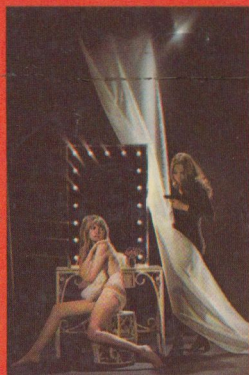
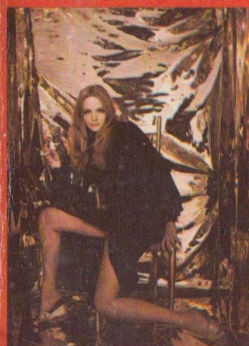
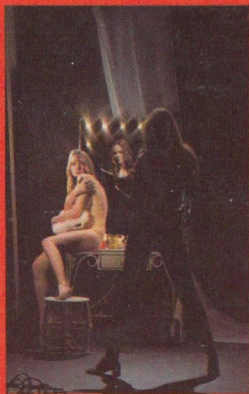
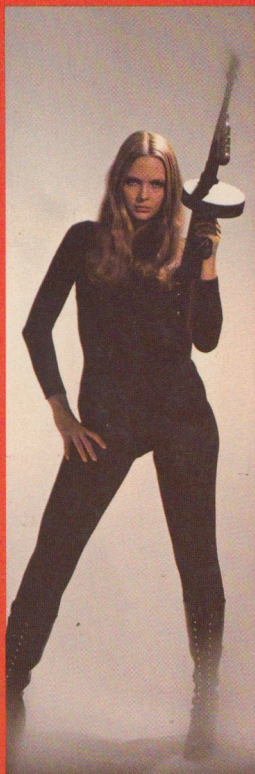
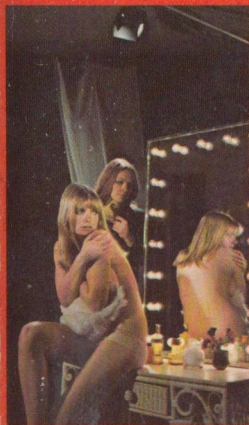


When agent **Honey West** does a job,
she gives it all she's got

Stiff as a Broad

G. G. Fickling

Espionage's sexiest operative
rides again!



WHISKEY, WOW WOW, GATMAN!

He lifted me off my feet and all hell broke loose with my pink silk wrapper. "Honey West!" he cried. "Only in Hollywood do they have drive-in brothels, gold-leafed johns in telephone booths—and voluptuous female dicks!" People were staring in our direction, eyeballs popping at the sight of my bosom popping from under the thin fabric.

Honey West, that 38-22-36 blonde bombshell, is back in a wild, riotous, explosive caper that not only turns on—but threatens to do the same for the whole world!

G. G. FICKLING

Is the pseudonym for two people—Skip and Gloria Fickling, who jointly created Honey West, first lady private eye in the hearts of TV fans and readers. The Honey West television series has been viewed in more than 30 foreign countries and the books read around the world by millions. The scene of the Ficklings' successful teamwork is a modern cliff-hanging four-story house in Laguna Beach, California, facing the Pacific Ocean. STIFF AS A BROAD, is the eleventh book about the world's sexiest girl detective.

STIFF AS A BROAD

G. G. FICKLING



**PYRAMID BOOKS
NEW YORK**

STIFF AS A BROAD

A PYRAMID BOOK

First printing, June 1971

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Along the narrow street, arc lights burned tattered **I** holes in the night. From my vantage point, the camera mounted on a telescopic boom resembled a monstrous claw belonging to a weird being from outer space. It hung there, empty now of its occupants, staring bleakly at the sheet-covered body twisted below on damp asphalt.

It had been raining earlier when the production crew assembled on International Film City's back lot to shoot a scene for the new television series, *This Girl for Hire*.

Weather conditions for the filming had been perfect. Almost too perfect. Drops caromed down through overhanging oak trees giving the lonely street with its false-front homes the realistic look of a rural area garbed in sinister darkness. On film the impact was supposed to create goose pimples, shock and trembling for several million television viewers.

Now that the fakery had suddenly become grim realism, the assembled TV cast and crew members, news photographers, reporters and police seemed almost too stunned to comprehend the true vengeance that had struck.

The star of the new show, a voluptuous young blonde

named Sindy Steward, had taken a bullet fired from a long-range rifle. The scene had gone exactly to plan: Sindy running along the street, black snakeskin coat clinging to her lithe wet frame, a pearl-handled Hi-Standard .22 revolver poised in her right hand. She had stopped under a street lamp beneath the camera, looking around, terror eroding her deep-set eyes. Then . . .

She spun sideways, toppling to the asphalt, her arms uplifted, a silent cry on her lips.

Rod Mayberry, the director, riding the camera boom in a turned-down white sailor hat, yelled, "Cut! Beautiful! Print that!"

Only then, did the hundred-odd actors, grips, electricians, makeup people and other onlookers see the barb of crimson erupt in the folds of Sindy Steward's coat. Somebody laughed awkwardly. *Who pulled the catsup gag? Come on, Sindy, get up! Who you kidding?* The gutter behind her head filled with ugly red fingers. Her wide blue eyes, brimming with rain and mascara, stared sightlessly up at the man riding the boom.

Mayberry swore. A script girl screamed. I threw off a plastic raincoat Johnny Doom had tossed over my head and dashed across the street, kicking off my patent shoes as I bent over Sindy. The bullet had severed the top button on her coat, and laid her bosom bare. The contours of her breasts swelled eerily in the rivers of red.

The scream of an ambulance brought me back to the present as it careened around the narrow streets and drew to a stop beyond the pools of light. TV and radio crews carrying hand-held cameras, mikes and tape equipment moved forward to record the grisly process of removing Sindy Steward's body.

One newsman with a microphone and carrying a tape kit paused at my side. He was already in the process of conveying what was happening into the dark box he clutched tenaciously to his chest. "—a gruesome scene . . . reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe . . . and here is Miss Honey West, the real-life female investigator . . . Miss Steward had been cast in her role in *This Girl for Hire* . . . I understand you were also consultant on the series,

Miss West . . . what are your theories on the murder?"

Johnny Doom pushed the newsman aside. "Nobody's proved it's murder yet. Get lost!"

A second microphone jutted in front of me. "Miss West, how does it feel to see your film image shot down right before your very eyes?"

I couldn't answer. The whirl of lights and clamor of sirens and voices had totally numbed me. I stared at the ambulance attendants in their starched white uniforms moving toward Sindy's body, maneuvering their litter between cables and TV equipment. A memory loomed hideously. A dark rainy hole torn in my past. When another solitary figure was cut down by a bullet. In a storm-drenched back alley behind the old Paramount Theater in Los Angeles. A man in a wet wool suit and a gray hat. My father. He toppled into the black gutter, face down . . .

Lieutenant Drake Cutler, head of homicide of the Hollywood Division, peered at me through cigarette haze billowing under a lamp in Rod Mayberry's backlot office. Sindy Steward had been dead thirty minutes. It was raining harder now and the sound of drops beat a steady rhythm on the temporary tin building.

"Did you see anything, Honey?" Drake asked, rubbing at his stubbled wet chin.

"I saw her fall," I said quietly, not looking at him.

"I mean, do you have any idea where the bullet came from?"

"No."

Drake paced across the room, shaking his head as if he were a soaked dog just out of a bath. He was a little man with massive arms and shoulders, ham-like hands and feet. He had inherited his job from Mark Storm, who had moved on to the CIA and Interpol. Johnny Doom and I were affiliated with the former on a free-lance basis and worked secretly as "illegals." At the moment, neither of us were on the government payroll.

The chunky little homicide detective turned his gaze on Mayberry and Doom who were standing just inside

the door. Drake's mouth grimaced around a corktip cigarette he clutched between his teeth.

"Okay." Drake gesticulated with a chubby thumb and forefinger. "The bullet came from long range. There's been a sniper at large in this area. He was probably lying up in those hills all day just waiting for a target of opportunity. When those arcs went on and that girl came running down the street, he zeroed in." Drake glanced at Johnny Doom. "Was Honey in the open when the shooting occurred?"

"Sort of," Johnny said, after a thoughtful inhale.

Mayberry tugged at his rain-soaked sailor hat, which now resembled a wilted lettuce leaf slapped on his bald head. "I don't think so, Lieutenant. She was sitting in a canvas chair outside our lights. I noticed that when I climbed up on the boom."

Johnny corrected, "Yeah, but Honey did run through the gun bit with Sindy a few minutes before you started rolling, Rod." He folded hairy arms across his chest. Johnny wore a T-shirt and dungarees. It had been hot earlier, before it started to rain, and he had left his coat in the car.

Mayberry grunted, nodding. He had a cruel, smiling mouth that never seemed to know whether to grin or frown.

I asked, "You think the killer might have been after me—and made a mistake?"

Drake shrugged. "It's possible he was confused. Both blonde. Both wearing the same outfits."

Johnny argued, "Yeah, but, snipers usually pick their targets on the spur of the moment, not for the individual involved."

The homicide detective spat through a cloud of smoke, "You never been to Dallas, Mr. Doom?"

"Hang Dallas!"

Drake smiled thinly. "A lot of people would like to."

I wriggled my toes nervously. They were wet and I wondered what had happened to the shoes I'd kicked off earlier. Rain cascaded hard on the tin roof.

I couldn't help thinking back to the beginning. Where it all started. Eight months ago in producer Hugh Murphy's plush office here at Star Gems. "Honey, I want to do a series based on a female private eye! It'll be exciting! New! Different We have a young starlet who resembles you, Honey! Fresh, vibrant, with a devil-take-the-hindmost look in her blue eyes! Just your size, five-five, a hundred and twenty pounds! And what a shape! Thirty-eight, twenty-two, thirty-six! She'll make men drool, women green—but everybody will love her, baby! Even the kids! They'll give up LSD to watch this, sweetheart! It'll be the biggest put-on, freakout of all time! But don't get me wrong, baby, it'll be sincere! People will cry! You think *Bonanza* grips people? Wait until you see *This Girl for Hire*! We're going to provide them with a message, sweetheart, that'll make love, mother, war and hate as exciting as gold nuggets for breakfast!"

I rubbed my arms, coming back to the present. "When will the rushes be ready on that scene?" I asked Mayberry.

"I have the footage in processing now."

Drake grunted. "I'll want blow-up stills of the impact. They might help establish a positive angle. I have men up in the hills right now, but it's almost a waste until we have some idea where he was hiding."

Wind rattled the tin building, a shivering clatter of metal mixed with pelting rain. I looked at Mayberry again. "What happens to the TV series now, Rod?"

The bespectacled director licked nervously at the corners of his mouth. "We have only three shows in the can. I would imagine the publicity on this alone will cover those costs. We'll get a new girl and start from scratch. We may even test you, Honey."

"No, thanks." I got to my feet. "How do I get out of here?"

Johnny Doom apparently had been thinking over the possibility of a mistake having been made. He took my arm. "Don't take any chances, Honey. We'll get you home."

"I'm not asking for an armed guard," I said. "Just my car." I started for the door.

"I—wouldn't—wear—that—snakeskin—goodie—out—of—here," Drake warned, emphasizing each word carefully.

I turned, ruffling the collar of the coat which matched the one Cindy had been wearing when she was shot. "What if I told you gentlemen there's nothing underneath except little ole me?"

"Don't be funny!" Drake spat. "People get killed playing games!"

"Lieutenant," I purred, tossing him a wicked glance. "If you only knew—"

Outside the temporary bungalow, a wall of artificial light caught my face, coat, legs in a sudden glare. The press corps had been waiting for me.

Voices cried out for a statement: *Was the killer really after Cindy Steward? Had a mistake been made? Were the police going to give me special protection if so?*

A sudden gust of wind brought gasps from the on-looking crowd. I glanced down, closed the gap in my coat and looked back at Drake Cutler's leering face in the doorway.

"Honey West! Damn it!" he bellowed. "I'm going to lock you up for indecent exposure!"

I raced toward the distant image of my Capri convertible, splashing barefoot through puddles. As I ran, I hurled an answer at Drake. "Since when does a naked body offend *your* decency, Lieutenant?"

It was still raining when the bedroom extension jangled rudely at 6:15 the next morning. My passionate pink penthouse, perched along Alamitos Bay in Long Beach, California, swam into view. I blinked, groped for the receiver and pushed it to my ear without getting up.

"Hullo," I said, yawning.

"Is this Miss Snakeskin of 1972?"

"Quit the kidding. Who's this?"

"A guy who caught your peekaboo performance last night and dropped his teeth. Honey, I realize you're allergic to clothes but for God's sake take pity on guys with twenty-twenty vision."

It was Fred Sims, a dry-humored newshawk for the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. Despite being a long-time friend he loved to stick needles into me and things like balloons, people, life. He never smiled except at a burial or the scene of a disaster. The last time anyone remembers him laughing was after he ran three hundred yards through a German machine-gun nest at Bastogne and won a Congressional Medal of Honor—but lost more than half of his right leg. When the President pinned the medal on his chest, Fred chuckled grimly, "You probably dug the slugs out of those krauts I killed to make this damned thing."

I rolled over, wriggling under the covers. "Fred, you're insulting. I got drenched last night and had to chuck my clothes. That's why I was wearing the snake-skin prop."

"You couldn't have been trying to confuse the sniper?"

"No," I said sarcastically, but with a touch of lightness to make him realize I wasn't mad, "I was just trying to give him a better target."

"Very funny," he said flatly. "The bullet that killed her was a 6.5-millimeter, which pierced the left ventricle, causing instantaneous hemorrhaging—"

"You don't have to go into the gruesome details, Fred. I was there."

"Lieutenant Cutler believes it was an Italian model. The same type weapon that killed President Kennedy."

"That's interesting," I said, sitting up, brushing wisps of hair from my face.

"You want to give me a personal statement for my afternoon edition or do I have to make one up?"

"Fred, you woke me out of a sound sleep. I haven't even had my coffee."

He groaned. "Some statement. I'd get a better one from the dead girl. Did you know she was a Princess?"

"Will you quit putting me on, Fred."

"I'm not kidding. The name Sindy Steward was a phony, natch. Her real name is Sonya Nostrum. She was a princess from a small isolated principality in Norway."

I got up, tossed a pink robe around my shoulders and carried the phone across the room to the fireplace where I placed a match on twin gas logs. Fred explained that Princess Sonya had come to this country ten years ago with her family during a good-will tour.

"She was sixteen, Honey, and as well-built then as she was up until last night. I've got some pictures of her I dug out of our files. You can hardly tell the difference."

A memory began to take form in my mind like an engraving on a steel plate. Princess Sonya of Norway. A teen-age beauty with hip-length blonde hair and magnetic blue Scandinavian eyes. The chisled face of a youthful madonna. The curvaciousness of a sleek animal. At all the press interviews the cameras had been turned on hungry-eyed Sonya. She even shocked her own parents with some of the low-cut gowns she wore, bringing additional demands from the newspaper photographers and television cameramen. Then one bright Sunday morning she disappeared from her Hollywood hotel suite on the day her entourage was to return to the homeland. Her carefully written note squelched hopeful journalistic cries of "kidnap!"

"Fred, I remember now. She left a note and—"

"Note, yes. I dug that out of the file also. It was brief, but wow. Listen. 'I am a cell within the human body. I am sound. I am a bright pigment of paint splattered on a Picasso. I am laughter. I am a mountain stream at dawn. A desert flower at twilight. I am the heat of a man's loins and the nakedness of his most fervent lust. And I am also death. The cold steel of its breath like a bullet in my bosom. You will never find me until I am finally the last of all these. Then you shall know the truth.'"

"Wow, is right," I said, repeating the last. "I am

also death. The cold steel of its breath like a bullet in my bosom.' ”

“How does that grab you, Miss Snakeskin? He got her dead to rights. Right where she predicted it.”

I stared at rain slivering down a picture window blotting out the distant Bay. A tremor passed through me. “Fred, are you certain about the identification?”

“Honey, you know what it’s like when you see a person who reminds you of somebody else. It was like a thorn in my side. I kept thinking of Marilyn Monroe, Elke Sommer, Anne Francis for starters. Not until last night when I came back to the office did it hit me. Really hit me. I felt like I caught a bullet in my gut, too.”

“You dug up a set of Princess Sonya’s prints?”

“Yeah, but it was rough. I spent half the night talking to every official office in Oslo. Her mother and father are dead. The principality is located near the Porsangeren Fjord on the Arctic Ocean. I couldn’t get through. Then I thought of the American Embassy. The matchup was made just fifteen minutes ago. It’s positive, Honey. Now, how about a statement.”

I couldn’t help the amazed smile in my voice. “I think you’re clever as hell, you crummy hero. What are you doing, bucking for another medal?”

“Why not? One of these days I’ll melt ’em all down into a bronze leg.”

I nodded, turned again to look at the rain-washed pane of glass. “Fred, there’s one thing I wanted to ask you—”

My voice turned to stone in my mouth. Like it was welded shut between clenched teeth. A huge man in a wet suit, his entire body enclosed in dripping black rubber, stood poised in front of me. He wore the hooded headpiece and froglike goggles of a skindiver. He also wore a smile embedded in flat sneering lips. *He* didn’t bother me.

It was the other one who suddenly placed a wet, slimy hand over my mouth. For all I knew this one didn’t have a smile in his entire body. But he had a gun against mine.

The receiver was yanked from my grasp and slammed down into its cradle. 2

I thought: You crummy hero genius, Fred, you forgot one important point! Mark Storm had said it once. You could make a necklace out of the people who hate me! And here were a couple of pearls—right out of the bottom of the sea—to prove it!

The friendly monster—the one without any hardware—advanced on me slowly, still grinning. “Okay, Miss West, on your feet and into some clothes.”

“I’ve had a lot of guys make propositions, but never that variety.”

“I’ll give you thirty seconds,” he grunted, his red-rimmed eyes piercing my pink robe like hungry hands.

“They give topless waitresses more time to change than that,” I said, feeling the chill snout of the gun against the base of my neck. “Why don’t you boys sit down and have some crab cakes and arsenic while we talk this over.”

“Up!” Monster Number One bellowed, wrenching me to my feet. He glanced at a rubber-encased watch on his wrist. “Twenty seconds!”

I started toward my dressing room, glancing at Mon-

ster Number Two. He was really funsville. Ever see an ape in a rubber suit?

"How can anybody put a brassiere on in twenty seconds?" I protested.

"You don't," the Friendly One said, still grinning. He crossed to a chifferobe. "And you *don't* leave the room!" He rummaged through several drawers tossing aside sweaters, skirts, panties. Then he hit the bathing-suit compartment. I could sense, whatever they had in mind, they were not planning to kill me here. Especially when he tossed me my sleek black suit slashed to the waist front and back.

"Put it on!" Charlie ordered.

"Here?"

"Don't be naive with me, Miss West. We know you could chop a gorilla across the groin or whittle Tarzan into a chimpanzee if you had half the chance. You have ten seconds."

I fingered the buttons on my pink robe. "You don't fool me."

"Nine," Charlie said.

"Did you really get the *wrong* girl last night? Is that it?"

"Eight."

"You made a mistake hanging up like that. That was a newspaper reporter. He'll know something's wrong."

"Seven!"

The Ape moved toward me, gun poised.

"This is a family neighborhood. You haven't got a silencer on that thing. They'll hear the shot and come running."

"Sex!"

"You don't speak very clearly," I said hesitantly.

Charlie brushed perspiration from his forehead.

"You think we'd kill you with a gun? Five."

I examined their faces. Maybe Charlie I could cope with, the Ape no. He was licking his mouth hopefully. He had a cruel scar over his right eye and lips that resembled the impression left by an ax when it strikes soft wood.

"Come on," I argued. "You boys are not the skin-diving version of Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Who's behind this?"

"The King of Hearts," Charlie muttered, also advancing. "Four."

"You mean the Ace of Spades."

"Three!"

I groaned. "Now I know how a rocket feels just before launch time at Cape Kennedy."

"Two!"

They were nearly upon me, breathing hard, nostrils distended, gun aimed at my stomach.

"You boys remind me of a couple of racehorses turning into the stretch."

"One!"

I let the robe slip to the floor. The Ape blinked like a bull impaled by a sword.

"Zero! Liftoff!" I cried, kicking the gun to the ceiling. The Ape turned, bewildered by the weapon's disappearance. Charlie, on the other hand, was not confused. He apparently had been briefed to the letter. He stepped toward me, and when I hit him with a karate chop on the back of his thick neck he pretended to go down. But he faked the impact, rolled and tossed me kicking on the carpeted floor. I gave him a few of my talented toes right in the mouth. He screamed like a woman, spurring blood and clamped thick hands to his lips. Suddenly the Ape was all over me. He removed a cloth from inside his wet suit. I hit him twice in the throat and across the bridge of his nose. He didn't even wince.

The cloth came down over my face, clamped to my nostrils. The pungent odor was unmistakable. Chloroform. My hands fought him. His free arm buried under my breasts. I gouged his face, eyes, nose, throat again and again and again and a g a i n a n d a g a i n . . .

"Miss West!" the voice sounded like an icy avalanche in my brain. I was on my stomach. Rolling over seemed to take hours. I felt weightless, a person suspended in

space. I blinked my way back to consciousness. Everything was swimming above me, free form, drifting in a well of yellow.

I pressed a hand over my eyelids, but it didn't seem to belong to me. It, too, was an extension. Five quivering fingers trying to find a home.

"Miss West," the voice repeated, stronger now, like a drum reverberating.

"Yes," I whispered, almost automatically. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry," the voice was now coming into focus like a bad dream turning into reality. You wake up on the highway, blinking lights cutting the darkness, and you are dead and somebody is saying they're sorry.

I shook my head, sighing. "The martinis are great, but the olives are too strong."

"You're not drunk," the voice insisted lightly.

"Dead?" I questioned, seeing a face above me with a tapered red Van Dyke and wondering if it was the devil.

"No," the bearded face said. "You're alive."

"This is living?" I said, seeing more of him. He was a gaunt figure in the pale light. Almost too thin. A human stick with a beard that could impale me.

"Please, Miss West!" He sat down next to me and the stick seemed to break in the middle and fragment. "I'm sorry."

"You said that," I murmured, floating again and trying to stop the impossible motion. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Chloroform will do that. You were not to be brought here under these conditions. They acted against my orders."

I sat up, fell back, groped at the covering over me. "You're a great guy," I whispered, fighting for consciousness. "We'll send you to Vietnam and if you lose a leg we'll give you the Statue of Liberty for a crutch—"

"Miss West, you're babbling, please—"

I opened one eyelid and peered at him. He was a handsome man, despite his frail body, about thirty, and

he had shockingly huge gray eyes under flame red brows.

I laughed and it sounded like it was coming from a drunk tank. I hated the weird frenzy of it. I sat up again, inhaling desperately.

The room was immense—or so it seemed. The ceiling stretched into a fibrous black emptiness. The walls moved in and out of focus like a zoom lens being handled by an amateur photographer.

"Miss West," the bearded man said. "You are out of control. Lie down and relax. Let me explain."

I blinked. Five women, all in brief costumes, moved into the faint circle of light. They stared at me as if I were some sort of weird ghoul.

The bearded man clapped his hands suddenly. "That will be all girls. You can hit the beach. Everything's under control."

The girls vanished into quavering corners of the room, their voluptuous bodies seeming to melt into the dark fibers. I was clad in the scant swim suit that Monster One had thrown at me.

"What are you?" I stammered. "Some sort of modern-day Frankenstein? Where am I?"

"Malibu Beach," he said simply.

I glanced around at the seeming hugeness of the room. "Come on. If this isn't Universal Studio's newest production produced and directed by Woody Allen I'll buy every ounce of your chloroform."

His thin forehead ridged deeply. "Miss West, I brought you here to hire you. Not to kill you."

"Cute line," I said dazedly. "You must read a lot of Shakespeare."

He crossed the room and whipped a curtain back from picture windows. Outside was a sandy beach. Ocean lapping on a hungry white shore.

"Now what do you think, Miss West?"

I swallowed. "Now I think I really will get sick."

An hour later I was on that beach, staring at the towering sheets of glass and steel which comprised Homer

House's four-story beach mansion. It had taken sixty minutes to shake me out of my lethargy. First, with a stinging cold shower and then a soothing, chilled martini.

He was sipping a frosted mint julep and studying a bevy of bikini-clad cuties tossing around beach balls, themselves, sand and running pell mell into the bright-blue ocean that fronted his spacious private beach. Finally he turned his gaze on me.

"So, Miss West, do you now believe my intentions with you are honorable?"

"You—you're Homer House, publisher of *Skin, Sin and She*?"

"That is correct," he said, nodding. "I grew up in a suburban community outside Chicago. A lonely little kid with no one who cared about me. My first venture was in games for those alone. I called it *The Play with Yourself Game Corporation*."

I was still a little dazed and angry over the way I had been kidnaped. "So now your filthy mag has got everybody playing—with each other. You know, Mr. House, I could have you put in jail for what you did to me."

He tugged at his scraggly beard. "I realize that fact, Miss West. But you won't after I tell you about Sindy."

"I had a feeling she was involved."

"Yes," he said sadly, squeezing sand between his hands and letting the grains drift down in hourglass fashion.

Sindy had been one of House's gatefold girls, the type who exposed her breasts or fanny or both in multi-color in the stitched fold of *Skin, Sin and She*. In fact, Sindy was due to be unveiled as his "Girl of the Century" in the very next issue.

"Eight million copies are already in hundreds of warehouses, Miss West, throughout the country. I can't release them after what has happened."

"So what do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

"Prove to the world that Sindy Steward is *not* the girl featured in my next issue."

"But you said—"

He clawed at his forehead. "Pay no attention to what I say! Is it worth a million dollars to you?"

I blinked. "Two hoods in wet suits chloroform me, then spirit me away half naked to a curtained dungeon ruled over by a red-haired fink who owns the world's largest sex magazine—and *then* he offers me a million dollars to perjure myself! What kind of a nut are you?"

"I can assure you, Miss West, I am in complete command of my faculties," he said, glaring at the capering cuties on the beach. "I have built an empire, worth five billion dollars, based on sex. One girl"—his teeth clenched angrily "one miserable girl cannot destroy my kingdom, do you understand?"

"Why not just rip out the gatefolds of that issue and forget Sindy Steward?"

He swore. "I can't!"

"Why?"

"The entire issue is based on her. The Princess and the Prostitute. It's the biggest exposé since the furor over the Kennedy assassinations."

"Then you knew about her past."

"Of course." He laughed bitterly. "Sweet Princess Sonya, the teen-age toast of the world." He fell back in the sand. "Do you have any idea, Miss West, what happened to that young girl after she disappeared?"

"No." I said. "When I met her several months ago she seemed nothing more than a promising young actress."

His flared eyebrows ridged together like burning embers. "She went down, down, down into the eternal bowels of the world. What she saw and what she did is a story no man or woman has ever captured on the printed page. The story of this girl is not just Sindy Steward but—"

The impact came like a sharp whistle. House crumpled in my arms. I yelled something. The bikini-clad SSS cuties turned and looked at us. Their mouths parted and suddenly exposed the livid red interior of their screaming throats.

"All right, Honey," Lieutenant Drake Cutler hammered again, circling my chair for the tenth time. **3** We were in his office. The sniper had struck for the second time in less than 24 hours. "One more time. Was the killer after you—or Homer House?"

"I don't know," I whispered faintly.

Johnny Doom said, "Leave her alone, Cutler!"

The chunky homicide detective whirled on the dark-haired handsome Doom, who was sitting cross-legged in a chair against the wall. "You stay out of this you fink wop! Just because she picked you up in a Florida swamp one time doesn't make you somebody!"

Johnny leaped to his feet, fists balled. "What the hell are you saying?"

"You heard me!" Drake roared, hunching his massive shoulders. "What are you, her housekeeper? Or does she just *keep* you?"

Johnny threw a punch, a long looping right that was not meant to hurt, just to show his anger. Drake Cutler blocked it easily. His left was not that kind. It cut Johnny's stubbled chin like a knife across a chopping block. Johnny spun back against a wall, steadied himself and moved forward. He was dripping blood. Drake was

ready for him. But neither man seemed prepared for what rammed between them. Fred Sims' cane separated Doom and Cutler individually with hard jolts of the rubber-encased tip. The newspaper reporter stood in the center of the room like a banty rooster. Ready for another three-hundred-yard run, if necessary. He steadied himself on his artificial leg, flashing angry glowers at both men.

"You two want a *good* belt in the mouth!" Fred hurled, seething. "I'll take you both on, with my real leg tied behind my back!"

"Shut up, Fred!" Drake spat, clenching his fists.

"No, you shut up, Cutler!" Fred returned.

"What do you want, Lieutenant?" Johnny demanded lowly, wiping blood from his mouth. "Whatever it is, I'll give it to you in a bag."

The homicide detective said, "Your head, Lover Boy!"

The two men circled around Fred. Johnny whirled, striking a hard blow under Cutler's left eye.

"You bastard cop!"

Drake reeled, but Fred's cane took it's toll. Johnny Doom felt it across his shoulder blades. He toppled. Drake moved in for the kill. The cane whirled again. Cutler's face grew a new welt. He staggered back.

"You son of a bitch!" Drake Cutler cried. "I ought to kill you!"

Fred stood in front of the squat deputy sheriff like a ticking bomb. "You try it, Lieutenant!"

Drake was furious. "I could squash your measly skull like a grapefruit!"

"Try it, Lieutenant."

The rotund little detective backed away, flopped into his wicker chair, groping for a cigarette. "You little son of a bitch hero bastard, the Germans should have killed you and saved us the expense of keeping you alive." He was scowling when he finished, "Who the hell do you think you are, Audie Murphy?"

Fred rapped his cane on Drake's desk hard. "You'd *better* smile when you mention that boy's name. Hear?"

Drake blew a ribbon of smoke. "Okay, so I'm smiling."

Fred looked around at Johnny Doom, who was staggering to his feet. "You smile, too, mister!"

Johnny nodded reluctantly.

I issued a disgusted hissing sound. "There's obviously a dangerous maniac on the loose but the three of you seem to need the psychiatric help!"

"All right," Drake said, grudgingly. "House had you kidnaped and you wound up in Malibu. You were on the beach with him and some of his nudie cuties when the shot was fired. What makes you so sure he didn't hire the sniper?"

"I told you, Lieutenant. The bullet missed me by an eyelash. He dropped in my lap. There was no second shot. We thought he had been hit."

"But he *wasn't* hit!"

I shrugged. "The gunman got Sindy Steward with one shot. House didn't move for almost ten or fifteen seconds. By that time there was enough screaming and yelling and movement to perhaps frighten the sniper off."

Drake crossed to a window. "Doesn't it seem damned strange to you, Honey, that a man would react that quickly when he wasn't even touched?" He rattled the louver shade with his fingertips. "Even a man who is summarily wounded doesn't drop that fast." The detective whirled accusingly. "But a man"—he gestured at Fred Sims—"like our hero buddy here—who is on a battlefield and expects gunfire *is* prepared to drop—hit or not—even before a shot is fired. Right, Fred?"

"Maybe," the newsman said thoughtfully. "I never reacted. Some do. Some don't. At the Kennedy assassination an FBI agent was out of a second car and running up the road in one point six seconds."

"Sure. And he was trained for that," Drake pointed out. "Other men in the Presidential procession thought the shots were nothing but fireworks."

Fred stroked his chin. "You may have something.

But a couple of points don't add. Why would House want Princess Sonya—née Sindy Steward—killed if he has a full magazine spread on her? Why kidnap Honey if he actually wanted her out of the way? And why pretend to hire Honey and expose himself to a possible sniper error?"

"That's what I'm going to find out." Drake Cutler's gaze drifted to a slit in the coat I was wearing. One of House's SSS girls had loaned it to me to cover my abbreviated bathing suit. "Honey, are you going to prefer charges against that bearded sex maniac?"

"Not at the moment, Lieutenant."

"Why?"

"I told you," I said. "He's made a business offer which I'm considering."

The detective rapped his desk. "Okay, play it foolish, *Miss Eyeful*. Don't say I didn't warn you. Our sniper may not think two out of three is such a bad average."

Homer House was waiting for me outside the Hollywood Station, nervously tapping on the steering wheel of his powder-blue Cadillac. He swung the passenger door open and ordered me inside.

I glanced around at Johnny Doom, who was still blotting crimson from his chin wound, and indicated he would hear from me.

Fred came out the door, surveyed the scene, then leveled his cane accusingly. "I'd keep my powder dry, Miss Snakeskin. Drake has a few valid points. I wouldn't want to see you as an eight-column banner."

I climbed inside the Cadillac, then winked at Fred. "How about a three-page gatefold in *Skin, Sin and She*?"

House pulled out into traffic. His face appeared metallic, silver-plated. "What did you mean by that crack?" he demanded.

I settled back in the seat, unbuttoned the coat and let it slide all the way open. "I've been considering your proposition."

He had been drinking heavily and his words were

belligerent and thick. "What did that stupid Lieutenant try and prove in there?"

"Nothing. He was only curious to know who our friend was shooting at this afternoon. Can you blame him?"

He groped inside his flamboyant red-checked coat for a flask, then let it slip from his grasp. I caught it between my legs. He peered down at the oddly shaped birthmark inside my right thigh.

"Interesting phallic symbol," he said, returning his eyes to the traffic along Hollywood Boulevard.

"You're getting away from the subject, Mr. House."

"Am I? Open that up!"

"What?"

"Open the flask!" he ordered angrily. "I want a belt. Then I'm going to show you something."

I unscrewed the cap and handed him the metal container. He gulped at the liquid, took a deep breath and returned the flask.

"Okay," he said, after a moment, wheeling the Cadillac into a parking lot flanking a complex of buildings. He pulled up in front of a warehouse, marked:

HOLLYWOOD MAGAZINE SERVICE A Division of HH Ltd.

House switched off the ignition. He smiled thinly at me, a drunken stare in his eyes that was almost pathetic. His thin hands lifted the coat over my legs, patting the area where the birthmark had been exposed.

"So Lieutenant Drake Cutler is curious," he murmured. "So am I, baby. So am I."

The warehouse of Hollywood Magazine Service was a dank, dimly lighted building across an alley behind the offices. Thousands of bundles of magazines were stacked almost to the ceiling. At the rear, near a truck and train docking platform, House found a huge block of the latest issue of *Skin, Sin and She* which had just been shipped in from his Chicago printing plants. He

snipped one of the bundles with a pair of wire cutters and removed several copies. Then he led me to a long table where other magazines for tomorrow's distribution were already packaged for Hollywood-area dealers.

"I own this joint," he explained, tossing the copies on the table. "Nobody works this warehouse late Thursdays. They come in early Friday mornings for routing and truck delivery."

"Grim place," I said, staring around at the silent unending stacks. "What is it they always say, 'if only pages could talk'?"

He opened a copy of *Skin, Sin and She*. "Go ahead. Ask these pages some questions."

I bent over the magazine. The slick paper smelled of multi-colored inks. The double page spread that House had turned to was headlined:

EXPOSE! THE PRINCESS AND THE PROSTITUTE!

The story that followed was bylined: Nelson Cooper.

I glanced at the wiry publisher. Perspiration lined his lower eyelids. He was breathing hard.

"*The Nelson Cooper?*" I asked.

House nodded. "Last year's Pulitzer Prize winner. It cost me a half million just for publication rights. My Triple S Press was scheduled to release the book in the fall."

"*Was?*"

He tore nervously at his tie. "Don't ask *me* questions, Miss West. I'm asking *you!*"

Superimposed beneath the double page of large modern type was a faint pink-cast photographic reproduction of Princess Sonya taken when she was sixteen visiting Los Angeles. Her lusty bosom was half-exposed in one of the garish gowns she had worn at that time.

The article began:

On November 10, 1950, a baby girl was born in a remote isolated village high in the Himilon Mountains in Norway. Icy fjords and cavernous glaciers for hundreds of miles rang with the sound

*of church bells pealing from St. Mark's and Odd-
esy chapels. A Princess had been born. Twenty
years later she was dead.*

I blinked incredulously, staring up at House's hollow, sweat-rimmed eyes. "What did Cooper mean by this—"

House stopped my words with a sharp gesture. He turned the page. The text continued, but now a vivid full-color photograph of a voluptuous blonde stretched rawly across the right hand page. She was totally naked. Her ice-blond hair dangled crudely to her shoulders spilling partially over voluminous breasts that appeared bruised and finger-marred. An unlit cigarette hung from her mouth like a sodden shaft rammed between hateful snarled lips. The picture was cropped just beneath her stomach, but it was obvious her hands were doing something under the severed line that must have been far more ugly than the printed remains.

"My God," I murmured. "This couldn't be Sindy Steward?"

"You're asking questions again, Miss West!" House's words fell like knives. "I want answers."

He turned to the gatefold and opened it all the way. The full-color three-page ribbon lay fully thirty inches long on the wood table stabbing me with its contorted creation. It was the same ice-blond, hair twisting down her back, a naked-rear pose showing her astride a huge red skyrocket. Round, gelatinous buttocks spilled over the shaft that she straddled conveying the image of a voluptuous nude witch on a broomstick. She peered back at the camera, a defiant, sensual smile on her pasty white face. Her deep blue eyes were rimmed with dark circles of lust and over-indulgence. Between her toes were squeezed unlit firecrackers and between her up-turned breasts protruded a twisted Roman candle which resembled the shape of a male organ.

I beat the page with my fist. "When was this filthy shot taken?"

"Several years ago," House said. "When she was doing semi-pornographic stuff."

I studied the wicked expression, the hard mouth, dis-

solute body. "This isn't Sindy Steward. Not the Sindy who was playing the lead in *This Girl for Hire*." I hurled the magazine closed. "And if that's Princess Sonya then I'm taking the next canoe down the River Styx."

House backed against a stack of magazines, teeth raking at his lips. "*Are you positive?*"

"No, but—Where did you get these photographs?"

"From Nelson Cooper when he submitted the documentary."

"Didn't you check their authenticity?"

He groped at his eyelids. "No. Who doubts a Pulitzer Prize winner?" His head folded against his chest.

I stared up into the remote distances of the huge warehouse, now growing even darker and more cold with the advancing night. "So that's it. No wonder you didn't laugh when I made the joke about appearing on your gatefold. How many pictures of me did you take, Mr. House?"

His face lifted slowly, eyelids blinking. "When?"

"When your thugs brought me to your Malibu house. It is blackmail, isn't it? My testimony or—"

Houses's face turned crimson. "I—I didn't have any pictures taken of you."

"You lie and your guts are livid from the words. Who pays a half million dollars for an article and then is willing to shell out twice that much to prove it's a fraud?"

He gestured futilely at the magazine. "You said it yourself. That is not Sindy Steward. That is all I want you to prove."

"No," I said. "You're afraid of a lawsuit that might cost you a billion—and possibly your life. You almost lost that today. That's what it's all about."

He shook his head. "I could dump every copy I printed."

"I know a little about magazine publishing, Mr. House. You must have sold the foreign rights to this article. Plus copies of these color negs in order to recoup part of the half million you paid Cooper. There is where you are hung up, baby. Hung up big. Right?"

He whirled, pacing down a narrow aisle of magazines. "But the girl in those photographs is not Sindy Steward. You said so yourself."

"Why not put Cooper against the wall, instead of me?"

House stopped, pounding suddenly on a table. "He's disappeared. Apparently blown the country."

"And left you holding the bag."

"That's right."

"Then it could be a fraud."

He nodded, not looking at me.

"And what if somebody got to Cooper the same way they got to Sindy Steward?"

House cringed, tucked trembling fingers into a coat pocket and tossed me a piece of paper. "It doesn't make any difference," he whispered. "Read that."

I unfolded the missile he had thrown. The grotesque letters appeared to have been scrawled in blood:

**YOU SHALL DIE FOR WHAT YOU—AND
OTHERS HAVE PERPETRATED UPON A SCAN-
DINAVIAN DEITY. THERE IS NO ESCAPE. EX-
CEPT DEATH.**

A scraping sound somewhere in the impossibly dark recesses of the warehouse brought me stock still. I peered up. A man stood like a grotesque statue at the top of a pillar of magazines. He held a gun in one hand aimed precisely at me.

"Don't move, Miss West!" the man said, grinning, as he vaulted from a stack of magazines to my feet. **4** He was a handsome dog with flame red hair and green eyes. He clutched a Webley .38 that almost buried in my coat as he straightened. Then he stepped back, tossed me a garter holster with a pearl-handled .22 enclosed in its niche and said, "Okay, Mr. House. I'm convinced she's clean."

I blinked, studying this rugged six-foot man who bore a cocky resemblance to Errol Flynn. "Who the devil are you?" I demanded. "And where did you get my gun?"

"Name's Erik March," he said, shoving the .38 into a shoulder holster. "Corporation consultant/investigator. At the moment I work for Mr. House. I picked up your .22 during a quick search of your Alamitos Bay pent-house."

"Erik March?"

"Right."

"The grand-a-day man?"

He grinned. "Or, how now, green thou."

"With the crazy pad in Laguna Beach with Tarzan suits, swinging vines and a pool?"

"You're getting warm, sweetheart. The next stop is my tree house."

House moved forward. "Are you certain she can be trusted, Mr. March?"

"Yeah," March said. "She totals. No ifs, ands or buts." He glanced, grinning, at me. "For that last I may have to check her out a little more closely. But that's between Miss West and myself."

"What did you find, out on the cliff above my house?" the frail publisher demanded.

"A few footprints," March said, still looking at me. "The police went up there with hobnail boots and plodded around. They messed it up pretty good." He rubbed at a cleft in his chin. "Your life is definitely not a bowl of cherries, at the moment."

"What are you going to do about it?" House demanded.

March shrugged. "There are three men in this warehouse right now within inches of you, Mr. House."

The publisher whirled. The building seemed awesomely quiet, cold, drawing even darker.

"Where?"

March snapped his fingers. Three men appeared out of grim spaces between magazine stacks, guns drawn. They were an ugly bunch. One resembled a tank.

"These men will look after you tonight, Mr. House," March said.

"Then you *will* be at the party?" the publisher asked.

"Of course."

"And you will inform Miss West of all pertinent facts?"

March grinned, almost disrobing me with his smile. "I shall indeed inform Miss West of every pertinent fact available."

House moved away, the three men following closely. "I shall expect you *both* at the party tonight."

After a moment, a door clanked closed distantly. Then came that weird silence again. I tossed the garter holster in my fingers.

"You're a fast move, Mr. March," I said, "but I have the King."

"And I have the Queen. Shall we play the game out at my place in Laguna?"

"Not *that* fast, Mr. March."

"Okay," he said, resignedly. "There's a place nearby where we can have a drink and talk over our first move *together*. What do you say to that?"

I bent down, slipped my garter holster over my right ankle and drew it up to the thigh. I caught his gaze as I closed my coat. He had smoky-green eyes that were hell on cartwheels.

"I can't wander around forever in this coat and bathing suit," I said.

"A pity," he said, taking my arm.

We wound up at a place called The Morgue on Sunset Boulevard, a wild cellar bar with open upright caskets around the walls. The cocktail tables were replicas of old tombstones. The drinks were all named for fatal poisons and categorized on a chart over the bar. Bourbon was arsenic, gin was cyanide, Scotch was strychnine, vodka was sulfuric acid, and so on down the line.

March gestured at the drink list. "Name your poison," he said, grandiosely.

"Crazy." I shuddered. "How about a cyanide martini?"

He laughed. "The first time you order, a queasy feeling comes into your stomach like maybe you'll really get what you asked for. But after braving that first swallow it gets really groovy. Pretty soon you've really gone to hell with yourself and changed from timid Dr. Jekyll into a grinning Hyde and you've got poison coming at you from all directions. I've seen guys order neurotoxin strychnine with a sulfuric acid chaser, and if a few of those don't bring on rigor mortis, you're in the wrong morgue."

March ordered arsenic on the rocks. My olive was speared by a skull and crossbones. We sipped silently, each searching for an opening.

I finally said, "Is Homer House for real?"

"You mean about the million-dollar deal with you?" March grunted. "I doubt it. He's running scared. Doing crazy things. Like that kidnap of you this morning."

"Were those your men?"

"No. He ordered that on his own. When I found out I wanted to belt him. But he would have expired just from the doubling of my fist."

"This whole business is so bizarre."

March nodded, rattling the ice in his drink. "Look at it like this, Honey. The gal starring in your television show and Princess Sonya of Norway were one and the same, right?"

"So I'm told, from fingerprint comparisons."

"Okay. The woman posed in semi-pornographic shots in House's new issue of *Skin, Sin and She* may be the same person."

"I doubt that."

He rapped the bar with his fist. "Whether it's true or not doesn't make any difference now. Princess Sonya is dead. House can't get this through his head. You put your finger on it back there at the Hollywood Magazine Service. He did sell the foreign rights to both the article and photo negs. Some of these publications, specifically one in West Germany, are about to make general distributions in thirty-three countries. House has tried to stop them, but they refuse to comply."

"Ouch," I said. "So the threatening letter is truthfully no joke."

"He thought so, until this morning when that bullet almost got him. The note had shook him up, but not enough."

My stomach growled. "Hey," I said, grinning, "your poison on my empty tummy lining is either going to rot me out or get me up dancing to my own funeral dirge."

His nostrils flared playfully. "How about my tree house? It's only four feet off the ground, but it's a great place for four feet—dancing or otherwise."

I felt dizzy from the martini, only not too dizzy to

know what he had on his mind. "I thought we were invited to a party tonight?"

March glanced at his watch. "We are. That's six to seven hours away. One of House's famed *Midnight Masquerades*." He got up from his stool. "I'll tell you what we'll do. I have all of the original transparencies of the supposed Princess at my place in Laguna. Let's drive there. I'll charcoal-broil some steaks, and we'll screen the photos and see if you can make a positive identification."

"Mr. March, are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes?"

"Not wool, not cotton, not silk. I wouldn't want one inch of you covered by anything."

I chuckled lowly, sliding off my stool. "You're a naughty boy, Mr. March." I wondered about his denial that those were his confederates who kidnaped me. Wondered, too, about possible photographs taken of me while I was unconscious. Homer House had seemed unusually familiar with the birthmark inside my thigh. The million-dollar proposition still sounded like blackmail. And Mr. Erik March, an admitted employee of Homer House, was playing it too frank and earnest for my money, which I had received none of so far.

"Okay," I said, coyly. "For the next twenty-four hours I am an item on your expense account. Honey West: one charcoal-broiled dinner, *and* one thousand dollars."

March whistled lowly. "Holy French onions, you really come expensive!"

"You know it, baby."

When we were seated inside his all-white Chrysler convertible, he said, "Okay, you've got a deal. The part tonight *won't* be any picnic."

I winked mischievously. "So, we'll have our own picnic, right?"

He started the engine. "Are you trying to pull the wool over my eyes, Miss West?"

"Not wool, not cotton, not silk," I mocked lightly.

March gripped the wheel, sending the car shooting out into traffic. "You've got more than a deal, baby."

We stopped en route at the studio to pick up my wet clothes that I had stripped off shortly before the murder of Sindy Steward. Erik waited in the car while I rummaged through Stage Six for my wild "High Yeller" outfit. The knit micro-miniskirt, ribbed turtleneck sweater and thigh-high python boots were crazy enough for even a masquerade party.

Rod Mayberry was hunched in a chair at the far end of the building, puffing silently on a cigar, a lonely figure in the vast expanse of stage. The sailor hat was tugged grimly over his bald head and his haggard face showed he probably hadn't slept a wink since the tragic occurrence.

I walked over to him, lifting his chin with my hands. "I'm sorry, Rod."

He exhaled lowly. "So am I, Honey. More than you could ever know."

"We're not on the air yet with the show. We can get another star."

His puffed eyelids squeezed out a few uncontrollable tears. He swallowed contortedly. "Not like Sindy. There'll never be another like her."

I had heard there was something going on between Sindy and Rod, but in Hollywood talk is cheap and love expensive. I rather doubted if Sindy ever cared about Rod. He had been instrumental in hiring her for the role. The payoff is what's really wrong with this false-front world. Nobody gives. Everybody takes. In the long run ninety percent of them wind up paying the Devil for the bit of hell they scratch out for themselves.

Rod brushed at his cheeks. "If I could find him, I'd kill him with my bare hands," he whispered in his throat.

I kissed his forehead. "Don't let it get you, Rod, please."

The afternoon *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* was

scattered at his feet. A banner front page headline blared:

MURDERED TV STARLET IS MISSING ROYALTY

Princess, prostitute, Private Eye!

New Issue of Man's Mag Tells All

I picked up the mangled page and tucked it under my arm along with my yellow outfit. Outside it was beginning to rain again and the skies over the back lot at International Film City were not only black but laden with darts of lightning. Thunder rumbled as I climbed inside March's car.

The handsome redhead commented on the news story as we drove through a heavy downpour to Laguna Beach.

"This was inevitable, Honey," March said, keeping his eyes on the rain-swept freeway. "The truth about the magazine article had to come out somehow. When Sindy Steward was murdered the dam broke."

"Erik, the director-producer, Rod Mayberry, was in tears."

"A lot of people are going to be in tears before this is over, sweetheart." March grimaced. "Fiction oftentimes is more deadly than fact. If Pulitzer Prize winner Nelson Cooper created this monster out of his own imagination then he is far more guilty than the man who actually squeezed that trigger."

"And what if it's true?"

"Let's wait until you scan the transparencies."

We rode in silence for a while; lightning creasing the sky around us, thunder crashing. The sound of it rattled something loose in my mind. How did we know for certain the killer was not after me? Making a mistake the first time and missing the second? House's threat note could be a fake. I had gone through the scene with Sindy moments before the fatal shooting. With darkness and rain falling and both of us blonde and wearing snakeskin coats how could anyone be absolutely sure they had the right person in the cross hairs? We had

stood together under the lights, a lot of people clustered around us. We had both run through the scene individually several times. How could a killer, enmeshed in mud and trees more than five hundred yards away on a lonely hill, know the difference? This morning the bullet missed me by a hair's breadth. Homer House *had* dropped miraculously fast. Until now I had fancied the idea that the bullet had narrowly brushed him. But was that true? Had it actually been aimed at me?

We turned off onto the Laguna Canyon Road, windshield wipers cutting the downpour. The rain increased as we drove into the hills near the seacoast and March was forced to slow his convertible almost to a crawl.

He suddenly turned to me. "One thing I neglected to mention, Hcney. I broke into Sindy Steward's Hollywood apartment last night—before the police arrived."

"You promised no wool, Mr. March."

He nodded. "That's right. And this is for real. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"It's off Hollywood Boulevard. Attractive place. Filled with white statuary, copies of Picasso, wall-to-wall chartreuse carpeting, books, TV scripts, a few bottles of good French wines, pink cigarettes—" He paused.

"So?"

Rain beat on the windshield furiously. "So, I searched for evidence of her past. I couldn't find any. Not one photograph, not one letter, not one Scandinavian painting or piece of sculpture. There was nothing out of the ordinary that would not stamp her as a typical up-and-coming American TV starlet with fair taste, ambition and drive. There were a few network blurbs on the show lying about, stills of her taken on the sound stage, even a photograph of you in your snakeskin coat obviously taken on the set sometime earlier."

I peered at him, shifting uncomfortably in the bucket seat. "What are you getting at, Mr. March?"

He cleared his throat. "Three detailed maps were spread out on her queen-sized bed. One was of San

Diego, one of Southern Nevada and the other of San Francisco. Everything was so orderly, spotless, perfect that this one note of disarray sort of caught me for some reason. I don't know why."

"San Diego, southern Nevada and San Francisco?"

"Were you planning to do location shooting for the TV series in those areas?"

"No. The show had a Los Angeles background and everything developed to this point was to be filmed here."

"Was she considering a vacation?"

"Not possibly," I said. "The schedule was running six days a week. Sometimes even seven. She couldn't have got away, even for a few hours."

March gestured at the back seat. "I shouldn't have taken them, but I did. There are some unusual red-crayon markings on them. Was she a good swimmer?"

I laughed. "No. In fact, Sindy was terribly afraid of water. We had to shoot several scenes in the back-lot tank with a double because she wouldn't go near the water."

Erik March brought the maps into his Laguna Beach home after we arrived. He owned a triple-decked fabulous hillside mansion with white shag carpeting, floor-to-ceiling windows, five bedrooms, five baths and three fireplaces. The storm had grown new teeth and wind now drove rain against the eaves, windows and roof with a passionate fury. He lit a fire in the main living room and spread the maps out on the floor in front of the hearth.

Then he removed his coat and said, "This is no weather for man, beast or charcoal broiling. So, how about some toasted cheese sandwiches à la March on the waffle iron—and a little red wine?"

"Piker!" I yelped, rubbing my stomach. "You're the kind of guy who asks a dying man in the desert if he'd like a teaspoon of water."

"See how I am," he said, ruffling my damp hair. "I'd

rather forget the sandwiches and just serve the wine, but you've got my sympathy."

I stuck my tongue out at him. "You mean your *number*. One more minute and I'll call Pizza Man. *He* delivers!"

His brows lowered dramatically. "You certainly know how to hurt a chef, don't you?"

I bent over the maps as he disappeared into the kitchen. "Where are these markings you were talking about?"

His voice drifted back. "For instance, look at southern Nevada. Locate Las Vegas, then trace your finger over to Hoover Dam. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Notice those two red dots? One penciled in the southern end of Lake Mead and the other at the dam site?"

I answered "Yes."

"Now refer to the San Diego area map. Ever been to the Kona Kai Club, the Half Moon Inn or the Bali Hai on Shelter Island?"

"Of course," I said, locating the finger-like peninsula which juts out along San Diego Bay.

He continued, "All right. Look opposite, across the harbor, at another mark made along the shoreline of the naval air station."

"Got it."

"Then farther south to the San Diego-Coronado bridge, about mid-span." He suddenly yelped as some pans went crashing.

"Some chef," I called to him. "You already Indian gave on those charcoal steaks. Maybe I'd better have a signature or a handshake on that one grand deal."

His face poked around a corner, grinning. "Okay, call the Pizza Man. See if he can do better with a *check-book*."

"Okay, okay. A broken-fingered chef is better than none," I said chidingly. "I hope."

"I thought I'd catch you talking out the other side of

your mouth." He disappeared again. "Did you find that mark on the bridge?"

"Yes. What do these things mean?"

"That's what I'm asking you, Honey. I thought maybe you were doing location shooting in these areas. Or that Sindy Stewart was planning some sight-seeing trips. How do you like your cheese sandwiches?"

"With cheese."

"Funneee—"

"What's with the San Francisco map?" I asked.

"Take a look at the Golden Gate Bridge!" he yelled, trying to talk above the clatter of rain.

I pinpointed the famed span which stretches across the opening into San Francisco Bay. Another red dot was chiseled into the center of the mile-long bridge.

"I have it."

"Okay," he answered. "Swing south to the city of San Francisco, pass Fisherman's Wharf, until you almost reach the Bay bridge. Got that?"

I found another red mark along the bay-front docks. "Looks like the indication for a ship debarkation point like the one marked at the end of Coronado Island."

"That's what I thought. But you contend nothing was planned at any of these three areas for your television show."

"Absolutely."

"Oh, it's probably nothing," he said, returning to the living room. "The maps were spread on her bed, and I am continually fascinated by things spread on beds."

"I'll bet you are."

He suddenly lifted me into his arms. "The tree house awaits."

"Erik!" I protested. "It's raining—and what about the cheese sandwiches? They'll be as hard as your—head!"

"Don't worry, we'll eat," he said, kissing my cheek.

"Have you been out there sampling the cooking sherry? Come on, we ought to concentrate on these red dots."

He winked mischievously. "The maps have hives."

"Be serious."

"I am." He carried me down a circular staircase to a patio below. The wind buffeted us wildly. Banana leaves thrashed. He staggered as he took me to a quaint bamboo-thatched hut near his tree-enclosed pool area. He climbed a short ladder and deposited me inside on a leopard couch. We were both drenched.

He lit a candle, then crossed to a bar and grasped a bottle of Chablis from a shelf. "Noah never had it so good," he said, yanking out the cork.

Suddenly wine, blood, fire and hell swept through the tree house. Erik dropped like a clock as the bottle of Chablis sprayed over him, against the walls, me, the bar. I leaped to my feet, but it was too late.

Being tipsy in a four-foot-high treehouse with the wind and rain blowing is wild. Add an explosive gunshot and it may *blow* your mind. **5**

It blew the candle and Erik.

Me? I was scrambling for cover when a thin male voice stopped the action. He was a vague wet shadow in the darkness.

"Where are they, Miss West?"

"Where are what?"

"The maps."

"Oh, I see, you're lost," I said, trying to feel around for Erik. "Well, there's a Texaco station down on the corner—"

"You know what maps I'm talking about!" he growled.

Thunder rattled menacingly outside, shaking the tree house. His voice was deceptively low, possibly faked. I figured he couldn't see me any better than I could him, so the less I said the better.

"I am losing my patience, Miss West. Speak up!"

Erik March lay in a corner atop broken glass and a river of something sticky. I hurled a shard of the Chablis bottle blindly. It struck a wall.

"Don't play the fox with me, Miss West. I'll as soon kill you if you try any games."

I could tell he was about two beats from pulling the trigger. He moved toward me.

"The maps are in the house," I said. "On the floor near the living-room fireplace."

He grunted. **"I would strongly advise you, Miss West, to keep your pretty nose out of this or you will get what your friend got in triplicate."**

His shadow disintegrated in the doorway, vanishing in the murky downpour.

I found the candle and relit its wick. Eerie tapering fingers spread out across the treehouse illuminating Erik's sprawled red-spattered figure. I knelt beside him and felt his pulse. He was still ticking! When I rolled him over he opened his eyes and blinked up at me. His lids were sticky from Chablis and blood. His forehead had minor cuts from flying glass.

"What happened?" he questioned lowly.

"Your ark was just blown right out from under you, Captain Noah."

"I remember hearing a shot and that's all," he muttered.

"The little old mapmaker showed," I said. "He wanted his goodies back. Are you all right?"

He felt around. **"I think so. When I dove for cover I must have hit my head on the corner of the bar. Holy French onions, am I going to have a goose egg. Where'd he go?"**

I helped him to his feet. **"The house to get the maps."**

Erik staggered to the tree house door. I seized his arm. **"Wait a minute, you're in no shape to drive."**

He tried to wrench free. **"If he finds those maps we may never know what they're all about!"**

"Weren't the red marks all there were to them?"

Erik shook his head dismally. **"No! There were some obscure figures on the front side of all three. Some sort of weird algebra. I never did understand what the hell it meant."**

We bolted for the house. I guided Erik through the blinding night and as we reached the lower entry the detonation of a powerful automobile engine and the screech of tires erupted on the road. Muddy wet tracks led us to the spot where we had left the maps. They were gone.

Erik slumped on a bar stool, mopping his cut forehead. "Well, that's that."

"Not exactly," I said. "We now know the maps do signify an important facet of this case—and somebody wanted them bad enough to come after them."

"That's pretty obvious, Honey. But it ain't going to get us back those figures."

"Can't you remember any of them?"

His face darkened. "Higher math was never my bag. Pi square to the eighth and all that kind of jazz just didn't go with me. I should have copied them down, but at the time—Did you get any sort of look at this guy?"

"No." I traced the muddy footprints to the front door. Just inside the stained panel I spotted a crumpled white object on the tiled entry. It turned out to be an engraved business card. The embossed letters read: DERFA, Box 666, Las Vegas, Nevada.

I asked Erik if he'd ever seen the card before. His answer was an abrupt negative roar as he snatched the card from my grasp. "The S.O.B. must have dropped it when he shoved the maps in his pockets."

"You've heard of DERFA?" I demanded.

"No!" he said.

"Do Everything Right For America."

"An organization?"

"You might call it that," I said, forcing the words harshly. "A doll named Beautia heads it—or did. Still no rings?"

"Sounds Dick Tracyish and way out. But nothing."

I added, "It's a Commie group. Nelson Cooper was at one time DERFA's Public Relations Director."

"Now I'm beginning to read," he said. "Go ahead."

"I investigated them about a year ago for a government organization I was working for. At that time no-

body knew exactly what the group stood for, except campus unrest and a few broken windows. The fact that a beautiful broad headed the group flipped my superiors. So, they tagged me to go in and match wits."

"Match what?" Erik said, surveying my wet blouse. "That woman's liberation movement has got a lot going for it."

"DERFA was headquartered in San Diego at that time. A little old broken-down office off 13th street, which looked like it belonged in Tijuana. There was an American flag hanging outside, portraits of Washington and Lincoln blown up on the walls inside, and two old baggy dames opening a pile of envelopes containing one-dollar bills, fives, tens—"

Lightning ripped the night sky, blotting out my words as a roar of thunder rattled the windows.

"Go on," Erik said, after a moment.

"Well, I went in and asked for this Beautia. These old dolls said she was out on a lecture tour. They said the DERFA program was based on the government's desire for good American health and vitality. The two of them had about as much zip in them as a couple of worn-out corsets."

"Now you ring," Erik said. "ANYH. America Needs Your Health. Box 1776, Philadelphia, Pa."

"Right. That was a sister branch. You've probably read some of their ads in the classified."

He chuckled lowly. "But I thought it was a gag. Who's going to send money for a health program that isn't even explained?"

"You'd be surprised. There is no law against asking people for money, *if* you don't promise anything. That's exactly what DERFA and ANYH have done."

Erik studied the business card I'd found. "Somebody would have to be pretty damned stupid to drop something like this."

"He had a clear shot at you—and missed."

"Maybe—deliberately." He flicked the card. "With this, too."

"It's a beginning," I said. "We just might get a lead

on Nelson Cooper through some of these former connections. There was also a cat in the San Diego org they called Mr. Fierce."

"He sounds jolly."

"I never met him. Supposed to be over two hundred pounds of solid steel. He fronted for the health program. A rich man's Charles Atlas. Exercise gimmicks, muscle toners, skin creams, the works. He split when he discovered he wasn't too musclebound to pocket a big chunk of that *free* money."

"Also wealthy-old-lady bait?"

"Right. Lured kids, love-starved wives and homosexuals."

"Mr. Fierce sounds like the all-American boy," Erik mused. "And what's this Beautia like? Five-foot-two, red-white and blue?"

"She never showed her colors or her face. Nobody seems to know what she looks like and if they do they aren't telling." I examined his forehead cuts. "It's a wonder a piece of that Chablis bottle didn't hit you in the eye."

He grinned broadly. "Every good Irish-Italian has four-leaf clovers floating in his wine bottle." His arms snaked around my waist. "What do you say we take *off* where we left *up*—I mean—"

I traced his nose with an index finger. "Don't let all this pasta fazoole you."

He kissed me lightly. "And don't kid me. I'm the guy who carried you soaking wet to the tree house."

"Down, boy. We do have a party to attend, sí?"

He snapped his fingers. "Holy Japanese jumpsuits! Hell, and we *both* need costumes!"

"I have my *High Yeller* outfit. What's the occasion?"

"Tenth anniversary of *Skin, Sin and She*." Erik whistled. "It should be wild. In fact, Honey, don't be surprised if a few of Homer House's gatefold girls show up *au naturel*."

"What about you?"

He gave my behind a gentle pat. "I'll go as a pair of big hands!"

"Seriously, Erik, a couple of guys are liable to show looking like Kirk Douglas in *The Vikings* and stick a shiv in our publisher friend. These Scandinavians are hot-blooded and long-knived."

The husky, red-haired corporation consultant/investigator pursed his lips and said, "Okay, we assume Sindy Stewart, née Princess Sonya, was gunned down because she was in possession of three maps—and probably knew what those figures and dots meant."

I nodded.

"So all we have to do is find out what the stupid maps mean, where the devil Nelson Cooper is holed up—and who the bloody damn is taking potshots at Homer House. Simple?"

"Yeah," I said, "like falling off a log—balanced on the nose of King Kong on the top of the Empire State Building."

He encircled my face with his hands. "That's it! Fay Wray is going to live again!" he said dramatically. "Robert Armstrong and Bruce Cabot! Kong Island and the wall! Only this time Fay will really drive that big monkey ape!"

Homer House's unbelievable Hollywood mansion resembled a massive alien flying saucer perched high on a vast hill overlooking the valley to the North, the city to the East, and the ocean to the South and the brooding dark mountains to the West. It was a three-story circular merry-go-round, all glass and aluminum and revolving at a speed of five feet every minute, traveling a complete circumference in two hours. A peripheral journey of 600 feet. The central cone of the "saucer" contained an elevator which traversed all three floors, aptly dubbed: 1st—Skin, 2nd—Sin, and 3rd—She. The lower area contained an indoor swimming pool, sauna bath, massage parlor, sun and game rooms. The middle floor was a wild array of multi-colored bedrooms and baths—ten of each. On the top level, the mansion sported a huge reception room, dining and living rooms faced by massive fireplaces, an open-air "saucer-top" penthouse

crowning the ultra-spectacular building with bar, bandstand (large enough for a 20-piece orchestra) and an under-the-stars dance floor. Homer House's private parking lot alone could hold 300 cars, and if you had to wait, cocktails were served to your car by scantily clad beauties built big enough to carry the trays on their bosoms.

We didn't have to spend any time out in the parking lot. In fact, people waiting for the elevator got out of our way in a hurry. Erik had had me strip to the buffy and wrap myself in a gauzy piece of pink silk that covered everything, but didn't. Then this red-headed kook hopped into a grotesque gorilla suit he keeps around his Laguna Beach pad to scare visiting Fay Wrays.

Erik carried me to the top floor, where he scared hell out of several hundred costumed guests. He swung from the chandeliers, wrestled with a couple of prehistoric monsters and then dragged me to the top of the "saucer," threatening to climb a flagpole before I got him calmed down.

I hustled him into a quiet corner and said, "How are we going to help Homer House with *you* putting on the floor show?"

He laughed under the gorilla hood. "If you think I went ape you should have caught the eyeballs on a couple of those guys when they glommed onto you. They swallowed everything *but* their bubble gum."

"I told you this was a nutty idea," I said.

"Sexy, not nutty." Erik's gaze roamed over my costume. "Honey, you are built like a brick—Empire State Building."

"Thank you—I think. Now let's get to work, hmmm? All you've done for your 'thou' today is monkey around."

"Funn—neee."

We found House down in the massage parlor having the kinks hammered out of his back by a big Swedish-looking blonde. A couple of Erik's boys were about to put an "arm" on the redhead when he dropped his gorilla hood and grinned.

"Nice work, boys. How's it going, Mr. House?"

The publisher groaned. "What the hell do you care? It's my hide, not yours."

"Any more threat notes?"

"Not yet!" House sounded in a mood to chew out a few tailbones. He chewed on a pipe, instead, and swigged at a bottle of pop.

"Well, don't feel too lonesome," Erik said. "A character dropped around my Laguna place tonight and took a shot at *me*."

House spat, "Too bad he didn't get you! Did you catch him—of course not!" He shot an angry glower at me. "You and Miss West were probably too busy fooling around—with her costume!"

Erik continued, "He did leave his calling card. Do DERFA or ANYH mean anything to you, Mr. House?"

A flash of arrogance showed in the wiry publisher's eyes. "Are you by any chance trying to put me on, March?"

The redhead was getting hot under the collar, but he managed to keep his voice controlled. "No, sir."

House shook his head regretfully. "Aren't you aware that I did a gatefold on Beautia a couple of years ago—the Commie broad who heads those two organizations?"

Erik hurled a quick glance at me. "I must have missed that issue. What does she look like, Mr. House?"

The publisher's voice grew brittlely hostile. "How the hell do I know? She wore a mask. We only ran the damned spread because she was a controversial oddity. And because—" he issued a stilted laugh.

"Because what?"

"—she's flat-chested."

Erik said, "Thought you went in for bovine boobs in your mag?"

"We do," House returned quickly. "But there was something else physically odd about Miss Beautia."

Another dart of inquiry from Erik as he asked, "Like what?"

House pulled himself up from the massage table and grumbled, "Pick up a back issue sometime and find out for yourself. Now you and Miss West get the hell out of here! I have to dress for my party."

Erik and I stopped at the indoor swimming pool for a brief conference. The SSS girls bouncing around in the water were as *brief* as you could get. They were squealing and frolicking for a group of photographers, who kept running from side to side hoping to immortalize a few curvaceous fronts and backs. The girls were more than happy to oblige.

I asked Erik, "House said, quote, 'there was something else physically odd about Miss Beautia.' What's your guess?"

The handsome redhead yanked his gaze away from the cavorting nudies and wryly speculated, "She's a man."

"*Skin, Sin and She* gets pretty weird but doesn't go that route, baby."

Erik tossed his gorilla hood on a table and shrugged. "She's an ape?"

"Seriously."

"Well, what the hell could it be, Honey?" he demanded darkly. "She was wearing a mask so it probably isn't a mustache or a beard. Maybe she's tattooed from shoulder to toe."

"That's a thought."

"Maybe she's got freckles on her but—she's cute."

I smiled apologetically. "You and Milton Berle share the same joke file?"

Erik banged the table angrily. "Why couldn't the little bastard just tell us what her physical dealiebob is, instead of hanging us up like this?"

I patted his cheek. "He wants you to earn your money."

A plastic beach ball landed in Erik's lap. Before he could even turn and see where the object came from a well-constructed, cute little brunette scooped it into her lithe dripping arms, kissed his cheek and bubbled in a Southern accent, "Oh, you great big beautiful darlin' "

—a squeaky pause as she surveyed his costume—then she added, “hairy sweetheart!” She bounced away, her bare fanny swaying in the most provocative manner.

Erik gulped. “I’m earning. I’m earning.”

We decided to split up and spend about an hour casing the place separately. Obviously Erik had some *female* casing in mind, not to mention the bouncing brunette.

I took the elevator to the top floor and sampled some Bombay on the rocks. Most of the costumes were fairly typical: sheiks, genies, clowns, cartoon cartoons—even devils.

One of these, a broad-shouldered fellow in an all-red outfit equipped with horns, mask and forked tail, asked me to dance.

We were whirling around the open-air floor when he suddenly belched forth with a chilling cackle. Then a bright baritone voice broke from beneath the mask, “Hello, Honey West! This is a voice from your passionate past.”

I stopped. “Well, if you really are the devil, I hope it’s not from my fatalistic future.”

He laughed warmly. “You must remember me. The biggest hellion of Long Beach Poly. We went to high school together. You couldn’t possibly forget the night I chased you up and down Signal Hill—”

I choked, “Not the Devil himself—?” I recalled too well the rugged flame-haired Poly halfback known for his vim, vigor and viciousness. Both on the football field and off, this big bear liked to crush ribs. A couple of mine were still not right since the night he dated me. “—Dick Devil!”

“Roger dodger!” He lifted me off my feet and all hell broke loose with my pink silk wrapper. “Honey bunny, Honey West!” he cried. “Baby, I’ve read all about you. Only in Hollywood do they have drive-in brothels, gold-leaved johns in the telephone booths—and voluptuous female dicks!”

People were staring in our direction, eyeballs pop-

ping at the sight of my bosoms popping from under the thin fabric.

"Dick, please—"

He let me down and said, "Have you heard about my new hotel, Honey?"

I got myself back in business and asked, "What new hotel?"

He lead me to the bar and ordered a round of martinis. "Hottest new place on the Las Vegas strip. Devil's Inferno."

I had read about the opening of a new 50-million dollar hotel-casino in some of the recent major magazines, but hadn't really paid attention to the particulars. "That's yours?"

"Hot damn right sweetheart!" the red-suited gargantuan roared.

He ripped off his headpiece. Ten years had made very little change. Dick Devil was a bit heavier, now around 260 pounds, and his curly red hair had thinned slightly and turned more carrot color. He still had those mischievous brown eyes. His nose, broken and bent many times from football and sticking it into other people's business, was spattered with freckles and resembled an overripe banana.

Devil grabbed me in that famous bearhug again and said, "My Lordy, Lordy, Honey Bunny, you're more ravishing now than you were at Poly high. There ought to be a law passed against you. If I were the local sheriff I'd haul you in."

"Which jail?" I asked chidingly.

"Jail, *hell!* I'm talking about that piece I own of Hades. Wait until you see it, Honey. You'll flip. Caesar's Palace has some of the most exotic landscaping and fountains in the world. The Landmark is a giant electrified mushroom in the sky. The International is a multi-storied fleur-de-lis erected in the middle of the desert. But the Inferno is really Las Vegas. Explosive, dynamic, unbelievable." He gripped my hands hard. "Hey, why not fly over this weekend and be my guest for a couple of days?"

I thought quickly about DERFA, Las Vegas, and the map depicting southern Nevada and Hoover Dam that Erik had found in Sindy Stewart's apartment.

I asked, "Dick, have you ever heard of a woman called Beautia?"

His big face lit up. "Heard of her? Are you kidding me? She's Rex Champion's wife!"

"Who?"

"Where the hell have you been, Honey?" Devil demanded, sipping at his drink.

I spread out my hands. "To tell you the truth I've been in Europe for a while—on business."

Dick said, frowning slightly, "You do remember Rex Champion? He was our star basketball player at Poly. Speech winner, senior class president. Big tall fellow with sandy hair"—Devil's face darkened—"and a black heart!"

Suddenly Homer House's huge flying saucer-like home seemed about to take off for the stratosphere. The entire foundation shook, rattled, quaked. Dick Devil and I were pitched against the bar. Dancers staggered, screamed. Orchestra members leaped to their feet, dropping instruments. The entire three-story building wobbled perilously on its mechanical axis—and then, *boom!* The elevator cage shot out of the conical center of the structure as if it had been launched from a pad at Cape Kennedy. Glass, aluminum, steel and blue flame burst into the dark sky. They rose above the hills in a shattering phosphorescent roar and then fell back like the dying remains of a skyrocket into the screaming, shuddering chaos below.

I bumped into Erik March, half in and out of his gorilla suit, stumbling through a third-floor torrent of hysterical people trying to find a way out. There were no lights and the smell of smoke lay heavy in the air. **6**

Somebody screamed, "Another earthquake!"

"What's happened?" I demanded of March.

"Somebody planted a bomb in the elevator shaft!" the redhead yelled. "They must have got House. He was just on his way up to make a grand entrance. I was on the intercom to the bottom floor when the blast came."

We calmed most of the guests on the upper story and talked the orchestra into playing something soothing.

"Shades of the *Titanic*!" Erik cursed.

We found an emergency "fireman's pole" secreted behind a panel and slid down to the first floor. Dick Devil followed.

Surprisingly enough, the elevator shaft was the only major area of damage. Apparently the outer doors had already closed when the bomb exploded and the cage itself just went straight out the roof. For a moment we figured it must have been a tumultous final "thirty" for the nudie mag publisher.

He was waiting for us in his private quarters beside the indoor swimming pool. His face was a whitewash of fear and fury. He wore a copy of the huge red-velvet coat of King Henry the Eighth. His jeweled crown was askew and his eyes blazed.

"Where the hell were you, March?" House screamed suspiciously.

Erik leered at him, lips contorted. "I was waiting upstairs for you—your *worse*-ship. I thought perhaps you were on Mars by now."

House's eyelids narrowed with fury. "That's where you would like to see me—all of you!" He wiped trembling fingers across his cheeks. "At the last moment—I realized I forgot my Henry the Eighth beard—and I jumped out of the elevator—just as the doors closed!" He rose with a furious burst. "And then *boom!*"

"Were you alone, Mr. House?"

"What difference does that make?" the publisher began running around the room, banging on the walls.

Lieutenant Joe Steel of L.A.'s Special Squad came sauntering in, a man in his early fifties: a cross between Chester Morris, the actor, and Chesterfield, the cigarette. Steel was as thin as a rail, but his face was handsome, intent and full of fire. He had two other plainclothesmen with him, neither handsome, intent or full of anything, except maybe beans.

"Having a little trouble?" Steel said.

"No!" Erik fired back. "We were in the middle of a sermon when the organ blew up. Lieutenant, how is it you always arrive before the ambulance? Are you a pyromaniac or what?"

"I have no idea," Steel said, removing his crumpled hat and bowing to me. "I was a Catholic for a while and then—Good evening, Miss West. What's been happening with our favorite private parts—excuse me—eye?"

House suddenly cried, "Lieutenant, arrest all of these people on suspicion of murder and arson!"

One of Steel's men came in, nodded at the gray-haired officer and reported, "No fatalities or serious in-

juries, sir. Apparently major debris from the elevator fell harmlessly on the side of the hill."

"Thank you, Roberts," Steel said. He glanced at House. "What were those charges again?"

"Somebody is out to kill me!" House protested wildly. "I want everybody arrested!"

"Everybody who?" Steel said. "Unless you produce some positive evidence against a person or persons, Mr. House, I'll have to return to ambulance chasing and let the county boys take care of this."

House unleashed fierce, glowering looks at Erik and me. "All right! You two are fired. Permanently! Irrevocably! Understood?"

Erik laughed. "You can't fire me. I already quit!"

"But—but you can't quit!" House stammered.

"Why not?"

"Because I need you!"

"But you just said—"

"Don't listen to what I say," the distraught publisher cried. "I've told you that before!"

Lieutenant Steel grunted. "'Pears to me, Mr. House, you *need* a little protection. That elevator ride would have been a humdinger—but your last."

The party—like the elevator—broke up quickly. We sent House to a nearby hospital to settle his nerves, then checked the elevator shaft. Someone had rigged a dynamite charge to the main-control cables, and hooked it to a special switch in the cage used only by the publisher to notify servants of his whereabouts in the three-story mansion. House's decision to step out of the elevator after he flicked this switch saved his life. When the doors closed behind him, the detonator pushed the lifting arm propelling the cage like a slingshot into ear-splitting orbit.

Erik observed, "The bomber had to know House had a private switch to maneuver the elevator—and that he was planning a grand entrance by himself."

Steel rounded up the servants while Erik, Dick Devil

and I walked up the hill to investigate the cage wreckage. There wasn't much left. I brought up Beautia again.

Devil laughed. "I guess this little accident kind of *broke up* that conversation, too."

At my request, Dick explained to Erik that Beautia was married to an old high school friend of ours, Rex Champion.

The redhead asked, "Isn't Champion opening a revolutionary type of hotel out near Vegas?"

"Roger dodger," Devil quipped. "Dirty bastard. Rex and I were the best of friends through school. In fact, we made a small fortune together after graduation. But he had a financial turn for the worse and dropped out. Now he's stabbing me in the back with this damn fool Atlantis of his. Can you imagine building a forty million dollar hotel-casino clear out at Lake Mead—with some of my own money? He's got to be crazy!"

"When does this—this Atlantis open?" Erik shot a quick look at me.

"Tomorrow night."

I said, "Dick, how long have Rex and Beautia been married?"

Devil scratched his head. "Damned if I know. They may just be living together. Isn't that the way to do it these days?"

I pursued the opening. "What does she look like, Dick?"

He smiled apologetically. "To tell you the truth I've never seen her. Talked with her by phone several times. She's some kind of weirdo. Hides behind locked doors like Howard Hughes. Too bad. If she's anything like her voice she must be a knockout."

I glanced at Erik, thinking of DERFA. "I'll bet."

Devil opened his arms, imploringly. "How about accepting my invitation, Honey. Come on out for a few days. We'll catch Rex's opening tomorrow night. Kick up our heels. Maybe even meet Beautia face to face. What do you say? I'll have a private plane pick you up at Long Beach airfield at ten tomorrow morning."

Erik nodded yes. I shook my head with a determined no.

Devil said, "That's the greatest two-headed answer I've ever seen. What is he, your nursemaid?"

I cocked an eyebrow at the redheaded corporation consultant/investigator. "If I stick around him very long he may wind up being my *hearsemaid*."

Aboard Dick Devil's Lear jet the following morning, I went back over what Erik March pounded into my head after the husky man in the red suit drove off in his fire-engine-red convertible.

"This is a great break, Honey!" the handsome 'thou a day' man said.

"You are so right, Mr. Barnum and Bailey," I hissed. "Ever wrestle with a bear? You are literally tossing me into his cage."

"You can handle Devil."

I smiled sweetly. "There is no guarantee on the package—but I'll try."

"Honey—get to Beautia—somehow. Find out what those red marks mean around the map of Hoover Dam. Find out, too, how this all connects with the murder of Sindy Stewart."

"Is that *all*—sir?"

"I'll be in San Diego. Vacation Village. If you need me."

"What are you going to be doing there? Getting a wild tan?"

He winked. "Close. A wild man—Mr. Fierce!"

Now, with the jet winging through cool blue skies, I had to admit I was getting the better of it. Las Vegas carried an exciting ring when you visualized the well-heeled crowds around gaming tables, and the bright gaiety of the fabulous stage shows. When the rest of the United States was dark and asleep, Las Vegas, like a Fourth of July firework spectacular, erupted into an atomic mushroom of neon, headlights and sparkling jewels.

Dick Devil was waiting at McCarran Field when his

plane landed. He grabbed me in that famous bearhug, spun me around his shoulders and practically shoved my miniskirt up my Adam's apple. I was wearing an all-white mod outfit with midriff portholes and boots.

"Whooooeeeee!" he cried, stopping the whole air terminal in its tracks. "Devil's *heavenly angel* has done arrived! Pipe her aboard, mates!"

Two guys with trumpets stepped forward and blew a few electrifying blasts, then disappeared in the crowd. A few people thought we were Liz Taylor and Richard Burton wearing wigs. A couple of others thought we were just plain nuts.

As Devil was carrying me out of the terminal, I noticed two men following us. One was a sinister-looking bristly Mexican hog. The other was blond and slender and had a pinch-nosed European look.

"Who are they?" I asked. "Your bodyguards?"

Devil followed my gaze, then shook his head, grinning. "Just some tourists. You're my bodyguard, baby." He gave me the rib crusher again. "Guard my body well, Honey. It loves to be pampered."

I exhaled sarcastically. "Same old Dick."

As we left McCarran Field in a cab I caught my first glimpse of Richard Devil's Inferno. The sky to the West, over the California Ranges, had darkened into billowy black rain clouds. In the foreground, across McCarran's barren runways, a ribbon of fire shot up, grotesquely lighting the desert. A sharp rumble followed.

"How's that grab you?" Devil asked.

"What was it?"

"Honey, I built a volcanic mountain in the desert floor. First time in the history of the world. The cone shoots out a flame fifty feet high every fifteen seconds.

A flaming neon sign half the size of the Queen Mary blinked:

**RICHARD DEVIL INVITES YOU INTO HIS
INFERNO! DEVILISH DOINGS IN THE HOT
BOX LOUNGE! THE SINDERS IN SATAN'S**

HOLOCAUST! STAG CAVERN'S SCINTILLATING SINDERELLAS! THE SINEMA!

The Inferno was now the last hotel on the famed Las Vegas strip, even farther out-of-town than the Tropicana and the Hacienda.

"Like it?" Devil asked, as the cab swung into a long driveway flanked with boiling lava, whirling steam and monstrous animated prehistoric animals.

"So you built a mountain," I said. "It doesn't look very big."

Devil chuckled. "It isn't. Not the volcano anyway. But this is the largest hotel in the world, Honey. It cost fifty million dollars. Can you believe that? I'm so damned mad at Rex Champion for trying to steal my thunder I could kill him."

The flaming volcano was about as tall as the miniature copy of the Matterhorn at Disneyland. It jutted roughly 100 feet into the desert sky. Several other hotels along the lush strip now ranged over twenty stories rising 250 to 300 feet in the air.

"Where's all the action?" I asked. "I don't even see any windows."

"There are no windows, Honey. That's the beautiful part. You know how Las Vegas lives. Sleep by day. Exist by night. Sunlight will never bother any of my customers. Everything's underground. Cooler that way, too."

"Wild," I said.

"Except the swimming pool. Actually it's a small lake on the other side of the volcano. Big enough so people can swim any way they wish without offending others—just for the *hell* of it."

I tapped his nose lightly. "Then you don't intend catering to the *church-going* crowd."

He winked mischievously. "On the contrary. Some of our most outstanding nudists are pillars of the church. I'm only trying to encourage individuality. We need more of that in today's world."

"I think I like your thinking," I said.

"I thought you would."

Deep in the bowels of the volcano a wild reddish facade revealed itself, the entry into Devil's Inferno. Cabs were lined up, people getting out and wandering around. They seemed as shocked and surprised as I felt peering through fluorescent sheets of smoke at the weird hotel's unique entrance. It looked like a huge eye standing on end, massive sheets of rubberized material opening and closing mechanically.

A voluptuous redhead in a devil's costume sprinted through the rubberized slit to meet us. She was at least six feet tall, beautiful and built to take punishment. She grabbed my three suitcases and heaved them inside without even using a cart. In the foyer there were phosphorescent fountains, plush red carpeting and more devil-costumed amazons. They wore turtle-necked leotards, slashed high at the hip, red mesh stockings and boots to match. Plus cute horned caps. I couldn't see a male employee anywhere, not even behind the gaming tables, which spread out across a massive dome-shaped room adjacent to the entrance to the hotel.

"You—seem to be partial to girls—*big* girls." I said, as he led me through the throngs inside the casino.

"Haven't I always?" he said, chucking me under the chin. "Did you also notice the bosom effect?"

I glanced at the six-footer carrying my luggage toward the elevator. I did a double take! Wow! Those were not red *buttons* sewn to her chest.

Devil shrugged. "The topless craze has got us, baby. Like it or not. At least my interpretation is different. More provocative, don't you think?"

I didn't answer. The elevator opened, a plume of smoke shot out and we were inside a velvet-lined red cage. We descended four floors into another fiery wonderland. The walls of the corridors were lined with exquisite, expensive originals from every era. They obviously represented a fortune.

We wound up in a suite that might have doubled for a football field. Dick had a gargantuan bed big enough to accommodate twelve bedfellows comfortably. Also a

sunken tub from the Cleopatra era, a massive circular bar and crystal-chandeliered dining room.

When the amazon left, I looked at Devil and said, "And what does this cost per night? A cool thou or a hot thigh?"

"It's mine," he said, jamming a cigarette between his teeth. "But don't get me wrong, Honey. While you're here in Vegas, it's all yours. I'll take a place upstairs."

"But you'll still have a key, right?"

He laughed, that high loud laugh I never liked when I knew him in high school. "I own the joint. I have a key to every room. So what?"

"I don't like key clubs, that's what."

He sagged onto a bar stool, poured himself a straight shot of Scotch, and then glinted at me through ribbons of smoke. "I'm no dummy, Honey. Neither are you. You want something. I want something. You give me what I want. I'll give you what you want."

"What do I want?"

He sipped at his drink. "Beautia."

"What gives you that idea?"

"You and your *March hare* come on like lead pipes. Him in his gorilla suit and you in your silk pastry ought to do an act in my lounge. We'll bill you as 'Hairy and Mary, Quite Contrary.' Is Beautia the cat who was trying to blow House out of *home*?"

"I don't know."

He looked at me sharply. "All right. Then let's talk about what you should know. Number one, Rex Champion is trying to ruin me."

"Why?"

"Honey, you must have read the *Time* magazine article about five years ago concerning two young men making an international fortune out of plastic products."

"No."

"They sold their patents for the unheard of price of a hundred million dollars and retired. Except one of the partners got more than the other."

"You?"

"Yes! Hell, I created the products. Rex sold them. I deserved more."

"But Rex didn't agree."

"No."

"He sued you."

"Yes."

"And won."

Devil's face contorted angrily. "Yes, the dirty bastard! That's what I mean when I say he's used my money to build that—that forty million Taj Mahal. It's the biggest white elephant in hotel history!"

"At least, you're not worried about his competition—being way out on the lake."

"No, but he has gone to the Nevada Gaming Commission complaining about my nudist pool, the exposed you-know-whats on my girls, all the fire and smoke, the connotation of the Devil—that sort of thing. They *could* close me."

"Does Rex really want that?"

Devil clawed at his cigarette, stuffing it in his mouth, exhaling loudly. "I'm certain of it. Two months ago I argued his right to open on Lake Mead."

"Why, Dick?"

"I told you. It doesn't make sense. He's so far off the beaten track, he'll take the biggest bath of all time. He's jealous of my operation. He's always been jealous of me. Since we were kids."

"I never heard Rex speak against you when we were in school."

Devil flashed hate-filled eyes at me. "You never knew him after we became partners. I was the one who developed the plastic theories that made us all that money. He hated me because I was creative."

The door to the immense suite popped open. Another voluptuous red-haired devil peeked inside. But not before the husky hotel owner stuck a hand in his coat and extracted a snub-nosed .38 revolver.

He replaced the gun quickly and stood up, voice quivering. "What—what is it, Kitty?"

Kitty had a sweet, pale face and large blue eyes. "I'm

sorry, Mr. Devil, but you're wanted in the office. It's very urgent."

After Dick left, nervous apologies spouting from his lips, I asked myself if this wasn't the voice I had heard in Erik's storm-darkened tree house the night before. It had been a .38 caliber bullet that shattered the Chablis bottle. We had dug it out of the wall before leaving for House's costume party.

I dialed the Atlantis from Devil's private phone and asked for Rex Champion. After a lot of red tape and far too much waiting, I was about to hang up when a male voice came on the line. It was low, and hesitant.

"Excuse me," the man said, "but the operator was very confused. We're opening tonight and—Did she say Honey West?"

"That's correct," I said.

"The Honey of my long lost days of Poly high?"

"Correct again."

"Where are you, sweetheart?"

"In Las Vegas, Rex."

There was a slight pause, a murmur of inhalation.

"Where can I meet you?"

"How about your place?"

"Beautiful. How soon may I expect you?"

"I just got in, Rex. It'll take a couple of hours."

"That's fine," he said. "That'll give me enough time to put in my teeth and adjust my wig."

"Will I have a chance to meet your wife?"

"What wife?"

"I understand you're married."

"Nonsense, Honey. I've saved myself for you. Meet me in Neptune's Palace."

"Where?"

He hesitated another brief second then laughed.

"This place'll kill you, Honey. Absolutely kill you."

Lake Mead is approximately twenty miles east of Las Vegas and walled on the southern end by mammoth Hoover Dam. The waters are contained by the Nevada Ranges and taper 115 miles through rocky gorges carved through centuries by the Colorado River. **7**

I rented a Mustang convertible and drove out on Highway 95 toward Boulder City when I noticed the first major signs advertising:

REX CHAMPION'S CITY OF ATLANTIS

Part of Lake Mead's New National Recreation Area

A Major Event In Your Lifetime!

Turn Left At Next Intersection

As I made this maneuver onto Route 41A, a man ran onto the road and flagged me down. His car was pulled to the side with the hood up. I braked next to him and asked, "What's your trouble?"

He was tall, with black wavy hair and a winning boyish smile. "Don't have any idea. It just quit on me." He gestured at a nearby service station. "Those jokers over there are so busy they can't get around to helping

me for several hours—or more. You wouldn't happen to be going to the new Atlantis, would you?"

"That's exactly where I'm heading. Hop in."

He grabbed a briefcase, fitted a blue felt hat to his head and quickly accepted my offer. He was dressed in a navy twill suit with a wide blue-striped tie and black shoes. He had the elegant cut of a lawyer, very neat and coolly efficient.

"Where are you from?" I asked, as we rolled along the desert road.

"Lake Tahoe. I drove in last night especially for the grand opening. How about you?"

"Long Beach area. Name's Honey. Honey West."

"Happy to know you. Mine's Mike Murray." He snapped his fingers. "Hey, I know you."

"You do?"

"Of course. I'm a business associate of Rex Champion. He's mentioned your name on several occasions."

"Pleasantly, I hope."

"*More than pleasantly,*" he added.

A bullet suddenly zinged between us, whining eerily as it came and went like a jet-propelled bee.

"What the hell!" Murray roared. "Somebody's shooting at us!"

The angle of the slug seemed to be slightly above the right-hand side of the windshield and cross-cutting past our faces. It ricocheted off the road behind us. I whirled the wheel, sending the convertible into an evasive S-shaped maneuver. A second shot kicked Murray's hat into the air, cartwheeling it across the desert. For an instant I thought he'd been hit. He fell sideways in the seat, then impulsively seized the wheel and gave it a vigorous jerk which sent us into a spinning, skidding roar through sand and cactus until the convertible bounced to a stop against an embankment. We slithered out the driver's side using the body of the car as a shield.

Another shot chipped a hole in the rock above our heads. Murray blinked as I lifted my skirt and removed the pearl-handled revolver from its garter holster.

"Cute gimmick," he said, tearing off his tie, "but that won't do much against a long-range rifle. What else have you got down there?"

"You'd be surprised," I said, focusing my attention on a group of hills about a half mile away.

"I'll bet I would," Murray answered, tossing his tie in the air. Another slug ripped through the striped fabric, spinning it to the ground. He pushed an index finger through the opening and added, "This guy's got a range-finder that could thread a needle. Take my advice and stay down."

I wiped dust from my lips. "Any idea who he might be?"

Murray peered up at the desert sun, then squinted at me. "Not one. How about you? You're the eyeful."

"Mouthful," I said, spitting out more grit. "Then you know I'm a licensed investigator."

He grinned, wiping his eyes. "School teachers don't usually carry guns between their legs. You'd be a helluva blind date in a back seat."

"Try me sometime."

"I will—if we ever get out of here." He crawled towards the front of the convertible on his belly. "I got a feeling somebody screwed up my car when I stopped at Dick Devil's Inferno a while ago. They must have set me up for this."

"Who's they?" I asked, feeling the desert wind on my cheeks, hot and unrelenting.

"I haven't an inkling," he spat, sounding more like he knew but wasn't about to say.

We listened for a moment. The wind ruffled my hair, whipped sand against the embankment. "That first bullet came closer to me," I said, after a moment. "If our friend is such a sharpshooter maybe I was the setup, and your engine trouble the spring."

He rolled around, shooting a fierce gaze at me. "What the hell you trying to say, lady?"

I studied his thin handsome face, noting a muscular twitch under his right eye. "I think you knew who I was when you flagged me down."

"That's ridiculous," he said, with heavy anger. "That was *my* hat and tie, remember? I grabbed the wheel. We could have rolled all over that highway. It was a stupid move on my part."

"Maybe not so stupid," I said. "We might have out-run him."

"Yeah, with big fat breathing spaces in our skulls." Murray removed a handkerchief from his coat breast-pocket and tossed it into the air. It fluttered down unmolested. He got to his feet slowly, peering over the car at the low hills. Then he sat down and cupped his hands to his chest. "We'll wait," he said, not looking at me.

"For what? Your friends to go away after you signaled them to leave?"

He exhaled through his nose. "Now what does that mean?"

"The white handkerchief," I said. "Why didn't you repeat the tie bit?"

"I don't have ten-foot arms," he returned, glancing at the blue tie lying near me. "Maybe I should have asked you to toss up your brassiere."

"What makes you think I wear one?"

Murray snickered lowly, "That's what I figured." He rolled over and started crawling back to me. "Who's playing with whom, Miss West? Private eyeballs, male or female, are purveyors of human flesh for cash. If this is a setup, maybe you were the spring."

"You flagged me, remember?"

He came nearer. "Yeah, but the timing was perfect. Almost too perfect. You are working for Dick Devil, aren't you?"

"Where did you get that idea?"

"I was in the lobby of the Inferno when you walked in with him a couple of hours ago."

"Then you did know who I was when you stopped my car."

He reached my legs, placed a hand on my knee. I put the .22 to his head. He didn't hesitate, running his fingers along my thigh.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Mr. Murray."

"Honey, you are unbelievably beautiful."

"And you are unbelievably bad. One more inch and I'll—"

"You wouldn't have the guts."

"Try me."

He grinned. Suddenly it was a nice grin and it bothered me. "You said that earlier, Honey. A woman who carries a gun is only trying to prove herself. Why don't you prove what you're trying to prove some other way?"

"I'm not Mata Hari."

His fingers crept upward. "But you *are* a woman."

Perspiration ran down into my eyelids, burning them. "If there is any question about that," I said, "I'll prove it some other time, some other place. Please!"

"You beg so nicely."

"I'm not begging!"

His hand spread out under my skirt. "What if I told you I'm with Central Intelligence?"

I stiffened. "I'd say you're from Central Stupidity. I don't buy your approach *or* your story, Mr. Murray."

"Why not?" He pushed me down. "You could kill me right now—but you won't."

"Mister, you have the wrong idea."

"No," he issued lowly, surveying me with hot hard eyes. "I've got the right idea. When I was a kid I always believed you should never wait for anything. When an opportunity arises you should grasp it totally, completely."

He sat up, unbuttoned his coat and tossed it aside, then nervously removed his shirt. He leaned over me. "Honey, this moment may go down in history as the wildest, craziest *thing* on record."

I pushed the gun against his bare chest.

"Honey, you say nothing in the nicest way."

His shadow filled the sky, blotted it out and came down with a furious vengeance. So did the sky itself. Rain began to fall in an impossible frenzy. The sand under my back pooled with water. Murray suddenly leaped to his feet, cursing, fists clenched.

"You planned it!" he cried savagely. "You planned it!"

I got up, replacing my .22 and laughed, "Would you like to take a *raincheck*?"

The humor of it suddenly caught him. He whirled me in his arms, laughing, shouting at the angry sky. "Rain-check, hell!"

The storm lay over Lake Mead like a dark tent, beating its vast waters furiously.

We parked near a huge neon-lit sign blaring:

**GRAND OPENING TONIGHT!
REX CHAMPION'S CITY OF ATLANTIS**

Mike Murray slipped into his shirt and coat and even redid his bullet-pierced tie, grinning at me as he tied the knots. "You're going to really like this place," he said, leading me through the downpour to a boat ramp.

We were both drenched to the skin by the time we boarded a small double-decked boat and headed out into the lake. Ahead of us in the storm winked a strange, weirdly lighted city built on the lake's surface. It rose above the water like a fantastic island freshly plumbed from the depths, with glittery towering peaks reminiscent of the Emerald City of Oz.

From my vantage point in the bow of the boat, rain driving against the windows, I could see huge spires rising over the lake like glistening jeweled shafts. Where Dick Devil's hotel resembled an ugly erupting volcano, the Atlantis appeared to be a monstrous gem perched on the lake's surface, a wonderland of dazzling lights and towers.

Our boat pulled up to a dock where a crew of white-suited sailors secured her and ran a ramp for Mike and me to scamper down. I noticed immediately this was no floating hotel. Apparently it was solidly stationed to the bottom of the lake.

Several silver-bodied mermaids with simulated fish-tails entwining their legs ushered us inside a fabulously

ornate foyer. The walls were made of inlaid pieces conveying the look of bronzed fish scales. Ahead of us, to the right, were the jaws of a tremendous whale. An intimate cocktail lounge was lodged within the giant sea animal's interior, aptly called Jonah's Joint.

Suddenly a tall, lanky man with shaggy blond hair flung his arms around me. When he held me out at arm's length I could not mistake those penetrating blue eyes, that infectious all-American smile. It was Rex Champion.

"Honey!" he blurted. "You're sopped clean through!"

"It's pouring," I said, glancing at Mike Murray. "Rain and bullets."

Champion flicked harsh eyes on Murray. "What happened?"

"My car went on the fritz and Honey picked me up on the road. We didn't get very far before a sniper started banging away at us."

I glanced at Murray ruefully. "In more ways than one."

Champion examined me. "You weren't hurt?"

"No," I said.

"Thank God!" Champion searched Murray's face for an explanation.

"Just beyond the turnoff on new 41A. Long-range rifle."

"Isn't that how your TV girl was killed, Honey?" Champion asked.

I nodded wetly. "This has been my third shoot-out in three days. I'm beginning to feel like a duck in a shooting gallery. How's about trading in some hot lead for a hot shower?"

Rex Champion took me by elevator up one of the castle-like spires. We rode to the top floor and stepped out into a virtual fantasy of thick white carpet, elegant gold-leafed baroque furniture and gleaming mirrored walls. Soft pastel lights embedded in a high turret ceiling beamed down on floor to ceiling windows. The view from here was unbelievably spectacular. Lake Mead's

choppy waters spread out below dappled by the storm's fury. In the distance could be seen the sun-blistered mountains of Southern Nevada and the brooding concrete towers of Hoover Dam.

The blond Adonis kissed my cheek and said, "A suite for the sweet."

"Bad pun," I said, "but thank you. It's truly magnificent."

He grinned, leading me inside. "Better than Dick Devil's dungeon?"

I whirled, searching his face. "You knew I was there?"

"Of course. No one makes a move in or out of McCarran Field without my knowing. What is my former partner saying about me these days?"

"Nothing good."

He took me into the master bedroom and gestured toward a majestically mirrored bathroom. "Naturally. Would you care for a drink?"

"HMMMMM. Something warming."

He walked back to the bar, voice drifting through as I stripped and stepped into the shower. "What brings you to this part of the country, Honey?"

I had to shout above the water. "DERFA and ANYHI!"

"What the hell's that?"

"Two Communistic groups organized to fleece money from people. You've never heard of them?"

The wheeze of a tea kettle floated in through the half-open bathroom door.

"No," Champion answered. "Am I supposed to have heard about them?"

Warm spray needled at my body and I yelled back, "What about Beautia?"

There was a long pause as he lifted the kettle from the fire and apparently poured me a hot drink. Then he said, "What about Beautia?"

"A few people believe you might be married to her."

"Name one."

"Dick Devil."

"He's crazy!"

I stepped out and grabbed a towel. "You do know her, don't you?"

"Hell yes!" Champion roared. "I've been living with her for the past three or four months."

"Where is she now?"

"Gone." A hand jutted through the door opening, gripping a steaming mug. "Hot toddy."

I accepted it quickly. "Thank you."

"Honey, what the hell's the tie-in between Beautia and this other garbage you're talking about?" Champion asked.

I wrapped the towel around me and joined Rex in the living room. He whistled lowly, licking his lips. "Wow! You make a hunk of terry cloth look like a million bucks."

"Thank you."

"What about Beautia?"

"She ran DERFA and ANYH. Possibly they're still going. What does Box 666, Las Vegas, mean to you?"

His eyelids widened. "That was her private box number! But how the devil is it I know nothing about this other crap?"

"Maybe she didn't want you to know. Rex, how were you able to build here on the lake when this is part of a national recreation area?"

Champion slumped into a chair. "Politics, pure and simple. I poured a lot of loot into the last big campaign. Suddenly all of my plans, blueprints and figures were okayed." He glanced around. "She's a tax-free government beauty—but she may wind up the biggest bomb since Hiroshima."

"Where is Beautia now?"

"San Francisco."

I sipped at my toddy. "What happened between you two?"

His lips curled back, tongue protruding. "I got tired of her little games."

"Games?"

"She hid behind locked doors, made mysterious long-

distance phone calls—she spent more time at Hoover Dam than she did with me!”

I gazed at the distant concrete towers. “What was her fascination for the dam?”

“*Damned* if I know!” he hurled sarcastically. “She said she was writing a book about it.”

“Did you ever see any of the manuscript?”

“Hell, no!” Champion snarled. He stood up and faced one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. “She would seldom let me see anything, including her face!”

“What does she look like, Rex?”

He whirled, laughing in his teeth. “You never saw that gatefold of her in *Skin, Sin and She*?”

“No.”

He crossed to a bureau and removed a magazine from one of the drawers. “This is what attracted me to her. I’m a very curious guy, Honey. When I saw this I went after her like Gang Busters. I’ve never seen anything like this in my life. It’s utterly fantastic.”

Champion threw open the magazine to the four-color fold-out and spread it flat on the bureau. My eyes flew open. Stretched across the pages was an extremely curvacious blonde with golden Shirley Temple ringlets spilling down the sides of her head. She was completely naked, except for two masks shaped like flaming dragons which she held to her face and at the vortex of her lush body. Her figure was exquisitely designed: long tapered neck, slim arms and shoulders, a tiny waist mounted with a deeply chiseled navel, a whisper of hips, plus long filly-like legs.

“My God,” I said. “That—that’s unbelievable.”

“Isn’t it?” Champion agreed. “She’s an unusually beautiful woman—and there must be many just as beautiful, but—” He dropped an index finger on the photograph.

I stared, shaking my head.

This delightfully arrayed beauty had no breasts! I was ready for that. Homer House had already said she was flat-chested. But he had also hinted of something else physically strange about Beautia.

Thrusting themselves out in dark-reddish indignation, blatantly fixed like fleshy gun barrels, were two Brobdingnagian nipples almost two inches long.

"Are they for real?" I asked, hardly able to believe what protruded from Beautia's chest. **8**

Rex Champion nodded. "I can *fully* attest to that."

"What's behind the mask?" I said, gesturing at the color reproduction in *Skin, Sin and She*."

"Which mask?"

"Well, I didn't expect that—"

"You're right. Everything's perfectly normal there. But, her face—"

I studied Champion's wide blue eyes. "What about her face?"

"Cut right out of white marble. Fabulous, but cold. Delicate, but without feeling."

"Do you have a photograph of her?"

"No! She'd never allow a camera within ten feet of her. Whenever she would go out she'd wear wraparound dark glasses and low-slung hats." Champion suddenly squinted. "What do you suppose she was doing up at the dam?"

"Are you certain that's where she went?"

He nodded. "Positive. I had her followed by Aardvark and Zarzito."

"By whom?"

A knock at the door turned out to be a bellhop with my luggage. He put the two suitcases and my makeup kit in the master bedroom and vanished. Champion then described his two body guards.

"Aardvark is a blond muscular Aussie with ice water eyeballs. Zarzito is a fat little Mexican with black hair and a temper like a tornado."

"They were at McCarran Field when I arrived," I said.

His eyes slid to my terry-cloth towel. "They followed you and Devil to the Inferno. Did you behave yourself, Honey?"

"What do you think?"

"I know Dick Devil."

I smiled sadly. "Then you don't know me, Rex."

The telephone rang. Champion answered and thrust the receiver in my hands. I nearly dropped the towel. It was Erik March.

"Where are you?" I asked, surprised by the call.

"In the hotel lobby. Listen, Honey, I have some weighty information. Did you find Beautia?"

I glanced at the startling gatefold. "Parts of her. How did you find me?"

"Dick Devil. He drove me over from his place for the grand opening. What do you mean, *parts*?"

My gaze stole to Rex Champion who was back at the bar mixing us another round of hot toddys. "I'll explain later. Meet you in the Neptune Lounge in about twenty minutes."

After I hung up, the blond ex-basketball star handed me my cup and inquired harshly, "Who was that?"

"My body guard." I slammed the two names together. "Erickmarch. A red-headed one hundred and eighty pounds of Blarney Stone and Paddy's pig all rolled into one hungry-eyed bachelor who doubles in brass, babes and bullets to make a buck."

Champion said gruffly, "You're putting me on, Honey."

"Rex, did Beautia ever mention—or did you see in her possession—any unusually marked maps?"

He was quickly losing his quiet demeanor. "Maps of what?"

"Hoover Dam, Golden Gate bridge or the new Coronado Bridge crossing San Diego Harbor."

Lightning scissored through dark sky like crooked hot needles. Thunder rattled distantly.

"What the hell would she have those for?" he demanded darkly, staring at the stormy sky. "GD weather. We'll probably be washed out tonight. I have Harry James *and* Tom Jones in the Lounge. Don Rickles in the main room. Plus a Frank Sennes production with one hundred naked swimmers. The biggest show ever presented in the world. Half on stage, half underwater." He downed the remainder of his drink. "I'd better get back to business. See you in the Lounge for the cocktail party."

Erik the red was waiting for me in Neptune's Lounge, the usual cocky smile lighting his handsome, now sun-burned face.

"You son-of-a—" I yelped. "You really did go to San Diego for a tan, didn't you?"

He shoved a martini at me. "My dear *sweet* Miss West," Erik said, shifting his stool around. "I spent an entire day from dawn until mid-afternoon floating around in a boat under the Coronado Bridge—without any luscious female companionship, without a bloody drop to drink and with my tongue hanging clear down to the blistered souls of my feet! I would readily have committed hara-kiri with an icicle!" His face contorted into a playful version of the Frankenstein monster. "Would you vish to go to Transylvania and play on my freeway, leetle girl?"

"What's this weighty information you were talking about on the phone? Did Mr. Fierce jump off the bridge into your boat, Dr. Frankenstein?"

Erik's voice lowered as he leaned forward. "No, but I found out Beautia spent a lot of time *at* the Coronado Bridge after it was built—pretending to be a reporter."

I nodded. "Seems she's been doing the same thing re-

cently around Hoover Dam—except pretending to be writing a book.”

“Where is she now?” the redhead asked.

“San Francisco.”

Erik drummed a fist on the counter. “What color is her hair?”

“At the moment—blonde.”

“Then it all fits, Honey,” Erik whispered, glancing around the Lounge. “Do you remember a girl named Gorgi Andrews?”

I shrugged. “No. Not really.”

“Well, your TV producer-director does.”

“Rod Mayberry?”

“Right. This Gorgi Andrews tried out for the lead part for your television series, *This Girl for Hire*. She lost out to Sindy Steward. But—I learned in San Diego that DERFA is now closed—and that Sindy and Gorgi were very close friends—and that Gorgi is *now* in San Francisco.”

“And you suspect—”

“—Gorgi and Beautia are the same woman.” Erik licked his lips triumphantly. “If not, I have a feeling this Gorgi Andrews will know something about the maps. Maybe losing that role to Sindy was enough to snap her mind.”

I nodded dismally. “You did sit out in that sun a *long* time, didn’t you?”

He knew I was angling for a barb. “What difference does that make?”

“Was that your bubble gum you just snapped or your—”

Erik peered down the deep V-halter top of my black silk cocktail dress and muttered, “No, that was my tongue.”

The Grand Opening at the City of Atlantis got a little wet, both outside and in. The storm raged over Lake Mead and the dozen or more bars poured—heavily. I danced with Dick Devil to the music of Harry James

and sat through the blistering routines of Don Rickles in the Atlantis Arena with Rex Champion.

At one point Rickles roared, "So your name is Honey West, huh? Well, who's this dum-dum with you, Molasses Sorgum?"

Later, while Champion and Devil squared off at a craps table, Erik and I settled for a quiet Grasshopper in the Bottom Of The Sea. The room specialized in half-naked mermaids serving drinks and cavorting in lighted waters beyond thick glass windows. Opening night had perked up and, despite the weather and Rex Champion's pessimism, several thousand first-nighters crowded the Atlantis.

I showed Erik the copy of *Skin, Sin and She* with the gatefold on Beautia.

"Holy Chinese egg rolls," he groaned. "She is a real kissin' cousin if I ever saw one. Incidentally, while you been living it up with Harry James and Don Rickles, I got on the phone and located Gorgi Andrews. I talked with her manager—a cat named Domonic Biggie. I told him I was Rod Mayberry and wanted to star his client in the Honey West role on television."

"What did he say?"

"He was very evasive. In fact, when I told him we were going to come and take another look at her, he started babbling about Gorgi appearing in North Beach and then he hung up." Erik threw his hands in the air. "He didn't say where she was appearing, come see her or even drop dead."

I said, "That doesn't sound like Beautia material to me."

Erik nodded. "I agree, but—"

"North Beach is the beat section of San Francisco, friend. Pillville, illville, bare backs and sick cracks—"

"Honey—"

"—old broken-down buildings with holes in them."

He sipped at his drink, staring at the naked swimmers beyond the glass. "We ought to go there. This really puzzles me, Honey. The background on this Gorgi Andrews, according to your producer-director, is high-

class theater. What the devil is she doing in North Beach?"

"That intrigues me, too."

He grabbed my arm. "Shall we take a peek?"

I shrugged. "I'm game."

We loaded our luggage onto one of the boats. I looked for Rex Champion and Dick Devil, but they were nowhere to be found. On the dock were Champion's weird bodyguards, Aardvark and Zarzito. The rain had slackened and they were standing in the shadows, wet cigarette butts dangling from their wordless lips. I waved good-bye, but they didn't move. Zarzito's dark eyes flashed weirdly in the gathering daylight.

We didn't leave McCarran Field until around noon. Erik spent almost an hour on the phone with Homer House trying to humor him into the idea he wouldn't die—at least, not until we returned.

House spat in return, "You money-hungry vultures are just waiting until I drop over. Before you suck my blood!"

The hysterical publisher swore he was going to call the AP, CBS, NBC, INS, ABC and even his CPA.

"Why not!" Erik roared. "Then they'll all know how much you been cheating the government!"

We had breakfast at Devil's Inferno before taking off. His 24-hour "Hellish Harangue," consisting of "red" eggs sauced in tomatoes, and hot peppers, plus three bloody Marys, really did the trick.

Except I had nightmares all the way on the air flight. One scene in particular haunted me: I was in a swamp, its cloying heat and scissoring insects clawed at me. Moss hung in thick webs of suffocation, blotting out sunlight and writhing about like tentacles of a giant squid.

They had abandoned me only seconds before.

The sound of their leaving had a sinister finality: ("Sweet Little Honey Sunshine, where are you?") a tumult of legs thrashing through stagnant water, arms and hands pushing aside low-hanging branches, the explo-

sive disintegration of their boat as it moved away from a distant beach. There was no color and the dream was slow and wobbly.

They had left me to die, tied hand and foot and half-submerged under a cypress tree. ("Where are you, sweet Honey Sunshine?") There seemed to be no way out. The glittery eyes of a crocodile surfaced a few feet away and moved nearer.

There was a soft whirl, like the purr of a hungry monster before it devours. Then a voice, in my nightmare, cried, ("Cut! Okay, let's make a take!")

Several men splashed into the swamp, yanked back an electrically operated crocodile and redid my make-up.

("Good, Honey baby,") the voice boomed again. ("Let's go with the print. This is going to be a great television series!")

I peered up into the arcs. Riding the camera boom was a curvacious blonde—holding a flaming red dragon mask to her *face*.

("Hey, wait a minute!") I cried.

They tossed a real crocodile into the water. It slithered toward me, jaws gaping wide . . .

Erik shook me awake. We had landed in San Jose because of engine trouble. We walked into the airport during the delay and had a cup of coffee. I told Erik about my weird nightmare. Then he told me about his—some disturbing facts the redhead had not revealed about his Las Vegas phone call to the quixotic publisher.

"Homer House is threatening to cut us off again. He's had another death warning. His magazine is due to be released nationally tomorrow morning and he's certain he'll be murdered."

"What does he want you to do?" I asked.

"Surround his house, his room, himself."

I shook my head. "Poor man. He may never make it whether we find who's after him, or not."

"That's what I told him." Erik said.

"And what was his answer to that?"

"A string of violent four-letter words."

I grinned. "And what was your reply?"

"I told him where he could put his pipe and Pepsi bottle."

We landed in San Francisco around dusk. Erik hailed a cab and then checked me into a suite at the fabulous Villa Roma. Night fog was bringing a chill in from the sea peculiar to the Bay area as we headed for North Beach. It dripped on the cab windows and dampened the streets with silent wet fingers.

Neon blazed and blinked along North Beach's Broadway, a belt of inexplicable nightclubs, beer joints, homosexual hangouts and newsstands crammed with dirty books and nudie magazines. They were all strung together like a gaudy chameleon, surrounded by Fisherman's Wharf, Chinatown and the somber towers of Telegraph, Russian and Nob hills.

The sidewalks were filled with jostling night tourists and "locals" wandering aimlessly along the wet slabs, pushing, ogling into doorways where vociferous rhythms stabbed forth from bistros along the street.

One cabaret advertised blatantly: **WE ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO ADVERTISE ANYMORE UNDER LAW! SO WE ARE NOT ADVERTISING—WE ARE TELLING YOU THAT THIS IS THE DIRTIEST SHOW IN TOWN!**

Erik and I peeked inside. A baggy-eyed brunette lay on a narrow stage, legs splayed, drumming her naked bottom on the floor as a trio of bearded nude men in Ben Franklin glasses strummed electric guitars and wriggled as their fingers twitched out the music. The female performer had huge breasts, enormous thighs and a mammoth red mouth where a playful tongue licked hungrily.

We squeezed out onto the sidewalk again, Erik wiping his forehead. "That's talent?" He smiled dazedly. "For a minute there I thought maybe it was—"

I reminded, "You said Gorgi was a blonde."

"I know, but—" Erik's words drifted to a stop.

I centered my attention on a neon sign across the street he was staring at blankly. It read: GORGI—THE ORIGINAL ALL-BARE GIRL—"BELLY BUTTON AND BOWS!" THIS IS NOT AN ADVERTISEMENT—IT'S THE TRUTH!

We walked through backed-up traffic on Broadway to the Crocodile Club, where Gorgi Andrews was featured on a huge billboard outside.

"Hey!" I said. "There were crocodiles in my nightmare."

From the photographs Gorgi appeared to be about twenty-five, a coppery blonde and extremely beautiful. None of the blowups plastered outside the Crocodile showed her totally naked. There was, though, a dramatic promise of things to come for those who wandered inside.

"Is that our girl?" I asked.

Erik nodded. "Yes, *ma'm!*"

A big, heavy-set man with the look of a giant Peter Lorre greeted us inside. His dark-rimmed baggy eyes and plastered-down black hair topped a bulging belly in a pin-striped suit. He wore white bucks and a button-down polka-dotted cap.

"Greetings and gal-utations," this apparition barked. "Welcome to the sweatiest—I mean, the sweetest show in town. Gorgeous Gorgi and her mam-ories." He belowed, slapping Erik on the back, "Get it! Mam-ories, Mamories—" He sang to the tune of "Memories."

"We got it," I said. "When does Gorgi Andrews come on?"

The bulky one turned to me. "Hey, sugar, sounds like with that last name bit, you knowsville our little Gorgi baby. Why don't you sling some flesh and introduce yourself?"

He was not the bone-chilling type of greeter-bouncer. More the friendly-fat undertaker type, smiling and nodding, but somehow very deadly.

I shook his hand. "Honey West."

The big man winced. "Oucherini! And this cat must be—"

I introduced Erik as Rod Mayberry. "Producer/director of my television series."

"Domonic Biggie," he wheezed, after a moment.

"We guessed," I said.

He wiped his forehead clumsily, then asked, "Well, what can I do for you?"

Erik surveyed the dimly lit interior of the club. "We would like to see Gorgi."

Biggie blurted. "No way!"

"Why?" I asked.

"It—it just is. She—she's got a cold."

"In her what?" Erik demanded, walking past Biggie. The voluminous one yanked the consultant/investigator to a quick stop.

"Look, buster!" Biggie roared. "This is a clean joint! Don't be insulting."

Erik judo-chopped the hold. "I understood this girl—Gorgi Andrews—to be a legitimate stage star."

Biggie wiped his thick-lipped mouth with the back of a huge hairy paw. "Damn right!" He grimaced sadly. "She's the most gorgeous chick you'll ever glom—and with a brain to match. Exactly the right cat for the part of Miss West here—in her boob-tube series."

Erik said grimly, "Your *advertising* outside doesn't seem to convey the same image."

"Well, man, I can explain about that," Biggie stammered. "I—I'm her personal manager and—and I will admit I put a small fix on her image, but—She's the greatest. And she deserves a break. If you could only slap your ears and eyes on her sometime—"

"Why not tonight?" Erik shot.

Biggie's face whitened. "I told you, man. She—she's got the *germans* up to here."

I tossed it in quickly while he was still stammering. "Did you know Sindy Steward?"

He choked. "Sindy who?"

Erik followed up. "Do you want Gorgi to play the part in Miss West's new television series—or not?"

"Hell, yes!" Biggie cried, still choking.

"Then let's see her!" Erik fired the final barrage.

Biggie released a brief faltering smile, shrugged ponderously and gestured for us to follow him into the complex catacombs that made up the rear portion of the Crocodile Club.

There were so many doors and corridors, it reminded me of a place I investigated once in Tijuana. Along the way we bumped into a fragile-looking man in his mid-thirties, emerging from a room filled with ledgers and papers, clutching a drink in well-manicured fingers.

"This is Mr. Seth Miller, owner of the club," Biggie said, making the introduction nervously.

Miller wore an immaculately well-tailored black silk suit and flicked past us wordlessly with a curt handshake for Erik and a nod at me. He apparently was under the assumption we were a couple of *nobodys*—or else figured he was too busy to find out.

The room which contained Gorgi Andrews was at the very end of "nowhere." There was no name or traditional star on the door. Only a weird inscription carved crudely in the wood: **SOMEBODY UP THERE LOVES YOU—YOU HOPE!**

Biggie didn't bother to knock. He flung open the worn panel so suddenly, the strikingly sensual blonde inside whirled, dropping something which shattered explosively on the floor.

"You—you idiot, Biggie!" Gorgi cried. "I was just taking my treatment! You should have told me you were coming."

Gorgi was nude from the waist up. Black mesh tights hugged her from there down to a pair of gold-sequined high heels. Erik March came to a rib-jolting stop as he entered the room. His eyes froze on the formidable figure which glared at us through heavily mascaraed eyelids. White lipstick was painted onto a sensuously full mouth and above this a pert tilted nose wriggled angrily. Blonde hair was piled atop her head like a luxurious crown, strands of it falling along her forehead in doll-like fashion. Her long, slender neck tapered down to feminine shoulders and quivering youthful arms.

It was immediately obvious she was not the woman

spread-eagled across the gatefold of *Skin, Sin and She*. Gorgi Andrews had immense bosoms, mounted by very tiny pink nipples.

An unlit cigarette dangled between her lips and she suddenly snatched it out, crying, "Who are these people, Biggie?"

"The ones from starsville, sweetheart," the big man whispered. His huge bulk trembled awkwardly. "I—I'm sorry, I should have given the door a knuckle sandwich."

She bent down and picked up the broken remains of a syringe and tossed the bent needle and glass on her dressing table. "You never did have any class, Biggie," she said, eying me. "So, you are the infamous Honey West." She laughed lowly. It was obvious she was very drunk.

I said, "You were a friend of Sindy Steward, right?"

"Wrong!" She sneered. "That dirty bitch stole every job I ever wanted. I could have killed her."

"Somebody did kill her," Erik reminded.

"Bravo!" Gorgi cried, fingers darting to the underside of her large breasts. She stared at herself in a mirror nailed to the wall. She smiled maniacally. "I know who did it—"

Erik shot a quick glance at me.

She whirled, staggering slightly. "I also know about the maps—and *what* is about to happen to the world two days after tomorrow—"

Biggie yelled, "Gorgi, what are you babbling about?" He tossed a sweater around her shoulders. "Tell—tell 'em about your singing voice, baby. Your acting credits. You—you're the greatest!"

She threw the sweater to the floor and dropped into a chair like a shattered fragile bird that has flown against a window. "We're all going to die," she whispered. "What difference does it make?" Suddenly her chin lifted in blazing defiance. "Sure, I could have been the greatest! Tell them the truth, Biggie. Tell them about your big North *Bitch*! Me! Tell them about this kind of

life, Biggie. Tell them about the people and the things you have to do!"

Biggie pushed the sweater onto her shoulders again. He glanced at us and his expression was the face of a drowning man. "I—I think maybe we all ought to split and try it again tomorrow."

Gorgi flung the sweater across the room and got up. "Tell them about your Chinese junkie, Biggie! Tell them about the serum and how you made me into a two-legged tank, armed and ready to explode when I hit that stage—" She lurched against a wall. "Tell them what it takes to be converted from a pretty little girl into the *booby* trap of North Beach!"

"I—I think maybe you ought to spin in, baby," Biggie pleaded, trying to guide her back to the chair.

She slapped him away and fell against a dirty old sink mounted on the far wall. Her eyes whirled as if they had been torn loose from the retina. "Tell them about Mor-dicini! About my saintly father and my saintly mother! Tell them!"

I grabbed Gorgi's arm, but she slithered away. Biggie tried to reach her and received a kick in the groin for his efforts.

She suddenly pitched over a table full of makeup bottles, the contents disintegrating under her as she fell headlong to the floor. Her crown of blonde hair tore loose from the impact, spilling down over her naked breasts as she rolled against a wall. For a long moment, nobody moved.

Then Biggie howled, "She's juiced! Don't judge her by this. It was a mistake."

I bent over the voluptuous blonde. Biggie gasped when he saw her teeth exposed in the gaping hole of her mouth. He dropped to his ponderous knees, rocking back and forth, hands clasped.

"Oh, dear God," he moaned.

Erik March froze like a twisted piece of film clipped from its sound track.

"She's not drunk," I said, staring at the two men. "She's dead."

A half-naked broken doll.

The stilted hammering roar of music accompanying Gorgi's replacement filled the Crocodile Club less than an hour after she was dead.

Domonic Biggie was still on his knees, rocking and weeping when they carried her out. Strands of her disheveled crown, dangling from beneath a sheet, brushed against Biggie's tear-stained cheeks as the ambulance crew jockeyed to remove her body.

"I was in love with her," the huge man moaned pathetically. "Why did she have to die? Why?"

Investigating detectives from a San Francisco homicide bureau photographed, dusted and examined every inch of the room. They took particular care with the twisted needle and bits of glass that had been Gorgi's syringe, sorting the pieces from shattered particles of perfume and makeup bottles.

When this tedious job was accomplished, they questioned Biggie, Erik March and me individually. I was last and the interrogation ended with a weird revelation. They already were aware of my being a private investigator and knew the details concerning the television show. To start with, they seemed interested only in the syringe.

"What did you see exactly, Miss West, as you entered Miss Andrews' dressing room?"

I had to speak up above the screaming, stomping crowd out in the show lounge. "As a trained operator I immediately noticed extreme terror in her eyes and the subsequent actions of her hands."

"What were these actions?"

"She was extracting a hypodermic from beneath her left breast."

"Then what happened?"

"She dropped it."

"You assume, then, that she was injecting something into her breast."

"Yes."

"What was this, Miss West?"

"I have no idea."

"How long would you guess it was before she fell to the floor?"

"About three minutes."

"Miss West, we understand you were the one who first diagnosed that Miss Andrews was dead. What exactly brought you to this conclusion?"

"Pulse, heart, respiration."

"Were there any signs of vomitus, gagging, cramps, paralysis?"

"None." Then I added, "In the minutes between the injection and death, she showed extreme aggravation and despair."

"Would you say in her excitement, she was having delusions?"

"Possibly," I said. "But if you are considering atropine poisoning, I don't believe she showed any sensations of throat constriction and there were absolutely no convulsions."

"What gives you the idea we consider this a poison death?"

"I read the same textbook."

The plainclothes detective named Pitt, who was asking the questions, snarled, "Don't be smart, Miss West!"

"And don't you be stupid, Lieutenant." I was suddenly enflamed over Gorgi Andrews' death. "She was too young to die from natural causes, including heart failure. The question is, what was in that injection? And was it suicide, an accident or murder?"

Pitt glanced uneasily at his confederates in the room and said, "I'd suggest you hang around town for a few days."

"Do you have any particular noose in mind?"

His face reddened. "All right, Miss West, I am not suggesting, I'm telling you. Both Biggie and your other friend seem confused about what happened in the seconds—and maybe minutes by their clocks—after Gorgi Andrews stumbled."

"Stumbled?" I said. "She *dropped* like a dead weight."

Pitt's mouth screwed into a ridge of mocking flesh. "That's your story."

"Did either Biggie—or my friend—mention about two days after tomorrow?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Miss West?"

"The murdered girl who was playing the lead part in my TV series knew Gorgi Andrews!"

"We *are* aware of that, Miss West. The coroner's verdict will be available by Monday."

I leaped to my feet. "But that's the day!"

"What day?" Pitt demanded.

"Two days after tomorrow!"

The plainclothes detective stared at me sarcastically. "I wouldn't have known if you hadn't told me."

I protested, "You can't hold me!"

"The hell I can't!"

I was bristling. "What kind of a town is this?"

"A thorough town, Miss West," Pitt said, flashing razored green eyes at me. "We don't operate like Los Angeles or New York. Beautiful blonde private dicks don't tell *us* the score."

I issued a disgusted laugh and said, "Who does? Your Spiro Agnew watch?"

Erik was waiting outside in the corridor. He grinned when I told him the police were retaining me in San Francisco. The redhead walked us far enough away from Gorgi's dressing room so the "watchdogs" inside couldn't overhear.

"Great!" he whispered.

"Are you crazy—or just plain stupid?" I demanded.

He put a finger to his lips. "I told them I was Rod Mayberry. They didn't bother to check my identification. If they had they would have detained us both."

"Why?"

"Biggie put the finger on you."

"You got to be kidding!"

Erik glanced down the dimly lit corridor. "Lieutenant Pitt told me some of the answers Mr. Big gave under questioning. He insinuated *you* might have slipped her something."

"Why that big slob—"

The redhead placed a hand over my mouth. "Look, *I* have to return to Los Angeles and build a wall around King Kong—or we're off the payroll—especially if he gets himself cooled. You stay here. Biggie probably knows about the maps. You heard how he tried to stop Gorgi just before she conked."

I shook my head angrily. "That big bastard is going to get his comedownance. I may let the air out of him."

"Play it smart, Honey." Erik thrust out his hands. "This looks like the place. Gorgi mentioned a Chinese junkie, and somebody named Mordicini—then there's her mother and father—there's Biggie and the possibility of finding Beautia—and—"

"Oh, brother," I moaned. "Every time I get the heavy end of the stick."

"What can we do? You're stuck here. You want to trade elevators? The next one that idiot publisher's in may make it to the moon. And I'll probably be on the damned thing."

I flashed a toothy Dracula smile. "Would you like to come play on my satellite, leetle boy?"

"Funn—neeee." Erik gripped my arm. "Hang in there, Honey. Those three maps obviously were not made up by a tourist bureau. Somebody is planning some kind of *whoopdedoo* at those two bridges and that damned dam—and I don't imagine it's where they're going to stage the annual Iowa State Cow and Bull Throwers Convention."

"Gee, and I left my lasso behind," I said.

He shrugged. "Okay, I'll build a wall around Kong and be right back. Meanwhile, get to Biggie and find out what Monday means—besides wash day."

I put Erik on a plane for Los Angeles and then shopped around for a taxi back to downtown San Francisco. Cab drivers live in a grisly void, especially those on duty at night, going from place to place like wandering minstrels. Those new at the game are often as confused as were those wanderers of old. The cabbie who took me to Domonic Biggie's pad near Fisherman's Wharf had been born two hundred years too late. He was young—about twenty-six—and drove with one hand on the wheel while he strummed a uke with the other. He finally found the place, after fifteen "rock" numbers and fifteen wrong turns.

I paid him for the mad excursion and musicale and suggested he move south to Los Angeles where his talents might gain him a movie contract, if not a plunge off Mulholland Drive in G Minor.

The night fog had thickened into a steady drizzle and I had to don my hooded trenchcoat as I scampered up a long flight of winding stairs to Biggie's establishment. Foghorns wailed dismally and the embryonic lights of San Francisco Bay seemed like pale beads on an old faded garment.

Biggie's outdoor porch held a goulisn greeting—an illuminated skull and crossbones over the door. He answered after the second knock. I had called him from the airport and he was expecting me.

The big man was still dressed in his suit and cap, but

his tie had been twisted into a miniature hangman's noose.

"Put your dead head upon my breast, Miss West," he said poetically, swinging the door wide.

Biggie's pad was filled with candles, some faintly lit, others hanging grimly dark from ancient candelabras. A wood fire crackled in one corner. On the bricks above clung a monstrous image of an angel with wiry wings and an emaciated body wrought in twisted steel. It was headless and from the upper trunk projected the handle of a dueler's sword. Despite the fire, it was dank and cold in the room and I quickly rejected his offer to remove my black snakeskin coat. His eyes were more puffy than ever from crying and he seemed ponderously broken as he moved back to his chair.

"Where are the grave diggers?" I asked, surveying the weirdly lighted room.

"Put your dead head on my breast, Miss West," he repeated lowly.

"Gorgi porgie, puddin' and pie, somebody slipped her something to die!"

His eyelids widened furiously. "Don't be smart, Miss West!"

"A detective from homicide said those very same words a few hours ago. Have you any idea why, Mr. Big?"

"I dig," he groaned. "They blew you a pad in town until the coroner's report."

"Why, *man*?"

He didn't move, just kept staring at the dark ceiling like a massive ghoul. "They figure you might have fed her something."

"I wonder who might have given them that idea."

"Your square hair—Mayberry!" he erupted. Meaning he had swallowed Erik's pretense—as had the police.

I advanced on him. "You know better, Mr. Big!"

He brushed at his wet eyelids. "I know nothing, except Gorgi's blasted."

I circled the room slowly, shaking raindrops from my coat. "Who blasted her, Biggie?"

He winced. "It must have been a freak-out." His deep-throated voice cracked. "She'd been taking this jazz."

"What kind of jazz?"

He tore off his cap. "You want a belt?"

"No."

"Pour me one." He gestured at a dark corner of the room. "Over there. The pinched bottle. Tall glass. Build it until it won't quit!"

I didn't move. "What kind of jazz, Biggie?"

He licked his lips, then said, "Juice to blow up her boobs. Chinese formula. Loaded. Some kind of jazz from goats mixed with paraffin."

"Is that what she was taking when we walked in?"

"Dig!" he spat.

"Who started her on it?"

"Mel" he hurled, clambering to his feet, weaving toward the pinched bottle. "I had to do something! She was too small for the topless routine. She *had* to be bigger to keep the job."

"What about all the notices you sent Rod Mayberry?"

He sagged into a corner, gulping at the bottle. When his mouth appeared he was grinning weirdly. "That's where it was. Great actress. Brilliant voice. Talent that wouldn't quit."

"Why did you prostitute her, Biggie?"

"Because she didn't have the guts. I had to levitate. Lift her like a finky idiot and hold her up before the crowds." He pushed the bottle to his lips again, hands trembling. "Yeah, me, the biggest fink that ever crawled hand and foot up the gutters of the Barbary Coast. I knew she had the bread, butter, everything. It was just a question of time and how hard I could push." His puffy eyelids widened piteously. "Do you dig what it's like to have a real star in your grasp? The likes of Judy Garland, Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe—all rolled into one way-out super chick?"

"Biggie, what does two days after tomorrow mean to you?"

He stared at the bottle. "Today's Friday. That's Saturday, Sunday—Monday."

"What does Monday mean to you?"

"My day off. I get drunk. Blastville."

I studied him. "Gorgi said Monday might be blastville for a lot of people besides her. What did she mean by that?"

He hissed lowly. "Gorgi smoked pot, took LSD, climbed walls. One night she jumped stark staring naked onto a table full of ministers who came to judge her dancing for a church magazine."

"Biggie, she admitted tonight she knew about some highly secretive maps. That was not LSD talk."

He laughed lowly. "Marijuana talk?"

"She said she knew who killed the girl who won the Honey West television role away from her!"

"She never spilled to me."

"Think, Biggie!"

He tottered into his chair again, mouth folding into a taut wrinkle of contempt and unhappiness. Tears beaded in his puffy lids. "Who did it, man? You tell me and I'll step on them. They gotta be two feet tall and have guts like peas." He lurched to his feet and swung one of his ponderous fists into a wall. A gaping hole opened, plaster falling to the floor in huge chunks. "I'll squash them!"

I shoved him back into his chair. "Biggie, who makes the serum Gorgi was using?"

"Like I said! A Chinese outfit. In Sausalito. A lot of Las Vegas showgirls use the stuff."

"Did you tell the police all this?"

He sagged forward. "No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I? I don't want to be on the front burner!"

"Why put me on it, Biggie?"

"I don't know!"

"Who's Mordicini?" I crashed.

"A musician. He wrote music for Gorgi. A real kook. Lives on a P-T boat about a mile north of here. Where did you grab that cat?"

"Don't you remember? He was part of Gorgi's tirade, including her *saintly* father and mother."

The front door suddenly rattled, banged, vibrated. A voice outside cried, "Open up!"

Biggie vaulted to his feet, thick jowels draining livid white. "What'd you do, bring the fuzz with you?"

I extracted my .22 and waved Biggie against a far wall. "No, but you can be sure it isn't Avon calling."

A small window in Biggie's front door shattered. Then a large hand groped inside through spikes of glass for the knob. I blew out two candles and was angling for the fireplace when the panel burst open. I whirled. A dark figure clutching a weapon that looked like a German Luger sprang into the room, legs spread wide, gun hand held high and rigid.

"All right!" the figure bellowed. "I'll give you exactly two seconds to produce the girl or I'll blow the place to—" Suddenly the weapon slithered clumsily to the floor, clattering on the tiled surface. The figure swore, leaned down to retrieve what he dropped when Biggie was on him like a huge cat. They rolled crazily into a corner. A chair splintered under their impact, fists flying.

Though I thought I'd recognized the voice before he dropped the gun, I wasn't certain until I walked over to see what Biggie had pinned under his ponderous bulk.

"Ever clapped your orbs on him before, Honey?" Biggie demanded.

"Yeah," I said. "He's the cab driver who brought me here." I peered down at the sizzling brown eyes buried under one of Biggie's huge knees. "Hey, friend, you're a long way from Mulholland Drive—and if you're going to tote a gun you'd better learn how to handle one."

He couldn't answer until Mr. Big released some of the pressure, then he choked. "I—I thought you were in trouble—from the way you acted in the cab. So I stuck

around. When I heard all the pounding and loud voices, I figured I was right."

I groaned dismally. "Okay, let him up. We thought we had troubles. Now we've got a gun-carrying, soul-saving folk-rock-singer to boot."

Biggie extracted his bulk and brushed the young man off. He introduced himself lengthily as Frenchy Acropolis, a descendant of a Greek Orthodox priest who broke away from the church during World War II and married a countess from the south of France. They both died working for the Underground.

Biggie tossed the curly-haired youth his Luger and slumped into a chair. "So, what else is new?"

I gazed at Frenchy for a moment and asked, "What's taxi fare to Sausalito?"

Biggie bounced to his feet. "Hey, baby, if you want to stay healthy, cut out from that scene!"

"Why?"

"There's a doctor in charge of the operation. A Doctor Fong. I'm afraid of the whole bit. That's why I didn't tip the fuzz."

Frenchy studied his watch. "I go off duty in five minutes. My off-duty rates are very cheap."

"You're hired," I said.

Biggie stopped us at the door. "You're nuttier than a fruitcake, baby. It's going on midnight. After that hour Dr. Fong stops shooting dogs and goes after people."

I winked at Frenchy, slipping my .22 back into its holster. "I thought goats were his bag? What's the address?"

"You don't know what white flagville means, do you?" the big man groaned.

I patted his flabby cheeks. "Not when *I'm* on the front burner."

He shrugged. "All right. It's on Bay Front, facing onto Angel Island. Dig? A small peninsula at the North end. Go ahead, bleed!"

I glanced at the headless, sword-severed angel. "Don't call them, Biggie—" I patted Frenchy's shoulder holster, "—or we'll call you. Dig?"

We were halfway across the Golden Gate Bridge before Frenchy spoke a word. "Your blob friend has got to be some kind of weirdo. Where did you dig him up?"

"La Brea Tar Pits." I scanned the thick steel cables which suspend the immense bridge hundreds of feet above the fog-shrouded bay. "Tell me something, Frenchy. Have you ever heard of this Dr. Fong in Sausalito?"

"No. Sounds like he's straight out of a James Bond book." The wheels slapped a wet cadence against the bridge's road surface. Frenchy finally added, "You are in trouble, aren't you, Miss West?"

"I guess you'd call it that."

He swallowed hard. "I'd like to help."

The cab moved off the North end of the bridge onto the road leading to Sausalito.

I grinned. "You're a very nice guy, Frenchy."

He laughed, lifting the holster under his left arm. "Your garter friend and *my* friend sort of have a love affair going."

Bay fog along the northern edge was intensely thick. We had to slow passing through Sausalito, despite the fact there was no traffic.

I finally asked, "Why do you carry a gun, Frenchy?"

He exhaled lowly. "It belonged to my mother. She took it from a German officer during the war. I was told it was the weapon that killed my father."

The cab suddenly skidded up to a gate, shrouded in fog. Frenchy helped me back in the seat and took a deep breath. Our eyes riveted on a sign that glared in the cab's headlights: THESE GROUNDS ARE PRIVATE AND PATROLLED! STAY OUT!!

"This is where your blob directed us," Frenchy murmured, climbing from the sedan. He removed his Luger. "Let's go."

"Hey!" I said, following him out and tousling his curly hair. "I have a feeling that love affair you mentioned is about to commence."

The peninsula bearing Dr. Fong's estate involved several acres of land plunging into North San Francisco Bay. From the air it probably resembled a hooked finger extending out into the water. **10**

After leaving Frenchy's cab, we crawled silently under a barbed-wire fence and waded through marshy lowlands until we reached a knoll near the first building.

At that point Frenchy whispered the funny of the night. "Hey, I forgot to ask you. What are we doing at this place?"

I whispered back, "Last time I was here I forgot to pick up my Green Stamps."

He grunted, "Oh!" and we crawled on.

The grounds were weird. Oriental arches formed from bleached bones jutting up out of the fog. Stepping stones made out of skulls dotted the ground near a bubbling brook containing a liquid that looked like watered-down blood.

"Friendly joint," Frenchy issued lowly. "Even a corpse wouldn't dig this."

A light flickered in the building ahead and we crawled to a window and peeked in. A flock of young goats grazed at one end. Nearby was a strange contrap-

tion that resembled a huge washing machine. Except inside were a set of gleaming steel blades instead of a plastic agitator.

Frenchy whispered, "Hey, that looks like a meat grinder. What's that old adage—you can lead a lamb to slaughter—?"

I shook my head. "That was a horse to water."

As we crawled on, the terrain became up and down patches of wet Korean grass. We approached a two-story house faintly illuminated by underground floodlights dramatizing a pagoda roof and assorted hanging lanterns.

Frenchy suddenly muttered, "I got a feeling we're about to go to war with China."

"What gives you that idea?" I whispered.

"*Them*," Frenchy said.

I whirled. A pair of grinning Orientals flaunting machine guns stood over us like pallbearers over a grave.

Dr. Fong's house was a ghastly green inside and the walls glowed eerily. A waterfall cascaded into an indoor pool, the sound of its tumult loud enough to wake the dead. A glass elevator descended from the ceiling revealing in its glittery depths the figure of an immaculate woman. Her skin seemed as white as snow and yet her slanted dark eyes glowed like jade stones embedded in the forehead of Buddha. She wore a blood-red gown. Jet-black hair streamed down her face, spilling almost to her waist. Her face was incredibly exquisite with a full-contoured mouth and patrician nose. A slender figure shaped the gauzy robe she wore.

She stepped regally from the elevator, walked toward me and extended a long graceful hand. "Miss West, I am extremely honored, although I must admit the hour is late. I am accustomed to reaching my bed by ten o'clock. However, since I was expecting you this evening, I delayed my slumber."

The two armed men grabbed Frenchy, taking him away. I turned, protesting, but the exotic woman halted my cries. "Do not fear, your friend will be cared for

until our conversation is completed. Please accompany me upstairs." She stepped back into the elevator, gesturing for me to follow.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked.

She smiled openly. "That depends upon you, Miss West."

It was then I noticed five more Orientals poised in the darkness, Japanese M-14's fixed in their hands. I quietly joined her.

"You are so hospitable," I said, nodding.

She flicked cruel, hot eyes at me. "It comes with good breeding, Miss West."

The elevator crept slowly upward, stopping on the second floor. When we emerged, any hope of turning my pearl-handled .22 on her sleek back vanished. Five more gun-toting Asians stood in wait.

She studied me wryly. "May I have your weapon, please?"

"Is that necessary?" I asked.

She extended her hand. "It shall be returned upon your departure."

I reached under my trenchcoat and removed the small revolver. She took the gun and tossed it to one of the five men. They withdrew silently into the shadows.

She led me into a large sitting room arranged with ornately carved furniture and a carpet that must have been something out of the Ming Dynasty, an immense red dragon tufted in its center. Logs crackled in a rock fireplace.

Her movements seemed almost imperceptible as she glided into the room. She seated herself in one of the high-backed chairs and indicated for me to sit opposite.

"May I introduce myself? I am Madame Fong."

"Wife of Dr. Fong?"

She corrected. "I am Dr. Fong, a surgeon, having trained in Hong Kong." She studied my face. "You wonder what I am doing in your country?"

"No. But I do wonder how you know me."

Her smile vanished. She reached to a table beside her chair, procured a cigarette and then inserted it into a

carved ivory holder. Out of the shadows slithered a lovely Oriental girl with cropped black hair and flashing dark eyes embedded in curved slits. She flicked open a lighter and ignited Madame Fong's cigarette.

"This is my daughter, Minipoo, Miss West. She is a fan of yours and wanted to meet you." She laughed. "Thus she apparently used this opportunity to do so. You are now long overdue for bed, my child."

The girl shot a quick glance at me, then nodded. "Yes, mother. Good night. Good night, Miss West." She vanished quickly.

"Beautiful child," I said.

"Yes. She is seventeen. My one and only. I was much younger than she when I gave her birth." Madame Fong exhaled a stream of smoke. "You are an extremely beautiful female yourself, Miss West. I am rather curious to know why you chose the field you are in—that of private investigation. I understand it is an extremely dangerous profession. One which is handled principally by men."

I could feel her sarcasm piercing like arrows into my flesh. "My father was a detective. When he—died—I took over the business."

"For what reason? Surely a woman such as yourself—"

"There were a number of strange circumstances surrounding his death. He was ambushed in a dark alley. I continued my father's agency principally as a means to locate his murderer."

She said flatly. "I am sorry."

"Since you were expecting me, Madame Fong, you must also be aware of the death of Gorgi Andrews."

Her voice virtually purred. "I heard of this unfortunate occurrence several hours ago. It was then that my contacts advised me of your presence in her room."

"Were you acquainted with Gorgi personally?"

She blinked innocently. "No."

Did you know Sindy Steward?"

Madame Fong brushed at her thick eyelashes. "The girl who was to play you in the TV series?"

"Yes."

"Of course not."

I nodded. "Gorgi also tried out for that part."

"Strange," she whispered. "And now they are both dead."

"Madame Fong, exactly what is this serum you manufacture?"

"It is a formula which builds the mammary glands. One that I brought with me from the Far East."

"What might happen if an overdose were administered?"

She tapped her cigarette nervously. "The glands would become sensitive and unduly turgid. Nothing more."

"How does the serum work?"

"It is a growth process. A budding. Asking only the gland itself—a natural area of development—to mature. True, it is necessary to continue treatment once it is started. But a woman in the capacity held by Miss Andrews needs a firm ample bosom, as do others in similar fields of endeavor—entertainment, show business—where the female is a major attraction. My serum is basically a fortified animal-hormone treatment."

"Then you believe what happened to Gorgi Andrews had nothing to do with your product."

"Absolutely!" She studied me for a moment. "I must point out, though, it would be relatively simple for someone to adulterate the formula with a poison. Such a deadly additive, injected into so sensitive an area, could reach the bloodstream in a matter of minutes and kill instantaneously."

"That's about the way Gorgi Andrews died."

"I am fully aware of that fact," Madame Fong said.

"Now, would you care for a late snack or a drink?"

"No, thank you." My belly was churning.

She seemed pleasantly convinced that I believed her implicitly. A gay smile lighted her lips. "I must admit to a certain humble pleasure having you as my guest, Miss West. You must return again for a longer visit."

After your television show debuts, I should like very much to hold a gala party in your honor."

"That's very flattering. Thank you." I knew she wasn't sincere. A celebration on this blood-stained peninsula would send the guests home gagging. I'd hate to see even my worst enemy in that gruesome grinding machine.

I stood up. "Your hospitality was most—generous. May I apologize for not knocking, but your main gate is a long distance from your—front door."

She knew I was chiding and graciously discounted the jest. There was, though, a deliberate threat in her voice when she rose and took my hand.

"Miss West, I hope we may continue to be friends—women with a purpose, so to speak—and that we shall never cause the other to take an irrational action."

"I hope not," I answered.

Her lips broke into a smile that held a strange hate beneath. "As I am a fan of yours, Miss West, I extend the wish that your television series has a long long run. Naturally, it all depends upon you—yes?"

She was as subtle as a Chinese gong.

"Where will you be next Monday?" I asked suddenly.

She blinked. "In Hong Kong. Why?"

"I thought maybe you might have lunch with me."

"Thank you. Perhaps another time."

We walked to the elevator and were whisked to the first floor. She again shook hands with me, whereupon five of her silent, armed faithful stepped from the shadows with a bewildered Frenchy in tow and escorted us to the front gate. Two of her henchmen politely shoved us into the cab and when the engine started another stepped forward and tossed my .22 revolver and Frenchy's Luger into our laps. This character was a real doll. When Frenchy swung around toward the road, the last thing we saw in the glaring headlights was his toothless grinning face and the machine gun he gripped so lovingly in his ponderous fists.

We were driving through the muted environs of Sau-

salito before Frenchy finally said, "Miss West, didn't I ask you if you were in trouble?"

"Yes, you did."

"Remember, I said I'd like to help."

"Yes."

He groaned. "Forget it!"

"What's the matter, Frenchy?"

He gripped the wheel tenaciously. "I don't dig the company you keep."

"Why not?" I asked sensing the answer.

"Your 300-pound bulldozer is a nut, but at least he's civilized. This last bunch—" Frenchy whistled—"man, shave and a haircut! If Dragon Lady had even sneezed while you were talking to her, they would have whittled my toenails to the kneecaps."

"What happened?"

He exhaled lowly. "Nothing, except the dog died! Have you ever been in an English pub and watched a dartboard match? Well, those yellow bastards put me against a wall downstairs. Your conversation came in through some kind of intercom system. Everytime you said something that upset them, they tossed a knife."

He gestured at the right sleeve of his shirt. There was a slit two inches deep along the outer edge. "That's when you said to her, 'then you know about the death of Gorgi Andrews.' Believe me, I think that one was aimed at my throat, but it missed." Frenchy grimaced at the memory.

"Are you sure it wasn't just an act to frighten you?" I said.

He groaned. "Maybe, but it sure was convincing. That's one playground I don't want to take my kids to—if I ever live to have any." After a pause, he said, "So, you're a private detective."

"Why do you think I pack a gun, Frenchy?"

"Well, I thought you were a police woman or with the FBI. You mean to tell me you do this free lance? You got to be dingy!"

We were on the Golden Gate bridge in heavy fog and

Frenchy's cab was crawling. Suddenly the engine quit. We coasted to a stop.

"What's the matter?" I demanded. "Are we out of gas?"

"I don't know," he said, glancing back. "Geez, somebody is liable to run into us." He started to get out. "I'd better find an emergency phone."

I leaped from the car, noticing a red box in the distance. "I see one. You try and push the cab out of the way."

I ran up the road, through heavy mist, to the telephone emergency post and lifted the receiver.

A voice answered immediately. "Bridge service. What station?"

I glanced at the white numerals on the phone box. "Forty-five—"

Something ripped the receiver from my hand and knocked me to the ground. I rolled from the impact, looked up and felt the heat of a terrible explosion sear my eyes. A reddish hole opened in the fog and in the burning center was Frenchy's taxi. It catapulted into the air and then plunged crazily over the side of the monstrous bridge in an explosive pyre of flame.

Someone was screaming.

Frenchy's cab torched the pre-dawn night like **11**
a cataclysmic star whirling, spewing sheets of
orange flame two hundred feet down into the water be-
neath the Golden Gate Bridge.

I ran toward where the explosion occurred. Head-
lights on the other side of the road groped jerkily
through blinding fog. Brakes squealed. A car skidded to
a stop.

I crumpled to my knees, got up. Pieces of debris from
the detonation bounced on the pavement, bombarding
me.

My eardrums reverberated from the pathetic
screams. I tried to shut them out, but they grew louder
and more fierce.

Something caught my arm and twisted me around.
My cheek felt the sharp sting of a slap and a voice
roared, "Honey, stop it!"

A figure in a torn shirt with blood streaming from
cuts on his face stood over me. It was Frenchy. I threw
my arms around him, tears bursting into my eyelids.

"Oh, dear Lord, I thought you were—"

"Easy, Honey, easy," Frenchy managed, rocking me

tightly, brushing at my hair. "I got out. I was worried about you—and I started up the road—When blew-eeee—"

"Your cab—" I stammered, burying my face against his bloodied chest.

"Must have been a bomb," Frenchy managed. "Never seen anything like it before in my life. It just went up into the air and then over—"

Voices rose distantly, other headlights, brakes. Then the swell of a siren as it raced toward us on the bridge.

A man ran up, his face as white as the ghostly fog. "My God!" he yelled. "Are we under attack? What's happening?"

Another voice blared distantly, "Did you see that? It was a meteor! It hit the bridge, then bounced off!"

"It was an atom bomb!" somebody cried.

I looked up at Frenchy's face. His eyelids were crimson and he could barely see through the daggers of red pouring down his forehead.

"You're hurt," I said.

"Not me," he managed, staring at the dark bay where his cab had fallen. "It's my uke—it's all I had left—"

Frenchy suddenly sagged to his knees and pitched face down on the wet road.

The sun came out early, a ball of impossible fire spreading across the bay and the hills beyond in mocking splendor, casting itself upon the face of San Francisco like rivets being driven into the flesh of the chilled city.

From a window in Lieutenant Pitt's office, high above the shadowed depths, the sudden presence of daylight reminded me sickeningly of Frenchy's cab when it briefly lit up the world two hours earlier.

Pitt examined me down the length of his flared nostrils after he entered the room, then said, "Your friend, Acropolis, is going to be all right. He suffered minor cuts and a lot of shock. He should be out of emergency within twenty-four hours."

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me," he groaned. "I have been with the city of San Francisco for twenty years. And never during that time, Miss West, has there ever been a bombing of such magnitude on the Golden Gate. First damage estimates come to about twenty thousand dollars!"

"I'm sorry," I said.

He laughed contortedly. "Miss West, you arrived in San Francisco less than twelve hours ago. During those seven hundred and twenty-odd minutes you have managed to create more havoc in this city than a revolutionary army!"

I brushed blonde strands from my forehead. "You ordered me to stay, Lieutenant!"

Pitt's face reddened. "Downstairs, Miss West, we have approximately two hundred reporters, newsreel cameramen and assorted press people clamoring to get a story, picture or peek at you. Do you know what that smells of to the Police Commissioner, to me and to everybody in this organization?"

I shook my head.

"Publicity!" he roared. "Publicity for you and your damned television series!"

"We're not even on the air!"

"No, but you're sure as hell setting yourself up as number one on the Neilsen ratings!"

I jumped to my feet. "Are you accusing me of exploding a bomb to gain notoriety?"

"We haven't filed any charges yet—"

"Then get off my back, Lieutenant, and start investigating this case instead of hurling ridiculous accusations!"

Pitt pounded a fist on his desk. "Miss West, go home! Get your damned fanny out of here on the first available flight to Los Angeles!"

"Lieutenant, seven hundred and twenty odd minutes ago, per your calibrations, you remanded me to stay here in this fair city. I wanted to leave, but no! Now you're not going to get me out with a team of mules!"

He groaned. "All right. The first tests are in. There was a poisonous additive mixed with the injection Miss

Andrews took. Prussic acid. Obviously it was no accident. It was either suicide or murder." He brushed at his eyelids. "Possibly self-destruction."

"But you're not convinced."

Pitt gritted his teeth. "I told you, Miss West, this is not your province. If you want to create an incident take it to Hollywood and Vine."

"Lieutenant, somebody may do something to the Golden Gate Bridge next Monday that might wind *you* up on Hollywood and Vine. Do you know of an Oriental woman name of Madame Fong?"

"No."

"She grinds up goats and blows up boobs—maybe bridges, too."

He sighed lowly. "You're way out of my spectrum, Miss West. Blown bridges and boobs and ground-up goats just don't fit into my dossier."

I started for the door. "What does, Lieutenant, a filigreed finger?"

I took a rear staircase and managed to escape the reporters and TV cameras. I took a taxi to the luxurious hotel Erik had checked me into upon our arrival in San Francisco. The Villa Roma is near Fisherman's Wharf, a grandiose cylindrical glass and concrete building elevated above the ground on pillars. Decorated in classic Italian provincial, my third-floor suite had thick plush carpeting, wall murals and Roman seating pieces, plus a sunken bath, wet bar and a King-sized bed built for *queenly* comfort.

I snuggled between cool blue sheets and was fast asleep—for five minutes. Then the phone rang. I groped for the receiver, waking from a dream where Lieutenant Pitt fell into Madame Fong's grinding machine—naked.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Honey?"

"I hope you have the wrong number and think you're talking to Honey Schwartz."

"This is Domonic Biggie," the voice announced. "You didn't pay attention to what I told you."

I groaned, sleepily, half-laughing, "And you didn't give me enough dynamite to blow up the bridge. How did you find me, Mr. Big?"

"The fuzz have a tail on you. After you left the police building *I* followed *them*. Don't joke. They may have your line tapped."

"Oh, nice," I whispered. "Hey, fellas, I was only kidding about the bomb. Please don't wheel in the bright lights and the saps. I really need sleep."

"Listen, man," Biggie said, "I don't care if the police dig or not. I really have a clue-in."

"Great. Does it have a tufted dragon in the center of her smoking room and fifteen dragons clinging to her chest?"

Biggie stammered. "Don't you dig, cat? I'm talking about North Beach and the cabarets up the street from our club."

"Keep talking. This is a recording."

"Come on, baby," he blurted. "There's this joker up the block named Bly—"

"Captain Bly, you opened your fly on Mr. Christian's cistern—"

"Honey, are you smashed or blowing weed?"

"No!" I groaned, dropping my head on a pillow. "I have been shot at, bombed and belly-ached—until I've had it, Mr. Big. Now, please, let me sleep!"

"Look, man, this Bly cat cut in on Gorgi last night before you made the scene—I don't know how he got past me at the door—"

I sat up. "Wait a minute, Biggie. Are you telling me there is no other way in or out of that joint except by the front entrance?"

"The fire department don't know it—but there ain't."

"And you were on the door all afternoon until Gorgi—"

"Every cotton-picking second."

"Who did you see go back to Gorgi's dressing room?"

He hesitated. "Well, before you showed her father

made the scene. With a couple of his weirdos—he calls 'em planetary beings.”

“Planetary what?”

“Don’t you dig, man? He’s head of a church over on the Barbary side. Calls his clan “Solar People.” They really shook Gorgi. You know, her dancing naked and all that kind of jazz. They tried to put on a prayer meeting right in the middle of the Club, until we cooled the scene and tossed them out.”

“So, that’s what she meant by her *saintly* father. Did *he* go back to her dressing room?”

Biggie’s voice narrowed. “Yeah—I think so.”

“Who else?”

“Mordicini.”

“The musician?”

“Dig. He talked to her about a new piece of music and then split right away. But this weirdball Bly—”

“Why don’t I meet you at the club tonight around eight. We’ll talk about it then.”

“But, Honey—”

I hung up and stared longingly at my impression left in the bed. Aching I showered and slipped into a comfortable black knit jumpsuit, fastening white pearl buttons up the front. I slipped my .22 into a shoulder bag. If the San Francisco police were on my tail this was no time for sleep.

Biggie was so right. A squad car sat parked beneath my windows. A plainclothes detective stood beside the vehicle, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

I picked up the phone. A female voice answered, “Desk.”

Forcing my voice into a hysterical babble, I blurted, “Operator, there is a woman—a blonde woman—naked except for a garter and a gun taking the elevator to the first floor—” I jammed the receiver down and peeked through the curtain. One, two, three, four, five—The detective beside the squad car suddenly dropped his cigarette, whirled and ran to the urgent cry of a distant voice. Another man in uniform climbed from the car and followed.

I moved swiftly to my door and parted it slightly, then seeing the coast was clear bolted down a back staircase. When I reached the ground floor, I crossed the street and walked north in the direction of Fisherman's Wharf. I didn't look back until I reached the sun-drenched docks where fishermen were dumping their night's bounty into waiting trucks. Seagulls wheeled and squalled in frustrated abandon.

Joel Mordicini's boat was moored two blocks away. It was a battleship gray converted Navy P-T, just as Biggie had described, as sleek as a polished bomb and bristling for action. So was Mr. Mordicini, a huge man with a chest the size of a baby bull and shoulders twice as wide. He had a black, neatly trimmed beard, long curly sideburns and a head of full wavy hair. His biceps were the size of a mule's hindquarters. So were his feet, calves and thighs. But his waist nipped in as if somebody had thrown a rope around his gut and cinched it until the bronzed hairy Adonis was a human sand clock.

Mordicini was stretched out on the upper deck, a pair of weather-beaten dungarees drawn to his belly button, chest bared to the morning sunlight, arms folded under his huge head. He opened one eye to the sound of my heels approaching. It was half-lidded and startling blue.

When he opened his mouth, revealing straight white teeth, he laughed. "Lo, cometh the dawn," he murmured, "and an angel pours from the Heaven upon my lonely being. Welcome aboard, angel."

I couldn't help grinning at such a warm reception. "Mr. Mordicini?"

He sat up, showing the immensity of his physique. "A Blonde angel with lips of passion and eyes of fire. What ho, angel? Tell me not that you are the new mailman on the route?"

"Hardly," I said.

He laughed, slapping the deck with a meaty hand. "You are devilishly cute. Ah, ha! You are the bride of Scratch coming to pick up my option."

"Perhaps," I said, going along with the gag.

Mordicini chuckled. "Is the old bastard afraid I'll run

him out of business? I wouldn't doubt it." Suddenly he sagged back to the deck, grunting lowly. "You are a mirage. A figment of a drunken night's new day. A luscious leprechaun. Give it a name and I'll buy every pound."

I slumped onto a deck chair and examined his massive frame. "I'm a bomb," I said, "about to blow up the Golden Gate Bridge."

He sat up again, fingers gliding along a tapered aquiline nose. "Uno momento!" The hand jabbed in my direction. "Angel, no. Devil, yes. Gorgi talked about you. Sí, Biggie the rat, too." His eyelids widened menacingly. "You are that woman—Honey West!"

A white tanker carrying a Scandinavian flag mushed along the bay behind Mordicini's boat, its hull buried deep in the water, its sleek mast bearing Swedish colors. I wondered where it had been when Frenchy's taxi exploded and pitched into the water.

"Guilty," I said. "And where does that put you, Mr. Mordicini?"

He stroked his beard sadly. "Alone. Where should it put me, without Gorgi? She was my doll. My all. How can I live without her? How can anyone?"

"Somebody decided they could," I said. "She was poisoned."

He winced. "You're putting me on."

"Put me on. How'd you know about the bridge bombing?"

He pushed his hands together into an angry bronzed mass. "I heard the explosion around three o'clock. It woke me. The first thought through my brain was Vietnam retaliation. I called the Harbor Patrol. Then the newspapers. I finally got the word about an hour ago. I don't usually sleep on deck, but after all that, I was bushed."

"Me too," I said yawning, knowing I could check out his statements later. "What time does the Navy serve breakfast aboard this tub?"

He leaped to his feet, rising into a six-foot-seven or more bulk that was positively immense. "*Immediately!* I

haven't had chow yet myself." He stroked his beard. "How about a little early morning swim first?"

This huge man exuded personality, fun, vitality, and a roguish spark.

I said, "I didn't bring a swim suit."

He winked. "Oh, no trouble there, love. We supply suits for all, including deep-sea paraphernalia, if that's what you need. That's my business. Besides knocking out a few show tunes. I run this perky little raft for parties who want to have fun in the sun, all the way from topless suits for the dolls to topless bottles of Scotch for the gents."

I nodded. "Great! But if it's all the same to you I'd rather dine now and swig later."

He laughed. "Follow me."

We went down a flight of steps into a modern galley, equipped with everything, *including* a kitchen sink.

He tossed a pound of bacon and some shredded potatoes into a giant skillet. Then he grinned cutely, "How about a swig first?"

"At seven o'clock in the morning?"

He kissed my cheek. "If you don't have it at seven, you might as well forget about the day because it's gone. What'll it be Scotch, gin, whiskey?"

"How about a Bloody Mary?"

He went about making one while he talked, "Gorgi liked gin. She was a swinger. Biggie called me at nine o'clock last night and told me she was dead. If the sun had suddenly gone out I could have believed it more."

"I was there when she died."

"I know, Biggie told me. Did you ever see her act at the club?"

"No."

He tossed a half a dozen eggs into another pan, avoiding my gaze. "She was something else. A brilliant girl. With a heart of gold. And a body to match. She never needed that stuff."

"You mean the serum to build her breasts?"

He nodded. "She had a beautiful bosom. It was that goddamned Biggie who hung her up."

"There was poison in the injection she took last night."

His bearded face was a mass of sudden fury. "You're kidding!"

"Prussic acid."

He slammed the spatula down with a furious thrust of his hand. "Who in hell would do such a thing?"

"The police think it might have been suicide."

"Gorgi wouldn't have killed herself!"

"How can you be sure?"

"Because she loved life too much." His head shook gravely. "She was all fire and brimstone. All love and longevity. If you ever met her father and mother you'd know the answer."

"To what question?" I demanded, sipping at the drink he handed me.

"To ten thousand questions. What made Gorgi run, first. What made Gorgi beautiful, second. What made Gorgi happy, third."

Joel Mordicini dished up the eggs, bacon and potatoes into two plates and thrust one at me.

"How do you answer the ten thousand questions?" I asked.

He slumped into a chair, his huge being filling it to capacity, and wiped at his mouth. "All right. First, what made Gorgi run? Fear."

"What kind of fear?"

"Fear fear," he said, laughing grimly. "The kind of fear fear that grips us all."

"Monday fear?"

"Monday what?" he slammed. "You want to know something, Miss Honey West? The gun is loaded. Where is the beauty? Where is our horizon, our tomorrow?" His huge face crumpled. "It is a bomb. Our kiss of tomorrow is death. And the big daddies of today are going to shove that ever-loving time bomb down our throats whether we like it or not."

"What about the questions?"

He reared back in his chair, rubbing his beard. "All right, forget fear. What made Gorgi beautiful? She was

born that way. A self-styled individual with a tremendous heart. She was beautiful in every way, except one."

"What was that?"

"She had no courage. No will to fight. She would quit at the first sign of trouble."

"Biggie said the same thing."

Mordicini snorted. "He had reason to. He was one of the people who beat her down. Made her into a puppet. Like her mother and father, Biggie was a thorn in her side."

I studied his bearded face. "All right, what about the third question? What made her happy?"

His eyes lighted. "Music. My music. Any music. She loved to dance and sing and cavort and twist and wriggle. She was a worm with the body of a carnivorous human. She lived every sound she heard, every beat, every lyric." He staggered upright. "Do you want to know something, Honey? Talk about love and hate. Biggie hated both of us because Gorgi loved me and my music. Her father hated her for what she felt as a human being, and her mother despised her for just being alive."

"Joel, did you know Sindy Steward?"

"Hell, no!" he said emphatically, dropping back into his chair.

"Have you ever heard of DERFA and ANYH?" I asked.

A flash of arrogance showed in his eyes. "Sure, *Do Everything Right for America* and *America Needs Your Health*. I subscribed to both of them and got clipped. They should have called it, WNYW, *We Need Your Wealth!* Gorgi even volunteered personal help to the bastards."

"When was this?"

"About six months ago. She went down to San Diego and sold subscriptions. That was about the time she tried out for your TV show."

"Did she ever talk about her experiences in San Diego?"

"She really grooved with the action at first. Then—"

"What?"

Mordicini grimaced. "Something happened. She never told me what it was. Just something weird with this writer who was connected with the whole rotten fraud."

"Nelson Cooper?"

He nodded. "I think that was his name. He pulled something on her. She never would discuss it after she got back to San Francisco. I guess she was too embarrassed because she got taken. Really taken."

"Did she ever mention any bridges or dams—in connection with DERFA or ANYH or Cooper?"

"No." He threw up his big hands. "Okay, the question and answer period is over. Now it's swim time."

"Same old problem," I said. "Still no bathing suit."

He stood up, suddenly shucked down his blue denims and tossed them aside. "All right, we're even!"

I blinked. "You did say swim time, didn't you?"

"What ever you like."

I smiled, cheeks getting hot. "I—I'm really too tired to swim."

"Then we'll just sit here and talk."

"Like—like that?"

He flicked open the top button on my suit. Then the second, third, fourth. "I don't want you to feel uncomfortable."

I stopped his hand. "What makes you think I'm uncomfortable?"

He kissed me softly on the mouth, then said. "I visited a nudist camp once. With all those people running around without any clothes I felt uncomfortable as hell."

He opened the last button. My pants suit fell to the floor. I had not worn any panties or bra. He encircled me with his arms.

"Now how do you feel?"

"Like—I'd like a swim."

He kissed the tip of my nose, my eyelids. "Too late,"

he whispered. "We follow a very regimented schedule aboard this ship. Swim period is over."

"But—"

When I woke it was three o'clock in the afternoon and I could feel the sway of Joel Mordini's boat beneath me. A wind had freshened the bay and was driving swells into the docks and landings along Fisherman's Wharf. **12**

I scoured the P-T from stem to stern but the bearded beautiful giant was gone. I climbed into my jump suit and walked up to the landing. Fog was beginning to billow over distant hills, a faint pallor of the night to come.

I found a phone booth near the dock and put in a person-to-person collect call to Erik March at Homer House's Malibu beach pad. The operator had trouble making the connection.

When the redhead finally came on, he was fuming. "That S-O-B has turned me into a nursemaid. No wonder somebody's been trying to kill him. I'm going to get in line."

I came back with the Transylvanian accent, "Come play on my *bridge*, leetle boy."

Erik had not heard about the bombing incident. "Holy French atoms, Honey! I said hang-in there. Not hang-up there!"

I quickly filled him in on Madame Fong, Frenchy Acropolis and Mordicini—also that Gorgi Andrews had worked for DERFA, ANYH and Nelson Cooper.

He returned, "Sounds like you're hanging in there all right—but a little too tight with this guy Mordicini."

"A girl has to get answers, doesn't she?" I quipped.

"*Stand-up* answers!" Erik roared. "What about the mother and father?"

"I'm just about to check them out. What's new on your front besides donning an apron?"

He groaned. "The police are beginning to believe House blew his own elevator for publicity purposes. Lieutenant Steel has a former employee of HH's who's already hinted he was paid to set the dynamite. If that's true this bastard has hung us in a big fat frame, using Sindy Steward and his magazine article as the debatable bait."

"Wow!" I said. "There are always those nuts who complicate cases just to satisfy their own egos. I've been worried about that cat. How's his magazine selling?"

"Like thousand-dollar bills being offered for a penny each."

"Yuk!"

"Keep in touch, Honey—and keep away from Madame Fong—and Mordicini."

After hanging up I found a listing in the phone book for Gorgi Andrews, Sr., on Telegraph Hill and caught a cab. She lived in an old broken-down hotel that must have suffered through the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. There were cracked plaster walls and thread-bare carpeting in the foyer. The desk clerk was surly and suspicious.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Andrews, please," I said.

He viewed me for a few seconds with a calloused gaze. "For what?"

I shrugged, unsmiling. "What do most people want to see another person for?"

He shrugged back. "You tell me."

"I'm not from the police."

He snickered loudly. "That's what you say."

I patted his cheek hard. "Whether I am or not, I still want to see her, understand?"

He winced. "One oh three, around the corner. I still wouldn't—"

I walked down a dark corridor to the door the clerk indicated and knocked. In a moment, a blonde in her late forties answered. She had pale blue eyes and the sweep of a cheap phoney wig dragged over her eyelids and forehead.

She smiled drunkenly and said, "Well?"

"Mrs. Andrews?"

Her mouth twisted. "If you're a policewoman, I have already answered all the questions. Now will you leave me alone?"

"I'm Honey West."

She hesitated for a second, then pulled the door open, exposing a fairly nice living room, a couch, a bar stocked with half-empty bottles, walls lined with photographs of a small blonde girl. "Come in."

She gestured for me to sit, but I remained standing after she closed the door. She was a small woman with a fragile face, clothed in a faded red velvet wrapper.

"I've read about you in the newspapers," she said.

"Your daughter didn't mention me?"

She whirled angrily toward the bar and poured herself a shot of bourbon. "I haven't seen my daughter in seven years."

I studied her face as she slugged down the shot. "You do plan to go to her funeral?"

She hammered the glass down on the bar. "Hell, no! *My daughter is not dead!*"

I stood silently, surveying the room, while she slumped into a tattered rose-print quilted chair and quieted a coughing fit which had stopped her angry words.

Finally, she peered up at me and said, "My daughter is not a flamboyant pig who lets people blow her breasts into ugly balloons, and who exposes those fake mon-

strosities to sick drunks who come to feast their moronic eyes upon those filthy ghoulish blobs!" She pressed the whiskey glass to her lips and swallowed as much of the liquor as she could take before bursting into another coughing spell that forced ribbons of the brown liquid to spill from her lips and drop onto the faded red robe.

Suddenly she laughed, a fist against her mouth, the laughter turning into a broken smile. "No," she continued in a hoarse whisper. "My daughter is a lovely child with large blue eyes and a pretty, angelic face. Her hair and heart are made of gold and she sings to me each evening before going to bed. Do you know what she sings?"

The glass trembled in her fingers as she peered around the small room at the myriad of photographs, her eyelids welling with pathetic tears.

I love you mother, mother of mine.
I love you mother, mother divine.
When I see you my heart fills with joy.
You are a princess, a fond living toy.

When the song was finished, she sat in the chair rocking back and forth as if she were holding a young child in her arms. A clock somewhere in the room ticked. She stared fixedly at the memory, lost in its haunting emptiness.

"Mrs. Andrews—"

"Leave *us* alone," she whispered.

I started to the door, then turned. "Her father—"

Her arms stiffened. "She has no father! Get out!"

I hesitated, studying the glass of bourbon held in one hand and the dead memory she clutched in the other.

"I—I'm sorry," I said after a moment.

"There is nothing to be sorry about," she said, not looking at me, continuing to sway in a motherly fashion. "She will be all right tomorrow."

Outside in the corridor, I closed the door gently and leaned against the wall. Mrs. Andrews' mottled face

clung in my mind like a pendulous weight, shaking me to the very core. As I groped my way out into the late-afternoon fog, I knew I had only a fragment of the Gorgi Andrews story. And they were such small pieces that only the outer edges of the puzzle were in place. At the top towered a tiny halo. At the bottom lay a twisted dirty syringe. In between, somewhere, lurked a vicious murderer.

Before taking a cab out to the Barbary Coast, I tried Biggie at the Crocodile Club. After a long wait, filled with banging, beating drums, he answered. I told him I might not make it by eight.

"What's the hold, chick?" he demanded, shouting above the noise.

"I have a few appointment that won't quit. I just talked with Gorgi's mother."

Biggie swore. "Cheese and crackers, Honey! You're getting in up to your garter belt! Let the fuzz handle that."

"I can't. Have you heard from Mordicini?"

"What the hell would that bastard want to beat my ears for?"

"Just asking. Biggie, what are Solar People?"

He practically screamed, "Honey, you stay away from them!"

"What are they?"

"Man, if you don't want trouble. Real trouble. Keep away from Gorgi's father. It's a religious cult. Fanatics. Nuts."

"You warned me about dear Dr. Fong. I managed to get out of that.

"You were lucky!" he cried.

"Biggie," I said soothingly, "I still don't believe you care."

"Honey—!"

I hung up and dialed a number listed for Joel Mordicini.

His rugged voice answered after a moment, jokingly, "Coast Guard."

"You mean *Ghost Guard*," I said. "Where did you go, Phantom?"

"Honey, where did *you* go?" His voice had a knife edge. "I took a brief walk, came back and you were gone. I've been worried."

"Why?" I said lightly. "The postmistress had to continue delivering her mail."

"I'm your only male, baby," he said tautly. "You'd better come back for a special delivery."

"And what might that be?" I asked, sensing a strange tenor to his voice.

"You're in trouble, Honey. Deep trouble. Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up."

Despite our hours together Joel Mordicini still didn't ring loud and clear. "What's the trouble?"

"The Viet Cong's on your trail, Honey. I got it through the grapevine. Madame Fong's on the war-path."

"Why?"

"I don't know. The chinks down on the waterfront get these messages through their pigtails. The word is, Honey, she's out to get you."

"The bomb didn't work to her pleasure, is that it?"

Mordicini spat, "Just cool it! Tell me where you are and I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

"I'm in Hanoi," I said. "It'll take a while."

His voice scissored. "Honey, don't be a fool! Don't get yourself killed for nothing!"

The old Barbary Coast, once a blood-and-thunder area, along San Francisco's outer North Shore, now lies in a dark belt of rambling streets, filled with nightly fog and crumbling buildings. The excitement belonging to it at the turn of the century has long since died. Majestic nightclubs, once frequented by the rich and elite, are now mostly used for warehouses, flophouses, after-hours clubs, beer joints, queer joints and whorehouses. There are a few dimly lit coffee houses, then farther south—dark oblivion.

That's where I wound up. When I climbed from the

cab, the driver shook his head and asked, "Are you sure you know where you're at, lady?"

Night and a heavy mist had blended into an impossible syrupy black.

I paid him and said, "You did say this is where the temple of the Solar People is, right?"

"Yeah," he groaned, gesturing. "Right across the street. But, ma'm, you don't look the type who needs that kind of religion."

I winked. "You never know."

After the cab was gone, I studied the neighborhood, trying to piece it together through the maddening fog that clung to me and the ground. My heels clicked rawly as I walked, making a clatter in the awesome quiet like the ticking of a clock. I reached an iron gate, swung it in, and started up a narrow block path before hearing the first sounds beyond my own since the taxi left. It was the *plink* of a mandolin. Someone was singing. I stopped.

The voice began to formulate in the wet mist:

Say it to me, say it again.

Say it to me, a prayer and when.

The total fathers of the universe,

Meet on a plain and can rehearse,

The meeting of a mind, the meeting of a soul,

The total total meeting of a peaceful role.

Peace, peace, peace, make me peaceful now.

Do not put me in the black black belly of a sow!

I stumbled in the dark, knocked a potted plant crashing on the stone. The sound reverberated sharply. The music and singing stopped. A door opened near where I was standing; a tiny wedge of light illuminated a tall lanky man clutching a mandolin. He had a long scraggly black beard and was clad in a dark robe. He grasped my arm and yanked me inside. Faint candles lit a room with purple walls draped with seaweed. At the far end I could distinguish another man standing near an open fireplace. He was also bearded and wore a white collar

and dark suit. There were many others sitting around on the floor, buried in the flickering light. I could see their shadows weirdly projected against the walls, but I could not make them out individually. The man with the mandolin flicked green darts at me, nighed in deeply welled eyelids. There came a moment of stark silence as he closed the door behind us.

"Who are you, maid? A princess of the dark?"

I couldn't help the start in my voice. "I'm looking for Mr. Andrews."

"Mr. Andrews, is it?" he sang blatantly, as if he were heralding my arrival with a weirdly inventive verse.

And where do you find him my pretty maid?
If you ask a sold-soldier you may be laid!
But if ye seek the truth and right,
Ye may find it in your heart this baleful night.
The universe and stars will unite, unite!

"Just Mr. Andrews," I said, glancing around.
The bearded wonder chorused:

You may, you may,
Hey, hey, hey, hey,
If you came to lay, do not say neigh.
Hey, hey, hey, hey,
God's word shall be this very day.
You may, you may!

A baleful chorus of his words rose contortedly. Hands clapped, instruments began to play. It was awesomely frightening. Suddenly the man in the white collar smashed his hands together and the noise stopped instantaneously.

"I think this is enough!" he chanted in the same sing-song.

Enough, enough, we cannot be gruff!
We must, we must be dearly sincere,
For I note, for I note, she wears no brassiere.

The entire group, lost in the dim regions of the room, began to chant:

No brassiere, no brassiere,
How dear, how dear.
For the stars and the Heaven will never revere,
The total man and woman alike
Who go riding to the eons on a soul-saving bike!

The man in the white collar came striding forward, grasped my hand and took me ceremoniously into a small candle-lit room away from the central group. A strange orange bulb glowed, splashing substance on a large bed in one corner carved from two free-form hands, holding up a curved mattress. On one wall was a naked orgy of men and women entwined in vivid oranges and reds and purples. Against another wall was a statue of two men wrapped in each other's arms. Nearby was a statue of two women. They were also grossly enthralled.

"Mr. Andrews—" I said, guessing he was Gorgi's father.

"King Father Andrews," he corrected, fingering his collar. "King of the Universe and Father of all man. What may I do for you, child? You seem to have found your fortunate way into my fabulous kingdom." His flared blond eyebrows were combed on his forehead. Wavy blond hair and fierce blue eyes topped a lean, lantern-jawed face. "Did you come here purposefully to seek my communion, or are you a lost soul in search of help from your Maker?"

I couldn't believe he was for real. "Well—"

He patted his dark suit and fitted his hands into his belt. "Either way, child, I can help you. I can give you strength you have never known. If you are sick I can heal any wounds, any ills."

"Are you Gorgi's father?" I asked.

He blinked, then a large smile filled his lean face. "I am the Father of all. Your father, the Father of the Fa-

ther. You have only to come close to me, child, to find the center of creation."

They were singing again and the sound of it inside the cardboard walls was so pagan and ethereal I couldn't help the shudder that passed through me. "I mean—Gorgi Andrews' father."

This time he couldn't shrug it off. He lifted his hands in a gesture of holy disdain. "And who might you be, my child?"

"Honey West."

His grin faded slightly. "South, East, North or West, you are one of us. A child of the solar system, a child of the universe. You may kiss my lips now, if you wish, and you will have total serenity in the night to come."

"I'm a private investigator."

He started to laugh lowly. "We have no fear—"

"Except fear itself," I finished. "When is the last time you saw your daughter?"

His face drained of its color, a sick white creeping over his eyelids and his thin jowls. He looked to be about fifty, but his deep sensuous lips belied his age. They fluttered for a moment, then grew taut. "You do not have a soul, thus you are not a free spirit and cannot climb into the heavens as we. I must ask you to go."

"I just visited your wife," I said, growing sick with his phoney lingo. "She wept and rocked the child she lost years ago. What happened to that child, *Mister Andrews*?"

His laugh was now a dry piece of toast, crumbling. "I am the Father of all—the entire universe. I am a solar priest. There is no God but myself. Now return to the oblivion from whence you came."

"A young girl named Gorgi Andrews was murdered last night. At a club in North Beach. You were there just before—"

"So what!" he spat suddenly, the cords of his neck dilating. "Get out of here!"

"What happened, *Mister Andrews*?"

He turned toward the wall, head sagging into his

hands. "You are barking up the wrong tree, Miss West."

"Not the wrong solar system, King Father?"

"Don't mock me!" he cried. "There is still the principality of God."

"You said you are God."

"I am!" he roared. "Make no mistake about that!"

"Why is your daughter dead, *Mister Andrews*?"

He exhaled lowly. "There is hell on earth. Gorgi was part of this hell. She burned in its terrible embers."

"She was poisoned," I said.

He nodded. "She took the poisoned apple."

"It was a needle," I said. "Plain and simple."

The door burst open. The bearded wonder with the mandolin stood in the opening. So were about five other bearded characters without mandolins. They began chanting:

Can we find you, can't, can't, can't!
Do you love us, chant, chant, chant!
In between the love and all of this secretion,
Is there a way to find your attrition?
Can't, can't, can't,
Chant, chant, pant!

One of them held a glistening needle in his right hand. I didn't wait for the second chorus. I ripped out my .22 revolver and leveled it. But I forgot about the King Father. His foot rose and booted it to the ceiling.

I ran forward, judo-chopped the bearded wonder into oblivion, and got his next of kin, but the third wave caught me against the cheek and I crumpled. I rolled, fought, bit, but the needle came down in the fire-flicked shadows and plunged into my arm. To the hilt.

A grinning, toothy, bearded man on top of me chanted:

Love, love, love, heaven above,
When you awake you'll be a dove.
Love, love, love,

The hell fires will burn you,
Will never spurn you, will surely burn you—

The needle seemed to be going deeper, into my soul, brain, heart. The room and the people began to seep into the hole, turning waxen and blood red and gooey. They began to roll and thrash around and liquify. Slowly they seeped into the opening and were all gone and darkness spread out and out and out until it was one total dark wave that swarmed over me.

Waves rolled blanket-heavy in a huge tumbling world of ferocity. I clung to one, fell off, rolled on another's bosom, then came down like a surfboard on its crest and felt the surge of a new one under me, lifting, pushing me up into the sky. I screamed. Another sound reverberated in my ears. A huge honking roar billowed up above the oblivion I found myself in, but it died as the wave behind me did, and I clung with its heaviness, riding it like a surf rider until I found it gone and the momentum of it lost behind me. **13**

I looked up at a towering peak capped with a swirling light and I was flung against this monstrosity. I clung to its rocky sides as a new wave flattened me against it with such frenzy that I thought I would be hurled back into the sea. A hand reached down into that void. Then I could hear a voice cry, "My God, Petel! There—there's a woman here! Give me some help! She's alive!"

The face that blinked its way into sensibility was a composite of two bright brown eyes and a nose, a large nose, and an Adam's apple.

"Are you all right, ma'm?" this crass apparition said, staring down.

"Do—do you sing songs?" I whispered.

The eye blinked. "Do you know where you are, ma'm?"

"No," I managed, shivering from the cold that surrounded me, blocked me in and held me in an impossible vice.

"You're on the Crown Lighthouse, outside San Francisco Bay. We just fished you out of the drink."

My teeth chattered, rattled, almost tore me asunder. "Call—call the—"

"The Coast Guard is on the way, ma'm. My God, if it hadn't been low tide you would have been torn to bits. Where'd you come from, a ship?"

"No—no," I babbled, dazedly "I—I come from Transylvania."

"From where?"

"Thank God, you—you don't sing songs."

The next face I recognized. It was angry, lean, fierce and impossibly contorted. It bent over me, breathing its contemptuousness on me in heavy quick breaths.

"Miss West, this is Lieutenant Pitt. Please!"

I exhaled lowly. "I never heard you use that word before, Lieutenant."

"Are—you all right?"

My eyes focused on a white ceiling, and grazed down on a window showing the outline of San Francisco, its buildings and the bay, now bathed in brilliant sunlight. There was a pot of flowers near the window. Bright roses. I sat up blinking.

"What day is this?"

"Sunday," Pitt said, continuing to study me.

"Where am I now?" I asked.

"Temple Memorial Hospital here in San Francisco. You were brought in by the Coast Guard. They found you clinging to the base of Crown Lighthouse, stark naked and screaming your lungs out."

"You make it sound so beautiful, Lieutenant."

His expression soured. "How am I supposed to express it, Miss West? One night you're involved in a lethal explosion atop the Golden Gate, and the next you're floating around a mile outside the bridge's span. I'm beginning to suspect this is *not* a publicity gimmick and it's boggling my mind."

"Bully for you." I sat up, feeling my arms and legs. Nothing seemed hurt. In fact, I felt like dancing. A wild urge tore through me. I burst from beneath the covers and ran toward a wall. An inane desire convinced me the wall was a mountain and I had to climb it. I tossed up a piton and hammered it into the plaster.

"Here I go!" I yelled, hoisting myself on a bureau.

"Miss West!" Pitt cried. "Have you gone crazy?"

He tried to grasp me, but I kicked him away. I was up on the mountain now and reaching for a new hold. The piton above me slipped from its niche and fell.

"I'm a cookie!" I bellowed. "So watch me crumble. Arms and legs altogether now. Crumble cookie!"

I felt myself vaulting through the air. Pitt was under me. He dropped, yelling for help.

I got up and brushed myself off. Nothing seemed insurmountable, not even Mount Everest. I *had* to climb the damned thing! I started for the window. Two arms grabbed me. I hit one, the other hit me. And that was all she wrote.

"Lysergic diethylamide acid," a voice said distantly. "LSD. She had enough to choke a horse. Apparently jumping into the ocean saved her. She must have swallowed a great deal of salt water, thus reducing its potency. But the dregs hadn't worn off after she woke up here at the hospital and she went berserk."

"Might she have jumped out that window?"

"In all probability. LSD can be a tremendous depressant, and with certain personalities the drug demands suicide, asks its users to crawl up walls, walk on water, fly, anything."

My eyelids opened. This time I could make out a friendly face. Erik March. He grinned down. A won-

derous slit in the hideous void that contained me earlier.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"All right—I think."

"This is Doctor Regis, a staff neurologist." The red-head introduced me to a heavy-set man, with myopic glasses, standing next to the bed.

"You took a powerful hallucinatory drug," the doctor said. "Lysergic diethylamide acid—LSD. The dosage crippled your thinking powers."

I blinked. "Permanently?"

"Have you ever taken acid before?"

"I didn't take it this time. Somebody *jammed* the stuff into me."

"Then you're all right," Regis said. "They gave you some very bad black-market stuff. Bathtub psychedelic gin, so to speak. LSD is a psycho-chemical drug that, unlike most other drugs, bypasses the blood-brain barrier and directly affects the brain itself. A bad overdose of this stuff can completely blow your mind."

I sat up in bed, shaking my head. "All the cells seem to be A-okay now."

"Then you're lucky," Regis said. "Whoever administered your dosage was certainly not trying to lengthen your lifespan. If you get what I mean." He left the room.

Erik's gaze was harsh. "Who tried to kill you, Honey?"

"I looked up Gorgi's father last night. He's a charismatic, cultic nut. Some sort of phony messiah with a following he calls *his* Solar People. The last thing I remember—before *waking* up in the water—was a needle being forced into *my* arm by some of his kooks. Did you bring me some clothes?"

He gestured at a suitcase of mine near the door. "They told me they fished you out without a stitch on—so I stopped at your suite at the Villa Roma."

"Thanks, pal." I pushed the bed covers away and stood up, clawing at the ties on the back of my hospital gown.

"Honey, you're not going to leave—"

"Of course, I am. I'm perfectly well now. What time is it?"

"Three-thirty, but—"

"What time did you get back into town?"

"Around noon. We seem to be doubling in bad news. Homer House was formally arrested this morning for falsifying evidence to sell his magazines. He capitalized on Sindy Steward's murder by faking threatening notes, hiring a guy to take a pot shot at the two of you on the beach—and dynamite his elevator. He claims total innocence—says we're still on the payroll—but—"

The ties were all undone and the gown slipped away from my shoulders. "*But* is right," I said. "You'd better wait outside."

He smiled mischievously. "I guess I'd better."

San Francisco was late-afternoon hot and stolidly waiting for fog to cool it off as we walked from the hospital. Lieutenant Pitt was also waiting. He caught me at the curb as Erik flagged a cab.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Miss West."

"I'm not leaving town, Lieutenant."

"The hospital lab claims you were under the influence of LSD."

"I know the law, Lieutenant. You have to have visual proof, beyond an analysis, of the drug itself."

He grimaced. "You knocked me down and damned near jumped out a window. How much more visual proof do I need?"

"I'll make a bargain with you, Lieutenant. Give me until tomorrow morning and if I haven't produced Gorgi Andrews' murderer, then lock *me* up."

Pitt grappled with his hat, removing it, punching nervous dents into the felt. "Why should I trust you?"

"You won't be far behind."

"You shook my tail yesterday."

I nodded. "And I may again today, but I promise you that by twelve noon tomorrow you'll have a murder confession, and maybe a couple of other goodies tossed in for bad measure."

Pitt was aching to solve this case because of administrative and civic pressures surrounding North Beach and its capricious night life. Unraveling Gorgi's murder might be the key to shutting down, once and for all, the hell pit of San Francisco's evil. My bargain was too good to turn down, even if it meant risking my life, which Pitt knew was in jeopardy.

He smiled thinly. "You're a damned fool, Miss West. You didn't take that stuff yourself. I talked with Dr. Regis after he came out of your room. Why don't you just give us all of the details and let us take it from there?"

"You've been around, Lieutenant. You know as well as I that somebody wants me. You never catch a rat unless you take the poison to him."

He swore under his breath. "Okay, Miss Poison. It's twelve noon tomorrow and not a second later. But if you fink out you're going to discover there's a rat in this town who thrives on poison—me." His gaze fingered my mini-skirted torso. "I'd like nothing better than to eat you up."

I climbed inside the cab Erik had pulled over, then reached through the window opening and chucked Pitt under the chin. "We'll have lunch tomorrow and talk about your peculiar culinary habits, okay?"

He threw his hands down angrily. "Damn you, Honey!"

Pitt was still standing in front of the hospital cursing as we drove off.

Sunday afternoon is similar to Saturday night along North Beach's Broadway. The only difference is less neon and more sunlight, and less drunks and more hung-over people searching for a pain killing way to get drunk again. The cabbie let us out in front of the Crocodile Club. Erik paid the tab while questioning why we were returning to the scene of Gorgi Andrews' murder.

"Doesn't the killer always return to the scene of the crime?" I said grinning.

Erik groaned, following me inside. "Pitt is right. You're nuts, Honey."

Biggie was slumped in a chair—two chairs to be exact—inside the door, clutching a glass that must have contained three shots of whiskey and no ice. The place was jumping. On the stage was an Oriental girl wearing absolutely nothing but a pair of jeweled high heels. I peered hard at her through the dimmed lights and cigarette smoke. She was tossing her lithe, voluptuously breasted body around wildly. The crowd, 95 percent men, roared, clapped and stomped.

Mr. Big lumbered to his feet when he saw me. He seemed stunned. "Hey, man, where the H have you been?"

"Taking a long bath, baby," I said, patting his flabby jowels. "A long wet trip—in LSD."

"In what?"

"Who's the new Chinese fortune cookie?" I asked.

"She's Gorgi's replacement," Biggie stammered, staring at me like he couldn't believe I was for real. "We call her Lettuce Blossom. Dig?" He grinned, a sour melon of a smile on his thick lips. "Let Us Blossom?"

I had recognized her immediately as the dark-eyed daughter of Madame Fong—Minipoo.

"Where'd you get her?" I demanded.

"Man, she came in off the sidewalk and—"

The young Chinese girl placed her hands under her mammoth bosoms and teased them as she bent down on her knees. The audience went into a total frenzy that suddenly ended with one loud drum roll, and Minipoo leaped to her feet and disappeared behind a curtain.

I started toward the back rooms. "You stay here," I told Erik. "Keep a weather eye out for anybody in a skull cap, kimono—or both—and don't let them pass you!"

Biggie chased me into the corridor leading to the dressing rooms. "Man, you can't go back there. It—it's out of bounds."

I whirled. "You mean to tell me you really don't know who that Oriental dancer is?"

He shrugged. "Give me a clue."

A hand touched my shoulder. I swung around into the hard steel eyes of the club owner, Seth Miller. He wore the black silk suit of Friday night. His finely manicured fingertips gestured for me to follow him. He flashed a self-satisfied, supercilious grin.

His office was buried among adding machines, files, account sheets, papers, books. He asked me to sit in a chair balanced against a 30-drawer cabinet.

I slung a hip on his desk instead and said, "So, what's your problem?"

He acted and sounded like James Cagney out of one of his famous hood movies. His hands rattled along with his words. "I don't like you in my place, understand? That's my problem."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Toss you out, see, on your curvaceous little ass."

I had to laugh. "Your 300-pound bouncer isn't going to do it, so who is?"

He flexed his padded suit. "How about me, for a beginning?"

"You're a lousy excuse even for a beginner," I said. "Now cut the movie routine and tell me where Madame Fong fits in this slimy operation."

"Get out of here!" he cried, cheeks reddening.

"This wonderful San Francisco hospitality just won't quit." I slid to my feet. "I like a man like you, Miller. You have only one purpose in life—making a buck. You don't care how—it's making the moola that counts."

He stiffened, eyes glowing like little coals enmeshed in his thick brows. "Don't give me the goody-good-good lecture. I've heard it a thousand times. What do you think those people are clapping and screaming about out there? It's flesh. Honest-to-God flesh. They want to see those big boobies bobbing in their faces. Sweat dripping off them. The sweat falling in their eyes, into their mouths." He hurled a challenging laugh. "I'll bet you'd like to be up there, dancing, naked, flinging your sweat in their faces. Wouldn't you?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I have a stronger notion you'd like to be up there yourself, Mr. Miller, with the same predominately male audience."

He reeled back. "You can't say that to me!" he issued, half cry, half gasp. "I am a man!"

"Pardon the pun," I said, opening his office door, "but only your hairdresser knows for sure."

Miller didn't follow. I walked straight back until I reached the dressing room with the cryptic, **SOME ONE UP THERE LOVES YOU—YOU HOPE!** scrawled on the door. I stepped inside quickly, catching the young Chinese girl completely off-guard. She was seated at a mirror replacing the one Gorgi Andrews broke. She was powdering her large breasts. Her gaze stabbed up at my reflection, twin darts of fear.

"Pardon me," I said. "I thought this was the ladies room."

"It—it is behind you, down the corridor to your right," she whispered, knowing full well that I recognized her.

"Like over the Golden Gate Bridge and turn right when you reach Sausalito?"

She quickly wrapped a towel around her. "I—I do not understand what you mean."

"Come on, Minipoo. What are you doing here?" I demanded.

She thrust the towel to her face, hands trying to hide her fright. "Please," she whispered.

"What is this, truth or consequences?" I roared. "If your mother knows you're here—knows you are exposing yourself to this—this ugly mob—she's worse than I thought. But if you're here, Minipoo, against her wishes, doing what you want to do, revolting against her, then God help the world. She could have the you-know-whats cut off every man in this place. She might blow up Broadway. Maybe even San Francisco. Is this what you're asking for?"

"No," she whispered, cringing against the dressing table.

I ripped the towel from her grasp. She dropped to her

knees, cradling her breasts. "Good God, little child," I said. "You've just answered my question. It's consequences. What did you tell Miller and Biggie?"

"I—I told them she wanted me to dance," she whimpered. "I told them she—she ordered it."

I placed the towel around her shoulders. "Those idiots! Don't they know you're not even eighteen?"

"No," she managed. "I told them I was twenty-one. When I removed my clothing they believed me."

"Naturally, with the build you have. Your mother owns the place, right?"

"Yes," she said, hesitantly.

"Miller's a front."

"He's a fag. He does everything mother tells him. That's why they believed me. They put me on right away. I love to dance, Miss West." She turned tortured eyes on me. "I've always loved to dance. This was my first chance."

I knelt down, grasped her shoulders. "What's the real business they're in, Minipoo. Not breast-developing products. Not flesh palaces. What is it?"

She blinked naively. "I don't understand what you are talking about."

The door burst open behind me. I sensed before looking there would be one of Madame Fong's "gong-ho" boys. He didn't even give me the benefit of a doubt that I was a frail female. He swung a fist at my jaw that would have knocked the head off a bull. I caught it in mid-air, twisted the arm around behind him as he was turning and yanked it up to his left earlobe. The scream he emitted didn't last long. I brought my right hand, stiffened into a karate blade, against his throat, then his stomach. He collapsed to the floor unconscious. I grasped Minipoo's hand.

"Come on, baby," I said, throwing a coat around her shoulders. "I'm not leaving you here for the kill."

We raced down the corridor, and into the drum and liquor sodden main room. Nobody seemed to notice us in all the turmoil. Another girl was on the stage, her body bared, swaying sexily, two sensuous blobs dan-

gling in the customer's faces. I looked for Biggie and Erik March. Neither one was near the door. Outside fog swirled along the street as we ran for a cab.

Joel Mordicini was pacing the deck of his P-T boat when we came aboard. I couldn't see him in the thick mist, but I could hear his heavy barefooted step, and then his hard booming voice, "Who's there?"

"Snow White and the Chinese army," I said, leading Minipoo up the boarding ramp.

"Is that you, Honey?" he cried hopefully.

Minipoo was terribly broken and upset over what had happened at the club. She had cried in the taxicab. Cried not only because she was afraid, but because she knew something she didn't want to tell me and the hurt of this deceit was like a marble in her throat. I took Minipoo straight to Joel's cabin. By the time he came down from above, I had her quieted, buried under some blankets with a pillow under her head.

"What the hell is that?" he demanded, gesturing at the cropped black hair.

I pushed him outside onto the deck, a finger to my lips, a hand on his broad hairy chest. "Come on, Genghis Khan," I said. "It's time for a drink. A *long* drink."

We walked up to the pilothouse where the fog had dwindled into a low tunnel of sky, and a half moon lay perilously canted above the bay.

Joel opened a split of champagne and poured me a glass. Then he asked, "Who is that sleeping in my bed, said Papa Bear?"

"Madame Fong's daughter."

He almost dropped the bottle. "You got to be kidding!"

"No." I clinked a toast, then ran my glass across his naked chest. "What are you worried about, Man Mountain?"

Joel groaned, "Honey you are the most beautiful, naive, deadly hunk of woman I have ever encountered in my life."

"Have you ever kidnaped anybody?"

"Of course not!" he snapped.

I extended my hand toward his cabin. "There's always a first time."

He moaned lowly. "The plot sickens. What are you trying to do, Honey? Turn San Francisco inside out."

I patted his chest. "You're going to help me, baby."

He walked to the railing and peered over into the fog. "The hell I am. I was a war hero once. That was enough."

"Joel, if you keep that girl here in safe custody for twenty-four hours, I promise you you'll be more than a war hero."

He nodded. "Yeah, I'll probably be a dead war hero. She's a hostage, is that it?"

"If you want to call her that."

He glanced back at me, twisting his glass. "What the hell has Madame Fong done?"

"It's what she hasn't done—yet," I said, "that we're worried about."

Finding a cab in the fog along a waterfront is murder. But not as murderous as the two attempts on my life since my arrival in San Francisco. The Golden Gate bombing and the LSD trip into the ocean were wild. Both about as way out as anybody could get. Almost theatrical. Well-planned, but missing by a hair. If I hadn't jumped out of the cab or landed on the lighthouse jetty . . . **14**

The first thing I had to do was tip off Madame Fong that I had her daughter. Biggie was waiting for me at the door of the Crocodile Club. His face was all bruised and battered. He held a bloodied handkerchief to his mouth.

"What happened to you?" I said.

"Funny girl," he said, pushing me into a corner. "What did you do with her?"

"Who?" I asked innocently.

He swore. "Don't play smart with me, man! Those damned chinks busted me good. They took your friend. You might as well write him off if you don't come up with Madame Fong's daughter—and quick!"

"You and Miller hired her," I said, scanning the action inside the club. It was jammed, as usual, another

girl on the stage flicking her body crudely. "She was your responsibility."

"But we didn't know—" He wiped blood from his mouth.

"Okay," I said. "I'll make you a trade. Minipoo for the truth about tomorrow."

His bulbous cheeks sagged. "So, you do have her! Man, find yourself a soft resting hole because you are going to be hanging by your toes inside the next hour."

I patted his forehead. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Take it anyway you want, cat," he said, swallowing hard. "It's a fact. I pleaded with you to stay out of the action two nights ago, but you wouldn't dig. Now the clocks have run out."

"What's the total hangup, Biggie? It's got to be more than Madame Fong and her Viet Cong. What's the whole ball of wax. What's really going to happen on *Mad Monday*?"

He glanced around. "Even if I knew I wouldn't tell you. I want to live a little, dig?"

I patted him again. "Stick around, man. We may dig you a grave, except a steam shovel will be required."

I walked outside onto the crowded sidewalk, the neon glare, the welling fog. A hand grabbed me. I whirled, ready to throw a karate cut. A curly-haired man with a bandaged forehead stood before me.

"Frenchy!"

He grinned broadly. "I just knew if I waited long enough I'd find you here."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course," he said. "I lost my cab and my uke, but you can't kill an Acropolis. Why didn't you look me up?"

"I've had a few problems since then," I said, pushing him along the sidewalk, glancing around. "You back in business?"

"Sure," he said, leading me to a mist-coated old cab. "Not the best, but when you lose one the way I did, you can't expect a Cadillac."

I climbed inside. "How about a ride?"

He barked quickly, "Not to Sausalito!"

"No," I said. "I'm just slumming tonight. How about over on the Barbary side. Bayview Shore."

"Oh, okay." He crawled behind the wheel. "Any particular address?"

"Temple of the Solar People."

He whirled. "You got to be kidding! That's worse than Sausalito!"

We were almost to Bayview Shore when Frenchy asked, "What does it all mean, Honey?"

"Nothing adds yet, Frenchy. Only the early precincts are in."

"But that bomb. It had to be planted by Madame Fong's gooks."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Your cab was parked outside her property. If she had wanted to kill us she had plenty of time before we returned to the car."

"You're not defending her, are you?"

"Hardly. But there's a lot more to this than just our visit to her place, Frenchy—and the bomb."

He exhaled audibly. "How much could there be?"

We pulled up before the Solar Temple. Faint lights gleamed through stained windows. "Possibly a lot more," I said, "than we might ever imagine."

I climbed out. He came around and grasped my arm. "Are you all right, Honey?"

"You still want to help me, Frenchy?"

"I told you I did."

"Okay, wait here five minutes. If I'm not out by then, call the San Francisco police and ask for Lieutenant Pitt."

He wouldn't release my arm. "Let me go in with you."

I shook my head.

He glanced at his watch. "Okay, five minutes. But be careful."

I went up to the walk, past the white statuary to the double doors and knocked. This time there was no music, no sounds. It was awesomely quiet. After a long

moment, the doors opened, exposing the bearded features of Gorgi's father.

"Yes, may I help you?" he said quietly.

"I'm looking for a quart of LSD," I said, forcing the doors from his hands.

"This is a church, madam."

"I am not a madam, Father God," I said, moving inside. The place was radically changed from the night before. The seaweed and candles were gone. The huge temple was totally barren. Only the ocean outside could be heard, crashing on the shore.

"Where are all *de needles*—I mean *de sciples*?" I said.

He flinched, poised his fingertips together and said, "I am afraid you have the wrong temple, my child. We do not have disciples. Each of our children is a figment of the Lord."

"Whose Lord? You, dear Father God?"

He knew I was trying to break through his serene exterior, but he wasn't about to give.

"I would wish you to be gone, my child," he said, after a long tenuous moment.

"I was almost gone," I smiled thinly, "Father God, when you loaded me with LSD and tossed me to the fish. Almost gone, but not completely. Where are the mandolins, those soulful singers. I miss them."

I did a sing-song of my own:

Pray, pray, are they hiding in the bushes?

Nay, nay, not tonight, the cop out he wishes.

Give me one more shot, dear Father God,

And the next wave I take will sink me like a clod.

Andrews marched into his office. I followed slowly. The lewd statuary was gone, so were the paintings and weird lights.

He grinned proudly. "If you have a problem, my child, me thinks you should take it to the nearest hospital, or to the police, not to me."

I feigned a low sigh. "Oh, and I thought this was a haven for those who needed help. I thought if I kissed

your lips I might find a sanctuary to hide my tortured body."

His mouth twisted. "That is enough, Miss West. It is not necessary for you to continue."

I found a chair and studied his florid face. "So, you *are* going to acknowledge me."

He seated himself behind his desk and drummed his fingers nervously. "The police were here. They questioned me. The cab driver who brought you had a report which they followed, naturally."

"Naturally," I said, indicating the missing pornography that had been an integral part of his office. "And, *naturellement*, all of your *objets d'art* flew the coop."

His eyes didn't change when he said. "There were no *objets d'art* when you arrived. I told them you were obviously drunk—or under the influence of a drug—when I permitted your entry."

"And they believed such hogwash?"

"I told them you came and went under the same hypnotic influence. Which was true. You appeared last night like a lost soul, struggling to find yourself. You were terribly gross and rather obscene, I am sorry to say, and I asked you to leave. You finally did. It was most vulgar."

"Don't give me that," I said.

"You seemed extremely upset about my daughter's death."

I gripped the edge of his desk. "What's it all about, Alfie? Your daughter and Sindy Steward were both murdered because they knew too much about three focal points in western United States."

"That's a ridiculous assumption!" he spat.

"Tomorrow is D-day, according to Gorgi." I glanced at two suitcases stacked in a corner. "Making a little trip?"

"Yes," he stammered.

"So is Madame Fong."

"Who?"

"Come on, Father God. Madame Fong is one of your

chosen few. She's lamming it for Hong Kong. You folks must be planning a pretty big blast."

Andrews suddenly reached inside his desk drawer and yanked out my pearl-handled .22 he had taken from me the night before. "That will be enough, Miss West!" he hissed lowly. "I warned you that night in Mr. March's tree house to leave this alone!"

"So you were the one who knocked out Erik's Chablis."

His eyelids narrowed. "I should have taken care of you then, but we didn't realize how dangerous you would become."

"So D-day is Doomsday and all the rats are leaving the ship. Why?"

His gun hand trembled. "Consider yourself lucky, Miss West. Too bad the LSD didn't work. You wouldn't want to be here tomorrow. What is about to happen is an atonement for man's inhumanity to man."

"Let me guess, Father God," I said. "The Chinese Communists plan to attack these three areas, as the Japanese did Pearl Harbor."

He chuckled lowly. "You have created your own monsters. They shall prey on their creators, instead of mankind!"

"Did you kill Sindy Steward—and your own daughter?"

"That's enough, Miss West!" he hissed, finger tightening against the trigger.

"No, that isn't enough, Father God," I said, shaking my head. "You failed to notice I removed the bullets from that revolver before walking in here last night."

He fell for the gag, snapping open the cylinder. I pulled his stunt and kicked the gun from his hand. He leaped up and bent over to retrieve the fallen weapon. His hand was on the revolver, index finger curling inside the trigger guard, when the office door behind him slammed open. The panel caught his arm just as he whirled and the gun went off.

Andrews screamed, "God Almighty!" and collapsed to the floor, a shower of red dappling his white walls.

Domonic Biggie charged into the room, followed by Seth Miller. They both carried small pistols. While Miller held me at bay, Mr. Big checked out Andrews. I could have told him it was a waste of time. The bullet had struck the self-proclaimed deity in the right temple.

"He's dead," Biggie announced.

"We're really going to get it," Miller moaned.

"We'll put the fix on her," Biggie said, examining the .22. "It's her heater. Come on, let's get out of here!"

They escorted me to a long black car parked outside. It looked like a hearse. Seth Miller took the wheel. I was ordered into the back seat. Biggie joined me. As soon as all doors were closed the car shot forward, heading towards the Golden Gate Bridge. I looked for Frenchy Acropolis, but his cab was nowhere in sight.

"So, it's back to the Sausalito salt mines," I said.

"What else?" Biggie growled.

"Madame Fong, is not here for long," I sing songed.

"Man," Biggie said, "you're in so deep you couldn't survive with a diving bell."

"I didn't know you cared, Biggie baby."

He grimaced. "I did once. But now I have only two outs. Live or die. Funny how your belly tells you what you really want, instead of your mind."

"With a belly like yours, Biggie. I can believe it."

"Shut up!" Biggie roared.

I grinned, thinking about Minipoo and Mordicini. My two aces in the hole. "How's your girl friend in the front seat doing?" I asked Biggie, gesturing at Miller.

The slick-haired man at the wheel grunted. "I hope they swing you by the toes, Miss West. You're like a piece of sandpaper caught in a man's jockey shorts."

"That's a compliment coming from you, Mr. Miller," I said. "I didn't know you wore jockey shorts."

Madame Fong was seated in her plush bedroom when they ushered me in. She was lying back on a satin chair wearing only a thin gauzy gown, her black hair brushed down in dark ribbons around her shoulders. Everyone seemingly vacated the premises,

but obviously a half-dozen thugs were watching every move I made.

"Well, Miss West," she said, urging lightness into her voice. "So, we meet again, and so soon. I did not expect it to be possible. A person of your excellent caliber. So highly regarded. For such a lowly person as I to have a second visit in such a short time seems regal indeed."

"Why not cut the fancy talk, Madame Fong?" I suggested. "And get down to the basics. You brought me here. What exactly do you want?"

Her forehead ridged in sudden anger. "My daughter. Where is she?"

"Aren't you aware teen-agers should never be out without parental consent?"

She traced tapered fingertips along her eyelids. "If I knew of her whereabouts, would I have brought you here?"

"No, you would have had me killed," I said.

"Perhaps," she said, without flicking a muscle. "But you have made a mistake. A tragic mistake involving my daughter. Another group is involved and they do not care what happens to Minipoo or to me. This mistake must be corrected immediately or she will die."

I stiffened. "What about all the others *Father God* said will die tomorrow? Both of you were planning to leave town. *He* blew it a little early."

She lay coolly immaculate on the couch, faint dark areas showing through her robe. "Where is my daughter?"

"You planned to take her with you, didn't you?"

"*Where* is my daughter?"

I demanded, "Who are the others and what are they planning to do?"

She hesitated for a long moment, then said. "There is a faction counter to our thinking. They plan a threat of unbelievable ferocity. We worked together at first. But now no longer. That is all I can tell you."

"That isn't enough," I said.

She sat up, glaring cold eyes at me. "Where is my daughter? It is not only a life and death matter between Minipoo and me, but for the world itself. You must reveal her whereabouts."

"You haven't told me a thing."

She leaped to her feet, twisting at the fragile gown. "And I cannot! My life is now in jeopardy also. You have placed the entire western America on a scale of indelicate balance. If you planned this you could not have turned events into a more harassed state."

"Then explain it to me."

"You will not change the course of time," she said, a dead tone to her voice. "But you may delay the outcome—somewhat. Where is my daughter!"

"What are you, two warring Communist factions trying to make the world swallow your own particular brand of poison?"

She said simply, "East meets West. We thought it might work. But it did not. You have felt the wrath of the other faction up until now. But you will find I am not an easy person to deal with either. I will not give in to their demands!" She clapped her hands, and four of her evil-looking Orientals appeared. "All right, Miss West, for the last time. Where is my daughter? Discovering her means more than you could possibly understand. It would be fortunate for you also, believe me."

"You haven't satisfactorily answered any of my questions," I said.

"You are stupid!" Madame Fong cried. "The other faction will kill you plain and simple. They have tried a number of times. They will use my daughter to get at me. You are allowing them this sanctuary. This is wrong!"

"What kind of wrong are you doing?" I demanded.

"Take her away!" Madame Fong commanded.

They took me down a long winding staircase to a place beneath the house that Frenchy had talked about. It was a dank impossible room with sheer raw walls. Three men stripped all the clothes from my body and lashed me to a pillar.

I couldn't understand their gibberish, but those sweating, grinning faces told me they weren't planning a picnic. Or were they? One of them licked his lips hungrily as he made a studied tour of my chilled nude flesh. Then he nodded for the others to move away. His tongue dragged along a thin mouth daggered by a deep scar in its upper edge. He advanced toward me, removing the cap from a red coloring pencil, and placed the tip of the instrument in the hollow of my throat. Meticulously he inked a line straight down over my breastbone and into the untanned valley beneath this, making the space wider with his free hand, and continuing over my navel and stomach until he was forced to stop.

When he straightened in front of me, I could see in his narrow-slitted eyes that the fun had just started for him. He traced a new line under my left armpit, now traveling horizontally up over a breast, into the cleavage where he crossed his original path, and on over my right breast, circumventing the nipple like a surgeon with a scalpel, and on into the armpit on that side.

Now he stepped back, grunting satisfactorily at the weird cross he had created.

"What are you trying to do?" I said, keeping the panic I felt out of my voice. "Make me into a pop-art poster?"

I was surprised when his cruel mouth slid open and he spoke in fluent English. "Hardly, Miss West. The son of your God was nailed to a cross, is that not correct?" He opened a cabinet at the end of the room and extracted several razor-sharp knives. "We shall perform the event the other way around."

"Don't make me laugh," I said, feeling about as light-hearted as an animal caught in a trap. "Madame Fong can't afford to have me dead until she learns where her daughter is hidden. This sort of bluff won't work."

He lifted the handle of a knife and aimed at me. "This is no bluff, Miss West."

There was a quick whirl of steel as his arm bent forward, releasing the blade—and *thunk!* It buried deep under my left armpit, just a fraction from where he had started the second line. I could feel it touching my flesh.

He straightened again, face contorted with hate. "Where is Madame Fong's daughter, Miss West?"

"Safe, dammit!" I cried, wrenching at my bonds.

He fingered a second blade, almost gleefully.

"Listen to me carefully, Minipoo's mad mother," I snarled angrily. "I know there is an intercom system between here and upstairs. If what you said earlier is true, then you are only jeopardizing your daughter's safety by keeping me here. This other faction may already be on their way to her hiding place."

The Oriental laughed lowly when no answer came. He raised the second knife and let it fly.

I screamed. Pain shot up my right shoulder. The blade skimmed my breast and rib cage before it struck the pole where I was fastened. A trickle of crimson zig-zagged to the floor. Whether the injury had been an accident or deliberate didn't seem to make any difference. The knife thrower grimly selected a third blade. Now it appeared to be an awesome tic-tac-toe game. He had three other moves. Top and bottom of the vertical line. Or the obvious hungry void betwixt and between.

"I warn you, Madame Fong," I said, wincing. "If you kill me, your team loses no matter what happens."

"Prepare yourself," the knife thrower said, poisoning this third toss. I could see the muscles of his arms expand as he gripped the weapon, swaying back and forth threateningly.

His legs rocked, gyrated and surged forward. But at the same time a window behind him exploded with such force, the frame, glass and a huge figure came spinning down.

The knife's course went completely awry, crazily catapulting through the air straight at my throat.

The only part of my body not lashed down was my head. I instinctively ducked. The knife's impact shook the board just above my left ear. But the crescendo of flying glass and wood blotted out any other sounds. It seemed as if a hurricane had torn through the window and landed on the knife thrower's back. He was completely flattened, buried under a savage avalanche of jagged shards. **15**

Madame Fong's three other henchmen ran for cover. A shot rang out. One of the hoods dropped. Another spun around. He also went flying when a bullet struck him. The third escaped up the staircase, dodging slugs as he ran.

When the smoke cleared, I discovered the hurricane was Erik March. He charged across the room, grasping one of the remaining knives and cut me free.

"My God, Honey," he moaned, "What have they done to you?"

His face was a mass of bruises, purpled eyeslits. "My God," I said. "What have they done to *you*?"

After quickly slipping into my skirt and blouse, I climbed up through the hole Erik made when he smashed into the room. He followed me out. I glanced

back at the fallen men lying in the cellar of Madame Fong's mansion.

Distant sounds on the fog-shrouded grounds indicated other forces were being mustered.

We raced through misty darkness, stumbling in wet grass. I fell once, felt Erik's strong hands lifting me. Madame Fong's bloodhounds were not far behind. I could hear them running, exchanging shouts in muffled Chinese. We finally made it to Frenchy Acropolis's taxi. The bandaged cab driver winked and fired up the engine. A face appeared in the window glass next to me, mouth twisted into a fierce snarl.

I clamped down on the door lock as he tried the handle. A fist struck the glass with a resounding crash. Hit again. The engine finally caught, shaking the old car as only a few cylinders responded. We plunged forward over a low embankment, tumbling our tormentor into a gully. A shot rang out, skidding along the cab's roof, and then we were soaring down the road for San Francisco.

Frenchy suddenly peered at me in the dull light cast from the dashboard. "You ever win a popularity contest?" he asked, the lights of Sausalito blazing past us.

"Not recently."

"Listen, Honey," Erik said. "Frenchy rescued me from the goat grinder. Gave me his gun. He followed Biggie and Miller after they grabbed you at the Solar Temple. He also contacted the police, so they should be there shortly."

I patted the cab driver's empty shoulder holster. "That love affair is getting hotter every moment."

Erik brushed at his blackened eyelids. "I finally recalled some of the equations scrawled on those three maps. Those chinks pounded them out of me."

"What do the equations mean?" I demanded.

"Honey, your coming to San Francisco may have saved over a million lives," the redhead muttered, staring through the cab's rear window.

"A million—? Madame Fong claims I only delayed some sort of tragedy."

"She's full of Chinese beans," Erik said. "On the San Francisco map there were a series of numbers, flanked by what appeared to be an algebraic formula, NG over 700,000. The same series of numbers were on the San Diego map, but there the formula read NG over 600,000. I thought they referred to your TV show and forgot them. Tonight they came back—with the help of a few brass knuckles and some billy clubs."

"And—"

"When Madame Fong found out I still remembered, she ordered me to the goat grinder. But before that she decided to brag to me about the maps." Erick flashed a pathetic expression, shaking his head. "Do you remember when the Army shipped over 12,000 rockets of GB nerve gas and highly toxic VX from Kentucky and Alabama—by rail—and sunk them off the Florida coast?"

I nodded. "There was a whale of a furor in Congress—and in the press."

Frenchy's taxi was bumping along the Golden Gate Bridge as Erik said, "Right. So the Army apparently decided to keep two other nerve gas centers quiet. One near Yuma, Arizona, and the other outside Eureka, California. But both of these centers had the same problem they had had in the East. The bombs had to be stored in steel and concrete vaults. *And* these vaults were threatening to leak."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Then NG stands for nerve gas!"

"And 700,000 for the approximate population of the San Francisco area," Erik added. "San Diego is about 600,000. The other numerals on both maps matched. Madame Fong informed me these indicated the same day the shipments of nerve gas would reach each city. Approximately six thousand rockets of both GB and VX nerve gas were to be taken across the new San Diego-Coronado Bridge to the Navy installation on the peninsula, then loaded on a ship and dumped in mid-Pacific. At the same time, nearly ten thousand more of these deadly weapons were to be moved across the

Golden Gate and loaded on another vessel bound for the same disposal area."

"When?" I cried. "You mean tomorrow?"

"Yes," Erik answered. "They plan to sabotage both shipments *on* the bridges. Fumes being blown by ocean currents would virtually wipe out both cities within minutes."

"Can they be stopped!"

"Both shipments have now been delayed, according to Madame Fong."

"Why?"

"Because of the explosion you and Frenchy were involved in two nights ago on the Golden Gate Bridge." Erik kept his eyes on the road behind. "Apparently the Commies *blew* their own thing."

"Madame Fong claims there are two factions—both at war with us and with each other."

He nodded. "In case she's lying we should still have sufficient time to warn the Army."

"What about the third map? Did she talk about southern Nevada?"

Erik grimaced. "No. She only hinted that three major seaports of western America would be totally crippled."

I listed. "San Diego, San Francisco—and what? Los Angeles? But how could they cripple L.A. by hurting Hoover Dam?" I snapped my fingers. "Electrical power?"

"No," Erik said. "I made a study of that a couple of years ago. Only about one to two percent of Southern California Edison's electricity comes from Hoover. Most of it's derived from steam plants like the one south of L.A. in Huntington Beach. Anyway, cutting off an electrical supply is not going to exactly cripple a city like Los Angeles—not the way the release of a nerve gas might."

I suggested. "What if they blew up Hoover Dam with a smuggled-in A-bomb? What would happen with the water in Lake Mead?"

Erik shrugged. "Pour down the Colorado River. Undoubtedly knock out Davis Dam and raise hell with

Lake Mohave and Lake Havasu. But by the time the flood reached Parker Dam 125 miles south—which feeds water via the Colorado River aqueduct to L.A.—it would be nothing but a small ripple.”

“Can’t you recall any of the figures on the Nevada map?” I implored.

Erik studied faint headlights behind the speeding cab. “Nothing that means anything. A large series of numbers. None of them, as I recall, relating to the other maps. The only algebraic equation that comes to my mind was 1000 over three million.”

“All right,” I said, “NG over 700,000 spelled nerve gas for San Francisco. NG over 600,000 meant the same for San Diego. The Los Angeles area has roughly a three million population.”

“One thousand over three million,” Erik repeated balefully. “One thousand of what? One thousand kilowatts? No. One thousand pounds of bombs? No!”

“Rex Champion told me Beautia kept going day after day to the dam. What was she doing there?”

“Spitting in it one thousand times?”

“Seriously,” I said. “Could some one contaminate the water?”

“With what?”

“Poison?”

Erik laughed. “Honey, a thousand gallons of poison—if that’s what we’re talking about—would dissipate so fast in that wild Colorado River, I doubt if even many fish would die.”

Frenchy’s cab shot off the end of Golden Gate Bridge. “Head for Fisherman’s Wharf,” I said.

“Have you flipped, Honey?” Erik demanded.

“I want to look in on Madame Fong’s daughter.”

He whirled in his seat. “What?”

“I took her as a hostage earlier,” I said. “Left her with Joel Mordicini—on his boat. We might have all been dead now if I hadn’t kidnaped her from the Crocodile Club.”

The redhead clapped his bruised forehead dismally. “Did you ever check Mordicini out?”

"No, but—"

"Well, I did—" Erik's voice took on the Transylvanian accent. "Come play at my health club, leetle girl."

I groaned. "Mordicini?"

"Yeah. The one—the only—Mr. Fierce!"

It was almost midnight before Lieutenant Pitt could give us any news. We had already checked on Mordicini and discovered his P-T boat missing from its slip. The detective had a scowl on his face when he entered his office and surveyed Erik, Frenchy and me. **16**

Then he said, "The Coast Guard has been unable to locate Mordicini's P-T so far. He might have gone to sea. Fog conditions have seriously hampered the search."

"Anything on Minipoo?" I asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "No. Nothing on her mother, either. Madame Fong apparently escaped from the peninsula. All we found were some stray goats and three dead Chinamen. Two shot. The third was killed from flying glass which cut his jugular vein." Pitt circled the room slowly. "*And* Domonic Biggie and Seth Miller. Also both dead. From gunshot wounds."

I exhaled lowly. "So they finally paid the piper."

Pitt nodded. "Madame Fong's place was loaded with DERFA and ANYH pamphlets and mailers. So was Miller's office at the Crocodile Club. *And*, ditto, for An-

drews' office at the Temple of the Solar People. The coroner's office says it appears Andrews committed suicide—with a .22 caliber revolver. Your gun, Miss West?"

"Until it was stolen." I grimaced. "Tag that 'heavenly suicide.'"

Pitt suddenly flung something in my lap. "Do you recognize that?"

"It's a map."

"Of what?"

"Hollywood. International Film City. Our TV studio."

"Notice anything unusual?" Pitt demanded.

"Yes. Here south of the back lot is a cross, which I recall is about the area of a small hill."

"And—"

"Another cross, here," I said. "About the exact location Sindy Steward was shot to death."

The wiry police lieutenant tossed a metal-clipped folder at me. On the front cover were block letters: THIS GIRL FOR HIRE. The top of the page bore the words "*No Place To Go But Down*" followed by "*Production No. 6400*" and a date.

"What's that?" Pitt demanded.

I blinked. "A shooting script from my TV show. The one we were working on when Sindy was murdered."

"We found that at Andrews' Solar Palace. How could he have come into possession of such an article?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know." I leafed through the mimeographed pages. They were heavily marked with pencil notes, camera-angle changes, deletions. "This obviously belonged to someone in production. Possibly the head of photography."

Pitt seized the teleplay and quickly opened to a page. "Here is a scene underlined in red. It reads: 'Exterior. Deserted Street. Night. Honey West, clad in black snakeskin coat, runs wildly toward CAMERA. She stops under street light, looking back fearfully. CAMERA PANS in for a close shot of her face when a shot rings out. Honey staggers and slumps unconscious to the pavement.'"

I replied to the detective's sudden glower. "That was the scene when Cindy Steward was murdered."

Pitt jammed the script closed. "The map of the studio area was fastened to that particular page."

I shook my head sadly. "Obviously Andrews was the triggerman, or the one who assigned the triggerman. I hate to say it, but I'm certain he poisoned his own daughter."

Erik said, "Lieutenant, you did notify the military?"

The police officer nodded, removing his hat. "Brigadier General Anderson confirmed nerve-gas shipment preparations from both Eureka, California, and Yuma, Arizona. They were both cancelled primarily because of the Friday-night bombing on the Golden Gate Bridge. In fact, both shipments, he said, were underway when they were called back." Pitt's thin face grew an apologetic smile. "Miss West—what can I say?"

I got up. "Don't say anything, Lieutenant. Not yet. Whatever they've planned for Los Angeles might still affect this area. Have you alerted Nevada authorities?"

"Yes," Pitt said. "The military has moved in also. Hoover Dam, at this moment, is blocked off and ringed by hundreds of soldiers. Nearby Air Force bases are on ready alert. One other thing," he added, holding up a small capsule. "We found several of these in Andrews' safe at his Solar Temple headquarters. They're being analyzed now by Dr. Regis at Temple Memorial. He's already certain that each capsule contains a powerful dose of LSD."

Erik and I bade Frenchy Acropolis good-bye at San Francisco International. The cab driver kissed my cheek and brushed clumsily at a few tears which welled in his eyelids. He promised to take me up on the Mulholland Drive suggestion. I told him if he did, I'd personally buy him a new uke and charge it to Homer House's account.

We arrived at McCarran Field in Las Vegas in a dark thunder shower. The sky was boiling with electrical fury and the landing was tricky and rough. Helmeted mili-

tary personnel, carrying M-1 rifles, were in evidence throughout the terminal. They checked ID's and personal luggage.

Erik and I caught a cup of coffee in the lounge while discussing our plans.

The redhead commented, "The Army has the dam covered and the Air Force is on red alert. So what do we do, rent out camp chairs, roast weiners and watch?"

I moaned. "I'm still trying to figure out how Andrews got hold of that copy of my TV script."

"You said he admitted to being the creep who took a shot at me and grabbed the maps. Maybe that was your copy."

"No. That belonged to one of the production people. Possibly the writer."

"Who wrote the script?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Rod Mayberry handled that end. Come to think of it, that particular story had no writer's name on the cover."

Erik asked, "Could it have been Nelson Cooper?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "A Pulitzer Prize winner—"

"—tries to blow up the world," Erik finished, "while we sit here asking foolish questions. Why don't you call Mayberry and ask him?"

I did. Rod was half asleep and took several minutes before sheepishly admitting he didn't know who wrote the script. "It came from the William Morris agency, which packages the program, Honey," Rod muttered. "Tomorrow morning call Sylvia Hirsch. She can tell you."

I told him tomorrow morning might be too late and hung up. When I returned to the lounge, Erik was chuckling over a news story he had found on the front page of Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*.

"How about this, Honey?" Erik said, referring to the article. "You thought you had a tough time Saturday night. Here's a whole town that was turned on."

"What?"

Erik read aloud,

Lynwood, California. This sleepy little city of thirty thousand people suddenly exploded Saturday when nearly half the population went berserk. People climbed walls, roofs, danced in the streets, and staged a nude party in the City Park bringing police from four other adjoining cities in an attempt to quell the festivities. More than a hundred persons, including children, were being treated at local St. Francis Hospital for overdoses of drug poisoning. A hospital spokesman said they had taken extreme amounts of LSD, and were on the critical list.

"Wait a minute!" I barked. "How could I get in touch with Dr. Regis at Temple Memorial Hospital?"

Erik suddenly sensed what I was about. He glanced at his watch. "Would he still be there?"

"It's a gamble," I said.

"Call collect. Give Lieutenant Pitt's name and say it's a government emergency!"

Dr. Regis was still in the hospital lab when he finally came on the phone. His first words staggered me.

"Miss West, each one of these capsules I've analyzed contains an ounce of pure lysergic diethylamide acid. Enough to turn on many many thousands and—kill a few in the offing."

"You mean, if a person took one of the capsules he would be dead."

"No," Regis returned abruptly. "You could personally swallow all of these capsules you wanted, but they would pass through your elimination system long before they could harm you."

"What do you mean, doctor?"

Regis cleared his throat. "These damned things have a gelatinous outer layer that is resistant to extremes. Acid conditions, water, even structural damage. Tests I made this evening prove they will survive in a solid state for four or five days before disintegrating. Which far exceeds the length of time for passage through the human body."

"Doctor, what if these capsules were sent through an aqueduct and into a reservoir?"

He hesitated for a moment, then answered, "Depending upon the time of disintegration and the size of the water entrenchment, one or more of them could be deadly."

I thanked him and hung up. Erik was on his feet when I walked into the lounge. He read my expression immediately.

"They're attacking L.A. with LSD," he said.

"Right. Gelatin capsules. Extremely resistant. Four or five days under the worst conditions. They could ride the Colorado River into the aqueduct and probably pass through the treatment centers without detection. Lynwood, Saturday night, must have been a test. Dr. Regis claims just *one* capsule could turn a whole city on."

Erik exhaled loudly. "Then even the Army *and* Air Force couldn't stop this."

"These capsules are going to be released, according to the map, somewhere near the dam. They must have figured the survivors of the San Diego and San Francisco nerve gas would naturally migrate to Los Angeles and be involved, with everyone else, in the LSD attack."

"The original jolly boys," Erik said.

I snapped my fingers. "Jolly girl! Rex Champion said Beautia spent more time at the dam than she did with him. She left about six days ago. That would just about time out the Lynwood turn-on."

Erik repeated the algebraic formula he saw on the southern Nevada map. "One thousand over three million. My God, Honey! If one capsule can turn on a whole city, what the hell would one thousand do?"

"Kill it!" I said.

The thunder storm had grown teeth by the time we reached the Atlantis. The brooding Nevada mountains surrounding Lake Mead crackled with electricity, lighting the dark sky like neon. It was strangely hot and there was no rain.

We bumped into Aardvark and Zarzito on the boat landing. They weren't about to let us go out to the hotel.

"What you want?" Zarzito demanded with a snarl.

"It's imperative we see Mr. Champion at once," I said.

"He ain't available, sweets," Aardvark returned, stuffing a large hand inside his coat.

I looked at Erik. "Remember a thing Bob Hope and Bing Crosby used to pull in their old 'Road' pictures?"

"You mean the old patty-cake routine?" the redhead asked.

I nodded.

"Let's try it," he said.

We both bent forward, facing each other and began slapping our legs.

"Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man—" we chorused.

The two gunsels thought we had lost our marbles. They laughed openly. Aardvark removed his hand from his coat and slapped his thigh.

"—bake a cake as fast as you can!"

We both whirled. Erik caught Zarzito with a fist full in the mouth. He was spitting teeth when he went down. Aardvark took a karate chop in the throat from me. They both weren't about to get up for some time. We disarmed them, climbed aboard the boat and set course for the Atlantis.

At five o'clock in the morning, most hotels are dead. Not Rex Champion's nautical beauty. The gaming rooms were filled with smoke, people and the clatter of slot machines.

I suggested Erik look around while I took the elevator up the main spire to Rex Champion's suite. I had lost my gun, but not the key to his quarters. Instead of knocking, I just barged in.

What a royal welcome!

A pearl-handled .22 revolver was stuck bluntly against my forehead. Behind it stood a spectacularly naked female. Her head was shaved to the bone. Dark

eyes flashed in curved slits as she waved me into the room.

Even without the flowing black hair, I recognized her instantly. Madame Fong. Then I recognized something else that I'd been wondering about for several days. This really staggered me.

Mounted on her boyish chest were two gnarled nipples the size of machine gun bullets.

I didn't have to add one and one together.

Madame Fong was Beautia!

"Well, Miss West, we meet again," she said, flashing an evil smile. **17**

"And apparently for the last time," I said, studying my .22 she held in her tapered fingers. "Where are the LSD capsules?"

"Where is Minipoo?"

"With Mordicini."

She snarled lowly, "You tried to play me right into their hands, didn't you?"

Lightning flickered across the lake, a hot knife blade in the rainless sky.

"That was not my intention," I said.

She gestured at a large carton in the corner marked **EROTICA PERFUMES**. "This was shipped in from the Far East several weeks ago while I was living here with Rex. It was passed through customs because the inspectors thought the one thousand gelatinous capsules were filled with exotic fragrances." She laughed maniacally. "One thousand ounces of lysergic diethylamide acid, Miss West. Inside five days the entire populace of Los Angeles, and its environs, will be dancing to *our* pied piper—death!"

"Why?" I demanded.

She thrust the .22 under my chin. "For your country's interference in Vietnam. For your stand against Communism. For your decadence. We'll show you what it is like to wage war *and* murder people frivolously!"

"We are trying to protect the world," I said.

"What world?" she hissed. *Your world!* Millions of people are starving."

"And we're trying to feed them," I said.

"You give to the rich and expect they will feed the poor. But they do not. We give to the poor and execute the rich."

"Something's wrong with both systems," I said. "Maybe we're batting our heads against the same wall. Where is Nelson Cooper?"

Her eyes lighted gleefully. "Dead. It was he who allowed the maps to fall into the hands of Sindy Steward and Gorgi Andrews. It was this grave error that forced me to order them to die—and brought on our miserable involvement with you!" She circled the room slowly, a contortedly naked figure, gun aimed.

I suggested, "Perhaps Nelson Cooper was subconsciously trying to right a terrible wrong."

She spat lowly, "Nelson Cooper hated the world! He wanted to destroy mankind." She laughed brokenly. "Would you care to know who the woman was that he so blatantly exposed in his national magazine article for *Skin, Sin and She?*"

I nodded.

"Not Sindy Steward!" she cried. "Me!"

I studied her in the lightning-flicked shadows of the room. She clawed at her face. Bits of the chalk-white surface began to flake off. "Me!" she repeated angrily. "I was the beauty he chose. But he deceived me. He retouched the photographs and made me look ugly. He claimed I was a prostitute—a former princess—and the lead in your new TV series!"

She continued to dig at her cheeks. Bits of facial tissue fell to the floor. "Because of that I wanted to kill you both. Andrews eliminated Sindy after she fell heir to the maps. But every attempt upon your life failed."

Her face was now a riddled piece of weird cheesecake. "The unfortunate explosion coming on the Golden Gate Bridge destroyed two-thirds of my plan. But in a few moments," she whispered huskily, "I shall swim out to the dam and insert these capsules into the out-flow vents. That shall be my last act upon this earth. By then you will be dead and shortly shall be most of western America!"

I grimaced. She tore the last remnants of her face back and all that remained was withered dark parchment stretched so tautly on her hairless skull that she appeared now as a hideous aged mummy, her eyes glowing weirdly in bony sockets.

"So now you know, Miss West. Only you!" Her mouth was a withered slit in her face. "I was the Chinese consort of the man who created Communism. I remained with his usurpers through the many wars, until I had my own following. I came to the United States and through DERFA and ANYH I made a mockery of your democratic system." She lifted her bony head triumphantly. "I even became the beauty of your most important sex magazine. I adopted the name, *Beautia*, because *I am* the most beautiful woman in the world!"

I turned, almost retching. She seized my arm, whirling me around. "Look at my body! My breasts failed many years ago, but it is still beautiful! My formula preserved everything, except my face. I am tired of wearing the mask!" she roared, clutching at her twisted features. "I could live forever, but—" She leveled the gun at me.

The ceiling opened in one massive explosive roar. A razored dart of lightning sliced through Rex Champion's penthouse spire with a violent clap, flinging me against the bar. Pieces of the walls and roof tore through the hole, soaring into the dark night, being sucked out like fragments of cardboard and falling into the lake below.

"Honey!"

I opened my eyes upon the bronzed, handsome fea-

tures of Joel Mordicini. My fists clenched. I tried to get up.

He pushed me down, grinning. "No suitee, no swim-mee."

"You Commie son-of-a—"

Another face swam into view. Erik said, "Would you like to climb on my lightning rod, leetle girl?"

Then another voice belonging to Lieutenant Pitt. "Mordicini's clean, Honey. He got out of DERFA and ANYH when he learned they were Communist fronts."

I sat up. The entire roof of the penthouse spire was gone. So was Madame Fong.

Rex Champion bent over me. "Honey, I'm sorry. Aardvark and Zarzito got it all mixed up. They were supposed to have stopped her, not you. I had no idea what she was planning."

"The capsules—?" I asked.

Lieutenant Pitt held up the perfume box. "All intact."

Another face appeared over me. A head of close-cropped black hair and flashing brown eyes. It was Minipoo.

She said quietly, "Miss West, you saved my life. Thank you."

Pitt said, "When you turned her over to Mordicini he followed your instructions and got the hell out of San Francisco Harbor. But then he had second thoughts and called the Coast Guard."

I peered up at Minipoo's pretty young face. "What—what happened to your mother?"

Minipoo frowned unhappily. "She was not my mother, Miss West. That's what I really wanted to tell you. She was my great-great grandmother."

When rain really rips through Erik the Red's jungleland it sounds like the end of the world, Noah's Ark falling apart, Doomsday. The tree-house rattled violently. 18

I lay on the leopard couch, staring up at his tousled wet countenance and said, "What did we actually accomplish?"

He snickered lowly. "Well, we didn't make any money, but we saved a few lives. *And* we sent a bastard publisher to jail."

"Poor old Homer," I sighed. "He was even worse than Biggie."

"What about Madame Fong? We thought she was trying to blow up boobs—but she was out to blow up the world."

"When they fished her out of the water, did you see her face?"

He grimaced. "Yeah. I thought it was the lightning—"

"Erik, do you remember years ago when Ronald Colman played the role of Conway in the film *Lost Horizon*?"

He nodded. "There was a young girl who followed Conway out of the valley—and when she reached the pass—" I stared at the rain-slashed window—"she suddenly withered and died."

"How old was she, Honey?"

"She said she was the concubine of the first Communist leader."

"My God, she must have been over a hundred!"

"Wait until Homer House hears about that."

"He'll choke," Erik said. "I hope."

The memory of her peeling off the outer layer of her face made me shudder.

The handsome redhead slipped an arm around me. "Well, the LSD capsules were confiscated by the mili-

tary, *and* the Western states' nerve-gas threat is over—all because of you, Honey. You'd be a national heroine, except the government's going to keep what happened secret. They wouldn't want it to be known—"

"—that the city of Los Angeles missed out on the wildest mass freakout of all time."

Erik chuckled lowly. "I know it's nothing to laugh about, but can you imagine how many nuts would have been fighting the mayor for the highest perch on the flagpole atop the city hall?"

"So, what's your next move?" I asked, feeling a hand on my open midriff.

"Would you like to play with *me*, leetle girl?"

"Get lost, Dracula!" I removed the curious fingers.

"How about that?" he groaned wryly. "I can't win. First, I had a deal with this publisher—and he reneged. Then I had a deal with this gorgeous blonde—and *she* reneged—"

"What deal?"

He grinned cockily. "Cheese sandwiches in return for—"

I couldn't help laughing. "Listen, buster, if those cheese sandwiches are still in the oven you'd better turn them over to the Air Force to be used as strategic weapons."

The storm suddenly shook the tree house violently. I threw my arms around him. "Erik, this thing feels like it's going to take off!"

"Did you say, take off?" he demanded, above the roar of the wind.

"Yes!"

His fingers quickly undid the snaps on the back of my halter top. "Okay, if that's what you want!"

"Wait a minute!"

"I'm only here to please, ma'm!"

"Wait—a—minute!"

"No ifs, ands, but—"

"Erik!"

"Holy Grecian Goddesses, Honey, and I was only going to give you cheese sandwiches in exchange for all this—?"

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