

**Kathryn Blair**

**THE AFFAIR IN  
TANGIER**

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## CHAPTER I

**THE** ship left Lisbon twelve hours late. Eleven of the ship's passengers knew why, but Tess Carlen was served dinner in her cabin and after it she slipped back into bed, read for a while and went to sleep. When she awoke next morning they were at sea and quite some way out from the coast even though they were steaming south. Tess looked through the porthole at the heaving grey-blue Atlantic and thought how remarkable it was that one could travel so comfortably and be so well cared for on a cargo vessel. They made up in the way of cuisine and service for the lack of a sun lounge and games deck. Tess liked to lounge in the warm southern sun, but she had no urge towards athletics. Her leg was still weak after eight days out of plaster and her shoulder ached if she didn't rest a good deal. But she was feeling better inside herself every day, and the few weeks in Tangier would put her back where she had been before the accident, on top of the world.

Wonderful of Clare to invite her. It had been so unexpected, after the year's silence. First of all the letter which had arrived during her first week in hospital. An invitation to spend her summer vacation in Tangier—a month at least if she could manage it. Tess had written back, telling Clare about the car crash and her own multiple injuries, and within days had come that remarkably solicitous letter and a renewed invitation. 'As soon as you can travel, darling, come and stay with me for as long as you can manage. I'll pay your fare—can't run to air travel, I'm afraid—but it won't cost you a penny from start to finish. Please let me know when you can come.'

Tess hadn't quite believed it, but what a difference even the hope of a long holiday had made to those weeks she had languished in plaster. A holiday with Clare, of all people.

After her father's death, a little over a year ago, Tess had thought she would never see her stepmother again.

There hadn't been enmity between them, but neither had they been friends. Clare was thirty-six now, fourteen years older than Tess. The distance between them had not been quite enough, and in any case Clare's nature could never be maternal. She had married twice, the first time an immature young man who had bored her and the second time James Carlen, who was much older but still not quite what Clare had wanted. During the past year Tess had wondered several times how long that marriage would have lasted if her father hadn't died suddenly when it was three years old. Once or twice, when remembering his tired, good-humoured smile and feeling an ache of loss, she had reminded herself, consolingly, that at least he had had Clare right up to the end. He would never know that she had sold the house and was presumably squandering the proceeds on high living on the Continent and elsewhere; or that Tess had had to find a room and leave the library to take a job in the book department of a store that paid better.

Had she misjudged Clare? It seemed so; the tone of both letters had been affectionate and full of goodwill. Clare was actually renting a little house, so she must like Tangier and the people she knew there. Tess was looking forward to meeting them herself. Eccentrics lived in those places, so she had been told, and such types were fascinating. Well, it was the ship's next port of call, the last for Tess.

As usual, she had breakfast in her cabin and dressed after it. She was still too thin, she thought critically, surveying her figure in cream cotton with gay stripes about the skirt. The smooth rounded cheeks had gone hollow and her collar-bone showed, yet her appetite was pretty good. The doctor had said it was shock that had thinned her down, that a gradual increase in exercise would help her fill out. She hoped he was right. She had always rather fancied herself as tall and serene-looking, but somehow she didn't even look tall, now. Elfin, rather, the dark brown hair with its wind-blown cut emphasising the effect. She looked closely into her hazel eyes. They hadn't changed, had they? How strange it was for Tess Carlen, who knew her book department from end to

end and handled the most difficult customers with poise and carefully acquired charm, to have become so uncertain of herself! She really did need a holiday.

The steward knocked and came in for the tray. He also brought a message. 'Captain would like to see you, miss. In his cabin, if you don't mind.'

'Now?'

'Yes, miss.'

'Only me, or other passengers, too?'

'Only you, I think. He said at your convenience within the next hour, but I'd go soon if I was you. Old boy's worried.'

'What about?'

'This woman who's missing. She just scarpered in Lisbon—that was what made us late leaving. We're not a proper passenger boat, see—haven't got the set-up to deal with this kind of lark.'

'I seem awfully out of touch—been resting too much. I do know the other passengers, though. Which woman is missing?'

'The little dark quiet one, at the lower end of the dining table. Señorita Moreno, her name is.'

Tess remembered her only vaguely. Thirtyish, mouse-like, no English. 'She disappeared in Lisbon? Isn't she Spanish?'

He nodded. 'She came aboard at Oporto, though. It's just a short hop from Oporto to Lisbon, so no one got to know her. The Captain was in touch with the police and we waited till dawn. No sign of her, but the Portuguese police are going to cable if they learn anything.'

'Why should the Captain want to see me about it?'

'I reckon you'd better go and find out, miss. Need any help?'

She smiled. 'No, we're not pitching. Thanks for the offer.'

In the rubber-floored corridor she could feel the beat of the ship's engine. She was a safe, steady little ship, but she had a positive, vehement chug. Tess stepped into the tiny foyer and out on deck, mounted the companion way to the bridge cabin and found the door latched open. The Captain was inside, but he got up and came to help her. Everyone on board did the same for Tess, yet she was sure she didn't limp and quite certainly there was nothing pathetic about her.

The Captain was about fifty and bluff-looking. At the moment he also looked relieved and almost happy. 'Come in, come in,' he said cordially. 'Sit down, Miss Carien. Like a footrest?'

'I'm so spoiled on this ship that life is going to be hard when I leave it,' she said, as she took the chair he indicated. 'The steward told me you wanted to see me. Is it something to do with the missing woman? I didn't know her any better than the others did.'

'I'm glad to say that's cleared up. I've just had a radio message from Lisbon—seems that as soon as the woman knew we'd left she gave herself up. She was booked through to Tangier, of course. She jumped ship because she was the only Spaniard on board and was frightened.'

'Frightened?'

'Never left home before.' He threw out a hand. 'You know the sort of thing. A narrow life in Salamanca and suddenly she's forced to take this trip. Someone put her on board at Oporto, but once at sea she was lonely for her own people as well as seasick.'

'I suppose it's understandable. What a pity none of us know Spanish; we might have reassured her. Wasn't she going to meet someone in Tangier?'

'Well, that's the reason I asked you to come and see me, Miss Carien.' He swivelled his chair and looked directly across at her. 'This Señorita Moreno was nurse to a little boy—that's why we waited in Lisbon so long. He's half English, and she was taking him to Tangier to his father, and was supposed to remain there as the boy's nurse for some time, till he's used to the place. The child is still on board.'

'Is he? I haven't seen a child.'

'She kept him in the cabin mostly, and left him in charge of the steward while she went ashore at Lisbon. This radio message,' he half-turned and tapped a sheet of paper on the desk, 'asks that the little boy be taken to Tiran, which is a village a few miles from Tangier, and delivered to his father.'

'Surely the father will meet the ship?'

'That's what I thought, but it looks doubtful. It's possible

the man doesn't know the child is on this particular ship. Miss Carlen, you're the only passenger who is leaving us at Tangier, and I believe you're going to your mother?'

She nodded, rather than correct him. 'You want me to help?'

'You'll be met, of course?'

'Oh, yes, I think so.'

'Then I wonder if I may pass the responsibility for seeing the boy to his destination on to you? If I hadn't lost so much time at Lisbon I wouldn't ask it of you. We generally stay a whole day in Tangier and leave at sunset—and that would have given me long enough to handle it myself, but this time we'll sail as soon as we've unloaded some goods and taken others aboard—possibly within two or three hours. I have to make up that time.'

'I'll be happy to do all I can.'

'Good. We needn't worry you with the child during the next day or two—the stewards will look after him—but if you'll see him through to Tiran I'll be most grateful. I'd much rather leave the boy with you than with a shipping agent.'

'I'd like to meet him. Where is he now?'

'Your steward will find him. Don't let it make you anxious, Miss Carlen. I just wanted to make sure the boy and his luggage would be in good hands.'

'I'd love to do it, but couldn't you cable the father?'

'We'll try, but Tangier isn't like Britain, you know. If we can get the father to the ship, all the better. I just wanted to be sure you'd take over, if it's necessary.'

'Of course I will.' As they stood up she said, 'You know, I feel rather sorry for Señorita Moreno. She must have been very scared to leave a child like that. But why should she be? They speak Spanish in Tiran, don't they?'

'Both Spanish and French. There's no knowing what got into the woman. Luckily, the child doesn't seem to care very much. He's an unusual kid—comes of the mixed parentage, I dare say.'

'Which half was Spanish?'

'The mother. The boy's name is Benito Westland. The father is Boyd Westland of Cuera, Tiran. I imagine Cuera is

the name of a block of flats or a pension. A taxi-driver would find it for you.'

Tess smiled cheerfully. 'We'll get the boy to his papa, Captain. And now I'm going to rootle him out.'

Again the man's hand went instinctively to her elbow as she stepped from the cabin. What is it with me now? Tess wondered. Men had never jumped to it like this before, when she'd had looks and something of a presence. Had the accident proved something—that the slender wilting woman has a stronger appeal to the male senses than the poised efficient kind? It was most intriguing.

She went below and looked over the rail, saw the Portuguese coast like a thickly pencilled wavy line on the horizon and long boats with as many as eight men rowing them, not far from the ship. The fishermen shouted greetings and waved, but kept on moving as if they loved the rhythm and the spray and the sun on their swarthy faces. If they did, Tess felt a kinship with them. Even after summer in England the south felt good. It was autumn back home, a sad time, she always thought. Here, it felt like eternal summer.

She found her steward and told him she would like to see the small boy, Benito. He persuaded her to go outside again and sit down; he'd bring the child along. She sank down gratefully into a deck chair. Sometimes, when she found herself tired early in the day, she was uneasy. She had never been the limp kind, had never needed looking after. If you grow up motherless you don't. Now, though, muscles ached unfamiliarly because she walked differently to guard her right leg; her right shoulder was only really comfortable when she lay back in a chair at a certain angle, and too much sunshine made her see green cartwheels. The doctor had said it would all even out, that she'd been badly knocked about and couldn't possibly recover in a hurry; he had told her, crisply, that she was darned lucky to have got away with only external injuries. She was young, but it might take her all of two months after leaving behind the plaster to feel normal again.

Tess was glad she couldn't remember much about the accident. She'd been out for the day with a crowd from the store, had fitted herself into one of the cars for the return



journey and practically gone to sleep with another girl half on her lap. She hadn't even known that with a load of eight in the car the driver was doing seventy. They had hit a tree, and the very fact of their sardine tightness had saved the others from serious injury. But Tess had been the one near the door which had burst open. She had been flung fifty yards on tarmac. She'd eventually regained consciousness in a hospital bed with compound fractures of this and that and mercifully only a slight concussion. It was only weeks, but it seemed years ago.

She had closed her eyes, but now opened them to look at the child who stood assessing her. He was round-faced, dark-eyed, olive-skinned, Spanish-looking except for a decided red-brown shine on the dark hair. He wore an old blue shirt and absurdly short shorts, had bare legs which ended in cheap espadrilles. About his firm little neck he wore a bright medallion on a string. He looked the sort of little boy you might see playing with others on a sunlit square or a beach.

'Hallo, Benito,' she said. 'Do you speak English?'

'What do you mean, do I spik Eengleesh ? Sure I do.'

She laughed. 'You're positively fluent. Where did you learn it?'

'From my papa.'

'You know him?'

'Sure I do. He live with us till I was four.'

'And you're five now?'

'Nearly six.' He made an almost elderly, humourless grimace. 'Time for go to school, my grandmother say. Papa must send me.'

'And your mother?'

'She die,' he said matter-of-factly.

'How old were you then?'

'Nearly four. Then Papa go.'

'I see.' She patted the chair beside her. 'Sit and talk to me. Tell me about Señorita Moreno.'

'Carmela? She is a fool.'

'You're awfully grown up, Benito. Why is Carmela a fool?'

'She not want to go live in Tiran. Grandmother say yes, and Carmela's father put us on a ship. Carmela cry, cry all

the time. She 'fraid of Tangier. Me, I am not afraid.'

'I'm sure you aren't. You'll probably be very happy with your father.'

'Except school.' He swung his legs as he sat, making circles with his toes. 'You go to Tangier, señorita?'

'Yes. If your father doesn't meet you I'll take you to him.'

'I am glad. You think he will want me, my father?'

'Of course he will. But doesn't he know you're coming?'

'I do not know. I asked, but they would not tell me. Me, I am a parcel,' he said, jutting his lower lip in self-disparagement. 'Carmela said I am *molestio* ... what is the Eengleesh word?'

'I'm afraid I don't know.' From the way he spoke it Tess guessed it wasn't a complimentary expression. He was a self-assured little boy, no one to inspire pity, but she couldn't help feeling that that in itself was lamentable. What sort of man could have left this little boy with a grandmother who didn't want him? 'Tell me about Salamanca,' she said.

He looked vague. His shrug said, Salamanca ... well, Salamanca i s ... Salamanca.

'I live there, but not any more.'

'Weren't you sorry to leave your little friends?'

'Sure I was. But they all say they come to Tangier when they grow up. Señorita, you know my papa?'

'No, I've never been to Tangier. If it's only two years since he saw you he'll know you very well.'

The boy nodded gravely. 'But he is Eengleesh. My grandmother said that is bad - the Eengleesh do not care about their families.'

'Oh, but they do care,' she assured him. *I* think your father left you with your grandmother because you were too young at that time to live with him. What is he like?'

'He is tall with much hair.' He looked consideringly at hers. 'Not like yours, señorita. It is red, dark red, and his eyes -I think they are like the sea.'

'Is that all you remember?'

'He has many white teeth and he smiles always. Even when he is angry he smiles, but not nice. What is your name?'

'Tess Carlen.'

Tess.' He mouthed it, pensively. 'Not bad.'

She wanted to laugh, but was careful not to. The child was intelligent rather than precocious; he wasn't consciously trying to be clever. A funny little mixture, with his brown Latin looks and the careless idiom he had learned from a man who sounded interesting but strange. An Englishman married to a Spanish woman and living in Salamanca; now resident in Tiran. Something of an adventurer, apparently.

'And you're Benito Westland,' she said. 'Is your second name Boyd?'

'No, it is the Eengleesh Philip, and I have another name, Jose, for my grandfather. My cousins make fun, but I punch their nose. Westland is a good name!'

'One of the best,' she assured him solemnly.

After a few minutes he left her, casually. She watched him plunge his hands into the pockets of his brief shorts and saunter to the rail, bend through and look over the sea. Another child doing the same thing would have brought her heart to her throat, but not Benito; his legs were straddled, his elbows gripped over the centre rail, and altogether he gave an impression of complete control. What sort of people could he have come from, this very mature little boy? It sounded as if he had never before left Salamanca, but he had worldliness bred in his bone.

During the rest of the trip she saw him only occasionally. He liked the stewards' quarters and the engine-room, but when it was too hot inside he would come out in his shorts and nothing else; his skin was tanned a dark gold as though he had spent the whole summer thus. She was quite sure he would have no trouble in settling down in Tiran.

Clare was such a surprise that Tess felt breathless as they drove out towards the fairly modern suburb in which she lived. Clare Carlen was no longer dark and ordinarily good-looking in tailored tweeds. A sparkling platinum blonde, her lashes and brows a good rich brown, she was so attractively curved in the pale blue silk that Tess felt like a lath in her green summer suit.

'My dear,' Clare had exclaimed in greeting, 'you look dreadful. You need spoiling, and I'm the very person to do

it! No, you're not to carry a thing. The chauffeur will manage.'

'**Your** chauffeur?' Tess had whispered.

'Good lord, no. He's Victor's, like the car. You'll meet Victor this evening. He came here touring three months ago and hasn't been able to tear himself away.' Her glance said why, with a wink. 'Tess, my sweet, you're going to rest for days and days. Tangier,' with a wave of her hand at the glaring white town on its seven hills under a hot blue sky, 'can wait!'

But in the car Clare gazed with her short-sighted green eyes at the small boy who looked out of the window. Her nose, once unremarkable and slightly pudgy at the tip but now strangely regular in outline, wrinkled very slightly and carefully with distaste.

'Did you say this child ought to have been met, and he wasn't?'

Tess nodded. 'His father lives at Tiran. Do you know the place?'

'It's just a few miles out. I'll send him on, when we get to the house.'

'I'll have to go with him. I promised the Captain.'

'But they have agents to deal with emergencies. The child is Spanish, my dear V

'Half English. His name is Westland.'

'Benito,' said the owner of the name, looking hard at Clare. 'You know my papa, señora?'

'I know the name, but that's all. I know nearly all the English names here.' Clare frowned at Tess. 'This is too bad. You shouldn't have been burdened with the child.'

'It's no trouble, and Benito and I are friends. Aren't we, Benito?'

'Sure we are.' But for the first time Tess detected uncertainty in the little boy's manner. 'Why did my father not come, señorita?'

'Perhaps because we arrived several hours late. But don't you worry. We'll find him after we've had some tea.'

'One can't talk with a child about,' said Clare. 'But it's lovely to see you, Tess. I'm so sorry you've had such a bad time. I didn't realise how bad till I saw you walk down from

the ship. Do you still have pain?"

"Very little—only a few aches, and the sun will take care of those. Clare, I can't believe this is Tangier."

"Some people don't like the place, but I adore it. The people are so different from those you meet on the Continent—even the English. At first, it seemed infernally dry and blazing white, and from outside the houses do appear painfully unimaginative—few real gardens and lots of peeling stucco. But my place has a pretty patio and the furniture isn't bad. We have tangerines and dates and figs in the garden. Imagine that!"

"It sounds like heaven." Tess wished she could get past the awkward stage. Maybe it was the beautiful sheened hair, the straightened nose; certainly there was something that made her wonder whether she had ever known Clare. The smile? It was blindingly pearly—had she had her teeth capped? She said, "I'd better get it over, Clare. You look so different that I just have to mention it. You make a stunning blonde."

Clare pulled a carefully reddened lip between those spectacular teeth, let it go. "Darling, here I've always been a blonde. I had it done in Paris, about ten months ago. You like?"

"Yes. It's quite amazing."

"No one believes an ash-blond is naturally so fair, but you won't give me away, will you?"

"Certainly not. It must cost you a mint, though."

"It does—too much. But it's worth it. I've never had so much attention from men in my life." The older woman glanced critically at Tess's fly-away cut. "Did you have that done for comfort, in the hospital?"

Tess nodded. "I hated losing that pile I grew with such care, but this was much easier with only one arm. By the way, I'd like to find a masseuse for my shoulder. I've a letter from my doctor about the treatment."

"We'll fix you up. Victor's very good at that sort of thing and he's longing to meet you. Look, this is our avenue. The houses are close together, but we do have plenty of trees. All kinds of people live here—Spanish, French, Italian and quite a colony of English as well. My servant's name is Pedro and he's half Moorish and all rogue. There you are!" as they

entered a tiny courtyard and the car stopped. 'Isn't it sweet?'

The house looked like a plaster box with holes here and there for windows. It had a flat roof on which, presumably, one could sit, for the faded top of a gaudy umbrella was visible, but there were no bedroom balconies and no visible veranda on the lower floor. On closer view the walls, though a fresh pink, were rough and uneven, as though they had crumbled and been repaired many times. But a disguise to the little square dwelling had recently been added in the form of wrought-iron work. There were grids of it over the windows and a screen each side of the plain front door hung with ferns and miniature jasmine in pots. The whole effect could be described as quaint, Tess thought. In spite of its comic aspect, she liked the place.

'You should have seen it when Victor bought it!' Clare was saying. 'Quite derelict, full of cracks inside and out and even the cement roof leaked. We had the place done through and the floors smoothed or re-tiled, and Pedro remade the garden. The trees were there, of course, so he had only to plant grass and some flowers—a dreadful job, I assure you, in this place. There's an iron staircase at the back which goes up to the roof, but we don't often use it. I did have a cocktail party up there once, but we were nearly blown down.'

'So the house belongs to your Victor. Who is he?'

'A man, dear,' said Clare with a flick of her fingers. 'Charming, rich and forty-three, but a little heavy. He now has business interests in Tangier.'

'I thought you said he came as a tourist.'

'A tourist on the lookout for good investments where income-tax doesn't run away with the dividends. This is one of several houses he's bought and reconditioned, and all were let even before they were finished. He lives in a hotel suite himself.' She opened the pale blue door and called, 'Pedro! Siesta's over.'

The servant came through from the dimness, blinking happily. 'Miss come? Hello, miss!'

'Don't be impertinent,' said Clare. 'Take mademoiselle's luggage into her room and then look after this little boy for a while. Give him something to eat . . . anything to keep him quiet while we have tea. Keep the car.'

The servant was small with a cafe-au-lait skin, a long hooked nose and beetling black brows under which his eyes gleamed merrily. His hair was black and crinkly with grey streaks. He looked bland, as he gathered suitcases and spoke to Benito, telling him to follow.

The little boy hung back, looked up at Tess. She smiled at him. 'Go with Pedro for a few minutes. We'll find your papa, I promise you that. Just give me time for a cup of tea. All right?'

'Sure it's all right,' he said, but he looked small and disconsolate as he trailed after Pedro.

For a moment Tess was tempted to put him back into the car and go off with him, but meeting the new Clare and driving through the dazzling whiteness had tired her a little. It wouldn't hurt Benito to wait for half an hour; Pedro could probably speak to him in Spanish.

She followed Clare into the long lounge. Turquoise walls, white chairs, a black divan scattered with brilliant cushions, and crimson rugs with some well-chosen Moorish pottery which was predominantly yellow standing on light wood tables. Nothing really costly, but the whole was pleasing and must have run into three or four hundred.

Clare flung out her hands and held the pose. 'A suitable background? Victor thinks so. He let me choose it all myself.'

'And he paid?'

Clare's glance slid away. 'Naturally. All his houses are let furnished. Sit down, Tess, and rest that leg. You haven't really told me about yourself.'

There wasn't much to tell. The year since Clare had left London had been quiet for Tess, until the accident, and the few details about that she had already written. So much more had happened to Clare during the past year; and not only the changes in her appearance.

'Why Tangier?' Tess asked. 'Why did you come here?'

Clare poured tea from a fluted silver pot. 'I was looking for somewhere to settle for a while. I'd almost chosen a place on the Riviera, but I knew it would be hellish expensive, and hesitated about it. How lucky that I did. One lump, isn't it? You don't have to cut out sugar!'

"Thanks, Clare. So you looked over Tangier?"

"I came on someone's yacht over four months ago. There was another guest who has a business here, and he and his wife invited me to stay with them, so I did. Then one night they gave a party and Victor Mears was there. He'd just arrived. So . . . I stayed on."

"Because of him?"

Clare's mouth smiled, her green glance remained lowered. "Yes, I think so. He wants me to marry him."

"I rather thought that."

Clare sighed. "Men are very difficult. There's not one who's completely without angles or prickles. I told Victor I wouldn't marry till I'd been a widow for a year; it's only decent, after all. Well, he accepted that, but now he's beginning to fuss."

"It's fourteen months," said Tess quietly.

"Yes, and he knows it. I was completely truthful about everything—about your father and you. I've told him how close we all were, how much it means to me to have you here when I decide. That was why I wrote to you in the first place, inviting you here for your summer holiday."

Something jarred slightly within Tess. She sipped her tea, shook her head at the plate of honey pastries. Her hazel eyes were very clear as she met Clare's veiled glance.

"Is that true, Clare? Or are you just hedging because you don't really care enough for the man though you like the house, and living here, and having a rich escort?"

"My dear, what a nasty mind you have," said Clare with a laugh. "I care for Victor quite a lot, but I'm not ready to marry again yet. Oh, by the way, I haven't told anyone about that first babyish marriage of mine. It isn't necessary, and divorce is such an ugly word. Here, I'm just your father's widow."

"That's all right."

"You sound rather stiff. Surely you didn't think I'd broadcast all my past mistakes?"

"No, it's not that. It didn't ring true, what you said just now. You don't need me to help you make decisions. That invitation of yours was the first letter I'd had from you in a year. There's something else, isn't there?"



Clare put down her cup, said charmingly, 'My dear, there's nothing that need disturb you in the least. I want you to rest and be happy, to get right well. I'm going to do everything I can to make up for our lack of real friendship in the past. Would I have invited you here otherwise?'

'I wish I knew. I'm grateful to you for inviting me, for paying my fare and being willing to have me for so long, but now I've arrived I can see there was something behind it. We weren't close, Clare, even when Father died.'

'Oh, now, Tess! Axe you still holding it against me—my selling the house and hanging on to the money? It *was* mine, and I don't have a career, like you.'

'You had every right to the money, but . . . but please don't let's pretend.' Tess knew, suddenly, that she wasn't up to this. Her hands were damp and trembling, reminding her that she was still a little weak. 'If I hadn't been depressed and needing the change I might have questioned your invitation, but I think I'd have come just the same. You'll have to be frank with me, though, Clare. Tell me what you want of me and if I can I'll do it.'

'My dear,' said Clare a little tartly, 'you bewilder me. I'd forgotten that appalling head girl's honour of yours. We'll talk about it later.'

'I'd rather you told me now.'

'It's not easy to talk about.' Clare stood up and walked slowly to the window. Without looking round, she said, 'Very well, if you prefer bluntness. I don't want to marry Victor Mears yet because there happens to be someone else. He's a Spaniard, Ramon Guevara, the same age as I, though he doesn't know it; he thinks I'm thirty-one. He's not quite as well off as Victor but much more attractive—dashing is the word. I want him badly.'

Tess put down her cup, sat back. 'Do you mean you're in love with him?'

'That's it, exactly,' said Clare laconically.

'And he?'

'I don't know. He lives here more or less permanently and I've known him ever since I arrived, but we haven't been able to get really acquainted. Oh, we know each other quite well, but there's an intimacy that invariably comes into the

relationship between a man and a woman. It's my fault it hasn't happened between Ramon and me. I went the wrong way about things.'

'How?'

'It's most difficult, talking to you like this. You're a bit narrow-minded, you know, Tess.'

'I'm not. I'm trying to understand. Are you expecting me to help you with this man in some way?'

Clare turned, and with the light behind her she was just a feminine shape with a luminous cloud about her head. 'You *can* help, darling. I've been playing off Victor against Ramon, but it doesn't work. He's the sort of man who'd think what the hell, there are plenty of other women who are willing.'

'He sounds objectionable.'

'He isn't. Take my word for it. It's just that he's proud, far too proud to consider an overweight like Victor a menace. Tess, don't judge me. I can see in your face that you're ready to.'

'I'm not judging you. After all, I don't have to get tangled up in it if I don't want to. I can always go home.'

'Don't say that.' Clare sounded almost pleading. 'I've worried about this, about dragging you into it, but I can't see that it will harm you in any way. All I want from you is your presence here, really. I want you to step in and take Victor off my hands as much as you can—leave me free to see Ramon alone as often as possible. Victor knows Tangier, he'll take you about, show you the sights, introduce you to all the local colour. He'll give you a good time and look after you. I want you to persuade him to act as your guide and keep him interested.'

'While you go after this Ramon,' said Tess in flat tones. 'You don't want to lose Victor Mears till you're sure of the Spaniard—is that right?'

'You've put it crudely, but yes, it is. That part of it isn't your concern, Tess, my dear. You'll admit that?'

'I'm afraid I feel humiliated.'

Clare came forward, stretched out a hand with a gesture that was all youth and impulsiveness. 'Don't be like that. I'll tell you exactly how it was. When Victor started pressing for

our marriage I was all tied up inside about Ramon and I thought what a good idea it would be to get you here for your vacation. I could give you a carefree holiday that would cost you nothing and in return you could help me to see more of Ramon. A little bargain between us from which we might both benefit. But when my letter reached you you were in hospital. I felt desperately sorry that you'd been so smashed up and decided it would do you good to come here for a long stay as soon as you were fit to travel. Meanwhile, this other problem became more acute. So you see where I stand?'

Tess nodded. 'I'm afraid I still don't like it.'

'You're not really well yet,' said Clare tenderly. 'Just rest here for a few days without thinking too much. More tea, dear?'

'No, thank you. I'd better take Benito to Tiran.'

'Come and see your room first. I had you in mind when I furnished it!'

Which must have been about the time that Clare had decided to get Tess over from England and make use of her. As she went up the short straight staircase just behind the other woman, Tess wondered why it should tire and depress her that Clare had had her own reasons for getting her here. Why should she have expected more? Those three years of her father's marriage to Clare should have prepared her for what was happening now. Clare had never known a deep feeling for either of the Carlens. She had liked being married and having a home, but rather more she had liked her Women's Club . . . or had the club been a blind for some other activity? Tess was beginning to suspect that all she knew of Clare was the light, detached personality she had known in the house in London. There could have been much more beyond. This was something that needed thinking about; she wished she didn't feel so played out, and anxious about the little boy.

It was a lighthearted bedroom into which Clare led her. Duck-egg walls, gathered net at the window and covering the sprigged cotton of the bedspread and pale modern furniture with a comfortable rose pink armchair and cream rugs. One suitcase was placed on a stool ready for opening, and

relationship between a man and a woman. It's my fault it hasn't happened between Ramon and me. I went the wrong way about things.'

'How?'

'It's most difficult, talking to you like this. You're a bit narrow-minded, you know, Tess.'

'I'm not. I'm trying to understand. Are you expecting me to help you with this man in some way?'

Clare turned, and with the light behind her she was just a feminine shape with a luminous cloud about her head. 'You *can* help, darling. I've been playing off Victor against Ramon, but it doesn't work. He's the sort of man who'd think what the hell, there are plenty of other women who are willing.'

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Clare said:

'I'm sure you'd like to change into something cooler, and to rest. Please let me send that child with the chauffeur.'

'No, I'll go now and get it over. Clare...'

'Yes, dear?' came the solicitous response.

'I don't think I can stay on your terms. I'm sorry.'

'Then stay on your own terms, Tess,' said Clare generously. 'I want you here. Now that I've seen how much you need this break I want you here more than ever. Relax there's a pet. No one will make demands, I promise you.' She opened the wardrobe doors. 'There you are, plenty of room for everything. Dear little room, isn't it?'

Tess was hot, muzzy-headed and deflated. 'May I take the car at once? I'll be as quick as I can.'

'There's no hurry. Yusef will take you right to the house, or whatever it is, and wait for you. Don't overdo it, honey. I'd go along with you, but ...'

'It isn't necessary. Do you mind calling Benito from the kitchen?'

The child came quickly. 'We go to my papa?' he demanded eagerly.

'Yes. Did you have some tea?'

'Lemonade and cakes.' He ran ahead of her out of the house, scrambled into the back seat of the car and moved over, to make room for her. 'I am happy we go now, Señorita Tess. You think we see Papa in ten minutes?'

'Sure I do,' she said, borrowing his idiom, and leant forward to speak to the white-clad chauffeur. 'Will you drive to Tiran, please. I want a place called Cuera.'

As the car moved away Clare waved encouragingly. Tess relaxed against the seat, conscious of a throbbing in her temples. This was her most energetic day for weeks and she was beginning to weaken round the edges, and perhaps a little way inside. Disappointment and disillusionment, a niggling fear because she wasn't as fit as she'd hoped and a dread she couldn't place, made her feel sober and apprehensive. She wouldn't think about Clare till later, perhaps not till tomorrow. She was here in Tangier, and out there on the street walked two women in voluminous white haiks and straight behind them a good-looking dark-skinned

couple in smart European summer wear. And everywhere, as they entered the streets of shops and cafes, were men in djellababs or tropical suits; men galore, with the faces of Spaniards, Jews, Moors. And in the alleys the boys played, dozens of them, around donkeys that were loaded with bulging sacks. When she became accustomed to the glare and the heat she would wallow in this place, thought Tess.

Through winding streets where goats and chickens were as numerous as the people, they passed into wider avenues and over one of the hills of Tangier to the wide main road. The houses and blind walls stopped and there was a view of bare hill country, the rust-coloured foothills of the Rif. A few arid miles, round a bend, and below them spread the valley with the sea creeping into it and Tiran built round the bay on a long slope.

'The address,' said Tess to the driver, 'is simply Cuera. Do you know it?'

Yusef looked ahead but spoke politely over his shoulder. 'The Cuera is a square, mademoiselle. The name, please?'

'Westland. Mr. Boyd Westland.'

He nodded, drove into the tiny town which was overlooked from a hilltop by an arcaded citadel. They ran into the Cuera and he braked. A fountain spouted gently in the centre of the little cobbled square, and on three sides small white houses were half-hidden by date palms and orange trees. The fourth side was taken up by a couple of small shops, a café and a post office, all of which must be on the verge of bankruptcy, for apparently only the café was being patronised, by a single customer. It was this man whom Yusef approached. A hand was flung out, indicating a retiring little dwelling in the opposite corner of the Cuera. Yusef drove on the few yards and stopped at the modest archway that was gated with wrought iron and bore on the stonework, in cement script, the name 'Las Perlas'. The Pearls. Peculiar name for a house. Tess got out of the car, took Benito's hand.

'Here we are, laddie. I hope your father is at home.'

'You think mebbe not?' the little boy asked anxiously.

'We'll try. That's it, push the gate for me. My goodness, you'll be able to play hide-and-seek here, won't you? This

father of yours doesn't intend anyone to stray from the path!"

The magnolia and coral bushes were so thick that it was like walking on cobbles between green and flowery walls. The path curved once and arrived at a white porticoed door which had a black bell-push below a curly knocker in gleaming brass. Tess placed a firm thumb on the bell-push, heard a brief peremptory ringing inside and waited.

Fully two minutes passed before the door was opened. They stared at each other, she and the tall man. He had a good lean face with rugged lines, thick but disciplined hair of a dark teak-red and grey eyes that analysed; at least, that was how Tess felt about them, though she wasn't sure that he was entitled to dissect people dressed as he was, in old slacks and a striped shirt in cotton jersey that wasn't even decently tucked in.

'Papa!' cried Benito, and cast himself in ecstasy at the man's legs.

Tess ignored Mr. Westland's look of utter consternation. 'How do you do,' she said. 'My name is Tess Carlen. I was on the same ship as Benito and ... well, it's a long story. You look surprised, so I suppose you didn't get a cable?'

He seemed to come to with a violent jerk. 'I've been out all day—got home only a few minutes ago. You'd better come in.'

Which wasn't exactly a warm invitation, but a man who'd look down with horror at his own son clinging to his legs after not having seen the child for two years ... it was surprising he hadn't said thanks and closed the door more or less in her face.

She stepped into a small hall, where a black oak monk seat was cluttered with periodicals of a technical kind and a bamboo trellis on the wall held a couple of beat-up hats and a neat panama. He opened a door and she entered a wax-smelling sitting-room heavily furnished in dark gleaming wood. There were brass sconces on the white walls and a vast copper urn filled with rushes stood in the black tiled fireplace. A grim room, but beautiful in its way.

He bent and firmly disentangled himself from Benito, held the child away from him with one hand and looked him



over, coolly. 'Well, well, you're quite a big boy. What are you doing here?'

Tess said warmly, 'Where else should he be but with his father? You're certainly giving him a chilly welcome. He's been dying to get here, was so sure that everything would be just right once he'd met you again. And now you're a s...'

'Hold on there,' the man said calmly, studying her thin face and the dark hair, her slim shoulders in the green suit. 'By the look of you you'd better keep cool and sit down. I don't want a fainting woman on my hands.' He waited till she had impatiently sat on a tapestry chair, looked for another long moment at her slender pretty neck as she bent her head, and then looked at the child. 'You're a surprise, Benito. Go and look round the house while I talk to Miss Carlen. Try upstairs first.'

'You don't like me here?' the child queried, with almost adult percipience. 'I'm pretty good, Papa—look after myself alla time. Carmela, she's a fool.'

'You'd better do as your father says, Benito,' said Tess. 'Just walk round the rooms till he calls you. Don't touch anything.'

Benito drew a sigh, gave a Latin shrug and trotted out of the room. Tess looked up at the man, but he spoke first.

'Who's Carmela?'

'She's had charge of Benito in Salamanca and sailed with him from Oporto. She got cold feet and left the ship at Lisbon; the Captain asked me to bring the child to you.' She paused and said, 'They cabled you from the ship yesterday. Weren't you here?'

'Only at night. There's nothing in my mail—I was looking through it just now as I changed. This is so unexpected that I'm not sure how to handle it. I can't have that boy here.'

'No?' She was wide-eyed, weighing him up. 'Why not?'

'It's not that kind of household.' His jaw tightened. 'All right, Miss Carlen, I know it's not your business. I'll arrange something. Thanks for bringing him.'

'I suppose you have a servant who can take care of him?'

'I've a housekeeper, but he'll need more than that, even if he stays only a week or two. I'll fix it up.'

'But he's expecting to live with you for good.'

'That's impossible,' he said abruptly. 'He'll have to go back to Salamanca. I suspect his grandmother would be willing to take him back if she were well paid.'

'How can you contemplate such a thing?' said Tess, aghast. 'Your own son . . . and you're talking like a monster. He needs you—don't you see that? Benito's sensitive and intelligent; when he sees that you don't want him he'll be brave but terribly hurt. You can't do that to him, Mr. Westland!'

'Will you kindly allow me to make my own decisions?' he said curtly. 'I work long hours and often at night. If he'd come with the woman, Carmela, I might have kept him for a while, but anything permanent is out of the question. If he's going back, for his own sake it had better be soon.' He moved pointedly towards the door. 'Just remember that fifteen minutes ago I was a free man.'

Tess moved with him into the hall. 'You weren't free. Someone else had your responsibility for Benito, that was all.' She blinked, suddenly, felt a wetness on her lashes and purposely kept her head bent. 'Please try not to let Benito see how little you feel for him.'

He hesitated with his fingers on the door-knob; good fingers, not over-long, and blunt at the ends. 'Are you in trouble?' he shot at her.

She gave a small smile, without looking at him. 'That's quite funny, in the circumstances. Haven't you enough of your own?'

'I can handle it. Can you handle yours?'

'I'm not in trouble.'

'Been sick?'

'A little.'

'Staying in Tangier?'

'Yes.'

'You don't want to tell me any more?'

She lifted her head then. 'Why should I, Mr. Westland? You're a stranger, and I can't say I like my first impression. Please . . . I'm very tired. May I go?'

His fingers dropped from the door, he nodded towards the sitting-room. 'Get back in there and I'll give you a drink. Go on—and stop questioning my motives.'

Because she really was feeling done, Tess obeyed him. She sat down, felt the sweat of fatigue on her brow and a mental lassitude that meant she had stood just a little too much, for one day. She took the glass he offered, sipped something that tasted only mildly of whisky and rather bitter.

'Take the lot down,' he said. 'It'll pick you up and keep you going till you get back to your hotel. Which one are you staying at?'

'I'm staying with... friends.'

'Well, don't let them kill you with night life. You haven't the stamina for it.'

Tess didn't explain. She felt a comforting sensation in her throat and chest, longed to lie back and stay here in this room with this strong impersonal man who knew nothing and need be told nothing. He wasn't a man who loved people, but a keen, knowledgeable look about him told her he knew what she was doing and could be depended on. Dependable, but not likeable. Too cool and unemotional to inspire liking. How did he ever come to marry a Spaniard?

'Is Tiran your permanent home?' she asked.

'It'll do, for a few years.'

'Do you prefer it to Spain or England?'

He answered offhandedly. 'I came here of my own accord, Miss Carlen. I please myself, am answerable to no one.'

'Sorry.'

'I guess that was rude - the way I spoke then.' He gave her a hard smile. 'I don't get along with young women these days - lost the knack.'

'And have no wish to find it again?'

'None at all.'

'You must have been very much in love, I should think.'

'I'm thirty-three,' he said tersely. 'A man's unnatural if he hasn't gone through the blazing hoop once or twice by that age. I'm past it all now, thank God. You've got it in front of you, I'm afraid, but you'll probably get through. Some time soon you'll find a man who'll want to take care of you.'

'Why soon?' she asked curiously.

'It's just that there's a look about you that you can't have had long. Sort of hurt, as if inwardly you're wincing from something. There'll be a man who'll want to comfort you.'

'You're quite discerning, Mr. Westland. Thank you for the drink. I really must go now. I won't say goodbye to Benito. If you do send him back to Salamanca I'll see him before he goes. But ... but please don't do it unless it's unavoidable. He needs love, and he thinks his papa is the best man in the world.'

'Does he?' His mouth twisted with distaste. 'That's one of the reasons I'd rather send him back.' He didn't elaborate, and this time, when they reached the door, he opened it at once. 'Do you want me to assure you again that he'll be properly looked after?'

'No, I'm sure he will. I'd like to think you'll ... love him, but perhaps that's too much to ask. You don't care for even that kind of emotional tie, do you, Mr. Westland?'

'Maybe I'm jaded. You came by car, I suppose?'

She nodded. 'It's waiting out there beyond the wall. Your path is like the maze at Hampton Court. Have you ever really seen your garden?'

He smiled faintly. 'I rent the place and the landlord keeps the shrubs clipped like that. Saves a lot of bother.'

'Why Las Perlas?'

'House of the Pearls. My landlord was sentimental as a young man. He bought this house when his first child was born, and the pearls were his wife and baby. Pearls beyond price, so he told me, with garlic on his breath and tears in his eyes.'

'You scoff, but I think it's far lovelier than the idea of pearls meaning tears. Your landlord is a man after my own heart. Benito is more like a topaz than a pearl, but...'

'Fantasies aren't in my line,' he broke in. 'You look anaemic. Don't stand about.'

She stepped back and made to turn in the same movement. Her heel caught the edge of Benito's shabby old case which the chauffeur had placed on the step, and she staggered. Instinctively, because of the weak right leg, she grabbed at his shirt. Her face went white with fright. He gripped her with both hands, steadied her.

'Good God,' he said quietly. 'You really are sick.'

'No ... no. I'm all right.' She swallowed, forced a smile. For some reason she couldn't tell him more, couldn't explain

that since the plaster had been sawn from her leg she lived foolishly in fear of a re-fracture; nor that grabbing at him had wrenched the beastly shoulder a little. What a mess she was. 'I've had a long day, that's all.'

He frowned at her speculatively for a moment, then took her out to the car and put her into the back seat, stood back and inclined his head as if she were a stranger who had inadvertently come to the wrong house. Her nod in reply was as remote. The car bumped gently over the cobbles of the Cuera and into the short main avenue of Tiran.

Well, that was over, though why she should feel empty she didn't know. Perhaps it was a trace of loneliness now that she had passed Benito over to his parent; having charge of him today had helped somewhat, got her past that disquieting meeting with Clare.

A strange man, Benito's father. Mysterious, too. He worked long hours, so he said, but at what? What did he look like—a writer, an agent, an artist? No, none of those. He seemed to live alone in a neat little house, had chosen to do so rather than go back to England after losing his wife in Spain. What else did Englishmen do in Tangier? It seemed important to Tess that she should know.

She recalled the look in his face when she had told him that Benito thought him the best man in the world. Distaste, cynicism; and a fed-up sound in his voice when he had answered, 'Does he? That's one of the reasons I'd rather send him back.' Why had he said that? And why in the world should a man who had shown himself perceptive and thoughtful about the young stranger, Tess Carlen, care so little about his own very appealing son? He *had* been thoughtful, and even kind, though cold-blooded too, the way he'd commented, 'You look anaemic' To him, apparently, no woman could be pale and interesting; she was merely anaemic!

For almost the first time since she had met Clare this afternoon Tess felt a small spontaneous smile on her lips. If she had been in trim she might have made a few disconcerting replies to Mr. Boyd Westland!

The house, when she reached it, looked peaceful and secure. Tess hesitated just inside the door. The entrance was

really part of the lounge, but one of the ubiquitous ornate wrought-iron grilles hung with plants partly screened the room from cellars. Through it, Tess saw a heavily built man in pale grey pacing near the window, and she decided, swiftly, that for today she had met enough strangers—including Clare. Quietly, she mounted the staircase opposite the door and turned left at the top, to enter her bedroom.

Her clothes had been unpacked and put away, the suitcases had disappeared. On a table just under the window stood a bowl loaded with red and white carnations that were lush but scentless and on the bedside table a flat basket was tastefully piled with tangerines, figs, bananas and grapes. A brand-new dressing-table set backed with petit-point had been arranged for her use, and there was a casket of exclusive scent as well as a range of cosmetics that might have pleased a *houiri*.

Clare had certainly gone to town to please her. In return, she would expect favours from Tess, or rather one collective favour, the monopolisation of that big man downstairs so that Clare would be free to pursue the difficult and arrogant Ramon Guevara. Tess felt about as fit to plot and plan as little Benito was to win his cold, clear-eyed father.

They had an affinity, she and Benito. Both had come hopefully to Tangier, expecting to be accepted with pleasure and perhaps affection, if not love. And both had been disappointed. Tess was wanted only for what she could give, and Benito wasn't wanted at all.

Slowly, she got out of her jacket and skirt. Gratefully, she felt the breeze about her, smelled freshness as well as the curried atmosphere of Tangier. She felt tired and let-down, wanted a bath and to get into bed, to sleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to face life.

Almost unconsciously she flexed her wrists. Were those faint bruises, or shadows? He'd hurt when he gripped, that man. But how good it had felt, suddenly, to be steadied by steel-strong hands, to know that if she'd liked she could have collapsed and known herself safe. And the warm, unyielding wall of his chest as she'd clutched at his shirt.

Any man would have felt the same to her then, of course, she told herself quickly. Something of a bulwark. It was

sheer physical masculine strength she had been aware of, not a person.

But as she went out, softly, to find the bathroom, Tess couldn't help pondering once more the mystery of the man at Las Perlas.

## CHAPTER II

VICTOR MEARS, florid, softy upholstered and beautifully tailored, was a man who gave a first impression of liking all the material things of life rather excessively. He ate well, savoured wines with his food, never took coffee without a liqueur and considered no meal complete unless it was followed by a choice cigar. His manner was expansive and smiling, as befitted a man with such tastes, and his face, which must once have been attractive, showed little bulges of flesh alongside the lines from nose to mouth. He had blue eyes in creased little pockets, a straight thick nose and a surprisingly good, clean-cut mouth. His hair, neatly waved back, was turning from sand-colour to grey almost unnoticeably.

Tess met him at lunch on her first full day in Tangier. She had come down at exactly one-fifteen, to find Clare and Mr. Mears chatting cheerfully as they walked through from the lounge to the blue and white dining-room.

'Ah, there you are, dear!' exclaimed Clare brightly. 'Why didn't you come down for a drink? Do meet Victor. This is Tess . . . my late husband's daughter. Small and sweet !'

Victor took Tess's hand and smiled as he bowed over it. 'I'm happy to know you, Tess. Sit down, sit down.'

He pulled out her chair, but Tess waited till he had seated Clare. 'I only *look* frail,' she said, 'and it won't last long. If I eat only a quarter of what's served to me I shall soon be fat as butter.'

'Excellent. Thin women scare me.' He took his place at the small square table near the window. 'You've been through a bad time, haven't you? Clare's been terribly anxious about you, and for her sake as well as yours I'm glad she's managed to get you here. She'll look after you, and if I can help in any way it will make me very happy.'

'That's most kind, Mr. Mears.'



'Call me Victor, please! I'm one of the family . . . almost. Eh, Clare?'

'Of course you are, darling. I want you two to like each other very much.'

'That won't be difficult for me, anyway,' he said.

Tess smiled, as was expected of her. 'I've never lived with so much goodwill. Are you English?'

'Of course he is,' said Clare swiftly.

He patted her hand on the table. 'It's a good question, Clare. Am I English? Not very, if I'm honest. I was born in England, Tess, but that's about all. I was educated in France and came into my father's string of boutiques at an early age. I've lived in Italy, Spain, Greece and even Israel. So I guess my nationality is cosmopolitan.'

'It sounds interesting.'

'It's interesting till you're forty. After that, you begin to wonder what the stay-at-homes have that you haven't. So I'm aiming to settle. I don't really care where, as long as I settle.'

'I wish you luck.'

He nodded his thanks and began to take an interest in the chilled consommé. Momentarily Tess met Clare's green glance; it was a smiling glance with the set look of warning. Just slightly Tess lifted a brow before taking an interest in the delectable array of foods. She had the odd conviction that Clare was just a wee bit at her mercy. But she might be mistaken; the new blonde, sweet-natured Clare still had the cool, measuring character of the dark widow who had cashed her assets and gone travelling. When she felt stronger, thought Tess, this situation might be fun. She'd make no promises, but sit back and enjoy it. The Mears man didn't really look a likely husband for Clare, but he was obviously besotted about her, and Tess had a soft corner for anyone anywhere who was in love. Yes, even if the lover happened to be forty-three, well padded and addicted to the lavish use of cologne.

Yesterday, Tess had felt too sickened and tired to reflect upon Clare's proposition. This morning, though, she had thought about it deeply, getting hot at one moment, when recalling that Clare didn't really care for Victor Mears but

would marry him without love if she could not have the man she wanted, and then frowning bewilderedly over a woman who had gambled with the three or four thousand she had received for the house and now wanted something her new look might not be able to buy.

Clare lived well. Her food bill alone must be considerable, and there was Pedro's wages as well as the rent; quite apart from the stylish frocks and shoes, the upkeep of the whitish hair-do. Plastic surgery was expensive and the dental work hadn't been done for nothing. And if Clare had lived at her present standard during the past year ... well, she couldn't have much in the bank; she had even mentioned debts. Yes, it had been a gamble, a careful one. Tess couldn't understand the mentality behind such a venture, but she could believe it, of this burnished, smiling Clare.

It was Clare who asked, as they were served with crayfish salad, 'Victor, do you know of a masseuse? Tess has to have treatment for her shoulder and I told her that you know how to go about such things in Tangier. Would your masseur know a woman ?'

'He might, but why not go to the Doria Clinic?' He turned to Tess. 'That's where you must go, my dear. Best clinic on this coast, and they have everything. I'll take you there myself tomorrow morning, if you like.'

'I needn't put you to that trouble. If you really think it's good I'll find it myself, by taxi.'

'I wouldn't hear of it. Of course I'll take you.'

'You see?' said Clare smoothly. 'I told you Victor loves helping people. Let him take you, Tess. He has pull, and will get you past the queue, if there is one.'

'Leave it to me,' he said. 'I'll phone them this afternoon and get you an appointment. Their orthopaedic man is French, and the other visiting doctors are of different nationalities; it's a wonderful idea in a place like Tangier. The place is a bit of a melting pot. The shoulder painful?' he asked sympathetically.

'Not very, but it's weak.'

'And the leg?'

'It's doing fine; walking is better than massage.'

'We'll get you right,' he assured her. 'You don't know

how glad I am that there's some way I can help you.'

And he meant it. He was kind, and there was even a youthfulness about him when he saw there was something he could do for someone else. How could Clare be cruel to him, or even deceive him? He did look a little gross, but only as a man who loves good living is gross, and his thoughtfulness and insistence on helping others, the kindness he radiated, even when he smiled, easily balanced his physical shortcomings. In any case, a woman he doted on could persuade him to change his eating habits. Tess was convinced that he'd give up a good deal for Clare. She just didn't care enough. Which, Tess thought, purely from his angle, was sad.

Victor could talk. He told her all she wanted to know about Moslem Africa, its architecture and throbbing music. He switched on the radio and translated the Arabic, twiddled knobs and found Seville and Rome, and was equally at home in their languages. By the time he had finished his cigar she had both respect and liking for the man who loved Clare. And it was he whom she was supposed to keep amused and out of the way while Clare chased her handsome Spaniard. Not if I can help it, she told herself. The man deserved frankness, and from Tess he'd get it.

Clare, for the rest of that day, was amazingly gentle and undemanding, and soon after dinner she insisted that Tess go early to bed. She made no reference to yesterday's talk but said, with a brave smile, that she intended to spend the evening alone and would possibly go to bed early herself.

Next morning Tess had her first close look at Tangier, or rather at the small part of it which had to be crossed to reach the Doria Clinic, on the outer edge of the town. Crowds premenaded, sat and drank hot chocolate, shopped and graphically gossiped. A string of donkeys, either burdened with goods or mounted by swarthy Berber women in robes and big straw hats, held up the taxis and flashy autos of the business men of Tangier. The car had to be parked some way from the clinic, but it was not too hot walking, and Victor Mears was a polite and considerate escort.

'Tangier is open all day and all night,' he told her. 'Clare and I will take you to the Casbah and the Roman ruins, to

the lighthouse and the caves and the night clubs—even to the Casino, if that's your taste. We'll mix things, so that you're not tired out. Tonight we'll all dine with a friend of mine—a retired diplomat who spent most of his career in the Far East, he likes the climate. Well, here's the clinic. I'll speak to the receptionist for you and take you through.'

A few minutes later Tess was introduced to the little French orthopaedic surgeon, who passed her on to Dr. Sheila Vernet. Dr. Vernet was a fine-looking woman of about thirty. She had black shining hair cut close, a sallow, good-tempered skin covering pointed regular features which had an almost patrician cast. Like many Europeans in such places, she was of mixed blood; in her case it was French and English, but her accent was hardly discernible. Her looks were Gallic, her manner English, but Tess got the impression that in private life the woman was a mixture of both. She had a smooth, candid way with her, a sure touch in her fingers as she felt over the injured shoulder.

'Thanks,' she said with a smile. 'Tentatively, I've fixed for you to come here for therapy three mornings a week at ten - Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Does that suit you?'

'Perfectly.'

'Good. I know the leg has healed, but may I see it? Will you lie on the couch?'

There had been a time when Tess had felt a fool lying on a doctor's couch; since the accident, however, that was one direction in which she had lost her shyness. She hitched her skirt and lay down, stared at the lifeless fan in the ceiling.

'Compound fractures of tibia and fibula - is that right?' Dr. Vernet asked.

'The femur, too - about three inches above my knee.'

'You really had it, didn't you? Are you ...' There came a tap at the door and she called, 'Who is it?'

He came in, threw a brief, 'Excuse me?' towards the couch without looking at it and said, 'Sheila, I'll have to have another section of that bone - the Tashfin man. I've just been in to see Bourdot, and he says you can do it tomorrow morning.'

'Of course, if you say so.' The woman gave him the close, friendly look of someone who knew him more than well. 'What happened to you last night?'

'I stayed at home.'

'You look dour this morning.'

'I feel it. See you later.'

'Just a minute—there's something here that might interest you—a patient who saved herself from smashed ribs and internal injuries by taking it all with her right shoulder and leg.'

Even when he came to the couch with Dr. Vernet he didn't look at Tess's face; only at her leg. But Tess, lying back on the thin pillow, felt something twist suddenly inside her, a sharp, almost agonising awareness. She saw the top of the dark red head as he bent over her leg, the foreshortened face, the wide shoulders in a short white coat. And she felt his fingers gently exploring the mended fractures, felt herself tightening against his touch.

'Young bones,' he said. 'Amazing how they knit. But you may not be so lucky next time you drive fast, young woman....' He lifted his cool, quizzical glance and saw her. Recognition was masked within a moment. He moved away from the couch. 'I won't be lunching here today, Sheila. I have to go home.'

Tess heard the woman ask, 'Is there something wrong?'

'No, it's just some details I have to attend to. It may keep me tied up for the next few days.'

'Not going out to the Country Club on Sunday?'

'I don't think so. Do you mind?'

'Not if it's work. Sure I can't help?'

Tess was conscious of his hesitation; it was almost audible. Then: 'If I need help I'll let you know. So long.'

He was gone, and Dr. Vernet still looked absent-minded as she wished Tess au revoir a little later. Tess walked down the corridor to the waiting room, where Victor Mears was reading *Paris Match*. She felt light-headed and a little empty, but as she and Victor walked to his car she put a query.

'Do you know a man named Westland?'

'Dr. Westland? I know of him.'

'You remember I brought a little boy ashore with me? Dr.

Westland is his father.'

'Is that so? You met him at Tiran?'

'Yes, but I didn't know he was a doctor. All the way home I tried to imagine what he could be, and got nowhere. He was wearing old slacks and a striped woven shirt.'

'He'd made himself comfortable, I suppose,' said the understanding Victor. 'Westland isn't a practising doctor. He's a pathologist attached to the hospital.'

'I saw him just now in the clinic'

'He has to go there, of course; they have a lab that he supervises.' Victor rested an enquiring smile on her face. 'You look pink. Was it distressing, or do you feel better?'

'It was no bother.' She gestured, perplexedly. 'I think it was seeing that man. He ... he ignored me.'

Victor almost paused in his walk. "That's strange. He's known as a reserved type, but that's the English in him. He's more or less engaged to a woman doctor here, Sheila Vernet.'

'Really?' Tess, unaccountably, felt winded. 'There's something not quite right about him. I don't know what it is.'

But in a way, she did know. The man was a paradox. In the clinic he'd looked every inch a doctor; in his home he had looked sporting. It was possible, of course, that a pathologist could have a slightly swashbuckling side to his character to which he gave rein when he relaxed, but somehow those two, the well-groomed doctor and the man at home who had looked with distaste upon his own child, did not coalesce. As she got into the car Tess was still reflective.

It had hurt, a little, his treating her as someone he had never seen before; perhaps more so because the moment he had entered that surgery she had felt him there with the very tips of her nerves. But he hadn't been aware of her until, casually, he had lifted his glance from her mended bones. And that moment, in which he should have said, politely, 'Oh, it's you, Miss Carlen. So this is why you looked off-colour the other day,' had elicited from him only a flash of recognition which he had doused. He neither wanted to know her nor to have others aware that he had met her. Which angered Tess. It was as though he blamed her for landing him with Benito !

'For **coffee**,' said Victor, 'I'm going to take you to a restaurant that's owned by an Irishman, and afterwards we'll drive round and look at the consulates. You need good legs **for** the markets and the Casbah, and they'll keep, anyway. On the whole it's not a bad idea to absorb the atmosphere of Tangier for a week or two before exploring. Tourists never give themselves long enough to let the place get into their bones.' He laughed, in his quiet way. 'Perhaps it's as well, or they might become fixtures.'

**The** rest of the morning with Victor Mears was pleasant. They had coffee in a kind of courtyard among palms and **were** entertained by a knowing little monkey dressed in a blue suit and a red fez. As they walked slowly back to the car Tess noticed that articles in the shop windows were bewilderingly priced either in francs or pesetas; Victor said he would write out the values for her, but she wouldn't find things expensive.

When they reached the house there was a staggeringly long and gleaming car outside it, on the road. Victor shrugged humorously.

'It belongs to Ramon Guevara. He will have asked himself to lunch. Like other men, he's attracted to Clare and she's **too** sweet-natured to snub him. You may enjoy Ramon. He's very handsome.'

**Tess** kept an open mind, though not about Clare. Fleetingly, **as** she went into the house, she wondered how Clare had managed to get her Spaniard to come to the house while Victor was occupied elsewhere. Then she met the man, and **saw** Clare seated in a white chair that set off the coral linen rock she wore and the blonde hair, and she knew it had taken no persuasion at all. Ramon obviously loved women, particularly fair ones.

He was tall, dark and exceptionally good-looking, his features long and fine, his eyes small and deep-set; in all, an El Greco come to life. He had the manner of a nobleman, but Tess had heard it was part of the Spanish stock-in-trade, that exquisite courtesy, the ability to make a woman feel had kindled fires. He turned it on for Tess; she was aware of it in the fingertips that lifted her hand to his lips.

'So . . . the lovely Tess from England,' he said warmly,

lingering on the sibilant in her name. 'I have been longing to make your acquaintance, señorita. May I bid you welcome to Tangier?'

'Thank you,' said Tess, withdrawing her hand and assimilating a grain of salt with his flattering glance. 'I've heard about you, too, from Clare.'

'I mentioned that you were one of our friends,' Clare put in suavely. 'Well, Victor, I hope you two have had a successful morning?'

'I think so. Shall we all go out to lunch, the four of us?'

She smiled at him sweetly. 'Do you mind if we have it here? I've already invited Ramon and told Pedro.'

"Then I'll wash, if I may.'

Tess also excused herself. She went to her room and changed into a fresh flowered print. When she came down the two men were drinking and Victor was mixing her a gin-and-bitters. The Spaniard seated her, accidentally brushed her bare shoulder with his fingers and begged her pardon. He was exciting, she admitted as she sipped, and knew he was appraising her with those warm, brilliant eyes. Exciting, unscrupulous, dissipated . . . a man one could enjoy but not trust.

It was during lunch that Victor Mears mentioned Dr. Westland. 'You know him, don't you?' he asked Ramon Guevara. 'Did you know he has a small son? Tess took the child to Tiran the day she arrived.'

The Spaniard listened to the details and looked thoughtful. 'You have been to his house, señorita? He lives alone, no?'

She nodded reluctantly. Since the encounter this morning she had come to the conclusion that Dr. Westland had not wanted his son in Tangier for a very simple reason; Dr. Sheila Vernet. Perhaps the woman didn't even know Benito existed. From that brief conversation between the two of them it was fairly plain that the man had told no one of the boy's arrival. She wished she knew why Benito was so unwelcome, why one doctor couldn't tell another whom he intended to marry that his small son was in Tangier, hoping to stay.

'Do you have to see him again?' Ramon asked her.



'No, and I'm rather glad. He looked through me this morning.'

'For that, I will challenge him to a duel!'

'I wouldn't,' she said lightly. 'I'd say he's pretty good with a scalpel.'

'I know Westland by sight, but what sort of man is he, this pathologist?'

'Cold, withdrawn . . . but to be fair he's quite considerate. He doesn't love his son and I don't think he loved his wife. I think he admires Dr. Vernet and that they suit each other very well.'

'And that is an adequate reason for marriage?'

'It could be, between two of a kind.'

Ramon gave a deep shrug. 'That is something I cannot understand. In Spain we have the arranged marriage, but it is not a calculated business of marrying two people who suit each other, and it becomes more and more rare. Even when a man has already been married there is surely some emotion left for a second wife.'

Clare said, with a nicely measured undertone of sadness, 'That's very true of women, anyway, Ramon. I think anyone, man or woman, is a worthier mate after a marriage which has been unsatisfactory in some way. Unhappiness of that kind makes one more *simpático*, more understanding and forgiving.'

Victor endorsed this, of course, though not in words. He looked gentle compassion and comprehension at Clare, would have put his hand over hers if he could have reached it. Tess felt her knees trembling under the table. Neither of Clare's marriages had been really unhappy, and during her three years with the Carlens she had been permitted every self-indulgence. That second marriage was the only one these men knew about, and by implying unhappiness she was tarnishing Tess's father, who had loved and spoiled her.

Perhaps Clare belatedly realised this, for she said brightly, 'Let's move outside for coffee, shall we? There's no breeze in the patio today.'

It was pleasant out there and the conversation took a more conventional course. Tess was included in it, but she said little. She watched the play between these three, acknow-

ledged to herself that Clare was clever and even Charming. About the Spaniard, though, Tess felt one could never be sure. Now and then he slanted that burning glance at Clare's fair head and vivid lips, but when he turned to Tess there was something equally vital for her in those dark eyes. It was as though he were sending her a message that meant life or death. Absurd, but thrilling.

Both men left at about three, and the two women cleared the ashtrays before going indoors. Clare stretched, voluptuously.

'I like having the two of them together—can you understand that?'

'I can understand it in you,' said Tess. 'You're playing a game.'

'It's not sport, it's serious. I'm getting into debt.'

'It doesn't seem to worry you.'

'Well, of course not, because there'll always be Victor. What do you think of Ramon?'

'That he's fascinating and devious and probably cruel. I think he'd love to have a serious affair with you, but he won't marry you.'

Just faintly, Clare's mouth hardened. 'Would you like to bet on it?'

'It's hardly a thing to gamble on.'

'Can you blame me for trying?'

'Not if you're in love with him. Whatever happens, I don't think you could hurt him.'

'How wise we are, at twenty-two,' said Clare with sarcasm. 'What else have you learned?'

'That you *could* hurt Victor Mears. He's sensitive.'

Clare gave her bell-like laugh. 'Sensitive? Victor? He's a business man, rich, but always keen for more money. He wants a wife, someone with looks and a flair for dress. That's the sort of man he is; kind, generous, hard headed. But not sensitive, my dear. Ramon is the sensitive one, the artist in living. He owns the plush Mirzeh Hotel along the coast and has rooms there. He has a studio, paints and writes.'

'Both?'

'A dilettante, perhaps, but he has a genius for living.'

When you get to know more about him you may find yourself falling for him. Only ... don't let yourself, will you? Hmmm? He's Clare's.'

'I'll remember that.'

'Don't look so prim. You're as capable of going overboard for a man as any other woman. But choose someone else—not one of mine!' She laughed again, and let a moment or two pass before saying, consideringly, 'I'm afraid we don't have your sort of man here, you know; they stay at home and consolidate for the future.'

This sounded so unpleasantly like another allusion to her father that Tess moved towards the stairs. 'I've a couple of letters to write. Do you mind?'

Clare didn't mind anything Tess did, and only occasionally did she take exception to one of her remarks. Even then, she remained pleasant in speech. Tess wondered. Was Clare getting her own way, after all? There were the therapy sessions three mornings a week, when Victor insisted on acting as her escort, evenings out at other people's houses or one of the night spots, when Ramon completed the foursome and danced with Clare while Victor, who hated dancing, sat with Tess, who hadn't yet tried her leg on a dance floor. While Victor was with Tess Clare knew herself free, and clearly she was making the most of those hours of certainty. Even by the end of Tess's first week there was a change in the relationship between Clare and the Spaniard; the flirtatious badinage had been replaced by a subtle intimacy of which Victor must have been conscious. Tess told him it wasn't necessary for him to accompany her to the Doria Clinic, but again he insisted.

'I can easily fit in a business appointment while you're inside, and it gives me pleasure to take you somewhere for coffee afterwards. You're feeling better, aren't you?'

'Much better.'

'I can tell,' he said, his smile almost affectionate. 'You're still thin and a little nervous, but you're getting eager to see everything. I'm glad to be the one who takes you round.'

After the first six treatments from the therapist Tess had to see Dr. Vernet. This time, the woman was businesslike and her touch was even slightly callous; preoccupied,

thought Tess. And then, unbidden, peculiar questions came into her mind. Did they kiss? Did they talk of marriage as a professional partnership or as some lovely bond which would grow stronger with the years? Had they yet discussed Benito? Was it possible that the man hadn't told Sheila Vernet of Benito's existence? How was he handling it now?

'Six more treatments,' Dr. Vernet said abruptly. 'If this ache at the back doesn't yield after the first three you'd better have cortisone. Did they give you cortisone in England?'

'Only one injection, just before I left. It helped a lot.'

Sheila Vernet nodded. 'You go for a treatment now?'

'No, I've had it—a short one today because I was seeing you.'

'Good,' offhandedly. 'I'll see you in exactly a week.'

Tess slipped on her dress, tidied her hair with a hand and picked up her bag. 'Thanks, Dr. Vernet. Goodbye.'

From habit, the other said 'Au revoir' as she took off her white coat. Tess had a glimpse of a good slender-waisted figure in navy and white before she was in the corridor, with the door closed behind her. Automatically her hand went up once more to her hair, to smooth the careless cut. She turned a corner, said quickly, 'I beg your pardon,' and sidestepped.

Dr. Westland said, calmly, 'Good morning, Miss Carlen. I'm glad you're still about. I'd like a word with you.'

'With ... with me?' She gave him a startled hazel stare. 'I'm surprised you even remember me.'

'All right,' he said jadedly, 'maybe I asked for that. Come into this office, will you?'

He opened a door and she went in first. He pulled the door to with a decisive thud, looked for a moment at the bare desk, the swivel chair set tidily behind it. There were no other chairs in the room, but beside the desk stood a low cabinet.

'Like to sit on that?' he said. 'I won't keep you long.'

'I can stand. Why do you want to see me?'

'Partly to apologise. You haven't asked after Benito.'

'I wasn't sure it would be wise, but I'd like to know how he is and what you've decided.'

'He's fine.' He said it as if Benito's rude health were almost too dependable. 'I cabled his grandmother, but she

hasn't replied, and I don't suppose she intends to. Benito is staying with my housekeeper all day and sleeping at the house.'

'Las Perlas,' she said, and smiled suddenly. 'I can imagine you two pearls there at night.'

'Yes ?' he remarked unsmilingly. 'I hear the treatment hasn't done your shoulder much good yet. Like to see Bourdot?'

She said, watching him, 'I've just come from Dr. Vernet. She's prescribed six more treatments and cortisone if the pain hasn't cleared within a week.'

'You could still see Bourdot if you wanted to.'

She shook her head. 'They told me in England the shoulder would take longest. It's not too bad.'

'It's up to you.' He pushed his hands into his pockets, looked down at the tiled floor for a moment before saying, 'I have to see you privately; it's important. Can you lunch with me?'

'Not without telling my ... my friends.'

'Mears?' His grey eyes met hers keenly. 'He's one of the lousy rich. What's he to you?'

'He's a close friend of my stepmother's and he's been very good to me,' she said firmly. 'I happen to like him immensely.'

'Okay, okay, don't protest too much. Look here, I'm tied up till noon, but after that I can be free till two-thirty. Would you care to come out to the house for lunch, or would that be against your...'

'You sound very much as if you're trying to be nasty, Dr. Westland.'

He lifted an eyebrow. 'I think maybe I am. Sorry.'

'You're not sorry. Why should you want to see me alone? The other day you even ...'

'I know.' He sounded irritable. 'I can't explain things here. Where can I find you at twelve o'clock?'

Her impulse was to tell him to go climb a wall. But instinct and curiosity were stronger. She wanted to see that house again, she assured herself quickly; that was all.

'I'll be at the cafe next door.'

'Without friends,' he said flatly.

'Very well.' She raised her head on the slim pretty neck.

'Did you expect to see me today?'

'I came over here from the hospital for that purpose.'

'So it really is important?'

'Do I strike you as the sort of man who'd take a young woman he hardly knows out to his house for lunch just for kicks?'

'Not exactly. Dinner, now ... that's a different proposition.'

'You've perked up since last we spoke. I'd better warn you—I don't rise to provocative women.'

She smiled. 'Then you miss a lot of fun, and even a doctor should have his quota. Twelve o'clock, then, Dr. Westland, and I'm far too scared of you to be provocative.'

Tess walked straight out of the office and down towards the arched entrance without looking back. But she knew that he went on, into Dr. Sheila Vernet's office presumably. Perhaps that was why the woman had sloughed the white coat. She'd looked smart and feminine without it.

Victor was surprised and pleased that she had a luncheon date. 'Perhaps the chap didn't recognise you the other day,' he said charitably. 'I've heard it said that doctors can differentiate one anatomy from another more easily than they can place faces. Poor things; they're indispensable, but I wouldn't be one for all the diamonds in Africa.'

They had a cool drink in a veranda looking over the beach, and he promised to tell Clare that Tess would be out for lunch. When he left her Tess tidied up. She would have liked to change the cream linen for something softer, but to console herself she reflected that he might consider she had donned a fresh dress for base reasons. Provocative women left him cold, so he said, but it was probably a half-truth. If they vexed him, it couldn't quite be caused through coldness. True coldness is indifference, and somehow you couldn't imagine Dr. Westland indifferent to anything at all. He was too sure of himself, too positive. And yet was it the act of a positive man to ask a strange young woman out to his house for lunch because he had something important to discuss with her? Her heart began to beat erratically; what could he possibly want of her—some help with Benito? Yes, that must be it. But why didn't he go to his doctor friend? Why had

he deliberately come to the clinic this morning, to find Tess Carlen?

Tess sipped her mint tea, watched stragglers coming back from the Casbah; a woman in a dragging haik with a gauze veil across her face, bearded men in robes and tarboush talking as gravely as if they were discussing deep secrets, two British sailors on leave looking hot, even in their tropical uniforms. The sky glared, an electric blue scarred here and there by huge black crows. Not a sea-bird in sight; what had happened to all those which had followed the ferry-boat from Gibraltar?

He came with firm, purposeful step. 'I'm right on time. Are you ready to go at once?'

She stood up. 'I'm not absolutely sure that I should go with you.'

He gave an indolent laugh as he moved her chair to give her room to pass. 'You're not so scared. I haven't forgotten the flames you darted at me when I failed to give Benito a fatherly welcome.'

'I didn't know then that you were a doctor.'

'Doesn't my profession mark me in some way?' He pushed her gently in front of him till they reached the car. 'I feel I know what you do in England, just by looking at you.'

'You do? Tell me.'

'Let me say I know what you *don't* do.' He opened the door of a low-slung black car and saw her seated. He was behind the wheel and starting the engine when he added, 'You have nothing to do with the medical profession - too dreamy-eyed. You could be in an office, but I don't think so. If I were permitted only one guess I'd say that you deal with music or books or paintings.'

'That's three guesses.'

He laughed. 'Somewhere near? Let's see. It probably wouldn't be art, which leaves . . . I'll go for books. Right?'

She looked at him curiously as they slipped through a street into the Boulevard Pasteur. 'That's uncanny. I have charge of the book department in a West End store.'

'I'll be honest with you. I didn't know what you were till I checked up in the clinic records.'

'You've been snooping?' she demanded crossly. 'That's pretty low, isn't it?'

'It was necessary,' he said quietly. And then, casually, he asked, 'What do you think of Tangier?'

Her words came bluntly because she found it less easy than he did to switch moods. 'It's very exotic, very hot, and no one here is quite normal.'

'What's abnormal about me?'

'Most things,' she said, looking determinedly out at the street they were climbing. 'Did you put a private eye on my trail?'

'You've been reading whodunits. Let's leave serious talking till we've had some lunch.'

'You can at least explain why you ignored me that first day at the clinic'

'It's very simple. You were Sheila Vernet's patient and I wasn't supposed to have seen you before. Also, at that time I hadn't mentioned Benito to anyone at all, and I'd got a lot on my mind—too much to start more intricacies. And now tell me about that accident of yours.'

She gave details, briefly, while he swung the car out on to the coast road. He nodded as he listened, and when she had finished he looked at her contemplatively for a moment. Then, as they came to a bend, his glance went back to the road which ran between arid sun-brown hills towards the valley of Tiran.

'Do you get along well with your stepmother?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And her friends?'

'You mean Victor Mears?'

'Mears has too much money, but he's harmless. I was thinking of Ramon Guevara.'

'Ramon? Do you know him?'

He simulated a Spanish accent and even a glossy smile. 'Everyone knows Ramon, señorita. He is one of the most famous figures in Tangier!'

'Do you mean infamous?'

'Maybe.' His next question was faintly stressed. 'Does he ever try to see you alone?'

'No. I don't think I've been alone with him at the house'



for more than a few seconds.'

'Will you promise me something?'

'I'm not sure. We're practically strangers.'

'But we do happen to be English, both of us. If Guevara ever tries to see you alone, will you let me know at once?'

'Let *you* know?'

He smiled mockingly. 'I'm not staking a claim on you, Miss Carlen. Will you promise?'

'Not until I know what it's all about.'

He shrugged. 'Leave it for now. We're nearly there. What do you think of my village? The old wall was built a thousand years ago and the market is held just inside it three days a week. The Cuera once belonged to a Spanish count who married a very beautiful Moorish woman. His house was where the shops now stand and the square was his patio. But that was a long time ago. My house is one of the newer ones and it's been there nearly a hundred years. My landlord is eighty-nine.'

'Tiran is fascinating,' she admitted, as she looked through a Moorish archway into a tiled courtyard where a miniature fountain spurted into a sculptured stone basin, 'but not many English live here, do they? Do you prefer it to Tangier?'

'Don't you?'

She **turned** her head quickly and looked at him, left his **question** unanswered. **When disconcerted**, act dumb, **she** thought. He made her feel uncomfortable, and she wondered if that were his aim. Perhaps it was a gambit he used with women since **he**'d been through **the** 'flaming hoop' ... meaning love.

He pulled up in the Cuera outside his own retiring villa. Together, they entered the quiet little hall and went into the sitting-room. He gave her gin-and-French, had a small one himself.

'I don't normally drink during the daytime, but this is an occasion,' he said, tongue in cheek. 'You're the first English woman I've ever entertained in the house.'

'But not the first woman?' she asked mischievously.

He lifted his shoulders. 'Only the second, actually. Sheila Vernet often comes in for a drink on Sundays.'

'Oh, yes,' she said calmly. 'Someone told me that you and

she are more or less engaged.'

'More or less,' he conceded. 'Do you play golf?'

'No. Is that what you do at the Country Club?'

'Occasionally.' He left the subject. 'We'll eat at once and talk afterwards. I'd better tell Marthe. Excuse me.'

Tess drank slowly, feeling the cool peace of the room seep into her. There was an odd quality about Las Perlas, but she couldn't determine what it was. The place was not as prosaic as it looked, the home of a hardworking pathologist; it was hushed, expectant. Even a little romantic, she thought, startled. And she must have had that eager, wondering look in her eyes when he came back, for he paused, suddenly, as he caught it.

'What's happened?'

'Nothing,' she said hastily. 'Why do you ask?'

'You look different.' Again a cynical shrug. 'But young people do register all their emotions, don't they? And somehow, they look them even when they haven't much expression . . . and you have plenty. I'd guard it, if I were you.'

Tess inspected her hands, the scrubbed hands of a child; thin fingers and pink unpainted nails. 'You miss so much if you go through life covering up. I'm not ashamed of being young and ignorant.'

'Why should you be?' he said, a little tiredly. 'You make me feel old and horribly experienced.' He waved towards a half-open door. 'Let's eat. It's all cold—Marthe only cooks at night. Do you mind?'

Marthe turned out to be a middle-aged woman who was French in everything but her colouring, which was decidedly dark. Clearly, she was surprised that the doctor should bring a woman guest for lunch, but it had her approval. In fact, she was even more keen to please Tess than to please her employer.

'*Est bon?*' she asked anxiously, as Tess tried each dish.

'*Tres bon,*' said Tess amateurishly, though she smiled with all her charm.

'Marthe thinks I'm crazy,' Dr. Westland told Tess when the housekeeper had left them. 'When I first took her on she brought a pretty girl here to wait on me, and was disgusted when I turned her away.'

Tess pinked slightly. 'And she still won't accept your indifference towards the sex?'

'I'm not indifferent.'

She remembered Sheila Vernet and said quickly, 'No, of course not. I should have said your attitude towards romantic love. The French are amorous but not romantic, and you probably have that same outlook.'

He helped himself to a second slice of galantine. 'And what's yours? Plenty of saccharin?'

'No,' she said firmly. 'I think the romantic love comes first—the attraction between two people, the little prickles of delight as you find and begin exploring each other. You feel old things in new ways and gradually everything has more significance and depth because until you're in love you feel only with the surface. All the people you've known before ...' She broke off, in minor confusion, pushed a piece of buttered croissant into her mouth.

He looked amused. 'Are you in love, Miss Carlen?'

She didn't answer, except with a brief cold glance. But after a moment she asked, 'Doesn't Benito have lunch with you?'

'Marthe gives him his food in the kitchen. It's what he was used to at home.'

'Is he there now?'

'I think so. I told her not to let on that you're here, but you can see him before you leave. Shall we have fruit and coffee in the patio?'

Tess was glad to get out into the air, even though it was much hotter than indoors. The patio was no larger than Clare's and was even more enclosed, so that you had the feeling of sitting in a hothouse that was embellished with stone pillars and climbing plants. The tall garden wall was white, and splashed along its length by garish profusions of rust-pink, saffron and purple bougainvillea, and at intervals a paving stone was missing and a bush palm grew there, spreading its green fans above a couple of garden chairs. Sunshine was muted by a pergola covered with orange and lilac bignonias. Here, colours warred and mingled harshly, but nothing had scent.

He got out cigarettes, and when they were lighted he

leaned forward with his arms along his thighs. He looked round at her as she sat back in her chair. His eyes were cool and grey, the eyes of a doctor measuring facts.

She withstood his scrutiny, but said, 'What are you wondering—how far I can be trusted?'

'I can trust you,' he said, 'but I don't want to burden you. Mind if I call you Tess?'

That queer little tremor in her throat. 'Not at all. I wouldn't feel quite right calling you Boyd.'

'The name is Philip Boyd Westland. I'm never called Boyd. I'm going to be frank with you, Tess, and if you want to get the hell out afterwards I shan't stop you. First... I'm not Benito's father.'

She stared at him. 'But ... but he called you Papa, and you let him!'

'I had a reason for that, and it still exists. I've never been married, but I was once briefly in love with his mother.' He gestured almost irritably. 'This would be easy if I could tell you everything, but I can't. Benito is really my nephew—my brother's child. But few people here know I have a brother, and it's best that way.'

'Then why are you telling me?'

'Because I feel someone should know, someone like you, who has a small interest in the child and will be staying here only a matter of weeks. I've said I trust you. Do you feel you can trust me?'

'I ... think so.'

His glance was tepid and sceptical. 'You're not sure. Well, I don't blame you. Just forget it—the whole thing.'

'But I don't want to. Are you ... are you in danger?'

'What gave you that idea?' he asked abruptly. 'If I were in danger would I hook you into it?'

'Not into the danger, but you might want to be certain Benito would be looked after. Is that what you were going to ask me—to send Benito back to his grandparents if it became necessary?'

'It was something like that,' he said curtly.

'Then you *are* in danger.'

'My dear girl, I'm just a pathologist in Tangier, and being a man I'm in rather less danger than you are. But odd things

possible.'

'It is, once you've been in love and got over it.' He sounded almost teasing as he added, 'It's not for doe-eyed romantics, though. You'll go through the lot, the whole agony. But wait for it till you get back to England; life isn't so brutal there.'

For several minutes neither spoke. Heat pressed down from a sun which had passed its zenith but still baked the atmosphere. Tess felt sad, and couldn't think why. She tried to imagine him meeting the beautiful Spanish girl who was to be his sister-in-law, falling shatteringly in love and going through the hell of being best man at the brother's wedding. It wasn't easy to see this cool, cynical doctor as a man in love; not surprising that he had decided to marry Sheila Vernet.

At last she said slowly, 'You haven't told me why you want me to let you know if Ramon Guevara wants to see me alone.'

'No, and I don't think I will. I just want you to stay clear of complications while you're here.'

'Is he likely to be a complication?'

'Ramon Guevara,' he said consideringly, 'is at the back of all the big shady deals in the city. He'll never get caught because he never does the dirty jobs himself, but he organises and takes his cut—politics, smuggling, anything.'

'Is that true? I can't believe it.'

'It's one of those open secrets. He has contacts among the Moors, Berbers, Hindus and Europeans.'

Tess bit hard at the inside of her lip, shook her head but decided to say no more about the man. Instead she asked casually, 'Is your brother younger than you?'

'Two years.'

'Where is he now?'

'God knows.' He stood up, decisively. 'I'll have to get back. I must get some papers from my room, but if you'll stay here I'll send Benito.'

He went off abruptly, and Tess, watching his tall broad-shouldered figure, felt again that small wrenching pain. Foolish to wish you had known a man before he'd been spoiled for love by some other woman. It must have been

do happen, and I wanted someone who knows Benito to promise me that if it's necessary they'll look after him till he reaches Salamanca.'

'If you feel strongly about it you could send him back now.'

'I'm undecided. Actually, not many people know he's here.'

By nature, Tess had always regarded herself as fairly shock-absorbent, but now, strangely, a sort of realisation feathered its little shocks through her system. She was afraid for this man. Whatever happened, she mustn't let him see it.

'I'll do it,' she said lightly. 'If you get bumped off in a dark alley I'll take over Benito. It's a promise, and I'll tell no one about it.'

He smiled suddenly. "Thanks. I don't anticipate any rough stuff, but thanks. You're a nice girl, Tess—and I mean that. You've got a clean, spare face, wide eyes, a truly lovely neck and the sort of mouth that would have sent me pie-eyed a few years ago.'

She entered his mood. 'Don't you go pie-eyed any more—even in private? You should, you know. It would help you to forget those unhappy love affairs.'

'There was only one, really, and I recovered from it long ago.' He paused, and queried laconically, 'Got any sisters?'

'No.'

'Then you'll never know how it feels to want the same man as someone near to you.'

She lowered her glance once more. 'Your brother must be quite a man.'

'Because he was preferred to me? Yes, I suppose he'd have much more appeal for a woman, but we didn't compete. They were already engaged when I came on the scene, and I stayed just a month in Salamanca, did my job as best man and got away.'

'You knew her only a month?'

'It was long enough. She wasn't my sort at all, but somehow I fell.' He grimaced at a memory. 'I don't want to feel again—not that way. There's a saying in Spain, Love where you marry but do not marry where you love. It's got sense.'

'You mean, choose first and love afterwards? It's not

nearly seven years ago, that brief passion. He'd have been twenty-six or seven, his brother twenty-five, and the girl perhaps her own age. But if Tess had known him then she would have been a long-limbed schoolgirl, which made her wish ludicrous. It was safer to laugh at oneself.

The little boy came running. 'Allo, señorita! Alla time I ask Papa why you not come. He say you busy, like him. Papa works much now, you know. You stay with me, señorita?'

'Not today, Benito, but I'll come and see you again. How do you like it here?'

'Is pretty damn good,' he told her cheerfully. 'No school yet, but this Marthe make me learn French. Soon I shall know everything.'

'That will be wonderful. Do you play with anyone?'

'There is a boy in the next house—older but *un bobo*. You know?'

'Stupid? Does he speak Spanish?'

He shrugged disparagingly. 'He speak Arabic and some French.'

'Then maybe he's not so silly—only strange.'

'Mebbe,' he conceded as he looked towards the house. 'Here is Papa. You like Papa?'

'Yes. I think you're lucky.'

'The señorita likes you,' Benito told Philip Westland gravely. 'She has just said it.'

'I'm glad.' But the man sounded offhand. 'You'd better go back to Marthe.'

Benito's dark, little-boy's eyes gazed up at him. 'In Salamanca you would make things for me. I had to leave my boat there, and I have none now.'

'I'll buy one for you.'

'Not make?'

'I don't have time.'

'In Salamanca ...'

'This isn't Spain. Say goodbye to Tess and go back to Marthe.'

Benito sighed resignedly. 'Tiran is not so good if there is no Papa. All right. I go. *Adios*, señorita.'

Tess was seated beside Philip Westland in the moving car

when she said, 'Benito is lonely and feels let down. Do you ever talk to him?'

'He's just a child. When he's past this period he'll forget it.'

'Are you cool with him because he reminds you of his mother?'

'God, no. I haven't thought of her in years and I don't even remember what she looked like. If anything, Benito reminds me of my brother—those expressions he uses. I'll take you home—where is it, exactly?'

His change of tone was like a dash of cold water. Tess felt her head go up, her jaw tighten. 'Drop me at the Place de France, please.'

'You'd better go home and rest. Don't worry,' drily, 'I won't go in with you or call on you. Is that what you're afraid of?'

What *was* she afraid of, Tess wondered wretchedly—that he wouldn't even want to see her again? Wouldn't that be best, all things considered? She had given her word that if necessary she would arrange Benito's return to Salamanca and that was all he'd wanted of her. And what did she herself want? Far more, it seemed, than she could possibly hope to achieve, even if there were no Sheila Vernet.

'If you insist,' she said quiedy, 'turn left at the Rue Jeanne d'Arc'

He said no more till they had reached Clare's house. Then, as he stopped the car, he put out a detaining hand. 'Thanks for the promise, Tess. I did mean to tell you more, but you looked so touching and vulnerable that I daren't get you involved. I don't resent Benito in any way at all—I simply don't know what to do with him till my brother gets back.'

'Is he coming—your brother?'

'He said so, but that was a long while ago. By the way, his second name is Boyd, too; it was our mother's name. He preferred to use it rather than his own name, Roger, because he thought it sounded more tough.'

'That little footnote rather describes him.'

'Yes, I daresay it does. In the old days he'd have been called a charming rake. Today ... well, let's say he lives by



his wits.'

She knew it was no use trying to probe further. She hadn't the right, anyway. That belonged to Sheila Vernet.

'Thank you for the lunch,' she said, and left him. As she went up through the quiet house to her room she felt sick and despondent, as well as weary.

### CHAPTER III

THEY were going to a floor-show that night, Clare told Tess when they met for tea in the bright modern lounge. Victor and Ramon were to escort them to the Moroccan restaurant on the Rue Sanlucar, where the dancers and orchestra were truly local.

'A pity you can't dance yet,' Clare said smilingly, 'but it's lucky that Victor is a non-dancer. He likes your company, darling—told me so today, over lunch.'

Tess asked, casually, 'How much do you really know about Ramon Guevara? Does he talk about his work, and so on?'

'My dear, what a peculiar question. And how it points the difference between your approach to men and mine. Don't you know better than to encourage a man to talk of his work?'

'A normal man rather enjoys it.'

'Even a doctor?' murmured Clare, with lifted brows. 'Did the Westland man describe his adventures with people's entrails in his laboratory?'

'Doctors are different. As a matter of fact, he told me that Ramon isn't exactly . . . straight.'

Clare's expression changed slightly, but she kept the smile. 'I hope Dr. Westland isn't in love with you,' she said a little tartly.

'He certainly isn't.'

'Then why should he speak against other men you happen to know?'

'It was only Ramon.'

'And you believed him?'

'He's been in Tangier longer than we have, and he spoke as though it's common knowledge—about Ramon, I mean.'

Clare smiled patronisingly. 'Victor's honest, you'll agree. Do you think he'd be seen in Ramon's company if he

thought there was something crooked about him?'

Tess shrugged, uncomfortably. 'Victor's been here no longer than you have, and he takes his cue from you. I only told you what Dr. Westland said because you find Ramon Guevara attractive and I thought you ought to know.'

'I know far more about him than your Dr. Westland does,' said Clare sharply, 'and I'm more than satisfied as to his integrity. Westland hasn't such a good name, privately, as you might think.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Well, well,' said Clare, on a rising inflection. 'So it's not that Westland is stuck on you, but the other way about. Tess, my sweet, you're on a loser. I can't tell you more than that, but it's a fact.'

'If you're alluding to Dr. Vernet I know all about it. And it means nothing to me. I came here for a holiday - not to catch a man.'

Clare sighed, and gave another of her charming smiles. 'I'd like you to have both, darling, you know that. But no one here is your type. Don't take too much notice of things you hear, particularly if they happen to be about Ramon. A successful man always has his detractors.'

But Tess couldn't quite leave the topic there. 'Had you heard rumours about him before?' she asked curiously.

'Naturally. The very first night I met him some jealous creature told me that a year or two ago Ramon had planned a fabulous jewel haul on a luxury cruiser - that it had made terrific headlines here for some time. It turned out the whole thing was absurd. Ramon was never mentioned in the papers and he was actually in Gibraltar the whole time the cruiser was in Tangier.'

'He could have got someone else to carry out the dirty work.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Clare angrily. 'He owns the most sumptuous hotel on the coast and is the luckiest man at the Casino. He's not quite as filthy rich as Victor, but he will be one day. He has things moving all the time - property deals, mineral concessions, import and export contracts. In Tangier, most business looks shady. That's the sort of place it is; I suppose it's the mixture of races as well as the fact that

it's a free port. For heaven's sake forget these stupid rumours!' *She* hadn't intended to be carried away by her vehemence, for the next moment she hurried the smile back to her lips and softened her tones. 'Tess, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bawl you out. It's lovely having you here, and you do take care of Victor for me, much of the time. I don't want us to quarrel, or even to get a wee bit cross with each other. We're very good friends, aren't we?'

If Tess could have answered, 'No, we only tolerate each other for our own ends: you, so that I can be pushed off with Victor, and I, so that I can remain in Tangier, where Philip Westland lives.' If she could have answered thus, she would have risen in her own estimation but found herself packing up and booking a ticket on the ferry to Gibraltar.

So she replied, 'We get along, Clare. I only told you about Ramon in case he was deceiving you.' Then, against her will, she said, 'You implied just now that Dr. Westland isn't all he should be. What have you heard against him?'

Clare gestured, belittlingly. 'It's not much. But they do say he lives in Tiran because he needs privacy for something he's doing on the side.'

'Is that all?'

Clare gave a little-girl pout. 'How did we get on to this subject of men and their pursuits? Personally, I don't care what they do if they're charming and well off. Do let's have a marvellous evening, Tess.'

You could have a good time and still be observant, thought Tess, later on, when she sat beside Victor Mears in the back of Ramon's car. She could see the swathed back of Clare's silky white head, and the dark gleaming hair of Ramon Guevara as he turned his very white smile towards his companion. His skin was biscuit-coloured, a startling background to the thick dark brows and glittering eyes. In appearance those two were a matchless foil for each other, and as they entered the Moorish interior of the night club others thought the same. They drew admiration, Clare and Ramon, some envy and even a little enmity when they entered a crowded restaurant.

It was the sort of evening they put on for tourists at the Moroccan Bar. Dancers in gauzy trousers and veils with

strings of gold coins about their heads and wrists, native musicians who drew plaintive, hesitant wailing from their instruments, a conjuror so slick that his tricks blurred the sight, and dancers again, men in silk this time and as heavily plastered with kohl as the women.

The decor of the Moroccan Bar lived up to its name. A Haroun al Raschid place with picturesque arches all round and more tables away in the gloom where Jews and Egyptians in pale western suits sat doing business with robed Syrians and Moors. Faces tight and sly, amused, handsome and long-nosed; eyes small and penetratingly bright, or so heavy-lidded that they looked closed.

And the smells. Patchouli, cigar-smoke, spicy foods, wines, all strongly tinged with the lemon which was served with every drink, even the mint tea of the Moors, who did not drink alcohol.

When the floor show ended there was general dancing to the music of a more sophisticated quintet. Victor sat out with Tess, but after a dance or two with Clare, Ramon turned his brilliant smile upon the younger woman.

'When one is young the life slides away almost unnoticed,' he commented. 'Each night you do not dance, señorita, you are losing that chance for ever. Will you not try, very gently, with me?'

His manner was persuasive, his tone almost caressing. Tess shook her head. 'I'll practice at home first, but thank you, Ramon.'

'You walk well,' he insisted softly. 'A waltz is not much more than walking, and with my arm round you ...' the Latin shrug. 'Come, Tess, let us try.'

'Not here,' she said hastily. 'Please!'

'Then outside on the terrace. You will excuse us, Clare, *cara mia?*'

'Why, of course.' Never let it be said that Clare withheld her grace and favour from her own sex. 'Do try, Tess. Ramon will look after you.'

Still Tess hesitated. Out on the terrace she would be more or less alone with Ramon. He was strongly male, and whatever might be said of him he did possess an almost irresistible magnetism. Just one or twice he had switched on to

her wavelength, and each time she had been relieved when he switched off again. Now, she felt his fingers on her forearm as he bent over her, and she thought, with a strange catch in her throat, how extraordinarily compelling he could be. Without even liking him very much you could feel quite overpowered by Ramon Guevara.

She stood up and moved with him among the tables towards one of the arched openings. Outside, the stone terrace was enclosed by an ornamental wall over which hung smilax and orange branches from the trees in the courtyard below. Dark glossy leaves with dusty golden oranges and here and there a precocious waxen white blossom which could not know the season.

The music sounded pleasantly withdrawn, and as Ramon took Tess into his arms and began to dance with her she felt the spirit of the place enter her veins, something old and exciting and mysterious.

'You are not afraid now?' Ramon murmured. 'How do they feel, those naughty bones?'

'Splendid. I've wanted to dance, but was plain scared.' Her voice thrilled a little with the new sensation. 'You can't imagine how marvellous it is to be dancing at last, even though you are taking most of my weight!'

'And so much better out here than risking a kick from someone who is tipsy, no?' He smiled down at her. 'You are very light and sweet, Tess.'

And you are a heady concoction, she thought, and I'm alone with you. What happens now ... what do I tell Philip?

'Thank you,' she said. 'It's good of you to bother.'

Please ... not such modesty ! You are pretty and young, and now that you are recovering from that regrettable accident you become a most stimulating companion. Not your speech, *querida*, because you are shy, but your presence. The fragrant skin, the funny little hair like silk rags in brown, the eyes which are like jewels in green pools. Did you know that you have a very beautiful neck, a glorious curve to your throat when you lift your chin and honey-coloured tendrils at the nape? Has no man ever told you these things before?

'No,' she said on a caught laugh, 'and I don't think you'd

better tell me now. On a night like this I might believe you.'

'But you must believe!' he exclaimed. 'You and Clare are the two most beautiful women I have known. She, the mature one. You, the delicious untaught! Between you, you rob my bachelorhood of its meaning.'

'They say there's safety in numbers.'

'It is not true, of two such as you. All I am sure of is that soon I must marry one of you!'

'That's not so complimentary as it sounds.'

'It is a cry from the heart,' he said. 'Naturally it is your youth and innocence that attracts me most, but I am not a boy. I need understanding.'

'Such as Clare can give you,' said Tess with an effort. She managed a more normal laugh. 'Do you always make love to your dancing partner, Ramon?'

'You think this is making love?'

'Either that, or you're philandering.'

'Neither. I am feeling my way with this girl who is beginning to come alive in the sun of Tangier. Tess, I wish to give a party for you.'

'Not yet,' she said quickly. 'I'm still having treatment for my shoulder. I'd rather be quite fit.'

'Very well. If you would prefer to postpone the party, let me grant you a wish. What would you most like to do or see in Tangier?'

He was still moving her gently, in waltz time, holding her no more closely than was necessary though his fingers were tighter over hers and she was acutely aware of his hand at her back. They were just far enough apart for him to look down at her brow, and now she took care that he could see no more of her face, in case her vague apprehension were visible.

'My tastes are those of the tourist, I'm afraid,' she answered. 'I'd like to see the Roman excavations, the Sultan's Palace, the Caves of Hercules, and go into an ordinary Moorish house.'

'You disappoint me. All those things are possible, and I wanted you to plead for the impossible. Think about it, and tell me tomorrow. Will you go with us to the beach in the

morning?"

'To bathe? I think perhaps I'd better mention it to the doctor first.'

'Dr. Westland?'

'No, he's a pathologist. Dr. Vernet is handling my case.'

'Ah, the woman.' There was a smile in his voice. 'It is strange that love should now guide the life of a woman who hoped to become an orthopaedic surgeon. But perhaps women are not so good at orthopaedics. Certainly I would not care to place my bones in the care of a female doctor, particularly if she happened to be in love!'

The music had ended and they had drifted to a stop, though Ramon had kept her hand in his. Tess withdrew from him, let both her hands drop to her sides. She should have turned to re-enter the restaurant, but the conversation had taken a turn she could not resist.

'Do you know Dr. Vernet at all?' she asked him.

'I think I have spoken to her once, at the Country Club.'

'And Dr. Westland?'

'We know each other by sight, but we are not acquainted.'

He moved towards the wall and looked over at the courtyard in the darkness, turned and smiled at her. 'He is not a very happy man, this Westland. Has he told you anything about himself?'

'Only a little,' she said guardedly.

'The child,' he said casually. 'It is strange that we have never before known that the doctor has been married.'

'He's a reticent man.'

'It is more than that. I think there is a mystery about that child. I have what is called a hunch.'

Tess wished she had not encouraged the conversation, and get it seemed there was something she should know, something that Philip . . . Dr. Westland should be told. She said carefully, 'A hunch about Dr. Westland and his little boy?'

But Ramon lifted his mobile shoulders. 'I think I could help him, but he would not be an easy man to assist, and I think he does not quite trust me. He is English, and no doubt distrusts everything foreign.' He paused, before adding philosophically, 'A man in my position makes many acquaintances but few friends. Yet often I am in a position to



help others and am hampered by this barrier.'

Tess came beside him, took an interest in **the** lights of the city which shone through and above **the** trees. 'If you could really help him,' she said, as if it were immaterial one way or the other, 'I might let him know. Though I wouldn't say he's a man who'd accept favours. I'm sure he isn't.'

'You are right, señorita,' Ramon said regretfully. 'If you meet the doctor again please tell him I shall be happy to do him any service in return for a very small token. He will know what is meant.'

Tess looked at the urbanely smiling Ramon. 'Have you approached him before, yourself?'

He nodded, indifferently. 'By letter and telephone. He does not reply.'

'What is it you want of him?'

'You amaze me, *pequeña*. This **is** a thing better not spoken of, even between you and me. Pass on my message if you will, but ask no questions. Come, it is a little chilly for you here. A drink, I think, and later we will dance again. Clare will wonder what has become of **us**.'

Clare obviously did, thought Tess, as she and Ramon rejoined the other two at the table. The older woman had a bright china smile and a flat look in her green eyes as she greeted Ramon and slid a glance over Tess's pink cheeks. The moment the music started again the two went off to dance, and Tess sipped a fresh drink that clinked with ice. Victor was silent, and Tess thoughtful. She was also worried, though she was not quite sure why.

What was it that Philip had and Ramon wanted? A small token ... what would that be? It could be anything. And yet those two didn't know each other, except by sight. Ramon had tried to get in touch with Philip by telephone and by letter, and had been ignored. When? And why? Impossible to believe there was a link of some kind between the two men, and yet Philip had warned her against Ramon, had thought it important that he should know **if** Ramon wanted to see her alone. He had said the Spaniard was behind all the shady deals in Tangier. Shady? A small token in exchange for help in any way that Philip might name? What in the world was it all about?

When the dancers returned Ramon suggested they move on to the Casino. Tess begged out; she was tired. Which pleased Clare enough to bring a warm smile to the varnished lips.

'Poor darling. We'll have to take you home first—unless Victor would like to oblige, and join us later?'

Victor said, sounding tired himself, 'I believe I've had enough too, Clare. I'll take Tess home and then go back to my hotel. You two like the tables, and I don't particularly.'

Victor remained quiet in the car, and when he saw Tess into the house he said merely, 'I'm not an attractive escort, am I, Tess? Easy-going, generous, fond of good living, but overweight and nothing for a young woman to flaunt. Goodnight, my dear. Sleep well.'

He was gone before she could speak even one comforting word. She felt unhappy for him as she made ready for bed, and angry with Clare. Yet neither emotion was any good. She was here as Clare's guest, and by remaining after that first day had admitted a willingness to fall in with her stepmother's plans. Yet she would give much not to have Victor Mears hurt in any way. He was that rarity, a successful man who, in spite of over-indulgence in some ways, had essentially remained unspoiled. Sometimes she felt he was oddly innocent.

Tess went to the beach with the others next morning and gratefully waded into the sea, but she did not swim. The following morning, after her session with the masseuse, she went to the waiting room adjoining Dr. Vernet's surgery, but was told the doctor had gone to Tetuan on a case for Dr. Bourdot.

'Has Dr. Westland an office here?' she asked the half-French nurse.

'He comes to the laboratory, mademoiselle, and uses the office there. He is not in the clinic this morning.'

'Is he at the hospital?'

'That is where he has his own laboratory. I think he would be there.'

Tess said, carelessly, 'Well, if I can't see Dr. Vernet I think Dr. Westland might be able to put me right, just on the telephone—he does know my case. Is there a telephone I

can use?'

'Will you come into the nurses' office?'

Tess followed her. The nurse sat at the desk, indicated the telephone and said, 'There is the hospital number, on the pad. Ask for Dr. Westland and they will put you through.'

Conscious of the woman who sat checking over the details of case cards, Tess made her call. Surely the nurse would leave her alone for a moment? But she didn't; she went on methodically with her work, and Tess wouldn't have minded betting that nothing would have shifted her. Perhaps she was an ally of Sheila Vernet's, or she might even have an eye on Philip herself. Women!

'Good morning,' said Philip's crisp voice, very close to her ear. Westland here.'

'Oh, Dr. Westland,' said Tess, as clearly, 'this is Miss Carlen.'

A brief pause. 'Yes?' came his query. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'm at the Doria Clinic. I hate to bother you with something so small, Doctor, but they tell me Dr. Vernet is away in Tetuan.'

'Yes, I believe she is.'

'It's my shoulder. Would it do it any harm if I swam?'

'Good lord, why ask me?' He waited for her reply, seemed to sense that she had none to offer at the moment and asked, 'Is that really why you called me?'

'No.'

'Can't you be more explicit? Is there someone in the room with you?'

'Yes, Doctor.'

'You want to see me?'

'Yes, Doctor.'

He sounded irritable. 'Can't you vary the response? Where can I meet you in, say, half an hour's time?' A silence. 'Hell, I'm not used to this kind of intrigue. Look here, I'm really quite tied up until this evening. Will it keep?'

'For that long, yes.'

'I'll pick you up at your home at six. Is that all right?'

'I'm ... not sure.'

'This is ridiculous. Go out and ring me from somewhere else.'

'I've friends waiting outside for me. Very well, Doctor, I'll do as you said.'

'Sure you're all right?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Oh, by the way—you can swim if you like, but don't get too energetic to start with. Just easy movements.'

'Thank you, Dr. Westland, I'm very grateful. Sorry to have troubled you.'

'Nuts,' he said laconically. 'They're probably listening in at the switchboard, anyway. Be seeing you.'

She put down the telephone, politely thanked the nurse and went out to Victor's car. As they drove to a beachside cafe she felt relieved, as well as uneasy. Relieved, because she had acted at last after a day or more of restless conjecture, and uneasy because she knew she shouldn't see him again. But the uneasiness was private, something she would have to suppress. It was good to know she would be able to get that other off her mind.

She had a tall iced drink with Victor before they were joined by Ramon, Clare and a couple of their friends. Ramon was in leopard-skin briefs with a matching shirt that he wore open like a jacket. His chest was brown and muscular with a fan of dark growth in the middle, his forearms were darkly tanned and thickly covered with the smooth dark hairs. His watch, thin, gold, on a beige strap, had the look of quiet good taste but had probably cost a couple of hundred. His bonhomie was infectious, his smiling eyes warm as he looked at Tess.

'So ... you speak to this woman doctor?' he asked her. And turned to Clare: 'I have asked Tess to demand at the clinic whether she may swim. Swimming ... dancing ... they mean so much to the young on holiday in Tangier.'

'Yes, I've been worried about that,' said Clare, who hadn't given it a thought. 'What was the verdict, Tess dear?'

'I may swim—easy movements, the doctor said.'

Clare's woman friend, a dark, thin, burnt-out creature with big hollow-looking eyes, murmured, as if speaking were an ordeal, 'You have Dr. Vernet, don't you? I know

Sheila quite well; she's a neighbour **of** ours—has the flat above us. She's away today. Does she have **a** stand-in?

Tess felt as if she were walking **on** thumb-tacks. 'I don't know. I spoke to someone else.'

'Dr. Westland?' asked Ramon, looking idly at his well-shaped fingernails. 'Could he examine you and give you permission to swim?'

'I didn't see him—only spoke to him **on** the telephone—but he knows my case history.'

'Do you see this child of his?'

'Child?' The woman, Nancy, leaned forward over her empty glass and asked tiredly, 'Did you say child, Ramon? Philip Westland?'

A shudder ran down Tess's spine. She tried to think of something light to say, something that would swing the matter out of range. But just in time she realised that an obvious manoeuvre would rouse more suspicion than silence. So she clamped her teeth, and waited.

Ramon was explaining, without enthusiasm or even much interest. 'Yes, I hear the doctor has been married, in my own country and to one of my countrywomen. What the English call **a** dark horse. I also hear that there is **a** small estrangement between him and Dr. Vernet; they have not been to the Country Club together these last two weekends. Would you say that Mademoiselle Vernet has been shocked by the sudden knowledge about Westland?'

'It's **a** thought, isn't it? Sheila's definitely been quiet.'

Ramon lifted his very fine shoulders. '**Tangier** is so full of surprises that they do not astonish any more. I am glad our little Tess may swim. This evening we will have cocktails served down here on the beach with tapas, and we will bathe for an hour before dinner. I like being outdoors when the sunset muezzin sounds; it gives me **a** feeling of peace and well-being.'

The subject was changed to **a** desultory discussion about Muslim customs and the speed with which the younger Moors were forgetting them. It was even said that they now dressed in European clothes in order to buy drinks, and **were** gradually forsaking **the** djellabah and tarboush **even** in their private lives. And everyone knew that the young men spent

fortunes on jazz records.

They **moved** towards the cars. Cleverly, carelessly, Ramon came last, with Tess. She felt an electric vitality in his hand as he **took** her elbow, wondered desperately if there could be any connection between the swift leap of her pulses and ... love. There couldn't be. She wasn't in love with Ramon Guevara, in some ways she quite disliked him. But ... but there was something.

He said quietly, 'I am so pleased that you will be able to swim a little, *pequeña*. It will make that shoulder strong—the leg, too. Already you are a trifle less thin, and that makes me happy. Why should I be so happy for you, Tess?'

The intimate note and the long-drawn sound he gave to her name brushed her nerves. 'You're a merciless flatterer, Ramon. Do you want me to lose my head?'

'Very much. As you grow more fit you grow more beautiful. I, too, would like to lose my head—with you.' He smiled disarmingly. 'I would never hurt you. I have never in my life crushed a flower.'

'Please!'

'Very well, we will be prosaic. On Sunday I am having guests out at the Mirzeh **Hotel** for lunch. You will come, of course, wearing your gayest sunsuit as well as your youth and happiness. Next week, also at the Mirzeh, I shall give a party for you—yes, I insist. We will call it a carnival so that everyone will wear fancy dress. And do you know what three-quarters of them will wear? Moorish dress! It is so easy, you see. A woman may disguise her figure with a haik or reveal it tantalisingly in pantaloons. A man may wear his suit with a djellabah over it.' His voice lowered. 'I shall be host and therefore alone. If you wish to bring a guest, a partner, I shall be happy to welcome him—so long as he permits me to dance with you!'

'I'm afraid I don't know anyone really well, except you and Victor.'

'And Dr. Westland,' he suggested very casually. 'We shall see, eh, *querida*? And now you go home for lunch while Ramon has to seek lunch in a restaurant. I have a dull hour ahead,' a grimace, 'with two business men. *Adios*, little one—till tonight.'

On the point of telling him that she must miss his cocktail party on the beach, Tess hesitated. She had never felt more unsettled with anyone than she was beginning to feel with Ramon. And she had the horrid conviction that if she let him down she would be letting herself down in some way. Which proved she was letting him influence her far too much!

All that afternoon she thought back to the various things he had said over drinks and on the way to the car. Had he meant that he wanted her to bring Philip to his party next week? She thought he had. And what had he gathered from the fact that she had spoken this morning with Philip on the telephone? Did Ramon think she was trying to please him, trying to play his game in his way?

What was wrong with her? she almost wailed aloud. Why was she drawn to Ramon in an exciting, physical way, and to Philip as well, but differently? Philip was a doctor, so one wouldn't admit a physical attraction, perhaps. Though when she thought of his wide compact shoulders, his proud, half tired, half cynical expression, those good, blunt-fingered hands, the take-it-or-leave-it voice . . . well, there seemed to be something unmistakably physical in that too. But Philip made her want to know him thoroughly, whereas Ramon set her skin tingling and closed up her mind.

She got up from siesta and looked at her face, small, still too bony and hollow under the cheekbones so that her eyes looked oversized. 'What's got into you?' she whispered fiercely. 'Never more than a puny crush before this and now you fall for two at once. You're crazy!'

But being furious with herself did no good. Nor would she get anywhere by wishing she hadn't telephoned Philip this morning. It was still possible to send a message to the hospital that she would not be free after all. But she wanted to see him; and for certain reasons she had to see him. What a terrible muddle it all was. If only she could have confided in Clare, or even in Victor. But nothing on earth would force her to be disloyal to Philip Westland; he might be calm and detached and engaged to Sheila Vernet, but with Tess Carlen he had a bond. It wasn't the same bond for both of them; for her, it was something in Philip himself. But for

Philip it was the child, not much more. Still, it was there. Thank heaven, she said to herself tremulously.

She put on a printed cotton, crisp yellow and white and green, with narrow straps over the shoulders and wide triangular pockets on the hips of a straight skirt. She brushed her hair and made up sparingly; light pink cheeks, light red lips and the faintest touch of eye-shadow. She wasn't out to captivate, but instinctively she knew that even though Philip had long ago given up all idea of making conquests, he did like a woman to look feminine. And her instinct was backed up by that glimpse she had had of Sheila Vernet in slinky navy and white; Sheila had expected Philip that day, had quickly shed the anonymous uniform and revealed a tall elegant figure that was mature in the right places. Oh, dear. Why did she have to think of Sheila Vernet now?

She went downstairs at five minutes to six, and found the effervescent Pedro setting out a tray of drinks. 'Ah, the señorita is early,' he said gaily. 'Drink now, or wait for the señora?'

'No drink, Pedro. I'm going out and may be some time. Will you tell the señora that I shan't be able to attend the beach party tonight?'

He bowed cheerfully, and winked. 'You come back alone for dinner? Bring a friend, if you like.'

She couldn't help smiling, but shook her head. 'If Mrs. Carien asks, tell her I'm going to Tiran.' A sudden inspiration: 'Tell her I may have supper with the little boy, Benito.'

'Ah, so, *el señorito* 1 He has brain, that boy, the sharp wit. Give him the good wish of Pedro, no?'

The bell jangled. 'I'll go,' she said quickly. 'It's for me.'

And so it was. Philip, in his professional grey, smiling coolly but looking preoccupied as he said, 'Hello, there. Ready?'

When he had seated her in the car she said, 'I don't want to be in your way. We could drive a mile or two and talk, and then you could bring me back to the corner of the road.'

'Is that what you expected?' He had slipped sarcasm into



his tone. 'I'm quite sure you thought I'd take you to Tiran for a drink.'

She gave his lean face a swift, direct look. 'I don't think you're in the mood for it.'

'If you tried, you might improve my mood.'

'Why should I ? I didn't cause it.'

'You did, partly. Ever since you phoned me this morning I've wished I'd come out at once and met you. It doesn't seem nearly so urgent now, of course. I don't know why,' a little roughly, 'but after you'd rung off I imagined you were in trouble of some sort.'

'In trouble? Why would I get in touch with you, if I were?'

'That's it,' he said in clipped tones. 'Why would you?'

Unaccountably, she felt shaky. 'We seem to be missing each other, somehow. What are you getting at?'

'Nothing at all. Skip it. We'll go to my house and have a drink, you can tell me what's bothering you, and I'll have you back at the house in time for your date with your Spanish friend.'

'Thanks a lot,' she said abruptly, and was silent.

In hyacinth blue evening light they arrived at Las Perlas. He took her into the sitting-room which was becoming familiar in a cool dark way, and at once poured gin-and-orange for Tess and whisky-and-soda for himself.

'Like me to get you some ice?' he asked.

'No, thank you. There's enough around.'

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her ankles, looked up at him. He was standing half-turned towards the window and she saw his profile in a light that made it peculiarly gaunt. Ramon had said Philip was not a happy man, and the way he looked now she could believe it. For an aching moment she felt him as someone hostile and withdrawn, who knew none of her own emotions.

'I'd better tell you right away,' she said. 'Ramon Guevara knows that I've seen you a few times at the clinic. I haven't deliberately talked to him about you—don't think that. But he ... he seems to know most things.' She stopped and ran the tip of her tongue along her lower lip. 'It's difficult to explain. Ramon takes things for granted.'

'Such as what?'

'He seems to think I can say what I like to you, but I'm finding it almost impossible to talk to you at all. You're like a steel wall.'

He turned about, glanced down at her. 'AH right, you and Guevara have spoken of me—I knew it would come. If he's asked you to try and get something out of me, it's no go.' Deliberately he met her clear hazel eyes. 'Was there anything else?'

'I'll deliver Ramon's message,' she said, low-voiced. 'I was to tell you he would do you any service in exchange for a ... a certain small token. He seems to think there *is* something you need, a favour he could do for you.'

'There's nothing.'

'Very well.'

'He didn't tell you anything more?'

She shook her head. 'There's one other thing you might like to know. I'm not sure whether you've told Miss Vernet about Benito, but if you haven't I feel you should. This morning I was with some people who live in the same block of flats as she, and they know her well. The ... the little boy was mentioned, and I'm afraid Dr. Vernet may hear about Benito from someone else. That wouldn't be right, and it might cause both of you ...'

He waited, but she didn't go on. So he said, 'Thanks. You mean well.'

His coolness struck a spark from Tess. 'You needn't be so damned condescending ! I got in touch with you for your sake, not mine.'

'Really? Somehow I gathered you were doing Guevara a favour. After all, he's never had a direct approach to me before, but now he has a go-between. Only I'm not rising to it. Don't ever mention it to me again.'

'You're impossible!'

'And you're very gullible where the fascinating Spaniard is concerned. I don't blame you for falling for the chap. You're fresh from a bad time in England, and if there's anything Guevara knows how to handle it's women, of any age. Have your good times, but don't discuss me.'

'You asked me to let you know if he saw me alone !'

'Well, you have—and thanks. It's what I expected.'

She stood up, leaving her drink on the table beside her chair. 'We could have managed it in a couple of minutes on the doorstep, couldn't we? I'm sorry I have to trouble you to drive me back, but I don't believe Tiran has taxis.'

'Sit down and finish your drink,' he said. 'I'll be back in a few minutes.'

Trembling, she went to the window and looked out at the dense magnolia and coral bush in the garden. Now, she knew she had been anticipating this meeting with Philip in an expectant mood; she had built herself up too high. He was just a cool, clinical man of medicine, and she was the young woman who had brought perplexity into his life in the shape of Benito, his nephew who, for some reason, had to be passed off as his own son. It was baffling, painful too.

She hadn't asked to come here to his house, and yet it was obvious he wished he hadn't brought her. What had he expected? He had arrived at Clare's house looking cool and remote; had he hoped she was in some ordinary little muddle that would be easy to unsnarl? Yet hadn't he implied that her telephoning him had worried him a little, in case she needed help?

She put a hand to her aching brow. This man was so maddeningly complicated. He loved, or rather was going to marry, another doctor with whom apparently he was not frank. He had a brother who dodged his responsibilities and whose son had arrived at an awkward time. And he had something that Ramon Guevara wanted, something valuable or even vital. There were things he had never explained; why Benito's grandmother had sent the child to Tangier, for instance, when it seemed that Philip's brother was not known here—that was something she would ask him, if he ever gave her the chance.

He came in, looking lithe and fresh in brown slacks and a dark green shirt. Without speaking, he put her drink into her hand and poured another small one for himself.

'You're staying to eat with us. Marthe phoned me some messages this afternoon and I told her I'd be bringing you for drinks. She thinks I don't entertain enough, so she's

prepared for you.'

She looked down into her glass. 'That's one way of phrasing an invitation.'

'I guess it did sound tacky. Will you stay and eat with me, Tess?'

'If it's what you want, yes. But not just because Marthe has cooked for one extra.'

He laughed briefly. 'I deserve that. I suppose I haven't grown as cynical as I thought—I still expect too much. Come on out to the patio. The boy's already eating.'

She emptied her glass, put it down and went with him. It was almost dark in the small enclosed patio and it came to her, suddenly, that she had not heard the muezzin while talking with Philip. There was a tower within sight of the front gate, yet she hadn't heard the call to prayer. She'd actually missed hearing the long wailing chant through being with Philip Westland; a sobering reflection.

Benito was eating with great relish—miniature meat balls with spaghetti and a mousse of fruit to follow. He waved his fork at Tess.

"Allo, señorita! You come to have supper? For you, Marthe has made paella, but me,' with enthusiastic disgust, 'this *revoltijo*!'

'You appear to like it,' Tess said. 'It's disappearing fast.'

He shrugged nonchalantly. 'I am hungry, so I eat. Is not bad.'

Philip seated Tess and took the chair opposite. He poured some wine to accompany the dainty array of hors-d'oeuvres, surveyed Benito with the mixture of exasperation and resignation she had noticed in him before. She thought he was about to comment on the child's table manners, which had gusto but not finesse, and said quickly, 'He really needs to go to school. Have you thought about it?'

'The question is, is he to learn in Spanish or English?'

'Whichever he finds easiest—until he can please himself.'

Benito's bright, nearly-black glance moved over them while he chewed. 'I can please myself now,' he said. 'My father is Eengleesh so I go to Eengleesh school, or mebbe,' with cunning, 'I not go to school at all? I can learn to fish with Ahmed and Ali and sell much to the people of

Tangier.'

'Who are Ahmed and Ali?' demanded Philip.

Benito shrugged his small secure shoulders. 'They live on the beach. I play with them sometimes. They are big, but not so...' he twiddled a finger near his temple, pityingly. 'They chew seeds all day.'

'Do they give them to you?' asked Philip sharply.

'Some, but the taste is bad—like scent.'

'Don't ever eat those seeds—hear me! And stay away from the fisher-boys or you'll find yourself in a boarding school with no freedom at all. Finish your supper and go to bed.'

'Yes, Papa,' the boy said, and thoughtfully swallowed the fruit mousse. Then he looked at Tess. 'Papa does not laugh all the time as he did in Salamanca. There we had always jokes and he would make things from little bits of wood, and tell me stories. And he was not a doctor. He would stay at home with us, make fun.' He sighed. 'It was helluva good.'

'It's good now,' she said hastily, 'but in a different way. Men do have to work and boys have to learn, but there's plenty of time for fun too. When you're older you'll realise that doctors are very important people, and you may even want to be one yourself.'

'Mebbe,' conceded Benito. 'Mebbe I build boats.'

'You get off to bed,' said Philip, 'and on your way you can tell Marthe we're ready for the paella.'

'Marthe knows already!' exclaimed the housekeeper, as she arrived carrying a huge tureen and plates on a tray. '*Monsieur le docteur* will serve, *non*? I will bring a lamp.'

Benito said a blithe goodnight and sauntered into the house. Philip ladled the appetising blend of chicken and rice, prawns and crayfish tails spiced with red peppers on to plates, and in the glow from a paraffin lamp they slowly savoured the good food and the soft evening, with stars visible through the pergola and the scent of moon flower mingling with the bitter-sweet smell of tamarinds.

She asked, 'What were the seeds Benito spoke about—that the Arab boys eat?'

'There are different kinds, but most of them are dope. There are two things that weaken the Moors—dope and sex.' He made a brief gesture. 'Sorry. For the moment I forgot

you're not connected in any way with our profession.'

She did feel a little hot. 'That's all right, I'm not squeamish. You do see that Benito should go to school very soon, don't you?'

'Of course. If I could get in touch with...' He stopped abruptly, broke a croissant and reached for butter.

'Your brother?' she asked. 'Do you think it's at all possible that Ramon Guevara could help you to find him?'

He shook his head. 'Possible, but impossible. If he could find Boyd he wouldn't be so anxious to get in touch with me.'

'So the thing he wants from you has some connection with your brother?'

Decisively, Philip said, 'Keep right out of it, Tess. The way things are there's no danger, but if they're stirred up anything could happen. The way I'm placed—at the hospital and clinic—I have to be careful.'

'Can't you tell me about it? I swear I'll keep it to myself.'

'God, no.' He sounded shocked. 'You're not only a woman, but you've been through it just lately. You're here to recuperate, not to get tangled up in the intricacies of Tangier. I keep clear of them myself, I can tell you!'

'Then *you're* not in trouble?'

'Certainly not.' He paused, studied her fine-boned face, the thick brown lashes that were lowered to hide her eyes. 'Does that make a difference—that I'm in no personal trouble?'

'It's ... comforting. You and Ramon are so different that I felt it must be something ... frightening. You know, the mystery of his wanting this small ... token. It's a queer word, token; could mean anything.'

'Forget it. Do you like the paella?'

'It's delicious. You're lucky in Marthe.'

He agreed, and complimented the woman when she brought fruit and savouries and a pot of coffee. She had barely returned to the house when the telephone rang. Tess could hear her guttural, '*Out? Mais certainement, mademoiselle. Un moment!*'

'Monsieur, the telephone!' she called.

Philip excused himself and entered the house. Tess noticed

that he pulled the door almost closed, so that his lowered voice would be audible as no more than a blur. She got up and walked to the edge of the patio, knew a stab of envy that hurt her right through. Was it envy . . . or jealousy? She was outside his world, outside the charmed profession.

The woman, Marthe, was suddenly close by. 'You startled me, mademoiselle. I thought you were still at table. More coffee?'

'No, thank you. It's been a wonderful dinner, Marthe. I enjoyed everything tremendously.'

The other clasped thick fingers across her middle; her expression was unreadable in the darkness. 'You should come more often. Monsieur has need of a woman in his life.'

'He has one.'

Marthe gave a sharp little sigh. 'Dr. Vernet? Two doctors, she with patients and he with none—you think that is right? She has not even been to see the child. If those two marry, the boy will be sent to school in Spain.'

'It could be best for him,' said Tess. Then, almost with desperation: 'Marthe, do you know why Monsieur is not very happy?'

The housekeeper was silent for a minute. She drew a breath and shrugged. 'For a year he was always one to joke and tease. Even me he would tease. We had little parties, very gay, and Monsieur would go to the Casino and to the houses of friends in Tangier. Then there was a change. First he was quiet, as if thinking much. Then, one day while I was out at our little souk, buying things for dinner, someone entered the house. Mademoiselle,' she said dramatically, 'you never saw such a mess! Every drawer upside down on the floor, everything mixed and flung about. But nothing missing. Nothing at all. I was distracted and called Monsieur. He was white and furious, and since that time he has smiled less and thought more.'

'But didn't you bring in the police?'

'In Tiran?' said Marthe, as though Tess had made a joke in bad taste. 'Yes, we consulted them, but they did nothing. There was no loss, you see. They could not be bothered to find the maniac who had wantonly turned every room in the

house into a . . . a shambles! If Monsieur had paid them well they would have discovered someone; for money, they will even confess to the crime themselves. But Monsieur wanted none of that.'

'How long ago did it happen?'

'Perhaps a year and a half. Monsieur has worked in Tangier for three years and lived here in Tiran most of that time. He likes Tiran.'

The french door opened, and Marthe nodded quickly and faded into the darkness. Tess came back to the table, but did not sit down.

'I've thanked Marthe for the splendid dinner,' she said, 'and now I must thank you. It's been very pleasant.'

'If you're not in a hurry we can take a walk down to the beach,' Philip said. 'It's not far.'

She felt sad and dispirited, unequal to dealing with him further. But in spite of it she nodded. 'Yes, I'd like a walk. It's a perfect night.'

And so it was. As they went from the Cuera down a side street towards the tiny stone waterfront where a few boats were tied up, Tess was aware of a sort of aching beauty in the atmosphere. She saw the brooding mystery of the ocean through a graceful Moorish archway, the ragged frond of a palm against a queer radiance. The night was smooth and silky, with a crescent moon fastened among the stars like an outsize jewel among brilliants.

They walked down a few broken steps to the beach, trod more slowly over the sand towards the water's edge. Points of phosphorescence danced in the lazy wavelets, and Tess knew a need to catch and imprison some of them before they escaped.

'You feel they're jigsaw bits of magic,' she said softly. 'Would they shine in one's hands, do you think?'

He kicked off his espadrilles, rolled up his slacks. 'Let's try. Coming in?'

Eagerly, she stepped out of her sandals and took his hand. They waded calf-deep, and he scooped water that fell from his fingertips in iridescent globules. Tess tried, laughed delightedly when, for a second, something glinted green and electric in her cupped palms.



'I got it, I'm sure I did. Plankton, or perhaps tiny fish. Look, I've done it again!'

She scooped and scooped. Philip grinned in the darkness, strolled a few yards up the beach and sat down, watching her as she stood, like an ardent child, dipping her hands again and again, into the soft white spray and veined ebb. At last she plodded the few steps to his side, and when he reached up for her hand and tugged, she sank naturally down beside him and leaned back.

'That was lovely. My legs feel so cool and strong. What a night!'

'Peaceful,' he agreed, and relaxed beside her, staring upwards as she did. 'Why do we get so damned keyed up about people and what they can do to us? How did we English lose the knack of enjoying the moment utterly, as the Latins do? It's made us cynical.'

'Not all of us; only those who've had the moments and found them empty.'

'What about this? How much will it mean in the heat of the day, tomorrow?'

'To you, very little, I suppose.'

'And to you?'

'Rather more, because it's my first time.'

'Never been on the beach in the dark with a man before?'

'Never. I'm glad it's you the first time. I'd hate to feel uneasy.'

'Why aren't you uneasy with me? Because of what I am or because you've decided I'm passionless?'

'You're not passionless,' she said swiftly, and stopped.

His head turned her way. 'I'm glad you've found that out without prompting. But how did you?'

'The way you talk and act,' she said confusedly. 'A man who gets angry isn't short on the other emotions, is he? I know you feel cool towards women as a whole, but you haven't always. You told me yourself that you've been through it. Weren't you ever in love as a student?'

'Yes, once.'

'Didn't you want to marry her?'

'You don't marry a butterfly. You admire it, and for a while you may chase it, but if you pin it down it dies. I'm

not a butterfly man.'

'Didn't you ever think of marrying before you met Sheila Vernet?'

The moment she had spoken the name Tess knew it had been a mistake; but there could be no retracting. So she lay still, listening to the murmur of the waves and his breathing, and waited.

'Not seriously,' he answered calmly. And that was all.

It was quite five minutes later when he sat up, used a handkerchief to dust the sand from his feet and tied on his espadrilles. Tess felt sunk in lethargy, an unhappy slackness that wouldn't let her even stir till she felt him treating her feet as he had his own.

'I can do it,' she said half-heartedly.

But there was painful sweetness in having him complete the small service, a yearning joy in the thrust of his fingers as he secured the sandal straps. As he finished he looked straight into her eyes; his were dark and absorbed.

His voice was level-toned, assured. 'How's this shoulder—better for the swimming?'

'Yes,' almost under her breath, 'I think it is.'

His hand moved over the satiny skin, gripped gently. 'It had to ache for a while, till the muscle got back into trim. I think Sheila will advise you to give up the therapy after the present treatment. You can always have more later, if it's necessary.'

Sheila again. Tess nodded. 'I'll miss the clinic. Philip, I'd better go now.'

'Come on, then.'

He sprang up, took her left hand. Perhaps it was the awkwardness of her posture as she rose that made her reach rather wildly with her right hand for his free arm. She swayed against him, tried hurriedly to draw back and almost overbalanced. She found herself close to his chest, talking almost incoherently.

'What an idiot! I'm so scared of wrenching my shoulder again that I don't use the arm as much as I should. You know? Instinctively, I sort of hold back, and find myself in silly positions. Philip, I didn't mean to be so stupid, but I'm still scared ... even about the leg. It was such a terrifying

experience, that accident. Sometimes, if I wake up in the night...'

He was holding her within firm, supporting arms, speaking quietly: 'Yes, I know. I've seen it in your face a few times. You'll get over it, Tess. And even the bad times can do good if they make you careful till the bones and muscles are normal. Don't expect to be right all at once. It won't take long now.'

Afterwards, Tess wondered whether he did hold her a minute longer than was necessary, whether that warm touch of his lips on her shoulder were intended as the sort of kiss one pressed to a child's hurt limb, or whether it had been inevitable, because it had been a long time since he had last kissed the soft, inviting skin of a woman.

And she wondered about the need and despair which had seemed to start in her scalp and the soles of her feet and clash near her ribs in a flood of pain. Perhaps it had been three parts Tangier and one part imagination. She hoped so.

## CHAPTER IV

**THE** Mirzeh Hotel was built almost at sea level, and no more than thirty yards from the high tide mark. It was white and balconied, and each balcony on the sea side had its gay orange and white striped awning, but on the whole the exterior was less spectacular than that of lesser hotels which were situated on the Tangier sea-front. Inside, though, the Mirzeh had much to offer. There was a central tiled courtyard where palms reached skywards, and a fountain splashed coolly over white marble figures which had been thought up by a voluptuary. The whole was enclosed by pale green arches and in the arcade beyond them black tables inlaid with ormolu and mother-of-pearl were flanked by cushioned rattan chairs from which one could view the courtyard, and the guests in robes, saris and smart western suits who wandered through it. Also, there were beautiful great archways which framed white beach, blue sea and bluer sky.

As owner of the place, Ramon could be extravagant and proud. At luncheon that Sunday, Tess had to give up being startled by the ultimate in luxury and sensual indulgence. There was so much of it. A dozen courses to choose from at table, sweetmeats, expensive cigars and cigarettes, nosegays for the women. When the Spaniard entertained he did it royally, and for that reason alone he was never without friends.

It was not difficult to understand why Ramon had always to have business of some sort on the go. He was a spender, neither pure nor simple. Today, after changing from the dashing outfit he had worn earlier on the beach, he was handsome in white. The dark hair was burnished black, the dark eyes sparkled, and his full red lips smiled with all the charm of old Spain. He was attentive to all the women in his party, but was also tender towards Clare and Tess, as though showing his world that he had staked a claim on these two

women, the one blonde and poised, the other young and almost fragile-looking in spite of the honey-tanned skin. Tess realised, uncomfortably, that she could do little about it. The pull of attraction was still there, but she disliked being taken for granted.

The luncheon party did not end till four o'clock, when someone murmured, replete and drowsy, that such a meal would have to be slept off if one hoped to enjoy the evening. They went off in their cars, leaving only Victor Mears, Clare and Tess. Ramon ordered mint tea and chocolate at a table near the courtyard.

'So, We are alone again, we four. Victor, my friend, you look weary.'

'It's the time of day,' said Victor gruffly. 'I'm an early riser and go to bed late. In this climate the couple of hours after lunch becomes a necessity.'

Ramon was solicitous. 'You may rest upstairs if you wish. And you, my dear,' turning to Clare. 'You also miss the siesta?'

Clare gave the bell-like laugh. She had cultivated it to sound young, and it did have a youthful ring. 'I'm still English, Ramon. One indulges in siesta only when there is nothing else to do in the afternoon.' Her tone implied that she could think of far better ways of spending those hours. She turned affectionately to Victor. 'I think you'd better rest in your own hotel bedroom, don't you; you'll feel easier there. If we're all dining here together you could come back.'

'I can't dine here in a play tunic,' said Tess. 'Did you bring a dress?'

Clare snapped her fingers contritely. 'Why didn't I remind you? I meant to, but Victor was on time with the car and it slipped my mind. Tess dear, you'll have to go home and change. Perhaps Victor will take you now, and bring you back at about seven?'

The gambit was transparent—to Tess, anyway. Victor showed nothing, except his tiredness. He said he'd be happy to take Tess.

Ramon said, 'Stay where you are, Clare. I will see them to the car and come back.'

She nodded, got further back into her chair with a curi-

ously feline movement and smilingly waved a hand. 'This courtyard makes me feel like the favourite wife of an Arab prince. I shall dream while you're gone.'

Ramon, apparently, was tireless. He talked gaily as they went out to the wide drive and made no attempt at a private word with Tess. But as Victor went round to the driver's seat, the Spaniard said, with careless good humour:

'You snubbed my cocktail party on the beach the other night, *pequeña* ... and for that cold, arrogant doctor ! I hope you had a boring time and are penitent.'

'No, I wasn't bored,' she said lightly, 'and I don't repent.'

'It was interesting?'

'Quite.'

His eyes half closed, amusement carefully maintained, he asked, 'Did you talk? Do you know more about this doctor than you did?'

Victor was politely standing at his door, politely not listening, though no doubt he heard.

Tess said, 'Yes, I think I do, but not much. Nothing at all that would interest you, I'm afraid.'

'Nothing? But surely you were inquisitive as all women are. Did you not question him?'

His voice had meaning now and he was holding her fingers negligently, separating one finger from the next as he studied her. Tess could feel in those fingertips an impact of warning that scared her. What was it about this man that made her feel weak?

'Yes, I did,' she said quietly, 'and it was useless.'

Ramon lifted the hand he held and deliberately kissed the inside of her wrist, where the blue vein beat. 'That was a first try with Westland,' he said, in a caressing undertone. 'There will be others.'

'I doubt it. After Wednesday, I shan't be going again to the clinic'

'*Bueno!* Then our party on Wednesday night will be a celebration of your complete recovery.' He opened the car door, saw her seated. 'Till seven, *carissima*. Rest well, and come back to me more beautiful than ever!'

Victor couldn't help but hear the last injunction. He set the car moving, lifted a hand and put on speed. Till he had

left the Mirzeh well behind he drove fast, but then he slowed to a steady thirty. His thickish, well-cared-for hands on the wheel moved automatically; in fact he was driving now as if his heart weren't in it.

'Do you feel quite well, Victor?' she asked anxiously.

'I'm fine.' He smiled her way for a second. 'I'm afraid I've had enough of the Mirzeh for one day. I'll send a taxi to take you there this evening. Do you mind?'

'To be honest, I don't want to go back there myself, but what will they think if we don't?'

'I should say they'll care more about your absence than mine. Ramon will, anyway.'

She thought, He's hurt; he knows just what Clare's doing, and he's too proud to allow her to go on doing it to him. It was strange to be sorry for the rich and experienced Victor Mears. The compassion made her angry as well, angry with Clare, who would purr like a pampered kitten when she discovered she had Ramon to herself this evening. Where would they spend it—in that studio where Ramon dallied with the arts?

'How can we let them know?' she asked.

'I'll telephone—for you, too, if you wish.'

'I'd be grateful if you would, Victor.'

After a minute he said, 'She thinks Ramon will marry her, but I don't think he will. I believe he's more attracted to you than to Clare.'

Tess didn't know what to say. A mixture of hope and fear fluttered about her heart. 'I feel he uses people,' she said.

'How could he use you and Clare, except as lovely companions other men would envy him? I've seen a great deal of Ramon during the past few weeks—much more than I wanted—and I have to admit he hasn't looked at another woman. It's just you and Clare.'

'I wish you wouldn't say that.'

With a worn smile, Victor said, 'It's true, my dear. I'm afraid that in my own life I've left things a little too late. In a week or two I shall be leaving Tangier.'

'But, Victor,' she said, distressed, 'you have property here, and other investments. You meant to stay.'

'I also have bigger investments elsewhere—if it matters. It

doesn't really matter what we own or where we own it; I've discovered that.'

'Have you told Clare you're leaving?'

'Not yet.'

'Then . . . then please don't. Let things work out a bit.'

'Some things don't work out, you know.' He spoke very evenly, as though he had thought it over many times. 'Your coming here was supposed to help our relationship, but it hasn't. It's not your fault, Tess,' he ended quickly, as she made to speak. 'It's something else, that I don't quite understand.'

'Well, please don't decide to leave in a hurry. You know,' with a wistful little laugh, 'I'd feel awfully lost if you left Tangier before I did. I seem to have seen more of you than of anyone.'

'Well, Tess!' He seemed at a loss himself, but looked happier. 'It never occurred to me that I made any difference. If you feel you need me here, of course I'll stay on a little. You make me feel rather humble.'

'Why? We've become good friends, haven't we?'

'I thought it was impossible that you could value friendship with a man of my age . . . and kind.'

She lightly touched his hand on the wheel. 'You're far too modest, Victor. I like you immensely, and not only for all the trouble you've taken—getting me to the clinic and picking me up afterwards, the walks in places where I wouldn't dare to go alone, and all the rest. We've talked a lot; I feel I know you almost better than I know Clare.'

'I'm glad,' he said simply. 'You've made me feel good.' After a moment he added quite cheerfully, 'Let's go out together this evening. I'll take you to the house of a Moor I know, in the Casbah.'

'Lovely!'

'It is a fact that if you set out on a jaunt with the intention of pleasing someone else you invariably secure far more enjoyment from it than if you are concerned with your own reactions. That evening Tess sat with Victor, a good-looking Moor and his even handsomer son round a low table which was perpetually supplied with good things to eat by a serving maid who wore a long white gown below which pale blue



trousers peeped, and a headscarf which she wore Muslim style, and drew across her face like a yashmak when her hands were free. There were spicy shebabs, green peppers stuffed with minced olives and almonds, tiny blocks of meat which one dipped into a communal bowl of thick sauce that tasted hot and herby. Fruit and nuts, the inevitable honey cakes and savoury seed wafers, and strong black coffee served with individual sticky mounds of brown sugar.

The Moor wore a heavy robe of cream with a turban; the youth had donned a courtesy robe of blue cotton over a beige tailored suit; a gray tie belied the dark age-old gleam of his eyes, the smooth, coffee-coloured skin, and he had taken off his tarboush when Tess entered the bare tiled room, with its doorless openings into other apartments.

After the long conventional meal, the son accompanied Victor and Tess for a walk among the cream and blue buildings of the Casbah. The half-moon lay a silver light over the square houses and narrow lanes, cast angular black shadows in which an occasional figure huddled, sleeping. Against a wall three stately camels sat, heads raised, jaws ludicrously champing from side to side, eyelids half-lowered, sleepily.

'They're probably the beach camels,' Victor said. 'Disillusioning, isn't it?'

'I won't think of them as so much a ride,' Tess stated. 'To me, they're North Africa, the desert, Bedouins. They're delicious.'

It had been an evening to remember and be grateful for, she thought later, as she made ready for bed. If only there were just Victor, Clare and herself, how thoroughly happy they could be. But there was the excitement and worry of Ramon, the unnerving existence of Philip Westland. Tess sighed and slipped between cool sheets, lay listening to the night sounds of Tangier.

As usual, the light continental breakfast was served in the bedrooms by Pedro, and as usual, Tess was already up and dressed.

'Ah, good mornings, good mornings,' the manservant cried exuberantly. 'You watch the wind, señorita ?'

Tess turned from surveying the tossing trees through the

wrought-iron grille at the window. 'It's amazing. I had to close the window because the air is full of sand.'

'It is the levante, the hot wind. It carries on much later this year because we have no rain. But this is not bad; in summer it get much worse.' He had deposited the tray and was about to leave when he remembered something. 'The señora sends a message. She does not get up in the wind, and would like you to visit her.'

A quaint way of stating what had probably been a command. 'Very well, Pedro. Thanks.'

She broke a croissant, dabbed butter and honey on to a small piece and ate, pensively. She rather wanted a visit with Clare herself and yet was gripped by a peculiar reluctance. Yesterday, with Victor, she had known more than compassion; she had realised that it would not be difficult to hate her stepmother for what she was doing to the man. Her complete distaste for Clare's tactics lingered this morning. She had no wish for a scene, but was afraid it had to come.

She crossed the landing and tapped at Clare's door, was bidden, in a lazy drawl, to enter. Clare's room was apricot and white, the bedhead quilted satin which matched the single armchair. The dressing-table was crowded with a costly array of crystal jars and cosmetic containers, the door of the white wardrobe stood open a few inches, revealing a green silk gown and a light-coloured fur stole. Clare herself rested among pillows in a pale gold bed-jacket which complemented the green eyes, and as Tess entered she took off the bronze-rimmed spectacles with their absurdly drawn-up corners and dropped them on to the white coverlet beside her book. A slim hand which had known only the minimum of work was lifted to pat the piled whitish silky hair.

'Good morning, dear. It seems we're going to be imprisoned today by this ghastly weather. The only thing I hate about Tangier is the winds. They don't suit Europeans; we can't wear djellabahs and pull a fold across the nose and mouth as the Moors do. So we stay indoors, and seethe.'

'You don't look seething. In fact you look extraordinarily cool.'

Clare loosely linked her fingers in front of her. 'I feel good,' she admitted with a satisfied smile. 'And I want to

thank you for being so thoughtful and kind yesterday. It was almost more than I hoped for, you know.'

'What was?'

'The evening alone with Ramon.' She wrinkled her nose, spoke playfully. 'You have quite a power over Victor, Tess. It's so strange, because he told me himself that though he's known you a comparatively short time he feels towards you like an uncle.'

Was there a barb in that remark? Tess didn't investigate. She stood at the foot of the bed, leaning against it, and said in level tones, 'I didn't persuade Victor to cut the dinner at the Mirzeh Hotel. He'd decided against it before he left you there with Ramon.'

A tiny, careful pleat appeared between Clare's brows; the plastic work had robbed her of the power to frown naturally. 'He had? How do you know?'

'He told me, and offered to send me out in a taxi.'

'I see.' And what she saw didn't quite please Clare, apparently. 'Well, thank you for not coming back yourself, anyway.'

'You're welcome.' Tess couldn't help the sardonic undertone. 'I presume you two had a joyous time together.'

'Not jealous, are you, dear?' asked Clare softly. 'You mustn't misconstrue Ramon's courtesies and compliments. He's kind to you because you and I are related, even though distantly. He wants you to have a good holiday, and so do I. But don't build on anything that happens here. Tess, or you'll find it will crumble.'

'I can believe that.' She paused. 'Clare, would you like me to leave Tangier?'

Almost imperceptibly, a veil seemed to form over the green eyes. 'Are you serious, Tess?'

'Perfectly. If you're sure of Ramon you don't need me any more.'

'That's rather crude, isn't it? You make the whole thing sound cheap!'

Her nerves tightened, Tess gripped her hands together behind her back, but she did not change the half-negligent posture. It was no use showing anger or low spirits. She strove for nonchalance.

'I'm afraid I do think it's all rather cheap,' she said. 'I didn't like it at the very beginning, but now that I know the two men I loathe it. I think you're treating Victor abominably, and that you'll probably lose him, even as a friend.'

Clare's thin nostrils flared slightly, but her voice retained its normal pitch. 'I didn't want your opinion, Tess, not at any time—still less now. It means nothing at all to me. And if you're trying to alienate Victor from me, I can tell you right now that you won't succeed.' The reddened lips turned back in a smile from the too-pearly teeth. 'Victor wants me more than he's ever wanted anything in his life. He even talks of his wealth as if it were worthless compared with what I mean to him. He's over forty, yet he's never before loved a woman. Which means, my dear Tess, that while I'm unmarried he'll stick around.'

'I wouldn't bank on it,' Tess said quietly. 'Victor told me yesterday that he's thinking of leaving Tangier soon.'

She had meant to say that, and to follow it up with the information that Victor had withdrawn the decision. But as she spoke that last sentence she saw something in Clare's face that stopped further speech way back in her throat. For the first time Clare looked frightened. And being frightened would do her good.

'You're lying,' she whispered.

'No, it's true. He's proud, and hurt.'

'Did you . . . sympathise with him?'

Tess had to move, do something instead of looking at Clare. Dislike and contempt were almost physical. She picked up a miniature from the table near the window and examined it. 'What I said to Victor doesn't matter. I thought you'd better know that you may be losing him even before you're sure of Ramon.'

'Does he know you're telling me this?'

'No.'

'Then, Tess...' her voice queerly hoarse, 'don't let him suspect that I know. I'll have to think about this, and change my attitude a little. Not too much, or he'll guess that I'm doing it to keep him here. Will you promise to let me know what he decides? I'm sure he'll tell you.'

Tess said sadly, 'Doesn't that strike you as rather terrible—'

that he should tell me things about himself that he doesn't tell you? I think you're treating him despicably, that you don't deserve him, anyway. It would be kinder to let him go.'

'You're my guest,' said Clare in a sharp whisper, 'and you owe me loyalty. If you tell Victor that I know he's planning to leave Tangier, I'll make you sorry.'

'You will? How?'

'There are ways. I'll make Ramon dislike you.'

'That might be for the best.'

'Then I'll go further!' Now, suddenly, she looked dangerous, like a leopardess at bay. 'I'll get an item put in a local gutter-rag—a paragraph about a certain respected pathologist and a bookshop girl from England who made love by moonlight on the beach at Tiran.'

The miniature fell with a crash. White-faced, Tess swung round and stared at the distorted smile of triumph on that pale, artificial face among the pillows.

'You wouldn't dare,' she breathed. 'Who's been spying?' 'So you admit it?'

'I admit nothing, except that I did go down to the beach with Philip Westland. Did you have me followed that night?'

'No,' said Clare, almost serene now that she was sure of her weapon, 'but you were seen. Can you imagine what it might do to Dr. Westland's reputation if the facts were publicised?'

'The *facts* would do no harm at all,' Tess emphasised, hollow-voiced with fear and fury. 'Why shouldn't a bachelor doctor take a stroll with a girl on the beach, even in the dark?'

'It wasn't only a stroll, was it, dear?' said Clare, winningly. 'I'm not blaming you ... or him. But if it became known it wouldn't do him much good in the town, and would certainly make a woman scorned out of the chic lady doctor. Or are you hoping to win him away from her?'

'Of course I'm not. There's nothing at all between Philip Westland and me.' Tess was still quivering, but the effects of the shock were disintegrating. 'I don't know how you could threaten anything so dreadful. A malicious rumour could

ruin him here. And I might tell you, Clare, that if you went that far I'd see that you got exactly what you deserved. Both Ramon and Victor would despise you for ever!

'So?' Clare gestured, economically, but her faint smile became set. 'It's a case of how much one had to lose, isn't it? But we understand each other now, and I think we'll each respect the other's affairs. I had no intention of threatening you this morning, or even of warning you, but what you've told me about Victor left me no option.'

Urgently, Tess wanted to get out of the room; she felt tainted. But there was one thing more. 'Who saw us that night, Clare?'

'A man. No one you know.'

'Was he set to watch us?'

'I couldn't say.' She stretched her arms. 'I think I'll get up after all. The wind is too noisy up here.'

Tess couldn't hear the wind; her senses seemed knotted into a blind necessity to get out of this room, and this house. Without another word she went to her bedroom and put on walking shoes and a dust coat, tied a scarf over her hair. She went down the stairs and out of the house, was caught by the wind and thrust down the road, towards the town. She felt strung-up and horribly alone. There was no one she could consult, nothing but the working of her own mind to help her unravel the chaos into which Clare had pitched her.

Someone who knew them both had watched Philip and herself on the beach the other night. Those gay sweet moments, wading in the sea, lying staring at the jewelled sky and talking, his arms round her, his lips to her shoulder ... they had been desecrated by some contemptible Paul Pry. Tess felt she couldn't bear it, that she wouldn't dare to be alone with Philip again, for fear of what might happen to his career. And his marriage to Sheila Vernet.

She walked blindly, found the wind was more tolerable among the shops, though while crossing an alley that led to the sea it was difficult to keep to one's feet. She recalled, dully, that this was Monday and she should be having her last-but-one treatment at the clinic. But she couldn't face it; she would telephone the reception desk, make the wind her

excuse for missing therapy this morning. And perhaps she should call at Victor's hotel and leave word, to save him coming out.

She went to the hotel first, and after she had given the message she used their telephone. The clinic receptionist asked her to hold on, but after a moment she came back on the line.

'Miss Carlen, I was asked a short while ago to give you a message as you came in. Dr. Westland wanted you to wait and see him after your treatment. At about eleven-fifteen, he said, but if you're not coming ...'

'No, I'm not. Is Dr. Westland at the hospital?'

'Yes, he's bound to be.'

'You don't know why he wanted to see me?'

'No. He said just for a few minutes.'

'Thank you. I'll telephone him.'

Tess felt cold and shivery as she waited again while the switchboard boy got the number. Philip sounded impatient, as though he had been dragged away from something important, but his tones changed when she spoke.

'How are you?' he asked at once.

'Fine,' she answered automatically. 'I'm not going to the clinic this morning. They told me on the telephone that you wanted to see me for a few minutes.'

'Yes, I do. Where are you now?'

'I'm ... I'm hung up, I can't see you, but ...'

'Something wrong?'

'Nothing at all.'

'You haven't got someone with you again, for Pete's sake?'

'No. Can you tell me now what you wanted to see me about?'

'I could tell you over lunch. We could have it in town.'

'I'm sorry, **Philip**. I can't see you then.'

'This evening?'

'I'm afraid not. I'm ... tied up for some days.'

'All right,' crisply, 'if that's how you feel.'

'Can't you really tell me now?' she pleaded.

'It was only about an arrangement I've made for Benito. He's going over to Gib. for a month with a married couple

who are friends of mine—they have a boy of their own. I thought you'd like to have supper with him, to say goodbye.'

'I wish I could. Really I do.'

'If you can't, you can't. It was just a thought. Keep indoors till the wind drops. Goodbye.'

The telephone clicked, decisively. It was like a death blow. Slowly, Tess replaced the receiver, paid for her calls and went out again into the wind.

She stayed out till late afternoon, plodding the almost deserted streets, drinking black coffee and smoking an occasional cigarette. She had never felt so wretched in her life. The wind lost ferocity, and eventually she was able to get a taxi back to the house. Still unresolved was the burning question: should she leave Tangier at once ... could she bear to go without even seeing Philip again?

Clare's only comment, when she saw the pale, wind-tossed Tess come into the house, was: 'You should have slept it off, my dear, not tried to exhaust all your emotions outdoors on such a day. If I were you I'd go to bed and have dinner there.'

Tess was so spent that she took the advice.

She was still pale next day, when Ramon came. 'This party,' he said, after he'd gaily greeted the two women. 'It is now short notice, and I think in any case it would be better held at the weekend. On Saturday, *pequena*?'

Tess shook her head. 'Will you be kind, and postpone it indefinitely?'

'You are unwell?' he said, concerned.

'Not unwell, but slack. Not in the party mood. Do you mind?'

The dark eyes had a gentle gleam. 'Your wish is my law. Let us be quiet for a few days. May I stay for dinner with you, Clare?'

'You're always welcome. You know that, Ramon,' in Clare's most caressing tones. 'I'll get Victor along. I like us to be four; we seem to belong together.'

It seemed to Tess as though she had been sidetracked and were going on somewhere else; she existed, but in a place where time hung suspended, unnoticed. She was aware of her immediate surroundings, of the fact that Clare was suave



and controlled and just a little limpid-eyed with Victor Mears; of Victor, slightly more at ease and less tired-looking; of Ramon, vital, considerate, and exciting even in his smooth acceptance of Tess's mood.

The four of them spent a morning touring the museum rooms in the Sultan's Palace, an evening at the roof cafe, watching the sun fade in tongues of flame and the light spring up in the Cape Malabata lighthouse. They attended a private cocktail party at the Yacht Club, went down to the Caves of Hercules and paid the stoneworkers there to light a flare and show the way through the caverns.

"They are not natural," Ramon told Tess, as he grasped her elbow and they peered into the inky water that filled the caves. "They began two thousand years ago, when millstones were first hewn in this district for use by the Romans in their olive-presses. The men who work here live in the stone-cutters' village nearby."

"It's awfully dark."

"In the afternoon the sun gives a little light. I would like to bring you here at sunset. There is a cave which grows red as fire; to me, it is a more exhilarating sight than the Blue Grotto at Capri. You have been to Capri?"

"No, but I'll go one day."

"I would like to be the one to take you, *chiquita*," he said, a throbbing note in his voice. "I would like to show you the world, to watch its effect on you. I believe I am in love with you, really in love."

An urgency in him got through to her, though inwardly she was still a little frozen. She became aware that they were alone in this archway of the caves, that Victor's and Clare's voices had moved on, leaving hardly an echo. She couldn't move without risking a dip in those awesome dark waters; what was more, she didn't want to move.

It was difficult to believe Ramon's declaration and yet she wanted to. How beautiful, to be loved and needed, to feel a man grow taut at one's touch, to have him hold one . . .

His mouth was warm and seeking. Her eyelids, her cheeks, the tips of her ears, her throat, her mouth. She clung, filled with a desperate longing to forget, a poignancy that speared through to the centre of her being.

'Such sweetness,' he murmured gently. 'Who could resist? Forgive me?'

A flashlight, the voices of American tourists. Ramon released her and without speaking again took her hand and drew her on, towards the daylight. Tess stepped out into the sunshine, walked a little apart from the others till her limbs lost the quivering, her mouth the numbness.

It mustn't happen again, ever. She would show him that it had meant nothing more than a brief interlude which might happen to any couple, in romantic surroundings. She wouldn't even meet his glance till she was sure her own was empty, and his normal.

The weekend passed, and then another week of fitful touring, with light cafe meals in between. Tess came to know every view of the seven hills of Tangier. While buildings, trees and palms, the harbour, the pedalos skimming round the ships, the dense blue and cream of the Casbah, the minarets. She knew the Little Socco and the Gran Socco, where you could buy almost anything and were bemused by the colours and smells and the tinsel glitter of Indian silks and Moroccan jewellery. She watched the croupiers in the Casino, even staked a hundred francs and won enough to keep her interested for half an hour. And in the twilight, through a barred window, she watched a snake-charmer with live coils about his turban and sinuous bodies festooning his bright robe.

One morning, when she happened to be walking alone near the shops, she met Sheila Vernet. The doctor looked svelte in a royal blue sheath dress of subtle simplicity. Her black hair shone, her olive skin glowed and there was a smiling sparkle in her eyes as she recognised Tess.

'Ah, Miss Carlen! You didn't come to see me after the treatments, so I suppose you are now without pain?'

'Yes, thank you, Doctor. I'm glad to have an opportunity of thanking you for your help.'

'It was nothing. I would have liked to invite you for coffee, but am meeting a friend.' Her accent became more pronounced, her smile friendly. 'When you were attending the clinic I did not know that you had escorted the little Benito to Dr. Westland's house. He is a scamp, that boy. He

talked of you.'

So she'd met him. Something twisted within Tess, and hurt. 'We liked each other, Benito and I. How is he now?'

A graceful shrug. 'Well, and in Gibraltar with other children. I met him only the night before he left. A small supper with him, to say hallo and goodbye. I don't think he will come back.'

Philip had said Benito would be away a month. 'Where will he go, then?' she asked.

Dr. Vernet said carelessly, 'There's no place for him here. He can go to school or return to his grandparents in Salamanca. Philip and I are professional people; Benito would be in the way. But,' with more of the cool charm, 'he is an enjoyable child.'

Like something in a sideshow or at a circus; a source of tolerant amusement so long as it's not always on parade. Tess smiled and said it had been pleasant meeting Dr. Vernet, and Sheila lifted one of her strong, well-kept hands and walked on, towards the cafe where she was to meet ... whom? Tess didn't care. She got away quickly, went down to the beach to join Clare. She undressed in one of the tall striped bathing tents that stood about like sentry boxes, and went straight down to the sea. The one good thing about swimming here was that it washed the mind clear of thought.

She didn't want to reflect upon Benito or anyone else, but later, when she lay drying on the sand, it all came back. Philip had taken Sheila home for supper that day; it was Sheila who had said goodbye to Benito in Tess's place. Had Philip and Sheila strolled on the beach afterwards? Probably, after the wind had died. And they had no doubt wandered along the beach many other times, before Tess Carlen had been heard of in Tangier. Philip must have told Sheila the truth about Benito, or surely there would have been no question of sending him away for good. Which meant that the constraint between them was over. Sheila had looked a happy woman. She had what she wanted, Tess was sure. And it was fairly obvious that what she wanted was Philip, without a small nephew in tow.

Poor little Benito. But there was nothing pathetic about

him. He had loved his father and had not quite accepted Philip; had been willing to love him as much, of course, but even though he had been only four when Boyd had left Salamanca he had retained a fairly vivid impression of a laughing, swashbuckling character who worked little and played much.

What was it Marthe, the housekeeper, had said about Philip—that he had been gay and teasing until the day the house had been ransacked? What could they have been looking for? What was it that Ramon wanted, yet was willing to bide his time rather than hasten events towards acquiring? It was something small but very important, so important that Ramon had never alluded to it directly again. A hint occasionally, a narrow puzzled look when she had mentioned that the child had left Tangier and there was no further need for her to see Dr. Westland.

How could she possibly leave Tangier with so much left unsolved? Yet how could she stay, knowing herself vulnerable because she loved a man who was immune and out of reach? Inside Tess there was an emotional deadlock.

It was several days later that she went down to town late one afternoon, to collect an evening dress which Clare had left with a dressmaker for remodelling. The house was one doorway and two windows in a long wall that shut in a narrow cobbled street, and Tess stepped gingerly into the dark interior and stated her errand. The woman, who wore an old ankle-length brocade and the usual veil over her hair, waved graciously to a chair and said that the gown was almost finished.

'More difficult than one thought, mademoiselle, but I shall not keep you long. One of my sewing girls is at work on it now.'

Tess sat on a rickety low chair amid scraps of material, dust, dirty tea glasses with sodden mint lying in them, and a welter of buttons and cottons. She saw people passing down the street, momentarily caught glances turned her way; eyes in bearded faces, eyes in the smooth faces of children, eyes revealed only through a slit.

It grew dark in the long narrow lane though the strip of sky above it retained the mauve-blue of early evening. Tess

moved restlessly. The place smelled of dope cigarettes and spices, of dust and cockroaches and harbour rats. Clare used this woman for cheapness, which seemed absurd when one recalled her grocery bill.

At last the dress was brought and displayed, wrapped in scraps of tissue paper gleaned from the corners of the room. Tess paid up and came out into sudden dusk. One seldom heard of anyone being molested in Tangier, but the mystery of silent robed figures is apt to strike a chill into a woman alone in the older parts of the town. Tess hurried over the cobbles, wound into another street named only in Arabic, and into another. Then, with relief, she reached a road that was wide enough for one-way traffic, and slowed. And that was where she saw him.

Tall, striding along on the other side of the street not twenty yards from her, wearing a burnous with the hood pulled low so that only the lower part of his face showed, and that shadowed by the tall buildings and the growing darkness. Philip! Tess caught a hand to her throat, saw him become aware of her and hesitate. Then his head went down and he moved more quickly, to disappear into a side street.

Jarred, she stood quite still. She was alone in a part of the town where no white woman came unescorted after dark, seldom even in daylight, and he had deliberately passed her by. It was unbelievable! Yet was it? Uncannily, he'd looked the part. Even his features seemed to have taken their cue from his garb, and gone more aquiline. Like an Arab's. What was the hospital pathologist doing down here in a burnous?

Before Tess could conjecture further, a taxi drew up right in front of her and the driver smiled ingratiatingly.

'You want taxi, mademoiselle? Gentleman say you want taxi. Yes?'

'Which gentleman?' she asked swiftly.

He jerked a dirty thumb over his shoulder. 'Back there. He speak Arabic like a foreign man.'

Gratefully, she got into the musk-smelling cab. So he'd sent this thing for her at once. For some reason he had come here disguised and couldn't be seen speaking to her. It seemed fantastic, but was it any more impossible than other

things which had happened here? This was a place where incredible things did happen. Such as finding Clare a beautiful blonde with gleaming teeth and a couple of rich suitors, and being kissed by one of the said suitors. And such as falling for a man who lived in a secluded house called Las Perlas. And there were other things, but she was too mixed up to think them out.

As she went into the house her leg ached, her shoulder ached, and her throat felt as if she'd swallowed a bucket of sand. And to help matters along, Clare was fuming.

'I wondered what on earth had happened to you,' she exclaimed. 'Ramon will be here in half an hour !'

'The dress wasn't ready. Clare, I think it should be cleaned before you wear it.'

'It was cleaned before I took it for alteration. They'll have pressed it. Let me look.'

It *looked* clean and elegant. Tess gave up. With one thing and another she felt almost ill and was very thankful that she was to spend the evening alone. She washed, but didn't bother to change before going down for a light supper.

Ramon Guevara, waiting for Clare, was helping himself to a Scotch with ice. He bowed to Tess, touched his lips to her fingers. 'I am glad to see you alone for a moment,' he said softly. 'How I wish you were going with us to the party this evening. Unfortunately, I was not asked to bring guests, simply a woman friend. I would have loved to take you, Tess. You know that?'

'It was natural you should take Clare. I think I'm going to enjoy having an evening to myself. One can have a surfeit of conviviality.'

'You will not be lonely?'

'Not a bit.'

His voice took a still lower pitch. 'You are bad for my ego, *pequeña*. Myself, I would rather be with you, anywhere, tonight, than go to this party. Yet you are happily looking forward to an evening alone !'

She said lightly, 'You assume too much, Ramon. How do you know I won't tell Clare what you've just said?'

He laughed, gave an arrogant shrug. 'She would not believe you. Even if you told her that I adore you, which is the

truth, she would not believe.'

She shook her head smilingly. 'You're so sure of yourself. You kiss in the dark and make love in innuendoes to two women at once. Some day your wicked ways will catch up on you. Meanwhile, enjoy yourself. That click just now meant that Clare is on her way down.'

He went to the foot of the stairs to greet the older woman. Tess heard his compliment, Clare's response. The remodelled dress was superb, of matt sea-green in a simple cut that enhanced curves and made the green eyes clear and sparkling. Clare looked like a sensuous mermaid; had the ash-blond hair been loose one could have imagined it floating. She took a small drink, let Ramon drop the fur stole about her shoulders. As he performed the act with his usual grace, he was looking at Tess, blatantly.

Tess felt warmth and vexation. She wished she were entirely unaffected by this man, and yet she doubted whether any woman could meet Ramon without at least a quickening of the pulses. Would Clare get him? she wondered. Would any woman ever tie him down?

They were gone, and Pedro was asking whether Tess would like her supper now. She decided she would, and when he had served it she told him he could go, if he liked. She would leave the plates in the kitchen, for the morning.

The manservant gave her his blithe smile. 'Thank you, señorita. I do have to see a friend this evening. He has some very good perfume, very cheap. Señorita would like to buy?'

'Sorry, Pedro, but I've more scent now than I know what to do with. You should try selling some to Señor Guevara. He gives it away in pints.'

This amused Pedro; he laughed inordinately. 'That is good,' he wheezed at last. 'Señor Guevara! It is Señor Guevara to whom this perfume belonged.'

'You mean it's sort of . . . contraband?'

'The señorita does not understand Tangier. No matter. Perhaps the señorita does understand Señor Guevara, no? He is a very generous man, with the things he acquires.'

'Does he get *everything* on the cheap?' she asked curiously.

'Many things,' a shrug, 'and many things for nothing. It is nearly all legal, except...'

'Except what?'

But Pedro felt he had said enough. 'No perfume, señorita? But if you should wish for anything else, tell Pedro.'

Tess did not know what made her ask, 'Jewels, Pedro? Is it possible to acquire jewels for less than their worth?'

He spread his hands, dropped his eyelids. 'All things are possible to Señor Guevara.'

'Wasn't he interrogated at the time of the big jewel robbery on the luxury liner? None of the stuff was ever found, I believe.'

'It is possible,' said Pedro with his bland smile, 'that the police were paid not to look very hard. *Bueno!* They make money, others make money and the owners of the jewels collect the insurance. Why worry, when no one loses?'

'Except the insurance company.'

Pedro laughed hilariously, and then said, with a show of contempt, 'It was not even half a million English pounds. A big robbery, but not the biggest, even in these waters. It is forgotten now. Perhaps in a few months we shall have another.'

Upon which optimistic remark he made an exit. Pedro often made extra pesetas from sidelines; was so good at it that Tess had reflected more than once that he could probably have made more without working than he did as a house servant. But maybe there was a question of caste. A servant to a European woman was above the rabble who traded on the streets, and it was possible Ramon's frequent visits to the house helped to keep Pedro informed on current deals. He was a wily customer. Most extraordinary, thought Tess, to live among intrigue and nonchalant dishonesty without being much affected. It was Tangier.

She finished her supper and took the remains into the little kitchen. Pedro, in his usual thorough fashion, had tidied the room and slipped the catch on the back door so that it had locked behind him. For almost the first time Tess was alone in the house, and it gave her a feeling of release and pleasure. She went upstairs and took a bath, got into pyjamas and a wrap and leafed through some of Clare's



magazines.

It was about nine-thirty when she heard a car on the short drive below. She tried to look down but her window stood at an awkward angle and the grille prevented her leaning over. The bell clanged, and she decided to ignore it. It rang again, and she recalled, suddenly, that the lights had been left on in the hall as well as in the porch. She would have to go down and speak through the eye-window.

She ran down quickly, slid open the six-inch-square glass window on the door and looked through the little wrought-iron cage at grey-clad shoulders and a blue tie. A head bent, grey eyes looked in at her. Her fingers felt like inflated rubber gloves as she fumbled with the lock and opened the door.

'Good evening, Tess,' said Philip Westland. 'May I come in?'

## CHAPTER V

**HE** was inside the house before he had finished asking, and it was he who closed the door. He looked down at her, saw her small and barefoot, in a belted lilac-pink gown below which showed bare golden-brown legs. The frilled white collar of the shortie pyjamas was ruffled against the collar of the wrap, and the effect was sweet and youthful.

'That mad little haircut,' he said vexedly. 'You look fourteen.'

'I didn't expect anyone,' she said quickly. 'There's no one else in and ... you've never been here before. Inside, I mean.'

'Not even a servant here?'

'No. I was reading in my room. I thought I'd get to bed early for once.'

He nodded coolly. 'You do get around, don't you? I'm not surprised you're tired.'

He meant this afternoon. That was what he'd come about, to ask her to say nothing; he didn't want to see her, particularly. Tess's throat closed in. She said offhandedly, 'You can trust me. I won't tell anyone I saw you in the Arab town this afternoon. And thanks for sending the cab.'

He drew in his lip and said nothing. They were very close to the small entrance, and for something to do Tess waved at the opening beyond the wrought-iron screen.

'Would you like to come right in for a minute? Do you drink at this time of night?'

He did follow her into the lounge, but said, 'No drink, thanks.' Then looked about him. 'Startlingly modern, isn't it—like your stepmother?'

'Yes.'

'Thought so; it's not really you.' A pause. 'I didn't have any particular reason for coming, except that I thought we'd been unfriendly long enough.'

She stood with her back to the small curtains, avoiding his glance. 'I don't think it's very healthy for us to be friendly, do you?'

His eyes narrowed. 'What does that imply?'

'Do you remember the last time we saw each other?'

'You mean ... this afternoon?'

'No. When I had supper at Las Palmas and we walked afterwards on the beach.' Her head went down and she toed a tuft in the rug. 'We were seen.'

A brief, throbbing silence. Then, in metallic tones: 'Well, what of it? I don't remember doing anything to make you scream.'

'It's... it's what people might think about you. Someone told my stepmother.'

'For the love of Mike,' he said violently. 'I belong to the medical profession. I don't take girls to the beach for fun and games!'

'I know, and so does Clare. But you see how facts can be distorted. I don't want to spoil things between you and Dr. Vernet, and I don't want scandal—for you or for me. That's why I wish you hadn't come here.'

'To hell with gossip. I just looked in to say hello. Isn't courtesy permitted?'

'Don't shout like that.'

'Why not, if there's no one here? I feel like shouting ... and hitting someone!'

She backed a fraction, apprehensively, from the steel-grey glitter of his eyes. 'I told you because I thought you should know.'

'Thanks,' he said bitterly. 'Is that why you wouldn't come to say goodbye to Benito?'

'Partly.' But he'd found someone else to do it, so what was he barking about? Desperately, she added, 'Philip, I've told you you can depend on my silence about seeing you this afternoon. I was shocked; you looked so ... so much at home in the burnous, and even your face had the lines that go with it. It was uncanny, but once the cab arrived and I realised you hadn't snubbed me, I didn't hold it against you. The only thing is ...' She hesitated, hoping he would speak.

But he *took some time. He got out cigarettes and gave her*

one, lighted both hers and his and dropped the match into an ash-receiver. Then, after blowing smoke and looking at her with an expression she couldn't read, he asked:

'What were you doing down there?'

'I called on a dressmaker in one of the alleys, for Clare.'

'She should have gone with you.'

'We did go together before, but the dress was for a party tonight, and she always likes to rest before a big date. I got there in broad light, but had to wait for them to finish the sewing and ironing.' She moistened her lips, got rid of the unsmoked cigarette. 'Do you . . . do you often go out dressed like that, into the Casbah, and those places?'

'We hadn't better discuss it. What you don't know can't hurt. Let's talk of something else. How much longer have you in Tangier?'

She took a breath, sighed it out. 'I don't know. Sometimes I feel like leaving at once.'

'But something pulls you back from deciding?'

'How did you know that?'

His smile was cynical. 'I know Ramon, by reputation anyway. I've never yet known a woman to leave him before he's tired of her.'

'You're being beastly again. I'm not having an affair with Ramon.'

'Are you sure?'

She lifted her glance to his, briefly, felt colour rise from her neck. 'It's not an affair,' she repeated doggedly. 'He's charming and thoughtful, and he does get a little overpowering, but he's Clare's escort, not mine.'

'He's doing well; two of you, each quite different from the other. While he's going the pace with Clare he can soft-pedal with you. Does he kiss you?'

'It's not your business.'

'So he does.' Philip gestured abruptly. 'It's no use warning you, I suppose. You'll go on till you're bruised and battered, and then you'll decide to limp home to England. You appalling little idiot!'

'Now you're being really offensive!'

'No, I'm just downright mad. At the back of my mind, when I came here tonight, I had a proposition for you. I was

going to suggest that you go and stay with my friends at Gib. There's Benito and their own boy, and they're good fun. Plenty of social life among normal, sane people; it's what you need. But I can see now that you wouldn't go, because you feel you have a chance with Ramon Guevara. I'm disappointed in you, Tess.'

'It happens,' she said jerkily. 'Are you always disappointed in people whose ideas disagree with yours?'

He didn't answer, but pulled on the cigarette as though it tasted bitter. He paced to the window and back to the sofa, looked measuringly round the room once more. Tess felt that if he paced again or ground that heel again into the rug she would scream. She didn't know why she felt nervous and tightened up, but she did know that she felt a horrible sense of loss, that the sudden beating in her veins at his appearance had dulled to a pain.

She said quietly, 'I don't want us to quarrel. If Benito is still in Gibraltar when I go home, I'll see him then.'

'I went over yesterday. He asked about you.'

'I'm glad.'

'I'm going to Gib. with Sheila and a couple of others next Sunday. Care to go with us?'

'No, thank you.'

'Does that mean you'll turn down any invitation, of any kind?'

'I think it's best.'

'You've a reason, of course,' he demanded crisply.

She had; a good one. She was afraid of falling more deeply in love with him. And there was another, less important; it was possible he was being watched, and while whatever he did with Sheila Vernet was permissible, with anyone else . . .

She threw out a hand. 'We move in different circles, you and I. You don't care for Ramon and I doubt whether you'd even find much in common with Victor Mears.'

'Ah, yes, Victor,' he said with sarcasm. 'How's that affair progressing?'

'You see? Can you wonder I dislike you?'

'Do you, now?' he said with a sharp smile. 'Why don't we sit down and talk it out?'

'Because I'm not dressed and you shouldn't be here.'

His mouth thinned slightly. 'Maybe I like taking a risk now and then. But if you don't, I'll wait while you get into something and we'll go out to a cafe, or just for a drive.'

'We've nothing to talk about, Philip.'

'Not much. But it would be interesting to know some of the things you're afraid of.'

'I'm not afraid.' She lifted a hand to push back a tendril, and her sleeve slipped back, revealing a delicately rounded forearm. The hand strayed round to her throat, remained there. Looking straight at him, she said pleadingly, 'Please go now. You may have been followed.'

'I probably have.'

She stared at him with fright. 'You know? Can they... will they do anything to you?'

He gave a cool laugh. 'Don't be melodramatic. You mustn't get like these Tangier types; they love melodrama. They'll follow a man for years, not even knowing why.' He moved towards the door, adding carelessly, 'All right, I'll go. Shoulder fit?'

'Yes, thank you.'

He was almost at the door when he said, 'By the way, what was the name of that street of the dressmaker?'

'I couldn't say. You know how it is down there—all the names in Arabic'

He nodded understandingly. 'It was in the Rue Moulay Gif we met, wasn't it? It happens to be the only street that will take a taxi width in that quarter. You were lucky I found one.'

'I thought that afterwards. You disappeared into an opening, and then the taxi was there. Did you come out higher up, and find it?'

'No. Just luck.' A lift of the broad shoulders as he looked down at her. 'You really are frightened, aren't you? What of, for heaven's sake? Have you had trouble with your stepmother?'

'Nothing I can't handle. We keep companionable on the surface and I can't hope for more. We were never buddies.'

'Does she resent you?'

'She has nothing to resent me for.'

'And you—do you resent her?'

'I can't explain how things are between Clare and me. It doesn't matter to anyone but us. Philip, are you sure you aren't in danger?'

'My dear girl,' he said negligently, 'I run a research lab, not a smuggling racket.'

'You do medical research in a burnous?'

He grinned. 'That's the boy in me, seeking adventure. They say all nice men retain something of the boy they once were.'

'You're putting me off. That wasn't play, this afternoon. In European dress you'd have spoken to me.'

'And got furious with you for being there alone. But it doesn't do a white woman any good to be seen talking to an Arab in his own district.'

'That's not why you ignored me.'

'That's my excuse, and I'm sticking with it. Relax, child. There's nothing going on that I can't handle. Thanks for your concern.' His glance mocked. 'If you persist in it I shall wonder if you haven't a little love-hate feeling for the man at Las Perlas.'

Warmth flooded into her cheeks and she said crossly, 'The hate part, yes. No one can love a man who never gives love. One might be attracted, but a woman's love for you would never have a chance of growing out of the bud stage; you'd see to that. You don't want love.'

'This is interesting. Go on.'

'Sneer, if you like. It's true. You'll marry Sheila Vernet because you and she share pride in your profession.' Tess almost choked on the final words, but determinedly said them. 'She loves you more than you love her, and you don't deserve it.'

'Well, well,' he said mildly, 'you *have* made a neat little sum. This is the first case I've met of one woman carrying a torch for another, Sheila would be gratified... and surprised.'

'Oh, go away,' Tess said shakily. 'You're an arrogant, self-sufficient brute.'

He was still smiling, but tightly. 'You may not know it, but you're saying just the things that might make me stay—and prove you wrong. You get quite a flash in your

eyes, young Tess. I can see what Ramon's after.' She didn't rise to this, and he added, curtly and with gravity, 'Be careful of that man. I don't for a moment think he'd harm you—he's not the kind to harm a woman—but he could flatter you into believing something that isn't true. That he's in love with you, for instance. However much you want to believe that—don't.'

'Have you finished?'

'For the moment, yes.' He put a hand under her chin and lifted it, smiled an experienced, jaded smile right into her eyes. 'Stay just as you are, Tess. You're sweet and gauche and unspoiled—yes, even at twenty-two. You'll find the right man, and it won't be Ramon Guevara.'

She slipped away from him and opened the door. 'Thanks for calling,' she said stiffly. 'You can depend upon my keeping quiet about seeing you this afternoon.'

'You don't have to repeat that.'

'It's what you came here for, isn't it? You wanted my word and you have it. Now, go.'

'Hey, not that tone,' he said, surveying her scarlet cheeks and angry eyes. 'I came here to invite you to Gib. Remember?'

'I don't need that sort of payment for keeping confidences.'

Suddenly the grey eyes blazed. 'You think that's why I asked you to go with us? You actually believe I'd do that? Hell, I suppose you're young and foolish enough to believe anything. I'd like to spank you thoroughly.'

She said nothing, but stood like a small ramrod near the door, waiting for him to leave. He drew a deep breath, shoved a swift hand round the back of her neck and gripped, bent and kissed her hard on the mouth. It took her so much by surprise that she only went more rigid.

'That's instead of a spanking,' he said grimly. 'I hope it hurt—and not only your lips !'

The door thudded with such force that the ornaments rattled. Tess let out an imprisoned breath and slumped against the wall, and after a moment her fingers explored lips which, inside, still retained the impress of her teeth. The ... the savage! From the beginning she had known Philip Westland was an unknown quantity, but it had never



occurred to her that he could be coldly violent in his anger. Coldly passionate, was the expression, rather; as paradoxical as the man himself. She felt as if she'd been flayed.

It took effort to put out the lights and walk upstairs, and when she reached her room she felt spent, and sad. 'You're sweet and gauche and unspoiled,' he'd said. And she'd always imagined herself poised and serene. Before the car accident that was how she had been; an experienced bookshop assistant who could hold her own even with the occasional poet or essayist. Now she knew that handling life needed other qualities and knowledge, that books wouldn't help her.

The despair was like a thick mist about her; a blend of disillusionment, hopelessness and physical pain. Perhaps she should be glad he had kissed her like that. At least it had dispelled any pretty fantasies she might have been fabricating, subconsciously. A man who could kiss mercilessly, to punish and vent anger, was incapable of tender love and the dear intimacies.

If Victor Mears hadn't fallen ill a couple of days later, life would have been astonishingly flat and depressing. Even with exotic Tangier spread dazzlingly round the bay, the lingering tourist bathers, the gleam-eyed, robed figures who stalked the streets, the veiled Muslim women whispering along in thin leather slippers, the vociferous mixture of French and Spanish business men who clinched deals at the café tables and used their offices only as an address ... with brilliantly hot days and cold nights that were reminiscent of the desert, with date palms bearing loads of sticky fruit which schoolboys deftly hooked down with sticks they had deliberately shaped for the purpose, with velvety, twinkling darkness that was unlike darkness anywhere else, with the muezzin's call and the pidgin French of the vendors of lottery tickets ... even among all the trappings of the polyglot free port, Tess felt peculiarly apathetic. She was marking time again.

Victor came down badly with shingles accompanied by persistent high temperature. He was confined to his hotel suite, where Clare visited him every morning and Tess most

afternoons. Clare was most solicitous. Perhaps she was also relieved, thought Tess. She could be gentle and affectionate with the man in private, show him in a hundred ways how it grieved her to have him ill, and yet take advantage of the illness in the evenings. Every evening with Ramon did not spell bliss, but it did give her immense satisfaction.

Dimly, Tess realised that though Ramon was as courteous and ardent as ever, he was abstracted. He had conferences with people in the Mirzeh Hotel, went away for a couple of days and came back looking even more thoughtful.

'You must forgive me, Tess,' he said one night, after the three of them had had dinner at a rooftop restaurant. 'Clare is older, and she understands that I have many problems at this time. You are too young to care about a man's problems, no?'

'It's difficult to care about something of which you know nothing. You seem to have so many different kinds of business that I don't think I could keep track of them.'

'Not so many,' he said, with a deprecating wave of his manicured hand. 'There is one which occupies me a great deal, and about which I can do very little at present. It irritates me.'

Clare leaned over the table and patted his hand, 'You poor darling. I'd put everything right for you if I could. Will you two excuse me for a moment? The Dumonts have just sat down at a table across the way and I'd like a word with them about some wines they are getting for me.'

Ramon stood and bowed as she left them. Tess took a minute off to reflect that it was unusual for Clare to inflict her domestic details on Ramon, and to recall that wines had been ordered only a week ago. Was this a gambit of some sort?

Ramon looked at the heavy ruby ring on the small finger of his right hand, tilted it to catch the light. 'Yes, you are right, *pequeña*. Clare has left us for a reason. I am to persuade you to have our grand carnival party soon. She wishes it.'

'Why should she leave us? You could have asked me in front of Clare.'

'She tells me you are not so happy together as she had

hoped. I, also, had hoped you and Clare would have great affection for each other. What is wrong between you?'

'How did Clare explain it?' she asked guardedly.

'She is at a loss, naturally. You are her guest, she made your father's last years ideally happy and she is most interested in your future. She feels the lack is on your side, but I know you too well to believe that. There must be a misunderstanding between you, and perhaps I can put it right. You may be frank with me, you know that?'

'Yes. But I don't really have anything to say about it, Ramon. Clare and I just don't ... hit it off as well as we thought we might. But we're not enemies—don't think that.'

'Of course not, *querida*? He covered her hand with his on the table, rested a warm smiling glance on her face. 'I love you both very much, and since you arrived in Tangier I have never wanted to be with anyone else—just you and Clare. More with you, naturally.'

Tess bent her head. 'That's not true, Ramon.'

'It is true.' And the flatness of the statement convinced her it was. 'At the risk of making you defensive I am going to talk of something we have avoided. I once asked you to do a small service for me, and you tried, though you were unsuccessful. I refer to Westland.'

A nerve jumped in Tess's hand and she quickly slid it from under his and sat back. 'I can't approach him again, Ramon. Even if I could, it wouldn't get what you want. He's an inflexible man.'

'But you,' swiftly, and with a caressing undertone, 'are a pretty girl, and he is not yet married to the good-looking doctor.'

'He won't give up whatever it is you want. Ramon ... why don't you go and see him at Las Perlas?'

'You think I have not tried to see him?'

'Then surely it's obvious there is nothing more to be done?'

'I have never in my life admitted defeat; somehow I will get what I want this time, as in the past.' Whimsically, he added, 'He is a man to study, this Westland. I have never before encountered one who is so careless of his own safety and yet morally impregnable. You are English—do you

understand him?'

'No.'

He nodded. 'That is what I thought. Why is he so complex? Professional men of his age come to work in Tangier for two reasons; either they wish to escape something or they know ways of adding to their income.'

'It could be that Dr. Westland is interested in the differences that must occur in the human body in Tangier, as compared with Britain,' she pointed out, a little coolly. 'Are you a professional man in Spain?'

Ramon was not put out by the hint. He replied suavely, 'I was a lawyer until a few years ago, and still retain much respect for the law. I came to Tangier to practise for higher fees, and was persuaded into business instead. The Mirzeh Hotel is the result of only two transactions.'

'You struck it rich, but I don't think Dr. Westland wants more money.'

'I know that. I have offered him money, by letter. He did not even reply.'

'Then why are you asking me to ...'

'No, I do not ask it again. As I told you, Clare wishes you to have your party soon, and all I'm going to ask of you is that you invite Westland.'

She shook her head slowly. 'You mentioned that before. He wouldn't come, and I'm not sure I'd want him to. Ramon,' with an earnest look at him, 'will you tell me what it is—this thing you want from him?'

'I regret,' he said charmingly, 'that the secret is not mine. I do not want it for myself, you understand, but for a friend. Come, *chiquita*, let us settle this thing. Such a party would take some ingenuity to arrange, and we must give the guests time to procure fancy dress. Let us say a week on Saturday, and we will send an invitation to Dr. Westland. You agree?'

'Very well. Send the invitation to Phil ... Dr. Westland, but please add Dr. Vernet's name.'

If Ramon noticed the slip of her tongue he gave no sign. He shrugged smilingly. 'If you insist. You are being very wise.'

But Tess wondered. She was so tired of secrecy that in a way she would have welcomed a showdown, so long as she

could be there, but because Philip was an important if unfathomable part of the scheme she was scared. She felt as though she were caught up in a net and hadn't even the energy to struggle free.

When Clare returned to the table she looked newly painted, her eyes bright as emeralds. Momentarily, she met Ramon's dark glance, and then, with a happy little laugh, she suggested they might have a few tapas, the delicious little savouries which, following the Spanish custom, were served with drinks at every bar in Tangier.

'And a bottle of champagne, eh, Ramon? I've just made an excellent bargain with Dumont, and I feel expansive!'

Tess knew they were celebrating her capitulation; she only wished she knew its significance. Not a bit of use asking Clare on the quiet; she was acting towards Ramon like a privileged accomplice. What was it about the man that made others do just as he wished? All except Philip Westland. Philip was proof against charm, bribes and threats. But not entirely proof against barbarism, she discovered, some days later.

They had been to see a German film that evening and Clare and Tess were outside the cinema while Ramon and one of his friends went off to get the car. As was usual towards midnight, the boulevard was packed with high-spirited people still in search of fun, but Tess saw Philip the moment he appeared, with Sheila Vernet at his side, coming towards the cinema. Involuntarily, she shrank back into shadow, but something that was stronger than her will kept her glance on him. He was talking, without a smile, lifting a shoulder but making no gestures. From this angle his face looked dark and set. Then he raised his head and she saw him fully, for a moment. There was a dressing across his brow and temple on the left side, and a discoloration on his cheekbone. Tess's breathing stopped for long enough to frighten her into believing she would never breathe again. Then she gulped, flung a glance at Sheila. The woman looked concerned and puzzled. Were they talking about a wound that was still fresh?

They had passed, but Tess's knees trembled till Ramon's car slowed at the kerb. Instinctively, she knew what had

happened to Philip. A visit to the old town wearing a robe, a meeting with someone who resented his interest in them, the use of a club, or a knife. Oh, God, why was he taking such risks? How desperate was this quest of his? Would he ruthlessly forge on, whatever the cost, till he got what he was after? Why didn't that woman stop him? She had the right; in her place, Tess would have clung so close that he wouldn't be able to haunt the old town without toting her along. And he'd never take a woman on a dangerous mission.

All right she lay tearing herself to bits over Philip, and next morning, inevitably, she went into the town and telephoned him at his laboratory.

'Trouble?' he queried at once, knowing her voice.

'None of my own,' she managed, with nonchalance. 'I caught sight of you last night in the street and wondered how you'd acquired the wounded-soldier look.'

'Oh, that.' His reserve, even over the telephone, was almost tangible. 'I had a bit of an accident—wasn't looking where I was going. Are you all right?'

'Yes.'

'Furious with me for kissing you the other night?'

'I'd forgotten it. I was only curious about the dressing on your head.'

'Are you sure that's the only reason you called?'

'Certainly, though I knew you wouldn't tell me the truth about it. I've told you, I'm the curious kind.'

'Very curious,' he said succinctly. 'By the way, I've received an invitation to your party, but I'm not sure whether I'll be free to attend.'

'Please yourself,' she said coolly. 'I'm only an excuse for the party. It's Clare's and Ramon's, really.'

'I thought it might be. Tess, will you *please* go to Gibraltar and stay there for a week or two? Ditch the party and everything else. Just get out of Tangier for a while. Will you do that?'

'You're the one in trouble, not I. Take care of that injury, won't you?'

'Damn you, Tess!'

'Thanks. Why did I feel uneasy about you? Just shows, doesn't it?'

'I meant damn you for a mule. You realise how you got mixed up in all this? It was through Benito; if you'd never had to bring him to me ...'

'I wouldn't know you, would I? You'd rather it was that way? Very well.'

'Listen, will you! If you won't accept advice offered in friendship please realise that I do have a sort of responsibility for you. I want to take you over to Gib. and see you settled among ordinary people till all this blows over.'

Her head began to knock. 'Till all what blows over?'

'I can't be more explicit on the telephone, and I don't think it's wise for us to meet.'

'You mean that... that bang on your head?'

'That—and other things. I'll think up something. I'm very relieved you rang me this morning; I've been wondering how to get in touch with you without anyone knowing. It's a week to this party of yours; are you likely to be alone in the house again before then?'

'I don't know, but don't come.'

'No—you mustn't be caught up further. But I could telephone you if no one's about.'

She slipped her tongue along dry lips. 'Why should you want to?'

He sounded harsh as he answered, 'For my own peace of mind, that's all. Tess, I'll tell you something. That thing Ramon wants ... if he tries to get it through threatening you in some way I'll give it to him at once. But I've kept it for nearly two years, waiting for an event that now seems imminent. The last thing I want is to be at Ramon Guevara's mercy, but if—through you—I am in that position, I'll yield. You understand?'

'Not yet, but I'll try to work it out.'

'It needn't touch you in any way, but I'd feel better if you'd go to Gib. When will you be alone at the house?'

'I don't know, but if you like I'll ring you when I am.'

'Promise?'

'Yes.'

'You know something, Tess? That knock on the face was the best thing that happened to me yesterday. If I hadn't looked like a fugitive from the clinic last night you wouldn't

be speaking to me now, and I'd still have been chafing for an opportunity of a word with you. I suppose you were with your usual companions when you saw me?'

'Yes,' she said, 'and you were with yours.'

Restraint seemed to grip the very wires that connected them. 'I want to keep her out of it, too,' he said. 'I'll depend on you to ring me as soon as you can, and certainly before the party. Don't worry too much about Ramon. He knows the law through and through and he'll never risk even a mild court case. That's been the whole reason for his back-door bargaining, and long patience. It's only a war of nerves ... and mine are pretty good.'

'I'm sure they are. Goodbye.'

She replaced the receiver without waiting for his response, and walked out into the windy heat of the day. She was becoming known at the Miranda Cafe; the waiter automatically brought coffee and a small sweet cake, and the other regulars, most of them business men, gave her their usual appreciative glance and went on talking. Tess lit a cigarette, sat back and stared at the promenade and the sea, and tried to concentrate.

Philip had been waiting for something for nearly two years—'an event that now seems imminent', he'd said. Could her brain ever absorb all the implications of this 'thing' which Philip possessed and Ramon wanted so desperately that he was elaborately planning a means of acquiring it? Two years. And all that time Philip had owned it and Ramon had coveted it without trying, after that one attempt when Las Perlas had been ransacked, to procure it. Though Ramon had admitted to having written to Philip, and trying to see him.

She sighed. Philip had said he would give up his secret if threatened; a secret he had kept for a long while, waiting and watching. What was it that had so much importance for him? And how did it tie in with Ramon? If only she knew what she was after and what she was up against, she might be able to help him in some way. It was the not knowing that scared her; she could face the known danger, would know what to avoid, but the unknown could be a nightmare.

She went back to the house for lunch, and spent a few



hours that evening half-heartedly choosing a Moorish dancer's dress for the party. Loose green silk trousers with a gold tunic over them and an ice-blue veil which would be kept in place by a headdress of tiny gilt coins. Clare had decided on one of the tight-fitting brocade dresses which button from throat to hem, and would wear over it a white silk haik.

When the dress merchant had gone away in the darkness, Clare relaxed with a cigarette and a gin-and-bitters. She looked across at Tess, who was standing at the window gazing at the thrashing trees and the needles of rain that scored the window pane.

'Draw the curtain, dear,' Clare said. 'Pedro says we shan't get real rain till the wind drops. I don't think I'm going to enjoy winter in Tangier. I never did like wet and windy weather. I believe I'll go to the Riviera for Christmas.'

Tess let the curtains fall together and turned round. 'Can you afford it?'

'Not at the moment, but I'm hoping.'

'And Victor?'

Clare snapped her fingers, almost irritably. 'I don't know. Since he's been ill he's mentioned marriage again. He's a dear thing and rich, but ... well, he's not exactly a dream-man, is he? I could never feel for him as I feel for Ramon.'

'Then tell him.'

'I never close a door till another is wide open, my pet. I didn't even leave my first attempt at marriage till after I'd met your father.'

Tess's glance rested a little wearily on the bright whitish hair, the green eyes, the pink-tan lips showing edges of the new white teeth. 'Don't *people* ever matter to you? Did you love that young man you married first?'

'Of course I loved him; it was the only reason I could possibly have for marrying such an improvident bore. After him, though, I looked for security—hence your father.' She gave a smile tinged with spurious charm. 'We were happy, you know, your father and I. He gave me a home and better clothes than I'd been able to afford for years, and I gave him affection and gratitude, and a young wife he could be proud of. But all along, when I had no money and while I was

married to your father, I knew I belonged elsewhere, and after the house was sold and I found myself with a good chunk of cash for the first time in my life, I knew what I wanted. A new beginning as a beautiful woman. Within a year I looked ten years younger and quite arresting. The woman your father married could never have attracted even Victor, let alone Ramon.'

'And yet,' said Tess, from the depths of a foolish hurt which was connected both with her father and Victor Mears, 'you're afraid you'll never get Ramon to marry you, aren't you?'

'Marriage,' said Clare candidly, 'is a worthwhile state with a rich man, but it's not everything. Often, one is better off and life far more enjoyable if one can have money without the man. I'm getting into a mood in which I'd settle for that.'

'Money? Are you going into business?'

Clare gave one of her clear little laughs. 'Not exactly. And now don't let's talk of it any more. We're alone for an evening, darling, which is a rare treat. Come and sit down. I want to talk clothes.'

Talking clothes with Clare meant listening while Clare sketched and thought aloud. Tess was willing. She went to the kitchen for the scrubbed pastry board and thumb-tacks, took a roll of white kitchen paper and scissors from a drawer and made a sketching board. Pedro came in.

'Ah, señorita,' he exclaimed happily. 'You become artist? You make a picture of Pedro?'

'It wouldn't flatter you, Pedro. Would you like to make some coffee and leave it on the stove?'

'But surely. Steak sandwiches, eggs, fish?'

'Nothing to eat, except a biscuit or two.'

Pedro closed the door into the dining-room and came back to the table. 'You find the letter, señorita?' he asked in conspiratorial tones.

'Letter?'

'I put it in your room some time ago. One of these ragged street boys brought it and said he must give it to you yourself. That you would pay him. I cuffed him and sent him away.'

'But ...' Tess stared at him, 'what does it mean?'

A big smile, a bigger shrug. 'Who knows? Me, I am a romantic, and I would say some man has seen you and wishes to know you better. It is an assignation, no doubt. This boy was just off the gutter.'

'And you paid him nothing?'

'Why should Pedro pay ... or the señorita? The man who sends the letter tells the boy he must return for payment. Then he knows the letter has been delivered. These boys, they will always try to scrounge the extra peseta!'

'Your slang is almost too good, Pedro.'

'You like?' he beamed. 'Jolly good show.' He winked. 'You need to send a reply, let me know. *Si?*'

It was not till Tess was back in the lounge that she thought seriously about the letter. Then, suddenly, it was urgent that she read it. Philip wouldn't risk writing to her, but the message could have some connection with him. She had to see it at once.

'I've a tickle in my nose and no hanky,' she said hastily to Clare. 'I won't be a minute.'

She took the stairs two at a time, entered her room and closed the door. The letter lay on her dressing-table, a soiled, crumpled envelope addressed to 'Miss Carien' in block letters. Shaking fingers ripped up the flap and took out a single sheet of cheap writing paper. She read, in the same print as that on the envelope: 'A blue car will be standing outside the Miranda at three o'clock tomorrow. Please use it.'

'Well, for heaven's sake,' she said softly, soberly to herself, and sank down upon the edge of her bed. An assignation, Pedro had surmised. It could be. Block letters, a street urchin as a messenger boy, no signature. She ought to ignore it. Yet there was just a possibility that it could be from someone she knew. Not Philip; he would never write to her like this. Or would he, because to do so would be quite out of character and therefore the letter would hardly be likely to be traced back to him? No, it wasn't from Philip; she felt it, deep inside. Then from whom? She knew so few people.

Should she meet the blue car? Of course not. It might even be a hoax. And yet there was that niggling possibility

that the letter might be connected with Philip Westland. Tangier, she thought despairingly. Was life ever normal here?

'Tess!'

'Coming,' she answered quickly, and waited only to tear the note to shreds before running down the stairs and blowing her nose vigorously as she went.

## CHAPTER VI

**THE** blue continental car was cruising. Tess saw it from the shade of a beach umbrella, watched the driver glance at the Miranda Café each time he passed that way. He could have been Spaniard, Frenchman or Moor. In European dress there would not be enough difference to show at this distance. Her heart began uncomfortably to thud. She recalled rumours she had heard about Tangier. A white woman could disappear; smuggled into the desert, imprisoned by some petty sheikh, she might never be found. Viewed from the gay city of tourists, good living and only normal crookery, the idea of being spirited into the harem of a desert chief seemed absurd, yet even in these days it could happen. Dare she approach the car and question the driver? She didn't have to get into the thing, only make enquiries. She couldn't let it go away, and never know.

Tess went up on to the road, crossed it and stood beside the palm nearest the café. Fright was a ridge in her throat, an ache in her leg and shoulder. It was odd, but the shoulder and leg which had been injured were positively painful. That was what nerves did to you.

The car stopped beside the palm and the driver got out. A Moor, but an elegant one who had excellent English.

'You are Miss Carlen?' he asked.

'Yes. Who are you?'

A shrug. 'Merely a messenger, mademoiselle. I drive the car. You will go with me?'

'Not without knowing where to, or who sent you.'

'Ah, yes.' From an inner pocket he took a note which had been folded small and placed it in her palm. 'Read it, mademoiselle. It will explain.'

She opened the scrap of paper. 'You may trust the driver,' she read. 'Please come, Philip.'

It was Philip's writing. Tess had seen a report of his at the

clinic in which the name had been signed exactly as it was here, except that in the report he had added his surname. She teetered uncertainly, thought, a little wildly, that if the man put on speed and drove away from town she would jump from the car. Within the town nothing could happen to her, surely. And the note *must* be from Philip.

'This doesn't say where you are to take me,' she said to the driver.

'It is not far.'

'A house?'

Just perceptibly he hesitated before replying. 'A café, mademoiselle. You will be quite safe. Monsieur regrets that this is necessary, but he is continually watched.'

It sounded genuine, and Tess was beginning to feel that if one shied away from every danger there was the chance of missing a good deal as well as letting someone down. Particularly, she didn't want to let down Philip. So she nodded.

'All right. Take me there.'

She got into the back of the car and they moved away just as a policeman approached, flinging up his arms and shouting because the car had stopped in a non-parking area. They drove away from the shops, into the street beside the Marchan, where football players were practising, and then into narrower cobbled lanes where there were no pavements. And inevitably, as Tess thought it might, the car came to the Rue Moulay Gif, where she had seen Philip that evening. It seemed to have happened a long time ago. Shut in by high white walls which were peeling and discoloured, edging past goats and cartons of refuse, the car at last halted at an alley which was too narrow for traffic.

'It is down here, mademoiselle. I will take you, but cannot wait long because I am blocking the road. Monsieur will be there.'

He bowed and went ahead into a short cobbled passage which ended at a flight of steps that led downwards into a cheap Moorish café. At this time of the day custom was at a standstill and the proprietor himself lounged in a splitting wicker chair, asleep. The driver went to a curtain, drew it back a few inches and looked through into an adjoining

room. He smiled and nodded at someone, pulled the curtain back and waved Tess forward.

'Monsieur,' he murmured, as introduction. And to the man: 'I will park the car and keep watch, monsieur. I will see mademoiselle as she comes out, and take her back into town.'

The curtain, of heavy Berber weave, fell back behind Tess. In the dimness, she stared at the man who wore a blue robe with a hood secured well down over his head by a ring of thick grey cord.

'Philip,' she said breathlessly.

And then she stared. The same features and tan colouring, the long straight nose and moulded chin. But a slack good humour at the lips and dark lines about the eyes, no clean-cut profile, seen close. And there was no sign of a recent wound! Tess gazed at him for a long, dawning minute.

'You're Boyd, aren't you?' she whispered. 'Benito's father?'

'Yeah,' he said negligently. 'Sit down, Miss Carlen. You and I have to have a talk, and I can think of no better place and time of day than this. Sorry to bring you to this dump, though. I've been holed out here for days—or rather next door. I daren't come in here often.'

'Are you in hiding?' She was still whispering as she lowered herself into one of the rope-seated chairs at the table. 'Yes, I suppose you must be, though I can't think why. Philip wants to find you—do you know that?'

Boyd Westland grinned despondently. 'He wants it so much that he'll get worse than that cut over the eye if he doesn't curb his impatience.'

'Did he . . . come here?'

'He did, and doled out two black eyes and a cracked jaw before he got away; I was told about it. It was your fault.'

She went pale. 'Mine? How could it be?'

'You mistook me for him the other day.'

'It was you?' Tess forced her mind to accept this, and get to work on it. 'But you looked like him . . . and you recognised me.'

'No. You stared as if you were seeing ghosts and I knew at once that you must know my brother, and had mistaken me

for him.'

'And the taxi?'

He lifted his shoulders in an easy shrug; you felt he did everything the easy way. 'You were obviously an English girl, alone. I'd have done that for anyone.'

So he wasn't without chivalry. But he was weak, this man, so different in his manner and outlook from Philip that it was hard to reconcile their characters as both Westland. Tess saw now that the skin appeared loose along his jaw and under his chin; yet he was two years younger than Philip. Which meant, probably, that he was self-indulgent, perhaps a waster.

'I saw Philip that same evening,' she said. 'I thought he'd come to my stepmother's house to extract a promise from me—that I'd keep quiet about having seen him. Even before he mentioned it I said I would; that was what told him,' she ended slowly. 'He didn't let on by the flicker of an eyelid, but he'd guessed I'd seen you.'

Boyd was sitting at right angles to her, leaning forward with the sleeve folds of his robe on the table. That smile of his had worn furrows in his cheeks; he must always have used it prodigally.

'I can't stay here long,' he said, 'so I'd better get to the point. Believe it or not, you're the only person I can contact here who knows both Philip and me. I've met Sheila Vernet, but only once, and we didn't gell; she wouldn't do a thing for me now, I'm sure. In a way she's too much like Philip; I can just about tolerate strong principles in a man, but in a woman—not at all. I like a woman who'll take a risk with a man, who'll do for loyalty things that aren't permitted in professional circles. Are you like that, Miss Carlen?'

'I've never thought about it. How did you come to know my name?'

'The taxi-driver. He found it out for me.'

'Do you use *everyone*?'

'When you're placed as I am, you have to. I'm stuck right here, daren't show myself beyond the Moulay Gif. But I must communicate with Philip—just as he has to communicate with me. Trouble is, I can't let him know where I am. I suppose all this seems very mysterious to you?'



'I'm getting beyond being puzzled. Don't you think you ought to tell me everything?'

He got out a packet of khaki-coloured cigarettes, shook a couple loose. When she refused, he took one for himself and closed the packet. She knew he was studying her as his hands moved, that he was weighing her up and wondering how far she could be trusted.

'How well do you know Philip?' he asked.

'I've seen him a few times.'

'You look an honest little kitten—and I'm going to be straight with you. Ever heard of Ramon Guevara?'

'Yes,' she said carefully.

'Well, my brother has something that Ramon wants, but which actually belongs to me. It's a key.'

So there it was, spoken almost casually. 'Key—just a plain metal one?' she said.

'Plain to look at.' He gave a brief laugh. 'But complex in some ways. Guevara may not yet have discovered that I'm in Tangier. I'm known as Monsieur Roger here—pronounced in French like a surname—and he knows me only as Boyd Westland. I want that key from Philip, but I've reason to believe he's being closely watched. You see, they expect me back—have been expecting me for some months. So they're watching my brother because they know I have to get in touch with him as soon as I show up. They want that key.'

'They being Ramon Guevara—and who else?'

'Two or three others, small fry who do the work while Ramon collects. Will you go to my brother for me?'

She looked down at her fingers, clasped in front of her on the table. 'He won't give me the key—you know that. He'd never let me come down here again.'

'That's Philip, all right,' he said with cynicism. 'If he did agree it would be suspect. He'd certainly tail you. Quite a guy, my brother Philip. Did he ever tell you that I also studied medicine and flunked out in my fourth year?'

'He's told me nothing about you.'

'I guess he gets it out of his system to Sheila. She'd say the right things, but you, I imagine, would make excuses for the spineless brother who wouldn't work. You'd be on the side of the loser.'

'Don't be so sure,' she said evenly. 'I've no admiration for rakes. They sound attractive, but to the people close to them they're a pain in the neck.'

'Ouch,' he said agreeably. 'You're as penetrating as that brother of mine! Well, the problem is, how do we get that key from his hands into mine, without our meeting? In the post it might go astray.'

'Before we go further, Mr. Westland—do you write exactly like Philip? I'd have sworn the signature on that note was his.'

'I forged it.' He grimaced. 'I've done it before, to get something I wanted.'

'Wouldn't it be better to be direct, for once? Philip knows you're in this district, doesn't he?'

'The district—that's all. You know what he got for exploring !'

'But who'd do that to him? Why should they harm him?'

'My guess is that they thought he had the key on him and was down here to give it to me. They tried to knock him out so that they could search him.'

'But that's thuggery!'

'Among a certain type it's recognised as justice. Luckily, I have a personal friend or two in this district and they keep me informed. I could go to Las Perlas, taking one of them along as escort and makeweight, but once the others suspected I had the key they wouldn't let up. Ramon wants it, badly.'

'What is it the key of?'

'It wouldn't do you any good to know that, my pigeon. You're rather like a sweet little bird, you know; determined and comparatively fearless but not really belligerent enough to get along without some means of flight.' His eyes narrowed mockingly. 'You wouldn't be gone on my brother, would you?'

'No,' she said without a tremor, 'I wouldn't.'

'What do you think of him, as a person?'

'He's dependable. That's also what you think of him, isn't it?'

He winced theatrically. 'There's not much of you, but you

can be needle-sharp. I rather like you, Tess, and I wouldn't mind trying to please you. However, that belongs to other times ... not now. About that key—I wouldn't have had you brought here if I hadn't a plan. I understand you're being given a fancy dress binge at the Mirzeh on Saturday.'

'That's right.'

'I'll be there.'

'You'll *what!*'

He grinned carelessly, jabbed out his cigarette in a stone ashtray and patted her hand. 'Bedouin get-up, my child—I'll have an exact copy of mine delivered to Philip. I get to the Mirzeh at about nine-thirty and he takes over at ten. At exactly ten o'clock I'll go to a car hidden among the tamarisks. He meets me there, gives me the key and goes into the party as if he's already had half an hour of it. Simple.'

'If he's being watched it'll be known he hasn't arrived at the Mirzeh at nine-thirty.'

'But not till long afterwards, at a post-mortem, when it won't matter. By then I'll have used the key and it will have lost all significance.'

'And you'll have disappeared, I suppose, leaving Philip to face Ramon!'

Boyd Westland sounded almost indulgent as he said, 'Silly girl. Ramon hasn't a thing against Philip except the possession of the key. Once he no longer has it, my brother will be more free than he has been for a long time. He'll be relieved.'

'And I'm to tell him of this plan of yours?'

'Yes, please.'

Tess looked at this man in robes, at his eyes with their surrounds of dark wrinkled skin, at his smiling mouth with its loose lower lip. The epitome of the charming cad. Once he might have been trustworthy.

'How did you get this way?' she asked. 'You grew up with Philip, I suppose—why aren't you just a little like him?'

A casual gesture. 'You know how it goes in families. My father was a doctor and Philip grew up that way. My mother was a good-looking, rather good-time girl, and she liked the

best because I was the younger and most like her. On my fourteenth birthday she and I split a bottle of champagne between us and no one ever found out. Smart going, eh?"

"Not very. And your marriage?"

He looked down, his eyes half-closed, the smile twisted slightly. "She was a Spanish . . . well, not quite a dancer, but she did dance occasionally in cabaret, which was how I met her. I wanted her, but her mother was a gorgon of a duenna and the family horribly virtuous, so we got married. I was more or less compelled to live in Salamanca, but it wasn't so bad. Living was cheap and no one forced me to work. I'd do a deal in Madrid now and then and that kept us going. When Lucilla died I lit out." A pause. "How's Benito?"

"I wondered when you'd get round to asking that!"

"Now look," he said lazily, "I don't want you to sit in judgment on me. I know I'm all sorts of a heel, but I couldn't take the kid along with me when I left. You must see that. He was far better off with his grandparents."

"If they'd wanted him they wouldn't have sent him to Tangier."

"That was my fault, I suppose. They always looked upon him as my child more than Lucilla's; he wasn't pure Spanish for one thing, and for another he liked me far better than any of them. After I left I sent them money, and the last I sent was from Tiran. But I got short of cash and missed several months. A grasping crowd," he said pensively. "Is the boy with Philip?"

"He's in Gibraltar, with friends of Philip."

"Good. I suppose he still looks Spanish?"

She nodded. "Except that there's a redness in his hair. He's all there—still thinks his papa the most wonderful man in the world. You don't deserve him."

"But Philip does," he said comfortably. "He was rather taken with Lucilla when he met her, so he'll look out for Benito."

"And what are you going to be doing?"

He laughed, frowningly. "You're the first woman who's ever made me squirm, do you know that? I'm no good to Benito, and Philip is in a respected profession so he won't want me around. I've had more than enough of Tangier,

anyway. Once I've got that... key, I'll get out and stay out. You might tell Philip that.'

She drew a long shaky breath. She hadn't realised how strung up she was till she heard that breath herself, its harsh unevenness. 'Why didn't you take that blighted key with you when you left?'

'Because it wouldn't have been a sensible thing to do.'

'You want me to tell Philip everything?'

'Everything except where I'm living at the moment. It would be dangerous for him to know—you see that?'

'But he may not want you to have the key.'

'He must. It belongs to my safe deposit box in a foreign bank here. I need my papers and some cash that's in it. I'm giving up the box.'

'And you're the only one who can open it?'

'Yes. It has two locks, one the customer's and one the bank's.'

'Couldn't you tell the bank you've lost the key?'

'Of course, but it's a long process—an advertisement has to appear three times in the local press, and after that I have to prove my identity. I can't have publicity of that sort.'

She stared at him, her lips were dry. 'There's more than that to it, isn't there? Why should your money and papers be coveted by others?'

'You know enough. Will you tell Philip?'

'I'll try.'

'Good.' He smiled almost genially. 'I had a feeling I could depend on you, Tess Carlen. If Philip agrees to giving me the key at your party, don't do anything at all. If he doesn't, post this.' He had drawn a business card from some inner pocket. It was addressed in print to a laundry and on its other side there was some message in Arabic. 'It simply says that a bundle of laundry has gone astray.'

Tess felt unsettled, incomplete. It was as though there were some point which, if she concentrated, she would see in a true and clear perspective. This man was smooth and convincing, uncaring about his brother and his son; when he had the key he would go. She slipped the postcard into her pocket and stood up. Simultaneously, there was a sound outside in the cafe, a throaty yawn, followed by a thick laugh

and a stream of unintelligible syllables.

Boyd Westland whipped a fold of his robe over the lower half of his face and said quickly, 'I must get out the back way. Wait just a moment and then follow; you'll meet the man who brought you here.' The eyes, all that was visible of his face, grinned. 'So long, Tess Carlen. As one Britisher to another, *salaam*.'

He was gone, and for a minute Tess stood, palpitating a little, in the small ante-room. Then she went the same way, through an opening into a dark passage. At the end of it, awaiting her, was the driver of the car, and as she reached him he put a finger to his lips and silently went ahead, through another passage, and another, till they came out on to the Moulay Gif. The car was in a tiny ancient courtyard.

They had almost left the old town before Tess was able to think. And then her thoughts were still chaotic. A safe deposit box in the vault of a foreign bank. Any money Boyd **Westland** might possess would hardly be even wine-money to Ramon Guevara, which meant that one or some of his papers were valuable. How could papers have value? Bonds? Perhaps a will that were better destroyed? Something incriminating? Tess began to wonder if perhaps she had gone to sleep after lunch and was dreaming all this. It seemed so entirely unreal.

Yet that man, Boyd Westland, was real enough. And she knew the key existed, that Las Perlas had been searched for it, that Philip had been fought for it only a **day** or two ago; the key of a safe deposit box was **probably** original in design, easily distinguished from others. Boyd said it was his. If so, why was it in Philip's possession? She ought to have asked the man that. Still, the explanation was no doubt simple. Boyd hadn't been long in **Tangier before** he had left again. He had given the key to Philip for safe keeping. Yes, that must be it.

'Mademoiselle wishes to be put down at the Miranda Café?' asked the driver politely over his shoulder.

'Yes, please.'

As **she** stood at the café and watched the car disappear she heard the chime of a clock. It was five, only two hours since

she had waited on the beach for the blue car. She felt as if she had lived a lifetime since then, in dark places.

She walked back to Clare's house, still thinking. Somehow, she had to see Philip at once. Impossible to visit him at Las Perlas without its being known, and Philip wouldn't like her to call at the hospital. The telephone again; there was no other way. Yet dare she talk plainly on the telephone?

Victor Mears was in the lounge with Clare. He looked paler and perhaps a shade thinner, though he could afford to lose more weight. He began to rise, but Tess shook her head quickly.

'No, stay there, Victor. I'm so glad to see you about again. How are you feeling?'

'Much better, now that I can leave the hotel. I've missed the quiet coolness of this place.'

Clare was wrinkling that still unfamiliar new nose. 'You smell of charcoal, darling. Where have you been?'

'Walking. I know this town better than the Tangerines themselves.'

'Sit down and have a drink,' said Victor.

'No, I think I'll take a bath, thanks.' She paused, nerving herself. 'Is Ramon coming tonight, Clare?'

'No, dear, he has a business meeting. Why?'

'If Victor's staying I might like to ... to ask someone over, just for a drink.'

'Someone?'

Tess's clear hazel eyes met the quizzing green ones. 'Philip Westland,' she said, and watched her stepmother closely.

Clare went carefully, smilingly blank, but not before a spark of eagerness had shown itself. 'Oh, yes, of course. You've accepted hospitality from him and returned nothing. Do have him in for a drink, if he'll come.'

'May I use the telephone?'

'Naturally.'

Tess made a complication of looking up the number she knew well, dialled and waited. She asked if Dr. Westland had left yet. He came on, and she said, unhurriedly, 'Oh, Dr. Westland, this is Tess Carlen. My stepmother would like

you to come in for a drink on your way home. Can you manage it?'

'Your stepmother?' he said disbelievingly. 'What *is* this?'

'Would it put you out?'

'Damn it, Tess, you've rung me up again with someone in the room!'

'It'll be all right, then, round six?'

'What I couldn't do to you I'll be there.'

'Be seeing you, then.'

Tess put down the telephone, smiled sweetly and impartially upon Clare and Victor and went upstairs for her bath. When she stepped into scented water five minutes later her lips were still smiling, but her body trembled. Now she knew something she had only guessed at before. Whatever Ramon's plan, Clare was definitely part of it. Quite how she fitted in, Tess did not know, but Clare must be well aware of details that were obscure to herself. In that small naked moment downstairs, after Tess had mentioned Philip's name, Clare had revealed something that Tess could not analyse. If she could have analysed it she might know how to act.

After her bath she put on a green splashy-patterned dress that had a wide collar about a low neck. She combed her hair back and made it curl a little, put on make-up and a touch of Nuit de Maroc, a cool Paris scent which Victor had given her. She went down at exactly six, and at two minutes past Philip arrived.

Tess opened the door herself, saw his calm enigmatic smile and an almost imperceptible half-wink. He thought this a joke! Oh, God, she thought hollowly, and he still has the scar from the last lot. What was it with these Westlands, both the good and the bad? Was that one Westland characteristic they shared - a love of danger?

Victor poured the drinks. 'I thought you and I were fated to see each other often but never to speak,' he said in his quiet, cordial tones. 'I'm glad to see you here, Dr. Westland.'

'I, too,' said Clare, gushing a little. 'How is your boy?'

'He's fine.'

'Won't you want to send him to school in England?'



'He's a sun-lover. For the present he's having lessons at Gibraltar.'

'How nice. Come and sit near me. Dr. Westland. I can't think why Tess hasn't invited you here before.'

Tess sat in her chair and watched Clare tearing into her act. She looked quite lovely this evening, her stepmother. The ash-blond hair shone in a swathe on top of her head and she wore an ice-coloured silk brocade that was green if you didn't look at her eyes and blue if you did. Very clever.

Philip drank weak whisky and water and ate a couple of things on sticks, which Pedro had brought. You would have thought he really considered himself invited by Clare, the way he behaved. His very look at her was a compliment, his slight attentions to Tess amused and calculated. Yet he must know that it was she who had got him here this evening, for a definite purpose. When he looked at his watch, Clare said,

'Can't we persuade you to stay for dinner, Dr. Westland? There are three of us, as you see, and we'd love to have you even us up.'

'I'm sorry.' Bother the man—he really sounded it. 'I'm still wearing the suit I came out in this morning—haven't been home all day. I have a couple of things to write up and some telephone calls to make. I'd have liked to stay, but...' a pleasant shrug finished the sentence.

'Then some other time. I insist,' said Clare. 'Unless you could come back?'

'It's kind of you, but it would be late.' Then, blatantly, he added, 'Miss Carlen might like to go home with me for a bite. I wanted to show her a letter I had from Benito, but I don't have it with me.'

Tess shook her head so swiftly that it throbbed momentarily. 'I can see it any time. I'm glad you were able to join us, even though you can't stay long.'

'Why, darling,' murmured Clare, 'that sounds most ungracious. You have nothing arranged for this evening and I'm sure you and Dr. Westland always have at least one topic of conversation. Even though you weren't at all well when you came to Tangier, you did love little Benito. I did myself; he's a diverting child.' Her eyes widened innocently as she

turned to Philip. 'I believe Tess is afraid your fiancée might not care to have you entertaining a young woman at your house, but you're both doctors and regard these things differently. I always say a doctor is above reproach.'

'Then you're occasionally wrong,' remarked Philip, with a touch of indolence that to Tess was reminiscent of his brother. 'Mostly, but not always. Miss Carlen has nothing to fear from me, though. When she has eaten and we've laughed over Benito's little effort, I'll bring her home. Get your wrap, Tess.'

If she could have looked what she was thinking he would have shrivelled. Or would he? He seemed different, harder, shrewder and more uncaring. In fact, ruthless, behind the facade of charm. She sighed sharply, and went upstairs.

In her room she stood still until her heartbeats slowed. She hadn't been to Las Perlas since the night they had walked on the beach and waded into the sea and fleetingly caught green diamonds on their fingertips. His lips on her bare shoulder, spied upon, though they hadn't known it, by the mean eyes of someone who had reported to Clare.

Tess swung round as her stepmother appeared in the doorway, smiling and urbane. She bit at her lip, went to a drawer and found a scarf. Clare strolled in and said cheerfully,

'He was *your* guest, darling; don't be offhand with him. I'm glad to see that he appreciates you enough to want your company for an hour or two.' She paused. 'I promise that you won't be watched.'

'What does that mean?'

'Why, Tess dear,' in surprised tones, 'I believe you're nervy. There's no need for it, I assure you. That little scene on the beach that I heard about—it was nothing, really. It was mentioned to me, that's all, and in a foolish moment I used it as a threat. Philip Westland's private life isn't of any interest to . . . to us; only his movements in relation to a certain article. Darling, you must realise that you're now in a position to put an end to all this intrigue. He'd talk to you, if you went the right way about persuading him to. It seems so silly that we should all be on edge because of this one stubborn man.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't want to know,' said Tess flatly. 'I'll go with him because I can't avoid it without making a hiss, but I'll get back as soon as I can.'

Clare's silky tones took an edge. 'Be careful, my dear ... and discreet. Perhaps I should tell you now that I've been empowered to offer you a little gift for whatever you might do for us. A *big* little gift, one might say.'

A cord tightened in Tess's throat, but she stared straight at Clare. 'Ramon bewitched me for a while, but not any more. I know just what he is—a man who lives by his looks and his wits. He doesn't care about anyone but Ramon Guevara. Not even you, Clare. He was playing us both along, for what he could get out of us. You were supposed to influence me, and I was to be flattered by compliments and kisses...'

'Kisses!' Clare's smile was gone, the too-white teeth were tight between lips which had curled back drily. 'That's a lie. You're trying to set me against Ramon.'

'I think you know it's true,' Tess said. 'Oh, the kisses didn't mean a thing to him, only a way of getting closer to something quite different. But I'm not going to help Ramon. I hate him.'

'Then help me,' said Clare in a quiet stony voice. 'He's promised me a handsome present, and extra for you. Let's take it, and get away from this place.'

'From Victor?'

Clare gestured impatiently. 'If Ramon weren't about Victor would stay faithful, hoping I'd marry him. He'd go where I go.'

'You think that's fair to him?'

'Don't look at me like that. You've never known it because ... there was no reason why you should, but I have a dislike for anything gross. Victor's sweet and generous, he's even as rich as anyone could hope for in a husband. But you can't feel attracted to a man who ... you know what I mean.'

'I think you just want money, and to be free as well.'

'Of course, don't we all?' She pouted grimly. 'I want romance before I grow too old for it.'

'You're already too cynical.'

'Not cynical, sophisticated. I want a sophisticated lover who's fun and good to be seen with, and plenty of money. I speculated every penny your father left on getting close to my goal, and at this stage I'm not backing out.'

'You invited me here to help you.'

'Yes, but I couldn't know when I wrote you that you'd be in such a valuable position here. That was accidental, because the boy was left in your care. This proposition is something quite new. In fact,' she admitted, with a return of the smile, 'it wouldn't exist if you hadn't take charge of Benito. Just imagine that.'

'Just imagine,' said Tess, a bit doggedly. 'Well, don't count on me. I don't want any gifts from Ramon, and I'm willing to leave just as soon as you want me to.'

'Does Ramon realise this is how you feel?'

'I doubt it. He seems to have a lot on his mind just now.'

'Then, Tess, please don't spoil everything by being childish towards him. He'll get what he's after, somehow, and we may as well gain by it. So please act normally in every way.'

Tess made no answer to this. Both she and Clare heard the men's voices below, near the foot of the stairs, and after exchanging a brief look they went down. Clare had quite recovered, for she said, clearly and invitingly,

'Shall we see you on Saturday at the Mirzeh, Dr. Westland? Fancy dress or a dinner jacket—take your choice. I do hope you'll be able to come.'

'I'm still not quite sure.'

'The invitation includes Dr. Vernet, of course—if you think such a function would appeal to her.' She looked up at him, artlessly. 'I saw her only yesterday—Dr. Vernet. A friend pointed her out. She's a very beautiful woman, Doctor.'

'Yes, she is.'

'She was with two other doctors, both male, and I thought how cleverly she seemed able to hold her own with them. She must love her profession.'

'I've yet to meet a doctor who doesn't.'

'I suppose that's why doctors marry other doctors, and

nurses. There's no lack in such a relationship, as there might be if you married outside your profession. Well, I can see you're chafing to get home to your telephone. Goodbye, Dr. Westland—till Saturday, I hope!

Tess went out with Philip to his car, waited till they were moving away from the house before saying, 'This is just what I hoped to avoid! And you go and ...'

'Tut-tut. I'm hanged if I'll be dictated to by a scented Spaniard. If I catch one of his snoopers I'll tie him in knots.' In the same pleasant, expansive tones he added, 'Not a bad night, is it ? Let's talk about the weather till we get inside the house. Quite a spell since I discussed the weather.'

She could have lashed out at him with her small bony fist; it might have hurt her knuckles more than it hurt his jaw, but it would have given her immeasurable satisfaction 1

## CHAPTER VII

PHILIP had apparently telephoned his housekeeper just before leaving the hospital, for Marthe was happily setting a table for two as they came into the house.

'Since when do we eat in the sitting-room?' asked Philip.

'I thought it would be . . . cosy,' Marthe replied, with a Gallic twist of the lips and a big shrug. 'We are too formal here.'

'We'll stay formal,' he said. 'It's safe.'

'How old are you, to want safety?' said the woman scathingly. 'Your excuse always is that you are a man of the medical profession and must be circumspect. But it was not being circumspect that gave you a cut on the brow, ha?'

'That's what I mean,' said Philip cryptically. 'All right, we'll eat in here as you've already arranged it. Any messages?'

'Two from the clinic. Dr. Bourdot wishes you to telephone him some time after dinner about an analysis you already know of, so he said; the report is needed for nine o'clock tomorrow morning. And later it was Dr. Vernet.'

'She left no message?'

'It was private, she said, and she would ring later.'

'Right. Talk to Miss Carlen while I change. I'll be about ten minutes.'

Marthe contorted her shoulders with another of her very individual shrugs, but said nothing till he had gone. Then she looked at Tess, one thick unbrushed eyebrow lifted.

'He becomes unbearable, Monsieur Westland. I am nothing, have no sense, no opinions. Cook and clean, he says, and mind your own business. What way is that for a man to talk to his housekeeper?'

Tess laughed. 'He talks to me that way, too. You know what I think? There's something he's been waiting for, and it's on the point of happening. That's how he strikes me.'

Fiendishly glad and keyed up to a pitch where he'd as soon knock someone down as argue.'

The woman's small dark eyes gleamed. 'Exciting, no? I wish I were twenty years younger . . . and handsome!'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't think a woman is involved in this change in him. It's something very male.'

Marthe grinned drily. 'But a woman would be a fool not to take advantage of it. A pity, to waste the hot blood. He is more as I knew him when he first came here—he smiles more, gets more angry. It is fortunate I know few English oaths, I can tell you! You know what I believe, *mademoiselle*?'

'What do you believe, Marthe?'

A thick knobbly finger lay along the woman's fleshy nose. 'That you are right. There is something for which he has waited ever since this house was searched. Cold and quiet he has waited, and now it is near. It is the reason he has not married—a danger into which he would not bring a woman.' She gave a gusty sigh. 'The sooner it is over the more I shall be glad. It is more than time that Dr. Vernet became Madame Westland!'

Tess tightened up, but asked casually, 'Does Dr. Vernet come here often, Marthe?'

'Once or twice a week. Always for a drink on Sunday evening, after they have been to the Country Club for golf or tennis. She told me they will not live here at Las Perlas after they are married.'

'No? Will they live in Tangier?'

A grimace. 'In one of these apartments, I suppose—perhaps the one she has now. It is no way to live for a man who prefers a house, but they will both work at being doctors, I suppose. You would be surprised if you saw them together, *mademoiselle*. They make love in the words of a medical dictionary.' She gave her guttural laugh. 'But later, of course, without words at all. So much better!'

Tess felt a little sick. She said, 'I believe the doctor has had a letter from Benito. Did you see it?'

'*Enfin!* such a mess—he is no writer—and he wants to come home to Papa.'

'Oh, dear. I hoped he'd be happy with the other boy.'

What's wrong?'

'There were no tears, just a plea. Benito is not yet six, but he has the wisdom of sixteen. Quite remarkable. Monsieur has promised to see him again soon, but it will do no good. They do not intend to have the boy in Tangier ... the doctor and Mademoiselle Vernet.' She moved away as a step sounded on the stairs and said loudly, 'Old and ugly as I am, I would still say there is nothing worth having in life but love.'

When Philip came in the woman had already reached the kitchen. He had a smile at the corner of his mouth. 'Was she giving you the works again? The silly creature has love on the brain—the French kind. Like a drink?'

'I never have more than one, thanks. Marthe was telling me about Benito's letter—that he wants to come home.'

Philip said coolly, 'This isn't his home, is it? Salamanca might qualify, but not Tiran. I'm only his uncle.'

'Neither Marthe nor, I believe, Dr. Vernet, knows that.'

'I didn't bring you here to talk about Benito.' He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of the navy corduroy slacks he had got into, unnecessarily eased the collar of a blue-checked sport shirt. 'You wouldn't have asked me out to your stepmother's house without a good reason. What was it?'

'I thought after you'd had a drink there I might walk out to the car with you, and tell you. I didn't want to come here.'

'I accept that. You made it plain enough.'

'Philip, I'm not being ...'

'I know what you're not being. You had to get in touch with me but wish to heaven you hadn't. Go on from there. Why was it urgent to see me today?'

'You're so darned forthright that you're making it difficult,' she said crossly, and looked up at him defiantly from her chair. 'I saw your brother this afternoon.'

He didn't move, except to go back a fraction on his heels; nor was his expression revealing. 'So you know now that it was Boyd you saw the other day, not me. Was he stupid enough to come out into the open streets?'

'No. I ...' She moistened her lips, was afraid of saying too



much, yet knew it was vital he should know what she had learned. 'Don't shout at me till I've finished, will you?'

His grey eyes went narrower, brighter. 'Get it out,' he said, 'and be quick.'

She sighed, exasperated. 'A note came to the house. It just said, in block letters, that a blue car would be waiting for me this afternoon at three outside the Miranda. I thought it was probably one of those men who prey on women tourists, but there was just a chance it might be something else, so I went down to the beach opposite the cafe. The blue car turned up, driven by a fairly well-dressed man ...'

'You actually *spoke* to him? Good God, hadn't you more...'

'I spoke to him,' she broke in desperately, 'and he gave me another note. It looked like your writing and was signed Philip. I was to get into the car and be taken ... somewhere.'

'You absolute idiot,' he said furiously. 'Would I approach you in that way? Would I? You know better, yet you got into a car and placed yourself at the mercy of some complete stranger.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' she said tremulously. 'I was sure it was your writing, and everything has been so terribly mysterious lately that I was prepared to believe anything. The car took me to your brother.'

'Where?' in deep forbidding tones.

'It's the only thing I can't tell you. Please listen, Philip. You're making me horribly nervous, and I don't want to mix things up.'

'I'm sorry.' But he sounded just as choked with rage. 'Carry on.'

He—your brother was wearing robes again. He wants what you're keeping for him—the key. Yes, he told me what it was, and what it belongs to. He knows you can't post it to him, or pass it to someone else for him, so he has a plan. You and he are to go to the party at the Mirzeh Hotel on Saturday night in identical Bedouin robes. He'll get there at nine-thirty and circulate a little, you'll turn up at ten and he'll disappear. He said that at ten he'll go to a car that will be hidden among the tamarisks and meet you there, take the

key from you and drive away.' Again the tip of her tongue slipped along between her lips. 'It's fairly sound, isn't it? I wish you'd do it, Philip—get rid of the beastly key and let him go away from Tangier. He doesn't care about Benito, or even about you. He's the sort of ...'

'Don't tell me,' he said with difficulty. 'I wish I had him here. My God, I wish it! *You* ... embroiled in this affair! Tess, if only you'd ignored that first note, if only you'd kept your innocent little nose out of my problems. I don't need help, but if I did you're the last person I'd approach. You know that?'

She nodded forlornly. 'It's just the position I happen to have dropped into. Your brother said I'm the only person he could think of as a contact. That day when I thought he was you he realised I must know you, so he began thinking along those lines. Philip, if that key is his, let him have it, let him go!'

'You don't know what you're saying. When he opens that safe deposit box I mean to be there.'

'But that would be terribly dangerous, and if the contents are his ...'

'You leave things to me, young Tess,' he said on a hard breath. 'Maybe you don't realise that my own future hangs on this—my reputation and the job I'm doing. Not that I'm thinking first of myself, but it does happen to be very important that I handle this carefully; why else would I have waited so long? It's not just a matter of passing the key to him; I'd have found some way of doing that in spite of the dogs perpetually on my trail. He rents that box and he's the only one who can open it; that's a rule of the bank. Very well, he can open it, but only if I'm there. If I knew where he was I could tell him to meet me at the bank, and I could keep the key in my possession until the last moment, when he had to insert it in the lock. That's necessary—take my word for it.' He paused, tautly. 'Where is he, Tess?'

'I can't tell you. I promised.'

'There's no need to keep your word to Boyd; he certainly wouldn't scruple about breaking his own promise if he thought it to his advantage. Where is he?'

She bent her head, shook it. 'You're followed everywhere.'

There'd be another fight, and this time there would be more of them. Even if I hadn't promised your brother, I wouldn't tell you how to get yourself beaten up.'

He bent over her, spoke soothingly. 'You're letting the stories you've read about this place get the better of you. Last time I was surprised by those men, but this time I'll be prepared. I've got to talk to Boyd.'

'Can't he come here? In robes, with his face covered, he looks just like a tall Moor.'

'If he dared to leave his hideout he'd have done it before now. He's being followed, just as I am.'

'But he said Ramon and his friends may not know he's in Tangier.'

'That's what he said, but he knows them even better than I do. That's why I can't forgive him for dragging you into the business. You're marked now, and it worries me stiff.'

She went white. 'You think they know I went there?'

'They know. They've quite a network. Tess, I'm going to take you straight back home, and you're to stay in the house till you hear from me, even if it's days.'

'I can't do that. Ramon might guess why, and they'd close in on you.'

He smiled. 'You do read whodunits, don't you? You keep safe at home and leave things to me. You're not so keen on Ramon now, are you?'

'He's grasping, but it's difficult to believe he's cruel.'

His mouth twisted. 'Love dies hard, doesn't it? Perhaps it'll soften things a little if I tell you he's not really a cruel man. He hates to be done down, and he was—by my brother.'

'Oh, no,' she breathed.

'Oh, yes,' he said laconically. 'So you can go back on to Ramon's side, if you like. Ready to leave?'

As though in answer the front door-bell gave a discreet little purr. Philip called, 'All right, Marthe,' and went to the door himself. The next moment he was back, with Sheila Vernet. Sheila looked tall and patrician in black with turquoises set in beaten silver at her neck and a mink stole over her arm. Her cool, slanting eyes gave Tess a direct glance, while she spoke to Philip.

I rang you at six, but you were not at home. I said I would telephone you later, but then came this invitation from Marcel Fougre, to late dinner with friends in Tetuan, so I thought I would call on our way.' Her glance still lingering on Tess's pale dispirited face, she went into technical details about something she had left in the clinic laboratory, for tests. Then said: 'Is Miss Carlen unwell again? I could see her in the morning, if you wish.'

'She's not too chipper. I brought her here for the drive and am about to take her home again. Are you sure Marcel won't come in for a drink?'

Sheila smiled. 'He asked me to hurry. Marcel didn't want to call here. I haven't intruded, have I?'

'Not at all. I wish you were alone, and could stay. Then we might have had dinner and driven back to town for a movie.'

'We'll do it tomorrow, *mon cher*.' She lightly touched his cheek. 'You work too hard, Philip. For both our sakes, they'd better get you an assistant soon!'

'I hope they will. You look very beautiful tonight. Too beautiful for Marcel Fougre!'

She laughed throatily, seemed to go more French. 'You are unkind to Marcel because you are jealous. But I promise I will not let him make love to me.' She peeped at her tiny jewel-set watch. 'I must go. Already we shall have to drive fast to get there in time. *Adieu, cheri*.'

Tess might not have been there. Sheila's graceful walk took her from the room and Philip went with her. Tess heard him call something to the man who was waiting, and then close the door. When he returned he looked pre-occupied, a frown between his brows. He hated Sheila's going off with the other man; you could see it in the way his jaw jutted, the faint arching of his nostrils. If Tess hadn't been here at his house he would have set himself to break up that dinner date. In his mood, it might have done him good to concentrate on wrecking something that was quite outside his profession and the trouble with Boyd.

'Shall we go now?' she said.

'No,' abruptly. 'You came for dinner. Let's have it.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Neither am I, but we'll eat. Don't be afraid of scandal—not with Marthe in the house. I won't take you to the beach.'

She gave him a quick hurt look. His expression was jaded and distant, and he wasn't looking at her. He poured a couple of drinks and put them on the dining table, pulled out her chair just as Marthe brought the soup.

It was a silent meal, made more so by the housekeeper's pointed comments each time she came in. Somehow, Tess got through baked fish in cheese sauce, a lamb chop with salad, and pastel green ice-cream sprinkled with nuts. Marthe cleared and brought coffee to a low table between the two armchairs. Philip poured.

Quietly, Tess said, 'There's one thing I forgot to tell you. If your brother hears nothing, he'll expect you to meet him at the party at ten on Saturday evening. If you're against the meeting, I'm supposed to post a card he gave me.'

'Where is it?'

'I locked it in a drawer in my room. It's addressed to a laundry in the Casbah and there's some wording in Arabic about a bundle of laundry gone astray. I suppose one of the men he uses works there and will see the card. It's almost like a circular, but there's probably some distinguishing mark on it.'

'How he loves it—the obscure ruses and stratagems,' he said bitterly. 'He's never been serious about anything in his life. Did he ask about the child?'

'Belatedly, yes. Will you keep Benito?'

Philip nodded. 'Some time I'll have to tell the kid the truth. I don't want to see him again till I can. He doesn't like Gib.'

'Are you going to send him to England?'

'He has no one there. I'll have to arrange something.'

'You could adopt him legally, I believe. Everyone already thinks he's your son.'

'And if I marry?' he said deliberately. 'Do you think my wife would accept him? He's rough-and-ready, you know—picks up every swear-word and uses them all in the right places, even to women.'

She smiled palely. 'Yes, I know. The only remedy for that

is not to swear in front of him. He loves new words, and he'd be just as eager to use good ones as bad. Swearing means manliness to him, but it needn't.'

'You really like that worldly little puppy, don't you?'

'He has character, Anglo-Spanish and earthy. It wouldn't be right to tame him too much, but he's teachable—very much so. With love and guidance he'd be a grand chap, I'm sure. I hope you won't ever neglect him.'

'Why should I?' he asked brusquely.

She replied a little hurriedly, 'You just mentioned marrying. Benito might be left out when you get a family of your own. I know it's not my concern, but I think the ... the person you marry should get to know and love Benito before she has any children of her own. I feel that children already here are more important than the problematical ones to come.'

'You put that well, Tess,' he said, but still sounded fed up. 'I'll look after the little beggar. More coffee?'

'No, thank you. Am I to post that card?'

'I've been thinking. I need to see Boyd and it might be best for both of us if we meet at the party as he suggests. But I won't take the key—simply tell him when to be at the bank. Only he and I will know what passes between us, and even if we're followed there's nothing much can happen in the busy streets of Tangier in broad daylight. Just the one brief meeting at the party, and then again at the bank. After that, there'll be no danger for anyone. So don't post that card. And stay close to the house till after the weekend.'

She nodded despondently, and for a long time neither of them spoke. They drank coffee, smoked a cigarette. Tess felt him watching her, even when he was looking elsewhere. Each time their glances collided her own was baffled and hurt, and his was calculating. By the way he smoked she knew he was thinking fast, from many angles. Imminent danger and the inevitable relief which would follow had made him a man of tempered steel. Tess no longer wished to know what it was all about; she wanted only his safety. And a lot of use it would be to tell him that!

He pressed out his cigarette. 'Now don't worry about a thing. It's all under control and very simple. It may help you

a little to know that you did me an invaluable service this afternoon; I wouldn't have had you meet Boyd like that for the world, but seeing it's happened the best way to reward you is to use it. I suppose he'll get one of his Moorish friends to send me a robe like his.'

'Yes, he'll send one.'

'Can you keep away from the party?'

'No. It's supposed to be for me.'

'Then stay with your stepmother. Greet Boyd, if you have to, but don't talk to him. As soon as I arrive I'll seek you out. That's a promise.'

She sat with her head bent and shoulders drooping; the smoke tasted bitter on her tongue though she had discarded the cigarette minutes ago only half spent. Light glossed her streaky dark brown hair, but her thin cheeks were in shadow and appeared more hollowed than they really were.

He leaned forward, close to her, touched her hair lightly. 'You have a sensitive little nose, Tess; I can see it twitching. Don't be nervy, there's a good girl. I hate your being made anxious by my affairs, and there's really no need for anxiety. It's going to be much easier than I anticipated.' He saw her nostrils arch suddenly, her mouth tremble, and he slipped forward on to his knees in consternation. 'Oh, come now, no tears! You poor sweet, it's all been too much—and I'm not surprised. You came here to recover from a ghastly accident and find yourself mixed up in something that's unsavoury and frightening. But you're out of it now. Even if you get another note, you must ignore it, you understand? Tess, don't tremble like that. Look at me.'

Her shaking fingers had ashamedly gone up over her face, and gently he pulled them away. Her eyes swam, a tear spilled, he let out a smothered word and drew her close. Briefly, she wept uncontrollably. Of their own volition her hands went to his sides and clutched him, and she felt his hand hard over the back of her head, holding her face to his shoulder. As her weeping ceased there was a stark moment of silence before she took a long shuddering breath.

Then, somehow, she had slid up from the chair and was standing pressed back against the seat, his arm tight about her, his mouth finding hers, his hand against her neck,

gripping her shoulder under the white collar, moving over her smooth warm skin with an urgency that sparked a flare of need in her veins. They were mouth to mouth, gliding into another world in a strange, burning heat that might consume them.

Then, with a suddenness that spun her brain, she was shoved away, down into the chair, and Philip had swung aside and was pushing a violent hand over his hair. His breath rasped as he said savagely,

'Bring your scarf. I'll start the car!' He went out.

Tess blinked hot eyelids, passed a quivering finger over lips that hurt, and got to her feet. Draggingly, she crossed the room, picked up her scarf and followed him.

The car sped through the night. The tawny fields were black, the sky grey-black velvet bedewed with stars; Tess had never seen so many, and how distant they looked. Everything ... everyone was distant, beyond the wall of ice which had grown about her.

As they approached the lights of Tangier, Philip spoke, without expression. 'It's not much use my trying to make you understand what happened back there. You have to be a man who's found himself with a weeping girl in his arms and had to deal with it, to have any notion of what got into me. Even then, it might be obscure.'

'We'd better forget it,' she said unhappily.

'I want you to believe it was something instinctive and completely unintentional.'

'I do believe it.'

'If you'd only gone to stay in Gibraltar when I asked you to!'

'Then you wouldn't have been tempted, of course. I think I understand more than you give me credit for. It's a long time since you made love to a woman—really made love. You and Sheila Vernet ... well, you're doctors, and you ...'

'Don't get any ideas,' he said roughly. 'Sheila's first a woman. I happen to be a little less strong than I thought I was. I guess you're right—we'd better forget it.'

And that was all. He drove to the house and saw her to the door, said evenly, 'Don't forget—no going out alone or answering notes. If you do get another one, phone me. I'll



see you at the Mirzeh on Saturday. Goodnight.'

She murmured a reply and went into the house. Clare must have gone out with Victor, for everything was quiet, the lounge in darkness. Tess mounted the stairs slowly, each step an effort. Her brain worked restlessly, yet seemed to have become entangled with a wad of cottonwool. Fully dressed, she lay face downward on her bed, her eyes closed. She felt Philip's arms round her, his demanding hands, the drowning kiss. Just the desire of a man needing a woman.

Intuitively, she knew that he didn't yet kiss Sheila like that, or hadn't recently. He had been waiting, growing more cold and austere as the strain it imposed grew less bearable. Waiting for the trouble with Boyd to resolve itself, because he wouldn't marry till it had. And now the time was near. He was vital, keyed up for the climax, but the man of iron who would meet Boyd on Saturday and force him to a rendezvous in the vaults of the foreign bank where the secrets of a safe deposit box would be exposed was also a vibrant lover who had been frustrated for too long.

Had he been alone tonight when Sheila Vernet had called, he would have kept her there. The man Fougre would have been sent on to Tetuan, and in the House of the Pearls those two would have made love.

I can't bear it, Tess whispered into her counterpane, I can't!

## CHAPTER VIII

To Tess, the following days had throbbing, ominous undertones, and she felt she was not the only one affected. Victor Mears was the least concerned, but even he seemed influenced by something unsettled in the air. In spite of his love of good food and wine and congenial company, Victor had never been loud or ostentatious; now, though, he was singularly quiet. Tess, on edge, uncertain, wretchedly in love with a man who knew passionate need but not that ultimate brimming tenderness which is the essence of loving, a man moreover who was engaged to someone else ... Tess saw the difference in Victor only mistily, but because she liked the man and would have helped him in any way she could, she taxed him with it.

They were in the small patio, waiting for Clare to come down for tea. Victor, wearing one of his expensive light suits and smoking the usual cigar, was enjoying the antics of the Siamese cat which belonged next door. An individualist, that cat, and conceited as Narcissus as he climbed the pergola, deftly caught and discarded a butterfly-moth and cleaned the moth-powder from his paws. He doted on the reflection of himself he saw in human admiration.

Victor said, 'I've always liked cats, particularly Siamese. Dogs are rumbustious, matey creatures, but they haven't the aloof intelligence and aplomb of the cat. Last time I lived in a house I had three cats who behaved to each other like diplomats from three different countries. With their technique and my own knowledge of finance, I could have been several times a millionaire.' He smiled. 'Not that I ever wanted to be. Once you have enough money to be able to make more without much trouble, the chase palls. In fact, you start wondering how to get rid of it, to do some good.'

'That's fairly easy.'

'Yes, charity cheques and so on, but they're impersonal.'

To help a single person now and then doesn't cost much, but it's satisfying in a way that donations aren't. You know the one you're helping and can watch results. Trouble is, in my position I don't meet many genuine cases; plenty of hangers-on and hard luck stories, but the honest man who needs assistance to get started in something worthwhile doesn't crawl, or even try the touch; he struggles without even realising that's what he's doing. He ploughs on till he gets somewhere or sinks in the attempt.'

'Striving is good for the character,' she said lightly. 'Charities always need money, but I'm not sure that financial help to one-man ventures is good, except in the arts, of course. You don't have to live in a garret to write or paint well. Would you like to finance a struggling artist or musician, Victor?'

'If I knew one with talent, yes. Do you paint, Tess?'

She laughed. 'Not with talent. I didn't get beyond "The Blue Danube" on the piano, either.'

'But you're good at books. How would you like a bookshop right here in Tangier?'

She began to laugh again, but sobered and said softly, 'I believe you mean that, Victor. What a dear thing you are.'

'Well, how about it?' he persisted. 'I'd love to do that for you.'

'I'm not staying, but it's a lovely thought.'

'Why shouldn't you stay, though? You've no one in England now, but here you do have Clare and—dare I say it?—me.'

She shook her head. 'No, I'm going back to London—probably in a week or two. But I'll always be grateful for that offer. I mean it.'

'Then a bookshop in England,' he said. 'It would give me tremendous pleasure, and be a sort of link between us—you in England, and Clare and me somewhere in the Mediterranean area.'

She looked away from him, smiling. His last words had created an awkwardness between them. Clare and me, he'd said, just a little carefully. Tess felt a sweetness in this man who wanted Clare the adventuress even though he knew she was working to a plan that didn't include him. There was

despair in him, too.

'Do you feel you're completely over your illness, Victor?' she asked him. 'Really well again?'

'Oh, yes. Shingles is unpleasant, but once you get back to sleeping normally you soon recover. I'm fine.'

'But quieter.'

'Perhaps.' He had left his cigar smouldering into a white cylinder, and now he broke the ash free and took a last pull at the cigar before stubbing it. 'I don't know if it was being confined to that hotel suite, but things look different since I've been about again.'

'Discouraging?'

'Disquieting, rather.' He paused. 'Ramon doesn't come here so much, does he? This may sound disloyal, talking behind Clare's back, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Tess, does she go out with Ramon on the evenings she's not with me?'

'Mostly,' she replied, hating the necessity. 'I sometimes wonder if it was unkind to keep you here as I did, when you decided to get out. Clare likes you immensely—you must know that—but I honestly don't believe she's in a marrying frame of mind.'

'I've known that for some time, my dear,' he said, 'but she'd marry Ramon, if he asked her. Not because she cares for him deeply, but because he's what he is: good-looking, continental and dripping with charm. He won't marry her, of course. He wasn't even close friends with her till you came.' He looked at Tess fleetingly. 'He's not after you so much now. Have you repulsed him?'

'I just keep out of reach. I find him disturbing, yet I dislike him.'

'That's understandable. I don't suppose you're looking forward very much to this party he's giving for you. He loves show, and a young woman as an excuse for it. Clare was telling me that you both have beautiful dresses.'

'Yes, Moorish style, though we're much too pale for it. You're not coming?'

'I may look in, for an hour.'

He looked slightly bleak, and she said impulsively, 'Why don't you go off somewhere for a rest? Let things slide here

for a while and then when you come back you'll see them differently. You could keep in touch, if you liked.'

His smile, philosophical and gentle, made her feel young and inexperienced. 'I never yet got a single thing by running out at an advanced stage. In a business proposition you just stick with it, ironing out the difficulties, weighing up the possibilities, cutting here, rounding there, till something very solid and lasting takes shape. It's the only drill I'm used to, and though I can't apply much of it now, it's disciplined me in such a way that whatever happens, I always want to stay with the problem till the end. Besides,' with a whimsical inflection, 'before I go in for anything I have to believe in it, and I've come to believe, lately, that Clare will need me when Ramon fades out.'

For a moment Tess wished she had the courage to tell him the whole truth; that failing marriage with Ramon Clare wanted money and freedom and was already planning how she could get them. If the first attempt failed, she might easily decide to make another. With Ramon, there would always be opportunities so long as one were not fastidiously honest.

But all she said was, 'You deserve better, Victor, but if it's what you want I hope you'll get it.'

Two or three minutes later Clare joined them, looking superb in a blue and white floral dress that was neat about her slim waist. Tess went in to get tea, and when she came back, followed by the noisily gay Pedro, the older couple looked thoroughly at peace together. You had to hand it to Clare, Tess thought. She could be what either man wanted; the blonde siren for Ramon, the attentive companion for Victor. She must have *something* to give or such men wouldn't seek her out; whatever it was, it must be a quality recognisable only by the male.

And yet, during those few days, Clare too was unsettled, though she was eager with it. Eager for the climax? And what did she hope the climax would be? Strangely, neither she nor Ramon again approached Tess about 'the small token'. Or perhaps it wasn't so strange. Philip was watched, Boyd Westland was watched; therefore it was known that she, Tess, had seen them both, acted as go-between and was

now taking great care never to leave the house alone—from which they deduced, of course, that she had been warned.

It was ghastly, this feeling of an alien presence close to the house; more so, as she never saw anyone who might be the watcher. Clare wore a mask of nonchalance, and an air of rising excitement which, she stated, was very natural because she had never before attended a fancy dress affair in Tangier.

Ramon, when he paid them a surprise visit for cocktails on Friday evening, smiled his brilliant smile and presented them with more scent and an evening bag each, Clare's covered in rhinestones and fitted with a gold compact and lipstick case, and Tess's monogrammed in small aquamarines and also fitted out in gold. Costly fripperies which Tess couldn't help suspecting. When Ramon kissed her fingers and let his scintillating dark glance rest on her throat she didn't feel the familiar pulsing leap which his wordless ardour usually produced. She remembered the treacherous kiss in the Caves of Hercules and the naked need in Philip's embrace, and she felt sickened and desolate. Even in that moment, with Ramon sparkling his spurious love at her, Tess was withdrawn enough to experience a dreadful sadness. She loved, and wanted so badly to be loved back, with tenderness and understanding. Even in the hospital in England she had never felt so much alone as she felt now.

Ramon, the gallant who wooed with looks and tones, was saying, 'So we are all prepared for tomorrow, no? It now remains for me to arrange a car for you. Is Victor well enough to be with us?'

'Poor Victor,' said Clare gently. 'I think he begins to feel his years. It wouldn't be fair to invite him for a party which will last till dawn. But I think he will drive us out, Ramon, and perhaps stay for a short while. You will see us home?'

'I would not miss the privilege for the world, *cara mia*. And, Tess,' the long sibilant sounding affected, 'it will be a great night for you particularly. We will toast you at midnight. Midnight,' he repeated in warm, intimate tones. 'Midnight is when a good party begins!'

It came to her then, like a cold electric shock, that he really did know everything. Of course he did. Who was Boyd Westland to command loyalty from the dregs of Tangier?

His 'friends', that well-dressed driver, the cafe proprietor, men he had used as messengers ... they were taking money from him and earning twice as much from Ramon for the information they passed along. Someone had overheard Boyd and herself in that cafe; that was certain. They had a pretty good idea of what she had told Philip that same evening as Las Perlas. But there was one thing they didn't know—that Philip had no intention of handing over the key they coveted. At midnight tomorrow they were to celebrate having Boyd in their possession, Boyd and his key.

Tess's head ached. She forced a smile when Ramon had to leave, forced conversation while she picked at a small supper with Clare. Clare, who was smooth as the Siamese next door and nearly as shrewd.

In bed, Tess lay staring at a bar of pale light that slanted through the window. Philip knew all this, had seen it when she told him about his brother. Boyd must know it, too. He wouldn't underestimate these people any more than Philip did. There was nothing she could do. Yet danger seemed tangible in the air, or was it the dark that made it so? She tried to visualise what would happen at the Mirzeh Hotel. Boyd, showing himself but staying clear of complications, would drift out towards ten. Philip would park unostentatiously and go to the car among the tamarisks. Watched through the trees, they would meet and exchange a few words in undertones, Boyd would get into his car and leave, followed by whoever Ramon had detailed to tail him. And then?

Philip would have worked out what came next, but only in his mind. No one would know till it happened. Oh dear, how did she ever become involved in all this? Why should she worry so much about something that was far too big even if she were capable of playing a part in it. And she wasn't capable. She felt small and helpless and almost ill.

It rained next day, gusted along the esplanade and up the side streets, varnished the cobbles and stained the walls, emptied the souks of people and cancelled the few tourist attractions. There weren't many tourists in Tangier now; they liked the burning blue and white summer days, the still, vivid scenes through Moorish arches, the profusions of

flowers in the Socco, the camel rides, the local Spanish and French families taking their evening airing along the boulevards, the packed cafes and scrawny men selling lottery tickets. It was now the slack season.

By the evening the rain had stopped, but it was cloudy and the wind remained fitful. Tess dressed in the green silk trousers and gold tunic, made up mechanically and adjusted the veil as Pedro had taught her, leaving her face a clear small oval. Clare, when Tess joined her downstairs, looked most seductive. She had gone the whole way, kohl, mascara and lip-varnish, and as the blonde hair was almost obscured by several thicknesses of gauze she looked like a beautiful oriental. It was an effect, of course; when men were about Clare would let the veil fall away to point her bloneness. A blonde Arab would certainly shake the populace.

Victor was wearing an ordinary white dinner jacket. His glance rested warmly upon Clare, and when he dropped the white silk haik over her shoulders he held it there a moment. Clare did the right thing, of course. She put up her hands and touched his, sent him a swift, secret glance as she turned to pick up the new evening bag, and said, with disarming candour,

'Do you like this, Victor? Ramon dropped in for a few minutes last night and brought one each for Tess and me. Just one of his gimmicks, for a party. You don't mind?'

If Victor did mind, he was too charmed by her frankness to dwell on it. 'It's a pretty thing,' he said. 'He'll probably have some sort of gift for every woman tonight. It's done. Shall we go?'

He drove at his usual speed, with Clare beside him and Tess in the back seat. Tess could hardly breathe. Her dress was new, but imagination impregnated it with a musky odour that seemed nauseatingly real. There was no joy, only agony, in assuming what could be a splendid disguise. It wasn't Tess Carlen who needed a disguise, though. In her mind she saw Boyd Westland in his robe, and Philip similarly dressed, horribly blatant.

Actually, as she realised the moment they arrived at the Mirzeh, only those in ordinary European dress were conspicuous. Ramon had foretold that the guests would be



unoriginal, and he had been right. There were many women in ordinary evening gowns that they covered with the Arab haik which could be thrown off for dancing, and others wore harem pants with halters or brocade tunics with the inevitable veil. There were yashmaks galore. But a woman here and there had chosen Spanish peasant dress or that of a French dancer or the universal Columbine. The men were about parallel. Ramon looked a very handsome, sensual, compelling sheikh from the desert, and he was fostering among his guests an atmosphere of tense if artificial excitement.

It was the sort of party you had to be in the mood for. Without the mood it became an affair of tinsel and cardboard and alcohol. Tess had never felt less friendly, less able to endure the banal jokes and prefabricated situations. And too many people were wearing masks; it was difficult to pick out men she knew quite well, let alone the man to whom she had spoken just once, in a cafe. If Boyd had not had the height and almost the breadth of shoulder of his brother, she would have missed him.

He was leaning against a white archway and looking through it at the pale stretch of beach and the wind-ruffled sea beyond. He looked negligent, as if he had dropped in from politeness and wouldn't be sorry when he could decently leave; just as Philip might have looked, in fact. He had chosen his archway carefully, for all the others were outlined in coloured lights and tables were set near them, and occupied. He was helped, of course, by the vast number of guests who seemed continually to move between the lounge, which was wide open to the night, and the lawns, where palms and flame trees were sprinkled with the brilliant globes of rainbow lights; they were like giant insects weaving about in a tropical garden.

Tess wondered if they were bothering to watch her tonight. Not that it mattered; they would certainly be watching him, and if she spoke to him it would be reported. Yet he looked so casual there, so unperturbed that she knew he had to be warned. He might know exactly where he stood, but he might not. He hadn't seemed to know, the other day. How could she speak to him, though?

Straight after the question came the answer. If she went through an arch on this side of the wall and came to the other side of his, without being seen, there could be no harm in calling his attention and speaking to him from the darkness. It was brilliant within the Moorish walls of the grounds, but outside it must be quite black.

She moved gradually, her heart thumping and the breath catching in her throat. She became aware, as if from a distance, of the chattering and laughter, the clinking, the weird music from the orchestra in djellabahs and royal blue tarboushes from which gold tassels danced. She slipped out into the blackness, passed a whispering, giggling couple who embraced, oblivious, close to the wall. She passed three arches, came to the one where the man leaned, smoking, staring carelessly out into the night.

Her throat felt as though she had chain-smoked a dozen cigarettes. She whispered hoarsely, 'Mr. Westland!'

He took a sip of his drink, dropped a cigarette and trod it out, and while watching it, said quietly, 'The Carlen girl? A message?'

'No. I just wanted to make sure you know you're being watched. They know *everything*.'

'Sure they do.'

The expression brought a sudden sting to her eyes; Benito had it, even to the cynical tone his father put into it. What was wrong with this man, that he couldn't need that child and want to provide an ordinary home for him? Benito adored his father, and Tess could see why; the nonchalance, the reckless poise, the piratical fearlessness when it came to getting what he wanted. An attractive wastrel.

'Are you ... going through with it?'

'What do you think? Now, run along and stay clear.'

She longed to tell him there would be no key, that he had better get away now, out of danger, out of Tangier if possible. Then she realised it would be a kind of betrayal of Philip, which was something she couldn't even contemplate.

'Be careful,' she entreated. 'And whatever happens, do as Philip asks. Do remember that he has a responsible position here.'

A smile came into his voice. 'I'm a louse, but not a com-

plete one, or I'd have gone straight to Las Perlas when I arrived in Tangier. In fact, I might never have left the key with him in the first place if I'd been entirely a swab. So take heart, little one, and do run along. You're much too thin and pretty to be snarled up in my affairs.'

'Is there nothing I can do?

'For Philip?'

'For either of you.'

'No, honey. I'm playing it lone, and my brother, bless his professional integrity, is going to be happy in the good old-fashioned way. He couldn't marry the lovely Sheila till I and my problem were out of the way. Well, it won't be long now. Scram, little one. It's getting towards ten and I don't want even a sweet little skirt like you on my mind. *Adios, chica.*'

The mockery was reassuring, just a little. Like Philip, this man gave the impression of having things under control, the difference being that his concerns might not bear scrutiny. Momentarily, she thought his eyes twinkled from the slits in his mask, but perhaps it was a trick of the gaudy lighting.

'Good luck,' she breathed, and flitted back along the wall, past the amorous pair who were aware of nothing but each other and back into the crowd milling about the gardens. She was too tense to care whether she had been seen, and when she was drawn by Ramon into a dance she felt as if she were standing aside and witnessing the spectacle. His lips close to her ear were no more than the touch of a fly. Even when he said something about midnight it hardly registered, though she knew it meant a climax. The hour when he would be sure of success?

He left her with someone else whom she never really saw. She followed the hands of her watch. Three minutes to ten, two, one ... ten o'clock. And the party getting into its stride. Two minutes past, three, four. Her hot aching eyes sought among the robed figures, sought madly, while her throat closed and her ears sang and her answers to her companion were like small cries of pain.

It was ten minutes past ten when Philip made his way to her with as much debonair apology to people whom he pushed aside as his brother would have offered; in the robe

he was uncannily like Boyd. Her relief was so intense that she closed her eyes and swayed.

'Feel faint?' he said solicitously. 'You'd better sit down. Excuse us.' This last to her partner.

Philip took her elbow and led her inside the lounge, to a chair. **He** called a waiter and ordered brandy, sat down beside her and said, for all the world as if this were just another party, 'Sorry I was a bit late. Been enjoying yourself?'

'It's been . . . intolerable.'

'Good lord,' he said, alarmed. 'I thought you were putting on a pretty good act so that I could speak to you alone. But it's real! Relax, you little idiot. It's over, and he's on his way, in a taxi.'

'A . . . taxi?'

'I drove into Tangier and took one off the street, came here and had it take Boyd back to his lodging. I told the driver to step on it and stop for no one. My car and Boyd's are too well known by this tribe—I'll get someone to give me a lift back to Tangier. Here's the brandy—take a drink, and for Pete's sake let the tension out.' **He** put out a hand. 'Look, I'm steady as a rock. What have you got to dither about?'

In sudden fury she swept his hand aside. 'You and your brother,' she choked. 'You make me sick, both of you! You've done nothing smart tonight, only postponed something horrible. He's like an overgrown boy, playing a game, and you're just about as reckless. Nothing's changed—don't you see that! If anything, the whole business is more inflammable. And you still have that beastly . . .'

'Stop it,' he said sternly. 'Have the rest of that drink and calm down. I spoke with Boyd, and it's all I wanted.'

'They'll follow the taxi and discover he hasn't the key !'

'But they won't know our arrangement. No one but he and I know that. You forget it, now. I could shoot myself when I think of all you've been through—just because you brought Benito to me.' He put the glass to her lips. 'Come on, drink up. Don't lift your head, but Ramon's on his way over.'

The Spaniard flung his robe aside with ringed fingers, and

took a chair at their table. 'Well, Doctor Westland I' he said cordially. 'I hardly thought you would come ... and in a burnous, too. Most gratifying. Do you know, Tess, *querida*, that this is the first time your friend Philip Westland has been in my company, socially. I am so happy that it should be my own party you have thus honoured, Doctor. You bring the beautiful fiancée?'

Philip shrugged, spoke suavely. 'I am able to stay only a short time, senior. Perhaps the first of your guests to leave will give me a lift into Tangier.'

'You have no car, Doctor? It is perhaps out of commission?'

'Temporarily. I came by taxi, to make a token showing, but that's all.'

Tess wondered whether the word token were used deliberately. Was he goading Ramon or merely demonstrating, with pointed urbanity, that he was not deceived by the bonhomie of his host? She wished he would go, get away, out of danger.

Ramon said, 'I believe Victor Mears is leaving soon; he will be glad to accommodate you, Doctor. And now, may I take our guest of honour back to the other guests? As you may remember, this party is for Miss Carlen, a tardy gesture from one who admires and loves her.'

Just perceptibly, Philip's mouth tightened. But he smiled as he stood up. Ramon rose more slowly, but as he did so the sleeve fold of his robe swept something from the wine table; the evening bag he had given Tess last night. It fell open, the compact slipped loose and some coins rolled, but he was equal to their recovery. When he straightened he was sliding the contents back into the bag, and something else with them, a slip of paper of which Tess saw only the white back. It was hardly noticeable, till she saw Philip's eyes narrow into hard grey points and his jaw stiffen. She looked swift enquiry, but his glance was averted.

He bowed. 'I wish you a successful party, senior ... Miss Carlen. I will find Victor Mears myself. Goodnight.'

Ramon's hand on her arm, firm and persuasive though it looked gentle, prevented Tess from moving till after Philip had gone. Mechanically, she received the glittering evening

bag from Ramon and walked into the courtyard with him. When he took her into his arms for dancing she had a sense of disastrous finality. Boyd Westland, that horrifying key, the meeting at the bank which was still to come, meant nothing. She had the fatal conviction that she would never see Philip again.

At midnight, nothing more momentous happened than the distribution of gifts, but the atmosphere became electric. Ramon revealed nothing, in any way, and Tess eased a little. Reason told her that now Boyd and Philip had met she was no longer of interest and therefore she was not being watched. After a while she slipped away towards the tamarisks, where the blue car was hidden. It was a dense little thicket, covered about half an acre of land adjoining the hotel grounds. The feathery foliage would not normally make a good screen, but there was so much of it that a truckload of troops could have hidden themselves. There was only one path through it, from the back, and Tess found it a short black tunnel filled with the night sounds of birds and mice. She came to a blank end, a wall of trees. The blue car had gone.

With Clare, she returned home at three-thirty. She cleaned off her make-up, got into pyjamas, rolled her fancy dress into a ball and stowed it away at the bottom of the wardrobe. But in bed she was too tired to sleep. Her mind reeled, but at length it focused on that brief conversation with Philip. And their parting, the look of icy distaste on his mouth, the contempt in the hard grey eyes. For Ramon?

She recalled, suddenly, that unfamiliar slip of paper, got up and found the purse, opened it and shook the contents on to the bedside table. Yes, there it was, neatly folded by a thumb and finger as it had been pushed out of sight. A cheque for five hundred pounds on a London bank, made out to Tess Carlen and signed by Ramon Guevara.

## CHAPTER IX

CLARE stayed in bed till after lunch next day. Tess herself rose late, but as soon as she had drunk some coffee she got out of the bedroom and into the open air.

For Tangier, it was a murky day. Clouds raced in from the Atlantic and occasionally shed rain, trees rustled with the wind against which the houses were shuttered on the west side. As usual on bad days, hardly a soul passed along the road; the town seemed to stand still.

Pedro, happily cantankerous, told Tess that only an English woman would sit in the patio on such a day. True, it was shut in and the chairs were comfortable, but what is a patio without sun dappling its paving stones and honey-birds sipping from the flowers? It was like an egg without salt or a kiss without a moustache. Pedro had a thin line of black bristles about an inch above his lip.

The house, to Tess, was suffocating, and the thought of a heart-to-heart with Clare sent caterpillars along her spine. But some things are unavoidable, and on the whole Tess didn't shirk the unpleasant. She merely wanted to get it over. She had an egg sandwich and an apple for lunch, and she was smoking her third cigarette after it when Clare, wearing a dainty nylon wool house gown in baby pink, drifted into the doorway and looked out at her.

'What a simply ghastly day,' she said in bored tones. 'I'd have liked to sleep right through till tomorrow morning. Have there been any messages?'

'None,' said Tess coolly. 'It's been ominously quiet. Not a single call, telephone or otherwise.'

Clare's brow puckered and she carefully straightened it out again. 'It's Sunday. Victor usually turns up.'

'He'd have guessed you were late home and needed rest. Victor's the most considerate man in the world.'

'Don't ram that at me,' said Clare peevishly. 'I've enough

on my mind.'

'Here's something more.' Tess took the cheque from the pocket of her dress and put it into Clare's hand. 'You may give that to Ramon. I've done nothing for him, and I wouldn't want payments even if I had obliged him in some way.'

Fractionally, Clare's eyes widened. 'Good heavens, you can't turn down a cheque of this size. It means little to Ramon, but think what it could do for ... for you. You've never had that much at once in your life!'

'I don't want it—from Ramon. By now, he may regret having given it to me.'

'You're mad. Don't you realise that money is all you're ever likely to get from him? He told me he'd pay you for what you've done for him, but I imagined he'd give me a small piece of jewellery for you. This is much better; you can never sell jewellery for what it's worth. As a matter of fact,' with slow emphasis, 'I don't think you've the right to turn down such magnanimity. I'm broke, and I haven't let you want for anything, have I?'

'You mean you want cash payment from me, as though you were keeping a boarding house?'

'Don't be offensive!'

'It's difficult not to be,' said Tess. 'Ostensibly, you invited me here to recover from the car crash, but when I arrived you told me it wasn't so. I was to keep Victor Mears contentedly occupied while you made a determined play for Ramon Guevara. I actually stopped Victor from leaving Tangier some time ago—for which I'm sorry now, because he's been caught up again, and he's hoping. I think I've earned what I've had from you, Clare, but if you disagree, I'll send you as much as I can spare when I get back to England.'

Clare quelled the retort which patently hovered. Instead she said, 'Tess, be reasonable. Things haven't gone the way I'd have liked, but if I'm careful I'll get a cheque many times the size of this one. It's all I can hope for now; I realise that. If Ramon ever marries,' with a vicious little smile, 'it will be some blowsily handsome Spanish woman with tradition and family property, and he'll go on having affairs in spite of her.'



Oh, he cares for me, and I could have an affair with him, but that's not what I want. I want hard security, and I intend to get it out of him as soon as he's got what he's after from ...' She broke off with a brittle smile, reached inside the room for her box of cigarettes. 'Very soon now he'll have plenty, and I mean to get my share. It will set me up in a house on the Riviera.'

'And Victor?'

'We'll stay friends, of course. He won't look round for someone else.'

'You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?'

'I'm sure of what I want from life—always have been. Getting this far was quite a battle, I assure you, and I'm not backing down at this stage. And don't think I shall let you be a fool, either. Endorse this cheque, and I'll get payment, here in Tangier. We can use the money.'

'I'd rather starve!'

'Theatricals never solved anything. Just sign the cheque and leave the rest to me.'

'No.' Tess reached forward swiftly, twitched the slip of paper from Clare's fingers and tore it to bits. 'I meant you to return it to Ramon, but instead you can tell him what I did with it.' Her voice began to quiver. 'He's small and mean, do you know that? Mean to the core! He pushed that cheque into my bag last night and did it so that Philip Westland could see it plainly before it disappeared. He thought everything was sewn up, that Philip had yielded what he wanted from him and that he could demonstrate, by the sly dropping of that cheque into my purse, just how powerful Ramon Guevara is. He wanted to show that everyone has her uses and her price, even a little softie like me! Conceit, meanness, deception ... what does he care so long as the weapon gets him money?'

'My dear, that bitterness is hardly appropriate, is it?' said Clare with a knowledgeable smile. 'It's not very wise of you to care so much what Dr. Westland thinks of you. He has a fiancée, if you remember—a clever and beautiful woman.'

Tess lost colour, but not her temper; she was beyond that. 'I don't mind his knowing the truth—that I've tried to keep some sort of balance between my principles and doing what

you wanted of me. I just wasn't wise enough to see a few moves ahead. We've really nothing more to say to each other, have we? I'll be going home this week.'

'Really?' on a counterfeit note of regret. 'Well, perhaps that's wise, dear. The air of Tangier has done you lots of good, and if we haven't been such good friends as we hoped ... well, perhaps it's because I'm too young to regard you as a daughter and haven't quite the potentiality for affection that's necessary in a sister. You've helped a little, though, and I'm grateful. I wouldn't dream of taking money from you, Tess. I shan't need it, anyway. By this time next week I'll have a comfortable little fortune of my own.'

She didn't wait for a reply, but tapped ash into the patio and turned back to cross the lounge and go upstairs. Worn, and shivering a little, Tess sank down again into her chair. Nervously, her spread fingers went through the short hair, and round the back of her neck. She could feel tingling in her fingertips, a dull sort of horror in her throat.

Did Clare think the key had been taken from Boyd Westland last night, or did she know it would remain in Philip's possession till he met his brother at the bank? If she knew all the facts, there must be some further plan, one that Ramon considered foolproof. Oh, God, would this ever come to an end?

For her, it would end when she caught the ferry to Gibraltar, an event which now could not come too soon. She wanted to get away from all the uncertainty and intrigue, from Clare's impenetrable smugness, from Victor's groundless optimism, from Ramon's charming, ruthless preoccupation with the contents of a safe deposit box. If it was true that Boyd Westland had once 'done down' Ramon, surely the Spaniard was entitled to revenge in his own way, he always seemed to get what he wanted without violence. Yes ... and she wanted to get away from even the possibility of seeing Philip, meeting him on the boulevard or coming from the hospital. She must escape that.

When Victor came, at about five-thirty, Clare was taking her bath. Tess was in the lounge with the patio doors shut to keep out the rain, but until Victor arrived she hadn't been able to settle. He, however, brought a more restful air into

the house.

'Filthy weather,' he commented. 'Lucky it wasn't like this for the Arabian Nights at the Mirzeh yesterday. What time did you get home?'

'Nearly four—much too late. The last couple of hours were a bore. You were wise to go home to bed, Victor.'

'I didn't, as a matter of fact,' he said with a smile. 'I went out to Tiran with Dr. Westland. He's a great chap. I'm glad I've really met him at last. I'd like to help his work, but I doubt if he'll let me.'

'He would, if the help were only financial.'

'That's what I mean; I'm not qualified to help in any other way. I'll look into it. Haven't had such an interesting hour for years. It was midnight before I took him back to Tangier, to collect his own car.'

'Did he seem . . . angry to you?'

'He was abrupt at first, but maybe that's his way. He's a taut personality. You must know that.'

She recalled, with heartache, that he could be different, very different; and changed the topic. 'I'm leaving at the end of this week, Victor.'

'Oh, my dear, I'm sorry! Do you have to?'

'I'm fit, and I do have to work for my living. I'm hoping my substitute in the book department at the store hasn't been too efficient!'

'The offer to buy you a bookstore of your own is still open.'

'You're a darling, but no, thanks.'

'Then find someone worthy of you—it won't be easy—and get married. I promise to bring Clare over for your wedding.'

'For a tycoon, Victor, you're a mushy sentimentalist, but I like it.'

'I'm not really sentimental,' he said, 'but even if things don't go so well as I'm hoping, I don't want to lose touch with you. We'll write to each other?'

'Of course, Victor. And if you ever come to England we'll meet. I'll sell you some books!'

They were still talking in that vein when Clare came down, looking slim and tired in black velvet which had a

wide-set silver thread collar. Her hair shone whitely, her eyes were attractively shadowed and the tiredness, oddly enough, was also attractive, particularly to a man who felt it a privilege to cosset her. Victor was all concern.

They had drinks, talked of last night's party, the lavish spread of foods and wines, the lovely gifts for the women. One would almost think, Victor said, that Ramon had been celebrating something tremendous.

'The idea began some time ago,' Clare said negligently. 'A small welcome party for Tess. It seemed to grow into something else.'

'A pity about that accident afterwards,' remarked Victor, 'though Ramon isn't the sort of man to allow it to mar the occasion for him.'

'Accident ?'

'Haven't you heard? A car with one of the guests in it went over the edge of the coast road, beyond the Mirzeh. I was told at lunch-time, in the hotel dining-room.'

Tess, chilled to the fingertips, asked in a whisper, 'Who was it, do you know? Was he badly hurt?'

'He was killed,' said Victor. 'A man wearing a European suit under a robe, driving a blue continental car. They hadn't identified him when I heard, but of course Ramon will know his own guests. They're waiting for him to get back from Gib.'

'Has Ramon been there today?' asked Clare, almost stupidly.

'Sudden business call, so it was said.'

Tess was trembling and she had clamped her teeth so tight that her temples knocked. The blue car. Boyd had come back for it, had driven it recklessly over a cliff. Or perhaps it had been tampered with, the steering or the wheels. Philip had sent his brother away in the taxi, and suddenly Tess knew why. Boyd, true to his nature, had returned for his own car, perhaps only shortly after leaving the Mirzeh. He was the sort to stop the taxi before they had gone far, pay off the driver and get into his own vehicle. He would never see danger, and would refuse to be warned.

Philip! How would he be feeling now? The news would have got through to him quite quickly. If only it were

possible to soften such a blow. Even a weak brother inspires affection, and Philip had assumed responsibilities for Boyd, faced a good deal of personal danger to get his brother out of a mess.

Poor little Benito. An orphan now, with no one but Philip. Would Sheila feel sorry for the child when she heard the truth? Tess doubted it. Sheila didn't want the boy she thought was Philip's son; his nephew would be even less welcome. Unless jealousy of the mythical woman who had been Philip's first wife was at the root of her indifference to Benito. Sheila was so superbly self-confident, so utterly unaware of patients as persons that it was possible she couldn't feel jealousy.

Yet I'm jealous of *her*, Tess thought tremulously, of her closeness to Philip, her chance of making him happy, of making him love again, more deeply and ecstatically than he's ever loved before. Perhaps Sheila was with Philip now, showing practical sympathy.

Again and again, even after she was in bed that night, Tess recalled Boyd Westland, who at an early age had eschewed the Roger he was given at baptism. Perhaps that boyish need to be tough was the clue to his character. Throughout, he had hated conformity. He had dropped medicine after getting through four years of it, had casually gone through a marriage ceremony with a Spanish girl who had not really been much more than a passing fancy, had uncaringly left his small son with grandparents who wanted only the money he had paid for the child's keep, and during a brief spell in Tangier he had crossed Ramon Guevara in one of his 'deals'. For the last eighteen months he had been hiding out heaven knew where, but inevitably, when his money had gone, he had come to collect ... what? Tess hardly cared. She could only recall that big indolent man, so much like Philip and yet so unlike him, who was lifeless, finished.

It was a bad night and the morning was hardly better, though the sky was clear and the wind had dropped. Clare got up earlier than usual. She fidgeted, on edge, and finally rang one of Ramon's friends, discreedy coming round to the question: Seen Ramon since Saturday? A negative, and she

rang someone else. Tess couldn't stand it. She went into town and checked about her ticket home.

She bought a newspaper but found no reference to Boyd Westland, and for a moment she thought of going to the clinic with an aching shoulder. She had coffee at a cafe instead and watched the passers-by. It was close to the clinic and her desperate little hope materialised. Sheila Vernet paid off a cab only a few yards away and had to pass the cafe to get to the clinic. She was wearing a smoky-blue suit and carrying her case, and she looked preoccupied, but she did catch sight of Tess and smile perfunctorily. Tess got up quickly.

'Oh, Dr. Vernet, I won't keep you a moment. I'm leaving Tangier at the end of this week, and I promised that on my way home I'd call and see little Benito in Gibraltar. I wonder if you could give me the address of the people he's staying with ?'

'Yes,' said Sheila absently. 'Give me your newspaper.' She used the ballpoint she kept in her pocket, scribbled on the newspaper's margin. 'There you are. Anything else?'

'Just thank you again, for what you did for me. The shoulder is fine now.'

'Good.' Then she hesitated, as Tess had prayed she would. 'You were at the Guevara party on Saturday, weren't you?'

'Yes, I was.'

'You've heard about the accident—the victim was at that party, uninvited. He went there as a sort of joke, I understand, impersonating Dr. Westland. They were actually brothers, but Boyd, the one who was killed, had a peculiar sense of humour. Also, he apparently drank too much and let his car get out of control.'

'I see. There was nothing wrong with the car?'

'Nothing at all. Philip looked into that first.'

'It must have been a great shock to him.'

Dr. Vernet shrugged. 'I suppose so, but Boyd wasn't the kind of brother one would mourn; too fond of escapades and letting someone else take the consequences.'

'Is Dr. Westland working?'

'Not for a couple of days. There is business to settle.' Her fine-boned, elegant features looked peculiarly cold as she

asked, 'You've seen him several times, I believe, but I don't think it would be kind to worry him with your farewells before you leave. Did you intend to do that?'

Perverseness made Tess answer, 'No, but I may run into him. I don't think he'd mind my saying goodbye in those circumstances, do you?'

Shelia Vernet squinted slightly, as if the sun were too strong; but maybe she was masking an expression. There was only a hint of annoyance in her tones when she answered, 'You will do as you wish, of course, but I can assure you Dr. Westland has no desire for small talk. That brother of his was no good—a waster, and worse. But Philip had an affection for him, incomprehensible though it may appear.'

'It's not incomprehensible to me. It's human nature to love the one who causes you most trouble and pain. I imagine Dr. Westland feels his brother's death very keenly.'

Tess felt it herself as though she had known Boyd much longer; perhaps she even felt it for Philip, too. There was nothing more to say to Sheila. The doctor shrugged and nodded goodbye, and walked on with her long graceful stride into the clinic.

Tess wasn't sure what she had hoped for from a meeting with the woman. Certainly not quite such a cool brush-off. She walked slowly back to Clare's house, to find her step-mother so strung up that she looked almost ugly. Clare was drinking, and it wasn't her first drink of the day.

She waved her glass and spoke loudly. 'Have you heard anything of Ramon?'

'No. Are you worried?'

'You're dam right I'm worried. The manager of the Mirzeh says he knows nothing, that Ramon took only an overnight case with him to Gibraltar. I think he's lying. I want you to go out there with me this afternoon.'

'No, Clare. If you're so interested, you go alone.'

'And act the jilted lover? What do you think I am?'

'I think you've drunk a little too much, and that if you went out there you might be very unwise. You'll have to be patient.'

'I've been patient—for months and months. Ramon

promised me ... he promised me!' Her voice rose; nothing bell-like about it now. 'For two pins I'd tell you what it's all about.'

'I think I know almost as much about it as you do, Clare. It sounds a phoney set-up to me, perhaps even criminal. Even if it means you won't be so well off as you thought you're better out of it. Just wait till Ramon gets back.'

'He won't come back! I'm sure of it now. I've telephoned all our friends and not one of them was even aware he'd gone over to Gib. yesterday. D'you know what he's done? He's collected, and cleared off with everything. He promised me a huge slice, but he's kept the lot. I doubt if he's even paid the men who helped him. Tess, you've got to go with me to the Mirzeh !'

'I refuse. I want nothing more to do with it.'

Clare's green eyes blazed dully. 'You don't care, do you? You could make the grand gesture—tear up his cheque and fling the bits at me. But that five hundred was nothing to what he promised *me*. I was to have enough to buy a villa and a chunk over. I can't give up without a fight.'

Tess said slowly, 'You can't do anything unless you can see Ramon. If you went to the Mirzeh and made a fuss, think how foolish you'd feel if he came back tomorrow and sought you out. You've got to give him time. Clare, go upstairs and lie down. Victor will probably call for tea this afternoon and you must look normal for him.'

'Victor,' said Clare on a sob. 'I like Victor, but hell probably hate me, too, when he knows everything.'

'He won't hate you. Not if you're quiet... and sober.'

Clare allowed herself to be led up the staircase and into her room. She slumped into a chair while Tess folded the bedspread, allowed her shoes to be slipped off, and heavily got to her feet when Tess gently tugged her arm. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes.

Tess pulled a cover half over her, and for a moment she stood looking down at the flushed cheeks of her stepmother. It was the first time she had seen Clare like this, the worse for drink; it was still not quite lunch-time. The threat to the cash payment she had been working for must have hit her hard, and though Tess half hoped Ramon really had gone



for good, she couldn't help pitying Clare, who valued the wrong things. Married to Victor she could have all the things she wanted ... except admiration and flattery and idle love making from the good-looking but penniless young playboys who haunted the Mediterranean.

Clare sobered up, put on the sweet and wistful expression of a woman who isn't really well but is bravely trying not to show it. Victor was deceived. He brought flowers, armful of magazines and a casket of new cologne.

A couple of days passed, slowly and painfully. Clare, when no one was watching, looked angry and hollowly resigned in turn. Tess felt just hollow. In three days she would leave Clare to decide her future, leave Tangier of the white walls and minarets, the blue sky and bay, the palms and swarms of people. And she would leave part of herself behind, the most important part.

It was in the middle of Friday afternoon that Pedro called her to the telephone. 'An old woman with a crab in her throat,' he said contemptuously as he gave her the hand-piece.

It was Marthe, speaking from Las Perlas. 'I have instructions, mademoiselle, from the doctor. He is away today, but has heard you are leaving. He is sending a car for you to come here for tea with me this afternoon. Just to say goodbye to me ... and to the house.'

Tess felt parched. 'Is that how he put it, Marthe?'

'I am afraid so, mademoiselle.'

'How is he?'

'He looks grim, but he is over the worst. Today, he is in Gibraltar on business. The car will arrive for you at three o'clock. You will come?'

'I'd like to see you, Marthe, but not the house.'

'That is what I thought. But you will come, please?'

'Very well. I'll come.'

Blindly, Tess replaced the telephone. The very last thing she wanted was to say goodbye to Las Perlas.

## CHAPTER X

TESS could not have described her feelings as she drove to Tiran in the hired car. She looked over the rust-red fields and through the figs and palms at glimpses of the sea, and at one moment she wished she might never see the House of the Pearls again, while the next brought a longing to enter the cool sitting-room and forget Clare and Victor and, inevitably, Ramon. It was good of Philip to give her an opportunity of saying goodbye to Marthe, yet cruel of him too. He couldn't possibly have stated more plainly that he himself had no wish to see her again.

As usual in mid-afternoon, the little town was asleep. A comatose old man, withered, brown and stubbly about the chin, lay against the stone basin of the fountain in the Cuera. A solitary robed figure occupied a table at the cafe; he might be the man who had sat there that first time she had come to the town. Not another soul stirred, but the frond of a palm rose above the curly edge of a flat roof and nodded disinterestedly in the lazy breeze.

The car stopped at the gate of Las Perlas. The driver told Tess, politely, that he would leave the car there and go across to the cafe; he would stay there till needed. She got out and opened the gate, walked along the shut-in path to the glossy front door. She had hardly lifted her hand to the bell when the door was opened by Marthe, in a clean black shirt and yellowed white blouse; she held out both of her knobbly, scrubbed hands.

'Ah, come in, mademoiselle! I was watching for you. You are well?'

'Yes. And you?'

'I could be worse.' The door closed. 'We have tea in the patio, yes? I do not feel comfortable sitting in the salon.' She bustled through to open the patio door. 'The sun is still hot even in October. It is the rain and wind that make our

winter.'

The table was already laid, and two chairs were set, one each side of it. The ghost of a hope which had survived within Tess was laid low. She stood looking about her, at the climbing plants, the slatted roof of the patio. It was a fortress, this house; a place where one could feel safe from all the plotting and anger and distrust and greed. And yet there was sadness here, she felt. Or could it be her own sadness clouding the atmosphere? She wished, suddenly, that she had not worn the plain white dress. She should have put on something gay, a flippant gesture that would carry her past the despair of this farewell. It was beginning to feel sharper than despair; much nearer to grief.

She shouldn't have come; it was too wrenching.

Marthe was saying, 'Shall we have tea at once or talk for a while? It is nearly four - both together, I think, tea and talk. You will pardon me for a moment?'

Tess sat down and stretched her legs in front of her. Slackly, she stared at the few mauve sprays left on the trumpet-vine and wondered whether she would ever see a bougainvillea or a trumpet-vine again. After this, she would **never** be **drawn** to the **Mediterranean**, as **others** were. Even a hundred miles south of England would **remind** her too poignantly of Tangier, and Las Perlas.

**Marthe brought the tea**, a dish of tiny sandwiches and another of cakes. She poured slowly.

'I am not a tea-drinker, but for today I will be English. You know, I cannot understand the English and their tea! Chocolate has so much more taste and body, and one needs only one cup.'

'**Perhaps** that's the reason the English like tea,' Tess commented. 'You can drink it for ever without filling up. Thank you, Marthe.'

Marthe dropped sugar into her cup, sipped and grimaced. 'I shall not go to England, ever. But then,' with a philosophical shrug, 'I shall not go anywhere else, either. I am not of the travelling kind. Will you write to me, mademoiselle?'

The thought of communicating with this house after she had left it for good seemed to find the raw tips of Tess's nerves. 'I may,' she said. 'It was thoughtful of Dr. Westland

to realise that I might like to come here and say goodbye to you.'

'He is a thoughtful man. And not very happy just now. You have heard about his brother?'

'Yes.'

'It was a bad thing. He came here to this house when he first arrived in Tangier, actually stayed with us for a few days. But we were too quiet for him; he wished for life, and adventure. It is strange to think of a man over thirty still feeling that to adventure is better than living.'

'I suppose it's the kind of man he was, Marthe.'

The woman cast her an oblique glance. 'You know that Benito is son of the brother?'

'I knew it almost from the start.'

Marthe threw out her hands. 'The doctor fooled me, as well as everyone else. I thought he had had a marriage he did not talk about. Even Mademoiselle Vernet thought that, until last night, when the doctor told us both. It was while I was serving dinner.'

'In the sitting-room?'

'No, in the dining-room. Always we are very correct for Mademoiselle Doctor! She was overjoyed, the mademoiselle. It meant much to her that he had not married before, and that the child was not his. *Naturellement!*'

'Yes, I suppose so. Was it Mademoiselle Vernet who told Dr. Westland that I'm leaving in a day or two?'

Marthe nodded, broke one of her own cakes and inspected it critically. 'So this morning, very early, as he was ready to leave, the doctor tells me that I may invite you to tea. He would instruct one of the taxi-drivers at the harbour that he must put himself at your disposal from three o'clock this afternoon. *Voila!*'

Pensively, Tess swallowed one of the inch-square crab-meat sandwiches. 'His brother's sudden death must have been a great blow. How did he hear about it, Marthe?'

'By telephone, at six o'clock on Sunday morning. He went out, and after that I did not see him till night, when he came in looking like stone. For two days he was busy, but in the house said nothing. Then he went back to work, and last night Mademoiselle came for dinner. I served, but left them

because my nephew is sick; I stayed at his house all night and returned here at about five-thirty this morning. Monsieur was already taking his bath; he said he needed a day in Gibraltar and had been offered a seat in a private launch leaving at seven. *Enfin*,' with the usual shrug.

'I'm not likely to see him again,' Tess said.

'You wish it were otherwise?' Marthe looked sly, but commiserating. 'I thought that was how it was with you. If you had been just a little older, mademoiselle, just a little more mature! I have never liked this idea of marriage between doctors—not for Monsieur Westland. A pathologist does not need a wife of his own profession; always he is concerned with things from which he needs relief. She is engrossed in her work, Mademoiselle Vernet, and with her our doctor will get no relief. Also, she has always liked more doctors than one. You understand?'

'I don't think I do.'

Marthe tried to express herself more clearly. 'Always while she has been close to Dr. Westland she has also had other friends. Particularly Dr. Marcel Fougère. Dr. Fougère is a man who would allow her to do as she pleased. Dr. Westland, as you know, is quite different! There will be explosions.'

'I think they're both capable of handling them.'

'Such differences can be managed only with love. One hopes they have enough, between them!'

'You're a pessimist, Marthe.'

'I am French, and a realist.'

'Mademoiselle is half French.'

'And half English. That English half may make her unreasonable and demanding. No woman should demand of a man; she should coax, perhaps, but better still, ask nothing and be all he wants. That is the way to make a man want even more. And after all, what is married happiness, *au fond*? It is giving with rapture, and discovering that you are able to give still more, so that always there is present enchantment and delicious expectation.'

Tess said, with a sigh, 'That's wonderfully said, Marthe. You're a very wise woman.'

'Wise now,' she admitted, with a tolerant shrug, 'but not

always. You like the cakes?'

They talked of cooking, both Spanish and French, until Tess looked at her watch and said it was five-fifteen and she must go. She had scarcely stood up when there was a commotion at the front of the house. The slam of a door, footsteps quickening to a run along the corridor. Then suddenly a whirlwind materialised and flew at Tess.

"Allo, señorita! I am back, no? What you think of my suit? Pretty damn slick, ha?"

Tess was laughing helplessly, with tears in her eyes. 'Benito! How did you get here?'

'*Dieu!*' shrieked Marthe. 'I thought you would never come, you little dog. Mademoiselle was just going and I could think of nothing more to keep her here. What have you been doing to be so long?'

'The boat was late. Tio Felipe get mad alla time, and I get mad. We both swear ...'

'And who is Tio Felipe?'

Benito wrinkled his worldly little nose. 'Is easier than Uncle Philip, and he say he not care. Is pretty good sort, Tio Felipe.'

'That's big of you,' said Philip, from the doorway. 'Good afternoon, Tess.'

She was shaking all through, had to steel her jaw before she could speak. Then she managed, 'Hallo, Philip.'

'Any tea for me?'

'Not for me,' said Benito, 'but I will have some cakes. Is lemonade, Marthe?'

'Is lemonade, yes,' she scolded. 'Bring the cakes to the kitchen and I will give you something to drink. I will make fresh tea, monsieur. Mademoiselle, you will not forget to say goodbye to Benito and me before you leave?'

'She's not leaving,' said Philip. 'I've sent the cab away.'

'So?' Marthe's knowledgeable glance rested upon his face for a minute, then more briefly upon the pink averted cheeks of Tess. Almost she smirked. 'Dinner for two and supper for the child. I understand. The tea will be two minutes.'

It was uncannily quiet when the woman and Benito were gone. Tess didn't know what to do or say. Philip hadn't anything cut-and-dried either, apparently, but he spoke first.

'We should have been here by four-thirty, but the ferry had engine trouble. I told Benito you'd be here to welcome him, but I'd also told Marthe she was on no account to tell you he was coming, just in case I couldn't bring him today.'

Tess looked down. 'I did intend to call and say goodbye to him at Gibraltar, on my way home,' she said. 'Has he come to stay?'

'Only for a couple of days. He goes back for a few weeks, till just before Christmas, and after that we make new arrangements. I haven't decided what they'll be.'

There was a curious flatness in his tones, and after a pause she sent him a swift glance. He looked paler than usual and tired about the eyes, but otherwise he was his usual strong, masterful self. Not in his tones, though; not quite. But was it a trace of uncertainty or could it possibly be emotion that deepened them and gave them an enquiring inflection?

She said, 'I don't know what to say about your ... brother.'

'There's nothing to say, is there? The cold-blooded view would be that he got what he'd asked for. I'm afraid I'm not quite that cold-blooded, but I've always had the feeling he might meet something he couldn't tackle alone, and go under.'

'There was no foul play?'

'None that could be traced. The road was examined, and it did look as though another car must have forced him off and over the edge of the hill, but there was nothing to prove it. If it did happen, there'd be no tracing the car that was responsible. In the records, it was an accident.'

'It's ... difficult to believe, isn't it? He seemed so very much alive.'

'He made the taxi-driver turn back and leave him outside the Mirzeh. The driver gave evidence on that; he was the last to speak to Boyd.' Tea arrived and he added, 'Sit down again, Tess. You can pour for me.'

'She is English,' said Marthe. 'She can also drink more tea. And, mademoiselle, persuade him to eat some of these fresh cakes. For you, I think he might do it.'

Tess gave her a swift, upward look. Marthe's ugly face gleamed in a smile, and this time her wink was unmistak-

able. Tess felt so tied up inside that it affected her hands; as she poured they shook. Philip took the pot from her.

'You're dangerous. Why are you trembling?'

'I don't know. Please drink your tea . . . and talk.'

The grey eyes, watching her, were keen, but he spoke almost non-committally. 'Ramon has cleared out altogether. Did you know that ?'

'I guessed. Good riddance.'

'You may as well hear it all. As you know, I'd intended to go to the bank with Boyd. I told him to be there first thing Monday morning, half an hour before the bank opened. I was going to arrange it with the manager on the telephone. Ramon's friends didn't know that. They thought Boyd had the key on him and forced him off the road to search him. He probably put on speed to lose them and that was what killed him—the spurt of speed caused the car to skid. They couldn't find the key and guessed what I'd decided. Eventually they reported back to Ramon.'

'During the party,' she said faintly. 'How horrible.'

'Horrible and heartless,' Philip said. 'Ramon must have done some quick thinking. With Boyd gone, the key was mine, so he thought. He didn't know Benito is Boyd's heir; it was because of Ramon that I kept the boy's real identity a secret. Ramon knew what I'd do if the key were mine, so he disappeared. You see, in that deposit box there was a parcel of jewels worth nearly a quarter of a million. They'd been stolen by Ramon's henchmen. My brother, for a consideration, agreed to keep them hidden for them for a while. He was singled out for that job because he'd had nothing to do with the robbery. His part was comparatively simple and straightforward and was to be paid for in two instalments, one when he secreted the packet and the other when he handed it over, a few months later, after the tumult had ceased.'

'The robbery on the luxury cruiser?' she whispered incredulously. 'I've heard about that.'

Philip leaned an elbow on the table, looked beyond her, grimly. 'Boyd carried out the first part of his arrangement before I knew anything about it and put the packet in the safe deposit. Then came the news reports; Tangier filled with



reporters and insurance assessors, and Boyd got cold feet. He vanished for a month, and when he returned the noises had faded somewhat but the insurance companies had men investigating the matter. Boyd went to Ramon and asked him to have the packet transferred to his name; Ramon, of course, refused—he wasn't going to be caught with it. So Boyd told me all about it; you can guess it was a shock. I demanded the key.' He leaned back wearily, drank some of his tea and got out cigarettes. 'Maybe you can guess what's happened since then.'

'Most of it. He cleared off again, and you found yourself left with the key—which you couldn't use. If you'd gone to the police ...'

'Had it happened in England, that's what I would have done. There, they'll suppress details that might injure the reputation of someone who had nothing to do with the crime. Here, there wasn't a hope. Boyd would have been a wanted man and I'd have wrecked my career. My only hope of a secret settlement of the business was to wait till Boyd got back and then approach the man who represented the various insurance companies concerned. I thought he'd turn up within weeks, but it seems he was too scared. So there was Ramon, knowing darned well that the loot lay in a safe deposit box in Boyd's name and yet able to do nothing about it. But somehow, through something my brother had let slip, they got to know that I had the key; they searched my house during my absence, and after that Ramon tried many times to approach me. I kept clear. As it happens, during the whole of the time that key has been in a deed box at my own bank. Yesterday I gave it to my lawyer.'

Her hands tightly clasped on the table, she stared at him. 'And Ramon guessed you would do that. What will happen now?'

'With Boyd gone, nothing very much. The insurance companies will be only too happy to get the stuff back, and there's no one they can prosecute, though I've been told that those responsible for the actual robbery will eventually be picked up on other charges. It's been a ... grubby business.'

She said softly, 'You must have loathed it. And I'm not surprised you were so bitter and cold about Ramon.'

'He's the worst kind of crook—others take the risks while he sets up a foolproof alibi. He avoids all danger and publicity. If you'd really gone overboard for him I'd have risked my own reputation and gone straight for him, with the police.'

She shook her lowered head. 'I hate myself for even having been attracted to him. It was a sort of fascination; I was attracted and repelled. I didn't take that money from him, you know. I didn't even know what that paper was till I got home. I tore it up.'

Almost to himself he said, 'I realised you would, afterwards. I could have knocked him down for daring to implicate you. At the time, though, I was too tied up with Boyd to risk a showdown. I wanted that packet out of the safe deposit and into a lawyer's hands. I knew that by turning evidence Boyd could get off, but greed in men like Ramon dies hard.'

In anyone, thought Tess, remembering Clare. 'You must have had a terribly worrying year or two,' she said. 'And my bringing Benito couldn't have been much help.'

'It did help, a little. This may sound odd to you,' with a keen-eyed smile, 'but you seemed to crystallise things for me. That same evening after I'd first met you I had a hunch. I'd had them before, but they were cloudy and unproductive. This one was different—I knew what to do. The following day I placed a cryptic message that only Boyd would understand in several Spanish newspapers. That was why I sought you out and asked you to see that Benito got back to Salamanca if anything happened to me. I had a feeling that at last the message would find him and might spark off unpleasantness, at least. Well, the advertisement combined with his empty pockets brought him here.'

'But now your brother is dead.'

'That's the way I regarded it at first. Then I made myself think about it sensibly. Boyd had to come back some time; he'd got into a spot where it was imperative. It was also inevitable that he'd underestimate the opposition, but I hoped it would happen while I was with him. If he'd been content to forget his car that night...' he threw out a hand. 'What's the use? He thought his life was charmed, that he

could get away with anything. In a war he'd have won the V.C. and gone out in a blaze of glory.'

'What would have happened if you'd given him the key?'

'He'd have tried to take his share, and disappeared again.'

'He shouldn't have married, should he?'

'Maybe not. Yet Benito's quite a card; he'll go places, but I'll darned well see they're the right places!'

'Does he know all about his father?'

'A good deal, but nothing bad. After I'd told him about the car going over the edge of the road he was quiet. Then he said, "He drive fast, my papa. He sure a fast driver. You think mebbe he drink too much wine first?" And that was all.'

She smiled unsteadily. 'He's young enough to love you instead.'

Philip pushed aside his teacup, leaned on the table, close to her. Quietly, he asked, 'Why did you suddenly decide to return to England?'

'It wasn't sudden. I'm fit now, and I'm in Clare's way.'

'Is that the whole truth?'

'Pretty well. I felt sick, too, about Ramon and your brother.'

'Not about anything else?'

She sent him a scared glance. 'What else?'

'Sheila Vernet.'

'I've nothing against her. She's a good doctor.'

'And a beautiful woman—yes, I know. Tess, I want to explain about Sheila.'

She drew back nervously. 'You don't have to. There are some things ...'

'Now, you listen,' he said sternly. 'When I kissed you I did it because I couldn't help myself. I've never felt like that with Sheila, never. I was going to marry her, yes, but that was before I knew you. You've got to see how things were. Even before that trouble with Boyd began I'd gone cynical about life, but during the past couple of years I got in much deeper. Obviously I'd need a wife, and Sheila and I did have a good deal in common. We weren't officially engaged, but there was an understanding between us, though I had no

intention of marrying till the other thing was out of the way. When you came I discovered the difference between liking and respecting a woman and wanting one so much that every single thing I did was bound up in it. There was this key business boiling up, Sheila being proprietorial, the child. I had to wade through it all before I could come to you. Tess ... darling, will you marry me?'

Her lips parted drily; her eyes blinked at him, as brown as the idiotic head of hair in the evening sun. 'Are you crazy ... or am I?'

He grabbed both her hands, held them tight between his. 'I hope we both are, a little. I'm overdue for a wild, completely abandoned love affair, and for your safety you'd better marry me before we start, because it's going on for ever, and anything might result from it. Tess, I want you so much that...'

He didn't finish the sentence in words. He was standing, drawing her up and tightly into his arms. He kissed her, draining, hungry kisses that hurt and soothed before they spread down into her being and set fires leaping all over her body. She strained to him, her arms close about his shoulders, her need swelling to meet the immensity of his. It was a long time before either of them could speak.

She was still in his arms when she said, in a frightened whisper, 'I love you so much more even than I thought I did. You knew I'd fallen in love with you, didn't you?'

'Hell, no. But I hoped. I was going to give myself—and you—just a week, till the weekend. I invited Sheila here last night because I had to be straight with her first. The whole evening was a mess. She started off by mentioning how pleased she was that Benito is only my nephew: it made him so much less important. Then she told me how she'd met you and that you were leaving in a few days; that unsettled me, so that I was much more blunt with her than I'd intended. I told her I wanted to marry you and she said that was fine, because Marcel Fougre had proposed to her more than once and she felt she might be happier with him, particularly as he's leaving in a few weeks to take up an appointment in France. She ended with an allusion to Boyd that...'

Tess put her fingers over his lips. 'Don't even think about it. I liked Boyd, and I love his son. I'm so glad he's here today, to be told about us.'

'I didn't bring him for that!' Philip said flatly. 'Boyd had damn-all to leave, but Benito does happen to be his heir, and the lawyer wanted to see him when I take over official guardianship. We'll have to decide what's to be done about him.'

'It won't be difficult,' she said softly. 'He belongs to us.'

In vibrant tones he said, 'Now I know why I've waited so long. My darling, beautiful Tess was growing up, getting ready for just this. Bless your stepmother, for choosing to live in Tangier!'

Bless Clare? Yes, of course. Perhaps she was in a spot now where she could do with a blessing or two, both she and Victor. Tess found herself hoping they would decide to go on living in Tangier for a while.

A fruity little voice said, 'Is fiesta time, Tio Felipe? That why you make love?' And then, admiringly, 'Some señorita, no? All gold and shining. You are lucky *hombre!*'

With which, naturally, Philip agreed. Tess sparkled with tears and laughter. Her heart was full and life was rich with promise.