

She lay on her left side behind the steering wheel of the expensive phaeton, a mink coat snug about her shoulders, her head drooping over the edge of the seat. The gorgeous face, half covered by a tousel of blonde locks, was sunk into the cushion. From the way her arms hugged her chest, the hands cupped near her face, Detective Clark understood why at first the maid thought she was sleeping. The legs told a different story. Clad in silk stockings, they twisted unnaturally from the center of the seat toward the driver's side of the floor. One foot rested next to the automobile's foot pedals, its pink lacquered toenails glistening through blue sandals. This was no ordinary slumber.

Clark felt her body. It was cold and stiff. She appeared to have been dead for some time. A slim platinum brooch, tied at the side in a bow and scattered with tiny sapphires and diamonds, pinned a wilted and faded flower to her dark blue evening gown.

The detective stepped back from the body and surveyed the death scene. The interior of the garage was still deep in shadows, its chilly air traced by a faint scent of mildew and oil. The automobile was backed into the right hand stall, the bumper pressed firmly against an old suitcase and a couple of tires, the radiator glittering in the noonday sun that poured through the open garage door. To the right, nearest the driver's side, a desk, a day bed couch and several steamer trunks were piled against the cement wall. A stall for a second automobile was to the left, presently empty. A narrow shelf with a few old jars and cans stretched along the wall on the rear of the garage.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to explain, at least at first glance, the dead woman lying on the car seat.

Clark looked at her again. He recognized her, of course. With her classic features, blonde, curly hair, and flawless complexion, she was one of Hollywood's most famous beauties, a veteran of dozens of comedy shorts with ZaSu Pitts and Patsy Kelly and many dramatic and comedic features, including films with the Marx brothers and Laurel and Hardy. Los Angeles also knew her as the proprietor of a swank restaurant and bar several hundred steep yards down the hill from the garage, Thelma Todd's Sidewalk Café. During the last eighteen months, it had become a watering hole for residents of the Malibu movie colony, beachgoers and the few locals of the sparsely inhabited neighborhood. The beautiful and vibrant Miss Todd, who often served as hostess herself, was its main attraction.