

Jeri tells Carol Ann she plans to leave the women's hotel

Upstairs in the room I shared with Carol Ann, I finished my letter with a promise to write again soon, providing Lex wrote me back. Then I stuck the envelope in my purse beside my note to the *Los Angeles Times*' Classifieds. This was my third attempt to reach my family, the Coopers. According to what my mother always said, the Coopers had been victims of the Dust Bowl and migrated to the San Fernando Valley in the early thirties. By the time I was ten, all of them had passed away or disappeared. This latest notice repeated what my last two said.

Family member looking for the Ohio/Kansas Coopers. Please contact Jeri Rose, c/o the Bayridge House. Hollywood, CA

"I used to feed my dog better back home," Carol Ann announced, bursting into our room after lunch. After tossing her magazine on her bed, she flopped down on her stomach. "You going with me to that audition tomorrow? They're casting for another big musical starring Claudette Colbert."

"Not me. I can't sing or dance, remember?"

"They won't notice with those gams and the way you fill out a chemise."

"Frankly, I don't understand how you keep it up. Spending every day down at Central Casting, always hearing the word *no*. Don't you ever get discouraged?"

Carol Ann groaned. "Don't tell me this is another heart-to-heart on life in Hollywood. Cause I got better things to do."

"Guess I should level with you. I'm leaving."

Carol Ann sat up. "Leaving? You only been here two months. Why throw in the towel so fast? Especially with your looks."

"I've been here over three months. And I need a real job."

"Don't we all. What're you gonna do, sell encyclopedias?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll do bookkeeping or teach school."

"Pull my other leg," Carol Ann said, tossing down her new magazine.

"It's the truth."

"You ringin' a school bell? I don't see it. Besides, the pay stinks."

"At least it would be steady. My husband's bills won't go away just because I land an occasional walk on. Beside, my being an actress was his idea, not mine."

"I ain't puttin' you down, honey. Some days ... well, I ain't the youngest gal here. But, aw shucks, Jeri, just when I decided you're okay, you're leavin'. I hate breakin' in a new roomie."

I smiled. "I'll miss you, too."

"Gosh, but I don't see you bein' a desk jockey or stuck in a classroom with a bunch of grimy kids. Me, I hated school. Just the thought of it makes me sick. If I left here I know what I'd do. And it wouldn't have nothin' to do with a bunch of snot-nosed brats. I'd go straight down to one of them places that caters to fine gents. Then I'd close my eyes and count the patterns in the wallpaper and collect a whole lotta greenbacks."

"You're joking."

"Hey, it's all acting, ain't it? I've done my time on casting couches here in sunny Hollywood. And I never got more than a few bits for my troubles. So what's the big deal? I know a few spiffy places right around here that wouldn't be half-bad."

"Really?"

"Ever heard of Mrs. Small's? A guy told me she's got a place right off Sunset. Then

there's a place out in the valley. The Rainbow. If things got rough, that's where I'd go. I met the lady that runs the joint. I was waitin' tables at a swanky private party at The Ambassador. And she asked me for a highball. So we got to talkin'. You'd never know she ran one of them places. She was just a regular person, only prettier. She looked like she stepped right off the cover of some fancy fashion magazine. Glamorous but lady-like. Of course my old mama would drop dead with heart failure if she knew I worked in a place like that. But I wouldn't exactly write home with the news. And at least I'd be able to send her and Pop a few bucks regularly."

"Seems like anything would be easier than breaking into pictures," I said.

"But you've hardly given the business a chance," Carol Ann said.

"I can't afford to."

"Just come with me tomorrow. Please. We can have lunch after. I know a real nice beanery nearby. Just think of it as a great adventure."

"You should be in sales. Okay but this is my last try."

END SCENE

Lupe barges into Franky's house. Franky hides Jeri; Lupe interrogates Franky.

Franky felt relieved. Somehow, Jeri had eluded Lupe. Now he settled back on the living room sofa and calmly lit a cigarette. "We're separated. I can see anyone I like."

Lupe's eyes narrowed as she crossed from behind the bar and stood over Franky. "You think I do not hear thee gossip? Thee way you have been fucking thee blonde woman with thee cow bosoms. Well, you better think again, because my father can make you very sorry. So you better listen to me good."

"I'm all ears," he said, wondering where Jeri could have escaped to.

"Send thee little *puta* home now and tell her she is finished."

"I have no idea who you're talking about."

"You must think I am thee idiot."

"Have I ever said that?"

"If she is not here, why do you have two wine glasses?"

Franky sent her his most condescending smile. "I used two glasses for two different wines."

"I am *sooo* impressed." Lupe rolled her eyes, then withdrew her gold cigarette case from her rhinestone bag and waited for him to light her cigarette. When he ignored her, she went back to the bar, poured herself a fresh drink, and studied him.

It wasn't fair, Lupe thought. She had to fret over every crease on her face. Franky didn't. He had aged, too. But it only made him more desirable. In fact, he was more handsome now than when they'd met twelve years ago. He still had a magnetism which drove women wild. His soft blond hair was still thick and shiny. Even his startling blue eyes didn't betray his passion for booze. And his physique made women stop and stare. Even in his cowboy clothes, clothes she'd often ridiculed, he exuded a breathtaking appeal. Deep down, she actually preferred him unshaven and rough. Still, she was glad she'd dressed for the evening in furs and a new satin gown that clung to her hips, belly, and thighs.

"Tell me thee truth. You no love this girl?" Lupe said, sure that the conniving starlet hiding in the closet or in one of the bathtubs couldn't please him in bed the way she could.

"What's your interest?" Franky asked.

"You are still Lupe's husband, no?"

"You might remember that when you're meeting Boyd Anderson in a public gin joint or one of those grubby bungalow colonies you're so fond of."

"As usual, you are not aware of thee latest news. But since your career is so pathetic, I tell you thee news myself. I no see Boyd no more. We are over with."

"What a pity. Did he slap you around like the last bum?"

She pretended to yawn. "That one, he drink too much. And I find out he is already married. He never bother to get thee divorce from his Ohio woman. I hear he is one of those hobo people now. A very sad story, really."

"Well, you still have your career. You're still a star."

Taking her drink and cigarette, Lupe moved back beside him on the sofa. Her voice became softer, more intimate. "This is very true. But little Lupe still gets lonely."

"Why? Is your father out of town?"

Lupe sighed loudly. "Why you make up such ugly stories? My father is ... *mi padre, mi amigo.*"

"Except when he's climbing into bed with you."

"I would prefer to discuss other things," she said, as her hand abruptly crept over his, and

her red tipped nails began to gently stroke the back of his hand.

“How is your career? I understand Lupe Valez is doing quite well,” he said, withdrawing his hand. “And Delores Del Rio, too.”

Lupe exploded off the sofa, her dark eyes wild. “Lupe Valez? Delores Del Rio? I spit on them. They are nothing. Always they throw these fat whores up to me. But they are second-rate. I will drown them with my fame and beauty.” Breathing hard from her outburst, Lupe reached for her purse and pulled out a lace handkerchief. After wiping her eyes and nose, she grabbed Franky’s wine glass and chugged it.

“What about your new picture?” Franky asked.

Looking dejected, she dropped down beside him. “Thee newspapers hate Lupe. Already they say thee new picture stink. Even when thee fans who love me have not seen it.”

“The press can be hard on anyone’s career.” He knew all about that, not that she’d ever shown him a whiff of sympathy.

“I want you to get rid of your other woman,” she said.

“There is no other woman.”

“Make her go away, and I will make you very happy.” Taking his hand, she placed it on her small breast. “You are still very attractive to Lupe. And we are still married, no?”

“I told you, there’s no one here.”

“I no believe you,” she murmured, stroking his chest, then kissing his face. First his chin, then his cheek, at last his lips. “I always like you better when you are rough with Lupe. It make me want you *very* much.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Lupe crushed her mouth to his, while her hand roamed over his jeans until it rested over his crotch where she began to undo the buttons. “I make everything better for you. Your career will get bigger, harder, stronger until you are thee powerful star again, like before. We will be very happy.” Her hand roamed inside his jeans, while her tongue probed his mouth. Lifting her dress up, she placed his hand between her legs. “Is ready for you, Mister Wyatt. Is always ready for you.”

As usual, her ministrations worked. Desire erupted between his legs. Every fiber of him screamed to throw her across the sofa and take her. But that was exactly what she wanted. And she’d rubbed Boyd Anderson and all the others in his face once too often. Shutting his eyes, he pushed her off him.

Still breathing hard, he said, “Let’s try to retain some dignity, shall we?”

I heard the slap all the way down the hall behind the thick wood door in the bathroom without my water glass. My pulse felt as if it would fly through the roof beams.

Then I heard something smash and Lupe scream, “I kill you for this! You are finished. You are dirt. You will never see your daughter again. Never. And you will never work again in Hollywood. Not even when your dick shrivels up to thee size of Lupe’s toe!”

I heard running and then a distant door slam. I hoped it meant Lupe Cardona had left.

END SCENE

Casper Bianco tries to seduce Jeri in his office. Lupe barges in; Jeri drives her home.

“Jeri Devlin’s waiting to see you, Mr. Bianco,” the secretary announced over an intercom, a bored expression on her aging, powdered face.

A moment later, the door labeled *Casper Bianco, Publicity*, opened and Mr. Bianco emerged. Under five feet, in spite of his shoe lifts, he had a thick nose, a bushy mustache, and a hairstyle meant to cover an expanding bald spot. Lorena’s description of the former Rainbow client was accurate down to his expensive dark flannel suit and bay rum aftershave.

“Come in, come in,” Bianco said, sweeping me inside with his hand, and shutting the door tight. Biting on his cigar, Bianco settled on the edge of his large brown desk and stripped me bare with his small eyes starting with my broad hat and narrow dress to my slender ankles. “How about a good look,” he said, gesturing with his cigar for me to turn around.

I gave him the full treatment, moving slowly, so his puffy dark eyes could feast on every curve.

“Have a seat,” he said, pointing to a low chair beneath him. Dropping down, I let my skirt ride up just enough to keep his interest.

“So, tell me about yourself. How’d you meet Lorena?” His gaze settled on the front of my navy dress with its white collar and modest neckline, which only hinted at my cleavage.

“She’s my cousin.”

“Really. You in the same line?”

“I’m an actress.”

“Done anything to prove it? I mean, besides the eighth grade play back home.”

Here came some real acting. “I was an extra on Broadway. I had a walk on in *King Kong*. But I’m currently between jobs.” I used my most educated voice, which didn’t impress him. To be fair, there were millions of college graduates who regularly ate out of garbage cans.

His hand moved to my knee. “How anxious are you to break into pictures?”

It occurred to me that he might simply pull down his pants or open his fly. This had never happened to me – so far. Mostly, the sleazy producers I’d met just suggested what they wanted. But I’d heard stories. Even waiting tables would beat having Casper Bianco’s dick in my mouth. “I’m anxious to get work but I’m not starving,” I said, removing his stumpy fingers.

“Too bad. Sometimes a hungry girl has an open mind.” His sweaty hand returned to my knee. “I can help you, honey. Make sure your name gets around with producers, directors. I’ll see you get a small speaking part in our next picture. Would ya like that?”

His hand had inched up my thigh. “Sounds wonderful,” I said, smiling, wondering how he’d react if I hit him with my purse.

Rising, he stuck his head out the door and said. “No calls, Doris.” After shutting his door, he dropped onto an old leather sofa and patted the space beside him. “Come sit by me, sweetheart.”

“It’s Mrs. Rose. And this chair’s just fine.”

He raised a curious brow as if this was just the first round and he had bigger ammunition to come. “First, I’ll need some consideration from you, Mrs. Rose. Understand?”

I didn’t need an Oscar to fall on me. I grimly thought of the expense of getting here. New stockings, fresh heels on my shoes, and trolley fare. Not to mention those sanitarium bills waiting to be paid. I pictured myself emerging empty handed into the glaring sunlight. And Nicky Desanto waiting for me.

“So how about drinks tonight?” he asked, leaning forward and putting his hand up my skirt all the way to my panties. I was an inch from walloping him in the jaw, when a woman’s shrill voice from the outer office broke the spell.

“When I get my hands on that ugly midget, he going to be sorry he was born!”

Lupe Cardona. I’d recognize her voice in my sleep

Bianco cursed softly, shot to his feet, straightened his tie, and quickly said, “Look, Mrs. Rose, it’s no good right now. But I know a swell little place. Great drinks. Good steaks. We could meet there tonight. Have a bite. Discuss your career potential. Pickup where we left off.”

The shrill voice outside the door reached a crescendo. “I going to murder him!”

“I can’t. My husband and kid expect me for dinner.”

Bianco’s expression turned to ice. “Look, honey, I’m a busy man —”

“With a wife named Annabel, three children, and a big house in Beverly Hills.”

Bianco’s eyes widened. “You ... know?”

“Please Mr. Bianco. I can answer phones, type, anything. Anything that we won’t have to be ashamed of.”

“But I already have a secretary and —”

“Think Mr. Bianco. A secretary, an usher in the theater, a script girl.”

“This isn’t Central Casting. And there are hungrier girls. Girls willing to —”

“A job Mr. Bianco. A prop girl, a receptionist, a stand in ...”

The door exploded open, slamming me in the back. I gasped and fell forward out of the way.

Lupe Cardona charged in. “You disgusting little worm!” she shrieked. “You fat little nobody. Three times I call. Three times thee puta out front tell me you no can come to thee telephone. And all thee time you are in here fucking thee starlet. I have you fired for this. I have your pathetic little penis stuffed and hung on thee Christmas tree.”

“Lupe, darling, please hear me out. I just got back this very minute and —”

“You think I am stupid? You think you can lie to Lupe and she no understand?”

“Please, Lupe. Tell me what I can do. Anything ...”

Lupe loomed over Mr. Bianco, all four feet eight inches of her. Dressed in a brown silk dress, her hair scraped back into a bun, six pounds of make-up, and a dozen dead foxes hanging around her shoulders, she clutched her snake-skin pocketbook as if she meant to strike Bianco with it. “My maid, that whore-faced puta, is fucking thee chauffeur. So tell me, Mister Pig, who is going to drive me to thee gala tonight? You?”

“Well, *I* would but my wife —”

“You better come up with thee answer now, you ugly little fat man. Because I angry enough to have your little thing stapled to thee door.”

Bianco’s eyes widened. “But Lupe, honey ...”

Thumping her purse against his chest, she moved nose-to-nose with the little man. “My father owns this studio, you disgusting boil. Do you forget? And now, today, *I*, Lupe Cardona, thee Guadalajara Spitfire, have been forced to drive here alone.”

“My God, Lupe, I had no idea —”

“I am fed up with this *sheet*.”

Bianco plastered a sickening simper on his sweaty face and spoke calmly, softly. “Now, Lupe, you know I’ll find you someone.”

“Don’t *Lupe* me. I want a man. And I want him *now*.”

“Haven’t you got a friend? What about your husband? Or that nice boyfriend Boyd —”

“How dare you mention this disgusting name to me. My father is going to hear about this. Now, get me a *man*!”

Sweating profusely, Bianco’s hand shook as he picked up his phone and mumbled into

the receiver. “Lupe, darling, please have a seat and I promise —”
“No more of your stupid promises. I want action.”

END SCENE

Jeri and Clark the Butler discuss life and Lupe

By four that afternoon, Lupe had withdrawn to her room for a nap. Needing to be alone, I hid in

the butler's pantry under the guise of filling out invitations for Lupe's next bridge luncheon. In the privacy of the room, tears finally broke through my self-control and streamed down my cheeks. Unfortunately, Clark, the butler, a tall handsome young man, chose that moment to bolt through the kitchen door wielding silver candelabra. Seeing my tears, he tactfully averted his gaze and knelt by a cabinet. Using a crumpled hankie, I quickly dried my eyes and nose.

"Now, where did I put that silver polish?" Clark said aloud, whistling, digging through the lower cupboard. "There you are." He pulled out a jar and chose the seat down the table from me and began rubbing the polish on. "You're new here, aren't you?" he asked, keeping his eyes on his job.

I cleared my throat. "Yes I ... I'm Jeri Rose."

He extended a large hand. "Clarence Berns. Clark to my friends. Nice to meet you."

We shook hands then both returned to our chores.

"She gave you a hard time, huh?" he abruptly said.

"You heard?"

"Everyone did, honey. Look, she acts mean because she's not very bright. She probably has no idea how she sounds. Or what she's saying."

"I don't usually cry, but ... " There was too much to explain. My whole life felt like a disaster.

"Honey, we've all been at the receiving end of that Guadalajara tongue. She put the curl in my hair and a permanent frown line between my brows." After grabbing another rag off the pile of freshly laundered rags, he continued rubbing the silver.

"How'd you get started here?" I asked, glad to find a friend in the house.

"You could say my theatrical career got sidetracked by The Crash. Not that I was a headliner yet. But back in New York, I did vaudeville, burlesque, night clubs. Then *kaboom*. The stock market took a dive and the work dried up so I headed here. Have you met Papa Bear, yet?"

"Who?"

"Caesar Cardona. The big man himself."

"Haven't had the pleasure," I lied, recalling that night at the Coconut Grove with Franky.

"You're lucky. At first I thought, Holy Mother, he's guessed I'm no football player. I even waited for the axe to fall. But nothing happened until he dropped by one day and said in a deep, accented voice, "Young man, I do not like thee way your butterballs are coming out."

I laughed out loud over Clark's imitation.

"I mean, there are fifteen servants slaving here and that doesn't include the fruit pickers that come to harvest the grapefruit, yet he's always wandering into the pantry to complain about the cocktail nuts or flower arrangements. Anyway, he makes Lupe seem like a saint. So beware."

"Thanks for the warning. And for cheering me up."

"Another afternoon of tea," he said, frowning at the pile of stationery, lists, and stamps before me.

"Monday. And a bridge luncheon the following Thursday. I just hope I get Sunday off."

"Don't count on it. She manages to create a catastrophe just about every weekend which holds everyone up."

"But I have plans."

"Ever heard of the Depression? She can do whatever she wants."

"But I'm supposed to meet my friend. When will I have a chance to call her?"

He glanced out the door. "Once Lupe goes out, things are pretty quiet around here."

"Sneak a telephone call?"

“An emergency is an emergency. And the next time she starts yelling, think of something pleasant, like the rotten state of her career,” he said. “And that handsome cowboy who’s about to divorce her.”

I opened my mouth to dig deeper into the household gossip when Juanita rushed in and handed me a letter. “This is for you. And thee Señora, she wants you upstairs.”

END SCENE

Jeri visits Lex at the sanitarium

With no choice, I dropped back into the large comfortable chair. I’d just pulled out my compact to check my hair and lipstick when a voice startled me. “Jeri?”

My heart lurched. I bolted to my feet and turned. “Lex?”

As if in a dream, I saw him standing a few feet away, tall and dark haired, if thinner than before. Even his bulky sweater and baggy grey slacks couldn't hide his weight loss. And he was paler than baby powder. But he still had a look nobody else ever would. My eyes filled up, and I groped through my purse for a hankie.

“Darling, how are you?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious. I longed to grab him and hang on but wasn't sure I should. Was he still contagious? Or had that passed? Would he want me to hug him?

Now I noticed a nurse standing in the background smiling, hanging onto a coat.

“Good to see you,” he said, as his beautiful blue eyes swept over me, approval in them. Then I was in his arms as we clutched each other.

He abruptly pulled away and sent me a wicked smile. “Better stop this right now. I may be ill, but I'm not dead. Besides, they're very snippy about affection here. How about a nice walk?”

The nurse stepped forward and helped him into his jacket. Then he reached for my gloved hand.

His hands felt warm and alive and he smelled of a tangy cologne he always wore. Side by side, we headed out into the chilly afternoon. Without a word we followed a narrow path through the fragrant pines toward the lake. The air was pristine and the autumn temperatures hovered in the high forties. Above the pines, the sun was strong with a sprinkling of glossy clouds.

“Is this okay for you?” I asked, as we hiked up a gentle hill.

Instead of an answer, he grinned at me, and his fingers squeezed mine. He felt both familiar and strange. I heard birds and the crunch of our feet over the moist earth and pine needles as we ascended a small hill and ended up on the same tiny bluff where Harris and I had ventured that first day here, months ago, when we'd brought Lex to Mrs. Jankel's Cure Cottage.

“So, how do I look?” he asked, tossing a stone into the lake.

“Fine. You look fine.”

“You don't look too bad yourself,” he said, grabbing me by the arms and pushing me up against a tree before burying his lips in my neck. “God you're still the sexiest woman alive. I thought I was dreaming when I came downstairs and saw you.”

“Is this okay? I mean, are you well enough to have visitors?”

“I won't kiss you on the lips again, I promise.”

I froze. “Darling, are you still contagious?”

He pulled back and gazed into her face. “Not for now. But I can't stay out too long anyway.” In his eyes, understanding blended with sadness. “It'll be rest time soon. Wanna take a rest with me?” he joked, winking.

I laughed, relieved. Linking arms, we strode back to the cottage. “You haven't changed a bit.” I teased.

“Have you met someone else out there?”

My foot faltered and I briefly stumbled. I felt my face flush. “No, I ... I didn't mean to surprise you like this. But I needed to see you.”

He briefly gazed into my face. And though I averted my eyes, I knew he'd seen the answer in the blush of my skin. Lex was bright, intuitive. And now, thanks to my bumbling evasions, he knew the truth. He knew I'd met someone else.

“Sorry, for not writing more,” he said. “Guess I've never been good about writing letters. It's not like I don't think about you. I think about you every time I breathe. At night in bed, I

even plan what I'll say to you when I write. How I'll word everything. But in the morning, I can't write. Half of me wants to tell you to get lost, to find someone else. And the other half of me ... wants to beg you to wait forever."

Heaven, help me, I'd betrayed him. And yet, he'd pushed me away with his silence. Or were these my justifications for being with Franky?

He abruptly paused to gaze into the distance toward a small meadow. "Look, there's no use in mincing words. I'm not going to make it. It's not a death wish or anything. I even follow most of their idiotic rules. But I'm not gaining weight. I still have fevers. And every time they give me a few lousy privileges, I end up sick again, back on complete bed rest. I don't want to write you about the food, the deaths, or the bloody coughs. But I hold my breath every day hoping for a letter. I want to hear everything about your life."

Tears flowed down my cheeks. "Thank you. Thank you for saying that. I wish ... I wish you'd written me these things." *And maybe I wouldn't have been so lonely. Or fallen for Franky Wyatt.*

"You shouldn't love me," he finally said. His face was calm when he said it.

"You don't mean that."

"Better head back now. It's almost nap time." Shoving his hands in his pockets, he set off down the path toward the cottage. Clouds had drifted across the sky, shutting out the sun, turning the afternoon gray.

"Are you tired?" I asked, as we approached the house.

He paused and waited for me to catch up. "Don't linger here, darling. Turn around and go back to California. Go back tonight or take the first train out in the morning. I won't be around much longer. At night, I cough. They're going to collapse my lung again, but the doctors aren't optimistic."

"Oh, Lex," I said, wishing I didn't feel so emotional. Wiping my eyes with a handkerchief, I blew my nose and managed to calm down.

"Be realistic, Jeri. You have to go on without me. Make the best of it. I just hope that whoever you fall for deserves you. That he loves you as much as I do."

I understood what he faced. The current cures. Rich foods, bizarre procedures to collapse his lungs, constant bed rest in the cold. I also knew that he probably wouldn't survive. Some night, he would call out. He would bang his cup. Foamy blood would bubble up in his throat and they would take him away.

"Tell me about California," he abruptly said, as we climbed the outside staircase to the front door. He sounded as if we'd dropped by some chic bar in the city and were chatting over Manhattans.

My guard went up. The details of my life seemed too sordid. *I was living at a brothel, while dating a married man, but now I'm a domestic for my lover's wife.* "It's okay, I guess."

"I meant, how are you making out with money?"

I didn't want to talk about money. I didn't want to whine about my problems. Or worry him. I wanted to talk about us. In a minute or two, he would slip inside and disappear. "I'm okay. I have a job working for an actress as her assistant. She's in a sanitarium in Arizona right now for emotional reasons."

"Which actress?"

"Lupe Cardona."

His eyes widened. "The Mexican Fireplug?" he said, screwing up his face.

I laughed. "The Guadalajara Spitfire for your information."

“If ever an actress had a knack for overacting and ruining a picture, it’s Lupe Cardona. You should’ve written me about that. At least it’s an interesting detail, unlike my health, or those endless sad stories about people dying in the gutters from starvation or typhus. Now come inside and tell me every nasty detail you can remember about little Lupe and her father, Caesar Cardona, king of the low budget picture.”

Inside, a plump blue-eyed blonde nurse in bright lipstick, flashed Lex a shy smile and said, “See you later for your bath.”

Janice, a beautiful, dark-haired patient, wearing a flannel robe, waylaid us in the hallway and said, “We on for a game later, honey?”

“Sure,” Lex said, before introducing us.

“We think your husband’s swell,” Janice said. “Best gin player I ever met. See ya later, handsome,” she purred, as if she had more in mind than counting cards.

I’d heard the rumors about sanitariums. Sex filled a void. It gave patients a sense of life. To the nurses and lonely female patients, Lex would seem as dashing and handsome as Clark Gable or Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. And thanks to my relationship with Franky, I had no right to complain. But I still had to take several deep breaths to avoid making a shrewish comment about his friendships here at Mrs. Jankel’s.

When we reached his room, I asked if I could sit with him while he napped. “I brought a good book to read, and I won’t make any noise. I promise.”

“It’s against the rules.”

“Well, then I could use a nap myself,” I said.

“I wish that were possible. But that’s against rules, too.” He stood in front of his room, barring my way. “Actually, there’s not much to do or see here, Jeri.”

He was urging me to leave. A physical pain surged through me for all the things still unsaid. “You look good, darling,” I said.

“You too.” He gazed into my face as if he wanted to memorize every bone. Bending down, he kissed me softly on the cheek. He still looked like the old Lex, that handsome Lothario who’d changed me forever. Now, as the clouds outside Lex’s window darkened, he took my hand and squeezed it. “Have a safe trip back, darling,” he said slipping a folded piece of paper into my hand

I wanted to say I still loved him. That I would always love him. Instead I said, “Promise me one thing. Promise me you’ll fight hard to get well.”

END SCENE

Jeri joins Lupe for tea at Casa Cardona

The sun was still high when I mounted those familiar grand stairs to Casa Cardona. I regretted wearing my reliable old brown dress from two seasons ago.

Clark answered the door. After bowing slightly, he glanced around furtively, then

whispered, "Sorry about being so rough that day. The big cheese made me do it."

Clark immediately resumed his bland butler's expression as he led me to the grand living room. But just before he opened the double doors to announce me, he paused. "I forgot. Some nasty hood came looking for you. I told him you'd left."

Nicky Desanto. Thank heavens he was back east now, providing Lex's information had been correct. "Thanks."

With a nod, Clark knocked twice, opened the living room doors, said my name, then silently backed out, shutting the doors behind him.

In the center of the room on the white sofa with a leopard skin rug draped behind her, Lupe reclined in pink silk lounging pajamas. Her feet, in pink ballet slippers, were tucked beneath her, and a white cashmere blanket rested on her lap. A fire burned brightly. Rita, her maid, busily set out an elaborate tea service on the coffee table. I suddenly wondered if Lupe expected company and was daft enough to believe I'd help serve.

Instead, Lupe rose slowly and extended her hand. "It was very good of you to come. Please have thee seat."

Apparently, the elaborate tea service with sandwiches, scones, and pastries *was* meant for me. Too bad I couldn't see the point in dragging out the scene. "Look Lupe, there's nothing you can say or do about Franky that will —"

"Tea?" Lupe interrupted, as she tipped the silver pot toward a small china cup and saucer.

"Sure, fine, whatever," I said, resigned to the charade, though I knew Lupe was about to drop a bomb on my head, some deadly item meant to rip Franky and me apart.

I reluctantly settled onto a tall, elegant chair opposite her. Trying to remain calm, I mentally ran down my list of unfinished chores which needed attention before my train left Wednesday. Like getting a final permanent wave. And forwarding my mail to the Grand Biarritz in New York.

"Please help yourself to thee food," Lupe said, gesturing toward the feast I would've enjoyed under different circumstances. I grudgingly accepted a crust-less sandwich wedge and tea before Lupe got to the point.

"Look, Jeri, I no intend to fight you," she said. "And I no beg you or Franky to come back to me. I only wish to explain my side of thee story. You must believe, I no want you to hate me. You been like thee big sister to me. So for me it is only right to warn you about thee mistake you make with Franky. He is not thee man you believe he is. And this I must assure you —"

"Wait just a second —"

"Please." Lupe held up her tiny hand to silence me. "I no take long for this. Maybe you will listen and understand that I tell thee truth. Yes, you can make up many ugly stories about me and my father for thee newspapers. But you cannot forget that I take you in. That I pay for you. That I trust you with my life."

I stood. "You worked me like a slave. And what has any of this to do with —"

"Please, I must ask you to listen to me now."

I sat.

"Maybe I not easy to love. And I know you have seen many things. Things which are not very easy to understand."

I swallowed. Lupe was alluding to her father's incestuous demands. I stared at the oriental rug unable to face her, amazed she'd brought it up.

"But I like you. When you were here – thee house, it was better. Not so lonely. When I no can sleep or I have thee bad headache, you try to help me very much.

But you must understand my husband. He was all thee time with thee young girls from thee first day to thee last. So I warning you, he will disappoint you, too. Not because he love me, but because he is afraid. He is afraid to make my father angry. And he is also afraid for his career. Because he know that Hollywood is finished for him. But he also know that my father can help him. So he cannot marry you. Because he still want with all his heart to be famous,” Lupe said.

No, I thought. She’s just trying hold onto Franky, to manipulate me. She wants to upset me, fill me with doubt, drive me off.

On my feet again, I realized I was shaking. “I really don’t have time for this *Lupe*,” I said, using her first name for once. “I’m amazed you can live with so many crazy illusions and lies. Have you been such a saint? What about your little trysts down by the beach?”

Without warning, Lupe’s eyes filled with tears, meaning she was either very upset or a much better actress than anyone believed. Curious, I dropped back onto my chair.

“Yes, I lie,” Lupe whispered. “I must lie. Or I would be dead. I work in thee business where I have to say yes when I want to say no. I make thee pictures they say for me to make. Every day I must ask: Will thee people like me? Will they like thee way I look? Thee way I dress. All I can do is work hard. I must always pray that they will think Lupe is still young, still beautiful. That I am still thee Guadalajara Spitfire.” Sniffing, Lupe pulled out a lace hankie and gently wiped her nose.

I studied Lupe reluctant to feel sorry for her. But I did.

“I no want thee divorce,” Lupe added. “What woman wants this thing? But you must believe Lupe. Franky has done this many times before. He meet thee *chica* he like, so he make up many stories. He tell thee *chicas* that he grew up with nothing to eat or to drink. He say to them that he was thee poor cowboy on thee ranch in Arizona. But he was not living with thee horses and cows when I meet him. His father owned thee food store in San Diego. And I no make him marry me either. He want to marry me for what my father can do for him. For many years, he make thee movie pictures because my father want him to be popular. But always, Franky is drinking and sleeping with thee young chicas from Idaho and Kansas who believe that he will make them famous. But he will never divorce me. No, that he will never do. He love himself too much. And he know that you cannot help him with his career, but my father can.”

“I have to go.” I grabbed my purse and stood.

“Please, Jeri, I no hate you. I tell you thee truth. Franky will not make you happy. Me either. But I am his wife and we have thee daughter. And I am used to him.”

END SCENE