

TWO FACES OF PASSION

Hodge Evens

They were sisters,
identical, breathtakingly
lovely. Meet Kit, who
would follow a man to
heaven... and Theona,
whose unholy passions
would drag him into hell!

THEN MEET THE MAN THEY
BOTH WANTED... WANTED BADLY
ENOUGH TO SHARE—WITHOUT HIS KNOWLEDGE!



B443Y
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THE SHOCKING STORY OF ONE MAN SHARED BY TWO SISTERS!



TAMING A WILD BLONDE

"You greedy, no-good—"

"Don't talk that way to me!"

"Is that a way to treat me? I say you're no good at all."

"Shut up!" He jumped from the couch.

She rolled over and buried her face in her hands. The yellow hair shook as she sobbed. **"A no-good, that's what you are."**

"I'll show you what I am." He flung himself upon her again, pinning her as she lay there on her stomach. **"Yeah,"** he swore, **"I'll show you."**

She felt the first touch of the horror he planned. Her skin crawled.

"No, Frank. Not that!"

"I'll—show—you—uh—I'll . . ." He was grunting and panting.

"No!" She heaved, twisted.

But he clung to his mount. He did not have to go to the whip. Theona let out a wild shriek. . . .



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work are fictional*

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CHAPTER ONE

WEARY and a little frightened, she descended the bus steps. A sign on the station wall said: *Riverdale. Welcome to the Orange Empire.* It was a ten-minute stop before the bus continued on to L.A. Hopeful male eyes watched her tall figure as she crossed the waiting-room. A fat salesman set his sample case on the floor to make room for her on the crowded bench. Pretending she didn't notice, Kit crossed to the newsstand. Not that she couldn't have used a few minutes of relaxation. But the fat salesman looked like the sort of man who would have busy fingers. It had been a long ride from El Paso. Too long. Even on a bus it cost money to travel these days. You had to eat. At Indio she had broken her last dollar for a hot beef sandwich. The remains of the dollar she clutched with moist fingers in the pocket of her tweed jacket.

Absently she eyed the bright-colored magazine covers on the newsstand racks. Smiling cover girls with shining hair. Good teeth. Happy, well-fed girls. A photographer took your picture and that was it. You were paid for it. She wondered how many of the girls peering at her from the glossy covers would forget their smiles after a season with Wilson's Girl Shows.

The thin-faced news vendor laid his *Racing Form* aside. He peered at her legs and whistled. "A tall one," he

said, grinning across a tray of candy bars. "With red hair. I like 'em tall."

She didn't bother to look up. This was familiar, an old routine heard wherever she went. From cab drivers and bellhops and brokers and actors. From anybody wearing a pair of pants. Either they said it aloud or they said it with their eyes.

The news vendor mumbled something about buying her a drink. But she was intent on the latest issue of *Variety*. She was broke and hungry and uneasy. Being stripped to a few coins and a bus ticket scared her. It reminded her too strongly of the years when her father, Charlie Durand, would return from a round of booking offices without a job. Maybe to pawn one of his precious throwing knives for a bottle. Kit was seven then and she had a younger sister to mother. But young as she was, she knew vaudeville was as dead as Charlie Durand's hopes. Deader, maybe. . .

With trembling fingers she picked *Variety* out of the rack and scanned the half-column story on page one that had caught her eye. There it was. Her luck. With nervous gray eyes she read the story that said Theona Layne was starring in thirteen half-hour television films for the Frank Manners Productions. The stories were being filmed at Manners' citrus ranch on the outskirts of Encanto. The story went on to say that television was just a hobby with the rich Mr. Manners, whose shadowed past concerned more than the raising of citrus fruits.

Kit thought bitterly, maybe Theona Layne can spare a buck for an old friend.

The news vendor said, "You good-lookin' dames ever figure on payin' for anything? Or do you read for free?"

Flushing, Kit replaced the *Variety* and turned her back on his sarcasm. Ordinarily she would have spent a quar-

ter for the show-business paper. But not today. Not with only thirty-five cents in her pocket.

At one end of the bus station she found a wall map of Southern California. Inspection proved Encanto wasn't too far from where she stood.

She walked back to where her bus waited on the ramp and asked the driver if he could take her to Encanto.

He chewed a toothpick as he stared at her and answered, "For Encanto you got to catch a local, Red."

Depending on the color you dyed your hair, you acquired new nicknames. Kit hadn't quite become used to Red.

She said, a little tremulously, "How much is the fare?"

In her high heels she was a shade taller than he was. He spat his frayed toothpick in the general direction of a sandbox. "Encanto's a tough town," he said. "Four thousand men are building Schuyler Dam. Or maybe you knew that already. Maybe that's why you're goin'. A lot of hot-lookin' babes like you are headin' that way."

His insolence angered her and for a moment she was tempted to slam her red snakeskin bag over his head. But she thought better of it immediately and walked over to the ticket window instead. A clerk told her Encanto was eighteen miles away. She could be routed on her ticket at no extra fare.

The bus driver grumbled when he had to crank open the luggage compartment and remove her suitcase. But he took the opportunity to stare at the trim line of her thigh and hip molded against the fabric of the tight skirt.

"In Encanto you'll do all right," he said, handing her the suitcase.

The Encanto bus was loaded and waiting to pull out and she barely had time to squirm into the crowded aisle. Just as she slid her suitcase onto the luggage rack, the bus be-

gan to move. She noticed at once that the rest of the passengers were males. Men in working clothes on their way to seek employment at the dam. In the aisle bodies pressed against her own with bold intimacy. When the bus swung around a corner she felt a hand. The hand moved. She winced. She tore blindly at a wrist with her long nails. One of the dark anonymous faces yelped. She saw a man in a cap push his way hurriedly toward the rear.

A fat Mexican who had observed the incident shook his fist at the man and said, "*Cabrone!*" Then he removed his sweat-stained hat and addressed Kit.

"You please to sit down," he told her gravely, indicating the seat he was vacating.

When Kit shook her head, he insisted. He even moved a box of carpenter's tools into the aisle so she would have room for her feet. She thanked him.

It was good to sit down. As the bus banged along through the night she stared through the window at the dark silent hills. Now that she had made her decision she experienced a slight uneasiness. It had been a year since she had seen Theona. Well, she wouldn't land in L.A. broke if there were any way to avoid it. And Theona offered a solution to her problem. Only a dire emergency would force her to chance another of Theona's tantrums. There was no telling how Theona would react to a request for money. Theona was a star. It said so in *Variety*.

Kit must have dozed, for suddenly she was aware that the bus was not moving.

The fat Mexican tipped his hat to her. He lifted his box of carpenter tools and said, "*Adios,*" and shuffled down the steps with the other passengers.

When she alighted she found the bus station was closed. She peered up and down what appeared to be the main street. To her left it slanted sharply uphill. The

thought of carrying her suitcase up the grade decided her. She turned downhill, her eyes watching for a drugstore or phone booth. Near the station the street had been deserted but now as she covered half a block she saw groups of men idling before darkened store fronts.

Switching her suitcase to her left hand, Kit clenched her right fist. Down the street a big red-and-green neon sign said *Prince's* was the place to dine and dance.

Off to one side, the tinny sound of an old-time bar-room piano rolled out through a dimly lighted doorway. Giving the entryway a quick glance, Kit saw a number of men and two girls in cheap evening gowns. One of the girls glared at her. Then, when Kit offered no competition by entering, the girl laughed and said something to a man nearby. The man put his hand on the girl's hip.

As Kit drew abreast of a group of men standing in front of a pool hall, a colored man stopped her. In the faint glow of street lights she could see his hair was gray at the temples.

"Beggin' your pardon, miss," he said gravely, "but I seen you come down from the station and figured you for a stranger. Reckon you don't know you're south of the line."

"The line?" she echoed, turning so that the light spilling from the pool-hall doorway fell across the planes of her face.

As the light struck her the colored man stiffened. He said, "Didn't recognize you at fust. Sorry."

Puzzled by the sudden unfriendliness in his tone, Kit said, "Maybe you recognize me. But I never saw you before in my life."

The colored man said tiredly. "I work at *Prince's*." He inclined his dark head toward the neon sign. "I waited

your table t'other night. But I guess maybe you don't want to remember that night."

Deliberately he turned his back on her and began talking to the men in front of the pool hall.

As she crossed the street and angled uphill, Kit's fingers were suddenly moist on the handle of the suitcase. The first cross street beyond the bus station, she noted, was Independence. Here the stores were brightly lighted. They looked clean. Expensive cars were slanted in at the curb. The business district, she saw, ended two blocks up the hill. Encanto wasn't much of a town.

When she finally found a phone booth, fear coiled in her stomach. She got the number of Frank Manners Productions from the operator. Although she didn't have much hope that anyone would be in the office at this time of night, she had to try.

A harsh male voice answered. "Yeah."

Kit frowned. "Is this Manners Productions?"

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"Miss Layne, please."

"Hang on," the male voice said.

In a moment Theona came to the phone. Kit said, "Hello, Theona. It's me." She got right to the point, telling Theona she was dead broke.

Theona's laugh was even more unpleasant than Kit remembered it. "I heard you were with a girlie show. What happened? Did you get raided?"

"The show folded."

"If your g-string's worn out," Theona said shrilly. "I'll buy you another one."

Kit felt her cheeks flush. "I'm not joking, Theona. I need some money."

"Don't we all?" That shrill note was in Theona's voice again. "But you don't have to be broke. Hang a red light

in the window. The guys will kick the door down getting to you—”

Color drained from Kit's cheeks. She clutched the phone tighter and said firmly, "I'm not talking about a loan. Just a small repayment on some of the money I've let you have in the past."

The shrillness increased in Theona's voice. "Bring up my past, damn you!" she cried.

Kit frowned. "What's the matter? You don't sound like yourself." Theona did sound like herself, Kit had to admit. Only more so.

Theona said, "I'm in a mess. I'm all worked up—"

Despite Theona's attitude, Kit said immediately, "Anything I can do to help?"

"Just get out of town and leave me alone!"

Kit clenched her teeth at the rebuff. "You got a break. I saw it in *Variety*."

Theona made no reply. After a minute, Kit jiggled the receiver, thinking the connection had been broken.

"Oh, all right," Theona snapped suddenly. "When you get to L.A., phone my agent, Charlie Williams. I'll wire him to let you have a hundred bucks."

Theona hung up. Kit's lips thinned as she said to the telephone, "Thanks sister. Thanks a lot."

Across the street neon letters spelled out a sign over a barroom: *Cort Bentley's*. Another sign in the window said *Kansas City Steaks*. The sign reminded her stomach that she was hungry.

"Damn you, Theona," she said aloud as she picked up her suitcase.

Recalling the shrill note in Theona's voice, Kit frowned. It could mean Theona was angered or frightened—or hurt. Theona had always been complex, unpredictable. Like the time Theona was five and had gotten into their father's

knife case and cut her hand. Instead of crying, she had laughed, holding up her hand so that Kit, shocked, could see the blood. Only when Kit bandaged the wound did Theona cry.

At the drugstore Kit bought a bag of peanuts with one of her nickels. One of the few things you could still get for five cents. They didn't give you as many peanuts as in pre-inflation days but at the moment it was the price, not the quantity, that counted.

Munching her peanuts, Kit returned to the bus station. A schedule on the door said the next bus that made connections for L.A. was due at four a.m. It was now nine-thirty. Sighing, she sank to a bench and put her feet on her suitcase. From the corner of her eye she glanced at the newspaper rack nearby and noticed a copy of the local paper, the *Enterprise*. In the glow of the station light she made out a large picture on page one. It was a photograph of a man with a bloodied face and shocked, frightened eyes. Over the picture a small headline said, *Dam Worker Rodzolo Victim of Slasher.*

CHAPTER TWO

IN the office of *Manners Television Productions*, an adobe building at the edge of an orange grove, Brill O'Hearn watched his employer combing his hair before a large mirror fastened to the inside of the office door. Automatically, O'Hearn tossed a cigarette from the pack he had taken out of his coat pocket and caught the cigarette in his mouth. It was a trick he had assiduously copied years ago from the leading man of a road-show company of

The Front Page. As a high-school sophomore. O'Hearn had considered this production an omen. He had seen it eight times during its brief run in Karankow Falls. One thing it had settled for him. He would pattern his life after the lead in the play. Newspapermen had a lot of fun and they also protected the weak and oppressed. And, too, it was the only profession in which you could thumb your nose with comparative safety at the racket boys.

In his idealistic youth O'Hearn had never imagined that one day he would be taking pay from a mobster. Even an ex-mobster like Frank Manners. But after a dozen police beats on metropolitan dailies, his ideals had been herded quietly into a remote corridor of his mind and the door tightly closed. At thirty-two he had developed a carefully nurtured cynicism.

Unconsciously, perhaps, he dressed the way a stage newspaperman would dress. His tweeds always needed pressing. He liked bow ties. He was tall. His shoulders filled out his jacket. To complete the picture he really should have worn horn-rimmed glasses, he supposed, and at one time he had considered adding them to lend a little dignity in his job as press agent. But on second thought he had realized there was little dignity required in grinding out publicity releases for Manners Television Productions.

Now, as he watched Manners combing his hair, O'Hearn was amused, and this brought the cynical smile flicking across his wide mouth. It seemed incongruous to him that a character responsible for spilling so much blood in the past should be so particular about the top of his head.

As Manners combed his hair, his small bright eyes found O'Hearn in the mirror. "You talked me into this TV deal," Manners snarled from the corner of his mouth.

Brill O'Hearn shrugged, lifted his slender hands, let

them fall. "It looked like some easy money. It still does. If—" he glanced across the room to the leggy blonde curled up on a red leather couch—"if you can keep certain things under control."

The blonde chewed a thumbnail. Behind her a bulky man leaned against the wall, well out of the glare of a fluorescent desk lamp.

Manners finished combing his hair and leaned against the corner of a large executive-type desk, putting the comb in the inside pocket of his plaid sports jacket. He patted his hair with his right hand. It was good hair. It had cost him over a hundred dollars.

The sound of the blonde nibbling at her thumbnail made him jump. He said, "For crissakes, Theona! Cut it out. You give me the creeps."

"I'm nervous," Theona said, twisting around and crossing her legs. She wore a bright yellow dress only one shade lighter than her hair.

The man behind her shifted in order to watch her legs. His hands, clenched now, looked as big as Coachella grapefruit.

Manners eyed the blonde. "You got a right to be nervous," he said nastily. "You blow the duke on me and I'll—"

Theona's eyes were a metal gray—a coarse metal now as she stared at Manners.

"You can't get along without me," she said.

"Can't I?" Frank Manners smiled with his expensive teeth. The teeth, like the hair and his built-up shoes, were custom made. He said, "The films are finished. They're in the can."

"So what?"

"You don't have to look so damned beautiful now," he said, glaring at her. "I can mess up your face—"

Brill O'Hearn said, "Just like Chicago."

Manners stared at O'Hearn. Then he jerked his head toward the husky man who stood against the wall. "O'Hearn forgot I don't like that kind of talk. Maybe you better remind him, Nacky."

Nacky Archer moved into the cone of light from the desk lamp. He looked like a character straight out of a bad movie. His nose had been broken. Above the bridge his brows were a thick, ragged line.

He came to the red leather chair and put the edge of his hard heel down on O'Hearn's little toe. He bore down. "Mr. Manners don't like to hear about the old days," Nacky Archer said.

O'Hearn's face whitened under his tan but he made no move.

"Sorry, Frank," O'Hearn said stiffly to Manners. He forced himself to grin as he stared up at Nacky. You bastard, O'Hearn thought. I'd like to take that gun you've got under your coat and ram it.

Manners gestured with his hand. Obediently Nacky stepped back to the wall and folded his thick arms.

Manners said, "I got thirteen TV films at twenty thousand apiece. You know how much dough that is?"

"It's plenty," O'Hearn said. "But you'll peddle them, all right." He wanted to rub his injured toe, but he was damned if he'd give Nacky that much satisfaction.

Manners said, "Before we sell any films, we got to get Theona out of this jam." He sank down into a chair behind the desk. He gave Theona a sharp glance as if he had just remembered something. "Who was the phone call from?" he asked abruptly.

Theona forgot to nibble at her nail. "From Kit, my twin sister," she said.

Manners jerked upright in his chair and snapped his

fingers. "She's the one that looks like you. Your double." Quickly he pulled open a desk drawer, fumbled through a stack of photos until he found the one he wanted. He threw it on the desk. It was a picture of Theona and Kit, smiling, their yellow heads together. The legend at the bottom read: *The Durand Sisters*.

"That's our out." Manners tapped the photo with a manicured nail. "Where'd she call from?"

"I gathered she's here in town," Theona said, excitement coloring her cheeks. She got to her feet and her long legs carried her to the window. Her body moved sensuously beneath the yellow dress. Hips and thighs and breasts stirred as she turned to face the others. She was a magnificently beautiful woman.

Theona's voice tightened as she spoke. "That's right. Kit could get me out of this mess." She looked at O'Hearn and added, "You'll have to do it, Brill. Kit won't listen to me."

O'Hearn peered at the photo on Manners' desk. True, the Durand sisters looked alike. But there was a difference. Kit's face showed something else. Character, maybe. But you couldn't be sure with a photo.

"Give her a fast pitch," Theona told O'Hearn. "She'd probably go for you."

O'Hearn frowned. "I don't like dragging your sister into this."

Manners' eyes looked ugly. "She worked for a girlie show. So you know what she is." He looked at Theona, but Theona said nothing.

Brill O'Hearn's big mouth was a tight line across his angular face. Then he shrugged. "I'm a press agent. Not a fixer."

"This time you're a fixer," Manners said. "I got suckered into this ranch. It's one sure way to go broke quick.

I don't know a damned thing about raisin' oranges. And I got my dough tied up in TV films. At twenty thousand a crack. Thirteen of 'em, O'Hearn. If the guy who's goin' to buy these films figures there's a scandal, he won't go through with the deal. I'll be flat busted. And I'm not goin' to be busted. You can bet on that."

"Nobody said you'd go broke, Frank," O'Hearn drawled.

Manners looked injured. "Soon as I try to go legit I get boxed."

"Why stay legit, then?" O'Hearn asked. "You're missing a big chance in Encanto. Four thousand men building a dam. You've got a warehouse full of slot machines in L.A. . . ."

"Slots are a federal rap now," Manners reminded him. "Besides, they're penny ante."

"They pay the overhead," O'Hearn went on, seeing the flicker of interest in Manners' eyes. "You could run some games."

"And bring in girls?" Manners looked at him. "You trying to talk me into a deal?"

O'Hearn shrugged. "I'll never get rich on what I make as a press agent. I'm getting no younger." He peered closely at Manners. "By the time Schuyler Dam is finished you would get back everything you lost in this ranch—multiplied by a hundred!"

A teletype machine behind the desk suddenly came to life. Manners turned to study the message as it came out. When it was complete, he tore off the yellow paper and flung it down on the desk top. His mouth twitched and sweat glistened along the band that held the toupé to his forehead.

"Read it," he told O'Hearn coldly. "Then get busy."

Theona bit her nails. O'Hearn read the message. It was

from the Hollywood agency handling the sale of Manners' television films. It said there were rumors that Theona Layne, star of the series, was involved in a troublesome situation. They hoped it wasn't true. Davidson of Ole's Oats wouldn't like it. Ole's Oats had an option on the films. They might cancel.

Manners said, "Get Theona's sister. Don't come back without her."

O'Hearn said, "Sure, Frank." Then, glancing at Theona, he remembered something. He took a small oblong box from his pocket and tossed it to her. She caught it deftly.

"Spare fingernails," O'Hearn said with a wry smile. "I picked them up downtown today. Sometimes I almost forget I run errands, too, for Manners Television."

Manners said, "You're gettin' paid."

Theona laughed unpleasantly, "I'll have to pretty myself up for Kit," she said.

O'Hearn left. Outside, he moved his tongue across his teeth as if he had tasted something unpleasant. As he walked to his parked car he wondered why he always felt like washing his hands after talking with Frank Manners.

CHAPTER THREE

INSIDE the office Manners leaned against the desk, reached out for Theona and drew her against him.

Theona giggled. "Do you want Nacky to watch?"

Manners said, "Beat it, Nacky."

Nacky Archer nodded. Stiffly, he walked to the door and went out, closing it behind him.

Manners tightened his grip on Theona. "I hear you were down at *Prince's* the other night."

Theona moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "Don't be mad," she said. She put a hand against Manners' cheek.

"That place is a dive," he growled.

"I just wanted some atmosphere."

"How much atmosphere did you get with Cort Bentley?" Manners asked. She started to bite her thumbnail again and Manners pulled her to him, letting one hand run over her curves. "If I ever catch you with anybody, I'll kill you."

"Then you'll have to commit suicide," Theona said with a grin.

"I don't get it," Manners scowled.

"You'll never catch me with anybody but you. See?"

She flicked off the desk lamp. In the darkness he could hear the rustle of her body against the leather couch. As he moved toward the sound he felt something soft about his ankles. Stooping, his fingers touched a wisp of cloth. From the feel of it he knew it was her dress.

He said, "Like a lot of dames you figure making love to a guy will even up anything."

"Won't it?" she said softly.

"Not that business down at *Prince's* with Cort Bentley."

Now that his eyes were accustomed to the darkness he could see her body, startlingly white against the red couch.

"Are you trying to say that I'd make love to a slob like Bentley?" she cried. "Right in *Prince's*?"

He laughed harshly. "You're the kind might do it. Yeah, you sure might."

"That's a mean thing to say," she murmured but she didn't sound angry.

"You'd probably have the band to give a bugle call and drum roll and call for a spot. When you figured you had everybody lookin' your way you'd climb on the table and give 'em a show."

She giggled. "I don't like Bentley that much."

"It wouldn't have to be Bentley. Just any character that looked good to you. Brill O'Hearn's got you figured right. He says you're an exhibitionist. He says if we didn't have laws, girls like you would be doing it on the City Hall steps."

"Brill O'Hearn says that about me? I'll show him!"

"With your clothes on or off?"

She regarded him a moment, then said, "O'Hearn's too smug. I don't like him." She got up and crossed the room. She fumbled for a cigarette from the silver box on the desk. "Don't lose any sleep over O'Hearn." Then, with the cigarette bobbing between her lips, she moved to the door, opened it, and peered down the shadowy length of the hall. A deeper shadow behind a tier of filing cabinets froze into immobility.

Behind her Frank Manners said irritably, "What the hell are you doing?"

"I thought I heard somebody in the hall."

"Who'd be out there?" he demanded, coming up to peer over her nude shoulder into the darkness.

"It might be Nacky spying on us."

"Nacky's in the car," Frank Manners said. "Outside."

She flicked the silver lighter she had taken from the desk, then held the flame so that its glow fell on the planes and curves of her body.

Manners said harshly, "Put that thing out."

She avoided his clutching hands as the flame threw dancing shadows across her round firm whiteness. Then she moved the lighter in a large circle so that the glow of

the flame left no part of her undiscovered. Slowly she kicked off her shoes.

"I forgot, Frank," she murmured, "you like me in bare feet so I'm not so tall."

"Are you ribbing me?" he snapped.

"No, darling," she whispered, letting the flickering light fall on his tight face. "I owe you so much. You've given me a chance in TV. I'll be a star."

"You'll be a star if you don't gum it up by getting involved with the wrong people."

She laughed. "You're the kind of people I like."

"O'Hearn said I ought to make you wear a chastity belt and then throw away the key."

"O'Hearn has some quaint ideas about me," she said quietly.

Still holding the flaming lighter, she brushed past him to stretch full length on the couch. Suddenly she released the catch on the lighter and the flame died. Into the darkness she said, "Either turn on the heater or come over here. I'm cold."

Frank Manners stood rigid a moment, then kicked the door shut behind him.

With the cigarette still in her mouth she waited for him. When he came to her she smiled softly and blew smoke at him. He coughed.

"This is a hell of a time to smoke."

"I'll put it out, Frank," she murmured. With one hand she squeezed his shoulder. With the other, she removed her cigarette. She put her face against his face and, still smiling, she watched her left hand move slowly down the ridge of his spine, a wisp of smoke trailing from the lighted cigarette. For a moment she held the cigarette at arm's length. Then suddenly she pressed the glowing end against the small of his back.

His scream was horrible. He jackknifed, then struck the floor moaning.

The door was flung open and a flash of light filled the room. Nacky stood in the doorway, a .38 in his right hand. His left hand was on the wall switch. All he could see was Theona, her back toward him, pressing against the leather of the couch. On the floor, Frank Manners sat with his knees drawn up. His face was white. Instinctively Manners snatched up the shirt he had discarded and drew it over his lap.

"Cut those lights," he snarled at Nacky. "And clear out!"

Suppressed rage pulled at the corners of Nacky's mouth. But he said, "Sorry, Mr. Manners. I figured somebody was tryin' to kill you."

His eyes glared at the white body on the couch. He switched off the overhead lights and went out, shutting the door.

Gingerly, Manners got to his feet and touched the burned place on his back. He winced. He opened a desk drawer, drew something from the depths. There was a brief clean sound of an oiled mechanism. Then abruptly it grew still. Moving to the wall, he flicked on the lights. She still lay on her side. For a long moment he watched her shoulders jerk, the spasm seeming to run the length of her body.

"Theona."

She turned over on her back. Her penciled brows lifted as she stared at the gun he held cocked in his hand. Her eyes, moist now, moved to his face.

Manners said, "If I figured you burned me on purpose, I'd kill you." He spoke quietly. Only a muscle twitching at his right cheek showed he was upset. His forehead glistened and one corner of the lace that held his toupé to his

scalp had loosened under the flood of moisture from his pores.

"It was an accident, Frank," she said. "I—I was trying to put out the cigarette on the floor. It dropped out of my fingers."

"Damned funny accident," he said, still not lowering the gun.

"You do things to me, Frank," she whispered. "I didn't even realize I'd dropped it until you yelled." She sat up, drawing her long legs under her. In her eyes was a little girl's pleading. "I wouldn't hurt you, Frank."

He stared at her moist eyes. When he was like this, quiet and without bluster, he seemed most dangerous.

He said, "I've seen you laugh till you cried. Is that what you were doing? Were you laughing at me?"

She rose quickly to her feet, a tall, voluptuous woman, standing before him in the glaring overhead lights without shame. "Those tears were real, Frank." Without taking her eyes from him she reached into the box on the desk and removed a cigarette. She lit it and, when she had the tip glowing, she handed it to him. "If you can even think I'd do such a thing deliberately, pay me back."

He took the cigarette from her. For a moment he stared at it. Then he put it between his lips and set the gun on the desk. He moved to turn out the lights.

A few moments later he was stretched beside Theona on the red couch. It was a big couch, big enough to hold even her considerable length. She lay on her back, breathing deeply and regularly. An arm reposed behind her handsome head to lift it a little. Her large, bold breasts, white mounds of beauty barely visible in the dark room, seemed to stir with a life of their own, and Frank Manners touched in turn the shadowy nipple marking the center of each bosom. Theona's knees were drawn up slightly,

the soles of her manicured feet resting against one arm of the couch. Though not fully stretched out, they seemed marvelously long and seductive to Manners, as indeed they were; he could make out Theona's nude body dimly, but what sight missed, his sense of touch supplied.

Slowly, with a certain tenderness, his hand stroked her yellow tresses, the beautiful planes of her face. Then the hand descended, greedily fondled the two big breasts, the nipples, pinching the flesh as if Manners meant to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

He moved a little, and his other hand, the left one, began to fondle and squeeze Theona's pretty feet. Then it rose gradually, stroking her calves, her smooth and satiny thighs. They were cool and soft to his touch. The hand climbed still higher, and at the same time his lips crushed themselves to her rosy mouth.

She squirmed. "No, Frank!"

"What's the matter?"

"That smell of cigars."

He removed his lips, letting them trail down as his hand had done, following the line of her neck and shoulders. His kisses produced wet, smacking noises; he sounded like a thirst-tortured traveler sucking at a can of beer. Then suddenly his mouth reached a buxom, quivering breast. He kissed it all over, still smacking his lips, then fastened himself to the quivering nipple like a vampire sucking blood. At the same time his hands went under her resilient and silky hips.

"You beauty," he muttered. "You goddam beauty, I'll never let you go." Then his lips started exploring and smacking again.

"What the hell are you waiting for?"

"I'm not waiting, Theona. I'm not waiting, baby!"

In a surge of irrepressible passion, the little mobster

quickly threw himself on her glorious tall body, his lips buried in her neck, his hairy chest against her heaving breasts, his probing physique searching out the velvet of her. Her hands clutched his taut thews. Her heart pounded in expectation.

She fought to match his rhythmic contortion, and she was marvelously skilled at it. But before her climb to ecstasy was even under way, he was at the peak, blowing out his pent breath in a great gasp. Then his body seemed to collapse in her arms.

"Why, you bastard," she muttered. "You greedy, no-good—"

"Don't talk that way to me!"

"Is that a way to treat me? I say you're no good, no good at all."

"Shut up!" He jumped up from the couch.

She rolled over and buried her face in her hands. The yellow hair shook as she sobbed. "A no-good bastard, that's what you are."

"Am I? I'll show you what I am."

Any tenderness or affection Manners might have felt for Theona were not visible now. He flung himself upon her again, pinning her as she lay there on her stomach.

She tried to heave him off, but Manners was stronger than he looked.

"Yeah," he swore, "I'll show you."

She felt the first touch of the horror he planned. Her skin crawled.

"No, Frank. Not that!"

"I'll—show—you—uh—I'll . . ." He was grunting and panting.

"No!" She heaved, twisted.

But like an ugly little jockey riding a beautiful filly, he clung to both his mount and his goal. He did not have to

go to the whip. Her undulating flanks betrayed her pain and fear. As he jerked spasmodically, his teeth clenched, Theona let out a wild shriek.

"Frank . . . Frank! . . . *aaaah* . . ."

Nacky Archer waited behind the wheel of a big station wagon angled in beside the office. He was sweating. For the hundredth time, he glanced at the darkened office windows.

"Goddamn you, Theona," he said under his breath.

There was the smell of spring in the air. Spring and orange blossoms. He'd been smelling those blossoms all his life. It was time he quit this damned town. If it hadn't been for Manners and his offer of a job with a future, Nacky would have gone long ago. He knew the real reason Manners had hired him—just because his old man was a big wheel in Encanto's one-horse Police Department. Nacky also knew he enjoyed being Manners' bodyguard. It gave him a chance to be tough. He was still reveling in the joys afforded by his work when Manners and Theona finally emerged from the building and came toward him. Theona climbed into the station wagon beside Nacky.

Manners gave Nacky a narrow look with small bright eyes. His voice was sharp when he spoke. "How's your memory, Nacky?"

"Lousy," Nacky said after a moment. He keyed the ignition.

Manners nodded. "Good. When a man works for me he has a lot of things to forget." Manners paused a moment, then said, "When you take Theona home, come back here. We've got things to talk over."

"What things?"

"Rodzolo."

Nacky said, "Okay," and swung the station wagon out to the road. This part of his job Nacky had originally enjoyed the most—driving Theona home each night. But now he hated it.

Theona was still enduring echoes of the painful discomfort Manners had inflicted on her. At the same time, she burned with inner needs Manners had stimulated without being able to slake. Yet she looked cool as a yellow-haired icicle.

After a while, she said, "You're mad at me."

"What the hell have I got to be mad about?"

Theona pouted. "You haven't tried to touch me since I got into the car."

"Why'd you open the door and stand there with that lighter?" Nacky asked abruptly.

"I didn't know you were in the hall, Nacky. Honest."

"Like hell you didn't," he said. "You were throwin' it in my face."

"Don't be mad, Nacky." Leaning close to him she tried to find the lobe of his ear with her teeth. He jerked his head away.

"You're a goddamn bum," he said.

She giggled. "I'm a beautiful bum. And you like me." He remained silent. "Do you think about me at night?" she asked.

"I don't think of anything else."

She found the lobe of his ear and this time he did not pull away.

When he spoke again his voice was thick. "Why'd you mess around with Manners tonight? Why couldn't you wait until I wasn't around?"

"You make everything sound so nasty," she said. "Why do you like me if you think I'm so horrible?"

He shrugged and kept his eyes on the road.

"If we had time I could teach you a lot of things, Nacky."

He turned to glare at her and saw that she was grinning. "I'm no jerk. I've been around."

"You proved that to me the other night, Nacky. You're a young bull," she said teasingly, giving him a sly glance.

"How about seein' you home? Clear home?"

She shook her yellow head. "No. The house is out. If Frank found me with anybody he might cancel my contract."

"You don't need Manners. I got angles I can play in this town. There's plenty of dough here."

She said, "We can't go to the house any more. That is a risk I won't take again."

Suddenly he switched off the ignition and let the wagon coast to a clearing near an abandoned pump house. With the motor cut it was very quiet. He sat rigid, staring at the faint glow of lights from Encanto against the dark sky.

With narrowed eyes she said, "You've been smelling too many orange blossoms. We're not playing bride and groom. Not tonight—"

He caught her two wrists with one hand. He lifted the other hand as if to send it crashing against her face.

Her body stiffened but she didn't cringe. She smiled at him, showing her white teeth. "What happened the other night didn't mean anything. It was just an incident."

Nacky lowered his hand. "An incident?"

She took his two hands and lifted them to her soft curves.

"Theona," he said hoarsely.

She slipped her arms around his neck. He seized her roughly and held her in a fierce grip.

Suddenly she twisted out of his embrace. "I've got to go, Nacky."

His hands reached for her but she managed to open the door. She slid toward the door as he caught her by her dress. The bunched cloth climbed to her waist. For a long moment she dangled over the edge of the seat, her bared thighs flashing in the moonlight. She kicked angrily at the ground with her high heels.

"Let me go!" she cried.

He said, "But I figured you wanted to—"

"Not with you, I don't want to," she said furiously and when his hold relaxed she lunged out. There was the sound of tearing cloth. The bodice of her dress parted, ripped clear to her left shoulder. He caught a glimpse of firm full mounds of mellow flesh before she folded her arms across her chest.

Then she slammed the door in his face and clutched her torn dress to her breast.

"You were deliberately teasing me. Leading me on just so you could hurt me—"

"Touch me again," she said, "and I'll start running. I'll say you tried to rape me."

He stared at her in a pool of moonlight, seeing her whiteness and her beauty. Then he said with hatred, "Just like Frank Rodzolo."

Her lips might have been smiling but he couldn't be sure. She said, "You can take me home and I'll say nothing about this. Or you can get tough and I'll tell Frank. He'll believe not you, but me."

He slid under the wheel and turned the key in the ignition.

"Get in," he said tonelessly and waited as she climbed aboard.

CHAPTER FOUR

A FLASHLIGHT sweeping across Kit's face brought her instantly awake. She blinked into the blinding light, forgetting for the moment where she was. Then the light died and she remembered she was waiting here for a bus to L.A. The lights in the bus station now were dimmed. She rose from the bench as she saw the tall man stepping out of the green compact car at the curb. He crossed to her bench and introduced himself as Brill O'Hearn, press agent for Frank Manners.

"Didn't mean to frighten you with that light," he said. "I've been hunting all over town for you." His wide mouth smiled at her.

Kit peered up into his face. "Did Theona send you?" When he nodded, Kit said incredulously, "She wants to see me?"

"I want to have a talk with you first. How about a drink or some food?"

"I could stand a little of both," Kit said wearily.

He took her to a big, noisy place with wagon wheels and branding irons on the walls. A blast of Western music swept over them from a platform at the far end of the dance floor. Fiddle, guitar and piano ground out a fast rhythm for the perspiring couples who crowded the dance floor.

Over a Manhattan, Kit studied O'Hearn and decided he wasn't bad-looking. But his gray tweed suit needed pressing and his bow tie had been carelessly knotted.

After O'Hearn had ordered a steak for her, he said, "I

didn't think it possible for two girls to look so much alike. Even twins."

Kit gave him a bitter smile. "There's a two-hour difference in our ages."

"Theona is your baby sister."

"Baby?" Kit laughed sharply.

Brill O'Hearn clinked ice cubes in his glass and gave her a tight smile.

Kit looked at him seriously and asked, "What kind of trouble is Theona in this time?"

"Eat first. Then we'll talk."

Suddenly the hunger for food was replaced by a coiling fear in the pit of her stomach. But she knew she must eat something so she went to work on the steak while O'Hearn smoked and drank another highball.

Just as she was finishing, a heavy man moved to their table. He chewed a cold cigar and when he grinned Kit could see a gold tooth in his mouth.

"Hello, Cort," O'Hearn said to the big man, none too happily. "Cort Bentley owns this trap," he explained to Kit.

Cort Bentley removed his cigar. "This trap, as you call it," he told O'Hearn pointedly, "might make some folks a heap of dough before the dam is built." He was dressed like a rodeo performer doing the town. The brim of a white five-gallon Stetson cast a shadow across his fleshy face. In his high-heeled boots he appeared enormous. He regarded O'Hearn carefully as he asked, "Did you drop a hint to our friend?"

O'Hearn looked uncomfortable. "Yeah."

"Exactly what did you tell him?"

Brill O'Hearn fingered a pad of paper matches as he answered. "I told him about the one-arm gimmicks he's got stored in that L.A. warehouse."

"Did you tell him about the—er—young ladies?"

"He suggested it himself."

Cort Bentley rubbed his fleshy hands together. "We like money, don't we, O'Hearn? Big money?"

"Yeah," O'Hearn said with a bitter smile. "I'm a sucker for a million bucks."

Cort Bentley laughed agreeably. To Kit he said, "You're a dead ringer for Theona Layne."

"Am I?"

His thick lips pursed a little as he looked from Kit to O'Hearn. "I heard tell Theona Layne's got a twin sister."

O'Hearn shrugged.

Bentley said, "Maybe our mutual friend has figured an angle to get himself off the hook."

"First time I knew he was on the hook," said O'Hearn.

"It's that Rodzolo thing," Bentley went on. "Maybe Manners figures to have somebody take the rap for Theona. Her sister, maybe—"

O'Hearn's face flamed. "Get away from here, Bentley!"

"That ain't no way for business associates to talk to each other," Bentley said thinly.

"We're not associates—yet."

The big man lit his cigar. "Could be I made a mistake, dealin' with the jack in the deck. Maybe I oughta deal with the ace."

"Deal any way you want to," O'Hearn snapped.

Bentley gave him an ugly look and shuffled off, the peak of his white cowboy hat visible across the room above the other heads.

Kit had been listening intently. Now she said, "What's Cort Bentley got to do with Theona?"

"Nothing. He's just the constable here."

Kit said, "Did I step into something?" And when

O'Hearn gave her no immediate answer, she added, "Who's Rodzolo?"

"Just a guy."

"A guy named Frank Rodzolo. I saw his picture in the paper. Somebody cut his puss to pieces."

O'Hearn looked at her sharply. Her face had gone so dead white he thought for a moment she was going to faint.

"So you know," he said dully.

To regain her sense of balance, Kit stared hard at Brill O'Hearn, noting details she hoped would help to anchor her spinning thoughts. He wore a light blue shirt with a bow tie. He looked like the picture of a Harvard man she had seen in *Esquire*. His eyes were brown and sensitive. His nose, like his ears, were a trifle too large.

O'Hearn was saying, "Those films starring your sister are in the process of being sold to Ole's Oats. It's a big deal and involves a lot of money. Old man Davidson who owns Ole's Oats used to be an evangelist before he got into the breakfast food racket. And he still thinks like an evangelist. And to him—outside of not eating Ole's Oats for breakfast, the greatest sin is anything that pertains to the flesh."

"Then the deal may be canceled because of something Theona's done?"

"Exactly."

"*Variety* called Manners a wealthy citrus grower who makes TV films for a hobby," Kit said. "If that's the case, he can afford to lose a sponsor."

O'Hearn's angular face grew serious. "Frank Manners can be very nasty. I wouldn't want you to be the one to make him angry."

She nodded her sleek head as if confirming some secret

thought. "So he's that Frank Manners. The one from Chicago."

Brill O'Hearn said swiftly, "Don't bring up the past in front of him. He's touchy about it."

"What is it you want of me?" Kit asked.

"I want you to help your sister. I'll give it to you straight. Two nights ago a man tried to rape her. She fought him off. He was hurt some and—"

"Theona cut him up."

"Yeah, that's about it."

Kit got to her feet and tucked her purse under her arm. "Thanks for the meal and the drink," she said. "I'll get my suitcase out of your car."

She turned and elbowed her way through the noisy crowd, aware that O'Hearn was calling her; but she did not look back. Uppermost in her mind was the desire to flee. Why, she asked herself, had she ever seen that story in *Variety*? By now she would have been in L.A. happily unaware of what had happened in a two-bit citrus town named Encanto. The sickness grew inside her.

She was skirting the crowded dance floor when she heard the burst of angry voices near the front door. Instantly a hush settled over the big room. The music slowed then halted on a discordant note. Men were crowded three deep along the bar that ran half the length of the deep building. A moment ago they had been laughing, joking. Now their faces turned toward the door.

Two figures stood motionless just inside the front door. One was the plump Mexican who had given Kit his seat on the bus. He carried his box of carpenter's tools slung across his shoulder. He had apparently had a few drinks, for he seemed a little tipsy but harmless, Kit thought. His amiable smile was frozen to his lips as he stared at Cort Bentley.

Bentley was grinning as he looked back over his shoulder at the tense crowd. "I 'preciate how you folks feel," he said in his large voice. "And I'll handle it. You don't have to worry none. There won't be nobody but whites in Cort Bentley's place." Bentley turned back to the doorway. "Outside," he said, jerking a big thumb toward the street.

The Mexican's companion, a slender colored man wearing a cap and coveralls, said to the Mexican, "Come on. We're in the wrong place, I reckon." His eyes looked a little frightened.

But Diego Jesus Guterrez refused to budge. He blinked up at the big man in the cowboy hat. "Why for we no can drink here?"

"This place is for white men only!"

Diego's coppery face lost color. Not four miles from here he had been born. Once, too long ago to remember, his family had owned the land where Encanto now stood. And his uncle was buried here. Killed by Americanos. The culprits had never been found. But Diego Guterrez was good with tools and he would work on Schuyler Dam and it would be a sort of memorial to Uncle Rafael.

A voice at the bar said, "Watch 'em, Cort. Them kind always got a knife up their sleeve."

Cort Bentley, enjoying himself, said. "I'll watch 'em." Again he jerked his thumb. "Outside," he told Diego, "and take your black friend with you!"

But before Diego could move, the big man in the white hat shoved him violently. With the weight of the tool box on his shoulder Diego went to his knees.

As if from a great distance he heard Luther Jones, the colored man, say, "Leave him alone. He hasn't done anything."

Luther Jones, his *compadre*. Two lonely men in a new town. Two men who wanted only a couple of drinks before they started out tomorrow to seek work at Schuyler Dam.

With one big hand Cort Bentley knocked the slim, dark Luther Jones aside. The other hand caught the Mexican hard across the face. The crack of the blow was loud as a gunshot.

The Mexican's head rolled and a thin trickle of blood stained his chin.

Somebody far back in the crowd said, "Let 'em have a drink, Bentley. They ain't hurtin' anybody!"

Cort Bentley spun on his built-up heels, trying to identify the speaker. Failing, he jerked his thumb at the Mexican who sat dazedly on the floor, and the colored man who was trying to lift him to his feet.

"There'll be a thousand more of these monkeys comin' to work on the dam," Cort Bentley said loudly. "If we ain't careful they'll take over our town." Bentley glowered. "We've given orders for 'em to stay south of Independence Street. That's the line. An' by God they're goin' to stay the other side of it!"

Kit looked behind her at the faces. There was disgust on some, anger on others at what they were witnessing here. Many faces were tight with the anticipation of seeing violence done. But no one made a move to interfere. She had seen these things before and the possibilities sickened her. And here it was again. She shuddered. A slender colored man in a pair of coveralls. He could have run but he was staying and attempting to get the Mexican to his feet. But his eyes were frightened.

Thoroughly aroused, Cort Bentley drew back his foot to kick the Mexican in the face.

Kit stepped in quickly. With all her strength she swung

out with her snakeskin bag. It crashed on Bentley's head, denting in the crown of his ridiculous hat.

A sigh ran through the crowd.

Opening her bag, Kit took out several tissues. She wiped the blood from the Mexican's chin. The Mexican blinked up at her as if trying to recall where he had seen her. At his side the colored man stood frozen with terror.

Bentley clenched his fists. "What the hell's the ideal!"

A big blonde, standing high on a chair yelled, "Looky at her. A goddam Mex lover!" Nobody paid any attention to her.

Kit flung the bloodied tissue on the floor. "Isn't there any law in this town?" she cried out in rage. "Somebody get a policeman!"

Cort Bentley held out a fat hand to her. In his palm lay a small gold shield. "I'm the law," Bentley said. "And I got a good notion to book you for assault."

"You touch either of these men again," Kit snapped, "and I'll yell my head off and the L.A. papers will pick it up. Before I'm through everybody will know what a stinking, rotten town you've got here!"

Bentley's Adam's apple moved in his thick neck as he swallowed. "Listen," he said. "We don't want no trouble here. You got no cause to interfere."

"I've got all the cause in the world. I don't like to see people kicked around."

Quickly she turned and motioned to the colored man.

"Get him out of here," she said.

Luther Jones picked up the box of tools. "Come on," he urged. "The lady's right. We jus' make more trouble for her if we stay."

A voice at Kit's elbow said, "In this town independence is only the name of a street."

Kit turned and saw Brill O'Hearn edging through the crowd, a sardonic smile on his lips. To the Mexican and the colored man, O'Hearn said, "If your money's no good in this place, maybe mine is. Step over to the bar and have a drink with me."

There was a nervous shifting of feet. Those who had been afraid to speak up before now voiced their approval of O'Hearn's action.

But another segment of the crowd decreed otherwise.

A stocky man in a leather jacket clenched his fists and glared at O'Hearn. "You set 'em up to drinks and I'll bust your goddam head."

Bentley said, "Don't try to be no hero, O'Hearn."

O'Hearn seemed not to have heard. The smile had not left his face. But there was something new in his eyes now, Kit noted. They glowed with anticipation.

O'Hearn said to the stocky man, "If you aim to try, just step up."

The man shrugged out of his leather jacket as the crowd broke apart. He came sliding in. He flung two quick lefts at O'Hearn's face. O'Hearn didn't move his feet. Only his head moved and the two blows whistled past his ear. Then his fists moved. There was a thud as the man hit the floor. He lay crumpled up against the bar front. He watched O'Hearn out of glazed eyes for a moment, then he flopped over on his stomach, upsetting an old-fashioned brass cuspidor. He lay face down without moving.

There was a moment of utter silence.

A feeling of panic swept over Kit. This was the way real trouble could start. A crowd divided. . . .

But nothing happened. She looked over her shoulder. The doorway was empty. The Mexican and the colored man had vanished.

Cort Bentley lifted his hand. The music started and the

taut circle broke up. Two men picked up the unconscious victim of O'Hearn's fist and carried him to a booth.

Bentley removed his cowboy hat and punched up the crown that had been flattened by Kit's purse.

He looked at Kit, his yellow-brown eyes cold and ugly. Then he said to O'Hearn, "I'm dealin' with the ace in the deck from here on out. You just cut yourself out of maybe fifty thousand bucks." He turned on his heel and went stomping off through the crowd.

O'Hearn stared after him thoughtfully. Then he took Kit by the arm and marched outside. Only when they had reached O'Hearn's car did Kit speak.

"Did you take the part of those men because you believed in what you were doing? Or was it because you thought it would soften me up so I'd help Theona?"

O'Hearn shuddered as if taken by a chill. "Damned if I know why I did it," he said honestly. "Sometimes I think I'm the biggest fool that ever wore pants."

"Then you did it because you believed what you were doing was right," Kit said.

He helped her into the car. "Yeah, I guess so," he answered. He gripped the wheel and stared into the darkness.

She put a hand on his arm. "I like you, Brill O'Hearn. But I didn't, at first."

He laughed and patted the hand on his arm.

"It cost you something tonight," she said, watching him. "You had some deal with Bentley. Now you've ruined it."

"That big frog is going to have a time drinking all the water in his puddle. He's going to need help." He stopped a moment, then added, "Bentley just thinks I'm out of it."

A tousled gray head suddenly appeared at O'Hearn's window. Below the hair was a lined face and straight eyes that peered through immense horn-rimmed glasses.

"Never had much use for you till tonight," the man said in a dry, cracked voice. "I thought any man who worked for Frank Manners wouldn't be worth a damn."

O'Hearn said, "Don't get carried away, Advocate."

The man stepped back, grinning faintly. "I liked that crack about Independence Street. I'll use it tomorrow in my editorial."

When O'Hearn wheeled the car into the main street, Kit said, "Who was that?"

"Simon Advocate. Runs the only paper in town. A crackpot."

"Maybe a crackpot," Kit said. "But without crackpots it would be a dull and dreary world. We'd still be living in caves and beating our neighbors over the heads with stone hammers."

"You surprise the hell out of me, Miss Durand."

"How?"

"A stripper with a brain."

Kit flushed. "So when I'm working I earn a couple of hundred a week taking off my clothes. I could earn fifty a week behind the counter in a bargain basement. And I'd still have to take off my clothes if I wanted a promotion. I know, I tried it once. This way I can let them look, but they can't touch."

O'Hearn patted her on her cute knee. "I like you, Kit," he said, using the name for the first time. "You've got courage. You stood up to Cort Bentley when everybody else was too yellow to move."

She said, "Independence Street. It's really a laugh, isn't it?"

"But you're not laughing," he said grimly, "and neither am I."

He stepped on the gas.

CHAPTER FIVE

O'HEARN drove the car under the overhanging branches of a giant pepper tree and cut the motor. Below, the town lights sparkled in the clear air.

Abruptly he said, "Why did you dye your hair?"

"So I wouldn't look so much like Theona."

"You hate her that much?"

Kit shrugged. "If I feel anything for her it's pity," she said. "No, the hair was Theona's idea. She was getting extra work in films. She said it would hurt her career if I looked too much like her. So I dyed my hair red."

Brill O'Hearn frowned at his cigarette. "How come she got all the breaks? She got the film bids and you didn't. And now she gets this break in TV."

Kit said tiredly, "Just one of those things."

"You look alike. What's the answer?"

"Well, she's a little generous with her body—"

"Which you're not."

"And my sister looks like an angel."

"Which she isn't."

Kit turned her head. "You don't like her."

O'Hearn shrugged. After a minute he said, "We'll have to get your hair back to its natural yellow. I'll find a beauty operator we can trust. You've got to be Theona's double."

"You're assuming a lot. I haven't said I'd help her."

"It boils down to this. Is blood thicker than water? You've got a kid sister and she's in trouble. You can go into court and let witnesses point you out. They'll swear

you were the woman they found with Rodzolo. But you'll tell your side of it."

"And what is my side of it?"

"Attempted rape. Even if Rodzolo is foolish enough to sign a complaint, he'll be facing the rape charge. Personally I don't think he'll do a damned thing about it. He'll take his butchered face and get out of town."

Kit said, "You want me to sit on a limb and saw it off—for Theona?"

"I'll bet it won't be the first time."

Kit sat quietly thinking. In one corner of her mind she could see a primitive yellow-haired female who believed her body was to be given freely or denied depending only on her mood. She remembered Collins' Imperial Shows and the night Theona stood frightened in the circle of lantern light outside the cook shack, with her dress torn.

And the drunken old boozier, Matt King, still holding his bottle. And the police and the faces of the others in the carnival. And Theona weeping in Kit's arms.

And one of the policemen saying, "Did he hurt you, sister?"

And Theona, crying harder than ever.

Matt King's bleeding lips where the policeman had struck him, opened enough to say, "I didn't mean nothin'. I never meant to hurt her. Damn it, she come and clumb right in with me. She teased me—I was drinkin' or I'd never-a touched her."

To Theona the policeman had said, "How old are you, sister?"

"Fifteen."

And the policeman had whirled on Matt King. "Why, you drunken old bastard. No kid fifteen would go for an old man like you."

And that night they took Matt King to jail.

And Kit had believed Theona blindly—until the next time it had happened.

But in another corner of her mind she could see only a frightened kid, belligerent, caustic in her denunciation of a father who could not support them. And Kit could not wholly blame her.

Now in the darkness something welled up in her. Pity, perhaps—or a maternal instinct. For through all the early years by virtue of their innate differences in character and maturity, she had never been a sister to Theona—only a mother.

Kit said shakily, at last, 'Of course I'll help her. Take me to her.'

Frank Rodzolo, Ward A, Bed 22, opened his eyes. The faint glow of a single light burning at the end of the corridor was painful. It stirred up the ache behind his eyeballs. When he turned his head the pain leaped across his face. His ruined face.

From the edge of the bed he peered through his bandages at the only other patient in the ward, a gray-haired man with his leg in a cast.

"You hadn't ought to be settin' up," the gray-haired man said.

Rodzolo made a reply. Unsteadily he rose to his feet, gripping the foot of the bed for support. He stumbled across the room to a large closet. He opened the door and with clumsy fingers removed his clothes. He slipped into a pair of old waist overalls, a blue shirt, heavy socks and work shoes. He took out an old felt hat and put it on his head. Because of the bandages, it did not fit.

Then Rodzolo moved to a window that opened on a

fire escape. On a small table near the wall a bunch of sunflowers in a cheap glass vase caught his eye.

He moved forward and crushed the petals between his fingers. "Yellow," he said stiffly, "yellow like her hair."

He threw a leg over the sill, climbed out on the fire escape and disappeared.

Only after he was gone did the gray-haired man ring for the nurse.

Addie Mansfield got the call on the annunciator. Sighing, she put aside a ledger and climbed the stairs to Ward A. The Encanto Hospital wasn't much. But it offered her a job. Many times in the years she had been here she had considered moving on. But she couldn't. She couldn't leave the only man in the world she had ever given a damn about. Maybe some day Lew Archer would marry her. She hoped so. It was worth hanging around for.

She was a pretty black-haired woman. Although she had put on weight her legs were still good. And efficient. They carried her quickly to Ward A where she received the news.

"Why didn't you stop him?" she asked the gray-haired patient.

"Me with this leg? And besides, he scared hell out of me. I think he's nuts."

Addie Mansfield nodded. "I knew we should have put him under restraint."

Then she saw the mutilated flowers. "Who did that?" she asked sharply.

"Rodzolo," the patient told her. "He kept saying something about her yellow hair. Suppose he was talkin' about the dame who cut him up?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Miss Mansfield said as she turned to go. Downstairs, she dialed the police station

and asked for Lew Archer. When Archer came on the phone she told him about Rodzolo.

Then she added, "Do you know who cut him up?"

Lew Archer said, "Some dame. That's all I know till I can get Rodzolo to make a statement."

Addie Mansfield said, "Do you know any yellow-haired women?"

Archer laughed. "You tryin' to trap me? Hell, you know there's only black-haired chicks for me."

Addie Mansfield smiled at the phone. It pleased her when Lew talked that way. But all she said was, "By the way, Lew, I've been meaning to call you about Nacky."

"What about him?"

"He was here a while ago and demanded to see Rodzolo. He was drunk. When I refused to let him go upstairs he got nasty and said I'd hear from Frank Manners."

"Nacky said that?"

"You'd better have a talk with him. He seems to think working for Manners gives him a license to be tough."

Lew Archer said, "Think tomorrow is a good day for picking flowers?"

"A swell day."

Lew Archer said, "See you at the same place. We'll talk about Nacky. And a lot of other things."

Beaming, Addie Mansfield said, "See you, Lew."

O'Hearn drove up beside a towering hedge of oleanders. Through the leaves Kit could see an old-fashioned two-story house. Dim light glowed through the leaded panels flanking the front door.

"Theona lives here—by herself?"

O'Hearn nodded.

He thought it best for Kit to see Theona alone. He

watched her safely up to the porch and then drove off toward Encanto. Kit pressed a button and a bell jangled somewhere in the big, silent house. The place smelled of age. From the wide porch she could see the dark mass of orange trees that crowded close to the house on all sides. When there was no answer to her ring she tried again.

At last the door was thrown open. Theona stood in the opening clad in a blue housecoat she had neglected to belt around her. For a moment the sisters stared at each other.

Theona said irritably, "Why didn't you phone you were coming?"

Kit looked at Theona and saw the lipstick smear on her chin. She stepped into a big, old-fashioned parlor. She sniffed the air. Over the musty smell there was another faint odor. Cigar smoke.

Kit said, "Did I interrupt something?"

"I was just going to take a shower."

The girls were identical in height and build. But in their faces lay the difference. Theona's mouth was tight and small tension lines were already beginning to etch the smooth skin.

"O'Hearn said you liked privacy," Kit said, looking around. "You've sure got it here."

Theona belted her robe. "So you've seen O'Hearn?"

"He's the most interesting person I've met in a long time."

Theona's gray eyes darkened. "I guess in your field you don't get a chance to meet many real people."

Kit said angrily, "As I told O'Hearn, I strip but I don't make love to the customers."

"Meaning I do. Is that it?" Theona cried.

"We understand each other. Let's not pretend."

Theona said, "He's been after me ever since I went to work for Manners."

Kit shrugged her shoulders. "Look, Theona, I came out here to help you."

Theona's eyes softened. "I'm sorry. Just a bitch at heart. That's me."

"You'd be worse than that if you played your games with a nice guy like O'Hearn," Kit said with more venom than she intended.

"Not such a nice guy. O'Hearn is trying to talk Manners into setting up a sideline in Encanto."

"That's O'Hearn's business."

Theona smiled again. "Gambling and women. They've got a name for men who deal in women. Want to hear it?"

Kit tucked her snakeskin bag under her arm and started for the door. Theona came toward her swiftly. "Please, Kit," she whispered. "I don't know what gets into me. You're trying to help me and all I do is make trouble."

Kit halted and turned. In the corner beside a big stone fireplace a grandfather's clock boomed the half hour. Kit's gaze flicked from the clock to a mound of white on the floor beside an overstuffed chair.

"So I did interrupt something," she said.

Theona shook her yellow head. "No, Kit. Nobody's been here all day. Nobody but the plumber."

"Do plumbers in Encanto wear white Stetsons?"

Theona followed Kit's eyes.

Kit frowned. "I hate to see you mixed up with Cort Bentley."

"So you've met the great Bentley," Theona said.

"Yes, unfortunately," Kit snapped.

"You're going to help me aren't you?" Theona asked.

"I want to. But—"

Tears suddenly glistened in Theona's eyes. "I've been a fool, Kit. But this mess is not my fault."

Kit sighed. The same old Theona. Nothing was ever her fault.

Theona clenched her hands. "If you don't help me, I'll be blacklisted."

Kit regarded her intently. What lay behind those beautiful gray eyes that were now so guileless? She could walk out now and never see Theona again. But Theona was all the family she had.

Kit said, watching the pale oval face, "I want the truth about you and Rodzolo. Then I'll see what I can do."

Earnestly Theona began to recount the gruesome experience. "Two days ago I was coming down from the ranch after we finished shooting the last picture. I got a flat tire. It was Manners' car and I didn't want to ruin the tire by driving on it. The road was lonely. This Rodzolo was walking to the dam to get a job, he said. He offered to change the tire."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

Theona shook her head. "No. Honest, Kit."

"Then he tried to attack you. Is that it?"

Theona nodded miserably. "I managed to get my nail file out of my purse," she said with a shudder. "I cut him across the face." The tears that had been glistening in her eyes now spilled across the soft curve of her cheek. "Some men were driving to the dam and they took him to the hospital."

"Did they see you?" Kit asked.

"I—I think so. Rodzolo has been screaming about a woman with yellow hair. The police are trying to get him to sign a complaint." Her lips quivered. "Kit, I'm scared."

"Like the time with Matt King? You were scared then, too."

Theona stiffened. "Why bring that up? I was only a kid."

Kit tried to smile. "I'm sorry, baby." She put a hand on Theona's shoulder. "If Rodzolo tried to rape you I don't see how he can afford to sign a complaint. You had a right to defend yourself."

"The scandal will ruin me." Theona's wet eyes pleaded. "I was mean to you tonight over the phone. I should have remembered you're the only friend I've got in the world."

Kit said softly, "No matter what else, you're still my sister. I'll stay—and I'll help you."

CHAPTER SIX

THEONA waited until she thought Kit was asleep, then sneaked downstairs in her stocking feet. She picked up the big white hat and went out. At the edge of the oleander hedge she put on her shoes and walked a quarter of a mile along the dark road to a gas station. There she phoned for a cab.

She found Cort Bentley in the small office above his bar. Bentley sat behind a littered desk, drinking from a bottle. His fleshy face was red. He had unbuttoned his shirt. Stiff red hair showed beneath his undershirt. A two-inch roll of fat bunched over the top of his pants.

She flung the hat in his face. "Why did you leave it behind?" she snapped.

Bentley smoothed the hat, his thick lips grinning. "Damned lucky I didn't leave my pants." He took a drink from the bottle, watching her. "Who was it?"

"My sister." She hesitated a minute, then added, "I don't think she likes you."

"That sure as hell is goin' to ruin my night, knowin'

she don't like me." He glared at her across the desk. "Your sister fixed herself in this town, so far as I'm concerned. I reckon you know what that means."

Theona lost some of her anger. "Lay off her till I get this Rodzolo mess straightened out."

"Why should I?"

She sat on the edge of the desk, lifted her dress and caressed her stockingless legs. Bentley started to put out a hand but she yanked the dress down quickly over the creamy thighs and grinned.

Bentley took a drink from his bottle. "You and your sister look alike. But, there's something different—"

Theona frowned. "You tell me she's better-looking than I am," she said, "and I'll cut your throat."

Bentley watched her as he asked, "You don't care for her much, do you?"

Theona flared, "I hate her!"

"How come you hate your own sister?"

"It goes back a long time."

"You hate good and strong, don't you?"

She removed a paper cup from a wall container, filled it half full of water and floated some whiskey on top from Bentley's bottle. She drank the concoction in a couple of gulps.

Bentley rose and came around the desk. He caught her with his big hands and held her as he kissed her. "You ever take a knife to me and I'll kill you," he said, grinning a little.

Theona matched his grin. She ran her fingers through his thick rust-colored hair. "I hate black-haired men. But you don't have black hair. I'd never hurt you."

"Is that why you cut Rodzolo? Because he had black hair?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't remember."

"Sometimes I think you're nuts."

The phone rang and Bentley picked up the receiver. "Bentley," he said into the mouthpiece. "Yeah, Lew . . . He did? Well, the hell with him, then. Say, Lew—you remember the two guys I was tellin' you about? Any line on 'em yet? Well, give 'em a floater out of town. I don't want 'em around. A colored guy and a Mexican. Yeah . . . I saw Simon Advocate talking to O'Hearn in the parking lot after it happened . . . I don't want that old hellion on my neck till we get things set around here. You understand, Lew? By the way, give my regards to Addie next time you two go pickin' flowers." Grinning, Bentley replaced the receiver.

"Lew Archer's quite a guy," he told Theona. "Him and Addie Mansfield have been sneaking off in the brush for years. They think nobody knows it." He chuckled.

She was watching him shrewdly. "How come you can give orders to the Police Department?"

He dropped his cigar into a cuspidor next to the desk. "I'm the constable, here. Besides I get a little background on people. Things they don't want known. That's how I operate."

"Is that all you've got on Archer? The fact that he's carrying on with a woman?"

"I got more than that on Archer. A lot more."

She leaned across the desk, letting her breasts display themselves to him. "How about that big money you were mentioning?"

"Your sister kind of interrupted our date before I got around to tellin'," he said.

"O'Hearn's been saying—"

"O'Hearn's out of the deal," Bentley interrupted. "From here on you're my pipeline to Frank Manners."

"Why cut Manners in?" She leaned over farther.

"He's had experience and we got to play it fast."

She stood up and his eyes relaxed. "I like money," she said. "Lots of it."

"And you're just like me," he chuckled. "You don't give a damn where it comes from." He put his hands on her slim waist, then let them slide down over her magnificent flanks. "I wonder how many men you've made happy in this town."

She glared at him and stepped out of his reach.

"But I don't give a damn," he said. "We're both bums at heart. That's why we'll make a good team."

Slowly the poison left her eyes. "I ought to shoot you for making a crack like that."

He grinned. "You'd look good with a tan, kid. I own a motel at the edge of town. Encanto Gardens. Got an apartment fixed up. And a patio where you can take sun baths without a stitch on. You and me can do a lot of talking about how things are going to be in this town for the next year." His leer did not seem to disturb her.

She watched his fleshy face. "Maybe I'm an actress at heart. Maybe I'm not so interested in other things, after all."

He made a deprecating noise in his throat. "Don't hand me that crap. You like money." He eyed her coolly. "Besides, if it ever gets out about you and Rodzolo, you're cooked in show business."

"And who would let it get out?" she asked carefully.

He shrugged. "Want that sun bath?"

After a moment's hesitation she said, "Sure, Cort. But I can't play around till my sister leaves town."

"Tell her to scram. You don't need her now."

"But this Rodzolo thing—"

"Your worries are over. Lew Archer phoned to say Rodzolo has beat it. Flown the coop."

Her look narrowed. "Why in hell didn't you let me know? Why keep me in suspense?"

"I like to string things out. That's how I get my kicks."

She eyed him a moment, then she grinned and said, "Cort Bentley, you're a bastard after my own heart."

O'Hearn brought the beauty operator at eight in the morning and it took more than an hour and a half to complete the job. When the operator had gathered her gear and been paid off, O'Hearn showed Kit the morning edition of the *Enterprise*. An editorial signed by Simon Advocate occupied a box on page one. Advocate was really laying it on. He used O'Hearn's jibe about independence and recounted the scene at Bentley's bar in detail. The editorial suggested that Bentley be relieved of his constable's badge for attempting to establish a "line" in Encanto.

O'Hearn gave her a wry grin. "Advocate is taking the town apart at the seams."

Kit ran a hand over her damp hair and studied her reflection in a wall mirror. For so long she had touched up her hair that it seemed strange to see it back to its normal shade again. Then she looked at O'Hearn. "That business last night at Bentley's ruined something for you here in Encanto."

She wore one of Theona's robes, a flowered print, zippered up the front. It clung to her curves lovingly.

O'Hearn said, "Nothing's ruined for me. Not yet, anyhow." He sounded a little worried.

Kit sat on the arm of the sofa and lit a cigarette. "I don't think this great impersonation will work."

"Why not?"

"A lot of people saw me at Bentley's last night. They'll

know Theona has a double. How will that look in court?"

"It'll never get to court," he said. "Besides, it's Frank's idea. I didn't want to drag you into it."

"You don't know anything about me."

"I saw your photograph. That was enough for me. Right then I knew Theona was the bum in your family."

Kit said a little coolly, "Don't forget—she's still my sister."

O'Hearn said, "Where do you think she is?"

Kit glanced at the spot on the floor where last night she had seen the white hat. "She'll be home," she said, swallowing. Then she frowned and asked suddenly, "Have you ever seen Rodzolo?"

O'Hearn nodded. "I was in town when they brought him in. He sure was a mess."

"Did he have black hair?"

"Yeah," O'Hearn said, looking at her. "Why is that important?"

"Our father had black hair." She got up and walked over to a narrow window through which she stared at the towering hedge of oleanders.

He came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He could feel her warmth through the thin cotton robe. "You're really worried about her, aren't you?"

Kit leaned against him. The feel of his arms around her was strangely comforting to her. It had been so long since she had last known the warmth of an embrace. Those months with Wilson's Girl Shows had been lonely. Only now did she realize how much she had longed for a moment like this. She knew that he was going to kiss her. And she waited for it, lifting her mouth with swift eagerness.

The kiss, when it came, unleashed a fire she had long thought buried. The tension that had held her so long in

its grip seemed to flee. She could feel his body against her own and she trembled with delight. For how long they stood locked in each other's arms, she had no way of knowing. But somewhere in the distance she finally heard the ring of a bell.

"The phone," she whispered, trying to pull away from him.

"Let it ring," he said hoarsely.

But the sound of the bell set up an answering clamor in Kit's own mind. Theona—it was Theona on the phone. And Theona needed help. Suddenly Kit tore herself from O'Hearn's embrace and ran to the phone.

Theona's hard voice came over the wire. "I just thought you'd like to know that Rodzolo has left town." When Kit did not immediately reply, Theona said sharply, "Are you listening to me?"

"Yes."

"You sound like you just ran the hundred-yard dash. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." She felt O'Hearn's eyes on her. "I've got some things to discuss with you."

Theona laughed. She sounded a little high. "Go on back to L. A."

"I want you to come home."

"Don't start that sister stuff with me. In the stand next to my bed you'll find a fifty-dollar bill." She giggled. "My mad money. Take it and get out."

Kit said, "Is it in the same drawer where you keep the knife?"

There was a dead silence at the other end of the wire.

Kit said, "You didn't use a nail file on Rodzolo. You had a knife."

"That's a lie!" Theona said wildly. "I don't know anything about a knife!"

"I'm not leaving. Not until you and I have a talk."

"Then you'll have a long wait," Theona screamed shrilly, and hung up.

Kit hung up too.

O'Hearn said, "What's she done now?"

Kit shrugged.

"Leave, will you, Brill? I want to be alone."

Her face felt wooden. Only a moment ago she had been surging with a spirit that had been foreign to her these past months. Slowly she climbed the stairs and flung herself across the big bed. She didn't cry. Thinking of Theona brought no tears. She felt she had failed her sister.

She had been lying face down on the bed but something plucked at her consciousness now and she turned over on her back. Brill O'Hearn stood in the doorway. The intent brightness had not left his eyes.

He closed the door behind him and came over to her.

Suddenly his hand reached down to her and before she knew what he was doing, his fingers were at the neckline of her robe. The zipper made a whisper of sound as he jerked it down. The robe parted. Her body gleamed whitely. In that moment as his eyes ran the length of her, she could hear the thunder of her own heartbeat.

He bent over her and put his face against her satiny flesh, pressing her softness against his cheek. The movement shocked her and the paralysis that had gripped her was suddenly gone. She forced his head away with the palm of her hand. Then she turned on her side and pulled the robe around her.

She said through trembling lips, "I'm not Theona."

"I wouldn't be here if you were."

"Then leave. Please."

"Since last night I've been trying to forget you. I tried to think you were just another good-looking girl."

"To make love to," she said bitterly.

It was within her power now to get to her feet. Instead, she remained motionless, staring dully at the wallpaper.

"You think because I was with a girl show that I'd let any man . . ."

"Once I might have thought so. But not now."

She was aware of his weight settling down alongside her. And now she could feel his warmth as he came close to her and slid one arm under her, then crossed the other over her shoulders. His fingers pulled at the robe and she tingled at the touch of his hands.

"Get out of here, O'Hearn," she said, trying to make her voice sound angry.

She tried to pull his hands away. Only then did she realize how strong he was.

"Quit trying to fight it," he said softly. "You want the same thing I do."

She tried to squirm out of his grasp but he caught her by the shoulders and twisted her so that she lay pinned to the bed. Desire pounded and roared through her, washing into every crevice of her consciousness, sapping her will.

His face grew large as he drew close to her, his arms encompassed her. And in the moment before her lips met his, she whispered lovingly, "Oh, Brill . . . Brill . . ."

And then all the wonder of her matchless charms was open to him. The tossing, sweet-scented hair, the pearly ears, the lovely gray eyes now filled with tenderness and adoration. The mouth warmly meeting his, a generous mouth, full-lipped beneath her pert nose. Then the graceful neck, the shapely shoulders and—his heart raced—those breasts, those beckoning, beautiful mounds the color of rich cream, each crowned by its cute rosette.

He lifted his face and looked down at Kit's shapely torso, at the shadowed mound of her navel, at her blushing buttocks and long, slim legs. All of this was his. His. "My Kit," he moaned. And he bent his lips to her womanly bosom, kissing the nipples as he would kiss a goddess.

Now her long red-tipped fingers were touching his back, stroking, caressing. Her hungry hands worked their way lower, gently touching, playing little games. Her touch was driving him into frenzy. Kit laughed in her love for him, and her red, seeking mouth kissed his chest. "Darling, darling Brill—you don't have to torture yourself—"

That was her way of letting him know that she was as ready, as eager, as he was. And in a moment, lip to lip and thigh to thigh, they were locked in the clasp of lovers, each desperate to please the other. When his manhood first made itself known to her, she felt pierced by hot delight. And Brill O'Hearn knew that in all the world there was no woman the equal of this one, no womanhood the equal of hers, no loins as insanely thrilling, as hotly sweet, as ecstatically and cleanly the gateway to sheer blessed rapture.

Slowly, to please her, he moved and loved. Ardently, to thrill him to his core, Kit contained her madness and cunningly swayed and rocked to prolong and intensify his pleasure in her. Her mouth was on his, wet and hot and poignant, and her tongue flicked his own to unbearable life. He bit down in reflex, at the same time feeling the rise of his power, starting at his toes, lifting, lifting and coursing through every artery, gushing like a torrent. And Kit in all her voluptuous beauty lifted triumphantly to meet him, experienced the same hot surge, feeling the very springs of her womanhood opening and welling up, overflowing as the dam burst. The breaking flood seized them both, carried them both, carried them on a golden crest

ever swifter, ever higher, until in one last moment they attained a very agony of happiness.

"Kit," moaned Brill O'Hearn.

"My dear. My darling Brill."

And sensing her still unexhausted need, he closed his lips on her breast and moved again.

She whispered, "You—you don't have to—"

The words died in her throat as if silenced by a mighty wind that wracked her body, and as he held her tight in his arms she knew no more cares, no weariness, no unspoken fears. Here everything was brightness and joy that lifted her high into a sea of incredibly white and buoyant clouds of ecstasy . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN O'Hearn reluctantly took his leave, he headed straight for the office. Only Nacky, sprawled on the red leather couch, was on hand.

"Where's the boss?"

Nacky said, "Manners is gettin' the bad news from the foreman. His crop is lousy. He sure bought a lemon when he bought this orange grove!" Nacky laughed at what he considered a good joke.

"Lemons or oranges," O'Hearn said, squaring around, "I got something to say to you."

"So say it, wise guy."

"I don't want trouble in front of Manners," O'Hearn said.

"So?"

"So I let you get away with tramping on my feet. Don't try it again."

Nacky rose from the couch. He looked a foot wider than O'Hearn. He was three inches taller. His thick lips were curled into a nasty smile.

Nacky said, "I hear you beat up Rob Castle last night. He's goin' to look you up. Me and Rob went through school together. He's a tough boy."

"It's you and me I'm interested in right now," O'Hearn said, "not Rob Castle."

Nacky's eyes were red-rimmed and his breath smelled of stale booze.

O'Hearn said, "Incidentally, if you've got any brains you'll stay away from Theona. Unless you want an early funeral."

"You'd look funny with a hole in your gut."

O'Hearn shook his head. "If you ever shoot anybody, it won't be in the gut. It'll be in the back."

The shadowed skin under Nacky's eyes tightened. He seemed to be groping for words.

Before he could say anything, Manners barged in and indicated with a nod that Nacky was to leave.

"And this time," Manners growled as Nacky left, "wait in the car, not in the hall."

"Look, boss, I never—"

Manners cut him off. "You were too quick to bust in the door when I yelled last night," he said thinly. "I been thinkin' it over. She was right. You were in the hall."

Nacky left hastily.

Manners sat down and leaned back in his chair but instantly sat upright and winced.

"Back sore?" O'Hearn said.

Manners glared at him. "Yeah. It's my back. I got burn-

ed." His lips trembled. "Sometimes I think that dame is screwy."

"Theona?" O'Hearn watched him.

"Who else?" Manners' small eyes were bright and hard. "If I ever figured her and Nacky was—" He didn't finish the sentence. Bitterly he picked up a sheet of paper from the desk top. It contained columns of figures. "I'm different than most of the guys," Manners said. "I try to go legit. Maybe I'm stupid. But I'm busted. Flat."

"Everybody can't grow oranges," O'Hearn said.

Manners hammered the desk with a clenched fist. "You know what? The foreman says I got to spend four thousand bucks to fertilize them damned trees. Four thousand bucks worth of sh . . . I mean, manure."

"Well, if it's got to be done—"

"The hell with them trees!" He jabbed a cigar between his lips. "I'm a mug at heart, O'Hearn. I used to get dames and they didn't give a damn how I looked. But Theona—"

"It was her idea about the hair and the shoes?"

Manners chewed the cigar. It was a touchy subject with him. He decided to change it fast. "What's this I hear about you and the Durand dame in Bentley's place last night?" he demanded.

O'Hearn sat back. Here it comes, he told himself. "Bentley was out of line. I didn't like it."

"Who the hell told you to butt in?"

"All Bentley needed last night was a sheet over his head with a couple of holes cut out for the eyes. He objected to a couple of citizens drinking at his bar." O'Hearn spoke softly, watching Manners' eyes. "Just because a man doesn't have the same color skin as you or has a funny sounding name shouldn't keep him from associating with the rest of us."

Manners blinked his eyes and O'Hearn knew he had

scored. The dark blood of Manners' Mediterranean ancestors stained the ex-mobster's cheeks. His own name had once been unpronounceable. He had changed it to Manners. O'Hearn had chosen his words well.

"So that's it," Manners grunted. "Well, I don't like that kind of stuff either. But we're goin' to work with Bentley. And we got to get along with him."

O'Hearn relaxed.

Manners said, as if it were his own idea, "I got slots in an L.A. warehouse. I'll send Nacky up for 'em. Bentley is getting a crew in to fix up the second floor of his trap. We'll have a sizeable layout."

"You've talked to Bentley?"

"Yeah. He's burned at you but I told him there was too much dough involved to get fancy on account of what happened last night."

O'Hearn said, "Looks like we're ready to roll."

Manners puffed on his cigar a moment and regarded O'Hearn through a cloud of smoke. "I ain't got my old boys around me, so I got to start from scratch. Nacky and Bentley I don't trust. I trust you."

"Thanks, boss—"

Manners leaned across the desk tightly. "Oh, I can still get some of my boys to come down here if things don't go right." He let that sink in, then added, "I can be rough when I have to be. Don't let the hair and them shoes fool you. I'm still Frank Manners."

O'Hara sat stiffly, looking at the small, evil man with the padded dome.

Manners went on, "We're takin' over the hotel behind Bentley's place. I'll get somebody to send down some girls—"

O'Hearn's stomach turned over slowly. In his mind's eye he was seeing Kit's face.

"Can't we just stick to the gambling end of it?"

"Girls is where the money is." He picked up the phone. "Think I'll take a ride out to the country. I feel pretty good now that we're gettin' things settled. I'll call Theona—"

O'Hearn said, "She's not home."

"How do you know, Brill?" Manners asked. It was the first time Manners had used his first name. The name suddenly sounded obscene, almost like a four-letter word. Pimp, O'Hearn told himself.

"I just left there," he said. "I arranged for Kit Durand's hair change. We're all set on that score. But with Rodzolo high-tailing it, I guess it was wasted effort."

Manners said coldly, "Where'd Theona go?"

"Downtown, I think," O'Hearn said, lying again.

Manners put down the phone. His small eyes focused on O'Hearn. "You keep an eye on her, O'Hearn. That's part of your job—and don't forget it."

Simon Advocate came hurrying toward O'Hearn as he parked his car in town. Advocate's thatch of gray hair stuck up like a mop. His eyes were excited behind the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Hear what happened to your friends?" he blurted.

"What friends?"

"The colored boy and the Mexican. They got picked up last night. They had a choice. Get out of town or thirty days in the clink. They got."

O'Hearn felt an unaccustomed dryness in his throat. "Justice, Encanto style," he said.

Advocate said, "I'm just getting warmed up. I'm after Bentley. You read the *Enterprise* tomorrow. I'll really have something to say."

Trying to make his voice sound casual, O'Hearn said, "What have you got cooked up for tomorrow?"

"Theona Layne. I'm asking how come the police don't arrest her. They know who cut up Rodzolo. In my editorial I'm suggesting we get facts. Either Rodzolo ought to be locked up where he won't go around attacking women —" Advocate's eyes narrowed, "or we ought to know if we've got a young lady on our hands who likes to see blood flow."

As the little editor turned abruptly to dash across the street to his office, O'Hearn stood with sweat pouring from his scalp. Before tomorrow he had to try to kill that story. Kill it for one reason—because of what it would do to Kit.

Frank Rodzolo's stomach had long been signaling its need for food. Now that the dope had loosened its hold on him the pain, coupled with the humiliation of his ruined face, made his nerves scream. At sundown he came out of his hiding place. It was a long building with many windows, open at one end. In a row of cupboards were stacks of tin plates and a drawer of knives and forks. But no food. It was surrounded on all sides by the thick greenery of orange trees. The building was probably used for summer picnics when the rancher and his friends gathered to pass the long hot Sundays. Now, in the Spring, it was deserted.

In the distance he could hear the throaty chug-chug of a tractor. Once during the day the tractor swung past the summer house. He saw the driver, a lank man in straw hat and overalls. A cultivator hooked behind the tractor tore up the firm weed-grown soil. The man came into the summer house while Rodzolo crouched behind an upend-

ed table. The man filled a canteen from a tap above a tin-lined sink. Then he went out, climbed back upon the tractor seat and was gone.

With the coming of night, the tractor had stopped. Only the inevitable thump of a distant water pump and the far-off wail of a train whistle broke the silence.

His bandages, he knew, could be seen at night. A stack of smudge pots, used for heating the orchard on frosty nights, caught his eye. He ran his fingers across the stack of one pot, black from the soot left by the oil it burned. Using his fingers, he smeared his bandages with a black soot. When he was through he peered at his reflection in a mirror and was satisfied with the black apparition that stared back at him.

Moving out into the twilight, he groped his way through the trees. Arms outstretched, hands carefully parting the branches so nothing could touch his face. Nothing must touch his face for the pain would be unbearable. He walking slowly, hunched over, his heavy work shoes sending up small wafers of dust from the freshly plowed ground. He knew exactly where he was going.

After O'Hearn had left that morning, Kit had felt an unaccustomed lightness of heart. But as the hours passed and he did not telephone, the feeling gave way to apprehension. And then to anger. Had that morning, after all, been only an interlude to him? Something to be enjoyed, then as quickly forgotten?

Yet, she admitted to herself, even if she wasn't sure of O'Hearn, the experience that morning had certainly been what she had needed. She felt a thousand times better for it. If only Brill O'Hearn would call. Where was he?

She was lost in conjecture and was just clearing away

her dinner dishes when she felt a draft about her ankles.

A board creaked somewhere in the big house. She listened. The sound was not repeated. The breeze that had touched her ankles seemed to have disappeared miraculously. And now the big house seemed almost warm again.

After much debate in her mind, she finally arrived at a decision. O'Hearn was staying at the Empire Hotel. She would call him and casually inquire if he had heard from Theona. She was worried about Theona. Now that Rodzolo seemed no longer to be a threat to her future, Theona might do something reckless. And Kit was not forgetting the big hat she had seen last night in the living room.

If only she could hear Brill O'Hearn's voice, she thought, all her troubles would vanish.

She walked briskly into the living room toward the phone. But, suddenly, as she reached for it, she was conscious of a wedge of terror—the breeze about her ankles, the creaking board culminated now in a swift awareness of panic. Someone was in the house!

Before she could move, she felt something thrust against her spine. Something that felt round and hard. And there was a metallic coldness that penetrated blouse and slip and touched her skin in such a way that she knew at once what it was.

A rough voice in her ear said, "Don't turn around. I got a gun."

She held herself rigid, feeling perspiration pour from her. Then her first moment of terror evaporated.

Forcing words through her stiffened lips, she said, "Who are you? What do you want?" She was surprised at the cool sound of her own voice.

The man didn't answer. Suddenly the lamp was flicked

off. In the darkness she could feel his breath against the back of her neck.

He caught her by the left wrist and doubled her arm behind her back. She bit her lip at the sudden sharp pain. Held this way, with the gun at her back, she was marched out of the house and across the porch.

Through a break in the oleander hedge she saw a pick-up truck and told herself bravely there might still be an opportunity to escape. But hardly had the thought crossed her mind, than she knew he was going to walk her into the deeper shadows of the orange trees that surrounded the house. When she tried to turn once, he tightened the grip on her arm so that she moaned.

"Don't yell," he warned.

Desperately she tried to identify the voice. But she was sure she had never heard it before.

Weeds growing around the trees tore at her stockings. Orange blossoms laid their springtime scent across the night air.

He halted at last at a clearing amid the trees where moonlight filtered down to form a silver pool. Above, the stars seemed warm and friendly. In the distance she could hear the thump of a water pump. Only last night it had seemed such an impersonal sound. Now it seemed to be her only contact with civilization. For the madman who held the gun at her back was not human.

Gradually she fought down her panic. More than once around the girly shows she had been forced to handle an overly assertive admirer. But never had it gone this far. Her training in looking out for herself in a tough business might pay off, she told herself reassuringly. Play along with him, she kept thinking.

She said, almost calmly, "Well, what now?"

"Take off your clothes," the voice said.

"I guess there's nothing else for me to do," she said, making herself shrug indifferently. Now was her chance, she thought hopefully. When he took his hand away, she would fly into the dark. And she would be a poor target among the trees.

"Hurry up," he said with a thin impatience.

"I can't undress if you hold me this way."

"Use one hand," he ordered.

A momentary despair tightened her throat but she battled it down. He had eased the pressure somewhat on her arm but his grip on her wrist was like steel. Her heart hammered wildly. She felt weak in the knees. I've got to trick him, she told herself. Somehow I'll get away.

But her fingers trembled as she began to unbutton the blouse with her free hand. When it hung loosely open he shifted the gun and caught the collar against the gun butt with his fingers. He ripped downward. Her bare arms gleamed in the moonlight. Panic started its swift cold climb in her again and she shivered. Stall him, she kept repeating silently, frantically. Make him think you're going to give in.

That he was demented, she had no doubt. And with his attention centered on one desire she prayed he might become careless. Even to accede to his wishes this far was repulsive to her but with growing certainty she sensed that if she were to scream he would shoot her.

And kill her he might, even if he had his way without argument. But she vowed that somehow she would match her wits against his in the hope of winning.

Reaching around with her right hand, she unzipped her skirt and let it fall from her.

Forcing her voice to be steady, she said. "I can't take off my slip unless you let go of me."

Without answering, he removed the gun from her back.

But he did not relax his grip on her wrist. Instead, using the fingers that held the gun, he snapped the straps of her slip and bra. The bra was torn from her first. Then the slip fluttered to her hips, hung there for a moment, and joined the skirt on the ground. Next she felt his fingers against the small of her back, tearing the hooks that held her garter belt. Savagely he ripped it in two, pulling the garters from the tops of her stockings. The stockings began to creep slowly down her thighs.

Roughly he shoved her forward so that she almost tripped over her clothes on the ground. He shoved her to a grassy plot that glistened wetly in the moonlight. Reversing the grip on her wrist, he turned her around so that she faced him for the first time.

And all she saw was a shadow. Where a face should have been there was only a deeper shadow.

She saw moonlight flash wickedly on the barrel of the gun he gripped.

She wanted to speak, to say something that would throw him off guard. Yet instead of forming words, her frozen lips trembled with hysterical laughter.

"You goddam bitch!" the man cried, as if her laughter had lit a new frenzy in him.

He jerked her up close by the wrist. And the gun was lowered. In that instant when his shapeless, shadowed face loomed above hers and she could feel his body against her, she knew the moment had come.

All her fear suddenly died. She waited, aware that her laughter had angered him so much he had released her wrist in order to strike her.

She saw the blow coming but she did not duck. Instead, she lifted her right knee swiftly, sharply. The shadow disintegrated before her and the only sound from him

was a terrible moan as he clutched himself and doubled up.

But she did not stop to listen. Like a frightened animal she sprinted off through the trees, her long legs scissoring the moonlight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

O'HEARN got back to Encanto a little after seven that evening, having driven from L.A. with the throttle flat against the floorboards. A hurry call had taken him to Hollywood. His old friend, Bernie Glassman, who owned the *TV Slant*, a Hollywood trade paper, had wired that he had information that something was cooking on Theona Layne.

Something that wouldn't smell so good, Bernie said in his telegram.

Three hours later O'Hearn had sat facing Bernie across the latter's cluttered desk. Bernie had been grinning and patting his bald head. "If you find any old toupés lying around," he had said, "send 'em to me."

O'Hearn had known Bernie was referring to Manners. When O'Hearn had first considered the job with Manners' new outfit, Bernie had been against it. O'Hearn and Bernie Glassman had been friends for many years, from the time they had first worked together on a downtown daily many years back.

Bernie had said, "Why work for a louse like Manners? You can get a better job."

"It's the money," O'Hearn had admitted. "I'm thirty-

two years old and I've got exactly fifty-eight bucks to my name."

Glassman had said, "I got you topped by five years," and had nodded at a photograph on his desk of a smiling dark-haired woman surrounded by three smiling younger faces. "I got a late start in this family-raising business and I'm not getting rich with this TV sheet." He had put a hand on O'Hearn's arm. "It's not always the money that counts."

It had angered O'Hearn at the time because Bernie had seemed to imply little difference in their respective talents. Bernie Glassman was smart and one day he would have the best TV trade journal in the business. He was a hard worker and he was content to wear forty dollar suits and pack his daily lunch.

O'Hearn had left the downtown daily for a job as a studio press agent. It had opened his eyes to the good life. Too many mink coats and too many Cads had dazzled him.

"What's wrong with working for Manners?" O'Hearn had wanted to know. "He's out of the rackets, Bernie. For good. Why, just mention Chicago and he'll blow a gasket. And he has lined up a good technical crew—and an agency commitment for the films."

"But he's got a she-cat by the tail and he's going to get himself clawed up before he can let go."

"You mean Theona Layne?"

Bernie had sighed then and looked once more at the photograph on his desk. "I don't like to think badly of any woman, Brill. But this Layne character will make love even to a zebra if it will further her career."

"Theona's a little wild, I'll admit. But we can handle her."

Bernie had grinned then and had held out his hand.

"Good luck, kid. And don't forget your bullet-proof underwear."

This morning when Brill O'Hearn once more settled into the scarred chair across from Bernie, he recalled some of his friend's earlier warnings.

Glassman looked worried. "I hate to do it to you, Brill. You of all people. But damn it all—"

"I know," O'Hearn said, feeling a tautness in his chest. "You warned me."

He looked at the newsprint proof sheet Glassman handed him. It said in effect that a certain TV actress making films in Encanto had taken a knife to a laborer. The police were doing nothing about it. Why? Was there a payoff to keep it quiet? Why not bring the facts into the open—or shouldn't we hurt the lady's feelings?

Across the bottom of the sheet was scribbled in pencil, "I'm running this in tomorrow's *Enterprise*, Bernie. Thought you'd like first crack at it. Simon."

O'Hearn laid the proof on the desk and chewed his lip. "I didn't know you and Advocate were friends."

"He gave me my first job," Bernie said. "He quit a good spot as managing editor to take over a moth-eaten old rag down in Encanto. Every newshound at some time or other has the idea he'd like to help right a few wrongs by sounding off on his own editorial page. Simon is one of the few who ever realized that dream."

O'Hearn avoided Bernie's eyes. He, too, had once had that dream. Bernie still did. And Bernie was doing something about it. He had started a trade journal from scratch. And he was going to make it pay.

The thought made O'Hearn acutely aware of his own shortcomings. He swallowed. "Kill the story, Bernie. At least, hold off."

"I've got circulation and advertisers to think of," Ber-

nie said. "They depend on me to get news. If I don't print it, *Variety* and *Billboard* will pick it up anyhow. I'll be in a spot, then."

"I've got personal reasons, Bernie." He tried to outline his meeting with Kit, attempting to make it appear like a casual friendship.

But Bernie was quick to grasp the situation. "So it's finally bit you. Old armor plate O'Hearn."

"Nothing bit me," O'Hearn said too quickly.

"The love bug, as the songwriters say." Bernie Glassman took a deep breath. "I wish I could help you, Brill. But when *Advocate* springs this editorial tomorrow—"

"I'll talk him out of it."

Bernie shook his bald head. "You can't buy him and you can't talk him out of anything. He does what he thinks is right."

Brill O'Hearn got to his feet. "Then I'll have to think of something else." He clenched his fists. "I don't give a damn about Theona. But I don't want Kit hurt. The bad publicity her sister gets will involve Kit."

"I remember Kit," Bernie said. "She's a sweet kid. I remember when she and Theona did their act. Everybody liked Kit. I'd like to help her. And I'm not kidding you. I don't want to hurt anybody, Brill." His face hardened. "But it's Manners I'm after. A louse like that has got no right in show business. I hated to see you get mixed up with him, but—" He shrugged, a small, narrow-shouldered little man who'd saw off his right arm if it would help out a friend. But a man who wouldn't betray what he considered a sacred trust—to publish the truth.

Bernie Glassman looked at the photograph on his desk, then glanced once more at O'Hearn. "When it's over, come on back here. I could use a good writer on this rag. You got a job, Brill. Any time."

O'Hearn gave him a weary smile, feeling a little foolish. Bernie Glassman couldn't spare enough money to hire a janitor, let alone a reporter. Yet Brill knew his friend wasn't pretending.

Bernie said, "I wanted you to hear this Theona Layne deal from me. Not secondhand. You're not sore?"

"It's all in a day's work," O'Hearn said, rising to go. "See you, Bernie."

"Sure, Brill." He tried to laugh. "And gather up those old wigs for me. My head gets cold in the winter."

O'Hearn's frozen face grinned as he stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Back in Encanto, he found a furious Frank Manners waiting for him in the small, crowded lobby of the Empire Hotel. O'Hearn had just stopped at the desk for his key when Manners jerked his head in signal for him.

O'Hearn followed him to a lobby sofa. Manners' eyes were ugly as he handed O'Hearn a strip of newsprint. It was the same story Bernie Glassman had showed him.

Across the bottom Simon Advocate had scribbled: "This runs in tomorrow's edition. Thought you would like to know. If you have anything to add to the story, give me a call."

O'Hearn handed the story back to Manners and told him about Bernie Glassman.

"So that's where you were." Manners snapped. "I been tryin' to get you all afternoon." He stared at the proof sheet.

"Advocate and this Glassman are workin' together," he said suddenly. "It's a lousy shakedown."

"No shakedown," O'Hearn informed him.

Manners grunted. "Offer Advocate a thousand. He'll forget about that story."

"You're wrong, Frank."

"Then we'll deal with Glassman."

"You'll stand more chance of buying Grant's Tomb for twenty bucks than of buying Glassman for a million."

Manners' eyes became small and wicked. "Whose side you on, anyhow?"

"I'm trying to do a job, damn it," O'Hearn said. "But Bernie's my friend."

Manners chewed his lips. "There ain't a man that hasn't got a price tag hangin' from his rear."

"Some things you don't understand, Frank."

"I understand this," Manners said angrily. "I go into the TV business because you tell me it's good."

"And it's just a blind so you can keep a stable full of women," O'Hearn shot back.

"So what?" Manners snarled. "I sign 'em, I make love to 'em. It's bein' done every day." He tapped O'Hearn on the chest. "If Theona's crazy enough to cut some guy up just because he gets rough with her, then it's your job to see it doesn't get in the papers!"

A plump man in a baggy gray suit was sitting at the far end of the couch. His prim woman's mouth was tight as he regarded Manners and his press agent.

Manners, suddenly noticing him, said, "Buff off, fat boy. Or I'll really give you somethin' to look at."

The fat man had a sample case on his lap and was writing in an order book. Without comment, he lowered his eyes and went on with his task.

Across the street, Cort Bentley plunged out of his bar-room and climbed into his car parked at the curb. He backed out, whipped the heavy car around and went barreling north on Main Street. He had switched on his red spotlights. His siren screamed.

"Bentley playing policeman again," Frank Manners said, hearing the noise. He removed a cigar from his breast

pocket and rolled it between his palms. "I sent Nacky to L. A. today. You know for what."

O'Hearn jerked his eyes back from the window. Several cars had started in the wake of Bentley's sedan. Small town excitement was in the air.

The hotel clerk said to no one in particular, "Wonder what's happened?"

Manners, peering up at O'Hearn, said, "The slots will just be the start of it. Before the week's out we'll have wheels and black-jack layouts and—if everything goes right, your take for the year ought to be forty grand."

O'Hearn licked his lips. Forty thousand dollars! He and Kit in some town. Forty thousand dollars might make a down payment on a newspaper . . .

A sandy-haired man stuck his head inside the lobby door. "Hey, Fred!" he called to the clerk. "Know what the excitement is all about?"

"Some yellow-haired dame got raped. She's at Ray's Service Station. And she ain't wearin' a stitch!" He waved and dashed out swiftly.

O'Hearn leaped to his feet and started for the door.

Manners said, "Where in hell you going? I want to talk."

But O'Hearn was no longer within hearing distance. He was behind the wheel of his car, turning the key in the ignition.

CHAPTER NINE

O'HEARN kept his car pointed toward Ray's place and went hurtling down the road at top speed. A *yellow-haired*

dame. Raped. The words kept whipping through his brain.

At last up ahead he saw auto headlights and a crowd clustered about the gas station. Ray, a curly-haired man in greasy coveralls, was telling Simon Advocate excitedly, "I heard the dame yell for help. I come up and there she was crouched behind the fence yonder. Nekkid." His eyes glowed.

O'Hearn elbowed his way to where Kit was sitting on a stack of old auto tires. She wore a man's raincoat, the belt tightened about her waist, and high-heeled shoes but no stockings. She sat with elbows on her knees, staring at the ground.

When O'Hearn came up she looked at him accusingly. "Why didn't you phone?"

O'Hearn handed her a cigarette without making answer.

"I waited for you to call."

O'Hearn said, "I'm going to get you home."

"Where's Theona?" Kit asked tiredly, searching his face with her eyes.

O'Hearn bent his head, explaining that he had gone to Hollywood on business concerning Theona. "I didn't want to phone until I was hopeful of good news."

She smoked a moment, then said, "I gather it's bad news."

He nodded. "The story about Theona and Rodzolo will break tomorrow."

"Poor Theona," Kit murmured.

Just then, Cort Bentley came plunging through the trees, carrying a big flashlight. In the other hand he held Kit's clothes. A group of men, some of them with guns, trailed him into the circle of light around the gas station.

"Couldn't find the guy," Bentley said, his yellow-

brown eyes sliding from O'Hearn to the girl and back again.

She took the wadded clothes from him and held them on her lap.

The males in the crowd inched forward a little, their eyes speculating on the fact that she wore nothing, absolutely nothing, under Ray's old raincoat. Ray said so himself. Ray had found her naked. By God, their eyes said, Ray sure had something to remember.

Bentley whipped a notebook from his pocket and wet the tip of a stubby pencil with his tongue. This was the role he liked best. Here was authority tacked to the front of his Western shirt in the small six-pointed metal shield that said *Constable*.

Bentley said importantly, "The fella must have beat it." He cleared his throat, his eyes malicious. "Just how far did he get with you, Miss Durand?"

Kit looked embarrassed.

O'Hearn said angrily, "You don't have to ask those questions here." He glared at the expectant faces that encircled them.

Bentley's yellow-brown eyes narrowed. "Don't be stick-in' your nose in, O'Hearn." He jabbed his pencil at Kit. "Maybe there's more to this than we figure. Last night I damned near run this dame in for creating a disturbance in my place."

A murmur ran through the crowd. Faces that had showed sympathy before changed suddenly. And it was as Bentley had intended. He gave the crowd a knowing look, a smile touching his mouth. This altered things. From a woman who might have escaped a rapist, Kit was suddenly transformed into a woman who might have gone into the woods with a man, then got into a fight with him and yelled "rape."

When O'Hearn balled his fists, Advocate said sharply in his ear, "Don't be a damned fool. Bentley wants you to start something."

O'Hearn stood glowering at Bentley's fleshy face.

Bentley said, "What did the guy look like, Miss Durand?"

Kit finished her cigarette and dropped it to the ground, putting her heel on it. She had stripped off her torn stockings and her bare legs were cold.

"I couldn't see his face," she said in a low voice.

"Couldn't see his face?" Bentley mocked. "Why, you was pretty close to him, wasn't you? About as close as you could get—" He looked around at the crowd, smiling. Somebody snickered.

"I couldn't see his face," Kit said. "For one thing, it was too dark."

"You mean his face was too dark?" Bentley said.

"I—I guess so."

Bentley looked at O'Hearn, then at Simon Advocate who stood nearby. Triumph was in Bentley's voice when he said, "Maybe you couldn't see his face because it was black."

Kit's shoulders stirred under the raincoat. "Maybe that was the reason." Then she looked up quickly. "I didn't mean to insinuate that he might have been colored, if that's what you're driving at!"

A strange silence gripped the men who crowded around the yellow-haired girl. They exchanged knowing glances.

In his notebook Bentley wrote, "Suspect—colored."

Bentley tipped back his white cowboy hat as he eyed the circle of tense faces. "A lot of folks," he said, his voice full of meaning, "figure I was wrong in fixin' a 'line' in Encanto. Now I guess you can see I was right. We got to protect our womenfolks—"

A short man with a round, fat stomach elbowed his way to Bentley's side. His dark blue uniform was shiny from age and one coat pocket had been mended. He wore a badge and a dark blue cap that was newer than the uniform.

"I was out at Joe Kemphill's, makin' a report when I got this call," the man said to Bentley. "What's up?"

"Attempted rape, Lew," Bentley said. "One of them black babies that come to work on the dam tried to attack this girl."

"The hell you say," Lew Archer murmured, looking at Kit.

There was an ugly, almost imperceptible murmur from the crowd now.

O'Hearn had been staring at Kit's wrists. Suddenly he shoved higher the sleeves of the raincoat. Her arms were covered with black marks. An idea clicked in his mind. He looked up, seeing Bentley and Lew Archer and the rest watching him.

"Could mean a lot of things," Bentley said uncertainly.

O'Hearn rubbed his fingers so they could see the tips. They were black. "Soot," O'Hearn said grimly.

"What the hell's that prove?" Bentley demanded, frowning.

"Rodzolo, maybe," O'Hearn went on. "We know he ran away from the hospital. His face was bandaged. A white bandage could be seen at night. Rodzolo didn't want that. So he might have smeared soot over his bandages."

"Where'd he get any soot?" Bentley said, his voice less positive than it had been. "Maybe off a fryin' pan?" He tried to laugh.

"Could be he got it off a smudge pot," the curly-haired gas station owner offered. "There's plenty of 'em around here."

Bentley glared at him.

Lew Archer was examining Kit's arms. Now the pudgy officer straightened up. "I believe that's possible, Cort. I got a call from Joe Kempfill. He surprised a prowler who knocked him out and stole a gun." He turned to Kit. "Did this fella have a gun?"

"Yes. It was shiny. I remember it well."

"Nickel-plated," Lew Archer said. "That's Joe Kempfill's gun, all right."

Bentley glared. "It's a damned nigger that done this—"

Lew Archer cut in, "Kempfill said the guy that knocked him out was wearing some kind of black hood over his face. It could have been bandages covered with soot. I thought Kempfill was just seeing things when he told me. Now I don't know."

Some of the tension went out of the crowd.

O'Hearn said, "Kit had her hair dyed yellow only this morning. If Rodzolo was watching the house, he probably mistook Kit for her sister. He wanted to finish what he started the other day."

Lew Archer slapped his pudgy hands together. "That's it. No doubt about it." He started pushing his way through the crowd. "Come on, Cort," he yelled over his shoulder. "Let's get that guy before he takes out after another woman."

Glowering, Bentley closed his notebook and followed.

When the two officers had gone, Simon Advocate thoughtfully rubbed his jaw and peered at Kit through the thick lenses of his glasses. "I've done your sister an injustice," he said gravely. "I guess Rodzolo is really a sex maniac, after all."

O'Hearn gave him a quizzical glance. "What about the story you've got set to run tomorrow?"

"I'll kill it, of course." He gave O'Hearn a wry grin.

"And I'll phone Bernie Glassman. Incidentally, he thinks you're quite a guy."

O'Hearn said, "I'm glad you changed your mind about the story."

"Any woman—I repeat, any woman—has a right to defend herself."

O'Hearn drove a silent Kit home. When they were inside the house he said, "You're a fool to stay here after what happened."

"I can take care of myself. I left the back door unlatched. I remember now. That's how he got in."

O'Hearn put a hand on her wrist, feeling the skin cold to his touch. "You're burned at me."

"I'm tired," she said, pushing the mass of yellow hair away from her pale face. "I'd rather you left me now."

He felt a faint stirring of anger that he quickly fought down. He handed her a .22 rifle, saying, "Take this. Only weapon I own. Not much of a gun but it would scare anybody off."

As she stared wordlessly at the rifle in her hands, O'Hearn made a quick search of the house to make sure no one was hiding on the premises. Then he tested the windows and doors. He went back to the living room and found himself suddenly remembering how vibrant and warm she had been that morning. Slowly he unbuttoned the front of the raincoat and opened the belt. She seemed in a daze as if not realizing his intention. Not until the coat fell open, revealing the smooth contours beneath it, did she slap his hands away.

Clutching the coat about her with one hand, she said, "This morning it was a zipper. Now it's buttons. You're talented, O'Hearn."

He flushed. "You make what happened this morning sound meaningless."

She said, "I've had a lot of time to think today. I want to be sure about things." Her eyes searched his face a moment, then she added, "Right now I'm worried about Theona."

O'Hearn said, "I'm staying here. I don't want to leave you alone."

She shook her yellow head. "I want to be alone when Theona comes home. We've got a lot of talking to do."

He looked at her carefully. "I wasn't going to bother you, if that's what's in your mind."

He approached her and bent his head as if to kiss her but she turned away.

"Please go," she said.

He walked to the door at last, saying, "I'll try to find Theona."

Then he was gone and she sank to a chair.

All night she sat there, holding the rifle, watching the front door. But Theona did not come home.

CHAPTER TEN

NACKY ARCHER wheeled the big truck along the highway. Nacky was in a sullen mood. His business in L.A. had taken much longer than he had expected. His stomach growled and when he saw Charlie Dorn's diner loom up on the outskirts of Encanto, he turned into the drive between the lunchroom and the sprawling motel. Upstairs over the diner was the single room in which Charlie Dorn lived.

When Nacky stepped into the diner, Charlie Dorn peered at him from over his hot plate. He seemed to be in

a foul mood, trying to wait on customers and cook up orders at the same time. Sparse black hair was plastered with perspiration to his high, balding dome.

"Damned hasher didn't show up this mornin'," Charlie grumbled.

Nacky settled his bulk to a stool and said, "If you didn't try to be always pinchin' their behinds, you could keep a woman."

The half-dozen truck drivers at the counter laughed.

Charlie Dorn said, "I'm takin' out the TV set tomorrow, boys. We don't need Bob Hope when we got comedians like Nacky Archer."

Nacky gave him a sullen look. His nerves were raw. All night he had waited for an okay to open the warehouse. Funny how damned frightened some people were of the law. To Nacky the law was something you could bend to suit your needs. You could get away with anything if you had a pipeline into the right places.

Addie Mansfield bustled in and said, "Hi, Charlie." Then she saw Nacky. She nodded and sat down. She wore her white shoes and uniform under her coat. She wasn't bad looking, Nacky observed. Black hair, a face with surprisingly few lines for her age.

"Been pickin' wildflowers lately?" Nacky asked as he ate the food Charlie had placed before him.

Addie Mansfield said, "Not yet—soon, though."

The calmness with which Addie regarded her affair with Lew Archer irritated Nacky. For ten years they had been going together. And for that long, Nacky had managed to prevent them from marrying.

And four years ago, when Nacky had been eighteen, something had happened that had clinched his hold on his father. Whenever Lew Archer weakened, all Nacky had to do was drive with him past a certain house on Ramon

Road. The house had once been occupied by a Mexican family. You could see the fresh section of wall that had been replaced with new bricks. It still showed even after four years. Nacky would murmur something about being an accessory and Lew Archer would knuckle under.

Charlie Dorn seemed unusually solicitous. He kept filling Nacky's coffee mug. He asked if the eggs were all right. Did Nacky want more toast? More jelly? But Nacky didn't even answer him. Charlie Dorn's perspiring face wore an expression of concern.

When Addie and the truck drivers had gone, Charlie said, trying to make conversation, "See you got a load, Nacky. What's in the truck?"

Nacky said, "Boxes. What in hell do you think I'm carrying?"

Charlie wiped his hands on his greasy apron. "Listen, Nacky," he said nervously. "I didn't mean anything by that crack."

"What crack?" Nacky said, giving the balding cook the full impact of his sullen eyes.

"About Bob Hope. Hell, I was only tryin' to have some fun."

"You had fun," Nacky said thinly. "Forget it."

Charlie picked up the tab he had made out for Nacky's breakfast. Slowly he tore it into bits.

Charlie said, "I just didn't want you to think I was cracking wise. That's all." When Nacky didn't reply, Charlie snapped his fingers. "Hey, it's a hot morning. Maybe the dame's outside."

"What dame?"

Charlie gave him a knowing wink. "Cort Bentley's got some broad holed up at his place next door. Yesterday she takes herself a sun bath. In her birthday suit."

Nacky's heavy face lost its look of indifference. "Good-lookin' dame?"

"A beaut. I got so damned worked up watchin' her that I tried to get Martha to go upstairs with me." He gave Nacky a sick grin. "Guess that's why she never showed up this morning."

Nacky thought of Martha, a plump redhead who had been working Charlie's counter for the past year.

Nacky said, "Let's take a look at this broad."

Charlie led the way through the kitchen up a steep flight of narrow stairs to a second-floor bedroom littered with the junk a bachelor can collect. Charlie's bed was unmade and a half-filled pint of whiskey was on the dresser.

"Got to be quiet," Charlie whispered, laying a finger over his lips.

He tiptoed to the open window, peered out cautiously, then beckoned to Nacky. "She's out there," he whispered.

Nacky looked down. Each motel unit had a private patio surrounded by a high concrete wall. The wall was built flush with Charlie's cafe so that nothing could be seen from the lower floor. But from up here . . .

There were two chrome lounging chairs and a hammock. But the girl had ignored these comforts. She lay on her back on a large blue towel that was spread out on the flagstone floor of the patio. She wore dark glasses. Even though her hair was covered with a blue kerchief, Nacky caught his breath as he recognized her.

"Ain't she somethin'?" Charlie whispered, his voice betraying his excitement. "A blonde. A real blondel"

"Shut up," Nacky snarled under his breath.

A truck pulled up and two men got out and walked into the diner below. Charlie descended after giving Nacky a puzzled look.

Nacky continued to peer down into the patio. The face was turned away, the hair was covered, but he recognized the body—the perfect pear-shaped breasts, the flat plane of stomach, the long rounded slopes of her thighs. Her crimson-tipped toenails winked brightly in the hot morning sunlight.

Nacky felt his throat tighten.

"Goddam you, Theona," he said silently.

As if some thought wave had touched her, she sat up suddenly. Then she got to her feet and walked to the two-foot border of dirt between the flagstone floor and the wall. She dug a toe into the dirt beside a green shrub. He watched her hips wink at him as she strolled across the patio and picked up a green water hose. She turned on the tap and, when the water had gained its full force, she adjusted the nozzle, as if to water the shrubbery.

Suddenly she shifted the hose and the nozzle shot a stream of water straight into the startled Nacky's face. As Nacky drew back, gasping, she dropped the hose. Giggling, she ran into the motel unit and slammed the door after her.

Nacky came downstairs with his shirt dripping, his face black with fury. He walked heavily through the diner to the parking lot outside. There he climbed into his truck and went roaring toward town.

When the teletype in Manners' office began to click, it typed out a crytic pronouncement of doom—*Ole's Oats canceled out. Sorry.*

Sweating, Frank Manners phoned the agency in Hollywood. They told him Davidson of Ole's Oats had been snooping around Encanto. He had been posing as a traveling salesman.

"Maybe you saw him," Burns of the agency suggested.

"A fat man in a gray suit, carrying a sample case."

Manners loosed a string of four-letter words into the mouth-piece as he recalled the man in the hotel lobby.

"We can probably peddle those films to another client," Burns said. **"But it will take time."** He paused. **"I suppose you know you have a—er—liability in Theona Layne. It will be hard to overcome."**

Manners spent the next hour cursing and going through new reports from the foreman of his ranch. Then he heard a truck pull up outside and he peered through the venetian blinds to see Nacky sliding from the cab.

Manners met him at the door. **"Where the hell you been?"**

Nacky's eyes narrowed. **"Mort wouldn't let me take 'em out of the warehouse till three o'clock this morning. Claimed it was safer then."**

Manners gave him a black scowl. **"Get the truck in the garage. Don't leave it here where some cop can snoop!"**

Nacky towered over Manners. He said, **"No cops in this town are goin' to bother that load."**

"Just the same," Manners said irritably, **"get it out of sight."** He lifted a hand to smooth his expensive hair. As Nacky started toward the door, Manners said, **"Where's Theona?"** He watched the heavy face, aware of a slight tension at the corners of the mouth.

"Don't know," Nacky lied.

"You drove her home," Manners reminded him, reaching for a cigar from a leather-topped box on the desk. He slanted his small hard eyes at Nacky. **"I haven't seen her around since then."** He lit the cigar. **"And she hasn't phoned."**

Nacky looked out of the window. **"You finished making them TV pictures. I guess she just took a couple of days off."**

Frank Manners settled into his padded chair. He said, "I'm remembering a night-club singer. A guy that had a national rep. You'd know him if I mentioned his name. He got a yen for a woman I had once. They found him floatin' in Lake Michigan."

"I'm crying," Nacky said from a corner of his mouth.

Manners smiled up at Nacky.

Nacky was sweating. "I'll get the truck in the garage."

Manners made no reply. He sat hunched in his chair, cigar smoke wreathing his small hard face.

Preliminary excavation for Schuyler Dam was under way and an employment office had been opened on Main Street to facilitate hiring for the actual construction. A line of men standing three deep extended a full block down Main Street. O'Hearn saw with disgust that the employment office was south of Independence Street. Bentley had apparently sold the contractors on his "line."

From a booth in the Empire lobby O'Hearn called Kit. She was coolly polite but she didn't wish to see him at the moment. When he hung up he murmured, "Women . . ."

In the Empire Coffee Shop, O'Hearn took a stool next to Simon Advocate. Advocate, dunking a hot roll into his coffee, remarked, "Bernie Glassman says you're a good reporter. He says that story you did on slum clearance in L.A. was a classic. Bernie says you've got a feeling for justice."

"It was a job," O'Hearn reflected, watching Clarice, the black-haired waitress, as she gave him her morning smile. "I got a five-dollar raise out of it."

"You like money, don't you, O'Hearn?"

"If it will buy me a piece of a newspaper," O'Hearn admitted.

Clarice stooped to take a bag of coffee from under the counter. Balancing herself on her heels she slowly and deliberately inspected the coffee bag. From this position he could see an area of smooth bare thighs and an edge of pink panties.

Clarice noticed his stare, flushed prettily and got up, dumping the coffee into the urn. She was small and cute and for a time O'Hearn had toyed with the idea of taking her up on the invitation that always seemed to lurk behind her dark eyes. Her black hair glistened cleanly.

Advocate munched his soggy roll. "I used to like money too," the editor said. "I was a hell-fire managing editor and I was in line for a nice block of stock from the publisher."

O'Hearn, noticing how Clarice leaned over the counter when she wrote an order on her pad, said, "That so?" Clarice straightened self-consciously and went to the kitchen with her order book.

Advocate said soberly, "Ten years ago my wife died. I realized then that all the money I could ever make wouldn't bring her back. I got a good objective look at myself. Here I was sitting in a nice office, making a crew sweat for me. I spent half my time in conference with the publisher, a hundred per cent American. So he said. The rest of the world could go to hell. He didn't like foreigners. But he forgot that only two generations back his family had arrived at Ellis Island. And when I'd remind him of that fact he would give me an indignant look and inform me that immigrants today were different from what they used to be. Now all they wanted was a handout.

"And I'd slant the news the way he wanted it because in only another year I was going to get that nice chunk of stock. And I was named in his will. When he died I was to

run the paper—of course, under the supervision of a board to see that his policies were carried out.”

Clarice brought O’Hearn his coffee and smiled sweetly. “My kid brother wants to be a writer, Mr. O’Hearn,” she said, looking at him through the fringe of her dark lashes. “I thought maybe you could stop over to the house some time and give him a few pointers. We live alone . . .”

O’Hearn, thankful for the respite from Advocate, said, “Sure. Clarice. Any time.”

Advocate went on, “Well, when my wife died, I sold our house and a couple of lots we had and I came down here and bought the *Enterprise*.”

“You’ve got a good paper,” O’Hearn said. The flush had deepened on Clarice’s cheeks. She smiled at him again and went off to wait on other customers.

“It’s here in the small towns that the work has to be done,” Advocate continued, finishing his roll. “In the cities all the people want is murder and sex. Out here you can shape destiny. You can do it slowly. Like that business at Bentley’s the other night. A lot of people need waking up.”

“Yeah,” O’Hearn said. Advocate made him acutely aware of his own shortcomings.

“You’d be surprised how many people are stirred up. Do you know the Women’s Club here is actually considering the membership application of a Mexican woman?” He chuckled. “In this town, O’Hearn, that’s real progress.”

O’Hearn glanced at his watch and thought about Kit. What was she so damned burned about? Just because he didn’t phone? Or was it because of what had happened between them?

As he recalled that incident, he felt his blood quicken.

Advocate said, “Ever think of working on a small-town paper?”

"Too dead for me," O'Hearn said.

Advocate shoved his coffee-cup aside. "I'm getting kind of old to run everything by myself. As long as Bernie Glassman vouches for you, I'd be willing to make a deal." He twisted around on the stool to peer owlishly through the spectacles. "You come in at a nominal salary and we'll split the profits. You can pay me back some of it for a share in the paper. In ten years or so you'll own half interest. And when I'm not around any longer you'll have it all."

O'Hearn licked lips that had suddenly gone dry. "In ten years I'll be forty-two years old. That's too damned long to wait."

Advocate gave him a faint smile. "I've got you topped right now by thirty years."

O'Hearn blinked uncomfortably.

"A town like this isn't so bad," Advocate said, picking up his tab. "I like Kit Durand. She really started something with that scene in Bentley's. She'd make somebody a good wife."

O'Hearn felt his cheeks flame and he knew Advocate had seen it. He was blushing like a school kid, all because he'd made love to a stripper. How adolescent can you get, he asked himself.

Advocate laid a hand on O'Hearn's arm. "This is my town. I've adopted it—or it's adopted me. It doesn't matter which. I was against Manners buying a ranch here but I thought I'd give the devil his due. As long as he raised oranges and made TV films, it was no concern of mine." He gave O'Hearn a searching look. "But if Manners tries to revert to type, then I'll be after him." Advocate's voice grew grim. "Maybe he'll bomb my paper. It's been done, you know. Or maybe the wreckage will be Manners himself—and whoever he drags down with him."

O'Hearn swallowed and said, "See you around, Simon," as Advocate turned to go.

"Keep your nose clean, Brill."

Clarice said, smoothing the uniform over her curves, "Don't forget about my brother, Mr. O'Hearn. I know he'll want to talk to you about the newspaper business."

O'Hearn slid off the stool and smiled at her. "Maybe one of these nights we can make your brother happy, Clarice," he said.

She gave him a bold smile as he left.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THAT afternoon O'Hearn climbed the stairs to Cort Bentley's office, a raw sickness in his stomach. Four men with saws and hammers were constructing partitions that would shield the big empty room from the stairway. The room ran the length of the building and would be used for a gambling layout, except for Bentley's small office.

The office door stood open and O'Hearn paused on the threshold, seeing Cort Bentley behind his littered desk.

O'Hearn peered back to where the carpenters were working with saw and hammer. One of the men, small and narrow-shouldered, his back to O'Hearn, was measuring a board. Something clicked in O'Hearn's mind; the figure seemed somehow familiar. But the thought was lost as Bentley said, "Come on in. Let's get things started."

O'Hearn took a chair. Frank Manners, straddling another chair, nodded to him in greeting.

Bentley said, "Shall we wait for Nacky?"

Frank Manners shook his head. "This is an executive meeting. Nacky's only a hired hand."

"Nacky's old man is part of the law here," Bentley reminded him, as if Frank Manners needed any reminding.

Manners said, "Thought you had Lew Archer in your pocket?"

"Sure. But it won't do no good to gum up the works by makin' Nacky sore."

"What about the sheriff?" O'Hearn asked. "Is he taken care of?"

Bentley said, "Me and the sheriff"—he laid two fingers together—"are just like that."

Manners said abruptly, "This kind of deal takes organization. Every man's got to be responsible for his own department." He paused and jabbed his cigar at Bentley. "Let's hear that breakdown you set up."

For a moment Bentley studied a paper on his desk, then slanted his yellow-brown eyes at O'Hearn. "As long as you're in the deal," he drawled, "I figured you'd be useful where you really got talent."

O'Hearn tensed, knowing the big man was baiting him. "What's the gag?"

Bentley said, "You're a good-lookin' guy. I figured it would be smart if you handled the woman end of the business."

"I'm not pimping, if that's your angle," O'Hearn snapped.

Bentley laid down the paper and clasped his hands behind his head. He grinned. "Nothin' wrong with bein' a pimp. It's right down your alley."

O'Hearn stood up, rigid with anger. "You better get another boy," he said, starting for the door.

Manners laughed and slapped his knee, then got up to stop him at the door. "Don't get sore," he said, still laugh-

ing. "Hell, it's a good joke. Here you went to college and you end up countin' the towels in a crib joint."

O'Hearn only stared at the thin, hard face and said nothing.

Manners went on, "And I never got outa the fourth grade and I'm running the show. That's the joke. Don't you think it's funny, O'Hearn?"

"No," O'Hearn said. But he sat down again. He had decided to play along a little further.

"You'll like your job," Manners said, his voice suddenly cold. He peered at O'Hearn's angry face for a moment, then continued, "You wanted in on this deal. So you're in—up to your armpits."

O'Hearn swallowed. He'd asked for it, he knew.

Bentley and Manners continued to talk but O'Hearn didn't hear a word they said. He was thinking of Kit and how she would react if she knew the ugly truth about his dealings with these lice. Finally, he said, "I'll go along for the ride. But the whores are out as far as I'm concerned."

Frank Manners gave him a dark look. "Okay, Brill. Bentley can take over that end of it. And remember, this is the last time I'll give in to you."

Bentley leered across his desk, his eyes on O'Hearn. "I never wanted him in the first place," he said to Manners.

Manners lifted his hand. "We got troubles enough without makin' an issue of this. Can we open Saturday?"

Bentley shrugged meaty shoulders. "Sure. If them guys get the partitions up. Hell, you can't get help in this town since the dam construction started. I done the best I could."

"We better open," Manners said thinly. "We got one year to make a killing. Every day we ain't operating is costing us money." He put his hand on the desk. "I fur-

nish the dealers and the games and the slots and the women. Right?"

Bentley shook the proffered hand. "Right. But what's O'Hearn furnish? Hot air?"

Manners gave O'Hearn an oblique glance. "He's got a job. He's going to keep the *Enterprise* off our necks."

O'Hearn looked at him in surprise. "I don't have any influence with Advocate."

Manners' lips barely moved as he said, "The only time you got to worry is if the *Enterprise* prints something we don't like."

Bentley said, "If anything ever leaks, we'll know where it come from, O'Hearn."

Manners gave Bentley a shrewd glance. "It would be damned unhealthy for anybody to talk. Anybody. That includes me and you, Bentley."

A loud knock at the door interrupted their talk. "Who is it?" Bentley growled.

For answer, the door opened and Nacky came in. He said sullenly, "Manners, I got the slots in the truck downstairs."

"Bring 'em up," Manners ordered.

Cort Bentley chewed at a cigar. "Get some of them guys to help you." He waved a hand toward the carpenters.

"That ain't smart," Nacky said.

"So what?" Bentley said. "Everybody in town will know we got slots, come Saturday night."

Nacky went over to the desk where he helped himself to a cigar from Bentley's box. He lit it and was about to drop the match into the ash tray when his eye found something of interest amid the welter of ashes and burned matches. He picked up the article and stared at it. Between his fingers, he held a false fingernail painted flaming red. Bentley's mouth opened slowly and his eyes flicked to Manners.

But Manners was studying a pad on which he had been making calculations.

O'Hearn, watching the play, felt his chest tighten. Nacky dropped the fingernail back in the ash tray. Only when Nacky had gone did Bentley lean over hastily to dump the tray into the wastebasket.

All that afternoon the carpenters worked upstairs and when the new partitions had been given a coat of quick-drying paint, the place was ready for business. Along one wall was a row of slot machines. A door in the main partition had a peephole in it. Up front were two blackjack layouts and two roulette wheels. Fluorescent lights had been hastily hung from the ceiling. The front windows that overlooked Main Street had been painted black and heavy drapes had been hung over them.

Once O'Hearn had managed to slip away from his associates long enough to phone Kit. And again she had seemed cool. Her attitude began to anger him. But at least she'd heard from Theona so perhaps that would settle her mind, O'Hearn reasoned.

He left the phone booth to join Bentley and Manners in what had once been called the Carrizo Hotel. It was across the alley behind Bentley's place, a two-story brick structure.

The knotted sickness in O'Hearn's stomach spread as he listened to the arguments over how many girls it would take to staff the place. Bentley wanted five. Manners said three girls who knew their business would mean more profit for everyone concerned.

Nacky Archer came in, flipping something in the palm of his hand. It was about an inch long and pointed at the end and painted bright red. He said casually, "All the machines are set up."

Manners nodded. Then his eyes tightened as he regarded Nacky. "How's your old man feel about this?"

Bentley answered the query. "I got Lew Archer on ice."

"Just how you got him on ice?" Manners asked.

Bentley flicked his eyes at Nacky. "If there's one thing Lew cares about besides Addie Mansfield, it's Nacky. Four years ago Nacky got in a jam and Archer covered for him. Both Nacky and his old man could go to the pen if it ever came out."

Instead of showing anger, the young giant's face remained expressionless. He kept flipping the small red object in his palm and at last Bentley's eyes focused on it and he stopped speaking.

Manners snatched the object from Nacky, looked at it and said, "Where'd you get this, Nacky?"

"Upstairs in the wastebasket," Nacky said innocently. "In Bentley's office."

Bentley's forehead was suddenly beaded with sweat. For the first time that day, O'Hearn was enjoying himself.

Manners said, "This here's a fingernail. Like Theona wears." He eyed Bentley. "She's been up to your place?"

"Hell no, Frank." Bentley's mouth jerked. "I had one of the barmaids upstairs for a little fun. Guess she left it."

Manners stared at the fingernail, then dropped it into his pocket. "Could be," he said and seemed to dismiss the subject from his mind.

O'Hearn thought he saw disappointment on Nacky's face.

After a moment, Nacky spoke. "I got all the slots lined up, Mr. Manners."

"You said that once," Manners snapped.

Veiled amusement touched Nacky's eyes. "Guess you took the other four, hey, Mr. Manners?"

"Other four what?" Manners growled.

Bentley said with false heartiness, "Let's all go over to my place and have a drink."

Manners repeated, "Four what, Nacky?"

"I brought down eighteen slots from the warehouse," Nacky said. "There's only fourteen upstairs—"

Bentley said quickly, "I thought you knew, Frank. I took 'em down to *Prince's*."

Frank Manners looked at him coldly. "You took four of my machines? What the hell has Prince got to do with this deal?"

Bentley managed a sick smile. "There ain't anybody named Prince. I own the joint."

There was murder in Manners' eyes. "So right away before we even start business you got a sideline. You sneak out four of my machines, figuring I wouldn't miss 'em. What do you take me for? A jerk?"

"I was going to tell you."

Manners eyed him closely. Then his anger seemed to take wings. He said, his voice softening, "How come you got your own joint and that other spot, too?"

Bentley said, "We got the Mex and colored trade down there. That's why I talked up the idea of havin' a 'line.' Keep that crowd south of Independence Street. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't see," Manners said.

"That way I collect all around. And down there the take is more. You can sell that crowd watered whiskey and cheat 'em blind. And if they yell we toss their cans in the cooler." He looked at Manners, some of his self-assurance coming back. "I was going to tell you, Frank. I figured just you and me would take the cut out of *Prince's*. I didn't want O'Hearn or anybody else in on it."

Manners said, "I've salted down guys in concrete for doin' less than that." Then he shrugged. "But I need

dough and I don't want to upset the works." He turned to Nacky. "Tellin' me about them machines will earn you a bonus," he said.

Nacky said, "I wasn't tryin' to make no trouble. I just thought maybe somebody had stole those machines. Hell, I've known all along that Bentley owned *Prince's*."

Manners seemed to have lost his animosity. "You played it smart at that, Cort. Keepin' the Mexicans and colored to their end of town." He removed the false fingernail from his coat pocket and studied it a moment while Bentley's fleshy face again grew pallid. Then Manners nodded at Nacky. "Find Theona and take her to the office," he said. He gave Bentley a tight smile. "All this talk about women has got me steamed up." He looked at Nacky. "Well, get movin'."

As Nacky left, Manners rubbed his hands together.

"To hell with TV and oranges. This is the kind of business I like."

"Manners," O'Hearn said stiffly, "I've been thinking it over—"

Bentley and Manners exchanged glances.

O'Hearn went on, "This racket isn't for me."

"I don't like them kind of jokes, O'Hearn," Manners said coldly.

"I'm serious." O'Hearn spread his hands. "I just can't stomach it, that's all." He got to his feet and started toward the door.

"It was your idea," Manners reminded him.

"I told you I wouldn't trust him no farther than I can spit," Bentley put in.

O'Hearn walked out quickly. Not until he had traversed the length of Bentley's barroom and reached Main Street did he draw an easy breath.

He had reached his decision quickly. And now that he

knew what he wanted there was only one thing to do. He had to see Kit. Somehow he had to convince her that Theona wasn't worth helping and if she stayed here Kit would only become involved in a nasty mess, and needlessly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IN the living room of the old house Kit faced her sister. "Where have you been?"

"I've been with a man," Theona brazenly declared. "Where do you think I've been?"

"Who? Bentley? You'll make trouble for yourself, playing off Bentley against Manners."

"You've been listening to O'Hearn again," Theona said. "Anyway, maybe I want to make trouble. Maybe that's how I get my kicks."

"I wanted so much to help you," Kit said slowly, "but there doesn't seem to be anything I can do."

"You can go back to Los Angeles," Theona said.

Kit studied her sister's face, noticing the shadows under the eyes. Kit looked at the bottles of gin and bitters and vermouth Theona had brought home with her. They had been placed on the table next to a bowl of ice cubes.

Kit said, "I'm your only living relative, Theona. And I have it within my power to send you to a hospital. I'll do it if you don't promise to cooperate."

"A hospital?" Color drained from Theona's face. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?" More shock than anger was in her voice.

"You just need help. That's all. I—"

As often happened, Theona's mood abruptly changed and she was contrite. "You've heard a lot of ugly stories about me. About Rodzolo and Bentley and Manners. A lot of those stories are of my own making." She smiled a little-girl smile. "Manners has never meant anything to me. Do you honestly think I'd let a bum like that love me?"

Kit stared into the gray eyes. "I didn't want to think so. But—"

"I know," Theona said. "O'Hearn's been telling you stories again." Her shoulders stiffened. "Sure I like to flirt and have men chase me. I've had my moments, yes." She watched Kit's face carefully. "Moments like those you and O'Hearn have had."

Kit felt the blood rush to her face. She wasn't a prude but what had happened with O'Hearn she regarded as something deeper than a casual affair. At least she had, at first. But now somehow she blamed him for her experience with Rodzolo, although she knew logically it was childish. If only he had phoned her or come out to the house that night . . .

"It's true, then," Theona said suddenly, "O'Hearn has made love to you, hasn't he?"

"That's my business!"

Theona gave her a sad smile. "It makes me damned sore that a bastard like O'Hearn can give my sister a line and get her to lay."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black. What were you doing all this time with Bentley? Reading poetry?"

"I wanted to be alone," Theona said. "I got tight down at Bentley's. I wanted to do some thinking with nobody around. Bentley leaves me alone."

Kit gave her sister an odd look. "Just what are you trying to prove?"

"That O'Hearn is a louse."

Theona's illogical pattern of thought disturbed Kit but it also heightened her anger. "Maybe you're jealous because you've been trying to catch O'Hearn's eye. And the fact that he paid no attention to you makes you resent that he and I—" She broke off, biting her lower lip.

Theona said, "Sure resent it. O'Hearn goes for me and when I turn him down he tries to make time with my sister."

"You're wrong about O'Hearn."

Theona's eyes glittered. "Why do you think he wanted you to dye your hair?"

"To help you out of a bad spot."

Theona smiled. "He wanted your hair yellow so you'd look exactly like me. He used you as a substitute for me, don't you see?"

"Theona you're mad. Absolutely mad." Kit felt a sudden urge to smash that smile from her sister's lips.

"If O'Hearn walked in that door and thought you weren't around, he'd go for me—all the way, Kit, as sure as hell. If I'd let him."

Kit flew upstairs in a blind rage and slammed the door to her bedroom. She flung herself across the bed, feeling bitter and helpless. Theona was jealous of O'Hearn, she kept telling herself. Now she regretted the way she had spoken to him. Suddenly she longed for him intensely.

How long she lay there thinking, she didn't know, but it was some time later that she heard voices downstairs. Swinging her legs off the bed, she got up and opened the door and stepped out into the hall. She peered over the banister down into the parlor.

In his rumpled clothes, O'Hearn stood facing Theona. His angular face seemed drawn.

O'Hearn said, "Where's Kit?"

Theona, holding a martini glass in one hand, said, "How do you know I'm not Kit?" Her yellow head was tilted back, watching him.

O'Hearn gave her a black look. "Tell Kit I want to see her."

Theona weaved to the table and put down her glass. "The Durand Sisters look alike," she giggled. "Maybe I'm Kit."

"Don't be silly."

Suddenly Theona took off her wide brown leather belt and pulled up the sweater she was wearing. She pointed to a small mole near her navel. "That's how you can tell us apart. Kit hasn't got one." Then she added, "Or maybe you've noticed that."

"You're obscene."

She made a mocking sound with her lips. She refilled her glass from a mixer still half full of martinis. She took a swallow of the drink, then set the glass down. As he started for the door, she pulled her sweater over her head and threw it across the back of a chair. Then she finished the martini and filled the glass again.

From the top of the stairs Kit watched, hardly daring to breathe. It had been on her tongue to call out to O'Hearn. But something had silenced her.

Sunlight streaming through the window downstairs washed over Theona's beautiful figure. Her skin was a gleaming bronze color.

O'Hearn's eyes were all over her lovely large breasts, her lithe long legs, and he said a little hoarsely, "Where did you get the tan?"

"When I tan, I tan all over," Theona said, unzipping

her slacks and removing them quickly. Then she kicked off her sandals and stood in her bare feet.

Suddenly she snatched her glass from the table and smashed it against the floor at O'Hearn's feet. She lifted her bare arms to him, her head thrown back so that her yellow hair fell loosely about her shoulders.

"You'll have to carry me, Brill," she whispered. "Otherwise I'll get glass in my feet."

O'Hearn's eyes ran over her curves. Suddenly he picked her up and she felt surprisingly light and warm against him. Her hair brushed his cheek. His shoes crunched on the glass as he carried her to a couch. She smiled up at him expectantly. Suddenly he dropped her roughly.

"Get your clothes on," he said, starting for the door.

In a flash, Theona was up on her hands and knees, glaring at him. "You're a black Irishman," she said through her teeth. "I never noticed before just how dark and ugly your hair really is."

"It's the same hair I've always had," O'Hearn said, without turning around.

It was a scream from another part of the house that made him pivot. In one split second he saw Kit standing white-faced on the landing above him. Then his gaze shifted. Theona had snatched something from her bag. As he watched, she extended her hand. Five inches of shining steel leaped at him as she pressed a button on a knife hilt.

He felt sweat break out across his back. But not from fear. Fury held him in its grip. When Theona's nude body rushed at him, he caught her by the wrist. Theona screamed and the knife clattered to the floor, too close for comfort.

His face ashen, O'Hearn kicked the knife across the room.

Kit came swiftly down the stairs and stood rigid and

speechless. Theona's big white breasts stirred with her ragged breathing. Her eyes were wicked.

"Thanks for the warning," O'Hearn said to Kit. "I might have had a knife in my back."

Kit moved toward him.

"Why didn't you let me know you were here?" he demanded. "Or were you trying to prove something?"

Without giving her a chance to answer, he turned and slammed out of the house. In another moment his car roared to life and, through the window, Kit saw it go hurtling down Paulo Road toward Encanto.

Theona tried to keep her voice level as she said, "Well, now you know. With O'Hearn it's any woman who's handy."

"Then why did you try to knife him?" Kit asked in a small dead voice.

"I hate him, that's why!" Theona shouted.

Kit turned and climbed the stairs. Up in her room, she began packing her suitcase. But she couldn't finish her task as tears suddenly sprang to her eyes and she fell across the bed weeping.

In a little while Theona came to the door. She was dressed again and she said quietly, "You're leaving?"

From downstairs came the sound of a honking horn. Theona cocked her head at the noise, recognizing the throaty blast.

Kit said, "Don't worry. I won't be here when you get back."

Something flickered across Theona's face and some of the pressure seemed to ease at the corners of her mouth. "Kit, I—"

The horn blasted twice more, impatiently. Theona turned and went out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR the first time in its history, the *Enterprise* had published an evening edition. As soon as O'Hearn angled his car in at the curb on Main Street, he noticed the crowd around the newsstand and walked over to look at the headlines. A box on the front page was headed: Are We Going to Allow Scum to Take Over Encanto?

No names were given but the implication was strong. There was frequent reference to a hoodlum who had become a citrus rancher and a TV producer and now was reverting to type. The story also pointed out that an officer of the law was in partnership with this unnamed character to build a local vice combine.

Feeling frustrated and alone, O'Hearn made his way to the Empire Hotel. The cocktail lounge was a small dim room with a short bar and a dozen chrome stools. O'Hearn had three straight shots and the liquor only increased his anger at Kit and made him curse his own bad luck generously.

He knew Bentley and Manners would think he had spilled that whole story to Advocate. They would be after him. But strangely, the prospect didn't bother him too much. It was trying to get straight about Kit that caused him to order another drink. Had she deliberately been hiding in the house, waiting to see if he would accept Theona's brazen invitation? It was a hell of a test to put a man through. If his dislike for Theona hadn't have been so intense, he might have succumbed. That would have been a hell of a note, he reflected,

right under Kit's nose. And the thought made him angrier than ever at the way she had acted. A trick to test his fidelity! It was the only reason he could name for her strange behavior.

A feminine voice at his elbow said, "Have you got a light, Mr. O'Hearn?"

He turned, flicking his lighter. Clarice smiled up at him, her dark eyes lowered demurely. This was the first time he had seen her out of her green lunchroom uniform. Now she wore a cute summer blouse. The fluffy neckline, provocatively low, was stitched with a black ribbon. With it she wore a short red skirt. Her small feet were encased in red pumps with spike heels.

"I just got through work and thought I'd have a drink," she said. Then, to the bartender, "A bourbon and ginger ale, Al."

The tall, thin and lugubrious bartender mixed her a drink. O'Hearn picked up her tab and ordered another shot for himself.

"But I shouldn't let you buy me a drink," Clarice said.

O'Hearn lifted his glass, "Here's to the brother who wants to write. God rest his soul." He downed the drink.

In the soft lights her black hair glistened. She sat primly on the stool, her shoulders straight.

"My brother really would like to talk to you, Mr. O'Hearn. He's so interested in the newspaper business."

"The name's Brill."

"All right, Brill," she said with a smile. She added, "If I had a car I'd eat at the drive-in. It's such a nice night."

O'Hearn said, "I've got a car!" She accepted the invitation with alacrity.

Outside, O'Hearn was surprised to find that it was dark. He stood for a moment shaking his head, taking deep breaths to dispel the fogginess produced by the drinks. Clarice clung to his arm, smiling up into his face as if he were the most wonderful man on earth.

Had O'Hearn been more alert at that moment he would have seen Kit standing in the lobby of the hotel. When she noticed O'Hearn and the pretty dark-haired girl cross the street and get into the car, she picked up her suitcase.

The clerk spoke to her. "Aren't you going to wait for Mr. O'Hearn?"

She didn't answer but walked out stiffly and made her way to the bus station where she turned in her ticket and waited for the Riverdale local that would make connections with the L.A. line. As she sat down wearily to wait, she suddenly felt utter contempt for O'Hearn and for every other male in the world.

Another observer on hand was Nacky, who had watched Kit come out of the hotel lobby. At first sight of her he had stiffened, thinking she was Theona. But there was something about her carriage that made him realize he was in luck. It was Theona's sister, Kit.

Climbing into the gray station wagon, he trailed her slowly to the bus station. Here he parked and waited outside the open door as she inquired about the Riverdale local. A bus from Riverdale had just unloaded a swarm of people and Nacky made his way over to it.

Kit sat disconsolately in the bus, the only passenger on the return trip to Riverdale. The stocky red-haired driver kept watching her in the rear-view mirror.

A strange fear touched her. She was still broke. It

had been foolish perhaps not to accept Theona's offer of money. But Kit had her pride left—if nothing else, she thought bitterly. Inside her was a gnawing remorse at leaving O'Hearn. But many things had happened to make her certain she never wanted to see him again. It hadn't merely been that little brunette. She had seen the story in the *Enterprise*. And O'Hearn had practically admitted to her that he was going to be associated with the unnamed characters in Advocate's editorial.

As the bus pounded on through the night she thought of Theona. Perhaps in L.A. she could find someone who would offer advice. But first she had to find work. A night-club booking, perhaps. Or if that failed, a spot in a burlesque house. Good strippers were hard to find. And managers were always on the lookout for fresh bodies.

The bus engine suddenly coughed and died and the driver let fly an oath and pulled off the road. Kit watched him as he opened the hood and fussed with a wrench. She walked to the door, peering out at the silent darkness. Far in the distance she saw the red flash of an aerial beacon.

The driver brought his head out from under the hood and gave her a weak grin. "Looks like we're through for the night," he told her. "Have to get a tow back to Encanto."

Kit felt a chill in the pit of her stomach. "Can't you do something?"

He shook his head and wiped greasy hands on a rag. "Fuel line's broke."

She sank wearily into a seat. Of all the luck!

Headlights washed over the bus and she saw a station wagon pull up ahead and stop. A large figure in a loud

sport jacket came up to talk to the driver, murmuring, "What's the matter, Mack?"

"Fuel line," Mack said.

"That's tough." The stranger looked up and Kit saw his face. A young guy, not bad-looking if you liked them on the brute side. "If I had time," the young guy said, "I'd go back to Encanto and send out a tow truck. But I want to get movin' on to L.A."

The driver glanced at Kit sitting stiffly inside, then at the young man. "I just as soon set here all night," the driver said, "I'm gettin' paid. But I got a passenger. If you're goin' to L.A., maybe—"

Kit saw the stranger frown and glance at his watch.

"Guess I could give you a ride to L.A.," he said with some reluctance. "If you're goin' that way."

Kit studied him carefully. This fellow might have ideas, she reflected. But—so what? She could take care of herself. And if she couldn't . . . She shrugged.

"I'd like a lift, if it wouldn't put you out."

He carried her suitcase to the station wagon and when she had slid into the leather seat he said, "I'll see if Mack wants me to phone the garage."

He returned to the bus and handed the driver two twenty-dollar bills.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NACKY kept the station wagon rolling at a fast clip along narrow oiled roads that spread out under the headlights like black ribbon. After an hour, Kit said

worriedly, "We should have been in Riverdale before this."

"I'm takin' a short cut to L.A.," Nacky told her, speaking for the first time. "Relax. I'm not goin' to bother you none."

He began to yawn. "Didn't get much sleep last night." He blinked his eyes at the road, hunching his heavy shoulders over the wheel.

"Want me to drive?"

He shook his head. "It's the boss' car. I'd get canned if I let anybody else have the wheel and he found out about it." Then, making his voice sound casual, he said, "Let's get a motel. I'm dead for sleep."

Kit felt a raw edge of anger. So this was it. Well, she might have expected as much.

"Just drop me off some place where I can get a bus."

He sounded hurt. "I mean we'll get two cabins. I'll be ready to leave at five. Then we'll get into L.A. bright and early."

Kit bit her lip. "But I—"

"Listen. If you're short of dough don't worry. I'm on an expense account. I'll pay."

He slowed the wagon after a few minutes and pulled along a dirt road and up behind a motel. On the highway beyond she could see a white building with a neon sign that read, *Charlie's Diner*.

"Wait here," Nacky said, sliding out of the car and taking the keys. "I'll register, then bring out the book for you to sign."

After he had gone, she considered walking to the diner and trying to pick up a ride. But she might do worse. At least this guy was young and not too bad-looking. She felt supremely confident that she could ward him off.

He returned shortly with a card and a fountain pen and when she had signed her name he carried her suitcase into one of the concrete block units and switched on her lights. "I'm across the court," he said. "I'll knock on your door when I'm ready to pull out in the morning."

She said, "Thanks. You've been very nice about this."

He shrugged and lumbered across a lawn toward the office, the registration card she had signed in his hand.

She closed the door and looked around. The room was small and neat, the floor covered with a rug made of hemp squares. In one corner stood a radio with a timing attachment and a slot for dimes and quarters. Leaving a lamp burning on the nightstand, she hurriedly undressed and, taking a robe, stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

Nacky had an ear to the door and when he heard the shower running, he grinned. He had been counting on the shower. This way it would be easier. Removing his shoes, he inserted a pass key into the lock and opened the door a crack. The room was empty. Light showed under the bathroom door.

Moving noiselessly across the room he listened at the bathroom door to the booming shower. Then he tried the door. It was unlocked. A blast of steam rolled over the top of the shower curtain. Quickly he snatched a terrycloth robe from a hook on the door. He closed the door.

In the shower, Kit felt a sudden draft. She ducked her head out from the shower curtain. Her eyes lifted to the hook where she had hung her robe. It was gone. A sudden nameless dread welled up in her.

In the next room Nacky quickly gathered up her clothes, stuffed them into the suitcase and carried them

outside. Then he stepped into *Charlie's Diner*. Charlie Dorn, perspiring behind his hot plate, said, "Hi, Nacky."

Nacky was fuming. Half a dozen men at the counter looked up. Charlie's new waitress, a sloppy blonde, was serving three men at the far end of the diner.

Nacky said, "A damn hooker gives me the eye and damned if she don't try and lift my wallet."

One of the men snickered.

Charlie Dorn said, "You oughta get married. Some day you'll get your head busted in by one of them women—"

Nacky dropped a coin into the slot of the pay phone and when he got his number he said loudly, "Hello, Bentley?" He repeated his charge over the phone. "Yeah . . . Damn right she's a hooker—"

Kit stood holding a towel around her, stunned to find her suitcase and clothing gone.

Her knees suddenly felt weak and she sank to the edge of the bed in despair as she heard a murmur of voices and footsteps approaching her door. Then a voice she recognized as Cort Bentley's said, "We won't stand for no whores in this town."

A key turned in the lock and the door opened, revealing Cort Bentley and the young man who had brought her. Kit pulled a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around herself.

"I sneaked her clothes," the young fellow was saying, "so she couldn't get away."

"Smart idea, Nacky," Bentley said.

Bentley seized her roughly by the arm and pulled her outside where a crowd had gathered. A big Buick sedan with flashing red spotlights stood in the drive.

Bentley peered at her closely. "I'll be damned. It's the dame that yelled rape the other night!" Then as the crowd drew closer, Bentley added, "We'll fix you, sister. You made a monkey out of the law when you tried to get some poor guy in a jam out in that orange grove. But we got you now."

She tried to protest but Bentley pulled her to the car and shoved her into it. Laughter from the crowd brought a sting to her cheeks.

Bentley drove rapidly toward town. And only then did Kit realize the young stranger had been circling Encanto for an hour to make her think he was heading for L.A. In the darkness, she had been fooled.

In the police station, Kit stood numbly facing a dark heavy-set man with a tired face. She remembered him as one of the officers who had been at the filling station after that terrible night with Rodzolo.

Bentley said, "I'm booking her on a charge of soliciting." He lit a cigar and eyed her coldly. To the heavy-set man he said, "You better tell that kid of yours to watch out—pickin' up strange women."

Lew Archer frowned and went about his task of booking Kit. When she gave her name and said she had been staying with her sister, Theona Layne, Archer gave Bentley a searching glance.

"Just what the hell is this, Cort?"

Sensing slight hope, Kit pleaded her case, telling how the bus had broken down, how the stranger had offered her a lift. The motel, the stolen clothes . . .

Bentley said, when Archer hesitated, "I'm a constable, Lew. I'm makin' a pinch. Are you goin' to book her or shall I take her over to Riverdale and let the sheriff have her?"

Lew Archer looked at Kit's pale face and said, "She doesn't look like a prostitute to me."

Bentley snorted. "Do hookers wear badges so you can tell what they are? Don't be a fool, Lew. She's a prostitute."

"And you're a pimp," Kit said.

Bentley glared at her. "I can book you for petty theft. You tried to lift Nacky Archer's wallet. But I'll stick to the morals charge." He turned to Archer. "She was found naked in a motel. And I got witnesses. Mack Randalls will swear she told him to stop his bus so she could get in the car with Nacky."

"That isn't true—any of it," Kit said.

Bentley ignored her and said, "Better get Addie Mansfield over here. We'll need a matron tonight."

O'Hearn kept shaking his head. The whiskey he and Clarice had been drinking out of a bottle at the drive-in had hit him like a fist.

He didn't remember when or how it had happened but he was suddenly on the other side of the car and Clarice was driving. The seat was too far back and she had to sit up close to the wheel. The skirt had hiked up above her knees. She didn't bother to pull it down. She was humming softly to herself.

And then O'Hearn's vision cleared momentarily and he recognized landmarks and knew they were on Paulo Road. When he saw familiar lights loom up behind an oleander hedge, he told her gruffly to stop the car.

"Where are you going, Brill?" she asked, a pout in her voice.

"Got to see a friend. Back in a minute."

He weaved across the old-fashioned porch and

punched the bell. Theona jerked the door open. She peered at him through dark glasses. This time she was dressed, still in gray slacks and sweater. She smelled of martinis.

She said, "What the hell do you want?"

"Kit. Where's Kit?"

"O'Hearn, you're drunk."

"So're you." He staggered into the house, yelling Kit's name. He climbed the stairs to the bedroom that had been a brief haven. It was empty. He retraced his steps to the parlor. "Where'd she go?" he demanded.

Theona poured herself a drink. "Kit left a note. She doesn't want to see either of us again."

"Kit said that? I don't believe it."

Now that Theona stood near the light from the lamp, he could see a small purple bruise on her chin. Reaching out, he snatched off her dark glasses. Her right eye was purple and swollen.

"Who hit you?"

She bared her white teeth. "Manners!"

"So he finally reverted to type," O'Hearn mumbled. "Why'd he hit you?"

"He accused me of staying with Cort Bentley. I laughed in his face." She smiled thinly as if enjoying the memory. "I told him I needed a man—not a dummy with phoney hair and built-up shoes!"

"No wonder he slugged you." O'Hearn saw his rifle standing beside the fireplace. Kit hadn't even thanked him for lending it to her. He started to pick up the rifle but changed his mind, "To hell with it," he muttered. and lurched out to the car.

Clarice keyed the ignition. "Isn't that the blonde who made those television pictures?"

"Maybe."

"Who gave her the black eye?"

O'Hearn didn't answer. He was aware that Clarice had pulled into an alley behind a small white house with a large back yard. Her small fingers were intimate and warm on his wrist as she said, "Come on, Brill."

He followed her along a flagstone path into a greenhouse made of lattice. Moonlight filtered through the interstices.

Clarice playfully shoved him down on an old army cot covered with a quilt. "Mother had this built. She liked flowers. Now Uncle Lew keeps it up. He comes over once a week."

Something clicked in O'Hearn's fuzzy mind. "Uncle Lew?"

"Lew Archer. You know him. He's my uncle."

"Oh."

Clarice sat down beside him. She smelled very sweet and suddenly he wanted to hold her. He put his arms around her and she snuggled against him, soft and warm. The scent of orange blossoms was strong.

"I'm sorry my brother isn't home," she said, peering at the darkened windows of the cottage.

He caught her chin roughly and kissed her. "You knew damned well he wouldn't be home," he said after a minute.

"I had to have some excuse to get you out here," she whispered. "There's something fascinating about a newspaperman."

O'Hearn gave a short laugh but she put a finger across his lips and pushed herself against him. When he didn't respond, she squirmed across his lap. Her skirt was caught under her body. A lacework of shadows crisscrossed her thighs in the moonlight.

Her face was warm against him as she whispered,

"I'm awful, Brill. Some day I'll catch pneumonia." She waited a moment, then whispered, "I'm not wearing a thing under my clothes."

"Yeah," he said, his voice husky with excitement, "I noticed."

Suddenly she fell back across his lap and her small oval face was revealed in a pool of moonlight. She lay there with her eyes closed a moment, then she opened them to give him a long searching glance. "Don't you like me?" she asked.

She moved away from him and pulled down her skirt and drew her legs up. She lay on the cot huddled in a little ball and he heard her weeping.

He put out his hand and his fingers touched her soft smooth throat. At his touch, she turned and looked up at him, wiping her eyes. Then abruptly she caught his wrist and plunged his hand down inside her blouse. And when he felt the silky smooth bare flesh against his fingers a wave of burning excitement shot up his spine and exploded at the top of his skull.

He bent over her. She removed her skirt and blouse and lay gleaming in light and shadow, waiting for his embrace.

As he leaned close she caught his face in her hands and said his name over and over again in a throaty whisper.

Now, O'Hearn had no real interest in Clarice. He had to admit that she was attractive enough, however. And she wanted him. Her very ardency made her almost impossible to resist. Denied Kit, he was full of loneliness, full of the need that only a woman's caresses could satisfy. Besides, alcohol had lowered his resistance.

His arms went down, and he lifted her bodily from

the cot. He sat down, arranged his clothing, and disposed her on his lap, his arms around her from behind, his bony fingers squeezing and fondling her breasts. Over her shoulder, he could see her soft, moonlight-dappled thighs. Her hair was tickling his nose and mouth. He moved and wagged her a bit, enjoying the soft, ample fullness of flesh athwart his thighs. Then he had pierced to his objective, and Clarice gasped happily.

"Oooh! You wonderful man, you. You big, cruel man!"

She snuggled back in his arms to enjoy herself.

For minutes in that most intimate of embraces they kissed and cuddled. Then it became too much for both of them. O'Hearn, already ashamed of himself and guiltily remembering Kit, wanted to get it over with anyhow. He went into the ageless, violent motion of the male animal. Clarice squealed and mewed. Then man and woman, caught up in their moonlit lusts, stiffened in galvanic ecstasy.

"Oh, good," giggled Clarice. "More, honey. I want you to love me and love me and keep loving me all night."

O'Hearn, full of guilt, was still thinking of Kit. "Can't. I'm tired. Get up, will you?"

She got up, turned. But she would not believe he was that tired.

"What you need is a little help," she said. "I know all about it."

"You do? How come?"

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't realize you had been around that much," he said.

The implication stung her. She plumped herself down

next to him on the cot, saying, "Of course I haven't. I'm only nineteen. I'm pretty choosy about the men I go with, and—well... You know Theona Durand, of course. . . ."

He pricked up his ears. "What's Theona got to do with it?"

"She's the one who taught me. How to really excite a man, I mean." With a kind of ingenuous enthusiasm, Clarice rolled over so that her feet were on the floor, her belly was on the cot, and her pert rear was pointing at the moon. "Go ahead," she challenged. "Spank me. Hit me as hard as you want to."

O'Hearn was unable to believe either his eyes or his ears. "That's what Theona taught you?"

"She gave me a hundred dollars," Clarice told him defensively. "Then she took me home. She made me strip, and then bend over like this, and then she beat me. But good."

"You deserved it," was O'Hearn's astonished comment. "What else did she do?"

"She made me crawl around on the rug in front of her, and then kiss her feet. And I had to tell her that I was her slave. Then she got down on the rug with me and we—we—"

Clarice stopped. She was blushing furiously, though the filtering moonlight was not enough to disclose the flush to O'Hearn.

"You mean to say you enjoyed that?" he demanded unbelievably. "Letting a girl make love to you?"

"Oh, no," Clarice said indignantly, straightening up and looking at him. "Not that. But the—the beating—that excited me. Gosh, and you should see how it excited Theona. I guess it's the most exciting thing there

is." She bent down again. "So go ahead. Just hit me until. . . ."

"No." Disgusted as he was, O'Hearn felt sorry for her. "Get that stuff out of your head and out of your memory. I'll show you what's most exciting." In his pity for her, he lifted her to the bed, stretched her out on her back. He stared at her pretty breasts. Then he lay down beside her.

Almost as their lips met and his hands ran down over her soft curves, the sound of a car braking to a stop in the driveway reached their ears. Then they heard a voice calling, "Hey, Rob. Wake up. It's Nacky!" And when there was no answer from the house, the voice cursed.

O'Hearn was suddenly stone sober and he drew back from Clarice. She whispered, "Nobody will hear us."

But the blood in him had suddenly turned to ice. He got up cautiously and peered through the slats. In the driveway stood Manners' gray station wagon. Behind the wheel sat Nacky Archer. He had apparently turned on the car radio and music drifted faintly to the greenhouse.

"Get your clothes on," O'Hearn said softly to Clarice.

Even then she waited, hopefully, her arms outstretched. But when he made no move to come back to her, at length she slipped the blouse over her head and drew on the peasant skirt.

"Of all the times for Nacky to show up!" she said in a small angry voice.

Then something she had said a few moments ago finally penetrated into O'Hearn's consciousness. "Nacky's

your cousin, right? But who is this Rob he was yelling for?"

"My brother."

In O'Hearn's mind was the picture of a man crumpled up in front of Cort Bentley's bar. "Hell," O'Hearn said.

He remained hidden in the darkness of the greenhouse, knowing he could not leave without being seen by Nacky.

After a time, a second car pulled into the drive and a door slammed. He heard Nacky say, "I been waitin'."

Rob Castle loomed bulky beside the gray station wagon. "I got tied up downtown."

"What's so important you phoned me to meet you here?"

"It's Advocate," Rob Castle said. "Twice I've seen him prowlin' round that house."

"What house?"

"The one on Ramon Road. As if you didn't know. And he was lookin' at that new section of wall and the people livin' there now let him look around the house."

"So what?" Nacky's face was sullen in the brief flare of a match as he lit a cigarette.

"Advocate is goin' to put the heat on you and me. I'm gettin' worried."

Nacky laughed. "You got no worries. You're a cop now, ain't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"When my old man pinned that badge to your shirt last night, he took away all your worries. That was Cort Bentley's idea." Nacky laughed again. "Our police force has to be bigger because of all those workers for the dam. That's what my old man told the mayor."

"I'm scared of Advocate. What if he digs the dirt?"

"I'm the guy that'll be hurt," Nacky said. "I was drivin' the car."

"Yeah. But I was with you."

"And my old man covered for us. So shut up about it."

Rob said, "Well, I just wanted you to know about Advocate." He stepped back and glanced at the house, then asked, "Clarice here when you come?"

"Never seen her. The house was dark."

Rob said, "I figured maybe she went walkin' with some guy. There's a car parked in the driveway."

A spotlight suddenly gleamed from the station wagon and shot across the yard, touching O'Hearn's car.

Nacky's voice tightened, "Jesus!"

"O'Hearn!" Rob cried. "That sonofabitch—if he's hangin' around Clarice I'll kill him!"

Nacky opened the station-wagon door and stepped out, leaving the spotlight on. "If he's here it ain't because of Clarice. He's snoopin' around. A goddam stoolie, that's what he is."

"Yeah?"

"But I fixed him. I framed his girl. She's in jail—booked on a prostitution rap." He suddenly raised his voice. "You hear that, O'Hearn? If you're around here, step out!"

O'Hearn stood rigid in the greenhouse. The knowledge that Kit was in jail staggered him. Clarice sat huddled on the cot, thoroughly frightened.

"When I get their attention," he whispered, "you run out. Go to town. Claim you've been to a movie."

She whimpered something and he walked out of the greenhouse toward the station wagon.

"I ought to shoot the bastard," Rob Castle said.

"That wouldn't be smart," Nacky said.

O'Hearn, blinking, walked into the spotlight. He heard a small scurrying sound behind him and knew Clarice had taken his suggestion. As the men stared at him, he said, "This is a free country. I can park wherever I please."

Nacky said, "What were you doin' in the greenhouse?"

"Listening to you!"

Then, the hairs prickling at the back of his neck, he turned and slowly walked to his battered compact.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALL the way back a terrible fear for Kit's safety tore at O'Hearn. And a full measure of pity too—if Nacky's statement was true, her humiliation was complete. Jailed as a common whore. Back at Clarice's he could have tried to jump them but it would have accomplished nothing. The first thing he had to do was to free Kit.

At the police station a cop O'Hearn did not recognize said he could not see the prisoner until morning and no bond could be given till then. He walked out, sweating.

A light burned in the *Enterprise* office. For only a moment he debated his next move. Then he walked into the newspaper office.

Advocate looked up from a typewriter. He wore a green eyeshade that he lifted back on his thatch of gray hair in order to study O'Hearn's tight face.

O'Hearn blurted, "I don't know where you got your facts about Bentley. But they're the truth." O'Hearn

banged a clenched fist on the counter. "I want to help."

From the rear of the building sounded the thump-thump of a press.

Advocate looked at his ink-stained fingers. "Kind of an about-face isn't it, Brill?"

"I don't care what you think of me. I'll dig up the facts. You print them."

"I've had another volunteer for the job," Advocate said quietly. Then he added, "I thought the boys were your pals—that you wanted some of that easy money."

"All I want is to break them into little pieces."

"Didn't they offer you a big enough cut?"

O'Hearn gripped the edge of the desk.

"Rats desert the sinking ship," Advocate said, yanking down his eyeshade.

"They've got my girl," O'Hearn said miserably and quickly he told what he had overheard at Clarice's place.

"If Kit is innocent," Advocate said, "I'll do all I can to help, of course." He peered at O'Hearn. "But you know very little about her . . ."

"If you were younger, I'd punch your nose. Are you insinuating she might be guilty?"

Advocate rose from his chair. "I gave you a chance to come in with me. But you turned me down. You didn't worry about your girl then." He sighed and shook his gray head. "A man of your intelligence teaming up with scum like Bentley and Manners—in a way, you're the worst of the lot!"

O'Hearn got up and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Across the street he peered through the doors of Bentley's bar. The place was jumping, men and girls crowded the room, every booth was filled. Perspiring cou-

ples jammed the dance floor. The small orchestra ground out its cornball tunes.

O'Hearn moved down the side of the building toward the alley, hoping to enter the bar by the rear door in order to catch Bentley alone in his office. The press agent had some things to settle. But just as he was skirting the parking lot he heard someone call his name.

Turning, he saw Rob Castle step from behind a parked car and move toward him stiffly.

"Keep away from me," O'Hearn warned.

But at that moment he was seized from behind. When he tried to free himself, someone grabbed him by the ankles.

"Hold him, boys," Rob said, grinning into the darkness. His arm came out and his fist snaked for O'Hearn's face.

O'Hearn tried to roll with the punch but it caught him high on the cheek, breaking the skin. Angered and desperate, he struggled. There were at least three of them, he guessed. One at each arm and one at his ankles. If they had chained him up he could not have been more helpless.

In a flash of neon from Bentley's sign, he saw Rob's face again. Rob was enjoying himself. He drew back his other fist and O'Hearn stiffened. Knuckles smashed into his mouth. He tasted salt and something began to clang in his head.

Suddenly he let his body sag. The men holding him by the arms laughed and loosened their grip. But the one at his ankles hung on. Falling heavily to the ground, O'Hearn twisted over on his back and kicked himself clear of the hands that held his ankles.

When Rob came charging in again, O'Hearn rolled aside and sprang to his feet as a face surged at him

out of the darkness. The face disappeared when O'Hearn jolted it with his fist. He sidestepped Rob as another man tried a grab around the neck from behind. Throwing off this assailant, O'Hearn measured Rob who was swinging around to get another shot at his quarry. O'Hearn flung out his left fist like a thrown baseball. It caught Rob across the bridge of the nose. Rob screamed.

A side door at Bentley's burst open. In the stream of yellow lights that poured through the opening, O'Hearn saw patrons jostling for a clear view of the battle. Rob's scream, blatant as a noon whistle, had drawn them from their drinks.

O'Hearn made out Rob's confederates running off into the darkness.

"Sonofabitch!" Rob screamed at O'Hearn. His face was smeared with blood from his smashed nose. Now he jerked aside his coat and in that moment O'Hearn caught a glimpse of the badge pinned to his shirt. Rob was dragging at a gun. O'Hearn hit him solidly at the point of the jaw and Rob collapsed.

O'Hearn sprinted for the back alley even as Rob fell forward. Behind him he heard Cort Bentley's roaring voice.

"It's O'Hearn!" Rob screamed, his voice high-pitched like the voice of an angry woman. "He was drunk and when I went to make the pinch he slugged me with a sap."

Cort Bentley hollered, "Nobody assaults an officer of the law in this town. Let's get him."

O'Hearn, crouching in the alley, heard them coming. Bentley had produced a flashlight and its beam cut into the darkness. Turning, O'Hearn saw the rear entrance to Bentley's empty hotel. The door was open and he stepped inside quickly, then ran down a musty cor-

ridor to the front entrance, then plunged headlong into the street. His face ached. He ran a finger across his lips and winced at the pain. Using a handkerchief, he wiped the blood from his face.

Emerging once more on Main Street, he found he was a block above Bentley's. Men were milling around in the parking lot. Moving cautiously, he got into his car without being spotted. As he drove past Bentley's, he saw Rob and Bentley coming back from the alley where they had lost him.

O'Hearn drove first to the big house on Paulo Road. The place was dark, so he continued on out to the Manners ranch. There were no cars in the parking area outside the office. Using his key, he entered the building.

The place was empty. But on the desk lay Theona's black leather bag. It was open and the contents—compact and lipstick and the switch-blade knife—had spilled out. O'Hearn stared at the bag a moment, feeling a cold ripple in his stomach. Outside again, he drove up the winding driveway to Manners' house. No lights showed from the windows. He woke up Manners' foreman who lived in a small white bungalow. The man came to the door with suspenders trailing.

He stared at O'Hearn's battered face. "Ain't seen Manners or Nacky," he said in answer to O'Hearn's question.

He drove back to Theona's house and parked. He skirted the oleander hedge grimly. Now that he was sober, he wanted to hear Theona's story. It wouldn't have surprised him if she had had a hand in framing Kit.

He crossed the porch and was about to punch the bell but the door opened under his hand. He went inside and thumbed a wall switch.

"Theona," he called softly. Not a sound in the big, silent house. A premonition of disaster spread over him.

Returning to town he saw that the crowd had dispersed. He angled the car into the curb and was surprised when Advocate stuck his head in through the window of the car.

"Figured you might come back," he said. "They can't make that assault charge stick."

"You ought to be happy I slugged a cop," O'Hearn said bitterly. "Shows I'm just a thug at heart."

"Slug a cop like Rob Castle any time you feel like it."

"I thought you hated me."

Advocate gave him a wry smile. "Friend of yours explained a few things." He didn't elaborate. "Coast is clear. Come on over to the office."

Advocate took him through the rear door of the *Enterprise* office as O'Hearn said, "What did you mean by saying they can't make an assault charge stick?"

Advocate chuckled. "I've got witnesses. I found a couple who had been necking in a car in the parking lot when the trouble started. They saw them jump you."

Advocate led him into his editorial office. A single light burned at the desk. Venetian blinds covered the front windows and the doorway.

Bernie Glassman looked up and gave O'Hearn a crooked grin. "Hi ya, Irish," he said amiably.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BERNIE stared at the bruises on O'Hearn's cheeks.

"He's been in town two days," Advocate said. "Came

down to do a little snooping on the Theona Layne story."

Light glistened on Bernie Glassman's bald dome. "I found more than I bargained for. I had a chance to pay back Simon for past favors."

"In other words," Advocate said, "Bernie did some leg work for me."

Advocate made it sound easy as he told it. Seemed that the dam construction had caused a shortage of labor in Encanto.

"I can saw a board straight—sometimes," Bernie said, grinning a little. "I hired on as a carpenter's helper. I helped put up the partitions in Bentley's place."

"And you had your ear to the door," O'Hearn said, remembering now there had been something familiar about one of the carpenters. "You took an awful chance, Bernie."

"Not so awful. Nobody knows me in this town." He paused, then added, "As I said, it was an opportunity to repay a favor. You see, it was Simon who lent me the money to get my lousy sheet started."

Simon Advocate shrugged. "The main thing is," he said, looking at O'Hearn, "a while ago Bernie came in and told me you'd quit the boys. And Bentley and Manners were plenty burned. And I know it happened before you could have seen the story in the *Enterprise*." He held out his hand. "I take back what I said about rats deserting the ship."

O'Hearn clasped the thin hard hand.

Bernie got up and headed for the door. "Back to Hollywood for me," he told O'Hearn. "I've got an issue to get out tomorrow." He smiled. "I'll go easy on Theona Layne on account of Kit. But you'll get Kit out of this mess. I know it."

He waved and went out and in a moment they heard the sound of a car going off.

Advocate turned to O'Hearn. "We'll get bond for your girl in the morning. Not a thing we can do tonight."

"The slimy bastards."

"Be glad we've licked them on one point," Advocate said. "Bentley figured to salt you away for that deal with Rob. But when I told Lew Archer about the witnesses to your beating, he agreed you couldn't be held." Advocate's eyes had a happy sparkle to them.

O'Hearn dug a smoke out of his pocket and said, "What sort of hold has Bentley got on Lew Archer?"

Advocate scratched a finger along his bristly jaw. "Lew covered up a manslaughter rap for his kid. I imagine he's regretted it many times. But if it comes out, he could be charged as an accessory. Bentley knows all about it."

O'Hearn repeated what he had overheard Nacky and Rob talking about when he had been hidden in the greenhouse.

Advocate nodded. "Rob was with Nacky when the accident happened. Nacky was eighteen. He had a hot-rod and was barreling along Ramon Road one night when the car went out of control. He crashed into a house. An old Mexican named Guiterrez was killed in his bed. Nacky managed to back the car out of the wreckage and get to Rob's house before a crowd gathered. All Lew Archer thought about was protecting his kid. He located a hot-rod that was a duplicate of Nacky's and hung Nacky's license plates on it. The old one he got rid of somehow."

"Why haven't you ever printed that?"

"No proof. And I hesitated to point a finger at a

man like Lew Archer. He's got standing in this community. People respect him."

Presently O'Hearn went out to the all-night coffee shop to bring back a jug of coffee. That night he had a story to write for the *Enterprise*, a story with facts and figures and names. It might mean his finish but he was past caring. Manners and Bentley had to be stopped no matter what risk was involved.

Clarice was sitting at the counter with a gangling, tow-headed guy. Her dark eyes glittered. When O'Hearn ordered his coffee, she held out her left hand. A small diamond sparkled on the second finger.

"Congratulate me, Mr. O'Hearn," she said, "Mike and I are engaged."

Mike grinned and patted her on the knee and O'Hearn offered quite sincere congratulations. He took his carton of coffee and as he stepped to the street, he saw her watching him with hatred in her eyes.

That night, after he had finished writing his piece, he slept on an old couch in the *Enterprise* office. He was exhausted.

Although the morning was young, Encanto's police station was already steaming. Lew Archer was not present but Cort Bentley was and he had in tow a fat man wearing white pants. The man looked worried.

Bentley said to Advocate and O'Hearn, "I just want you to see what a tight case we got." He turned to the fat man and gestured.

Charlie Dorn licked his lips and began to recite as if from memory. "This gal come in my diner about eight o'clock last night. She tried to pick up a couple of truck drivers. She went out with one of 'em. A while

later, a fella said he seen her get on the Riverdale bus. Still later, she comes in with Nacky. She gets me aside and tells me if I find any prospects to send 'em to her at the motel—"

O'Hearn lunged for the fat man but Bentley thrust his heavy body between them. Advocate said, "Easy, Brill."

Charlie continued, "This dame and Nacky go to the motel. And pretty quick Nacky comes back and phones for the law, sayin' the dame tried to lift his wallet."

Bentley said, "We've got her cold, O'Hearn. She can get six months for soliciting." His eyes were red-rimmed and he needed a shave. He glared at Advocate, then shifted his gaze back to O'Hearn. "It's up to you. Lay off or she'll get the works. Cut out them stories in the *Enterprise* and we'll clear her record." Not waiting for an answer, Bentley motioned to Charlie to follow and went out. Advocate said, "Now you know the kind of people you're dealing with."

A perspiring clerk made out a receipt for the bail bond Advocate offered him for Kit's release and in a few minutes a door opened and Kit, looking pale and drawn, came in. Her suit was wrinkled and a button was missing from her blouse. Under her arm she carried her red snakeskin bag. She signed her name to the property slip and O'Hearn got her suitcase. Her gray eyes seemed lifeless.

They walked outside to O'Hearn's little car. Advocate said, "There's no extradition for a misdemeanor. Get her to another state, if you figure that's the way to do it."

O'Hearn swallowed. "I'm sorry, Simon. I'd like to stay but—" He looked at Kit who sat stiffly in the car, staring straight ahead.

Advocate said, "Take care of yourself. Let me hear from you some time."

O'Hearn frowned, got into the car and, without looking back, headed toward Riverdale.

Kit sat motionless and unspeaking. It was only after O'Hearn gassed the car at Riverdale that she broke down and began to weep. O'Hearn let her cry. After a dozen miles she straightened and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

"The Durands finally made it," she said bitterly. "Both first-class tramps."

O'Hearn gave her an oblique stare. "It was my fault you got into this mess."

She said, "If it wasn't Encanto it would have been some place else." She smoothed her tight skirt along her thighs. "Now they've got my name down in their little book."

"It doesn't mean a thing," O'Hearn said grimly.

"It means that Kit Durand is a whore."

"That's a harsh word. And it doesn't apply to you."

"I think it does," she said coolly. "For a while I thought Theona was mentally ill. Now I don't know. I guess she's just made good use of her talents."

Under O'Hearn's palms the wheel grew slick. "Don't get crazy ideas. They framed you. It's got nothing to do with your morals. If you're in trouble, it's because of me. I had some big ideas—"

"You've still got big ideas, O'Hearn," she said with a husky laugh. She stared out at the flat and empty desert around them. "Where do you think you're taking me?"

"Out of California. They can't touch you then."

She leaned back in the seat and regarded his rugged, suntanned face. "Well, I guess that's true. But a state

line can't erase the fact that on my record I'm a prostitute."

"Don't be foolish. Nobody will ever know."

She said, "They took my fingerprints."

O'Hearn swore. "They had no right to do that. It was a misdemeanor."

"You're so very clever about these things, O'Hearn. You should have told them that."

"I'll get back those prints."

She shook her yellow head. "We're two of a kind, O'Hearn. You pimp. And I sell it. Maybe we should team up."

"Quit it," he shouted, an angry flush spreading over his face.

"When Theona first told me about you, I didn't believe her. I've seen a few pimps in my time but they weren't like you. But then, you can't always go by appearances."

"I've broken with Bentley and Manners. Can't you understand that?"

She shook her head slowly. "On second thought," she said, "I don't think we'd make a good team. You're a big operator. You wouldn't be interested in handling just one girl. Big money. That's you, O'Hearn."

He jerked his right hand from the wheel toward her and she said, "Go ahead. Hit me. That will put you completely in character."

O'Hearn put his hand back on the wheel. "You've been through a lot, Kit," he said. "You'll cool down and talk sense after a while."

"I've got more sense now than I've ever had in my life," she said. "I've been going at it wrong. From now on it will be the money that counts."

"You're not the type. Quit trying to sell yourself on it."

Pressure tightened the corners of her red mouth. "How do you know what I am?" she asked. "You knew me only—how long?—just a few hours—and you made love to me—" she snapped her fingers—"just like that!"

"For me, it was different. Can't you get it through your head?"

"Different?" she echoed. "I suppose you'll try to tell me you thought you were the first."

"I don't care how many lovers you've had."

She laughed. "You were way down on the list, O'Hearn. Way down." She clutched her bag and turned away from him. "You thought all along because I worked in a girl show I was a bum."

"Maybe I did think it at first," O'Hearn reluctantly admitted. "But I soon changed my mind."

"You shouldn't have, O'Hearn. If I'd played it smart, I could have owned the Wilson show. We shared the same accommodations so everybody looked on me as his wife. But I wasn't satisfied with him. In every town there are always half a dozen men who hang around after the last show trying to date you. I picked the ones that appealed to me most. It was fun, O'Hearn. Lots of fun. But from now on it'll be business. I'm tired of being broke. I seem to have only one talent—so I'll exploit it to the limit!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AT YUMA they drove across the bridge and into town where O'Hearn parked and said, "Let's get something to eat."

They ate in silence and when they had finished and returned to the car, Kit said, "There was a cute motel at the edge of town. Let's go back."

He slid in under the wheel, snarling, "What in hell has got into you?"

"A business proposition," she said. "You did me a favor. You drove me to Arizona where they can't touch me. So I want to repay you."

"Then what?"

"Then it's New York." She looked at him, her eyes glinting. "I don't imagine I'll have much trouble getting a lift."

He made a U-turn and drove back down the road to the motel, a collection of cottages built around a filling station. Leaving her in the car he walked stiffly to the manager's office and signed the register.

Inside their assigned cottage, Kit opened her suitcase and removed a terrycloth robe. "I'm going to take a shower. I hope you'll be here when I come out."

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked gruffly.

"The last man I was with stole my clothes and left."

He was lying on the bed smoking a cigarette when she came out of the shower. Steam had curled her hair. She looked fresh and well-scrubbed. But the shadows were still under her eyes and the bitterness had not left her mouth. She went to the mirror above the dressing table and ran a puff over her face and applied lipstick. Then, turning, she unbelted the robe and let it fall away from her.

She was so beautiful his breath caught in his throat. He turned on an elbow and crunched out his cigarette. His breathing became ragged as she moved across to him, her lovely curves swaying. She kneeled next to him. Extending his hands, he touched her soft white flesh. For a long

moment there was quiet in the small room. Outside, traffic hummed. It sounded a million miles away.

If he thought his hands on her body would melt the glacial ice in her eyes he was disappointed. Smoothing her hair she lay down alongside him and he moved toward her. He saw that she stared at nothing, her face a blank. Mechanically she extended her arms and they encompassed him.

When he kissed her there was no warmth to her lips. She turned her head aside after a moment. The indifference of her mouth extended to the rest of her body. After a moment he said, "Why can't you . . ."

"Because then I was a fool," she interrupted harshly. "I'm repaying a debt. Do you want me to love you or not?"

"Not like this, I don't," he snapped.

She pulled a sheet across her body. "This is probably the first time a Mr. and Mrs. John Smith enterprise has fared so badly. It sets a bad precedent for the motel."

He turned to her, infuriated. "I signed the register Mr. and Mrs. Brill O'Hearn. I brought you to Yuma for one reason—I want to marry you."

She turned away from him, the sheet accentuating the curve of a hip. "You don't want to marry me." She began to sob.

Angrily, he pulled her face around, forcing her to look at him. Her long pale lashes were wet.

He said, "Whatever I did with Manners and Bentley was for us. I'll admit at first, I was thinking of myself. But after that morning with you, I wanted it for both of us. It was wrong, I know that now. And I'm responsible for the mess you're in. That's why I've let you talk to me as you have. All this stuff about selling yourself." He made an angry gesture with his hand. "I don't

care how many there were before me. It's out of character!"

She said in a small, still voice, "I was trying to make you angry. There was nothing between Wilson and me." She bit her lip. "Or those others. You see, all my life I've had to be terribly careful about men. I've had to—"

"Live down Theona's reputation," he cut in. "Getting arrested on this morals charge made you feel just like your sister."

She peered up at him. "I've always hated bitchy women. But I guess I just can't help being one for once." She swallowed. "What happened between you and that dark-haired girl?"

He tried to keep the surprise out of his voice when he said, "Nothing important."

When he glanced at her again, the ice was gone from her eyes. And this time when he bent his head, her mouth moved under his own and the hot vibrant point of her tongue sought the point of his. She put one hand to his head, clutching a handful of his coarse thatch. With the other hand she pulled aside the sheet that covered her.

"I love you, Brill," she whispered hoarsely, "and I want you to love me . . . now . . ."

"And don't think I'm not going to," he said hoarsely. "But first—I mean, you're so clean—so delicious. . . ." He loosed her grip on his hair, then bent his head and reverently kissed the rosy bud crowning the breast nearest him. Then he kissed the other breast, at the same time smoothing and stroking it with both hands.

In response, Kit felt pricklings and proddings of deepest pleasure. "More," she begged, as nipples tautened. Her large, graceful, white breasts felt heavy and turgid to her,

as if they were full of love for this man, full of desire for his caresses.

And O'Hearn, to please her and himself, continued to play with those magnificent breasts, kissing them, petting them. But the temptation of the thighs was even greater than that of the breasts. Suddenly he let his lips fall warmly and intimately on Kit's flat stomach, and then, unable to resist, he planted his cheek against those lithe, creamy thighs of hers. He lay still, sighing with blissful intoxication. Kit too sighed blissfully. She pressed her mouth against O'Hearn's angular shanks. In turn, he twisted slightly and with his tongue tasted of the soft, bare skin of her.

Kit responded as if shocked by an electric current. As his tongue trickled liquid fire and his fingers made forays of their own, she heaved and convulsed. "For God's sake, Brill. Please. Come up here!"

And with a laugh, he did. His lanky, bony body uncoiled itself, grappled intimately with hers. Now his lips were on her lips. Her breasts were under him. In her tender eagerness, she wagged her hips saucily and guided him—in fact, pulled him—to the secret portal of her vital womanhood. O'Hearn seemed in the grip of a mighty spasm. His arms hugged and his hands clutched. His body was a battering ram. Kit cried out at the force of the impact, but in a moment the cry became a murmur of love and gratitude as all her yearnings and achings found succor.

Then came the shared convulsions of natural passion, the weaving and the weltering, the swelling tide that bore them both up in its waxing and waning rhythm. Her lips tasted to him like the petals of roses. Her breasts were silky cushions. Her thighs under his, damp with the juices and perfumes of her womanliness, seemed to urge him on wildly.

"Brill, my Brill—"

"Pretty Kit," he gasped in ecstatic answer.

And writhing in each other's arms they rode a starburst, a shattering explosion of rapture so pure it was like pain.

They were married in town by a justice of the peace that same afternoon and when they were back in the motel she made her suggestion. "Let's go back and face it. You'll always feel you ran out on Simon Advocate if you don't. And I've had a change of heart. Now that I'm your wife, I'm no longer afraid."

Life seemed to spring back into his eyes. "We'll beat that charge against you, baby. We'll beat it if it takes every nickel I'll ever make in this or any other life!"

Addie Mansfield was tired that morning when she left the hospital. Last night she had spent some time with the girl at the jail. Somehow Addie couldn't believe the charge against her. It didn't ring true. Addie parked her old sedan at the edge of the foothills. Below she could see orange groves and tiled roofs through the greenery. Lupin made a purple carpet in the distance.

Addie Mansfield tramped along a gully on her way to meet Lew Archer. In a few moments he joined her and she noticed that his round face seemed unusually worried.

He sat down beside her and gave her a spiritless kiss. Then he said, without prelude, "Nacky and Cort framed that Durand girl."

Addie nodded her dark head. "I've been thinking the same thing. Are you going to let them railroad her?"

"It's part of a plan to silence the *Enterprise*. Bentley

and Manners are set to open Saturday night. They've moved in slots and roulette wheels. They've got three girls holed up in the old Carrizo Hotel. But Advocate wants to stop them."

She put a comforting hand on his arm. "It doesn't do any good to go back, Lew. But four years ago you should have clamped down on Nacky. It would have been a blow but it might have made a man of him. And now you would be free to do your duty."

"Yeah. Ever since the day Bentley wormed the truth out of him, I've been under Bentley's heel." There was venom in his voice.

"Nobody cared very much; Lew. That's the sickening truth. If it had been an American killed there would have been an investigation. Nacky might have been sent up. But a Mexican. That didn't matter. Who cared?"

Lew Archer stared at her numbly. "Are you turning against me too?"

She shook her head. "I'm worried, Lew. These past few days I've had a number of men, Mexican and colored, brought to emergency. Broken heads. Beaten up because they crossed the line. Do you know what can happen in this town, Lew? Blood is going to flow and that blood will be on your hands."

"What can I do?"

"You've got the authority. Put a stop to it. If necessary, get the sheriff here."

"The sheriff is Bentley's friend."

"The sheriff is also a politician," Addie reminded him soberly. "He's not stupid, Lew. Public opinion won't allow this sort of thing any more. It's out of date. I've heard the talk around town. Most of the citizens resent that line. The ones who condone it aren't worth bothering about."

Lew Archer put his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands.

Addie Mansfield went on, "You can start righting a few wrongs by taking Rob's badge away from him."

"Bentley forced me to put him on."

"Listen, Lew. You've got to remember that Nacky's a big boy now. You've given him too much leeway. He got away with killing a man once. He's cocky because he works for Manners. He's going to make trouble in this town. And I don't want to see you hurt, Lew—because of Nacky."

He straightened his shoulders. "You know what I'll be letting myself in for if I cross Bentley." He looked at her for a moment, then said, "Will you wait for me? No matter what happens?"

Addie Mansfield hugged him to her. "I've waited ten years, Lew," she said softly. "I can wait a few more—"

Lew Archer said, "I should have married you, Addie." He got to his feet and helped her up and they began to walk into the canyon. "I was afraid. Afraid that my mistake would catch up with us. Ten years of sneaking off into the hills."

Suddenly he crouched low, and jerked her back. His face was strained and old. She followed his eyes to where a spot of yellow showed through the brush.

"Sunflowers," she said, trying to make her voice light. "I'll pick a bunch—"

"That's no sunflower!" He dashed forward, flinging himself through the brush.

She followed him on her sturdy legs.

Now as she halted by Lew Archer's side and looked down, she saw that he was right. This was no sunflower. The yellow was the bright sheen of hair, stirred slightly by a gentle breeze that sifted through the brush.

The girl lay on her side. She might have been sleeping.

On her face was the mark of violence. One eye was purple and there was a bruise on her chin.

Death was no stranger to Addie Mansfield but now as she kneeled she felt a wave of pity for this girl. Too young to die, she thought. There were brown stains on her neck. She had been shot through the back of the head.

"Theona Layne," Lew Archer said dully.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

KIT took the news of Theona's death with dry eyes. O'Hearn knew she wanted to be alone so he let her go up to the hotel room he had rented for them. Then he crossed the street to Bentley's and climbed the stairs to the office. Bentley sat behind his desk reading the latest edition of the *Enterprise*. A picture of Theona Layne was on the front page. The story O'Hearn had written did not agree with the law's theory of her death.

Bentley leaned back in his swivel chair, regarding O'Hearn out of hard eyes. "So you don't think Rodzolo killed her?"

O'Hearn leaned over and put his hands flat on the desk. "First we'll talk about my wife."

Bentley said, "Mean to tell me you married her?"

"She's my wife now," O'Hearn said softly. "If you try to push that charge against her, I'll get you. So help me, I will."

Bentley said, "You seem pretty damned sure of yourself."

"I am. First, I've got a bus driver who will swear he received forty dollars from Nacky to fake a breakdown.

Next I'll go to work on that slob who owns the diner. I'll shoot your story to pieces."

Bentley hooked thumbs under his armpits and put his feet upon the desk. "Okay," he agreed. "We'll forget the morals charge."

O'Hearn regarded him suspiciously. This was too easy. "I want the record cleared and I want her fingerprints returned."

"Sure," Bentley said. "Anything else?"

O'Hearn felt a flutter of concern and shook his head.

Bentley thumped a copy of the *Enterprise* and said, "So Rodzolo didn't get her?"

"No."

"If you play along, O'Hearn," the mockery deepened in Bentley's yellow-brown eyes, "I'll go after Rodzolo. I'll shoot him on sight. That'll end it."

"What have I got to do with it?"

For answer Bentley removed his feet from the desk. From the floor beside the desk he picked up a .22 rifle. A brass plate on the stock said, *Brill O'Hearn*.

A tautness spread from O'Hearn's face across his chest.

Bentley said, "It was found this morning. Twenty feet from the body."

"You planted the gun!"

Bentley shook his head. "A crowd was out there. You know how people are. Curious about a good-lookin' dame getting herself murdered." He took his time lighting a cigar. His eyes watched O'Hearn. "A kid found the rifle."

O'Hearn swallowed and a drop of sweat rolled down his back.

"Lew Archer questioned Kit a while ago on the phone. She said you gave her the rifle to protect herself with. A lot of people know there wasn't much love between your wife and her sister." He leaned forward and peered at

O'Hearn, the cigar clenched in his teeth. "I can make murder out of this, O'Hearn. I can tie the two of you into it. You and your wife. You both ran out at just about the time Theona was killed."

O'Hearn said, "You can't prove it."

"I'm giving you a choice. Either you and Advocate lay off and let me operate—or I'll damn well make a good try at proving murder. If you figure it's worth dragging your wife through this mess, go ahead. But I'm warning you."

"And if I agree to this," O'Hearn said quietly, "then we nail Rodzolo to the fence. If we find him, we shoot him. If we have to extradite, then we railroad him."

"Right."

O'Hearn clenched his fist and turned to leave. From the doorway he looked back at Bentley. "I've got my own ideas about who killed Theona," he said.

He picked up Simon Advocate and they made their way to the coffee shop where he told the editor of Bentley's threat. "Manners gave Theona that bay eye and the bruise on her chin," he said, recounting how he had stopped at the house and found Theona wearing dark glasses. "I remember," he went on, "seeing my rifle against the wall. My guess is that Nacky needled Manners about Theona, showing him the false fingernail he found in Bentley's waste-basket. Manners beat her up. Then when he got to thinking it over, he came back and used my gun to kill her."

"Possible," Advocate admitted heavily. "Lew Archer thinks she was not killed where she was found. At the house probably. And her body dumped in the canyon." He wiped his glasses and said thoughtfully, "Bentley's sure he's got you and Kit over a barrel. This isn't any soliciting charge he's fixed up this time. It's murder. And

if we ruin his game here in Encanto it's possible he might be able to get an indictment from the grand jury."

Just then, Addie Mansfield came in and walked up to where they were sitting. "Saw you in here and thought I'd let you know that Lew thought I ought to keep Mrs. O'Hearn company." From the pocket of her coat she showed them the butt of a revolver, then let it fall back out of sight.

Kit looked up as Addie and O'Hearn came in.

O'Hearn put a comforting hand on Kit's shoulder. "Addie Mansfield will stay with you," he told her. "And I've made all arrangements for the funeral."

Kit nodded.

He left them together and made his way to his car.

He drove into the parking area near Manners' office and went to the side door. The door was open.

Manners sat hunched in his leather chair. His small hard eyes rolled up to give O'Hearn a penetrating look. "What do you want?" he growled. Then added, "You stoolie!"

O'Hearn said, "You killed her, didn't you? I knew you were jealous but I didn't think you'd let Nacky get under your skin."

Manners rose slowly from his chair. His face had lost all color. "I loved her," he said simply.

"You gave her a black eye—"

"She had it coming." He stared down at his desk. "I let her have her own way. I let her have that barn of a house. I never put no strings on her. Except I didn't want her with nobody else."

"So you took my rifle and pumped a bullet into her head."

He gave O'Hearn a terrible smile. "I know who killed her. And I'm goin' to finish him—slow. I'm goin' to put a bullet right where he zippers his pants. Then I'm goin' to laugh and put a bullet in his head."

"Rodzolo?"

Manners made a cutting motion with his hand. "Rodzolo, hell. It was Cort Bentley!"

O'Hearn said, "He's your partner."

"No more my partner than you are." He glowered at O'Hearn. "I'm goin' to send word to L.A. I can get a couple of good boys down here. Then I'm takin' over, O'Hearn. I swore a long time ago that I'd never die broke."

"It's too late to take over this town," O'Hearn said.

Manners came around the desk. He had discarded his built-up shoes and stood in flat sandals. His pants were too long so he had rolled them up at the cuff. He took a gun from his pocket and pointed at O'Hearn. With his other hand, he reached up and tore his toupé from the top of his head and flung it into the wastebasket.

"I'm Frank Manners," he said, his lips curling. "The real Frank Manners. I been a jerk. No more, O'Hearn." He jabbed with the gun. "You get Advocate to be nice to me in my old age. Either that or I'll blow up his god-damn plant and him with it!"

A bell jangled. Manners set the gun on the desk. He said, "Yeah," into the phone. He handed the phone to O'Hearn. "For you."

It was Simon Advocate. "I figured you'd be there. You remember Joe Kemphill, the rancher Rodzolo knocked cold? Well, he thinks somebody's been hiding out at his summerhouse. Lew Archer wants me to have a look. He can't leave the office without Bentley trailing along."

"How come Archer's on our side of the fence?"

"He's done a lot of thinking, Brill," Advocate said. "I'll tell you about it later."

The editor gave directions for reaching the Kempfill ranch and hung up.

Manners said, "Remember what I told you. You got a wife now. Better worry about her for a change. You ain't no hero."

O'Hearn stared at the other's working face. In Manners' eyes was a thin wildness. It was a long way down the corridor to the side door and at every step he expected Manners to shoot him in the back.

Joe Kempfill, wearing overalls and a straw hat, met him at the ranch. "Place where my wife used to store summer furniture to keep it outa the rain," he said excitedly. "I been losin' chickens and eggs. And it must be this Rodzolo. Just a while ago I seen him."

They tramped through the grove, Kempfill carrying a rifle. At sight of the big summerhouse, open at one end, they pulled up short. Beside the building was a lean-to. O'Hearn stepped up, threw open the door and leaped aside.

A pitiful figure stumbled out. A man in dirt-encrusted clothes and soot-stained bandages. Some of the bandages had loosened and O'Hearn could see his scars.

The rancher stood as if paralyzed and O'Hearn snatched the rifle from him. "Go phone the police," he ordered. "And don't talk to anyone but Lew Archer."

As Kempfill hurried off, Rodzolo began to sob. "I'm glad it's over. I never meant to hurt her." He shuddered. "I stole a paper off the porch. It said I had the wrong girl. It was this other one's sister. I never meant to hurt anybody!" His voice hardened. "But the other one. She took a knife to me—"

O'Hearn said shortly, "We'll get you to a hospital."

Rodzolo put his hands over his bandaged face. "She was standin' there with this flat tire and she smiles and I fix the tire. And we get into the back seat and she gets me goin' and then she takes out a knife and cuts me—"

O'Hearn felt sick. "She's dead," he said. "Somebody shot her."

Rodzolo peered at him through the slits in his bandages. "I didn't kill her," he screamed suddenly, starting to back up.

O'Hearn heard approaching footsteps and turned to see Cort Bentley. For once he was without his white hat, and sweat streamed on his fleshy face. Holding a shotgun, he looked at O'Hearn. "We been tailin' you." He shifted the muzzle of the sawed-off shotgun. "Get away from him, O'Hearn."

O'Hearn understood Bentley's intention only when the man pointed the shotgun. Rodzolo stood rigid against the wall of the lean-to, frozen by terror.

Bentley said, "How about it, O'Hearn? Give me your word you'll lay off. If you do, Rodzolo's our boy."

O'Hearn smashed down with the barrel of his rifle, catching Bentley across the wrists. The shotgun sent its twin charges into the ground.

"Run," O'Hearn shouted to Rodzolo as Bentley aimed a kick at the groin. O'Hearn managed to take the blow on his thigh. The rifle slipped from his grasp. As he was bending over, Bentley kicked him viciously in the face.

Bentley was yelling, "There he goes! Get him, Nacky!"

For the first time, O'Hearn was aware that Nacky had come out with Bentley. Bentley yelled, "Wing him!"

Rodzolo was scampering across the clearing. Suddenly he broke stride at the sound of Bentley's voice. He half turned, his hands outstretched. Nacky shot him. Rodzolo took a few staggering steps and Nacky fired again. Rod-

zolo fell heavily. His twitching body sent up little geysers of dust for a moment, then lay quiet.

O'Hearn, getting slowly to his feet, saw Lew Archer coming through the trees. The officer was pale and tense. O'Hearn knew he must have witnessed the killing. Archer stopped, panting, as he gazed at his son across the uneven ground. Rodzolo was a crumpled shape, the dirty bandages over his face slowly staining red.

Lew Archer abruptly drew the gun from his holster. "You're under arrest, Nacky," he said in a dead voice.

Nacky didn't move. Neither did he drop the revolver he still clutched.

Bentley rubbed at his wrists where the skin was broken from O'Hearn's blow with the rifle barrel. His eyes were wild. "Are you nuts, Lew!" he cried. "Rodzolo killed Theona. Nacky shot him in self-defense."

Lew Archer said, "Drop your gun, Nacky."

Bentley glared at Archer. "You ought to pin a medal on your kid. I told him to shoot Rodzolo." When Archer still made no response, Bentley said ominously. "You're gettin' too big for your pants, Lew. If you ain't careful, you won't be wearing that badge any longer."

For the first time Lew Archer turned his gaze on Bentley. "You can't hold that Ramon Road business over my head any longer. I'll take my medicine along with Nacky. And as for the badge—when I lock Nacky up, I'll turn in my badge. Because, after all, he's still my kid. I'm going to do what I can to help him. A lot of this is my own fault—"

Nacky unexpectedly began to run.

Lew Archer cried, "Nacky. Wait!"

But Nacky didn't wait. Lew Archer fired. Nacky pitched forward on his face and began to writhe on the

ground. When O'Hearn reached his side, he was retching and his eyes were closed tight.

"I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die!" he kept screaming.

Archer came over and bent down. He looked at the torn place in Nacky's hip and, as if in explanation, he said in a low voice to O'Hearn, "He never could stand pain."

Nacky screamed, opening his eyes wide. Sweat beaded his forehead and he stared wildly at the ring of faces over him. He wet his lips and spoke with difficulty now. "Theona . . . we was lovers. I—I let her beat and whip me. But she made fun of me. She laughed at me. I found a rifle. When she turned her back on me I shot her. I took her out to Knight's Canyon—" His eyes rolled back in his head.

Frank Manners, on his way downtown, saw the crowd and braked his station wagon to a stop. He asked a man in bib overalls what was going on.

"Shootin'. Lew Archer shot his kid. You know Nacky Archer? Well, Nacky thought he was goin' to die. And damned if he don't admit he killed that Theona Layne. Seems like her and him was pretty cozy for a while. But they got in a fight—"

Frank Manners stepped out of his station wagon and left the motor running. Woodenly, he kicked his way through the crowds to where the ambulance was pulled up and waiting. Two men were carrying a stretcher from the grove. Manners saw an inert shape. He moved forward. The top of his head felt cold, bared as it was for the first time in months. Some of the spirit gum that had held his toupé still clung to his forehead.

He saw O'Hearn and said, "So it was Nacky."

O'Hearn nodded, thinking how small Manners looked without his hair and his built-up heels.

Manners walked over to the stretcher and looked down at Nacky's pale face.

Manners gripped something inside his pocket. Flame and smoke spurted through the fabric. Nacky shuddered. The men holding the stretcher jumped back and Nacky's body rolled loosely into the dirt.

Before anyone could realize what had happened, Manners was sprinting toward his station wagon. O'Hearn started after him. Just as the wagon roared away, Lew Archer came wheezing up to slide under the wheel of his sedan. O'Hearn jumped alongside him.

With siren screaming, the sedan hurtled down the narrow road after the tail of the station wagon. They had gone almost two miles when a sharp bend loomed ahead. There was a screech of tires, then the sickening tear of rubber as the station wagon wavered ahead of them. Wheels hit plowed ground and, as O'Hearn watched, the heavy wagon turned end over end. Almost lazily it nosed over for a last time. For an instant, as the dust settled, it lay broken and inert. Then something bright flickered from a break in the hood and there was a *poof* and the gleaming metal body was engulfed in flames.

Lew Archer jammed on his brakes and they piled out, O'Hearn jerking a fire extinguisher from under the dashboard. He worked the extinguisher but he might as well have been trying to fight the fire with a water pistol.

Staring dismally at the smoking ruin Lew Archer said, "I'm sorry he went like this. I wanted to kill him."

After Theona's funeral, O'Hearn decided it would be best to get Kit away from town, at least for a while. Ad-

vocate assured him he could handle things alone now.

Cort Bentley and Archer had both turned in their badges the same day—but for different reasons. As Nacky was dead, the D.A. at the county seat decided there was little point in prosecuting Archer as an accessory in that hit-and-run affair of four years ago.

Archer and Addie Mansfield had quietly left town.

Kit and O'Hearn, seated in the battered compact car, listened as Advocate leaned in to bid them goodbye. "Remember what I told you once. There's a job here for you, Brill. And a piece of the *Enterprise*."

Kit studied O'Hearn's lean profile for a long moment. Then she said, "What can be gained by going away?"

"So many horrible things have happened in this town. I thought you—"

She opened the car door and stepped out. "Whatever I have to forget, Brill, I can forget just as easily here—with you. Besides, some very nice things have happened to me in Encanto." She turned a radiant face toward him and smiled.

THE END

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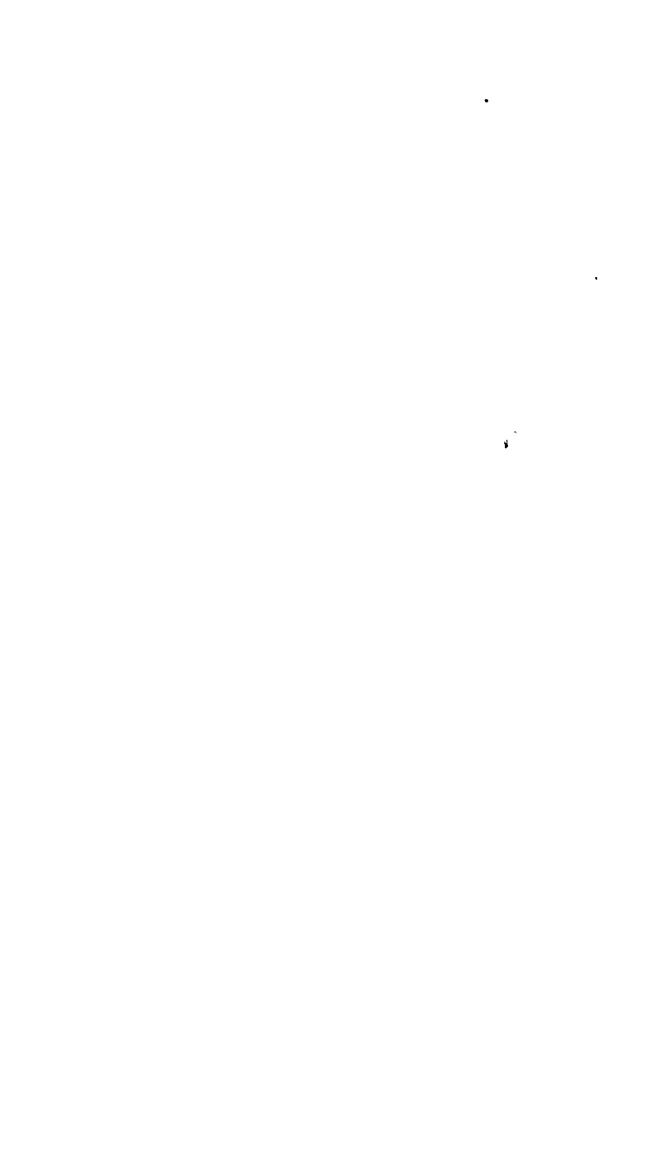
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