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WINGS OF DEATH

WINGS OF DEATH

by Marjorie Boniface



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WINGS OF DEATH

Chapter 1

I FIRST saw the Naval Air Cadet as he hurried through the bus depot in El Paso, Texas. He was a sturdy, vital appearing young man, his blond coloring toasted golden brown by the Texas sun. His fresh khaki uniform and cap with insignia of the corps became him well.

"See that Navy Cadet?" the gray-haired, mild-spoken agent from whom I'd been buying tickets all summer asked. He jerked his head to indicate the vanishing young man. "Going up to Mount of Doves on this bus. Says he's just had word his brother up there is dead. Know him, Mrs. Wickley?"

"Why, no," I answered, pocketing my ticket and craning my neck for a further view of the man in question through the milling crowd. "I can't imagine who he is. I know everyone on Mount of Doves, including the sick in the government hospital," I added. "Who was his brother?"

The ticket agent didn't know. "I pointed you out to him as you came in," he said. "Told him you were go-

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ing all the way to Doves on this bus. Thought you wouldn't mind," he explained apologetically, "in case he wanted to talk with someone from up there."

I was the last passenger to enter the bus that runs between El Paso, Texas and the several small resorts in the White and Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico, a hundred and twenty-five miles or so to the north. In fact, I had nearly missed it altogether, for the city of El Paso—that Border crucible for the melting of cosmopolitan, cow-town, military, and Mexican atmosphere—had interested me particularly that day. There had been a colorful cowboys' parade on the paved streets of the modern city, and a rodeo was underway at the big Coliseum at Washington Park, while posters and radio told the town and the army at near-by Fort Bliss that a bull fight was scheduled for the following Sunday in the arena in Juarez just across the river.

I had lunched on delicious quail at the Tivoli in Juarez that day and enjoyed my walk across the International Bridge with the crowds, though the early September day was hot. I felt half reluctant to leave for the mountains.

Upon entering the bus I was not disappointed to find that the only remaining vacant seat was the one next to the Cadet. As I paused beside him he glanced up, removed his bag and blouse from the vacant seat to make a place for me, then looked expectantly at the broad back of the middle-aged driver, as if hoping that at last we could

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get underway. But the driver continued to fiddle with the windshield wiper apparatus.

Later, I was to have a great deal of respect for the man's forethought on the state of the weather, though at the moment of my entering the bus there was not a cloud in the blue bonnet of the sky.

With a short, disgusted sigh the Cadet leaned back in his seat and took a paper from his pocket and, as he read, I saw at a glance that it was a radiogram. As the vehicle moved out into the hot, brilliant sunshine of the street, he turned to me. He had waited for the deafening noises of the starting motor to subside into smoother going before speaking, I understood.

"I beg your pardon," he said softly, "but I'd like very much to talk with you. My name is Paris Warner. The ticket agent told me you had been staying at Palomar Lodge on Mount of Doves. I wonder if you knew my brother, Peter Warner."

"Oh, yes," I said, confused, for I had seen Peter Warner two days before, "I know him well. We're good friends. I'm Mabel Wickley," I added. "Peter and I both live at the lodge on the mount."

"This is a notice of his death," the young man said, pointing at the radiogram. "Here, read it."

Practically speechless, I took the radiogram and the message seemed fairly to leap up at me.

"Regret inform you your brother, Peter Warner,

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died today," it said. "Come at once or advise disposition of remains." It was signed by a name I'd never heard. "Lumpkin," it said, "Major, U. S. Army. Hospital for Convalescents, Mount of Doves, New Mexico."

"It's incredible!" I exclaimed. "I can't believe it possible. Why Peter was alive and well as late as Monday, the day before yesterday, when I left the lodge. He must have died that day."

"The message knocked me for a loop," Paris said. "Had you noticed anything unusual about him lately? Do you think the thing was accidental?"

I shook my head in complete bewilderment. "No. Nothing unusual. I don't know."

Paris' brows drew together in troubled thought.

"It seems unbelievable," he said. "Pete's been writing normal letters. I can't get away from the idea that it was an accident or," he paused briefly, "or foul play. Did—was there anyone who had it in for him, do you think?"

"No," I said. "No, I don't believe anyone disliked Peter."

"This notice of death was about the only thing that could get a leave for me from flying school," Paris remarked conversationally. "I'm due to graduate in two weeks, get my commission as Ensign in the Naval Air Reserve. I'd planned to use the short leave they give upon graduation to marry. But when this radiogram came they gave me six days."

I saw a momentary flash of pride in his eyes as he

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spoke of his prospective commission and marriage. I thought how excellently one of his appearance and fine young manhood would fit into that splendid force and decided the girl, whoever she was, must count herself lucky.

I had heard Paris Warner spoken of on Mount of Doves as Peter's only living relative. They looked greatly alike, I saw, and I noted the resemblance more and more as I watched Paris. He was heavier than Peter, physically robust while his brother was slight and somewhat frail, but their coloring was identical, while their height varied less than an inch in Peter's favor. There was a difference of about three years in their ages, I'd been told. That should make Paris around twenty-three as Peter had just turned twenty-six.

Paris was speaking again. "I've been tormented by all kinds of thoughts," he said. "Got to wondering if Pete, in his strange mental condition, had done away with himself. He may have needed me, didn't like to say so. The thought," he exclaimed bitterly, "is pure hell!"

He ran his fingers distractedly through his short stubble of blond hair in a backward sweep.

"He wasn't really responsible for his actions with his memory blacked out the way it's been since his injury in the South Pacific. Tell me about him," Paris urged. "Was he still training those pigeons? He was getting a lift out of that last year."

"Yes," I answered. "Peter had found a real job to do,

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something worth his time and attention. He has taken the native pigeons that have nested for years in the overhanging eaves of the old lodge on Mount of Doves and trained them as carriers. It can be done, he says, if their build, stamina, and training are right. The government has given them serial numbers and will use them in the United States Signal Corps.

"You should have seen him at feeding time with his doves," I continued, visioning Peter as I had watched him so many times that past summer. "It was an inspiring sight. Every bird he's trained flew straight to him the moment he came among them with his pan of grain. There were certain ones that vied with one another for places on his head and shoulders. There was a blue-check carrier pigeon, a sort of cock-of-the-walk, who fancied he deserved the place of honor, and two old white doves that were pets. They're not carriers, just squab breed, but beautiful—snow white except for their pinkish eyes and red feet. Peter called them 'Como Se Yama' and 'The Missus.' He vowed those two spoke Spanish."

I paused, my eyes stinging at the thought that charming, courteous Peter Warner whom we'd liked so much on the mount was no more. I found it hard to believe him dead.

"You probably know," I continued, seeing that Paris waited, "that training the doves is something Peter seemed to remember out of his past. He told me he was

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convinced that he'd trained pigeons before at some time. He couldn't capture the memory quite, couldn't peg it down in time or place, but all that he did in working with the birds seemed instinctive. He never had to be told how to go about their feeding, care, that sort of thing. The government showed him about training them as carriers, though. Do you know," I asked, "whether he'd ever trained pigeons?"

Paris' eyes lit up momentarily. "Had he!" he exclaimed. "Until the time Pete went away to prep school he had a cote and dozens of pigeons at our home in San Francisco. Then in the summer he used to mess around with the ones grandfather had at Palomar Lodge. Pete spent a lot of time with Grandad on Mount of Doves during his vacations. He built the old lodge, Grandfather did. Left it jointly to Peter and me when he passed away a few years ago. That and a famous Goya painting that hasn't materialized, by the way. No one knows what became of it." Paris grimaced slightly. "Too bad about that," he exclaimed. "I could use the money without any trouble at all!"

I smiled. "The lodge is still full of paintings," I said, "some of them pleasant; some atrocities. But certainly no Goyas. I supposed you knew where it was."

"I think the old gentleman dreamed it up," Paris said with a little laugh.

He lapsed into silence for a moment, then spoke of his brother again.

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"Pete didn't remember me at all after his injury," he said. "It seemed darned strange. 'I'm your brother,' I'd say. '*Paris*. Don't you know me?' But he didn't; the ship's doctor had to convince him with the Navy personnel records. We had been on the same ship, as luck would have it—Pete an Ensign, a graduate of the Naval Academy, I an ordinary seaman."

His lips twisted petulantly for an instant.

"I played in hard luck trying to get into the Naval Academy," he said next. "It's okay now for I'm going to fly and, while I'll only have a Reserve commission, there's a swell chance of a good flier getting a Regular commission, if he wants it. I couldn't go through the academy as Pete did; couldn't get a congressional appointment. It made me pretty unhappy for a while. Then I enlisted, hoping to be appointed to the academy in that way, from the ranks. Well, that didn't work either; couldn't pass the zany exams."

Paris was speaking with genuine bitterness. He became aware of my gaze at that moment and smiled wryly.

"It's okay now," he said, "I'm going to fly and that's right up my alley. But I wish somebody would tell me," he continued, frowning again, "why they make the entrance exams to their holy academy so preposterous. Only a book termite could pass them. There ought to be a law against their asking fool questions like who-wrote-the-following-quotation. And why," he ex-

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claimed heatedly, "it's supposed to help a Naval officer to be able to bound the Ancient Roman Empire. And what-the-heck difference does it make if a fellow has a wife? The poor jerk is barred from entering the Naval Academy if he has ever been married at all. That was all right with me," he added with a slight shrug of his broad shoulders. "I could swear to my state of single blessedness, but the old devil academ got me."

From all that I gleaned the knowledge that his resentment was due largely to his own lack of preparation for his examinations. His next words confirmed this.

"Gosh," he exclaimed, "I go in for living, not for burying my nose in a book!"

He dismissed the academy with a wave of his hand.

"You've been to Mount of Doves before, haven't you?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"When I was a kid," Paris nodded, "and again a year ago when I took Pete up there to be near the hospital where the army doctors could look after him. I thought the old environment he'd enjoyed so much as a youngster might be good for him and the Navy doctors agreed. Pete went along with me willingly, did whatever I suggested, but he had no recollections of me or anything else." An expression of pain darkened his eyes for a moment. "He was like," he hesitated, bringing his brows together in a vertical frown again, "a kind stranger. It was a great day when he discovered soon after his injury that he could still read and write. His

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knowledge of the care of the doves was the same sort of thing, I suppose."

"Yes," I agreed, "that is how it was, I imagine. One forgot about Peter's amnesia because he seemed so normal and charming," I commented. "Probably you've guessed that he was falling in love."

"In love—Pete?" Paris seemed genuinely surprised. "Good Lord, that wouldn't have done. He had a wife. Didn't you know? Sure," he continued, "married her in Java a few months before his injury. A native Javanese girl, a nice sort, though, and beautiful, I'm told. That was before Pearl Harbor was bombed. We were convoying supplies to China in those days. Pete knew about his wife, that is, he'd been told, though she's one of the things he'd forgotten. I'm surprised he'd permit himself to make love to another girl," he added with a shake of his head. "That's not like the guy."

"Oh, I don't think he'd spoken of love to this one," I told him hastily, "though she's frankly been trying to persuade him. I have a feeling it's taken all his will power to resist her. She's the toast of Mount of Doves, so to speak," I said smiling as I remembered the gay, vital girl. "I have been thinking," I added, "that Peter was holding out against her because of his amnesia. I never dreamed that he was married already."

Paris shook his head. "Maybe that's it," he said. "See what I mean? He's already married and finds himself falling in love with another. He cracks under the strain and—and puts an end to himself. Must have been hell

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for old Pete," he added, his voice deep with feeling.

We said no more at the moment, each of us busy with his own thoughts.

We traversed the eighty miles across the floor of the desert to the little town of Tularosa which lies, a bright green, deeply shaded oasis, amid the yellow sands and scrubby brush at the turn of the highway from desert to foothills. My spirits were lifting to the mountains as they invariably did at that point, when I saw that the winding highway high up the ascent was enveloped in low hanging clouds. The peak off to the right where the resort of Cloudcroft nestled was heavily shrouded in mist. We passed through the Mescalero Indian Reservation in a fog so dense we hardly realized when we'd left the pretty settlement behind and entered the tall pines of the forest.

The driver could not see his way for any great distance ahead, just a few yards of dark, wet pavement in front of the bus. Actually it was not yet sundown by our watches, but there wasn't any sun, just enveloping mists.

After passing through the small town of Ruidoso which is strung out along each side of the little stream of the same name for several miles, we left the paved highway and the road became narrow and winding. By the puddles of water in the uneven surface of the road I knew that they'd had rain that day on Mount of Doves, though there was now only heavy fog in the air.

Precarious mountain roads make for tense riding for

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me at best, and in the foggy light I found our slippery way positively terrifying. If we should meet another automobile, I kept thinking, and one or the other in trying to pass should skid over the edge. . . .

There were only three passengers left in the bus besides Paris Warner and me. A soldier in uniform, a stout elderly man in a business suit, and an attractive young woman in a smart traveling suit of gray.

I felt that Peter's body had probably been placed in the morgue of the hospital which stood at the foot of Mount of Doves, but when the bus paused there to let the soldier and the stout man in the business suit alight, Paris made no move to leave the machine. I said nothing.

We drove the short distance up the mount to the top in silence except for the raucous, labored protests of the bus' engine. The mists were somewhat thinner here, for I could see the high bluff on my right and the sheer drop down the mountain on my left as we rounded the hairpin curve near the top.

I held my breath until we had rounded the curve and the old two-storied rock lodge loomed before us at the top of the mount. The cabins of the guests were flung out in a half circle along the rim behind the lodge itself. The sign above the door stood out plainly, its black lettering glistening from the recent rain. "Palomar," it said, and underneath, in letters of the same dimensions, "Alamo Jones, Manager."

When the bus drew to a stop in front of the building

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the young woman in the gray suit got out quickly ahead of Paris and me. Without waiting for her luggage she went directly into the lodge.

As I stepped from the bus I looked up to see Peter Warner's birds flying about the eaves of the main lodge. Their wings were flapping loudly and they were making the cooing sounds characteristic of pigeons. They sounded mournful this evening, I decided with an inward shudder, as if grieving for the man who had been their faithful friend and keeper. Little wonder their voices sounded doleful!

The pigeons Peter had trained as carriers lived in a frame cote that he had built for them, a hundred feet from the lodge; a small building where they were accessible to his hand at all times. I involuntarily looked that way.

A man was strolling toward me through the mists. It gave me a queer start to see the plump white doves—Como Se Yama and The Missus—perched on his shoulders, wings a-tilt, just as they had been wont to do with Peter.

My knees shook violently, and I involuntarily took a step backward. I bumped into Paris who was picking up his luggage from the ground where the bus driver had set it. My expression betrayed my agitation to the man approaching.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked cheerfully. "It's this

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confounded fog. We were afraid you wouldn't make it back today, Mabel, on account of the weather."

It was Peter Warner, very much alive.

At an exclamation from Paris I looked at him. He was staring pop-eyed and apparently speechless.

"Paris!"

"Peter!"

Paris strode past me in the direction of his brother.

"Pete," he cried shakenly, "Pete!" Then, his tone suddenly gruff as if from the effort to conquer his weakness, he fairly shouted: "Great God, man, are you okay?"

Peter came quickly to meet him, a smile on his lips, a quizzical light in his eyes.

"Of course I'm all right," he said. "I hardly expected you today, though. How's the American Eaglet?" And he gripped his brother's hand.

"I, well, I—" Paris stammered an instant, not knowing what to say, apparently. "I, uh, decided to come," he struggled on. "What, uh . . ." Then, suddenly, he blurted out, "Look here, Pete, what's the meaning of this damned radiogram?"

"Radiogram?"

"You didn't know about it?" Paris' voice rose on a high note of exasperation. "You mean to tell me . . . Well, I'm a son of a gun!"

"What's this?" Peter asked quickly. "You got a radiogram you thought I had sent?"

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Peter's nicely modulated, courteous voice was interested now, curious.

"Pete," Paris begged earnestly, "look at this damned thing. Who is this Major Lumpkin who signed it? I came as fast as plane and that creeping bus could bring me. Read it, for gosh sakes."

Peter took the rumpled radiogram. As he read, a vertical crease appeared between his eyes.

"Who is Lumpkin?" Paris prodded.

"Never heard of him," Peter answered, looking serious enough now. "He's not on duty up here at the hospital. Must be someone at Fort Bliss. It's a mistake in names, of course. Someone with a name similar to mine is dead. But it was sent to you," he added, biting his lower lip speculatively.

"And that," Paris commented grimly, "will take quite a bit of explaining."

He turned from Peter to survey the scene about him as if half expecting to see someone lurking in the mists that enshrouded us there at the top of the world.

"At any rate," Peter exclaimed, that completely winning smile of his lighting up his features, "the report has been greatly exaggerated."

"Bringing me up here from flying school is no joke," Paris said sternly. "Have you got enemies here, Pete? There's something behind this fool thing," he persisted as Peter smilingly shook his head. "It has purpose; meaning. There's danger for you here," Paris continued, tak-

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ing another quick look around. "I can feel it in the air; in this pea-soup mist."

"Nonsense!" Peter's laugh was deliberately light, I felt. "There has been a mistake in names made, that's all. We'll look into it tomorrow, but that's what we'll find. When the sun comes up on the mountain in the morning you'll feel differently about the atmosphere, too."

"Look, Pete," Paris persisted doggedly, "I wasn't sent for to look at the sunrise. Besides, I've seen it before."

Peter glanced again at the radiogram in the dim light. That vertical crease, common to both brothers, appearing again between his eyes. Suddenly, with a decisive movement, he squeezed the paper into a ball with his long fingers, then hurled it down the mountain side. The expression on his face relaxed with the action, as though in getting rid of the printed word he had thrown away its import.

"Now, kid," he said, "stop worrying. We'll look into this tomorrow, but for tonight—forget it. I want you to meet these people coming up."

"Tomorrow," Paris declared half belligerently, "you'll be on your way to San Francisco and I'll go back to flying school where I belong."

Peter only smiled and turned again to watch the three people who could be seen climbing up the steep grade.

Chapter 2

THE three figures coming up the mountain trail through the mists took on familiar shapes as they drew nearer. The tall man on the right I recognized as Sam Rayburn, Forest Ranger, who was living at the lodge, and the heavier figure with the sloping shoulders at the left of the group could be no other than Dwight Summers, widely known cartoon artist, who had spent all of the past summer at Palomar.

The two men were flanking a smaller figure that was obviously extending its stride in an effort to keep pace with them, and succeeding in the ratio of about three steps to their two. The denim trousers, leathern jacket, and gray felt hat might have been worn by any cowboy, but the lilting, carefree voice was as feminine as you please.

It was the girl whom we called "Westie." Peter and I walked forward to the main entrance of the lodge and stood waiting for the three to come up. Paris followed with his luggage.

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The girl was talking animatedly, the two men listening to the running flow of her voice.

"Old Blue merely humped his back a little and the dumb dodo fell smack into the stream," I heard her say.

"I been telling you old Blue was mean." That was Sam Rayburn, teasing her. I could see his wide smile as they drew nearer.

"Old Blue's a lamb!" the girl protested. "This self-styled rodeo rider I'm talking about simply doesn't know one, two, about a horse. He's still trying to explain . . ."

She broke off at sight of me standing in the doorway.

"Hello there, Mabel!" she cried. "Am I glad to see you! The last two of the women guests left yesterday and there's a preponderance of masculine opinion around here. What I mean, it tips the scales."

Her young spirits were as warming and cheerful as a sudden bright blaze on a cold hearth. The mysterious radiogram coupled with Paris' worry and annoyance had given me a feeling of dread and premonition. Finding Peter alive and quite himself had been a vast relief, but the misty twilight was cheerless in the extreme.

Peter was next in Westie's line of vision. She promptly forgot me at sight of him.

"Why, Peter Warner!" she exclaimed, cocking her bright head, heavy with its big hat, slightly to one side. "You look like a waterfowl! F'heaven's sake, don't you have enough I.Q. to come in out of the rain?"

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She stepped before him as she spoke and, looking as severe as a schoolma'am ran her fingers through his wet hair, leaving several tufts of it standing jaggedly on end in the wake of her fingers.

"You!" she scolded. "Go rub that thatch of yours with a heavy towel until it's perfectly dry! What're you trying to do—get yourself a bed in the hospital?"

Peter stood smiling down at her, pleased with her bossy solicitude, it appeared. I remember thinking that it took someone as young and as pretty as Westie to ruffle a normal man's hair in public and make him like it! He was wearing a brown suède jacket over his khaki uniform, but he'd been feeding his pigeons bareheaded, ignoring the mists.

"Oh, I'll do," he assured Westie, adding, "my birds wouldn't know me with a hat on my head."

"Never mind those pigeons," she told him, turning him about in the manner of a mother with a small boy, "they're as foolish as you are. Upstairs with you, and don't come back until you're dry."

Peter obeyed, smiling indulgently over a thin shoulder at her as he went.

I saw that Paris was amused at the incident. It was the first time his expression had lightened since we'd reached Mount of Doves. A smile added considerable charm to those strong, virile features of his.

Without waiting for an introduction Westie spoke at once, taking notice of him for the first time, I think.

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"Hello," she said, "you must be Paris." And she studied him with interest. We were inside now, walking across the old stone floor. "You're going to be good for Peter, and for me, too, I hope," she added frankly.

Paris laughed, a pleasant, rich tone that was good to hear after his several hours of worry.

"I'll do my best," he promised, meeting her smiling eyes. "Looks like nice work, too," he continued. "May I ask how—" He began, hesitated momentarily, then said suddenly, "Here, wait a moment! Let's begin all over again and do it right."

Drawing his handsome figure to its full height he snapped to attention before her.

"Flying Cadet Paris Warner, at your service," he said smartly.

Westie's blue eyes darkened with the pigment of delight. Then her moist lips jerked into a severe, unsmiling line. She struck a pose of her own, a slouching stance, hands thrust into the pockets of her blue denim trousers, big hat pulled forward at an angle over one eye.

"Howdy, Admiral," she drawled in the tone of one who shoves aside a chew of tobacco with his tongue. "Right glad to meet yuh. Mah name's Bean, not the Navy kind—the jumpin', frijole variety. Sara Bean, but I reckon you can call me Westie, if you're amind. Everybody does around these parts—darn it!"

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Paris' laugh was a little uncertain. "Is she really from the forks of the creek?" his eyes questioned me. His undecided, waiting expression was funnier than Westie's clowning had been.

I burst out laughing, and the others, with the exception of Dwight Summers who never laughed, joined me. Summers, I knew, was enjoying the nonsense as much as the rest of us, the evidence of his graveyard expression to the contrary. He was an unusual man, extraordinary, in many ways, his appearance not the least of these. He was possessed of the thickest, heaviest lips, and the largest ears that I have ever seen on a human being, as well as the soberest expression. He looked amazingly like a huge, flop-eared hound dog, though his ears didn't actually flop. They stood out from his head like the handles on a soup tureen.

In reality Dwight Summers was an intelligent, courteous man of the world, and a genius with his pencil. Too, just as with some dog most of us have known and loved, he was liked all the better for his unadulterated ugliness.

Paris shook hands with Dwight Summers and Sam Rayburn as I tardily introduced them, and we continued across the big, beamed ceilinged lobby in the direction of the log fire that burned in the great rock fireplace.

"Why," I heard Paris ask as he walked beside the girl, "do you permit these people to call you 'Westie' if you don't approve of the name? Personally," he was quick to add, "I think it's swell."

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She stepped close to the lazily burning fire and poked a smoldering pine log with the toe of her slender cowboy boot. The loosened bark showered like a bank of pin-wheel sparklers for an instant, then caught fire.

"No use fighting a nickname," Westie answered, turning about and removing her hat. "Unless you want to use your fists."

She tossed the hat to the top of a table beside the wall, gave a quick shake of her head and her ash blonde hair fell down her neck in thick, soft waves. It had been tucked up under her hat out of the mists. She smoothed it with a deft, absent minded movement or two, removed her damp coat, flung it on the back of a chair, then dropped into a comfortable seat near the fire.

"Take mine, for instance," she continued. "I was all set to be the Girl of the Golden West, right out of the story book. I run the Golden West Riding Corrals for Alamo, and I live in one of the cabins here at the lodge. I sing quite a lot like Jeanette MacDonald, too." Her eyes sparkled at that. "A Belasco set-up, if ever there was one. And do you know," she went on smiling, "the best any of these unimaginative Romeos up here could invent by way of a nickname for me was 'Westie'—ugh!"

Dwight Summers, seeming on the point of dropping off to sleep, aroused and spoke.

"My dear girl," the homely man said in his deep, rumbling voice, "your sobriquet comes quite sponta-

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neously to the mind, I assure you. The West never had a daughter of her own as delightfully, determinedly western as you."

Paris stood leaning an elbow on the mantel, smiling down at Westie. His head showed up clean-cut and fair against the dark oils of the huge canvas picture above the mantel piece. His bright gaze had never left the girl since she had thrown off her hat and coat. It touched her hair, clean and shining in the fire's light; the healthy color of her smooth, tanned cheeks; the firm column of her throat disappearing into the open neck of the loose fitting blue sports blouse she wore, and the soft swell of her bosom that gave evidence of high, young breasts. A carefully polite gaze, but a busy one.

I noticed that Sam Rayburn who was sitting opposite Westie was quietly observing Paris. The Ranger had what appeared to be a cast in his left eye. It gave him an odd look if you caught it just right. Most of the time, however, his expression was complacent and pleasing, and few guessed, just at first, that his left eye was sightless.

Westie laughed merrily at Dwight Summers' words about the appropriateness of her nickname, but Peter was seen coming down the stairs at that moment. She forgot everyone else in the room instantly.

"Here's Petie," the girl cried. "All dry and beautiful again. And there's the dinner bell. Come on, Mabel!

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Let's make with the soap and water. Bet I beat you getting ready."

The manager and general factotum of the lodge was a tall, slightly stoop-shouldered Texan by the name of Bowie Travis Jones. He once told me he'd been called nothing but "Alamo" since his first day in public school, which was natural enough, goodness knows, considering his famous namesakes. Certainly no one in the vicinity of Mount of Doves ever addressed him in any other way. One forgot he was not the owner of Palomar Lodge.

He did all the cooking himself except during the height of the season when there were more guests than he could take care of. Lace, his estranged wife, who lived less than a quarter of a mile away in her own cottage down in the draw, came up each day and performed the duties of chambermaid, but she was always through by noon. Contrarily, she refused to eat Alamo's cooking, so we saw little of Lace except as she bustled about with mop and dustpan.

Guests at Palomar were expected to look after themselves pretty well. It was no place for anyone who required a lot of small attentions. But all forgot minor inconveniences when they sat down at Alamo's table. He was one of the best cooks I've ever seen. "No frills, though," he'd say. "Just plain, honest-to-God good eating."

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The evening meal steamed on the table as we entered the dining room. A huge platter of roast beef and oven-browned potatoes, another of hot buttered beets, and a third of small green lima beans. There was a wooden salad bowl filled with hearts of lettuce, young radishes, onions, and watercress, freshly tossed in lemon and oil dressing. I could detect the faint odor of garlic with which the inside of the bowl had been lightly rubbed. The golden brown muffins were piping hot.

The aluminum coffee pot, large and very hot, sat at the right of Alamo's place at the head of the table. At the left of his plate a huge glass pitcher of spring water stood ready to his hand. Thus a guest could have as much coffee or water as he chose by the simple expedient of passing his cup or glass to Alamo.

He came out of the kitchen, buttoning his coat, as we entered the dining room. He cooked in a white chef's coat and cap, but when he'd set the hot food on the table and rung his dinner bell long and loudly, he'd hurriedly slip off the chef's coat and cap, grab the coat of a business suit from its nail in the kitchen, fling into it, and take his place at the head of his table and host the meal.

Paris stepped forward to greet Alamo as he entered. They had met a year before when Paris had brought Peter to the government hospital below.

"Hello, Alamo," the young man said heartily as he extended his hand. "Glad to see you!"

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Apparently Alamo had not known that Paris was there. He gave a slight start, then looked at him searchingly, his lips pressed tightly together. He would grin in an instant, I knew. I'd seen him go through the routine a hundred times. That moment of severe appraisal, followed by a grin made him appear as guileless and trusting as a woolly lamb. There it was! Slightly one-sided, as if about to crawl up his left cheek, tobacco stained, but charming, nevertheless.

"Be blest if it ain't the Gen'ral!" he said, gripping Paris' hand and looking the fine fitting, khaki uniform up and down. "You've put on twenty-five or thirty pounds of muscle since you was here last, ain't you? Done way outgrewed your brother, Gen'ral."

"Not 'General,'" Westie told Alamo. "That's just the Navy's summer uniform. Call him Admiral."

Alamo grinned. "So that's how it is!" he said. "Well, I reckon there's one thing the Army and Navy have got in common with all of us—appetite. Come set down to the table, Admiral, pull up. . . ."

He stopped, turned his head to listen. Footsteps were heard crossing the stone floor of the lobby, light, quick sounds, coming toward us. The next moment the girl in the gray suit who had come up on the bus from El Paso that afternoon appeared in the doorway. She had come directly into the lodge when we'd got off the bus and, even Alamo, who had met her and shown her to her room, had forgotten her presence in the house

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for the moment. It took me an instant to recognize her, for I had forgotten her entirely.

She had changed her gray traveling suit for a black silk faille frock, one of the so-called coat-dresses of the season, very smart indeed. Its simple lines were unadorned, and the girl wore no make-up with the exception of lipstick. Her black hair was swept back from her forehead in a smooth roll about her head. It was jet black in color. Her exquisite white skin had the soft, subdued glow of a pearl.

She was slender in build, and as supple appearing as a young willow, though she stood erect, her head held proudly and high.

Alamo, his best greeter's manner in evidence, hurried across the room to make her welcome, then presented her to the rest of us, more or less in a lump. "Miss Montgomery," he said.

"How'd you do?" she responded in a high, clear voice, and took the chair that Paris drew out for her.

In a different setting I merely should have noticed her as a smart, unusually pretty young woman, probably English, possibly European, and let it go at that. But here on the mountain top where the men, with the exception of Paris, were in their rough clothing, Westie in her blue denim, and I in the brown jersey I had worn up from El Paso on the dusty bus, the contrast was striking indeed.

A glance at Westie's face showed me that she was

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feeling the difference between herself and this attractively gowned contemporary. The clothing she'd found so romantic all summer must have suddenly seemed coarse, though, goodness knows, it was the accepted garb of the young people who came up to the mountains to play. The newcomer was the only one among us who was inappropriately dressed, but not one of us felt this at the moment. Paris' high-powered gaze was already at work, and Westie was observing that, too, I saw.

The newcomer had looked steadily at Westie as Alamo made us all known to one another—the blue denims; the colored blouse; the cowboy boots. There was not so much as the flicker of an eyelash to indicate what she was thinking but, significantly, there was no trace of a smile on her cool face.

"Miss Montgomery here has got the room next to yours, Pete," Alamo announced, picking up the carving knife and starting to work on the roast. "All this weather has sort of gave her a wrong impression of Mount of Doves, I reckon. Said she'd prefer a room inside the lodge to one of the cabins. Most all my folks want a cabin outside, Miss Montgomery," he continued affably.

The girl smiled at Alamo's words, and I was aware that the expression of her sapphire-blue eyes was arrestingly sweet at the moment. Her mouth was small,

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but her lips were full, and she smiled with just a suggestion of restraint that, in her, was somehow alluring.

"You are right," she said clearly, "the dusk and fog have made me feel strange on your mountain top. And those pigeons," she continued, looking quickly around the table as if searching our faces for sympathy, "they're so very mournful. Do they beat their wings against the eaves all night?"

Her question was directed at Paris, but Alamo didn't give him a chance to answer.

"Oh, you'll get used to 'em, Miss," he assured her confidently, though I noticed he didn't promise that the doves would mend their ways. "You'll like 'em," he continued expansively, "everybody does. Peter here trains 'em as carriers for the government. Got 'em acting cute as puppies. You'll like the doves."

Peter smiled his courteous, charming smile as the girl's gaze, a bit startled, sought him out.

"I hope they won't keep you awake," he said. "Doves are very happy birds, actually. Try to think of them as cooing, not complaining. The mount only looks dreary tonight," he went on, "because of the mists, but you'll like it tomorrow when the sun comes out. It's lovely here on top of the world, and the view is something to write home about." Peter's smile became particularly engaging as he continued. "One of our American writers once made a remark about the weather that I've often

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remembered since I've been here where we have so many quick changes. 'If you don't like the weather,' he said, 'wait a minute.' "

"That's charming," the girl exclaimed, pleased with Peter, apparently. "It was your quaint Mark Twain who said that, wasn't it? I'm sure," she added graciously, "I'll like this place when the sun comes out. Possibly," and that peculiarly sweet smile of her's lightened her features, "I'll like the pigeons on better acquaintance."

"That's darned big of her." I caught Westie's low tones down the table from me. "How about sharing the butter with me, Sunshine?"

The newcomer didn't hear the remark, I'm sure. She was answering Alamo's invitation to have more coffee by passing him her cup.

Who was this girl? What had brought her to Mount of Doves? I tried to guess as I ate. She must have someone sick in the government hospital, I decided. That would explain her presence here in Palomar Lodge. I had a strong conviction that the life of our West, this free and informal manner of living, was new and strange to her. I couldn't see her in any setting other than a metropolitan one.

She gave us no clue to herself as the meal progressed, though I'm sure each of us was waiting for her to do so. In spite of her prettiness and careful politeness, there was a reserve about her that held even Alamo's wish to question her in check, and that, I well knew, was some-

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thing of a feat. She paid not the slightest attention to Westie throughout the meal until near its end. Her glance, when it traveled over the girl in cowboy clothing, was wholly impersonal. A waitress in a soiled apron would have been accorded a more approving scrutiny.

Alamo, according to his custom, kept up conversation at table, not so much through a sense of obligation as host, as from a natural urge to talk. It was pretty much of a monologue, really. I became aware after a while that he was angling indirectly for information about his stranger guest. I learned later that she had registered, paid a full month's hotel bill in advance, but had offered no inkling of her reason for being on Mount of Doves. With nearly anyone else in case, Alamo would have known all about her in a few moments and have been calling her Marie instead of the more formal Miss Montgomery. But he was after her at last, I began to understand, though he appeared to be uncertain just how far he should go with his questioning.

"We're sort of a small outfit up here now," he remarked. "Season's over for dudes. Pretty soon Mabel and Westie will be going; Sunshine, too. Reckon you're merely on a short furlough, Admiral."

"Six days," Paris answered, nodding.

"After they're gone," Alamo continued, "there'll be just Peter, Sam, and me, mostly. And you, of course, Miss Montgomery," he added with a keen glance at the girl. "Gonna have us some fun," he continued as she

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said nothing. "Got a deer spotted," and he winked a black eye. "Big buck. Get a bead on him—bang! Venison for supper. Get some wild turkey, too, come snow. Ever do any hunting, Miss Montgomery?"

"No," the girl answered, and an almost imperceptible shudder passed over her shoulders. But the next moment she surprised me by saying: "No, I haven't hunted, but I suspect it is fine sport. I believe I should enjoy it greatly in these mountains. May I hunt with you gentlemen?"

Alamo was surprised at her words, too, I saw; momentarily taken aback. He got his balance quickly, however.

"Sure, Miss," he told her heartily. "Glad to have you. Sam here—he's a Ranger. Goes all over these mountains a-horseback."

"A Ranger?" The girl turned the full battery of her long-lashed eyes on big Sam. "How—nice! Rangers are officers of the law, and so very brave, aren't they?"

Was there a faint note of mockery in her polite tones? I couldn't be sure.

Sam Rayburn grinned in embarrassment and shifted his weight uneasily.

"Not me, Ma'am," he began, but Alamo characteristically broke in and answered for him.

"Forest Ranger, Miss," he explained. "The kind you're talking about are them Texas Rangers. Don't see them much any more, except in the movies. This here's

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New Mexico, you know, though Texas ain't far away. Sam comes from Texas, down Corpus Christi way. Lives in the double decker cabin behind the lodge. Got him a telescope spy glass for looking all over these mountains. Keeps watch for fires; rides miles whenever he so much as sees the smoke of a cigarette." He paused to accent his venture in hyperbole with another wink. "Of course," he continued, "he's got hisself a telephone, and there's a big ranger station up Cedar Creek Canyon, but they're sort of short of men on account of the war. Sam does a whole lot of riding hisself. Good feller to make friends with," and he treated the girl to another wink.

Marie Montgomery smiled sweetly. "I learned to ride in school, but I haven't been on a horse for several years," she said, looking at Sam Rayburn. "I should like to take up the sport again. One can get a horse here?"

"Oh, sure," Alamo answered for the Ranger. "Westie has got a corral full; runs my riding academy for me. Westie's leaving us in a few days, season's over, but I reckon she could show you all you need to know before she goes."

"Oh." The single sound was Marie Montgomery's not altogether approving comment. "That," she added after a brief pause, her face turned in the general direction of Westie, "would be very nice, I'm sure." Then, lifting her cup to her lips, she sipped her coffee as if serenely unconscious of the other girl's presence.

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It was just as well that she was not looking at Westie at the moment, for Westie's eyes were fairly throwing off sparks. I expected an explosion momentarily. Paris was smiling and watching her with the interest of a spectator in a ringside seat who anticipates a fine main event just coming up.

Peter spoke. He was leaning forward slightly to look past Dwight Summers at Westie, smiling gently.

"I saw your friend Sensation this afternoon, Sara," he said. Peter was the only one of us who ever called Westie by her real name, and he did it only now and then, though once in a while he claimed the privilege of calling her "little Frijole," affectionately. "He asked me to tell you," he continued, "to be sure to bring along your guitar this evening."

I didn't hear her reply, though I'm sure it was favorable. I was listening to hear what Alamo was saying to Marie Montgomery. His curiosity had at last broken bounds and could be restrained no longer, I guessed.

"They'll be moving the patients from the government hospital up here next week," he was saying, "down to William Beaumont Hospital in El Paso where the climate will be warmer for the winter months. I reckon you must have somebody sick at the hospital, eh, Miss?"

The girl's long lashes fluttered for an instant, but she answered Alamo without raising her eyes from her plate.

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"No," she said simply, and without further comment went on with her meal.

I had trouble restraining a smile at the picture of acute chagrin on Alamo's face and, glancing about the table, I saw that the others, with the exception of Westie and Buddha-like Dwight Summers, were struggling as hard as I. Paris' super-charged eyes said this would do very nicely in place of the main event that hadn't come off.

At that moment Westie, her face still flushed and her eyes bright, shoved back her chair. She didn't rise immediately, but waited until the attention of the table was focused on her, then stood up.

"Wa-al, Alamo," she said in her best forks-of-the-creek tone, "I shore enjoyed the grub pile, but I reckon, if you'll excuse me, I'll be gittin' on down the mountain."

She had Marie Montgomery's attention, all right, and I realized, with a skip of the pulse, that she'd been waiting for just that. Deliberately she wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"Mabel," she whanged, "looks like you've 'bout finished that Java o' your'n. Whatta you say you come along down to the hospital with me?"

Paris nearly strangled on his coffee, and Sam Rayburn took quick recourse to his napkin to smother a sudden attack of coughing.

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Westie gave a hitch to her trousers and strode man-nishly across the room.

"Westie," I called, "wait! Of course I'm going to the hospital with you. Give me a moment to get my sweater. You'd better take your guitar, hadn't you?"

"Oh, shore," she agreed. "I'm gonna stop at my cabin and curry my mane a little. Meet you outside where the air's fittener, gal."

Marie Montgomery was watching Westie keenly, I saw. She suddenly spoke.

"Miss, ah, Westie!" Her tones were high and clear. Westie paused and looked back. "I will begin my riding lessons tomorrow morning, if you will be so kind. I'm sure," she added, "you can teach me a great deal I shall need to know about riding in your mountains."

Westie shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her blue denim trousers, the gleam in her eyes boding Marie Montgomery no good.

"Wa-al, Countess," she answered, "I'm a-leavin' these parts in a few days now. Don't reckon I'd better take on no long, hard jobs I likely couldn't finish. Alamo will learn you, though. Podner," she addressed him directly, "podner, you can take any horse you like from the corral for the Countess. Beginnin' any time she wants. And Alamo," she added in a voice that was almost drowned in feeling, "good luck to you, old friend."

I got up from the table and followed Westie out. As I went I heard the clear, clipped tones of Marie.

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"Are all the natives of this place as quaint as that one?" she asked.

"Gosh, no," I heard Alamo answer. "But Westie ain't no native. She's from Kansas City. Been out here this past spring and summer recovering from a spell of pneumonia. Swellest kid you ever saw . . ."

Westie was very popular with the patients in the government hospital. Many of them teased her for the sake of hearing her merry, spirited come-backs. Her's was not particularly clever repartee; not what the girl herself would have termed terrific. But what she lacked in wit she more than made up in friendliness and exuberance of spirits.

She took her guitar down every evening and the men would group about her in the recreation room and there'd be music. One man played the piano, another a mouth organ, and still another, an American born Italian boy who had lost a leg fighting the Japs, was something of a genius with an accordion.

He was "Sensation" to everyone after Westie called him that one day. The boy adored her.

I spent an hour with my niece Kate who was convalescing in the hospital from injuries and shock she'd sustained when the Japanese took Manila. An army nurse, she was one of those lucky enough to be taken off the island just before Bataan fell. In a few days she

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expected to be released from the hospital, and I planned to take her East to visit her mother.

Peter and Paris dropped by the recreation room just as Westie and I were leaving. They had been talking with the man at the hospital switchboard, and had been to the telephone exchange in the town of Ruidoso. Paris looked worried. They'd learned nothing, he said.

As we entered the lobby of the lodge Alamo called to Paris.

"Long distance for you, Admiral."

"That'll be Jill," Paris exclaimed, frowning. "She's got a notion in her head to meet me up here. Got a wire from her in El Paso. I've got to head her off."

"The mischief you have!" Peter exclaimed, smiling. "Let her come. Give us a chance to meet your fiancée."

"Not a chance," Paris answered already on his way to the office telephone. "You and I are getting out of this mysterious joint tomorrow."

I would leave, too, I resolved, just as soon as Kate should be released from the hospital. I had an overpowering feeling that neither Peter nor Paris was safe here. That extraordinary radiogram certainly had meaning; purpose. I didn't believe for a minute it had been sent by mistake.

As I went out through the lowering mists to my cabin to bed the very atmosphere of the lonely mount itself seemed charged with danger, premonition. I didn't like the set-up a little bit.

Chapter 3

I AWOKE next morning to the sounds of voices, and opened my eyes to the light of a bright new day. Peter's promise that the weather would mend its ways had come true. I dressed quickly and stepped out my door, pausing to survey the scene before me.

Down the mountain side and in the wooded hollows and vales at its foot, the fog still swirled gently in voluminous skirts of chiffon-like mists. But the mountain top was a diamond of light shot with the rays of a bold new sun.

They were all there in the yard, with the exception of Alamo and the *Countess*, I saw. Dwight Summers sat on one of the stone benches. He looked like an ugly watch dog that was too lazily contented to work at his job. Sam Rayburn stood near by holding his own and another saddled horse, while Paris, that worried crease between his eyes in evidence, was leaning against the dove cote watching Peter and Westie feeding the birds.

Westie was dressed just as she had been the day before, though her denims and sports shirt were freshly

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laundered, as they were each day. Her only concession to the competition the *Countess* offered was to knot a big, corn-flowered blue neckerchief about her throat, cowboy fashion. She was as freshly pretty as an apple blossom.

The two old white doves, Como Se Yama and his Missus, were greedily pecking their breakfasts from Peter's hands as they perched by their pink feet on his head or shoulders. All about him the other pigeons fluttered and cooed and pecked industriously as he flung them their meal of mixed corn, Canadian peas, vetch, kaffir corn, and canary bird seeds—the pigeons' candy.

The white doves, by virtue of their intimacy with Peter and, perhaps, their color, attracted most attention, though they were less interesting from the trainer's standpoint than the *silvers*, *mealies*, and the *checks*—reds, blues, grays, blacks—all with their vari-colored, burnished necks. Old Como Se Yama and his mate were of the common squab breed and could not be trained to function as carriers. They had not the wit, Peter once explained to me, nor sufficient homing instinct, and were too clumsy and heavy to carry additional weight. Besides, they had not the heart of the carrier. Like the fine blooded horse, a true carrier will strain to the last ounce of its strength to perform its allotted task.

Como Se Yama and his Missus were used for the sole purpose of bringing the homers in when they flew afar and were not inclined to come back to the cote promptly.

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Whenever the carriers stayed too long on a flight Peter would toss the two white doves up in the air on Mount of Doves. They would fly about for a while, circling, never venturing far, never straying. And the carriers, seeing the white birds, would come winging home.

"Let me have two of the homers, Peter," I heard Westie say. "I'll take them down to the corral and turn them loose so you can watch them come back to the cote with the extra weight you're putting on them this morning."

"Fine, darling, good idea!" Peter exclaimed.

He went to the cote where his special carriers were fed. Several pairs were trained and now ready for service in the Army Signal Corps. They had been given serial numbers by the government—raised numbers on narrow rubber bands about their legs. Peter came back in an instant with two blue *checks*, and Westie helped him fasten a small celluloid capsule on a leg of each.

I watched them place the narrow, rose colored cotton tape band, that was attached securely to the capsule, around the bird's hard shank, then deftly snap the stout fastener in place, thus binding the capsule to the pigeon's leg. These transparent capsules were about an inch long and as large around as my little finger. I saw that, instead of any message on paper, the capsules contained a few dark, round objects.

"What are those?" I asked. "Berries?"

"Just as I think you're beginning to grasp the tech-

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nique of training pigeons you ask if they're carrying berries." Peter shook his head, chiding my stupidity. "How much do you suppose that many berries would weigh?"

"Shots, then," I said. "Lead."

"Good!" Peter exclaimed, laughing. "You renew my hopes in you. This pair of birds," he told me, "can now carry their full complement of weight. This fellow," indicating the male bird, "weighs sixteen ounces, and the female here just a trifle more. They're both carrying almost a fourth of their weight this morning. That's more than they've ever been called upon to carry before, but other carriers do it, and these two will fly home with the weight like true soldiers of the air, I'd be willing to bet. I'm to turn them in Saturday to be shipped away. To tell the truth," he admitted with his nice smile, "I hate to part with my fine feathered friends."

"Me, too, Peter!" Westie took a bird in each hand preparatory to going to the corral.

"Like me to take a bird down toward Three Rivers this morning, Pete?" the Ranger called out at that moment. "I'm riding that way. The Countess," he confessed, smiling widely and lowering his voice, "is going with me."

Peter's eyes sparkled merrily.

"Well," he exclaimed, "congratulations, big boy.

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Sure, take a bird, this *mealy* here will do. If you see anyone with a rifle on the way don't release him, Sam. And don't toss him up in the vicinity of the army camp."

Peter turned back to the cote to pick up the *mealy* just as Marie Montgomery appeared in the doorway of the lodge. I happened to be looking at Westie at the moment and was startled by the quick, hard look of hatred that flared into her eyes at sight of the strange girl.

I turned to observe the Countess.

She was dressed for her ride in a conventional dark riding habit that would have attracted no attention in a fashionable riding park, but was guaranteed to make anyone in these mountains sit up and gasp. Her white stock was perfectly arranged, and her hair was brushed smoothly back under her hat, not a strand out of place.

Again, as on the night before, this girl's clothing was entirely unsuited to the locality but, oddly enough, it was the rest of us who felt badly dressed at the moment.

Big Sam Rayburn swallowed twice before he found his voice.

"Morning, Countess," he said with his broad smile. I imagine he didn't even realize he'd used the nickname that Westie had bestowed upon her. "I think this little bay mare will carry you just fine." And he indicated the horse she was to ride.

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The girl smiled as she thanked him, then stroked the bay's nose, a trifle timidly I thought. She eyed the big stock saddle a bit doubtfully, too.

"The fog is clearing up fast," Sam said.

The girl nodded and stood watching Peter who was coming toward her, a *silver* or *mealy* homing pigeon in his hands, the two old white birds on his shoulders. Their bright eyes were alert as they neared the horses.

"Hello, there," Peter greeted the Countess as he handed the carrier to Sam Rayburn. "How does the weather suit you this morning?" he asked, his winning smile appearing.

"Oh, splendidly," the girl answered in her clear, precise voice. "It was worth waiting for," she added.

I was struck again by the tender beauty of the smile with which she favored Peter.

"I'm very much ashamed of criticizing your doves last night," she continued. "They're lovely," she exclaimed, reaching out a hand to touch Como Se Yama, "sweet!"

Whereupon the white pigeon promptly flew away, his Missus following him like the good squaw bird she was.

Peter and Marie Montgomery laughed together as the birds flew away. She was facing the morning sun while Peter stood with his back to it.

"I was childishly frightened last night," I heard her say. "This place looks quite different in the sunshine."

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"Sunlight becomes you!" I heard Peter exclaim softly, lightly, as he smiled down at her lovely face.

Westie didn't wait to hear more, but turned and started down the mountain trail at a rapid walk. She was holding a pigeon in each hand.

Paris called to her.

"What makes down the mountain?"

"Got a riding party this morning," Westie answered, pausing for a moment to look back. "Four kids from a girls' camp. Heap big job."

"Well, but don't you need a riding master? Sailors make the best."

"We're taking a picnic lunch," she answered. "Won't be back before late afternoon."

"Swell," Paris answered. "I'm staying 'til tomorrow. Shall I bring the pigeon boy along for chaperone?"

They were shouting at each other now as Westie continued down the mountain.

"Okay, Admiral," she called. "Chaperones are fine if you need 'em."

Paris' healthy face glowed with pleasure.

"You've got a date!" he told Peter. "Come along, I'm keeping you strictly in my binoculars today."

"Oh, I expect to go," Peter answered, smiling. "I'm Westie's little lamb—follow her everywhere. We'll wait until the homers she took down come back to the cote. She'll release them in a moment and they'll fly straight back to breakfast." Peter turned again to the Countess.

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"Want to watch?" he asked. "If you've never seen them it may be of interest."

As we stood watching for the returning pigeons Sam Rayburn remarked that the mists were practically gone.

"We'll start as soon as the birds get home," he told Marie. "We'll release this fellow," and he held the *mealy* up and surveyed it admiringly, "down below near the internment camp."

"Internment camp?" The girl's inquiry was sharp.

"Yes, Ma'am," and big Sam smiled his widest, pleased at her interest. "Here," he said, "I'll show you. Over there," and he pointed away toward the southwest, "you can see the Three Rivers country. Right about there," still pointing, "is the ranch property that was the home of the late Albert B. Fall. And on up north of it a piece through the saddle in the ridge you can see the country where the government has got its internment camp. Some Germans and Italians."

The Countess was following Sam with keen interest.

"Down farther south," he continued, "you can catch a glimpse of the White Sands. They're a national monument, miles and miles of some sort of gypsum. And that smoke on the other side of the Organ Mountains is coming from the town of Las Cruces."

"Show me just where we're going to ride this morning, Mister—uh, Sam. Is there another road out of this place?"

Just then the two *checks* that Westie had released

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came winging in, straight and true, the additional weight having no visible effect on their flight. They flew straight to Peter and were flapping their wings about his head and shoulders in an instant. The male bird settled to a position on Peter's head, claws meshed in his thick hair, wings a-tilt. From there he flew to the unoccupied shoulder and took a peck at the lobe of Peter's ear. Laughing, Peter took the bird in his hands.

"Here, Sam," he said, "take this fellow instead of the *mealy*. I want him to have a longer flight. He's my strongest homer—and the only mean bird in the lot," he added good naturedly.

The Countess mounted timidly, in spite of Sam's able assistance, and they rode off down the mountain to the southward, at a walk.

Peter and I exchanged glances as they rode away. He was smiling, but I felt uneasy about the girl. The country was rough, and if the fast little mare misunderstood one of its amateur rider's signals, the girl would fall off as sure as Christmas.

"They'll manage," Peter assured me. "Sam's patient and dependable."

"If she gets nervous and attempts to hold on by the reins and tries to hook her heels around the mare's barrel, the bay's going to take her for a real ride. That is," I added, "until she's dragged off the saddle by a limb. Sam's going to need all his admirable qualities and the speed of a jet-propelled horse, which he hasn't got."

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Peter only laughed at me, unworried about the Countess, himself, or anyone else, it seemed.

I walked down to the hospital after my morning's coffee and found my niece Kate going through her wardrobe trunk, cleaning out drawers, discarding this and that, then deciding to put most of it back again. She was too weak for the job and I scolded her for making the effort, whereupon she snapped back at me. Between the two of us we finally got the business done, she was persuaded to rest, and peace and good humor were restored.

That afternoon, inspired by my niece's efficiency, I resolved to put my own effects in order for the journey East. Instead, I lay down for a cat-nap and fell into a profound sleep.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when I waked.

The sound of the telephone bell in the lodge proper had wakened me. I realized it had been ringing and ringing. There could be no one in the lodge or the phone would have been answered before this.

I ran across to the lodge. The call must be important. My voice sounded breathless as I picked up the instrument and said "hello."

"Hello, hello!" an insistent voice sounded over the wire. "Who is this—Mabel?"

It was Sam Rayburn speaking. His habitually calm, easy voice was loud and strident.

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"Mabel," he said, "where's Alamo? You've got to find him at once, or someone. Tell him a fire has broken out down here toward Three Rivers and I've got to get to it as fast as I can. I've called the station. But the Countess has disappeared, Mabel. I've looked for her as long as I dare. Her horse must have run away."

"Yes," I said. "I understand. What do you want me to do, Sam?"

"Atta girl, Mabel! Find Alamo. Tell him to get help and ride this way. I lost the Countess when I came here to the Williams ranch to telephone the look-out. Tell Alamo and the men to ride in the neighborhood of the ranch to look for her. Understand, Mabel?"

"Yes," I said. "There's no one here except me. The only horse in the corral is old Blue. But I'll find them."

I flung the telephone back on the hook. Alamo would be in his vegetable patch in the draw, I decided. As I hurried down the west side of the mount I heard him shouting something. Then I saw him. He was in the act of hurling something through the air. A chip, I saw, or a pine burr. At Lace! I caught a glimpse of her stout figure disappearing inside her cottage. She had been exchanging pleasantries with him from the shelter of her front porch, I gathered.

I called to Alamo and he left off tossing his chips, which had been only a gesture, anyway, for he couldn't have hoped to hit Lace at that distance. He came to meet me, seeing that I was running.

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"Hi, Mabel," he called jocularly, his quarrel with Lace forgotten already, apparently, "where's the fire?"

"West of the Williams ranch, between there and Three Rivers," I yelled. "Sam wants you to get help and go search for the Countess. She's lost."

"Christ a'mighty," Alamo shouted. "You mean there's a genuwine fire? Where, for the love of. . ."

"I told you—between the Williams ranch and Three Rivers. But Sam said look for the girl. She couldn't ride worth a cent; I saw that this morning. Hurry, Alamo!"

"Girl be durned!" he shouted, already swinging his long arms and legs into a lope. "If that fire ain't stopped every man, woman, and child in these mountains will have to be rescued. Palomar will go up in smoke. Scoot you up the mountain, Mabel," he called over his shoulder, "get on the phone and tell everybody between here and El Paso to get ready to fight fire."

It was somehow gratifying to have Alamo sharing my excitement. I hurriedly climbed the mountain, though I could hardly have been said to "scoot" as I was out of breath already. I paused to look for smoke when I reached the top of the mount, and there it was, about three miles away, a whitish cloud rising out of the timber and curling gracefully toward the sky.

"I'll never know how I happened to think of Sheriff Hiram Odom at that moment. Perhaps it was because I'd turned to him for help in this western country more than once before. However it was, I remembered that

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my friend the sheriff from Salinas, Texas, was supposed to be encamped below us in the Lincoln National Forest with a herd of cattle he'd helped drive up. He was said to be near Hollywood, New Mexico. The Post Master there would know.

I didn't stop to reason how a Texas sheriff could stop a forest fire in the Mountains of New Mexico single handed, but I could have whooped for joy when the Post Master at Hollywood, ten miles or so below us, told me Odom had been in the Post Office a few moments before.

"Find him," I ordered, "and tell him there's a forest fire in the neighborhood of the Williams ranch. Tell him . . ."

"Forest fire!" The Post Master shouted the interruption. Those words struck horror wherever they were heard.

"Yes," I said. "Tell Sheriff Odom to come to Mount of Doves on the run. Tell him Mabel Wickley phoned. I've got to hang up and call others."

I called the hospital next, the first of a long line of calls. When I had called everyone I could remember who might be of help, I started down the mountain toward the hospital. I was surprised, upon reaching the Golden West Riding Corrals to see that the horses were inside. That meant Westie and her party, including Peter and Paris, had returned from their picnic. None of them was at the lodge. I decided they had caught a

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ride on a truck and gone to the fire, otherwise they would have ridden the horses. The animals were wet with sweat and I knew their riders had run home in a great hurry. The horses moved restlessly about the corral, heads high, whinnying, uneasiness in their manner. I realized they were not only impatient for their oats; they had caught a whiff of the burning forest. I could now detect the odor myself.

I continued down the mountain and had reached the little creek at its foot when I heard an automobile approaching at a high rate of speed. It was a station wagon, I saw. There was something vaguely familiar in the set of the rolled brim of the wide felt hat of the driver; the blue and white bandana neckerchief; as well as the slightly hefty proportions of the figure. A man past middle age with a distinct resemblance to a Saint Nicholas in cowboy dress—my good friend Sheriff Hiram Odom, here already!

I called to him loudly and he stopped the station wagon at sight of me.

“Hello there, Mabel,” he called, precisely as if nothing in the world were the matter. “Got a message,” he continued, eyes twinkling, “that you was anxious to see me. I hurried right up.”

“That I was anxious to see you!” I cried. “Why you exasperating old . . .”

I stopped, seeing that he was laughing at me.

“You’re a mighty fine looking middle-aged blonde,

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Mabel," he remarked, "but you're too hefty to get so excited. You'd ought to keep your blood pressure sort of calm."

"For your information," I said severely, "the forest is on fire just southwest of us here, as you can see if you'll take the trouble to look."

His delighted expression didn't alter at my words.

"Take it easy, girl," he told me, at the same time fondling the head of a black-and-white dog on the seat beside him. "The Forest Rangers are all on the job," he continued. "I saw 'em leaving Ruidoso, going hell-for-leather, with all their modern fire fighting equipment. Rained up here yesterday," he said glancing in the direction of the smoke. "Woods won't burn fast as they might. Of course," he added speculatively, "we've had a sun and a light breeze all day. But every able bodied man in Ruidoso is up there helping the Rangers by now. Don't worry, Mabel, they'll have the fire out pretty quick."

"Well," I exclaimed, feeling more reassured than I cared to have him see, "I hope your complacency is justified! Why did you come in such a hurry if you weren't alarmed over the fire?"

"Oh, I was alarmed some," he admitted. "Always treat a forest fire with respect no matter how small it is. Nearly all of them start from jest a match and become full grown in a mighty short time." He paused briefly, watched my expression, then said:

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"I came because I had me a notion I might be needed to take some hysterical women out of here in my station wagon, in case the fire got plumb threatening."

He laughed at me as I reddened and choked, then he threw open the door of the station wagon.

"Hop in, girl," he ordered. "We'll drive up to the lodge and have us a look through the telescope in the Ranger's cabin."

Sam Rayburn slept in the lower room of his double-decker cabin, and an outside stairway ran up to the room above. This room had windows on all four sides, and served as a look-out. The view of the surrounding country with its low forest, tall peaks, hazy purpling distance over wide desert stretches beyond, was truly breathtaking in beauty.

Hiram Odom had been there before at some time, it seemed. He knew how to swing the big telescope about and focus it on the region of the fire. While he studied the scene through the glass, I looked out across country for the fire. I could see the smoke, fluctuating like a live thing. The sun was just dropping below the horizon, the shadows of the mountain falling across the valley where the fire was at work, and I could glimpse bright tongues of fire in the cloud of smoke.

Soon Odom let me look through the telescope and I was almost startled at the vividness with which the scene leapt into my vision. I could see the figures of men

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scurrying about fighting the fire. A "fog" smoke of water played on one side of the fire from what, I knew in reason, was an incredibly long hose. By great good fortune this particular fire had broken out sufficiently close to a well and wind mill on the Williams ranch to make the use of the hose possible. They were fighting with chemicals, and beating around the edges with green pine brushes.

"They're sure handling her pretty," Odom remarked, and would have taken the telescope away from me, but I had caught sight of a horse and rider circling around the mountain at its base.

The rider was a woman, I saw, and, with a start, I recognized the Countess. Through the glass she appeared to be only a few yards away. She was bare headed, and her black hair was disheveled as if from a hard run. She was sitting the horse at ease, I saw, handling him with expertness. Why, this was no amateur rider; her timidity of the morning had been merely an act!

I gave the telescope to Odom and pointed out the Countess to him. "Amateur rider, eh?" I asked.

Odom studied her casually, leisurely.

"Whatta you mean, amateur?" he asked. "That's a genuwine horsewoman, or I don't know 'em no more. Who is she?"

"She's a fake," I said shortly. "Dropped out of nowhere on Mount of Doves yesterday. No one knows

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why she's here or anything about her. She was supposed to be lost today when the fire broke out."

"Hu-um," commented Odom, studying her with renewed interest. "She ain't lost now."

He straightened and looked at me, a teasing twinkle in his eyes.

"You wasn't suspecting that pretty thing of playing with matches, was you, Mabel?"

The sun had disappeared behind the mountain entirely and dusk, hastened by drifting smoke from the fire, was gathering thick on Mount of Doves when Sheriff Odom and I came down from the Ranger's look-out.

Odom had left his dog, Leopard, fastened by his leash to the door handle of the station wagon to prevent his chasing the frightened pigeons. Leop was barking furiously at the birds, or something.

I tried to persuade Odom to spend the night at the lodge. Ever since the coming of Paris with the mysterious radiogram I had dreaded the coming of night and the feeling of mystery and uneasiness that seized me at that hour. He would not be persuaded, however. Must get back to the herd, he said.

He was unfastening the dog's leash from the door of the wagon when the bus from El Paso was heard laboring up the steep mountain road.

"Wonder who can be on the bus," I remarked, look-

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ing down the road through the dusk. "It's late in the season for guests."

The words had hardly left my lips when there was a sharp report, followed by a muffled roar. The lights of the vehicle flashed into view on the sharp turn of the road, wavered about crazily, then flashed over the side of the bluff, disappearing amid the sickening sound of crashing, grinding metal over rocks as the heavy bus plunged down the mountain side.

The ground trembled beneath my feet, and above the noise of the crash there arose the unmistakable cry of a human voice. It was as thin as a knife, and as shrill and piercing as the whistle of escaping steam.

I continued to tremble after the earth had stopped, and my head spun dizzily. Beside me I heard Odom's voice.

"That first noise was the crack of a pistol shot, sure as shooting," he said. "Mabel, go inside and telephone the doctors at the hospital. Tell 'em to send an ambulance down into the valley. Don't reckon anybody is left alive in that bus, but tell 'em, anyway."

He was off toward the scene, the dog trotting at his heels, before I found voice to protest his leaving me alone in the semi-darkness. I haven't the slightest doubt that when the Angel Gabriel sounds the last trumpet someone will order me to telephone the news abroad. I had to summon all my courage to cross the lawn and enter the dark, silent lobby.

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The pigeons in the eaves had been disturbed by the sounds of the bus crashing, and their throaty cooing had changed into whirring notes of fear. Their wings beat thumpily against the overhanging eaves. I groped my way inside and felt along the wall for the light switch. As the lights flashed on some of my courage returned, and I quickly got busy at the telephone.

The crash had been heard there, I learned. They were sending a doctor and men with an ambulance. As I hung up I thought I heard the noise of stealthy footsteps overhead. I listened, my heart pounding unreasonably, but I heard nothing more. I hurried from the lobby, feeling a compelling urge to get away from the place, even into the darkness outside.

I went to my cabin and picked up my flashlight. I had no wish to see the victims of the accident, goodness knows, but I decided to make my way to the spot on the road where the bus had gone over. From there I should be able to look below. There should be lights, people.

I picked my way along the mountain road without difficulty by the light of my flash. As I neared the turn of the road I thought I saw someone just ahead of me, a shadow, and the flash of a shod foot in the fringes of my yellow light. The bulb of my flash was old to be casting a light of that color, I realized. Pray heaven it didn't go out on me! I stopped for an instant to listen,

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but heard no further sound and I continued down the road.

At the sharp turn in the road where the bus had plunged over I came upon a yawning hole in the road bed. It was deep enough to have served as a burying place for a dog. It was near the edge of the road, and the outer section of the hole had been ripped away completely. That, I knew, was where the bus had plunged.

One of the huge front tires of the vehicle must have blown out just at that critical point, I decided, upsetting the equilibrium of the machine and sending it hurtling over the side of the mountain.

As I looked down the sheer side of the bluff I caught my breath sharply. The scene below was bright with light from the burning vehicle. The bus was literally enveloped in flames and the forest about it was almost as bright as day. I could see men scurrying about. I caught a glimpse of a stretcher being borne along. The victims of the accident must have been removed before the flames became so great, I decided with a surge of relief.

In a short time the engine of the automobile whirred and long arms of light flashed through the trees beyond the fire as the machine began to move. It was probably the ambulance from the hospital bearing the victims of the accident away.

I turned to go back up the road and distinctly heard

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a loose stone roll down the mountain. I threw the light of my flash in the direction from which the sound seemed to come, but there was nothing. The white face of a boulder gave me a start as I hurried along.

I resolved to leave Mount of Doves next day if I were forced to walk. With the bus lying at the bottom of the mount I wouldn't be able to get out any other way. I felt at the moment I could not bear another instant of excitement and ghostly mystery.

"Enough is enough," I said aloud, and at that precise moment my flashlight blinked out.

Someone spoke close behind me and I could feel the hair rising on my scalp.

"Is that you muttering in your beard, Mabel?"

It was Peter—half laughing at me!

Suddenly I was furious. That teasing note in his voice was too much.

"Shut up," I exclaimed angrily. "How many were killed?"

He came up beside me and I felt his hand gently cup my elbow. He turned my footsteps slightly to the left. I had been off the trail a few yards, it seemed.

"This way, Mabel," he said soothingly. "The smoke's in your eyes, my girl."

"The bus ran off the road," I said nervously, forgetting for the moment that he probably knew all about it. "Oh, Peter, it was horrible. That nice bus driver must be dead."

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Peter's voice was serious enough to satisfy even my jangled nerves.

"The driver was dead when the bus left the road. There's a bullet wound in his right temple, the doctor says." He hesitated for the space of a breath and I felt his fingers loosen and drop from my arm. "It was a deliberate, cold blooded murder, Mabel," he said slowly. "They're phoning for the New Mexico Sheriff."

Chapter 4

AT THE entrance to the lodge Peter and I paused in the light from the wrought iron hanging lantern. Paris was calling to his brother.

He strode into view, his eyes bright and determined looking in his sooty face.

"You give yourself a lot of trouble keeping up with me, kid," Peter told him a trifle impatiently.

"Okay," Paris answered, "so I give myself a lot of trouble."

He was hot from climbing the mountain, and he took a handkerchief from a pocket of his badly soiled uniform and mopped his face. By their faces and clothing I guessed that both he and Peter had been helping to fight the forest fire.

"This bus murder ties in with that blasted radiogram somehow," Paris continued. "It ties up with you and me, and I don't like it a little bit. You've got to promise to leave this place tomorrow. Go on out to San Francisco, or come with me to Corpus."

Peter didn't answer. He walked off into the dark-

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ness, and a little later I saw him with a lighted lantern at the dove cote.

Westie came out of her cabin and joined us in the light. She was wiping her face with a towel. Her blue denims were smutty, and her shirt sleeve torn at the shoulder. She'd been battling fire, too, and hard. Westie did nothing by half measures.

Sam Rayburn came up the path, Sheriff Odom puffing behind him. Dwight Summers was suddenly there. I hadn't heard him coming. Sam said the fire was practically out. It would have to be watched; two Rangers had been detailed for the job.

Odom had seen them all in the group at the scene of the accident, I gathered, all except Westie and Summers. He was quiet, though watchful of everyone who spoke, I noticed.

Westie's eyes were bright, shocked in the light. She linked her arm through mine and pressed close to my shoulder.

"Mabel," she said, a slight catch in her voice, "it was so awful it made me half sick. That poor woman passenger! They say she's burned and mangled and just everything, but still breathing. That's the awful part—she's alive, like that."

"It's the bus driver I'm thinking of," I said. "I knew him; liked him."

I rather surprised myself by the statement. To tell the truth, I had never thought about liking him or not as

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an individual until that moment. I knew, however, that he was a thoroughly competent driver.

"He didn't suffer none, Mabel," Odom assured me. "The doc says he went out like a light from the shot. The girl's pulse is beating a little, more's the pity."

"Does anyone know who she is?" I asked.

"No," Odom answered. "Not yet. Face burned too bad for recognition." He paused, looking at the circle of faces about him. "Doctor told me to tell you folks you'd be expected to go down to the hospital tomorrow to see if you can identify her. Hands and body ain't so bad burned; head got the worst of it. Might know her rings; or something. Whatever luggage and such she had was burned in the bus."

I felt a shudder pass through Westie at Odom's words. The prospect of viewing the injured girl was not a pleasant one to any of us, I imagine.

"Hiram," I said, suddenly remembering the scene of the accident, "you'll have to fill in that awful hole in the road where the bus went over. If you're determined to go back to your cows tonight, that is."

"Reckon Alamo can put me up for the night," was the sheriff's studiously casual reply.

Odom's words attracted no undue attention among the others. What he had just said sounded natural enough. Only I knew how set he'd been in his determination to go back to the herd that night. At his words my heart suddenly quickened its beat. To one

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who knew Hiram Odom as I knew him, his gaze, as he spoke, had been a shade too blank. I couldn't read his mind. I never could, but when he shut me out in this manner, closing his mental processes to my explorations, I knew he had become interested in something he didn't care to share at the moment. I didn't let him see that I was pleased at his resolve to stay the night, but inside I was shouting a glad hurrah. In spite of mystery and murder on Mount of Doves I would be able to sleep, I thought. How little I knew of the hours ahead!

My flashing thoughts were interrupted by Paris.

"We'll all be questioned about this murder, won't we?" His voice sounded irritated, worried. "I hope they won't try to detain us here. Peter and I are leaving tomorrow."

"I reckon there's bound to be an investigation, questions," Odom answered, "though not 'til morning, probably. Seems Sheriff Case at Carrizozo is sick. He's sending his deputy."

"What about you?" Paris asked. "You're a sheriff, aren't you?"

"Texas sheriff," Odom stated in a tone of finality. "No authority whatever in New Mexico."

"Well, but," Paris was beginning argumentatively when the sound of Alamo's voice, loud and angry, interrupted him.

"Smashed, by grannie! You'll have to foot the bill," we heard him say.

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I think we all believed that Lace was there and the two of them indulging in one of their frequent skirmishes. I know Dwight Summers thought so.

"Those two are going to finish each other off, like the gingham dog and the calico cat, one of these days," he remarked solemnly. "Alamo throws things. Yesterday it was a wet mop. Some day he's going to make a bull's-eye with the poker and it'll be serious."

"I can hardly wait!" Westie exclaimed. She hurried inside. The rest of us followed. None of us liked Alamo's queer, unprepossessing wife, Westie least of all.

Alamo was squatting on the floor of the lobby in the act of examining a foot-and-a-half square of dark wood before him as we entered. The wood was split and shattered, I saw at a glance, and immediately I realized that this was the wooden back of one of the old paintings that had hung on the wall. The canvas lay beside him.

"Everybody that comes to this lodge starts in a-hunting for a durned picture that was once supposed to be here," he was ranting. "They mess up the attic, knock on the walls, and turn the place upside down. But nobody ever smashed the back off a picture before. . . . You take the cake, Ma'am, and you're gonna have to pay. I'm responsible for the property of the lodge . . ."

I was amazed when I saw that he was dressing down our Countess. She stood a few yards away from him, apparently frightened and distressed. Her blue eyes

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looked childishly appealing as she looked from Alamo to us and back again.

"I had nothing to do with breaking the painting," she protested, her white hands fluttering nervously at her breast. "I was upstairs resting. I heard a great explosion or something on the mountain, and a crash down here in the lobby. I ran down the stairs, but there was no one here, and the painting was lying there on its face, just like that."

Alamo had become aware that he had an audience. He rose, grinning, a little shamefaced, the broken wooden back in one hand, the canvas in the other.

"Oh," he said, "I reckon then the explosion shook it down off the wall. I think I can fix it up, easy. The canvas picture don't appear to be hurt none. I'm sure sorry I lost my temper, Ma'am. I've got a lot of responsibility and a durned heap of work around this place."

He hurried off to the kitchen. "Think I can fix it with my hammer and short nails," he said as he went.

The painting hardly justified Alamo's trouble, I felt. It was an amateurish copy of Rembrandt's "Girl at a Window." The color was not too bad, but the likeness was poor.

The Countess still stood as if rooted to the spot. She continued to protest, though Alamo had gone.

"No one was here," she said. "No one is ever here. I'm always alone in this frightful place. What was that

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explosion?" Her hands fluttered anew and her voice rose hysterically. "Was anyone hurt?"

Peter came in from caring for his pigeons at that instant. Marie Montgomery took an impulsive step toward him, then stopped abruptly. She had checked her involuntary advance, but her gaze, flying to him as straight as one of his homing pigeons might have done, was a desperate appeal for sympathy, help.

"The doves," she cried, "they're beating their wings and groaning in that mournful way again. What is going on in this terrible place?" Her hands were gripped tensely.

Peter crossed quickly to where she stood. He took her hands and, gently forcing them apart, held them firmly in his own for a moment. He led her to a seat beside the fire. She followed him without question, as a child led by a parent he trusts.

"There was an accident," Peter told her gently, quietly. "The bus from El Paso tumbled over the side of the mountain on its way up this evening."

He smiled down at her, a completely reassuring, winning smile. I remember thinking that, possessed of a smile like Peter's, one didn't need many words.

He continued in the same gentle tone.

"The pigeons were frightened at the noise, and at the dog outside. They're busy now reassuring one another. That coo is their only language," he explained. "They'll

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be quiet in a little while, you'll see. Think of their voices as cooing, can't you? They don't gro-oan."

Again he coaxed her with his smile.

Something prompted me to glance at Westie at the moment. She was watching the little tableau enacted by the Countess and Peter with such open anger and jealousy that I felt a distinct shock. She spoke.

"The bus driver was murdered, shot." Her tone was blunt and compelling. "There was one passenger, a girl. She can't live out the night, the doctor says. That," she concluded, flashing a rebuking glance at Peter, "is how unimportant the *accident* was."

Westie should have been satisfied with the look of surprise and shock on the face of the Countess. I half expected Peter to be angry because of her blunt speech, but his gaze held a look of mixed surprise, rebuke, and affection. A smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Where were you at the time, Sara Bean?" he demanded good naturedly. "You managed to escape me at the fire."

"*You* did the escaping act," she told him shortly. "I rode home on a truck."

Alamo who had returned with the painting and hung it in its place on the wall now joined us at the fire. Apparently he was not aware that he'd nailed the wooden back on slightly askew. The canvas bulged a little, giving the subject of the portrait a pronounced case of mumps. His good humor was restored, apparently.

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"There was a long distance call for you this morning, Admiral," Alamo said as he placed a fresh log on the fire. "Sunshine here," indicating Dwight Summers with a nod in his direction, "took the call. Operator 'phoned later to say the call had been cancelled," he added.

"Who was it?" Paris asked sharply. "Jill Rayburn?"

"I dunno," Alamo answered indifferently. "Didn't say."

All of a sudden he was interested keenly.

"Hey, did you say 'Rayburn'?"

"Yes." Paris was frowning, preoccupied. "Corpus Christi girl." He looked at his brother. "Jill's old man has a lot of money," he said. "She's used to getting her own way."

Alamo's eyes were bright. "Hey," he exclaimed, "same name as Sam's."

Sam made a nervous movement, and I saw that he was trying to light his already glowing cigarette with a flaming match. He burned his fingers, dropped the match, and uttered an embarrassed little laugh.

"Sam comes from Corpus," Alamo was persisting. "Maybe Jill Rayburn is a relative of his." When Sam Rayburn ignored the remark Alamo persisted further. "Know her, Sam?"

The Ranger shifted his weight uneasily.

"Yeh," he said shortly.

I could feel something in the wind, so to speak, some-

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thing touchy; a charged balloon that would burst if Alamo didn't stop prodding it. But Alamo wouldn't see, or couldn't. He was beaming with delight.

"Well, whatta you know!" he exclaimed. "Maybe Sam and the Admiral here's going to be related by marriage. The world is sure a small place, ain't it?"

Paris was interested now. Apparently he hadn't been paying strict attention to what Alamo was saying up to that moment.

"Is Jill a relative of yours?" he inquired of Sam.

"Not exactly," Sam admitted, his face flushed and his expression unsmiling. "Maybe you'd better know—Jill got the name Rayburn from me." He paused, looking up at Paris as if waiting for the full impact of his words to strike home. "I was one of her husbands," he said quietly, "her second mistake."

Paris reddened and gave a low hissing whistle.

"Ah," he exclaimed, like one who begins to see clearly and doesn't particularly like what he sees. "Jill's been married twice, it's true. The first time when she was sixteen; got that annulled. Then she married a big brute who beat her." Paris was speaking slowly, with deliberate insult. He took a step toward the big Ranger, his entire muscular being seeming on the qui vive to spring into action. "He beat her," he repeated with emphasis, "a cowardly brute who confines his fighting to women, it seems."

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"Take it easy, fellow," Peter spoke quickly. "Rayburn didn't bring this subject up."

Paris ignored his brother's warning.

"A big brute," he said again, deliberately goading Sam, "who confines his fighting to women."

The Ranger rose slowly, unhurriedly to his feet. Standing straight and at ease before Paris, the big fellow spoke as quietly as before.

"Not always just women," he said. "I'm willing to take on a fourflusher any time, providing he's got the guts to back up his fighting words."

The moment was tense, I can tell you. My heart pounded against my ribs like a galloping horse.

"Be good enough to step outside," Paris answered heatedly. He appeared only too willing to back up his words.

Instantly both Peter and Alamo were in between the two angry men, Alamo bristling and determined.

"Now you two roosters look-a-here," he ordered loudly, thrusting his head out like a belligerent turkey cock's. "Cut out this scrapping. You may be a powerful fighter in the navy, Admiral," he continued, "but here at Palomar Lodge I'm the boss, being general manager, and what I say goes. There'll be no fighting around this place, and you can both take a chaw of that. Admiral, you'd oughtta apologize to Sam. He ain't fighting in the army 'cause of the fact that he's blind in one eye and the army wouldn't take him. Government could

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use him better here. His ex-wife broke a glass in his face and a piece of it put out his eye," he said. "Now darn you, stop snarling at each other and behave like two grown men."

I could see by Paris' expression that he had not known Sam's odd looking eye was sightless. He had that thwarted look again, the one that I had learned to expect whenever he was stopped in some act he'd been eager to perform. He was angry still, but confused.

"I can see okay," Sam put in steadily. "I'm asking no favors of anybody."

"See here," Paris said heavily to Sam, "I didn't know about your eye. I—apologize." Then, his voice rising in tone, "But if Jill struck you as Alamo just inferred, she must have had good reason."

"Just a rumor I heard," Alamo hastened to say placatingly. "Forget it, now, Admiral. Hold your horses and you and Sam let bygones be bygones."

"It's okay with me," the Ranger said, stooping to pick up his hat from the floor. "I'm sorry the subject came up, and as far as I'm concerned it's already forgotten." He smiled that wide, friendly smile of his and held out his hand to Paris.

"How's about it, Admiral?" he asked. "I take back them fighting words I spoke."

For an instant I thought Paris would persist in the quarrel, but like a flash his frown disappeared and that charming, boyish smile of his broke out. He shook hands

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with the Ranger, slapped the now beaming Alamo on his angular shoulder, and laughed at Peter.

"Cheer up, Pete, you old sea dog!" he exclaimed. "And you, ladies—my humble apologies! What about dinner, Alamo? We ever going to eat again around here?"

"Won't take long now, Admiral," Alamo assured him. "Cold roast, potato salad de luxe, and lemon meringue pie tonight. Mostly ready."

He strode off in the direction of the kitchen.

I went to my own cabin to freshen up a bit for dinner. I was brushing my hair when I heard a light tapping at my door. I started involuntarily.

"Who is it?" I asked, thinking of what a bundle of nerves I had become.

"Let me in, Mabel!" It was Westie's voice.

"Come in," I answered. "The door isn't locked. It won't even close altogether. If Alamo doesn't fix it tomorrow I'm going to move down to one of the lodges in Ruidoso," I said crossly.

"No you won't, Mabel." She was inside now. "You'll never be able to leave Alamo; he makes too good with the pots and pans." She picked up my fingernail file from the dresser and dropped into my one comfortable chair. "I've got to talk with you, Mabel," she said seriously.

"You'd better be good, and snappy," I told her.

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"When the dinner bell rings I'm off. I was never hungrier."

"Know who the Countess really is, Mabel?"

"Marie Montgomery?" I was surprised at her question. "Isn't that who she is?"

Westie caught and held my gaze, and the moment of silence was dramatic.

"I'd stake my life," she said solemnly, "she's Mrs. Peter Warner."

The wife whom Peter had married in the South Pacific and couldn't remember! I recalled what Paris had said of her—"A native Javanese, a nice sort."

I shook my head. "I don't think it's possible," I said, adding, "I didn't suppose you knew Peter was married."

"Oh, yes," she nodded, "they know it here. I heard it from Dwight Summers. He says she's probably the only one living who knows where the original Goya painting is at this time. Figures Peter would have told his wife. You know," she continued, "the thing is supposed to be very valuable. Peter's grandfather Warner entrusted him with the secret, and Peter doesn't remember that or anything else. They figure when she comes to America she'll be able to tell where the picture is stored."

Westie compressed her lips in a cynical expression.

"They'll be surprised," she said, nodding, "to learn she's already here."

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"Your Countess doesn't look Javanese to me," I told her.

"How many Javanese have you seen?" Westie asked squelchingly. "Tonight," she continued, "after you'd come out here I told Paris I believed the Countess was Pete's wife. He doesn't think so, but hopes she is. He thinks," she added scornfully, "even though Peter doesn't remember her, it would be just ducky!"

"Well," I said, laying down my hair brush, "perhaps it would. Peter must have loved her once; he married her of his own free will, I suppose. But aren't you working your imagination overtime to assume that Marie Montgomery is his wife? The name, for one thing, is against her."

"There's lots of half-Dutch half-English people in Java, Paris says. Mixed ancestry."

"She knows Peter doesn't remember her," Westie went on promptly. "She's chosen to work on his affections incognito. Very pretty and romantic! Call it intuition, Mabel, but I'm positive she's his wife. Haven't you noticed the comforting, protective manner Peter assumed toward her from the jump? It's his subconscious working. That nervousness of hers is just an act—bidding for sympathy. She's scared—like the Gestapo. But she's beautiful, darn her!"

Suddenly Westie was crying, her face buried in her hands. Not just tears; rending sobs shook her. I had not guessed that her love was so desperate. Peter was married,

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she had known, yet she was acting like this! I was a little shocked, but sorry for her just the same. No one could offer her much comfort in the matter, though.

I gave her a clean handkerchief.

"Westie," I said, "you've created a Frankenstein out of nothing, and you're horrifying yourself with it. I don't believe for one minute this girl is Peter's wife. There's no special significance in his being kind to her. He's kind to everyone; to pigeons, and everything that breathes. Now you stop this foolishness and don't cross imaginary bridges."

She wiped her eyes; blew her nose.

"She's his wife, all right," she stated, "but she shan't have him." She applied the handkerchief again. "Paris is nice. Don't you think so, Mabel?"

"Yes," I answered, "I do. Spoiled a bit, too much temper, and mighty quick on the trigger, but nice, and charming. That Jill person he's engaged to marry doesn't sound like just the right dish for him. Why," I asked, trying more than anything else to divert her thoughts, "don't you transfer your affections from Peter to Paris, save him from that minx?"

"Really, Mabel!" Westie was shocked and offended. "You speak as if all I had to do was pick up my poor affections in a basket and pass them from Peter to Paris. I don't believe you've ever been in love!"

"Oh, all right," I said. "You love Peter with a deathless passion, but has he ever made love to you?"

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She hesitated for a reluctant second. "Not in so many words," she confessed sulkily. "He kissed my hair one day," she went on, "then regretted it the next moment. 'You're a sweet child,' he said. Child, my eye!"

"Haven't you guessed why he doesn't tell you he loves you?" I persisted.

"Suppose you tell me," she challenged.

"It's not altogether because he has a wife," I told her, "though you can chalk her up as something of a stumbling block, in this instance. I imagine he'd hardly tell a girl he loved her with his condition what it is. With his memory gone he has no past, and heaven only knows what he can expect in the way of a future. You could hardly call Peter an excellent match for a girl; I'm sure he's entirely aware of that."

"Excellent match—pooh!" She dismissed all that I had said. "I just want Peter, for better or worse. I've counted on some trouble with him because of the amnesia business." She paused to ponder a moment, then spoke, her voice suddenly bitter, hard. "But Marie Montgomery shan't have him. Maybe she's his wife and again maybe she's only the Countess of Sheba. I don't care! In my vocabulary she's a snooty little stinker—no less."

She was young and foolish, and jealous, of course, and didn't mean half she was saying, I decided. I dismissed the whole thing pretty lightly, I'm afraid, with the ringing of the dinner bell.

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Everyone was quiet at dinner. The bus murder had sobered everyone, and the day had been packed full of excitement, besides. Smoke from the forest fire still hung pall-like over the mount. The quarrel between big Sam and Alamo had been disturbing. The fact that a murderer had come very close to us, if indeed he were not one of us, was not cheering.

Paris' brows were knit all through dinner.

"I'm moving in with you, Pete," he announced as we were leaving the table. "For the rest of our stay here," he added.

"Somebody's after either you or me," I heard him growl. "Nobody was trying to kill the bus driver. Whoever fired that bullet was probably laboring under the impression that either you or I was in the bus. I'm not leaving you so much as a yard until I can get you away from this place."

"We know nothing at all about the bus driver, boy," Peter told him. "He may have had enemies, probably did. Somebody wanted to wreck the bus for a purpose, heaven only knows what, but that was the way to do it. Maybe the killer was after the driver, maybe not. But it's ridiculous to assume that he was after you or me. He could see who was on the bus. Whoever fired the bullet into the bus driver's head must have been on top of that huge mound beside the road. That would have brought him on a level with the driver, and the bullet went

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straight into the temple, they say. Stop worrying, kid."

"I'll worry for both of us," Paris replied. "I'm going to put another bed in your room and sleep there. There's a murderer loose, and he's not finished with us."

I thought Peter was going to object. Suddenly he smiled that quizzical, tolerant smile he so often had for his brother.

"Okay, me lad," he said lightly, "if that's the way you want it, okay. If you snore, though, I promise to heave you out the window. I suppose," and he cocked a quizzical eyebrow at Paris, "you have your automatic somewhere ready."

"I have," Paris answered doggedly, "and you can tell the world I'll not hesitate to use it."

Peter smiled. We had reached the lobby again. Both had been indifferent to the fact that I, walking just behind them, had heard every word they'd been saying.

"My prize blue-check pigeon is not in the cote," Peter said to Westie as he came to stand with her before the fire. "I'm afraid he was confused by the forest fire and is lost. He may be up in the eaves, but I don't believe he is."

Westie stared at him, then dabbed tears from her eyes.

"Just one more little thing," she vowed tearfully, "and I'll be a raving neurasthenic. I simply ca-an't ta-ake it."

Peter put an arm about her shoulders, gave her a little shake.

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“Stop it, little Frijole!” he exclaimed. “Come along to the cote with me. We’ll have another look around for the government’s prize blue-check. What do you say?”

They went out together into the night.

Chapter 5

WE WERE still discussing the murder of the bus driver, and resulting crash of the vehicle, in the lobby at Palomar when the telephone rang. The Major in command of the prisoner of war camp was on the wire. Three of the prisoners had escaped their guard, he said.

All available men, including prisoners, had been taken from the camp to the scene of the fire that afternoon to help in putting it out. The camp authorities were now spreading the news of the escape of the three prisoners and asking that a searching party be organized at once to assist in rounding them up. The men had overpowered their guard, tied him up, and escaped into the forest.

The three prisoners, one of whom was named Otto Haupt, had two guns between them, the prison authorities said. They had taken the guard's weapon by means of another gun which they had obtained from somewhere. Presumably they'd had an accomplice. The Major warned everyone to be careful in arresting the men.

I had a sudden seizure of panic. If all these men went out hunting prisoners—I knew darned well they would!

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—we three women, the Countess, Westie, and I, would be left alone on the mount. I didn't like the prospect a little bit. Here was I, in appearance a middle-aged, dependable widow on whom the girls might lean for comfort and moral support, yet, in reality, I was beset by lowering spirits and premonitions of catastrophe. The very atmosphere of the high, lonely mount seemed to speak of mystery and danger tonight.

I picked up my knitting and commanded my attention to the normal room and the little evidences of everyday living about me—the mud on Westie's boots; the tick of the old clock on the wall; the burning of a fresh log on the fire; the scent of tobacco from cigarettes and pipes. The men, of course, at the moment, were the most reassuring evidence of normality about me, but they would be gone soon. My thoughts were hard to control.

For a nervous instant I considered taking the girls down to the hospital to spend the remainder of the night. I could do it with good grace; everyone knew that I was there for the express purpose of looking after the welfare of my niece, Kate. I could say that I wished to be with her, and the girls could probably be persuaded to come along. Kate, herself, would guess the real reason for my coming, and she'd utilize the opportunity to scold me for being childishly afraid—"At your age, Mabel!"—but afterwards I could depend upon her to give me half her bed and a bromide.

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On the other hand, I reasoned, if anything really exciting should take place on Mount of Doves I would only hear of it second hand later, dished up cold. I decided to leave Kate to her own excellent devices and take my chances at Palomar Lodge with the girls.

"Like looking for three needles in a haystack," Alamo grumbled as he prepared to go down to Ruidoso with the rest to join the searching party. "They're making tracks for the Border south of here, if they've got good sense," he declared.

As for us, the Countess, Westie, and I, we were told to stay in the lobby, keeping all doors locked, until their return. No one thought it likely that the prisoners would show up at any public place, such as the lodge, however.

For the time the business of the bus accident and the identity of the injured girl were entirely forgotten.

I resolutely went on with my knitting. The Countess brought writing materials down from her room and busied herself with writing at a table in the lobby. Westie moved restlessly about, unable to settle down to the magazine she had attempted to read just at first. After a while she lay down on her back on the wide, leather divan, locked her arms behind her head, and stared with wide-eyed concentration at the beamed ceiling. Every now and then she would ask me some question about the recent happenings, or offer some comment of her own.

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"What's your guess about the girl who was in the bus accident, Mabel? Who do you think she is?"

I didn't know, of course, couldn't guess.

"She may be this Jill gal," Westie said. "The one the Admiral expects to marry. Though I wouldn't put it past him to change his fickle mind." She sat up at that point, apparently excited over the idea that the injured girl might be Jill. "He talks as though she's sort of head-strong and determined," she expounded the thought. "He said she wanted to come up, but that he thought he'd talked her out of the notion. Remember? Maybe she decided to come anyway."

"In that case," I said, "both Paris and Sam Rayburn should be able to identify her. Unless," I added, "she's burned too badly."

"Hu-um," Westie speculated, "once married to Big Sam, and now the Admiral's fiancée. I thought they were going to fight over her. Must be a looker, huh, Mabel? Or plays up the sex angle hard," she continued with the complete frankness of her generation. "Of course, her money doesn't exactly repel certain people, I imagine."

She lay down again, eyes on the ceiling.

The Countess was silent, not ignoring us by design, I imagine, but busy with her letters. The scratch of her pen was the only sound in the room except for the intermittent crackle of the bark on the fire logs.

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It was twelve o'clock when the telephone rang loudly on the quiet of the night. The noise startled me for an instant, though the phone rang often enough at Palomar, goodness knows. Westie got up and went into the office to answer it, glad of an opportunity to do something, I imagine.

"No," I heard her say, "no one by that name. What! Yes. Yes, that's right. Yes . . . Yes." Her voice dropped. "Wait a moment, please," I heard her say, her voice muffled.

Looking up from my knitting I caught sight of her startled face in the doorway of the office. She was motioning frantically for me to come to her. I laid aside my knitting and, without a word, went to where she stood.

The Countess was sitting with her back toward the office and had not seen the girl. The scratch of her pen continued uninterruptedly.

Westie quickly closed the office door as I entered, then hurried back to the telephone.

"Yes," she said, "all the men have gone to search for the escaped prisoners. Yes, I can. Yes. Yes, I'll tell him. I suspected her all along," I heard her state dramatically. She hung up and turned to me.

"Mabel," she whispered, her eyes fairly leaping with excitement, "do you know who the Countess really is?"

Oh, my, I thought, here we go again!

"I have your word for it that she's Peter Warner's wife," I answered her.

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"I was mistaken about that," she said hurriedly, "though why she's been playing up to him with that sugar-coated smile and scared-to-death pose, I can't guess. She's Mrs. Gretchen Lo-something, Haupt," she declared triumphantly, and waited for my eyes to pop.

"Is that bad?" I asked.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Westie whispered angrily. "Her real name is 'Haupt,' I tell you. For goodness sakes, Mabel! That's the name of the leader of the German prisoners they're after."

"You think there's a connection, I take it."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Mabel! A child would know. Someone furnished those prisoners with a gun today. Well, her ladyship was in that vicinity. She started that forest fire," Westie declared positively. "She did it because she'd been told to do it. Somehow she knew that in the event of a forest fire the prisoners, like everyone else, would be taken to the scene to fight the blaze. She's a relative of some kind."

"Did whoever telephoned just now tell you that?"

"He didn't have to!" she exclaimed, scornful of my dull wit. "That was the F.B.I., Mabel. They've had word to hold a woman guest at this lodge—Mrs. Gretchen something Haupt. She answers the description of the Countess to a T," she added.

"Okay," I said, feeling more excited than I'd permit her to see, "she won't be hard to hold; she's not acting very frantic at the moment. Relax," I urged. "And when

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the men come home you can turn over your strenuous job to them."

"Oh, you!" she whispered angrily. "Don't you think we ought to do something—lock her up or—or something?"

"Certainly not," I told her. "Leave her alone. Act as if you've heard nothing of importance. I'll go back to my knitting and you follow in a moment and pretend to read your magazine. There are some cross-word puzzles near the back of the book. They might hold you."

The Countess certainly didn't appear to have taken any notice of our absence, or return, for that matter. She was writing steadily, rustling the stationery in the large box on the table in front of her occasionally, now and then putting her long fingers to her lips to cover a yawn.

It was about an hour later that the shots rang out down the mountain somewhere. The sounds startled me and electrified Westie. She leapt to her feet as though she'd been shot. The Countess looked up at Westie's sudden movement. She seemed curious, but undisturbed.

"What was that?" Westie cried.

"Shots, undoubtedly," I answered.

"The prisoners," the girl vowed. "They've caught the prisoners!"

Her gaze flew to the Countess in alarm at what she'd just said.

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"Do you think they've shot those men?" the Countess asked quietly.

"I—oh, I don't know," Westie stammered lamely. "Of course, it might just be someone hunting," she added unconvincingly.

The Countess was a cool one under fire, if the incident meant to her what we thought it did.

"It is rather terrible," she commented, but she might have been speaking about something as far away as Africa, by her tone. She went back to her letters.

A half hour later I distinctly heard the opening and closing of the kitchen door. Westie heard it, too, I saw at a glance. There came the sound of heavy footsteps, then a metallic click like the opening or closing of the icebox door. A little more walking around, then a pause, and the footsteps came nearer. Someone tried the handle of the locked door which led from the dining room to the lobby where we sat, and I felt the hair rising on my head like the quills of an angry porcupine.

"Who is it?" I demanded, my voice loud and shrill.

"It's me. Lemme in, will you?"

Hiram Odom's voice! I could have broken down and cried with relief.

Westie fairly ran to let him in. He entered, eating a doughnut as he came.

"You nearly scared the wits out of us!" I cried, my temper rising at the remembrance. "Why couldn't you come to the front door like an honest man?"

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Odom came on toward the fire, his eyes twinkling. He took a large bite from the doughnut, chewed an instant, then answered me.

"Knew the kitchen door was unlocked," he stated calmly. "It don't close good. Besides I had me a notion to look up the cooky jar."

"Those shots," I said, "where did they come from?"

Odom paused in the act of raising the doughnut to his mouth. His eyes hardened.

"The prisoners were sighted in the draw below the lodge," he said slowly. "Unfortunately, one of them resisted arrest."

"Did they kill him?" Westie demanded, her eyes intense and excited.

"Yep," Odom answered shortly. "The fast-shooting deputy sheriff from Carrizozo killed him instanter."

"Which one?" Westie's voice insisted.

"Eh? Oh, the big one. Otto Haupt, they called him. Bad sheriffing," Odom commented with a shake of his head. "Could have been handled without bloodshed if he'd a-been a patient man." I sensed heavy disapproval in Odom's tones. "Deppity Black shoots lightning quick," he added, "like the two-gun men of the old frontier West. Now," he said, "he's got hisself a man for breakfast."

"Oh, no—not that!" Outrage and horror were stamped on the face of the Countess.

Odom noted her look and smiled understandingly.

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"Jest an expression," he said reassuringly. "In the early days of the west, particularly in the wild mining town of Tombstone, Arizona, they used to say it like that, Ma'am," he continued. "So many folks was shot the people of the town got to where it didn't excite 'em much. If a feller was killed during the night they jest said to one another next morning, 'There's a man for breakfast.' "

His explanation didn't take the curse off the phrase for the Countess, though. Judging by her expression, the sheriff would be Odom the Cannibal to her until the last amen.

Westie had been primed to speak a piece ever since Odom had entered. I saw by her face that she deemed the moment right. She wet her lips.

"Sheriff Odom," she said dramatically, "you have a prisoner right here in Palomar Lodge." Then, as he stared at her: "The F.B.I. telephoned an hour or so ago. They want you to hold this woman," indicating the Countess by a gesture of her hand, "until they can come for her. Her real name," and Westie's eyes triumphed over the startled Countess at last, "is Mrs. Gretchen Haupt."

"So?" Odom's gaze was bright, and, I decided, comprehending.

The Countess sprang to her feet and faced Westie. Her anger was like a flame on her countenance.

"You're ridiculous," she cried, her words like the

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lash of a whip. "My name is no such thing. Ever since I've been in this place your conduct has been outrageous."

"Well, now," Odom began, leisurely getting up from his chair and sauntering, as if unconscious that he did so, between the two angry girls, "reckon I'd better look into this."

The gun fairly leapt into the hand of the Countess from the big stationery box. It seemed to me she just made a gesture over the table and there was a workman-like pistol in her right hand. She'd had it ready to her hand all evening, I realized, and I'd never suspected.

"Now, Sheriff Odom," she said coolly, "stay where you are. Raise your hands above your head and clasp them together."

My disappointment almost amounted to nausea as I saw Odom comply with her oddly worded command. I had to acknowledge to myself that he was right to do so; she would have shot him down without the slightest hesitation, I felt sure.

He looked ridiculous, though, standing there, his red hands clasped together as if shaking hands with himself, his eyes never leaving the Countess' face. I found a little reassurance in the normal tone of his voice when he spoke.

"In this country we say it sort of simpler, Ma'am," he told her conversationally. "We just say 'Put up your

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hands,' or 'Hands up,' or maybe, 'Stick 'em up.' Awful slangy, but simpler, Ma'am."

She was not to be diverted by his small talk.

"You will go and stand there," she ordered Odom, indicating the wall beside the fireplace, "with your face to that wall. And you," she said dictatorially to Westie, "stay exactly where you are. Give that handkerchief about your neck to Mabel. You," she said to me, "will tie Sheriff Odom's hands behind his back very firmly." She was cool and commanding.

Odom started walking forward on his way past the Countess to the wall.

"Oh, it won't be necessary to tie me up, Ma'am," he assured her, talking as he went. "I know when I'm out-generaled, I reckon. Now, why don't you jest leave me set down in that comfortable chair . . . old fellow like me . . . my feet are so doggoned tired . . ."

I feared that in a moment the old softie would stumble over the loose, Indian rug on the lobby floor between himself and the Countess. Walking with his hands above his head in that clumsy, absurd fashion, he was not watching the floor, would be sure to trip. The thought had no sooner registered on my mind than he went down like a blimp, flat on his Santa Claus stomach. The breath escaped him in a gusty grunt. It looked for a moment as though he'd passed out, or had not the will to make the attempt to rise.

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The Countess' face flushed with anger.

"It is too bad that you are so clumsy," she exclaimed impatiently. "Those high heeled boots are ridiculous even on the young. Get up at once!"

She stepped closer to the sprawling figure and I quailed inwardly, believing for the moment she intended to kick him. She was as watchful as a cat, I saw, and her hand holding the gun entirely steady. Westie made a move, a step toward the Countess, but stopped as she found herself looking into the muzzle of the weapon.

Odom was slowly rising on his elbows, softly grunting and wheezing all the while. He was rising on his knees, coming up on his palms, when he suddenly dropped heavily back on his stomach.

Never had I expected to see the sheriff in such a predicament. I pitied the helpless man from the bottom of my heart. There was no softening on the face of the Countess, however.

Slowly Odom began to rise again. He reached a position on his elbows, looked up at the Countess, then plunged forward on his face, hands outstretched before him. Almost faster than the eye, he grabbed the loose, woolen rug on which the Countess was standing. She went down, feet flying from under her, as he jerked the rug. Her head struck the stone floor with a thud like the sound of a falling coconut.

Odom jumped to his feet with the speed and elasticity

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of a bouncing ball. The Countess' pistol now lay half way across the lobby from where she had fallen. Odom pocketed the weapon at once, then turned back to the Countess.

She struggled to a sitting position valiantly, but her eyes were fairly rolling with dizziness. I thought for an instant she would fall back, but she struggled for command of her senses like a punch-drunk fighter. Her gaze finally focused on Odom.

"Sort of took you by surprise, eh, sister?" he said, chuckling softly. "You'd oughtta see our moving pictures once in a while. They'd learn you not to put your trust in these small Indian rugs."

Westie was childishly exultant. She walked around the Countess, as eager as a puppy.

"I was right all along," she declared triumphantly. "I knew from the first she wasn't on the level. I was wrong about one thing, though, Mabel. I thought she was Peter's wife that he married in the South Pacific and can't remember. I should have known better," she declared, scornful eyes on the Countess. "Peter's too swell a person to have married Dracula's daughter."

Odom chuckled again as he assisted the Countess to rise.

"Reckon," he said to Westie, his eyes bright with a twinkle, "you haven't neglected your movies none!"

The Countess walked unsteadily to the nearest chair and sat down. Her lovely face was distorted with anger

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and physical discomfort. She put her hands to her head.

"You can't arrest me, Sheriff Odom," she said in a dreary, muffled tone, ignoring Westie.

"Is that so?" Odom's voice was gentle, too gentle. "Why?"

"Because I have a right to be here. I have a right to," she hesitated, her look became cautious, "to do anything I choose here. I have done nothing illegal. You can't," she looked up to say with deliberate emphasis, "arrest an American citizen unless a complaint has been filed, unless you have a—a warrant."

"You an American citizen, sister?"

"I am." She spoke quickly, triumphantly. "I am the wife of Peter Warner. Half of his estate belongs to me."

The announcement by the Countess that she was the wife of Peter Warner was followed by a moment of silence. We were all profoundly shocked. Outside under the eaves the pigeons moaned restlessly.

I glanced at Westie. Her face was white and stricken looking in the fire's light. The thing she had feared at first, apparently without much reason, was reality, if the Countess were telling the truth.

A log that had smoldered on the hearth all night burned in two just then; it fell with a muffled thud into the hot ashes beneath. Odom spoke.

"Ma'am," he said politely, "I'm afraid you did not rightly understand me. You could be the wife of Saint Peter hisself, and it wouldn't get you off from question-

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ing by the F.B.I. I'm advising you to go along quietly when the prison authorities come in the morning. Make a clean breast of things. Lies will only delay things a little; they won't help you in the end."

He was looking at her, his eyes keen and severe, and I wondered if he hadn't believed her statement of a moment before and, if not, to what he now alluded.

"Meantime," he continued when she made no response, "I'll have to ask you to come along to your room. You come, too, Mabel," he ordered. "We'll take a little look-see around her room. Might be another weapon concealed somewhere."

The Countess went, without protest, up the stairs ahead of us. Her back was rigid, her chin high, but her lips were firmly closed.

We found no other weapon of any kind, but Odom gathered up every shoe that she possessed, including her riding boots and a pair of blue satin mules. He handed a pair of woolen house slippers to me.

"Gimme the shoes she's wearing, Mabel," he said, "and put these here on her feet."

The Countess, seated on the side of the bed, gave me a surprised, angry glance, but she raised no objection as I made the exchange.

"According to Westie," Odom told her, "you're wanted by the F.B.I. for being an enemy agent or something of the kind. I'm making no charges, don't know anything, but I don't reckon you'd get very far bare-

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footed in these mountains, was to get you an idea to run away."

"You suspect me of being an enemy agent?" The Countess had suddenly found her tongue.

"Reckon that's the charge—helping prisoners to escape, starting a forest fire, and so forth," Odom answered.

The Countess suddenly laughed, a high, shrill note. Peal after peal of laughter followed, hysterical, half insane. I hurriedly left the room feeling I must get away from her. Odom promptly followed me, closing her door behind him. The diabolical sound of her hysterical laughter followed us all the way down the stairs.

Odom hadn't locked her door, I remembered, only closed it. I didn't believe she would attempt to escape into the night, however. She would be scratched badly by the thick growth of the forest, her feet would be lamed, and hunger, cold, and thirst would chastise her arrogant spirits considerably before she reached the Mexican Border on the floor of the desert a hundred and thirty odd miles away.

I fully believed her guilty of the charges, and of shooting the bus driver as well. I delivered myself of these opinions to Sheriff Odom at the bottom of the stairs. I hoped in this way to learn his own convictions in regard to the accusations.

"Eh?" he asked, called out of his preoccupation, "got you an idea she shot the driver of the bus, Mabel?"

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He elevated a bushy eyebrow at me.

"Reckon you're ahead of the coroner and the New Mexico Deputy Sheriff, Black, then. They looked the situation over in fifteen minutes tonight and come to the conclusion the bus driver was shot by person or persons unknown." There was no tell-tale sarcasm evident in Odom's tones, but that "Looked the situation over in fifteen minutes," was criticism enough for me.

"Better go to bed now, girl, and get yourself a little shut-eye," he told me, dismissing the subject. "Getting on to two o'clock."

He looked up at the closed door of the Countess, his head cocked in a listening attitude. The hysterical laughter had died away and all was quiet above. Odom then walked directly to the front door, opened it, and, stooping, deposited the armful of shoes he'd brought down from the Countess' room on the ground beside the steps in the darkness. He closed the door behind him as he stepped inside. There was a gleam of mischief in his eyes as he came back to where I stood.

"She wouldn't hardly suspicion a nice old butter-mouthed gent like me of putting her fine shoes in the dirt, would she, Mabel?" he asked. "Reckon a pair of tender feet in rough country like this ought to make a couple of pretty good jailers, eh?"

"You didn't even lock her door," I reminded him.

"I've got no legal authority in New Mexico, Mabel," he explained. "As for the F.B.I. asking to have her

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locked up—how do you know what was said on the phone to Westie this evening? You've got only her word for it, and she's pretty excitable; hates this Countess like poison, appears to me."

"Oh, I think the F.B.I. phoned her," I said.

"If you was asked to swear to that could you do it?"

"Well, no," I was bound to admit.

"That's what I mean," Odom said, dismissing the subject.

I confess chucking the footgear out the door didn't seem such a smart move to me. But after thinking it over I decided that if I were searching stealthily through a house for my confiscated shoes in order to escape into the night, I would probably look first in all the likely places, then the unlikely ones down to and including the ice box, but it would never occur to me that anyone had simply opened the door and thrown them out. I couldn't decide whether Odom were more fox or fool.

Westie was sitting beside the fire, I saw. She was sprawling a little, arms lying relaxed along the wide arms of the chair, her bright head thrown back, her face turned slightly away in the shadows. Our self-styled Girl of the Golden West was done in, it appeared, asleep.

I crossed the lobby quietly, and as I drew near Westie I was struck by the expression on her face. She was certainly not asleep.

Her eyes were open, yet she appeared oblivious to

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her surroundings. The expression on her face was one of utter dejection and hopelessness. She didn't look up or notice me as I approached, for she was completely lost in the spell of her miserable preoccupation.

"Westie," I said, unconsciously speaking in the hushed tones of someone addressing a sleep walker. "Westie, dear, come along with me to bed."

Without turning her eyes toward me she spoke in the impatient voice of a child who is cross from physical tiredness at the close of day.

"Please leave me alone, Mabel," she said petulantly.

But the next moment she was sorry for the way she had spoken.

"I'm sorry, Mabel," she apologized, turning her head to look up at me. "I've got to think things out. I couldn't sleep if I went to bed."

"Come on," I urged, taking her arm and gently pulling her to her feet. "You can think all you like in your bed. You may surprise yourself by going to sleep, too."

I said good night to her at her door and went to my own cabin and to bed. I went promptly to sleep despite my feeling of unease and dread. With my last waking moment I heard the voices of the men talking together as they passed my cabin on their way to the lodge.

Chapter 6

I WAKED to another gloriously bright morning on Mount of Doves. The sun was eagerly trying to give the lie to the atmosphere of tragedy and mystery that had shrouded the place in gloom the night before, it seemed. I knew from past experiences that the early morning was no true barometer of the day's weather in those mountains, though. It might be raining in sheets by noon.

I felt considerably refreshed after several hours of sleep, but I had missed out on an exciting conversation by going to bed before the men came home, I learned.

Westie, Peter, with Paris still sticking closer to him than his shadow, and Dwight Summers were already on the lawn when I stepped out of my cabin door. Peter and Westie were each busily feeding the doves, but from the expressions on their faces they might have been preparing the last rites for all, the birds included. The blue-check carrier had not come back, but his absence was not responsible for their solemnity, I knew.

Westie told me the girl who had been injured in the

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bus accident the night before still lived, but that was all. The doctors held no hope for her recovery. So far no one had recognized her.

I inquired the whereabouts of Sheriff Odom and Paris told me he'd gone for a morning's walk. No one saw anything unusual in that, apparently, but it was not only unusual; it was abnormal, where Odom was concerned. It sounded a bell in my head the moment I heard he'd gone. In the first place, Hiram Odom never walked anywhere without purpose, and in the second place, he never walked at all if he could reach his destination by automobile or horseback. So, when they said he'd gone strolling for his health, I suppressed a lively desire to answer "Oh, yeah!" and said nothing.

I went to the kitchen for my morning coffee and found Alamo there, cleaning up the remains of breakfast. His head was high, his eyes bright, and he was behaving generally like an old fire horse that has overheard a threat of arson.

"Gosh darn it, Mabel," was his greeting to me, "there's sure something queer going on around here. Durned queer, if you ask me." Whereupon he set a cast iron skillet on the huge coal and wood range with such abandon that it chattered for the next thirty seconds in protest.

"You're telling me," I said. "Where's the sugar?"

"You using sugar again? It ought to be on the shelf there, but like as not it's in the toe of my boot. Look

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here," he continued as I located the sugar bowl on the back of the stove where he had set it by mistake, "where do you think I found the Countess' shoes this morning?"

"Do tell."

"In a pile just outside the front door. Now whatta you make of that?" He was highly indignant. "If she thinks I'm gonna shine her shoes in addition to all the rest of the work I've got to do running this lodge, she's crazier'n Lace. Satin comfy slippers, too. Don't suppose she expected me to black 'em, do you, Mabel?"

"Did you ask her?"

"Lord, no! I'm not speaking to that she-Nazi until the authorities come and take her away to jail. Prison camp's too good for her, says I."

Alamo plunged another pan into the steaming suds of his sink.

"That was sure a swell mess that was stirred up here last night," he said next. "The Countess claimed Peter was her husband, and Peter said it was a lie, he wasn't any such. Sheriff Odom had sent her up to bed, but he was telling us what she'd said. Pete had to admit he wouldn't recognize his wife if he was to see her, on account of this amnesia thing he's got, but he felt sure he'd never married the Countess. Wasn't his type, I guess. The Admiral said well now, maybe she was, and that got Pete sore. First time I ever saw him riled," Alamo commented with a half-admiring shake of his head. "He's got one of the prettiest tempers you ever saw, a

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regular beaut. The Admiral kept trying to soothe him down.

“ ‘Steady, old man,’ he said, ‘you’ve got a wife you can’t remember; maybe this is the girl. Now take it easy . . . If she’s your wife she’ll have proof, and if she isn’t. . . . Sa-ay, how would she know you had a wife you’ve forgot?’ the Admiral says all of a sudden. ‘Pete,’ he says, ‘go up and have a talk with her, at least.’

“Pete was for going, but this here Sheriff Odom wouldn’t have it. Said it was nearly daylight, the Countess would be asleep, and everybody should go to bed now and talk next morning. There’s a foxy old buzzard, Mabel—you know it?”

Alamo meant Sheriff Odom.

“He sort of took the floor at that point, in a manner of speaking. Started asking questions of Sam Rayburn. Had he, by any chance, talked about Peter’s losing his memory to the Countess on their ride yesterday? Sam squirmed around a little, but admitted he had mentioned it. Said he was sorry, reckoned he’d talked too much, but if she was Peter’s wife he hadn’t told her anything she didn’t know.

“So then,” Alamo continued, “this feller Odom says, ‘I got me an idea that’s the answer. Westie mentioned tonight in the Countess’ presence that she thought at first the Countess was Peter’s wife he’d married and forgot. That’s a smart girl, that Countess,’ Odom says. ‘She can put one and two together fast as a professor.’ Then

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he explains," Alamo continued, "says, 'I think the girl was lying, hoping to save her neck. I told her I would have to hold her for the authorities, and she comes back at me with the statement that she's an American citizen, Peter Warner's wife. I thought at the time she might be snatching at a straw, sort of,' the sheriff says.

"The Admiral started in on Pete, pestering him to go on out to San Francisco. Says he's got to get back to flying school and don't intend to go 'til he sees Pete on the train. Boy!" and Alamo's black eyes shone, "Pete told him off. 'Better send in your resignation to the Navy Department,' he says sarcastic like a persimmon. 'That'll be about as easy as getting me away from here before I'm ready to go,' he says."

Alamo paused to grin, wiping his hands on his apron.

"But the Admiral wasn't through yet," Alamo continued. "Had his dander up some. 'Look here, Pete,' he says, 'no matter if this Countess gal is lying or not, you've still got a wife. The one you married in the South Pacific—remember?'

"And Pete snapped back at him. 'That's the hell of it—I don't remember, as you know.'

" 'Aw, Pete!' the Admiral says, 'I'm sorry about the whole thing. Promise me you'll leave here for San Francisco tomorrow,' and they went at it, tooth and nail, again.

"Well," Alamo said, flinging a wet towel on a line beside the stove, "they all finally went to bed. I went

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to bed. But do I get any sleep? Not on your tintype! Hadn't no more'n hit the hay when the telephone rings. 'Ring, durn you,' I says, 'ring your danged head off!' And that's just what it did. You know how the sound of a ringing telephone jangles up your nerves after it's rung a while? I got up and answered it. It was the Sheriff from Carrizozo wanting us to be sure and hold the Countess for the F.B.I.

"I went out to the cabin where Odom was sleeping and told him what the Carrizozo sheriff had said. What do you think he said, Mabel?"

"Probably that a pair of tender feet in this rough country made a couple of pretty good jailers," I said patly.

Alamo stared at me, surprised and half offended. I had taken the words right out of his mouth. Then, all of a sudden that tricky grin of his started crawling up his left cheek.

"You're durned tootin'," he said, "but how'd you know?"

"I saw him take her shoes and throw them out doors, and that was his explanation," I answered.

"Oh!" Alamo understood everything now, apparently. "So that's how come," he said, pausing to enjoy it. "'You hold her from now on,' Sheriff Odom said. 'I'm jest an over-night guest at this lodge; no authority in New Mexico at all.' That's the way the guy talked," Alamo said, and added: "Now he's gone for his morn-

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ing's exercise, or something. He's sure a unexcited sort of a hombre."

I couldn't tell by Alamo's speech whether he was more disgusted or enchanted with the Texas sheriff.

"Getting back to the Countess," I said, "has she had her breakfast this morning?"

Alamo blew disgustedly. "We're dividing up our rations with about half the world as it is," he declared. "Durned if I'm feeding any Nazi of my own free will. Next Java she drinks will be prison brew."

At that point someone called him from the yard. The authorities had come for the Countess.

I felt no sympathy for her, yet I didn't wish to see her being led away to prison. I decided to leave the lodge by the back door and go in search of Odom. If I could watch his movements I might be able to guess a little of what went on in his mind. I finished my coffee at a gulp, took my field glasses from a nail where I had hung them in their case the day before, and stepped out the kitchen door.

I could hear Alamo's voice out front calling to Lace. She came to the door of one of the cabins, dust pan and brush in hand, as I crossed the yard. In a loud voice she demanded to know what he wanted of her.

"Go upstairs," he ordered, "and knock on the door of number four. Tell the Countess to come down. They've come to arrest her."

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The Countess should hear him from where he stood, I thought, unless she'd become stone deaf.

"Go yourself, you big baboon," was Lace's response to her husband's request, and she turned back into the cabin she'd been cleaning.

"Go on up, Lace," Alamo insisted. "She's a female and you're the one to do it."

The stout, florid-faced woman laid down her dust pan and brush in the door way and started toward the kitchen door, muttering angrily as she went. I still remember how the sun gleamed on her brightly hennaed, rough hair as she crossed the yard. I said "Good morning" to her as she passed me, but she did not respond.

I stood for a moment considering where best to look for Odom, then decided on taking the main road down the mountain. The thought of the bus tragedy of the night before was fresh in my mind. I decided Odom would likely be at the site, looking over the scene for clues. But as I paused at the edge of the lawn and looked back at the lodge, I saw that Odom had returned from his walk.

He stood in a group of men who were talking together before the entrance. Alamo was there, and an army officer and enlisted man whom I presumed were from the prison camp. Besides these there was a tall, lanky individual with a metal star gleaming on his open vest, and Paris Warner. Peter and Westie were working silently with a pair of pigeons a little distance away.

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While I watched, Dwight Summers got up from his seat on the stone bench and, strolling over, joined the group of men near the door. The conversation, I decided, must have sounded distinctly promising, since the cartoonist had made that much effort to hear it.

I started on down the road. I suppose I had an idea of searching about at the scene of the wreckage myself, though the plan was vague in my mind. Suddenly I was brought sharply up in my tracks by the sound of Lace's voice. She was shouting angrily. I looked up and saw her at a second story window. She had thrown open the screen at the window and was leaning far out, shaking a fist excitedly as she looked down on Alamo standing in the group of men below.

"Bring on your sheriff, you big baboon," she shouted. "He'll have work to do. You've murdered her because she was German, poor girl. You sent me up here knowing all the time she was stone dead and hanging from the ceiling. You'd have done the same thing to me long ago if you'd been man enough. Now you've committed murder, and justice is going to overtake you at last!"

"Shut up, you old fool," Alamo yelled.

Lace disappeared from the window as the men in the group hurried as one into the house.

I simply sat down on the ground where I stood, for my knees suddenly refused to do their part. The next instant Westie stood beside me, breathless from excite-

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ment and from the running dash she'd made across the lawn to join me.

"Mabel," she panted as she dropped to a sitting position beside me, "did you hear what Lacey just said? But, of course you did! Who killed the Countess, do you think? Not Alamo! He had no reason. Hating Germans is not enough. I hated her," she went on excitedly, "and Peter," her voice sank to a dramatic whisper, "must have hated her—after last night. I confess I wished her dead when I, when she, last night . . . And now she's really dead." She looked terrified.

"Wishing her dead didn't kill her, Westie," I told her. "Get hold of yourself, child; you're not talking sense."

"Peter wouldn't have done it," she went on as if I hadn't spoken. "Not even if she were really his wife as she said," she added illogically. "But he was mad with her about last night," she half whispered, "terribly, terribly mad at her, and at Paris. Alamo told me."

"Peter hasn't been accused of anything, Westie," I said impatiently. "The men are coming out again. Be still and try to hear what they're saying."

"What those men are saying isn't any secret, Mabel," Westie said, rising to her feet. "We can just go over and listen to them." She brushed some loose, dry grass from her blue denim trousers as she spoke. "If the Countess has been murdered we have a right to know,

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especially," she added shortly, "since I'm the best suspect."

"Nonsense!"

"I don't know anyone around here who loathed her as much as I did," Westie answered. She claimed to be Peter's wife and that gave me not only the wish but the motive for murder." She was pretty grim.

"You don't even know that it was murder," I reminded her. "Perhaps it was suicide. Anyway, I wouldn't propose to that deputy sheriff there that he send me direct to the electric chair, if I were you. According to Odom he's just the boy to do it and think about it afterwards."

"Oh," she said, "so that's Deputy Black from Carri-zozo!"

The lean, middle-aged man in question was talking.

"There ain't no sign of violence on her or in the room," I heard him say. "I reckon she hung herself, all right. Whatta the rest of you think?"

His eyes were a cold gray under the wide brim of his cowboy hat as he glanced about him. His expression plainly announced that anyone wishing to remain in his good graces would agree with his verdict.

The army officer indicated his belief that it was suicide, and Alamo agreed emphatically. Paris appeared to be deep in thoughts of his own. "Looks that way," he said absent mindedly. Dwight Summers and Peter each signified agreement by a nod of the head.

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Sheriff Odom said nothing, his expression bland as became a Texas sheriff on a visit to another state.

"Like to hear your opinion, Odom," Deputy Black said with studied formality.

"I'd rather reserve my opinion until we hear what the doctor has to say, Black," he said good-naturedly. "He'll have to walk up," he added, "road hasn't been fixed."

"Yeh," Alamo exclaimed, "we better fill up that hole right away. I'll fetch the tools."

Peter crossed the few yards of lawn that separated him from Westie and me. He stopped in front of her, his back turned on the others like a closed door, and took her shoulders in his two hands.

"Sara Bean," he scolded gently, "you're all tied up in a knot. Relax, darling! The Countess was afraid she would be hanged for her activities, and she chose this way out. It's pretty ghastly! But it's done. Smile now, dear, please!"

She smiled for him, her eyes fairly drowned in love and tenderness, but only for an instant.

"Peter," she said, "she wasn't—she couldn't really have been your wife, do you think?"

Peter's hands fell away from her shoulders. He stiffened, and I'd never seen his expression so cold.

"I'm sorry, Petie," Westie cried feelingly, and put out her hand to him.

He thawed at that, and his old charming smile broke reassuringly.

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"No, you little goose," he answered. "I would know somehow if she'd been anything to me. She knew about my loss of memory and said she was my wife thinking that no one could prove otherwise for the moment. It was just a ruse she employed in her desperation."

Alamo had supplied the men present with picks and shovels from his tool house by now. They all moved off with the exception of Dwight Summers and the deputy sheriff from Carrizozo who remained on the lawn, talking together. Paris walked beside Odom as they started down the road. He was frowning deeply, gesturing as he talked. Peter followed them.

"I'm going for a ride, Mabel," Westie announced, watching the men walk down the road. "Alamo's having the horses driven to winter pasture this afternoon; season's over. I," she added, sighing deeply, "am supposed to be going home to Kansas City tomorrow."

"Are you?" I asked.

"I don't know." She turned away. "I've got to think things out."

As she started down the mountain toward the riding corrals I had an impulse to call to her, to urge her to go back home, but I restrained the urge to meddle. She'd do as she liked, anyway.

I went down to the hospital to spend a while with my niece. I felt I must get away from the lodge with its atmosphere of murder and mystery.

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Kate was interested in hearing about all that had transpired.

"Any one of the lodge's guests may be a murderer," I concluded. "The poor bus driver, the girl passenger, and now the Countess. I've had about all I can bear of it."

"Mabel," Kate said reprovingly, "you have just one murder so far—the bus driver. That could have been done by a stray shot. Who's to say," she went on, "that the girl in the bus didn't shoot him?"

"Okay," I said, "person or persons unknown, at least, for the moment. But suicide isn't a final verdict on the hanging of the Countess. You've got to admit the case has possibilities."

"Your Countess was just the type to commit suicide, if you've described her accurately," Kate stated positively. "Imaginative; dramatic; determined. Probably neurotic. She found herself cornered and took that way out."

Kate's positive speech and manner often irritate me, but at the moment I found them somewhat reassuring.

"Well," I said, "I hope you're right."

Suddenly I remembered the mysterious and peculiar radiogram that had brought Paris to Mount of Doves.

"Explain that away," I dared Kate.

"Why," she said unhesitatingly, "Peter was right about it being sent by mistake, I imagine. Some soldier at a typewriter was told to send a message to the next

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of kin of some man who had died, and he drew Peter's card out of the record files by mistake. It's been done before."

"The radiogram said Mount of Doves," I reminded her.

"That's nothing," she said. "This hospital keeps the medical records of all the camps in this vicinity."

I let the matter rest at that. To my surprise Kate was inclined to pursue it further.

"Of course," she said speculatively, "someone could have sent the message for some purpose that isn't apparent. I wouldn't put any wild, romantic scheme past Westie. And there's Peter to consider. Perhaps he went temporarily haywire; knew such a message would bring his brother here."

I laughed. "Oh, all right, Kate," I said, getting up. "I'm delighted to learn that it all amounts to just nothing at all. Rest today so that you'll feel equal to the trip on the bus to El Paso as soon as we're free to go."

"Wait a minute, Mabel!" Kate's red-brown eyes were fairly snapping with an idea. "What about this fellow Sam? The Ranger, I mean. You said he'd once been married to Paris' fiancée. There, if you're looking for the sender of the radiogram, is my choice. What better place to get rid of a rival than up here in these mountains? So, what does he do? He summons him with a message that can't fail to fetch him!"

"I see," I answered. "And because he wanted to get

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rid of Paris he shot the driver of the bus and hanged the Countess just to get his hand in. Oh, no, that won't do, darling. Besides, Big Sam wouldn't harm anyone; he's as gentle as a lamb."

Kate's expression registered contempt. "You," she said, demand a villain, and when I point out the most likely one of the lot, you reject him because he's so sweet or something."

"Oh, well," I said, "forget it and rest a lot today."

"What else do you think I do around here?" she asked acidly, but when she saw that I was going she changed her tone. "I want you to come down here and sleep to-night, Mabel," she said quickly. "I'll get the boys to put another bed in my room. There are several empties right now. If there should be anything going on up on that mount you'd probably get yourself bumped off. You'd be certain to get in the murderer's way."

"Oh, not at all," I answered flippantly, "the only spying I intend to do is on your chosen villain, and as Big Sam wouldn't harm a fly, I'll be perfectly safe at Palomar Lodge."

Her voice followed me down the hall.

"You're no fly, you fool," she warned, "and don't you forget it!"

I started back along the road to the lodge, thinking to take a look at the point in the road where the bus had gone over. It must be repaired by now. At the spring near the foot of the mount I came upon the soldier

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whom we called Sensation. He was standing leaning on his crutch beside the spring, watching the pigeons drink. He looked up with his bright smile as I said hello.

"Ever watch the doves drink, Mabel?" he asked as I stopped beside him. "They don't do it like chickens, or any other bird I know," he continued. "See? They just put their beaks into the water and drink," he explained, watching a blue-check who was drinking a few yards away from where we stood. "Other birds I've watched fill their beaks, then lift their heads high to let the water run down their throats, but pigeons don't do it that way. Watch 'em. They just drink," he said smiling, "like a horse or any other animal."

I knew that the birds were a pleasing, constant interest to the lame soldier. He never missed a day without coming on his crutches to watch them at the spring. He had gathered a bunch of the watercress that grew so luxuriantly at the water's edge, and had thrust it into the pocket of his uniform blouse. The green leaves stuck out like the fern fringes of a corsage. The watercress was hard-stemmed this late in the season, but Sensation liked the flavor of the leaves, liked to put a bit into his mouth and hold it there.

He said Westie had ridden off alone from the corral, and he looked troubled about her.

"I thought she looked worried and unhappy when she rode past me, Mabel. Look after her," he begged me earnestly.

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Westie was the sun, moon, and stars of his existence, I knew. I told him I'd keep an eye on her as well as I could. "She'll be all right," I said reassuringly. "She knows these mountain trails like her own palm."

The soldier nodded. "She rode Kitten," he said. "Kitten's as safe as any horse."

I went on up the road. When I reached the point where the bus had crashed over the side I found the hole had been filled up and a wooden railing built along the outer edge of the road. It would serve as a warning, at least.

I stood beside the railing and looked down upon the scene below where the charred remains of the bus lay. A breeze was blowing, and it felt very nice and cooling after my climb up the hill. I could see the torn branches in the pine top through which the heavy bus had crashed on its way down. I studied the scene below through my field glasses. As I watched I caught a glimpse of something white as the breeze swayed the branches of the tree. Now it was there, like a white-winged bird a-tilt on a limb, now it was gone. I realized that it was something in the branches that showed only as the wind blew.

At first I had thought it one of the white doves, but as I watched I realized it could not be a bird. It always showed up in the same spot, looking precisely the same. Probably, I decided, it was a piece of letter paper.

After luncheon, I promised myself, I would go down

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into the little valley and have a look at whatever it was.

Alamo was at the desk in the lobby when I got back to the lodge. The mail carrier had come up with the mail and Dwight Summers, Odom, Peter, and Paris were there. All except Odom had mail, it seemed. Alamo put the out-going mail down in a pile and, beside it, a clumsily wrapped package. The handle of a fishing rod protruded from the long, round bundle. The postman made him wrap more paper about the rod and tie it more securely before he'd accept it for mailing.

Alamo's lips were grimly compressed and his brows black even after the mail carrier had gone. The others had gone off with their mail, and Odom sauntered outside smoking a cigarette. I picked up my own mail but, seeing how unhappy Alamo appeared, I paused for a word with him.

"Oh, cheer up," I said. "That was the worst job of wrapping I've ever seen you do."

Alamo looked up as I spoke and a grin started crawling up his left cheek.

"Oh, the mail man was right," he admitted. "It was just the last straw, seemed like. Every durned man that leaves this lodge forgets his fishing rod. It's no trouble at all for Alamo to send it, oh, no! Now on top of all I have to do, I've got a murder under my roof. Gonna plumb kill off business, and me with a lease."

"The Countess? Murdered?" So, it wasn't suicide!

"Doctor says she was choked to death before she was

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strung up," Alamo explained. "There's bruises on her throat made by human fingers, he says, though the killer was wearing gloves. Doggoned if I don't find it hard to believe, but that's what he says. Never heard a sound, and that sort of thing can't be done noiseless."

He slammed the last of the remaining mail down on the desk.

My knees were positively weak. "What does Sheriff Odom say?" I asked.

"Nothing, and lots of it."

Alamo relented all of a sudden and leaned on both elbows to talk.

"That fellow Odom found a curiosity in that hole in the road where the bus went over the cliff. Piece of metal like a lengthwise section of a exploded shell. Looks like maybe somebody put it there to explode when the bus run over it," Alamo explained. "Deppity Black is sort of offended with Odom for nosing around, I think. You know, jealous of a Texas Sheriff, though Odom gave the gadget to him. I wouldn't be surprised if he asked Odom to mind his own business; maybe kicked him out. How far you think he'd get with that, Mabel?"

"With kicking Hiram Odom out?" I asked, surprised at the question. "Can you imagine kicking a ball of melting butter any distance, Alamo? If Odom wants to stick around he'll be here when the Carrizozo deputy has played out and gone home to rest," I added.

Alamo nodded. "'Bout what I thought," he said. He

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shook his head and compressed his lips. "Lord knows," he remarked, "what the news of this murder will do to the trade at Palomar. Shooting the bus driver was coming close, but this hanging was right under my durned nose. All the folks here seem so nice, too," he exclaimed. "That blamed Countess was the only maverick in the herd." He cocked a black eye at me. "Ever been in any trouble with the law?"

"Don't you accuse me!" I exclaimed, startled. "I escaped a speeding fine by the skin of my teeth once, that's all."

"Me, I'm a bad one," Alamo said, nodding. "Had to kill a guy once. It was me or him and he drawed first, but I served two years in the pen for it. Reckon I'm as good a suspect as anybody around here."

He turned to answer the telephone and I went out on the lawn. I saw Peter standing at the brow of the hill near the big pine watching his pigeons as they flew overhead. Paris was seated under the tree. The two brothers were not talking, but Paris looked worried and unhappy.

The dark clouds that had been banked to the north since around ten o'clock in the morning were spreading, I saw. They were almost overhead now, though they had not as yet covered the face of the sun. Nearly half of our little mount lay in the shadow of the clouds, while the south half basked in dazzling sunlight. The pigeons had been flying into the clouds that morning,

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it seemed. I could see two white birds circling about overhead, and I guessed that Peter had tossed Como Se Yama and his Missus up to lure the other doves home.

I forgot Peter and Paris in my absorption, watching the dipping, turning, maneuvering of the white doves as they flashed against the dark sky. One instant their wings would be fully spread, so that you saw them plainly for the birds they were, but the next moment they appeared merely a flash, only one wing visible in a lightning flip as they sailed along. Then, suddenly, a swift turn, and the pattern would vary, so that the birds appeared to be only angularly shaped scraps of paper tossed about by high winds.

They were as lovely as a pair of ballerinas there against the dark backdrop of the sky.

The flock of pigeons was flying into view from the north, their wings flashing strokes of grace and beauty. Now the white doves were circling, coming lower. Soon they'd all be following them home.

In my absorption I didn't see the men coming up the trail until they were close enough for me clearly to hear their voices. Sam Rayburn and Deputy Black were talking together; Odom and Dwight Summers walking behind them in what appeared to be comfortable, silent thought.

Westie came in from her ride while we were at luncheon. She dropped into her accustomed place at

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table, her expression grave and thoughtful, altogether unlike the gay, laughing girl we'd known all summer. I saw Peter studying her face as if about to speak to her, but she didn't meet his eyes and he went back to his food without saying anything to her.

Odom sat through the meal without joining in the occasional conversation, but when the Carrizozo deputy got up from the table Odom spoke.

"Oh, Black," he said amiably, "wait outside for me, please. Jest 'til I finish polishing off my plate. I learned something this morning I think you oughtta know."

"All right," Black said shortly, and stalked out.

Westie, Peter, and I were the last to leave the table but there was little talk between us. Peter got up first and, walking behind Westie's chair, took her face in his hands and held her fair head against him. He turned her head slightly, looked long into her eyes, that tender smile of his in evidence, then stooped and kissed her full on her lips. From where I sat the kiss looked as if it should satisfy all her dreams of the past summer, with compound interest.

"Don't, Petie," I was surprised to hear her say. And, as he straightened, I saw that her face was constricted painfully. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she opened her eyes.

"Don't," she said, "you have no right. After tomorrow you and I will never see each other again. Please," and her voice was a sob, "leave me alo-one!"

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"Why, little Frijole!" Peter exclaimed, startled. "Have you lost your senses?"

For answer Westie jumped up and fairly ran from the room. Peter started to follow, hesitated, then turned and went out through the kitchen door.

You could have knocked me over with the proverbial feather.

Sheriff Odom and Deputy Black were talking together in Odom's station wagon as I crossed the lawn to my cabin. They were getting out as I passed them.

"Thought you'd ought to know what the Chemical Warfare Officer at the hospital told me," I heard Odom say.

"If the contraption you found on the road where the bus went over is an explosive gadget, like you say, it wasn't hardly dropped there by accident. When that outside front tire run over this thing it would've exploded then and there, without waiting for no timing device. I'll have a talk with that Chemical Warfare man," he said importantly.

Odom's conversational tone was studiedly casual.

"Reckon the Admiral will be leaving us this afternoon," he remarked conversationally. "New bus operating today. Saw his suitcase in the lobby."

"Nobody is to leave this place." Black was fairly bristling with determination as he swung around. He strode across the lawn and into the lodge.

Odom stood looking after him, his ruddy face almost

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cherubic with an expression of pleasure and relief.

"I hope someday you'll let me read your book," I said, approaching him.

"Heh?" He was momentarily startled by the sound of my voice. "What book you talking about?"

"Don't tell me you haven't a book on the psychological effect of suggestion, in sheep's clothing."

Odom's bay window shook with a chuckle.

"Hiram," I said quickly, glad of an opportunity to question him, "who shot the bus driver? Who on earth hanged the Countess? No one here had a reason; a motive."

Sheriff Odom's hand strayed to the back of his neck in that thoughtful gesture I knew so well.

"There's always a first rate motive for murder, Mabel," he said. "Find a motive strong enough, a fellow desperate enough, and you've got the ingredients for murder in case of certain mentalities. Look, Mabel," he said, suddenly changing the subject, "how about doing a little sleuthing for me on the quiet?"

Chapter 7

THE sky to the northward that had looked so dark and threatening before luncheon had lightened in color and broken up like an ice floe by one o'clock. The clouds were thunder heads now, giant bubbles blown in a sea of milk. There was some wind in them, too, by their movements. But the sun on Mount of Doves was warm.

Odom spent the afternoon on the lawn in the deep, cool shade of the lodge. He sat in a comfortable hickory chair, his extended feet on a second one, his old, sweat-circled felt hat drawn partly over his eyes, his plump hands clasped over his Santa Claus paunch. A picture of an indolent fat man without a worry to his name. The Deputy Sheriff must not be allowed to think Odom was taking an interest in the solving of the murders in New Mexico, I understood. He had done quite a bit of telephoning from the hospital that morning, but to all outward appearances was taking no active interest in solving the crimes on Mount of Doves.

The old fox, I thought, seemingly innocent of arti-

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fice, but with his mind hitting on all eight cylinders! An hour later when I saw that he was undeniably asleep I lost ninety-nine percent of my faith in his wiliness.

Nevertheless, I prepared to go on a sleuthing expedition at his request.

"Sort of watch this man Dwight Summers this afternoon, Mabel," Odom had whispered to me before settling himself for his nap. "I can't do it myself without arousing suspicion, and Deppity Black is keeping his hawk eye on me. I'm gonna sit right here in plain sight and prove to him I'm not only not interfering with New Mexico justice, but don't give a hoss. I'm jest a little curious about this man Summers; sort of like to know where he goes sketching. Spy on him, will you, Mabel?"

"I've done the like before for you down in Texas," I said, "but if you think Dwight Summers committed these murders you're loco. He's too lazy. What on earth are you spying on him for?"

"Oh, jest watching everybody a little, girl," he said. "You be good enough to do as I ask now and I'll tell you why later."

I consented. Actually, I was glad of an excuse to get away from the lodge for an hour or so.

"Pretend you're going fishing in the stream below," Odom had said. "Take Leap with you, if you don't mind. I have to keep him on his leash up here on account

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of the pigeons and he's spoiling for some exercise. Leop's got real good eyes and ears, too; might help you find Summers," he added.

We were all free to move about the mount and vicinity as we wished. We were not to go beyond the hospital or to take the new afternoon bus out of the mountains, however. Deputy Black had talked with his chief, Sheriff Case of Carrizozo, who was too sick to handle the case himself, and those were his telephoned instructions.

I watched Dwight Summers stroll out with sketching paraphernalia about four o'clock. He headed for the steep trail at the back of the lodge. I confess I felt a little cheap at the thought of following him for the express purpose of spying on his movements, but I salved my conscience with the assurance that I was aiding the law to catch a murderer, though I didn't for one moment believe Dwight Summers to be guilty of the recent crimes.

As soon as he disappeared on the trail I prepared to keep my promise to Odom. I got my fishing rod, put my field glasses in my wicker fishing creel, took Leopard's leash in my hand and set out, the dog trotting happily along in front of me.

Peter and Paris were in the office at the lodge, Paris at the telephone trying to get his Jill on the wire. Westie was in her cabin. I could see her through her window

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seated beside a card table poring over some papers before her. Sam Rayburn, I guessed, was in his own quarters, for his horse was tied near by.

I had left Alamo and the Deputy Sheriff sitting together in the lobby, smoking and talking about the deer in the mountains.

Peter, standing at the office window, called to me as I passed.

"The dog will be lots of help catching fish, eh, Mabel?" He was smilingly observing us. "If you ever caught anything," he said, "I would understand your passion for fishing."

"You may put on the skillet," I told him, inwardly blasting him for calling everyone's attention to my going. "Fish for supper tonight."

I moved on toward the south trail in response to Leopard's gentle but insistent tugs at his leash.

I would descend the south trail to the bottom of the draw, I decided, so that Dwight Summers wouldn't see me following him, but when I reached the stream I would turn westward up the little valley or draw toward Alamo's vegetable patch and Lace's cottage. In that way, by circling around, I should be able to see the cartoonist by an indirect approach.

When I came to the path that angled slightly away from the river in the direction of Alamo's gardens and Lace's cottage, I stopped. Taking my field glasses from the creel I patiently searched the surrounding wood. If

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Dwight Summers were anywhere about I should be able to pick him up.

The lodge was actually very close in point of distance from where I stood. Just up there on the mount, within a stone's throw if one had a good pitching arm, though the climb from that side was pretty steep.

I could see Sam Rayburn's look-out atop his living quarters, the lodge itself, and several of the cabins, but nothing moved. The place up there, the mountain side, and the valley appeared as deserted as a church yard. Except for some birds about, and a flock of pigeons flying overhead there was no life, it seemed.

Then, all of a sudden, I distinctly heard the door of Lace's cottage slam. I didn't need field glasses to see her when she came out on her front porch. She had on a hat and carried an umbrella. I was afraid she had seen me, but she turned abruptly before reaching the steps, like one remembering something he'd left behind, and went back inside the house. I ran quickly to cover behind some thick shrubbery, fairly pulling the dog along as I went. I dropped to my knees on the cool grass and waited, my hand on Leopard's collar. She could pass on the trail without being aware of my presence, unless the dog gave me away. I felt more than a little foolish, I admit, but I had a feeling the virago might stop in the middle of the path and demand an explanation of my presence so near her cottage. It would be hard to give.

She came out again in a moment, walking quickly as

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if to make up for lost time. As she came nearer I almost forgot my own ludicrous position in my surprise at Lace's appearance. She was literally dressed to within an inch of her life for the corset that hugged her like a cobra from armpit to hip threatened to shut off her breath any instant.

Her frock was made of that brightly flowered material so much in vogue that summer. The kind that looks like a flower garden in the shop windows but more like a combination of scarlet fever and mumps on a stout figure. Her small green hat perched like a bird's nest on her brassy hair. Yet, in spite of the wrong dress and lavish use of rouge and lipstick, Lace was handsome in the Lillian Russell mode.

She walked rapidly, looking neither to the right nor the left. No doubt she was going down to the little town of Ruidoso where, I had heard, she had friends.

I breathed freely again when she was out of sight, and patted Leopard's smooth head in appreciation of his good behavior.

There was still no sign of Dwight Summers to be seen. I sat still for a while, watching, trying to think where he could be. Certainly he had been descending the steep path leading down into this little valley when I had last seen him. Leopard was impatient to be on his way, half starting, checking himself, then turning to look at me with gentle pleading.

I got up and started walking toward Lace's cabin but

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at the insistence of Leopard I let him have his head and, holding on to his leash, simply followed where he led. I saw that he was heading for a clump of low spruce from which a flock of birds had just risen. It lay a little way up the mountain side to the north. As we approached the thicket I had to extend my stride to keep up with the dog. He plunged into the shrubbery as far as his leash would permit and I heard a low growl. Bending down I followed him in among the spruce.

Under the low spreading limbs of a perfect little Christmas tree there lay a new orange crate. Leopard sniffed it eagerly, then smelled the ground all around it.

The crate was empty, but underneath it were some scattered grain, a tin can of water, and some loose straw and sprigs of wilted watercress. A few downy feathers lay about. Some bird or chicken had been held here only recently, it was plain. The idea occurred to me that Lace might have hidden the blue-check carrier pigeon under the crate in this clump of spruce, then cooked it in a pie. The thought made me shudder, but I wouldn't have put it past Lace to do that very thing.

After a careful look about me again through the glasses I took the dog away from the spot. He went with docile reluctance.

We climbed further up the mountain to a fringe of scrub oak, and there I sat down to watch, out of sight from below. I sat there for perhaps half an hour and was becoming bored with my assignment no end and

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contemplating going back to the lodge when a rumble of thunder sounded through the mountains. It seemed to shake the mountain side on which I sat, and was followed by a stabbing streak of lightning that appeared to be only a few yards away from us.

There came another clap before I'd recovered from the shock of the first one, and again lightning flashed in a darting streak along the dark sky. We were in for an electric storm, without a doubt.

I arose and started along the ridge toward the lodge, snapping Leopard's leash to my belt in order to free my hands. The lodge was up there at the top of the mount only a little distance away, by the shortest trail, but the climb was steep. I decided to take that route and the steep climb rather than to follow around the less precipitous path to the south that I had used in coming up.

What on earth had become of Dwight Summers? I had seen him come down into this valley. There was no place to go from here except to follow down the river to Ruidoso and if he'd been going there he would have taken the east trail down from the mount. No place to go except to Lace's cottage or back up to the lodge. I gave him up, dismissing him from my mind as rather unimportant to the case in spite of Odom's ideas, whatever they were.

I was hurrying along toward the trail up the mount when I felt a drop of rain on my head. Without slackening my pace I looked up at the sky and felt a splash

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of rain on my face as lightning again zigzagged across the heavens. It was while I was in that position with my eyes on the heavens that Leopard gave a low growl and leaped forward on the trail. I went down on my face in a headlong plunge.

Momentarily my breath was knocked out of me, but I was conscious that the leather strap of my creel had broken and that creel, fishing rod, and field glasses had flown off in three different directions. I was lying on my stomach in anything but a comfortable position, for underneath me I could feel something like a couple of ridge poles, but my spinning brain comprehended these things vaguely for that first moment. I was conscious that my ribs hurt fiercely, and that Leopard was doing nip-ups around me.

Then I became aware that the ridge poles beneath me were squirming and jerking spasmodically. Still blindly dizzy I raised myself painfully on my elbows and looked down. As my gaze focused on them I suddenly caught my breath, my heart in my mouth. I was lying across the trousered legs of a man!

Hastily I pulled myself up to a sitting position, and as I did so the deep, bull-frog tones of a familiar voice swore pungently.

Then, "Son of a gun!" it said. "God's grace, Mabel, is that you?"

"What's left of me," I answered shortly.

It was Dwight Summers, of course. He was lying on

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his back across the trail, his big, homely face looking more canine than Leopard's own.

My ribs pained me, and, at the moment, I blamed the cartoonist alone.

"What on earth do you mean by tripping me up in this way?" I demanded indignantly. "A school boy trick if ever I saw one."

He raised himself on his elbows and literally glared at me, ignoring the rain that was spattering his face.

"Madam," he said, "I was sleeping in peace and dignity when you . . ." But he stopped himself. "Mabel," and he shook his big head reprovingly, "I'd call your method of waking a victim violent, to say the least, but effective, girl, effective! You aren't hurt, I hope."

"Certainly I'm hurt." I had risen and was stooping to pick up my scattered paraphernalia and the pain was biting at my ribs. "All forty-eight of my ribs are broken."

"I'm so sorry," he rumbled, getting slowly to his feet and carefully testing his knee joints as he did so, "but you're just half as badly off as you think. You only have twenty-four ribs to break."

"That should make me feel fifty percent better, I suppose," I told him, "but somehow it doesn't."

We climbed the mount together through the blinding rain, he limping along behind me, Leopard leading the way. I could hear an occasional deep grunt or a muttered "God's grace!" but I didn't look back. What did he mean by pretending he'd been asleep? That thunder,

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rolling and crashing through the mountains as it had done, would have wakened the dead.

It was early dusk when we reached the top of the mount and saw the lodge building and encircling cabins looming before us. It was not quite dark, yet ordinarily the lights would have been gleaming from main building and guest cabins by now as all made ready for the evening meal. There was not even a light in the kitchen, and I could detect no tantalizing odors of food in the air. I was completely jaded, but my appetite was not, and I found the thickening dusk, relentless rain, and the quiet of the place oppressive. Where was Alamo, anyway?

I left Dwight Summers without a word, going straight to my own quarters. The pigeons had gone to roost, and not a soul was in sight. I was wet to the skin, my side ached, and I had a strange feeling that everyone, excluding that fake, Dwight Summers, was dead. I glanced back at the lodge from the doorway of my cabin, hoping to see the lights go on, but the building was still shrouded in gloom, down stairs and up. That central window up there looked in on the room that had belonged to the ill-fated Countess. I turned back to the murky interior of my own room with a little shudder of dread which was augmented by the chill of my wet clothing, no doubt.

I took Leopard into the room with me out of the

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rain. He snapped the leash from my hand as he entered, dashing across the room. A hissing whisper came from the depths of my easy chair, and I all but jumped out of my skin.

"Sh-ish," it said, "it's me. Don't speak, Mabel!"

Sheriff Odom. I could see dimly the outline of his ample figure as he leaned over to pat the head of the dog. I stood for an instant, trembling in spite of myself.

Odom got up and laid a hand on my arm.

"Why, girl," he exclaimed, still whispering, "I'm sure sorry if I scared you. I didn't think of that. I waited for you here because I couldn't let anybody see me talking with you, and I wanted to hear your report."

"Turn on the lights, please," I whispered, chattering from cold and nervousness, "and light the heater."

"Sh-ish," he warned again. "I can't turn on the lights—electricity's off all over the place. That thunder storm. Alamo's out at his plant trying to fix it up. Looks to me like," he added in heavy disgust, "he needs him a new plant entirely."

So that was the reason for the blackout.

Odom drew the curtains over my windows.

"You've got to change your wet clothes for dry or you'll be sick," he said, stooping to light the heater. "Tell me quick anything you learned. Where did Summers go?"

I told him how I had approached the valley, seen

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Lace, bedecked like Mrs. Astor's horse, on her way out; of my failure to locate Dwight Summers at first, then falling over him on my way home. "I have some broken ribs," I told him, saving this last for a dramatic touch.

Odom took no notice of my infirmity.

"You think Summers was feigning sleep?" he inquired. "He drops off mighty easy."

"Nonsense," I said, "that thunder would have wakened the dead. Now I want to know why I was sent to watch him. Give out—you promised."

"I don't know any more about him than you do," Odom told me, "except that the F.B.I. inquired if he was here. I'm sort of examining everybody, as well as I can without offending Deppity Black. Them sketching expeditions of Summers being the only suspicious move he makes, I thought we'd jest look in on one of 'em."

"Is that all?" I cried, only to be shushed into silence by Odom. "Well," I whispered loudly, "he's an authentic artist, whatever else he may be."

"While we're on the subject of the F.B.I.," Odom said, "seems the name they had for the Countess was Lowenhaupt. Jest another alias, I reckon, apt as not. No connection between her and the German prisoner that was shot, it seems. Similarity in names mixed Westie up some."

Suddenly I remembered the empty orange crate Leopard had found in the draw.

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"I think Lace has eaten the blue-check carrier pigeon that disappeared," I said, and told him about the empty crate and scattered down.

"Hu-umm," Odom murmured. "Reckon better not say anything about that to Peter at the moment. We don't know that Lace had anything to do with it. Might be another reason why the pigeon disappeared." He moved toward the door. "I'm sure sorry you fell and bruised yourself, girl," he said. "You'd oughtta look where you're going."

Out he went, Leopard at his heels.

The darkness swallowed them up before I had thought of a sufficiently insulting rejoinder. I couldn't hear their retreating footsteps over the noise of the rain.

Chapter 8

I DRESSED and put on powder and lipstick by the light of my flash. There were dim lights in the lobby of the lodge, and in a few of the cabins, by seven o'clock. That would be candle light, augmented only by the two kerosene lanterns of the lodge, I surmised.

Alamo's dinner bell had not rung out its welcoming call, but I prepared to go over to the lobby to wait, having some vague idea of trying to hurry the meal, I suppose, or of meeting it half way. The rain had settled down to a slow drizzle, unpleasantly chill. I put on a warm sweater under my slicker, rubbers on my feet, and a newspaper over my head before venturing to cross the short distance from my quarters to the lodge proper.

Westie called to me as I stepped outside the door of my cabin. Her door was standing open, the light of a candle streaming out through the misting rain. She stood in her doorway, leaning against the jamb, and I felt she had been there some time, waiting for me.

She gave a low whistle to attract my attention, then called softly:

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"Mabel! Come here a moment, please."

Ordinarily I would have thought nothing of her calling me to her cabin. Westie and I frequently visited each other's rooms, but the serious expression on her face, the tired, forlorn droop of the lines of her trim figure, warned me this was not just a casual wish to chat on her part.

I turned back to her cabin and when I had entered she closed the door without a word. I saw that her blinds were closed, also. Glancing about me I noticed that her card table held a little stack of papers, and a large, light colored handbag of some striped cotton material. I had never seen it before, and I thought I knew Westie's summer wardrobe almost as well as my own. The bag was torn badly.

She saw me looking at the handbag and went to the point straighter than one of Peter's homing pigeons.

"Bag and papers belong to Peter's wife, Mabel," she said.

I looked at her quickly. She was pale, and tragically, grimly resolved.

"You mean the Countess?" I asked wonderingly.

She shook her head. "I'm not guessing or playing a hunch this time, Mabel," she said. "It's all there in those papers. The girl in the bus accident," she added.

My mouth fairly fell open in surprise, though I was far from convinced. I knew that nothing had been

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found to identify the injured girl; no scrap of evidence saved from the charred ruins of the bus.

"I found the bag on my ride this morning," Westie explained, seeming to read my thoughts. "It was lodged in one of those trees the bus crashed through when it fell down the mountain. I just happened to catch a glimpse of something white as I rode past there this morning. When I got under the pine I saw that it was this bag, the torn cloth of it flapping in the breeze. I climbed the tree and brought it down."

That this was the same light colored object I had seen lodged in a tree that day, I had no doubt.

She placed a chair for me beside the table, seated herself opposite me, and spread out the little stack of papers before us in the candle's light. I leaned forward for a better view, but the pain in my side straightened me up fast enough. Westie paid no attention to my muttered "Ouch!" so intent was she on the papers.

"These," she said, "are her credentials; passport, and so forth. And this is the certificate of her marriage to Peter."

It was with a sense of profound shock that I read the names on the certificate and knew that Westie was right. The marriage had taken place at Batavia, Java, November 5, 1941. Her passport read "Mrs. Peter Track Warner." Natalia Madura Warner, born in Batavia, of Dutch and Javanese parentage. Nineteen years old. Her papers were properly and legally stamped by

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the American officials in Honolulu and viséed again at San Francisco. No doubt about the passport being authentic. It appeared from the papers that she had been living in Honolulu for some months.

There was a photograph, of course, the usual passport atrocity, but the likeness was much better than most of its kind. A faintly smiling, sweet-faced young girl looked out at me from great dark eyes in a round face, somehow managing to convey the impression of poise and unsophistication at the same time. She was really lovely, I decided.

The knowledge that this girl lay broken and probably dying in the hospital below, gave me a keen sense of personal pity, though up until now my sympathies for the girl in the bus accident had been merely humane. That the one in the hospital was the owner of the bag in question I didn't doubt for a moment. It had fallen out of the bus as the machine plunged down the mountain side.

There was a little wallet of the billfold type, a bit worn at its edges. I opened it and saw that there were a few paper bills of small denomination in United States money, and one cashier's check for twenty-five dollars. As there was no checkbook or other indication of funds, I arrived at the conclusion that this girl actually had only enough money to last her a few days longer when she arrived at the end of her journey. She had been coming to Peter, though, of course—her husband!

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I replaced the money in the wallet and laid it aside, again taking up the papers. Westie was studying the photograph of the girl, and her mouth was tight with pain. I paused as I caught sight of her expression, and she looked up at that moment.

"If this girl lives I could never marry Peter," she said in a tone dulled by the tragedy. "Not even if she consented to a divorce. She's so young, so innocent looking, and it isn't her fault that Peter's amnesia has blotted her from his mind." Her voice faltered, but she quickly got herself in hand. "He wouldn't want to divorce her now, anyway, not under the circumstances. Peter's too kind to do that to a woman hopelessly marred, as she's bound to be if she lives."

At last I understood her surprising reaction to Peter's kiss in the dining room that noon, I thought.

"Why haven't you given these things to Peter?" I asked.

"Mabel," she said, holding my gaze, "don't you see what these papers mean?"

"Of course," I answered. "They're plain enough."

"Can't you," she persisted, "imagine what that deputy of the law from Carrizozo will think when he sees them?"

That Peter had ample reason for wrecking the bus! That he'd deliberately murdered the driver to achieve his purpose!

"You think he'll suspect Peter?" I asked. "But that's

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absurd! Peter simply couldn't have done a thing like that."

"He couldn't, Mabel, but who'll believe it? He had a wife he couldn't remember and he was in love with me. Oh, I know he is!" she exclaimed. "They'll say he got word his wife was coming and caused the bus to be wrecked."

"They would have to prove that he did it," I said.

Even as I spoke I remembered that circumstantial evidence is the most incriminating of all. There was a convincing lot of it here. I felt Peter could not have done it, yet I had to admit that I knew very little of this man from whose mind a segment of life was missing. How tell to what extent his character might have been affected by the injury and resultant amnesia?

"If I know Peter," Westie was saying, "he'll show these papers to the investigating deputy, admit that she was his wife, and let the law take its course. I hate to think what that course will be! Don't you see, Mabel?" She leaned forward persuasively across the table. "They're looking into the bus accident now, trying to. Perhaps they'll find the killer. But if they see these papers, they'll stop looking for the real culprit, the real motive . . ."

I nodded, knowing nothing reassuring to say.

"What do you think I ought to do, Mabel?"

My first impulse was to tell her that there was only

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one thing to do—give the papers to Peter. But suddenly I remembered Hiram Odom. He was working on the puzzle on the quiet, and in his own way, and, though it was a clear case of confusion to me, I had no doubt Odom knew what he was about.

“If I were in your place, Westie,” I told her, “I would show them to Sheriff Odom. He’s far more astute than you’d ever guess by the look of him. And I’d take his advice. He may tell you to turn them right over to the authorities, but there’s a chance that he may have a better idea.”

Westie considered my advice for a moment, her eyes bright with her thoughts.

“I’ll do that very thing, Mabel,” she exclaimed presently. “I’ll go and give the bag with everything in it to him, right now.”

She rose with the words and flung her raincoat about her with a sweeping gesture, covering her head to shield her bright hair from the rain. The flying skirts of the slicker brushed the table, scattering the loose papers, some of them falling to the floor. At the same time the clasp at the neck of her raincoat caught in her hair.

I got up and freed the strand of hair from the clasp, then helped her gather the injured girl’s possessions. She put them back into the bag, tucked it under her arm, and started out.

“Wait,” I cautioned. “Don’t let anyone see you give

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the bag to Sheriff Odom, and don't tell a soul you've done so. He doesn't want the deputy to know he's meddling with the case. Dead Shot offends easily."

"I'll be careful," she promised. "They've probably gone over to the lobby, all of them, anyway. I hope I find Sheriff Odom in his cabin. See," she exclaimed, "his light is burning. Now's a good chance!" She went out quickly.

Suppose Peter had committed this awful crime? He was acting strangely. His memory of his bride was completely gone, he claimed, but was it? If it turned out that Peter was not quite what he seemed to us. If . . . Westie would grieve terribly, but her heart would mend. She was young and desirable to many men; there would be others wherever she went.

I picked up my slicker from the back of the chair in which I had been sitting, and as I did so something fell out of its pocket and rolled under the table. It was the small metal box in which I carried flies and fish hooks, I saw. I had forgotten that they were in my slicker pocket.

As I stooped to retrieve the box I caught sight of the old leather billfold lying half open on the floor. Westie and I had overlooked it in gathering up the things that had been brushed off the table. I picked it up and, as I did so, I saw a white cardboard protruding from a section of the wallet that I had not discovered before. Kneeling there beside the table I drew it out and looked at it. It was a kodak picture, and written across the

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space beneath the figures were the words, "Nata Madura" and "Peter Warner."

"So, there they were together, and before their marriage, judging by the use of her maiden name.

It was a pleasing picture. Two laughing young people standing side by side on a beach. How young they were, and how gay! The girl was unmistakably the same as the one on the passport. She was so pretty, so brightly happy, yet her smile was tempered with a tender shyness that would not be denied.

And young Peter! He was slender in his white navy uniform, the wind blowing the wide bell-like bottoms of his trousers about his legs and ruffling his blond hair that was showing in front of his funny little rolled-brim sailor's hat. He was laughing, jaunty, and one arm was thrown about the shoulders of the girl beside him. It was hard for me to imagine that the gentle, serious, introspective man I'd been seeing all summer on Mount of Doves could ever have been so carefree. But why not? After all, this photograph probably had been taken before his injury and subsequent loss of memory. Amnesia would very likely have a sobering effect on the spirits of the jolliest of men, I reasoned.

I felt half sick as I rose and drew on my slicker. The thought of the dreadful fate that had befallen both those two beautiful youngsters since the day when someone had snapped their photographs on that far-away beach was anything but pleasant. She was lying

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broken, marred, and at the point of death, while he was unable to recall her existence as his wife.

I put the kodak picture into the billfold in a conspicuous place where Odom would be sure to see it when he should open the wallet, and slipped it into my pocket. Holding my newspaper over my head, I stepped out into the drizzling rain without waiting for Westie's return. I looked in at Odom's door as I passed. He was putting on his hat preparatory to going across to dinner, but Westie was not there. Perhaps she had given him the bag and hurried on.

I held up the wallet so that Odom saw it, then tossed it lightly inside his door.

"Belongs in the bag," I whispered.

Odom nodded understandingly and I hurried on.

I was on my way to dinner, but I realized that my appetite, keen an hour ago, had deserted me. I didn't know whether to blame my aching chest or the tragic testimony of the photograph I had just seen. Perhaps it was due to a combination of both.

Inside the lobby the big fire on the hearth was doing its best to dispel the gloom the rain and cold had brought upon our little high-lonesome world. Alamo's guests were all present, with the exception of Westie and Sheriff Odom, when we entered.

They were examining the twisted fragment of the explosive that Odom had found in the hole at the scene

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of the bus accident. He had given it to the deputy, I remembered. They had another, an unexploded one that had been given them from the hospital, someone's trophy. It was being passed from hand to hand as each in turn examined the screw cap mechanism. The small upper chamber was empty, but they told me the sealed section beneath it was filled with fulminate of mercury. To make the gadget explode, one put sulphuric acid in the upper chamber, then screwed the top in.

The metal object was about an inch in length, and was pencil-like in form. It was divided into two sections, an upper and lower chamber, by a copper plate. It seemed the timing of the explosion depended upon the thickness of this copper disk. The sulphuric acid in the upper chamber could be counted upon to eat through the plate in a few moments, the length of time consumed depending upon the thickness of the copper plate. This action took place sooner than if the explosion were brought about by the generation of heat alone.

Deputy Black was showing it around and explaining its mechanism with some importance. "Chemical Warfare Officer, a patient down at the hospital, showed me how it works," he explained. He failed to mention that Odom had first showed it to him, also had found it! Anyway, Black had all the information about the mechanics of the device patly on the tip of his tongue now.

"Whoever shot the bus driver," the deputy said, "first put one of these explosive gadgets—sort of like a incen-

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diary pencil, Chemical Warfare Officer says," and he held it up, turning it in his fingers. "Put one of these gadgets in the road," he continued, "where the tire would be obliged to run over it. That off-front tire. Road's narrow at that point. I reckon the murderer placed this contraption in the road when he heard the bus at the foot of the mount. Figgered the weight of the bus would crush the thing and make it explode even if the timing shouldn't be just right. Then he hid out and took a shot at the driver to make things sure, one way or both."

Every face was solemn and strained-looking in the firelight, I noticed. Paris looked particularly worried, even pale, in contrast to his normally healthy glow.

"When will the rest of us be blown off the map, or hung to the ceiling?" he exclaimed half angrily. "There's a murderer here in our midst—maybe me; maybe you," and he glared around the circle at the rest of us as he spoke. "Who's doing anything to find out?" he demanded contemptuously, deliberately insulting Black. "The murderer isn't through here; who's next?"

"Stop it," I said, vexed with his outburst. "You're horrifying yourself, and you're doing my nerves no good."

Paris frowned heavily, then broke out one of his sudden smiles.

"Sorry all around," he exclaimed. "What has happened to the world's best cook and our supper?"

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"Be quiet," Peter ordered. "Listen."

"These contraptions are of German make," Deputy Black's voice was continuing. He was still fingering the explosive pencil. "Those Nazi saboteurs that came ashore on Long Island at the beginning of the war had some like these, the Chemical man says. Our government don't have anything like this. Somebody brought these to the hospital here a few months ago as souvenirs, and they've been on exhibit in the office ever since. Japs had some, too, sort of lend lease from the Germans. Lately," he said, his sharp black eyes looking suddenly at the faces about him, "four of 'em was stolen."

"Then anyone of us could have taken them," I exclaimed, impulsively. "No trouble at all to have taken them from the office. If it's true that all anyone had to do was charge the thing with sulphuric acid to explode the fulminate of mercury already in the gadget, why, it would be easy to blow us all up." I had worked myself up over the idea. "It seems to me," I added, "the hospital authorities are at fault for leaving them there in an unlocked case. Who," I demanded on a sudden thought, "brought them to the hospital, in the first place?"

Deputy Black ignored my outburst. Evidently women should be seen, if they must, but not heard in legal matters.

Westie answered me. "Sensation brought them here,

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Mabel," she said a bit defiantly. "Anyone who'd suspect him of," she hesitated, "of anything, would be crazy."

"Oh, Sensation!" I exclaimed. "No, certainly not."

After dinner Odom surprised me by offering to drive me down to the hospital where I could have a doctor examine my ribs. I was touched for an instant, then I realized he had something up his sleeve, and was using me as an excuse to get away from the lodge. Probably wanted to use the hospital telephone, I decided.

Dwight Summers rose also. "I'll go along, if I may, Sheriff Odom," he said. "Have the doctor bandage this knee. The ligament is strained, I think."

With that he looked at me precisely like a gentle old dog that's been kicked when he was expecting good treatment.

At the hospital Kate didn't believe I had a fracture.

"You'd be in more pain than this, old girl," she stated positively, "if a rib were broken."

"You underestimate my fortitude," I told her.

"The doctor won't," she assured me. "The x-ray machine doesn't lie."

On my way to the X-ray room a little later I saw Dwight Summers sitting in the recreation room listening to Sensation's music. If the doctors had done anything for him I couldn't observe the results. His trousers would have hidden a knee bandage, however.

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It was almost worth the discomfort of the fractured rib to have Kate proven wrong for once. I enjoyed the look of chagrin on her face when the doctor told her. They bound me up so tightly in adhesive tape that I felt precisely like an old Ptolemy on the day of resurrection. I declined to go to bed in the hospital for the night as the doctor suggested, though.

"Afraid you'll miss the next murder!" Kate told me scathingly.

It was ten o'clock when Odom came for me. His stout, brown woolen short-coat was wet, I saw. He seemed as surprised as Kate had been when told that I was nursing a fractured floating rib, and was satisfactorily sympathetic.

The recreation room was dark, Odom remarked, adding that Dwight Summers must have walked back to the lodge.

"If that's so," I said, "I've now heard everything."

"He's not around, anyway," Odom said, dismissing the subject.

"The girl that was in the bus accident died tonight," he told me on the way up the mountain. "It's better that way, the doc says."

At his words I remembered with a sensation of shock the bag and papers Westie had found that day.

"Westie gave you the papers that belonged to the poor girl, didn't she?" I asked quickly.

"Yeh," Odom answered. "I already knew, though."

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The clerk at the hotel in El Paso told me on the 'phone she'd been registered under the name of Mrs. Peter Warner."

"Oh, Hiram," I exclaimed, half frightened at my own thoughts, "who on earth wanted to get rid of that young girl? Who, besides Peter, could have been interested in the coming of his wife?"

"Find me the feller that had something to lose by her coming," Odom said heavily, "and I'll find the murderer for you."

"Peter?"

"Could be."

"Or Westie!"

"Could be."

"Oh, no, Snooks," I said, impatient with the man, "you'll have to do better than that to sustain your reputation as a detective!"

"At the minute that's the best I can do for you, Mabel," Odom told me. "I'll tell you this, though, the murderer, whoever he is, hasn't finished his job."

"He's after Paris, then," I cried excitedly. "Hiram, do something. Don't be so darned calm and indifferent. Paris is watching after Peter, but no one's doing anything to protect Paris himself. That radiogram that brought him here—it meant something, Hiram."

"Oh, that," the man said smugly. "Peter Warner sent the radiogram through the Albuquerque Base. Bus driver that was killed took the message down to the Base

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for him. Got the original message in my pocket. It's Peter's handwriting, all right. I reckon the bus driver didn't know what was in the message that he was asked to have radioed."

So great was my shock at Odom's piece of information I was hardly aware that he had brought the station wagon to a stop at the lodge.

"It's incredible!" I exclaimed. "It's—not like Peter; like what I've thought him to be. Why, if he wished so much to see Paris, didn't he just wire him to come?"

"I reckon he must've figgered Paris wouldn't come unless he made it strong. Then again, Peter knew the authorities at the flying school wouldn't give his brother no furlough at this time except in the case of a death. Keep this piece of information to yourself, Mabel," Odom warned me sternly.

Odom went into his cabin and I hurried through the wind and rain to the lobby. He overtook me as I stood fumbling for the door latch, and the sheriff and I entered together.

They were all there with the exception of Dwight Summers. I remember thinking he'd gone to bed with his misery.

The big lobby looked gloomy enough by candle light. The dark beams of the ceiling were fairly lost in the somber heights. The atmosphere of gloom seemed to permeate everything. The group about the fire ap-

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peared to have run out of anything to talk about. Deputy Black puffed at a cigarette he'd rolled himself. His hard gray eyes looked particularly piercing under the wide brim of his black hat that he habitually wore indoors or out. He took it off only to eat and, I presumed, to sleep. Alamo whittled on a stick. Big Sam Rayburn fingered the exploded gadget that Black had exhibited earlier in the evening, his brow creased thoughtfully. Paris was writing at the lobby desk, half in darkness, and both Peter and Westie sat gazing into the fire—from opposite sides of the hearth.

I can see Odom yet as he looked that night. He stood with his back to the blaze, his wet coat smoking from the heat and smelling strongly of hot, wet wool, and spoke quietly.

"I'm sorry to have to report the death of the girl that was hurt in the bus," he said. "She died tonight."

Automatically my gaze sought Westie, my heart beginning to pound heavily against my aching rib. She knew the girl's identity from the papers that had been recovered in the handbag. This meant a great deal to her. I distinctly saw her come to life, alert in every nerve of her body, but she said nothing, made no move.

The news didn't prove the bombshell to anyone that in my apprehensive state I had half expected it would. In this room, very likely, sat the person who had been responsible for her death. They all appeared interested, but took the news quietly. "Pore thing," Alamo com-

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mented with a shake of his head, then went back to his whittling.

Odom's own manner was as bland as baby food.

"Got any idea who the girl was, Peter?" he asked.

Peter lifted an inquiring eyebrow for an instant. He shook his head.

"Reckon it'll be news to you then," Odom went on quietly, "but you've got to know. She was registered at the hotel in El Paso as Mrs. Peter Warner."

Peter moistened his lips with his tongue. Dazedly, he looked at Sheriff Odom in a fixed stare.

From underneath his coat Odom drew out the handbag that I had last seen in Westie's possession.

"Here," he said, handing it to Peter, "is her bag and identification papers. They were found lodged in a tree where the bus plunged through the thicket."

Peter was white now, his lips drawn tight and thin. I saw his hands shake violently as he took the bag. That he was deeply moved, shocked, there seemed no denying. He fumblingly opened the bag and took the papers out in his hand, only to have them fall to the floor at his feet.

Big Sam Rayburn quickly stooped and picked them up.

"Here, Pete," he said kindly, "spread 'em here on this table." He took a candle from the mantel and placed it beside the bag on the table.

Peter, moving like one in a dream, sat down in the

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chair Sam placed for him and picked up the papers, one by one in his trembling hands and examined them. He came last to the photograph of the girl beside the laughing young sailor whose arm was thrown about her shoulders. I could see that much from where I stood three yards away. Underneath the figures, I remembered, were the names "Nata Madura" and "Peter Warner."

Peter gazed at the little kodak picture a long time, a troubled crease between his eyes, the fingers of his left hand pressing his temples as if trying to make his dormant mind react normally. I felt that he forgot the others in the room. He appeared to feel alone with the picture he studied with such absorption.

He began to speak, apparently to the photograph.

"So this is the way you looked," he murmured. "Simple and sweet and trusting, I should judge you. And you were coming here to the man you loved. The sailor who'd married you in Java and was now supposed to be out of his mind. But you were murdered at the end of your journey. The man you loved didn't want you any longer, so he put an end to your young life, Nata Madura. He will pay for his brutal crime—I promise you this."

How strange it was to hear Peter talking to the dead girl's likeness, and, seemingly, about himself. His voice had a far-away, dreamy quality, as if he talked across an echoing chasm that separated the living from the dead.

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The candle on the table before him illumined his lean, pale face, giving it a quality almost ethereal.

No one spoke nor so much as moved a hand or foot. I broke out in a positive rash of goose pimples, but I hardly breathed for fear of breaking the spell that apparently possessed Peter Warner.

"He must pay for his crime," Peter's monotonous far-away voice continued. "I thought his worst fault was making you love him, then changing, in his fickle way, and leaving you to forget. But I was wrong, little Nata Madura. To protect his own hopes, his career, a new love that he'd found, he resorted to the crime of brutal murder. It's all here—the proof.

"A wise person once said that no man ever found lasting happiness by walking roughshod over the hearts and prides of decent women. You never heard that cliché, did you, Nata? There's still truth in it. No matter how callous his conscience, or ruthlessly brutal his will. Fate has a way of balancing the books, though the mills of the gods grind slowly. Not so slowly in your case, though, Nata Madura. Your killer shall pay."

You could have heard a pin drop in that lofty candle-lit room. Then all of a sudden Westie burst into loud, terrible sobbing.

"Don't, Peter!" she cried hysterically. "Do-on't talk like that, not to the dead, Peter. Do-on't!"

Her agonized outburst recalled Peter to himself, his whereabouts. There was an instant's startled look on his

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face like one suddenly awakened from a profound sleep. His eyes filled with sudden tenderness as they rested on Westie.

"Don't cry, Sara," he begged. Instantly he withdrew the look, his expression becoming a cold mask. "The Warners aren't worth your tears, my dear," he said in a distinctly formal tone and started picking up the papers from the table.

"The evidence is here, Sheriff Odom," he said. "All you'll need to convict the murderer of Nata Madura Warner, I believe. You must have seen, understood this. You're free to act on it, man."

"You're crazy, Pete!" Paris quickly crossed to Peter's side. "Here," he ordered, "let me see those papers. What on earth are you talking about?"

Peter's eyes were glittering as he rose to confront his brother. Was the combination of candlelight and fire's glow responsible for the burning intensity, the look of madness in his eyes? I shuddered involuntarily as I watched him. Surely, Peter was insane!

Paris fairly snatched the handful of papers from him.

"A week ago," Peter said, letting the evidence go without protest, "I sent you a radiogram that I figured would bring you here."

"You sent that damned message?" Paris shouted. "He's mad," he cried, speaking to Odom, "crazy, poor devil!" Then to Peter he said: "Here, sit down, Pete! Everything's going to be all right."

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Peter brushed away Paris' soothing hand from his shoulder.

"I worded the message the way I did because I knew it would bring you here," Peter confessed, his voice shaking with the intensity of his feeling. "I didn't tell you sooner because I knew you'd leave immediately before I had accomplished the thing that I had to do. I sent for you because I felt you must be persuaded to acknowledge that Nata was your wife, or to start proceedings for a divorce. You were planning to commit bigamy by marrying Jill within a week!"

"He's crazy!" Paris shouted, his face working with anger. "You're raving mad, Pete. Nata was your wife, you fool. Try to get that through your muddled brain."

"A week ago," Peter continued gripping the table's edge as if to prevent himself from falling, "I received a letter from Nata. I have it here somewhere," he said, fumbling in the watch pocket of his trousers. He brought out a square of paper that had been many times folded, and handed it to Odom.

"The letter was directed to me," Peter continued doggedly, "but the salutation was to you, Paris. 'Dearest Sparks,' it starts out. When I saw that word memory suddenly came back to me that the men of the crew always called you by that name. Old seaman O'Hara started it. You had to 'spark' every girl you saw," he said.

"But much of the past was confusion," Peter continued, his gaze steadily on his brother. "I knew I had

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not married the girl, that in some way it was you in my place, had been all along, but I could prove nothing. Then when you came you denied everything. I felt you were lying, but I was helpless to do anything but appeal to your honor and hope you'd relent out of a basic, fundamental sense of justice and character that I thought surely you must have. You were my kid brother, I kept assuring myself; you'd do the right thing in the end.

"You didn't." Peter put up a hand to silence Paris when he started to protest. "You'd changed. You could lie and deceive. But as I looked over these papers just now when Sheriff Odom gave them to me I began to understand. When I saw the photograph of Nata and you the mists that have hung like a curtain over my mind so long suddenly cleared away. I saw a sunny day in Java. I lying in a steamer chair on deck, too sick to leave the boat. You and this very girl strolling on the wharf, your arm about her shoulders, laughing and talking. You waved to me. I remembered that I never left shipboard those several weeks we were in Java. Yet this marriage certificate of Nata's shows she married someone who called himself Peter Warner during that period.

"It's all quite plain," Peter said, and his frail erect figure swayed slightly as he spoke, but his gaze on his brother's face never wavered. "I now remember everything clearly. You lied when you said you'd never seen Nata. Here's proof in a photograph. You married her,

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using my name instead of your own because you thought I'd never know, that I was going to die, or probably have only a fragment of my mind for the rest of my life. Or, and this is likely, you thought it would never be known after you'd left Java that you'd married at all. You would leave with the ship; you'd have your cake and eat it too, and be able to enter the Naval Academy in a few months as a single man. You had your heart set on the academy, but no one who has ever been married can hope to be appointed to it.

"All this I had guessed before I sent that radiogram to you. What I didn't know was that Nata was on her way here. Her letter said she was going to come as soon as she could get passage from Honolulu. I expected it would be several months.

"Well," Peter said tiredly, "she came. Somehow you knew she was on that particular bus. I believe you kill . . ."

"Stop it," Paris cried, dashing the papers he held to the table top. "You're my crazy brother, but you can't say that of me, crazy or not!"

Paris' strong arm went about Peter's neck and his hand closed firmly over his mouth.

"You don't know what you're saying. He's absolutely mad," Paris declared to the rest of us.

Peter's body began to crumple. I saw his knees fold, his body go limp. If Paris hadn't held him up he would have fallen to the floor. Paris picked him up bodily and

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laid him on the wide leathern couch there in the lobby.

"Stand aside, all of you; give him air," Odom ordered. He leaned over Peter checking pulse and heart beat. He and Paris lowered the head. Westie, crowding in close was crying in short, harsh sobs again. At a look from Odom she restrained herself, her lower lip between her teeth.

Paris appeared frightened half to death.

"I only put my hand over his mouth," he exclaimed. "Just lightly; couldn't have hurt him!"

He bent over his brother, his hands working in nervous agitation, his blue eyes bulging. "I didn't hurt him, I swear."

At a word from Odom I hurried to the office telephone and summoned a doctor. Paris was still protesting that Peter had lost his senses, gone stark crazy, and that he couldn't have hurt him, when I came back to report that a doctor was on the way up from the hospital.

No one except Westie seemed to be taking any notice of his excited protestations. All were anxiously watching Peter.

"Shut up!" Westie whispered loudly. "You've done enough to him already. Maybe you were trying to kill him!"

"Sh-ish," Odom warned, his fingers on Peter's pulse. "It's jest a faint," he said then, reassuringly. "Pulse is

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ticking along, weak but reg-lar. Reckon he'll be all right soon. Doctor oughtta be up right away."

The quiet, uniformed medical officer from the hospital ordered Peter left where he was. He had come promptly.

"He fainted," he told us, "but he's sleeping now. I'd say he's completely exhausted. Leave him here, just as he is, and don't attempt to arouse him for anything. He may sleep like this for hours. If so, he'll be much the better for it. Keep him warm, and see that he's not disturbed for any reason," he repeated. "Call me if you need me," he added, "but I think he'll be all right."

Peter lay as still as a corpse except for his light breathing. Seemingly, the sudden blinding light of returning memory—if indeed it had returned!—was too much for his constitution in his frail condition. He appeared to be as unconscious of himself and those about him as a patient under a narcotic.

Alamo brought a woolen blanket and spread it over the patient. The couch was several yards away from the fire and the night was growing colder with each hour.

It had seemed natural for Odom to take command of the situation. He was one of those people who in an emergency inspires confidence. He was a leisurely person, but he moved with directness and decision in whatever he did. He now ordered everyone from the room except Deputy Black and myself, and the deputy didn't seem to object to Odom's assumption of authority. He

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looked a trifle confused, I decided, as if the events of the evening had moved too fast for him.

"I'm going to stay with Peter until he wakes," Westie announced.

"You're going to your room, Miss," Odom told her firmly, "if I have to carry you over my shoulder."

The girl stared at Odom a long moment.

"You mean you think I might try to harm Peter?" she asked, her tones spiced with sarcasm.

"Didn't say so," Odom answered, untroubled by her tone, seemingly, "but everybody's going to bed and so are you."

Westie rather surprised me by going without further ado. She bent over Peter's white face for an instant, then left the lobby.

"Sheriff Odom," Paris said when she'd gone, "I want to stay beside my brother tonight. Those fantastic charges he made against me this evening came from his strange mental condition. Surely you realized that."

"Admiral," Odom said, rising and stepping a little away from where Peter lay, "I saw the papers and photographs before Peter saw 'em. I'm obliged to tell you I agree with him that the feller in the picture beside the girl is you. The rest of what he said don't sound fantastic when you consider that he was suffering from this amnesia business at the time the marriage certificate was issued. Sure looks like that mental condition

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of his has cleared up. You go to bed and take a while to think it over before you make too many statements, Admiral."

"You're mad if you think I murdered Nata," Paris said, agitating that worried frown of his. "My brother is crazy, but I'll kill anyone who attempts to harm a hair of his head. You may think what you like, you knuckle-headed old fool, but there's a murderer after Peter, the one who killed Nata, probably, and you waste time suspecting me!"

"Didn't say who I was suspicioning," Odom told him, still unruffled. "Do you figger I could be that murderer feller?"

"No, of course not."

"Reckon Black here could be him? Or Mabel?"

"No!" impatiently.

"Then you go along to bed, Admiral. Black and me's gonna stay right here the rest of the night. We won't leave Peter alone for a minute. He couldn't be safer. Go along to bed and get that thinking job done."

"You swear you'll not leave my brother alone unguarded for a single moment?"

"Sure, Admiral. Guard him closer'n my bank account. Go along to your room."

Paris went, though he looked anything but easy in his mind. The crease between his eyebrows was deep and restless.

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"Mabel," Odom said to me when all had gone except Deputy Black and ourselves, "you don't have to go if you don't want to." His eyes shot a sudden gleam of mischief. "The Admiral has give you a clean bill of health. Make yourself comfortable on the studio couch in the office," he went on seriously. "You look sort of peaked. Feel much pain, girl?"

"No," I told him, "there isn't enough room for pain inside this adhesive tape corset. I'll take a sleeping pill the doctor gave me. Though I imagine you expect to need me."

I started for the office, realizing at last just how tired I actually was .

As I went I heard Black speaking in low tones.

"What do you make of that hombre—the Admiral?" he asked Odom. "He's in the uniform of Uncle Sam. I don't reckon we'd oughtta be hasty in accusing him of this murder 'til we're plumb certain, though if the other one, his brother, ain't crazy it sure looks bad for the Admiral."

"Oh, we've got to have more proof before we accuse anybody," Odom answered. "You've got to remember, though, Black, that wearing a uniform don't necessarily change the character of a man from what it was before he entered the service. It's a pity it don't! But there's good and bad among our fighting men, same as among civilians."

"Maybe his brother is loco. Where'd you get them

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papers and pictures, anyway? Maybe this crazy man faked 'em."

"Nope," Odom answered, "they're legal, without a doubt." Then, lowering his voice so that I caught his words faintly: "There's another angle to this situation that I want to talk over with you, Black," he said.

Chapter 9

FROM the couch in the office where I lay I could look through the door and see Sheriff Odom and Deputy Black talking before the lobby fire. Their voices were low, but I could see that they talked earnestly, interestedly. They fell into lapses of silence now and then only to pick up the conversation with the zest of a new idea, or the interest of a fresh question to be put one to the other.

It seemed to me that ghosts as well as murderers must be stalking our lonely mountain top retreat that night. Outside the rain came down in a slow, blinding mist, like a curtain hanging between us and the rest of the forest, but with no more noise than the falling of snow. The pigeons in the eaves sounded restless, their voices seeming to warn one another against the dog Leopard, or something that they feared.

I could see Leopard lying in luxurious comfort on a rug near the fire. He changed his position slightly now and then for added comfort, looked up briefly, drowsily, whenever either Black or Odom moved his feet, but he

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paid no attention to the protests of the nervous pigeons outside.

I closed my eyes and tried to coax sleep, but it was of no use. My mind refused to be lured away from thoughts of the unexplained murders that had been so ruthlessly and brutally committed on the mount. I propped my shoulders high on a stack of sofa cushions for bodily comfort, then deliberately set my mind to work to assemble the events of the past few days in sequence. The answer to the riddle of who killed the bus driver, the girl, Nata Madura Warner, and the ill-starred Countess must be in the information we had somewhere, if only one could find it.

The mystery of the radiogram that had brought Paris to Palomar Lodge had been explained. Peter admitted having sent it. If one could accept his explanation of why he'd done so, that incident could be dismissed. I liked Peter Warner, and so chose to believe his explanation of why he'd sent the radiogram.

Paris, according to Peter's statement, was married to the girl Nata, yet he was planning to marry Jill within a few days. He had to be stopped. Also, with Peter's memory befogged as it was, Paris was the only one who could straighten out the tangled evidence that had led Peter himself to believe, for a while, at least, that Nata was really his wife. Peter had known that his headstrong, obstinate brother would not come to him if he knew the reason for which he was sent.

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Paris, on the other hand, vehemently denied the charges. His brother was crazy, he vowed. Well, perhaps he was! Yet the laughing young sailor in the kodak picture beside Nata was surely Paris; not Peter. They were very much alike in appearance, it was true, but no one could doubt which brother it was, once he'd been told it was Paris. Besides, Peter would have been in the uniform of an officer. I wondered why I hadn't thought of that when I'd first seen the snapshot.

The outbreak of the forest fire and the shooting of the bus driver were unsolved mysteries. I had thought at first the fire had been started by the Countess in order to effect the escape of the prisoners of war, as Westie had assumed, but I knew Odom discounted that theory. The fire, he thought, had probably been started by the person who had planned to wreck the bus, as a cover, to distract the attention of everyone on the mount at the hour the murder must be committed.

Now on the bus were the girl Nata, and the bus driver whom Peter had entrusted with the radiogram he wished sent to Paris; the message with a false signature. The driver had taken it to Albuquerque. Of course, he could have stated, had he been asked, that Peter had sent the message. If one had sufficient imagination he might suppose Peter had killed the bus driver to prevent his testifying to that effect. The idea was insane, I decided, whereupon the memory of Peter's mental condition suddenly popped into my mind. Who was to say that

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he could be counted upon to act sanely? I pushed the thought of his guilt out of my mind with both hands, in a manner of speaking.

Next, there was the death of the ill-fated "Countess." The nickname Westie had bestowed upon her the day of her arrival had stuck to her like a burr, even in death, though she had claimed to be "Miss" rather than "Mrs."

If she were a celebrated picture thief, mightn't she have been murdered by some other person among us who was also interested in the old Goya? Or, was there yet another motive for her murder? Westie had frankly hated her. It was true that Westie was now exhibiting a lot of sympathy for the dead girl Nata. Yet, actually, who could prove that her pose of pity and soft heartedness was not just an act?

Peter, too, had hotly resented the Countess' statement that she was his wife. We now knew that she had lied, only seizing upon the ruse to protect herself at the moment. Someone had brutally choked her, then hanged her to the ceiling to make her death appear suicide, just the same.

Peter should be able to clear up one thing when he waked. He was supposed to know, when in his normal state of mind, exactly what disposition his grandfather Warner had made of the Goya painting. Paris had pretended he thought Peter's wife should know, but that was only a part of his deceit; the girl wasn't Peter's wife, but his own, it appeared. If the painting by the Spanish

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master could be located, Peter and Paris Warner would be the richer by about seventy-five thousand dollars.

Odom got up every once in a while and went over to where Peter lay. He'd feel his pulse, watch him for a moment or so, then go back and sit down beside the fire.

I gave up trying to solve the problem of the three murders. It was not that my interest flagged, but I was fast losing my ability to concentrate. I suppose it was the sleeping tablet at work at last; I seemed floating on a cloud. It was rather a pleasant feeling. I slid down on my pillows and let my senses drift. I don't know how long I slept, but I dreamed, and my dreams were weird and troubled.

I seemed to be fleeing in my nightgown all over the misty mountain top, some killer in my wake. At times he seemed to have an odd eye, like Sam Rayburn's, but most of the time my pursuer seemed to be the Deputy Sheriff from Carrizozo, his hawk eyes searching through the misting rain for me. They seemed to me two small, bright spotlights shining under the wide brim of his black hat.

I still believed the dream to be real for an instant after I awoke, for the biggest object in my line of vision was the man Black. He was sitting, chin on chest, his black hat shading his face. I couldn't tell whether he were asleep or awake. Odom was awake, however. As I

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watched he got up and again crossed the room to Peter's couch.

I flung my blanket off and got up. My side seemed to have stiffened with soreness and the effort was no fun, but I felt I must see how Peter was getting on; speak with Odom.

Odom looked up as I stopped beside him. We both stood looking down at Peter for a moment. There was color in his cheeks, I saw by the dim light. His breathing was strong and regular. Peter, I felt convinced for the first time, was going to be all right in every way.

Odom and I walked quietly back to the fire.

"Peter looks fine," I whispered.

Odom nodded. He started to speak but at that moment we heard steps crossing the dining room. We both listened, turning to watch as the dining room door opened. Alamo thrust his head inside, reminding me of a long-necked rooster. Seeing Odom and me that characteristic grin of his started crawling up his left cheek and he followed his head into the room. He was carrying a log for the fire.

Odom put a finger to his lips to warn him to keep quiet and Alamo came, tiptoeing across the lobby, and laid the log on the glowing coals with great care.

"How's Pete?" he whispered as he stood up.

"Okay," Odom answered.

"Reckon he's got back his memory, like he said?"

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"Dunno."

"Sort of guarding him, eh? Maybe a good thing. Him and Paris have sure been a-fussing. Blood's thicker'n water, though." And Alamo went out again, shaking his head.

I went back to my couch and Odom sat down near the fire. Black slept soundly. It was three o'clock in the morning.

I was just lying back carefully on my pillows when I heard the noise of footsteps outside the office window. They were light, stealthy, but I was sure I had not been mistaken when Leopard came trotting into the office, ears alert. He gave a sudden sharp bark and I followed his gaze to the window. I was just in time to see a face disappear from the window pane.

I was positive I'd seen Lace's brightly dyed hair, her prominent blue eyes. She'd been looking in at me.

Suddenly to discover someone peering in through a window from the darkness outside is an unpleasant sensation at best. The belief that it was Lace gave me a distinct feeling of shock. Had she seen me watching her in the valley that afternoon? Why was she on the prowl at three o'clock in the morning?

Shaken in spite of myself, I got up and went and told Odom what I'd just seen. He was starting toward the office, having heard Leopard's sharp bark.

"Stay here with Peter 'til I come back, Mabel," he told me. "I'll jest take a little pasear around the build-

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ing. If anybody else shows up wake Black, pronto."

Odom came back after a few minutes. He'd seen no-one, he said. I got up and started back to my couch, now thoroughly weary. I hadn't reached the office when I heard the front door of the lobby being opened quietly.

I stopped still in my tracks, watching the door in nervous fascination. Was Lace coming in?

It was Westie. I breathed more easily when I realized that it was she. I went to meet her.

"How's Peter?" she inquired in a loud whisper from the doorway.

"He seems all right," I told her.

I didn't tell her I'd just seen Lace. Why get her excited? Westie didn't come into the lobby. I believe Odom had her bluffed. As she started to turn away her gaze swept upward toward the head of the stairs and I saw her expression undergo a change. Her eyes flashed and her chin lifted.

Paris was just starting down the stairs, tiptoeing and peering over the railing at the sleeping deputy beside the fire.

Odom, whom Paris apparently hadn't seen, stepped to the foot of the stairs. Paris halted.

"I couldn't sleep without knowing how Pete is," Paris said quietly.

"He looks okay," Odom answered. "Go back to your room."

Paris frowned deeply. He looked at Odom belliger-

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ently for a long moment, then turned and went back upstairs. Westie, too, had gone.

I went back to my bed in the office.

Dawn was breaking when I awakened next. The east window of the office looked out on a dismally gray sky, but I could have shouted for joy. No matter what the weather this was the light of day. I'd had enough of night with its strange prowlers.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was three minutes past seven o'clock. I heard a door open, then I saw Alamo enter the lobby with a cup of steaming coffee. I got up and went into the room where Peter lay. Odom was standing beside a window. He had turned about as Alamo entered.

"Here you are, Pete," Alamo said cheerfully, loudly. "It's daylight, and I got me a notion this cup of Java'll be just what you need. Slept all night, eh? How you feel, Pete?"

Peter sat up on his couch and stared at Alamo. Black awakened and stood up. Alamo's voice had aroused both men. Goodness knows, he'd made no effort to suppress it. It looked as though he thought daylight was a signal for everyone to rise and shout and throw off the shackles of the night. I confess I felt a little of the same impulse.

Odom took the coffee from Alamo.

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"What's all this?" Peter asked curiously. "Did I sleep here last night?" All at once a look of understanding flashed into his eyes. His expression instantly changed to a gray, unsmiling mask. "Where's my brother?" he demanded.

"Upstairs," Alamo told him cheerfully. "It's now five minutes past seven o'clock," he continued, glancing at the clock on the mantel. "I'll go wake him for you, Pete."

"Seven, is it?" Peter exclaimed. He swung his feet off the couch and reached for his shoes. "I'm late with the pigeons' breakfast," he said, rising and hurrying toward the door. "That's very bad for their training. Never mind waking Paris," he called back. "That business," he added shortly, "can wait."

Apparently Peter's memory was all right. I didn't give much thought to it at the moment, for Odom was doing a curious thing. As Peter left the room the sheriff quickly took the pistol from his open holster, broke it, and emptied the cartridges into his hand, dropping them into his pocket. He stuck the empty weapon back into its holster and hurried after Peter. There was another gun in his hip pocket, I saw. Black followed Odom out.

"Well," I said aloud to myself, "poison gas never emptied a room quicker!" and I followed Black and Odom outside.

Peter was just entering the small feed bin in the

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pigeon cote. Odom, with Leopard, the dog's leash in his hand, stood beside the bin. Deputy Black was about midway the length of the lawn. He was scanning the scene as if trying to make up his mind whether we'd have rain or sun for the day.

Cabin doors began to open. Westie stepped out. She stood watching Peter as he came from the bin with a pan of grain. The two white doves, Como Se Yama and his Missus, instantly lighted on Peter's shoulders. Sam Rayburn came around the corner of the lodge leading his horse.

Lace was earlier than usual. I saw her pass from the kitchen to the cabin in the rear where she kept dust pan and brush and mops for cleaning.

"Why, Sunshine!" I heard Westie exclaim. "Where've you been all night?"

Dwight Summers had come up the mountain path. He was limping up, his face set and immobile as a sphinx. So, Odom and I had been mistaken in thinking he'd come home ahead of us the night before, apparently. I felt a twinge of remorse as I watched him. His limp looked convincing.

"Spent the night across two chairs in the hospital," he answered Westie's question. "Fell asleep listening to the music and didn't know when they turned out the lights. I wouldn't recommend the position to a dog," he added, limping on toward the lodge.

I heard a clatter of footsteps inside the lodge, and

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Paris burst out the door, nearly colliding with Summers.

"Petel!" he called. "Where the devil are you? Oh, how are you, guy?"

I'll never know just why I happened to look up at that precise moment, nor why I instantly recognized the prize blue-check carrier. Certainly I hadn't heard the flutter of his wings as distinct from the others; the air was full of the sounds of fluttering, noisy pigeons. Leopard's presence disturbed them considerably, but their appetites proved the stronger force. They protested, but stayed with their breakfasts.

There was the missing blue-check, flying straight down when I saw him, as if he'd plummeted right out of the blue. He was following the shortest course to Peter and his breakfast.

"Look, everybody!" I cried excitedly. "The blue-check carrier pigeon. He's come back!"

I was obliged to repeat what I'd said, for Alamo was yelling loudly from the kitchen window at that precise second. "Hot cakes for breakfast," he sang out. "Hurry up, folks!"

The combative blue-check was fighting off old Como Se Yama and The Missus from the coveted places on Peter's head and shoulders, pecking and scolding with his usual zest. Suddenly I caught sight of the message capsule on the blue-check's leg.

"He has a message," I cried. "Look, on his leg!"

Odom's voice was like a bellow.

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"Knock him off, Peter!" he yelled. "Run away from him!"

Looking dazed and startled at Odom's loudly voiced command, Peter thrashed at the pigeons with his free hand.

He took a step backward, but the blue-check maintained his perch on his head.

"Knock him off," Odom continued to yell. "He's loaded with explosive!"

Peter really dislodged the bird at last, only to have the strong carrier swoop back again, burying its claws deep in Peter's hair as it held its position. Accustomed to take his breakfast from Peter's palm as he perched on head or shoulders he had no intention of giving up.

Then Paris sprang forward. Lunging at his brother's head he grabbed the blue-check carrier in both hands.

"Toss him high," Odom shouted, the gun from his hip pocket in readiness in his hand. "Toss him up and I'll shoot him."

Paris started to do as Odom bade. He had opened his hands, and that act prevented his losing both members, for the explosion occurred at that moment. The air was suddenly thick with smoke and flying feathers, the unsightly remains of the blue-check falling to the earth in gory litter.

Paris fell to his knees and bent over his two hands, groaning in mortal agony. Peter and Sam Rayburn were instantly on the ground beside him, grasping his arms

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and inspecting his wounds. His hands were bleeding profusely.

"There're no bones broken," Peter said after a moment.

"Get some clean hand towels and some bandages, please, Ma'am," Odom called to Lace as she came bustling up, her eyes like two saucers. "Westie," Odom continued, "you go telephone for the doctor, girl." Then, "Maybe a tourniquet on the right wrist 'til the doctor comes, eh, Peter?"

Alamo had rushed out from the kitchen at the sound of the explosion and was now squatting in the group about Paris. Dwight Summers came out of the lodge at a limping run.

Those about Paris were smeared with blood before the bleeding was checked. Paris was mad. The pain hadn't suppressed his volatile temper; probably aggravated it.

"God damn it," he stormed at Odom, "I've been warning you ever since you've been here that somebody was trying to kill Pete. Nobody would do anything. This time the killer all but succeeded. Just another mystery that can't be solved, I suppose," he said sarcastically. "I tell you somebody has been holding that blamed pigeon ready for this moment. He was released close by, and only a minute or so ago, for that explosion was timed." Paris groaned from the pain and cursed in angry frustration.

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"Take it easy, Admiral," Odom said, rising. "You're sure fortunate not to lose your hands. You saved your brother's life, though, without a doubt."

Paris made little or no response to Odom's words, though he lowered his eyes to his hands and grunted something. In a moment he spoke to Peter.

"I did marry Nata, just like you said last night," he said in a low, gruff voice. "It was moronic, I know, but I didn't suppose it could ever make any difference to you. So, I used your name instead of my own; she'd only heard me called 'Sparks.' She was a nice kid but I couldn't marry and ever hope to enter the holy Naval Academy, and I was hell-bent on doing both at the moment."

Peter didn't speak in answer, didn't so much as look up from the wrist he was holding. I think he had his fingers on an artery.

"There's no excuse," Paris persisted, frowning heavily, "but I swear I didn't suppose she'd care a lot. Probably marry another sailor right away. I swear to God I had nothing to do with her death, Pete," Paris' voice was rising as he spoke, "I swear it. It was—horrible! I—didn't even know she was here."

"Well, Admiral," Odom said, his hand resting lightly on the butt of the gun in his open holster, "you'll have to answer to your Maker and your conscience, if you've got any, for the wrong you did your wife in marrying her under false pretenses, then deserting her. But her

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death," he said slowly, emphatically, "will be paid for with the life of the person who took hers."

Odom paused. All eyes were on him now, alert in anticipation.

"The same person that put a bullet in the head of the driver and an explosive under the wheel of the bus, causing the death of two people, and choked a woman to death, also attempted to take Peter's life this morning."

I thought Westie was about to speak. She looked quickly about the circle of faces, moistened her lips, but apparently changed her mind as Odom spoke again.

"The attempt on Peter's life failed," Odom continued, "but that wasn't the killer's fault. His method of getting the girl you called the Countess out of the way was different, but his reason for wanting her dead was the same."

"And that reason?" Peter looked up to inquire.

"His purpose," Odom said, his keen eyes on Peter's face, "was to get his hands on the seventy-five thousand dollars that had been offered for the famous Goya painting."

"The painting!" Peter momentarily lost his grip on the artery he had been checking. "He killed for that! Why, I remember—it's here, on the lobby wall. There's a copy of Rembrandt's 'Girl at a Window' stretched over the Goya. Grandad had an amateur artist paint it one summer. He covered the old painting by Goya with the

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new. I remember the infinite detail of the heavily embroidered robe on the subject of the old painting of Goya's. Grandfather reasoned that it would be safer here in these mountains where no one would expect to find it than anywhere else. I was sixteen that summer," Peter added, "and I remember it well."

Peter remembered Paris' wrist at that moment. I heard Alamo mutter, "Christ a'mighty—seventy-five grand!"

"The Countess found it," Odom continued. "Remember the night she was alone in the lobby and claimed the picture had fell on the floor and smashed? You were pretty mad and excited when you found her there looking at the thing, wasn't you, Alamo?"

"I sure was," Alamo nodded. "She'd pried the back off. Seventy-five grand!"

"You said you'd have to nail the frame back in place and you whipped it right out to the kitchen and fixed it, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sir-ee!"

"You cut the original Goya out of the frame from behind the amateur's painting, nailed the back in place, then hurried in and hung the picture up again. Pretty slick, Alamo. You almost got away with it."

"Hey, what're you saying, Sheriff? That ain't no way to joke with a guy."

"Where's the original Goya now, Alamo?" Odom

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was stern at last, advancing toward Alamo, slowly, as he spoke.

"Gosh, you're crazy, Sheriff! I don't savvy why you're talking this way."

"Reckon it'll save time if I tell you," Odom said. "The Goya canvas is being held by the authorities in El Paso. Post Master found it wrapped around the fishing rod you mailed."

Alamo's black eyes fairly exploded with excitement. For an instant his lower jaw sagged stupidly. But in a twinkling he had himself in hand.

Odom had stopped directly in front of him. I watched Alamo compress his lips, then that half-embarrassed, boyish smile I knew so well started crawling up his left cheek.

"Aw, now, Sheriff," he begged, "lay off, will you?"

As my mind raced over the incident of the mailing of the fishing rod Odom continued relentlessly.

"I reckon you were feeling pretty safe," he said, "until you got word by telephone from the Paso Del Norte Hotel in El Paso yesterday morning that Mrs. Peter Warner was coming up on the bus. I checked on the message. You was sort of desperate, wasn't you? Peter's wife, you figgered, would be sure to know where her husband's valuable inheritance was hid. The poor girl wasn't really Peter's wife, only his sister-in-law, but how was you to know?"

"So," the Sheriff continued quickly, "you started a

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fire in the forest close enough to the Williams ranch to be put out by the Rangers without too much trouble, being close to a well. That, you knew, would create a fool-proof diversion for every soul in these parts. So, you was free, at the proper moment, to lay one of them diabolical explosives in the rut of the road where the bus was bound to pass over it. In fact," Odom added, "you felt so durned safe you made the thing doubly sure by putting a bullet through the driver's head."

"You got no proof. You're crazy!" Alamo shouted.

"No?" Odom asked softly. "What about the arsenic you took to Peter in that cup of coffee this morning?"

"It wasn't ar—" Alamo stopped abruptly, realizing too late that he'd made an admission. His face reddened to a deep purple.

"No, it wasn't arsenic," Odom said almost gently, "I didn't think it was. Jest a heavy sleeping powder, likely. You figgered you'd get Peter so groggy he'd never be able to get away from the carrier pigeon with the explosive capsule, even if he should see it, in time.

"You come tramping into the lobby talking loud so's to wake Peter, said it was seven o'clock, knowing he'd rush out to feed his birds. Then off you run upstairs, put the sulphuric acid in the open end of the gadget to make it explode, slipped it inside the message capsule already on the pigeon's leg, then released the pigeon, knowing he'd fly straight to Peter's head and shoulders.

"Oh, you were smart," Odom exclaimed. "You

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wasted no time getting down the back stairs and calling to us from the kitchen window. 'Pancakes' you were shouting, and at that very minute you were watching to see Peter's head blown to bits.

"Take him to jail, Black," Odom snapped with sharp suddenness. "He's your murderer!"

Black started forward, drawing a pair of handcuffs from his pocket as he came, his stride unhesitating and determined.

I watched in awful fascination as the Adam's apple cavorted up and down Alamo's long neck. Suddenly a wily look darted into his staring eyes.

In a flash he had grabbed the pistol from the open holster at Odom's side and was hurriedly backing away, swinging the gun's muzzle from side to side in a slow arc as he went. He had the entire group of us covered.

"I'll kill the first one that makes a move!" he shouted.

Not one of us doubted him; no one moved. He was walking backwards toward Odom's station wagon.

Odom spoke softly to his dog. "Git him, Leop!" he said.

Instantly the dog's muscular body made a black-and-white streak through the air. He lunged at Alamo's neck. But Alamo was braced for him. He sent the dog hurtling to the ground with such force that I involuntarily winced at the sound of the heavy thud.

Leopard was up instantly and flying through the air again. This time Alamo's gun was ready. His aim ap-

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peared true; I heard the click of the hammer. Then a gun near me roared deafeningly.

The look of amazement on the distorted features of Alamo as he pitched forward on his face was the stuff of which nightmares are made. It was a moment before my startled senses comprehended that Black had fired the shot; not Alamo.

I was suddenly sick and dizzy. I felt myself slipping slowly down to a seat on the wet earth. I turned my back on the shockingly still form of Alamo. Odom was sternly calling off the stouthearted dog.

"There wasn't any call to shoot him, Black," I heard Odom say after a moment. "You're too doggoned quick on the trigger, man. I unloaded that gun and left the holster open a-purpose, because I figgered he was jest the type of excitable hombre to give hisself away by grabbing for a gun when he thought the jig was up." I had seen him unload the gun, I now remembered! "With Leopard's help we'd a-had him in a jiffy, alive and on his way to stand trial," Odom continued.

"Oh, the shooting was legal, all right," he admitted impatiently at a word from Black. "Alamo was resisting arrest. But it sure ain't proper sheriffing; you've got yourself another man for breakfast."

Chapter 10

"ALAMO had imagination. We'll have to credit him with plenty of that." Sheriff Odom held one of the transparent cellulose message capsules in his hands as he spoke. He dropped one of the explosive copper pencils into it and closed the capsule. "Fits perfect," he said with satisfaction. "If that one had of exploded while the bird was on Peter's head or shoulders it would have been good-bye, Peter Warner."

Odom was visiting me in my hospital room on the afternoon of the day Alamo was shot. I needed rest more than medical care, but they'd taken advantage of my collapse to throw me to the lion Kate while I was too weak to protest. I had sent for Odom to come to see me before he went back to his herd.

"Peter was to be allowed to live, seems like, unless he got his memory back. But in that case he had to be prevented from interfering with Alamo's theft of the picture. I reckon," Odom continued, "Alamo liked Peter better'n nearly anybody. He let him live here nearly a

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year and had every opportunity to kill him, yet he didn't do it 'til he had to."

"For heaven's sake!" I exclaimed. "I hope no one ever loves me in just that way."

"You don't realize what a sacrifice that was to Alamo," Odom said. "As a matter of fact, it cost him his life. He was determined to have the money that painting would bring; nothing was to be allowed to stand in the way. If you were in the way you had to be eliminated, as Alamo figured. Yet, he put off killing Peter until too late." Odom shook his head. "It jest goes to show," he remarked next, "if you're going to be a criminal you'd better be as tough as you can; going soft at any time will throw you."

"He was a fiend," I said with a shudder. "He had sent the old Goya out by the mail; he needn't have killed Peter, so far as he knew. How you guessed the old canvas was wrapped around the fishing rod he mailed I don't know, unless you smelled it, have X-ray eyes or something."

"Oh, I didn't know, didn't even think of such a thing until the Countess was killed. Alamo killed her after the row they had about the old picture being on the floor the night we came in and found her in the lobby alone. Alamo was too durned excited over the incident. It's the little things that count in a business of this kind," he paused to comment.

"When the F.B.I. phoned the Countess was wanted

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as a picture thief, I remembered the row over the painting in the lobby. I figured it had some connection. Alamo believed the Countess had recognized the Goya. That night he murdered her, as brutal a piece of work as ever was." Odom frowned heavily at the memory.

"But to get back to the picture," he said, "I examined the one he'd hung back on the wall, and I could see he'd had it out of the frame. It was wrinkled across the face, and the wooden back was on sort of lopsided. I decided he had snatched the original picture out of the frame and quick substituted another in its place."

Odom smiled widely at that point.

"Summers says that conclusion was a sure lucky mistake. Says if I'd a-paid any attention to the picture before it fell I'd a-known the canvas Alamo hung back in place was the same one that had been there all along. That," Odom nodded, "would a-throwed me for sure. It was pure luck," he continued, "because I didn't know 'til Peter told us this morning after Paris was injured that his granddad had two pictures on that one frame—the original Goya covered over with one painted by a amateur. Of course, I knew right away that what Alamo had done was remove the original Goya.

"But to get on," he said, "I next set my mind to work to figger what Alamo might've done with the picture after taking it out of its frame. I snuck around and tried to find it. Then I remembered Alamo's mailing a fishing

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rod that he'd only half wrapped. Postman made him do it up better before he'd accept it. Alamo, I figured, wanted everybody to be able to see that it was a fishing rod by jest glancing at it. You'd've swore, if asked, that it was jest a fishing rod, wouldn't you, Mabel?"

"Why, yes," I said, "I would."

Odom grunted with satisfaction.

"Well," he went on briskly after a slight pause, "I hot-footed it down to the telephone office and phoned El Paso to find it and hold it. It was addressed to some man in El Paso, care of general delivery. I reckon Alamo figgered he could call for it and get it later. Or maybe he'd directed it to some real feller he knew and could trust."

"Well, I believed firmly he'd mailed the picture on the fishing rod, and I'd notified the authorities in El Paso to grab it, but I hadn't had time to hear from them this morning when I told Alamo they had found the Goya. I was bluffing; thank God it worked!

"The luckiest piece of business of the whole durned show," Odom said after he'd paused to roll and light a shabby cigarette, "was you seeing the pigeon coming and spotting the message capsule on his leg."

"How you knew it contained the explosive is more than I can see," I told him.

"Saw it," he nodded. "Saw the copper of the explosive pencil shining through the transparent message capsule. I reckon I was sort of prepared for it, in a way."

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It's hard to explain," he said, his hand straying to the back of his neck in that absent minded habit of his, "but when you told me you'd seen a empty crate in the draw where some blue-check pigeon had recently been confined, I felt right away I oughtta be able to connect the fact up some way with the murderer. I didn't get very far with developing the idea, but it stuck in my mind and I worried it every now and then.

"I was on the alert for any threat to Peter's safety, I reckon, Mabel. I expected Alamo to make an attempt on his life, for I had a pretty definite opinion by then that he'd done the other killings. So, you see," he concluded, "I was sort of prepared for anything. That, I reckon, is why I saw the copper thing in the message capsule so quick.

"We know now," he went on, "that Alamo captured the blue-check carrier, hid him in the draw, then, later, brought him here to the lodge and kept him in one of the rooms upstairs, probably. But, as I said before, I believe he didn't intend to use it on Peter unless it looked necessary. It wasn't a bad device," Odom said, "and with a little luck it would've worked. Paris was guarding Peter close, and sending death to him by carrier pigeon seemed like a good idea to Alamo; one that oughtta work at feeding time, even though he was watched and guarded.

"It would be another 'mystery death,' he probably figgered."

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"Just think," I said, "the motive, the whole cause of these murders has been Alamo's greed for money! I wonder just how much Lace knew of his guilt."

"I don't know for sure," Odom answered. "I've talked with her. I feel convinced she had nothing to do with the killings. She suspected him of dishonest practices, she says, when he tried to beat her out of some money. That led to their first quarrels. She's been suspecting him of the killings here; felt he was after Peter. Been trying to catch him red-handed.

"About the painting," Odom said, bringing his brows together for an instant, "she swears she didn't know that Alamo had located the old Goya. Got me a notion Lace was looking for the picture, too. That I don't know; the F.B.I. don't seem to have anything on her. So she's free to go when and where she pleases. Leaving right away, I think."

"There's just one thing more," I said, detaining him when he would have risen. "The Countess was wanted by the F.B.I. for stealing valuable paintings. All right so far; I'm sure that was her reason for coming here—to try to locate the Goya. But some of her actions I fail to understand. She pretended to be an amateur horsewoman, yet she rode expertly. She took that ride with Sam for a purpose, I feel sure. I thought for a while she'd done it in order to aid the prisoners of war to make their escape, but no one seems to think she had anything to do with them, no connection."

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"There's certain things we jest have to guess at," Odom said. "I've got me an idea she was learning the lay of the land more'n anything else. Looking for a way out of these mountains besides the main highway she'd come up. Probably planned on getting out of here with the valuable picture a-horseback. I dunno. Anyway, she was sure interested in the lay of the land, and she could ride—pretty as you please.

"On the other hand," he continued, the suggestion of a twinkle in his eyes, "she might jest have been trying to worry Westie by her interest in Sam Rayburn and Peter. Most women seem to have time for a little of that sort of thing on the side no matter what else they're up to. Though her claiming to be Peter's forgotten wife was a trick she used at the minute because she was desperate."

Odom put on his old hat.

"Well, girl," he said, "I hope I've satisfied your curiosity sufficient. Leopard and me have got to be getting back to the herd."

"No, please," I begged, "I want to know how you guessed there was anything wrong with that cup of coffee. I've seen Alamo take many a cup to Peter."

"I jest wasn't taking any chances," Odom answered. "Alamo wasn't to be allowed to come near Peter with any device that could possibly do him injury. When I put the coffee to my lips to test it I knew right away

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there was a drug in it. That was all I needed to know—Alamo was guilty as hell!”

“You see, Mabel,” the sheriff went on, “he was a killer, as hard and as cruel as they come. But he wasn’t what you’d call a cold killer; his temperament was too hot, apt to boil over. He was a pretty good actor, but I figgered he was jest the type to give hisself away if cornered.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to drink another cup of coffee,” I said with a shudder. “When I think of the food I’ve consumed at Alamo’s table! And all the time, if I had made him mad enough, he could have poisoned my pudding and probably never turned a hair.”

“Nope, I reckon not.” Odom shook his head reflectively. “Alamo didn’t kill for jest a little ‘mad.’ Too shrewd for that. There’s men who’re both smart and plumb ruthless, but their judgment ain’t always the best. Sooner or later they trip. Alamo killed a feller in a quarrel over money once, and served a penitentiary sentence for it. He got off with his life and a two-year sentence. I checked with the penitentiary by telephone. They made him cook in the pen; liked him fine. It spoiled Alamo, though. Made him think he was too clever for the law.”

“Things certainly looked bad for Paris a while,” I said. “I couldn’t see how anyone besides either Paris, Peter, or Westie could have shot the bus driver and caused the wreck.”

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"Yeh," Odom agreed, "looked bad. But all along I felt the Admiral's reasons for murder wasn't strong enough. A feller don't kill without a mighty strong reason, not planned murder. Not unless you're a hardened killer, and Paris had no record of that sort.

"Most everybody on the mount come in for suspicion," he continued. "Westie, Peter, Sam, and your sleepy friend what you crippled. Being a sort of an artist like he is, I suspicioned he might be after the Goya. F.B.I. wanted him checked. Seems he's lived abroad a lot; record's incomplete. He admits the story of the missing picture was what attracted him to Palomar Lodge in the first place."

"I still don't believe he slept through all that thunder," I told Odom. "Do you?"

"We-ell," he said, and I didn't like the glint in his eye nor his over-casual tone of voice. "You've got to either accept his story or assume he tripped you deliberate, Mabel," he said. "You'd be a better judge of that than I would."

"Nonsense!" I was impatient with his humor and his implications. "He certainly isn't deaf," I said, "and in my opinion he'd never trip a woman older than Westie."

"I checked up on him a little," Odom admitted after he'd enjoyed a chuckle. "Doctor tells me dropping off to sleep like that is a sort of disease with him. Doctor thinks it's entirely possible he was doing jest what he said—sleeping."

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Odom got up. "Anyway," he said, "we've caught the criminal—killed him, rather." That still rankled, I saw. "The authorities in El Paso have notified us they're holding the painting, and that's about all that matters, I reckon, except the wedding."

"What wedding?"

"Peter and Westie. Tomorrow. They won't need me for that, I reckon."

"Wait, please," I begged. "What about Paris?"

"Be all right in a few months, I guess. Maybe need some skin grafting. Now relax and take care of yourself, Mabel. I've sure gotta be getting back to the herd."

"Wait a minute!" I demanded. "There's something else I wanted to ask you. For the moment I can't seem to remember. . . . Wait, those cows aren't missing you!"

"I don't know about that," he said over his shoulder as he started, "they don't talk much." He paused at the door just long enough for a parting shot. "That's one of the most agreeable traits of the cow, I reckon," he declared. "She don't know nothing, but she don't give a damn."

THE END

