MY KEY FITS EVERY DOOR

By Dennis Louis Dyer

Five years after the Second World War, film-makers have revived Hollywood's golden age. An upscale stockbroker is murdered in an extravagant Hollywood hotel, the Chateau Chillon. Private eye Mark Taylor is hired to investigate.

Taylor has also been retained by wealthy industrialist Louis Schribner to search for some missing documents. Meredith Morgan is Schribner's private secretary and resides at his estate. Mark and Meredith have planned an evening out to see a movie but instead visit a night club owned by Mark’s friend Hymie Hillman.

Two pertinent events occurred prior to this scene: Mark recently met his neighbor lady Sandra, and he was beat-up by two hoods named Leroy and Flatnose, who warned him to curtail his murder investigation.

Mark narrates this action which begins as Mark and Meredith enter the night club. The story line strengthens romantic attraction between Mark and Meredith and leads into a suspenseful situation and diversion.

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Hymie Hillman's 'Boots and Saddle Bistro' was at the pre-jive stage when Meredith and I walked in. The three-piece combo was taking it easy with some sweet, soft dinner music. Meredith slipped out of her wrap and I checked it.

I ushered her through the maroon drapes that covered the entrance to the dining room. On the other side the lights were softened down to the point where you couldn't see very well. A maitre d' greeted us and led us to a table for two.

After being seated, I took a better look at the maitre d'. There was no mistaking his mammoth bulk even in a tux. He looked like something out of a Sears and Roebuck catalog. I knew Leroy and Flatnose worked here for Hymie, but I didn't expect Leroy to be his official greeter.

Hillman's place had a lot of class. I had to hand it to him. There was just enough ham in Hymie to capitalize on the cowboy craze that was sweeping Hollywood. Hanging along the walls was a lot of cowboy paraphernalia such as bits, spurs, lariats, chaps, boots, Stetsons. Even the small bar at one end of the place had leather saddles for barstools. And the three-piece combo was corralled behind a small rustic fence.

"Cute place," Meredith said.

"Yeah, if you like Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy."

A waiter came up and plopped a couple of horse-sized 24“ by 36“ menus in front of us. He waited until I ordered a couple of Gibsons and scurried off in the direction of the bar.

I took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one and handed it over to her. Then I lit one for myself. She blew out a plume of smoke to one side and let her eyes rove all over me. She knew how to look at a man. There was just enough expression in her eyes to make me feel she was interested.

I watched her munch on the onion and then asked, "Hungry?"

"Not now," she said. "Maybe a sandwich later."

The boys in the combo must have gotten bored with the three-quarter stuff and picked up the beat with what I thought was "Body and Soul." Nearby a couple of party boys kicked back their chairs and stood up, snapped their fingers in time to the music and shooed their partners out into the dance floor.

"That's one of my favorite numbers," I said as I drummed the rhythm with my fingers.

"Want to make use of it?" she asked.

"Let's."

We zigged-zagged our way through a few tables to the dance floor. The top of her head hit right even with my eyes. She settled into my arms like a babe in a bassinet. The first time around the small oval floor we drifted, the second time around we glided, and the third time we floated cheek-to-cheek like two shadows that were together as one.

When we got back to the table we finished our drinks fast. I slipped the waiter a sawbuck, told him to forget the food and to keep the drinks coming, strong and regular.

Three dances and four drinks later I was on Meredith's side of the table. We had our heads together and were whispering a lot of things that made us both feel we had a great deal in common.

"What about Schribner?" I asked.

"What about him?"

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"You really going to marry the guy?"

"Jealous?"

"Yeah. I like you, Meredith. You're my kind of woman. A cute mixed-up angel that needs a guy like me to look after her. Want to bring me out of the rain?"

"It doesn't sound at all like the rough and tough Mark Taylor."

"It's a put-on job, Angel face, I can be nice sometimes."

Just then I noticed a blonde-haired doll picking her way through the tables in our direction. I tried to duck my head between my shoulders and avoid her glance. But it didn't do any good.

"Hello, Mr. Michael Angelo," she sneered as she walked up. She stood by the table dressed in something white and holding a black beaded purse in her hand. She looked like a haughty queen bee. She was buzzing with a load and there was a sting in her voice.

"Go away, Sandra, they don't allow table-hopping in here," I said.

"Is that so?" she said in a blurred voice and teetered into a chair next to us. "Who said so?" She reached over for my drink but I grabbed it ahead of her. "Okay, cheapskate!" She yelled out to a waiter to bring another round. Her voice was thick and rasping. It could have cut a piece of kindling wood.

Meredith didn't say a word. She just gave Sandra a cool calculated look. I had a hunch she was enjoying the whole thing at my expense.

"Why don't you go get a cup of coffee, Sandra?" I said.

"To hell with the coffee," she said flippantly and turned her attention to Meredith. "I don't know what your name is, honey, but this big ham is nothing but a lousy peeper. And his specialty is peeping on women in their bedrooms. -- Believe me I know."

She stopped as the waiter came up and placed three drinks on the table. She hoisted one of the glasses and gurgled into it for a moment. Then she continued, "Like I was telling you, this peeper will stop at nothing to get what he wants. He hasn't any manners at all."

"Can that stuff, Sandra," I growled. "I don't need a phony press agent."

"Listen, Mr. Angelo, I just want to warn your girl friend to keep her bedroom door locked." She kept on talking, tearing me down and trying to get a rise out of me. I didn't tumble. But I felt smaller than a Borneo pygmy. Suddenly she spotted a tall, slim man that looked like he was tight-rope walking along the edge of the dance floor.

"Here, I am, darling," she shouted at him and stood up so he could see her.

Slim turned around and when he saw Sandra he grinned like a ten-cent Halloween mask. He changed course and plodded over to us.

The suit he had on told me who he was right away. Last time I'd seen it, it was hanging neatly in a plastic clothes bag in the closet of Sandra's bedroom. The suit looked a lot better hanging in the closet. He was thin, almost too thin, with very red cheeks and thin pencil-like eyebrows. His hair was sparse on top and a bushy gray-blond at the sides. I figured him at a young forty. There was a white carnation in his lapel which he fingered nervously.

"There you are, my dear," he gushed at Sandra. "I wondered where you'd disappeared to."

"Darling, I want you to meet some friends," she tittered and fluttered her hands. She reminded me of how a sea-sick sea gull would look.

I didn't want to be rude, especially in front of Meredith, so I said, "Sit down, Gerard."

He reached up with a long feminine hand and padded his bushy hair and sat down. "Oh, you've seen some of my pictures," he beamed over at me.

"You might call it that," I said.

"Which one? -- Oh, that must have been the new one that was released about four months ago. Since then things have slowed up a bit here in Hollywood, you know. Been filling in my spare time doing a little legitimate stage work."

Sandra slipped an arm through one of his, pulled him closer and snuggled her head on his shoulder. "I just loved Victor in his last picture," she cooed.

Victor looked pleased. "Yes, you know, Mr. uh -- I didn't catch your name. I got very good reviews in my last picture. Louella and Winchell said I was terrific. Of course, I always give all the credit to the director. He was great. Simply great! But I can't understand why I don't get more work."

"You bragging or complaining?" I asked. I didn't like Victor Gerard. He was my idea of nothing -- depressing as a funeral dirge and dull as a third generation mortician. "You got troubles -- take it up with the Screen Actors' Guild -- if you paid up your dues."

Meredith reached over and put her hand over mine. "Mark, please." I looked at her and wondered if she hadn't gone overboard for this two-bit movie actor. She gave Victor Gerard an apologetic smile and said, "I'm Meredith Morgan. Mr. Taylor's a great kidder."

Sandra unburdened a little gas from her stomach and hiccupped. Then she said, "Yeah, I'll say he is."

"I understand, Miss Morgan," Gerard said. "I've got quite a sense of humor myself. You know, my dear, I was out on location once -- there's always a lot of clowning going on around the set. We got a hold of a box of itching powder and spread it around, and before the day's shooting was over everybody on the set was scratching like mad. You should've seen it."

His recollection of the occasion started him laughing. His eyes disappeared behind a mass of crinkly flesh that was his eyelids. Sandra joined in and they laughed off-key together. They kept it up until Gerard reached up and rubbed a couple of tears the size of raindrops out of his eyes. Then he added: "Everybody thought we'd run into a swarm of phantom fleas. -- Isn't that a hilarious situation?" he managed to wheeze out.

"Yeah, very funny," I said.

"I see you appreciate a good gag, Mr. Taylor." He wasn't very sure of me. "Taylor -- Taylor?" He rolled his eyes around and let a far-away look get in them like he was trying to remember something. With a graceful theatrical flourish, he pointed a slender artistic finger at me and said, "Is that a stage name? Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"You don't know me from Adam," I said abruptly.

I lit up a cigarette and the three-piece combo came to life with a screeching circus-style fanfare. The house lights dimmed, blinked out and an amber spot blinked on. The spotlight was anchored behind and above us

somewhere. Its colored beam angled across and directly over our table. In its glare Gerard look ghoulish and Sandra seemed waxy-like. But the light hadn't done Meredith any harm.

We all jerked our heads around and a sloppy M.C. in elephant-ear chaps and a ten-gallon Stetson high-heeled it to the mike. He cracked wise with a lot of loud stuff that sounded like a phonograph record which had been speeded up. After a few off-color stories, someone threw him a rope and he whirled it a few times over his head until he had formed a wide loop. He jumped in and out of it couple of times and waited for applause that didn't come. Then he slithered off into the darkness.

The combo went into a bouncy number and a line of about a dozen cuties came skipping out on the floor. They had on white cowboy boots, white panties and not much else above their navels. They wore long cowboy neckerchiefs which weren't very stationary. They did grinds and bumps around the dance floor in something that was supposed to be a dance routine and suddenly the place was quiet.

The girls were followed by a dummy and his ventriloquist and they were followed by a tall fat dame who walked around carrying a singing midget. The cuties came back on with different costumes but with the same routine.

When the house lights came on again, the waiters moved in and out among the tables making up for lost time. Hillman had the boys well-trained. Our waiter came up, took away our empty glasses, and I told him to do it again.

Gerard was feeling good. "I've traveled a lot in my day and I still say we have the best girls here in Hollywood. Don't you think so, Miss Morgan?"

Before Meredith had a chance to answer, Sandra said tartly, "That's the whole damn trouble. The men around this town are plain spoiled." She pitched a dirty look at me.

Sandra must've been psychic because just then a round-faced woman with square bone-rimmed glasses edged in gold leaned over from the next table and shoved a menu and a gold pencil in Victor Gerard's face.

"I've been watching you for more than five minutes," she bubbled out, "trying to make up my mind. But now I've recognized you. -- You're Victor Gerard, the movie actor, aren't you? I wonder if you'd be kind enough to autograph my menu?"

Gerard swelled up like a peacock, did something with an eyebrow like John Barrymore used to do and said, "Delighted, madam, delighted."

He handed the menu back to her and brushed away her thanks with a wide sweep of his hand. Sandra pouted and looked around for someone to exchange glances with.

Most women like to be the center of attraction, or like to be with someone who is. Meredith was that way. She flashed Gerard a warm smile and said, "I suppose they bother you with a lot of that?"

"Autographs? That's part of my job. I love it. I'd be lying if I said I didn't."

Gerard then made such a fuss that he drew the attention of others nearby and he was lapping it up. Flatnose noticed the scene and I saw him looking at me. He flashed me a sour expression of recognition.

Meredith seemed to revel in Gerard’s popularity. What had prospects of being an enjoyable evening was quickly turning foul on me. I felt more stuffy than if we had gone to the preview. She could tell I was upset. "We came here to have a good time, Angel face," I explained. "If you're unhappy let's leave."

I killed my drink and stood up and she got up with me. I turned to let Meredith get by me and I saw Flatnose beating his gums with Leroy. I hadn't seen Leroy walk up but it wasn't hard to figure out what their topic of interest was.

I pushed Meredith gently by the arm to get us through the crowd that the waiters were still trying to calm down and get seated. Flatnose came up to me and asked, "Leaving so soon, lover boy?"

"Yeah," I growled. "I'm particular about the people around me."

I took a firmer grip of Meredith's arm to steer her by a few of the gawkers. But Flatnose had other ideas. He clamped a paw on my shoulder and spun me around and the few drinks I had in me almost helped him in setting me down on my soft spot. I nearly pulled Meredith down and this got me hot in the head, so I gave his chin a quick hard jab.

He went down. Leroy stepped over Flatnose and some waiters clutched him. Others grabbed me and told me it was enough and sat me

down at an empty table. Meredith came over and joined me and I turned to one of the waiters and said "Scotch and water and a Martini."

"Wha' happened?" Someone behind me asked in a moronic tone.

I turned around and Hymie Hillman was standing over me. His cigar hid half his face and he didn't seem like he had much of anything on his mind.

"Hi, Hymie," I said.

"I thought you were the genteel type, Mark?"

"Meet Meredith Morgan."

"Hello, Miss Morgan. -- Excuse me, but I must say that Mark's always a sucker for a pretty girl."

Meredith nodded with a slight smile that just as much said thank you and that we were very nice too.

"What gives?" I asked Hymie as I motioned for him to draw up a chair and sit down.

"I should ask you." he sat down and gazed at me over his fat cigar with a long look that probably was busy weighing everything about me. He had on a smartly draped pin-stripe flannel in brown.

"Your boys like to play a rough game of sluggo."

"Things're rough all over, Mark. My boys are good guys. And they might get -- uh -- tougher."

"You mean the boys, -- or just things?"

"I mean both, Mark. So? " Hymie flicked a two-inch stem of ashes off his cigar and into a tray with a slow delicate motion.

I took a slow sip of my drink and it felt real good going down. I glanced at Meredith but she didn't have to tell me she wanted to blow the joint.

"I want to talk, Hillman," I said. "Somewhere around we can lay down fifty-two cards?"

"I should do the talking and be telling you what you can and can't do."

Before I could say more, he invited, "Come to my office."

He rose and headed back to the rear of the club. I excused myself from Meredith with "Be right back," and followed.

Hymie's private office was just that -- a very private office. And what made it very private was a special door that looked strong enough to stop a steamed-up locomotive. Inside, three walls were in a dreamy chartreuse while the fourth had a gob of garish wallpaper in a combination pattern of palm fronds and giant philodendron against a creamy background. The room was such a part of a dude ranch style as Hymie Hillman was with his padded shoulders, peg-top trousers and his big cigar.

"Park it," he said as he took a seat and pointed out a green easy chair near his desk. "Now -- what bothers you?"

"Your goons, Flatnose and Leroy." I looked at him and his face didn't change. He sucked on the cigar. Something bothered him.

"They're okay," he said.

"For rousting jobs?"

Hymie tilted himself back on his swivel and peaked an eyebrow and stared at me down his long cigar with his heavy-lidded eyes. He seemed puzzled. Maybe I had given him a puzzle but I wiped that idea out, too much like fantasy.

"Say what you mean, Mark."

"Okay, Hymie, I'll give to you straight. -- Your boys pulled a snatch job and worked me over a bit the other night. I want to know why?"

The little man eased himself forward a bit and with a deft movement flicked more ash off his cigar. Then he crossed a leg over a lap and settled back in the swivel like a contented businessman. "I can't buy that," he said slowly and pointedly.

"You think I'm lying?"

"I don't say that. I think you got my boys all wrong. I'll check with 'em and see what the score is."

He uncrossed his legs, leaned forward on his chair and reached down one side behind his desk. Then he angled back on the chair and carefully surveyed his fingernails. Then blew on them and rubbed them on his coat lapel.

The heavy door swung open and Leroy stepped in and Hymie told him to ask Abe in too. In a moment they were both standing by me.

"Got a beef on the two of you." Hymie explained as he took the cigar from his mouth and forced a smile that showed off his gold teeth.

For a while they just stood there like a couple of bashful innocent kids listening to a lecture on the facts of life. Leroy looked as if he had put on his dad's tuxedo for high school graduation back in Pinebluff, and Abe seemed to have cornered a part of a Hollywood haberdashery. He had on a blue tweed sport coat with big white squares and a pair of tent-sized dark slacks.

They glanced at each other and then looked at Hymie. Leroy said, "What kind of beef?"

"Rousting my friend here around," Hymie said.

"Who says that?" Leroy asks, trying to appear confused.

"Leroy," I butted in, "there's an old saying about a ham and an actor. And you're no actor."

"A guy's not a friend if he calls you names," Leroy stared at me and I could tell that he was planning uncomfortable pains for me. His eyes were sharp like a machete.

"Cut the bull, Leroy. Did you guys roust him or didn't you?" Hymie sputtered.

"I tell you, boss, I don't know a thing 'bout no rousting," Leroy explained. "How 'bout you, Abe?"

"Naw," Abe said gruffly, "I don' know nothing either."

"Hymie shrugged his shoulders slightly. "There you are, Mark. Nothing to it."

Hymie waved an arm and motioned Leroy and Abe out. Before they reached the door he yelled, "When Mark comes here again, take care of him good -- and I don't mean brawling."

The two big jerks gave me a look that could've been called dirty but in front of Hymie they had to clean it up. Both said okay boss and went out.

Watching Hymie very closely I said, "Hymie, this pow-wow didn't clear up anything. I think Abe and Leroy are connected with the Burton case, and I'm not so sure about you." His expression did not change.

"Better watch your mouth, Mark. Maybe that's why you got a fat lip."

I reached over and ground out my cigarette on the ash tray. "Well. Okay. I'll keep my cards close." I pulled myself up and looked down at Hymie Hillman from what felt like a shaky unsteady height. "Can't linger, I got a lady waiting."

"Yeah. Be a pal and don't be a stranger. Come out more often. Always glad to see you."

"Thanks, Hymie, I'll remember that." I said walking out.

The combo was easing through the smooth, dreamy bars of 'Stardust' and the dancers were slowly slithering about the dish-pan floor.

Back at the table Meredith seemed to be doing all right -- she was tight with Victor Gerard. They were close like a couple of monkeys clinging to one another for warmth. They saw me coming and drew back from each other and made out as if they hadn't seen me.

"Let's leave, Angel face," I said softly.

"Not jes' yet, my great big hero," Meredith gushed out and laughed hard thinking it was a cute bit of dialogue. Her head moved in the jerky but slow movements of a lush. "We're staying for the -- for the next -- show, -- aren't we? -- Aren't we Victor?"

"That's right, my dear," The actor assured her and patted the back of her hand with affection. "We're staying right here, Mister -- Mister -- uh -- What'd you shay your name was? Uh?"

"Ivan the Terrible," I snapped, wondering if he may have slipped something into her drink.

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My mind was going around fast and smooth like a new Cadillac whipping up Roosevelt Highway north of Malibu. I thought I was pretty well oiled, but if I'm oiled up Meredith must be saturated.

I reached down and grasped her by an arm and got her up to her feet. I did this fast. She wasn't even surprised. I pushed her over across the dance floor and steered her toward the hat check room to get her wrap. Then she put up a little fuss and for a moment I gave the place a little more color and made like a real cowhand trying to break a frisky filly.

I got Meredith to the hat-check stand and the rhubarb she was putting up caused the attendant to look down her cute nose at me. She stared and I scowled back. I fished out the check and jammed it to her. I got the stole and wrapped it around Meredith and tipped the cow girl with a raspberry.

Just then Victor Gerard staggered up.

He lisped, "Hey you -- Ya can't do thish to me -- to her -- I mean to me and her."

He put a hand on my shoulder and I brushed it off like a fly, giving him a shove and he bounced back against the wall. "Hey, you -- I don't like you," he spouted.

"Buddy," I snorted, "you better save your heroics." I heeled around and took hold of Meredith by an arm and started to pilot her to the door. She tried to push me away but she couldn't and I made her look like a slow-motion toe-dancer, toting her out.

We got to the door and out the side of my eye I saw Victor Gerard coming at me like a good bull in Pamplona. I pushed Meredith to one side fast shifting my weight and did a strong straight-arm like a halfback skirting around end. Gerard got his nose in the way and jumped and crumpled himself onto the carpeted floor.

I wondered what was the matter with him. Because since when does a 140 pounder measure up to a big, fairly solid man? I guess he felt like most Hollywood actors. Invincible in a way. But that he'd be good for one punch with his glass jaw and that a night club single-punch beef was good for publicity -- especially since he hadn't had many roles lately.

Meredith looked, didn't say a thing and was rather receptive when I placed a hand under her arm and escorted her through the door and out into the cool air of the night.

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There was a distant sweet smell of newly cut alfalfa, faint and light as the down on a butterfly's wings and almost as hard to catch. The air felt a bit damp and heavy and I drew up a deep breath that seemed to wash out my lungs and give me a new lease on the evening. I glanced at Meredith and it looked as if the freshness did the same for her.

I opened the car door and got her in and dashed around and slid in behind the wheel. We didn't talk at all and in five minutes we're in the sheltering darkness of the large road-side trees skimming along up Laurel Canyon Drive back to Hollywood.

"Mark," she almost purred.

"Yes, Angel face."

"I'm sorry about the way I behaved. I -- uh, -- I don't know what..."

"Skip it."

All of a sudden I was real happy again. A hard lump like a sugar cube stuck right in the center of my throat and I thought I would never get rid of it. But I did and it traveled down and seemed to take a vagrant's license to loiter where it wanted and found a parking spot in the middle of my chest.

We watched the canyon road roll by. There was a lot to say but it wouldn't come out. We topped the summit at Mulholland and started downgrade. Again there was beauty in the serenity and solitude. Just being with her made it that way. I know there was no harm in thinking this way about her.

Suddenly the sweet strains of 'Clair de Lune' found a niche in my mind and I got to thinking the slow and then turbulent ripping spells of the rhythm were shadows of Meredith.

It was soft; she was soft. It was restless; she was restless. It was moody; she was moody. It was beautiful and she was beautiful too. Only I had noticed at Hymie Hillman's that a certain set hardness crept in every now and then as if she was mad as somebody or something. I thought maybe she had a stinger like a scorpion and could strike like a snake.

My thoughts were broken by headlights that were tailing me too close. I eased up on the throttle and the car behind slowed down too. I picked up speed down the grade, just enough to make the curves without squealing rubber, and the guy following raced his car along.

I couldn't tell what make car it was. I would tend to that when I got to the boulevard. I knew I couldn't get rid of him by scooting up one of the dead end streets off the canyon drive. He was a good wing man. He kept right on our tail. But I kept him right in my rear-view mirror.

I didn't tell Meredith we were being tailed. It wasn't any of her business. At least I didn't think so.

Most of the homes along the canyon were lit up and the lights twinkled in the blindness of the darkness. Glimmers from headlights, street lights and house lights filtered through the trees to cause streaky bits of white to hit inside the car and upon our faces. A ray bounced off Meredith and I thought I saw her wince and fidget slightly. I was about to ask a question but she took the play away from me.

She said something that made me think maybe she was under the weather with a bug fluttering around in her stomach.

"If you're sick I'll rush you home," I said.

"No, not that. There's nothing but turmoil there."

I took a fast glance at her and noticed that her gaze was centered on the road in a sort of fixed look with her eyes glassy. I tried hard to be casual. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She looked as if she was going to pass out. I reached over to her window and rolled it down. The wind shot into the car and a slight odor, like oleander, rushed in. It seemed to revive her. I turned toward her and she returned my look with a piqued smile that told me she was all right.

We got to the bottom of the canyon where the glare of the street lights clashed with the swank neon writings on the shops and night clubs. The brightness almost turned the boulevard into daylight.

I looked in the mirror and Mr. Tail-job was doing a good job of flying number two spot in our formation. He had followed and was keeping about a half block back. I wondered whether I should try ditching him before I reached Schribner's house.

Just then I saw Meredith shiver and I stretched out my arm past her to roll the window up. She guided it back brushing her cheek with the back of my hand. Then she grabbed it and pressed it hard against her cheek. She

said something that sounded like a sigh. I took my hand back and put it where it belonged -- on the wheel.

"Don't take me home."

"The Jimmy Stewart picture is over by now."

"What difference..."

"I promised your boss I'd get you home early."

"It's too early now." she murmured.

I knew what she meant and I let what she said guide me. I wanted to park but thought better of it, especially with a guy tailing us. So I kept on driving and passed up the turnoff to Schribner's hillside place, then the last of the high-brow clip joints. The lights dimmed and seemed to turn off as we dropped over into Beverly Hills.

Out of the distant shadows I could make out the spectral estates and mansions. As we loafed along, my wing man kept pace with us. When we were near the Beverly Hotel, Meredith leaned her head back over along the car seat and sighed tightly but with a spasm of relief.

"I know a place," she whispered. Her voice was strained, taut.

"No more drinking," I cautioned.

"It's not a drinking spot," she protested. There was a challenging overtone in the way she said it.

"No motels either," I said, using my better judgment.

"And it's not a motel," she sputtered.

I just drove for a few moments and she seemed to accept my silence as a defiant challenge. "Let me out," she hissed. "I'll take a cab." She had a glint and blaze in her look that made me think of fire reflecting off a tiger's eyes.

"Put away your guns, Angel face. I'm just trying to protect you."

"Better take care of yourself first."

"Okay, so you don't need protection." It was half comment, half question.

I braked the car to a stop in a quiet neighborhood. I'd had about enough and decided to call her bluff. "Get out," I said.

She opened the door and started to get out. I barely caught a glimpse of her in the dark as she furrowed her brow, relaxed a bit and then sat over on the edge of the seat and clung to the door handle.

"You're a nice bushel of peaches, Angel face, but your temper gets to me."

"I could say the same about you."

She was lost in her mind for a few moments that seemed like hours. Then suddenly she pulled her legs in, set back on the seat and slammed the door shut. She reminded me of a badly fused firecracker that sizzles when it should pop, then explodes with a loud bang when you don't expect it.

"Fine! You win! Take me home," she said.

"Okay."

My wing man was flashing a lighter at a street sign a block behind. I started the car going and headed east. Mr. Tail-job was on the job again. A block later I saw him turn the corner and tag along. I didn't want him to track us all the way to Schribner's house so I came up with a plan and turned south on Highway One.

"Would it be asking too much to ask where you're taking me?" Meredith nestled into the far corner of the seat and turned half-way around so she could see me.

"Go ahead and ask."

"I'm asking -- where?"

"To a show."

"To a show?"

"Yeah, a movie."

"What for? I thought we nixed that idea."

"You'd be surprised."

I drove on as fast as red lights would let me and slowed down when we got to the drive-in theater that I was aiming for. I cornered into the driveway and stopped near a white-smocked attendant. He was a callow-faced kid with a long nose, black curly hair and a chin-full of pimples.

He leaned toward the car and I asked what time the next show started. He said the main feature was about over. I looked back then and saw Mr. Tail-job across the street, double-parked. He looked as if he couldn't make up his mind what to do next. He was in a light-blue Buick with a lot of chrome around it, one of the late models.

I rolled on to the ticket booth and paid for two and smiled at the uniformed brunette when she smiled at me. Then I flicked my dim lights on and took my blind chances easing along in the dark as attendants guided me with their flashlights.

There was a parking slot near the front and I nosed the car in and braked. I reached out and hooked the window speaker on the door. John Wayne was in a wild dash with a bunch of Indians, then the chase was settled and he made torrid love to a pretty blonde who looked familiar.

Meredith moved around a bit trying to get comfortable. She sat straight up on the edge of the seat and stared at the screen. I settled back and looked at her for a long moment. Then I rested an arm on the back of the seat my hand behind her. She eased into my arms, smooth and graceful, like a gentle-moving swan on a mirrored pond.

My arms went around her and the scent of her perfume lingered with me. Her head came close to my face and her hair felt like folds of satin on my cheek. I let a hand wander about and I fooled around with the lacy inside edge of her low-cut gown -- only I wasn't fooling.

Her lips found mine and I kissed her hard. Her lips parted and she speared me with a hot lance that sent quivering tremors through my body like a hot knife ripping me to shreds. She pushed hard into me and breathed in short and fast gasps.

"Hold me tight, you brute," she said hoarsely.

I felt her shake in a jerky spasm and her trembling started me shaking. Her eyelids flickered faintly, and then stopped and closed. Her arms tightened around me.

"I want you, darling," she said softly.

I drew back from her. She opened her large round eyes. She looked more beautiful than a rose at sunrise and was making every word count.

"Take me someplace private." She raised her head and kissed me again. It was a long, lingering kiss, the kind that lifts you up and knocks you down, takes your breath away and leaves you all worn out.