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a cigarette, lit it and lit one for himself. "I've been thinking while you were upstairs, Susan. I do seem to remember this Steve Connors of yours. Believe I heard some nice comments about his work around the studio. I'll keep an eye on him."

Susan's shoulders moved uneasily. She hated to use people. Steve had insisted, however, that it was the only way he could get a break ... that, when you were getting started, who you knew was more important than what you did. "That's nice of you, Gabriel. After all, you hardly know me."

He smiled. "I think I know you very well ... certain things about you, that is. I make no claim to being able to understand women. Do you think your Steve would mind if I tried understanding you better?"

Susan knew he wouldn't since Steve had told her how useful Gabriel Wells could be. But she didn't tell Gabriel that. She only shrugged, feeling guilty. "Steve expects to be very busy ... making more contacts, I expect. I don't intend to spend my days and evenings brooding in a hotel room."

"The races Saturday then?"

"They should be fun."

They were. Being anywhere with Gabriel Wells was fun, she discovered. Hot as exciting as being with Steve, of course. Steve took her to Ciro's and the Mocambo and Larue's and the Ambassador. They danced beautifully together, and he was enthusiastic about the impression they made. Gabriel Wells took her to entirely different places ... to the midget auto-races, where they were splashed with dirt the cars threw up going around turns, and concerts at the Philharmonic. They spent an evening wandering around Olvera Street, buying perfumed candles and eating tamales. They rode the chute-the-chutes with Bonnie at Ocean Park and watched the fishermen unload their boats at Balboa. And they talked a lot ... about Susan's Connecticut lakes and hills, which he knew, and his somewhat arduous struggle up the line before he achieved success as a producer. He talked about Bonnie and wanted to know why Susan didn't join in the chorus of instruction he constantly received. Susan told him what her grandmother

had told her mother ... that all a child needs to get properly started is plenty of love and affection. Susan was liking California.

It was on an unprecedented rainy afternoon that Steve exploded his bombshell. Susan had just come in from checking the studios for a set-decorating job ... feeling that if the waiting were going to last much longer, she should be doing something constructive with her days. The telephone call from the lobby was jubilant. She hurried downstairs. Steve grabbed her, pulled her into a booth in the coffee shop and kissed her exuberantly. "Congratulate me, honey! It's happened!"

"What has?"

"A new contract. Five years on an ascending scale. Which shows what comes of knowing the right people."

Susan blinked. "Steve, how wonderful!"

"Isn't it, though?" He was beaming. He pressed her fingers. "I owe a lot of it to you."

She shrugged happily. "Does it matter? It's what we've both been waiting for, isn't it?"

"Well ... uh ... not exactly." His face lost some of its ebullience. His shoulders moved rather uneasily. "The contract has a clause."

"They have all sorts of clauses, don't they?"

"This is a very particular clause as far as we're concerned. It says that I don't get married for its duration."

"Oh, Steve!"

His explanation was hurried. "They want to give my exploitation a special type of publicity and use me in young love stuff. I couldn't argue too much about it. After all, the contract is far better than I ever expected."

Susan had to fight to keep her eyes from overflowing. "But ... but what about us?"

He smiled. "I've got that all figured out also. Give me a year. After they've given me a big build-up, I'll be too much of an investment for them to toss overboard. We'll just hop to Las Vegas and tell them about it later."

"Oh, this is awful!" Susan stood up. "I don't want to wait another year. It's bad enough now. You should see the last letter I got from mother. It's full of 'I told you so' remarks ... said all my friends are talking."

"But Susan—"

"I won't do it! It's ridiculous. They just can't do this to us!"

Gabriel telephoned about eight. "Your message said it was very important. Anything wrong?"

"Everything!" Susan's eyes were dark. "Just how much did you have to do with getting Steve that contract?"

"A little. I've checked his work. I think he has what it takes. I suppose you're both rather pleased about it."

Susan's teeth gritted. "I'm delighted. You knew, of course, about the clause in the contract which prohibits him from getting married for five years."

There was a moment's silence at the other end of the wire. Then he said, "That front office is always cooking up something." There was a pause. "Susan, are you really in love with Steve?"

"Why do you think I came out here?"

His voice sounded queer. "Well ... I'll see what I can do."

What he could do, evidently, was all that was necessary. Steve bounced in two days later with the news. The studio had cancelled the clause. He was free. Not only that, but they were financing the chartering of a plane to Las Vegas for them that weekend ... were going to give the marriage a publicity build-up. Everything was turning out perfectly. Susan had three days until the wedding. Could she get ready?

Susan could. But there was shopping to do. And thinking. Particularly the night before they were to leave. Steve had left her alone to get ready. Susan felt a deep sense of satisfaction at the thought of her mother ... at the words her mother would have to swallow. Her friends would be envious.

Steve would be a star soon. Everything had turned out so perfectly. Wouldn't it have been awful if she'd just turned around and gone home when Steve hadn't met her at the station? She wondered if she'd have called him without the encouraging influence of the gray-eyed man she'd met on the bench.

Susan wished suddenly that she could stop thinking about the gray-eyed man. It was strangely disturbing. She hadn't heard from Gabriel since the telephone call that night when she'd told him about the clause in Steve's con-

tract. She missed hearing from him ... missed it terribly. He wasn't like Steve, of course. But in a different way, he had sort of become a part of her. She swallowed, feeling empty. Being married would mean an end to their being together. Susan opened her suitcases and placed them on the bed. She started putting dresses in. No, it wasn't the way she felt about Steve. It was very different.

She looked out through the window. The night, with its star-clustered sky and softly waving palm trees, was very quiet. She felt all queer inside ... queer and worried. She should have heard from Gabriel. It wasn't like him not to have called. He might be sick or have had an accident. Ordinary courtesy required that she find out.

Emily answered the telephone. Bonnie had been sick. Gabriel was upstairs with the doctor now. Should she call him? Susan said, "No, thank you," and hung up. She put in two nightgowns and a slip. Poor little Bonnie, sick, with no one to love or cuddle her but a very worried father. Susan looked at her clothes and her suitcases. She was almost ready. The plane wasn't scheduled to leave until noon. She could easily finish packing in the morning.

The taxi deposited her in front of Gabriel's house. She strolled up the graveled walk quietly. Emily answered the door. Emily looked surprised to see her. She said, "I thought you were the nurse."

Susan stepped inside quickly. "How is Bonnie?"

"I told you on the telephone. She—"

"Is Mr. Wells still upstairs?"

Emily nodded. "The doctor just left."

"I'll go up." Susan walked past her and climbed the steps. She stepped into the dimly-lighted nursery. Gabriel, who had been bending over the little girl sleeping in the bed, looked around. His eyelids opened wide.

Susan put a finger on her lips and tiptoed over to look at the flushed tousled little head on the pillow. She took Gabriel's hand and led him outside. "How is she?"

"Much better, the doctor says. But where did you come from? I thought you'd be getting ready—"

"I called. Emily told me Bonnie was sick. I had to come over and see whether I could help."

He took her hand and pressed it. "Thanks, Susan. I-I'm terribly glad you're here. I've really been worried."

She resisted the impulse to smooth his disordered hair. "When did she first feel badly?"

"Tuesday. Didn't know what it was, of course. Thought—" He stopped short, staring at her. "This is awful!"

"What is?"

"Your being here!"

Susan pouted slightly. "But you just said—"

"I don't mean I don't want you. But you're supposed to fly to Las Vegas to get married tomorrow. You can't now."

"Why not?"

"We're quarantined. Bonnie has scarlet fever. It may be two weeks before it's lifted." He looked around. "Where's Emily? I can't understand why she didn't tell you."

Susan smiled. "She did."

His eyes blinked. Then they focused on her. He frowned. "What did you say?"

"I said she told me. It didn't bother me."

"But what about your marriage to Steve?"

Susan shrugged. "I thought about that too ... a lot. It's really not as important to get married to show your mother she's wrong as it is to be with the man you love when he needs you, is it? Even if he doesn't love you."

He looked at her. All the strain seemed to have gone out of his eyes. "Susan, that clause in the first contract we gave Steve was no accident."

She stared at him. "Oh, you—you awful person! How could you stoop so low?" He shrugged. "It was a silly thing to do. I didn't think you really loved Steve. And I was in love with you ... if that excuses anything."

"Stoop a little lower, please."

He did.

After a moment, Susan drew away, a little breathless. She was afraid her mother would approve of Gabriel, but she didn't care. She loved him anyhow.

THE END

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