

## QUEEN OF THE DOGS

by Holly West

*1979 - Los Angeles, California*

Marisol Ramirez twisted her long brown hair into a bun and secured it with bobby pins. She sprayed a bit of Aqua Net onto her fingertips, smoothing any errant strands against her temples. Her employer, Mrs. Markham, expected a tidy appearance, which meant a freshly washed and pressed uniform, neatly styled hair, and no makeup.

Satisfied with her appearance, she exited her room over the garage and hiked through the lush garden to the main house. Marisol once overheard Mr. Markham brag that landscaping the enormous property had set him back nearly twenty grand. She paused by the pool and took a moment, as she always did, to admire the view. She could see all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

She entered the house through the back door. Elena, the cook, stood at the stove, scrambling the egg whites Mrs. Markham insisted on eating for breakfast every morning. She decorated the plate with an arrangement of artfully cut strawberries and set it on a tray along with a glass of orange juice. “Take this upstairs to the *Señora*,” she said in Spanish.

“Upstairs” meant Mr. Markham hadn’t come home last night and Mrs. Markham was too groggy from booze and pills to get up.

“Again?” Marisol said. She knew Mr. Markham had a girlfriend on the side. She’d once picked up the phone and heard him talking to her on one of the house’s numerous extensions.

“Hurry,” Elena prodded. “Before it gets cold.”

Marisol hated when Elena bossed her around, but arguing with the pushy cook wasn’t worth the trouble. She carried the tray to the second floor and knocked on Mrs. Markham’s bedroom door.

“Come in,” was the muffled reply.

She pasted a demure smile on her face before she opened it. “Good morning, *Señora*,” she said brightly. “I’ve got your breakfast.”

Mrs. Markham lay in a heap on a bed big enough for four people. Her frosted blonde hair was a mass of messy curls and her sleep mask was askew on her forehead. One of her false eyelashes had migrated down to her cheek and her red lipstick was smeared. But even in this disheveled state, she was a beautiful woman. Like a Barbie doll, Marisol thought.

“Leave it,” Mrs. Markham said.

A liquor bottle, three-quarters empty, sat on the bedside table. Marisol moved it and set the tray down. “Do you want me to draw the curtains?”

“God, no.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“Is Mr. Markham home yet?”

“I haven’t seen him, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for that pig.” Mrs. Markham sat up and got her first close look at Marisol. She narrowed her blue eyes.

“Are you wearing makeup?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Go wash it off.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“And tell Elena to bring me a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“With skim milk.”

Marisol hurried downstairs to the kitchen. “*¡Ay dios mio!* She’s in a mood today,” she said.

“What’d you do this time?”

“*Nada*. But she says I’m wearing makeup.”

Elena clicked her tongue. “She has it out for you, for sure. You’re too pretty, she doesn’t trust you around her husband.”

“Why’d she hire me then?”

She shrugged. “Maybe she wants to make sure someone else in this house is as miserable as she is.”

“She wants a cup of coffee. I’ll be right back.”

Marisol scrubbed her face pink, knowing that it didn’t matter how clean it was. Mrs. Markham would find something else to complain about. But she didn’t care—this was the best job she’d ever had.

She’d come to Los Angeles in 1973, when she was sixteen. She’d taken a job as a housekeeper at the Blue Hacienda, a low rent hotel in Hollywood where she was expected to clean twenty rooms a day for forty dollars a week. Mrs. Markham might be an unreasonable bitch but she paid a higher wage and provided three meals a day plus a comfortable room. So

what if she had to share it with Elena? And if Mr. Markham got a little too friendly now and then, she could handle it.

#

Unless the Markhams hosted a party, Marisol's workday ended at eight. After that, her time was her own, and most nights, she went to the disco with her two best friends, Carmen and Dolores.

Tonight, Elena lay on her twin bed, pretending to read a movie magazine while she watched Marisol get ready. Marisol tucked a pink silk flower behind her ear, buckled her feet into spike-heeled sandals and draped her purse's chain strap over her shoulder.

"Don't wait up," she said.

She scurried down the driveway. It was nine-thirty and Dolores was waiting in the beat up Chevelle her brother, Chuey, had fixed up for her. Marisol opened the passenger side door and slid in. Carmen sat in back.

The three of them met while working at the Blue Hacienda. Carmen still worked there, but Dolores started taking classes to be a hairdresser and got a job sweeping up hair at a swanky salon in Beverly Hills. She liked reminding Carmen and Marisol she wasn't a housekeeper anymore, but Marisol didn't see the difference—she was still cleaning up other people's messes, wasn't she? But she kept these thoughts to herself because it was Dolores who'd told her about the job at the Markham's.

Marisol slammed the door shut and Dolores pulled away from the curb. "*Hola, chica,*" she said. "Where you want to go tonight? Carmen wants to go to the Oracle but Crimson is better on Wednesday nights."

"The Oracle has dollar drinks," Elena said. "I haven't gotten paid yet."

“Let’s go to Crimson,” Marisol said. “We’ll find some guys to buy us drinks.”

Carmen harrumphed and sank into the back seat. “You only wanna go there because of that guy.”

“Do you blame her?” Dolores said. “He’s a fox.”

Heat rose in Marisol’s cheeks. Carmen was right. But how could she be so infatuated with him when she didn’t even know his name? She’d seen him at Crimson last Friday night and since then, she couldn’t think of anything else.

“Forget it,” Carmen said. “He had plenty of chances to talk to you but he didn’t. You’ll probably never see him again.”

“Why you always gotta be so negative, Nita?” Dolores said. She laughed. “Yeah, that’s you, ‘Negative Nita.’ Mari will see him again. I can feel it in my bones.”

Music thumped in the vestibule as they entered the club. Mirrors lined its walls and Marisol re-checked her appearance while she waited to pay admission. The night was humid, but so far, her hair had held its curl. Her eyes were bright with anticipation and she smiled at her reflection.

They found seats at one of the tables on the perimeter of the dance floor. Marisol waved at Dennis, her favorite DJ, spinning records from an egg shaped-booth overlooking the dancers. He winked and pointed a finger gun at her. A moment later, “Dancing Queen” came over the speakers. Dennis always played it when Marisol came in.

“C’mon, let’s dance,” Marisol said, pulling her friends out to the floor. She closed her eyes, immediately lost in the music. She loved everything about dancing; the way the bass beat reverberated under her feet, how men watched her out of the corners of their eyes as they danced with other women or from the sidelines, working up the courage to ask her to dance. Here, she

was no longer just a maid who cleaned other people's toilets. She was a foxy lady, the object of everyone's desire. A dancing queen.

The song morphed into "Boogie Nights." A short man in three-inch platforms and a brightly colored sateen shirt snuck over to her and swung into an amateur version of the Hustle. He spun her around too quickly and she stumbled. Someone took her elbow to steady her. It was her mystery man from Friday night.

"You all right?" he shouted over the music.

She looked up at him and nodded. Their eyes locked for a moment. He was a foot taller than she, with a sexy smile that made her insides tingle. He was stylishly dressed, with broad shoulders and smooth brown skin. She wanted to run her hands across his chest and everywhere else.

The woman he'd been dancing with jerked him away and pushed her long, slinky body against him. Suddenly Marisol felt short and dumpy. Her confidence slipped away and she scurried back to her friends.

"He's here!" Dolores said. "I told you you'd see him again."

"Yeah, but do you see his woman?" Marisol said. "I don't have a chance."

"That's what you think. He's coming over here."

Before she had a chance to react, he'd arrived at their table, bringing another man with him. "Can we buy you ladies a drink?" he asked.

"*¡Por supuesto!*" Dolores said. "Three Tequila Sunrises, *¡por favor!*"

He flagged down a waitress and ordered.

"Dolores..." Marisol said under her breath.

"What? We let guys buy us drinks all the time."

The waitress left and he said, “This is Ben. I’m Germaine. Mind if we sit down?”

“What about your girlfriend?” Dolores nodded toward the woman he’d been dancing with.

“Who? Josie? She’s just a friend.”

“In that case, have a seat.”

Germaine took the seat next to Marisol while Ben sat down between Carmen and Dolores. He put his arms around both of them and said, “What are you three stone foxes doing here unescorted?”

Dolores didn’t miss a beat. “Waiting for you, handsome. What took so long?”

Carmen just giggled.

Germaine leaned in close to Marisol. “I saw you here last week, didn’t I?”

“My friends and I come here a lot,” she said, flattered.

“I just got to LA but I’m enjoying the sights so far.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York City, born and raised.”

“But New York is so exciting. Why did you leave?”

He shrugged. “I needed a new scene and LA seemed like the place to be.”

“Is it?”

He leaned in to whisper into her ear. “It is now.”

#

Marisol braced herself with one hand against Germaine’s car window, leaving a ghostly print on the steamy glass. She straddled his lap, skirt hitched up to her hips, her underpants wound around one ankle. His large hands rested on her ass, guiding her as she raised herself up

and down, using her knees for leverage. She threw her arms around his neck and moved at a near frantic pace until at last she cried out in relief.

Germaine's pleasure-filled shudder followed a moment later and together they slumped in exhaustion, both sweating and breathing hard. They'd known each other just a week and had already played this scene several times. She lifted herself off him and straightened her clothes while he zipped his fly.

"*Mierda*," she said. The elastic of her underpants were ripped. She slipped them off and wiped herself, crumpling the soiled fabric into a ball. "I wish we could do it someplace other than your car."

"Soon, baby, soon. You sure we can't go to your place?"

"I told you, my roommate is always there."

Even if Elena hadn't been a constant presence, Mrs. Markham would never allow her to bring a man to her room. She hadn't yet told him she worked as a housekeeper. It wasn't that she was ashamed—he just hadn't asked. She knew as little about him as he did about her. When she'd asked about his employment his answer was vague—something about being in between jobs at the moment. She didn't press.

"I know he's good-looking but you'd better make sure he has a job," Dolores counseled, clicking her tongue.

"He must have money," Marisol said. "He drives a Cadillac."

Now Germaine ran his fingers through her hair and grabbed the back of her head, pulling toward him and giving her a forceful kiss. There was something in his physicality that was just slightly aggressive, as if there was violence in him, lingering below the surface. It scared her a little but excited her much more.



She was about to mount him again when a siren blared and a red light flashed behind them. “Fuck, the cops!” Germaine said. He pushed her off him and she knocked her head against the window.

“Ow!”

Germaine rolled over the top of the front seat, turned the key in the ignition, gunned the motor and pulled away from the curb. Marisol, still in the back, rocked and rolled across the leather seat.

“Slow down!” she said.

Germaine turned right onto Santa Monica Boulevard, keeping his eye on the rear view mirror. After they’d gone a few blocks, he said, “They’re not following us. It must’ve just been a parking cop. A real cop would’ve followed us.” He pulled into a gas station parking lot and stopped the car.

Marisol pouted. “You didn’t have to push me.”

He sat sideways, turning to look at her. “Sorry about that. I had some trouble in back home and I can’t get arrested. I’m guessing you can’t, either.”

He was right. She couldn’t imagine what Mrs. Markham would say if she got taken to jail. She’d be fired for sure. She leaned forward impulsively and hugged Germaine’s neck.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said.

He laughed. “C’mon, I’ll drive you home.”

Disappointed, she caressed his arm. “One more time?” she coaxed.

“After all that? No way,” he smiled. “Besides, I got some place I need to be.”

She pouted playfully, but her jealousy was real. “You better not have another woman.”

“You’re all the woman I need, baby.”

When she directed him toward Beverly Hills, he let out a long whistle. “Don’t tell me my little *mamasita* is rich.”

“Pull up here,” she said.

He stopped in front of an impressive mansion and said, “This is where you live?”

She laughed. “No.” She pointed to the Markham’s house, which was just visible in the distance. “I live there. But I don’t want my boss to see us.”

He grabbed at her, roughhousing. “What, you ashamed of me, huh?”

“It’s not that—she’s very—” she couldn’t find the words in English. “She wouldn’t like it if she knew I had a boyfriend.”

“Forget her. Some day I’ll buy a house like this just for you. We’ll never have to fuck in the back seat again—unless we want to.” He gave her a wicked smile.

Marisol kissed him goodbye. As she hurried through Markham’s garden, she heard a rustling. Mrs. Markham sat in the shadows, the end of her cigarette glowing as she inhaled.

*Mierda.*

“Come here, Marisol,” she said, slurring her words slightly.

“Good evening, *Señora*. Do you need anything?”

Mrs. Markham took her in. “You’ve been fucking.”

“No, *Señora*, I—”

She chuckled. “Don’t lie to me. I can smell it on you. Who is he?”

“I haven’t been, I swear it.”

“Men are dogs, Marisol. Take my word for it. Whether they give you diamonds or a good stiff cock they’re all the same, chasing after all the pussy they can get their hands on.” She lit a second cigarette off the end of the first one.

Marisol's cheeks burned. Mrs. Markham had never spoken to her this way. "Thank you, *Señora*. Good night."

As she scampered off toward her room, Mrs. Markham called out, "And for God's sake, don't get pregnant!"

#

After that, Germaine questioned her about the Markhams every time they saw each other.

"What does he do?"

"He makes *películas*—movies," she said. "I've never seen one, though."

"Wait—you work for Miles Markham?"

"You know him?"

"Everyone knows him, baby. He's famous. Someday I'll take you to one of his movies."

"Tomorrow night?"

"I've got plans tomorrow. Next week, maybe."

Germaine used the word "someday" a lot, but so far, they'd never been out on a real date. He always had something else he needed to do. He held the prospect of a real future together like a carrot, dangling it in front of her nose, just out of reach.

Once, when the Markhams were away on a rare trip, they screwed in the Markham's bed—the first time they'd ever done it anywhere besides the Cadillac's backseat. It was better than she'd ever imagined but Elena almost caught him inside the house and she vowed she'd never do such a foolish thing again.

A week later, Mrs. Markham asked Marisol, "Have you seen my gold earring with the pearl drops?"

Her pulse raced. She didn't know where the earrings were but if Mrs. Markham thought she'd stolen them she'd be fired.

"No, *Señora*," she said. "Should I look for them?"

But Mrs. Markham didn't accuse her. She seemed happier since they'd returned from the trip. "I hope I didn't leave them in Italy. Keep an eye out for them."

#

Germaine kissed her neck, sending shivers through her body. "You love me, baby?"

Her heart skipped. "Yes," she said. Would he say it back?

"You'd do anything for me, right?" He kept kissing her, moving his hands to her breasts, caressing her nipples.

She writhed against his touch. "Anything."

"I have an idea."

"¿*Que*?"

"Let's rob the Markhams." His fingers continued their exploration, forging a trail down her belly.

Marisol laughed. "What are you talking about, robbing? We can't rob my boss."

"They're rich, baby. They'll never miss anything we take."

"No way, Germaine."

"C'mon, this is our ticket out. It'll set us up for good."

"Quit talking *loco*. What about my job?"

"You deserve a lot better than that job. You're my queen. I can't have you working as no maid."

"The Markhams have been good to me."

“What, by letting you clean up their shit? You think they give a damn about you? You’re nothing to those people.”

He started kissing her again and she began to relax. “Just think about it, baby. You can have the world, but only if you’re willing to take it.”

She agreed to think about it.

#

When Dolores graduated from cosmetology school a week later, the three friends went to Crimson to celebrate. They’d just sat down at their usual table when Marisol spotted Germaine on the dance floor with Josie—the woman he’d been with the first time she’d seen him.

Dolores glanced at Carmen. “Sorry, *mija*,” she said. “We tried to tell you—”

“You knew about this?” she asked.

“It’s only dancing,” Carmen said. “But yeah, we’ve seen him with her lately.”

Josie slithered around him, running her body along his like a snake. His hands explored her curves the same way he’d touched Marisol. Only a fool would believe they weren’t sleeping together.

Marisol bolted for the ladies room. She stumbled into the nearest open stall, barely slamming the door shut before retching into the toilet. She coughed and sputtered, mixing tears with bile.

She rested on her haunches, trying to catch her breath. Someone pounded on the metal door, shouting for her to get the fuck out. She pulled a handkerchief from her clutch bag and wiped her mouth.

“Mari, where are you? Are you all right?” Carmen called from outside.

She exited the stall amid dirty looks and curse words from the women waiting in line.

Carmen took her arm.

“You okay, girl?”

“Yeah. Give me a minute.”

She edged her way to a mirror and surveyed the damage to her makeup. Intent on fixing her eyeliner, she didn't immediately notice Josie standing next to her until she spoke.

“I know you've been fucking Germaine,” Josie said, concentrating on her own reflection as she re-applied her lipstick. “You think you mean something to him?”

“Do I know you?” Marisol asked.

“I got some advice for you: lay off him, bitch. He's mine.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Your shit will be seriously fucked if you go near him again.”

Josie tossed her hair back and Marisol saw Mrs. Markham's missing pearl earrings: they were hanging from Josie's ears.

#

Marisol asked Dolores to ask her brother, Chuey, to get her a gun.

“No way,” Dolores said. “I'm not gonna let you shoot yourself over that *pendejo*.”

“I'm not gonna shoot myself. I want to teach Germaine a lesson.”

“You crazy? I'm not gonna let you shoot him either.”

“I'm not gonna shoot nobody, I promise.”

Two nights later, Dolores handed over the gun. “Chuey wants it back,” she said.

When Germaine called her the next day, wanting to meet up, she readily agreed. He picked her up at nine o'clock, down the street from the Markham's house.

“I’m glad you’re not mad about Josie,” Germain said, navigating the car through Beverly Hills’ pristine streets. “You know you got nothing to worry about, baby. You’re my main girl. Where do you want to go tonight?”

They went to a drive-in theatre in Culver City and screwed in the backseat while Alien played on the big screen. On the way home, Marisol said, “I been thinking about what you said. You know, about robbing the Markhams. Maybe we should do it.”

He glanced over at her. “You mean it?”

“It’s like you said. They don’t deserve the money. He’s all the time fucking other women while she stays drugged up. I’m tired of it.”

“These rich folks don’t know how good they got it.”

“So yeah, I want to do it.”

Germaine beamed. “I knew you were my girl. Hey, you want to stop and get something to eat?”

Two weeks ago, Marisol would’ve been over the moon to be seen in public with Germaine. Too bad she knew his game now.

Her plan was simple: the Markhams were scheduled to attend a party on Saturday night. After they left, she’d let Germaine into the house, and while he was busy going through their stuff she’d call the police. If she had to, she’d use the gun to keep him there while she waited for them to arrive.

She hoped she wouldn’t have to.

#

When Mr. Markham finally backed the Rolls Royce out of the garage at half past nine, Marisol was relieved. They’d been arguing all day and Mrs. Markham had threatened to stay

home more than once. Mr. Markham resorted to cajoling, saying it was an important night for him and he wanted her by his side. Mrs. Markham said he only wanted her there to keep up appearances, but finally agreed to accompany him anyway.

Elena was already asleep and snoring, but Marisol waited until ten o'clock before tucking Chuey's gun into the waistband of her slacks, checking the mirror to make sure her loose-fitting blouse hid the bulge. She went to the main house and called Germaine, who was waiting at a gas station phone booth on Santa Monica Boulevard, about ten minutes away.

He answered after the first ring. "Hello?"

"Hurry up, they're gone," she said.

"Be there in five."

She unlocked the back door so he wouldn't have to knock. Without turning on the lights, she went to the liquor cabinet and poured herself a shot of rum, hoping it would calm her nerves. Standing in the shadows, she couldn't help fantasizing: what if she went ahead with the robbery herself? Escape to Mexico, sell the goods for cheap and live like a queen in Baja. Hire someone to clean *her* toilets, for a change.

She went to the kitchen to rinse out the glass, setting it in the rack to dry. The backdoor edged open.

"Mari?" Germaine called softly. "Is that you?"

"Yes," she said, turning around as he slipped inside, followed by someone else. "What's he doing here?"

"This is Ben. Remember—you met him at Crimson. Thought we could use some help."

She remembered. He was the guy who'd hit on Dolores that first night. Goddammit. The plan was sketchy enough with just Germaine. How was she going to deal with two of them?



Fuck it. She'd manage somehow. "C'mon," she said. "There's not much time."

They followed her to the buffet in the formal dining room, where Mrs. Markham kept the family silver. She watched as they emptied its drawers into large canvas bags. Candlesticks, a tea set, cutlery, platters, a soup tureen—anything that looked of value.

"This is good, baby," Germaine said. "What else?"

She led them to Mr. Markham's office. He kept a stash of cash in a locked drawer in his desk, but she'd found the key at the top of the window ledge once when she was cleaning. She unlocked it and pulled out the envelope filled with hundred dollar bills, waving it at Germaine.

"A little taste of what's to come," she said.

He reached out for it but she pulled her hand away. "Nope. That's for later." She folded the money and put it into her bra.

"What else is in here?" he said, opening drawers.

Distracted by their rummaging, neither man noticed when Marisol went into the hallway and dialed 911.

"What is the nature of our emergency?" the operator said.

"Help!" Marisol whispered. "Two men have broken into my house!"

"What's the address?"

Before Marisol could tell her, Germaine entered the hallway, pointing his own gun at her.

"The fuck are you doing?" he asked. "Bitch, I know you ain't calling the cops!"

"No—I—"

He grabbed the receiver and hung it up. "You're gonna pay for that, you stupid bitch." He hit her upside the head with the butt of the gun and she saw stars. She staggered and he caught her by the arms.

“I shoulda known this bitch was playing me. I oughta blow her mother fucking brains out.”

“Please, Germaine,” she said, sobbing.

“I’ll do it,” Ben said.

Germaine took a second to think on it. “No. Tie her up. Then we’ll clean out the bedrooms and get the hell out of here,” he said.

He grabbed a chair and pushed her into it. Ben held her still while Germaine pulled the phone cord out of the wall.

“I’ve got her,” he told Ben. “Get the cord from the office phone.”

“Germaine, baby, you don’t have to do this,” she begged.

“The fuck I don’t.” He forced her hands behind the chair and wound the cord around her wrists. “Second we leave you’re gonna call the cops, like you just did now. Can’t trust a bitch, *bitch*. You’re lucky I don’t kill you.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“Fuck you.”

Ben returned with the second cord, which was longer. Germaine twisted it round both her ankles and tied them to the chair legs.

“Gimme one of your socks,” Germaine said.

“No way, man,” Ben said. “Use your own.”

Germaine took off a sock and stuffed it into Marisol’s mouth. She choked. It smelled of sour sweat and cologne. He put his shoe back on and said, “Upstairs, c’mon.”

As soon as they were out of sight she tried to shake her binds loose, but Germaine had done a good job securing them. The chair’s back was open and her fingers could just touch the

gun behind her but she couldn't take hold of it and was afraid it would fall on the floor if she tried to get it out. She rocked the chair back and forth but stopped when she nearly toppled backwards.

Germaine and Ben worked quickly. By a quarter past eleven, they'd scavenged the bedrooms and headed for the stairs, carrying their bags full of stolen treasure over their shoulders. They were almost at the bottom when the front door handle unlatched and Mr. and Mrs. Markham stepped into the foyer.

Germaine dropped his bag and drew his gun, pointing it at Mr. Markham. "Freeze, mother fucker!" he said.

"What the--are you kidding me?" Mr. Markham said.

"Stay where you are, nobody gets hurt."

Mr. Markham put his hands up. "All right. All right. Just do what they say, Liz, and everything will be okay."

"What have you done to Marisol?" Mrs. Markham demanded, stepping toward the chair.

"I'm warning you, bitch," Germaine said, training the gun on Mrs. Markham. "Stay where you are."

"Listen to him, Liz!" Mr. Markham said. Germaine returned to pointing at him.

With Mrs. Markham so close behind her and Germaine intent on Mr. Markham, Marisol took her chance. She lifted her shirt and eased the gun from her pants with the tips of her fingers, hoping that Mrs. Markham would take it.

Please don't let her be too drunk to help me, Marisol prayed.

Keeping the gun on Mr. Markham, Germaine picked up his bag and heaved it over his shoulder. "I'm watching you, mother fucker," he said. He continued down the stairs with Ben following. "Just let us get out and no one will get hurt."

"They seen our faces," Ben said. "We gotta kill 'em."

Germaine paused at the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Markham still hadn't noticed Chuey's gun and now Marisol fluttered her hands behind her, trying to get the woman's attention.

"What're you doing over there?" Germaine said. He aimed the gun at Marisol's forehead. She sat perfectly still, terrified that he'd find her gun before Mrs. Markham did.

"Nobody's doing anything," Mr. Markham said. "Please. Just take what you've got and get out. We won't call the police."

Mrs. Markham took up the gun so quickly, that even Marisol barely noticed. Germaine turned back to Mr. Markham and as he did so, she raised it and shot Germaine in the face. His head exploded.

Marisol jerked forward in the chair as if to go to him.

With Germaine's body blocking him, Ben had nowhere to go but up. He fell backwards and crab-crawled to the next step. Mrs. Markham shot him. He cried out, lost his footing and slid down to where Germaine lay. She shot him again, dead this time.

"Thank God, Liz," Mr. Markham said, starting toward her. "How'd you do that?"

"Shoot first," Mrs. Markham murmured. "Ask questions later." She removed the sock from Marisol's mouth. "Are you all right?"

Marisol nodded, tears rolling down her face.

"What the hell happened here, Marisol?" Mr. Markham asked. "Is that the guy I've seen you with?"

“Leave her alone, Miles,” Mrs. Markham said.

“The hell I will. I want to know what’s going on.”

Mrs. Markham pointed the gun at her husband. “I *said*, leave her alone.”

“This isn’t funny, Liz. Let me have the gun.”

She laughed. “Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? Give it to you so you can shoot me, make it look like it happened during the robbery so you can run off with your little slut mistress.”

“You’re drunk. Stop it right now.”

Marisol began to worry. Was Mrs. Markham so out of it that she’d kill her, too?

“It’s okay, Mrs. Markham,” she said. “Don’t shoot.”

“Men are dogs, Marisol,” Mrs. Markham said. “Remember that. Sometimes the only kind thing a woman can do is put them down.”

She aimed at her husband’s head.

“No!” he shouted.

She pulled the trigger. His left eye disappeared and the back of his head splattered the wall. She turned to face Marisol.

“Shoot first,” she repeated. “But I first, I do have one question. Did you ever fuck my husband?”

Marisol’s eyes grew wide. *She’s going to kill me because she thinks I had an affair with her husband.* She shook her head wildly. “No, never, Mrs. Markham. I swear on my mother’s grave!”

Mrs. Markham smiled. “I didn’t think so.” She tucked the gun beneath her arm. “I know you had a part in this, but neither of us wants to go to jail, do we?”

Marisol swallowed. “No, Mrs. Markham.”

“That’s right.” She moved behind the chair and began loosening the cords. “Let’s get you untied so we can clean up this mess.”

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