

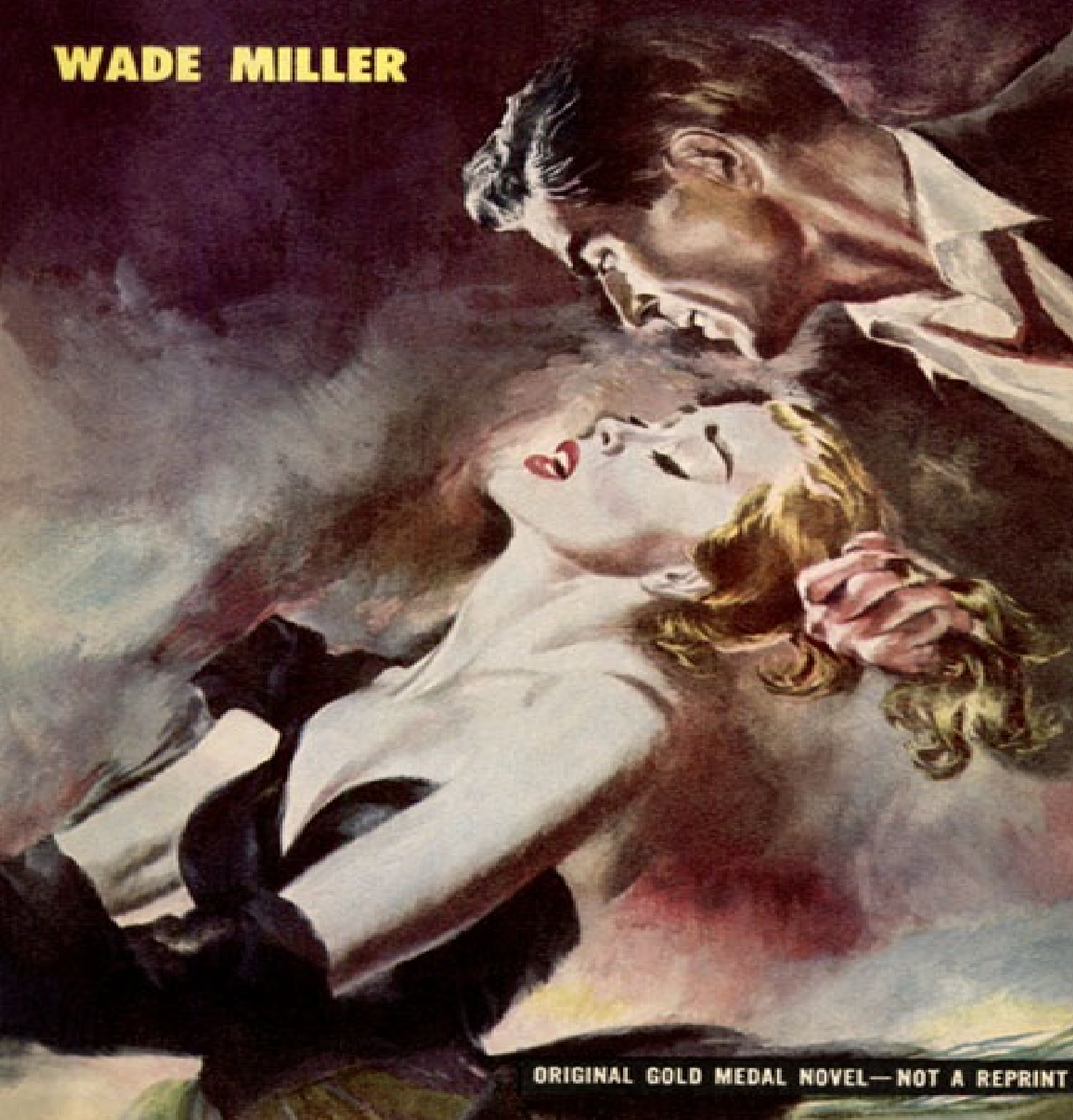
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An exciting new novel by the
author of "THE TIGER'S WIFE"



BRANDED WOMAN

WADE MILLER



ORIGINAL GOLD MEDAL NOVEL—NOT A REPRINT

Wade Miller

Branded Woman

CAY MORGAN ceased pretending to sleep as the huge Mexican airliner commenced circling through the tropic night for its landing at Mazatlán. Directly above her forward seat, the warning sign lighted up in two languages, advising her to fasten her safety belt and not to smoke.

A moment later, a handsome black-uniformed steward of the *Compañía Mexicana de Aviación* appeared from the pilot's compartment and hesitated alongside her, breathing her ever present aura of sandalwood. "If you will please fasten your seat belt," he requested in English. "The flight from Tijuana has been wonderfully smooth, has it not, señora?"

Cay looked up at him through her lashes. "Miss," she corrected him softly. Just past thirty, she grew vainer every year about her ability to make men perspire. She added, with a strange smile, "Perhaps this trip has been rougher than you suppose." The steward continued hurriedly along the aisle of the DC-4 to check on the other passengers.

She knew she was being watched but she didn't turn her head. She reached into her gray suede purse for her compact, briefly touching her tourist card, which told a few details—mostly falsified—about the American woman Miss Catherine Morgan. The tourist card allowed her to visit Mexico for six months, which she considered enough time for her present mission. Before closing her purse, she nudged her gun nearer to the top of the bag.

She had come to Mazatlán to kill a man. But now, with mirror, brush, and lip rouge, Cay concentrated on painting her soft wide mouth into its usual seductive shape. Only in her most lonely and self-pitying moments did she ever admit she might be merely striking instead of beautiful. Her small but ripely rounded body, sheathed for traveling in a wheat-colored gabardine suit, was constructed daintily in spite of the impudence of certain curves about the hips and bosom. Her flesh everywhere was so smoothly pale and fine of texture that pearls were naturally her favorite jewelry, almost a fetish. So long as her skin was not dimmed by a pearl's luster, Cay could say to herself, Yes, I am still young.

Despite the sultry poise of her figure, men noticed her hair first. It was technically blonde, but silver rather than gold, a hue once called platinum but which Cay herself fondly termed pearl blond. She wore it flowing to her shoulders so that it framed her piquant face, emphasizing the delicacy of her features. And over her forehead lay a thick straight curtain of pearl-blond bangs, almost to the arch of her brows. An exotic effect; but the men who'd had the misfortune to know her remembered longest her eyes. They were the sky-blue eyes of a born troublemaker, usually pale with blank innocence yet disquietingly capable of darkening in passion or anger.

She did not look like a woman planning murder; no one seeing her now would suppose that she could hate so long and so hard. She supposed that she could love the same way if she were ever given a worthy opportunity. Always her idol had been money, but she loved herself even more. She had lived through many a reckless enterprise but she had seldom surrendered jurisdiction over her own sleek body. Promises were cheap; she was not.

Having perfected her lips, Cay tilted the compact mirror to survey the plane seats behind her. Then she put the compact away grimly. Both of the men were still watching her. With automatic femininity she pulled her skirt more securely over her knees. Yet she knew the watching had nothing to do with her thighs; it had been too steady and too covert, all the way down the coast from Tijuana.

The big plane made sudden smooth contact with the airstrip and through her window she could see the dark ground race by, slowing gradually. Behind her the passengers stirred with relief and sudden gaiety. Cay began to gather her belongings without once looking over her shoulder.

One of the watchers sat only two rows in back of her. He was the Slavic-looking one, a small willowy young man, not much larger than she. He had yellow hair and his clothing was nondescript save for the fringed scarf of white silk thrown carelessly around his throat. The lids of his narrow slanted eyes hung constantly half closed, sleepily.

The other man sat stiffly upright at the rear of the ship. He appeared more dangerous because there was more of him, a tall gaunt body in a dark pin stripe suit. He held his hat in his lap, and a circlet of sandy hair fringed his bald head. The lack of expression on his wooden face, his impenetrable eye-like brown agates tokened long experience in waiting. His only movement was his methodical chewing of gum.

Yet Cay was more exhilarated than fearful as the DC-4 taxied to a stop. The passengers, Mexican and Americans, began their bustle of debarking and she rose to her feet. Keeping her pistol-heavy purse handy, she drew on long flaring gloves and from the baggage rack retrieved the short gray suede coat that matched her tam. With the coat masking the open purse in her left hand, she managed to be the last to leave the plane. The steward gave her a final nervous smile as she descended the steps. She was too busy trying to spot her shadowers to acknowledge it.

The warm night air, heavy and humid, weighed down upon her instantly, as if to prove that she had arrived in the Torrid Zone. It smelled of sea salt and tropical vegetation. She crossed the asphalt milling with passengers and baggage cars—safety in their numbers—to the airport building. It was a brand-new structure of white stucco and red roof tiles.

The yellow-haired Slav with the white scarf casually smoked a cigarette beneath a palm tree by the field entrance. She passed close to him, neither of them giving the other a glance. She was unable to locate the bald gum-chewing man, which worried her slightly.

No sooner had she entered the one-room air terminal than she was cornered by a plump taxi driver shirtsleeved and pressing his stained felt hat to his chest. “You—Mazatlán? Taxi? *Cinco pesos*—five pesos! Mazatlán?”

Her reply in Spanish only confused him until he realized that this blonde American woman spoke the language as fluently as he. Then they conversed more comfortably, Cay requesting that he get her baggage and offering ten pesos to have the taxi all to herself.

The driver plunged away with her luggage checks in his hand. Beyond him, through the window behind the melee at the baggage counter, she saw the slant eyes of the man with the scarf still sleeping, watching her.

Cay turned and sauntered through the rest-room door marked “*Damas*.” Once within this narrow stone-floored sanctuary she drew a breath of relief. At the far end of the rest room where the washbowls were, two Mexican women were freshening their make-up before the mirror. The large swing-away window beside them stood wide open. Cay pulled it nearly shut for the sake of privacy. Then she closed herself into a booth.

She heard the two Mexican women leave, chattering, as the DC-4 began roaring through its warm-up exercises out on the field. Most of the passengers on Flight 585 would continue inland to Guadalajara or Mexico City. But not the silk-scarved Slav or the tall gum-chewer; Cay felt sure of that. She took her pistol from her purse and checked it over carefully. It was fully loaded—six bullets—and its chamber spun smoothly, free of lint. It was a lovely nickel-finished pearl-handled weapon with a snub three inches of barrel: a .357 Magnum S&W revolver, the most powerful handgun in the world. At ten paces it could reduce a man’s skull to splinters. Cay smiled at the thought.

As she left the booth to go to the washbowls, she sensed something strange, as if disaster waited just outside the door. She piled purse and gloves on the ledge below the mirror and washed her hands, frowning slightly. Then it came to her, the thing she had noticed. The rest-room door she had entered from the air terminal was now bolted on the inside; since she hadn’t bolted it, then who...

Other eyes than her own gleamed in the mirror, sleepy slant eyes, a face floating over her shoulder. ~~She saw her own mouth drop open in surprise and horror. She had been stalked by a man into this most~~ private of places, a refuge that her woman's mind had considered absolute.

She didn't scream. She whirled to fight as she was dragged backward, away from her precious gun. But the white silk scarf was already bound around her throat, tightening. Outside, the airplane engines thundered to a crescendo that threatened to burst her head. She fought wildly with her knees and flailed out judo cuts with her hands and felt her blows land with terrifying weakness.

Then the room got too dim for fighting and she could only claw at the silk garrote at her throat, scrabbling with her fingers for the breath she couldn't find. Above her swam glimpses of the sleepy-eyed face, the open window through which the face had come, and flashes of red and ever deepening darkness. She fell finally into the darkness, which received her gently.

SHE COUGHED rackingly, then gagged at the impact of new air filling her lungs. The stone floor pressed coldly against her back and her eyes were watering badly. Cautiously through her damp lashes Cay focused up at the face above her.

The face had changed. Now the man was bald, his quizzical forehead and naked skull gleaming under the merciless fluorescent light from the rest room's ceiling. He still chewed his gum, but he was now so woodenly expressionless as he had been on the plane. Cay's eyes dropped to his shoulders, then followed down the dark pin-striped material of his arms. He was squatting beside her prone body. In his left hand he carried his hat; he was flexing the fingers of his right.

Cay whispered, "He took me by surprise, George."

His thin lips quirked with relief but his agate-brown eyes continued to gaze at her worriedly. He said in his flat voice, "You know, I wasn't counting on anything like this."

Cay sat up, made certain her bangs were in order, and wiped her watering eyes. George Hodd simply squatted there, saying nothing more. She said angrily, "If you'll think back to four days ago in Los Angeles, you'll recall that I hired you. You don't get hired by people without troubles."

Not stirring, George Hodd said, "You hired me as an investigator, Miss Morgan. Not as a bodyguard, not as a strong-arm lad. There's a big difference between having trouble and making trouble."

"I'll thank you with a bonus."

"I still don't like it. My business isn't supposed to include violence." He added, "Maybe you do."

"Oh, don't act so damn fatherly. I'll try to see that it doesn't happen again."

They both got to their feet. He didn't offer to help her. She surveyed the man who still lay on the floor, a bruise swelling the yellow hair behind his right ear, the white silk scarf trailing from his hand like a dead snake. Cay's mouth curled, and in a sudden access of pure viciousness she stooped and cuffed his pale unconscious face with her right hand. The single pearl in the ring on her third finger left a red dent in his cheek. She was glad to see it.

Conscious of Hodd's disapproving eyes, she sauntered to the mirror to see if her throat had been bruised by the scarf. It hadn't. "What did you hit him with, George? You did it nicely."

"I just hit him. You know I don't carry anything." He flexed his fingers again, then put on his hat and rubbed his knuckles slowly. "I think I may have sprained something a little."

She said caustically, "I presume you've been too worried to search him."

She knew better; Hodd was a thorough and competent man, despite his misgivings about her. He said, "Clothes labels from Mexico City. No passport or other papers. Assets, about a thousand pesos. According to the case of his pocket watch, his name's Jack Diki. Know of him?"

"No." Cay transferred the pesos from Diki's wallet to her own purse. She smiled. "That'll help pay your bonus, won't it, George? Did he talk to anyone here?"

"No. On the plane and here, he paid attention to no one but you. When you came in this place, I wandered around to the side. I saw him go through the window. I held off, waiting to hear of a disturbance, expecting you would handle him yourself."

Cay laughed softly. "I'm glad you think I'm capable."

"Capable?" Hodd shrugged distastefully. "Maybe dangerous is a better word, Miss Morgan. At any rate, I had to come in after him."

"Jack Diki," mused Cay, staring down at the sleeping baby face. "There must be some use to b

made of him. Obviously, he spotted me in Tijuana while I was trying to trace Valdes. Which seems to prove that Valdes is still important.”

“But not important enough, you tell me.”

“I’m only interested in the man at the top. Valdes is close to the top. Diki here is probably considerably less than Valdes.”

“It makes for a bad situation. Now, if you knew the name of this top man—if you even knew what he looks like...”

Cay chuckled. “You want high pay for easy work, don’t you? I’m beginning to regret hiring such a timid chap to help me find the Trader. Please snap out of it.”

Hodd said patiently, “We’ll get along better if you quit mistaking legality for timidity. I’ve got a license and a reputation to maintain. Furthermore, Diki spotted you. He didn’t spot me. Consider this a reference.”

“Or a rebuke, eh? But it proves you’re elected to do the legwork in Mazatlán. I’m spotted, you’re not. It’s that simple. I’ll go on into town and check into one of the tourist hotels. I believe there are three here. Later on tonight or in the morning, you get a room at the same hotel. But no one must know we’re acquainted, much less hunting together.”

Hodd glanced down at Diki. “All right. You want me to stick with him for a while?”

“Exactly. You’d better go now. Diki’s bound to come around pretty soon and I want you to be sure to find out where he goes. Perhaps directly to Valdes. That would save us a lot of time.”

Hodd chewed his gum contemplatively. “You’re the boss,” he said to Cay finally. “See you.” A second later he had folded his gaunt body through the window and was gone. She complimented herself again on picking a good man, all business. She was grateful to Hodd for his quiet negative virtues; he seemed to have no intentions of trying to paw her, of making sly suggestions about the hotel arrangements.

Cay collected her gloves and purse from the shelf below the mirror. She paused over Diki’s body. At first sight of him stretched out there, she had felt a little sorry for him, despite everything. His smooth face was so childlike and his small frame appeared so helpless, making her wonder what had ever turned such an everyday person into an assassin.

Then she thought of herself. Why was *she* out for blood? And the hate flooded up inside of her. She remembered that Jack Diki was part of the Trader. However far removed, he was part of him. Perhaps he was of no more consequence than a fingernail, but nevertheless...

For an instant she was ready to kill the helpless creature on the floor.

Instead she smiled broadly. She murmured, “Perhaps I should give him something to think about.” She didn’t mean Diki. But it was Diki’s smooth forehead that, crouching, she marked with her lipstick. She drew a blood-red letter T. Then she slipped out through the window and walked around the building to her waiting taxi.

A CARDBOARD “*Libre*” sign on its windshield was the only indication that the black Pontiac was a taxi. It hurtled along the highway and into the narrow one-way streets of Mazatlán with a gross disregard of property rights. To disguise her fears, Cay stuck a cigarette into her ivory holder and tried to smoke. She had a hard time lighting it. All the car’s windows were open to the muggy night air, and she couldn’t keep her eyes off the dark faces of the aggressive pedestrians who seemed intent on walking right through the speeding, honking taxi.

“You have a lovely old town,” she told him in Spanish.

“Very old, yes. But notice how modern the city, *señora*. No decaying museum, as some cities pride themselves on being to the *turistas*. Do you come to hunt or to fish?”

“To hunt, I believe.”

“Then be so kind as to beware in choosing a guide. The *boas* and *tigres* can be dangerous—and there are yet bandits in the hills on occasion.”

“*Gracias*. I have a modest ability with firearms.” She didn’t tell him that she had been called a bandit herself on occasion. She got a colorfully blurred impression of the peninsula city, a strolling yet bustling populace in shirt sleeves and cotton dresses. She saw as many Cadillacs as burros, much more glass brick and neon than adobe and iron grillework; flat roofs capping flat façades that rose directly from the high sidewalks, a silver crescent of ocean beach, surf surging toward the sea wall and a broad marble-benched esplanade.

This was the Paseo Olas Altas. The taxi driver parked before the starkly modern tower of the Hotel Freeman, eight of its eleven floors completed, and assisted Cay up to the second story, where the registration office was temporarily located in a guest room. With its commanding height and angular balconies, the Freeman loomed above the city like a great gray filing cabinet with all drawers open.

“I have no reservation, *señor*,” explained Cay with a doleful smile. “But I am alone, and surely only a small single room...”

“Please be reassured,” said the young man in charge. But he chewed his lip worriedly as he sat down on his stool and searched among the cards on the wooden table. Cay toyed with the postcard rack and looked wistful.

Five minutes later she found herself the lone occupant of Room 22 on the third floor, gazing amusedly around her quarters. Ranged about the clean tiled floor were the usual writing desk and chiffonier, a canvas deck chair, and three beds—two doubles and a single. Very good, she thought, so long as all this sleeping space doesn’t give George any bright ideas.

She hung her coat in the closet, pulled off her tam, gloves, and shoes, and explored. Both lock and bolt on the hall door worked efficiently. The bathroom contained a vast shower but no tub, and the transom to the air shaft was too small for even a midget to creep through. Since she had seen bottles of water racked in the hall outside, she deemed it safe to drink a glassful from the carafe on the bedstand.

The west end of the room was completely paned in glass, high French doors in the center opening onto a private balcony. Cay lingered out there, leaning on the low pipe-iron railing, letting herself melt into the beauty of the somnolent night. The pungent smell of the city was less obvious here, but the tang of the surf was sharp. A guitar strummed distantly, a man sang. She watched the couples drive along the curving promenade while taxi drivers waited patiently for them to tire. She listened to the faint chatter of shoeshine boys, for this was the tourist quarter, and to the north along the boulevard she could see the Hotel Belmar and the Banco de México and the Americanized *salones de cocteles*. Offshore flickered the lights of some anchored freighter, too large to navigate the harbor channel.

A sentimental lump formed in Cay's throat—until she noticed the friendly arrangement of the hotel balconies. Each concrete platform was inset slightly from its left-hand neighbor, but it would require no feat of daring to traverse completely the front of the hotel by the balcony route. And her balcony was attainable from either side.

The lump in her throat changed to a choking memory of Diki's white silk scarf. She whirled back into her room and closed the French doors, testing the lock. It was small comfort, but she decided any sounds of its being forced would be enough to awaken her. Her blue eyes pale and cold now, she placed her .357 Magnum within reach on the single bed and began to unpack.

Her unpacking was both routine and ritual. Experience had taught her the folly of unpacking any apparel beyond the moment's need. But first of all she brought forth these objects that transformed wherever she was into her home. The table runner of Madeira lace went across the chiffonier. On the table she set her brass incense burner and ceremoniously lighted a cone of fragrance. The scent of sandalwood began to fill the hotel room. Its seductive odor already permeated everything she owned; she used no other perfume.

She wound her Swiss traveling clock, set it ahead an hour, to Mazatlán time, and placed it on the bedstand. Then back to the chiffonier with two gilt-framed silhouettes, a man's profile and a woman's, which she had bought in a secondhand shop in Rome. Her father and mother, Cay pretended. That was the way she remembered them—as shadow people. Her dead mother had been American; her runaway father, English. Cay's own past was so misted in her own lies and changes of name that she could scarcely remember any true details.

Except for the Trader, five years ago...

Her face had been more angelic then, framed in golden-blonde hair without the bangs. She had been in Morocco, on her own, as always. Her business had involved buying a collection of antique jewelry from a displaced Austrian family and smuggling it to England for sale to an art dealer there.

For such profits there was competition. She was warned against consummating the deal by a skull-faced Spanish pawnbroker claiming to be an agent for the Trader. She had never heard the name before. "Pet," the pawnbroker had crooned unctuously, "I beg of you to let my friend the Trader fend off those gimcracks. We have the proper facilities for distributing them quietly—everywhere we have representatives. Please retire from this delicate business like a good girl."

"Why, señor? I'm not a good girl. And you can't do worse than kill me."

"Can't we?" the pawnbroker had replied.

She had been a good enough girl to slip the jewel collection to her outlet in Liverpool without being caught by customs men or competition. But she had answered her door in London one evening to find the Spanish pawnbroker standing there, and a sickly-sweet cloth had been clasped over his mouth and nose, and his oily voice had said, "Easy, pet, the Trader wants to teach you your manners" and she had awakened the next morning in a stinking alley in Lambeth, sobbing with pain.

She had known then that the Trader could do worse to her than kill her, for he had done it.

And she had never seen him, or heard his voice, or known his name. It was a phantom she hated, yet she determined to kill him for what he had inflicted on her. But as she made her way in the world she learned how ghostly his elusiveness could be. The results of his illicit barter appeared everywhere, but the creature himself remained unknown or unrecognizable to his markets, even to his own dealers and appraisers and agents. She might have seen him many times without realizing it. Every rumor she tracked down had ended in grinding frustration.

Until last week...

Cay discovered she was sitting tensely on the foot of the single bed, one hand pressed flat over her revolver, lost in heated reverie. She stood up angrily and got the brandy flask from her suitcase and poured a drink into one of the pair of crystal goblets she always carried with her. She sipped it, the

drew the draperies across the glass-paned west end of the room and stripped off her clothes. She padded into the bathroom, bound up her mane of pale blonde hair, and took a relaxing shower. She wondered where Diki the strangler had gone, and if Hodd could follow him. She was counting a great deal on Diki's providing her with a further trail; the slant-eyed youth had proved to be a lucky break. She didn't expect Hodd to report in very soon, probably not before morning. Then she thought about what a pretty town Mazatlán seemed to be, its quaint crooked streets and warm-lit windows and arm-linked couples on that romantic esplanade. Suddenly, toweling her lovely body, she burst into tears.

She was lonely and sorry for herself.

She pampered her dejection, sniffing occasionally as she combed out her hair and finished her glass of brandy.

Replacing the brandy flask in her suitcase, she came across the ragged newspaper photograph that had brought her to Mexico. Although she knew it by heart, she studied it afresh through her lorgnette, a dainty silver device with a single pearl set in the handle. Lately she had needed an aid for close work, but she would rather be beheaded than wear spectacles. The lorgnette suited her taste perfectly. When it was necessary to use her lenses publicly, she could pass them off as an affectation instead of weakness.

She had been sunning herself by a swimming pool in Palm Springs, as alert for prey as an animal at a water hole, when she had first discovered the picture in the Examiner. It showed some box seats at last Sunday's bullfights in Tijuana, four Los Angeles socialites smiling in the foreground.

But Cay's eyes had narrowed at an unidentified man in the second row who had not realized his news photo was being taken. He was intent on the action below in the bull ring, his small movie camera masking his right eye and cheek. Yet the visible half of the tight-skinned skull-like face was unmistakably that of the Spanish pawnbroker.

Cay had immediately abandoned all her other schemes. After hiring a muscular assistant in Los Angeles, she had flown to Tijuana, where she learned that the Spaniard had stayed one night before proceeding to Mazatlán. He was now using the name Eduardo Valdes.

Five days behind him—she hadn't been so near in five years. If Valdes had remained in Mazatlán, then something in this city greatly interested the Trader. Indeed, wherever Valdes was, there the Trader himself was likely to be. Older and colder trails had taught her that much. The Trader was in Mazatlán... Her hands clenched in vicious prayer, crumpling the newspaper clipping. At this moment he might be taking a nightly stroll on the boulevard outside; he might be as close to her as the roof overhead and she wouldn't know. He might be any name on a hotel register, any face in a passing taxi of any nationality.

Valdes knows him, Cay told herself for the millionth time. Valdes can be made to take me to him somehow. She smoothed the clipping and put it away.

She was standing before the chiffonier mirror and she turned to confront her naked image. She looked at her small waist, her full breasts, her smooth throat. Finally she looked at her unsmiling face. So beautiful, Cay thought. I would have been so beautiful.

Suddenly she raised her hand and pushed up her long pearl-blonde bangs, disclosing the high sweep of her brow. Abruptly she was ugly. She stood staring, breath held, torturing herself anew with what had been branded on her forehead.

Five years had smoothed the scar's puckered edges, but the deep brand of the T was still gullied into her skin like a pale headless crucifix.

“WELL, I’M REGISTERED in the room right over your head,” said Hodd, sinking down into the canvas deck chair. “I think we share the same air shaft.” He mopped his bald head and gave a dejected chuckle. “I think I’ve been slighted—my room only sleeps four.”

“What are you doing here so soon?” Cay asked between her teeth. “What happened to Diki?”

“The airport people got curious about their locked-up toilet. They found Diki before he woke up. Police came and Diki went—off to the local *calabozo*.”

Cay swore. In French, like a lady.

Hodd got the drift. “I agree. I hung around the jail to make sure he was salted away. For twenty pesos the turnkey told me he’ll stay salted till Monday morning, at least. Nothing much happens here on Sunday.”

She paced the long room, thinking. She was still barefoot, but at Hodd’s cautious knock she had flung on her negligee of deep-green silk. It was sleeveless but with a short cape that covered her shoulders; three buttons held it fastened across her stomach, and the rest was left to skill. Her thigh appeared through the silken folds whenever she paced by Hodd, and he would politely avert his eyes. He unwrapped a fresh stick of gum and said, “I followed through as far as I dared.”

“I realize that. Your news isn’t all bad, George. I think Diki was operating on his own, attacking me. We know he didn’t have time to contact anyone else. So if he’s out of circulation... well, perhaps we can find Valdes before Monday. Until Diki is turned loose, Valdes won’t know I’m in town.”

“It’s a big town to comb. Fifty thousand, anyway.”

“The depots will still be open. Airport, and try the bus lines to neighboring villages, and the Mexican Southern Pacific has a terminal here.”

“Already checked the airport. Valdes hasn’t left by plane.”

Cay gave him a rewarding smile. “Also cover the hotels. And the tourist air and travel agencies may be open tomorrow. Banks will have to wait until Monday. So will the telephone company, and light and power—in case he’s rented a house here. I’ve already looked in the hotel phone book. What’ll stick us is if he’s staying with friends. But we can try the camera shops to see if he’s bought movie film... Here, divide some of this routine up.”

“You’re the boss,” Hodd said. After making some meticulous entries in his pocket notebook, he left her.

Alone she swiftly donned fresh underclothes and a black linen dress, bare-armed, high-necked. She left her legs bare also and slipped her feet into high-heeled clogs with broad black straps.

Regretfully she pinned up her conspicuous hair and wrapped it completely in a polka-dot beach bandanna, even swathing the bangs on her forehead. The result was pleasingly piratical. After darkening her brows and lashes, Cay concluded she might get by as a very pale Mexican. At least she wouldn’t appear incandescent in a crowd. And she knew that, after a few more conversations, she would have the *mazateco* accent down pat.

With gun, tourist card, and pesos fitted into her black box purse, she set out into the languorous night. A taxi dropped her downtown at the Parque Revolución just as the cathedral clock tolled ten. She caught some of the camera shops before they closed down their iron screens and then, leaving them rest till tomorrow, she returned to the Parque Revolución. The marble benches lining the tiled walks of the city’s main *plazuela* were pinkish-brown and dedicated like tombstones; the one Cay chose allowed her to sit through the *cortesía de Luis Guillermo Hajar 1948*. Behind her the stark façade of the Palacio Federal watched as darkly as she did across the park to where a crowd was streaming for

from the fortress gates of the Palacio Municipal; the basketball game in the city hall's patio had just ended. For a while the pushcarts of the shrimp, oyster, and coconut vendors did a brisk business and then the crowd thinned. There was no sign of Valdes.

The *plazuela* drowsed under its laurel trees. A jukebox still played fitfully from the refreshment bar beneath the bandstand; to the north of the bandstand's filigreed cupola reared the orange and blue spires of the cathedral, so high that their two neon crosses seemed to swim among the stars. The top-heavy busses vanished to their garages, the slurring scuff of huaraches and the clip-clop of horse carriages died away. A khaki-clad policeman, armed with pistol and loaded swagger stick, eyed Cay thoughtfully, and when the cathedral clock struck midnight she somberly got up and walked back to her hotel.

She was showering again when, like an echo of her own brooding, she heard Hodd's voice say, "No luck." She whirled—but his voice had spoken to her down the air-shaft. She reached up and knocked three times on the open transom to signify she'd understood. Between the cool sheets of the single bed, she fell asleep concocting further plans for the hunt.

Early next morning she set Hodd to watching masses at the cathedral. Still wearing the black linen frock and polka-dot bandanna, she breakfasted in the baronial dining room of the Hotel Belmar and then resumed her search on the hard leather seat of an *araña*. This kind of tiny black gig, with flared fringed roof and drawn by one small horse, seemed the most popular and inexpensive transportation in Mazatlán. Cay shrewdly chose one with a semblance of rubber on its two great wheels; to the driver's growing bewilderment she directed him back and forth through the Sunday silence of the city, exploring every street. Occasionally she dismounted into the blazing sunlight to investigate a cantina or patio café, or to converse with a sidewalk vendor or a street sweeper. She learned nothing... and with tomorrow's release of Diki, her search would be made doubly dangerous. She ate the main meal of the day, the *comida corrida*, at an ancient restaurant on Calle Sixto Osuna, and then discovered that the entire overheated populace had retired indoors for siesta. Only the black buzzards kept vigil, soaring circling omens in the blue-white sky.

At last the mustached *araña* driver eyed his strange passenger wearily. "Is there not some place of interest we could visit where my sorrowful beast may rest for a few moments only? A view of the lighthouse, perhaps, or our lovely cemetery, or the *corrida de toros*?"

"*Corrida de toros*?" Cay sat upright, seizing his arm. "Here in Mazatlán? At the hotel I was assured the nearest arena was three hundred miles away, in Guadalajara."

"Bah, they don't know everything, these hotels! Mazatlán may not observe the spectacle of the bulls with regularity, but at this very moment, in the arena on Calzada Gabriel Leyva North progresses a benefit for the school of—"

"You must take me there immediately! No—first to the hotel."

At the Freeman, she slipped a hasty note under Hodd's door, praying he'd return soon: "Bullfight after all! Calzada G. Leyva N. Cover me." Cay realized she was perhaps too elated at the resurrection of this lead that her earlier information had forced her to discard. But the elusive Valdes was a Spaniard; she had originally discovered him through a bullfight in Tijuana; as an *aficionado* of both bulls and cameras, he must surely be unable to resist a look at Mazatlán's *corrida*.

The *araña* bounced her across the city again, through its outskirts of thatched and tin-roofed shanties, stately palms and motherly papaya trees standing sentry for the poor. Cay impulsively pressed a fifty-peso note into her driver's hand for his brilliant suggestion of the bullfight. It was also a thank offering to the goddess of chance. The rickety horse trotted along the endless causeway across mud flats and estuaries of the bay; Cay saw an old walled cemetery and a hill of army barracks, but no stadium hove into view.

"Have you more speed?" she asked, fidgeting. "The afternoon passes."

“It is not necessary. Please see ahead—the *corrida de toros*.”

Cay’s heart sank. “Mother of God!” she murmured. “Do *mazatlanos* dare to term this a bullfight? For within the scrubby grove of cottonwood trees rose no high-tiered commercial arena, but merely a split-rail corral surrounded by a gay throng of Mexicans who blocked her view.

“A parish fiesta. But there are bulls,” rationalized the driver meekly. “Skillful bulls, since they are never allowed to be killed. However, if the generous lady doesn’t foresee excitement enough—”

“I am here, so I shall look. Have the goodness to wait. Later we shall discuss this subject further.” At a gate in the barbed-wire fence she paid a peso and fifty centavos admission to a matronly Mexican ensconced behind a card table. Within the larger enclosure she elbowed her way through the crowd until she was standing by the rail fence.

Cay told herself that Valdes would never attend this *pachanga*, this whistle-stop exhibition—never. The *toreros* in the dusty corral were merely dungareed adolescents, scampering playfully between the horses of a half-dozen *vaqueros* in straw sombreros, who cantered around the ring, jostling with the spectators and swinging their *reatas* proudly. From an adjoining pen two men on foot belabored with stout clubs the hindquarters of an old bull, one of four.

The bull made a sudden bound into the corral, raising a shout from the spectators, but then he stood placidly considering his determined enemies. He was dull of horn and wise of eye; aside from his bulk, he looked anything but ferocious.

The youthful matador in a faded but conventional costume of purple and orange stepped forward boldly and flapped his tarnished gold cape for the bull’s attention. From the far side of the corral the three-piece band struck up a rollicking air. After further consideration, the old bull lunged forward playfully. The matador scrambled aside wildly, drawing another delighted shout from the crowd. The bull stopped to survey all these noisy people; he seemed to shrug.

Cay could only smile sadly. Another time she might have enjoyed this simple earthbound spectacle. But not today, not without Valdes. With a perfunctory glance around, she prepared to turn away. And then she saw him.

Opposite her, a high narrow platform had been built to overhang the corral fence. One end of the platform was supported by the bole of a cottonwood tree, and at this end sat the band, the tuba player actually straddling the tree’s crotch. The raised platform held some castoff chairs and benches, choice seats for those who came early.

No *aficionada* herself, Cay would never understand the forces that had caused Eduardo Valdes to secure an early seat at this affair. But there he sat in mid-air, his movie camera to his eye, eager for action below. Cay sucked in her breath, making a savage hissing sound. She withdrew slightly behind a fence post and, eyeing the quarry she had stalked so long, she felt her forehead burn feverishly in the shape of its disfiguring scar.

Valdes, who knew the Trader...

He hadn’t changed so much in five years. He looked a bit plumper in his white suit and probably there were fewer oily curls beneath his Panama hat, but his dark sunken-cheeked face was the kind that never changed, not even in death.

A tiny hand grabbed Cay’s. “*El toro! El toro!*” squealed a ragged little boy, pointing excitedly. The bull had found a loose rail and was shouldering his way out of the corral to join the audience. People scurried away, amid screams and shouts, and the *vaqueros* galloped lazily after the escaped beast, *reatas* poised.

Cay retreated, taking the little boy with her. She wasn’t afraid of a mere bull, but the sudden exodus from the fence had left her exposed to Valdes’ gaze if he should glance that way. She was glad of her foresight in covering her shining hair. She seated herself in the shade of a huge canopy hung within the barbed-wire enclosure. A feast was being prepared here to follow the entertainment. She

bought some orange soda for herself and the boy, and loitered among the tables, waiting for Valdes to leave. ~~The shadows were lengthening; he wouldn't be able to use his camera much longer.~~

As soon as the bull, festooned with ropes, was dragged helplessly back into the corral, Valdes buckled his camera into its carrying case. He rose and picked his way gingerly along the high platform toward the steps. Cay turned abruptly and joined in conversation with the women at their cooking. She gave Valdes a full two minutes to make the roadside gate and then, trembling with impatience, followed after him.

But seeing Valdes again only turned her frantic with frustration. He was handing a large bill to a *araña* driver—*her* driver, the only transportation in sight—and swinging up to the seat. She wanted to rush into the road, shout her protests at fate, hold Valdes back until she had an opportunity to follow.

But there was no opportunity. The *araña* was fifty yards away now, rolling at a trot. The driver, feeling guilty about the bullfight's lack of magnificence, fearing perhaps for the exorbitant fee she had already paid him, had allowed himself to be bribed.

Cay stood flat-footed and watched Valdes' back disappear down the causeway toward Mazatlán. She could feel the tears of rage on her cheeks.

SOME OF the Mexicans were regarding Cay's obvious distress with curiosity. Summoning her most pleading smile, Cay singled out an affluent-looking gentleman and headed toward him. She intended to ask for a bicycle or a horse or even a telephone to call a taxi.

But before she could speak, brakes squealed on the highway behind her. Then came a piercing whistle, and from the back window of a shabby blue Chevrolet, George Hodd beckoned to her. To the affluent Mexican's dismay, she whirled and ran for the road. Her knees weak with hope, she scrambled through the door Hodd was holding open.

"Miss Morgan, I just spotted him!" Hodd said, considerably excited for him. "Got your note, I just passed an *araña* back there, and who should be riding in it but—"

"I know," she panted. "I found Valdes and then lost him. Get this taxi going! Go right by him. She slid to the floor, out of sight but still talking. "Tell me when it's safe. There's a big intersection coming up, with a police sentry box. I saw a vacant *araña* there. If it's still there, I'll take that and take Valdes when he comes along. This taxi would be too conspicuous shadowing a horse and buggy, so you keep way back—but handy for any showdowns."

"You're safe," Hodd said. Cay popped up onto the seat again and peered out the rear window. Valdes was no longer in sight on the causeway. Hodd tapped her arm. He said dubiously, "I don't know what you have in mind when you say showdown, Miss Morgan, but—"

She laughed excitedly. "I realize my pagan tendencies frighten you, George, but I really don't intend to kidnap him right here on the open road. I'm sorry I can't, but Mazatlán does have a police force and I shouldn't care to be locked up with Diki—not again. Don't worry, I merely want to confab with Valdes quietly." Which was a half-truth.

At the intersection of Calzada Leyva and Avenida Angela Peralta stood a lemon-colored kiosk, Caseta de Policía No. 3. By the curb lingered a black *araña* whose driver came fully awake at the sight of Cay's peso notes. However, she did not present him with any in advance. Hodd and his driver parked a quarter mile down the road, where the first vestiges of Mazatlán's residential section began.

Cay waited for nearly fifteen minutes in a ramshackle produce stand before Valdes' *araña* came rolling by. It turned west beneath the slender pines of the divided Avenida Peralta, apparently intending to return to the city by the roundabout seaside route. Cay signaled to Hodd, boarded her own *araña*, and instructed her driver to follow at a discreet distance.

Soon the leisurely pursuit began to gnaw at her confidence. Not that Valdes ever looked back or displayed the least suspicion; rather, from his meandering course and his driver's conversational gestures toward the reed-bound lagoons, he appeared to be going nowhere at all. Cay groaned, reining in her impatience. The Spanish pawnbroker might behave like a sight-seer, but, like the pelican winging over the marshes, he would have to light sometime. Now and then she caught a glimpse of Hodd's taxi. He was paralleling her course, wherever possible, on hilly side streets to the south.

Five-thirty; the sun rested nearly on the horizon as she reached the red-cragged ocean shore; here, abruptly, began the Paseo Olas Altas with its smooth stretch of beach and sudden façade of civilization. Cay clenched her fists in exasperation as she saw Valdes carelessly trundling along the esplanade, toward the Hotel Freeman. She wondered if irony was leading him to her own door. Among the girders of the Freeman's uncompleted top story buzzards roosted ominously, waiting as she did.

But Valdes continued south on the curving boulevard and his *araña* began the climb of Cerro de Vigía, Lookout Hill, which guarded the harbor mouth. Cay halted her carriage until Hodd's taxi pulled alongside. "Wait for me at the hotel," she told him. "There aren't enough roads on that hill for the

parade.”

Halfway up Cerro del Vigía the walled residences dwindled away, leaving the upper slopes sagebrush and gnarled pine trees. One of the highest homes stood gloomily uninhabited, a fire-gutted Tudor mansion. Beyond this the streets gradually merged into a single graveled scenic drive circling the bluffs at the tip of the city’s peninsula.

Rounding a loop of road, Cay again came in view of her former *araña* and driver, halted by the cliff edge. Valdes was gone. But a path led down over the lip of the bluff to one of the many *glorieta* small semicircular balconies, that studded this side of the peninsula.

“Pass on,” Cay commanded her driver. “I will enjoy the view from the next *glorieta*.” She turned her face away, hoping she wouldn’t be recognized by Valdes’ driver. Apparently she wasn’t; his eyes were drowsily watching an approaching bicyclist.

Anxiously, Cay dismounted a hundred feet farther on and hurried down the ramp of another *glorieta*. These balustraded balconies of stone, man’s addition to nature’s erratic rock formations, had been built solely for the contemplation of nature’s awesomeness. Far below raged the white-faced angry surf; westward lay the golden sheet of the Pacific, stretching to the very rim of the sun. But Cay could see nothing from the first rectangular platform.

A jut of rock blocked her view of the neighboring *glorieta*, which Valdes presumably occupied. Valdes... and who else? She thought surely that he had come to this lonely place for a rendezvous. She scrambled down the steps to the next lower balcony.

She drew back against the rough cliffside, descending no farther. Now she could see Valdes. He stood on the bottommost platform of his *glorieta*, hands clasped behind his rump, looking out at the sea as if he owned it. Cay swallowed a cry of disappointment. Valdes was alone. He was simply watching the sun go down.

Seeking solace, Cay squinted at her wrist watch. Not quite six o’clock; perhaps the theoretic appointment was for six sharp. She waited. Valdes perched his camera case on the waist-high balustrade and ceremoniously lit a cigar. Smoke wreathing his head, he turned—to look up and across to where she stood.

“Señorita,” he called with a smile.

Cay went rigid. But there was no obliterating her presence; her face and arms gleamed too pale in the dimming sunlight. To retreat would have been to admit her interest in him. So she played stranger, glancing down his way scornfully, then gazing off toward the ocean.

Valdes made her a gay little bow. “Don’t pretend, please,” he said. “I know you’re there just as you know I’m here. Have you enjoyed our pointless excursion, pet?”

Her choked throat wouldn’t have allowed her to reply even had she been able to think of the word.

Valdes chuckled in that liquid way she remembered. “Yes, I am aware. Moreover, I believe I’m even aware of who you are, pet. Or who you were five years ago...” With an indolent wave he turned away to admire the last red streaks of the sunset.

Through the shock of surprise, Cay’s brain sorted out vague ideas. She found herself unsnapping her purse, extracting her gun. To her right a brushy ledge of rock made a precarious path nearly to Valdes’ *glorieta*. Then one long step over space and she could gain the platform above him, blocking his ascent. The drivers on the road overhead could not see either of them and were probably dozing. Perhaps with a gun in his plump back, Valdes would change his insultingly airy attitude to a more informative mood.

But before she could move, she heard a faint sound below, a musical chiming like a fairy tune. Valdes heard it too and spun around to face something behind him, something out of sight to Cay.

A shadow—in the fast fading light that was all she could make out, the arm shadow striking like a snake at Valdes’ vest pocket, the tiny knife shadow withdrawing and vanishing.

Then the only movement on the *glorieta* was the white-suited form of Valdes. His outflung arm knocked his camera off the balustrade into space. When his hands returned to his chest, he staggered and buckled slowly to the stone floor of the balcony. He made no cry and, finally, no movement.

For the second time that afternoon Cay stood helpless, watching her priceless quarry slip away from her. But this time Eduardo Valdes had gone where she could not follow.

A MOMENT LATER Cay had vanished from her *glorieta*; only her high-heeled clogs and her purse lay in a shadowy corner of the balustrade. But a chance watcher from the rumbling sea below might have gazed upward at a curious sight. Across the scowling face of the cliff there crept, step by step, a barefoot woman in a modish black frock, its skirt held high on her shapely legs. The same hand that kept her skirt free of her legs carried a pearl-handled revolver. The ledge was narrow; as she advanced carefully, Cay leaned her body toward the cliff, her free hand constantly maintaining a grasp on the flimsy brush and roots that sprouted from between the sheer rocks. No fear glimmered in her intent eyes—even during that tortured moment when she was forced to round a fat sprawling cactus which she didn't dare cling—and when the rough ledge came to a precipitous end, she made a short leap to the railing of the other *glorieta*.

A quick look around, pistol ready, assured her that she was alone. The shadow killer of Valdes had not lingered. This *glorieta* was bordered on one side by a thick growth of sagebrush through which descended a steep but usable dirt path. Now she could understand how the knifer had reached Valdes without being seen by either her or the victim. But she could not understand the strange soft chiming she had heard immediately before the murder.

Cay padded down the cold stairs to the lower balcony where the dead body lay. The skull faced her and stared upward at her and the first faint traces of stars in the sky. She bent and commenced ransacking the pockets of the white suit, regretting only that this dead lump of flesh under her prying hands represented the probable failure of her plans. How was she to find the Trader without Valdes?

As she searched for some scrap of information that might rescue her mission of vengeance, she fastidiously avoided the wound in Valdes' chest. Surgically neat, it had bled scarcely at all. Just below the breastbone, apparently an upward thrust into the heart itself. The assassin knew his business.

Who? She wondered if the Trader had killed Valdes, for some reason of his own. Then she shook her head slowly at that theory. The Spanish pawnbroker had been the Trader's trusted aide for many years. And the circumstances—so open to chance, almost impulsive... Did the Trader have another enemy in Mazatlán besides herself?

She found the letter in Valdes' brassbound wallet; it was all she found of any value to her. It was typewritten in English. The envelope was gone, so there was no telling where it had been mailed, but it was dated less than two weeks before. Holding it close in the gathering dusk, she read; "My dear Eduardo: As outlined in previous note, events have bettered. Our concluding arrangements must be made by 9 December. Your presence in Mazatlán before that time I consider vital, certainly, and I shall leave it to you to summon Diki or one of the others similarly talented. Let me impress upon you—by no means underestimate the size and urgency of this coup. Until that happy day—"

It was signed with a penciled "T."

Cay pressed the letter between her hands for a moment before she tucked it in her dress pocket. She had never before handled anything that she knew had been touched by the Trader. The letter was the link between them. She was getting nearer. The tone of the message left no doubt in her mind; the Trader himself was in Mazatlán or nearby. He intended to accomplish something by December ninth or next Sunday. That he had summoned Valdes and Diki and perhaps others gave exciting indication that sizable profits were involved in his mysterious project. Although his illicit enterprises reached to many parts of the world, the Trader involved as few persons as possible in each transaction. It was safer that way.

Cay rose to her feet, unwilling to leave Valdes when she'd learned so little, but fearing that he

araña driver might come in search of his passenger. And there remained the risky ledge to recross before the light got any worse. But, remembering the motion-picture camera, she glanced curiously over the balustrade from where it had fallen toward the noisy surf below.

Curiosity had its reward. The strap of the camera's case had hooked on a sagebrush limb about a yard below the broad railing. Conscious of the hastening moments, Cay leaned over the balustrade and felt her stomach. Reaching down as far as she could without losing her balance, she painstakingly fished the camera up again.

She paused to perform one last act, for which she had brought her lipstick in her dress pocket. She knelt beside Valdes and drew a large red T on his forehead.

The ledge across the cliff seemed even narrower in the gloom, and the stolen camera slung from her shoulder knocked about uncomfortably. But she regained her own *glorieta* without discovery. Brushing off her feet, she slipped into her clogs and replaced gun and lipstick in her purse as she trotted up the steps to the roadway.

Her driver had lighted the twin oil lanterns on his *araña*. He clucked in relief as she appeared on the other side of the night. "Ay, señora, another moment and I would have come in search of you."

"I was entranced by the quality of the sunset and the waves," Cay told him, congratulating herself on her timing. She climbed up through the back of the gig, and when the seat had been folded down behind her she said, "I became frightened with the dark. No doubt I'm foolish, but I imagined that other eyes were watching me. A man, perhaps..." She let it dangle like a question.

The driver laughed gallantly, turning his horse. "That is an experience to which a woman such as you must have grown accustomed. But tonight, no."

"Then no one passed you on the road?"

"No one." He hesitated, and Cay wondered if he had noticed her acquisition of a movie camera during her visit to the *glorieta*. "Unless, of course, you refer to the bicyclist."

Cay tried to recall. Just before their halt at the *glorieta*, someone had bicycled by the *araña*. But she had been concentrating too hard on the pursuit of Valdes to notice any details. And although her driver had spoken of the bicyclist in the masculine gender, she soon found that he wasn't positive the rider had been man, woman, or child. "In the dazzle of the sunset, señora..."

Rolling downhill toward the lights of the Paseo Olas Altas, they passed Valdes' *araña*, the driver fast asleep but waiting. This time he obviously had not been paid beforehand. Cay wondered how soon he would go looking for his passenger.

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