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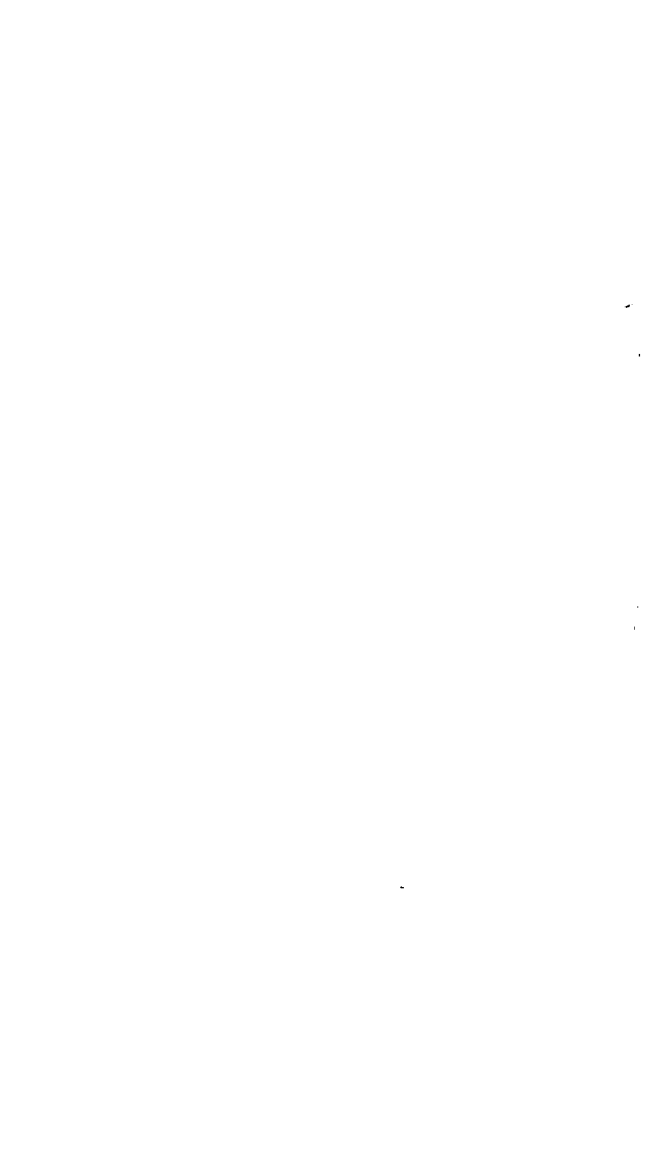
*Marital boredom
among the smart suburban couples
could lead to only one thing...*

The Night It Happened

Dean McCoy



**a new novel that dares to discuss a
major problem in modern life — sophisti-
cated people tired of their marriages,
seeking new thrills — new excitements**



unfaithful

Al whispered, his voice taut with emotion again, "Before this night is over, I'm going to spoil you for any other guy."

Spoil was the word, she thought, though not in the sense he intended. She felt spoiled in the way dead things become rotted—the seeds of decay, perhaps even of death, had been planted in her tonight.

Well, she'd asked for it. Anything to keep Mike happy, to keep her marriage from becoming unglued. A shaky laugh bubbled somewhere within her. She was with a man who was not her husband, and Mike was next door with a woman not his wife. Modern sophistication—or soap opera? Intelligent behavior—or stupidity?



**THE
NIGHT
ø ø ø IT ø
HAPPENED**

DEAN McCOY



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work are fictional*

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1

EVEN when she entered the living room wearing the pink shorty nightgown, her blond hair down her back, Mike paid her no attention. He simply stood up, went to the portable bar at the far end of the room and started to mix his second crock of martinis of the evening. Diana bit her lip and studied the man she had married three years ago for better or worse. The better part of their marriage they had left behind them in Los Angeles. Out here in the suburbs Mike, at least in outward appearance and physical appeal, seemed unchanged, but their marriage could stand improvement.

Mike, slim, crewcut and twenty-eight, was rambling on about his job as warehouse superintendent for the suburban branch of a Los Angeles manufacturer of power equipment. It was after hours, a time for fun and games, and Mike should have had his mind on other matters. Standing in the big modern living room of their ranch-type home, Diana felt a little frightened.

She spread her arms. "Mike—don't you want to—"

He looked around from the bar, having a time focusing his eyes. "Want to what?"

"Well—relax. Maybe turn in, lie down just for a while?"

"Too early—" He stared at her blankly for a minute, then pushed aside the pitcher holding the vodka. He had not yet gotten around to adding the eyedropper of vermouth. His eyes came faintly alive. "My God, you're a beauty—sometimes I forget."

She held out her hands to him. "Honey, I miss you."

"Miss me?" He shook his head. "I've been here all the time. Shooting off my face about the job, as a matter of fact, except for the time you were gone to the bedroom just now." He eyed her appreciatively. "Wish I could feel the way I used to. It's this goddam place. This Oakley Hills that dries out the blood. They should surround the whole area with a wrought-iron fence and call it a cemetery, which it is."

Diana Eaton remembered the ads that had induced her and Mike to move to Oakley Hills: *A place in the sun for young moderns of all ages . . .*

Young moderns, Diana thought bitterly. She felt like an old modern—old and undesirable. Mike's work problems were not all that was wrong with their marriage.

Earlier this evening, well into his first crock of martinis, Mike had said, "The living dead, that's us. We're clean kids. I hear stories—either you play games like making it with somebody else's wife or husband or—" His gray eyes had stared somberly through the solid glass wall at the seemingly endless rows of shed roofs, oak trees and hedges that stretched below their knoll.

"Or what, Mike?"

"Or end up with the loonies at the local alcoholic ward. I'm drinking this stuff like water."

That was when Diana had decided to put on the nightie and remind him that she was his wife. That she was still lovely and very much in love. She guessed he had spoken as he had just to hear himself talk—still, she was perturbed. Mike definitely needed to relax and enjoy himself.

She felt silly standing in her nightgown in the middle of

the living room. Mike was busy again at his drinking. She grew aware that the drapes were not drawn across the picture window and someone just might drive along Primrose Road, look in and see her—though whether anyone did or did not was, perhaps, immaterial. People already thought the worst of her around here.

Still, she had to make an effort to save herself and Mike—and their marriage. She crossed to the bar, took the glass from his hand. She kissed him on the mouth. And after a moment his arms clamped around her and she sensed the beginnings of victory.

She twisted away from him, went to the silent mercury wall switch to snap off the lights. She returned to his arms. She did not think she could get him into the bedroom—he simply was not in the proper mood—but the living room held romantic potential. Faint light from the kitchen outlined the sofa, a big chair, the carpet, the wall with the fireplace. In the warmth of the summer night, the dead fireplace gave an effect of coolness and comfort.

When the house had been in planning stages, she and Mike had taken the tract salesman's suggestion to make the raised hearth oversized. Although she had not been sold on the thought that it would be a place to lounge on winter evenings, she was glad now that Mike had liked the idea.

She drew him toward the cool stones and, after taking a moment to finish his drink, spilling some of it on the shirt he was clumsily trying to unbutton, he followed her.

She wished he would hurry before things were spoiled as they had been so often recently. She also wished, wistfully that they had a bearskin rug. The cool tiles of the hearth felt hard through her thin nightgown as she drew him down with her.

When she began to help him with his shirt buttons, he was less than enthusiastic.

"Let me try to get used to this idea," he said. "You sure rush a guy."

Diana felt a touch of anger—he was blaming her again.

But for once she kept her mouth shut. Mike's preoccupation with things other than connubial joys had started about the time they had a row with the next-

door neighbor concerning a concrete brick wall dividing the two properties—just one of many harassments since they had moved out here. Since then his failures as a husband were always her fault. Usually she protested—often cuttingly. Tonight she was trying to change not only his attitude but her own. Perhaps in some measure she was to blame. At least a part of Mike's sex drive was motivated by a normal man's desire for a family. So far, she had failed to become pregnant.

"Honey, take your time." She clung to him desperately, basically wanting what he did—children.

"You sound sore."

"I'm not. Really. Come here." She caught his shoulders, cradled him in her arms. She whispered, "We shared a magic once—it still works."

"Magic?" he asked. "You mean right here—on these stones?"

"Next hearth we build, we'll order it special. With springs."

He laughed, going along with the gag. "Maybe we could glue a fireproof bearskin to the tiles."

"Mike—please don't joke right now."

But he had to keep talking, holding back. "It ain't fair to the lady." This time his laugh was shaky. "Here I'd have all the cushion. You've got nothing but tiles."

"Mike, it doesn't matter," she whispered hoarsely. "It just doesn't matter. I want us to be in love—the way we once were."

"You do sound sore—as if I didn't love you."

"No, Mike, I—"

He made an effort to respond, failed. "For what you've got in mind we should have gone into the bedroom. This was your idea—"

Even before he actually withdrew from her embrace she accepted defeat. The moment he went strongly on the defensive the result was inevitable. He made one last valiant attempt but he was a warrior stripped of armament.

"It's all right, Mike," she said and kissed him. "I bet even at times Casanova was—" She groped wildly, realizing she had let herself into a trap by the imprudent remark. She

could not say the word. In the embarrassed pause, as she tried to find a substitute, he said it for her.

"This is what I meant. When the old boy was stoned he probably disappointed a lot of his lady friends." She laughed to show her words were a joke. If jokes were what he wanted, she would go along.

He stood up, buttoned his shirt again. "Sure, I'm half-way stoned. But do you know what really is the matter?" He glared in mounting fury. "It's this damn suburbia bit. This mausoleum. This production center for the manufacture of children by the dozens. Except we don't have any."

"I sometimes wish we'd never left the city," Diana said wistfully.

"You're the one wanted the chirping birds to wake you up in the morning, instead of the clatter from the freeway."

She did not remind him it had actually been his idea to move to the suburbs: *Do things with my two hands again. Drop a seed in the soil and marvel at its growth . . .*

She was sure he had read that somewhere.

Associate with real down-to-earth people . . . was another remark she remembered.

She left the living room to take a shower. At some point while she stood under the spray, Mike had made his way to bed. By the time she had finished in the bathroom Mike was sleeping soundly.

She lay in her own bed, wishing something would happen. Anything.

The night was so deadly quiet—a bedlam of silence.



2



IT had taken only a few months for Diana and Mike Eaton to become completely disenchanted with life in suburbia—but at first they had really believed their dream.

After Mike had managed his transfer to the valley division of the parent outfit in L.A. and they had built the house, he had come home each night and changed into overalls. He had planted a patch of corn because he had remembered corn growing at his uncle's place where he once vacationed as a boy. Mike's plants had grown promisingly until they were stricken with a mysterious blight. After trying gallons of sprays and special fertilizers the man at the local nursery had finally decided that Mike's problem was the soil, about which little could be done instantly.

Diana had discovered she possessed an equally untalented green thumb. Her roses had provided a haven for aphids and other pests. Garden sprays had given her hay fever. Reluctantly she had had to admit that her efforts were as great a disappointment as the corn.

Even Mike's building projects were doomed. His concrete-

block wall, a labor of love for ten weekends, had been found to be sixteen inches on the adjoining property. The mistake had originated with the surveyor who had laid out the lots. "Sorry, old man, but it's a little late to rectify it now," the surveyor had said apologetically.

Legal steps might have been taken, of course, but the case might have taken years to process. Most neighbors would have been inclined to let the wall stand. Not Emil Jenkins. He was the father of a small boy. The boy and his friends had needed room to run across Mike's newly planted lawn, through shrubbery barely rooted. The resulting havoc had caused Mike to have a talk with Jenkins regarding juvenile despoilers of greenery and bad feelings had been the upshot.

Jenkins had maliciously allowed Mike to break his hands and his spirit building the wall, then had ordered him to tear it down. Jenkins' attorney had stipulated that the wall had to be removed within seven days from receipt of notice.

"But he knew all the time the survey was off," Mike had complained to the attorney. "Why did he let me go ahead and build?"

"Some people love their children," the lawyer had said with a hard smile.

Mike had gotten the message. Because of the short time allowed for removal of the wall, he had been forced to hire a crew with an air hammer. After the wall had crumbled, a solid redwood fence had taken its place. Mike had insisted. He and Diana might hear Jenkins and his brat beyond the fence, but would not have to look at them.

The end of the gentleman-farmer bit had come when a family of moles had moved in and started to work on the root of the myporum.

"The hell with it," Mike had said in disgust. He had hired a gardener and begun to order vodka by the case. Not much later, Diana had begun to worry and to read all the women's magazines that featured columnists and articles dealing with problems of adjustment to suburban life.

Their attempts to make friends had been as unrewarding as their gestures toward agriculture and masonry. They had joined a local social group called Rangers during their

first weeks. Dressing in Western outfits had been *de rigueur* for the monthly gettogethers. There had been barbecues and square dances at the recreation center provided by the subdividers.

Diana soon learned that "woman talk" at such gatherings pertained mostly to pediatricians, orthodontists, diaper rash, PTA, Cub Scouts and the latest styles in maternity garments.

The bedrooms of suburbia, it seemed to Diana, were more productive than the soil. She rarely met a woman who was not in some stage of pregnancy or child-rearing.

The talk had a habit of settling eventually and rather embarrassingly on herself when the women got off by themselves in a corner of the recreation hall.

You and Mr. Eaton are childless by choice?

How often had she heard the question, variously phrased?

Not by choice . . .

How often and in how many different words had she answered it, forcing a brilliant smile, fighting anger?

Our doctor says . . .

She had never been given the opportunity of quoting her doctor. The ladies had volunteered advice, naming pills, tonics, shots. Elevating the feet, even standing on the head following certain functions, if such antics could be managed. Try new doctors, try new . . .

Mike had fared no better. The young fathers burdened with laundromat sessions while the wives were at home having hourly crises with the children, had resented Mike's freedom from such activity.

What gives, Mike? If I had a wife as good-looking as yours, she'd be pregnant once a year . . .

I try . . .

Mike had smiled to show they were all good guys and just having fun.

So-and-sos got a kid by using artificial insemination . . . nice kid . . . They're having a ball . . .

I knew a guy in the war. Sad case. He came home and—well, he couldn't cut it, see? And he said it was okay if his wife got it around the neighborhood. And they finally had the kid they wanted . . .

Whose kid was it?

Could have been any number of guys . . .

Everybody had laughed.

Beer, fun and frolics for the Rangers—but no fun for the Eatons.

Driving home after one such session, Mike had said, "Just because we don't have kids, we're some sort of creeps. This place is wearing me thin."

"I guess you can't blame them," Diana had said. "People who have kids want to talk about them." She had grown misty-eyed and Mike had patted her hand.

"Don't take it that way—"

"Mike, I—sometimes I just feel so darn inadequate."

"To hear the boys at the beer joint tell it, you'd think I was the one to blame."

"We know it's me," Diana had said, blowing her nose. "Remember what the doctor told us?"

"He also said these things adjust themselves normally, given time. We're just a little behind schedule—these people's schedule."

When they had reached home, Diana had said, "You know what's the trouble with us? We're just darn lonely."

"Yeah." Mike had mixed a pitcher of martinis. "And I wanted to come out here and meet down-to-earth people. Make real friends. Find folks with whom we'd have something in common. We do—arguments."

He gave a hoot of laughter.

A month ago Diana had met one of the down-to-earth types. A local group had started a drive to oust a science teacher at a nearby high school. The charge had been that his wife had worn a bikini at a popular resort beach. A schoolboard member who had happened to be present had snapped a picture of her. Copies of the evidence had been distributed among other male members of the board, the photos blown to eight-by-tens so the incriminating qualities of the pictures could be better appreciated.

Diana had first heard about the furor when an indignant female named Mrs. Maudine Prince had appeared at the Eaton front door. Mrs. Prince had thrust a petition under

Diana's nose and asked for her signature and approval for firing the teacher.

Diana had declined. She had given as her reasons for not signing her belief that individuals were not answerable for their actions to a community unless they broke a law or an ordinance.

Mrs. Prince had pleaded, argued, finally become abusive. Diana, it had seemed to Mrs. Prince, did not care what kind of persons taught young children—perhaps because the Eatons had no children of their own.

Diana had tried to hold in her anger. "Possibly the teacher's wife should have been more discreet in view of his position in the community. But I don't see where the wearing of a bikini is an earth-shaking event."

Mrs. Prince had folded the petition, "Those of us with children do regard this matter quite seriously."

"Everyone is entitled to an opinion," Diana had said crisply.

The woman's gaze had snapped to Diana's blond locks. "Your hair is lovely, Mrs. Eaton. I've heard a number of people express that opinion. It rather calls attention to you—what do you do to it?"

"Comb it. The color happens to be natural."

"A fact undoubtedly any number of males can verify—beyond mere opinion."

"Why—" Diana had been momentarily speechless with shock and anger. Finally she had managed, "That remark was rather uncalled for."

"Perhaps. We are a new community, filled with respectable people. We intend to keep it that way."

Diana had slammed her front door in Mrs. Prince's face. She had told Mike about the incident that night.

Mike had shaken his head. "You're just worn-out from trying to cope with this place. Forget it."

"Forget it! I tell you she said every word. Every rotten word. I was never so stunned in my life."

Mike had leaned tiredly against the bar and reached for the vodka. "The woman must've been drunk."

"I doubt if she's ever had a drink."

"Forget it, honey, you can't change how people talk."

He had sniffed toward the kitchen. "What has my non-working wife got cooked for dinner?"

"Mike, she frightened me."

"Just some well-meaning old biddy wanting to reform everybody."

"She wasn't old. She was well-dressed—but not well-meaning. When I refused to sign the petition she turned on me. I never experienced such venom."

Mike had sagged onto a bar stool. "Well, why didn't you take the easy way out and sign her damn petition?"

"But I just didn't believe the charge against that teacher was justified."

"Must be more behind it than his wife's wearing a bikini."

"Maybe. But they're using her doing so as an excuse to get rid of him."

"Well, a teacher shouldn't marry a gal who looks good in a bikini. Maybe that's the moral. Now you in a bikini—that would be different."

He had kissed her and hurried her off to their new bedroom. There Diana's problems had exploded into rose-tinted bubbles and she had floated contentedly back to earth. It had seemed that perhaps for the moment they had managed to get their personal lives back on the track after all.

But their euphoria had failed to last. The road back to the good days—before the corn crop failed and the subterranean moles foraged among their shrubby roots and the wall had to be torn down—had proved difficult.

Soon word got around that Diana took nude sunbaths in the side patio, where anyone driving a high-wheeled vehicle would be able to see her over the presumably screening oleanders. For some days she noticed an unusual number of cement and lumber trucks using Primrose Road. She thought that possibly a new development was going up in the neighborhood. The drivers all seemed to stare at the Eatons' house with more than casual interest—perhaps because Mike's and Diana's house was also relatively new. Diana waved to the drivers because she felt their interest was friendly—too, she was pleased that the place she and Mike had created at-

tracted attention. She spent a lot of time outdoors—so far she had firmly resisted the narcotic of daytime television.

One day after Mike had gone to the plant she made her usual preparations for the morning sunbath. She showered then picked her sunsuit out of a chest of drawers. Admittedly the suit would have been daring anywhere except in the privacy of her own patio. It consisted simply of two strips of flimsy, sand-colored cotton. It almost matched her tan.

This morning, though, the sky was overcast. Diana returned the sunsuit to the drawer, dropped a full-skirted cotton dress over her head, slipped her feet into sandals and decided to go out and inspect the yard. Watching for signs of gophers and moles was still one of her daily projects. By the time she had covered the half-acre knoll it was usually noon. Then all she had to do was fill in the afternoon until Mike came home—an eventuality she viewed with mixed emotions. These days he was often too tired and cross and would drink more than was good for either of them. They would have dinner, followed by additional drinking. She would usually precede him to bed, tense and wondering what had happened to her as a wife, as a female.

On this day she had covered most of the yard and was inspecting the oleanders when a squeal of brakes made her glance toward the road. Through the thicket she could see a blue delivery truck, parked near the house. Before she could wonder what it was doing there, she heard a step.

She turned and saw the blue-uniformed driver, young, cocky. He laughed, showing strong white teeth.

"You ain't wearin' the birthday suit today, honey" he observed.

Birthday suit? Diana found herself flushing—his words were the first intimation she had had that the sunsuit she had considered merely daring had been interpreted as nothing at all.

"You—you're mistaken," she managed and his grin grew wider.

"I get you, baby." His eyes ran up and down her, from

head to ankles, paused speculatively on her dress. "Under that, huh? Nothing?"

She glanced at her watch, feeling her heart begin to pound. She was frightened. She remembered now seeing the blue truck often before, crawling past the house, remembered herself waving at the driver. She had never really noticed him before—now he seemed like a young animal to her, strong and, oddly, not unhandsome.

"My husband will be home soon," she said, her voice quavering a little. "Don't—don't try anything silly."

He laughed again. "Silly's not the word I've got in mind—fun's more like it. Something your husband probably doesn't get around to very often and the boys tell me you've just about been asking for."

Her lips parted slowly as she grasped his meaning fully. So both she and Mike had been the subject of intimate local gossip. She remembered the Rangers and Mike's comment that people blamed him for her childlessness. She remembered something else—the many unsatisfactory nights she had spent with Mike—and something stirred in her that frightened her almost more than the young trucker's stare.

His bold dark eyes seemed to be burning right through the thin cotton dress. She lowered her gaze, seeing his name, Butch, stenciled in green thread on the right side of his uniform. She grew aware of an engulfing warmth that seemed to shrink the front of the dress against her breasts. She felt confined and flushed and slightly hysterical.

She tried to inject a note of normalcy into the situation. She said, "You'd better be careful how you talk to strange women."

"We don't have to talk, do we, baby? We got signals of our own."

"Signals?" Her voice sounded small.

"Sure, waving to each other."

"I do that to all the drivers—"

"You ain't kiddin', there. There's at least ten guys seen you out here in your birthday suit."

"You're mistaken," she told him. "I've always worn a sun-suit. Now you'd better leave."

She started for the house, walking at first—then, sensing that he was following her, she began to run. She reached the door, slipped through, tried to slam it shut in his face, but he slipped right in with her.

"One thing for sure," he said hoarsely, "You weren't kidding about wearing the birthday suit under that dress—and nothing else."

She realized her full skirt must have billowed out as she ran, probably showing him a good deal more of her than it should have. He reached for her and she pounded futile fists against his arms and chest.

He drew her to him and, although she tried to twist away, forced her mouth to meet his. The contact startled her so she felt her knees start to cave and instinctively she nearly responded. Then she wrenched her lips from his, turned her head. His face was hot against hers.

"That wasn't half a kiss," he panted.

"If I kiss you will you leave?" The question was instinctive, involuntary—she was in a frenzy of panic, trying desperately to find a way out, not only for herself—but for him as well. What he was doing to her simply should not be happening.

"Try me."

This time her lips relaxed and she let him hold her. But she should have known partial surrender would not satisfy him. His hands swooped to her breasts and for an insane instant she wanted them there—she wanted the rest of it . . . and only then did she fully realize how starved for excitement, for love she had been.

"You—you shouldn't do that," she whispered, stepping back from him. "You'd better leave."

He seemed indignant. "Hey what goes?" His cap had fallen off and a lock of black hair curled over his forehead. "You out there every day in the raw and signaling—"

"No—" She gave a burst of near-hysterical laughter. "Oh, I can see how you'd be mistaken—"

"Not me, baby. I ain't ever mistaken about a good-looker like you. I seen it all."

His hands were on her arms again. She fought him.

"No—you see, this is the way it happened," she said. "My sunsuit is—well, it's about the same color as my tan."

"Even some of the dames seen you in the raw."

She swallowed. This development really startled her. "What dames?" she demanded, feeling angered again. The reawakening of her resentment of the local, gossiping women felt good, sane. When she was mad she could fight back. The emotional diversion made a good defense—and if anger failed her, she could use scorn. "I repeat, what woman or women saw me sunning myself in the nude?"

"I'll name one—Mrs. Prince. She told Marge it's disgraceful how you carry on. Them's her exact words."

"So that's it. And who's Marge?"

"Hasher at Joe's Coffee Shop. This Prince dame is always talkin' about the big blonde on Primrose Road. That's you, baby."

"Next thing I know, she'll be getting up some sort of petition," Diana said thinly. "You shouldn't believe gossiping women."

"What're you tryin' to hand me? You wave at all the guys. They wheel their rigs outa the way just to have a look at you. I'm one of them."

"I only meant to be friendly—"

"I like friendly dames," he said and then his hands moved so quickly that they ripped the neckline of her dress when she tried to escape. Her panic overrode all thoughts of strategy. With a desperate wrench of her body she tore herself free and started running. If she could reach another room, lock the door . . .

His foot shot out, tripping her. As she fell, he dropped with her and his weight pinned her to the floor.

"You can't do this," she whispered. "The neighbors—I'll scream—"

Reason did not reach him at all. He clamped a hand on her mouth and went on with what he was doing—or going to do. She fought him with her knees but her strength was no match against his. He began to hurt her and she whimpered against the roughness of his palm.

He raised his hand slightly and once more she tried frightened reason. "Let me up and I'll say nothing—"

"I won't say nothing, either," he said against her throat.

He was too strong for her and she knew now from the hurt his hands inflicted that it was impossible to fight him. Stories she had heard and read of women being hopelessly maimed and even murdered flashed through her mind—she shivered and closed her eyes and felt him grind her into the soft rug.

When it was over he tried to kiss her, but she turned her head and he seemed too spent to make an issue out of her refusal.

"If you are not out of here in one minute," she said, her voice trembling, "I'll call the police. I mean it."

"Jeez, you act sore. What the hell?" He suddenly looked frightened himself and strode out of the room, muttering, "Crazy dames—"

When the sounds of his truck could no longer be heard, Diana picked herself up. Reaction set in. Her whole body began to shake. She staggered to a chair. What sort of hell had she and Mike moved to? In the city people were shielded by anonymity, locked doors. There were rapists in the city, sure, but they were crazy people and one guarded against them. Out here her rape had actually begun with local gossip that had damaged her reputation beyond repair even before she had actually been violated.

As she sat alone in the big house it came to her suddenly that she felt a strange lack of anger, of indignation at the man who had assaulted her—all her silent, pent-up rage was directed at the community which seemed bent on destroying her . . . and Mike? What effect would this have on Mike?

Although she did not want to burden him with her problems, she felt it wise to tell him at least part of what had happened. He had to know about the kind of place they were living in. That the attack had occurred—the background gossip that had motivated it were actually more important than the fact that her attacker had succeeded . . . she did not need to tell Mike everything.

And if he heard the full story from other sources, it would be Butch's word against hers. She would deny everything.

3

BY the time Mike got home that night, she had managed to regain most of her composure and had her story ready. After much thought, she had decided to play down the incident as much as possible, while still putting across her point about the neighborhood. Her main worry now was to keep Mike from going on the warpath and to save what was left of their marriage.

Mike had had a discouraging day at the plant and was not particularly amused when she tried to make feeble, ironic jokes about what had happened.

"I hope there isn't more than one deliveryman around here with Butch stenciled on his coveralls," Mike said, looking around from the bar where he was pouring vodka over ice in the evening's first martini pitcher. "I might punch the wrong guy in the nose. You didn't happen to notice the name of his outfit on the truck?"

"No, I didn't. And I don't want you to make a big deal of this or punch anybody—even the real Butch. It would only cause more talk. That's the whole point I'm trying to make. People are already gossiping about us."

Actually she would know no sorrow if someone killed Butch—she felt unclean, despoiled by the episode—but she did not want the killer to be Mike.

"Talk. You'd better start wearing some clothes around the yard if you want to avoid comment."

"Mike, I already explained. I just dropped the dress over my head and went outside. Without even thinking about it. I didn't expect anybody to come storming through the shrubbery—"

"Look, you can get a guy steamed up even when you're dressed decently—"

"Decently!"

"Next time wear a bra and pants. You'll drive the whole place into orbit if you don't. And throw out that sunsuit."

"Mike—"

"I oughta call the cops about this guy."

"No—please. We have to live here—and there's no telling what people will think and say or the story he'd give to the police—"

"Right now he may be planning to come back for another whack at you."

She hoped her guilt did not show either in her voice or eyes. "Mike, that was a revolting thing to say."

"Yeah, I guess it was," he admitted.

His tanned face seemed drawn, the muscles at the corners of his mouth standing out. The job transfer to the suburban division of the company had not been easy. Mike had had to make adjustments. Out here his seniority meant little. This branch was really a small Eastern firm that had merged with the larger plant in L.A. Nearly the entire staff of the outfit here had been brought from the East when the merger occurred. In fact, the L.A. office had been disappointed when Mike had asked for a transfer. Mike's immediate superior and the president of the company had advised against the move, saying Mike's idea of country life could turn out to be a disappointment to a city boy. Diana needed no psychoanalysts to tell her that Mike was unhappy—and her own experiences had demonstrated conclusively to her that the move to the suburbs had proved nothing short of disastrous. It only remained to be seen to what degree.

Mike poured himself a martini. "You mean because we live in this cemetery with street lights, that I can't punch a guy who insults my wife?"

"Honey," she tried to explain. "This Prince woman seems to have it in for me. She's the one who started the gossip—"

Over the rim of his glass he gave her a strange look. "Don't tell me the old theory holds true in this case."

"What theory?" she demanded, aware that her heart was pounding.

"Where there's smoke . . . You seem to be awfully anxious to keep this Butch from getting hurt—" He broke off and gave her a sloppy grin. "I was only kidding."

"No, you weren't." This time Diana's anger was righteous, not defensive. "Do you honestly believe I'd invite the attention of those truck drivers? What in the world do you think I am?"

"Maybe you've been a little hard up lately—" He let the thought dangle, continuing to grin, his mouth muscles still taut. There was not much humor in his expression.

"Mike, I didn't care for that remark. You keep on and we'll have a real fight."

Mike stopped all pretense at humor. "I guess it's something we should have faced up to before this," he said miserably. "In Rome, live as the Romans and so forth."

From Primrose Road came the crackle of a sports-car exhaust. With a squeal of tires, the car turned into the driveway of the house below them and to the east. The Riley boy's MG.

"Mike, I only told you what happened, so you wouldn't hear it from somebody else. This Butch—"

"I know the kind," Mike snapped. "Whether he got it or not, he'll say he did. If we go to the cops, he'll swear you invited him in. And I can just hear our good neighbors on the witness stand."

Diana felt a rush of embarrassment she tried to cover with indignation. "What did you mean by that remark? Whether he got it or not?"

"Hell—I don't know what I meant. Just thinking out loud."

"'Whether'—that could be translated to mean that he might have gotten it."

"I know he didn't. You told me so. What are we arguing about?"

"Nothing."

She crossed over to the bar. She had fixed herself up tonight. After Butch had left, she had cleansed herself thoroughly, soaked in the tub and against Mike's homecoming she had dressed and put on perfume just as if they were going out for the evening. Suddenly she realized she was excited, that she wanted Mike very much—she needed him to erase what had happened earlier in the day. Not that she could ever obliterate Butch's violation of herself—but even nightmares had an end and their memory receded, could be made to fade.

What mattered was the future. And tonight. She felt upset—no, terrified was the word. Deep down in her she knew a dread of the future, especially her future with Mike. She also had a curious sense of unreality, as if by moving out here she and Mike had moved to another world.

Mike's thoughts seemed to have taken the same direction as hers. "I wish you'd never talked me into coming to this goddam place," he said bitterly.

"You'd better think back." Diana helped herself to a martini. For the first time in her life she desperately needed a drink. Her hand shook so that she spilled some of the liquor on the bartop. "You were the one who said you wanted to get your hands in the soil. Build things. Be your own man, you said. Breathe country air."

Instead of admitting the truth, he lashed back. "If it had been dark instead of daylight. What about your friend Butch then?"

"Mike, you'd better stop it." Her face was flaming and she was sure he could read the guilt in her eyes.

"Don't be so touchy." His laugh was hollow. "You're a good-looking kid, Diana. Built like you know what. And you aren't getting much these days. Not from me, anyway—"

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Dammit, I told you I don't know what I mean. I'm so mixed up—"

"Mike, are you building up a case for an affair on your own? Maybe you're tired of me."

"If I were tired of you, I'd be long gone." He gave her a narrow-eyed look. "You remember that."

"And you remember the same thing." Diana raised her hands in a gesture of despair. "Oh, Mike, why are we quarreling?"

"Well, tonight wasn't exactly my favorite kind of home-coming." He reached for the pitcher of martinis. "I had a rough day at the plant with all the crew-cut bastards from the Ivy colleges back East and the rest of those phonies smiling behind my back when I made a suggestion that will save the firm some money. And then I come home and my wife tells me about a romp with some guy she's been waving to. Do you have to be so goddam friendly with strangers?"

"Mike, let's go back to the city before this stupid place blows our marriage to pieces."

"Yeah—" He stared as if he had failed to notice her until just now. "Say, you're really fixed up tonight." He pushed aside his glass and walked over to the hearth. He sat down and patted his lap.

Despite the fact that Diana was trembling with eagerness and relief, she took time to finish her drink before going over to sit on his lap.

"Well?"

"You're all tense and—well, sort of funny. This is your old man. This isn't Butch—"

She forced herself to relax in his arms, almost dreading his next move. If he failed her tonight . . .

But he did not. As soon as his mouth covered hers she knew for a certainty that he was the old Mike Eaton, the man she had married. She clung to him.

"Let's go back to being civilized, Mike," she whispered. "We've got a bedroom—" The memory of what Butch had done to her in this room was suddenly too real in her mind.

Mike carried her into the bedroom and what happened after that was like the old times between them, when they

had had their first little apartment in the hills above Silver Lake, near downtown L.A. The neighborhood vanished, became anonymous and they were alone . . .

A long time later they lay exhausted in the dusk-filled room. Mike stroked her pale hair, saying, "You haven't been like this in weeks."

"Neither have you," she whispered.

"I can't stop thinking about what almost happened with you and that other guy—"

"Don't say it, Mike."

"Be something if he had a wife and lived next door to us. A good-looking wife like you, of course."

"Mike—" Coldness gripped her. "You don't know what you're saying."

"No?" His grin was twisted. "That guy sure got you all steamed up for tonight. Why shouldn't I return the favor? We seem to share the same tastes in women. Maybe he's got some of my problems, too."

"Don't talk like that!"

She jumped up and fled into the bathroom and to the shower. Guilt stabbed at her. She might as well have told Mike everything—it might have been better if he had gone out looking for Butch or even called the police than for him to think as he did, talk as he did. Now he actually seemed to feel she had somehow committed—or at least wanted to commit—adultery.

She snapped off the shower. Nonsense. What was getting into her, anyway? Mike had just gotten into those martinis a little too fast.

She was a little surprised, as she dried herself, to find her face getting wet all over again.

She was crying.



4



AL HIGHT looked up from his desk behind the vast glass front of Hight's Super Service. His wife, Ginger, was moving around the shop.

"Honey," Al said, sinking back in his chair. "Please don't wear the stretch pants here. At home, I love 'em. Here, I get no work out of the crew."

He jerked a thick thumb in the direction of the lube rack. The two assistants there were staring at Ginger, at her short red hair, her freckles, the proud, firm breasts making small mounds against the tight fabric of her blouse. Mostly, though, the men seemed fascinated by the green stretch pants molded to thigh and hip.

"Let me have my fun." Ginger's smile showed strong white teeth. "What else is there to do here? Dress up to make a man look at you. At least I know I'm still alive."

"Quit griping." Al grinned. He was thirty-two, built like a wrestler. During his first year in college he had actually tried wrestling but had discovered he had the wrong temperament for the sport. He had generally lost his temper against an opponent and the intercollegiate rules governing the sport

had usually left the mat along with whoever happened to be the other contestant. He had quit college when his father died, leaving Al enough inheritance to open this station.

Al had married Ginger six years ago. She had been twenty and a sex bomb. He had loved her then and still did, but during the past two years they had admitted to each other that monogamous sex could get as threadbare as the grease rags Al used over and over on his lube rack. They had begun exploring separate avenues of escape from marital monotony. For them the experiment had worked—it had seemed to hypo up their own marriage.

"Al, I dropped in to tell you the Jenkins house is going to be for sale," Ginger said. She inspected crimson fingernails. "The Eatons live next door. You know—the blonde." She watched for Al's reaction from the corners of her eyes.

Al's beefy face opened in a grin. "Ah, yes—Mrs. Eaton."

"The one the boys talk about." Ginger lit a cigarette. "Not that I believe everything I hear. I've seen her buy gas here. She seems happy with her husband."

Al ran a hand over his heavy jaw. "He's not a bad-looking guy." He studied Ginger, who was giving him a tight grin. Al said, "Nice house, good neighbors—just what we've been looking for."

"Don't get your hopes up too high," Ginger advised. "Just the fact that some truckers shoot off their faces doesn't make her what they say she is."

"I wouldn't believe anything anybody said about anybody in this place," Al Hight said vehemently.

Ginger stretched, posing. She had once modeled and could still do it. "I'll see how much Jenkins wants for the house."

Al squinted one dark eye. "You'd better get out of here. With those pants you give me ideas."

"I like your ideas. I hope you still have them tonight." She blew him a kiss and started for the door. A new sleek black Porsche pulled up in front of a gas pump. She turned back. "Your two dyke friends," she whispered.

Al got up, stocky, bull-necked. "You're as bad as the rest of the gossips. Letitia and Madge are just a couple of gals who like to pal around."

She gave him a wise smile and went out.

Al hurried to wait on Letitia Granger. "Hi. See you got the new car."

"Isn't it a beauty?" Letitia Granger had a deep voice.

Al nodded to the other occupant of the little car. Madge Henry was a real looker, with soft brown hair and brown eyes. She was quite young and innocent-looking. If she had ever been around at all, Al decided, she had not been very far.

"Our first venture together," Letitia said. Her short hair curled close to her rather large skull. Somehow she reminded Al of a male rock-and-roll singer.

"First venture?" He started the gas pump.

"We own it together." Letitia squeezed Madge's knee. Madge blushed. Letitia leaned out of the car and pointed a large forefinger at a banner taped to the gas station window: VALLEY RACEWAY—OCTOBER 15—GRAND PRIX. INFIELD TICKETS FOR SALE HERE. "I want you to set aside a pair of tickets for us, Mr. Hight."

"You understand, you might have to line up and sleep in your car. There'll be a mob. Infield gates open at seven in the morning."

"We understand," Letitia said, giving him a cool smile. She paid for her gas and the Porsche shot out of the station.

Al shook his head, returned to his desk behind the glass wall. Maybe Ginger was right. He picked up his pen and thought of the blond Mrs. Eaton. In a gas station you heard all the gossip. He knew other neighborhood wives resented her. They were jealous—with or without reason. Knowing most of the husbands, Al suspected without.

He hoped Jenkins would not ask too much for his damned house.

Diana decided that what she needed was a job. Working would account for her time and Mike would have to stop making wisecracks about what she did while he was away at work. Also, it would relieve her boredom. She talked it over with Mike at breakfast. Her working was all right with him, but with house payments and other bills they had only been able to afford one car. Most of the time he needed it.

"Sort of limits you," he pointed out.

"There are places in the village. I could walk from here. Do me good."

"That's fine, then." Mike reached across the table, gave her hand a squeeze. "Sorry about last night. I didn't mean to make all those cracks."

"But you made them. It all boils down to this, Mike—we're childless. We don't really belong in this kind of life."

"You're probably right," he muttered thoughtfully. Then he grinned. "One thing we've got here is seclusion. If people don't like us, we'll lock the front gate. To hell with everybody. We'll be an island."

After Mike had left for the plant, Diana put on a gray, tailored outfit. She wanted to look like a working girl. Swinging her bag, she started down the hill. She had covered only a short stretch of road when a red MG pulled up beside her. The driver was Pete Riley, crew-cut, tanned, friendly. She and Mike had met his parents but the Rileys had remained casual acquaintances. Pete was trying to finish college by living at home—despite the flashy MG, Pete had never impressed Diana as too spoiled. He was engaged to a bouncy, dark-haired girl named Liza.

"Give you a lift to the village, Mrs. Eaton?" he offered.

She was about to accept, then decided against it. She had told Mike she was going to walk. She smiled. "Thanks, anyway, but I need the exercise."

He glanced dubiously at her spike heels, hardly designed for pleasant walking. "You and Mr. Eaton interested in sports-car races?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"You can buy infield tickets at Hight's Service. Thought maybe you'd like to know—it's the big deal around here every year." His strong young hands gripped the wheel. "I want to take Liza, if her folks don't make a row."

"Why should they, Pete? After all, an auto race—"

"Well, people get pretty excited and part of the fun is spending the night before the races outside the gates, waiting for positions in the infield. Sometimes things get a little rowdy—but what could Liza and I do in bucket seats that would worry her folks?" His grin was a little embarrassed, as

if he hoped, but was not sure Diana would understand he was joking. "Well, you know what I mean."

He waved and drove off.

The village was a product of the developers of this vast acreage that had once been a huge ranch. The commercial district consisted of a single block of shops with redwood fronts and shake roofs. She decided to try Dunbow's Insurance first.

As she crossed the street, sunlight flashing on her nylons, an air horn tooted. A heavy truck motor growled behind her. She did not look around but felt her ears turning red.

Alex Dunbow himself greeted her in the insurance office. He was in his forties and played the country bit, wearing tweed jackets and jodphurs.

"The day brightens. You're Mrs. Eaton, I believe." He had a small mustache and bad teeth. He seemed alone in the place. "Insurance problems today?"

"I thought perhaps you might have an opening. I—I'd like to go back to work. I used to be a secretary."

Dunbow's dark eyes flicked over her, from nylons to pale hair. They returned for a second visit to the front of her blouse, visible under the tailored gray jacket.

"Ah, I see. Children getting you down and you want to get back in the swim, so to speak."

"Mr. Eaton and I have no children."

"Oh?" His brows lifted. "Bills, then?"

"I know it's considered immoral to be childless and to be able to use more money here, but—" Her smile wavered. She had not intended to use the word "immoral"—it was not part of the community language, unless employed in its literal meaning. She continued. "Actually, we're planning a family and I'd like to put some money aside against the years I won't be able to work."

"Ah—I might need help now and then," he said thoughtfully. "But sometimes the work might cut into your evenings."

Her fingers tightened over the strap of her handbag. "You

haven't asked if I have any insurance experience," she said quietly. "Doesn't that interest you at all?"

"An attractive woman is an asset to any business. I often have to deal with clients and prospects after normal business hours and someone like you might help to create the proper atmosphere—"

"I shouldn't wonder," Diana said. She walked out.

Before crossing the street she waited for a station wagon to pass. In the front seat were two young matrons. The back of the wagon was filled with a half-dozen children of kindergarten age. On the opposite sidewalk Diana saw a harassed woman, obviously in the latter stages of pregnancy, wheeling a baby buggy that contained a wailing infant. The mother was screeching at a small boy in a cowboy suit. The boy ran into each doorway, firing a cap pistol. Another woman, leading twin girls by the hand, stepped from a parking lot.

Diana felt simple jealousy. Children were the only thing that made any sense in marriage. Certainly they made the only sense in a married couple's living out here.

She turned toward the real-estate office with its window filled with photos of houses for sale. The usual come-ons and bargains were listed. Among the properties displayed was the house adjoining theirs—the Jenkins place. The caption under the photo read: OWNER TRANSFERRED.

When she entered the office a thin young girl looked up from a typewriter. "May I help you?"

"I'm Diana Eaton, I thought perhaps—" She stared past the girl at a woman sitting at her desk in the dim rear of the office—Mrs. Maudine Prince. Diana said to the receptionist, "I'll come back later."

When she stepped outside, she felt defeated, hopeless. The Prince woman epitomized all her problems—the mere sight of her brought back the memory of Butch . . .

Braving the gossip that would naturally follow a woman entering a bar at this hour, Diana headed for a sign: VILLAGE TAVERN. In a cool leather booth, she relaxed over a cigarette and a martini.

The fat, middle-aged bartender was busy cleaning up and paid no attention to her.

She glanced at her watch. Eleven o'clock. The day would be warm by the time she climbed back up the hill. She could phone for a cab from the railroad station, but to do so would only call attention to her departure from the tavern—cab drivers probably talked as much, if not more, than truckers.

She sipped at her drink, then rose and strode to the powder room. There she removed her girdle and stockings. She wadded them into her bag. She felt better, but the action was also symbolic of defeat. After returning to her table and finishing her drink, she headed for home. When she was away from the village, she took off her shoes and carried them. The pavement was warm against her feet. She felt like a girl again.

She had gone two blocks when a young voice said, "Hi, Mrs. Eaton."

Diana looked around, saw a teenager in bobby sox and flat-heeled shoes, flaring skirt and sweater. Fresh, young complexion, a touch of color at the lips. Dark hair touseled.

"I have a feeling you're Liza," Diana said.

The girl nodded. "I cut classes today. Mind if I walk with you?"

"Love it. You're Pete's girl, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder. Pete said he saw you earlier." The girl looked directly at Diana. "Do you think I should go with him to the sports-car races? I mean, spend the night there?"

"Well, I—" A breeze had come up, stirring the foliage lining the road. Diana had not been quite prepared for the role of Dear Abby. "I suppose the decision is up to your folks."

"Tell me, Mrs. Eaton—"

"Why don't you call me Diana? And ask Pete to do the same. You're both making me feel old."

Liza smiled. "You're not old at all. Pete and I think you two are just wonderful—you and Mr. Eaton, I mean. If we could have a marriage like yours it's all we'd ask."

"Oh?" Liza's innocent remark suddenly did make Diana feel old.

"You seem to have so much fun."

"I guess we do have fun." The lie made Diana feel even older—a protector of innocence.

They walked a block in silence. A Cad passed and a gray-haired man at the wheel gave a double take at Diana, barefooted, carrying her shoes, wearing a tailored suit.

"You're unconventional," Liza said, expressing what the driver of the Cad must have thought. "That's one thing that gets us. Pete and I hate convention. You don't care what people think."

Dammit, she did care what people thought. "A certain acceptance of convention is necessary," Diana said.

"I want to ask you a blunt question." Before Diana could brace herself, Liza went on: "Do you believe a girl should—well, have premarital experiences. That's the way people put it these days."

"You should ask your mother."

"When sex is mentioned in our house she and Dad freeze. I mean freeze."

"Then I think you should wait until you're old enough to decide for yourself."

"If Pete and I have to wait in line all night at the speedway, he's going to want to do it." Liza was thoughtful. "That's one of the problems. When is a person old enough? I know all about the age-of-consent bit, but that's kind of silly. I mean it varies a lot according to where you live—geography. Does a line on a map make you older or younger, depending on which side of it you're standing?"

Diana felt trapped and flustered. She was sure Liza's next question would be, *When did you do it first?* She did not feel equal to answering it—the responsibility frightened her.

She glanced at her watch. "Oh you've almost made me forget I have company coming for dinner. I have a lot of planning and thinking to do. Have to say goodbye now, Liza. We'll talk again some time."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Eaton—Diana."

Coward . . . Diana accused herself.

5

THAT afternoon Diana Eaton saw a moving van pull in next door. Another followed. She was pleased that the Jenkinses were leaving, but apprehensive about whoever was moving in. She stayed indoors, avoiding showing herself to the moving men. There was no sign all afternoon of the new owners and she could not tell from her furtive glimpses at the furniture whether they were young or old, had children or not.

That evening she and Mike discussed the situation.

"Whoever's moving in can't be worse than that jerk who raised hell about the block wall," Mike said, his voice bitter at the memory. Diana knew the incident had killed something in him. He had spent so much time on that wall, taken so much pride in it, only to have it destroyed, have his privacy violated.

That evening the windows next door blazed with light.

"Let's go outside and pretend we're looking at the yard," Mike suggested. "Might as well try to get a look at the enemy."

Hand in hand they walked along the drive, pretending to

inspect the oleanders. Surreptitiously they watched the other house. All they could see were occasional shadows moving at the windows.

Suddenly the shadows vanished. A door banged and presently a man and woman climbed up a path from the adjoining property. They came through a row of myporum into the Eatons' yard. In the dim glow of light from the two houses, Diana saw a stocky, black-haired man wearing a white shirt and dark trousers. The woman was about her own age, long-legged, red-haired.

The couple halted and the man said, "We moved in next door. I'm Al Hight and this is Ginger."

"Hi," Mike said and introduced Diana. He grinned at Al Hight. "I know you. I buy gas at your place." They all nodded and smiled and made small talk about the night, the smells of vegetation, the lack of rain.

Finally Al Hight said, peering toward the Eaton house, "Is it true you folks don't have any kids?"

Instantly Diana was on the defensive. "Our family's at the planning stage."

Al glanced at his wife. "So's ours. That's one thing we have in common."

They all laughed and Mike invited the Hights in for drinks.

Diana noted that Ginger's stretch pants seemed to fascinate Mike to an extent. She could not blame him—she had enough female vanity to know that Ginger expected to be noticed. She herself was getting enough attention from Al to sustain her ego and was prepared to like Ginger if for no other reason than that she, too, was childless. And Al's interest in her seemed to stimulate Mike.

Mike mixed drinks at the bar, followed Al's gaze at Diana's legs, smiled and gave a soundless whistle. His eyes rose to meet Diana's and a warm glow went through her. Mike was beginning to show a little life.

When the drinks were passed around, Al Hight lifted his glass. "Here's to all couples who can wait for kids. I tell you, neighbors with kids can run those who haven't any crazy."

"We've had that problem," Mike said. Once again Gin-

ger's slacks were getting his attention. "The four of us ought to get along."

Al glanced at Diana. "Yeah. I'd say things seem to be looking up."

Diana hiked down the hem of her skirt, began to talk to Ginger. Al and Mike talked football, baseball and fishing. They touched on business.

"Can't make it, pumping gas," Al Hight said with a shake of his head. "Got to sell lubes, oil and tires. The companies cut down the percentage. Hell, I could pump gas forty-eight hours a day, if a day was that long and still be in the red. What's your line, Mike?"

"Machinery. We build power mowers and saws. That sort of thing."

Diana and Ginger talked clothes, groceries, cooking.

The next night the Eatons went over to the Hights for dinner. Ginger, wearing a tight green dress to match her eyes, made a roast on an electric rotisserie. Not only an exotic-looking creature, Diana thought, but also a good cook and homemaker. Despite the fact that they had just moved in, the Hights' place looked immaculate.

After dinner Al switched on the stereo and dance music filled the room. He grabbed Diana by the wrist and pulled her to her feet.

There was a disturbing power in the way Al Hight held her. Diana wondered whether she quite liked it. Earlier in the evening—and last night—when they had been talking, eating or drinking he had seemed nice enough. But there was something compelling about the way he propelled her about the big living room—he seemed to control rather than lead her. She felt oddly, a little frighteningly helpless.

"I've seen you around town," he said softly when they were out of earshot of Mike and Ginger, who were also dancing. "I sure never figured I'd be lucky enough to move next door to you."

"Ginger is lovely," Diana said rather inadequately.

Al's laugh boomed. "I noticed that when I married her."

Diana felt relieved. For some reason—because of some unusual effect he was having on her—it was important that Al like his wife.

Abruptly the room went almost completely dark. The only light came from the dimly glowing stereo which evidently had its own illumination to facilitate changing records. Staring over Al's shoulder, Diana could not find Mike and Ginger. Through the large glass wall the lights of suburbia fell away on the slopes.

Then she heard Ginger say, "Mike, I'm a poor dancer. That's why I turned out the lights."

"I like the dark." Mike laughed.

Al looked around. "Hey, you two, no busy hands." His laugh boomed across the room.

Ginger said, "Why, Al—Mr. Eaton is a gentleman. Aren't you, Mr. Eaton?"

"You just try me, Mrs. Hight."

Ginger giggled.

At last Diana saw them—Mike's arm around Ginger's waist, they were heading toward the patio. The recording under the needle had a bubbling sound to it. Al said it was an oldie from before the war.

"Say, how old are you, anyway?" he asked her.

"Twenty-two."

"I got you by ten years, honey." He drew back to study her shadowed face. "A child bride, huh?"

"Not quite," she said stiffly, trying to see out to the patio.

"Don't worry about Mike and Ginger," Al said, laughing.

"I'm hardly worried. Do you mind if we sit down? I've been on my feet a lot lately and they're tired—"

He drew her once more against him.

"If I had my way, honey, you'd be on your back."

She twisted away from him and her heels rapped their way to the bar. She sat on a padded bar stool. Al came up behind her and she felt his hands sliding along her hips. She tried to knock his touch away.

"Don't be sore," he whispered, leaning against her, kissing her on the back of the neck.

She drew away. "Mike has to be at the plant earlier than usual tomorrow. I'd better go find him."

But she did not have to look. Mike and Ginger came back from the patio.

Ginger switched on the lights. Mike, noticing the way Diana sat stiffly on the stool said, "Hey, you and Al sore at each other about something?"

"Mike, I think we'd better go." As she turned, Diana saw the bright smear of lipstick on Mike's mouth and cheeks.

Al said, "Hey, Mike, your color is showing."

Mike flushed guiltily and smeared at the lipstick. Some of it came off on the back of his hand.

"Ginger's always marking up the guys," Al laughed.

Ginger gave her husband a look of mock indignation. "Stop it, Al. You make me sound like a—well, like a girl who goes around kissing all the boys."

"And what's wrong with that?" Al asked. He seized Diana pulled her off the stool and enfolded her in his wrestler's arms. He kissed her on the mouth. "See you again, honey."

Back home, Mike headed straight for the bar.

Diana asked, "Didn't it make you mad when Al kissed me like that?"

Mike did not even turn to look at her. He seemed to be having difficulty maintaining his balance while he made his drink.

"That Ginger," he muttered thickly. "Quite a girl. Quite a girl."

"You came in from the patio well-marked," Diana said acidly.

"Say," he said, turning and leaving his drink at the bar. He came toward Diana, his gaze bright. "Let's try that hearth bit again."

"Oh, Mike, that's silly. This time of night—"

Grabbing her by the hand he hauled her to the hearth-stones. He did not give her a chance to get completely out of her things—but at least her bare back was not against the cold tiles.

The maneuver might have failed before—this time it worked.

Finally he grinned down at her. "Plenty of life in the old boy yet."

Diana could not answer. She felt shaken.

By the time they were in their bedroom she had recovered somewhat. "I'd feel flattered if I thought I was the one who stimulated you."

Mike pretended to be asleep—she could tell by the way he breathed.

"Judging from your reaction," she said thinly, "being alone in a patio with Ginger Hight must be quite an experience."

"Don't be sore," he said, deciding to hear her. "I've got a hunch we might begin to like this neighborhood."

"This I doubt."

"Well, at least I didn't tackle her when she was alone in the house like your friend Butch did you."

There it was again, the mountain of guilt neither dared to name, rising out of the dark sea of their suppressed awarenesses. Diana swallowed, picked at the bedclothes with her nervous fingers. Who was she to complain about Mike's wearing Ginger's lipstick?

"Oh—I guess the Hights are all right," she murmured. "Both of them."

"That's better. Nothing wrong has happened so far and we can have a lot of fun, the four of us."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Funny, but I got the feeling you didn't like Al."

"He'll grow on me," she said dryly after a moment. But by then Mike was snoring.

6

LETITIA GRANGER wrapped gloved hands around the steering wheel of the Porsche, reacting to the power of the small car. The gloves were not to protect her hands—she didn't mind calluses. In fact, she took a certain pride in the fact that her nails were kept short and were sometimes darkened with grease when she fooled around with the motor. The calluses were badges of achievement, acquired even before she and Madge Henry had purchased their sports car. They dated from the weeks she had been a switch hitter with the girls' softball team of the firm which employed her.

The firm had since discontinued its sponsorship of the Amazons, as the team had been called, because of certain unfortunate episodes.

O. E. Quayle, a minor executive in charge of promotion had originally sold the idea of a championship girls' softball team to his fellow company executives on the basis that it would be good promotion for the firm. "Cute girls running around in their shorts, with the company name on the backs of their sweaters will be good publicity."

Quayle had been fooling nobody. He had correctly expected to travel with the team as sponsor-manager and had anticipated engagements in towns distant enough to warrant overnight stops. All sorts of delightful possibilities had suggested themselves to his forty-five-year-old mind—not the least a legitimate excuse at long last temporarily to flee the domain ruled by his wife.

The task of organizing a winning team had been given to the company public-relations man, a cynical former big-city police reporter.

His first question to Quayle had been, "You want these girls to be champions on the field or champions in a motel room?"

Quayle had pretended indignation. "A pennant is all we're interested in."

Within two weeks six girls had been hired away from a wholesale bakery that had sponsored the previous year's championship softball team in the valley circuit. The girls had been given jobs as file clerks or similar semiskilled posts.

Letitia Granger had been one of the three regular employees of the company able to make the team. She had entered the competition with zest, enjoying the feel of the bat in her hands, the muscular activity, loving the noise and the dirt and the sweat. And when she had played an exceptional game, which had been most of the time, she had felt fully rewarded when Madge Henry, brown eyes shining with pride, had hugged her and said, "Gee, Letitia, you were wonderful today."

At such times, Letitia's heart had warmed under the baggy, oversized, sweaty uniform shirt and her pulse had grown a little faster.

Even the "regulars" who drifted from plant to plant as a team nucleus had admitted that Letitia was a natural athlete.

"But if you'd trim down on the shirt size," a gum-chewing team captain had once informed her, "you'd cut down wind resistance and be able to steal more bases."

Letitia had not known whether the other girl had

been ribbing her or not, but the statement had struck a responsive chord. She had stared down at her own chest.

"I hate tight-fitting shirts. I don't like—like those damn things." She had been referring to her breasts.

The team captain had given a hoot of laughter. "Me, I've got none. My roommate says I'm flat in the chest as a bathroom door."

"Wish I were," Letitia had said ruefully. "They just get in the way."

"We've got no game this week," the other girl had suggested, lifting an unplucked brow. "Why don't you come over to the apartment Saturday night? We'll talk baseball and have a few belts."

"Why, that would be nice." Letitia had felt honored and curiously elated at being chosen a member of the inner circle—a regular.

The unplucked brow had risen even higher. "By the way, bring that cute Madge Henry with you. Now there's a doll if I've ever seen one."

Letitia's smile had frozen. "I'll see," she had said stiffly and walked away. But her mind had already been made up. She had had no intention of subjecting Madge to those rough girls. Madge, she had known, was too sensitive, much too fragile for such bawdy types.

Even back then, Letitia had worried about Madge. The girl had always been too trusting, almost angelic. Letitia had considered getting an apartment with Madge—if they lived together Letitia could have extended the bulwark she had erected at the office to shield Madge from the ugly world into their private lives. Of course, she had seen Madge twice weekly when they had dined at the Paris House and taken in a foreign movie or a concert. But there had always been blank spaces in the week's calendar when Madge was completely unprotected and vulnerable. These were still the nights when Letitia worried. These were the times when Madge might meet with tragedy. Any girl living alone could become the target for a predator and all men were predators, Letitia believed, with two possible exceptions—her late father and Mr. Quayle. Her father she was sure of. And Mr. Quayle—well, he had never

pinched, touched, leered or made lewd remarks to the girls, as far as Letitia knew. He had seemed inordinately shy around females. His wife, a mountain of a woman, had not had to trade skirts for trousers in order to advertise who wore the pants in the Quayle household.

Halfway through the softball season, with the team soaring toward a pennant, the whole project had been called off. Quayle had begun to lose interest even earlier. His original attitude had changed the day he first saw the team members out for practice.

"My God, they look like fullbacks," he had told the firm's press agent.

"If you want cuties, you don't win pennants. I asked which you wanted—remember?"

Later, when Quayle had seen Letitia at her desk one day, he had said, "I was surprised at how different even you look in a baseball uniform."

Letitia had glanced up from the engineering report she was typing.

"Different?"

"You look so—so brawny out on the field."

Quayle had not meant it as a compliment but Letitia had taken it as one. The remark had pleased her.

The softball fiasco had been Quayle's one and only excursion outside the marital zones defined by the mountainous Mrs. Quayle.

One Saturday when a foreign movie Letitia and Madge had planned to see had been canceled because of pressure from a local morals committee, the two girls had taken a walk along the sports-car row. At sight of the shiny Porsches behind a plate-glass show window, Madge had clapped her hands.

"What delightful little cars," she had said excitedly.

"Pretty, that's for sure."

"They—they're like toy cars. Little jewels. Real little jewels."

"I've thought of getting one several times," Letitia had said in her deep, thoughtful voice.

"You have?"

"They're impractical, for one thing—"

"But why would they be?" Madge had asked.

"Well, they only seat two people and—"

Their eyes had met, held a moment before Madge had looked away in odd confusion. "I guess some people want a lot of company when they go riding," Madge had said. She had sounded disappointed.

The remark had brought a flush of pleasure to Letitia's cheeks. "Two seats are certainly adequate for my needs. But the car costs a lot of money."

Madge had stood staring into the showroom where a young salesman had been dusting one of the cars almost lovingly. "It is just made for two people," she had reflected. "I guess most people need a bigger car."

Letitia had touched Madge on the arm. "You'd look pretty behind the wheel, Madge."

"Oh, I can't drive," Madge had said quickly, turning to stare up into Letitia's face. "You'd have to do the driving. I'd just be a—" Madge had produced a delightful little-girl squeal of laughter. "I'd just be a very contented passenger."

"I didn't know you were so crazy about cars."

"Just to look at, before this. I have to be very sure of the driver or I don't have any fun riding in one. You know, I need someone I have confidence in—as regards most things."

Letitia had noted Madge's ears had been red, though soft brown hair had partially screened them. Her own had been warm and she had felt a sledging thump in her chest.

"Maybe we could buy it together," Letitia had offered tentatively.

"You mean split the down payment? Then make monthly payments?"

"It would be ours." Letitia's throat had felt dry. "Ours and nobody else's. Just the right size for us."

The following week Mr. Quayle had called the girls into the company recreation hall and informed them of the official decision to disband the softball team. It seemed that in a neighboring community the teenage daughter of the mayor had made a hysterical confession compromising two members of the team. The matter had been hushed up,

but it had marked the end of the company's sports program—and of Mr. Quayle's interest in athletic young ladies.

By then Letitia and Madge had taken possession of their new car.

Now that Madge was no longer a spectator at the softball games, rooting for Letitia, her accolades took another form. Every act Letitia performed in the little car brought a delighted response from Madge. Letitia downshifting, cornering, her expert handling of the wheel all brought praise from Madge.

Because there was no garage at Madge's apartment, it had been agreed that Letitia would keep the Porsche at her place. She called for Madge each morning, took her home in the evening. Their nights out together per week became more frequent but there were still times when Madge did not invite her upstairs. These occasions caused Letitia concern.

Madge, alone, was vulnerable. Not too long ago a visiting salesman, Ralph something-or-other, had begun to show an interest in Madge. Every time Letitia saw him put his arm casually around Madge's waist, something crumbled inside her. Her only consolation was the fact that Madge seemed cool and not too happy when she was around Ralph.

After she had broken up with Ralph, Madge had confided to Letitia, "Ralph was all right. But when he wanted me to do—to do you know what. That was the end of it."

Madge had shuddered.

"It's all men think about," Letitia had said, pleased. She had experienced a brief, sobering thought that no man had ever propositioned one Letitia Granger. But only for an instant had she let her mind dwell on this undeniable fact. She had never invited a man to proposition her.

Now their greatest pleasure came when Letitia donned the driving gloves Madge had given her, and they would zip along hilly back-country roads where Letitia's dexterity with the wheel and the gears brought squeals of delight from Madge. Locked in, strapped to the bucket seats with safety belts, they were truly in a world of their own.

"Won't it be wonderful," Madge exclaimed, "going to the sports-car races? It's all they talk about at the office. It's to be the biggest one ever held out here."

Letitia took a firmer grip on the wheel, aware of a squeezing warmth in the pit of her being. "If we go in the infield, we'll have to get there early to get a good spot."

"How early?"

"It will mean getting into the line Saturday afternoon and spending the night. The gates won't open until morning."

"I don't mind," Madge said in a small voice. "We could bring food and some soft drinks."

"We'd be cramped in the car, but—it will be our first night together."

"That's right," Madge said, a flush creeping across her pretty face.

Letitia took a deep breath, satisfied with herself. Satisfied with the whole world.

7

ONE Saturday night the Eatons and the Hights planned cocktails, dinner and dancing at a well-known nitery some fifteen miles away. Diana found herself anticipating the evening with mounting excitement. It would be the first time in months she and Mike had gone anywhere to dance. The site of their revelry was far enough away to make unlikely their running into neighbors. Not that it mattered, Ginger had been quick to point out, except that she and Al were in business here. They knew most of the local people and a thing like a night out could work damage in several ways. If they ran into a customer in compromising circumstances, they could lose trade. The result would be the same if a customer disapproved of seeing them. It was best not to mix business with pleasure.

"A short road to bankruptcy," Al had said with a grin one night in midweek when the Hights had come over for highballs after dinner. "During business hours I've got a cash reason for seeing my customers. It isn't my fault if I see them drunk and disorderly while I'm selling them gas. Outside business hours, it's the kiss of death."

Al and Mike had watched the wrestling matches on TV while Diana and Ginger had talked clothes and gardening. Ginger had passed along the latest gossip that Al had picked up at his station. It was amazing, Diana had thought, what went on in a so-called staid community such as this.

For the Saturday date Diana bought a new black gown to show off her pale hair. When she dressed for the evening and Mike came out of the shower, he gave a small whistle of appreciation.

"We've been buried in this trap for so long that I've forgotten what you could look like, Mrs. Eaton, when we go on the town."

"I guess finding friends out here has been good for us both." For the moment she believed what she said—there had been no repetition of the disturbing elements their first dinner party with the Hights had brought out.

Mike reached for a towel. "That Ginger is sure a swell kid."

Diana, applying lipstick at the triple mirrors of her dressing table, glanced at Mike. He seemed lost in deep thought as he toweled, then began to dress. She could only guess at what he was thinking of. She hoped nothing would happen to spoil the evening—that the new black dress would be a match for anything Ginger wore.

But what if it were not? Should she feel jealous—or simply grateful that knowing the Hights had brought new vigor to Mike and even to their marriage?

Mike saw her staring at him. "Something the matter?"

Diana shrugged. "Of course not."

But suddenly she was not sure. Somehow Mike's reaction to Ginger was a reflection on Diana as a woman. As a wife. For some reason she could not define, she suddenly felt deficient. Not jealous. Why not jealous? And abruptly she understood.

The reason for her lack of jealousy lay far down in her subconscious—deep in herself, she knew she was attractive to men. Attractive enough to have caused malicious gossip—to have invited rape. Her stomach constricted in sudden terror—was she thinking normally? Had something hap-

pened to her out here that had changed her forever?

Mike had merely grinned at her, commented dutifully that she looked good dressed up—and instantly thought of another woman. Under normal, earlier circumstances her anger would have been swift. But not since her violation by Butch. Mixed with her terror was a feeling of guilt. She had deceived Mike about Butch, but would she herself ever be able to forget that terrible morning when it happened?

She was jolted back to the present when Mike said, "Bet you kind of like Al by now."

"Ginger said he used to be a wrestler."

"Muscles out to here," Mike said lightly, watching her reflection in the triple mirrors. "Wonder how different our lives would have been if—"

His voice trailed off as if his own thoughts had suddenly embarrassed him.

She shifted her gaze, studied him as he sat on the edge of the bed, buttoning his shirt. In the mirror she could see him watching the back of her head expectantly, as if he were trying to read in her mind the answer to his unfinished question.

"You didn't ask it all, Mike," she said, capping her lipstick.

"Well, if I were married to a gal like Ginger. And you—well, you know."

"You're imagining me married to someone like Al?" She turned on the padded dressing-table bench, her smile showing strain.

"It could have happened," Mike said. "Al's a real nice guy."

"And Ginger's a nice girl, I believe you said."

"Hey, you sound like maybe you're getting sore."

"I'm not sore, Mike. I know that you want to sleep with her."

"Hey, now, wait a minute—"

"And you'd like me to tell you I'd want to do the same with Al. That would even it up, wouldn't it?"

"You're saying it—I'm not," he muttered. "Nothing like that will ever happen."

Somehow the discussion killed her anticipation of the evening. Although she had so looked forward to it, she now felt that this night might change their lives completely. The thought put a freeze into her breast.

At that moment the door chimes sounded and Mike said, "You get it, honey."

Smoothing her dress, Diana took a final glance at herself in the mirror, then hurried to open the front door. Ginger was again wearing her favorite green to match her eyes and as a contrast to her flaming hair. Tonight she wore her hair in an upsweep, topped with a chignon.

"Got something to talk over with Mike," Al Hight said. He was carrying a large brown paper bag in each hand. He strode past the two women and Ginger gave an exaggerated shrug to convey to Diana that there was no understanding men. Ginger seemed annoyed.

When Al set down the sacks on the coffee table, Diana heard a distinct clinking of bottles.

Mike came in from the back part of the house. He slapped Al on the shoulder, threw Ginger a look of appreciation.

"Hi, green eyes." He grinned and his gaze swept Ginger from chignon to spike heels.

The attention he paid her seemed to bring Ginger a faint pleasure and momentarily she lost her look of irritation. Diana had the feeling that Ginger and Al had had words earlier in the evening.

Al was saying, "I figured that for the price of a meal at the night-spot and all that jazz, we could have a real night for half the money right at home."

Diana was standing so she could see only Mike's face. Al had his back to her. She had the distinct impression that Al must have given Mike some signal, perhaps a sly wink, to get his unqualified support for the change of plans.

"Sounds okay with me," Mike said. He shot Diana a dubious glance. "But how about the girls?"

"Ginger says it's all right with her," Al put in hastily, not giving his wife a chance to offer any objections.



8



THE Hights had been through it an hour ago. Ginger had just finished zippering up the green dress when Al had suggested they alter their plans for the evening.

"Oh, fine," Ginger had said meagerly.

They had few secrets from each other, but even so Al had debated whether to tell her his real reason for asking that the night-club part of the evening be called off. He had pointed out that it was the women who went for that sort of evening. Guys did not give a hang about dancing and all that jazz. Not unless they were trying to make out with a dame. And if you knew for sure you were going to make out, why go to all the bother of an expensive build-up. Besides, he told her with a grin, you could get to the business of the evening that much sooner.

"Diana is attractive, I admit," Ginger had said. "But why all the rush?"

"Don't tell me you're not steamed up to do your own sampling next door."

"I like Mike, sure. But we've got all night."

"Just this once," Al had begged, "do what I ask."

She had tilted her head, giving him a cool, green-eyed appraisal. "You might as well tell me, Al. You know I'll worm it out of you sooner or later. What's the real reason for the rush?"

Through Al Hight's mind had raced any number of possible explanations but he knew from experience it did not pay to lie to Ginger. She would forgive almost anything but a lie.

"I heard a juicy tidbit today, as you gals say," Al had explained. "There's this truck driver, see—"

"Oh, that again." Ginger had snorted in disgust.

"No, this is something new. A guy named Butch."

"I suppose you heard it from this Butch?" she asked skeptically.

"I know it sounds like the old business of a guy bragging about something he didn't get. But this hasher at the coffee shop runs around with Butch, see. And she found out about it and went into orbit—"

"Al, that still doesn't prove anything."

"Sounds to me like maybe it happened—Diana and this Butch. Just a hunch."

Ginger had considered the story for a moment, then made a final pitch for her evening. "Even if what you heard were true, why not go out as we planned—"

"I've got nothing on my mind but that blonde. You can give in once, can't you?"

Ginger had hesitated a moment. "At least you might have told me before I pinned on the wig. Maybe Diana and Mike won't like your changing the plans," she warned.

"Back me up. It's all I ask. I'll buy the booze for the evening."

They had a few drinks, some nervous discussion about world affairs. Then Al suggested going out to the patio. All four of them went and sat a moment under the stars, talking. Then Mike went in for more drinks and Ginger followed to help him.

Diana and Al were alone and suddenly silent. She heard distant sounds of traffic. Somewhere a dog was barking.

Clouds drifted under the moon. Inside, the hi-fi began to play and Al got up to slide the glass wall shut. The music faded to a faint throb. Al came to stand beside her.

"Alone at last."

She said, "But not for long."

He grinned. "Guess again."

Just then the living-room lights went out. The patio grew completely dark. Diana stood up but Al put a strong, restraining hand on her arm.

"What's the matter? Don't you trust Mike? I would, with Ginger. You've got twice what she has."

"Oh?"

She faced around, staring away from the house. Far across the valley the headlight of a diesel stabbed a silver finger into the night. It would have been ridiculous for her to go into the house now—Mike was probably kissing Ginger or she him. And what difference did it really make? As Al had said, she had twice the stuff Ginger did. Her experience with Butch was proof of that. She felt strangely cold.

"Diana, I guess we both know what we been waiting for," Al said breathlessly.

"Waiting for?"

Al's answer was not oral. He seized her suddenly. It crossed Diana's mind to scream her indignation, but Al had turned her so that she once more faced the solid glass wall of the living room. It remained dark, opaque—even the hi-fi was silent. The house itself seemed suddenly quiet with its secrets.

She was stunned by the rapidity of Al's onslaught. It was even swifter than her experience with Butch, although Al must have planned this, after a fashion, probably with Mike's conniving consent, whereas Butch's assault had been impromptu.

Because of what Mike was probably doing with Ginger indoors, she let Al kiss her. His mouth was hard, expert. She was aware of being lifted like a feather and of being carried to the chaise in the patio.

Briefly she felt overpowered, controlled, as she had the first time she had danced with Al. There was a tremendous

strength, a masculinity about him to which she all but found herself responding. But when Al put her down on the lounge and began to work at her clothes, she began to resist him forcefully.

It was not for Al that she had bought and worn the black dress tonight.

Partly because her sudden resistance took Al by surprise, she managed to break free and run to the sliding doors. She heard his panting curse behind her as she pushed the glass panel aside, stepped in and with a flick of the switch flooded the living room with light.

The room was empty. Again a chill touched her. The door to her and Mike's bedroom was closed but faint sounds came from behind it, Mike's laugh merging with Ginger's.

Then, silence.

Al stood behind her. She became aware of him only when he took her roughly by one shoulder. With his other hand, he turned out the light again. He drew her back to the patio and once more she found herself on the lounge, with Al working frantically at her dress. She was numb, unresisting. She even made herself respond after some moments—and found purely physical response almost frighteningly easy.

There was a curious magnetism in Al's strength, in his fast, almost animal ardor—but in large measure her response grew from a sense of betrayal by Mike . . . from that strange sense of inadequacy she had known earlier in the evening when Mike had commented on her dress and had instantly thought of Ginger.

Mike had Ginger in there now—and it took little or no imagination to understand what he and Ginger were doing.

Despite herself, Diana grew excited. She threw her arms around Al's neck and kissed him. She felt his hands on her . . . she let him do whatever he wanted . . .

She had just begun to enter the spirit of the thing when it was over. Al was through. Emotionally she remained unconquered, almost chaste—though not physically. She did not know whether to cry in frustration or laugh with relief.

She did neither. When Al released her, she sat up, began to rearrange her clothes.

Al was contrite. "I hope next time—dammit, I don't know what the hell happened. I guess you held me off too long."

Diana tried to think of something to say. She felt indecent and exposed. She quickly remedied at least the physical exposure. Turning her back, she saw that one of her stockings had been snagged on the edge of the chaise. There was a hole in her perfect nylons.

Al lit two cigarettes, looking flustered and mad. "Look, Diana, this hasn't happened to me for so long I can't remember. You'd think I was a high-school kid out with his first girl." He gave her a weak grin.

"Forget it, Al." She was so embarrassed she could not look at him. She drew on the cigarette he had handed her. The smoke tasted rancid. She dropped the butt and smashed it under her black pump.

"We might as well go in," she said and got to her feet.

"Not yet," Al said quickly, glancing toward the quiet house.

The chill she had known earlier came back to her. Turning, she stared at the dark glass wall—it's opaqueness was suddenly somehow sinister. Fear caught at her throat as if she knew of a crime being committed behind those walls—a crime that had almost taken place between herself and Al out here on the patio. That had actually taken place physically, though she had failed to reach the emotional peak of adultery. But the savage tension left her as quickly as it had come. What all four of them were doing was an accepted way of life, not a criminal act. Young moderns, sharing each other.

Light flashed briefly behind the dark glass panel, as if a door had been quickly opened and shut.

Al said, "It's okay now. They're just coming out of the bedroom—" He caught himself. "I mean, it's okay."

"I know what you mean," Diana said dully.

The living-room lights went on as she and Al entered the house. Mike crossed over to the bar, looking a little foolish, Diana thought. Al slid the glass wall shut.

"Well, how's tricks?" Al emitted his booming laugh. When no one echoed it, it died with a sound like a leaky valve.

Mike said, "How about drinks all around?" He started pouring bourbon without waiting for a reply.

Diana took the glass he offered, wanting to break into hysteria. Ginger stood at the big glass doors, watching the lights below the knoll.

Diana took a gulp of her drink, put her glass down on the coffee table. "I have a hole in my stocking," she said lamely. "Al and I were dancing and I snagged it—"

Everyone was looking at her. Their collective attention seemed to squeeze off Diana's voice. It was so utterly stupid for them all to go on pretending. Each of them knew what the others had been doing.

She hurried into the bedroom. If Mike and Ginger had used one of the beds, they had repaired the damage. Both beds were neatly made up. When she had changed her hose Diana returned to the front room, feeling somewhat calmer. Make the best of it, she kept telling herself. Perhaps no more had happened in the bedroom than on the patio.

Al and Mike were talking about the big race coming up next weekend. "There'll be fifty thousand people there, at least," Al said. "And why not? All the big-bore jobs will be racing. Cream of the crop in drivers."

"I love sports-car races," Ginger said. She seemed quite composed—like the neatly made beds in the next room, Diana thought. Ginger flicked a glance at Diana, gave her a small conspiratorial smile, then drank from her glass.

"More fun if we go to the infield," Al explained. "You're not tied to one spot like you are if you sit in a grandstand."

"Idea sounds good to me," Mike said. "How about you, Diana?"

"Anything goes, as the man said." She looked Mike in the eye. He flushed and turned away.

Al smothered a yawn with a large hand. "Well, I guess we'd better shove off. Have to get the station open early."

Ginger crossed the room to touch Diana on the arm. "Don't look like the world just ended," she whispered.

"I'm trying to be modern and objective," Diana said through her teeth. "But under my own roof—"

"I know what you mean," Ginger said thoughtfully. "I guess it does sort of rub you the wrong way. It's happened to me. In my house. But—" She squeezed Diana's wrist.

After the Hights had gone, Diana said, "I'm tired. I guess I'll go to bed."

"Me too," Mike said, giving her a sidelong glance. "They're a nice couple."

"Very."

"You act sore."

"Sore?" Her laugh was brittle. "It was a wonderful evening. I enjoyed every minute of it."

She spoke defiantly. Mike did not seem to notice. He was putting the liquor away behind the bar. He did not look around. They had not had many drinks this evening so that not even drunkenness could be blamed for what had happened. Somehow everything had gone wrong—without excuse.

In the bedroom Diana waited tensely, trying to pretend sleep. Mike did not bother to come over to her bed. She was relieved when at last she heard him snore. They did not belong with each other tonight.

Diana thought of the chaise with its faded pad in the patio. She and Mike had bought it for sunbaths. Tonight it had functioned briefly as a bed. Guilt nagged at her—a different kind of guilt from what she felt about Butch. She had deceived Mike about what had happened that morning. Mike knew what had happened tonight, except for the minutest details—but the end result was the same.

Diana felt as if suddenly she had acquired a union card in the world's oldest profession.

9

THERE was something odd about the guy, Al Hight had always felt. His name was Perce Forrest and he drove an Aston-Martin that probably had cost at least a cool twelve grand. Al remembered when Forrest had first driven the new buggy to the station. Al had made admiring sounds as he viewed the latest-model English job with the chrome wire wheels.

The temporary blue registration slip had been gummed to the windshield, in compliance with the law. And Al, wiping the front glass, had noticed that no bank or finance company was named on the slip. Percy Altmont Forrest had from the start been the sole owner.

In an area where ninety-nine and nine-tenths per cent of all vehicles were top-heavy with finance, to see a new car fully paid for was a rarity. Especially a job like this. Al had been impressed.

Perce Forrest had moved to the area two months before, to be near the plastics manufacturing plant he owned in the next valley. People said that his mother, who had died earlier in the year, had bought him the plant

to give him something to do. People also said he was loaded and Al believed them. The car Perce Forrest drove was proof enough for him.

Perce was in his middle thirties. He had a receding hairline, wore his thin brown hair too long in the back. He liked dark suits with multicolored sport shirts. He always gave Al the impression of being nervous, as if he were afraid somebody would learn some secret about him.

When he had first come to Al's station and signed the slip for gas, he had said almost defiantly, "I have to sign this damn thing Percy. But everybody calls me Perce."

"Sure, I understand, Mr. Forrest."

"I suppose you think the name is sissified."

Al had returned the credit card. "Not at all. My middle name is Jesboro."

"I don't see the connection," Forrest had said stiffly.

"Well, I've always felt mine was an odd name, is all," Al had muttered, trying to placate the guy. Anyone who drove an Aston-Martin was an asset to the business.

"I don't think Perce is such an odd name," Forrest had snapped.

"I didn't mean it that way. I meant my name was odd." Al had begun to sweat.

Sharing the car with Perce had been a slender brunette wearing diamond earclips. Al had known the stones were real because when she had turned her head the blue-white fire had almost put out his eyes.

"Perce, he didn't mean anything," she said, giving Al a smile through the windshield. She had good white teeth and, despite her obvious class, had looked like a good sport. She was put together like a model but with a little more meat on her, something Al liked in women.

She had looked like a lady. Probably some society dish.

Today they drove in together, the car purring like four million bucks. Perce said to fill it up. He and the woman were arguing. One of Al's assistants was about to gas up the car but Al waved him away. He liked to handle this customer himself. Keeping these executive types happy

could be harder than coping with a temperamental woman.

Besides, he liked to look at the brunette's legs. She wore short skirts and never quite seemed to get them anchored very far down when she slid into the bucket seat. He had learned that her name was Patsy Straight and the local scam was that she came out from L.A. two or three times a week and stayed overnight. A cleaning woman who did for Forrest twice a week dutifully reported to the crowd at the coffee shop that she would find panties and bras and "all that kind of stuff," scattered about Perce's house during and after these visits.

The woman said that Perce Forrest was jealous of Patsy Straight. Once he had screamed at Patsy, "Why don't you get back to your old racket?" And Patsy had said, "Maybe I will."

The word "racket" had caused eyebrows to lift that morning in the coffee shop.

And then a drug salesman passing through got a little stoned one night at a tavern where Perce and Patsy were having cocktails. Later the salesman had confided to whomever would listen that Patsy sure looked like a dame who had entertained certain members of a pharmaceutical convention at a Los Angeles hotel the year before.

This story Al found hard to believe. He had seen plenty of hookers in his time and this one just did not wear the brand. You could tell a whore every time—all you had to do was look at one.

Today Patsy Straight said, "Perce and I want two infield tickets for the races on Sunday—if you have any left."

"Sure, Miss Straight. You should race this job of yours, Mr. Forrest."

Forrest's head shot up. "What kind of crack was that?"

"Oh, Perce," Patsy said exasperated. "He means the car. The sports-car races. Job—car. Don't you get it?"

"I suppose." Perce sulkily handed over his credit card for the gas, but Patsy paid for the tickets herself. She said it was her treat. She loved auto races. She beamed at Al.

She stowed the tickets in her alligator bag and, while Al

was still dazzled, Perce spun his wheels out of the station and drove toward the big house on the hill.

"You certainly got a lilt in your voice when you told that guy you liked auto races," Perce told Patsy sourly, gunning the car too fast along the winding road.

"You're in a lovely mood this morning," she observed, turning in the seat to study his tense profile.

"Do auto-racers have conventions?" he asked in that nasty, accusing tone he could manage on occasion.

"You'd better turn off the faucet, Perce," she ripped out, "before you drown yourself."

"I knew you liked furniture salesmen, real-estate salesmen, auto dealers—"

"You wore out that record a long time ago. Don't bother to put in a new needle."

"Anybody who attends a convention, my Patsy likes. Go on, tell me. Do race drivers have conventions? Is that why you like them?"

"What do you want for your birthday, Perce?" she asked suddenly, hoping to get his mind off all the mattresses he thought she had been on.

"Never mind my birthday. Answer me. Did you ever sleep with a roomful of race drivers?"

"Two roomsful—or is it roomfuls?" She laughed, trying to ease the strain. Then her dark eyes grew thoughtful. "Perce, why do you keep bringing up the past? I thought we agreed to forget it?"

He drove some distance in silence. Gradually the petulance left his mouth. After downshifting at a corner, he lifted his right hand from the stick and dropped it on her thigh.

"Seems like a hundred years since you were here—and it was only last week," he said. "I can't wait to get home."

He had made the drive to L.A. at four A.M., hoping to catch her with some man. But she had been alone in her apartment. And because he had made such an ass of himself, she had refused to let him get into bed with her. He would have to wait until they reached his home. She

had made him coffee before they had left and then dressed and packed an overnight bag, taking her time.

She liked Perce, but there were times when he drove her to distraction. She had hoped that when his mother passed on the silver cord would snap at last. But it seemed too resilient for that. If anything, the ties that had bound him to his mother in life had become some sort of invisible cable between his physical world and a psychic plane somewhere overhead. At times Perce would stare at the sky as if listening for the sound of a familiar voice.

"The races will be fun," she said. "We can eat popcorn and drink beer and smell exhaust fumes and be like kids."

A shadow touched his face and his grip tightened on the wheel. "Funny, but I never did anything kidlike when I was a boy. I went everywhere with Mother. She wouldn't let me eat popcorn or hot dogs. Food makes the man, she used to say."

"I remember your telling me," Patsy Straight said—at least five thousand times, she wanted to add. *Food makes the man . . .* Only recently had they been able to eat breakfast in a restaurant without Perce's asking if the eggs were fertile and whether the ham or bacon was smoke-cured or whether chemicals had been used.

No waiter or waitress had ever understood what he was talking about and their ignorance had been Perce's cue to go into a dissertation on the evils of modern food processing. And when Patsy had objected, he had said, "Mother always told me to spread the gospel."

Little by little, almost by infinitesimal degrees, he seemed finally to be coming out of his maternal strait jacket. He took an interest in new things. He liked his sports car in contrast to the conservative four-door sedan his mother had always favored.

There were times now when he would get a little high on bourbon and relax in bed with her without once mentioning his mother. Patsy considered each such occasion an improvement over the Perce she had first known.

10

FOLLOWING a conference with Al down at the service station one evening, Mike outlined their new plans to Diana.

"We worked out an idea," Mike said, pouring himself a drink while Diana fixed dinner. "A way to spend weekends away from home that won't cost so much."

"So much as what?"

"You know, motels and all. They run into dough."

"Why not just get one room with two beds?" she asked a little savagely and slammed a skillet down on the stove.

"Now don't be sore. Hear me out."

"I'm sorry, Mike." Diana tried to smile.

"Well, this new idea will cut down the costs if we ever decide to take a short trip and—"

Diana was at the stove, bent over to adjust the burner. She looked around.

"Go ahead, Mike. What were you going to say?"

"Whatever we do," he plunged on, "won't be under our own roof."

Straightening, Diana gave him a skeptical look. "Under our own roof?"

"Well, it's the only thing that seemed to upset you about what happened the last time we got together with the Hights."

"Oh, that." Their eyes met across the bartop. Mike reddened, gulped down his drink.

"We'll get campers," he said. "You know, the kind that go on pickup trucks."

"I don't see the point."

"We won't get elaborate ones. We'll have a stove in each one. And an icebox and all that. And a bed, of course."

"Of course." Diana began to tear up chilled lettuce for salad. "And what do we do? Go on a permanent camping trip?"

"We'll use the campers on weekends. We'll go to the mountains and the desert in the winter. And the beach in the summer."

Diana brightened, though she remained wary. "It sounds like a good program so far."

"We can do whatever we feel like," Mike said, walking over to switch on the TV. "And there'll be no chance for gossip neighbors giving us a bad time."

"You mean not just camp. But—do other things."

He pretended to watch the screen. "Do we have to live in a cage? Or by the standards of this graveyard?"

What standards, she wondered.

"Mike, don't raise your voice. There's no need for that."

"I can tell you this." Mike stalked back to the bar and gripped the edge with his hands. "If I ever hear one word of gossip about you and that Butch I'll break his neck."

Diana felt suddenly helpless. Mike talked about standards—evidently he had a separate set of them for Butch, another for himself and Al. And what standards did he apply to his wife? He seemed to have allocated her none at all. Once again she found herself wishing she had told Mike the whole truth about Butch. Then, perhaps, there would have been none of this business with Al—though either Mike or Butch might be wearing a broken nose.

Then again—her telling the truth might have made no

difference. Mike would have believed what he wanted to believe.

"Has anything been said about Butch?" Diana asked in a small voice.

"Nothing I've heard so far but there's plenty of gossip around. No matter what people do around here there's somebody to tell it big down at the coffee shop."

"I know what you mean," she agreed. "I've heard Al and Ginger talk." She set the salad bowl on the bar and gave him a wan smile. "You do whatever you want, Mike—about the campers and all. I'll go along."

"I told Al you would. I said you're a good sport." He came around the bar to hug her. "Don't worry about gossip. Whatever we do from now on will be done far from this land of the living dead."

"I do think it's a good idea, Mike."

She kissed his neck, trying to go along with his mood—and suddenly it was no good. Had Ginger's lips been at that spot? Where else had Ginger kissed him that fateful Saturday night? She felt shaken. She had gone along with Mike's and Al's original plans then, too—only to have the night end in what deep down in her mind she considered disaster. But had it been disaster? At least she and Mike were still together—husband and wife—though the words might have changed meanings.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Mike grinned. "You're keyed up all of a sudden."

"I think the roast is burning."

"And so am I," he laughed. "Wait'll I get you after supper."

"Why, Mr. Eaton, I do believe you're propositioning me."

"Thank God we can still play games. If we couldn't do that—" his face darkened as he stared through the glass wall into the night outside—"I'd really go off my nut."

"I know how you feel," she said seriously. "I guess boredom is the curse of the age. We're trapped by material possessions acquired in an economic rat race and—and

other things," she finished rather lamely. Trapped by marriage as well, she had almost said.

"We're going to start living." He slammed a fist into his palm. "Meeting Al and Ginger sure makes it easier to stomach this place."

"When will we get the campers?"

"Al knows a dealer and he can get us a discount. The dealer has two truck campers all ready to roll. We can get them before next weekend."

"But we're going to the sports-car races."

"Sure, and we're going to use the campers. We'll wait in line all night for infield positions. Gates open early in the morning. We'll be right on the spot to get a good location."

Diana gave him a strange look. "We sleep all night in a line of cars waiting for the gates to open?"

"Don't look so worried. The camper windows have thick curtains. Nobody—but nobody will know what goes on inside."

On Tuesday Mike and Al picked up the campers. Diana had to admit the vehicles were functional. Because she and Mike could not afford two cars the transaction meant trading in the one they had. Diana did not particularly like the idea of having to ride around in a pickup truck wherever they went but Mike did not seem to mind.

The campers were identical in styling, each with an icebox, a three-burner stove and a dinette that made up into a double bed. Ginger, making the inspection tour with Diana, pressed down on the springs of the dinette seat, then turned to give Mike a wink. Diana felt her face grow warm when Al, standing near the door, slipped his wrestler's arm around her waist. She stiffened, fought an urge to flee, fought once more the terrifying sense that she was sinking into a kind of madness—perhaps actual insanity.

Mike was saying, "How about this, honey?" He was looking at her. "This beats a trailer. You don't have to haul it around with you. Everything under one roof."

"I—I like it," Diana managed.

During the rest of the week her premonitions of disaster dissolved in the general excitement heralding the coming race. Sports sections of all the L.A. papers were devoted to the event. There had been sports-car races in the area before but this was the big one. A grand prix, like those run in Europe—only this would be on a closed track.

On Friday Diana and Ginger went shopping in Ginger's Volkswagen. They bought canned goods, coffee, eggs, bacon and steaks.

"The boys will get ice for the boxes before they come home tonight," Ginger said.

"The night should be fun," Diana murmured.

They stopped off at a tavern for a drink and while they sat stiffly at the bar, Ginger broke a tense silence between them.

"You don't like the idea much, do you?"

Diana turned on the bar stool. "How do you mean?"

"The idea of a marriage such as Al's and mine." Ginger shrugged. "And spending the night at the speedway."

"I've always liked to do different things." Diana felt her earlobes heat up. "The camping-out part seems like fun—and I've never seen an auto race."

Ginger gave her a tolerant smile, sipped her martini. "You know what I mean, Diana," she said quietly after a moment. "You're a holdover, honey."

"Holdover from what?"

"The Victorian age. Men can do it—even though you don't like the idea. But gals shouldn't do it."

Diana looked away. The bartender was talking to a salesman with an order book at the far end of the room. Two young matrons, one pregnant, were drinking beer at a table near the door. There was no one else in the place.

"I'm trying to get used to the idea," Diana said stiffly. "Mike seems to go for it."

"Honey, sex is all a big act. It doesn't mean a thing. Whether you can see it or not, Al and I are very much in love."

"I always considered that sex meant a lot." Diana felt

she had to defend her position—but deep inside her lurked that bottomless uncertainty. If sex really meant a lot to her, why had she lied to Mike about Butch—even kidded about the episode? She had no answer to that.

"Look at it this way, Diana. We were put on this world to enjoy life. If you don't hurt anybody, who cares?"

"There's a word for it. Hedonism." Diana realized she was trying desperately to find logic in the situation she faced—to avoid insanity.

"I don't know what hedonism means." Ginger grinned faintly. "But it sounds dirty."

"It means a philosophy that puts pleasure above all else."

"Tell me what else there is in life and I'll buy it."

"There should be deeper values. For one thing, Mike and I honestly want children."

"And maybe some day you'll hit the jackpot." Ginger leaned toward her, green eyes intent. "In the meantime, why not have fun? I love Al but if I had to sleep with him and nobody else for the rest of my life, I'd give it up. Sex, I mean. If we ever have children, you won't catch me cheating on them."

"It all depends on what you mean by cheating, I guess," Diana said. "You're entitled to your opinion. I have mine. In the meantime, I'm interested in saving my marriage."

"Look, honey, you're all wound up. It shows."

"Then let's drop the subject."

"Not just yet. Explain this to me—why did you take nude sunbaths where those truck drivers—"

"I never did any such thing."

"I'm not trying to make a big deal of it. But there's talk around town. And—" Ginger gave a small laugh—we're all exhibitionists at heart. There's nothing wrong in what you did. It just shows that you were wound up tight as a dime-store spring and you needed unwinding before they gave you that sunny room at the happy house."

"I did not take nude sunbaths. I have a sunsuit that's just the color of my tan—" Diana's voice faltered before the wise look in Ginger's green eyes.

"Honey, don't get mad. I'm only trying to point out one

thing. Face up to facts. One reason Al's so hot about you is that he's convinced one of those truckers made it with you at your invitation—"

"That's just not true!"

"Don't get excited. I didn't say I believe it. As a matter of cold fact, I don't. But I also believe as a matter of cold fact that you showed a lot of yourself and one of them tried. When Al and I lived in Emersonville we tried to pretend. But then we faced up to it. Both of us needed to fatten our egos with new conquests. We even brag to each other about them. It's made us both better—healthier."

"It has?" Diana turned again to look directly at her redheaded neighbor. She had to admit Ginger did not look unhealthy.

"We think it has. Al and I." Ginger smiled. "Let's stop kidding ourselves. I like Mike. Al likes you. He told me that he got so nervous being with you the first time that he didn't give you much fun—"

"You don't have any secrets from each other, do you?" Diana looked at her in amazement.

"Before I get through with Mike, he'll be a much better lover. You'll appreciate me then." Ginger picked up her handbag from the bar. "We'd better get back to the car before those steaks spoil."

Diana followed her numbly to the door. She felt as if she had just heard a bad, cheap, dirty story. It had left a sour taste in her mouth.

As they headed for Ginger's car a girl with an exaggerated hairdo, wearing a white uniform with MARGE stenciled over the pocket, came swinging out of the coffee shop. Purse under her arm, she was heading for the variety store. When she saw Diana, she came to an abrupt halt. She glared and her lips made a soundless but readable reflection on Diana's ancestry.

Then, with hips swinging, she strode down the street.

"What in the world was that all about?" Diana asked.

Ginger was already behind the wheel of her small sedan. "She's a waitress. Runs around with the driver of a de-

livery truck. Good-looking young fellow—named Butch. I think you may know him.”

Diana slid into the seat and closed the door.

Ginger keyed the ignition and said casually, “That drink must not have set very well. You’re pale.”

Diana said nothing. All the way home she barely listened to Ginger’s chatter about clothes, houses and landscaping. She sat as if frozen to the seat, remembering the hate in the eyes of the girl in the waitress’s uniform. She knew about Butch. Ginger knew about Butch. How long before Mike learned all there was to know about Butch?

Maybe Ginger was right. Maybe it was time she stopped pretending and faced up to facts. She had stolen the boy friend of a waitress named Marge. And the boy friend had bragged about it. Face facts, Ginger had advised her. Well, those were the facts, whatever had been her conscious intentions.

“I guess sometimes people do get so wound up,” Diana said, staring straight ahead through the small windshield, “that they can’t even see the truth, much less face it.”

Ginger gave her a sidelong glance, but made no comment.



11



BY three o'clock on Saturday afternoon the line began to form for the infield at Valley Raceway. At least a hundred cars stretched across the gently rolling land. Concession stands had been set up along the road, and the air held the odors of hot dogs frying in stale grease, of candied apples and hamburgers and unbuttered popcorn colored a butter-yellow.

A majority of the cars in the growing line were sports jobs. But spotted here and there were station wagons and sedans and campers. Even though the Eatons and the Hights had arrived early they were some distance from the gate. Three cars ahead of them was a red MG. Behind the wheel Pete Riley sat with arms folded. Liza Devery occupied the other seat. She looked very young and somehow frightened.

Nearer the gate was a new Porsche. Its occupants, Letitia Granger and Madge Henry, ate popcorn while they talked excitedly about the race tomorrow.

Perce Forrest's sleek Aston-Martin was receiving admiring glances from sports-car buffs.

In the lineup were more elaborate campers than those occupied by the Eatons and the Hights. These were over-the-cab models with flush toilets and holding tanks. A truck had brought a crowd of teenage boys.

A sheriff's car cruised by. A deputy leaned out, saying loudly, "No drinking in motor vehicles." He might as well have been writing his words in the dust. Nobody paid attention.

In the Aston-Martin Perce Forrest said, "Patsy Straight. That's a helluva name if you ask me. You don't know the meaning of going straight."

"Perce, I tried to tell you. I had to go to the bank on business—"

"Bankers have conventions, if I remember correctly. How many of them have you taken care of in your day?"

Patsy started a retort, then sank back in the bucket seat, her arms folded across the front of her blue sweater. It was going to be a long night and probably an unpleasant one. If Perce kept on his present course, he would be intolerable before morning. She had left a note for him, saying she was at the bank and asking him to wait for her. When she had not returned by the time he thought she should, his mind had begun running out of gear again.

"Perce, I didn't sleep with anybody," she had told him. "I got tied up at the bank. Some things take longer than you plan."

"What things?"

"Oh, stop it," she had told him. She had made him sleep on his own sofa last night and had kept the big bed in his bedroom all to herself. Several times during the night she had been on the point of calling to him to tell him to stop acting like a boy and come in and let her love the man in him.

But she had decided against it. He had to be taught his lessons. This morning they had eaten a silent breakfast and she had been about to call off going to the auto races and to hell with him. But then he had seemed to thaw out and here they were. But now he was back in the old rut.

It had started when a man had strolled past the car,

looked in at her and then done a double-take at the front of her sweater. She had ignored the stranger but Perce had said she had invited the look by wearing what she had. Well, she had put on the sweater without thinking of consequences. By now she should have known better.

"Somewhere I'm going to find an old tent and make myself a dress," she had said thinly, lighting a cigarette. "Then maybe you'll be pleased when nobody looks at me."

"He was probably a member of some convention," Perce had said bitterly. "Maybe he even remembers your breasts from some other meeting."

"Well, I've got them, Perce, and men are going to look. And I'm really sorry, but that's the way it is."

At times, since he had moved from the gloomy old family home in L.A. to his place in the suburbs he had seemed almost carefree. During such times Patsy could almost believe herself to be in love with him.

They had met last year quite by accident, during one of those periods when he had had to flee temporarily from his mother in order to retain his sanity. He had rented a tent and pitched it beside a stream in the mountains. It had not been much of a campground because the year had been dry and there had been little water in the stream. But he had sat on a folding campstool, reading. By the hour he had read, unconsciously swiping at mosquitoes circling his head.

Patsy Straight and the other girls had got to wondering about him. He should have been reported because no camping had been allowed in the area. But he had either failed to see the no-trespassing signs put up by the county or ignored them. He had looked so wistful and alone that the girls had speculated about him and why he had picked such a place to camp.

One of the girls had said, "I'm so hard up I'd even go for a guy like that."

"He's not so bad," Patsy had said.

"If Miss Aggie ever sees him, she'll bust his arms," another had said.

Miss Aggie had been one of the matrons.

One day when Patsy and two other girls had been

hoeing weeds along a path, he had come tramping toward them. Suddenly he had seen them and come to a halt, his mouth dropping open. His eyes behind the horn rims had skipped over their denim uniforms with COUNTY JAIL stenciled in white letters across the front and back.

And because of the consternation flooding his face, Patsy had smiled and said, "Don't look so worried. We're not jail-breakers."

"I didn't suppose you were," he had said weakly.

"This is an honor camp." Patsy had waved a hand at the mountain behind her, thick with pines.

"Honor camp?" he had bleated. He had looked ready to flee through the woods.

One of the girls had said, "You-all keep watch. And you —" she had crooked a finger at Perce—"I want some lovin' back in the brush."

"Loving?" He had looked positively terrified.

"And you better be strong and eager," the girl had continued, "or Ill cut you, so help me." She had giggled and Perce had turned red.

"Leave him alone," Patsy had said sternly and jerked her head at the other girls. They had drifted away. When they had gone, she had said, "You shouldn't camp here. It's an honor camp as I already said and we have a certain amount of freedom. But when the deputies come you might get into trouble."

"Thanks for telling me. I—I guess I didn't pay much attention to where I was. Are you—really a prisoner?"

"I'm afraid so. I have thirty days more to serve."

"You don't look like the kind who'd be—be arrested."

He had seemed like a nice guy in spite of his naïvete and confusion. She had felt sorry for him. He had looked as bewildered as if he had been pulling a Rip Van Winkle and had just awakened after many years of sleep and had been unable to figure out what had happened to the world he had left.

She had wanted to lie to him, to make up some story. But the truth had come spilling out of her mouth.

"I was arrested for offering," she had told him.

"Offering?" His bewilderment had increased. "Offering what?"

"It's a nice way of saying I was a call girl. Prostitute. Now do you understand?"

He had given her a stunned look. And then one of the other girls had hurried up to warn of a matron's approach. Patsy had waved at Perce, smiled and disappeared into the brush.

The next day when Patsy had come down the path she had found that Perce's tent was gone. Somehow his leaving had saddened her.

But before the week was out she had had a visitor. Perce had learned her name and she had found him waiting for her in the recreation room. He had brought her a box of candy and two books. One volume had been titled *Food For Man*. The other had dealt with a doctrine of guarding your thoughts so that only the pure could take root.

Instead of being shocked by her candid recital of the charges against her, he had seemed to find nothing revolting in her character. Or at least so it had seemed on the surface. When she had signed her release papers he had been waiting out front in a costly sedan.

Miss Aggie had leered: "Well, back in business, I see. The first John's already waiting."

"He's a nice guy and I like him."

"Next time the judge'll give you a straight hundred and eighty."

"No next time for me," Patsy had said as a matter of routine, purely.

Perce had taken her to dinner. They sat in padded red-leather booths and had cocktails and listened to a piano. Perce had groped shyly for her hand under the table. And because her ninety days of confinement had left her with a consuming need for a man, she had responded in a way that had caused his face to turn a violent shade of red. She had wanted him. She had needed him. During her imprisonment she had stayed away from those prisoners who had tried to sell her on the

idea that love did not necessarily have to involve a male. She hated deviates. They gave her goose-pimples.

That night she had slept with Perce. Strangely enough she had experienced fulfillment. In the morning she had been further surprised when he had suggested she meet his mother.

They had driven out to one of the old mansions in L.A. His mother had stepped through portieres to give her an icy appraisal. She had put out an icy hand for Patsy to take.

"How do you do, Miss Straight?" the old woman had said crisply. "An odd name, if I may say so."

"Probably," Patsy had replied.

Later, when Perce had gone to wash up and she and the old woman had been alone, Perce's mother had said, "I've been afraid Percy would take up with a spineless girl. He needs someone with backbone. A woman of the world. I assume you are a woman of the world, Miss Straight?"

"Are you?" Patsy had shot back.

"In my younger years I was," the old lady had admitted candidly. "You have obvious strength of character. Percy cannot rule himself. A woman must plan his life for him. Always remember that."

Patsy had said nothing. The turn of the conversation, in view of the fact that they had just met, had startled her.

Three months later the old lady had died. And in looking back on their meeting, Patsy decided Mrs. Forrest had known she did not have long to live and had been desperately trying to plan Perce's life without her. She had in effect handed over the reins to Patsy.

But Patsy Straight had had no wish to rule. She wanted only to be loved. And probably that was where her troubles with Perce had started. He was like a powerful motor with the governor removed. Freedom had made him insecure and brought out the worst in his disposition.

But at a time when the world of Patsy Straight had exploded, he had been the only human to give her a kind thought. So she could put up with a lot. He had given her

the courage to turn her back on the kind of life that had once trapped her.

Last week she made up her mind to do something nice for him—to show in some way that she appreciated him. During her former occupation she had invested regularly in savings bonds—a program probably not anticipated by the U.S. Treasury Department. So she had the funds to buy whatever he would like.

"Perce, honey, tell me the truth," she had said, as he wheeled the British car into the drive at the top of the hill, during their last good day together. "What would you like for your birthday?"

"A color TV set." He had smiled.

In the house he had mixed them both drinks. She had looked across at the next hill.

"I wonder who lives over there," she had mused, pointing.

"The Eatons. She's a blonde. They talk about her. Something about nude sunbathing and truck drivers. The cleaning woman told me. It's one of those stories, I suppose."

"Gossip is a stone that's brought down more than one high-flying bird."

While they had been having their drinks she could tell from the intense set of his features that it was going to be one of those days. The preliminaries required to arouse him sexually were the only trait in him she really disliked. But they seemed to give him such pleasure and—well, didn't everyone have some peculiarity?

"Pretend I'm on a convention," he had said in his hoarse whisper that was a prelude to his familiar routine.

"This is my hotel room. I'm in a strange city and I've just phoned for a girl."

"All right, Perce." She had left the room and closed the door. In a moment she had knocked and he had told her to come in.

She had opened the door and leaned back against it. "Honey, did you send for a girl?"

"I did. But I don't know the price. How much do you charge?"

"A hundred dollars, honey." She had crossed the room slowly, her hips swaying.

"Does it entitle me to sleep with you all night?"

"All night comes higher than that. Why don't you just take the short haul now, honey? I have several more engagements with your fellow conventioners."

"Could you come back—when you're through?"

"It might be hours. I have a full schedule."

"I'll pay the hundred for now." His breathing had grown tight. His eyes had taken on an almost narcotized look.

"Then you come back to me."

"I must look you over. Here, let me help you, honey."

And as always he had made frantic sounds and clutched at her. When it was over he had turned on her, as he often did when she had satisfied him.

"You liked it. You'd like to go back to that life."

"That's enough, Perce," she had said in her coldest voice. "That's quite enough."

Perce turned on the car radio and Patsy leaned back in the bucket seat, eyes closed, smoking a cigarette. Around her rose the sounds of the growing crowd. A beer can clattered against the wall of an abandoned barn near the road, one of the structures left when the acreage was converted from ranch to speedway. From the track came the sounds of a motor revving up.

"Mixture's okay now, Ed," a distant voice shouted and the motor cut out.

"I'm sorry I was such a bastard," Perce said, reaching for her hand. "I—I wish there were some place we could go."

"Maybe when it's dark. We'll see." She gave his hand a squeeze.

Some men had started a crap game nearby and one of them happened to look up. "Hey, boys, look at the dish in the fancy car. Wonder what kind of fruit's under that sweater." They all laughed.

Perce said, "I should go over and punch him."

Patsy shook her head. "Sit right there, honey. I want you in one piece, not half a dozen."

"He's got no right to insult you."

"Honey, if a man ever really insults me—does something I can't possibly overlook—then I'll call on you. And I know you'll do what has to be done. Until then, pay no attention to empty heads with overgrown mouths."

Even when she said it she knew the idea of Perce's ever defending her was ludicrous. But to offer to do so made him feel better, more a man, less a spoiled brat. That was all that counted.

Some men came from the direction of the infield gate, muttering that the gate should be open. The hell with waiting out here all night. One of them paused to take a drink from a bottle he pulled from his hip pocket. The bottle was passed around.

Patsy watched them for a moment, thinking that it was going to be a rough night. Very rough.

12

MIKE beamed at Diana. He was drinking beer in the dinette. "How do you like it?"

"Wonderful, Mike." She was reading the directions on the butane stove. "It's amazing how compact these campers are."

He took a sip of beer, studying Diana's profile. She seemed tense, he thought. But she would loosen up once the evening got started. Ginger had told him she had had a talk with Diana and that Diana seemed to be getting the picture at long last.

A light tapping at the door was followed by Ginger's voice: "Hey, you two. I'm cooking dinner tonight. You come and eat in our camper."

"Thanks. Sounds good." Diana unlatched the door and leaned out.

Ginger, her red hair shining in a glow of headlights from a nearby car, lifted a hand in a salute to Mike.

"Hi, lover." She grinned.

Mike gave her a weak smile. "See you soon," he said. He wished she would lay off that lover bit when Diana

was around. The word had brought a twitching to Diana's shoulders as if someone had struck her across the back with a whip.

Diana and Ginger were discussing what Diana was to bring to the other camper. Mike finished his beer, wishing he and Diana could have had dinner here alone. Sort of initiate their new camper. The rest of it—the pairing off—could wait till later.

When Ginger had gone, Diana turned. "Mike, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. I—I was just thinking that Ginger puts too much pepper on everything she cooks."

"Well, it's what you like. Pepper. Red hair, peppery disposition. A hot number, I guess most men would call Ginger."

"Hey, don't go getting sarcastic on me."

"I'm not, Mike. I don't mean to be." She sat opposite him in the dinette, looking a little sad around the mouth.

"I want everything to go just fine for you—for us."

He emptied the bottle, stared at it. "I guess this kind of thing is hard to talk about unless you've got a few belts of booze in your gullet. Beer isn't quite strong enough."

"I—I hope we don't have to start drinking to excess in order to—" She was unable to finish her thought.

Mike frowned at her, puzzled. At the moment his wife seemed more concerned with alcoholism than with infidelity. He turned the idea over in his mind, trying to rationalize it. Finally he sat up straight, forced a laugh.

"Hey, we look and sound like a couple of gloom kids," he said. "We're here to have fun, remember?"

"Sure, Mike."

His laughter ended on a note of strain. "Just don't get so you like it too much." He avoided her eyes.

"I won't. But you're the one to watch out. Ginger says she'll send you back to me a much better lover than when you left."

His head jerked up and he looked stricken for a moment. "You mean I'm not much now?"

"Mike, stop it." She turned her back, swallowing. Her

throat was dry. Tension was beginning to put incipient cracks in the fragile wall still holding together their marriage.

They were saved from further discussion by Al's shout that supper was ready.

Taking a fifth of bourbon, Mike helped Diana out of the camper. He locked the door and looked around. The double line of cars now stretched as far as they could see across the dark hills. An early moon put a haze to the east. In the distance a steady stream of headlights approached the speedway.

Down the road in the glare of a gasoline lantern somebody strummed a guitar and several couples were square-dancing. Other groups milled about. A transistor radio blared a rock-'n-roll number and somebody was screeching, "Not a dime in my pocket—got an empty head—all I want to do is take her to bed—"

"You're making up the words," a girl said from the darkness.

"All I want is to make up my bed with you in it."

"Well, there's no bed."

"What's the matter with the ground?" somebody said. "The Indians did it that way."

The singer made an angry sound. "Who you callin' an Indian?"

"Nothing wrong with Indians," another male voice said belligerently.

"I don't like how you talk," the singer snarled. "You rub me wrong, like ground glass on sandpaper."

"Charlie, shut up," said the girl. Then she explained to somebody, "Every time he drinks he goes loopy."

Al opened the door of the camper, grinning out at Diana and Mike. "Hi, kids. Some night, huh? Reminds me of when I was a kid and the old folks blew up the town on VJ Day. Come in, come in."

They crowded into the dinette and Mike poured drinks from the bottle he had brought. They grinned too much and laughed too much.

And when Ginger put the steaks on the table and said, "Raw meat for us wild animals," they all laughed,

almost on the verge of hysteria, Diana thought. As if Ginger had said the funniest thing since the dawn of the human race.

A small fear burgeoned under Diana's breast when she realized that Al was already well stoned, as Mike would put it. Suddenly she was aware of Al reaching for her under the table. Instinctively her knees snapped together, trapping his hand.

Giving her a look he withdrew his hand. "Don't bother locking the gate tonight, baby," he grinned. "I've got the key that'll open it."

A shadow crossed Mike's face and Ginger said quickly, "I think this is going to be a wonderful night." She looked at Mike. "One none of us will forget in a hurry."

She smiled at Mike and he seemed to relax.

Although she had no appetite, Diana ate the steak to give herself something to do. In some ways it tasted to her like the last meal of the condemned. And suddenly she wondered where in the maze of their lives—hers and Mike's—they had made the turn that brought them to this.

Then Al was saying, "How're we going to work this? I mean, who sleeps where?"

Ginger flicked her green gaze to Diana. "You make the choice. You and Al here. Or you and Al in your camper."

"I—I guess we'll go to our camper." Even the condemned were entitled to a last walk, was the hysterical thought that bubbled up in her. The last mile. She had an insane urge to laugh.

Reaching across the table Ginger gripped Mike's hand. "Soon as they go, lover," she said with mock seriousness, "we'll be alone at last."

Al got up and caught Diana by the arm. "I don't think they like us much, baby. Let's go find a nice quiet haystack." His booming laughter caused Diana to wince.

Right there in front of them Al put his arms around her and kissed her roughly on the mouth. Then he ran his hands down over her and turned, saying, "Hey, Mike, you're smart not to let her wear girdles and all that extra dressing. I hate 'em."

Ginger frowned, still gripping Mike's hand. "Diana, don't let Al drink too much. If he does you'll get nothing but sleep tonight."

Al made a sound of annoyance. "I'm as good drunk as I am sober. And I'll prove it." He grinned at Diana and slapped her on the hip. With his arm around her waist, he led her to the door.

Then they were outside in the cool night with the stars spread across the sky like bits of stainless steel shot from a nuclear cannon. Al closed the camper door and stepped down, lifting her with him.

"Quit shaking," he said amiably. "You'd think you were going to get shot or something."

Some dark forms loomed up as they moved toward the Eaton camper. A man said, "Hey look at the blond bomb—"

Al turned, holding Diana by the arm. "Buddy, you've got a head on your shoulders. You open your yap again your head will be in the next county."

Evidently Al's size created an impression. Nothing more was said.

Al unlocked the camper with the key Mike had given him. He lifted Diana in, followed her. The door closed and she heard him lock it.

He came up behind her, reaching around to cup her breasts. She thought of protesting, of becoming indignant—but what was the use? This was only the preliminary. The rest was to come and there was no use in protesting the inevitable. And so far as that went, she told herself, the experience might not be entirely unpleasant. She had almost enjoyed it that night on the patio. She had to believe tonight would be better—otherwise nothing made sense.

"I'll help you make up the bed," Al said over her shoulder. "Then we'll have a couple of drinks."

"All right, Al."

Liza Devery grew restless in the bucket seat of Pete Riley's MG. Pete had put up the top and the side curtains

against the night's chill. The little car enclosed them in a world of their own. Usually she felt at ease with Pete, but tonight she continued to repulse his advances. More cars were stringing out behind them, more people milled about in the darkness. New bonfires sprang up and sparks rushed off into oblivion against the sky.

Finally Pete withdrew his arm from her shoulders. "You're icy as the north pole." He sounded hurt. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"I've said something or done something and you're peeved."

"It isn't that at all."

"Then what in the hell is the matter?"

She turned to study his profile. He looked disgruntled, slouched in his seat, staring through the windshield.

"I lied to my folks," Liza said. "I guess I can't help but feel guilty."

"I don't see why you didn't tell them the truth."

"I—I tried to—"

Pete beat a fist against the rim of the steering wheel. "We're engaged. I don't see the point in lying."

"You know my folks as well as I do," Liza said stiffly. "I had to lie and tell them I was going to spend the night with Esther."

"Good grief. What can happen to you in a sports car? With the top up there's hardly room to sit up straight, let alone do anything—if you know what I mean."

"I know perfectly well what you mean."

"Look, Liza, I want to marry you. Isn't that proof of my intentions to your folks?"

"I just don't know." Liza put a hand to her eyes. "I wish I had somebody to talk to."

"You can talk to me." He grinned, trying to ease the strain building between them. Some men drinking beer out of cans passed the MG. One of them threw an empty at the abandoned barn. It fell short, but made a thunking sound against a fence post.

"I mean, talk to another woman. I can't talk to Mother about anything like that. She just—just freezes up. And

Dad—he thinks I'm some sort of higher-echelon angel, too good even to play a harp."

"We came to enjoy the races tomorrow. Let's forget the rest."

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into going to the infield. We should have gotten reserved seats in the grandstand and come here in the morning at a decent hour—"

"How many times do I have to explain? A real sports-car buff likes the infield."

"The main point is I wouldn't have had to lie. I feel cheap."

"Liza, sometimes you really bug me."

"I just don't want to mess up our lives before we even get a good start. So many people seem to be doing it these days."

"All right, then—you should have told your folks. But you're eighteen now. You can get married without their consent. You can—"

"I owe them so much."

"Sure you do. But don't forget that your mother ran off with your father when she was only seventeen."

Liza turned to him in surprise. "How in the world did you ever learn that?"

"Your father told my father once. They had a big laugh about it. Defying parental rule, I think your father called it."

Liza frowned. "Maybe things were different then."

"Things were no different," Pete snorted. "Two people in love are two people in love. The answer is as inevitable as one in geometry. No matter how you try to juggle the equations the correct result always comes out the same." He dropped a hand to her knee. "Now quit worrying, will you?"

"I'd like our marriage to be good."

"It'll be good," Pete said. Then he added thinly, "Although I admit we don't have too many good examples set for us these days."

"I'd like our marriage to be like the Eatons'," Liza said. "She's very nice. I don't know him so well, but—"

"One thing in her favor. She doesn't seem to give a hang about the village gossips."

"She'd never do anythig wrong—I mean to hurt her marriage. That's why she doesn't fear what people say about her. She knows she's innocent."

Pete jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "The Eatons are just a few cars behind us."

"They are?"

"I saw them pull in when I went to get cokes."

Liza felt excited. She twisted in the seat to peer out through the small rear window. Pete was telling her about the two truck campers. He'd been gassing up at Hight's station when he saw the two pickup trucks with the cab-high camper bodies.

Liza faced around. "Now if somebody gossiped about that Ginger Hight, I might be inclined to believe them."

"That's a woman for you." Pete gave a small laugh. "Just because she's a redhead."

"I've seen her look you over when we've been in the station together," Liza countered.

Pete gestured at his throat, as if straightening an imaginary bow tie. "Well, you must admit the gal has something to look at."

"Conceited." Liza smiled and the tension between them seemed at last to ease.

For a few moments they sat in silence. Finally Pete cleared his throat. "I've got a blanket in back."

Liza stiffened, both hands clamped to her knees. "It—it wouldn't be right."

"It's our first night together. All night. And we're going to be married."

"That has nothing to do with it."

Pete shook his head. "You've got a conscience an elephant couldn't carry."

"All right, so I have," she flared, chewing lipstick from her lower lip. "I lied to my folks and I just—just couldn't do anything tonight with you."

"Afraid lightning will strike?"

"Is this why you talked me into coming out here?" she demanded.

"Look, Liza, you're eighteen. If you're a virgin, swell. If you're not it doesn't make a damn bit of difference to me. But odds are all in favor that some boy chopped down the cherry tree a long time before this."

"I don't have to listen to your insulting me!" She fumbled for the door pull on her side.

Pete caught her by the arm, hauled her back into the seat. "Don't be so touchy. I just meant that we're adults—"

"Adults! I can't vote. I can't go in a bar and order a drink." Her voice was shaking. "That certainly makes me anything but an adult."

"I can't do those things either. Not for six months. But I'm old enough to go out and get my head shot off in a war. I'm not complaining, but since I was eighteen I've been old enough for that. So far as I'm concerned, I'm an adult. And so are you." He turned to her, his voice softening. "Now let's act like adults."

She opened her door. "I'm going to take a walk."

"You walk with me," he said stiffly. "You're not going out there alone."

She stood up, the breeze whipping her heavy skirt. Pete had unlocked the rear deck. He removed a blanket. He held onto her arm as he maneuvered her toward the barn that loomed up in the shadows across what once had been a grain field.

A hundred yards behind them, along the line of dark and silent cars, the square-dance crowd had grown. Two fiddle players and an accordionist had joined the guitar player. Twenty or thirty couples were dancing, kicking up a great cloud of dust. A mob ringed them, clapping in time with the music, laughing.

At the entrance to the barn Liza froze. The place smelled old and there were frightful shadows. Pete prodded her toward a corner where he located a mound of old hay.

He spread the blanket and sat down. He patted the spot next to him. After a moment's hesitation, she sank down, hugging her knees. She could feel her heart pounding.

"Now listen to me," he said earnestly. "We can't sit in

that car all night. We'll be stiff as boards if we do. We've got to move around—"

"And stay on this blanket," she cut in. "I know what you have in mind, Pete Riley."

"All right, I admit it." Leaning over he kissed her neck. "I said let's act like adults—"

He pushed her down flat and leaned over her. She stiffened her body for a moment—then her arm hooked around his neck. "Pete, I do love you," she whispered, staring up at the rafters barely touched by light from the ring of distant gasoline lanterns. "But I'm scared."

"There's no reason to be scared. I'm with you."

Footsteps sounded outside the barn and Liza made a small sound of fear. Two couples, arm in arm, strolled past the side door of the barn, heading toward the mob around the square-dancers.

When the couple was gone Liza relaxed. She felt Pete's hand move and caught his wrist. "Pete it's just a feeling I have about tonight," she said against his shoulder. "Please don't—"

She twisted away from him and sprang to her feet. She stood poised and ready to flee if he made a move toward her.

"Well, I guess that's that," Pete said, unable to keep anger and frustration from his voice. "I guess I've lost the old touch or something."

"See you back at the car," she said and spun away in the darkness. She could hear him shouting as she ducked around the barn, finally reached a line of portable chemically treated rest rooms spread strategically along both sides of the line of cars.

Finally she realized that Pete had given up hunting for her or was trying to find her in an entirely different direction. It was easy to lose track of a person in this mob. People were tramping back and forth, some of them singing college songs. A man gave her a tentative smile but she hurried away.

She made her way to one of the two identical truck campers parked behind Pete's MG. She was not sure which one belonged to the Eatons but as she stood in the

darkness, she heard Diana Eaton's voice coming from the front one. Liza crept to the camper door, ready to knock. Maybe Diana would take a walk with her and they could discuss some of the things uppermost in Liza's mind.

What she heard Diana Eaton say froze her fist in mid-air.

" . . . no, I've never been unfaithful to Mike. Not until—until the other night with you in the patio."

"Come on, tell me the truth." Liza recognized Al Hight's voice, sounding skeptical. She had heard his deep, booming tones often enough when she and Pete went into his station for gas. "Not even once?"

"Really, Al, I've never been with another man until you and Ginger moved next door."

"You're kidding."

"Only you, Al."

"Looks like I'm getting something special." There was a sound like a hand slapping lightly against bare skin. "But I can't see how come no guy ever made a play for you before me."

"A lot have tried, believe me."

"But none of 'em got you down on that sun pad with your feet in the air." Al's laughter boomed through the thin walls of the camper.

"Can't we stop talking about it?" Diana said. "And—"

"And get down to business? It's what we came for, isn't it?" He chuckled. "Wonder how Mike and Ginger are making out?"

"They're making out," Diana said heavily, "as the teenagers put it. You can be sure of that."

"You sure are a dish. The other night you had all your clothes on. First time I've seen you in the raw."

"Somebody might hear you."

"Nobody's going to hear. Yep, you sure are a looker."

Liza shivered. Al Hight's voice was getting that husky note that always afflicted Pete's when he got amorous.

Liza stood woodenly in the darkness. Finally she lowered the hand she had raised to knock on the camper door. She shut her eyes, feeling dizzy. So this was what marriage meant. Why had she held off Pete? Why not go the limit now—if when you got married you were going to

go the limit with your next-door neighbor? Or any friend of your husband's. She had the reply to the question she had intended to ask Diana. The only trouble was that Diana's answer made her ill.

Suddenly she wondered if her own parents had been unfaithful to each other. The possibility horrified her. She could imagine her parents unbending enough to be with each other—the other concept was unspeakable. Yet anything seemed suddenly possible to Liza. Why worry about nuclear incineration? The world was already dead.

From the camper issued a series of sounds that caused a rush of hot blood to her face. Embarrassed, Liza whirled away into the darkness.

13

GINGER sat up in the darkners of the camper. Mike lay on his side. He gave a long sigh, turned and stared up at her. He put his hands over her breasts. She shivered. Leaning over, she kissed him on the mouth.

"You're shaken up or something," she said, trying to see his face in the shadows.

He tried to make his voice light. "Being with you would shake up anybody." But his voice did not quite lose its edge of strain.

Puzzled, she tried to analyze his mood. "Is it the camper? I mean, being so close to people outside?"

"Does make us sort of like goldfish in a bowl," he admitted. They lit cigarettes, the flare of the match casting a brief shard of light across his sober face.

She took the cigarette he handed her, drawing the smoke deep into her lungs. "Either I wasn't good enough—"

"You were swell," he said quickly and pushed a hand above her knee.

"Then you're worried about Diana," Ginger suggested. "Is that it, Mike?"

"Sort of worried, I guess." He glanced in the direction of the other camper. "Diana's not used to this kind of thing."

"She's a woman, isn't she? What's a woman for except to love a man?"

"It's not quite that simple with Diana."

"Maybe I'm thick or something, but I just don't see what difference it makes. She's with you or she's with Al or any other guy you both approve of." Ginger shrugged bare shoulders. Somebody passed the camper carrying a flashlight and the beam touched briefly the curtained windows, putting flame on Ginger's red hair, outlining in shadow the curve of her breasts. Then the light was gone. The square-dance music started up again.

"Diana takes this bedroom stuff seriously," Mike said.

"What's serious about it?" Ginger asked, shaking her head. "People are people and if they aren't all chained down with inhibitions, they enjoy being themselves."

"Yeah, I know but—"

"Is Diana any good? You know how I mean."

"Of course," Mike said quickly, springing to his wife's defense. "I stay married to her, don't I?"

"I bet you wish we'd never moved next door."

Mike patted her on the stomach. "You know better than that."

She bent her head to kiss him again, then drew back to study him. "Quit worrying about Diana. Al will take care of her." She gave a small laugh. "Don't worry about that. When Al gets through with her she'll know she's been had."

"Sometimes I think it doesn't mean a damn thing to you," he said, his voice taut. "The sex bit, I mean."

"Sure it means something. I enjoy it, don't I? Didn't I prove it?"

"Yeah, but what if we moved out and some other guy moved in next door?"

"Well, if Al and I liked him and he had a nice wife like Diana—" Ginger shrugged again. "I just don't get your slant. Why all the sweat?"

"I thought you liked me—"

"My God, Mike, I do like you." She made a wide gesture. "I've done everything I know to prove it. You want me to write you a letter?" She smiled in the darkness and patted his cheek. "Now stop fretting."

"Easy to say."

She punched out her cigarette in a glass ashtray. "If you're a good boy," she whispered. "I might be good to you. Very good and very special."

He made no reply. He just sat there on the bed with the blankets twisted off onto the floor of the camper. A dour sort of man, Ginger thought, watching him smoke his cigarette down to the last inch. Worried about a wife who was all woman.

"Put out that cigarette," she said softly, "and I'll take your mind off everything but me."

Later, when they sat up in the gloom and drank bourbon, she knew she had failed to impress him. His wife's being right next door was what did it, she supposed. Mike tried to act as if he did not give a damn what Diana did—but he was kidding no one. Probably not even himself. Worry was beginning to tighten him up. If he failed to get over it, Ginger reflected, she and he would end up having a hell of a night.

She had meant it when she had asked him earlier why all the sweat?

For her sex had never held any real mystery. Her father had run off somewhere when she was six and from then on her mother had brought home a succession of Uncle Freds and Uncle Jims and some she did not even bother to introduce as relatives. None of the men stayed around long enough to assume any status in the family.

At ten, Ginger had come home unexpectedly from school. She had never forgotten how her mother had leapt up from the daybed, looking foolish and annoyed. And some uncle Ginger had never seen before had rolled to the floor, fumbling hastily with his clothing.

At first her mother had been angry—but soon she had calmed down. And as she buttoned the dressing gown she slipped on, her mother had said, "Well, now you know what it's all about."

"You mean what you and him were doing? I've known about that for a long time."

Ginger had fully expected a backhand slap for her insolence, but her mother had only said, "I'll have to learn to plug up the keyholes around here. Well, you might as well hear the rest of it. I don't want you to grow up having the silly problems I had."

When Ginger was thirteen her mother had hired a carpenter to put in bookshelves on both sides of the fireplace that was all sooty and needed new bricks. Her mother had found two boxes of books left behind when the next-door neighbors moved out and had decided it would give the house a little class if they had books and a place to show them off. The carpenter's name was Henry.

And because her mother never got home from her check-out job at the market until six, Ginger had had the place to herself after school. She had enjoyed teasing Henry and watching how the teasing affected him.

She would run around the house in her mother's dressing gown, which was too big for her but transparent if you looked hard enough. And Henry had looked hard enough, though he had been pretty old—about twenty-five. But he had not been bad-looking and on the day the bookshelves were finished he had suddenly pulled her onto his lap. And with the dressing gown fluttering to the floor he had initiated her into the world's oldest cult.

At thirteen years, three months, Ginger had become a woman. And that same afternoon Henry had moved out of his rooming house, packed his tools in a pickup truck and left the state. He had not even sent a bill for the work he had done.

His failure to collect his money had given him away. Ginger had had no intention of telling her mother about the incident. But her mother had been smart enough to know that a grown man did not forget to send a bill for services rendered. Henry's not having left a forwarding address had confirmed Ginger's mother's suspicions.

For some days her mother had stormed about the house, looking grim. Then one day she had said, "Well,

the worries are over. Thank God for that. Pregnant at your age would have been just too much. Too damn much even for me."

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"Did it hurt?" her mother had shot back.

"A little."

"I should have known better than to hire that bastard in the first place." Then the older woman had added philosophically, "Well, I suppose it had to happen some time."

Ginger had been popular in high school and had known the reason and had not given a damn. On a field trip with a science teacher named Smith, she had nearly caused an eruption in the faculty. Smith had resigned and the principal had issued an edict—henceforth no male teachers were to go on field trips with mixed classes. Women teachers were to take girl pupils on the trips.

Ginger had never seriously considered marriage until she had met Al at a beach party. She and Al had liked each other but had swapped around that night. But when it came time to leave in the small hours of the morning, they had ridden home together. She had liked Al and he had seemed to fit in with her scheme of things. When they were first married they had pretended that outside interests were unnecessary. But soon both of them had grown restless and had worked out what had seemed to them the sensible solution.

They prided themselves on being realists. How could you be anything else in these times?

Only once had Ginger ever given any indication that her philosophy might be built on quicksand.

She had said wistfully, "If my father had never left home. And my mother had been different—"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Al had looked at her in surprise.

"Sometimes I just wonder if I've missed anything."

Missed anything? Or missed anybody?" Al had considered her brief regret a huge joke. "Neither one of us has missed anything."

From then on Ginger had never turned her mind to

what might have been. You accepted the life you were given and that was that.

Mike finished his drink and said, "I guess if people have kids it makes a difference."

"Kids?" Ginger gave a shaky laugh. "Sure, kids would make a difference." And in the cramped quarters of the camper, with the stupid fiddlers sawing away outside and the crowd clapping and somebody yelling about dosie-do and all the rest of the square-dance chatter, she felt an odd twisting sensation in her breast.


Almost savagely she put her glass on the floor and pulled him down on her. "Make love to me," she said tensely. "Now."

"You think I'm superman or something?"


"You'd better be," she said and threw herself into the act of proving that her world was solid and secure and right.

"Don't talk about kids," she said wearily at last. "The little monsters turn my stomach."

The statement was one of the few lies she had ever permitted herself.



14



LETITIA swung her long legs out of the Porsche and stood up to stretch. She looked around at the double line of cars now strung as far as she could see into the night. Numerous bonfires put a glow against the sky. She listened to the laughter, watched the crowd surging to the various concession stands and back into the shadows. A girl giggled and a man cursed as he tried to explain to another why his favorite team had finished so low in the standings last season.

A group of men, some of them leaning against a big sedan down the line, were discussing the race to be run tomorrow. They were talking about big-bore jobs and the right fuel mixture and whether the Italian cars could outlast the British. And would some Yankee car builder come up with the right formula at long last.

She leaned down, peering at Madge who was applying lipstick in the glow of the small dashlight.

"Come on," Letitia said impatiently, "let's go watch the dancing."

"That'll be fun." Madge capped her lipstick and fluffed out her hair.

Letitia helped her out the door, then locked their prize jewel of a car. She took Madge's arm and walked her boldly toward the dancers. She felt her chest swell with pride at being able to escort Madge—she also enjoyed the anonymity of the darkness and the crowd. They passed two identical truck campers with the windows discreetly curtained and no lights showing. Letitia wondered briefly just what went on behind those walls of aluminum—if anything.

What if she and Madge had such a camper? Then they would truly be shut off from the outside world. Of course in their sports job they were alone to a degree, but its close confines lacked the comforts of a camper.

Madge clung to Letitia's arm with one hand, pressing the other against her billowing skirts. A breeze had come up in the last hour. She looked around at the dark land, peopled with mysterious shadows and gave a small shiver.

"It's a spooky place."

"Don't you worry." Letitia smiled. "No spook is going to get you."

They were behind the remains of a board fence where the breeze was cut. Madge's skirts no longer were subject to the gusts of wind. She put both hands on Letitia's arm, letting Letitia help her over the uneven ground.

"I'm never afraid," Madge said quietly, "when I'm with you."

Letitia reached around to pat Madge's hands clinging to her arm. She felt strong and self-sufficient in her wool shirt, open at the neck, in her Western-style pants. She had purchased the outfit at a men's shop, explaining they were for her nephew. She wore pull-on flat-heeled boots the type worn by some racing drivers.

When they neared the clearing where the dancers performed in shifts, she used an elbow to pry an aisle through the crowd.

One man she shoved turned in anger and said, "Hey, fella, who do you think you are—"

Letitia halted. With Madge hanging to her arm she felt a sudden urge to do battle.

But the man took another look and muttered, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Letitia's face fell and she experienced a moment of the familiar confusion and uncertainty that had plagued most of her years since early adolescence. Somehow she felt let down.

The two fiddlers were taking a rest, squatting near one of the larger bonfires and drinking beer. But the guitar and accordion were still going strong, a little off key, though no one seemed to mind. At times you could hardly hear them anyway because if they played one of the old standards the crowd would join in on the lyrics. A lank man calling the dances had yelled himself hoarse, trying to project his voice above the tumult. He paused occasionally to drink from a pint bottle. Some of the dancers had already quit. They were sprawled, sweating, on blankets and beach towels. Somebody passed a jug—probably claret or burgundy, Letitia thought, from the dull red color of the contents.

Madge came to her toes, her breath warm against Letitia's ear as she whispered, "Wish we had something to drink."

"Should have thought of it," Letitia said gruffly and turned to peer back into the crowd at the man who had been angered one moment, apologetic the next. But the faces she saw were just a bank of shadows.

Madge, noting the direction of her gaze, said, "Did something that man said make you angry?"

"He didn't bother me at all," Letitia assured her friend.

"I don't care what he said." Madge clung harder to Letitia's sturdy arm. "No matter what happens, I know you'd take care of me."

Something inside Letitia that had built over the years to the consistency of spring steel was suddenly transformed to wax exposed to a hundred-degree heat. She felt as if she were melting inside. Madge was saying many things tonight that she had long wanted to hear.

A shout of laughter went up from the crowd. One of

the dancers, quite drunk, had tried to make a turn and had fallen into the dirt. When he picked himself up the crowd applauded. Hands raised over his head like a winning fighter, the man staggered off to reach for a can of beer being held out to him.

The night wind had cleared any smog that might have drifted this way from the metropolis of Los Angeles.

Nearby a man was saying, "I got ten bucks says the Ferraris will take the whole thing tomorrow."

"I like the Maserati Joe will be driving," said another.

Madge again came to her toes and once more her sweet breath was against Letitia's ear. "I wish you were driving tomorrow, Letitia. It would be so wonderful."

Letitia's mouth tightened in bitterness. "I should be able to drive." She glared around at the various male faces turned toward the dancers. "It's a free country. I should be able to do anything any man can do."

"You could. You're as good as any man in the world. Better. You are to me."

Letitia experienced a small shiver that ran with the speed of light down through her body.

"But on second thought, I wouldn't want you to drive," Madge said. "You might be hurt. I couldn't stand that. Ralph used to tell me how dangerous racing is. He drove a hot rod in a race—oh, I'm sorry I mentioned his name."

The fires of an old jealousy Letitia thought were completely extinguished suddenly burst through.

"You didn't pay much attention to me when you were running around with Ralph." Letitia could have bitten her tongue. Now, why had she said such a fool thing? True or not, it was unwise to bring up the episode. It only showed up her own weakness. Madge removed her hands from Letitia's arm, turned her face soberly toward a new group of dancers taking up where others, exhausted and laughing, were moving away. The crowd began to clap in time to the music. By this time the two fiddlers had finished their beer and rejoined the group.

Letitia turned, studying Madge's face in the wash of firelight. Such a sweet face, Letitia thought, the melting

in her more severe than before. So in need of protection. Madge said, "You were jealous of Ralph."

"Yes," Letitia answered, swallowing.

"I knew it," Madge said in a low voice. "Even before we'd said more than two words to each other, I'd see the way you looked—and I knew you didn't like it. My going out with him, I mean."

"I didn't know it showed."

"Or my going out with any man."

"I can't deny that," Letitia agreed.

"All you had to do was say something. I'd have quit Ralph long before I did," said Madge.

Letitia looked away from Madge's profile. She stood rigid in the darkness, motionless amid the jostling crowd, the shouting the off-key music.

"That was all you had to do," Madge persisted. "Just say something."

And when Letitia still did not reply, it crossed Madge's mind that perhaps Letitia would never say anything. Never make any sort of protest at what Madge did—that nothing would ever come of their friendship, nothing at all.

They owned a car together and Letitia would hold her by the arm and speak boldly of strength, but that was as far as it went. Letitia never put her foot down, not really. Never showed how far she was willing to carry her strength into a friendship that could have developed into something more meaningful to them both.

Madge felt bewildered, alone in the world. Over a period of years, she had read all the books she could find pertaining to her emotional problems. They had left her without answers.

She came from a good family. She had loved her parents. At an early age she had realized her father keenly felt the loss of her brother, who had died before Madge was born and she had tried to compensate for it.

"Daddy wanted a boy, didn't he?" Madge had asked her mother one day. "To make up for Steve. And then I came along." Steve had been her brother, drowned at Lake Tenderly. And she had once overheard her father say, "Lake Tenderly. A hell of a name for a body

of water that could claim the only child I would ever really love."

During this period her cousin Jack had often come to visit at the house. He was not really a cousin, Madge's mother had once explained. "Oh, maybe fifth or sixth cousin, if relationships can be extended that far."

In the late evening Madge and Jack had usually been sent upstairs while their parents played bridge and told stories.

Jack had teased her unmercifully when they had been watching TV in her room. Jack had been three years older than she. One night Jack had pretended to be weary of watching a show. He had retired to his room. Madge had switched off the set and gone to bed.

A sound had caused her to sit up, holding the bedclothes to her throat. She had stifled a scream, terrified by what she saw in the shaft of moonlight streaming through the window. She could hear the murmur of voices, the laughter from downstairs.

"What—what are you trying to do?" was all her confused mind had allowed her to say.

Jack had said tensely, "This is for girls."

"For girls?" she had squeaked and finally lifted her eyes to his face. Somehow she had known it was a terrible thing he was doing. But she had not known how to prevent him.

The pain had been terrible but not lasting. And when Jack had climbed off the bed with the warning "Don't ever tell anybody," and returned to his room, she had known he had opened a wound in her that would never heal.

During high school her lack of interest in boys had so worried her parents that they had taken her to the family doctor for a complete physical. When the examination was over and Madge had been dressing she had heard the doctor say, "I'm afraid it's true, Mrs. Henry."

"But when—my God, when could it have happened?"

"The only consolation is the fact that your worries concerning her lack of interest in boys are unjustified. We know that at one time she was not uninterested."

There had been the faint suggestion of a smile in the doctor's voice. "You can't deny the facts, Mrs. Henry."

After that Madge had often caught her mother looking at her strangely, worriedly. To please her parents she had started dating boys. But she had become known as flighty. She would date a boy once, twice—perhaps a dozen times. Then, for no reason at all, she would drop him, pick up with a new boy.

Her actions had been understandable only to Madge. She had been able to stand boys dancing with her. She had even let them kiss her. But if at any time they had shown any further physical reaction to her, she had been through with them.

Even Ralph. She had gone with him for two months. They had gone to dinner, to a few nightclubs. And then one night when they were dancing, he had whispered, "Madge, you're beautiful. I want you so much—"

His male eagerness had caused her to flee, to leave him in the middle of the dance floor. She had never dated him again, nor had she offered any explanation when he had stopped by her desk to plead with her to date him again. Finally he had given up.

Letitia nodded at the square-dancers. "We could dance together, Madge. Not like the others, with everybody putting their hands on you. But just together."

As if on cue the fiddlers began to play a waltz and suddenly Letitia's strong hands guided Madge. They swayed together. Madge closed her eyes, knowing that in this embrace there would be nothing at all to shock her sensibilities. Nothing to strike terror and wound her and punish her because her brother had died so long ago in a body of water incongruously called Lake Tenderly. "The only thing I ever really wanted," her father had said. "My son."

Letitia whispered, "You're so light on your feet."

In the darkness Madge's hand moved timidly and after a moment she said, "I'm so thankful we're alike. Our bodies are the same. We could not hurt each other if we tried."

Letitia started to press her lips to Madge's cheek when

a harsh male voice said, "Hey, Louie. Look over there. A couple of the girls, sure as hell."

Letitia straightened, her mouth hard. "Leave us alone," she said angrily. "We're not hurting anybody."

The two men stared at them a moment, then moved off into deeper shadows, shaking their heads.

"Did you mind what that man said?" asked Madge.

"We have our own world," Letitia said fiercely. "Men have no part in it."

"I know, I know."

They started walking together, arm in arm, away from the crowd. Beyond the barn to a place where old pepper trees grew on a mound of earth. Nearby was a rusted plow touched by moonlight. A strip of rotted leather was nailed to the trunk of one of the trees.

"The people who tilled this soil are gone," Letitia said, staring around at the flat lands, the distant rolling hills. The bonfires, the headlights, the line of darkened cars. Toward the speedway floodlights bathed a high wooden gate in the infield fence.

"People who owned that plow are in the ground they tilled," said Letitia. "Life is so short. Everyone should—we should all make the most of it."

"Oh, Letitia," Madge whispered against her bosom. "I've waited so long to hear you say that." She sounded like a breathless little girl.

Letitia smiled into the darkness. At last she felt that life held some promise.

15

DIANA sat up and numbly reached for her clothing. It had fallen from the drain board beside the sink to the floor of the camper. She began to dress.

Al was mixing a drink. "Hey, what gives?"

He stood in the back wash of light from an electric lantern set to reflect its beam from a wall to provide dim, indirect illumination. A big man, wide, solidly built with a round skull set on his wrestler's neck. He held two glasses and handed her one. Diana suddenly hated him.

He came to sit beside her on the bed. "You trying to run out on me?" he asked.

"I'm just tired."

Her admission amused him. "Hell, the night's still young."

She glanced around the small enclosure, shuddered. "Can't we at least go for a walk?"

"Walk?" He seemed surprised. "You mean you'd rather walk than stay here with old Al?"

She took the glass, feeling defeated. The whiskey almost nauseated her, but she forced it down. Perhaps

if she drank enough the rest of the night would be a blank space in her memory. It certainly was something she never wished to recall—not if she lived to be a hundred. This much she knew.

Leaning over, Al kissed her earlobe. She shivered, drew away. He misinterpreted her actions and chuckled. "Al really sets the fire up in the gals, don't he?"

"Al, can't you leave me alone—for just a little while?"

"I'm trying to make up for the boo-boo I pulled in your patio the other night."

"You don't have to prove anything more," Diana said through her teeth. "I'm impressed."

"You're not impressed enough, baby," he whispered, his voice taut with emotion again. "Before this night is over, I'm going to spoil you for any other guy."

Spoil was the word, she thought, though not in the sense he intended. She felt spoiled in the way dead things become rotted—the seeds of decay, perhaps even of death, had been planted in her tonight. She wanted to lash out at him, but she was afraid to antagonize him. He might get the idea that part of the program included knocking her around the camper.

Well, she had asked for it. Anything to keep Mike happy to keep her marriage from becoming unglued. Even to the point of rationalizing her lie to Mike about Butch and trying to pretend that what Mike was doing with Ginger and she herself with Al had something to do with sanity. Hedonism, she had called it to Ginger, giving it the name of an accepted cultural behavior pattern.

A shaky laugh bubbled somewhere within her. She was with a man who was not her husband—Mike next door with a woman not his wife. Modern sophistication—or soap opera? Intelligent behavior or stupidity? The whole thing reminded her of the daytime television her mother had used to listen to—all messed up.

Al was saying, "I'm only trying to make up for leaving you hanging high and dry the other night."

"You don't have to make up a thing." Her voice shook. "I'm quite satisfied—"

"Hey, you can't kid me." He slapped her lightly and she

could see the flash of his white teeth. "I've got a hunch weekends in campers won't be enough. You'll be whistling for me to come over when Mike's at the plant—" He seemed to think the idea was funny and she remembered what Ginger had told her about Al's having heard of the Butch episode.

Diana froze. "I'd really like to go outside and get some air."

"Any night in the year you can go outside and get fresh air. Not every night in the year have you got Al Hight."

"Al, don't you ever get tired?" She tried to push him away.

He chuckled at her attempts to budge him. "I got some holds you've never even seen yet. You should've seen me when I used to wrestle."

"I imagine you were great, Al," she said, hoping she could get him to start talking about himself. Maybe he would get his mind off her for a while, at least.

"Never will forget when I wrestled a fella named Tucker. I lost the first fall. But then we maneuvered around and suddenly I got him just like this." He picked her up off the bed, lifted her high so that the back of her head was against the camper roof.

"Al, put me down—"

"Then I slammed him like this. Only I do it to you, gentle. See?"

"And then what happened, Al?"

"Why, I pinned him flat. Like this."

"Al—no—" She made a half-hearted attempt to resist, then realized she might as well save her strength. But she could not keep sarcasm from spilling from her lips.

"If this is how you pinned your friend Tucker, you must have been quite a sight in public."

"That would be something, wouldn't it? Maybe we've got an idea. Champion lady wrestler meets champion man wrestler."

"Al, stop it. You—make me feel like something out of the gutter."

He remained silent then, briefly ceasing his assault upon her. She wished she and Mike were a million miles

away, on some heretofore undiscovered planet. Away from people like Al Hight and Ginger. Away from the stupid world that was spinning itself to pieces like an off-balance flywheel.

At last Al said, "Well, have I made up for the other night?"

The damnable thing was that he had. She had not been able to avoid responding to him earlier in the evening—nor had she tried at first. In the beginning she remembered thinking that had been the whole idea—the only part of the proceedings that might make sense. Such thoughts seemed a million lightyears away now. Nothing made sense any more.

Al poured himself a drink and seemed lost in a private contemplation of his triumphs of this night. Occasionally he would glance at her huddled there on the bed.

Finally he said, "I'll make you holler for help yet—wait and see."

But he made no immediate move toward her.

Patsy Straight yawned and tried to shift her tired body to a more comfortable position in the seat of the Aston-Martin. For the past hour Perce had been talking about his boyhood. It did not seem to be a particularly happy subject for him—she noticed that for the most part his voice was tinged with bitterness.

As far as that went, she wondered how many persons had childhoods that were precious to look back upon, when in the savage years of adulthood they tried to recall the diminutive, unformed, helpless creatures they once had been?

Through the windshield she watched some couples strolling toward the chain-link and barbed-wire fence that surrounded the raceway. The girls wore slacks and heavy sweaters. The boys seemed very attentive. There was much laughter.

"More than one of those girls," Patsy observed, "will have her backside hammered into the weeds before the night is done."

". . . I was eight at the time and Mother had bought

me a linen suit and some white shoes—" Perce broke off, turning his head. "Did you say something, Patsy?"

"I said, the Ming Dynasty produced some very fine porcelains."

For a moment he sucked on his lower lip, as if trying to strain her remark through his widely-spaced front teeth so as to prepare it for analysis.

He gave up. "What has the Ming Dynasty to do with Mother's buying me a linen suit and taking me to Carmel for the summer?"

She sat up, hands on her knees. "Don't you get it?"

"Frankly, no. Maybe I'm not very sharp tonight but there is absolutely no connection—"

She sank back against the leather seat. "Perce, I was only kidding." She gave a deep sigh.

"Well, Mother might have overwhelmed me but I still won't kid about her," Perce said stiffly.

"I didn't mean that I was kidding about her. I think she was the type of woman you would never kid about in this life or beyond. If there is anything beyond."

"One thing that always impresses me," he said seriously, "is the fact that there must be something beyond. In relation to Mother. It can't be the end—this life, I mean. Mother's indomitable spirit just couldn't be extinguished."

Patsy closed her eyes and wished mightily she had not tried to be cute with that crack about the Ming Dynasty. Perhaps if she had remained silent, by this time Perce would have run down on the subject of boyhood and his relationship to his mother. She had failed in her attempt to switch subjects and liven up the night which was becoming deadly dull. She had wanted to go and watch the dancing, for instance, but Perce had said there were too many unattached men wandering around.

"You might meet some old friends in such a crowd."

She had lifted her hands, smacked the palms on her thighs with such force that they had stung her flesh through the knit fabric of her dress. She had long since learned what Perce meant by friends.

"You really mean former clients," she had snapped. "Why don't you say it?"

"All right, I will. Former clients."

Whenever he became depressed, as he seemed to be tonight, he invariably started on her past sins. She had hoped that one day he would not go too far. There was a limit to what she could stand.

When he vetoed joining the dancers even as spectators, she suggested they visit one of the hot-dog stands scattered across the field. "We're not so likely to run into any of my paying customers," she could not resist saying.

But Perce was off on another subject, suggested by her mention of hot dogs. He recalled a book his mother had once read to him. It concerned an eyewitness account of the manufacture of various food items involving meat products. By the time Perce was through with the details of the slaughterhouse operations as he knew them, Patsy wondered why she stood for such boredom. But as always at such times she remembered his many kindnesses. At a time when she was lower than low Perce Forrest had given her an arm to lean on. It was only when he himself was depressed that he picked on her. She had handled many parallel cases in her professional capacity. She had met men who had dominant wives or were latent homosexuals—or had mothers who cast so overwhelming a shadow that their offspring could not possibly retain their own identities, even as adults.

She had learned early in the game that a good portion of her fee went not so much for the manipulation of her physical self, but for her ability to listen and understand. To have repeat clients for her services she had had to develop an eager ear. Most men in one way or another simply wanted to prove something about themselves with her.

From the first, the business had held no special glamor for her. Her choice of occupation had been cold-blooded. She had weighed the financial advantages of the profession she chose against those of the one she had been trained for at the Mildred Munken School For Girls—a nice way of saying orphanage. Social workers seemed

to feel the word "school" lent a certain dignity to a depressing subject.

Patsy's parents had died before she was twelve. She had been handed over to an aunt to raise. The aunt, a restless sort, had married and gone to Mexico to live with her new husband. The new husband had not been interested in a rail-thin, dirt-poor relative, even though, as far back as that, Patsy had been indubitably female.

Patsy had been delivered to the state. She had been sent to the school mentioned and her selective approach to life had begun. Special types of love were offered by other inmates—even by adults connected with the school. When Patsy had refused certain offers, her stay at the school had become strangely lacking in special privileges. At fourteen she had permitted herself to be initiated into the twilight brand of love on the theory it might make her life at school easier. She had, however, experienced a natural revulsion and made her next choice. She had run away from the school.

At a city park she met her first benefactor, who saved her from an assembly-line disposal of her charms. The man had had a wife and daughters older than Patsy, but he had set her up in an apartment. He had bought her a full set of carefully selected literary works. He had made her read aloud to him and had criticized her diction when criticism had been warranted. During intervals when he had not demanded her services in more basic fields, he had taken her to museums, ballet, the opera. Even though his family had remained in the East, there had been a chance of scandal touching his name, but he had seemed to feel the risk was worth taking.

Patsy had always had an instinct for mimicry and clothes. Today she was able to move in circles that ordinarily would have been closed to anyone with only a second-year high-school education.

She had never forgotten the man who had started her on her way. Had she not already been on the pinwheel of sex in a high wind, he might have either frightened or nauseated her. But she learned quickly to overlook the various trappings he assumed in order to replenish his

ego in a desert seared by years of living with an indifferent wife. At first his association with Patsy had been a matter of trial and error. There had been times when he had seemed to function normally but these were rare and since he had done so much for her, she had made up her mind to cater to him in any way possible. It had been quite by chance—or so she had thought at the time—that he had found a package in the hall outside the apartment he had rented for her. The package had contained a black evening gown covered with sequins. Obviously quite expensive and too adult for her.

Half in jest—so she also had thought at the time—he had suggested she try it on. The dress had been a perfect fit. For some reason she had not then been able to understand, her wearing of the dress had acted as a catalyst. He had never again, in the brief companionship left to them, been without vigor.

In the spring of the following year he had leaped to his death from the twenty-second floor of the skyscraper he had just built. It still bore his name among the ornate high-rise structures still new in the West Coast metropolitan areas.

The city's great had attended his funeral and the papers had extolled him as a civic leader. His death had been blamed on overwork but Patsy knew the real reason. He had simply grown alternately terrified and weary of having his body occupied by two such diverse personalities. She had been with him in his periods of despondency. Usually she had been able to console him with her love and the catalyst of the black gown. But this one time he had not been able to reach her in this moment of crisis.

He had been inspecting his new building. Suddenly, witnesses had testified, he had made a small gesture of farewell, smiled sadly and stepped off the roof.

Patsy's memory of him was one reason she tried to be tolerant with Perce. Perce, too, had befriended her and she felt that in many ways loyalty was a form of love.

A shout went up from the area near the barn. Patsy stirred and saw somebody being tossed in a blanket—a girl, from what she could tell in the shadows. But in

these days of slim pants and short hair you never knew.

"Next on the program," she murmured, "gang rape."

"What—what did you say?" Perce asked, her voice rousing him from his reverie, a world of rose petals and starched little-boy collars that had made up his pre-teen years.

Patsy repeated her words.

"That's an ugly thought," Perce said.

"And it's an ugly thing to happen."

"Did it ever happen to you?" Perce demanded suddenly, and she wished again that she had kept her mouth shut.

"Of course not."

"Naturally—you'd give in," he said from a corner of his mouth.

"Those are things you never know about," she told him, "until they happen."

"You'd surely give in without a struggle."

"If I could save myself from being beaten to death, or my throat cut," she said acidly, "Yes—I'd give in."

"I suppose you've never considered such a thing as honor."

"Oh, Perce, what an ungodly thing to say! What has honor to do with it?"

"The purity of womanhood—"

She laughed. She could not help herself. "Where in the world do you get such antiquated ideas? And since when have you demanded purity in my relationship with you?"

"I suppose every time my back is turned you're with some other man."

She sobered. "No, Perce—as it happens, I'm not."

"But you miss it."

"Miss what?"

"Your old life. The hotel rooms. The conventions."

"My old life was a bad dream. I've been loyal to you."

"But you must have felt something in those old days."

His voice was developing that strange tautness she had come to recognize but not to understand. "I still can't believe you could be with those men and not—not feel anything."

"Does it give you any particular pleasure to trim your toenails or wash your hands? Well, that's as much pleasure as any woman gets out of such arrangements."

"I don't believe you."

"This is something you'll have to take my word for. I don't think you have quite the equipment to judge for yourself." She smiled and patted his knee.

She closed her eyes and tried to get a little sleep. But the sawing fiddles, the yelling, made this impossible.

Even above the noise she was vaguely aware of the click of her purse catch. Opening her eyes, she looked around. Perce had her purse in his lap and was going through its contents under the dashlight.

At first she experienced a raw anger at this invasion of her privacy. But already he had opened her wallet and was drawing out the five one-hundred-dollar bills she had put there earlier.

His face held a sort of agonized triumph. "There—five hundred dollars. One hundred per man is your rate. Five men."

"Perce, let me explain," she said quietly, trying to keep her voice calm.

"That's where you were—out earning this money—when I came for you and found that note saying you were at the bank."

"It's where I was. At the bank."

"Oh, no. You were in a hotel room. What convention was it this time, Patsy Straight?"

"Perce, listen to me. I've bought savings bonds for years. I wanted to buy you something for your birthday. A color TV set—you said you wanted one. I cashed some of my bonds at the bank."

"A great story." His voice sounded as if he were on the verge of tears. "It never occurred to you to write a check."

"Yes, it did, Perce, but—"

"Everybody writes checks but you. That's a thin story you're trying to make me swallow. Mighty thin." His eyes were taking on a wildness in the dashlight's glow.

"Perce, it was a personal thing. I wanted to buy some-

thing you wanted for your birthday. The cash made it more personal. You can't understand that, but it makes it seem more real to me to buy something with cash. Money and credit were always second nature to you, Perce—you grew up that way. They weren't to me."

"Perhaps not until you decided to wear out the mattresses in various hotel rooms—"

"Perce, don't make me mad. You're coming close to it."

"You still deny the five hundred dollars is unearned?"

"It was earned, Perce—a long time ago and, as you say, it was earned on a mattress. But I did not go behind your back—"

"Patsy Straight, I think you're a liar."

"That's quite enough, Perce," she said coldly.

"You're a whore. You'll always be a whore." He fumbled in the back of the Aston-Martin and came up with a bottle of brandy. He took a long pull from the bottle.

Patsy got out of the car, her face tight with anger. "Whore I am, Perce. Remember that."

She slammed the door shut and stalked away into the darkness. What was the use? The stupid fool would never believe in her loyalty to him—a loyalty as close to love as anything she would ever feel—even if she swore to it on the grave of a mother she could hardly remember. Even if she swore it on a stack of Bibles two miles high. What was the use of trying to work things out with Perce?

I have the name, she thought bitterly. Why not have the game?

16

NOBODY seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation. No matter to whom Pete Riley described Liza to ask if anyone had seen her, he got nothing but smart answers, or maybe a chuckle or a wave of the hand, indicating all sorts of prospects.

"Why look for a girl?" one man said. "Just take your pick. They're everywhere."

Pete Riley held his temper. He prowled one column of the double-parked cars clear out to Wemberly Road. Deputy sheriffs were directing traffic. Pete stopped one of the police cars and explained his predicament.

When Pete had finished the officer gave him a stern look. "You should know better than to bring your girl out all night to a place like this—and then let her get lost."

"I thought you could help me find her—"

"We'll do what we can. Check back with us from time to time." The officer gave Pete a disgusted look. "Meanwhile, you'd better keep hunting her yourself."

Pete walked away and began the long trek along the

other line of parked cars that led clear to the infield gate. At each step he swore under his breath—at Liza, at her parents, at himself, at the police.

Damn cops, he thought. One-track minds. They've been assigned to direct traffic. The fact that a girl is missing doesn't interest them worth a damn.

But in his heart he knew he probably should have known better than to bring Liza here in the first place. But he had had the wild hope that getting her away from her folks for one night might help unlock the gate, so to speak. Everything else had failed. He wanted her physically and knew she wanted him. They were going to get married, so what was the harm in his need of her? But she had built a fence against his onslaughts and it was still up, a mile high, the gate securely locked. At least for him.

He slowed, wondering if any other guys had found it unlocked. The thought made him kick savagely at an empty beer can.

A girl in one of the dark cars giggled and called out, "Temper, temper."

Pete ignored her and continued his search for Liza. She was being stubborn, acting like a kid. But maybe she had grown weary of walking around in this mob and had returned to the car. That was probably it. He quickened his pace, heading toward the infield gate where the MG was parked.

The girl in the blanket was Liza. Six men held the blanket and a grinning crowd stood around them. Each time she came down to the blanket, winded and frightened, she pushed down her skirt.

A man laughed. "Don't bother, honey. We've seen what you're wearing underneath. Pink."

The group around the blanket laughed and the men tightened their grip on it and tossed Liza into the air again. She squealed, getting an upside down view of the crowd. She came straight down, her skirt ballooning

around her face like a fouled parachute. A howl of delight broke from the crowd.

At last, as Liza came down hard, breathless, flushed with embarrassment, a woman said, "That's enough. You've had your fun. Now leave her alone."

A man looked around. "Maybe we'd better give you a toss in the blanket."

"Don't try it," Patsy Straight said coldly and nobody did.

Liza scrambled off the blanket before the men could send her aloft again. Sobbing in anger, she pushed her way through the crowd, unmindful of the feet she stepped on with her flat-heeled shoes. A man made a laughing grab for her. She rammed the point of her elbow into his stomach. His middle was as soft as a mound of dough. He made a gasping sound and sank to his knees.

The woman with him, probably his wife, said scornfully and a little drunkenly, "That'll teach you to fool with stuff too good for you."

Liza reached an area of comparative quiet. She paused to catch her breath. A group of what looked like college kids was sprawled on the ground, singing. One of the boys called to her.

"If you're looking for somebody it must be me."

She did not bother to reply. She reached the barn where she had last seen Pete. Putting her head in the side door she called his name.

A voice said, "Ain't none of us named Pete, but we'll sure be glad to help out till he comes back."

Hands grabbed her wrists, pulled her into the barn. She smelled raw whiskey and glimpsed young faces in the shadows. Young and rough. Somebody struck a match and held it close to her face.

"Hey, this is prime stuff," he said in a quiet voice that sent a stab of fear through her.

She opened her mouth to scream. The scream pushed flat and soundless against the callused palm of a hand. They carried her across the barn. Every step of the way she struggled and tried to scream, but the hand remained clamped tightly to her lips, and too many hands gripped

her elsewhere. Her heart pounded so she felt sure people could hear it in Pasadena.

If it hadn't been for the bedlam outside.

They threw her down on the hay where Pete had earlier spread his blanket. "Keep your mouth shut," one of them warned. "And you won't get hurt."

"Please," she begged, as the hand left her mouth. She gathered herself to scream and the hand was slapped back in place.

"Maybe this ain't private enough," whispered one of them.

"How about over by them pepper trees?" said another.

They carried her out again, ringing her so that anyone nearby in the darkness would have a hard time telling just what was going on.

As the group neared the pepper trees her fear increased. She could see the trees, ghostly, stirring in the night wind. The boys holding her quickened their pace.

They came to a halt suddenly and the beam of a flashlight one of them held shot toward the trees. The beam fell on a rusted plow, half-embedded in the soil. And two figures beside it.

"Somebody's beat us here," said one.

Another gave a whoop of laughter. "It's two dames. Looky there. Two dames!"

They were so surprised and hilarious at this revelation that Liza was set on her two feet and momentarily forgotten.

"Two dames," whooped one of the group. "Hey—you two hard up or something?"

"One of 'em ain't so bad," said the one, shifting the flashlight beam.

"Her girl friend's got a face like a crock of beer."

Liza slipped between two of the men. She began to run. She heard a shout, angry voices. Then, behind her, the stern voice of a woman, "Get out of here, you hoodlums."

"She ain't foolin'," said one of the group. Liza glanced back over her shoulder. The flashlight was snapped off.

The yelling had brought a crowd of curious onlookers.

The group that had held Liza melted away into the new arrivals.

Shaken, she made her way to Pete's MG. When she saw him standing there, she gave a glad cry and ran into his arms.

"Pete, Pete," she sobbed. "Don't ever let me go. Not ever."

"You've had me worried sick," he said, holding her.

A group of motorcyclists riding lightweight bikes tore across the flats, popping their exhausts, their weaving headlights making a criss-cross of beams in the darkness. Down the line of cars a battery-operated light was focused on a sports car. The owner, in his twenties, wearing greasy coveralls, had decided to put the long night to some use. He was working on the motor of his car, while some dozen or so sports-car buffs crowded around, offering advice.

Some people were curled up in their cars, trying to sleep despite the din. The sound of a flushing toilet came from one of the more elaborate campers. Beyond the barn a crap game was in progress on a blanket. Those watching the dice wore identical sports jackets with CRUMLEY CAR CLUB on the back of each. They seemed fully absorbed in the game until one of their number came up holding a woman by the arm.

"Look what I found, boys," he said, grinning. "An old friend. Name of Patsy."

"Hi, Patsy," they said and some of them rose from where they had been kneeling on the ground to give her a closer inspection. They liked what they saw. The knit dress curved nicely against her in all the right places. She had a nice smile and looked like class.

"I used to work for a wholesale-grocery outfit," said the one who had found Patsy. "We had a convention at the Barksdale Hotel." He hugged Patsy against him. "She was real friendly to a whole bunch of us."

"Maybe she'll be friendly to us, too." One of the players picked up the dice, slipped them into his pocket.

Patsy Straight gave him a calculating smile. She looked around at the others. They were all in their late twenties or early thirties. She had heard of their organization. The members all lived in San Fernando Valley and two years ago had formed their own sports-car club. She knew they had money.

"You'd be surprised how friendly I can be," Patsy said, "when I hear the rustle of nice fresh twenty-dollar bills."

"I never paid for it in my life," one of the men said indignantly.

Patsy laughed. "Then your life hasn't been complete."

"That's telling him off," howled the one who had his arm around her waist. "I found her, so I reckon I'm first."

He led her into the barn and sat down with her for a moment to smoke a cigarette. "I never see you around the hotel any more," he said, staring at her in the darkness. When she drew on her cigarette a faint glow touched on one side of her face. She seemed thoughtful but remained silent. He added: "I've been back there a dozen times, but never did see you again."

"I quit for a time," she said. "I had some trouble. And then I met a man—well, he's been throwing it up to me. What I used to do."

"Bet he brought you out here tonight."

"He did."

"I couldn't figure your coming out here alone. Not to work."

"I didn't intend ever to work again," Patsy said. "But then we don't always have our plans turn out the way we'd like, do we?"

"You remember me, don't you?"

"Of course I do." But she did not. She had been watching some people trying to do the twist when he had come up like a long-lost friend. As far as she could tell, she had never seen him before in her life. But when he had mentioned the Barksdale Hotel and the wholesale-grocers' convention, she remembered. Not remembered him personally, but only the group as a whole.

"I sure enjoyed myself that night," he said. Then he went on tentatively, "You said you did, too. Remember?"

"Sure—I'm not likely to forget."

"Bet you don't even remember my name."

She laughed at the sudden switch. "So you're one of those who like to play games. To test my memory."

"Go on, what is my name?"

"All right," she said. "I don't remember you at all. This isn't a room at the Barksdale. It's an old barn at the edge of the speedway. And there are a couple of thousand people milling around. We'd better get down to what we came for."

She sounded and felt bitter. What was the use of pretending she was anything but what she was? Perce had flung the label in her face tonight. It fit her like make-up. After tonight Perce could strangle in his silver cord for all she cared. She would let him know later what she did tonight in order to sever all future connections with him. Once more she had reached her typical moment of decision.

She anticipated the look of revulsion on his face and could already hear herself say, *Perce, you asked for it . . .*

She put out her hand and this intimate friend whose name she could not remember, thought she wanted him to shake her hand. She smiled, shaking her head.

"The money, honey," she said, putting a lilt in her voice. "The rent will be twenty dollars."

"The rent?" he said, surprised.

"Well, you don't want a lease, do you? I don't think you could afford me on that basis." The bitterness crept back into her voice. "Even at twenty dollars you're getting the bargain rate. I'm really quite expensive."

By the time the clock over the infield swung down on the south side of midnight she felt disgusted with herself. What if she flung a handful of twenty-dollar bills in Perce's face? Why should she care about his reaction? She had to be getting soft in the head—something a girl in her business could ill afford. She would go to San Francisco where she had no record. The city was probably hot—but what city was not, these days? She would

make out. She damned well better make out. She was not about to starve.

And yet when she thought of how things might have worked out with Perce, she felt a sting of tears at her eyes. If he could only have met her halfway. Chances were he had already pulled his car out of the line and gone home. Probably this grandstand play of hers was all going to waste. Such a stupid thing to do, really.

"I believe you do remember me," the nameless voice of her first conquest of the evening had said when he had been through with her. "You sure acted like it."

"I told you I did," she said and watched him get to his feet, a long, faceless shadow in the dark barn.

For the rest of her days—as long as she could keep going—this would be her life. The banter, the exchange of money, the faceless shadows. Sometimes jail.

She shivered and a new voice said, "Freddie said you were good. He wasn't kidding."

A member in good standing of the Crumley Car Club am I, she thought. All members participating in my new initiation. She began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" demanded the new voice indignantly.

"It's life that's funny. From diapers to mortuary, one big laugh."

Tears spilled down over her cheeks and she stared up at the rafters she could dimly see.

17

TO Mike Eaton the bourban began to taste sour. His night with Ginger was turning sour. The whole damn thing was a mess. They had been smoking too much in the unventilated camper. The air was stale.

Ginger sat up, yawning. "Night of love," she said. She failed to sound happy about it.

"Maybe we'd better let some air in." Mike got up and cranked open the ceiling vent. Through the opening he could see a pattern of glittering stars against the sky.

"It's cold," Ginger complained. "Gosh, us kids with no clothes on and you want to get fresh air all of a sudden."

He closed the vent. Somehow her remark sounded cheap. *Us kids with no clothes on . . .* She sounded as if sitting around in a crackerbox like this in her birthday suit with the husband of her next-door neighbor was something you did all the time. He recalled his father talking about some guy back in the Thirties who had preached about sharing the wealth. Well, this was share-the-body week.

"You'll like it when we start taking trips on weekends," Ginger said. She sat cross-legged on the bed, putting on lipstick by the light of a six-volt lantern.

He wanted to laugh, the whole damned thing struck him suddenly as silly. There she was, wearing nothing but that sloppy little smile of hers and worried that her lipstick was not on straight.

Ginger chattered on about future weekend jaunts. "There's a lake up in the Sierras. Al and I once spent a week up there. Of course now we'll have the campers, but then we had to stay in a motel. There was this place, sort of rundown, but did we have fun. The couple in the cabin next to ours was talking divorce, but before we were through with them they'd decided people could still have fun, though married."

She paused, peering up at Mike, her red hair tumbled about her face. When he had first seen her he had thought her exotic but now she just seemed cheap. Goddamn cheap.

"Mike, why are you looking at me like that?" she demanded crossly.

He had not thought his feelings had shown on his face. He tried a grin. "I was thinking about breakfast."

Ginger decided to play it cute, tilting her head to one side. "Sir, do you mean you can think about food at a time like this?"

"Anything gets old-hat," he said, draining his glass, "if you do it enough."

"That wasn't a very nice thing for you to say, Mike."

"I just meant—"

She switched off the lamp. "Like I said, when we travel a bit, take trips, you'll enjoy it more. It's your first time and we haven't had a chance to go outside and walk around—"

"That's a swell idea. Let's get dressed and go see what the rest of the natives are doing," he said enthusiastically.

For a moment she seemed offended. "Do you mean to say you'd rather go out and walk around than stay in here with me?"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"I almost think there's something wrong with you."

"Just how do you mean that?" He bristled.

She smiled. "Don't get sore. You've proved enough to know how I mean it."

"Yeah, I guess so," he grunted. He began to dress.

She stared at his shadowed figure a moment, then reached for her bra. They dressed in silence.

When they stepped outside Mike took a deep breath of the night air. It seemed to cleanse his lungs of the foul stuff he had been breathing back in the camper. He closed the door, then started along the line of cars, Ginger beside him.

He had not intended even to look at the other camper—his and Diane's. He had planned to pretend it was not even there. But something made him turn to look at it. The shiny aluminum sides glowed in the moonlight. The windows were dark. Not a sound came from it.

Ginger gave him an apprehensive look. "Now don't go letting your imagination run away with you," she warned in a hoarse whisper.

He took a step toward the camper and she sprang forward, clamping both hands to his arm.

"Don't do it, Mike."

He thought of shaking her off, then decided she was probably right. Whatever was going on between Al and Diana was his own fault. He stood glaring.

"There are certain ethics in a thing like this," Ginger explained earnestly. "You wouldn't have liked it if Al had broken in on us—now would you?"

"I suppose not."

She was maneuvering him slowly away from the line of cars. He could easily have resisted, but he did not.

Ginger said, "Think of Diana—your breaking in would embarrass her. It's the worst thing that could happen to a girl. You know—somebody coming in at a time like that."

Clenching his fists, he turned his back on the parked cars and started walking away, fast. Ginger had a hard time keeping up with him. The dancers had quit, but

one of the fiddlers, quite drunk by now, was still trying to squeak out a tune. Couples lay on blankets or were crowded in cars, most of them trying to sleep. The hands of the clock over the infield stood at three.

With Ginger clinging to his arm Mike passed an expensive foreign job with chrome wire wheels. It looked like an Aston-Martin. The man behind the wheel was drinking from a bottle. When he lowered the bottle Mike could see tears on his face.

A man crying. What next? Mike wondered if the lone weeper was mooning over some woman. Dumb bastard.

He swung away from the road, with Ginger still hanging onto his arm. He had covered some distance when he realized that directly ahead was the old barn he had seen when he had pulled in yesterday evening. Was it only hours ago? For some reason yesterday seemed a lifetime away. He tried to remember how he had felt last night in the new camper with his own wife—all full of the old vinegar and anxious for the moment when he would give his wife to another man for the night. The vision was impossible to conjure up. How could the Mike Eaton he knew be such a dumb bastard—a damned sight dumber than the guy weeping in his brandy back there in that expensive foreign car.

Mike Eaton—married to Diana Eaton, the most beautiful blonde in the world. That is, if he was still married to her. Maybe Al Hight possessed her now—emotionally as well as physically.

Ginger said, "Wonder what's in the barn."

"Mice, probably."

"Good place to shack up," she giggled. "Bet it's been amour for some of the kids tonight."

The way Ginger talked about sex began to get to him—it really did. Sex was to order like hot dogs or drinks at a bar. Her way of talking took something out of sex—ultimate satisfaction. Ginger simply stressed the need.

"Let's look inside," Ginger suggested.

Mike started for a side door but before he reached it

two men stepped out. They blocked the door, arms folded, looking stern and a little drunk.

"You a member of the Crumley Car Club?" asked one of them.

"No," Mike said stiffly.

"Then you're not allowed inside," the man said thickly. "Only members of the Crumley Car Club. Initiation now going on." Both men howled with laughter.

Mike could see nothing funny about whatever was going on—but then he realized he did not know what was happening in the barn. Nor did he give a damn.

He started to walk away.

"A pair of idiots, if you ask me," Ginger said, looking back over her shoulder. "Wonder what they've got inside?"

"Why don't you go and find out? They'd probably let you join the club."

"Why, Mike, are you trying to get rid of me?"

"The way they looked you over, I have a hunch you'd be welcome to their initiation."

Ginger was quiet for a few steps. "I don't go that route, Mike. I never have."

"What route? What are you talking about?" He looked down at her red head.

"Al and I swap around, but never with more than one at a time."

"Well, who said you did?"

"You sounded as if you thought I'd enjoy a barnful of men."

"Oh, hell," he muttered.

They started back for the camper as if by mutual, silent agreement. He got to wondering how he had ever managed to get into this mess. The whole thing was his fault. Diana had not been sold on the idea—not for one minute. She had even been dubious about their moving out of L.A.

Mike wished now he'd listened both to his wife and his boss at the home office before moving out here. In fact, looking back on it, Mike wished his old superior had hit him over the head with a pipe wrench instead of

merely offering advice. It might have knocked some sense into one Mike Eaton.

As he neared Al's camper and looked at his own, still silent, still showing no light, except perhaps a very dim glow like an electric lantern set to give indirect illumination, perhaps reflected from a wall, he felt a rush of anger.

18

LIZA huddled in the right-hand seat of the MG. For a long time she just sat still, a hand over her eyes, unable to discuss her experiences. But she knew that at long last the story would have to come out. She sighed.

"I can talk about it now," she finally told Pete. In the car ahead a woman was pouring coffee from a thermos into two cups.

"What happened out there?" Pete made an effort to keep his voice steady.

"Some men—they were little older than boys, really. They were going to—to gang-rape me."

"We'll go get those deputies," Pete said, reaching for the door pull.

Liza caught his arm. "No, Pete. Please."

He sank back in the seat giving her a perplexed look. "They'll have battery lanterns. We can search every face in this crowd until you point out the guys who—"

"Pete, they didn't hurt me. Not any." Her hands clenched into small fists. "They just made me realize that the world is an ugly place—if you're with ugly people."

I've been too protected. I know that now. My folks shielded me too much. I was even wrong about the Eatons."

She told him what she had heard outside Diana's camper. Pete listened grimly, but made no other comment than: "The Eatons have nothing to do with us—we don't ever have to be like them. But I still think we should hunt down those guys who tried to hurt you. They should get ninety years."

"Of course they should. But I'd have to testify against them and—I—I just couldn't get up on the witness stand and talk about it."

"I shouldn't have let you get out of my sight."

"Pete, it was my fault. I ran away. I acted like a kid." She leaned toward him, her arms reaching for his shoulders. "Pete," she whispered hoarsely, "Do anything you want to me. I want you to."

"You know something? I did a lot of thinking while I hunted for you. My Uncle Ned's been wanting me to come to work for him. He owns a string of garages. I like cars and I hate school. I'm just not cut out for study."

Liza drew back, brushing a lock of dark hair from her eyes. "But shouldn't you finish college?"

"Uncle Ned's made himself a pile of money. He didn't even finish high school. I've got three years of college under my belt and he doesn't want me just to pump gas. He wants me in the business."

"I like your Uncle Ned. But maybe you should wait—"

Twisting in the bucket seat, he caught her hands. "I want to get started on a life of my own. With you. I don't want to wait."

"You'll disappoint your folks—"

"My folks probably disappointed their folks," Pete said with a tight grin. "Our kids will disappoint us in some way. That's how it goes with life, I guess." He studied her for a moment. A concession truck ground slowly along the line of cars in low gear and a man called out, "Coffee—sandwiches—"

Pete said almost off-handedly, "By the way, going

back to the Eatons—where was her husband while she was in the camper with Al Hight?"

Liza's face changed. "I overheard some things, Pete. Mr. Eaton was in Al's camper—with Al's wife."

Pete was silent for a long time. Even in the dim light, Liza saw his face darken and knew he was blushing. Finally he said, "Some people are—well—just different, I guess. Nothing like that could possibly happen to us. You know that, don't you?"

"I know it," Liza said. "I've read about such things," she went on. She sounded suddenly bewildered. "I never understood how anybody could—and right in our own neighborhood—"

"Let's not talk about it—or tell anybody," Pete cautioned. "There's already enough gossip around here as is."

"Pete, take me somewhere after the races. Somewhere nice. Not this place—not on a blanket like animals. I want to be your girl. I want it all the way, Pete."

"You're going to be my wife." He smiled and keyed the ignition. The motor coughed, caught and began to purr.

Liza looked surprised. "Where are you going?"

"To take you to that nice place you mentioned." His voice was tight. He swung the wheel and began to back and fill to get out of the parking spot where they had waited for so many hours.

"But, Pete, the races. You've looked forward to them for so long."

"I've got a lifetime left for races." Pete's bumper nudged the car ahead.

The man behind the wheel of the other car, drinking coffee out of a plastic cup, looked around. He seemed amazed that Pete was pulling the MG out of the line.

"Hey, you nuts or something?" he said, leaning out. "Wait all night in line, then give up your place."

"I'm going to get married," Pete shouted above the roar of the motor.

"What a time to pick," the man muttered, shaking his head. "An hour before sunrise when the gates open. And suddenly this guy wants to get married."

The woman in the car said, "It's likely true love. But you wouldn't know anything about that." They started to argue.

As Pete drove slowly along the line of cars and people sleeping on the ground, some in tents, Liza said, "You were wrong about one thing, Pete."

"Wrong?" He looked around.

"You said somebody probably chopped down the cherry tree a long time ago."

"I shouldn't have said that." Pete put his eyes back on the rutted dirt road he was trying to follow. "I was hurt and frustrated."

"I'm a virgin, Pete. Maybe I'm not very proud of the fact. Maybe I am. I don't know, but I thought you should know."

"I told you once it doesn't matter. Either way, I love you."

"Where are we going, Pete?"

"Uncle Ned has a cabin at Big Bear. He said I could use it any time. I'll phone him from there. I'll give him the word about going in with him. Then we'll head for Las Vegas and get married."

"My folks will worry."

"So will mine. We'll phone them. Your folks eloped and so did mine. They can't make too much of a fuss."

When the MG pulled out into the main highway the deputy directing traffic looked into the car. "Well, I see you found her." He grinned and waved Pete through the thickening traffic.

Pete swung left toward the mountains and Big Bear Lake.

Mike Eaton crossed over to his own camper and hammered on the aluminum wall with his fist. "You two have ten minutes. Then we're coming in for breakfast."

Deliberately he turned his back and walked some distance away, Ginger trailing along.

"Al won't like what you did," she said worriedly.

"I suddenly don't give a damn whether he likes it or not," Mike snapped. He lit a cigarette. Ginger studied him a moment, then held out her hand. He gave her the cigarette, fired up another for himself. He smoked nervously, glancing at the big clock. Diana and Al had exactly eight minutes and forty-six seconds to get out of bed, put on their clothes and make themselves presentable.

Ginger drew on her cigarette, watching some people near the infield gate flocking around a concession wagon. Presently she gave Mike a sidelong glance.

"You're certainly in a rare mood."

He made no reply. From here on the less he said the better. His temper was delicately balanced and it would not take much to swing him into orbit. After their walk across the fields he and Ginger had returned to the Hight's camper. They had kept their clothes on and listened to the radio. Finally Mike had pulled aside a window curtain and seen that the eastern sky was growing silvery. The time had come to put a stop to this nonsense, he had said.

Ginger had argued, worried that he would do something foolish and get Al mad enough to fight. With his professional wrestling background, Ginger pointed out, Al could be a formidable opponent when aroused. But Mike felt pretty formidable himself at the moment.

Now he and Ginger stood stiffly in the predawn chill. Up ahead Mike saw a gap in the line of cars where someone had pulled out. Probably some joker like himself who'd gotten smart at the last minute and wished he had never come.

He glanced at his watch again in the growing light. Seven minutes left. He looked around at his own camper, hating it—hating its still being here.

Diana had heard the MG pull past the camper. She lay in the narrow bed, her head below a window. Al slept on his back, a heavy arm across his stomach. Lifting her head, she peered into the darkness. She saw

headlights and two people in an MG that was moving in low gear. The occupants looked like Pete Riley and his girl friend. She wondered what had prompted them to leave. Perhaps a quarrel, Diana thought. It was entirely possible. Liza was a nice girl, but immature for her age. A product of doting parents.

Diana's movement had awakened Al. He cocked one eye and grinned. He moved closer to her and put his head on her bare shoulder.

"Just can't leave me alone, huh?" His booming laugh rattled the plastic dishes in the rack above her head.

Diana felt dizzy. So far, she had had little sleep, and it looked as if she would get no more during what remained of the night. She had coaxed Al into drinking a considerable amount of bourbon. Most of her own drinks she had managed to pour into the sink when his attention had been diverted. But even when he had finally passed out, she had been too disturbed to sleep. She had considered leaving the camper, but the crowd noises outside had frightened her. She had desperately wanted to go to Mike—but he was with Ginger. Where he wanted to be.

Al leaned over to try to kiss her. Sickened, she drew away. "I thought by this time you'd be too drunk for more games," she said wearily.

"Yeah, I know. So you hoped." He chuckled, and winked at her. "Booze only makes me long in the wind."

"Al," she said desperately. "I feel sick—"

"I've got just the right cure—" The booming laugh again, his lips so close to her face that she thought the sound would break her eardrum.

"Al, don't you ever sleep?"

"Come on, show a little life," he said peevishly. His arm jogged her as if that would stimulate her enthusiasm. He lifted her, let her fall back on the bed.

"In wrestling parlance," she said, peering up at his broad dark face, "I've lost every fall tonight."

And she lost this one. She closed her eyes, wondering how long it would be until this nightmare ended. Al was a satyr and there seemed to be no limit to his en-

duration. At this late hour he seemed as energetic as he had at the start of this horrible night. She wondered dully if Ginger had to endure this sort of treatment or was it something Al reserved for extramarital adventures.

Finally he was spent and shortly he was snoring. Diana managed at last to doze off.

Suddenly there was a violent hammering on the side of the camper near her head. Startled, she sprang up so violently that Al, on the edge of the bed, was dumped to the floor.

Then Mike's voice came as if from a great distance, saying they had ten minutes to get dressed. Then he and Ginger were coming in for breakfast.

Diana sat on the bed, shaking her head to clear her brain. Al, on the floor, looked mad. She stared down at him in disgust. He looked like a lump of flesh someone had forgotten to butcher.

"We've got to hurry," Diana gasped. "They—they mustn't find us like this."

She knelt on the bed and reached for her clothes. She had just dropped a slip over her head when Al pulled her down on the floor.

"Al—please," she whispered, wondering if Mike had his ear to a window. "Not now—not any more—"

"Remember that old tune—one more time?"

"Oh, my God," she groaned. Her hand groped along the floor, found a shoe. She picked it up, raised it and brought the heel down on Al's head as hard as she could.

Al slumped. She jumped up, got into her clothes. She did not even look at Al on the floor. She did not care if she had killed him. She almost hoped she had.

Not until she was fully dressed and had converted the bed into its function as a dinette did she look at him. He was breathing, his massive chest rising and falling. She did not want Mike to come in and find him like this and a little frantically she began to dress him.

His bulk gave trouble, but after a while he began to come to and was able to help her a little. A small trickle

of blood ran down his cheek from a scalp cut her shoe had inflicted.

Diana wiped it off and had just finished helping him wash and towel his face when Mike appeared at the camper's doorway, Ginger peering in over his shoulder.

Mike looked quickly from Diana to Al, then back to Diana again. Both he and Diana seemed embarrassed, but Diana was pleased that at least she had managed to make herself, Al and the dinette presentable.

Ginger looked at Al who still seemed a little groggy. "You must have had a night, lover. Oh, the dark circles."

She crowded past Mike and sat down in the dinette. Al stared red-eyed at Mike, who glared at him and for an instant tension was thick as smoke in the confines of the camper.

Ginger smiled a little crookedly at Diana and said, "Well, honey—it's time to feed the animals. Let's you and me make breakfast."

The tension broke and Al managed a sloppy grin. Looking from Mike to Ginger he asked, "How'd you kids make out?"

"Mike's got a one-track mind," Ginger said, trying to be flip, but unable to keep a slight hurt from her voice. "I think he's in love with his wife."

Mike did not sit down. He stood, resting one hand on the edge of the stove. "If you folks don't mind," he said, "I think Diana and I would like to eat breakfast alone."

19

THE man in the coupé directly in front of the hole in the line where the MG had been all night spluttered in fresh amazement. A sleek Porsche, painted a battleship gray, was maneuvering out of the line ahead. It backed, filled and finally made the tight turn. The occupant of the right-hand bucket seat was a pretty brown-haired girl, who looked wildly pleased about something.

The man in the coupé leaned out, directing his attention to the driver. "Hey, guy, have you lost your marbles too?"

His wife nudged him. "That isn't a guy, stupid. It's a woman."

The man gave a double-take as the Porsche slipped past his coupé.

"The hell you say." He shook his head. "These days you can't tell 'em without a program. Got any more coffee?"

His wife passed him the thermos.

In the Porsche Madge Henry said, "Letitia, are you sure you want to miss the races?"

Letitia removed one gloved hand from the wheel. She patted Madge's flat little stomach. "Next time we come out here, we'll have a truck camper."

"Oh, wonderful!" Madge clapped her hands. "Our own house on wheels."

"Then nobody can bother us," Letitia's unplucked brows drew together. She was remembering last night in the pepper trees when those hoodlums had come upon them so suddenly. She squeezed her eyes shut against tears as she recalled the brutal beam of the flashlight that had fallen upon them. "Beasts," she said harshly, opening her eyes.

"You mean those men?" Madge asked in a hushed voice.

"They had no right. We weren't hurting anybody."

"Will it always be that way—people laughing at us?" Madge's voice was shaky.

"Nobody will laugh at us again—ever. Wherever we are in the future we'll have four walls around us and a roof over our heads."

"Just be good to me, Letitia," Madge whispered. "And keep me safe. That's all I ask."

Immediately following the incident with the men at the pepper trees Letitia had been too shaken to drive. She and Madge had sat in the car, drinking coffee, discussing their plans. There had been no use in further pretense. They would take an apartment together. For the first time they would really live.

They reached the main road, jammed now with cars inching toward the speedway. Harassed deputies were trying to keep the mess of traffic from strangling itself. Letitia waited for a clearing, then sent the little car darting in the direction of her home.

They'd gone perhaps a mile when Madge asked in a small voice, "What if one day some man comes along and you fall in love? What will happen to me?"

"My father once said that no man in the world was good enough for me," Letitia said after much thought.

"No man is worthy of you," Madge said quickly.

"I idolized my father. We'd go camping together. Once

we climbed a mountain. I shot the rapids of Snake River with him. He was so—so wonderful. I just couldn't think of myself with a man. It would be almost like—incest, because I would always think of him in relation to my dear father."

"Then I have nothing to fear," Madge said, smiling. She glanced at Letitia hopefully and saw the tears streaming down the gaunt cheeks. Madge averted her gaze in order not to embarrass her friend.

Letitia had seldom allowed herself to think of her father, let alone discuss him. Her memories of him broke her up inside. They had had so many plans and so much fun together. Even while she had been going to college she had kept house for him and on weekends they had taken their imported bicycles to lonely roads and ridden for miles. Or they had swum and played tennis.

She had been nineteen when her father had come home with a black-haired woman. He had said, "Letitia, this is Mrs. Nelson. We're going to be married. I've been very lonely since your mother died but I waited until I found someone I knew you'd approve of—"

"Lonely?" Letitia had screamed at him. "Lonely when you had me?"

"There's no need to take on so," her father had said.

Mrs. Nelson had murmured, "The poor girl is upset. After all, it is a shock—"

Letitia's swimming eyes had remained fixed on her father. "You let me think that I was your life. Your life!"

After the wedding Letitia had left home. And within herself she began to build an inner structure of spring steel, piece by piece, impervious to the acids of the world.

"You give up your apartment," Letitia said, drying her eyes on gloved knuckles. "We'll move into mine. I have the garage."

"I love to have you make decisions for me," Madge said.

"Don't ever leave me, Madge," Letitia said, her pale lips trembling. "I couldn't stand that."

"I won't."

Letitia managed a small laugh as she gestured at the

boots, the rest of the outfit she had purchased in a men's shop for her "nephew."

"I guess I look pretty ridiculous," she said thoughtfully. "I've learned my lesson. When we're out, I'll dress normally. But when we're under our own roof it's nobody's business what we do."

"That's the part I like," Madge said, putting her forehead against Letitia's shoulder. "Under our own roof."

Diana lit the butane burner and put on the coffee pot. Her hands were shaking. She pretended to adjust the flame so she would not have to look around at Mike. The silence that had begun building between them as soon as Al and Ginger had left had reached embarrassing dimensions. Mike slumped in the dinette. He had poured himself a drink but had pushed the glass aside without tasting it.

Finally he cleared his throat. "Quite a night," he said.

Diana broke eggs into a bowl, lit another burner on the stove. "I didn't enjoy it," she said, her voice a little shrill. "Not one bit."

"Neither did I," Mike told her ruefully.

The admission caused her to look around, her pale brows lifted. "If you didn't enjoy it, then why—"

She caught herself. She had been about to ask, *If you didn't enjoy it, why did we have to go through with it . . .* but deep down she knew why she had suffered through the experience with Al. Because Mike had made her feel inadequate, had convinced her that he had needed a new female to stimulate him, to rejuvenate his zest for living after the discouragements of suburban existence. And then there had been her own feelings of guilt—she had wanted to make up to Mike her deception of him regarding the Butch episode.

Mike said, "What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I don't know." She put her back against the range, faced him squarely. It took all her courage to tell him, "I don't think either of us can say anything that'll make

much sense right now. Nothing we've done makes sense—at least to me."

Mike looked through the window at some people passing the camper. They were chattering about the coming races, laughing.

"Did your time with Al—well, did it matter to you at all—in any way?"

"I already told you I didn't enjoy it."

"Ginger said that he'd spoil most women for anybody else," Mike said quietly.

"That could mean several things. Ruin a woman, I think would be more accurate. Ruin her self-respect—spoil her in a way that would make her undesirable to any decent man . . . with that I'd agree." Diana's mouth began to tremble. She felt her eyes fill with tears. "Mike—I feel degraded. Do you still want me?"

"That's a hell of a question to ask."

"Why don't you answer it?"

He remained silent. Diana turned back to the small range. She dropped eggs into a frying pan, began to stir them with a fork. "What about you and Ginger? She promised to send you back a better man."

Mike spoke carefully. "I guess in a way she did. At least I'm smarter—smart enough never to try anything like this again." His voice grew earnest. "Diana, I want you to believe this. Long before the night was over, I couldn't stand the touch, the thought, the sight of her. What I wanted was you."

Without turning from her cooking, Diana said, "I wanted you too, Mike."

They were silent. Neither made a move toward the other. After a while the eggs were done and Diana carried them to the dinette where she had set out plastic plates, knives and forks.

She sat down across from Mike and they both stared at their plates.

"I'm not hungry," Mike said. Suddenly he raised his eyes to her. "I guess the Hights just aren't our kind of people. Nobody around here seems to be."

Diana met his gaze. There was still defeat in her eyes, a curious, dead hopelessness in her heart.

"Can we go back, Mike?"

"To L.A.?"

"That would be a start."

Mike looked at his plate again. "I could call the plant when we get home." He sounded a little more sure of himself, Diana thought, as if he had found at least some small thing to hold on to.

"Better eat your eggs, Mike," she told him, "Before they get cold. I'll pour some coffee. It ought to be ready by now."

She stood up, went to get the percolator. When she came back, Mike was eating. He did not seem to be enjoying it but he was doing it. She sat down, poured coffee.

Mike's voice was even surer than before. "I'll call the home plant, ask for a transfer back. If they don't want me, I'll find something else in the city." Once more he looked up. "Will you come with me?"

"There's that question I asked you before. Do you still want me?"

Mike put down his knife and fork. His gestures were deliberate. He wiped his lips with a paper napkin. Then he stood up and rounded the table to sit down beside her.

His arm went around her, tightened. "I want you," he said and waited.

It was a while before Diana answered, "I'll come with you."

They sat like that for a long while. Mike made no effort to kiss her—and Diana did not want him to. Not with the memory of her night with Al so fresh in her mind. Not with the thought of his lust for Ginger still between them.

Mike seemed to understand and for that she was glad. Perhaps things would still work out between them.

Presently Mike said, "Let's clean up the dishes and stow our gear. I'll help you. Then let's get the hell out of here. We didn't come here to see the races anyway."

He stood up and she rose with him.

"No, Mike," she said. "I guess we didn't. I'm with

you—let's clear out. Whatever we came for, we didn't find it here."

"Don't be too sure of that, Mrs. Eaton," Mike said gruffly. He turned her to face him, drew her to him and something of the nightmare between them vanished. "I'd like to think we've still got a chance. Maybe just a slim one—but a chance."

She was afraid at first when he kissed her—but no shadow of Al touched her as his mouth claimed hers. And suddenly she clung to him, knowing that he had spoken the truth.

They still did have a chance.

20

LOOKING back, Patsy Straight wondered if she would have returned to Perce Forrest's Aston-Martin that morning if it had not been for her handbag. She had forgotten to take the bag with her—such had been her state of mind when she had left Perce earlier. The bag contained her driver's license and a charge-a-plate.

After a lull during the night, when most people had tried to sleep, the area was beginning to come alive again. A tent was being taken down, cots were being folded and stowed in various vehicles. Two couples were cooking breakfast over a small alcohol stove. As early as it was, the crackle of exhausts came from the speedway as engines were given a final check.

Most of the crowd seemed cheerful, but here and there were the telltale signs of hangovers or otherwise rough nights. A gray-haired woman was berating a paunchy man with a swollen jaw. "No wonder he hit you. She was his girl and you didn't have sense enough to keep your hands to yourself."

"I never laid a finger on her."

"You were king of the square dance," the woman said shrilly. "So drunk you didn't know up from down. Every time you fell on your face the crowd howled. You were some clown, all right."

As Patsy moved woodenly toward the line of cars, she saw a camper lumbering over the ruts. A man was driving. A blonde sat beside him. Both seemed determined about something and stared straight ahead through the windshield. Patsy wondered why the camper was moving toward the highway, away from the raceway, after its occupants had waited all night to get in to see the races.

A great day for the races, she thought. And it had been a great night for Patsy Straight. In her hand she clutched a wad of currency.

Directly ahead she saw the Aston-Martin. Perce sat numbly behind the wheel. He looked sick and she felt a little sorry for him. Then she remembered what he had called her last night and the other things he had said. She strode toward the car, her head high. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She was what she was and there was no changing it. Perce had apprised her of that fact.

He heard her step, turned his head and stared at her dully for a moment. Then he straightened up in the seat.

"Where the devil have you been?" he demanded crossly. "I've been worried."

He looked awful. As she came closer she could see the brandy bottle in his lap. Nearly empty now. He had to be quite drunk, although his speech seemed normal enough.

The window was down on his side. She leaned in, arms resting on the sill. "Perce, last night you found five one-hundred-dollar bills in my purse."

"How could I forget?" He had pulled back a little to keep her face in focus.

"I tried to explain about that money. I tried to describe to you the pleasure it would give me to take cash and go to a store and buy you a present."

"So?"

"I could have written a check, as you pointed out.

But paying cash somehow made it more personal. As I also pointed out, you wouldn't understand." She gave him a tight smile. "When I was growing up I had no money. You did. That makes us different."

"You've got some straw in your hair."

"So I have." The smile grew tighter. "Last night you called me a name."

"I don't remember." He looked away, his mouth sullen.

"Yes, you do. You called me a whore. It's a word no woman likes to hear even if she's in the business."

"I'd been drinking. I was angry."

Her smile was tight. "Well, now we're even. I've been whoring. I was angry."

"Quit talking about it—"

He did not seem to understand. Patiently, she explained. "I spent last night in a barn with a bunch of men. I don't even know their names—or how many."

"You—you're joking."

She saw the shock in his eyes, saw them widen, saw the sullenness leave his mouth to be replaced by something she could not name.

"I'm not joking, Perce," She opened her right hand. A flood of twenties, tens and fives fluttered into his lap. He stared down at the money, then lifted his eyes, looking at her incredulously.

"Now you're justified in your accusations." Patsy said. "No more snide remarks. I'll never again try to make you see what you don't want to see. Now you know you're right. I earned every dollar of that money on my back." She reached into the car, past him. She picked up her handbag. He tried to catch her arm but she stepped back. She started walking toward the highway. If she could find no cab she would hitchhike.

Hearing steps, she turned. Perce was running toward her, shouting for her to stop. People turned to stare.

He did not seem to care who was looking. He flung his arms around her and said hoarsely, "I love you. I love you!"

She stood woodenly for a moment, appraising the

agony in his face. "I told you the truth about what I did," she said quietly. "Aren't you revolted?"

"I love you more—more than ever."

She felt him tremble and knew the decision had to be hers. She could accept the reins that Perce's mother had in so many words begged her to take, or she could turn her back on him. If she did, this episode might end as had that other in her life, when a man had relied on her had been unable to reach her in his hour of crisis and had stepped off the roof of a skyscraper.

"We're going home," Patsy said abruptly. "I'll drive. You're in no condition to handle a car."

He nodded and walked meekly back to the sleek vehicle. And she thought of the complexities of life. All she had ever wanted was to be loved. She did not want to give orders, to plan the future of others. But with love went responsibility.

As she wheeled the car back toward the highway, past the jam of autos and waiting people, she wondered if the invisible cord had parted and would soon take root in her own body. Perhaps it had already.

Perce said, "I'll never talk to you like that again."

She hoped he would not. But one day when the tension built up again, he would abuse her again. That he would do so was inevitable—as inevitable as her wearing the black gown with the sequins at incongruous moments of love had been with the other man.

"Patsy, I think I should marry you," he whispered.

"Don't worry, you will." She turned and smiled at him, then put her eyes back on the road.

And the deputy sheriff directing traffic took a moment to stare at the expensive car and the attractive woman behind the wheel. High class, real high class. And that little guy beside her with his red eyes. How could a woman like her go for a character like that? The deputy shook his head and blew a shrill blast on his whistle.

21

AL Hight stood outside his camper, smoking a cigar and scowling at the mob pressing toward the infield gates. With no parking area left on the road, some of the late-comers had left their cars on the highway and hiked for the gates. They would find vantage points and watch the races from folding camp stools if they were lucky—or stand through the whole thing if they had no place to sit.

Stupid, Al thought. The whole bit was stupid.

Ginger came out of the camper. She had washed her face and put on fresh lipstick. She stood beside her husband, arms folded over her bosom. The morning sun turned her hair to fire.

"I should've punched Mike in the nose," Al said heavily.

"I'm glad you didn't. It wouldn't have proved anything."

"Everything was going okay and then all of a sudden he acts like his wife is too good for me or something."

"Mike didn't exactly act like I was the fairest rose that ever bloomed," Ginger said bitterly.

"I wonder what went wrong?" Al glowered at the sky as if he expected to find the answer there in letters of fire.

Ginger was silently thoughtful for a moment. A group of shouting kids ran past their camper. Cars were inching up, closing in the gap left by the vehicles that had pulled out. Al had already moved his camper nearer the gate.

Ginger said, "I guess this sort of thing doesn't work for some people."

"You mean swapping around?"

Ginger nodded. "Some people just aren't cut out for it. I guess Diana and Mike are that kind." Ginger bit her lip. "Some people find all they need in each other. They—well—they don't need anybody else."

Something in her voice caused Al to look at her in surprise. "You sound like maybe you wish we didn't need anybody else."

She shrugged and looked away at the old barn across the fields. The decrepit structure looked peaceful in the morning light. Beyond, a grove of pepper trees spread green lace against the horizon.

"I wonder how it would feel," Ginger said, "if you really didn't need anybody else."

"I dunno." Al threw his cigar into the dust and stepped on it. "Be pretty dull, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose. To use your term, swapping it around is fun. We—I guess we need it, don't we Al?"

"I guess." He frowned and patted her flaming hair. "Did you have any fun with him?"

"At first. Then he got moody."

"About the same with me. She tried to get me drunk. But every time she turned her back, I poured the booze down the sink. She acted like the end of the world when I didn't pass out."

"Funny, but I thought they'd be regulars. You know, our kind."

"So did L. Hell, I wouldn't have talked him into the

idea of these campers if I hadn't. Now we got a camper and the problem of what the hell to do with it."

"Have fun in it, I suppose," Ginger said listlessly.

"Say, that's an idea." He brightened. "We haven't initiated it ourselves yet."

Later, in the camper, with the dinette made into a bed, they finally broke their embrace. Both were quiet for a moment, listening to the sounds outside.

"I enjoyed it, Al," Ginger said.

"Yeah, it's always good to come home." He slapped her playfully on the hip. "But it's good to go away again, huh?"

She turned and looked at him. A shadow touched her eyes for a moment, then was gone. "I guess we do need it. We're not like Diana and Mike. We need to go away. But we appreciate coming home."

"I got a hunch Mike and Diana will clear out of this area."

"Did they say anything?"

"No I just have a hunch."

For a moment their eyes held, then Ginger said, "I wonder who will move in next door."

Al grinned. "I can't wait to see."

"Me neither." They both laughed.

At last Al said soberly, "Boy, I'm bushed. I don't think I can stay awake to watch those races."

"Take me home, Al. And pretend I'm the wife of the new next-door neighbor. It might be fun."

Mike was unable to wait until they reached their house. He pulled up in front of the Village Tavern. On the south side of the building, adjoining the parking area was a phone booth. Mike strode to it.

"I hope Joe doesn't raise hell about the hour," Mike said. He glanced at the sky. "It isn't exactly the middle of the day."

Well, he always was an early riser."

"Let's hope he still is," Mike said. Propping the door to the phone booth open with his foot, he gave the oper-

ator his company president's private number. He crossed his fingers for luck.

The phone rang twice and a raspy voice barked into the phone. "For Pete's sake, what's happened now?"

Mike swallowed. Usually the president of the firm held his temper. But this morning something had steamed him.

"Hi, Joe. This is Mike. Mike Eaton."

"Oh." Silence. Then: "I thought it was the plant calling again. We've got a rush job—overtime, you know. Everything's loused up. Guess I'll have to go down and straighten it out. What do you want? They got you in jail?"

"Joe, you warned me about moving to the Valley Division and you were right. I was wondering—"

"Want to come back? Is that it?"

"Well, I was hoping—"

"Stop hoping. The idiot that took your place doesn't know a lug wrench from a drill press. Welcome back to civilization."

"Thanks, Joe—"

"By the way, Mike. What will you do with your house out there?"

"Sell it, I guess."

"The guy who took your place is young and bright with a head full of figures but afraid to get grease under his nails. I'll transfer him out there and maybe he'll buy your house."

"Is he married?"

"Fine-looking wife."

"I hate to see any young couple—"

"I tried to tell you but you wouldn't listen. I'm not going to waste time trying to convince him. Let him find out for himself."

"Yeah, I guess it's something everybody has to learn for himself. We'll pack up and come back."

"Sooner the better, Mike."

On the way up the hill Mike told Diana what his boss had said. Diana was pleased.

They parked the camper in the drive and looked

around the yard. It was very quiet on the knoll. A typical suburban Sunday morning.

Mike looked at his wife with the sun shining on her pale hair. "I need you, honey. But not in that damn house. And not right away. We've got a lifetime ahead of us—and just a couple of nights to forget."

From a nearby house or from somebody's portable radio came a sudden blasting sound. An announcer's voice said, ". . . and just this minute, ladies and gentlemen, the infield gates at Valley Raceway swung open. Hundreds of people are streaming in . . ."

Whoever owned the radio adjusted the volume. It was suddenly very quiet.

Cemetery-quiet, as Mike had said.

THE END

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