludwig Rhinau's face appeared. He said, "That was very clever of you, Lance. To admit you are the one who has the capsule. We will toss you a bone. Possibly one of your own!"

Rhinau took me on a tour of his underwater city a short time later. They had separated Lance and me and provided me with some of my own clothing and a shower. I had a feeling the tour was executed for

two primary reasons: one, to make one last interrogation of Towbridge, and two, bolster Rhinau's ego which had been blighted by Berne.

He walked me out onto a narrow ramp high above the concrete floor. I leaned over to get a better look when he caught my arm, and pulled me away from the railing.

"That opens," he warned. "For shipping purposes."

"Shipping?" I asked.

"Eventually we will be in full production," Rhinau said, indicating an area below where white-coated men moved about in laboratory surroundings. "At the moment only a few of my former colleagues are with me. More will join us later."

He extended an arm, gesturing up at a mirror-like ceiling. "This is a giant plastic dome created years ago during the Hitler era, by me, and submerged in the English Channel. It was abandoned and forgotten until a few years ago when I decided to resurrect it. Using private tugs I carefully moved the dome from a point beyond Cherbourg to here. With thick fogs and extreme low tides, plus the protection of fast-moving sentries, we had very little trouble creating dikes, digging our floor, building our city, fitting the dome into place and allowing the water to return."

He grinned triumphantly. "We have an atomic-energy fuel source, high-compression generators, enough heat and light for the entire Empire State Building."

"Truly miraculous," I said.

"More than miraculous!" he hurled. "Conrad dances on the moon, but we have captured discoveries that will make his dance and Armstrong's first walk resemble a Mickey Mouse cartoon." His face hardened. "In the months and years to come I shall show the world."

"I?"

He whirled angrily. "I am the creator, Miss West! This is mine. Hitler could not destroy me. Nor did Berne. Nor shall you!"

I nodded. "What about the lady with the fancy gloves and burned eyeballs. How does she feel about *your* creation?"

He winced. "That is Berne's work. See what his madness has done! The capsule can undo some of the harm. Parts of what he created we can use for a better world. But parts we must reject! I beg you, Miss West. Give us the capsule—you and Towbridge—and we can unchain the wrong and benefit from the right."

I shook my head. "Doctor Rhinau, what you consider to be right, according to Doctor Berne, is wrong. Whether it is or isn't, secretly trying to take over the world has to be wrong!"

His forehead ridged. "But I am more capable than Berne ever was. Germany would have won the war easily if Hitler had listened to me." He threw his arms out. "Look at this, Miss West! To this day the world has never fully realized the functions of its own seas. We reach to the moon when we have unlimited areas on our own planet that are unexplored."

"Then why not share your knowledge?" I said.

"People will not listen to me!" he roared with fury. "At Provence, Berne and I took our thoughts before the Society—but they rejected us!" His eyelids widened, pupils dilating. "They said we were mad. Was Pasteur mad? Was Galileo mad? The stigma of madness was even put upon Edison and Benjamin Franklin." His face grew dark and distorted. "Where must man go to escape the ridiculous arrows of his own folly?"

"Doctor Rhinau," I said patiently. "It cannot be one man's conquest, one man's ideologies, one man's world. Doctor Berne apparently realized that fact—too late. Hitler never realized."

He suddenly gripped my shoulders. "Miss West, Berne's capsule contains the answer to total creativity. It is a millennium's worth of time and space. The loss of those formulas could mean a setback to our civilization of thousands of years." His mouth twisted sadly.

"I must admit Berne was a remarkable genius. Leagues above all others in the history of mankind. Please, Miss West, for civilization's sake tell us where the capsule is."

I stared at his pathetic face. "I almost wish I could, Doctor Rhinau."

He moaned lowly. "Then she will execute you."

The execution was not quite what I'd expected. They handed me my pearl-handled .22 revolver and shoved me back into that room with Lance Towbridge. I was dumbfounded.

Towbridge was beside himself with joy. He lip-mouthed, "It—worked!"

"What—worked?"

"You said—you would—like to—kill me—with your—own gun."

I glanced down at the blue Hi-Standard. Suddenly some of the last words Phil Arno ever spoke came ramrodding into my brain:

*"Where's your gun, Honey?" "I can't tell you where the capsule is. If you knew you might screw things up!" "If anything happens, keep your gun handy!"*

I shot a glazed look at Towbridge.

He nodded.

I snapped open the .22 and examined it. Three chambers were empty. The bronzed tails of three bullets glinted in their niches. I lifted out two of them. The third seemed to be jammed. Towbridge removed a tiny penknife from a hidden compartment in the heel of one of his shoes. He inserted the blade tip along the steel wall and pried. A bronze end flipped out. But that's all! The bullet had apparently been taken apart and the casing cut to pieces.

Behind where the casing end had sealed the chamber was a gray capsule-shaped object the same circumference as the opening itself. Using the eraser tip of a pencil, Towbridge gently pushed the object along the firing canal until it lay in my trembling left palm. It

was almost twice as large as I had expected it to be. Exactly the same size as a .22 bullet, only curved at both terminals.

Towbridge was beside himself with joy. His eyes gleamed brightly behind his weird glasses. He quickly indicated I should pocket the capsule and replace the two bullets. I slipped the gray object into a hanky in a narrow skirt seam opening built in for minor cosmetic items. Then reloaded the chambers.

Towbridge patted my skirt pocket and mouthed, "Don't—worry. They told me—this bomb will not—explode—unless hit with—tremendous force. Now—follow—my lead!" His voice suddenly rose in an angry snarl. "Well, what are you waiting for? I told you you didn't have the bloody nerve!"

He pointed his right index finger toward the ceiling, the thumb cocked. Then he quietly crumpled himself on the floor, face down, arm still raised. He pantomimed pulling a trigger.

I backed against the wall near the door, lifted the .22 and fired. The small room reverberated from the shot. Towbridge's arm dropped heavily. The door banged opened and Rhinau charged inside carrying a 9 mm. Luger. I judo-chopped his gun to the floor with a hard crack on the wrist. He spun around. Towbridge seized the Luger and leaped to his feet.

"Well," Rhinau said, quickly analyzing the situation and raising his hands. "The cat and mouse *will* play. But you haven't a chance. There are armed men on this floor."

"Tell them to back away!" Towbridge ordered. "Honey has the capsule on her."

Rhinau laughed testily. "You lie poorly, Englishman. We have examined all of her clothes—and even her body—thoroughly."

"Did you examine her gun?"

"Of course. Three bullets fired. Three remaining. We pulled this little trick, thinking you might frighten

each other into making a confession. Especially since she said you stole the capsule from her, Englishman."

Towbridge laughed in his throat. "Phil Arno pulled off one of the most evasive, ingenious actions of all time. It even fooled the American CIA. He sawed off the casing of a .22 bullet and jammed it back into the chamber. But, my dear Doctor, on the opposite side he inserted Berne's capsule."

"You lie!" the scientist cried.

"Arno knew firing the .22 would not detonate the capsule. He even knew radioactive testing equipment could not penetrate the steel housing of that gun. *And* he knew, too, that eventually Honey would examine the misfired shell and discover the bomb and the micronized formulas."

I studied Lance Towbridge's maniacal stare behind his smoky glasses. Sweat streamed down his lean face.

"How did you happen to figure that all out, Lance?" I asked suspiciously.

He cocked an owlish eye at me. "Remember the little old lady sitting next to you on the plane—with the little old Italian man?"

I nodded.

He chuckled lowly. "Well, I was the little old lady, wasn't I, dear *Herr Doktor*?" He shoved the Luger harshly into Rhinau's back. "And it wasn't La Bouche who shot Arno. It was I!"

Towbridge squeezed the trigger.

# 17

Rhinau.

One of the world's great scientists toppled to the floor. Almost like an old tree caught in a furious wind, tumbling from the impact. A 9 mm. tears a savage hole at that range. The whole floor was red in a matter of seconds.

Towbridge kicked my .22 across the room and shoved me through the door, the Luger now cradled in my back.

"Why?" I asked, referring to the senseless slaughter of Rhinau.

"He's a madman. Not bloody well to be trusted." Towbridge suddenly plucked the hanky from my skirt pocket and shoved it inside his coat. A bullet zinged off a wall near us. He yelled, "One of us has the capsule! We're bloody well coming through. If you hit us or the bomb, this place will go up in great big watery splinters. Do you hear me?"

A corridor that fanned out to our right seemed familiar. I had a feeling this was the route which led to the Black Widow's fantastic tomb-like lair.

"I have one more score to settle," Towbridge said, his voice weirdly harsh. He jammed the gun against my spine. "Would you care to join me?"

As we walked along the corridor, I asked, "What are you going to do with the capsule?"

He grunted delightedly. "Sell it!"

"Then why not sell it to the allied nations?"

"Because that particular country will give me *twice* what anyone might offer—plus *I* shall be King! Not of England—not of France—not of South Africa—but of the world!"

"You people are absolutely crazed for power."

He pushed me through the door into the Black Widow's fantastic sanctuary. "It's the capsule, baby," he said. "When you realize its potentials, your mind spins!"

The voice of the Black Widow sprang out of the semi-dark room. "*Monsieur* Towbridge, I understand you have what I seek?" Her voice sounded pathetically drawn.

"Yes, I have, ducks," Towbridge said. "But I will sell you only one item. A copy of the invisibility return formula."

Her voice lifted. "At what price?"

"Ten million non-blackmarket American dollars."

"I couldn't possibly—" she returned.

"Sell everything you have in the States and in France. That house and studio must be worth several million alone. You made the mistake, baby. Not I!"

"Couldn't you make it half that?" she pleaded desperately.

"No!" Towbridge slashed angrily. "If *I* hadn't found the capsule, you would have had me killed! But you're not dead, baby. No. You're just in limbo. And that's where you are going to stay!"

"Please!"

She appeared from behind the blue screen as before. The gold helmet, the jeweled mask, the long sequined gown. She walked toward Towbridge, the dress swishing eerily.

"Stay back!" he threatened, brandishing the Luger.

"I cannot," the woman said, advancing upon him. "You would not give me the formula, even if I had the money."

"I told you!" Towbridge spat, so frightened by her

appearance that he stepped away from me as she came nearer.

"Doctor Rhinau was correct," she said, lips unmoving. "You lie. You are infinitely corrupt. You will do anything for yourself. No matter."

He stumbled backward, gun leveled, staring at the ugly openings in her mask. "You—you're wrong!" he cried.

"We might have done well for the world," she said, advancing on him. "I believed that from the very beginning. That is why I agreed to take Berne's serum. I had played the roles. Venus. Goddess. Empress. Now they were to be real—not just something on film!"

"Stay away from me!" Towbridge hurled.

"But your kind *Monsieur* Towbridge proved that Berne's theories are principally wrong. That man is part of the devil and has no hope for tomorrow."

"I told you to stay away from me!" he cried.

He aimed the Luger and I leaped to keep him from squeezing a bullet into the helmeted woman. He kicked me to the side and leveled the gun again.

Suddenly the floor quaked and Towbridge's bullet went awry. The three of us were thrown to the floor. The huge dove of peace crashed down from the ceiling, splintering jaggedly across the room. Another tremor ripped through the underwater city. I looked up. The mammoth statue of Christ was toppling. I yelled a warning, tried to get to my feet, but the gargantuan stone image fell. The smiling face of Jesus, His arms wrapped meditatively across His chest, struck with a furious roar. I heard the jewel-faced woman scream. I saw Lance Towbridge being rammed against a glass wall, pieces of the Diety tumbling like building blocks around him.

When I finally gained my footing, I was bleeding and my clothes were torn. Towbridge staggered from the room. Dust was settling on tons of shattered stone. The torn figure of the Black Widow lay near the coffin-like

slab they had put me on earlier. I knelt beside her. Her jeweled face was poked with holes that showed nothing but her suffering.

"Miss West," she whispered. "They called—Saint Joan—a martyr. A—woman—who bore the suffering of all mankind. No woman—or man—could suffer as I have. Destroy Berne's formulas. They are a curse. Rhinau convinced me we—we could create a new world." The face of Christ lay across her chest. "Only God himself has that power." The glittery mask went limp.

A hand touched my shoulder. I whirled, swinging angrily, suspecting it was Towbridge. I glared up into the bloodied face of Juan Sanchez.

"Honey! We must get out of here!"

"What's happening, Juan?"

"It must be an earthquake. The room they had locked me in fell to pieces. Let me help you."

He lifted me to my feet. We staggered from the Black Widow's broken chambers, the dust and debris still rising from the shattered image of Christ that had fallen on her.

The corridor seemed to be trembling under our feet as we moved. "The elevator's our only chance!" Juan yelled.

We made an abrupt turn and were running when we saw Lance Towbridge on the loading platform ahead of us. His glasses were splintered. A deep crimson slash slanted down his cheek. His clothes were torn. He leveled the Luger at us and backed against the railing Rhinau had warned me away from earlier.

"You stupid people!" Towbridge hurled. "Insignificant ants just crawling for a hole. That is all you uninspired fools ever look for, isn't it?"

"Lance, stay away from there!" I warned.

He mopped at his contorted mouth. "I know where the elevator lift is!" He laughed grimly. "The bull-fighter and the lady! Someday as bloody spirits re-

turning to earth you shall find the towers, the mountains and the seas named after me! You will find constellations, and worlds beyond the realm of imagination, bearing my name." He leaned hard on the railing, ranting derisively. "Dukes and princes have had the name of Towbridge. But I shall live to give that name a place of majesty unequalled in all time!"

The loading barrier gave way. He pawed for support, dropped his Luger, tore his splintered glasses loose and flailed for help. The passage behind him widened. He toppled outward, kicking his legs frantically and then screamed the last frantic word in his lungs, "NOOOooooooooo!"

The cry carried all the way to the floor of the underwater city, almost a hundred feet below, the protest, the anguish, the contemptuous disbelief. He struck the concrete floor with a tremendous impact.

A weird pyre of blue flame suddenly shot upward, rising from the spot where Towbridge fell, striking the mirrored ceiling of the city with such savagery, plastic pieces of the dome exploded. The city shook, trembled, cracked apart. Water poured down as if being hurled through a giant sieve.

# 18

Storm.

A hard-jawed contemplative glower belonging to Marcus H. Storm. He peered down at me, mopping my face with a towel. Next to him was another hard-eyed, salt-sprayed mask belonging to Johnny Doom. They both stared at me with a wrath that resembled the fury poured down on the underwater city and on the Black Widow as her massive statue fell.

"Honey—"

"Where am I?" I managed.

"On a United States destroyer off the Channel Islands. Well, you led us to them just as we hoped. How the hell you ever got out of there alive—"

"Did Juan make it?"

"Yeah. He's in another bay. He didn't fare as well as you, but for a lousy bullfighter," Mark said, "he'll survive."

"We lost Berne's formulas," I said lowly. "A thousand years of research—and locked inside a chamber of my gun. That's where Arno put the capsule."

Mark flicked his eyes at Johnny Doom. "We were just a little too late. We apprehended the sailboat and then lobbed shells around the perimeter of the dome, hoping the rats would abandon ship."

"Mark—Johnny, Berne *did* discover the answer to invisibility."

"We never found any proof of this, Honey," Mark

said. "The micronized bomb, yes—the invisibility principle, no."

"She was invisible," I managed to say.

"Who?"

"The Black Widow."

"Honey," Johnny Doom said, "we found a small projection machine secreted in the ceiling of your pent-house apparently by Auberge. The whole thing was a hoax."

"But she wasn't! I saw it with my own eyes. I was with her when she died."

Mark Storm steadied himself as the Navy ship lurched in the growing darkness. "She was the only one? She was the guinea pig?"

I nodded.

"Who was she, Honey? Who was the Black Widow?"

I shook my head dismally. "She needed the serum desperately. Like Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and his fits of madness, her periods of visibility were growing shorter. Ultimately, they ended altogether. She went blindingly insane."

"Who was she, Honey?"

I laughed lowly, thinking about the world and its weird frailties. "Once she was a little French girl, hoping to find her star. And along came a prince—"

"Honey, you're fading out on us—"

"A handsome prince named Jacques Auberge and he said to her, 'come with me little Monsic Boullet!'"

"Honey—"

"—And he kissed her and she became a beautiful princess and he named her Karol Kardinale—"

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