

JOHNSON

SHEILA goes to RENO

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*Sheila
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Reno*

By

LATIFA JOHNSON



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Chapter 1

To my husband Lee Roy and my seven
children, Louise, Gregory, Kenneth,
George, Virginia, Mary and Robert

To your friend,
a good
Latifa.

Chapter 1

THE HOT sun beat down on New York on a late-August Saturday afternoon of 1948. Many fortunate New Yorkers had left the city for the summer months. But those who remained tried to combat the heat in the best possible way.

Central Park, with its shrubbery, bright green grass, and summer trees, was crowded with men, women, and children who availed themselves of every shady spot. On the East Side of New York, firemen played a hose of cold water on youngsters. Boys in their swimming trunks and small girls in cotton or muslin bloomers pranced around in that welcome relief from the heat. Mothers watched from stoops and windows, as if wishing they, too, could don bathing suits and join the children.

Along the hot pavements, men trudged, shirt collars open, perspiration streaming down their faces, and trousers damp and wrinkled against their legs. Wall Street, that Saturday afternoon, looked gloomy without the vast multitudes of people on the streets; all office buildings were closed.

In the Taylor flat on the top floor of a four-story, red brick building on West 116th Street, Jim Taylor, a heavy-set man in

his late fifties, felt as if he were going to pass out. He was sitting in the large, cheerful kitchen by one of the screened windows. The only stitch of clothing on his body was his blue-and-white striped rayon shorts. He was drinking a tall glass of cold beer and grumbling in a coarse voice. On the window sill close by was a small gray washbasin holding a chunk of ice. Every few minutes he wet a face towel by laying it on the ice. Then he would rub it over his flushed face, neck, and chest.

"Edna, I feel as if I was sitting over steaming hot water — how I wish it was winter," he grumbled to his wife. She was sitting at the long white enamel-topped table preparing potato salad for dinner. With a deft movement of her fingers, she chopped celery and minced onions.

A slender woman of medium height, she looked cool and crisp despite the heat. A light, blue-flowered plastic apron covered her cotton print dress. Her slightly grayed, dark-brown hair was worn in an upsweep. Her eyes were a clear blue.

She glanced over at her husband and shook her head, with a slight smile on her lips. "Jim, dear," she said gently, "if it was winter you would complain about the cold. And I wish you would stop putting that ice water on your head and chest. It isn't good for you."

"Who cares if it's good for me or not? I like it. You know I'm not well. My back hurts, I have pains in my legs, and my heart's no good."

"I know you're not well. You remind me of it enough."

"I'm sorry if I complain so much."

"Drinking so much beer isn't going to help you any, Jim, and your stomach looks as if it was going to burst like a balloon. I know that you won't feel like eating dinner."

"Dinner? Who the hell wants to eat in this heat?" he retorted sharply.

Edna smiled at him and shook her head. "Just because it's hot doesn't mean that the people in New York have to starve."

Jim chuckled. "I guess I'm in a bad mood today, Edna. Sometimes I wonder how you and the children put up with me."

Edna did not answer. She let her thoughts drift back to the man he used to be. *Poor darling Jim! How hard he used to work when the children were small. He was so strong, so jolly. Just*

because he hasn't worked for a long time, the children think he is lazy. But I know all the good points he has and I still love him dearly.

Bringing six children into the world and raising them had been a difficult task for Edna. She was forty-four to her husband's fifty-seven.

The subway was crowded and Sheila Taylor had to stand. She clutched an overhead strap with one hand while, with the other, she held on to her white pocketbook and a long brown cardboard box. Her tall slender body swayed back and forth as the train rocked forward. At 116th Street, she pushed her way through the crowd and stepped out on the platform. She hurried up the stairs to the street, her white linen dress that had been immaculate earlier, now wrinkled and damp.

Sheila's figure attracted attention in any crowd. Proud of her tall, slim height, she walked with a slight swaying of her hips. Men turned, stared and whistled, and Sheila's conceit mounted. She did not resemble her sisters or brothers. Her naturally wavy, honey-colored hair reached to her shoulders, and her large, deep-blue eyes sparkled with vivaciousness. Dark brows slanted slightly upwards. Full and generous were her lips; her voice, low and a little husky, matched her sultry appearance.

Sheila did not like girls. She thought they were all jealous of her and could not be trusted. She basked in delight with the knowledge of her feminine loveliness.

When Sheila reached the building in which she lived, several women who were sitting on the high stoop made room for her to pass. As soon as she was out of sight, one of the women said, "She makes me sick to my stomach, she is so damned conceited."

Another woman snickered. "I hear her yelling at her sisters every night. I don't know how they stand it."

Mrs. Pasto, who was leaning out of her first-floor window, her black hair untidy, her large breasts looking as if they were going to fall out of her wrinkled dress, said, "Those Taylors make me sick too, always quarreling. Mrs. Taylor must be stupid to put up with them. A lazy husband who sits in the kitchen all day guzzling beer and a rotten brat of a daughter. I

wouldn't stand for it. I'd tell them to get the hell out and stay out."

Mrs. O'Reilly, a husky blonde, who up to now hadn't said a word, glared from one woman to another, then rested her gray eyes coldly on Mrs. Pasto. "Don't you dare knock Mrs. Taylor in front of me. She doesn't sit on the stoop and gape or lean out of the window knocking any of you. She minds her own business and she keeps a better and cleaner flat than someone I know in this building."

"Are you by any chance referring to me, Mrs. O'Reilly?" Mrs. Pasto shouted angrily.

"Maybe I am," Mrs. O'Reilly retorted, glaring at her.

"Well then, I'll come out and knock your thick Irish block off."

Mrs. O'Reilly doubled her fists and said quickly: "I dare you to come out. I'll knock *your* stinking block off, you yeller belly."

The window went down with a bang and Mrs. O'Reilly faced the other two women. "I better not ever hear any of you knocking Mrs. Taylor. Shame on you, you cats."

The other women shrugged their shoulders and went into the house.

"Have you anything cold to drink, mother? I'm so thirsty that my mouth feels as if I just finished eating a hot potato."

"I have some iced tea, unless you want a glass of beer."

"I'll take iced tea," Sheila said, her eyes slanting over to her father and back to her mother again. She squeezed a little lemon in the tea and drank it slowly. "It was so hot shopping. I bought a new negligee from Saks."

"That's nice, dear," her mother said gently.

"Well, I think I'll sit in a tub of cold water while I have the chance."

"Go ahead, dear. You will feel much better."

"I wish we had a shower in this dump," Sheila snapped and sauntered into the bedroom that she shared with her twenty-four-year-old sister Ann. She took off her clothes and left her dress in a crumpled heap on the floor. She stood in front of the long mirror that was the length of the closet door, admiring her body. Then she took her blue robe out of the closet and

slipped it on. She shoved her feet into matching bedroom slippers and strutted to the bathroom. She filled the tub with water and stepped in. Oh, this was wonderful! — the cool water on her soft warm body.

When Sheila walked out of the kitchen her father said, "Edna, why don't you stop being so sweet to Sheila? You know she doesn't deserve kind words. You spoiled her when she was small and you're still doing it. She doesn't appreciate you at all."

"Jim, please don't start in about Sheila again, please," Edna pleaded.

Sheila did not let anything worry her. Nothing excited her as much as expensive clothes or a new man. As far as men were concerned, she was wise beyond her age of twenty-two. She liked it when men called her a tease, even though she knew they resented it when she tried to make fools out of them. She knew she had enough sex appeal to twist many men around her little finger and let them dangle there like toys on a string.

Sheila went out with many men for what she could get out of them. Most of them wanted to pay the rent on an apartment for her and keep a key for their own convenience, but Sheila wouldn't say yes or no. She would stand tantalizingly close to them and look so provocative that for the moment they were satisfied with her kisses.

She had once remarked to a girl at the office: "When I kiss a man he stays kissed."

She received expensive gifts and often money from the older men. She delighted in buying sheer nightgowns and underwear. She didn't believe a woman had to love a man to marry him and thought her mother was foolish for bringing six children into the world and being a slave for her father, whom Sheila didn't like. She would often think: *I'll be damned if I ever become a slave to a man.*

Though she earned more than Joan and Ann, she gave her mother less. She had remarked flippantly: "I have to be well dressed all the time on account of my position. Ann and Joan don't go to the exclusive places that I go to." While Sheila shopped for the best, her sisters haunted the bargain basements.

When she was nineteen, she had started working as a stenog-

rapher for a brokerage firm on Wall Street. After a year, she became secretary to one of the head men.

Now, she let her thoughts drift to Steven Hellern, the man for whom she worked. A small, slightly-built man with thin gray hair and sharp features, he was getting on her nerves. His too obvious devotion and his insistence that he rent her an apartment, as well as his love for whiskey, made Sheila shudder as she sat in the tub. She closed her eyes and visualized how he had kissed her the last time she had gone out with him. She could smell the odor of whiskey as if he were kissing her now. He had bought her a platinum wrist watch set with tiny diamonds. Her family thought she had bought it on time. She was going out with him tonight and had decided it was going to be for the last time. He had better not ask her to return the watch because he wouldn't get it.

A banging on the bathroom door startled her out of her thoughts. She called huskily, "Who is it?"

"It's Betty. Hurry up. I want to wash for dinner."

"You'll have to wait until I come out. Beat it and stop annoying me," Sheila snapped.

"Mama said you've been in the tub an hour. Joan and Ann are home from work and want to wash up too." Blond, sixteen-year-old Betty shook the doorknob. Finally the door opened and Sheila emerged, her robe partly opened, showing her long, well-shaped legs and dimpled knees, and bringing with her the smell of a hothouse flower.

"Well, it's about time," Betty said, going into the bathroom and shutting the door.

Everyone was seated around the dining room table except Danny who was twenty-five and the oldest child. He drove a laundry truck and had not yet come home. Betty and fourteen-year-old Robert had their plates heaped with food and were eating. There was a large platter of potato salad deftly arranged on crisp lettuce and garnished with slices of tomatoes and dill pickles, a platter of thick slices of boiled ham, and a bread-tray holding French rolls and Jewish rye bread. A bottle of ketchup, a jar of mustard, and a dish with butter were also on the table.

Although Jim had insisted earlier that he did not want any-

thing to eat, Edna had made him a ham sandwich on rye bread. He was drinking cold beer and eating slowly and looked more relaxed. He now wore a white sweat shirt and light summer trousers.

Mrs. Taylor said anxiously, "I wonder where Danny is. He is always home in time for dinner."

"Don't tell me you're worried about *him*? He's old enough to take care of himself," Jim assured her.

"Maybe he's playing the horses," towheaded Robert said, looking up from his plate.

"How do you know so much about it, young man?" his father asked sternly.

"I hear guys talking about horses, and Mr. Pasto plays them all the time."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I better not ever hear of you taking any bets for him or even going near a bookie."

"I never did, dad, and I never will," Robert promised, the glass of iced tea trembling in his hand.

"Maybe he won some money and is having a good time," Sheila suggested casually.

Her mother shook her head. "No, if Danny wasn't coming home for dinner he would have called me up."

"He probably had to work overtime," Joan said.

There were a few minutes of silence while the Taylors busied themselves with their meal. Suddenly the front door opened and tall, lanky, blond-headed Danny breezed in carrying something in his arms. He called out cheerfully, "Hiya! Sorry I'm late — couldn't help it. But I want you all to meet 'Skip.'"

Betty and Robert leaped to their feet quickly, upsetting their chairs. They dived at Danny, almost knocking him off his feet, and tried to grab Skip.

"Say — wait a minute, take it easy," Danny warned, laughing at them. He handed Skip to Betty, who cradled him in her arms just as a mother would cradle a baby. She cooed, "Oh, you sweet thing, you little darling." Skip, a golden and white shepherd dog with dark brown eyes, seemed to enjoy the attention he was getting.

Jim shouted gruffly, "Put that dog down and go wash your hands and finish your dinner."

Betty put Skip on the floor with reluctance, much to the amusement of her brothers and sisters.

"Come on, Danny, sit down. You must be hungry," Mrs. Taylor said anxiously.

"I'll say I'm hungry! Wait until I wash up a bit." He bent down and kissed his mother on the cheek. Then he reached into his pants pocket and took out several bills. He flipped his mother a twenty-dollar bill; walked around the table and gave his father ten. The family smiled as Jim shoved the bill into his pocket. They knew what the money would be spent for.

Mrs. Taylor heaped a plate with ham and potato salad for Danny. She went into the kitchen and came back with a large bottle of cold beer and a tall glass.

Skip sat on the floor by Danny's chair. "Where did you get the handsome dog, Danny?" his mother said, while her eyes rested on the scowl on Jim's face. She knew he resented the dog.

"I bought Skip for a few dollars. I hit a daily double today." Betty and Robert started to laugh.

"Stop acting like nitwits," Jim said angrily. He disliked to hear Danny say that he had been gambling. "I wish to goodness you wouldn't gamble. I don't like it."

"Leave Danny alone, Jim. He isn't the only one and he doesn't go to extremes," Edna said.

Sheila was sipping her iced tea slowly and watching her sister Ann. Suddenly she said, "Ann, I haven't met your new boy friend. When is he coming over again?"

Ann stared at Sheila. She seemed to be plagued by a depression which she could not shake off. There was a malicious expression in Sheila's blue eyes as she said, "Ann, you haven't answered my question."

Ann's lips quivered slightly. "Ron is coming over tonight," she said coldly.

Eighteen-year-old Joan stopped eating and looked across the table at Sheila. Her small green eyes flashed angrily. "What business is it of yours when Ron is coming? What good do you think it's going to do you?"

Betty said abruptly, "Sheila thinks she can take him away from Ann the way she did the others."

"Keep quiet, all of you and finish your dinner," their mother ordered sharply.

Sheila, having no intention of keeping quiet, said, with a tone of dangerous sweetness, "I can take him away from you if I want to, Ann."

"Listen, Sheila," said Ann tensely, "I'm in love with Ron and I know that he cares for me. So keep away, do you hear? Keep away from him," she repeated breathlessly.

"I don't see an engagement ring on your finger," Sheila replied.

Ann's face reflected worry. She was afraid of Sheila. She knew that all her sister had to do was to stand close to a man and look at him and he was in her power.

"Ron is going to buy me a ring after his fight at Madison Square Garden," Ann said.

"Did he tell you that?" her mother asked.

Instead of answering, Ann kept her head down, pretending to eat.

Sheila said coldly, "I don't believe he mentioned anything about marrying you. You just made that story up about the ring, thinking you could keep me away."

"Leave Ann alone. Don't you think you've given her enough raw deals?" Jim said gruffly.

Ann's face flushed to the roots of her tawny hair. She glanced around the table at each member of her family and tried to restrain her tears.

Edna said gently, "Don't worry, Ann. If Ron falls for Sheila, it means he just isn't the man for you."

But the look of mockery in Sheila's eyes was a warning signal to all that it would be better if Ron did not come that night.

Chapter 2

SHEILA stood up and pushed her chair back. There was a smug expression on her face. "I think I'll get dressed. I have a date for ten o'clock."

Ann said acidly, "Don't forget to wear your best dress, *dear*. You want to make a good impression on Ron, don't you?"

Sheila smiled wryly. "I have you worried, haven't I, Ann?" She was delighted by the misery on Ann's face. With a gesture of her hand she said, "I can get men to fall for me regardless of what I wear." With an air of assurance, and feeling oddly pleased with herself, she strutted out of the room.

Ann ate her dessert in silence.

Joan said gently, "Ann, I wouldn't let it worry me if I were you. If Ron would rather have Sheila than you, it's best you find out about it now."

"For goodness' sake, am I so ugly that I can't get a man without having Sheila take him away from me?" Ann burst out passionately. Her eyes burned with bitterness. The irony of the situation might seem funny to her family, but not to her. She faced her mother, her eyes blazing fire.

"I'm sick and tired of having Sheila take my boy friends away from me deliberately." She stopped and took a deep breath. "I really love Ron very much. Sheila doesn't know what love is. She only loves herself."

"Make sure she doesn't meet Ron, then," Betty suggested.

"You're wrong, Betty. The sooner Sheila meets Ron, the better," Danny said shortly.

Mrs. Taylor sighed heavily. She started to clear off the dining room table, and Joan and Ann helped her.

Jim said, "Edna, you are the only one who is to blame for Sheila."

His wife went into the kitchen and started to wash the dishes. She admitted to herself that Jim was right, but thought it was too late to try changing Sheila now.

Danny left for Coney Island, and Robert took Skip out for a walk around the block. Joan and Betty dried the dishes as fast as they could.

Betty said, "I'm going to the Capitol movies with Johnny."

"I hope you are going to an early show. You can't come home late," her mother warned.

"We are going early, mother. Johnny will be here any minute."

"You can't go out with Johnny tomorrow," her mother reminded her sternly.

"Oh, for crying out loud, why can't I?" cried Betty.

"Once a week is enough, and you are too young to be going steady."

"I was going for a walk in Central Park tomorrow."

"You can't go and that's final."

"All the girls my age have steady boy friends," Betty argued.

"I don't care what other girls do. I care what *you* do."

"Gee whiz, I wish I was of age. Gee whiz!"

Chapter 3

ANN took life more seriously than any of her sisters. She washed and ironed her clothes, knew how to sew, knit and crochet. Her mother had many pretty dresser scarfs and tablecloths that Ann had made for her. She was well-liked at the restaurant on Madison Avenue where she had worked as cashier for the past eight years.

Ann was five feet two and slender. Her tawny hair was long; she wore it parted at the side and knotted in a roll on her neck. Her skin was slightly tan, her face plain. Her voice was low and gentle, except when she was angry. Then it became high and shrill.

Ann gave her mother more money than Sheila and Joan. Though she was not stingy she was thrifty, and knew how to stretch a dollar. She had a large cardboard box, in the closet in her room, filled with dish towels, pillow cases and scarfs that she had embroidered and was saving for the home she hoped to have someday. She was her father's favorite, and also the other children's, who thought: No one is as nice as Ann.

Several months ago her boss had introduced her to Ron.

Ron took her out several times and seemed to enjoy her company. Though she lacked obvious sex appeal and warm passion, there was a demure appearance about her, a clean freshness.

Ann fell in love with Ron and was hoping that he would tell her he loved her and ask her to marry him. But though he took her out and kissed her lightly when he took her home, he never told her he loved her. Now that he was going to meet Sheila, she felt sick at heart with the thought. For a brief moment she considered the unfairness of it all. She was a girl who blushed easily, who could not flirt and be forward.

Why can't I be like Sheila? Why can't I fight for the man I love? she demanded of herself.

Ron came at nine o'clock. Ann introduced him to Sheila and, seeing the way Ron's eyes caressed her as he clasped her hand in his, thought: *I know I've lost him to Sheila. I'm as sure as I am sure my name is Ann.*

Sheila said in her low husky voice: "How do you do?" while her eyes stared into his.

Ron flashed his charming smile and said, "Ann, you never told me you had such a beautiful sister." Sheila gently pulled her hand from his, and said, "Mr. Graham, you don't look like a fighter, you look more like an actor. You haven't ears like a fighter generally has."

Ron's face flushed to the roots of his dark hair. He asked anxiously, "Why don't you come out with Ann and me? We'd love to have you."

Sheila glanced at Ann, who was standing close by, a pained expression in her eyes. Her heart had contracted with jealousy when she had seen the hunger in Ron's look at her sister.

"I'd love to go, but I have a date," Sheila said coyly. Then standing tantalizingly close to him and gazing at him intently, she drawled huskily, "Thank you for asking me to go with you, Mr. Graham. Even if I could go, I'm sure Ann wouldn't like a third party. Good night."

She sauntered past Ann and went into the bedroom, closing the door gently. She sat down on the bench in front of the vanity table and glanced into the mirror. Her face was flushed,

her eyes were more brilliant, and she felt excited. She spoke to herself in the mirror. *Sheila, he is practically yours. Watch him come crawling to you.* Sheila suddenly remembered a remark she had heard at one time: "Most fighters are tough in the ring, but soft when it comes to girls."

Well, she thought, *at last I've come across the man that I want to marry.*

She was physically attracted by him. She closed her eyes and visualized how it would feel to be crushed in his strong arms and to feel his lips on hers. She heaved a deep sigh. There was not the slightest doubt in her mind that he would marry her. As to how the marriage would turn out, she neither knew nor cared. She said to herself, *If I marry Ron, I'll be spiting Ann, and I will get into society.*

She heard Ann and Ron go out, and she knew that Ron would not have a good time. His mind would be on her. There dawned on her face a provocative smile.

Chapter 4

WHEN Sheila arrived at the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street at ten o'clock, Steven Hellern was waiting for her. "Any special place you want to go?" he asked, slipping his arm through hers.

"No, I'm only thirsty," Sheila said coldly.

Steven gave her a quick puzzled look, but Sheila did not see it. Her eyes were straight ahead and she was thinking of Ron and Ann.

They went to a club on West Forty-seventh Street which was air-conditioned and not too crowded. They sat at a table near the door and a waiter came over to them. Steven ordered straight brandy and Sheila a Tom Collins with cracked ice.

Steven said abruptly, "Well, how about the apartment?"

Sheila took a silver cigarette case and lighter from her bag.

She lit a cigarette, inhaled, and let out a long stream of smoke. She looked at him coldly and wondered how in the world she had ever put up with his kisses. What a difference there was between him and Ron. Would Ron be able to give her expensive gifts and take her to the best places, too?

"Well, why are you so quiet?" Steven asked.

Sheila sipped her Tom Collins slowly, looking at him over the rim of her glass. Steven repeated his question about the apartment.

"The answer is no, so don't ask me about it any more," Sheila snapped.

Steven's mouth twisted and there was an angry glint in his eyes. He drained his glass and called the waiter for another drink.

"You had me believe that the answer was going to be yes. What are you trying to pull?" He raised his voice and some of the people looked at him. Sheila disliked scenes in public places.

"Please lower your voice. I want to go home."

"I thought you loved me, Sheila," he said softly.

"I never told you I loved you. I never told any man that I loved him." After her frank outburst, he ordered another drink and drank it down quickly. He ran his hand through his thin hair and his bloodshot eyes bored into Sheila's.

"I want the wrist watch I gave you. I don't care about the other small gifts, but that was the most expensive."

There was a sly smile on Sheila's lips. "I didn't know you were an Indian giver, Steven. You gave me the watch and when anyone gives me anything, they don't get it back."

"I paid a lot of money for that watch. I gave it to you thinking you were going to be good to me."

"Really? Well, you should have waited to make sure."

"You little devil, you encouraged me enough."

Sheila rose, pushing her chair back. "I'm going home," she said abruptly.

Steven paid the check and followed her outside. She said coldly, "I'm going home alone, and I want you to leave me alone at the office."

"All right," he said passionately, "but remember this. Someday you're going to tease just once too often, and there'll be a man who will break that lovely neck of yours."

Sheila walked away, holding her head high. She entered a yellow cab that had been parked a few feet away, gave the driver her address. She relaxed in the back seat, congratulating herself that she had gotten rid of another sucker.

Sunday morning dawned with leaden skies and the promise of rain. Sheila opened her eyes slowly and glanced at the small clock that was on the night table. The hands pointed to eleven. She turned over on her stomach and closed her eyes. She liked it when she had the whole bed to herself. Ann got up early, Sundays, and went to church with Joan.

The aroma of coffee and the odor of bacon sizzling in the kitchen was so tempting that Sheila was unable to go back to sleep. She realized she was hungry and leaped out of bed.

Danny was just finishing his breakfast when Sheila came into the kitchen. She tightened the belt to her negligee and flopped into a chair.

"I'm really hungry this morning, mother, make the bacon crisp and the eggs sunny side up," Sheila said, helping herself to a cigarette from the pack Danny had by his plate.

Her mother handed her a tall glass of cold orange juice and while she sipped it slowly, she watched her mother cook breakfast.

"It looks as if it's going to rain, and I hope it does," Sheila said.

"I know it will and I hope Betty and Robert hurry home. I sent them to the delicatessen for milk," Mrs. Taylor said anxiously.

She set a plate of bacon and eggs in front of Sheila, and poured out two cups of coffee. "We are going to eat dinner at one o'clock today. I want more time to read the Sunday papers and listen to the radio with your father."

"One o'clock? Too early. I won't be hungry," Sheila said.

"I can't help it. The rest of the family wants to eat early."

The telephone rang and Danny went to answer it. He called, "Sheila! Telephone."

Sheila wiped her mouth with a napkin, rose, and sauntered into the dining room.

A man's voice said: "This is Ron, how are you?" Before Sheila had a chance to reply, he said eagerly: "Can I see you tonight?"

Sheila hesitated for a moment, a sly smile on her lips and her heart pounding with excitement.

She said sweetly, "Are you sure that it's me you want to see and not Ann?"

"If I weren't anxious to see you, I wouldn't have called, would I?" Ron said impatiently.

"You can call for me at eight, Ron." Sheila replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to face Ann, who had returned from church.

"So you did it again, didn't you? You cheat, why don't you leave him alone. Haven't you enough men on the string now?" Ann threw at her.

"Why don't you go to hell! I didn't tell him to call me up," Sheila retorted angrily and stormed out of the room.

Sheila went back into the kitchen and finished her breakfast. Her mother sat across the table from her, drinking a cup of tea and thinking. She hoped Sheila would marry. It would be much better for Ann. She could not understand why two sisters could not get along.

Betty and Robert finally came back from the store with the milk and Danny said, "Go back and get the Sunday papers."

"Oh, for crying out loud, why didn't you tell us before?" Betty cried.

"It's my fault. I forgot to remind you to buy them," Mrs. Taylor said.

"Let Robert go. I'm staying in," Betty said.

Danny gave Robert the money and said, "Get the usual."

Sheila went back to bed. She flipped through a magazine while her mind was on the evening ahead, happily scheming how she would make herself so enticing for Ron that he would want her as he had never wanted anything in his life.

The largest rooms in the six-room flat were the kitchen and dining room. The dining room was furnished for comfort rather than style, being used all the time by the Taylors. There was an old ten-piece oak suite, consisting of a large round table and high-backed chairs with leather seats. A chintz-covered sofa with several bright cushions and a dark rug with a flowered border were the other features. Two wide windows overlooked

a side street and had only dark green shades. In another week a pair of cream-colored lace curtains would grace them. A small radio that used to be in the living room was now on a long table which stood between the windows. Mrs. Taylor was known around the neighborhood to keep a spotless flat. Though she seldom went out — always busy cooking, baking, and cleaning — she never complained. She believed it was her sacred duty to her family that their comfort should come first.

The rain beating down against the window pane woke Sheila. Glancing at the clock, she noticed it was almost one and her mother had told her they were going to eat at one. She slipped out of bed and went to wash up.

The dining room table was laden with platters of fluffy mashed potatoes and creamed carrots and peas. There were also a tender juicy roast beef and hot biscuits.

Danny said, "This meat is so delicious. You're some cook, mom."

"I'll say she is! Your mother can make whatever she cooks taste wonderful," Jim said, flashing Edna a warm smile.

Mrs. Taylor smiled affectionately at her husband and son. "Thank you, thank you very much for the compliment," she said happily.

Betty picked Skip up and sat him on her lap, one arm around him tightly while she ate her meal.

"Put that dog on the floor this minute," Mr. Taylor ordered angrily. He resented that it was Danny who had bought the dog instead of him. It was many years since he had bought the children anything.

"Well, Betty and Robert will be returning to school in a few days," Danny said, smiling a broad smile which made his eyes glow.

"Don't remind us of school," Robert said, so seriously that the family burst out laughing.

Danny reached into his pocket, took out a bill and said, "Here, mom, take this hundred dollars. Spend it on Betty and Robert."

"Oh, Danny! Are you sure you can spare it?" his mother asked anxiously.

"Sure I can. Come on, take it." He held the bill across the table toward her.

"I'll take it if you don't," Sheila said crisply.

"Try and get it," Danny retorted, laughing.

Mrs. Taylor took it and said warmly, "Thanks a lot, son."

Mr. Taylor said sharply, "Did you hit another daily double?"

Danny shook his head. "I won it playing poker last night."

"Why don't you give up gambling, Danny? You never used to."

"Not now, dad. Someday I will."

"Mother, what have you for dessert today?" Joan asked, by way of changing the conversation. Though she was a hearty eater, to look at her, one would think she had not eaten in a couple of weeks.

"I made a graham-cracker cake with marshmallow and coconut icing," her mother said.

"Oh, boy, do I love that," Robert said, rolling his eyes and rubbing his stomach.

"Count me out. All the beer that I drank wouldn't mix with that cake," Mr. Taylor said.

His wife laughed shortly. "I should say it wouldn't."

"Give me pop's share," Robert put in quickly, as if he were afraid that someone else would ask for it before him.

"I'll bring the cake in here. Whoever wants a piece of it can help themselves." Mrs. Taylor went into the kitchen and returned with the cake. She set the dish wearily in the center of the table.

"I'm going to the movies. Who wants to come with me?" Danny said, getting up.

Joan said, "I'm going to finish the murder story that I'm reading."

"I'm going to see a girl friend later," Ann said calmly, her eyes avoiding Sheila's.

Sheila thought, *she wants to make sure she isn't home when Ron calls for me.*

Danny put his arm around his mother and said cheerfully, "Come on, mother, the show will be good for you. Maybe dad

will go too. I'm going to take a cab, anyway."

His mother shook her head. "I'd rather stay home, thank you just the same, son."

"I bet Betty and Robert won't refuse, will you, kids?" Danny asked, laughing.

"You bet we won't," Robert said through a mouthful of cake.

Chapter 5

SHEILA took a warm bath, and while she bathed, sang the words to the song *That's My Desire*. Her mind was on Ron.

After she had dressed, she dabbed a little perfume behind each ear and on her wrists. She smiled with satisfaction at her reflection in the mirror.

She went into the living room, after telling her mother to take Ron in there when he came. She glanced around the room with critical eyes. The ash trays were emptied and the magazines in a neat pile on the walnut end-table. Everything in the room was new and she loved the colors. The walls were a light pink, the rug a solid rose shade, and the furniture upholstered in tapestry with walnut-finished frames. The curtains, eggshell in color, reached to the floor, and Sheila thought they were a perfect foil for the blue and rose coloring of the furniture.

She turned the radio on to soft music, lit a cigarette and sat in one of the deep armchairs, crossing her legs. She let her thoughts drift to the stricken expression on Ann's face that morning, when she knew Ron had called her up. *I guess I should*

feel terrible about it but I don't. It's too bad if Ann can't hold on to her men.

Ron came at eight o'clock and Mrs. Taylor ushered him into the living room. He came towards Sheila, flashing his wide smile, his hand outstretched.

He said, "You are even more beautiful than I realized."

"Thank you, Ron," she said sweetly.

Ron sat on the large couch and stared at her. "Where would you like to go, Sheila?"

"I'll leave that up to you," Sheila told him.

"It's still raining, but not too hard. I have my car. Would you like to go to one of the clubs around Times Square?"

Sheila wore her black felt hat with the white ostrich feather and slipped into her black gabardine coat. She took her large black corded bag and gloves, gave a final glance into the mirror and, feeling well pleased with the way she looked, left the room.

The night air was a cool and welcome relief from the intense heat that had gripped New York for days. Ron opened his car door for Sheila and went around to the other side and slid in under the wheel. He did not say anything until he had nosed the car out of the heavy traffic.

"I can't understand why I didn't meet you sooner. Ann never told me about you."

Sheila knew why, but thought it best not to mention it. She said, "She probably didn't think of it."

Ron parked his car several blocks from Times Square. They went to a place on Forty-third Street. The headwaiter showed them to a table that was close to the orchestra. Ron ordered steaks well-done, French fries, string beans, and dry martinis.

The tune coming to them from the orchestra seemed to weave an intimate spell. While they danced Ron whispered in her ear: "This is only the beginning. From now on, you're going to be my girl."

How many men had said the same words to her; but they were so much more romantic coming from him.

After the dance was over and they had returned to their table, Sheila asked him about himself. He told her that his mother had died right after he was born, and his father married again in six months. His stepmother didn't want him and he was placed in a home. He ran away from the home when he was fourteen, hitched rides from Philadelphia to New York. He sold papers, shined shoes, and washed dishes in lunchrooms on Tenth Avenue. He told her he was always getting into fights and, as he got older and fought with men, he was noticed by Charles Murphy. He took him under his wing and was still his manager. So far he had had thirty-seven fights and had never been knocked out.

Later, when he drove her home and parked the car in front of her house, he turned to her and suddenly his strong arms were around her. He pressed his lips on hers in a kiss that left her breathless and, just as suddenly, let her go. He stepped out of the car, walked around and opened the door for her.

She said, "Thank you for the lovely evening, Ron."

His voice full of emotion, he said, "Good night, Sheila. I'll call you."

Chapter 6

MONDAY morning dawned with clear, cool skies. The heat wave had been broken. Sheila drank orange juice and two cups of black coffee, and walked slowly to the subway station.

She managed to get a seat and crossed her legs. She enjoyed the bold stares of the men. At the Wall Street station, she hurried out to the street and into the office building where she worked, rode up to the fifth floor, and said good morning to some of the girls in the large office before she entered a door marked *private*.

Her boss had not come in yet and Sheila started to get things in order. She took the cover off her typewriter, took some pencils out of the drawer in the desk, and started to sharpen them. The door opened and one of the clerks came in. She was snapping her gum so loudly that it sounded like a small toy popgun. She sat on the edge of Sheila's desk, swinging a nylon-clad leg back and forth.

Sheila said, "What's on your mind, Ruth?"

"You're lucky, do you know that? You don't have to work

today. Your boss called up a short time ago and said he wasn't coming in and for you to take the day off."

Sheila narrowed her eyes in anger. "Can you beat that? He couldn't call me up at the house. I would have stayed in bed, darn him." With a quick movement of her fingers she grabbed the cover and flung it over the typewriter.

"I wish I could have the day off — too much week-end," Ruth said. As she walked away, she called over her shoulder, "Some girls get all the breaks."

Mrs. Taylor was taking pies out of the oven when Sheila came in. She handed her mother a box of chocolate-covered cherries and a box of peanut brittle that she had bought on her way home.

"Give these to Betty and Robert. It's their favorite candy."

"What in the world are you doing home at this hour?" her mother asked anxiously. "Are you sick?"

"My boss didn't come to the office and I have the day off."

"Oh, I see."

"My goodness! How many pies are you making?"

"Eight. It's nice and cool for baking, so I thought I would make enough for a couple of days."

Sheila said abruptly, "Are you going to spend the hundred dollars just on Betty and Robert?"

Her mother knew what Sheila was hinting for. She often asked her mother for a loan, but she never paid her back.

"Yes, why?"

"I want to borrow fifty of it. I want to get a fall dress."

"Sheila, don't you think you are overdoing it? Look at all the lovely clothes you have now. You don't need any more, not for a long time."

"A girl in my position can't have too many clothes. I told you that before."

"Yes, I heard it many times before, but I can't let you have it."

Her mother took pies out of the oven, set them on top of the stove, and put more in. Then she said casually, "Have a good time with Ron last night, dear?"

Sheila thought quickly. *I'm not going to tell her anything, or*

anyone else either. Let them keep guessing. They think I am going to throw Ron over just like I did the other men. What a surprise they are going to get.

She said coolly, "I've had better times with other men."

September was a lovely month in New York. Though the mornings and nights were cool, the afternoons were warm. Betty and Robert returned to school with new clothes. Now that Labor Day had come and gone, New York was back to normal.

Sheila was happy. Even though she had been going with Ron only a week, she was going to marry him in a few days, the day after his fight at Madison Square Garden. He had told her he loved her and Sheila had decided to rush into marriage to spite Ann.

When he brought her home the night before and parked the car in front of the building, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her passionately. Sheila had felt a deep emotion in her being. She knew she did not love him, but he excited her more than any other man ever had. The third time he had taken her out, he asked her to marry him.

Sheila had said, "Can't we get married without anyone knowing it? I can tell my family after we are married. I want it to be a surprise."

"As soon as we get the license it will be in the papers," Ron had said.

"I'm not going to tell them yet, anyway," Sheila had replied.

"Do whatever you want, dear," Ron had told her. He gave her a ticket for a ringside seat at the Garden.

When Sheila went up to the flat she had found her room in a turmoil. Ann was taking her clothes out to Joan's room, while Betty was bringing her clothes from the room that she had been sharing with Joan into Sheila's room.

"What the hell is going on in here anyway?" Sheila demanded angrily.

"Joan and Ann are going to sleep together and Betty is going to sleep with you," her mother explained.

"So! That high and mighty Ann thinks she's too good to share my bed. Well, I don't give a damn if she gets out of the

house altogether. She's mad because she can't have Ron. Jealousy is eating her up."

Ann came into the bedroom and took some of her shoes out of the closet. Sheila glared at her. "So you can't take it, eh? Does mama's little baby want the bottle?" Ann let out a scream and lunged at Sheila, knocking her down and sitting on her. She hit her with her fists and cried over and over, "I hate you — you cheat — you devil, I hate you — you'll be punished."

The attack had taken Sheila by surprise. She covered her face with her hands and tried to ward off the blows. Danny and her mother pulled Ann off her, while Betty and Joan and Robert stood gazing on with awe.

"Shame — shame — two sisters coming to blows. I never thought I'd live to see the day that my daughters would fight," Mrs. Taylor moaned.

Sheila had risen to her feet and brushed her hair off her face saying with sarcasm, "Mother, don't be so melodramatic."

Robert liked to rub Skip's stomach, and did so every time he had a chance. Mr. Taylor would grumble: "Get that dog out of here. This is no place for a dog." Skip would jump up at Jim unexpectedly and Jim would lose his temper.

At dinner one evening, just as Jim was about to raise a glass of beer to his lips, Skip dashed up on him. Jim was taken by such surprise that he fell back on the floor, the chair breaking under him, and his face was splashed with beer. Everyone ran to help him except Sheila. She stayed in her chair drinking her coffee and watching them with nonchalance.

The night before Ron's fight Sheila came home early. Danny and four of his men friends were sitting around the dining room table playing poker. Sheila knew all of them. Though each of them had tried to date her at one time or other, she had refused them all.

Mrs. Taylor was in the kitchen arranging a platter of cold cuts, and Sheila said, "I'll wait on the men. First, I want to get into something more comfortable."

She went into her room and came out a few minutes later wearing her new light-blue sheer negligee over a sheer night-

gown, and all perfumed. As she passed through the dining room the men let out a long whistle, and Sheila saw the disapproving look in Danny's eyes.

She went into the kitchen and her mother looked at her in dismay.

"What is the matter with you, Sheila? How can you have the nerve to let all those men see you like this?"

"You talk as if I was naked. The girls at the beach go around in much less than this."

"This isn't the beach. Shame on you!"

"My legs are covered, and if I feel like going around in a negligee, that's my business," Sheila said hotly.

Her mother shook her head. "What a negligee. It doesn't leave much to the imagination."

The men all jumped to attention as Sheila came in with the cold cuts. They cleared off the center of the table, moving all the colored chips. Sheila set the platter down gently. Her mother came in with rye bread, ketchup, and dill pickles. Danny went into the kitchen and came back with more beer.

Sheila sat down at the table and Danny said, "Mother, you get up so early every morning, why don't you go to bed? Sheila will clean up here."

Sheila gave Danny a scornful look and said, "You'll have to, Danny. I might get my new negligee dirty."

All the men laughed, and Sheila took a sandwich that one of them fixed for her, wondering what Ron would say if he could see her at that moment.

Chapter 7

THE NIGHT of Ron's fight arrived and Sheila was very excited. She had planned how attractive she was going to look and decided not to get to the arena until a few minutes before the main bout. She wore a gray suit, a powder-blue hat set jauntily on her head, and a black coat.

The cab she took slid to a stop in front of Madison Square Garden. Sheila paid the driver and stepped out. Before she entered she took off her coat and flung it over one arm. Her tight-fitting suit showed her figure to perfection. She walked down the aisle swaying her hips. She received so many whistles that one would think she was the reason the Garden was packed with people.

She sat in a ringside seat, knowing that many eyes were upon her. Glancing around casually, she wondered how many thousands were there. Suddenly there were screams and applause, and she looked and saw Ron coming towards the ring, wearing a maroon robe. There was a wide grin on his face.

Sheila sighed, thinking, *how good it feels to know that he will belong to me tomorrow. He loves me so much.* She knew

that he was a one-woman man. His love would be as strong as his body. And the thought of what he might do, should the one he loved fail him, sent a slight quiver through Sheila's body.

Sitting in his corner, he caught her eyes and flashed her a smile.

She remembered Ron telling her that he was a "Southpaw" — he fought mostly with his left hand. She did not understand much about fighting but he had told her that he loved the confusion, the crowds, the smell of new leather on his hands, the grit of rosin under his feet, and the applause, which was music to his ears. There had been such a tender expression in his dark eyes when he talked about his fighting, as if it were a mother talking of her newborn baby. And now sitting here, Sheila could almost understand a little of what he meant. She liked the blaze of lights, the rows upon rows of people, and the smell of liniment that came from the ring and tingled her nostrils.

She gasped when she saw Ron's opponent enter the ring. Tony Castallno seemed like a giant. His thick sandy-colored hair was curly, his eyes small and gray. One ear was flattened to his head. Sheila wondered how Ron would be able to last ten rounds with anyone so brutal-looking.

The men took off their robes, and the referee introduced them. His loud sharp voice droned: "In this corner, weighing one hundred and ninety pounds and wearing white trunks, Ron Graham from the Bronx." There was a thunderous applause and cheers for Ron, who was a heavy favorite.

"In this corner, weighing two hundred pounds and wearing black trunks, Tony Castallno from Los Angeles." He received a large ovation. The air was thick with smoke. Sheila was leaning forward in her seat, watching the newspaper reporters.

The referee gave the boys their instructions and they shook hands and returned to their corner.

Sheila heard a man in back of her say, "That Graham boy is going to be the champ yet. Wait and see."

Another one said, "You're right. I always bet on him."

Sheila opened her bag, took a cigarette out of her case, and just as she was about to light it, heard the man next to her say, "Allow me." She turned quickly and the man was holding his lighter. After she lit the cigarette, she thanked him. She

knew that his eyes were on her even though hers were directed towards the ring.

At the sound of the bell, the boys leaped from their corners to the center of the ring and touched gloves. Tony fought with his head and shoulders slouched over, Ron with his head high. A looping right from Tony to Ron's jaw was blocked with Ron's left to his opponent's jaw, a right to his chin, and another left uppercut to his chin. Tony threw punches that Ron blocked. They went into a clinch and the referee parted them.

After a left hook to Tony's nose, a right to his jaw, and a left again to his nose, they bobbed and weaved around the ring, Ron holding his head high, a serene expression on his face, Tony slouching over, swinging his right which went wild. A right to Ron's jaw sent him up against the ropes, but he quickly regained his feet at the sound of the bell.

Sheila heard someone say, "Graham and Castellno are feeling each other out."

At the sound of the bell for the second round, the boys dashed into the ring. The crowd roared as Tony threw a savage punch to Ron's heart, but it didn't seem to hurt him. A left, a right, another left and right to Tony's mid-section by Ron. Then Tony let go with a hard right to Ron's jaw. Ron came back with two left jabs to Tony's heart. Tony tried to keep Ron at close range to pound him with body punches, but Ron danced around the ring. Then he threw a right uppercut to Tony's jaw, a left to his eye. Tony threw a right which went wild, then a right to Ron's head, and another right to Ron's body. Ron went down on one knee. The crowd roared, but Ron got to his feet quickly. He tore in with savage blows. At the sound of the bell, Tony had a cut at the side of his left eye and a little blood was oozing out.

Sheila ripped her small handkerchief to pieces and was biting her lower lip. The man who had given her a light said, "Exciting, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," Sheila remarked crisply.

With the sound of the bell for the third round, the boys tore into each other like bulldogs, each anxious to knock the other

out. The crowd was yelling for a knockout. A solid right to his heart by Ron, followed by a hard left to the jaw, sent Tony through the ropes and into the laps of the newspapermen.

Tony was helped back into the ring, and he swung a right to Ron's head but was blocked by a left. They went into a clinch and the referee parted them. A hard right to his mid-section caused Ron's knees to sag, and he almost fell. A right jab to his jaw staggered him slightly at the sound of the bell.

In the fourth round, the boys rushed forward, and Ron let go with a hard left to Tony's jaw which dazed him. Tony, with his head slouched low, was watching his rival with a vicious glare in his eyes. Ron's quick eyes saw the opening he was waiting for, and with a hard long drive to Tony's body, he shot out quickly with a hard left to Tony's jaw. Tony's feet slipped out from under him and he fell back, hitting the canvas. Ron went to a neutral corner and the referee raised his arm up and down as he droned to the count of ten.

The spectators broke from their seats, shouting and whistling as the referee held up Ron's hand and announced him the winner by a knockout in the fourth round.

Sheila heaved a sigh of relief as she settled back in her seat. The man next to her said, "Can I take you home?"

Sheila said, "No, thank you. I'm expecting someone."

While she waited for Ron to come for her, she watched the crowds leave the Garden. The heavy smoke drifted out in dense clouds toward the exits, and gradually the stadium became very quiet. Sheila smiled at all the men as they passed her, most of them smiling at her, some of them remarking, "Hello, beautiful," or "Hiya, babe." Sheila enjoyed the attention she was receiving and flirted with all of them. She decided that it was a lot of fun and very exciting to go to see a fight. There were enough men around.

When Ron came for her, he said, "Sorry, darling, I kept you waiting. I hurried as fast as I could."

She said sweetly, "Oh, I didn't mind waiting."

They went to the Stork Club, and over their martinis he said, "Did you tell the family that we are getting married tomorrow?"

Sheila shook her head. "No. I might tell them tonight."

"We are leaving for Florida right after we get married. I can

attend to some business while we are on our honeymoon. You don't mind, do you, dear?"

"Anything you say is all right with me, Ron."

The waiter brought the chops that Ron had ordered and Sheila thought of Ann and wondered what she was going to say when she broke the news at home.

Later that night, Sheila packed her best clothes and was glad that she had such lovely sheer lingerie and nightgowns. She tried to be as quiet as possible so she would not wake Betty. She went into the kitchen for a drink of water, and while she was there, Danny came home.

He closed the door that led to the dining room and said, "Sheila, we all know that you are getting married tomorrow. We can read, you know. Mother is deeply hurt that you didn't tell her. She doesn't want you to know that she feels bad. Ann is heartbroken, but dad is glad that you're leaving. So am I."

Sheila turned and faced Danny. "I think I have a right to keep my affairs to myself. Why should I talk about them to anyone if I don't want to? Anyway, I intended to tell all of you in the morning. Too bad about Ann being heartbroken. She'll get over it."

The next day Sheila met Ron at Times Square. He took her to a jewelry store and bought her a two-carat diamond ring and a platinum wedding band set with tiny diamonds. She was married in a powder-blue sheer wool suit. Flung over her shoulders was a navy-blue topper with an orchid pinned to the shoulder.

Two of Ron's friends went to City Hall with them. Sheila felt a thrill as soon as they started down the steps. Fight fans and newsmen were gathered around, and flash bulbs exploded. Sheila heard someone remark, "What a lovely-looking couple."

Chapter 8

THEY drove to Florida, Sheila sitting close to Ron. He whispered, "Happy, darling?" Sheila nodded her head and gave him a wide smile.

"Very happy, Ron."

She thought of the scene she had had at home that morning, when she told her mother she was getting married. Her mother had said anxiously, "Sheila, how can you rush into marriage when you don't know if you love each other or not? You only met Ron a couple of weeks ago."

Sheila had laughed and replied crisply, "What has love got to do with it? I like Ron a lot."

Her father had snickered. "You can't love anyone but yourself. The poor man doesn't know what he's letting himself in for."

Sheila had stormed out of the flat after telling her mother that she wasn't going to stay and take any more of her father's insulting remarks.

"Why so quiet, darling?" Ron asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking," Sheila said casually.

"About me?" Ron said, laughing.

"Maybe," Sheila said, looking at him provocatively.

They stopped and had dinner. Ron said, "No use in driving any more tonight. We might as well stop at a hotel and get an early start in the morning."

"Whatever you say," she murmured.

They went to the best hotel in town, and when they were finally alone in their room, Ron pulled Sheila to him and kissed her. She pushed him away gently and said, "Ron, please let me make myself comfortable. I feel messy after that long ride."

"Okay, go ahead. You can take your shower while I start unpacking my suitcase," Ron said.

Sheila came out of the bathroom looking tantalizing in a sheer white negligee over a white silk nightgown. Ron held his breath.

"You are beautiful, simply beautiful," he said, letting his eyes roam over her body. Sheila laughed and helped herself to a cigarette.

Later, Ron came over and stood in front of the chair that Sheila was sitting in. She reached up and playfully pulled at the belt of his blue dressing gown. He pulled her to her feet and carried her, as if she were a baby, to the bed and fell down beside her. She rumbled his thick hair and flung her arms tightly around his neck. He pressed his lips to hers in a long, lingering kiss.

Sheila felt the mad pounding of his heart against her chest. He moaned, "Sheila, Sheila."

When they were settled in their hotel room in Miami, Sheila donned her black sarong one morning and said, "I'm going for a swim. See you later, Ron." Before he had a chance to say anything, she was out of the hotel.

She attracted a lot of attention as she strolled on the beach, and thought happily, *it won't be long before I meet Ron's society friends.*

Chapter 9

THAT evening was a very pleasant one for Sheila. She danced to her heart's content in the hotel ballroom. Ron introduced her to several men that he knew and she danced with each of them. But she could not understand these friends of Ron. They dressed flashily and talked loudly. She did not like it. But because they were *men*, she let them hold her a little too close while they danced and knew that she was the center of attraction. Her dress, which she had bought that afternoon, was daring and beautiful. It was white crepe, embroidered in silver. One shoulder was bare, the other covered with a narrow strap. There was a band of chinchilla on the flowing skirt.

Much later that night, Sheila felt too sleepy and tired to care about anything. She let her dress lie on the floor where she had slipped out of it. Her white silk panties and bra and sheer hose were thrown helter-skelter. One white sandal was under the bed and the other across the room. She put on her white nightgown, got in bed, and closed her weary eyes. She heard Ron

come into the room and pretended to be asleep, hoping he would not want to make love.

But when Ron got in bed, he merely laid one arm across her body lightly. Sheila smiled to herself. *So he really thinks that I'm asleep*, she thought.

When she awoke the next morning, the hot sun was streaming through the window. She turned over on her side and flung an arm across Ron's pillow. She looked and saw that he was not in bed. Glancing at the small clock that was on the dresser, she was surprised to see that it was twelve o'clock. She lay passively, feeling languid and happy, thinking, *this is the life*.

Ron came in and, seeing that she was awake, came over and sat on the bed. He said teasingly, "Hello, sleepy head." He bent his head and kissed her on the lips. Sheila clung to him affectionately.

"Why didn't you wake me when you got up?" she asked, running her fingers through his hair playfully, and pressing her lips to his in a long kiss.

Ron took her to watch the dog races, and to the tracks. It was there that Ron said, "Sheila, remember I mentioned in New York that I had business to attend to down here?" When Sheila nodded her head, he said, "Well, I bought a horse and he is going to race today."

"Why, Ron, I didn't know you were interested in racing. I thought your only interest was fighting."

"I like all kinds of sports, and most fighters have other interests besides the ring. My horse — Star — is a long shot. I doubt if he will win first time out, but you never can tell."

"My brother Danny plays the horses."

"I only play them at the tracks, either in Long Island, California or here."

Sheila said, "Are you going to bet on your horse, Ron?"

"No. I have a bet on the favorite in that race," Ron told her, smiling warmly.

"I want to bet on him, then."

"Why don't you play him across the board?"

"What do you mean 'across the board'?"

"You win if he comes in first, second or third."

"Why, that's wonderful," Sheila said, then added laughingly, "but it's still Greek to me."

"Look around at the thousands of people. Most of them gamble when they come to the track."

"It is very exciting. How about putting five dollars across the board on your horse for me."

"Very well. I'll be right back."

When Ron returned after placing the bet, he said, "Some horses are only good racing in mud, and some can't race in mud. Mud makes a distance horse stop at three quarters. They pull up and refuse to extend themselves. Mud also makes a three-quarter horse go a mile and an eighth."

"Is that right? No wonder I see so many men studying racing forms," Sheila said.

The race with Star started. It was a mile-long race with ten good horses. Star trailed for the first few yards, then gradually quickened his pace. The jockey seemed to be riding him well, but the favorite was way out in front. Sheila bit her lower lip, and twisted her handkerchief. Ron laughed at her. There was a calm expression on his face. As the horses came into the stretch, Star gained a little more speed, then fell back. At the finish, it was the favorite who won, and Star came in third.

Ron said, "Well, he came in the money. I had ten across the board instead of five."

"What did he pay?" Sheila asked, a breath of excitement in her voice.

"We'll know in a minute. They're posting the prices up on the board now. I'm glad he came in third first time out. Look at that. He paid ten dollars for show. We'll get the money on the way out."

The rest of the honeymoon was spent practically the same way — going to the races, dancing, swimming, sleeping and making love. Ron was very proud of all the attention that was bestowed on Sheila. He thought she was perfect. No matter where they went, she was always at her best, well groomed and perfumed just enough to be tantalizing.

Chapter 10

MRS. TAYLOR was sitting in the kitchen, enjoying a cup of tea and a piece of homemade apple pie. There was a knock on the door and she called, "Come in."

She uttered a cry of surprise when she saw Sheila, and jumped to her feet quickly, almost upsetting her chair.

"Hello, Sheila dear. Sit down and I'll get you a cup of tea."

"I don't care for any tea, thank you just the same. Did you get the postal card I sent you?"

"Yes, but you didn't say anything — only 'Having wonderful time.'"

"I was too busy to write a letter. I just came over to pack my trunk with the rest of my clothes so I can send it to our apartment."

"Where are you going to live?"

"On Riverside Drive."

"Oh. How nice. I guess you will cook all the things that Ron likes. You can learn easily from a cook book."

Sheila gave a short laugh. "I thought you knew me, mother.

You don't think for a minute that I have any intentions of keeping house, do you?"

Her mother looked at her in bewilderment. "Who is going to do it, if you're not?"

"A maid, of course. Who else?"

"Oh my, oh my! I can't understand it. Why, I love to cook and bake and fuss around the house."

"Sure, you work yourself dizzy all the time, but not me, not Sheila. I'm too smart."

"What are you going to do with all the spare time on your hands?"

Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "Have fun, I guess."

Ron rented a four-room, attractively furnished apartment on Riverside Drive. Sheila was happy because there were two bedrooms, each with a private bath. She cuddled on Ron's lap and told him that she wanted her own room, and when he protested she said, "I like to read in bed until all hours, and I think married people should have some privacy."

Ron said, "All the married couples I know sleep in the same bed, or else in the same room on twin beds. I don't like it."

Sheila pouted and Ron said, "All right, you can have your own room if that will make you happy."

She threw her arms around him and kissed him.

Sheila slipped into the routine of her new life with ease, just as if she had never been a working girl. Ron hired a woman to come in from nine until six in the evening and another one to help once a week with the heavy cleaning. He gave Sheila food money for the week and a generous allowance for her spending money. He was going to take care of all the other expenses and the money for clothes. That arrangement pleased Sheila. Every morning she wrote out a menu of what she wanted cooked and gave it to the maid.

Ron left the house every morning and did not return until evening, just in time for dinner. Sheila often wondered where he went, what he did. She thought of asking him but decided to wait until he told her.

Though Sheila did not lift a finger to keep the top of her dresser tidy, or her stockings and underwear off the chair and

floor in her room, she gave strict orders that she wanted the apartment spotless and tidy.

It was late November, two months since Ron and Sheila had rushed into marriage. Ron was taking her to the Waldorf's Wedgwood Room, and she was going to meet his manager, Charles Murphy. There was a slight frown on Ron's good-looking face as he stood watching Sheila adjusting her hat.

"I can't understand it, Sheila. We've been in this apartment a month since we returned from Florida and you've had six different maids. They all leave. Why?"

"Because they're jealous of me, that's why. I treat them all so well, too. You'll have to get another one right away. I simply have to have a maid."

"I'll see what I can do tomorrow."

Just as soon as Ron introduced Sheila to Charles Murphy and she looked into his eyes, she had an uneasy feeling. She thought she saw contempt in them.

Charles devoted all his time talking to Ron about the most important fight that was to take place at Madison Square Garden in June. Charles said, "Just think, Ron, you win this fight and then you'll have a chance to fight the heavyweight champion of the world. I know you can do it."

"I have my heart set on it, Charles. It's my heart's desire to get a chance to fight the champ," Ron said eagerly.

Back in the apartment Sheila remarked, "Your manager doesn't like me, Ron."

"Don't say that. Everyone likes you, dear. They can't help but like you, and I love you because you are so wonderful." Ron put his arms around her and crushed her to him.

"Take it easy. You're going to break my bones," Sheila gasped, pushing him away.

Sheila sat in the kitchen watching Ron fix something to eat before they went to bed. Ronald had on a print apron and was broiling two thick steaks and frying some potatoes. Sheila was smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of coffee.

"I didn't know you could cook too. It's more than I can do."

"I can just cook enough to keep from starving," Ron said, flashing her a warm smile.

Later Sheila said, "That was good — so tender. I certainly enjoyed it."

"Glad you did," he responded, happily.

The next morning Ron went right to the employment agency. The woman who sat behind the huge oak desk looked at him with a serious expression in her gray eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Graham, but I can't send you any more women. It isn't fair for them to be insulted by your wife and to be treated like slaves."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Ron said angrily.

The woman tapped her pencil on the desk. She said, "Each one of the women that I sent you was highly recommended when she came here. They all seem to be doing well somewhere else."

"I'll go to another agency," Ron retorted, and stormed out of the office.

That evening Ron said, "I got a maid for you. She'll be here in the morning. She is colored and has been in New York for a week. Comes from Atlanta, Georgia."

"How did you get her?"

"A friend of mine told me about her. She has good references and I was told she is very clean."

"I hope she stays longer than the others did."

"Some friends of mine are coming over. Do you want to visit your family?" Ron asked.

Men coming to the apartment, and her go out? Sheila smiled to herself. *Ron couldn't get me out of here tonight with a derrick. I'm going to have fun, I can flirt with them and let Ron know that I am still beautiful to other men.*

She said, "I'd rather stay, if you don't mind."

"Why should I mind? I thought you might be bored with just men and no women around," Ron replied.

Sheila went into her bedroom to change into something else. Ron opened the gate-leg table and set it in the center of the large living room. He went into the kitchen and checked to make sure there was enough ginger ale in the house.

Sheila stood in front of her mirror dabbing perfume behind each ear and on each wrist. She wore a pair of black satin lounging pajamas which brought out the creamy whiteness of

her skin. The jacket was tight-fitting with one button open, half revealing her firm young breasts.

She glanced with critical eyes at her radiant reflection, ran the powder puff lightly over her face and sauntered into the living room.

Sheila breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Charles hadn't come. Ron came and put his arms around her shoulder and introduced her to the four men. She smiled at them and noticed how their eyes roamed over her boldly.

One of the men fixed her a drink and handed it to her. Another got her a chair and put it close to him so she could watch while they played poker. One of the men said, "Do you know how to play, Mrs. Graham?"

Sheila said, "Yes, I know how, but not very well."

"Come on. We'll deal you in."

"No. Sheila doesn't want to play," Ron said abruptly.

But she ignored him and stood up. "I'll be right back, boys. Deal me in," she told them.

When she came back with some money she saw the frown on Ron's face. They played draw poker, opening with jacks or better. Sheila went in with a pair of tens, discarded three cards, and drew three after opening the bid.

Then she drew a ten, an ace and a five, and won the pot with three tens. Good at bluffing, she opened one game with a pair of eights and won after drawing two kings.

Every time Sheila looked at Ron she noticed the grim line around his jaw and the look of disapproval in his eyes. About one o'clock someone said, "Well, we played enough tonight."

After the men left, Sheila counted her winnings. "Ron, I won fifty dollars," she said. She went to her room and put the money in her purse.

Ron cleared off the table, emptied ash trays, and took the glasses into the kitchen and washed them. Then he went to Sheila's room and watched while she sat in front of the vanity brushing her hair. He said angrily, "Sheila, I don't want you playing poker with my men friends again, do you hear?"

Looking at him in the mirror, Sheila retorted, "Jealous?"

"No, I'm not jealous, but you made me feel like a fool because

I told the men you didn't play, and then you disobeyed me." Sheila snapped, "Some friends!"

"What do you mean, 'Some friends'?" Ron demanded.

"All any of your friends care about is poker or drinking beer and talking about horses. If they aren't talking about horses they're talking about fighters — who won the last fight, who's going to win the next. And what loud mouths they have."

Ron glared at her. He said briskly, "Nevertheless they are my friends, and I like them."

Seeing the pained expression in his dark eyes, Sheila said, "Forget it and give me a kiss." Ron leaned over and gathered her in his arms. Sheila thought to herself, *I have him wrapped around my finger.*

Chapter 11

THE NEW maid came at nine o'clock the next morning.

A husky colored woman of medium height, she drawled out a good morning and followed Ron through the foyer and went into the living room.

She said, "Mist' Graham?"

Ron said, "Yes, I'm Mr. Graham. My friend told me all about you." Ron noticed how neatly dressed she was and how her dark eyes sparkled when she smiled. He judged her to be about forty.

"I'm in a hurry, and my wife is still asleep. Don't wake her. When she wakes up, she'll ring for you," Ron said, slipping into his overcoat and dashing out the front door.

The maid was dusting the living room and humming in a low tone of voice when she heard the tingling of a bell. She drawled out, "I'se comin'." She opened the door and saw Sheila propped up in bed. She went to the windows, pulled up the shades, and opened one of them.

She said, "Let God's fres' air in."

"Close that window! Do you want me to catch my death of cold?" Sheila snapped.

The colored maid paid no attention. She came over and stood by the bed, looking at Sheila and flashing her wide smile at her. "Yo' sho' need some sun," she said.

Sheila pulled the blankets up to her chin and said, "Close that window at once."

The maid shook her dark head, then drawled, "Yo' sho' putty, honey chil'. Yo' sho' is putty."

Sheila smiled at her and said, "Thank you, thank you very much. Now please bring me a tall glass of orange juice and a cup of black coffee."

"Yas, ma'am," she said, and wobbled out of the room.

Sheila leaped out of bed and closed the windows. She lit a cigarette and got back in bed.

In a short while, the maid came in carrying a silver tray and set it in front of Sheila, a wide grin on her face.

Sheila took one look and said, "Take it back. I don't want all this. What do you think I am, a horse?" The tray held a large glass of orange juice, coffee, several pieces of link sausage, two scrambled eggs, brown gravy, and six golden-brown biscuits split open and dripping with butter.

"Yas, ma'am, I'se gwine do my bes' fo' yo'. I'se yo' new 'oman."

"I don't care if you are my new woman, I don't feel like eating. I just want the juice and coffee. Why, if I was to eat all that I would burst."

"No, yo' woan'. Yo' eat," she kept insisting.

Sheila drank the juice and coffee and the maid went out of the room with the rest of the food mumbling that Yankee gals ate like birds and leave it to the Southern gals to start off the day right by eating a good breakfast.

Sheila laughed and slipped out of bed. She put on a robe and went into the living room. "What's your name? You didn't tell me," she said.

"Wistie, ma'am."

"Wistie, I'm not going to tell you what to cook for dinner. Cook whatever you want tonight, but it better be Southern style."

Wistie's face beamed with pleasure. "Ah sho' will," she drawled.

That evening, Ron and Sheila sat down to the first meal that Wistie cooked for them. She brought them golden chicken soup with chunks of white meat, rice, minced onion and pieces of celery floating in the bowls. After they finished the soup, she came in with a platter of legs and breasts of chicken fried to a golden brown, milk gravy, buttermilk biscuits, sweet potatoes split open and dripping with butter, and fresh peas and carrots with thick cream sauce.

Ron said everything was delicious, and Wistie flashed her wide smile and said, "Shucks." When she brought in the banana pudding with vanilla wafers Southern style, Ron had to open his belt.

Sheila said, "It looks wonderful, but I couldn't take a bite to save my life. I don't know when I ate as much as I did tonight."

Sheila got along better with Wistie than she did with anyone else. Instead of having her coffee in bed in the morning, she would go into the kitchen and drink a glass of either orange or tomato juice and a cup of black coffee.

Wistie wanted to teach Sheila how to cook but Sheila said no so loud, that Wistie did not mention it again.

It was two weeks before Christmas, and Ron and Sheila were at her mother's. They had gone to spend the evening, and Ann had gone out as soon as they came in.

Mrs. Taylor said, "I want you both to eat Christmas dinner with us."

Sheila opened her mouth to refuse — she wanted Ron to take her to an exclusive place to eat and then to a show, but before she had a chance, Ron said eagerly, "We'd love to come, mother." He smiled at Sheila, then added, "There isn't anything nicer then a large family sitting around the table and enjoying Christmas dinner together. We'll send Wistie over to help you. You'll need her."

Back in their apartment, Sheila turned blazing eyes on him. "I didn't want to have Christmas dinner at my mother's. I wanted you to take me out," she stormed.

Ron looked at her with a puzzled expression. "I'm surprised at you, dear. I can't think of a better way to spend Christmas."

"If you think for one minute that I'm going to stay cooped up in the house all day Christmas, you're crazy."

"Oh, so that's what's worrying you. Well, you can ease your mind. One of my friends is having a party that night. I'll take you there," Ron promised, smiling at her affectionately.

Then he took out a roll of bills and gave several of them to her, saying, "You'd better start buying your family Christmas presents."

Sheila went shopping the rest of the week, something which she really enjoyed. Two days before Christmas, it started to snow. Traffic in New York was practically at a standstill.

Ron bought a medium-sized tree and set it in a corner of the living room. Sheila relaxed on the couch, smoking a cigarette, while he decorated and arranged the gifts that she had bought under the tree.

"That's a wonderful job, Ron. You're a Jack-of-all-trades besides being a fighter."

Ron laughed, then flopped into a deep arm chair and said, "Come on, sit on my lap."

Sheila came over and cuddled in his arms. He pressed her head back on his arm and bent his dark head down to kiss her.

"You don't know how much I love you," he mumbled against her ear.

Sheila hoped he would not ask her if she loved him. Every time he did, she kept silent.

Chapter 12

CHRISTMAS morning dawned with plenty of snow. The sky was a clear blue and the wind had died away. It had stopped snowing the night before. Wistie came over at eight in the morning and fixed breakfast. Ron gave her twenty-five dollars for her gift. Very appreciative of any kindness that was shown to her, she bowed her dark head, and said over and over, "Tankee, sah. Tankee, sah."

Ron sent Wistie to Mrs. Taylor's in a cab, so she could help with the cooking. He would arrive later with Sheila.

Two extra boards were added to the dining room table. Mrs. Taylor carved the very large turkey and, after she served portions of it on each plate that was handed to her, she returned the plate and told them all to help themselves to the vegetables, fluffy mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and giblet gravy. Wistie had made buttermilk biscuits and candied yams.

Wistie was told to sit in the kitchen and eat while the food was hot. None of the gifts were opened. All of them were under the tree, including all the gifts that Ron and Sheila had brought with them.

Robert said, "I can hardly wait to see my presents."

"Me too," said Betty.

Sheila noticed how Ann's eyes glowed when they looked at Ron. Ron, busy eating, didn't notice, and his eyes were only for Sheila.

Danny said, "I was reading in the paper about how important your next fight is to you."

"Yes, it is, and not only to me but to the other fighter as well," Ron said.

"I'll bet you'll win again," Robert said. His mouth was so full of food it was hard to understand what he was saying.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you became the heavyweight champion of the world," Danny said.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Ron said, laughing.

"I would," Danny said.

"It's going to be a tough fight. I hope I don't disappoint the ones who have faith in me."

"You won't," Mr. Taylor said.

"Thanks, all of you. I certainly appreciate your confidence in me."

Watching him, Sheila could not help but note his good taste in clothes. The blue serge suit, white shirt and maroon tie he was wearing gave him a distinguished look.

"Sheila, I bet you can't guess where I went last night?" Betty said.

"To a dance with Johnny?"

"No, guess again."

"For goodness' sake, tell her where you went. She can't guess," Mrs. Taylor said abruptly.

"I went to midnight Mass with Mrs. O'Reilly."

"You did?" Sheila said casually.

"I liked it. I enjoyed the hymns."

"That's nice," Sheila replied coolly.

Dinner over, Wistie and Mrs. Taylor started to clear off the table. The rest of the family went into the living room except Ann. "I want to help," she said, picking up a few dishes. It was obvious she did not want to be around Sheila and Ron any more than she had to.

Betty and Robert started to open the gifts, but Jim said, "Wait until your mother and Ann come in."

"They have so much to do, let's open them now," Sheila said eagerly.

"No, let's wait," Ron said.

"I agree with you, Ron," said Danny.

"Betty, why don't you and Joan go in and help them?" Sheila suggested briskly.

"I have a better idea," Ron said. "Why don't all you girls go in and give them a hand. After all, they've been in the kitchen cooking and baking all morning."

"That's right, all of you help," Jim said.

"Count me out," Sheila said flippantly. "I'll ruin my dress. Let Betty and Joan go in. Their dresses are cheap."

There were a few minutes of silence as they all looked at Sheila. Jim and Danny exchanged knowing glances.

Ron said sharply, "I'm surprised at you talking like that, Sheila. Suppose you were to get a few spots on your dress? You could send it to the cleaners, couldn't you?"

Sheila let out a long stream of smoke towards the ceiling, then looked at Ron with anger in her blue eyes. "I want you to keep quiet."

The Christmas tree in the Taylor flat was a thing of beauty. Ron exclaimed that he had never seen such a gorgeous tree. It reached to the high ceiling, and had full, wide branches. There were many differently shaped bulbs in bright colors, silver tinsel, and peppermint candy canes. Stuck at the very top of the tree was a large silver star. The tree had twelve sets of electric red, blue and orange lights.

Ron said, "Who decorated the tree?"

"All of us except mom and dad," Danny said.

When Mrs. Taylor finished her work in the kitchen and came into the living room, Danny sat on the floor and started to pass the gifts around. There were socks, nylon stockings, handkerchiefs, sweaters, stationery, a heavy bathrobe for Jim and a pressure-cooker for Edna.

"Oh, how lovely. Thank you so much, Sheila and Ron," she exclaimed, happily.

Ron received some sport shirts, socks, and ties. Sheila gave

him three silk shirts and a pair of blue silk pajamas. She opened the gift that Ron gave her, a diamond bracelet.

"Do you like it, dear?" Ron asked her anxiously.

"Oh yes. It's lovely, thank you," Sheila said briefly. She had hoped for a mink coat, then chided herself for thinking that Ron had that kind of money. She thanked the family for the presents they gave her of handkerchiefs and stockings. When she opened the gift from Ann and saw that it was a large cook book, she said coldly, "I'll keep this and give it to you for a wedding present in case you should ever get married."

Ann felt her face flush to the roots of her tawny hair. She stormed out of the room with tears in her eyes.

There was a tension in the room as every one stared at Sheila.

Danny said suddenly, "Ron, how about a game of poker tonight? Some friends of mine are coming over."

Sheila did not give Ron a chance to answer. She said quickly, "He can't. We're going to a party, and I think we should go home now."

Ron sighed and stood up. He came over to Mrs. Taylor and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thanks for the lovely dinner and for the presents, mother," he said affectionately.

After they had arrived home, and Sheila had put her gifts away, Ron came into her room and sat on the bed. There was a frown on his face and, noticing it, Sheila said, "Well, out with it. What's on your mind, Ron?"

"I can't understand why you insulted Ann for no reason at all. And the remark you made about Betty's and Joan's dresses being cheap!"

"Ann knows I don't like to cook or do housework. She had no right to give me a cook book. And, anyway, I have a habit of saying what is on my mind to a person's face, and not behind their back."

"I wouldn't have met you if it wasn't for Ann, you know that, don't you?"

Sheila shrugged her shoulders carelessly.

It was the day after Christmas, and Ron and Sheila had their first serious quarrel since their marriage. It started when Ron

had taken her to his friend's party the night before. Sheila was surprised to find that most of Ron's friends were rough. She had told Ron that she did not want any of his friends coming to the apartment.

Ron had said, "The people I know are real. They would do anything for me. They've been my friends a long time and they're going to remain my friends."

Meanwhile, Sheila had made friends with Iris Williams. Iris was forty-five, had dark auburn hair which she kept touched up, and her hazel eyes had a twinkle in them. Her clothes were well chosen, and she gave the impression that she really enjoyed life.

When they came home from the party, the first thing that Ron said was, "Sheila, keep away from Iris Williams. I forbid you to even speak to her, do you hear?"

Sheila replied, "And why, may I ask?"

"She's poison. She goes around with a fast crowd, and she's been divorced twice. I despise her."

Sheila said, "I think she's nice. I didn't see anything wrong with her."

Before Sheila went to her room, Ron's last words to her were: "Remember what I just told you. Keep away from Iris."

Chapter 13

IRIS WILLIAMS was reclining on the couch in her living room, smoking a cigarette and drinking a highball. Every minute or two, she would reach for the glass that was on a table close by and take a sip.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, the day after Christmas.

She was thinking of Sheila and hoping she would call her up. She had taken an interest in Sheila last night at the party. She knew that Ron did not approve of her, regardless of the fact that she respected him. She was startled out of her thoughts by the ringing of the doorbell. She went to answer it and gasped in surprise.

"Sheila, how nice! Come right in. I was hoping you'd give me a ring."

"I didn't have anything to do so I thought I'd come over to see you. My, you have a lovely apartment here on Madison Avenue," Sheila said, glancing around at the comfortably furnished living room.

"Glad you think so. I've been living here a long time. Come on, make yourself at home, I'll get you a drink," Iris said, dis-

appearing into the kitchen. Sheila flung her coat, hat, and bag on the couch and lit a cigarette. Iris returned with a tall high-ball glass. She handed it to Sheila and told her to sit down.

Sheila sat in one of the heavy armchairs and crossed her legs.

Iris said, "Didn't Ron warn you about me?"

"How did you know?" Sheila asked, startled.

Iris laughed lightly.

"I know that Ron hasn't any use for me."

"I can't understand why. What do you think of him?" Sheila asked shortly.

"I think he's wonderful, I really do," Iris said.

"That beats me," Sheila said, shaking her head.

"I've been married three times, not twice. My first husband was wonderful to me, and I didn't appreciate it. He divorced me and married again."

"What about the last two men?"

"I married in too much of a hurry. My second husband drank too much. He would come home and beat me. I couldn't stand it. I went to Reno for a divorce. My last husband didn't like children, and I do. We fought all the time. I'd thought I loved him but I came to realize that I didn't. And he confessed that he didn't love me either, so again I went to Reno for a divorce."

"My goodness, you had plenty of excitement, didn't you?"

"I really loved my first husband. I made many mistakes in my life, Sheila, and, believe me, I'm sorry about it."

"Ron doesn't want me to bother with you."

"Aren't you afraid to go against his wishes?"

"Iris, I never had a girl friend in my life. Why, even in grade school and later in high school, I didn't get along with girls. But I certainly had all the boys. What fun I had! Plenty of boy friends and not one girl friend. But because Ron forbids me to go with you, I find you exciting, and just the type I want for a friend."

"I wouldn't want to be the cause of breaking up your marriage, Sheila."

"Don't worry about it. Ron is madly in love with me."

"Wait until I get more drinks," Iris said, disappearing into the kitchen.

"Do you think you'll marry again?"

"Yes, I do. I want to make a home and fuss over a man. I love to cook and bake, and believe me, Sheila, the next time I marry it will be a different story."

"What do you mean? In what way?"

"Well, I'm not going to rush into marriage, and if I'm lucky enough to get a good man, then I'm going to make a darn good wife."

"How old are you?"

Iris laughed. "I'm forty-three."

"You have such pretty auburn hair, and your skin is so smooth. You're very attractive, do you know that?" Sheila asked soberly.

"Thank you. I'm glad you think so."

Sheila finished her highball, and Iris said, "I'll get you another one."

"No, thank you, Iris. I had enough for now."

"I'm going to get another one for myself. I like to have enough so I can feel good. It helps me to forget."

When she returned from the kitchen, she sat down again.

"I've been out with plenty of men. Some wanted to marry me and some just wanted to set me up in an apartment," Sheila said.

"How did you meet Ron?"

"Through my sister."

"Did you go with him long?"

"I married him in a hurry, the way you married your last two husbands."

"Well, Sheila, I married my last two husbands in a hurry, but let's forget about them and talk about us. Do you want another drink?"

Sheila shook her head.

"I had enough for awhile, too. How about coming out with me? I know where we can go and have a game of poker."

"I'd love that, but I want to be home before six. That's the time Ron comes home every night, sometimes earlier. I don't even know what he does all day or where he goes."

"Why don't you ask him? He'll tell you."

"I think I will."

"Is this your maid's day off?" Sheila asked.

Iris laughed. "Are you kidding? I do my own cleaning and cooking. I love to keep house."

"You do? Too bad you haven't the love of a good man. I wouldn't think of doing without a maid. I hate to cook and keep house."

"We are not all alike."

That day was the beginning of a friendship. Every week, Sheila played bridge or poker either at Iris' apartment or at the home of some of Iris' friends. Sheila usually lost more than she won.

One afternoon, Sheila arrived at her apartment and was surprised to see Charles Murphy sitting in the living room, smoking his ever-present cigar.

Sheila said sarcastically, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Charles took the cigar out of his mouth and said, "Won't you sit down, Mrs. Graham. I would like to have a few words with you."

She sat down in a chair across from him and crossed her legs boldly. She was annoyed when she saw that he did not pay any attention to them. He was looking at her face with something like contempt in his eyes.

Sheila said coldly, "Well, Mr. Murphy. What's on your mind?"

"I'll come right to the point. I've been like a father to Ron for years. I couldn't love him any more than if he was my own son. It grieves me to see that he isn't happy."

Sheila threw back her head and let out a long laugh. Then she stopped and looked at him angrily.

"You have one hell of a nerve coming here to tell me that. As a matter of fact, Ron *is* happy. You only imagine he isn't. Does he know you're here?"

"No, he doesn't. He doesn't tell me anything about his home life, but I have two eyes."

"You resented Ron marrying me, didn't you?"

"That's right, because I happen to know more about you than Ron does. I've seen you around clubs in New York with many different men before you married Ron."

"That wasn't any of your business, who I went out with

before I married Ron," Sheila snapped angrily, her eyes blazing fire.

"All the men that I used to see you with were not only old enough to be your father, but some of them your grandfather as well. And I happen to know that they all had money. You were just out with them for what you could get out of them."

Sheila gasped, "Get out of here, you cad."

"If you really loved Ron you wouldn't be so cold-blooded. What I can't understand is why you married a man you don't love."

Sheila was startled by that question. "How do you know I don't love Ron?"

"I'm not the only one who knows. All of Ron's friends do. Ron must be blind not to be able to see through you."

"Some friends! I was the one who was fooled. I thought he had society friends. Instead they're all fight-crazy or horse-crazy or card-crazy."

"They're true-blue friends and would stand by him through thick and thin. That's more than his own wife would do."

Sheila's bosom was heaving with the anger she felt. She was looking around for something to pick up and throw at him.

He said, "I warned Ron about you, but he wouldn't listen. Why did you marry him if you didn't love him?"

Neither one of them heard Ron come in, and Ron, hearing Charles raising his voice in anger, stood and listened. His face flushed to the roots of his hair when he heard Sheila say, "I married Ron to spite my sister. Now, get out of here and stay out!"

Without waiting another minute, Ron went out of the apartment quietly.

After Charles left, Sheila lit a cigarette and walked around the living room. There was a grim line to her pretty mouth. She thought, *that Murphy is jealous. That's what is wrong with him. He had a nerve coming here and insulting me. If he was to tell Ron anything, he wouldn't believe him, he loves me so much.*

She went into the kitchen and saw Wistie making a pineapple upside-down cake. She said abruptly, "Wistie, you didn't hear what Mr. Murphy was saying to me, did you?"

Wistie smiled and shook her head. "No, ma'am. Ah din' hear not'in'."

Sheila smiled at her. "Thank you, Wistie."

When Ron walked out of the apartment, he went to Dinty Moore's. After ordering Dinty's famous hamburger with onions, he ate slowly and let his mind wander to Sheila and Charles. He wondered why Charles and Sheila had never liked each other. He loved Charles as if he were his own father, and he loved Sheila. She must have been hurt deeply by something that Charles said to her, or else, why would she tell him she had married him for spite?

Chapter 14

SHEILA was twenty-three the middle of March. Ron bought her a dinner ring—a cluster of small white diamonds. She had kissed him passionately and told him how generous he was. Ron never mentioned the mid-winter afternoon when he had come home early and overheard Sheila and Charles talking about him. Sheila had been so affectionate that night that Ron dismissed the incident from his mind.

Ron knew that Sheila was seeing Iris, and it hurt him deeply to know that she was drinking a little more than she should. She had staggered into the apartment one night after being at Iris' apartment all day.

There, she had met Thomas Preston and James Brady. Thomas had danced with Sheila, holding her close and telling her how beautiful she was. Sheila had let him lead her into the bedroom, but when he started to take off her dress, she had pushed him away and slapped him across the face.

Thomas had remarked, "She's nothing but a damn tease. I'd like to break her neck."

Ron was sitting in the living room reading the evening paper

when he noticed that Sheila could hardly stand. He threw the paper aside and came over to her. He grabbed her by the arm and swung her around to face him.

"So, now you're starting to come home drunk?"

Sheila jerked her arm away and her eyes blazed angrily. "Don't you dare tell me that I'm drunk. I know what I'm doing. I'm a little dizzy, that's all."

"You might as well know it right now. I will not stand for you coming home like this, do you hear?"

"I feel good, that's all. And who are you to scold me? What do you do every day? Where do you go? Have you another woman on the string?"

Ron clenched and unclenched his hands. He wanted to slap her. But she came close to him and put her arms around his neck.

"Kiss me, Ron," she said, holding him tight to her. Suddenly the scorn he felt for her was giving way to a stronger feeling in his being. He put his arms around her, crushing her to his chest.

He whispered hoarsely in her ear, "You're driving me crazy. Why do you torment me? Why did you lock your bedroom door last night?"

Sheila started to laugh, but he crushed her lips with kisses until she lost all sense of reasoning.

Things went along smoothly for a month. Ron took Sheila out more often. It was while they were having dinner at a Syrian restaurant that Sheila asked him the question that was bothering her. Ron had ordered small green stuffed squash, cabbage rolled with lamb meat and rice and cooked in tomato sauce, baked kibby, chopped lamb mixed with fine yellow imported wheat, and lettuce, tomato, and cucumber salad with vinegar and olive oil dressing. Sheila thought the food was delicious.

"I've been here many times with some of my friends," Ron said. "It's good to have something different and so tasty to eat once in awhile."

While they were drinking Turkish coffee and smoking cigarettes, Sheila said abruptly, "What do you do every day, Ron?"

"I go to different orphanage homes. I show boys how to box I tell them stories," he said simply.

Sheila looked at him in awe. "Is that what you do? I suppose you give them money and buy them things, too, don't you?"

Ron's face flushed slightly. "I wish I could do more. I love children," he confessed shyly.

She said sternly, "Ron, I want you to give up this foolishness, for that's all it is."

Ron shook his head. "Never," he said seriously.

"I want you to give it up, Ron."

"Sorry, Sheila. I wouldn't give it up even for you."

"Why?"

"It would be just like tearing my heart out, that's why. And don't talk about it any more."

Sheila was surprised at Ron's frankness. She felt that she really did not know him after all.

Chapter 15

IT WAS the last day in the month of May, eight months since Sheila had married Ron. Their marriage was at the breaking point. Whenever any of Ron's friends came over to the apartment, Sheila would either go out or lock herself in her room.

Ron said to her one evening, "Why don't you stop seeing Iris Williams? Why don't you go around with a refined married woman around your own age?"

Sheila snapped back, "Stop knocking Iris to me. You don't know her like I do. She has far more good points than bad. She's the only woman that I ever cared to have for a friend."

Ron answered bitterly, "She started you drinking more. She puts ideas in your head."

Sheila threw back her head and laughed.

"Don't make me laugh, will you? If you want to know the truth, Iris is always preaching to me, and I don't pay attention to her. That's the reason I like her, I guess. She's a very outspoken woman. Just like me."

And another time when Charles had come to see Ron about his fight, which was close at hand, Sheila had remarked with

acid in her voice, "For goodness' sake! Look who the wind blew in." Then she stormed out of the living room, slamming the door shut. There was a pained expression in Ron's dark eyes, and Charles had shaken his head sadly.

This morning, the last day in May, Sheila awoke early. She felt sick to her stomach and slipped out of bed. She barely made it to the bathroom where she heaved so much she thought someone was sticking a knife through her stomach. She came back into the bedroom, so dizzy she could hardly walk. Perspiration covered her forehead and face. Her hands were clammy. Perhaps she had eaten something that did not agree with her last night. It could not have been from drink. She had had only one highball the night before.

After she got back in bed and lay there for a few minutes, there was a knock on her door. She opened it to see Ron and Wistie, each with an anxious expression. Ron said, "Are you sick? I heard you heaving."

"Call a doctor, Mist' Graham," Wistie said. She helped Sheila back in bed and said, "Yo' stay thar, chile'."

After Ron called the doctor, he came in and sat on the side of the bed, a worried look in his eyes. Sheila lay with her eyes closed. When the doctor came, he asked Ron and Wistie to leave the room for a few minutes.

Ron walked up and down the long living room, his hands clasped behind his back, a grim line to his mouth. After what seemed like an hour, but was only a few minutes, the doctor came out, a smile on his face. He patted Ron on the back and said pleasantly, "Well, Ron, you're going to be a father in about six months."

Ron stared at him with a bewildered expression. Then, as the words sank into his mind, he clasped the doctor's hand in his and almost shook it off.

"Thanks, doc. Thanks a lot," he said, and went dashing into the bedroom. The doctor smiled, shaking his head. He had been Ron's doctor for several years and knew how much Ron loved children. Wistie stood with a wide smile on her dark face, her eyes aglow.

"Sheila, darling, isn't that wonderful news? I'm willing to

forgive you and to forget our quarrels. Oh, I love you so much," Ron said, sitting on the bed, and looking tenderly at her. He bent down and kissed her warmly. "Is there anything I can do before I leave? I really have so much to do today, dear, or else I would stay with you," he said gently.

"No, I want to be alone. I'll be all right. Wistie is here," Sheila said dully.

Ron kissed her again and said, "I'll see you later, dear. Words can't tell you how happy I am." Then he was gone.

Sheila stayed in bed until she made sure that Ron had left the apartment. She rang for Wistie, and when Wistie came in, she said, "Bring me a cup of black coffee right away. I'm going out."

Wistie told her that she had better stay in bed.

Sheila said angrily, "Don't give me orders, Wistie."

"Yas, ma'am, ah woan'," Wistie said, going into the kitchen for the coffee.

"Oh, God, I don't want the baby. I don't want children. I have to think of something. I just have to," Sheila said to herself while she dressed.

She rushed over to see Iris, and, when Iris opened the door and saw Sheila there before noon, she said, "My goodness! What are you doing here at this hour? Come in. You look as if you were going to faint."

Sheila came in and sat down on the couch. "Iris, you have to help me. I'm in trouble."

"What kind of trouble, Sheila?"

"I'm going to have a baby."

Iris threw back her head and laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks. Sheila narrowed her eyes in anger when Iris looked at her and said mirthlessly, "You call having a baby trouble? I couldn't help but laugh, Sheila. The expression on your face was like a person who had done something bad. Having a baby happens to most of us married women. Why are you looking so serious?"

"Never mind all that. I don't want it. I don't like children," Sheila said.

"Does Ron know?"

Sheila nodded her head.

"What does he think about it? When did you find out? When do you expect it?" Iris popped the questions at Sheila all in one breath.

"I found out about it this morning. I was sick, and Ron called the doctor. He's almost crazy with happiness."

"Just like a man, and especially a man like Ron. I don't know of anyone who loves children more than he does."

"I have about six months to go. I don't want it. You have to help me, Iris, you just have to. What shall I do?" She stood up and walked up and down the room, wringing her hands.

"Sit down, Sheila, and calm yourself and let's talk this thing over quietly," Iris said gently.

Sheila sat down on the edge of the couch. "Well, tell me what to do."

"I'll tell you what you should do but it will go in one ear and out the other. My only advice is for you to have the baby and be thankful that you're able to bring a child into the world. It will have the love of a wonderful father, and it might make you realize that you really do love Ron. Why don't you make the best of it? In the end, you will be happy. Happiness has to be earned, Sheila."

Sheila jumped to her feet quickly, her eyes blazing with the anger that was seething within her. "I thought you were my friend. I told you I don't want the baby. You must know of someone who can help me."

Iris seemed to be deep in thought. The silence stretched into minutes. Sheila snapped abruptly, "Damn it to hell, anyway! Are you going to help me or not?"

Iris gave a deep sigh and said dully, "Very well. But you're crazy. You might die, you know. Many women do."

"Stop preaching to me, Iris Williams. I don't care about any thing except getting rid of being pregnant, and if you mention the word *love* to me, I'll throw something at you."

"What's Ron going to say when he finds out? Have you thought of that?"

Sheila shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not going to worry about that now. Anyway, he'll forgive me. He loves me too much."

Iris shook her head sadly and went into the bedroom and came back with a small white card.

"Have you got enough money in cash? You'll need about five hundred dollars."

"No, I haven't got that much. You know how my luck has been at cards lately."

"Well, you'd better hock something, then."

"I don't wear my diamond bracelet often. Ron probably won't miss it."

"We'll drop by your apartment, and you run up and get it. I'll call a cab now."

Sheila got her bracelet and told Wistie if Ron called up while she was out, to say that she was sleeping. Wistie said she would. They went to the Avenue of the Americas and Iris pawned the bracelet for six hundred dollars. Sheila said, "Isn't it lucky we got so much for it?"

"What do you mean, lucky? Do you know that Ron must have paid plenty for that bracelet? You'd better not lose it."

"How far do we have to go?" Sheila asked.

"I don't know. We're going to meet the woman I called, and she'll take us to the place in her car."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you want to back out?"

Sheila's voice rose to an angry shout. "No!"

Iris shrugged her shoulders and settled back in the cab. Sheila said suddenly, "You have such beautiful auburn hair, Iris. Is it natural?"

"What do you think?" Iris said laughing.

"I think you keep it touched up."

"Right you are."

The yellow cab slid to a stop at the corner of 125th Street. Iris paid the driver and they stepped out of the cab. Sheila said, "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know. But I see the woman waiting for us in that car across the street. Come on, let's hurry!" she said, leading the way.

A middle-aged woman was sitting at the wheel. She said abruptly, "Come on. Make it snappy, will you please?"

About a half-hour later, the car pulled up in front of a very

large yellow brick building. They got out and the woman led them up the stone steps and into a large hall.

Sheila said in a low voice, "I don't like the looks of this place. It looks like a broken-down old factory to me."

"I don't like the looks of it either. Do you want to back out?" Iris asked eagerly.

Sheila shook her head. "No. I came this far. I'm going all the way."

Two hours later, Sheila and Iris were riding back in a cab. Sheila looked very pale and lay back with her eyes closed.

Iris said, "Who performed the operation, a man or a woman?"

"I don't know. They had masks on their faces," Sheila replied dully.

"Did you feel any pain?"

"It was hell. They didn't put me to sleep."

"They didn't?"

"No."

"Well, I know one thing. I died a thousand deaths waiting for you. They wouldn't let me leave the building until it was over with. I walked back and forth. The woman at the desk kept telling me to sit down, that I was getting on her nerves. I went through hell. Never again."

"I'm the one that suffered," Sheila said.

"You'd better go right to bed as soon as you get home. You're not out of danger. I hope nothing happens to you."

"Stop telling me that. At least I'm not going to have a baby, and that's all I care about."

Chapter 16

AS SOON as Ron was told he was going to become a father, it seemed as if he could not do enough for Sheila. He would come home with flowers, a fancy bottle of perfume, a box of the best chocolates, or a basket of assorted fresh fruits. He would say tenderly, "Take it easy, darling. Don't lift anything heavy. You do want to have a healthy baby."

Sheila ate her breakfast in bed every morning, Wistie fussing over her as if she were a baby. Since the abortion, Sheila had not let Ron sleep with her. She would complain of a headache or a backache and dash into her room and lock the door.

There would be a pained expression in Ron's eyes. He would shake his head as if he could not understand what it was all about. He thought, *I should never have consented to let her have her own room.* At times he would get the urge to break her bedroom door down, then he would laugh at himself for thinking of such a thing.

One afternoon, Sheila was at Iris' apartment. Thomas Preston and James Brady were there, too. They played cards, drank highballs, and later, Thomas and Sheila danced while Iris and James sat on the couch and talked.

Although Sheila did not like Thomas, she thought he was exciting with his small black mustache and dark, piercing eyes. He was a little over medium height and when he looked at Sheila, she could feel a thrill surge through her.

While they danced, Thomas whispered, "Sheila, I love you, know that?" Sheila laughed into his eyes.

Later, after Thomas had left, Sheila asked Iris if he had ever married and if she knew how old he was.

Iris laughed. "You've seen Thomas here plenty of times. Why all the questions, all of a sudden, Sheila?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I'm just curious."

"He's about thirty, never been married, and pretty well off, too. And, you know, he thinks a lot of you."

"I know he does. He tells me he loves me and that it's too bad he didn't meet me before Ron did."

"Well, Thomas is nice, but I know one thing. If he were your husband, you couldn't get away with having your own way."

"That's what you think, Iris. I can wrap Thomas around my finger, too."

"Don't be so sure."

"I wouldn't marry him if I were single. He isn't my idea of a husband," Sheila said crisply.

"Don't kid yourself, Sheila. He would make some lucky girl a fine husband."

"Let's forget about Thomas. I have something far more important on my mind right now," Sheila said.

"What?"

"About Ron finding out about the abortion. I won't let him sleep with me. I lock my door on him. When he wants to know why I'm treating him so coldly, I complain of a headache or pains in my back."

"You won't be able to get away with that much longer. The first thing you know, he'll call the doctor."

"I know it."

"I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when he finds out."

"I'm almost sure he will forgive me. He'll be angry at first, but he'll get over it. He forgives me everything."

"I certainly feel sorry for him. I could sit down and cry," Iris said, shaking her head.

"Say, whose side are you on, anyway?" Sheila asked angrily.

"On Ron's. You know that."

"I don't know why I keep coming to see you, Iris, the way you always insult me."

"We are alike in some ways. We both speak what's on our minds, that's why."

"I can't stand anyone giving me orders," Sheila said.

"I've lived longer than you, and I've made mistakes which I'm sorry for now. I don't want you to do anything that you'll be sorry for later on in life."

"Listen, Iris, you don't really know me. I'm never sorry for anything I do. Remember that."

Iris sighed.

"I guess I better go on home now. Ron will come home as usual and ask me how I feel."

"When he finds out what you did, he'll blame me for taking you," Iris said.

"You don't think I'm stupid enough to tell him that you helped me, do you? Give me credit for having a little bit of sense, anyway."

"I have a very guilty feeling. I should've tried to talk you out of it more than I did."

"It wouldn't have done you one bit of good, Iris. My mind was made up to get rid of it and that's all there is to it. So forget it."

Chapter 17

THE NIGHT before Ron's main fight, he was sitting in the living room reading the evening paper. Sheila was lounging on the couch, her mind working ceaselessly. *I wonder if I should tell him now?* she thought. *He seems to be in a good mood. It isn't going to be as easy as I thought it would be. I don't know what to do.*

Ron finished reading the paper, folded it, and laid it aside. He smiled warmly at Sheila and said, "Come on and sit on my lap. You look too beautiful to be sitting there all alone."

Sheila came over and cuddled in his lap. He kissed her and said, "You're not going to lock your door on me tonight, are you, dear?"

Sheila bit her lower lip in a nervous gesture. Ron was saying, "Just think. It won't be too long now. If it's a girl, I want her to look like you, I love you so."

"I think I'll go to bed now. I feel tired and I have a headache," Sheila said, getting off his lap.

"Don't you think you've been having too many headaches lately? I'm going to call the doctor right now," Ron said, walking towards the phone.

Sheila grabbed his arm. "No, don't call the doctor now. I'll be all right," she said anxiously.

"You haven't been yourself at all, Sheila. If you keep on like this, I'm going to call the doctor."

"See how I feel tomorrow. I'm going to bed now. Good night."

She dashed to her room and locked the door.

She was unable to sleep and tossed from side to side, her mind in a turmoil of emotions. She told herself, *things can't get any more complicated than they are right now. Why don't you go in and tell him? You don't love him. What are you afraid of? Why torment yourself with worry. Go ahead and tell him. Have it over with. He loves you. He'll forgive you.*

She slipped out of bed, lit a cigarette and sat smoking it slowly. When she finished, she squashed it out in the ash tray, took a light blue silk nightgown from the dresser drawer, and put it on instead of the pink one. She tied a blue ribbon around her hair, touched a little perfume behind her ears, and left her room.

Ron was sitting up in bed reading, a small table lamp lit by his bed. He looked startled when Sheila opened his door. Then his face glowed happily.

"Sheila, honey. What a happy surprise! This is the first time you ever came in here." He turned the covers over and patted the bed. "Come on, get in."

Sheila slipped in bed beside him. He bent her head down on the pillow and kissed her on the lips. She clung to him, her arms tight around his neck. He kissed the warmth of her throat, his hands caressing her. Sheila pushed him away from her gently.

She said huskily, "Ron, I have something to tell you."

"Never mind now, you can tell me later," Ron said, pressing her close to his chest. Sheila freed herself and sat up in bed. Her heart was pounding madly. *Now was the time.*

"I have to tell you now, Ron. Please listen."

"Is it so important that it can't wait until later?" Ron asked impatiently.

"Ron, I'm not going to have a baby," she said abruptly.

"What did you say?" he asked, a puzzled expression on his face.

"I had an abortion. I'm not going to have the baby."

He stared at her as if he had not heard right, and then Sheila noticed the angry set to his jaw and the pained expression in his eyes. She threw her arms around his neck, holding him tight.

She said huskily, "Don't be angry at me, Ron. I don't like children. I'm afraid it will ruin my figure, or I might die."

He jerked her arms away from him roughly and leaped out of bed. His eyes blazed as he stared at her, as if seeing her for the first time.

"You deliberately committed murder. Why?"

Sheila slipped out of bed and walked towards the door. She looked at him with defiance. "Because I didn't want it, that's why. Isn't that reason enough?" she snapped.

He shook his head. When he spoke, he was choked with emotion, his voice hoarse.

"What a blind fool I've been. Charles warned me about you, and I wouldn't listen, because I didn't want to believe anything bad against you. Look at you, coming in here to tease me. You've hurt me more than any blow I ever got in the ring. It might have been a son. How happy I was!"

He ran his hand through his hair and heaved a deep sigh. "I really see you now for the first time—a selfish, conceited, spoiled brat, who thinks of nothing but herself. I hate you, do you hear? Hate you! I know now that I never really loved you."

Ron walked to the door and opened it wide. Then, turning to Sheila, he said roughly, "Get out of my room and stay out."

Sheila sauntered out, holding her head high. She went to bed and in a few minutes was lost in a deep sleep.

In his room, Ron sat in a chair by the window. He rested his elbows on his knees and held his head in his hands while hot tears rolled down his face.

The next morning, when Sheila awoke, she heard voices in the living room. She got out of bed and went to the door to listen. She heard Ron talking to Wistie, but was unable to understand what he was saying. She dressed quickly and went into the

living room. Ron's bedroom door was open and Wistie was helping him pack.

She stood in the doorway of his room. Ron glanced up and seeing her standing there with a wry smile on her face, said, "I'm moving out. I want a divorce. The quicker the better. You can leave for Reno as soon as possible."

Sheila was surprised to see how tired he looked, as if he had not been to bed all night. She said with scorn, "Suppose I don't want a divorce. What then?"

Ron said briskly, "I want a divorce. If you go to Reno and get it, there won't be any scandal for you, and if you want to cause trouble, then I'll file for a divorce here in New York and everyone will know why. You have no choice. That's final."

He handed her a card with his lawyer's name and said, "Your lawyer can send the papers to my lawyer, and I'll sign them."

As soon as he was gone, Sheila turned to Wistie and said flippantly, "Wistie, you and I have a lot to do. I'm leaving for Reno the day after tomorrow."

"Yas ma'am," Wistie drawled.

Suddenly Sheila remembered that Ron's big fight was that night and she was going with Iris. She called her up and explained what had happened since the night before.

When she was through, Iris said, "Too bad you told him at this time. I hope it doesn't interfere with his fight tonight."

"That has nothing to do with it. I happen to know that the fellow he's going to fight is very good, too. So if he loses, it won't be on account of me," Sheila snapped.

"If you loved Ron, you wouldn't talk like that," Iris said.

"Stop preaching to me, Iris, do you hear?"

"I'll meet you at Times Square. We'll have dinner together and then go to the Garden."

"So long, Iris. I'll see you later."

"Wait a minute, Sheila. Why don't you sell some of your jewelry? You'll need the money for Reno."

"Have you forgotten that my diamond bracelet is in hock?"

"I'll get it out for you, and after I sell it for you, I can take out my money. Is that all right?"

"I don't understand why you're so nice to me, Iris."

Iris laughed and said, "I must be crazy."

"Never mind about that. Have you got tickets for good seats?"

"I'll say I have—ringside."

After Sheila replaced the receiver on the hook, she said aloud, "You're not going to win tonight, Ron."

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

FIGHT-CONSCIOUS New Yorkers who were not going to Madison Square Garden were sitting at home close to the radio. Taverns that had television were packed to the doors, and night clubs broadcasting the fight did an enormous business. Crowds gathered outside of radio stores that were showing telecasts of the fight in their show windows.

Sheila, looking stunning in a powder-blue tight-fitting dress, with a small black hat with a fine veil perched on the back of her head, was eating dinner with Iris at a restaurant on Madison Avenue.

Iris said, "You're going to have a good time in Reno, I know. Why not contact my lawyer? He'll get in touch with a lawyer in Reno. As soon as you're settled in your hotel, the first chance you get, you go and see him."

"But I am leaving for Reno the day after tomorrow."

"I'll take you to my lawyer in the morning and he'll call up Reno, don't worry." Iris shook her head. "I don't know why you don't love Ron," she said with a sigh.

"Don't talk about love to me. I'm sick and tired of telling you · don't believe love is important," Sheila snapped.

They arrived at the Garden fifteen minutes before the main bout. Iris said, "There's Jack Dempsey! Look at all the famous people that are here."

"Yes, I know," Sheila said crisply, glancing around her at all the men.

Ron was sitting in his dressing room. He had not told Charles that he was through with Sheila.

Noticing the sullen droop to Ron's mouth, Charles said sharply, "You better snap out of it. What's on your mind, anyway? Did you have another quarrel with that wife of yours?"

When Ron did not answer, Charles added, "You're the heavy favorite. Your fans expect a knockout from you. The Garden's packed. Not a seat to be had."

Ron remained silent while the gloves were slipped on his hands. He looked as if he had not slept in several days.

When Ron entered the ring and sat in his corner, Iris said, "Sheila, you should have waited until after the fight was over before telling Ronald about the abortion. After all, he *has* been wonderful to you."

"So what?" Sheila said sarcastically. "Many men have been good to me, and there'll be many more who'll be good to me."

Iris did not have a chance to answer. The referee introduced Ron and his opponent, Jack Malloy, who weighed one hundred and ninety pounds and was from Chicago.

Sheila whispered, "Look at how good-looking he is. Blond hair, blue eyes. I could go for him."

"He isn't any nicer than Ron, and when it comes to being a wolf, why, you're worse than a man," Iris observed.

Sheila shrugged her shoulders and lit a cigarette. The gong sounded for the first round. Iris sat forward in her seat, a tense expression on her face. Sheila sat back, feeling relaxed. A sly smile was on her lips.

The first round of the fifteen-round bout was a tense, pulse-quickenning one. The boys touched gloves and started swinging. Ron threw a left jab to Malloy's jaw, Malloy a hard right to Ron's chin, but it was blocked by Ron. They danced around the ring. Ron flicked a light left to Malloy's face, and Malloy flung

a hard right to Ron's body. They went into a clinch and the referee parted them. They danced around the ring, and then Malloy came in with a right to Ron's jaw. Ron fell on his knees but rose quickly. He flung a left to the mid-section of Malloy at the sound of the bell.

In the second round, both boys came in swinging as if the round would determine life or death. A right uppercut to Ron's jaw and another right to his body landed him through the ropes, into the laps of newsmen. The spectators stood up in their seats shouting. Ron was helped back into the ring.

Sheila noticed that Charles Murphy was moving the ever-present cigar in his mouth nervously. She knew he was worried, afraid that Ron might lose the fight.

At the sound of the bell ending the second round, Iris said, "Ron seems to be in a trance. Anyone can see he isn't himself."

Sheila snapped, "Oh, keep quiet."

They heard a man say, "That Malloy is a good fighter. He wants to win so he can fight the champion. Some of those blows hurt Graham."

While Ron was being tended to in his corner, Charles said angrily, "What the devil is the matter with you? Get in there and knock Malloy out before he knocks you out. Your fans are going crazy. They don't know what the hell is the matter with you all of a sudden."

The gong sounded for the third round. Malloy seemed to be more cautious. His eyes were flashing as he stood, inviting Ron to come closer. Ron swung a hard blow to his ribs, another left to his mid-section. Malloy came back with a forcible blow to Ron's chin and quickly clinched to avoid another blow from Ron. The referee parted them as the bell sounded.

Charles whispered to Ron, "For God's sake, snap out of it. All you've been talking about for months was how you were going to win this fight. You look as if you were in a trance."

Ron did not answer. There was a grim line to his mouth and a faraway look in his eyes. He was realizing that the golden opportunity he had been waiting for was dangerously slipping away from him.

The bell introduced the fourth round. There was a howl from the spectators as Ron let go with a hard left which was followed

quickly with a right to Malloy's mid-section. He winced in pain and came towards Ron swinging a right uppercut to his eye, and then another right to his eye. Ron dodged a third blow from Malloy, and they danced around the ring for several seconds. Malloy dealt a short blow to Ron's jaw at the sound of the bell.

Charles was chewing his unlit cigar and pulling at his hair.

"For God's sake, do something in this next round or you'll be done for."

At the fifth round, Charles said angrily, "Knock him out," as Ron went to the center of the ring. The Garden was thick with smoke. Ron's fans were puffing away madly at their cigarettes. No sooner would they finish one than they would light another.

Ron's speed and rapid-fire blows were now in evidence. He came towards Malloy with a terrific left to the heart which floored him to the count of five. The crowds screamed for Ron to knock him out. Then, suddenly, Sheila appeared before his eyes. It was the night before, and she was in his room, in his bed, pressed close to him, telling him that she was not going to have his child. The word *abortion* kept flashing through his dazed mind.

Malloy, being a calculating fighter, swung lefts and rights to Ron's head. Blood was running down his face. He swung punches that went wild. Malloy kept battering Ron on the face, and he was groping around the ring, his eyes swollen, and blood oozing out of his mouth from cuts around his eyes. Malloy let go with another right to his face. Ron's arms dropped to his sides. He staggered like a man who is drunk. The referee came over and stopped the fight. He announced Malloy the winner by a technical knockout in the fifth round. Ron was helped out of the ring by Charles and his trainers.

There was a wild bedlam in the Garden as the spectators broke from their seats. Flash bulbs exploded, and newsmen dashed to the phones, some to the dressing room. Iris was crying openly.

Much later, after Ron's wounds were attended to, Charles was waving his hands wildly and grumbling, "There's no excuse. You lost the fight because you're stupid. I'm through." He flung his cigar across the room. "You know Malloy is a good fighter.

He was hoping you would give him just one little chance and you did."

He stormed out of the dressing-room slamming the door.

Then, just as suddenly, he came back and stood in front of Ron's chair. He laid a hand on his shoulder, and his voice, that had been so rough a few minutes ago, was now low and gentle. His eyes were sad.

"I'll stick by you, kid. Forget what I said," he said warmly.

Ron grasped Charles by the hand and held it tightly. He was silent and words were not needed to tell Charles how badly he felt.

Sheila and Iris stopped at a lunchroom for coffee and sandwiches. Iris said, "I don't think you have a heart, Sheila."

Sheila said abruptly, "Why bother with me then?"

"There's something about you that gets me. I don't know just what," Iris said.

"If you want to stay friends with me, don't preach to me, and don't you dare mention the word love. I'm sick and tired of telling you all this over and over," Sheila snapped.

"Skip it. What time are you going to meet me in the morning so I can take you to see my lawyer?"

"About nine, and I'm leaving for Reno a day later than I had planned. It will be Friday, the first of July."

The evening before Sheila was to leave for Reno, she went to see her family. They were getting ready to eat dinner. Her mother heaped a plate with ham, cabbage, potatoes, and carrots and set it before her.

Mr. Taylor said, "Where's Ron?"

There was a sly smile on Sheila's lips as she looked across the table at her sister Ann.

"Yes, where is Ron? Why didn't he come with you?" her mother asked anxiously.

"I'm getting a divorce." Sheila smiled and added, "I'm leaving for Reno in the morning."

Everyone stopped eating and stared at her with puzzled expressions. Sheila said abruptly, "For goodness' sake, stop staring at me like that."

"You've only been married a few months. What in the world happened?" her mother asked anxiously.

"I got bored and told Ron that I wanted a divorce. That's all there is to it," Sheila said casually, while her eyes rested on Ann's face.

"I don't believe a word of it. He probably found out how selfish you are," her father said sharply.

"Jim, was that nice to say?" Edna said, flashing him an angry look.

Seeing Ann's face flush, Sheila thought, *she's glad, and I don't care if she marries him or not.*

"Too bad. Ron is such a fine boy. Why don't you think it over before you rush off to Reno?" her mother said eagerly.

Sheila shook her head. "No, my mind is all made up, and I won't change it."

"I can't understand why Ron lost the fight. His heart was set on winning," Danny said.

Sheila rose from her chair and said angrily, "I'm leaving right now."

"Go ahead. I don't want you here," Jim said.

"Don't pay any attention to your father, Sheila. Sit down and finish your dinner," her mother pleaded.

"No, I'm going. And I might as well tell you right now, I have no intention of coming here again while the old man is alive," she said, gesturing towards her father.

There was a gasp from everyone, and Danny said quickly, "Hurry up and get out, Sheila, and don't slam the door."

Sheila went into the bedroom for her hat and bag and her mother started to follow her. Danny raised his hand in protest.

"Mother, please sit down. Let her go. She's insulted dad."

"I'm sure she didn't mean it, son."

"Oh yes she did!" Joan said.

Sheila came out of the bedroom.

"Mother, I'll write you from Reno," she said. She went out, slamming the door so hard that the loose plaster in the foyer fell with a crash.

All during the plane ride to Reno, Sheila sat looking through the small window. Iris had gone to LaGuardia Field with her. She had kissed Sheila on the cheek and told her she was going to

miss her. Sheila had thanked her for getting her diamond bracelet out of pawn and selling it for her.

She smiled when she thought of Wistie. When she had asked her what she was going to do, Wistie had drawled that she was going back to Atlanta, that there was no place like Atlanta. She had given Sheila her address in case she ever went there.

As the plane finally hovered over Reno, and Sheila saw many tiny flickering lights, she thought they reminded her of beautiful jewelry and of glittering stars in the sky at night.

The plane bounced gently and taxied to a stop at the Reno airport. Sheila grabbed her make-up kit and, after she inhaled deeply the fresh mountain air, entered the air-lines limousine with several of the other passengers, pleased with having completed her first plane ride.

Chapter 19

RENO, the Biggest Little City in the World, was in a turmoil. Flags were strung from building to building along the main part of the town; streets were brilliantly lighted and alive with ranchers, cowboys, old-time miners, and men, women, and children. Thousands of tourists filled the town. Not a sleeping room was to be had. Unfortunates had to stay in their parked cars all night.

The majority of the people were dressed western-style for the most important occasion in Reno, the rodeo, held every July. It was a great day for all the Nevada Indians, who donned their buckskin, painted their faces, and brought along their squaws.

Thousands of people filled all the clubs, some gambling, some drinking, and others merely watching. The drone of dealers' voices, rattle of dice, and *whir* of the roulette wheel was music to the gamblers' ears.

As soon as Sheila was settled in her room at the Golden, she took a shower, slipped into a cotton dress and went downstairs. As she stepped out of the elevator, she took in details of the

lobby—the newspaper and magazine stand, cigar and cigarette counter, slot machines, and the coffee shop.

She also took notice of the men and women lounging around in the lobby. She went to the newsstand and asked the girl behind the counter where the dining room was.

The girl smiled at her and said, "Right in there where the gaming is."

Sheila thanked her and sauntered away gracefully, conscious of the admiring stares from most of the people around her. The headwaiter ushered her to a table, and she felt the eyes of the diners upon her as she picked up the menu and ordered a martini. For her dinner, she ordered a steak with mushrooms, no vegetables, and a tossed salad and rolls.

She glanced around casually as she waited for her order. She noticed many people at the bar, dice table, and roulette wheel. At the slot machines, a woman suddenly shouted, "Jackpot!" and money came tumbling out of the machine. She heard the dealer's voice coming from the dice table as he droned, "Seven, front line winner."

The jingle of silver dollars and the clink of ice at the bar was music to Sheila's ears. Soft music came from the band that was on a platform where the floor shows were held three times a night. A tall, pleasant-faced man came over and asked Sheila if she cared to dance.

Sheila said sweetly, "I might as well. I'm waiting for my order anyway."

He led her out to the dance floor, and while they danced, he asked her what she was doing in Reno and where she was from.

Sheila said, "I'm from New York. I arrived about an hour ago. I came here for a divorce."

He smiled and said, "I got my final papers this morning. I'm leaving later, going back to London."

"Don't tell me you came here from London," Sheila said, a look of amazement on her face.

He laughed. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I guess, only I was taken by surprise. I guess you won or lost a fortune while you were here, didn't you?"

"No. Believe it or not, I don't gamble."

"You don't?"

"I wanted to see what Reno was like. I mean, all of Reno, not just the clubs."

"And did you?"

"I certainly did. I have plenty to tell all my friends when I return home."

"I have a grandmother and two aunts in London, on my mother's side," Sheila said.

"Where do they live? What is their name? Perhaps I know them."

When Sheila mentioned their name, he shook his head. "No, I don't know them."

The music ended, he led her back to her table and thanked her for the dance. "I have to go now. I wish I could have met you sooner," he said, smiling into her eyes.

"Aren't you staying here at this hotel?"

"I stayed at a guest home five miles out of Reno. I liked it very much. That's where you should stay."

Sheila shook her head. "No, I like to be right in the heart of town so that I can see all the excitement."

"Well, you're truthful, anyway. You'll meet many people while you are here. Some you'll like and others you won't. And the ones that you'll like will probably leave Reno just when you really become acquainted with them. That's Reno, you know."

"I suppose you're right," Sheila said, thinking of how distinguished-looking he was.

After he left, she finished her dinner, signed a check for her meal, and stepped outside. She stood in front of the hotel glancing around and trying to decide which way to turn. She noticed the famous Bank Club and the Palace Club, with crowds of people entering them.

She headed towards East Second Street and stood on the corner waiting for the traffic light to change so she could cross. Hearing a noise like an exhaust whistle and the laughter of men and women, she glanced around and saw a paddy wagon parked in the street. In large letters were printed the words BLACK MARIA, and at the top of the wagon, in smaller print, *Junior Chamber of Commerce*; at the front, the word *Jaycee's*. A young girl and a man stood on the step, dressed in western clothes. They hopped

off, and before Sheila had a chance to realize anything, each one took hold of her arms gently.

The man said pleasantly, "Come with us, miss. You're under arrest."

Sheila glanced at him with a bewildered expression. "Under arrest for what?" she said sharply.

"You're guilty of not having anything western on, so we're taking you to jail."

"I only arrived in Reno a short while ago. I don't know what it's all about," Sheila protested.

"It's really all in fun and for a good cause. You'll see," the young man said, smiling at her.

Sheila looked at him for a minute, shrugged her shoulders and said, "I guess I haven't anything to lose."

They led her to the paddy wagon and helped her in. There were several men and women sitting in the wagon, some of them laughing and some with puzzled expressions on their faces.

The Buckaroo Court, a wooden structure with bars simulating a jail, was mounted on a long wooden platform and was parked on one of the main streets in Reno. There was a small platform where the announcer stood with a microphone in front of him. Two young girls dressed in western clothes stood in back of him, each holding a cloth bag. A crowd of people was gathered on the sidewalk watching the fun and excitement, their laughter long and loud, feeling sure of themselves in their western clothes.

When the paddy wagon backed up, Sheila and the other people were led into the "Jail." There were two long wooden benches, one on each side with room enough for seven or eight to sit in comfort, and standing room for about ten more.

Looking out through the bars, Sheila saw the bright lights of the Crest movies, and her eyes wandered to the people who were standing on the sidewalk. Her thoughts were broken into by the announcer's soft voice.

He stuck his head through the door and said, "I want all of you to sign that black book in there. Please sign your name and from where you come."

The book was passed around, and when Sheila signed her

name and New York City next to it, she flipped casually through the book. She was amazed at all the cities that were mentioned, and she noticed that New York and California headed the list.

The announcer said, "Have you all signed the book?" When he was satisfied that they all had, he said, "Do you all know why you are here?" Most of them shook their heads and others kept quiet. Sheila thought he was cute.

"Every year, Reno has a rodeo on the second, third, and fourth of July. The members of the junior chamber of commerce operate the Buckaroo Court for ten days and nights. All of you are guilty of not having anything western on. It could be anything, a tie, a kerchief, hat, pants, or shirt, but it must be western. Now as each one of you is led out of 'Jail,' you will be asked a few questions and then you will be fined. The fine is anything you want to give. The money goes to the orphans in Carson City. The members of the junior chamber of commerce take all the orphans to the rodeo and they are shown a good time. And with the money that is left, things that are needed at the orphanage are bought for the children. So you see, it's all for a good cause. You drop your fine into one of these bags one of the girls is holding. The other young lady is selling pins for a dollar. If you wear one of the pins, it will show that you have already been picked up and fined, and it will not be necessary for you to buy anything western while you are in Reno during the holiday."

Sheila saw women opening their pocketbooks and men reaching into the pocket of their trousers, or taking out their wallets. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she had left the hotel without her bag.

What in the world am I going to do? How stupid of me, she said to herself.

The announcer started to take the people out of jail. He would ask them a few questions, and then he would finally say, "Where is the best rodeo going to be held?" If they did not reply, "Reno," they were told to get back in the jail and stay in there until they changed their minds. Some people were asked to sing, and Sheila saw the announcer hand two girdles to a couple of men and heard him say, "See which one of you can get into the girdle first." There was a roar from the people on

the street as the men struggled to pull the girdles on over their pants.

Finally, Sheila was called out. She stood on the small platform, holding her head high, and the whistles of the men were music to her ears.

The announcer asked her where she was from and told her that if she was a tourist or in Reno for a divorce, she would have to pay a fine for not wearing anything western.

Sheila said shyly, "I'm sorry, but I left the hotel without my bag."

The announcer smiled warmly at her, and his eyes roamed over her quickly. "Don't let that worry you. I'll take care of the situation." He said over the microphone, "Who wants to bail this beautiful young lady out of jail?"

Someone called out, "Fifty cents."

Sheila felt her face flush. The announcer said, "Come on now, who bids more?"

A man's voice called out, "Ten dollars." There was a hush among the spectators and Sheila felt a thrill surge through her.

The announcer said, "Ten dollars it is. Step this way, sir, and pay your fine to one of these young ladies."

Sheila saw a man come over to the platform, drop ten silver dollars into one of the bags and hand another silver dollar to the girl who sold the pins. She stepped down, and the Black Maria returned with more people who were put in jail.

She noticed the man looking at her casually. He handed her the pin, which she attached to her dress where it could be seen. Then, she took mental inventory of the handsome stranger before her. He was dressed in western clothes which seemed to be a part of him. She judged him to be over six feet tall. He carried his large Stetson hat in his hand, and his sandy-colored hair was thick and wavy.

Sheila said sarcastically, "Why did you spend eleven dollars on me?"

His gray-blue eyes regarded her boldly, and he looked into her eyes mockingly.

"You hate yourself, don't you? You happened to be in a predicament, and I bailed you out. It so happens that the money I gave is going to make some little orphan happy the Fourth of

July." Then he turned away from her, and walked towards North Virginia Street.

Sheila stood staring after him, her face slightly flushed and her lips pressed together angrily. She thought, *damn him, walking away from me. I just have to see him again, she decided. I just have to.*

She returned to the Golden, powdered her face lightly, took her white shoulder-bag and went out again. She went into the Palace Club, looking at every man she could see. She saw many men standing around the dice tables, playing twenty-one and the slot machines. The dealers' voices droned out from all parts of the club. She took notice of the change girls, who wore small green aprons with deep pockets, holding change for the slot machines and heard them calling "Jackpot" after a customer.

She was surprised to see several Indians, playing slot machines and blackjack. She sat at the long bar and ordered a highball, her eyes glancing around frantically in the hope of spotting the stranger.

Some of the girl dealers flashed her a friendly smile, and Sheila smiled back at them. She finally left the Palace and came out on Douglas Alley. She went into the Bank Club, looked around, and left.

Men flirted with her, but her thoughts were only on finding the stranger. She went into Harold's Club, and stood as if she were rooted to the spot, the place was so crowded. She fought her way through the crowd and, at the same time, kept her eyes open, looking for him.

She went up to the second floor on the escalator, but it was just as crowded as the first floor had been. The loud laughter of men and women caught her interest. It certainly had been worth it to take a trip to Reno just to see everything that went on there. She walked over to the bar that was by the escalator. There were 2,143 silver dollars set in special plastic. At the back of the bar was the famous "whiskey falls," real bourbon pouring down like a mountain stream. Sheila thought it was odd and attractive. She walked over to the other side where there were some twenty-one tables and a roulette wheel. She did not pay any attention to the players. Her gaze was on the pictures which hung the wall.

The pictures were brightly painted on glass and seemed real. One picture was from the painting that was in the Texas State Capitol, called "Battle of San Jacinto," and showing General Sam Houston and his small Texas army avenging the fall of the Alamo by defeating Santa Anna.

Another picture was from the famous Remington painting called "Waylaying the Pony Express," showing Indians ready to ambush a rider crossing a dry lake, typical of those so common in Nevada.

Sheila was very much impressed by the paintings. She could almost see the figures coming to life. She passed on to the next picture, which was from a painting that was also in the Texas Capitol, called "Fall of the Alamo." It showed the fight to the death of 183 Texans against 3000 Mexicans at the Alamo on March 6, 1836.

Sheila stared at the green-covered gambling tables with their trays stacked with hundreds of silver dollars. She was in the midst of a lot of noise, the swirl of colored lights, people putting coins into slot machines and pulling down the lever and tinkling of coins.

Now and then, someone yelled, "Jackpot!" When she saw an empty stool in front of the silver dollar bar, she perched on it and ordered a highball. A woman sitting on the next stool said, "Hello, dearie. All alone?"

Sheila glanced at the woman who spoke to her and said, "Hello."

The woman said, "My name is Kate. What's yours?"

"Sheila," she replied, noticing every detail about her. She was a woman of about fifty, slightly plump, and well dressed. Her face was pink, and her blue eyes seemed to have a wistful expression, like that of a small child. Her silver hair was in neat curls on her head. The hand that rested on the bar was chubby, and a diamond ring with a plain gold wedding band graced her finger.

She said, "Have a drink on me, Sheila." She called the bartender, and Sheila ordered a scotch and soda. The bartender brought it over and she downed it in one gulp.

Kate said, "Have another one."

"I will, but not on you. I'm paying this time."

A bald-headed man sitting on the other stool next to Sheila was laughing out loud, and Sheila could smell his stale cigar.

She said, "You can't smell beer, liquor, or cigar smoke in the clubs unless you sit at the bar, or else are close to a person who has been drinking."

Kate said, "I know. That's because the clubs are air-conditioned."

"Are you here for a divorce?" Sheila asked.

Sheila heard the echo of a cry in her voice. "I came here for one three months ago, and I'm still here."

"You don't seem happy about it," She said.

"I'm not. I didn't want a divorce, my husband did. I'm heart-broken over it. Just think, after being married twenty-five years, too."

"I bet you hate your husband now."

Kate shook her head. "I still love him and always will."

"I don't believe love is important for marriage," Sheila said.

Kate looked at her in dismay. "You don't?"

"No, I don't. I married Ron, and I didn't love him. I came here for a divorce because he wants it. I was pregnant, and had an abortion behind his back."

"Oh, my, and he found out about it," Kate said.

"I had to tell him. There wasn't anything else I could do. He was bound to find out anyway. So here I am."

"Aren't you sorry now?"

"Not me. I'm never sorry for what I do."

Kate shook her head. "Was he a good man?"

"Too damn good. Old-fashioned type. I was getting bored anyway."

"You'd be surprised at the things that women have told me since I've been here. So many of them laugh and drink and gamble, but underneath their hearts are breaking."

"So you see, Kate, how foolish it is to marry for love."

"I have my memories, Sheila. Wonderful memories of the first few years of my marriage and when my boy and girl were small. I wouldn't take anything in the world for those years." Sheila saw her brush away a tear.

They stayed in Harold's, and then Kate took her around to the sky room of the Mapes where she had a room. They sat at

the bar and Sheila had a highball while Kate ordered a beer.

Sheila said, "Is that all you drink, beer?"

"Yes, and not too much of that."

"This must be a new hotel. It's lovely," Sheila said.

"It is about two years old. I like it here. I've been here since I came from Jersey."

"Jersey? What part of Jersey?"

"Newark. Why, are you from Jersey, too, Sheila?"

"No, New York City. But it's all the same."

"I went to New York every week, either to the Radio City Music Hall or shopping on Fifth Avenue."

"Any special reason why you lived in Newark?"

"My husband had his business there."

"Do you think you'll go back to him, that he might change his mind and want you again?"

Kate sighed. "No, he's probably married again, to someone younger than me."

"Sure, when you really need him now he doesn't want you."

"That's life, Sheila. No one can understand why things turn out the way they do."

"Where are your children now?"

"My son is in the army in Germany and my daughter got married last summer. She lives on Long Island."

"You must like Reno if you're still here."

"I might as well stay, for awhile anyway. I haven't any place special to go to. I thought I'd stay and try to enjoy myself in my own way."

"Well, I had some excitement since I arrived here. I was picked up and put in the jail, the one that the Junior Chamber of Commerce has charge of. And I didn't have my bag with me, so I was bailed out by a very tall, handsome stranger. He was dressed in western clothes."

"Wasn't it fun, though? And it's all for a good cause, too."

"I know, but I'm anxious to find the stranger. I've been looking for him since."

"You have? You're foolish. There are many men in Reno. You don't have to run after any special man, a young beautiful girl like you."

Sheila smiled. "I want him because he ran away from me."

Kate nodded her head. "Oh, I see what you mean."

Chapter 20

SATURDAY morning, the first day of the big parade and rodeo, was a scorching hot day in Reno. Sheila woke at nine, showered and dressed in a strapless light-blue cotton dress. She set a small white hat on the back of her head, took her bag, looked again in the mirror, and went out.

She entered the coffee shop of the Golden, perched on a stool in front of the long counter, and ordered tomato juice, buttered toast, and black coffee. While she drank her coffee, she was thinking that she would keep her eyes open for the stranger all the time, and would find him even if it took her six weeks.

Later, Sheila went to the lawyer's office on Sierra Street. A middle-aged man, with keen gray eyes which crinkled at the corners when he smiled, he extended his hand and said in a vibrant voice, "How do you do, Mrs. Graham. Have a seat."

"Thank you," Sheila said, smiling warmly at him. She sat by his desk and crossed her legs. He asked her why she was there for a divorce. Sheila told him that Ron wanted the divorce and explained why. He asked her if she thought she was going to like Reno.

"I like it very much, just from what I have already seen of it," Sheila said. "I went to bed about six this morning and I got up at nine."

"The tourists and divorcees don't get much sleep," he said pleasantly. "You understand, don't you, that you must be seen at the Golden, where you are staying, every night for the six weeks? The divorce law in Nevada is very strict about that."

When Sheila left the lawyer's office, it was almost time for the parade. She met Kate, who said, "Come. Let's find a nice place to stand."

They walked along Virginia Street until they came to the Chamber of Commerce building. Thousands of people lined the streets along Virginia Street from the Commerce building to Commercial Row, were jammed along Center Street, in front of the post office and the library, along the bridge, in front of the theater, police station, Club Cal-Ne-Va, and on both sides of the streets to the railroad tracks.

Sierra Street was crowded. People were looking out of hotel windows and apartment houses. Fathers carried small children in their arms. It seemed that everybody had on something that was western.

Announcers were stationed at three downtown locations, explaining the line-up of the parade to the spectators.

"Kate, I never saw anything like this in my life. Look at all the people, thousands of them. Reno is the Biggest Little City in the World, and it reminds me of the biggest city, New York."

"Yes, and take a look around you at all the happy faces you see. The grown-ups are as thrilled with all this as the children are," Kate said, glancing around her.

They watched as the Reno Royal group passed, carrying the flag of the Reno Rodeo Association. Then came Miss Nevada. On horseback were the famous Nevada White Hats, ranchers, who wore either light blue satin shirts, or bright yellow ones. Then the sheriff and his posse passed on palomino horses, which were dancing and had shining silver saddles and spurs. Some of the trappings on the horses represented thousands of dollars and months of careful skill.

On horses were cowgirls and cowboys, all of them colorfully

dressed. There was a float with an accordian group all playing at once. Then came the most elaborate float, of the Club Cal-Ne-Va Lodge from Lake Tahoe. The float was blue in color and resembled a barroom scene, featuring Rudy Vallee and a group of satin-clad chorus girls who were appearing with him at Lake Tahoe. The girls were sitting around a table, each with a large glass and pretending to be drinking beer.

After that, the Indian braves, led by Chief Warriar Frank Jones, went by on horseback. Squaws and papooses followed on foot and drew the most applause. The local police and traffic officers had a difficult time keeping children and spectators away from the roads.

Sheila said, "My, what handsome men. What a parade!"

"Most of the people are here from California. They never miss coming here for the rodeo," Kate said.

"I don't blame them." Sheila's eyes were roaming around in the hope of spotting the stranger.

"Well, come on. Let's get something to eat and go to the rodeo," Kate said, taking Sheila's arm.

"I won't be able to sit with you. You have a box seat," Sheila said.

"That's all right. We can meet after it's over and come back together."

"Very well."

While they were having lunch, Sheila said, "Kate, I've changed my mind. I'm not going to the rodeo. I can see it at Madison Square Garden."

"Sheila, please come with me. You don't know how exciting it is. They even have an Indian Village at the rodeo grounds, and the bronco riding will raise goose-bumps on your body."

"I'm going to my room to take a nice nap. Then, when I wake up, I'm going to see if I can't find the stranger. I want to look my best. I might have to stay out all night," Sheila said, smiling.

"Why are you so anxious to find him?" Kate asked, a puzzled look in her eyes.

"Because he treated me coldly when we first met, and you should see him!" Sheila rolled her eyes and Kate laughed.

"Suppose you find him. What are you going to do? Go right up to him and speak?"

"Certainly not! That would be the worse thing I could do. I would pretend that I didn't see him, but I'd make sure that he saw me. Then he would say, 'Aren't you the young lady that I bailed out of jail last night?' I would look at him with a surprised expression on my face and answer, 'Oh, was it you who bailed me out? I wouldn't have known you.'"

Kate laughed. "Sheila, you'd make a good actress, do you know that?"

"Never gave it a thought, but I certainly am going to put on my best act when I see him, or should I say *if* I see him."

"I think you'll meet him again, Sheila."

"You do?"

"Yes. He must be here for the rodeo. From the way you described him, I think he's a rancher."

"I hope you're right," Sheila agreed soberly.

After Kate left for the rodeo, Sheila went shopping for a new dress and hat. She walked along Virginia Street and looked into shop windows. Finally, she entered a store after seeing what she wanted in the window.

Chapter 21

SATURDAY morning of the same day was very hot in New York, too. Mrs. Taylor had all the shades pulled down at the windows to keep out the glare of the scorching sun.

Jim said, "Edna, I think I'll go to Central Park and sit under a tree."

"Why, Jim, you shouldn't think of going out of the house in this heat. It's terrible. I bet you could fry eggs out on the pavements."

"I have a headache. I'm sick and tired of staying in the house so much. I'll go now while it's still morning. Then I can come home in time for dinner."

Edna looked at Jim with deep concern. "Dear, I wish you wouldn't go out today. Please."

"I think it might do me good. I haven't been to the Park in quite a while. Don't worry. I'll take my time."

"Why don't you take Robert with you?" she suggested eagerly.

"Ask him if he wants to come with me, then, but don't let him bring that Skip."

Mrs. Taylor went into the dining room and called Robert.

"Son, I want you to go with your father to Central Park."

Robert glanced up at his mother quickly from the book he was reading. "Central Park? Dad wants to go to Central Park in this heat?"

"Yes, and I think you should go with him. Take your book. You can read there."

"Gosh, mom, do I have to?" Robert asked dully.

His mother nodded her head. "I'm afraid so, son."

"Why can't Betty go with him?"

"Betty is baby-sitting for the day, and, anyway, dad would rather have you."

"Oh, all right then. But I don't want to go, really."

"Come on. I'll give you and dad a light lunch before you go."

"I just want a nice large glass of beer, Edna," Jim said. "I'm not one bit hungry. I'll have something when I come back."

Edna fixed Robert a lettuce and tomato sandwich with a sandwich spread and gave him a tall glass of cold milk.

"You can take some cookies with you, too," she said, getting a small bag and filling it with homemade cookies.

Skip came into the kitchen and looked up at Robert with a sad look in his dark eyes.

Robert said, "Dad, can Skip come with us?"

"No, let him stay here."

"Aw, dad, look how sad he is," Robert said, stroking Skip with one hand and glancing at his mother pleadingly.

"Jim, I don't know why you resent Skip. He only wants to be friends with you. If you decide to like him, he will learn to love you. You always did like dogs."

Jim looked at Edna sheepishly, then grinned at her.

"You win, Edna. Skip can come with us and I'll be better to him than I have been."

Edna came over and stood by Jim's chair. She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, dear," she said gently.

Jim patted her hand that rested on his shoulder.

When they went out of the flat, Edna followed them out into the hall and said, "Jim, take your time going down the steps."

Then she closed the door and started to sprinkle clothes which were to be ironed later.

She thought that Jim really should go out more often than he did. It wasn't good for him to stay in the house so much.

Suddenly, Mrs. Taylor heard running footsteps and the loud barking of a dog. Before she realized what was happening, Robert burst into the room with Skip at his heels. Seeing the horrified look on his face, she grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Son, what's the matter? Where is dad?"

Robert was breathing heavily and having a difficult time talking. "Dad . . . It's — dad —"

He pointed with his finger to the window but his mother did not wait. She dashed down the steps, her face drained of color, fear in her eyes. When she reached the front stoop, people were running out of their flats or looking out of windows. Then the sirens of the ambulance and police cars came to their ears. Mrs. Taylor stood still, and her hand flew to her throat in a quick gesture. Mrs. O'Reilly put an arm around her quickly, and everyone was mumbling, "What happened? What's wrong?"

People were running towards the corner. Robert came down from upstairs. He was crying, tears streaming down his freckled face. "It's my father," he said. "I don't know what happened. We reached the corner, and suddenly he grabbed on to me, and before I could ask what was wrong, he was down on the sidewalk, breathing hard."

A police car stopped in front of the house and a tall, grim-faced cop weaved his way through the crowd that had gathered around the stoop.

He said, "Mrs. Taylor here?" When the women who were around nodded towards Edna, he said, "Mrs. Taylor, that was your husband. He had a stroke."

She stammered, "Is . . . he —"

Her heart was beating madly, her hands clammy as she rubbed them together nervously. Her eyes held a look of anguish.

The officer nodded his head.

There was a moan from Edna, and Mrs. O'Reilly enfolded her in her arms tenderly.

Chapter 22

SHEILA was awakened from her nap by a knock on her door. She called huskily, "Come in." The door opened and a bellboy brought her a telegram. She asked him to hand her her purse which was on top of the dresser. She tipped him, and he went out, closing the door gently.

She sat up in bed, flipped open the envelope, and took out the sheet of yellow paper. She read:

DAD DIED SUDDENLY OF A STROKE.

DANNY

Sheila flung the telegram on the night table. The heat must have got him. Too bad. She glanced at the clock and saw it was seven. She had had a good nap. She slipped out of bed, took her new dress and hat out of the closet, and laid them on the bed.

After she had showered, powdered and perfumed, she dressed and stood back from the mirror.

She said aloud, "Sheila, you are beautiful, beautiful."

Her new dress, a black net over pink taffeta, with a strapless

top and lace bodice splashed with sequins, brought out her tall, slender body to perfection. Her white throat rose tantalizingly. She put on her large black picture hat and took her small black evening purse and went out.

She stood in front of the hotel wondering if she should eat then, or wait until later. She decided to eat later, and take time to look for the stranger. She walked to Virginia Street and through the Nevada Club. Everyone stared at her. She heard a woman say, "She must be a tourist. She has a hat on."

Sheila remembered that that was what Kate had told her. She left the Nevada and went into Harrah's, but it was as crowded and noisy as the others.

She noticed that all the clubs had the same form of gambling and were air-conditioned. She heard someone call her, turned around, and saw Kate smiling at her.

"Sheila, you look stunning. Anyone would know this is your first time in Reno."

"How?"

"Because you have a hat on."

"Oh," Sheila said, her eyes roaming around and looking at all the men.

"Come on. Have a drink on me, and we can play the slot machines," Kate said.

Sheila shook her head. "No, thanks. I'm busy looking for someone."

Kate nodded her head in understanding. "Oh, yes, I had almost forgotten that you were going to look for the stranger. Well, I wish you luck."

"So long, Kate. Maybe I'll see you later."

Sheila went out the back door of Harrah's Club, crossed the street, and walked slowly along Second Street. She did not know where to look or where to go. If he was in Reno, where would he hang out?

Asking herself questions that she was unable to answer, and feeling discouraged, she suddenly found herself in front of the Roaring Camp. She remembered that Kate had told her Harold's Club owned that too. An old covered wagon from the frontier days stood outside.

She went in and stood by the door, her eyes taking in the

large room. She saw many slot machines, roulette tables, and comfortable chairs grouped together around a charcoal fire. She took in the long bar and the old-style carriages which hung overhead, suspended from the ceiling. She started to walk around slowly. It was quiet in here, and there were not too many people. She felt she might as well look around as long as she was here.

She stood in front of an old organ and read the sign over it:

I'm old; it's true — for I knew the lady known as Lou — saw the shooting of Dan McGrew — as my Jassy tune the boys were whooping it up in that Malamute Saloon — So I say — “Nuts to Paul Whiteman” — for he is a man — while I'm only a thing made by man — but I do and I can for a lousy quarter — all by myself — play the whole G—d D—m — band, “Alexander's Ragtime Band.”

Sheila inserted a quarter in the slot and heard the old nickelodeon play “Alexander's Ragtime Band.”

She moved away slowly and noticed another player about forty years old or more, a Wurlitzer Orchestrion, which played at the old Tivoli in Stockton. Another organ called “Hell's Bells” from the old Bella Union caught her interest. She read the sign over another organ: “This Grand Old Honkey Tonk, saved from Spider Kelly's at the time of the Frisco Quake, taken to the docks, then to Vallejo — still plays for a nickel.”

Sheila read more things of interest and almost laughed out loud at:

Gold Gulch Gertie, the miner's dream

Her heart was as hard and cold as her sucker's gold
Who left in the night, to pay this Queen tribute and make
Their prayers to this lovely rag,
A bone, and a hank of yellow hair.

She walked over to the glass cases displaying all types of old rifles and guns. She stood and looked with interest at the famous Jesse James guns and saw the gun that was obtained by Tom

Stagg after Jesse was killed by Bob Ford. She saw the first harmonica pistol made in France and put out in 1850. She looked at the early flintlock made in Belgium and which was carried by Peter Stagg, Harbor Master of New York, when New York was known as "New Amsterdam."

Sheila heard one woman say to another, "Isn't that tall blond girl extremely seductive looking?"

She smiled to herself. Then the voice she had been wanting to hear spoke to her.

"Hello, remember me?" She turned quickly and there was the handsome stranger smiling down into her eyes.

Trying to appear calm, Sheila said, "No, I don't remember you."

He raised his right eyebrow, and his eyes bored into hers intensely. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

Sheila looked up at him provocatively and drawled in her husky voice, "Oh yes. You're the man who bailed me out of the Buckaroo Court last night!"

"That's right, I am. But you can't fool me. You knew who I was all the time."

Sheila laughed, and there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he let his gaze linger on her slim white throat. She hoped he would not walk away from her again. She would have to think of some way to keep him with her all evening.

As if reading her mind, he said, "How about a drink and something to eat?"

Pretending that she was thinking it over, Sheila hesitated before answering him. "Very well. As a matter of fact I didn't have my dinner yet."

"Come on. Let's go then," he said, taking her arm. When they stepped outside, he said, "I might as well leave my car parked where it is, and we can go to the Club Cal-Ne-Va."

While they ate, Sheila felt a surge of excitement at the way his eyes seemed to caress her every time she caught him looking at her. She knew that many women who were at the other tables around them were casting admiring glances at him.

He said, "How long have you been in Reno?"

"I arrived last night. I came to get a divorce."

"I know you're here for a divorce. I heard you tell the announcer that last night," he said.

"Do you live in Reno?" she asked crisply.

"No. I have a ranch twenty miles from here."

"Did you see the parade today?"

He laughed. "I was in the parade."

"You were? I didn't see you," she said briskly.

"I was riding my palomino."

Sheila started to say, "I was looking for you," but checked the words as they rose to her lips.

"By the way, what is your name?" he asked, smiling, and Sheila was quick to notice the twinkle of amusement in his eyes again.

"Call me Sheila. Now tell me yours."

"David Benneth."

"Isn't your wife with you tonight?" she asked, hoping in her heart that he was not married.

"I have no wife."

"You mean you've never married?"

"That's right."

Sheila lowered her eyes and started to eat. She could feel her heart beating madly.

He said, "Do you think you're going to like Reno?"

"I like it already. So much excitement, bright lights, noise, thousands of people up all night. I don't think anyone goes to bed here, do they?"

He smiled across the table at her. "The tourists don't get much sleep, but everyone else does."

"I think you're right. I had to take a nap this afternoon," Sheila said.

"This isn't the real Reno. Reno is actually three communities in one. The usual visitor who comes here gives the place a quick once-over-lightly, and then leaves after missing two of its communities. This is really just like any college town. Thousands of people lead a normal, healthy, quiet life. They raise families, go to church, belong to women's clubs, go to the movies, bowl, and never even think of gambling. They live like thousands of other respectable people do in the United States."

"Is that right? I can't imagine Reno like that from what I see of it now," Sheila said.

"There are more quick marriages than there are divorces. You can look at cars parked overnight in front of the Washoe Courthouse with couples waiting anxiously until morning so they can get married. And it's easy to walk along the streets of Reno picking out all the newlyweds."

"I couldn't pick them out," Sheila said, smiling warmly at him.

"It's easy. They walk along with that heavenly smile on their faces, holding hands, and the girl will have a corsage on. Why even the old people can be picked out that way, even if they have been married more than once."

"You certainly know all about it, don't you?" Sheila said, pushing her plate back and lighting a cigarette.

"I should. I've been in Nevada all my life. I was born on a ranch."

"Oh? How nice! The same ranch that you have now?" Sheila asked, hoping she could find out everything about him.

"Yes. My father left it to me. I had it remodeled."

"Aren't you lonesome without a wife?"

"I can't be lonesome. I have a cook, a man who keeps the two bunkhouses and the ranch house clean, and three wranglers."

"Wranglers?" Sheila asked, a puzzled look on her face.

He smiled at the expression on her face. "Cowboys. Now you know."

"You must have a pretty large ranch then?"

"Not very large. Five hundred heads of cattle, six horses, a stable, chickens and a vegetable garden."

"Oh, how lovely. I've never seen a real ranch outside of the movies," Sheila said, trying to look innocent.

"Perhaps you can see my ranch while you're here," David said, and the smile he gave her warmed her heart.

"I would love to. Now tell me something about the Reno that I see now, the Reno that's around us."

"You might get bored if I talk too much."

"No I won't, not as long as it's interesting."

"How about another drink, first."

"Very well. I'd like a Tom Collins."

David called the cocktail waitress and gave his order. Then he leaned over the table, keeping his voice low.

"The Reno you see is a very important Reno. Why, the gambling payrolls alone amount to better than twelve million dollars a year. That's a lot for a population of about thirty-five thousand people. This is the Reno which supports the smart shops, the night clubs, the class A hotels. More news originates in Reno than in any other city its size in the United States. This is the Reno that is heavily populated with lawyers, doctors, judges, and the people who do business with the wedding couples, divorcees, and gamblers, and which the natives refer to as 'Douglas Alley Society.'"

"My goodness, what a picture you've shown me. I'm very glad to know all that," Sheila said earnestly.

"You'll be able to see for yourself while you're here for the six weeks. I can tell you one thing, Sheila. Reno certainly deserves the name 'Biggest Little City in the World,' for that's just what it is."

"I agree with you," Sheila said.

All around them was the drone of the dealers' voices from the dice tables, the rattle of dice, and someone screaming out in an excited voice, "Jackpot!" Laughter rose from men and women at the bar.

"This is a nice club," Sheila said, glancing around.

"Yes, it is, and the same owners have a place at Lake Tahoe," David said.

While Sheila sipped her highball, she studied him. The western clothes he had on were of the best and the Stetson hat must have cost him plenty. He had a huge diamond on his finger. She was going to rope him in. He would not get away from her this time.

After they left the club, David asked, "Do you want to go swimming tomorrow?"

"I just love to swim. Yes."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Golden."

"Too bad you aren't staying at a guest ranch. You'd have a wonderful time."

Sheila smiled and shook her head. "I would much rather stay right in the heart of town."

In the lobby of the hotel, she said sweetly, "Thank you for everything."

"I'll call for you at one tomorrow. Good night."

As David turned to go, he said suddenly, "I'll tell you what. Be outside of the hotel so you can get right into my car. I won't be able to double park, and it will save time."

"Very well," Sheila said, flashing him her most charming smile.

She watched as he left her, and laughed to herself. Instead of going up to her room, she went to the phone and called up Kate at the Mapes.

Kate said, "Sheila! I was wishing you would call. How did you make out?"

"Are you going to bed now, Kate?"

"No. Why don't you come over?" she said eagerly.

"Meet me down in the lobby. I want to play the slot machines," Sheila said.

Kate was in the lobby of the Hotel Mapes waiting for Sheila. Seeing the radiant look on her face, she said, "You don't have to tell me. You found the stranger."

"Oh, he's wonderful. We had a long talk. He took me to the Cal-Ne-Va, and he's taking me swimming tomorrow."

"I can see you're falling for him," Kate said, with a smile.

"Oh, I've fallen for him but not in the way you think."

"Many women and men come out here for a divorce and get married," Kate said

"Yes, I know. I was told that."

"Well, are you going to gamble now?"

"I thought I'd try the machines in here."

"Go ahead. No one is stopping you."

"Did you have any luck tonight, Kate?"

"I played Bingo at the Golden Bingo parlor. I won ten dollars."

"You like Bingo, don't you, Kate?"

"I love it better than anything else. Sometimes I play the slot machines, but not often. Why don't you play Bingo some time?"

Sheila shook her head. "No, I like something much more exciting, such as the dice table, or a game of poker."

Chapter 23

Sheila was ready and waiting for David at one the next day, Sunday. He parked his "town and country" and opened the front door for her. She slipped in beside him, and he drove off.

"We're going to Lawton's. It's nice there," he said.

"You ought to know," Sheila retorted.

When Sheila had donned her two-piece light-blue bathing suit, she met David, and he let out a long whistle. She thought, *what a build he has. What a man!*

Although the holiday had prevailed pleasantly in Reno Saturday and Sunday, there was a much grimmer outlook in Reno on Monday, the Fourth of July. A strike of restaurant workers and bartenders was in full swing. The Chamber of Commerce set out long tables on the wide front lawn of the large building, and food was served to thousands of tourists. Kate took Sheila there to get her meals. They had boiled ham, baked beans, and coffee.

Sheila said, "Too bad about the strike. Especially at this time."

"There are a couple of small lunchrooms that are non-union, but just try and get in there. It's like a madhouse," Kate said.

All over the streets of Reno could be seen pickets holding signs and parading up and down. Kate and Sheila went to the Golden and sat down in the lobby.

Kate said, "Did you have a good time yesterday?"

"Wonderful. What a swimmer he is! After we left Lawton's, he took me to the Christmas Tree for dinner and he brought me home early."

"When are you going to see him again?"

"He said he would call and take me out to see his ranch."

"You don't waste any time, do you?" Kate said laughingly.

"I'm a fast worker, Kate, once I make up my mind about what I want."

"Do you think he'll call up today?"

"I don't know, but I certainly hope so."

Motherly feeling overflowed in Kate, and she said tenderly, "Sheila, I look upon you as if you were my daughter. Please don't do anything foolish. If David should ask you to marry him, wait until you're sure you love him. Remember, you wrecked one marriage."

Sheila turned to Kate, noticed the fineness of her face and the sadness in her eyes. She said gently, "Kate, I might as well tell you now. I *am* going to marry David. I told you I didn't believe in love. And another thing, I detest anyone preaching to me. I wouldn't take it from my own mother. If you want to be friends with me, don't preach, and don't mention the word love."

"All right, Sheila. I didn't mean any harm. I just want you to be happy."

"I know you mean well, Kate, but I'm afraid you can't change my way of thinking."

For two weeks, Sheila was like a person who did not have a friend in the world. She stayed in bed all morning and called room service for her breakfast. When she went out, it was for a short time, all the while thinking that David might call. Now she lay in bed, smoking a cigarette and flipping through a *Ladies' Home Journal*. The phone rang and she picked up the receiver.

The hotel operator said, "Just a minute." Then David's voice said casually: "Hello, Sheila. Are you doing anything special today?"

Not a word about why he had not called her sooner, or how she felt. But she had to see him.

She said, "No. Why?"

"How about coming to see my ranch?"

"All right. Can you wait for me in the lobby? I won't be too long," Sheila said, trying to keep her voice from betraying the excitement she was feeling.

When she stepped out of the elevator, David came over and said, "You look lovely, Sheila."

She murmured, "Thank you," and followed him out to where his car was parked.

Sitting in the front seat with him, Sheila had the feeling that a new chapter in her life was taking place. She saw his lips pressed together and a serious look in his eyes. She thought, *I admire him for his thoughtfulness in driving through these high mountains carefully.*

"How do you like the view?" he said.

"It's beautiful, and I'm surprised at the lovely homes we passed. Just think, only a few miles back is the heart of Reno with its glamour and bright lights."

"Didn't I tell you?"

He nosed the car off the high slope of the mountain to the level ground of the wide highway, then drove through a narrow road beneath the high Sierra Mountains until he reached his ranch. He stopped the car and helped her out.

Sheila studied the low, rambling ranch house with admiration and glanced around her at the stretches of green lawns and the golden-brown mountains covered with sagebrush.

David said, "Like it?"

"It's wonderful. The mountains look as if you could just reach out a hand and touch them."

He led her into a long, cheerful living room, which was comfortably furnished with maple furniture. There was a large assortment of Navajo rugs scattered on the highly polished floor. A huge stone fireplace at one side of the room, with a large mirror over it, caught her eye.

David said, "Make yourself comfortable while I tell Andy to set an extra plate for lunch."

Sheila took notice of the two Mexican posture chairs which

flanked the fireplace. A modern circular sofa faced it, and the room was full of maple end-tables, a platform rocker, and a long bookcase filled with books. Sheila liked the growing plants in copper urns, and the large picture window which looked out across miles of bare land.

David came in. "You can freshen up in the bathroom and powder your face," he said, smiling at her.

"You have a lovely place. How many rooms are there?"

"Not many, but they're all very large. Two bedrooms, a dining room, this living room, a bath, and a kitchen."

The bathroom Sheila entered was as clean as an operating room would be at a hospital. It was white tile, and the curtains at the window were crystal plastic, Priscilla style, with a background of water lilies. She then went into his bedroom, took a comb out of her bag, and ran it lightly through her hair. She took notice of the very wide bed covered with an Indian Jacquard novelty blanket. A reading lamp stood on the night table by the bed with a bronze ash tray and several books.

When she came out of the bedroom, David said, smiling, "We usually eat in the kitchen."

Sheila followed him through the wide hall, and the tantalizing odor of food made her realize how hungry she was.

David said, "This is Andy, the cook." Andy, a husky man of about forty-eight, with sharp gray eyes, said in a deep voice, "Howdy." Then David said, "This is Sam. He keeps the house and bunkhouse clean, takes care of the chickens and garden."

Sheila said, "Hello, Sam."

Sam, tall and lanky, with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes and a dimple in his right cheek, looked at her with interest. He drawled, "Hello."

They sat down on the long wooden bench at one side of the large table which was covered with a red and white checked tablecloth. The back door opened and three men sauntered in. They flung their large hats on the wide window sill and straddled the bench.

"Sheila, meet Jim, Tom and Howard." She smiled sweetly at them and the men nodded an acknowledgment and started to eat. Andy set a platter of mashed potatoes on the table, thick

slices of bread, a large bowl of stew meat, slabs of butter, and plenty of coffee.

Sheila spent the rest of the day at the ranch. While David was showing her around, she asked, "Where are all the cattle?"

David laughed at the serious tone in her voice.

"All over, behind the hills, just scattered every which way. I have a roundup in the fall. Then I hire several more men to help."

"How interesting," Sheila said, while her eyes wandered around to see if Tom and Jim were watching her.

On the way back to Reno, David drove the car a little off the highway and brought it to a stop. Sheila was close enough to him to feel the jerk of his body. Then his arms went around her with such force, she thought her bones would break. He crushed her to him and pressed his lips hard against hers. The flame of his lips against hers left her trembling. Then, just as suddenly, he let her go and started the car.

After driving a few minutes in silence he asked casually, "How would you like to go to the Wishing Well for lunch tomorrow?"

"I'd like it very much, but why is it called the Wishing Well?"

"There's a large well outside of the place. You can drop any amount of money you want into the well and make a wish."

"How nice. I think I'll make a wish as soon as we get there."

David laughed. "Don't tell anyone what you wish. Wait and see if it comes true."

David stopped in front of the Golden and said, "So long, Sheila. See you tomorrow."

Chapter 24

DAVID slid his car to a stop in front of the Wishing Well, stepped out, and helped Sheila. She opened her purse and took out a silver dollar. Closing her eyes, she wished, *I hope David tells me he loves me and asks me to be his wife, and I hope he kisses me on the way home.*"

Laughingly, David said, "That was a long wish. You had your eyes closed long enough."

Sheila flushed. She said, "Aren't you going to make a wish too?"

He took two silver dollars and dropped them through the slot. Sheila glanced down and saw pennies, bills, dimes, and silver dollars.

"Did you wish already?"

"Certainly. I don't have to close my eyes to make a wish."

He led her into the cocktail lounge first. They sat at the bar and after they had a drink, he led her to one of the sofas in front of the large stone fireplace.

"Let's have a cigarette before we go into the dining room," he suggested.

Sheila glanced around at the slot machines, the piano, and the men and women at the bar. She thought, *how quiet this place is. So different from the noise of the clubs.*

Looking at David and seeing the tender look in his eyes she told herself, *I know he likes me. I can tell.*

He stood up and said, "Come on. After we eat, I'm taking you to see Virginia City."

Driving through the high, awe-inspiring mountains to Virginia City, Sheila thought she had never in her life seen anything so beautiful.

"It's beautiful, David, but it frightens me when I glance down. We must be about six thousand feet high."

David smiled without taking his eyes off the narrow road. "You get used to it after you've been on this mountain road as many times as I have."

"I guess you do."

"Don't expect to see the excitement of Reno. Virginia City is just a ghost of the past, but a very interesting ghost."

"I've heard a little about it."

"On Saturdays and Sundays, especially during the summer months, thousands of tourists come to see it."

"I didn't know that."

"At one time, Virginia City had a population of 75,000 people and there was no Reno."

"Tell me more," Sheila said.

"We're here. You can see for yourself."

David had stopped his car on the main street. Sheila looked around with a bewildered expression. Main Street, about four blocks long, was practically deserted. David helped her out.

"The first thing you're going to see is Piper's Old Opera House."

Sheila said, "My goodness! Look how large it is, and why does the stage slant down like that?"

"That's so the actors who stood in the back row could be seen by the people just as easy as the actors in front of the stage."

"That wasn't such a bad idea, was it?"

"This opera house, Sheila, was a gorgeous affair for a mining town. The curtain was a work of art, and gas footlights were used. Piper provided the best shows that were on the road.

Comedies, Shakespearean tragedy, Edwin Booth, Maude Adams and David Belasco all appeared here. The Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind, sang here also."

"How interesting! It's worth the time just to come to Virginia City to see all these things."

"Come on. Let's go to the saloons now. You can see more," David suggested, taking her arm. He took her to the Brass Rail, and they looked in windows. Sheila saw pictures of the early bonanza boom days, fine collections of ore specimens, and copper and bronze souvenirs. She bought silver and turquoise necklaces and bracelets, handmade Indian-beaded belts, and Indian novelty jewelry.

David said, "You can buy Indian things in almost any store or saloon up here."

Sheila noticed several very old men, crossing the street. "See those men?" David said.

Sheila nodded.

"They're about ninety years old, and look at how spry they are."

"It's almost unbelievable," Sheila said.

"It's true, just the same," David replied.

"See this building with all the old newspapers plastered on it?"

"Yes."

"Mark Twain started in as a reporter and feature writer in this very building, on *The Territorial Enterprise*, a very powerful newspaper of the West."

David led her into Saw Dust corner and said, "Sheila, look at the famous suicide table—oldest Faro table in Nevada."

"Why is it called that?" she asked curiously.

"It seems that all the owners had trouble over it. A lucky customer would break them, and the owner would kill himself. Why don't you read all about it? There it is right over the table," David said.

"No, some other time," she replied. "I can just imagine how exciting it must have been in the old mining days, men leaning over the table and watching nervously as the dealer turned the card."

"Let's go into the Crystal Bar," David said, taking her arm.

Sheila looked with awe at the chandeliers of the Virginia City

before the great fire of 1875. Then David pointed to the mystery clock—numbers painted on the long mirror behind the long bar.

"Sheila, the only movable parts of that clock are the hands. There are no mechanical parts to it whatsoever. Watch." He called the bartender and said, "Will you please show this young lady how that clock works?"

"Sure," the bartender said. He swung the hands around and they finally stopped, designating the correct time.

"My goodness, how can it work like that?"

The bartender said, "It's propelled by gravity."

Then he took her to see St. Mary of the Mountain. A guide escorted them through the church, explaining that it was all Gothic architecture, hand carved. They noticed that each pew had a small swinging door. He then led them downstairs where they saw a large collection of vestments brocaded with gold that came out of the local mines, and which was donated by the parishioners. The church overlooked miles of awe-inspiring mountains.

After that, at the Bucket of Blood Saloon, she gazed at the beaded, handmade Indian jewelry, old-style lamps, and slot machines.

During the days that followed, Sheila went out often with David. He kissed her every time and told her he loved her, but she wanted him to ask her to marry him.

It was two days before Sheila was to get her divorce. She was sitting on the sofa with David, in his ranch house. He was smoking his pipe and watching her as she relaxed against the cushions, smoking a cigarette, her long, well-shaped legs crossed.

Suddenly David laid his pipe in the ash tray and moved closer. Sheila looked at him with a provocative expression, her lips partly opened, her face slightly flushed from the excitement seething within her. He took the cigarette away from her and crushed it out in the ash tray. Then he put his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. Sheila bent her head back on his arm, flung her arms around his neck, and smiled at him. He bent his head down and pressed his lips on hers in a kiss that left her gasping for breath, then raised his head. His breathing was labored, and his voice was husky with emotion.

"Sheila, I love you. I want you to marry me. What do you say?"

Biting her lower lip to keep back a laugh and thinking, *my wish has come true at last*, she said, "When?"

"The day after tomorrow. Right after you get your divorce."

"Very well, David. I think a lot of you," she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Sheila, why are you getting a divorce? You never did tell me. And what about telling me if you love me?"

"My husband was cruel to me. I couldn't live with him any longer, and I don't know if I love you or not, David. I do think a lot of you."

"You must love me, Sheila. Probably you don't know it because this is so sudden to you, and you were disappointed in your first marriage. But I'll make you happy, darling."

Sheila smiled charmingly. At last she was getting him. What another girl could not do, she had done—roped him into marriage.

"I won't see you until the day after tomorrow then, David. I can get my clothes ready tomorrow. I'll see you in the courthouse about nine-thirty. You can be with me while I get my divorce."

Before going to bed, Sheila wrote Iris, and a short letter to her mother. She called Kate at the Mapes and told her to come over to see her in the morning about nine.

"I have something to tell you," she said.

The next morning, Kate and Sheila went to Wingfield Park. They sat on a bench underneath a large tree. Children were playing on slides, boys and girls in shorts were playing tennis. The laughter and screams of small children came to their ears.

Kate said sadly, "It reminds me of the time I used to take my children to Branch Brook Park in Newark."

"Well, Kate, I'm marrying David in the morning after my divorce," Sheila said crisply.

"No!"

"Yes, I am. He asked me to yesterday, told me he loved me."

"Sheila, don't marry David if you don't love him. It isn't

right the way you roped him in. He's too fine a man to be made a fool of. You wrecked your first marriage."

"I think a lot of him. I don't know what love is, do you?"

"Love is much more than a physical attraction, Sheila. You want to do things to make him happy. If he quarrels with you and you know it's his fault, you're willing to forgive. You want to cook the dishes he likes, bake what he likes, be satisfied to stay home with him in the evenings if he wants you to. Oh, I can go on and on about what love is. It's happy companionship. You enjoy each other's company. You try to think of some surprise that will make him happy."

Sheila threw back her head and laughed long and loud. Then she looked at Kate with amusement in her eyes.

"I don't love David, and I didn't love Ron, because I wouldn't do all the things you told me a person in love does. Not me. No, sir."

"Too bad. You haven't lived until you have loved."

"What good did it do you to love your husband? Where is he now when you need him? What have you got now, Kate?"

"Wonderful memories. I wouldn't take anything in the world for them. The years that I was happy with my husband and when the children were small. As long as I have those memories I won't be lonely."

Sheila saw her brush tears away and thought, *I'm glad I'm not like that. To hell with memories and love.*

They stayed in the park about an hour and Kate said, "How about a couple of games of Bingo, Sheila? I won't be seeing too much of you after today."

Sheila and Kate went to the Golden Bingo parlor and played a game. Kate won five dollars, and Sheila said, "I like the dice tables. More exciting."

"I like Bingo the best. I love to play Bingo. It relaxes me," Kate said, spreading twelve cards in front of her.

Chapter 25

SHEILA went to the Washoe County Courthouse with David.

He said, "It won't take long to get the license and get married, and it won't take long for you to get your divorce, either."

The witness was put on the stand first and sworn in.

The court asked, "How long have you lived in the State of Nevada, County of Washoe?"

"Three years," he answered.

After the court asked him where he lived, he was asked, "How long have you known the plaintiff?"

"Ever since July the first."

"Under what circumstances did you meet the plaintiff?"

"She stayed at the same hotel where I work."

"Is she the lady seated in the courtroom?"

"Yes."

"To your knowledge, has the plaintiff resided in the State of Nevada, County of Washoe, actually and physically and continuously, during the last six weeks preceding this date?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen the plaintiff each and every day during said six weeks?"

"Yes, except on my days off, and then she was seen by my assistant."

Sheila, represented by her attorney, was called to the stand and sworn in. She saw the court reporter looking at her, waiting to hear what she had to say. David smiled at her, and Sheila flashed him a warm smile back.

Sheila was asked her name, her address and if, when she came to Nevada, it was her intention to stay for a divorce.

She answered yes, and when asked why she was getting a divorce, she said, "My husband was cruel to me. The doctor told me if I continued to live with him, I would have a nervous breakdown."

Asked if there were any children, Sheila said no, and although she had asked for four hundred dollars a month from Ron, she was not getting it.

Well, she did not want it now, anyway. She was marrying David.

The court asked her if she intended to make Nevada her home.

Sheila said, "Yes, I do."

The court ruled that the divorce on grounds of mental cruelty was approved.

Then Sheila waited out in the hall for several minutes before her lawyer gave her the divorce papers completely signed.

"Am I glad that's over with," she said to David.

He took her to a jewelry store and bought her platinum wedding and engagement rings, set with tiny diamonds. Then they returned to the courthouse, got their license, and went to the justice of the peace.

David took Sheila to Lake Tahoe for their two-week honeymoon. They stayed at the best hotel, went swimming, horse-back riding, and dancing at night.

She found herself comparing David with Ron quite often. It did not take her long to find out that she could not cuddle on his lap and tease him the way she had done to Ron. If David was in the mood to make love, he expected her to respond with affection.

When he told her she should not smile at other men, Sheila said, "I didn't know I was doing anything wrong, and what harm is there in smiling?"

"They'll think you're flirting with them," David replied, and Sheila noticed that his voice was stern.

When they returned from their honeymoon to the ranch, David led Sheila to the other bedroom and said, "This will be your own room."

She was puzzled. "Do you mean I'm not going to sleep with you?" she said.

"I like to sleep alone. I think a person should be entitled to some privacy, don't you?"

Sheila, remembering that she had told Ron the very same thing when they returned to New York from their honeymoon, said curtly, "Yes, you're right. It's better this way."

Sheila went shopping in Reno for suitable clothes to wear at the ranch. The jeans were tight-fitting, and the western shirts were left partly open at the neck revealing her bosom.

"I don't like that, Sheila. You have to keep your shirts buttoned higher," David said sharply.

Smiling at him, she said, "Oh, David, there isn't any harm in wearing them like this."

As the weeks slipped by, Sheila tried to enjoy herself at the ranch. She flirted with the wranglers, but David scolded her about it sternly.

In the meanwhile, she received a letter from her mother telling her that Danny was married and living in Flatbush with his wife's people. Ron and Ann were also married.

She said out loud, "I hope they're unhappy. I hope they don't get along."

Sheila always left her bedroom door open, so David could come in any time he wished. At nights, they sat in front of the fireplace. David would smoke his pipe and sometimes they could hear the western songs drifting up from the bunkhouse.

Soon, Sheila discovered that David was a home-loving man. He took her to the Crest and Majestic movies a few times, and to visit some of his ranch friends. The women did not like Sheila, and she did not like them.

Sheila was watching David now. His long legs were stretched out in front of him towards the bright fire. He had on a blue robe, was smoking his pipe, and reading.

Sheila thought, *I'll go crazy for sure if I have to put up with this kind of life. I thought he would take me into Reno all the time. We could gamble and have fun.*

She said suddenly, "David, can I drive into Reno for a while now?"

Without taking his eyes away from the book, he said, "I should say not. I don't mind you going in the daytime but not at night alone."

"Well, how about you coming with me? We could gamble for a while."

"I told you, Sheila, I never gamble."

"I'm going to bed. Good night," she said abruptly and stormed out of the living room.

Chapter 26

Sheila went horseback riding with David every day. While he was busy around the ranch, she would lounge around smoking and flipping through books and newspaper clippings from the bookcase. She was surprised to see pictures of David when he was younger and a famous football player at the University of Nevada. It was curious that he never bragged about himself. The silent type, undoubtedly.

While they all sat down in the kitchen to eat, she would smile at Jim and Tom and start a conversation with them, but seeing the disapproving look in David's eyes, the men would feel embarrassed.

Sheila received a letter from Iris and she uttered a cry of surprise when she read it.

Dear Sheila,

By the time you receive this letter I will be married. His name is Jimmy Worthington. He is forty-eight, and his first wife died five years ago. I am really and truly in

love and so happy. At last I can appreciate a good man and I am going to cook and bake and try to be a good wife.

Your last letter was short. So you finally married the rancher you told me about. I hope you make a go of this marriage, Sheila. Wish you all the luck in the world.
Your friend,

Iris

Sheila smiled wryly and crumpled the letter. She flung it into the blazing fireplace. *Those women that make slaves of themselves to men are stupid. I'm glad I have more sense*, she mused.

It was November, and the mornings and nights were cold. Sheila enjoyed the hot Nevada sun in the afternoons. She was resentful because she could not go to Reno more often. When she went in with David, it was to one of the movie houses, and she could not gamble while she was out with him. She realized, however, that although he was more strict than Ron was, he was more of a man. He left her breathless after his love-making, and Sheila could not help wishing that she slept with him. She did not like to have her own room.

They were sitting in front of the fireplace one evening, David smoking his pipe, and Sheila reading a story in a magazine.

"My sister Clare and her daughter Irene will be here the day after tomorrow. They're going to stay for a week," he said.

"I didn't know you had a sister and a niece. Where are they living now?"

"Boston."

"Isn't your sister's husband coming, too?"

"No, he can't get away from his business."

"Where are they going to sleep?"

"In your room, and you can sleep with me," David said. Sheila, noticing a twinkle in his eyes, thought, *I wonder what he has up his sleeve.*

"Shall I take my clothes out of the room now?"

"Just a few things. The closet is pretty large and they won't bring too much with them."

Sheila wanted to ask him more questions, but he returned to reading of his book, and she decided against it.

She hoped his sister was not a snob. If she gave her orders, she would tell her off quickly. She did not care if David got mad at her for it. No in-law was going to boss her.

The next morning David said, "Sheila, I want to show you something."

She followed David into the living room and he led her to the window.

"Take a look at what I bought you."

A gasp escaped Sheila's lips as she stared at a long convertible, sky-blue in color.

"Oh, it's beautiful! Where did you buy it? How lovely."

"I ordered it about two months ago, right after we came back from our honeymoon. They called me up early this morning and told me to come in for it."

"I can't drive," Sheila said.

"I'll teach you how. Tom drove in with me in my car and I drove your car back."

"Oh, thank you, David dear," Sheila said sweetly, throwing her arms around him and pressing her lips to his.

Chapter 27

"**WE'RE** going to a square dance tonight, Sheila. Wear low heels and a cotton dress, or a wide skirt and a blouse."

"No, I don't want to dress like that, David."

"But you won't be able to dance if you wear high heels and a tight skirt, and everyone will be laughing at you."

"Let them laugh."

"I want to dance. I enjoy it," David said.

"Listen, David. I intend to watch, but I won't stop you from having your fun. So please don't talk about it any more because it won't do any good."

"You'll be sorry when you hear that snappy music and everyone is out on the floor, while you just sit there."

Sheila shrugged her shoulders and went into her room to get ready. She said to herself, "I'll give the ranch women something to talk about. I'm going to wear my strapless black taffeta."

David said, "Come on, Sheila." He opened the front door and helped her into his car. Sheila was excited. For the first time she was going to a barbecue and square dance. She heaved a happy sigh and David said, "Wait and see all the fun everyone has.

You'll see young and old dancing. It's really something. We should go at least once a week."

"Will they have any ballroom dancing at all tonight?"

"No. They'll play a waltz but that, too, is danced differently out here."

"I'm not going to dance. I'm just going to watch."

"You'll be missing all the fun. You made a big mistake in not wearing low heels and a cotton skirt or dress. You're going to look so out of place in that fancy evening gown."

"I told you, David, I like to be different from other women."

"You'll be stared at and talked about."

"That's just what I like," Sheila said. She knew that all the men would be desiring her, too.

When they arrived at the big ranch, most of the people from other ranches were already there. The place was brightly lit. Sheila noticed a long bar with red leather stools in front of it, and lined up against each side of the long room were chairs with red leather seats. At one end was a raised platform with the western band. There was a large sign which read, "Silver State Wranglers. Typical, traditional, the best in square dance music." She saw the men with their fiddles and banjos and guitars.

As she crossed the room with David, there was a hush. She walked with her head held high and a slight, provocative swaying of her hips. She heard women whispering and saw the bold stares of the men as they rested on her.

Sheila was thinking, *this is what I like, to be the center of attraction. I like the envy in the eyes of the other women.*

When they sat down, David said, "Sheila, you're being stared at. I feel embarrassed. I wish you hadn't come all dressed up like this."

"Don't take things so seriously, David. What if I am stared at? You should be proud that you have such an attractive wife who knows how to dress."

"But, don't you understand? You're dressed as if you were at a high class club. You should be like the other women."

Sheila smiled and shook her head. "David, please don't type me. I like to be myself, and, what's more, I don't care what anyone thinks about me, either."

"Salute your honey!" called one of the fiddlers.

The caller droned: "All the square dancers step out on the floor." The floor filled up at once, faces lit up in happy anticipation. All the partners bowed to one another, and Sheila saw that David had an attractive red-headed girl for his partner. A surge of jealousy rushed through her. The caller's voice bellowed through the microphone the words to the tune of "Old Susanna":

*Everybody swing your honey, swing her high and low
Allemande left with the old left hand, round the ring
you go
It's a grand old right and left hand, and don't you boys
be slow you
Promenade the circle with Jane and Jack and Joe*

The dancers rocked back and forth, feeling the heavy beat of the fast rhythm in their muscles. They flexed their knees, stamped their feet, and clapped hands, swaying, whirling, the caller's voice droning loudly,

*Around the lady peek once more
Back to the center and circle four*

David caught Sheila's eyes, but he did not pay any attention to her. His mind was on his dancing. Sheila knew he was angry because she had not come ready to dance. Well, she would flirt and have a good time. He was enjoying himself with that red-head.

The caller's voice bellowed:

*Swing that pretty girl — the one you know
Here we go don't be slow
Circle four round you go
Everybody swing*

Skirts swirled, faces smiled, and boots stamped hard on the floor.

*Same old thing promenade round the ring
Don't be late circle six*

Skip to the girl with the curly hair
Figure eight don't be late
Dos-a-dos
Swing that pretty girl the one you know
That's all there is there ain't no more.

The dance over, David came over and said, "What a dance! You don't know what you're missing, Sheila."

"I notice you're having a good time. That girl you're dancing with has a crush on you. It shows all over her face."

There was a twinkle of amusement in David's eyes. "Jealous, are you?"

Sheila was sorry she had made that remark and said, "Get me a drink, will you?"

After a few minutes, the caller droned, "Come on, all dancers out on the floor."

Without a word, David strode over to the same girl and said, "Come on, Margie."

Margie replied, "Why isn't your wife dancing, David?"

"Well, she would rather watch this time," David said dully.

The music was fast and another caller was at the microphone.

Everybody swing promenade round the ring
Circle half one more time, now form a line
Shake it up and make hay
Cowboy, don't delay
Inside out, outside under, meet your partner
swing like thunder
Meet in the center, swing on your toe
Go on home and swing your own
Join hands circle left, start with the left start it
right, back to the left if it takes all night
Don't be slow, away you go, come on cowboy
shake a toe

Sheila was startled when a man's voice said, "May I sit next to you, Mrs. Benneth?"

He sat down on the chair next to her, and Sheila looked him over quickly. He was a husky man, dressed in black frontier

pants and a blue and gold satin shirt, and he carried his large black Stetson in his hand. His dark brown hair was slicked back, his eyes were small and gray.

"How do you know who I am?" Sheila asked.

"Margie told me who you were."

"Who is Margie?"

"That pretty redhead dancing with David."

"Oh."

"You should be out there, too. Didn't David tell you what to wear to this kind of a dance?"

Sheila laughed into his eyes. "Yes, he told me but I wouldn't listen."

"Oh, so you don't like to take orders," he said. Sheila noticed a look of amusement in his eyes. "By the way, I want to introduce myself. My name is Lem Crawford."

"How do you do, Mr. Crawford," Sheila said, smiling warmly, and looking at him provocatively.

"You are the most beautiful woman here tonight, do you know that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

Lem stared at her with a startled expression. "You're very outspoken, too, I see. Why don't you call me Lem. I think you and I are going to be good friends."

"All right, Lem. You may call me Sheila."

As soon as that dance was over, another started at once. Sheila could not see David, but he must have been down at the other end of the room. The caller's voice droned, and there was a very fast beat of music.

*First couple left and circle four hands round
Pick up two and make six hands around
Take two more and make it eight hands round
There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight*

Dancers swayed, twirled, swung around madly, and stamped their feet.

*Allemande left with the lady next to you
Right hand round with your right hand lady too*

*Pass your own and do a left hand swing
And a grand right and left round the ring
Meet your own and do a dos-a-dos
Take her in your arms and round and round
you go
Promenade with the sweetest gal you know
There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight*

Sheila laughed heartily. "The words are so nice. I never saw anybody have so much fun."

"Look at all the old people dance, too. Just as full of life as the young ones," Lem said.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it with my own eyes," she said.

"Come on. Let's go for a little drive," Lem suggested.

"No, I can't. Maybe some other time. Here comes David."

David's towering form was coming towards them. Seeing Lem sitting next to Sheila, his eyes held an angry glint.

Lem said, "Hello, David. I was keeping your wife company while you were dancing."

"I see you were," David snapped sharply.

His eyes seemed to hold hate for Lem, and Sheila noticed it. He was jealous, and for no reason at all.

When the music started, David said, "We're leaving after this dance, Sheila." He gave Lem a scornful look and went out on the floor.

"He doesn't like me, and I don't know why," Lem said.

"I thought there was something wrong in the way he was looking at you. Are you a rancher too, Lem?"

"No, I don't like the wide-open spaces. I came out from New York to stay with my stepmother and father for awhile."

"From New York?" Sheila said with excitement.

"Well, I was born here in Nevada but I went to Columbia University. After I graduated, I went to work in the advertising business. I like New York. All of my friends are there."

"You look just like a fighter, do you know that?" Sheila said, noticing his large, thick hands and broad shoulders.

He chuckled, slapped his leg with his hand.

"You know something? If I had one person ask me if I was a

fighter, I've had a hundred. Especially when I was in New York."

"It's a wonder you didn't become a fighter."

Lem shook his head. "No, I wouldn't have liked that at all."

Sheila sighed. "I wish this was a regular dance. Then I'd have had a good time dancing with all the different men here."

"David wouldn't like that."

"So what? I'd do it anyway."

"I like you, Sheila. You're frank. You speak what's on your mind. So many women think one way and say something else. They're afraid to offend, but not you."

Sheila's face beamed with pleasure. "If I should happen to meet you in town some day, will you dance with me?"

"Would I? How about making a date right now," he said eagerly.

Sheila shook her head. "No, but I'll be seeing you in town. I love to gamble and take a couple of highballs in one of the clubs right in the heart of Reno. I generally go there about two in the afternoon."

Lem laughed. "I take the hint, Sheila. You're a devil after my own heart."

When the dance was over David came over.

"Come on, Sheila. We're going home now," he said.

"It's so early, David."

Lem said, "Why don't you go on home, David? I'll be very happy to take Sheila home for you."

"I'm sure you will, but it so happens that I wouldn't think of it," David snapped, flashing Lem a warning look.

Sheila went to get her coat, and David said quickly, "Lem, keep away from my wife, and don't say I didn't warn you."

Lem shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

During the ride back to the ranch, Sheila and David were silent, both with their own thoughts. David drove, his jaw muscles tight, his mind working over his anger.

Sheila was picturing herself in Lem's arms, and she smiled to herself. At the ranch, she opened the car door and went into the house, straight to her room. While she was taking off her clothes, David came in and sat on the edge of the bed.

He said roughly, "Why did you make a fool of me in front

of my friends? Why did you flirt and encourage Lem Crawford? Why did you smile and flirt with all the men?"

She turned and faced him, her eyes reflecting the anger she was feeling.

"Why — why — why? Suppose I ask you why you're asking me stupid questions. You took me to a dance, and I had to have some enjoyment. You had a good time with that redhead, I noticed."

"No one's to blame but your own self. I told you before we left that you wouldn't be able to dance with those spike heels and that dress. I told you that when people went to square dances, they were dressed properly for it. Well, what did you answer? That you didn't want to dance, you wanted to watch, and that I could go ahead and have a good time."

"Well, why are you so angry because I was friendly with Lem Crawford?"

"Because he has a bad reputation. Decent women don't bother with him."

Sheila let her eyes rest on David's face coldly. "Do you know why the women don't bother with him? Because they're afraid of themselves. It isn't because they don't trust Lem. They don't trust their own feelings."

David stared at Sheila with a bewildered expression. "It will be too bad for you if I ever see you with him. Remember that, Sheila."

He went to put out the lights in the living room and to lock up for the night. Sheila dashed to her door and locked it.

"This is one time that you won't be able to walk into my room, David Benneth," she said aloud.

She undressed and slipped on her silk nightgown, took a magazine, lit a cigarette, and got into bed. A short time later, she heard David turn the knob of her door. She smiled to herself.

He called, "Sheila, open the door!"

"No, David. You can't come in here tonight. I'm mad at you," Sheila retorted.

He rattled the knob and demanded angrily, "Open the door, Sheila."

"No! I won't! Go away and leave me alone, David. I don't

care if you bang on the door all night. I'm not going to open it," Sheila shouted.

She snuggled against the pillows, a smile of satisfaction on her lips. Well, he knew now that when she said something she meant it. He would probably sulk now.

Before Sheila realized what was happening, she heard a loud crash. She was startled and let out a scream as her bedroom door was flung open, and David came sliding in on his stomach. He rose to his towering height and came over to the bed, his eyes narrowed to pinpoints of anger. Sheila thought he was going to strike her.

"My dear, don't you ever lock your bedroom door on me again. If you do, it won't do you one damn bit of good, remember that. Is that what you used to do to your first husband? Well, if it was, you can't do it to me. No locked door can keep me out if I want to come in."

He crossed the room and started to undress. Her heart beating madly with excitement while she watched him, Sheila thought, *boy oh boy. What a man. What a man!*

Sheila waited nervously while David went to the airport to meet his sister and her daughter. She stood by the living room window thinking about their visit.

David had told her before he left, "Please, Sheila, be good to her, no matter what you think of her."

Sheila had answered, "Sorry, David, but if your sister insults me, I'll go her an insult better."

When she saw David's car coming up the road, she went to the bedroom and closed the door. She wore a simple gray wool dress, had dabbed on a little lipstick, and her hair was brushed into loose waves about her shoulders.

The bedroom door opened, and David came in. He said in a low voice, "Sheila, my sister and her daughter are in the living room, and also a very good friend of hers, Lynn."

"What do you mean, friend? You're acting strange, David, why?"

"Sheila, I never wrote and told my sister that I was married. She was very much surprised. Lynn is a lovely girl. You'll like her."

"How do you know? If you have something on your mind, out with it," Sheila said bluntly.

"As a matter of fact, I have. Last winter when I was visiting my sister in Boston, I went around with Lynn and asked her to marry me. Then, at the last minute, I backed out. I couldn't go through with it."

"Oh, now I see it all very clearly. Your sister didn't know you were married, so she brought this Lynn out here with her in the hope that you would change your mind."

David ran his hand nervously through his hair.

"Listen, Sheila. I married you, didn't I? Everything is my fault, anyway. I should've written Clare about my marriage. Come on. They're waiting to meet you."

Sheila followed David into the living room.

He said, "Sheila, this is my sister Clare."

Sheila found herself looking into a pair of gray eyes that stared at her coldly, and what Sheila thought was also contemptuously. Her voice matched the coldness in her eyes, and her voice grated.

"How do you do?"

Sheila put out her hand, but Clare ignored it and turned away.

David said, "This is my niece, Irene."

Irene, about eighteen, of medium height and slender, flashed her bright blue eyes at Sheila and drawled sweetly, "Pleased to meet you, Aunt Sheila."

"Thank you, Irene," Sheila said.

"Sheila, this is Lynn." Sheila looked into a pair of green eyes, and her first thoughts as she clasped Lynn's hand were, *what beautiful eyes, and her auburn hair is gorgeous. Refinement is written all over her, like a label.*

Lynn said, "How do you do, Sheila." And she smiled at her so charmingly that Sheila thought she was going to like her. It was not her fault that she had come here and found David married.

David called Sam and told him to take the whirl-a-way bed out of the large hall closet and put it in the bedroom.

Sheila saw Clare staring at her so intensely that she felt uneasy.

David said, "How about something to eat before you go to bed?"

"Very well," Clare said.

David went into the kitchen to prepare coffee and fix sandwiches. Clare said coolly, "Why don't you go in the kitchen, Sheila. After all, you *are* the woman of the house."

Sheila said abruptly, "What if I am? If you think he needs help, why don't you go in and help him?"

Irene and Lynn exchanged glances, then looked at Clare. There was a thin line to her lips, and they were pressed together tightly.

David brought in a large tray and set it on one of the tables. He poured out the coffee, passed them each a cup, and then brought the cream and sugar. They all sat around the fireplace on the sofa. Sheila had refused a sandwich, but while she was drinking her coffee, she noticed the tender look in Lynn's eyes every time she looked at David.

Later that night when David and Sheila were in bed, Sheila said, "Lynn is lovely. So tall and slender and refined. I can't understand why you didn't marry her."

"It was like kissing a stone every time I kissed her. I wanted someone warm and alive like you."

"So you kissed her?"

"Certainly I did, so what?"

"Didn't I tell you that your sister wouldn't like me? Thank goodness they're here only for a week."

"We're going horseback riding before breakfast. Want to come with us?" David asked eagerly.

"No, and you'd better not wake me up."

"What shall I tell them? They'll expect you."

"I don't care what you tell them. And aren't you going to give me a driving lesson? What good is it to have a car if I can't drive?"

"Good night," David said and turned over on his side.

The next day, after lunch, Lynn said, "I would like to see Reno, David. This is my first trip out here."

"That's a good idea. How about coming with us, Clare?" David said.

She shook her head. "I'm going to take a nap, David. Some other time."

No wonder she's plump. She probably sleeps too much, Sheila observed.

"How about coming with us, Sheila, and you too, Irene," David suggested.

"I'd love to," Sheila said quickly.

"I too," Irene said.

"You can't go," Clare said quickly.

"Why don't you let her go, Clare? This is her first visit to Reno," David said

"David, you know how I feel about gambling. I'm strictly against it and against saloons. You know that."

"Irene isn't going to gamble, and even if she wanted to, she couldn't. Minors aren't even allowed in the clubs. They have to be twenty-one. The law here is obeyed. You don't have to worry about that," David said.

"Well, I'll let you go into town just to see the shops and the outside of the clubs, but that's all," Clare said sternly. Sheila had known what his sister would be like coming from Boston—too high-toned for her. Did Lynn think the same way?

"Very well. I'll take all of you in," David said, getting up and pushing his chair back.

"I'm going to take a nap while you're gone. Make sure you keep your eye on Lynn and Irene, do you hear, David?"

"Don't worry, nothing is going to happen to them in Reno. You have the wrong idea about it. Ask Sheila if you don't believe me."

"I don't have to ask. I'm entitled to my own way of thinking," Clare said, casting at Sheila a cold look.

"You girls get ready while I get my car out of the garage."

"Aren't you going to use the station wagon, David?" Sheila asked.

"No, Tom's going to use it," David replied.

Chapter 28

DAVID parked his car on Mill Street, three blocks from the heart of town. He led them to South Virginia Street, Lynn walking beside him and Irene and Sheila in back. David pointed out the Washoe County Courthouse and the State Building that housed the Chamber of Commerce. The State Building was directly across the street from the courthouse, with its stretches of lawn in front, and a few green benches scattered about. Large trees and a statue stood in the center, not far from the front door of the building. A statue of a pioneer mother, a pioneer father, and a child represented early Nevadans.

They went up to the Sky Room of the Mapes Hotel, looked out at the Washoe Valley and at the surrounding mountains.

David said, "You should come up here early in the morning and watch the sunrise. It's the most beautiful scene, breath-taking in its beauty. Crimson and gold against the green and brown and gold of the mountains."

"I bet it is lovely. I think I'll come up some morning and watch it," Sheila said.

David took them to see the Roaring Camp and, while Lynn and Irene were being shown around the large room, Sheila played the slot machines. She guessed Lynn would be shocked, but she did not care. She loved to gamble.

In a few minutes, David, Irene, and Lynn stopped and watched Sheila.

Sheila said, "Lynn, why don't you try your luck?"

Lynn smiled and shook her head. Her green eyes had a twinkle of amusement in them.

"I like to watch you. I never saw anything like this before, but I don't believe in gambling."

"Well, you're not the only one, Lynn. Many people don't believe in it, and many others do. That's how the world is. We can't all be alike," Sheila retorted casually, putting coins into the slot and pulling down the lever.

They left the Roaring Camp and walked along slowly, Lynn and Irene looking into shop windows as they passed and watching the people going in and out of the clubs.

Sheila said suddenly, "David, why don't you take Irene over to the drugstore across the street for a soda, while I take Lynn through Harold's Club and a few of the others? Just so she can see what they're like inside."

"That's a good idea. Go ahead. Irene and I will meet you in front of Harold's in about an hour. Tell you what. After we have a soda, Irene and I will go and get my car. Make sure you and Lynn are out in front of the club. I can't double park, you know."

"O.K., we'll do that," Sheila said.

She took Lynn through the Nevada Club, through Harrah's, and then showed her the paintings in Harold's.

"Lynn, I want to have a highball. Do you want one?" asked Sheila.

"No, thank you, Sheila. I don't drink either," Lynn said softly.

"Do you smoke?" Sheila asked crisply.

Lynn shook her head. "No."

Sheila felt like saying, "What the hell do you do?" But she decided against it.

Lynn and Sheila waited outside of Harold's Club for ten

minutes before David parked his car long enough for them to get in. Then he drove off.

On the way back to the ranch, Irene said, "Uncle David bought a set of canasta, score pads, and even a plastic canasta table cloth."

"Oh, how nice," Lynn exclaimed, her face aglow. "Have you ever played it before, David?"

"No, I haven't, Lynn. But Irene was telling me that all of you played, so I thought I would let you teach me."

"How about you, Sheila? Do you want to learn how, too?" Lynn asked eagerly.

Sheila shook her head and said huskily, "No, I can watch you play. I like to play poker for money."

David glanced at her sharply, then turned his eyes back to the road.

Lynn said, "I don't know how to play poker. I don't believe I would like it."

Sheila shrugged her shoulders slightly and did not answer. She had seen the sharp look that David had given her and knew she had made him angry, but it did not matter.

It was already dark when David pulled his car up to the ranch and helped them out. Clare was reclining on the sofa in front of the fireplace, flipping through *Harper's magazine*. Her steely eyes went past Sheila and rested on Lynn.

"I am so glad to see you back, dear. Did you have a nice time?"

"I enjoyed the ride and some of the sights we saw. Too bad you didn't come with us."

"I had a nice nap, and I feel very fresh. What shall we do this evening?" Clare said, looking at David.

David handed her the package he was holding.

"I'm going to learn how to play canasta."

"You are? How wonderful! You can be my partner, and Lynn and Irene can be partners," Clare said anxiously.

"Very well. Sheila doesn't want to play, anyway," David said.

"I think it best that she doesn't. It might be rather difficult for her to learn how. It requires so much thinking," Clare said, glancing coldly at Sheila.

Sheila came over in front of the sofa and glared at Clare.

"It can't require too many brains or *you* wouldn't know how to play," she retorted sharply and sauntered out of the living room to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

David said grimly, "I don't think that was a very nice remark for you to make, Clare. After all, she is my wife, you know."

Lynn said, "David is right, Clare. You're showing your dislike of her so openly. After all, you might try to like her."

Clare turned to Lynn, and her voice rose a little. "Do you mean to tell me that *you* like her, after she tricked David into marrying her?"

"Now just a minute, Clare," David said. "Sheila didn't trick me into anything. I married her with my eyes wide open."

"I think she's lovely. I don't blame David for loving her," Lynn said briefly.

David got the canasta craze, and Sheila would sit in the living room, flipping through a magazine or listening to the radio. She let her thoughts dwell on New York and wished she were back there. Since his sister and Lynn had arrived, David treated her with coldness.

One night, Sheila was sitting up in bed, smoking and thinking. When she got her license, she would go to Reno every day. He was treating her coldly now, but she would get even with him after his family left. All he cared about now was canasta and more canasta.

She was awake when David came in. He said casually, "They are staying two weeks instead of one. I'm so glad."

"Well, I'm not. The less I see of that sister of yours, the better I like it. And I get my license tomorrow, or have you forgotten about it?" Sheila said crisply.

"I blame you for the tension in the house. You haven't even tried to be friendly."

"Why should I be? I'm not two-faced. If I don't like anyone, I let them know it. I don't beat around the bush."

"That's the reason all of my rancher friends don't come here any more. You didn't try to be friendly to their wives."

"What made them decide to stay an extra week?"

"I asked them to, that's why," David said curtly.

Feeling resentful about his actions, Sheila wondered if he had discovered that he did love Lynn.

As soon as Sheila got her license, she went into Reno and gambled heavily. She began to lose large sums of money and sold almost all of her jewelry. She sat at the bars and drank with any man who asked her to.

Chapter 29

IT WAS a little more than a week since Clare, Lynn and Irene had come to stay at the ranch. Sheila was sitting in the living room with a bored expression on her face. David had taken his sister, Lynn, and Irene to see some friends of his in Carson City. He had asked Sheila to go, but she had said she did not feel well, that she had a headache. By the way David had looked at her, she knew that he did not believe her, but she did not care.

She glanced through some magazines, and then threw them aside. She smoked nervously, walking up and down the living room, trying to decide if she should go into Reno and gamble. While she was thinking, the phone rang. She picked up the receiver, and Lem's exciting voice came to her.

"Hello, beautiful. Is David home?"

"No, he isn't. And what right have you to call me here? Suppose he was home and had picked up the phone, what then?" Sheila said sharply.

Lem laughed. "Don't worry your pretty head. I would have hung up." She heard him laughing out loud.

"Lem, you're drunk. Where are you?"

"No, I'm not drunk. I feel good. Come on and keep me company. I'm lonesome."

"Where're you?"

He mentioned a club a couple of miles out of Reno. Sheila hesitated. She did not know what time David was coming back, but he would have a good time, so why should she stay in? David would not find out anyway.

She said, "I'll see you, Lem. Stay there."

"Atta girl. Hurry up."

Sheila went into the kitchen and said, "Andy, I'm going to see a friend of mine. I won't be home for dinner."

Sheila met Lem at a bar on South Virginia Street about two miles out of the heart of Reno. His eyes were bloodshot and he was slurring his words.

"Si' — *down*, Sh . . . Sheila . . . Havvadrink . . ." He motioned for the bartender to bring some highballs.

"I'm going to have a drink and then go into Reno to gamble. I'm not staying with you. You're too drunk," she said.

When she finally started to leave, Lem tried to hold her back. Then he put his head down on the table, knocking his glass to the floor. Sheila knew that he had passed out.

Instead of driving back to the ranch, she kept on going right into Reno. She parked her car several blocks from the heart of town. Feeling the urge, she hurried into a club and right over to the dice table. She flung the dealer a twenty-dollar bill, and he gave her twenty silver dollars. She put ten of them on the front line and lost. She put the other ten on the field and lost. She changed another twenty and put ten on the front line and lost again. When it was time for her to throw the dice, she opened her bag and took out fifty dollars and laid it all on the front line.

I'll win. I can't lose all the time, she said to herself. She flung the dice across the table, letting them hit the other end. She threw a five. The dealer put a small ring around the number five and pushed the dice back to her with the long stick. Everybody around the table was betting every possible way — in the field, on the line, on don't come, and on hardways. Sheila threw the dice and made a hardway six. The dealer gave her back the

dice. She flung them across the table and turned up a seven. All front line players lost.

She left the club, angry at herself for betting heavily.

At five-thirty, David slid his car to a stop in front of the house. He helped Clare out of the car while Lynn and Irene got out alone. He went into his bedroom, after glancing around the house and not seeing Sheila. Finding his room empty, he went into the kitchen.

"Andy, where is Mrs. Benneth?" David asked anxiously.

Andy, busy mixing a salad, said, without looking at David, "Mrs. Benneth left a message for you that she wouldn't be home for dinner. She said she was going to see a friend."

"What time was that?"

"About one o'clock. Right after she got a phone call."

"A phone call? Who called, a man or a woman?"

"I don't know, Mr. Benneth. Your wife answered the phone."

David stormed out of the kitchen, his jaw set grimly.

Clare said coolly, "What's the matter, David?"

"Nothing's the matter. I just feel disappointed in not finding Sheila home."

"You should have told her what time we were coming back, David. She probably didn't want to eat dinner all alone," Lynn said.

"Why are you taking her part, Lynn?" Clare said sharply. Her cold gray eyes turned to David. She said crisply, "She might be out with another man."

"How can you say that?" David snapped.

Clare did not answer.

All during dinner, David ate in silence. The thought that Sheila might be with Lem was more than he could stand. After he finished eating, he took his hat and went out.

Lynn, Clare, and Irene glanced at one another. Then Clare said abruptly, "David is going to look for her. I hope he finds her with another man. Then he'll know I'm right about her."

"Clare, I am really surprised at you," Lynn said calmly.

Sheila was sitting at the bar in a tavern on a side street. There was a cigarette between her fingers and a tall glass of whiskey in front of her. Two men, one on each side of her, were talking

and laughing to her. She was feeling high from too much drinking and angry for losing that afternoon at gambling.

One of the men kept leaning over and whispering in her ear, telling her how beautiful she was and asking her to go to a hotel with him. Sheila kept staring at her reflection in the long mirror that lined the wall behind the bar. Her face was flushed, her blue eyes unusually bright. She glanced at her wrist watch and, noticing that it was a little after nine, realized that she had been away from the house more than seven hours. *I just hope David's worried about me*, she thought. *I hope he gets a bellyful of that stinking sister of his.*

As she lifted the glass to her lips, her reflection stared back with a horrified expression. She saw David standing behind her, and the look on his face caused a cold fear to run through her. She grabbed her pocketbook and gloves from the bar and started to get off the stool. Her knees were weak, and she had the feeling that she was going to fall flat on her face. *So be did worry about me*, she thought. *He must have. How in the world did he find me in here? I hope he doesn't say anything in front of all these people. I look awful, too, damn it to hell.*

One of the men said, "Where are you going, honey? Come on, have another drink on me."

David said sternly, "Come on, Sheila. Get out of here now."

She turned and looked up at him with defiance in her blue eyes.

"I don't want to go. I'll go home when I get damn good and ready." She sat down on the stool again and said in a husky voice, "Order me another drink. I'm staying."

The man patted her on her back and said, "Atta baby."

David's towering form hovered over the man. "Leave my wife alone," he demanded angrily.

The man's bloodshot eyes glared at David, then he said to Sheila, "Is that guy your husband?"

"Yes, but don't pay any attention to him," she snapped.

"Are you getting up and coming with me quietly, or do I have to use force?" David growled.

"Go away and leave her alone. She don't want to go home," the man muttered.

Without another word, David pulled the man to his feet,

clenched his fist and threw a hard right to his jaw, causing him to fall back with a heavy thud. With one sweep of his arm, he picked Sheila up and, holding her under one arm, strode out of the club, while the customers howled with mirth. He held her under his arm, while she kicked and tried to get free, until he reached his car. Although he was being stared at along the street, he did not care.

He opened the car door and pushed her in roughly. When he got in the seat with her and started the car he said, "If anyone had ever told me I'd have to use force in a public place in order to get my wife out, I'd have told them they were crazy."

"Nothing but a bunch of cowards in that club to let you carry me out the way you did," Sheila stormed.

"This is Reno, not New York. People here know how to keep out of trouble. They keep their ears and eyes open and their mouths shut. I'm not the only husband in Reno who's had to carry his wife out of a club for being drunk."

"I'm not drunk. Don't you dare tell me I'm drunk. I know what I'm doing. I hate you. Why didn't you leave me alone!" Sheila screamed.

"I gave you warning, remember? I told you not to drink at bars and to leave men alone. You've made me a laughing stock in front of my sister and her friend."

"Don't mention your sister to me, and too damn bad you didn't marry your sister's precious friend. She would've been perfect for you. She doesn't gamble, doesn't smoke, and she doesn't drink. She's Miss Goody-goody," Sheila said sarcastically.

"Never mind bringing Lynn into the conversation. She hasn't said one word against you."

Sheila sneered. "She's dead but she doesn't know enough to lie down. All she needs is a lily in her hand."

"That's enough out of you about Lynn, do you hear?"

He pulled the car in front of a gas station on South Virginia Street and turning to her, said, "Go into the ladies' room and wash your face with cold water. Then I'll take you where you can have some black coffee. I can't take you into the house looking the way you do."

Sheila got of the car reluctantly and walked in a slightly swaying motion towards the ladies' room. David heaved a deep

sigh and sat motionless until she came out. He drove to a lunchroom and ordered two cups of black coffee. While Sheila drank it, she kept her eyes away from his face. If he was waiting for her to tell him that she was sorry for the way she had acted, he would rot. The sooner he knew how she felt about everything, the better. *I don't give a damn any more*, she told herself.

She sat there drinking her coffee and smoking a cigarette, contemptuously unconcerned. David felt like shaking her good and hard. A tall, lanky-built man, wearing western clothes and the high-heeled boots of a cowboy, came into the lunchroom, pushed his large hat back on his mop of dark, curly hair and sat down at the table close by. Sheila glanced at him with a warm smile.

David, noticing it, leaned across the table and said, "What are you trying to prove to me — that you can do as you please? Well, you can't. I saw you smile at the fellow."

Sheila, remembering how he had socked the man in the club, did not answer. She thought he might do the same to the cowboy. She drank two large cups of coffee, and they got up and left.

Instead of going straight to the ranch, David drove her around for an hour. She asked him why, and he answered bluntly, "To sober you up. . . . My advice to you is to behave yourself from now on, do you hear?" he said sternly.

When Sheila did not answer, David repeated his question.

"Yes, I heard you," she answered curtly.

Suddenly he said, "I think your first husband was too easy with you, and you stepped all over him, but, my dear, you're not going to step over me."

Chapter 30

IT WAS the beginning of December. Sheila was lounging on the living room couch, smoking a cigarette which dangled from a black and gold holder. She had seen Lem in town the day before and had made a date to meet him again today. She was trying to think of an excuse that would allow her to stay away most of the day.

David was filling his pipe, and Sheila said abruptly, "Oh, my goodness! I almost forgot. I have to have my hair washed and set today."

"You never stay home during the day. Maybe I made a mistake when I bought you the car," David said.

Sheila said, "Where do you ever take me? I noticed that when your sister was here with her daughter and that friend of hers, you took them out."

"Why not? I took them to meet my friends. You didn't want to go, so don't complain about it."

"Well, you're always busy here at the ranch, and I have to have some fun."

David did not answer. He merely took his large hat and

sauntered out of the house. Watching him from the window, Sheila saw him going towards the bunkhouses. She went to her own room and started to get dressed. She was happy and hoped Lem would take her where they could dance.

Before going out, she sat down and wrote Iris a long letter, telling her what she wore to the square dance when she went with David, and also about Lem. Near the end of the letter, she wrote, "You are going to laugh when you read this. I locked my bedroom door on David, and he forced it open, landing on his stomach in the middle of the room."

She signed it, sealed it and put it in her bag to mail.

Sheila pulled her car to a stop on South Virginia Street, and Lem slipped into the front seat beside her.

"Well, beautiful, where shall we go?" he asked, his eyes boring into hers.

"I don't know, Lem. Any place you say."

"How about a ride to Carson City, to the Ship Bar? We can gamble and have something to eat and drink."

"That sounds wonderful," Sheila said, laughing.

Lem showed her which way to go, and, after a few minutes, he said, "How did you manage to get away for the afternoon?"

"I told David I was going to have my hair set, and that I had some shopping to do."

"You and I can have a lot of fun together, you know that?"

"You forget I'm a married woman, Lem."

"What's the difference? David doesn't take you any place where you can enjoy yourself. Why should you waste your youth away?"

"David forbids me to see you, Lem. It'd be too bad if he ever found us together," she said.

Lem said suddenly, "Sheila, drive into that narrow road and stop the car."

Sheila turned into a narrow dirt road and brought the car to a stop. She turned and looked at Lem with a puzzled expression.

"What's the idea, Lem?"

For his answer, he pulled her to him and crushed her lips to his in a long kiss. Sheila flung her arms around him and clung to him. He let her go, his face flushed and his breathing heavy.

"Sheila, I've been wanting to do that since the first night I met you at the square dance."

"I've been hoping you would kiss me, Lem. Now let's get going," Sheila said briskly.

"No, wait. I want to talk to you."

"Listen, Lem, if we're going to Carson City, we'd better get going."

"Why don't you divorce David? You and I can have a swell time. We're just alike. We like to gamble, we enjoy dancing and drinking. What do you say?"

"Do you mean you want to marry me, that you love me?"

Lem laughed, then said, "Certainly not! I'm not the marrying kind. And I don't love you either, Sheila. I think you are beautiful, exciting, warm. I want you. What do you say?"

Sheila shook her head. "If I was divorced from David I wouldn't go to you, Lem."

"Why not? I know you like me. We have the same outlook on life. I know you enjoyed my kisses a few minutes ago, didn't you?"

"I've enjoyed kisses from many men. That doesn't mean a thing to me. Let's leave well enough alone for the time being, shall we?"

"All right, if you want it that way now. But you'll belong to me yet. Wait and see," Lem assured her.

Sheila shrugged her shoulders and started the car.

They were silent the rest of the way. In Carson City he showed her around and told her that she could gamble at the dice table if she wanted to.

Sheila played dice and roulette and won a hundred dollars. Lem told her to keep it, it was hers. Then, they ate dinner at the Ship Bar and started back to Reno.

On the way back, Lem said, "Tell the truth, Sheila. Aren't you getting bored staying home night after night?"

"Yes, I am, damn it."

She arrived at the ranch about five-thirty. David was sitting in the living room, his long legs stretched out towards the bright fire. He took his pipe out of his mouth and said coldly,

"Where've you been all day? Does it take seven or eight hours to get your hair washed?"

"I took a ride to Carson City, bought some gifts to send to New York, gambled a little, and then came home," Sheila said quickly.

David rose and came over to her. His eyes were brightly strained and there was a determined set to his strong jaw.

"Were you alone all day?" he asked, his eyes boring into hers.

When she did not answer, he grabbed her arm and demanded roughly, "Who was with you? I want to know."

She chose her words carefully. "After I had my hair washed and set, I thought I would do some shopping in town. Then I saw Lem Crawford."

David said, "Go on."

"Lem asked me if I wanted a drink. I said no, I was going to do some shopping and come home. Then I showed him my car. He remarked how beautiful it was and asked me if I was a good driver. I said, not too good. Then he suggested we take a little ride to Carson City. That's all."

"Do you mean to tell me that you spent all those hours with Lem Crawford?" he demanded angrily.

"Well, what if I did? There wasn't any harm in it."

"I gave you so many orders about Lem Crawford that I'm sick and tired of it. It seems to me that you like to do just what I tell you not to do. Why?"

"Stop being so jealous. Let go of my arm, you're hurting me," Sheila said.

"I might as well warn you now. You'd better behave," David snapped. "So Lem Crawford was out with you all afternoon?"

"What if he was? What harm is there in that?"

"I don't want you fooling around *any* men, and especially Lem Crawford. Remember that," he warned, his eyes blazing at her.

"He was a perfect gentleman. He didn't say one word out of the way," Sheila said wryly.

"That's how he works around the women. I'm giving you strict orders right now — don't you dare go out with him again, do you hear?"

"I'm not promising anything. Why should I? Suppose I met

him sometime, and he wanted me to have a cup of coffee with him. Is there any harm in that? After all, you know him. It isn't as if he was a perfect stranger."

"He might as well be a perfect stranger as far as I'm concerned. I'm not going to have my friends talking about my wife. You made a fool of me at the dance, remember? Well, you won't get the chance to do it again. I'm wearing the pants in the family, not you. If we intend going anywhere, you have to wear the proper clothes for the occasion or else you won't go."

"Have you finished your speech, Professor?" Sheila said sarcastically.

David faced her with resentment churning inside of him. He was clenching and unclenching his large hands, with a scowl on his countenance. Suddenly he took her in his arms and crushed her to him with such strength that Sheila thought her ribs would snap. He rained kisses on her face and said, in a voice full of emotion, "You make me so mad, I feel like killing you, but I find myself kissing you instead. Damn you, Sheila! You know I'm jealous."

Sheila woke up startled. The light in her room was switched on, and David was sitting on her bed, an anxious expression on his face.

"Why did you scream? I heard you all the way in my room. What's wrong?"

Sheila sat up in bed, perspiration on her face, her hands clammy. There was a slight trembling of her body.

"I had a terrible dream. It was awful."

"What kind of a dream?"

"That New York was Reno," she said. She buried her face in her hands and shuddered.

"For goodness' sake, did a dream like that have to scare you so much?" David said impatiently.

She raised her head and looked at him. "It was what I saw that frightened me. All the restaurants, drugstores, hotels had crap tables, blackjack tables, and slot machines by the hundreds were lined up in all the stores. People were going mad to get to New York. They were coming from Brooklyn, Jersey, Long Island, all over so they could gamble. And I can hear the screams

of the people in my ears now as I saw them falling off the platforms on the tracks and getting killed in the subways. Hundreds of them were running up and down the City Hall steps, holding their divorce papers in their hands, and the judge was yelling DIVORCE GRANTED, DIVORCE GRANTED, and hundreds of planes were crashing over New York, loaded with people."

"I see what you mean now, but that goes to prove what would happen if any large city like New York were to have open gambling and six-weeks divorce," David said soberly.

"Do you think they would ever have it?"

David laughed and shook his head "No, there's no danger of that, so don't worry about it. You must have been thinking of New York, and you have been gambling a lot, too, haven't you?"

"Maybe that's why I had that dream," Sheila said. She wished he would sleep with her the rest of the night.

"Well, go back to sleep now. You'll be all right," David said. Then he was gone.

Sheila flirted with Tom and Jim when they came to the ranch for their meals.

David said, "Sheila, your actions are being questioned. I don't like it. And you're embarrassing the boys."

"I never saw such narrow-minded people in my life! Just because I smile at them and sit close to them, everybody talks about me," Sheila said angrily.

"I'm giving you a last warning, Sheila. You'd better listen to me," David said tensely.

Sheila would lie awake in bed hoping he would come in, but a week passed, and he acted like a stranger, speaking to her only casually. Sheila thought, *he is punishing me, that's what he is doing. I just can't stand this. I have to think of something.*

She went to Reno and sold more of her jewelry. She would go to a club and say, "Well, I lost yesterday, I might win today." If she won, she would bet it back and lose her money again.

In her room now, she realized she had not seen David since she came back from Reno. She missed Kate and wished she were still in Reno. Kate had left a message for her that she was going to Florida and would come back to Reno in the spring.

Suddenly Sheila spoke aloud: "Well, you'd better make up with him first, Sheila. Tell him you're sorry for your past actions and make yourself tantalizing right now."

She took off her clothes, slipped into a sheer nightgown and negligee, and went into the living room. She was sure she would find a way.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

SHEILA propped the fancy cushions on the large sofa and rested her back against them. She stretched out to her full length and flipped through a fashion magazine. She hoped that David would come home soon. Her heart was pounding madly, she knew she was going to break the ice, even if she had to humble herself.

She spoke aloud: "Sheila, no man is going to treat you cold the way he's been doing, no man. Not to you, Sheila, who's had so many men after her."

About an hour later, she heard footsteps on the front porch. She swallowed a lump that rose to her throat. There was a loud knock on the door. She thought that was funny. Even if David had forgotten his keys, the door was unlocked.

She called, "Come in."

The door was flung open, and Lem Crawford staggered in. His hair was uncombed, his eyes bloodshot. Sheila leaped to her feet quickly. Her eyes reflected the fear in her heart at seeing Lem.

"For heaven's sake, Lem, what are you doing here? And you're drunk!"

He came toward her, his eyes roaming over her boldly.

"I'm not drunk, beautiful. Just feeling good. I know what I'm doing."

"You must be crazy to come here. Are you out of your mind? Leave at once, before David gets here," Sheila demanded, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Is that a nice way to treat a friend? I come to see you, and you want to throw me out. I'm going to stay for a while. I want to talk to you."

"Will you go?" she said, rage breaking through her.

"You know you don't want me to leave. You like me. You told me you did, and remember how you enjoyed my kisses?" He laughed and advanced towards her.

Sheila's mind was in a turmoil. She was thinking of a way to get him quietly out of the house before David came back.

"Lem, I like you as a friend, but nothing else, so please leave, won't you?"

"Now, now. Come sit on the couch with me."

Sheila shook her head and took a step backward. Suddenly Lem was upon her. He had his strong arms around her and pulled her toward the sofa. He sat down with her on his lap. She tried to get up, but his strength prevented her from even moving an arm. His voice was choked with passion.

"You're in my blood, damn it. I can't get you out of my mind, do you hear? When a man's tasted your kisses, he's hungry for more."

Lem pressed her head back on his arm, rained kisses on her face, on her throat. The harder Sheila tried to struggle, the tighter he held her to him.

When her lips were free, she mumbled, "You kissed me. Now please go. Quick! Please."

The whiskey from his breath came to her nostrils and made her sick to her stomach. She kicked and fought with her hands, but Lem threw back his head and laughed.

"You don't love David, so why are you worrying about him finding me here?" He tore roughly at her negligee. Her shoulders were exposed, and she was breathing heavily with fear.

"Lem, I'll see you tomorrow, I promise. Just go now," she pleaded, but Lem shook his head.

"Why put off until tomorrow what can be done today?" he said, looking deeply into her eyes. She relaxed in his arms, knowing it was useless to struggle. Her only hope was that David would be delayed wherever he was.

He pressed his lips to hers tightly. Sheila was helpless in his arms. Her head was bent back on the cushions, her hands on his chest in the hope that she could free herself. They didn't hear the door open until they were startled by David's voice.

Sheila and Lem leaped to their feet quickly. She trembled at the anger in David's eyes. Lem ran his hand through his hair. There was wry smile on his lips, and his face was flushed.

"What is the meaning of this?" David said.

Lem said, "Ask her," gesturing with his head toward Sheila.

Sheila was rubbing the palms of her hands together in a nervous gesture. Her mouth felt dry, and there seemed to be a lump in her throat. When she found her voice, she said, "I didn't want Lem to kiss me. Please believe me, David."

David threw back his head and let out a long laugh, then glared at Lem.

"What right had you to come here tonight? Aren't there enough women in Reno without you coming after another man's wife?"

Lem snickered. "She gave me plenty of encouragement. Ask her if you don't believe me, and all of your friends are saying how blind you must be not to know that she doesn't love you."

Sheila was biting her lower lip. Her breathing was labored, her hair ruffled, and her negligee torn, revealing her shoulders and part of her breasts. She uttered a cry when she saw David hit Lem on the jaw with his fist. Lem doubled his fists and lunged at David, who was too quick for him and let him have a hard right to the jaw, sending him across the room, flat on his back. Then David grabbed him by the arms and shoved him out of the front door.

Trembling inwardly, Sheila went into her room. Just as she was about to close the door, David came in. She backed away from the angry look in his eyes, until she was standing against the wall. Her eyes held a look of terror as his flared at her with untold anger.

"I warned you over and over not to bother with Lem Craw-

ford. I gave you strict orders not to drink at bars with strange men, but you did just as you damned pleased. My sister warned me about you, but I wouldn't listen. I didn't want to believe that you were anything but honorable. You have never been a real honest to goodness wife to me. I was hoping that you would wake up and be different. You've disgraced me, and I'm the laughing stock of all my friends. I don't love you. I don't know how any man in his right mind could love a selfish, conceited brat, for that's just what you are. I should have known better than to rush into marriage when I hardly knew you."

Sheila found her voice and looked at him with defiance.

"I still say that I didn't do any harm. I didn't ask him to come here tonight. Lem just took it for granted that I liked him. I didn't do anything wrong, David, please believe me."

"You heard what Lem said, that everybody knows you don't love me. Why did you marry me, then?"

Sheila hesitated for several minutes, then said coldly, "You appealed to me. I wanted to prove to myself that I could get you to marry me, even though you hadn't known me long."

"Now I know why you told me that you didn't want women for friends. They weren't jealous of you. They could see through you much quicker than a man could. Well, my dear, I have a surprise for you."

Before Sheila knew what was happening, David hit her across the face. His strong fingers gripped her arms and he shook her. Then he knocked her down with his fist, pulled off his belt, and cracked it over her arms and across her legs and back. Sheila covered her face with her hands. She screamed out in pain, thinking surely he had lost his mind.

He was bending down, holding her with one hand while he beat her with the other.

Sheila moaned, "Stop, David. You're killing me. Stop!"

"Shut up, you conceited brat. This should have been done to you a long time ago. Your first husband should have done it. Maybe it would have put some sense into that head of yours. You think you're too beautiful for any man to lay his hands on you unless he's caressing you."

He stopped beating her and straightened to his towering

height, putting his belt back on. He pulled her to her feet and flung her across her bed.

"No woman is going to make a fool out of me the way you did and get away with it. I'm going out, and you'd better be out of here before I get back, or I might kill you." He stormed out.

Sheila cried in self-pity and humiliation. How dared he beat her! How dared he.

"I hate him, I hate him. Ron would never have laid a hand on me like that, never," she sobbed.

It was Christmas Eve in New York. Mrs. Taylor was taking a sweet potato pie out of the oven. There was a knock on the door and she called, "Come in." A gasp escaped her lips and her face lit up with pleasure.

"Sheila, dear, come in. My goodness, what are you doing in New York? Where's David?" Her mother spoke all in one breath, putting her arms around her.

Sheila kissed her on the cheek and said, "David is in Reno. Are you home alone?"

"No, Joan, Betty and Robert are in the living room putting up the tree."

Sheila sat down at the table. She thought, *same old kitchen, nothing changed in it, always so clean.*

Her mother said, "So David let you come and visit us for Christmas? That was nice of him."

Sheila lit a cigarette and let out a long stream of smoke.

She said, coolly, "Mother, you might as well know it. I left David. I've been very unhappy."

Her mother looked at her sharply. "I thought you were happy. You wrote and told us how good he was to you."

"So what? He never wanted to take me out, unless it was to a square dance or the movies. I got bored."

Her mother shook her head. "That's too bad. You're so young and already been married twice. I don't approve of it at all."

"I can't help that. I'm not going to continue living with a man if I can't get along with him."

"Marriage should be give and take. Did you try to make a go of it? I don't think you did."

"If you're going to start preaching to me, I'm leaving right now."

"Go into the living room and see your sisters and brother."

Sheila went into the living room.

She said, "Hello, kids."

Joan replied, "We're not kids."

Sheila shrugged her shoulders and returned to the kitchen.

"I have to go now, mother. I'm going over to see a friend of mine."

"So soon? You just came in. Don't you want coffee or tea, or a piece of pie?"

"No. How did dad die? You didn't tell me just how it happened."

"He wanted to go to Central Park to sit under a tree. It was a hot day. By the time he got to the corner, he had a stroke. He died right away. I miss him terribly. This is a sad Christmas for me."

"Why don't you marry again? You're young yet."

"I wouldn't even think of it. I loved your father. I couldn't love anyone else."

"Why don't you marry for companionship, then? You won't be lonesome."

"I'm not lonesome. I still have the children."

"Well, I think you're foolish."

"That's because you've never been in love," her mother said, popping another pie into the oven.

Sheila said casually, "Do you think it's wrong if a woman marries again after her first husband dies?"

"Certainly not. I just told you that I couldn't. Some women can and do, and some don't. We're not all alike."

"Well, I'm going."

"Why don't you have dinner with us tomorrow? You don't want to eat alone on Christmas, do you? Ann and Ron will be here. So will Danny and his wife Virginia."

"I think I will. What's Danny's wife like?"

"You'll like her. She's a sweet girl. Very quiet and refined. Nice looking, nothing fancy about her. She doesn't have much to say, but she thinks a lot."

"Oh, a goody-goody type, I see."

"She and Danny get along wonderful. She's a good cook, too. So is your sister Ann."

"I guess they're going to make themselves slaves to their husbands, just like you were to dad."

"Sheila, I resent that. I resent that very much," her mother said angrily, and Sheila saw tears come to her eyes.

Sheila laughed and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Don't take life so seriously, mother. So long. See you tomorrow."

As soon as Sheila left, Joan came into the kitchen.

"What is Sheila doing here without her husband? I thought she was in Reno."

"Listen, Joan, for reasons that we don't know, Sheila's marriage with David broke up. So let's not talk about it, all right?"

"Did you invite her to eat dinner with us tomorrow?"

"Certainly I did. What kind of a mother would I be if I didn't invite my own daughter to have Christmas dinner with us?"

"I think you made a big mistake, mother. Ron doesn't want to ever see Sheila again, I know."

"Save your breath, Joan. Go back into the living room and don't knock your sister to me. I don't like to hear it," her mother said sternly.

Joan pressed her lips together angrily and stormed out of the kitchen.

Chapter 32

SHEILA went to see Iris as soon as she left her mother's flat. Iris opened the door and flung her arms around Sheila, crying, "Sheila, honey, what a surprise! Come in. My goodness, I never expected to see you for Christmas. Where's David?"

"Is your husband home?" Sheila asked, glancing around.

"No, he won't be home for another hour. He had to stay a little later at the office. Say, you don't look so happy. Anything wrong?"

Sheila flung her hat and coat on the couch, lit a cigarette and sat down, crossing her legs.

"Plenty. I just came over from my mother's. She was surprised to see me, too."

"When did you arrive in New York? Come on, tell me everything. I'm dying to hear the news," she said eagerly.

"I have plenty of news, but I'll make my story short. David came home one night and saw me in Lem's arms. You know I wrote and told you about Lem."

Iris nodded her head.

"Well, it was unexpected. He was slightly drunk and I couldn't

get rid of him. David had words with him, hit him a couple of times on the jaw, then told me what he thought of me. And, before I knew what he was going to do, he took off his belt and beat me. And here I am."

There was a look of surprise and awe on Iris' face.

"Do you mean to tell me that David beat you? Oh my!" Iris threw back her head and laughed long and loud.

Sheila said angrily, "What the hell are you laughing at, Iris? I don't see anything funny."

Iris stopped laughing and looked at Sheila. "Come now, Sheila. You know I couldn't help laughing. I know that you must have been the most surprised person in the world, having a man beat you. What a man that David must be!"

Sheila looked at Iris in dismay. "Do you mean to tell me that I should have been beaten?"

"Truthfully, yes. You must have deserved it, Sheila. Men are human, too, you know. You must have hurt him very much, or else why would he do such a thing? Some men, Sheila, can just stand for so much from a woman, and when the woman makes a fool of them, they go all to pieces. I think Ron should have given you a beating."

Sheila jumped to her feet, her blue eyes blazing.

"Iris, I thought you were my friend. I thought you were going to feel sorry for me."

"I do feel sorry for you, Sheila, very sorry, but not in the way you think. I feel sorry because you haven't had sense enough to know when you were well off. You had the love of two good men and you made fools out of both of them. You're not happy, Sheila. You never will be until you learn what real, honest-to-goodness love is."

Sheila laughed wryly. "I have another surprise for you. I'm four months pregnant."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. Isn't that awful? I didn't know it until yesterday. I felt sick, and thought maybe I had gas. I went to the doctor and he told me I was pregnant. I cried and told him I didn't want it. He said I was going to have it whether I wanted it or not. I also asked if it was possible to be pregnant without knowing it. He said certainly it was."

"You'd better write and tell David. I bet he wouldn't have beaten you if he had known that. It's a good thing he didn't use his strength on you."

"Listen, Iris, David thought I was untrue to him, but I want you to know that I was faithful to him. Do you believe me?"

Iris nodded her head. "Yes, I believe you, Sheila. David will probably divorce you. Then again, if he knows you're going to bring his child into the world, he might want you back."

"You don't know David. He wouldn't believe it was his. I know he won't. I'm going to write a letter and tell him, but he won't believe it."

"You can probably prove it easily enough. After the baby is born, have a blood test. That will tell him that it's his. He'll know then that you told him the truth."

"I'll see. I'll think about it later. I arrived in New York two days ago. I sold my car and got two thousand dollars for it."

"Are you going to stay at your mother's?"

"No, I got a two-room apartment with bath on Fifty-seventh Street. The living room turns into a bedroom at night. I can eat out."

"You had a good time in Reno, didn't you?"

"I lost all my money. The gambling got into my blood."

"Too bad. When I was there, it didn't bother me any. Didn't you win at all?"

"Sure, I won sometimes, but what good did it do? I lost it all back, and my own money, too. And I met plenty of women who cried in their beer. So many didn't want a divorce, but their husbands did."

"I know, it's so pitiful," Iris said, shaking her head.

"You look so happy. Your eyes just glow. I guess you're going to tell me it's love," Sheila said.

"You bet it is. I'm really happy. I cook and bake, and enjoy doing it. I love to make my husband happy."

"I'm going to have dinner at my mother's house tomorrow. Ron and Ann are going to be there."

"Please don't start anything, will you, Sheila? Ron is happily married. Leave them alone."

"Iris, don't give me orders."

"Do you think David will really divorce you?"

"Of course he will. There's no doubt about it."

"Wait and see how happy you'll be after you have your baby."

"If you think I'm going to keep it, you're crazy," Sheila said.

"Suppose David doesn't want it, even if he finds out it's his. What then?"

"I'll give it away. You can have it. You love children."

Iris sighed and shook her head. "Sheila, don't talk about it any more. Wait until you have it."

"I have to go now. I'll meet your husband some other time."

"You didn't tell me everything. What happened after David beat you?"

"He told me to get out quick, so I packed a few of my things and left a note that I would send for the rest of my clothes, and I drove here. I'm glad to be back in New York, anyway. Did I suffer! I was really in pain, but he didn't use too much strength. If he had, no telling what might have happened to me."

"You would have lost the baby."

"That's right. I wish he had beaten me more. Then I wouldn't have to have it, damn it."

"Sheila, you burn me up. I feel like slapping you myself, talking like that," Iris said angrily.

"Never mind that. I noticed that you didn't offer me a drink. What's the matter, Iris? Are you slipping?"

"I was so glad to see you, I didn't think of it. I'll get you a highball," Iris said, rising from her chair.

"I want it straight, Iris. Plain brandy."

Iris gave her a sharp look, shrugged her shoulders, and went to get her the drink.

Sheila drank it down quickly.

"Thanks, Iris. I really have to go. I'll call you up tomorrow and wish you a Merry Christmas."

"Too bad you won't stay and meet my husband."

"Some other time. Here's my address," Sheila said, handing her a piece of white paper.

Sheila awoke and lay still, enjoying the warmth of the soft bed. The sunlight slanted through the cream-colored panel curtains, casting bright patches on the dark rug and furniture. She had the feeling of one who had slept very well.

I'm going to write David now, she decided as she stepped out of bed.

She slipped into her robe, shoved her feet into slippers, and went to the small desk and sat down. She wrote:

This is to inform you that I am going to bring your child into the world in about four and a half months, and you may send my clothes to the above address.

Sheila

She put it in an envelope, sealed it and, after addressing it, put it in her bag to mail it later. She thought then of Ann who would certainly be jealous when she saw her again.

Chapter 33

CHRISTMAS day at the Taylors' was quieter than it had been when Jim was alive. The tree was a huge one, decorated so that hardly a branch could be seen. The table in the dining room had two extra boards added to it, and Mrs. Taylor was using her best china and silverware.

This Christmas, Mrs. Taylor had two extra children, Ron and Danny's wife, Virginia. While Danny, Ron, and Robert were in the living room listening to the radio, the girls were helping to set the table. Ann looked radiantly happy. Her plain face glowed with the happiness that was within her.

"It's two o'clock, and Sheila isn't here yet. I wonder what's keeping her," Mrs. Taylor said anxiously, glancing at the electric clock on the kitchen wall.

"I bet she won't show up," Joan said.

"Oh yes she will. She likes to make a grand entrance, you know," Betty retorted.

"I don't think we should wait. The turkey'll get dry," Joan said.

"Very well. Go into the living room and call the boys in. We might as well get started," her mother ordered wearily.

They all bowed their heads and repeated a prayer after Mrs. Taylor. Then she started to carve the turkey, and handed around plates so they could help themselves to the vegetables and gravy.

"I wish Sheila would come. I'm so disappointed," Mrs. Taylor said.

"Don't worry so much about Sheila, mother. You did your part, inviting her here. If she doesn't show up, it isn't your fault," Danny said.

"I wanted to meet Sheila. Too bad," Virginia said.

"There's more turkey for me, now. I can have Sheila's share," Robert said, laughing and stuffing his mouth with food.

Suddenly the door opened, and Sheila breezed in. She slammed the door and sauntered into the dining room. Her mother rose quickly to her feet and said, "Sheila, honey! I was worried about you. I was so afraid you weren't coming."

"I was delayed on my way," Sheila said flatly, while her eyes travelled around the table and rested on Virginia.

"Hello. You must be Danny's wife," Sheila said crisply.

Virginia said, "Hello, Sheila. Pleased to meet you. I heard a lot about you."

Sheila said coolly, "I bet you did!"

"Sheila, take your things into the bedroom, while I fix your plate," her mother ordered.

When Sheila came out of the bedroom, Danny noticed that she was swaying slightly and he knew that she had been drinking.

Sheila sat between Ann and Betty and glanced at Ron. She was annoyed to see that he did not look at her. She said, with acid in her tone, "When I opened the door and came in, I heard voices. Now, all of a sudden when I sit down, everyone is quiet. What the hell is everybody quiet for? Is this supposed to be a jolly Christmas dinner or a wake?"

All eyes turned to look at her. Danny and Ron exchanged knowing glances, and Danny saw Ron sigh. Ann's face was flushed. Joan had an angry expression in her green eyes. She knew Sheila had been drinking, and Betty and Robert had the same thought as they looked across the table at their sister. She was nothing to them but a spoiled brat.

Her mother said gently, "Sheila, dear, you are only imagining things. Eat your dinner before it gets cold."

Sheila noticed that Ann and the rest of them seemed to be ignoring her, and the thought hurt her vanity. Suddenly, she jumped to her feet, knocking over her chair with a heavy thud. Her bloodshot eyes blazed angrily as everyone stared at her with bewildered expressions.

"I'm getting the hell out of this morbid house. I shouldn't have come in the first place. I know what you're thinking. That I'm drunk. Well, I'm not so drunk that I don't know when I'm being snubbed."

There was a hushed silence, then Danny said sharply, "Sheila, sit down and stop dramatizing yourself. Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Sheila caught the beseeching look in her mother's eyes. She picked up her chair and flopped into it, a sullen droop to her mouth.

Her mother was thinking, *I am really seeing Sheila for the first time. Why didn't I listen to Jim when he told me I was spoiling her? I'm shocked at her actions.*

When everyone finished eating, the boys went into the living room while the girls, except for Sheila, cleared off the table. Sheila was drinking a cup of strong black coffee and watching Ann.

Unable to control the words that were sizzling in her mind, she said abruptly, "You don't have to be so stuck up, Ann, just because you're going to have a baby. I'm going to have one, too."

Ann said, "That's nice. I'm glad to hear it," while she took an armful of dishes off the table. Sheila, feeling resentful at the way Ann looked, so smug and sure of herself, burst out sharply.

"I suppose you think you took Ron away from me? But you didn't. I could still be married to him if I had wanted to be."

There was astonished indignation on Ann's face as she looked at Sheila. Her cheeks paled.

"I don't want to hear any more from you, Sheila," she said, in a dull voice.

Sheila threw back her head and laughed. "I don't care what you don't want to hear. All of you might as well listen to what I have to say."

Her mother said, "Sheila, you've said enough. Keep quiet."

There was mockery in Sheila's eyes. "I haven't said the most important thing yet. Ron and I broke up because I didn't want to bring his child into the world. I was pregnant, and I had an abortion."

There was a gasp from her mother's lips. Ann looked as if she were going to faint. Virginia and Joan put an arm around her and helped her into a chair. Sheila was enjoying the scene. Her mother grabbed her by the arm and said angrily, "Sheila, get out of here right now. And don't you ever dare set foot in this house again."

Hearing the angry rise of voices, Dan, Ron, and Robert came into the dining room, looking from one to the other. Ron, noticing how pale Ann looked and the serious expression in her eyes, put an arm around her.

He said tenderly, "Ann, dear, what's the matter?"

"I don't feel very well, Ron."

"Why don't you ask her why she doesn't feel well," Sheila said icily.

Danny grabbed Sheila by the arm and pulled her into the bedroom. His mother followed them in, and they closed the door.

Danny said, "Get out, Sheila, now. We know you've been drinking, and even if you didn't have anything to drink, you're nothing but a trouble maker."

Suddenly Sheila flung herself across the bed and started to cry. Danny and his mother looked at one another in dismay. They could not remember ever seeing Sheila cry.

"Danny, go ahead in. I'll handle Sheila," Mrs. Taylor said.

After Danny left the room, Mrs. Taylor said sternly, "I'm not going to preach to you, Sheila. I don't feel one bit sorry for you. I want you to leave. When you change and get some sense into that head of yours, you can come to see us, but not before."

Sheila mumbled, "I'm pregnant. I don't want the baby. I'm afraid."

Her mother said coldly, "Danny's wife and Ann are going to have babies and they're thrilled about it. Shame on you!"

"I don't care. I'm afraid," Sheila cried.

"This would be some world if every woman thought the way you do. I brought six children into the world. Each one of you

was born at home, and I didn't have a doctor, I had a midwife. And now everything is so modern. It's normal for a woman to give birth. You're not afraid to have the baby, Sheila. You don't want to carry it for nine months because you know you can't run around drinking and staying out all hours. You can't fool me any more, Sheila. At last my eyes are open."

Sheila stopped crying and got up from the bed. She took her hat and coat and stormed out of the room, holding her head high and swaying.

Chapter 34

IT WAS almost five months since Sheila had walked out of her mother's flat on Christmas Day. She went often to visit Iris and her husband. They taught her how to play canasta, and many times Thomas Preston would play with them. As the time for Sheila's baby drew near, she had them come to her apartment.

She had received a letter from David shortly after she had written him and also papers from a New York lawyer which she signed. David had written:

I don't have to give you any money, but I am enclosing a check anyway for five thousand dollars. You don't think for a minute that I believe the baby is mine, do you? Why don't you ask Lem, the father, to marry you, though I doubt that he will.

David

Sheila had cried, and she called Iris and told her about the letter.

Iris had said, "Prove it's his after you have it."

Sheila learned how to cook simple things. She knew how to fry