

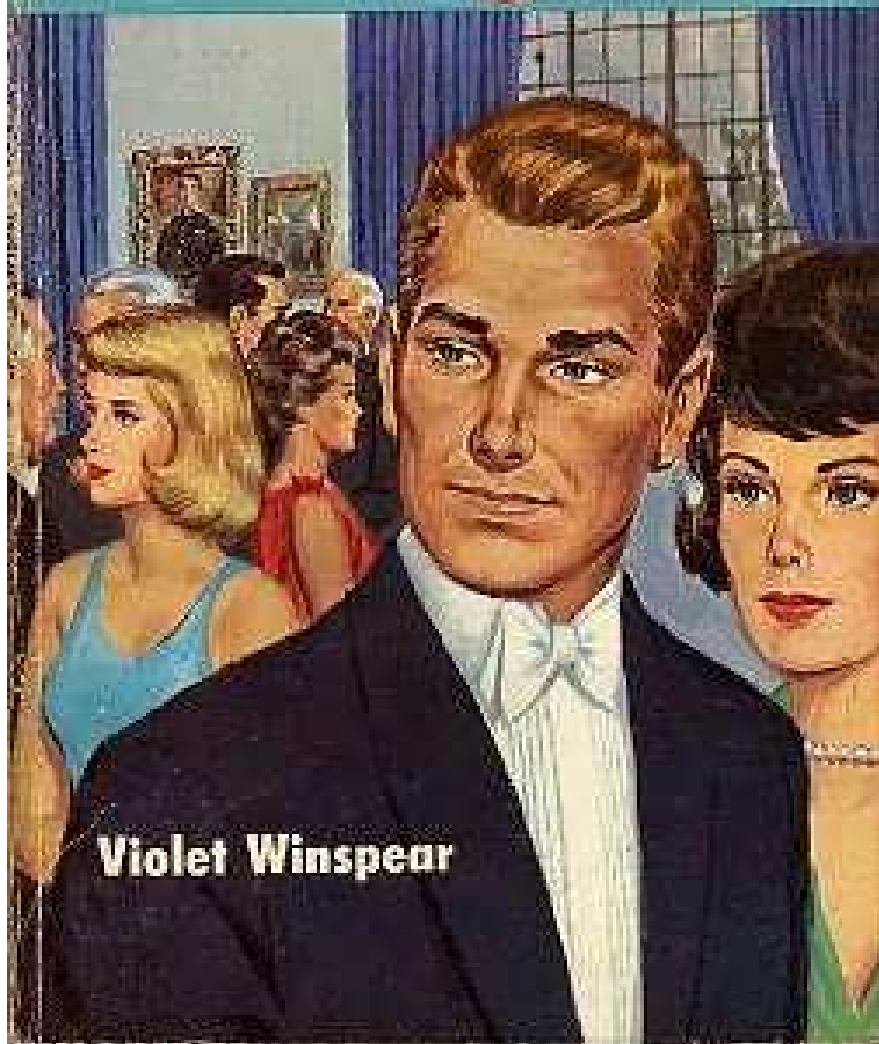


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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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The Viking Stranger



Violet Winspear

THE VIKING STRANGER

Violet Winspear

From the beginning, Jill Pride had been intrigued by the personality of Erik Norlund. He seemed to be two people in one, and she couldn't decide which of the two was more dominant the smooth, successful American tycoon that he actually was, or the wild adventurous Viking whose blood had been handed down to him from his Danish forebears,. She was to get her chance to find out when Erik offered her a job in his luxury department store in sunny California-but she also discovered that there was another woman in his life, with whom she could not possibly hope to compete-the glamorous model Corah Bennet.

CHAPTER ONE

IT was around two-thirty when a slim girl, dressed simply but expensively in blue, pushed open the door of the hotel boutique. Jill Pride glanced round the display stand on which she was arranging a blouse and gave the girl a warm smile. 'Why, hullo, Miss Manet,' she said. 'I hope you're feeling better?'

'My legs are still a bit wobbly, but it's great to be out of hospital.' Linda Manet returned Jill's smile, and her smoke-blue eyes were still shadowed by her recent illness. 'Can you help me?' she asked. 'I want to buy thank-you gifts for the nurses who were so kind to me in hospital, but I'm an American and I'm wondering whether you British girls like different things from us.'

'How about perfume? Speaking for myself I'd say it was the ideal gift.' Jill reached under the glass counter for several attractive bottles. 'These have only just come in. Miss Manet. This one is a Molyneux, and this Lancome's Envoi. Let me dab some on your wrist— there, isn't that just like a breath of spring?'

The American girl sniffed at her scented wrist and regarded Jill with a rather shy smile. According to hotel gossip Linda Manet had been left very wealthy by her textile manufacturer father, but for all her worldly goods she seemed to Jill a rather unhappy, lonely sort of girl. Poor little rich girl, Jill reflected, but without cynicism. It wasn't in her nature to be cynical; she was a genuinely warm and helpful person. For about half an hour—the boutique manageress was visiting her chiropodist—Jill and her customer enjoyed themselves dabbing on various perfumes and admiring inviting trifles like beaded bags, embroidered gloves and delectable silk headsquares. 'You've been a pal helping me like this,' Linda said gratefully, when Jill had gift-wrapped her purchases. 'I guess you enjoy working among all these cute things, don't you?'

Jill gave a nod of agreement, smiling as she put away a tray of gloves. 'We've made the place smell like a harem, so I only hope the hotel manager doesn't decide to pop in.'

'Will he be wild with you?' An expression of alarm came into Linda's eyes. 'I wouldn't want you to get into trouble on account of being so obliging--'

'I was only kidding, Miss Manet,' Jill quickly reassured the girl, who was either nervous by nature or made so by her recent nasty bout of pneumonia. 'Monsieur Paquin is really a pet.'

'My uncle calls him the Penguin.' Linda's smile came back and laughter filled in the hollows under her cheekbones.

'He does look a little like one,' Jill laughingly agreed, feeling at the same time a disconcerting tide of warmth creeping up her neck into her face at Linda's reference to her uncle, a big fair man who had grey eyes so penetrating they seemed to drill a hole right through a girl's defences. 'I saw your uncle having a canter in the Row as I was coming to work,' she added casually.

'He likes getting into the saddle whenever he can.' A look of warm affection sprang into Linda's eyes. 'He's my mother's brother, you know, though they aren't all that much alike to look at. Mom's always trying to get him hitched up to one of her glamorous girl-friends, but Uncle Erik is too tied up in the store to have much time for funning around. I guess I ought to explain that the store is Norlund's, which in our part of California is like saying Saks of New York, or Neiman Marcus down in Texas. It's quite a concern, and that Viking of an uncle of mine is the dynamo at the core of the works. He flew to England specially, when I got so ill on holiday here.'

Linda glanced down and touched a pretty bracelet- watch on her wrist. 'He bought me this as a coming-out- of-hospital present.'

'That was nice of him.' Jill said. 'Does he own the store?'

'The store was founded by his grandfather. Sven Norlund, a Danish immigrant to the States,' Linda explained. 'He eventually married an American girl and had two sons, but the eldest son wasn't too hot on business and he kind of let the store go down. The other son, Uncle Erik's father, took over and formed a corporation to try and get the store out of the red into the black. Uncle Erik was made managing director about three years ago, but he started at Norlund's at the very bottom.'

Linda swung a gaily wrapped package on one finger and went pink with pride, right up to the delicate eyebrows that matched in colour the soft mink collar of her dress. 'He's like that. He believes in doing everything thoroughly, and I guess it's what makes him such a super businessman. The department store is booming now, under the directorship, but Mom worries and thinks he drives himself too hard. He laughs at her for worrying. Says he's as tough as hickory, but I guess it would be nice if he found time to get romantic about someone. He's attractive, don't you think?'

Jill thought of him as she had seen him that morning, the spring sunshine on his cropped thatch of very fair hair and the tweed of a hacking jacket slung on wide, easily carried shoulders. Recognising Jill from a collision he had had with her in the hotel lobby one lunch-time, he had wished her good morning, and she had noticed that his mouth was modelled on generous yet curt lines and that it was set in a stubborn-looking jaw below a thin-boned, assertive nose . . . yes, he was attractive in a forceful, crackling, very much his own boss fashion.

'I can imagine him having a lot of appeal for— sophisticated women,' said youthful, innocent Jill, who up until five months ago had been the sole companion and support of a strict and elderly grandmother.

Jill saw Linda Manet several times during the next few days. She would slip into the boutique when business looked slack, and on Friday she unexpectedly asked Jill if she was doing anything special the following evening.

'No, nothing.'

'That's great,' said Linda. 'You see, I'd like you to come and see a show with Uncle Erik and myself. Mom bought three tickets for the new Ivor St. Clare musical, but now she's gone and made a date for the same night with a friend she hasn't seen in a long time. I suggested asking you to go, and she was all for it.'

'What about your uncle?' Jill heard the note of diffidence in her own voice. 'Won't he mind having a stranger tagging along?'

'You're my friend, Jill,' Linda said warmly. 'That'll be good enough for him—really, he won't eat you!'

Jill thought of strong, white teeth glimmering against a Californian tan and wondered!

'Well, if you're sure he won't mind—' the eagerness in Linda's eyes made it difficult for Jill to refuse her. 'I've never seen a big West End musical--'

'Then that settles it!' Linda gave Jill's hand a squeeze of delight. 'It's going to be a dressy affair and I've a white lawn that will look dishy on you, Jill, if you'd like to wear it. It was bought for our trip over here, but I've lost so much weight since my hospital bout that it hangs on me. What do you say?'

What could Jill say? The offer was made with such shy charm, and not the faintest hint of patronage, that she would have seemed churlish if she turned it down. Besides, Jill didn't possess an evening

dress and buying one would mean digging into the money she was saving for her summer holiday. 'Thank you for the invitation, Linda, and the dress sounds lovely,' she said gratefully.

Linda at once suggested that Jill come up to her mother's suite in the lunch-hour so she could take a look at the dress. 'We could have some eats together,' she added. 'Mom's going to a fashion show, and Uncle Erik's utilising his time over here by seeing some of the manufacturers whose goods are sold at the store. British goods go down well in the States, especially your dishy cashmeres and cool cotton dresses. Norlund's has a snazzy fashion department, with a teenage boutique you'd really go for, Jill.'

Jill rather thought she would go for it, but letting her adventurous young mind dwell on sunny California and its various enticements was not an indulgence she was going to allow herself. When you were alone in the world, except for a few little-known relatives up North, it could lead to moodiness and dissatisfaction with your job to start longing for trips over the rainbow.

'I'll be up on the dot of one,' she promised Linda.

The Manet suite was on the penthouse floor of the hotel, and Jill was let into the spacious, smartly furnished lounge by Linda, who said at once that neither her mother nor her uncle had yet returned from their various jaunts and so they had the place to themselves.

Jill felt her nerves relax at this welcome piece of news, and followed Linda out to the terrace patio where a table for two had been laid. She leant over the stone parapet and treated herself to a three-dimensional view of the city, but Linda wouldn't come and stand beside her. Heights unnerved her, she said, and it made her feel sick travelling in planes. 'Uncle Erik calls me a bundle of nerves,' she half laughed. 'I suppose he's right, but I just can't seem to snap out of it.'

'We've all got our phobias,' Jill swung round and gave the other girl a staunch smile. 'I'm a country girl, but I can't stand a spider anywhere near me. There was a leggy horror in the boutique stock-room the other day and I nearly dropped an expensive pottery vase when it ran out of its hidey-hole.'

'On the level?' Linda fingered the jewelled watch- bracelet on her wrist and took in Jill's trim air of capability that could turn to panic at the sight of a spider. She broke into a smile. 'Men, the brutes, don't seem to be nervous of anything, do they? I guess that's why women amuse them so much, why they laugh at our clothes, our arguments, and even the books we read.'

Jill perched on a canopied swing-hammock and flipped open the magazine Linda or her mother had left lying there. She could well imagine self-assured Erik Norlund laughing at women, yet he probably attracted them like bees to a honeypot for that very reason. Strange, the power arrogant men had over women— which, she supposed, just went to show how much primitiveness there still was in the female of the species.

A waiter brought lunch and the two girls sat down at the table. Linda's appetite was still finicky, but Jill ate with the healthy appreciation of a nineteen-year-old who had been busily at work since nine o'clock. She tucked into crunchy chicken with creamed potatoes and tiny green peas, while Linda pushed hers round her plate and talked about Norlund's, and Santa Felicia, where she and her mother lived.

'Mom designs model hats, you know,' she explained. 'Would you like to be a model, Jill?'

'I haven't the height or the assurance,' Jill laughed, but none the more for that her country upbringing had given her the fresh, spare look of good health and the kind of skin that was pale and creamy until the sun turned it to honey. Her eyes were large and a clear, tawny-brown.

Her hair was also tawny, striped like a tiger-kitten's, sunny here, shadowy there. Her nose was small, inclined to freckle in the summer and to be independently haughty at times. There was none of the zippy, immediate impact about her which attracted boys, but a deep, warm, waiting look. A girl who would love with every bit of her heart—when the right man came along.

'What do you think about boys?' Linda asked.

'I like little ones,' Jill's hazel eyes were twinkling, 'but those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five are a bit adolescent for my taste. I suppose being brought up by a much older person has made me serious-minded.'

'I'm a bit that way myself—boys are so boisterous. More coffee, Jill?'

'Please. You know, I had no idea Corah Bennet worked for Norlund's. I saw a picture of her in *Town And About* the other day. Mmmm, that dress -she had on!'

'That was probably one of Roger Frenais' photographs. He's really the tops, and does a lot of, work for the store.'

'He sounds French,' Jill said, sipping her coffee.

'He is, with emphasis. Tall and lean, dash of silver in his hair, plenty of temperament.' Linda cocked her fair head and studied Jill across the table. 'I bet you'd like Santa Felicia. It's quite a place, you know.'

'I bet it is.' Jill smiled. 'That was a super lunch, Linda. I thoroughly enjoyed it.'

'Where do you put it all?' Linda's eyes skimmed her slenderness.

'I burn it up dashing about the boutique.' Jill gave a sigh of contentment and lay back in her chair. The sunshine felt good on her

arms and throat, and up here above London its rush and roar was muted and somehow conquered. It was only down there on the pavement that the traffic fumes clutched at your throat and sudden loneliness overwhelmed you in the crowds hurrying to bus stops, tube stations, and home to families you could not share because your family had consisted of one person who was now dead ...

'It's gone half-past one,' Linda said, shooting a look at her watch. 'Come and look at the dress I want you to ,, wear for the show.'

Jill followed Linda to her bedroom, where she pushed opened a mirrored door and displayed a selection of long and short dresses. She drew out a silver-bodiced dress with a drifting cloud of a skirt, and when Jill held it against her, her heart began to race and a Cinderella feeling came over her. The illusion was intensified when Linda urged her to try on a pair of silver kid slippers.

'They fit me!' Jill gave an excited laugh. 'At least, the right one's perfect and I can wear a sock inside the left one.'

'If you lose the slipper, some handsome Prince Charming might pick it up and come looking for you,' Linda quipped.

'What a hope!' Jill took a walk up and down the bedroom in the silver slippers, noticing how the tapering heels flattered her own slender ankles. 'Anyway, I'm not all that gone on handsome men. They always strike me as being a bit conceited.'

'What sort of men do you go for?' Linda stood clasping* a stole, a smile of interest on her thin, pretty face framed in a mink-brown, incurving bob.

'I suppose I like them to look masculine and dependable, and to have nice eyes.' Even as Jill spoke she was surprised at herself; she hadn't

realised that she had given any specific thought to the matter, but it seemed she had. Nice eyes, eh? Yes, she did like a nice pair of eyes...

'What do you think of my uncle?' The white velvet stole, reversible to silver, was thrown round Jill's shoulders at the same time that that startling question was tossed at her.

'Your—uncle?' Her fingers crushed the soft nap of the stole. 'He looks a regular hustler to me, and I can well imagine him keeping the staff at Norlund's on their mettle.'

'Do you know what they say about him, that he's a rocket and the store is his launching pad. I'd love you to see him in action—try the stole on the silver side, Jill. There, it sort of lights up your eyes. Do you like it?'

'Mmmm, I shan't know myself when I'm all dollied up.' Jill struck a pose and cuddled the silvery velvet up against her chin, imitating for Linda's benefit some of the snootier clients who shopped at the boutique. They were having a giggle, when from the lounge of the suite a voice carolled: 'Baby, where are you?'

'That's Mom!' Linda caught at Jill's hand. 'I want her to meet you.'

Jill expected Mrs. Manet to be on her own in the lounge, and she was gripped by an unnerving shyness when she saw a tall male figure standing by the cocktail bar and extracting a cigarette from a box on the counter. He thrust the cylinder between his lips and fixed his eyes upon Jill as he struck a match and carried the flame to the tip. He didn't smile, but casually took her in from her ankles to her eyebrows, then puffed out smoke in a way she found very needling. He wore a loosely tailored grey suit, soft white shirt and a knitted silk tie, yet he still managed to look as barbaric as his Viking forebears. A man, Jill decided in the heat of the moment, who probably debunked everything which did not swing in his particular orbit.

He tipped ash into a glass tray on the bar counter and quirked a brow the tint and toughness of flax as his niece said excitedly: 'This is Jill Pride, my friend from the hotel boutique.'

'I'm happy to know you, my dear,' Karen Manet radiated elegance from her softly waved Titian hair, jade-blue eyes, natural beauty spot high on her left cheekbone, to the mink gleaming against the beige material of her stylish suit. 'I'm so pleased you can go to the theatre with Linda,' she smiled. 'The poor baby hasn't had much of a holiday in England and we shall . be heading for home in about another week. My brother here,' her eyes twinkled .their unusual blue at him, 'has the absurd notion that Norlund's will fall apart if he doesn't hurry back to take charge, and he insists we fly home with him.'

Erik Norlund towered over Jill as she was formally introduced to him. Her small hand disappeared into his large one and for a startling moment it was as though she had touched exposed electricity. A flurry of tingles ran upwards into her armpit and she drew quickly away from him when he released her. hand, aware of an alarming urge to duck out of the Manet suite to the safety of the boutique downstairs.

'Do you often walk to work, Miss Pride?' he asked, in the resonant, slightly grating voice she remembered from the other morning.

'When the weather's fine, Mr. Norlund.' Her lashes quivered restively as she met the piercing, gun-metal grey of his eyes. 'I live in a hostel quite close to the park and it's quicker than waiting for a bus.'

'Is it awful, living in a hostel?' Linda wanted to know.

'It isn't too bad.' Jill turned to her with a sense of relief. 'We have to be in by eleven o'clock at night, but it's mainly the girls with boy-friends who have a grouse about that.'

'You aren't included in that category, eh?' The question came out as deliberately as the smoke of the cigarette Erik Norlund was smoking.

Jill shook her head and caught the edge of his cynical grin as she shot a look at the wall-clock beyond his broad left shoulder. 'Oh dear, look at the time!' she exclaimed. 'I must be getting back to work.'

'I'll ride down in the elevator with you.' At the precise moment Linda took hold of her arm, Jill saw Erik Norlund quirk an ironical eyebrow at his sister. It was as though he had touched an exposed nerve in Jill. What did he think, that she was encouraging Linda because she was rich and there might be a few more outings in store before they flew home to the States? As he strode past Linda and herself and held open the lounge door, Jill's skin prickled hot and cold at what he might be thinking. 'Never ask, and never expect, but take with a smile when it's given,' had been Grandma Pride's maxim, and Jill lived by it.

'We'll see you tomorrow evening, Miss Pride.' Norlund again stressed her surname as though it amused him, in a caustic way.

'Jill's coming up to the suite to get ready,' Linda gaily informed him, totally unaware that beside her Jill was bristling like a kitten confronted by a large meddlesome dog.

'Is she, my honey?' He touched the curve of Linda's ! bob and a fond smile slashed a groove at the left side of his mouth, but when he looked at Jill there was a sardonic gleam of speculation in his eyes and she knew he lingered in the suite doorway as she and his niece made their way to the lift. If Jill had not felt so certain of hurting Linda, she would have said then and there that she had changed her mind about going to the theatre. All the way down in the lift she was conscious of a hot lump at the back of her throat. She had never felt so angry about anything as that look Erik Norlund had raked over her face—as though he thought she wore a mask of pretence and he was

trying to probe behind it for the person he assumed she was ... evidently some sort of gold-digger!

'Cheek!' she fumed inwardly. 'My smiles go all the way through, as Gran used to say.'

Her anger gradually ebbed away in the hours that followed, but it left behind a dull ache and a disinclination to see the man ever again.

'Pity he's going!' she muttered, kneeling on her hostel bed to curl her freshly tubbed hair in green rollers that made her look rather like a grass-mopped nymph. She, sprayed on setting lotion, then sat buffing her fingernails. Jill had pretty, hands. They were slender and shapely and deft, with nails that had a natural pink sheen. On her right hand she always wore a garnet-set ring which had belonged to her mother.

Jill couldn't remember her mother, who had died giving her birth, but vague memories of her sailor father persisted. He had been taken ill during a voyage when Jill was four; by the time his ship had reached Malta he had grown too weak to survive the operation performed on him. He was buried on the island of Malta and Jill hoped one day to go and visit his grave.

She caught back a sigh and decided to go downstairs for a cup of cocoa and a cheese sandwich—the hostel management provided its girls with breakfast and supper, but their in-between meals had to be bought in restaurants or at sandwich counters. Jill paused in front of the rather spotty mirror of the vanity-table and touched one of her rollers. A slow grin lifted her cheekbones and the corners of her mouth.

'Whoever heard of a Cinderella with straight hair?' she mocked her reflection.

The hands of the boutique clock moved slowly round to five-thirty and at last the manageress was locking up and wishing Jill an enjoyable evening. 'Have a good look round the theatre for celebrities,' she added. 'Plenty of them show up for these charity performances.'

'Oh lord, will there be tiaras and tails there?' Jill pressed a hand to her fluttery midriff.

'Now don't go getting into a flap,' Mrs. Naylor laughed. 'I wouldn't mind an evening out with the masterful Erik Norlund.'

'You make it sound as though I had a date with him,' Jill protested. 'His niece is going as well--'

'What a shame!'

Mrs. Naylor was always on at her young assistant to get herself a boy-friend, and it was just like her, Jill thought as the lift swooped her to the penthouse floor, to assume there was something personal about this evening out. The masterful Erik Norlund wasn't her sort, and she wasn't his! And what was more, any funny remarks from him tonight and he would get his answer!

Linda opened to her ring and said at once that they had an hour in which to get ready. 'The show starts at eight,' she added, 'but Uncle Erik's taking us somewhere special for dinner. Thrilled, Jill?'

'You bet,' Jill said, and hoped her smile wasn't as shaky as her knees.

'Mom,' Linda called out, 'Jill has just got here.'

'Hullo, my dear,' Mrs. Manet carolled from her bedroom. 'Now don't dawdle about, Lin, you know what a hustler your uncle is. He'll expect both of you to be ready on the dot.'

'We're going to get ready right now.' Linda winked at Jill. 'You'd better hustle along yourself, Mom, you're usually the one who gets him rattled.'

'My, you are feeling your oats tonight, baby.' Mrs. Manet laughed, then added, 'Don't get over-excited, will you, honey?'

'I'm fine, Mom.' Linda smiled and took Jill by the arm; gone were the shadows that had lain under her eyes the day she had come into the boutique for the first time. 'Uncle Erik is a hustler,' she murmured. 'Fancy being one of his secretaries!'

'How many has he, for goodness' sake?' Jill exclaimed.

'Three—he couldn't get through the work *he* does without three at least. He isn't one of these bosses who leaves other people to get on with all the work. He thrives on it, and actually lives on the premises in the most super penthouse.'

'The merchant prince in his palace, I suppose,' Jill said, her small nose in the air as she followed Linda into, a Nile-green bathroom that had about every sybaritic gadget ever dreamed up.

'You'll want this, Jill.' Linda handed her a shower- cap. 'There are the bath towels, and on that shelf dusting powders and cologne. Okay?'

'More than okay,' Jill assured her. 'If you knew what a scramble it is to have a bath at the hostel—I could spend an afternoon in here!'

'I'm afraid you'll have to make do with ten minutes,' Linda smiled regretfully. 'My uncle is the world's champion hustler, and added to that I guess he hasn't much patience with the nutty foibles of us womenfolk.'

'A confirmed misogynist, I take it?' Jill's tone was cool.

'Well, let's say he takes some pleasing. See you, Jill.'

Jill tingled pleasurably when she stepped from under the shower on to a deep bathmat and dried herself on one of the large towels, warm from a heated rail. She dusted down with a pale gold powder that smelled of wallflowers, then slipped into the underthings she had brought with her. When she entered the adjoining bedroom, Linda was sitting at the dressing-table doing her face.

'You need a whiff of blusher.' She looked at Jill's pale cheek and flipped open a handsome beauty-box fitted with elegant pots, tubes and sable-tipped brushes. 'Sit here and I'll make you beautiful.'

'We'll be here all night if that's your intention,' Jill quipped, but she obligingly perched on the dressing stool and submitted her face to Linda's ministrations.

'We were taught all this kind of nonsense at finishing school,' Linda told Jill as she applied a hint of hazel shadow to her eyelids. 'There, you don't need mascara. You've lovely thick eyelashes and the cutest flyway line to your eyebrows.'

Jill gazed wide-eyed at her brushed and tilting lashes and the blush-rose mouth Linda had given her. 'I think I'd sooner wear my usual pink lipstick,' she faltered.

'You're going to stay just as you are.' Linda looked pleased at having someone to boss as she whisked the white and silver dress out of the cupboard. 'Come along, let's get you into your finery.'

'There, you look a picture!' Linda stood back to admire her handiwork, while Jill stared at her reflection and told herself that fine feathers had certainly transformed the country mouse who had worked behind a shop counter since the age of fifteen. 'Now I'd better

get into my own finery or I've'll have that uncle of mine thumping on the door.'

Jill felt her nerves tighten up as Linda mentioned her uncle, who would take one look at her dress and guess his niece had lent it to her. She touched the glittering bodice with nervous fingers, aware that of all the people she had met during the course of her work not one had been like Erik Norlund. His personality was so definite—he wore it like a suite of armour that could not be dented or probed. He was, she decided, uncomfortable to be near—though there were probably plenty of women who were bowled over like ninepins by his look of a hard-bitten Norse warrior who enjoyed riding storms and was made restless by serenity ...

Jill shook her head, as though to clear it of mythological fancies, and was glad to occupy herself with the long zip at the back of Linda's cyclamen-pink wild silk dress. 'Mom treated me the other day,' she said, adding the name of a couturier who made Jill blink. The name told her that she was walking beside at least two hundred pounds' worth of silk and inspiration as they rustled together into the lounge.

Linda's uncle was over by the cocktail bar mixing drinks in a glass rummer. He swung round at the entrance of the two girls, and Jill felt her backbone going rigid as his calculating eyes travelled over her without missing a detail, silver sandals and silvery stole draping her slim arms. Jill quite expected him to say something, but she didn't expect him to quote Byron!

One flaxen eyebrow quirked, the glass rummer cupped in his roomy palm, he coolly quoted the master of romantic irony:

' 'Tis true, your budding Miss is very charming But shy and awkward at first coming out, So much alarmed, that she is quite alarming.'

Erik Norlund alarmed? That was a good one, Jill thought, knowing full well that he was baiting her, trying to see if she would be silly enough to rise to a line that was hooked. Chin tilted, eyes like fired bracken, she tossed back at him the sting in the tail of the quotation—Byron, too, had been cynical in his knowledge of women and Jill was familiar with his poetry:

'The nursery still lisps out in all they utter--

Besides, they always smell of bread and butter.'

'Do we indeed?' Linda looked indignantly from Jill to her uncle. 'Smell that, if you please.' She thrust a wrist under his nose and he obligingly took a sniff.

'Bread and *Fille d'Eve*,' he drawled, his left cheek grooved.

'It's immoral to know so much about girls and what they put on themselves.' Linda gave him a reproving look and said to Jill: 'You shouldn't encourage him to be cynical, he's bad enough without that.'

'I shouldn't have thought he needed any encouragement to be cynical—about women,' Jill said, mock- innocent.

Grinning away to himself, he poured out a pair of cherry-coloured drinks, and as Jill took one of the frosted glasses she noticed that his tuxedo was midnight- blue and that his onyx cuff-links and narrow, double- ended tie were very dark in contrast to the crisp gleam of his pleated shirt. He wasn't in the least handsome, but he looked as scrubbed and smelled as clean as someone who had just come out of the sea.

'Do you enjoy working in a hotel boutique, Miss Pride?' He hitched his tapered dress trousers and lowered himself to the arm of a chair, a position that brought him somewhat nearer to Jill's level. He studied

her, with such directness that it was all she could do not to lower her own eyes in confusion 'from the steel-keen gaze that could drive deep, or flick your skin with a graze of uninterest.

'I see plenty of new and interesting faces,' she replied, fingers locked about her cocktail glass, 'and my manageress is easy to get along with.'

'Linda tells me you're not long up from the country.' He quizzed her as he had yesterday, as though he was thinking that for a little country cousin she wasn't backward. To cool the heat that rose in her throat she took a too-hasty gulp at her drink and it went down the wrong way and set her off gasping and choking like a gauche idiot. Norlund towered to his feet, calmly thumped her on the back, then strolled to a door at the other side of the room. 'Come along, Mouche,' he called out, 'you're holding up the party.'

'I'll take a cab to Montpelier Square if you and the girls want to get away, Erik,' his sister called back.

'We'll hang on a few more minutes, but get a move on.' He shot a look at his wristwatch, then strode to the bar and poured himself a second Martini.

'Where are you taking us for dinner?' Linda asked from her perch in front of a dish of pretzels, which she was munching.

'A place called the Bermudian. It isn't far from the theatre, Lin, but what I'm concerned about is finding somewhere to park the car.' He swung a sardonic look at Jill. 'This city of yours isn't exactly organised in that respect, and having treated myself to a new car I want- to use it.'

'Don't you care for London, Mr. Norlund?' Jill asked.

'It possesses a certain quaint charm,' he said wickedly, 'but I couldn't live here. I have to be near the boom and tang of the Pacific Ocean.'

'As I'm from the country,' she rejoined, 'it doesn't ruffle my feathers that you aren't in love with London. I found it rather overrated myself when I got here five months ago.'

'Jill's from a place called Liphook,' Linda informed her uncle.

'Liphook?' he repeated, looking amused. 'It sounds like a place out of a fable.'

'I assure you it exists,' Jill spoke up in quick defence of her birthplace. 'It's near Portsmouth—I'm sure you must have heard of that place—and one of the reasons my father went into the Navy.'

'So your father was a Navy man?' Erik Norlund gave her his direct, probing look. 'He couldn't have died during the war—you're too young for that.'

'He fell ill during a voyage and died when I was four,' Jill explained. 'He hadn't long been promoted to petty officer and was going to transfer to the New Zealand service. I—I'd have liked that, to live where the sun really shines.'

'It takes a lot of grit and hard work to make your way up from the ranks,' Erik Norlund said. 'A pity he had to die.'

Jill, startled into looking up, caught a fleeting gentleness in the gun-metal eyes that could look so hard, so cool, so cynical.

Then he swung his glance away from her as his sister came into the room.

'You two girls look very chic,' Karen Manet smiled, looking them over. 'If the show finishes late, Jill, you can come back here and make

use of that extra divan in Linda's room. Charity shows often overrun on account of the palaver beforehand, and Erik might not manage to get you back at the hostel by the time you're supposed to be in.'

'It's a swell idea,' Linda agreed, looking eager.

'Motion carried!' Her uncle's voice was droll as he swung his sister's stole round her shoulders and hustled the feminine trio out of the suite.

His car had been brought round to the front of the hotel, an English Jaguar, black as midnight with plenty of power gadgets and the tang of new leather in a steel- grey shade. As Jill slid in beside Linda her white skirt billowed and a teak-brown hand quickly brushed the soft tulle clear of the door. 'Th-thank you.' Jill's lashes curtailed the leap of confusion in her eyes as they met quizzical grey ones for a brief instant.

'My pleasure,' he murmured, the left side of his mouth quirking into the smile that always seemed to Jill extra sardonic when he spoke to her. The door clicked shut beside her and he swung in behind the wheel, the broadness of his shoulders right in front of Jill, a devil's peak of flaxen hair pointing downwards in the scrubbed nape of his neck. She gave a shiver as her glance settled on the peak and her fingers gripped the silver-kid purse on her lap.

As the car swept into the traffic, Linda leant towards Jill and whispered: 'Are you a bit scared of him?' She nodded at the crisp blond head in front of them.

'No!' Jill denied, quite fiercely, lowering her voice to add: 'I just think he's bossy.'

'It's being top dog at the store that makes him act that way,' his niece defended him. 'He's a big pet, really.'

A pet! Jill told herself that one might as well refer to a jungle lion as a pussy cat as to call Erik Norlund a *pet*.

It didn't take them too long to reach Montpelier Square, and after Erik had escorted his sister into the smart block of apartments where her friend lived, he headed the car toward Covent Garden.

They drove into the market square, where, thankfully, a uniformed attendant was able to direct them into a groove of precious parking space that just took the sleek Jaguar. Linda and Jill bounced out of the car and after Erik had locked it and tipped the attendant, he suggested that the girls latch on to his arms for the hike back to St. Martin's Lane. Jill stood on the cobbles, fussing with her stole and pretending not to have heard him. Suddenly her hand was grasped and thrust through the crook of his right arm.

'So this is where the notorious Nell Gwynn bought her oranges?' he drawled.

'I-I take it you've nothing near as historical as the Garden in the States?' Jill managed, for her contact with him was shooting the most peculiar sensation up her spine.

'Nell would have plucked her oranges right off the trees had she lived in our part of the globe.' He glanced down at Jill's tawny head. 'You've never tasted an orange straight off the tree, have you?'

He made it sound like a gourmet wonder, Jill thought tartly. 'I've no craving for oranges,' she replied, in case he was thinking she was after an invitation to California, where they grew in such golden abundance.

'You'd love Santa Felicia.' Linda poked her head round the bulk of her uncle's chest. 'I wish you could get to see it, Jill.'

'Southsea is more my mark,' Jill said, looking straight ahead of her and feeling again that nerve-tickling zip up her spine.

In the rainbow splash of neon above the theatres and restaurants along St. Martin's Lane, the blond giant with a pair of attractive girls on his arms was bound to attract notice. Glances followed the trio, some admiring, others laced with curiosity.

'I guess people are thinking you're a wealthy roué, Uncle Erik, accompanied by your latest conquests,' Linda laughed. 'Do you like feeling like a conquest, Jill?'

'Your uncle looks so much like a Viking raider that I feel more like a piece of plunder.' Jill dared his eyes as she spoke and found them glinting with sardonic amusement.

'You're quick with the comeback, aren't you?' he drawled. 'Who was your teacher?'

'I was brought up from a tot by my grandmother,' Jill smiled. 'She was quite a character.'

'Was?' Norlund quirked a brow. 'Are you now on your own?'

Jill nodded, looking up into his face and noticing how the neon signs intensified the strong modelling of his chin and his cheekbones. Above his deep temples his light hair was sheened to silver into a metallic cap. He was bold and striking, shoulders and head above the other men passing by; every bit as fierce, Jill told herself, as the Danish marauders whose blood haunted his veins.

'It can't be much fun being on your own,' he remarked.

Was this politeness or genuine sympathy? It was hard to tell with a man who had his kind of face, and a voice that grated. Anyway, she

would give him the benefit of the doubt as he was about to treat her to dinner.

The Bermudian turned out to be quite a place, with a calypso band, and a tropical decor that included murals of plumed palms fringing coral beaches, peacock-tail water spinning drift in lagoons where dolphins leapt, and islanders in wide straw hats lounging beneath trees that dripped with lush, improbable blossoms.

The trio were shown to a palm-plaited table set in an alcove, with a glass starfish glowing rosily above their heads. There were Bermudian dishes on the menu and both girls wanted to try crab-in-the-back. Erik said he'd have the same and ordered a pink champagne with it.

'What are we celebrating?' his niece wanted to know.

'Your recovery from that nasty bout in hospital, my honey.' He turned easily to the wine waiter who had just brought their bottle of champagne to the table. It nestled in the crushed ice of a cooler, and when the waiter popped the cork a scent of crushed strawberries stole to Jill's nostrils. She had never tasted champagne in her life, and when it bubbled a delicate pink in wide-brimmed glasses, Erik Norlund raised his and said: 'The best wine is being young, so here's to youth and the romance in store for both of you.'

Champagne bubbles can make you sneeze the first time, and Jill promptly did so after taking a sip at the wine with its delicious taste of strawberries.

'Bless you!' Linda laughed.

'Thank you.' Jill caught Erik's sardonic eye and blushed to match the champagne. She seemed doomed to make a fool of herself each time he gave her a drink.

The crab-in-the-back was delectable, followed by chicken and salad with a guava sauce. They rounded off their meal with a mixture of island fruits served in hollowed pineapple shells with a coconut ice-cream. It rather surprised Jill that her host should have a sweet tooth, and she thought of something she had once read in a book, that there was a boy hiding inside most men. Be that as it may, it was obvious the man facing her was enjoying every mouthful of his pineapple, papaya, mango and cream. As she was! It was exotic, tangy, mingling with the atmosphere of the restaurant and the champagne glow in her veins.

'Let's finish the bottle,' Erik said, 'then we'll just have time for some coffee.'

Linda palmed her stemmed glass and gazed round at the tropical aquaria set in the walls of the restaurant. 'I've been thinking about your champagne toast, Uncle Erik,' she said. 'Isn't there any romance in store for you?'

He quirked a flaxen brow at the question, then gave his deep-throated laugh. 'I'm too long in the tooth for any more belief in it, my honey. Too sunk to my neck in the commercial race. Don't let it worry you, honey.' He glanced abruptly at Jill, taking in her tawny-eyed, spare creaminess that in her fulfilled years would turn to beauty. 'Your friend has me summed up, Lin. She knows I'm a business machine minus a heart.'

Jill wondered when he said that whether he was challenging her to deny it. But how could she, when everything about him bespoke the aggressive careerman? She had the feeling that it was right in the marrow of his bones to be exactly what he was. He was wedded to the mammoth organisation that bore his name; it was his love and his life. Jill had never felt so certain of anything as she met his eyes across the palm-plaited table.

The Lyria Theatre was only a few yards from the restaurant, and the pavement in front of it was crowded with celebrity-spotters, press photographers, and groups of people alighting from cabs and cars. The pillared entrance of, the theatre was roped off with thick velvet cords and a dark red carpet swept from the kerb right up a wide half-moon of marble steps into the foyer.

Jill took one look at the swarming mass of people and did not protest when Erik Norlund tucked Linda and herself chick-wise under his arms and ruthlessly used his height and his arrogance to get them through the crowd.

Their seats were in the centre of the circle and Linda, chattering away, dropping her stole and then her programme in her excitement, finally settled down between Jill and her uncle. He was looking tolerant and obligingly holding things while she and Jill peered over the parapet at the tiaras and tails in the fauteuils, below them. They recognised several well-known people, and' were shocked at how dissipated a certain TV hero looked out of his costume and paint.

'Gosh, he isn't nearly as dishy as my uncle,' Linda whispered, and Jill, obeying a feminine impulse, shot a curious look at him and found herself reluctantly admitting that *Uncle* was certainly a man you couldn't fail to notice.

It was as Jill returned her attention to Linda that her glance fell on the occupant of a box to the left of the. stage. She was a fairly young woman, companioned by a couple who sat talking, and noticeable on several counts. The rose faille of her gown, which was cut to reveal seductive white shoulders, the striking platinum of her hair and the fact that her vivid blue eyes were fixed on Erik. He sat talking to the man beside him and seemed oblivious of his glamorous observer—then quite suddenly he looked towards her and Jill saw the edge of his mouth quirk upwards as he deliberately returned her

scrutiny. A moment later Linda said something to him and he appeared to forget that entrancing vision in rose faille.

The theatre lights began to dim and Linda gave a bounce of anticipation as the curtain rose slowly on the brilliance of the first act. Jill's tawny eyes were fixed on the stage and her surroundings dimmed around her as she was transported to the world of enchantment and song created by Ivor St. Clare.

In the interval Erik went off to the bar for a drink, leaving the two girls eating ices and discussing the show. The second half had started by the time he returned, and some imp of curiosity urged Jill to take a look at the box occupied by the blonde . . . she, like Erik, was just sitting down. It was obvious they had met for a drink in the bar!

The second half of the show didn't seem so magical to Jill. Like Cinderella, midnight had struck for her and she was back in the world of reality where people were just people, not princes.

It was late when the show ended to a storm of applause, curtain after curtain call, and speeches by the youthful playwright-composer and his producer. Jill took a glance at an illuminated clock across the road from the theatre and knew it was no use demurring about going back to the hotel. But when Erik Norlund said: 'Come on, plunder, let's trek,' his right hand was occupied with a cigarette and he didn't insist this time that Jill latch on to his arm.

In the car Linda dozed off against Jill's shoulder, and as the sleek Jaguar purred through the sleepless West End, Jill let the events of the evening drift through her mind. The car stood at some traffic signals and Erik turned to look at Jill in the shaft of emerald. 'Linda asleep?' he asked.

'Fast off, Mr. Norlund,' Jill murmured.

'She enjoyed herself tonight.' His voice went gruff, as though with emotion. 'The poor kid had it tough in hospital—she isn't all that strong, you know.'

'I know.' Jill spoke gently.

'You two kids get on well, don't you?'

Jill met his eyes and for a startling moment they seemed to hold the danger red that the very next instant changed to an amber glow. He turned to drive on, and Jill, with Linda breathing quietly against her shoulder, felt her own heart beating very fast. Something significant had been expressed and it was as though a promise of some sort hung among the scents of new leather, cigarette smoke and *Fille d'Eve*.

A dusky breath of Hyde Park wafted in to join these and Jill realised that they were almost at the hotel. . . the hotel where four months ago, very new to London and far from keen on the manager of the shop where she was working, Jill had applied for the boutique job in competition with several girls far more glamorous than herself.

Molly Connors, an Irish girl lodging at the hostel, had encouraged her to apply for the job. 'Take it from me it isn't always the raving beauties that catch all the plums in their laps,' she had said, when Jill had been doubtful about landing the job because she wasn't quite so slick as the other girls. 'You've a fetchin' smile on you, Jill Pride, and I'll be havin' a word with the little folk just to give you an edge.'

Jill smiled to herself, for a touch of whimsy in people had always appealed to her, understandable, perhaps, in a girl who came from quaintly named Liphook and who had lived most of her life in a thatched cottage. A tipsy little thatched cottage with hollyhocks in the front garden, and Grandma Pride's herb patch scenting the air of a night. Jill breathed the scents that were locked in the Jaguar and they excited her, and made her feel strangely restless.

CHAPTER TWO

JILL spent most of Sunday with Linda. They ate breakfast in bed, then afterwards took a stroll through Kensington Gardens and circled back to watch the young couples punting on the Serpentine. They didn't see Linda's uncle on horseback this particular morning, nor did they see him again after lunch. He casually remarked that he was meeting someone and departed. Mrs. Manet retired to her room, and the two girls lazed in the spring sunshine out on the terrage patio, where they later had tea.

It was a slow, enjoyable day for Jill, with an edge of anticipation to it. This feeling was still with her when she awoke at the hostel the following morning, and while dressing for work she found herself humming a tune from the St. Clare musical. Suddenly her humming tailed off. She put a forefinger between her teeth, a habit when startled or faced with a problem, and gnawed the tip of it.

It had just hit home to her that she was doing what she had vowed firmly not to do, getting involved with the Manets to the extent of anticipating something crazy and improbable—something that could only leave her feeling let down when they departed for the States. She shrugged, slipped into a brown and cream check jacket, swung a gilt-chained bag over her shoulder and hastened downstairs for breakfast.

'Hullo, celebrity!' That was Mrs. Naylor's greeting as Jill walked into the boutique. 'Seen yourself in the *Global New si**

Jill looked uncomprehending for a moment, then she flushed hotly as she took stock of a picture in the news-paper and saw herself encircled by Erik Norlund's arm, a bedazzled smile on her face as she gazed up at him. Under the picture there was a suggestive line of print:*

'Erik Norlund, boss of a well-known American department store, seen entering the Lyria Theatre with a close friend.'

Close friend! 'They've gone and cut Linda off the picture,' Jill exploded. 'She was on the other side of him.'

'Don't blow your top, dear.' Mrs. Naylor's eyes were on Jill's flushed cheeks. 'I think you look—quite charming.'

'I—I look like one of his popsies—and that's the implication,' Jill rejoined.

'Look how they praise up the show,' Mrs. Naylor soothed. 'Did you enjoy it, Jill?'

'Yes—yes, of course. It was full of colour and lovely music--' Jill caught the other woman's glance and saw how curious it was. 'I haven't fallen for Mr Norlund, if that's what you're thinking,' she said hotly. 'That picture couldn't present a more false impression. I find the man cynical a-and overbearing ... besides, he has more of an eye for mid-thirty blondes who dress to kill!'

'Most men have, lovey,' Mrs. Naylor laughed. 'It's purely biological.'

'Hardly pure, if you want my opinion!' Jill tossed the paper to one side and began angrily whipping muslin covers off the counter displays. A flush still lingered in her cheeks and she was wishing, with female perversity for which there is no cure, that she had never met Erik Norlund.

Around five-fifteen that evening it started to rain and it was still drizzling when Jill left off work. She made her way to the bus stop, a scarf tied over her hair and her attention fixed upon the toes of her shoes as they struck the wet pavement. She was deep enough in whatever she was thinking to shy like a leggy colt when a car swept

into the kerb where she was about to cross over and the driver leaned from the wheel to suggest peremptorily that she 'jump in'.

She was about to tell him that she wasn't that sort of a girl when she met steel-grey eyes under flaxen brows. 'Oh!' she gasped.

'Come on, get in before I collect a parking fine,' he ordered.

She scrambled in, felt the brush of his tweed jacket as he slammed the door, then they were sweeping forward with the rest of the traffic. 'Th-thank you for giving me a lift.' Jill sat stiffly, gazing straight ahead at the rhythmic windscreen wiper.

'I'm not giving you a lift,' he rejoined. 'I'm taking you to the Surrey Windmill, where we're going to dine and have a talk. I was waiting for you to quit work, but I thought you might prefer not to be seen getting into my car . . . especially after that picture in the *Global News* yesterday. They're gossiping already, aren't they, that supervisor of yours and the salon hairdresser? Mouche was in there this afternoon.'

'I'm sorry,' Jill gasped. 'I realise that you must dislike petty gossip--'

'Forget it as far as I'm concerned,' he broke in. 'I couldn't care less about the yakkity-yak of a bunch of women, but you're only a kid and they could make you feel uncomfortable. Women can be the devil, eh?'

'I'm not exactly a sixteen-year-old,' Jill reminded him.

'There are two, maybe three years on top of that, I imagine?'

'I'm nineteen.'

'You look younger—I guess it's something about your eyes.'

'Mr. Norlund,' Jill plunged, 'about taking me to dinner—I don't know why you should.'

The glance he shot at her was tinged with amusement.

'You are young,' he laughed. 'Most females would take it for granted I was personally interested—do I take it. you wouldn't be interested even if I were?'

'We haven't a thing in common.' Jill spoke with all the forthrightness of modern youth: all the innocence, as well. 'I can't think why you're taking me out, unless you're a bit curious about me. Is that it? Do you want a British teenager's slant on fashion, or something?'

'What exactly does the "something" incorporate?' he drawled amusedly. 'Does it seem totally incomprehensible to you that I might fancy your company for a few hours, or am I far too long in the tooth—ah, and a heartless machine, to boot?'

'I didn't call you a heartless machine.' Her cheeks grew warm and her fingers were twisting the gilt chain of her bag. 'Leadership imposes a certain amount of isolation on a man, I realise that.'

'And isolation makes for refrigeration, up there in my ivory tower, eh?' She felt his glance, knew his eyes were caustically amused. 'Ah, well, we're not going to the Surrey Windmill for a cosy chat about me and my heart. It's a nice place, let me add.'

And tucked away out of town where he was not likely to run into people he knew, Jill tagged on. As his taste ran to blondes with a bold eye, and other attributes a teenager couldn't match, she didn't blame him—certainly not after that suggestive picture in the *Global News* and the gossip overheard by his sister in the hotel beauty salon. He had his tough executive image to uphold, and being seen around with

a little unknown who , worked in a boutique was likely to throw his sophisticated image out of focus.

'You don't like me very much, do you?' he broke in on her thoughts.

'I hardly know you,' she rejoined.

'Don't quibble, Jill Pride. A lot of people don't like me, but I'm not the bruise-easy type. Tell me, are you ambitious?' He shot her a caustic grin. 'I'm not referring to modelling or acting, although you have a certain charm about you. Modelling takes a helluva constitution, and to really make it to first grade a girl has to be entirely eaten up with the business. When I ask if you're ambitious, Jill, I'm referring to the immediate future, not to mention three or four years ahead, when you'll be firmly tied up with what you were born to do.'

Jill gazed at his profile and felt the fast beat of her heart under her nectarine blouse. A smile slashed a groove in his cheek; a smile of hard knowledge of life and people and the part he was born to play. A feather of curiosity drifted on the tide of Jill's thoughts—had he ever loved someone? If so, what had it felt like to be with him when he loved, to be that someone? Was he different? Did he smile without that caustic edge to his lips? Were his lips . . . ?

Stop that kind of thinking, Jill Pride, a warning voice cried out in her mind.

But she had to go on to the end—were his lips warm, exciting, ruthless as they looked? Having indulged the thought, Jill found that she Was breathing quickly and unevenly and looking away from him out of the other window. The car was now in the country, among hills mantled in pinky-lavender dusk. The rain had stopped, and Jill lifted a hand to her head-scarf and took it off. She hadn't realised she was still wearing it . . .

'Why do you ask me if I'm ambitious, Mr. Norlund?' She didn't look at him, but sat running a comb through her hair. With one hand he adjusted the tidy-table in front of her seat and her reflection sprang into focus in a small oblong mirror. She stared at her own face, searching for the charm he had said she had about her. Was it a compliment, or a mere statement of fact? Probably the latter, as she was just Jill Pride whose hair was tawny and not piled silver above a striking face and a lush red mouth.

'What exactly do you mean by ambition?' She saw her pink lips move with the question.

'If the hotel boutique satisfies you and you don't find yourself looking beyond it, then you aren't ambitious,' he replied.

'It's quite a decent job—there are prospects.'

'What do you mean by prospects?' he asked.

'The supervision of a boutique, with an assistant of my own. The hotel is one of a chain, and Monsieur Paquin was saying only the other day that I—well, he said I have a flair for counter work and the customers find me amenable.'

'I know.' Erik Norlund spoke deliberately. 'He said as much to me, rather more eloquently, when I was making enquiries about you this morning.'

'You—were what?' Jill couldn't believe her ears.

'You heard me.' His eyes flashed shrewd and steely over her startled face. 'Not every saleswoman is good at handling women customers. It takes patience, an inborn sympathy, a flair that is much an art as strolling up and down a fashion salon in a model gown. I've been in the buying and selling business for a number of years and I still find it

fascinating to watch a really gifted sales person handling a difficult customer and winning her over. You like your work, huh?'

'Yes, of course. It's what I've done ever since leaving school—w-why did you speak to. Monsieur Paquin about me?' Jill demanded, her voice shaking a little with her indignation.

'I wanted his opinion of you as a worker. I had already summed you up as a person.'

'But what possible interest can you have in my work, or my character?' Jill's indignation was giving way to bewilderment.

Instead of lifting her out of the depths he plunged her further in by saying: 'What would be your reaction if someone offered you a job abroad, at a much higher wage, where the chance of advancement also exists?'

Jill stared sideways at him, her heart fluttering like a bird in her rib cage. 'Th-that isn't likely to happen,' she said faintly.

'On the contrary, it's usually the unlikely thing that happens,' he drawled. 'Well, would it interest you to work abroad, say on the Californian coast?'

Jill sat stunned, and all she could tell herself was that your secret longings weren't suddenly made tangible like this. Much as you dreamed of a trip over the rainbow, rainbows died even as they were born in the sky. 'It isn't very kind of you to say that sort of thing to me,' she said stiffly.

'What the devil--' he gave her a sharp look. 'What are you talking about?'

'That I live in a hostel, that I'm quite alone in London and I have few friends,' she retorted. 'If under those circumstances I didn't indulge in day-dreams, I'd go nuts. You know I've indulged a dream about visiting some colourful, faraway place, Mr. Norlund, but dreams don't come true. You know it as well as I--'

'Sure I know it,' he cut in. 'But we're not talking about the impossible, you little idiot. I'm offering you a sales job at Norlund's!'

The Surrey Windmill was a picturesque, black and white timbered inn with a thatched roof. An ancient mill-wheel splashed the water of a stream that ran beside the glassed-in veranda where Jill dined with Erik Norlund.

Erik took over the ordering of their meal, while Jill, still shivery with shock, sat looking out over the dark garden of the inn.

I want the job, she thought in panic and elation. I've never wanted anything quite so much.

She looked at Erik Norlund as the waiter went away. He returned her look quizzically. 'Scared of pulling up stakes, of living and working far from home?' he asked.

Home? That impersonal hostel? That single room tucked above the chimney pots of Kensington?

'Do you really think I could fit in at Norlund's?' she asked. 'I-I'm not a sophisticated person—I've only been working in London five months. Most of my life has been lived in a country village.'

'Even so, Jill, you left the village for the big city. That took courage, to do it all alone, not knowing what obstacles you might encounter.'

The startling clarity of his gaze held hers, then he took in the nervous interlacing of her hands on the table edge. 'You've Navy blood in your veins, Jill. Come on, you're not scared of Norlund's, or California—or me.'

She smiled at that. 'You can be tough as rawhide,' she said.

'You've got to be that way in big business,' he admitted, left eyebrow quirked. 'It's kill or be killed, a kind of modern piracy, with the big stores sailing the commercial seas under the captaincy of various cut-throats. You called me a Viking, didn't you?'

Yes, a Viking. With that formidable head, those silvery eyes, and ruthless combination of strength in chin, deep chest and broad shoulders she could plainly imagine him at the helm of a long-boat. And this was the man who had just offered her a plum of a job, under his captaincy. Excitement flared along her veins, but there was panic moisture in the palms of her hands. Liphook and London were separated by only a few miles of railway line. The English coast and that of California held between them miles of space, fathoms of ocean ... they were two distinct continents, and it would surely take the nerve of an Anne Bonney to sail it under the flag of this modern-day pirate?

'Jill,' he made a steeple of his fingers and surveyed them thoughtfully, 'there's another reason why I'd like you to come to Santa Felicia—it's my niece.'

'Linda?' Jill gazed perplexedly across at him.

'My sister worries about her—we both do—and it hasn't escaped our notice that when Lin's with you, she's a new kid. Bright-eyed, happy—she likes you, Jill. There seems to be a meeting-point between you and neither Mouche nor I wish to sever it. We both think it would be good for Linda to have you near at hand, someone she can

be pals with, relax with, and know herself liked as just another girl instead of the daughter of Marius Manet. Manet was a very wealthy textile manufacturer and he left Linda a great deal of money—you know that?'

'Yes, I know,' Jill met his shrewd, unsparing gaze as it lifted from his steepled fingers. 'You thought me another parasite, didn't you?'

'Yes, until I met you.' A smile moulded his lower lip into a sudden, almost sensuous fullness. 'This is a mighty materialistic world we're living in, Jill Pride, and it's got so that people are wanted for what they possess, or what position they hold in the success or social scale, rather than for what they are. Look at it from my angle. My eldest niece, of whom I happen to be pretty fond, comes to me and enthuses about this girl who works in the hotel boutique. I'm frankly sceptical. I hear mood music in the background as I'm told about the village drapery, the hostel in London, and the shop manager who can't keep his mind off his assistant's legs--'

'I never meant Linda to tell *you* that!' Jill gasped.

'I've been a father figure to Lin for a number of years,' he drawled. 'She does tell me things—he really sent you up the step-ladder that number of times?'

'Yes,' Jill said shortly. 'Men are awful! He had a stack of art magazines under the counter as well.'

'So the little speckled moth walked into the spider's web straight off?' Erik mocked her, but with a smile in his eyes that wasn't too unkind.

'You were saying you were sceptical, about me,' Jill prodded. 'Ah, yes. Well, there have been too many "give me and give nothing" types hanging around Linda and the kid has been hurt—do you remember that morning in the park, Jill?'

'You spoke to me—and I nearly fell into the Serpentine with surprise.'

He exploded into a laugh. 'Miss Demure in blue— not so demure, eh?'

'I'm not a gold-digger, anyway.' Jill watched him turn to the wine waiter who had come to his elbow, and she knew he had had all this in mind Saturday night when he had remarked on how well she got on with Linda. Jill frowned, for it seemed to her that anything Norlund wanted, Norlund got, and he always had the price just right. He knew he couldn't ask Jill to go to California as a mere playmate for his niece; he knew he had to let her keep her independence, hence the offer of a job.

But the job, and Linda's friendship, were attractive. Jill wanted to travel. She yearned for the sunshine and the sea—the boom and tang of the Pacific Ocean.

'What do you think of the Surrey Windmill?' Erik asked.

The splash of the mill-wheel, the velvety night beyond the veranda windows, the soft lighting that made it easier to look at her companion and to be looked at... Jill realised that they were a deliberate setting, but she was too young to fight their enchantment. Oh, how he knew women, and wine, and what it took to melt one to his moods and his whims!

'You're clever, Mr. Norlund,' she spoke into the deep bowl of her long-stemmed, milky-blue wine glass, then looked up slowly. His smile said: *Touche!*

'I'm not offering you a job solely out of concern for my niece, I'm not that benevolent,' he added. 'You have ability, and we can always use that commodity around Norlund's.'

'Is it a vast place, Mr. Norlund?' Jill asked.

'Oh, sure, the store is pretty big,' he replied. 'The job I have in mind for you is in our Speciality Shop. It's an amusing little joint, selling things like pottery lamps, Steiff animals, Hummel dolls, driftwood curios, wall hangings—you name it, that place stocks it. Californians go a lot on smart knick-knacks around the home, and working there will break you in more lightly than if I threw you headlong into Teenage Fashions.' He forked broccoli spear and quirked an eyebrow at Jill. 'That's your metier, eh, teenage fashion? You'd like that eventually?'

'I'd love it!' Jill breathed, her eyes sparkling a deep brown.

'Well, we'll let you settle in for a bit. Let you acclimatise to the American scene, speech, manner, etc.' He laid his knife and fork across his empty plate, and their waiter appeared like a genie at his elbow. 'Now what about a sweet, Jill? Crepes Suzette?'

'Yes, please, Mr. Norlund.'

She sounded like a polite little girl, and she knew from his quirk of a smile that he was thinking the same. He sat looking at her, deliberately, without speaking, as their waiter proceeded with the table-side ritual of the Crepes Suzette. Jill kept her gaze fixed on the flaming pan, but she could feel, inevitably, a tide of warmth creeping up her neck into her face. The Norlund eyes went on looking at her, taking it all in, her countrified youth which the city had not really touched, her lack of assurance. With a man, him in particular, her flaming blush. She felt it tingling in her cheeks, and had no idea how startlingly attractive she looked in the glow of her youthful blush. Almost lovely, like a plucked rose crying out silently against the invasion of anguish. Her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands. This pain . . . what was it?

A flambe pancake was transferred to the plate in front of her and she bent over it, tears smarting in her eyes. She felt that she, too, had passed through a flame.

'Santa Felicia has quite a few delights in store for Miss Pride from Liphook—say, that sounds like the title of a musical,' chuckled her tormentor. 'For nine months of the year our weather is warm, though the temperature is inclined to drop when the sun goes down. Californians live mostly out of doors, you know. They're friendly, hospitable, gay, and the terraced hills of Santa Felicia set off to perfection the pastel villas, Spanish- type houses, and small ranches. There are groves of orange, lemon and grapefruit trees. Sub-tropical blossoms in the gardens. Sage hills all around that sweep the town in their scent of a night .-, . do you want to come, Jill?'

There are moments in every life when a momentous decision has to be made, for better or worse. Jill knew that she and this man Norlund were of conflicting temperaments; she visualised future clashes with him, and foresaw trouble of some kind for herself. But it would be exciting as nothing else might ever be if she let his offer slip out of her grasp and stayed to become—in all probability—the staid manageress of a boutique, out of town, with a small flat of her own, a cat to keep her company and an ordered life with no one, ever again, like Norlund to torment her, maybe bully her, and look at her with eyes like sun-shot crystals.

She met his eyes and took the breathless plunge . . . 'Yes, I'll come,' she heard herself say. 'Thank you for asking me.'

'Good!' He beckoned the wine waiter and ordered a couple of brandies.

He flicked open his cigarette case and looked faintly surprised when Jill said she didn't smoke. 'In that case I'll have a cigar.' The waiter brought a box of Havanas and Jill watched as Erik cut the end with

surgical neatness and applied a light. The strong smoke hazed the space between them and Jill found herself doing what they did in films, inhaling the aroma of the topaz brandy in her balloon glass. 'You'll have to get a passport,' Erik said. 'Get vaccinated against smallpox, and polio as well, as you'll be living in California. Then you'll need to get a working permit from the American Embassy—I'll come with you. Got it clear?'

'Yes, sir.' She grinned and ducked her nose in her brandy inhaler, then brought it out again. 'Oh—I shall have to give in my notice to Monsieur Paquin. He'll expect a week at least, a-and he isn't going to be too pleased at having to find a replacement at such short notice.'

'Monsieur Paquin will have to let you go on Friday.' Erik spoke peremptorily. 'I don't think he'll be too surprised, or raise too much Gallic fuss--'

'You were very sure of me,' Jill broke in. 'I suppose you've already suggested that he advertise for a replacement?'

'Roughly my wording,' was the shameless reply. 'As I told you, it's every man for himself in the retail trade, and as for being sure about you,' a shrug of the broad, tweed-clad shoulders, 'you said you wanted to live where the sun really shines. You have no ties here now your grandmother is dead, but, naturally, if there had been a boy-friend hanging around I shouldn't have anticipated your acceptance of the job. You're the kind to put emotion before ambition.'

'Surely most women do that?' Jill argued.

'Not all of them, not these days.' The smile edging his lips was frankly cynical. 'In their emancipation women are losing what has always made them emotionally superior to men, their tenderness and essential warmth of heart. It's happening, Jill girl. And men are getting so they don't care, and when that attitude comes to full flower

we'll maybe have another Roman holiday on our hands, and another age of glory lost under a pall of ashes--"Oh, don't!" she exclaimed. 'Don't be so cynical!'

Black ash spilled from the end of his cigar and he flicked at it with a long, aggressive forefinger. Some of the ash settled on the innocent anemones in their nest of fern in the centre of the table, and Jill, her heart curiously disturbed, leant forward and gently blew the ash from the white and purple petals. When she looked up, Erik was watching her, moodily.

'Drink your brandy,' he said curtly. 'We'd better be moving if I'm to get you back at the hostel by eleven.'

She gulped it, and he winced at such treatment of Courvoisier.

Her gulp and his worldly exasperation set her off choking, so that as they made their way to the parking lot her shoulder was still hurting from the thump he had given it. 'There must be something wrong with your throat,' he said, as he put her into the passenger seat of his car. It was again drizzling with rain, also quite cold, and Jill shrank from the inadvertent touch of his hand as he wrapped a tartan rug about her knees.

'Thank you—my throat's all right,' she said stiffly. 'I'm just not used to strong drink.'

'I'll have to remember that you're the orange-juice type,' he said dryly.

The ignition clicked and they swung out on to the road that wound through the night-wrapped Surrey Hills. What with the car heater, the rug, and the brandy, it was no wonder Jill was soon feeling drowsy. The tick- tock of the windscreen wiper had an hypnotic effect as well, and she found herself drifting into that nebulous, cushiony limbo between awareness and slumber.

She turned restively, as though in her bed at the hostel, and burrowed her cheek more comfortably into what she took for the pillow. Hard old pillow. She put up a sleepy hand and gave it a thump.

'Touche!' laughed a deep voice above her head.

Jill roused and blinked upwards, and for a shattering, sleep-dazed moment it was as though she lay in Erik Norlund's arms. The car throbbed at an intersection and in the dashboard glow he was looking down at her, his mouth quirked in his cynical smile as he took in her young head at rest against his shoulder. Confusion bathed Jill and she drew quickly away from him. 'I'm s-sorry for sprawling all over you,' she mumbled.

'Don't apologise,' he drawled. 'I quite enjoyed being used as a pillow—though it kind of hurt my feelings that you should think me a hard one.'

'Did I say so?' She could feel the heat in her cheeks and knew she looked as ruffled as she felt. 'The pillows are rather hard at the hostel.'

'And presumably my shoulder matches them,' he said in a droll voice as the car moved forward in the rain that was now hitting the roof and splashing from the wiper blades. 'Still, you're welcome to snooze on it until we reach London.'

'I'm not a bit sleepy now,' she assured him hurriedly. 'Tell me some more about California. Shall we be flying there?'

'By jet, Friday evening.'

'I've never been up in a plane--' and as she spoke she realised that the man beside her would be paying her expenses. She nibbled her fingertips, for she knew how astronomical were long-flight air fares, and she could hardly suggest handing over to him the meagre

twenty-two pounds she had so far saved for her holiday at Southsea. 'Mr. Norlund,' she blurted, 'about my fare—you will be deducting it from my future wages, won't you? I-I realise that it's quite a lot and I haven't--'

'Shut up about money,' he interrupted her, rather rudely. 'Your travelling expenses are the firm's concern. It's the recognised formula when an American firm exports staff, in case you're about to jump to the conclusion that I'm acting as a kind of benevolent Santa Claus.'

Jill was relieved by what he said, and at the same time stung by his frankness. He certainly didn't pussyfoot around facts but trod straight on your corns, and like most young people Jill had her share of those, figuratively speaking. She was going through the contradictory-mood stage, sure of nothing, least of all the world around her and the people in it. She was insecure but eager, a suppliant for reassurance. She shrank away from Norlund, for he didn't reassure, but left her groping around in the mazy, sometimes spangled, more often depressed world of youth.

When the car drew up outside the hostel, Erik Norlund sat facing Jill with an elbow on the wheel, the neon lights of a nearby shop playing their rainbow facets over the strong, hard modelling of his face and throwing into relief the wide span of his tweed-clad shoulders. 'You're absolutely certain you want to come to America?' he asked, his eyes glimmering blade-silver in that harlequin play of coloured light. 'If you've any doubts, then let's air them now, not when we reach London Airport, or land in San Francisco and you suddenly realise that you've cut your links with home.'

'I have no home—no real home.' She indicated the shabby Georgian pile that was the hostel. 'Only a room that I rent.'

He glanced towards the hostel, then back at Jill. Perhaps she imagined it, maybe it was an illusion created by the neon lights, but it seemed to

her that his lips had lost their hardness and grown a little gentler. 'It's no paradise, is it?' he said.

'As a child I knew what it was to be content,' she said. 'I loved the tipsy cottage in which we lived at Liphook. I was happy there, and I suppose I'm searching now for what I've lost.'

'A cottage, Jill?'

'No, what it symbolised—happiness.'

happiness is often just a word, child. You hear it in the pop songs, read it in the magazine stories, see it glamorised in films. I can't guarantee that you'll find happiness by coming to America with—us.'

Jill gazed back at him and it crossed her mind that he could be warning her that there was nothing personal in the relationship that lay ahead of them. He was the boss, she the new staff hand, and without being too brutally blunt he was telling her not to get any romantic, film- struck notions about the tough tycoon falling in love with the shy little salesgirl.

As though—Jill went hot and cold and fumbled with the door handle beside her—as though she'd given any thought to such an incredible idea! She didn't particularly like him, felt herself shrinking into a knot as he reached over and pressed down the lever that released the door—she was trying to open it with the one that closed it!

There was a whiff of Havana, a tang of old brandy, a masculine warmth that smote the breath from Jill's throat. 'G-goodnight,' she stumbled out on to the pavement. T-I shan't forget about the passport and those shots for smallpox and polio.'

'Your arm will feel sore,' he warned her. 'If you're nervous--'

'Oh no,' she backed away, hardly knowing why. 'I shall be all right—I'm a lot tougher than I look.'

'Really?' His eyes raked her as she stood there with the rain weeping over her, her fingers nervously clenching the chain of her shoulder bag. 'Well, cut along in, young Jill. I'll see you on Wednesday and we'll go to the Embassy for the rest of the papers you'll need. Goodnight, child.'

'Goodnight, Mr. Norlund.' She dashed up the steps into the hostel porch and heard the Jaguar swoosh away behind her. There were voices in the dining-room as she hurried across the lobby to the stairs, up which she raced, scrabbling her room key out of her bag as she went. She wanted to be alone, with her door shut, so that she could think about the momentous decision she had taken this evening.

She tossed bag and coat on to her bed, fluffed her wet hair and gazed at herself in the spotty mirror of the dressing table. Her eyes looked huge and so unusually dark that they intensified the creamy pallor of her skin. She looked very young, less than her nineteen years, and suddenly she held her tawny hair to the crown of her head and wondered whether a French pleat would help her to look older and more responsible. 'Just think, Jill,' she cocked her head at her reflection, 'you're going to Santa Felicia to work at *Norlund's*--'

And so excited was she that she almost jumped out of her shoes as a fist thumped on her door and Molly Connors came in. 'And where is it you've been all the evenin'?' the Irish girl demanded. 'We did have a date for the pictures.'

'I'm sorry, Molly.' Jill released her hair to her shoulders, where it arranged itself in its usual tilt-ended style. 'I'm afraid I forgot all about our date.'

'You don't look all that sorry.' Molly sat down on the bed and took stock of Jill, especially of her starry eyes. 'You look as though you've been out with a man—so that's it, you've found yourself a boy-friend? Now tell me his name, you sly girl. Tell me where you've been with him?'

'We dined at a gorgeous place called the Surrey Windmill, and,' Jill's smile grew mischievous, 'his name is Erik Norlund.'

'Saints be praised—not *him*.' Molly's eyes went sharp as sloes. 'Jill me girl, you must be clean off your sweet, innocent rocker.'

'Now don't go jumping to any conclusions.' Jill laughed and sat down in a lopsided basket-chair that groaned even at her light weight. 'Mr. Norlund has offered me a job out in California and I've accepted it. I'm flying there with him and the Manets on Friday.'

'Jill, you're having me on,' Molly said sharply. 'You can't mean what you're sayin?'

'Guide's honour I mean it.' Jill solemnly crossed her heart, where ripples of excitement were running to its questioning young shores. 'It's like a dream come true, Molly. I'm going to California!'

Molly sat staring at her, lost for words for once. 'Are ye bein' quite wise, Jill?' she said at last. 'You'll be a long way from the old country.'

'I know that, Molly, but if I give myself time to think, I shall lose my nerve and back out. I-I'm not going to think—I'm going.'

'Is it because of Norlund?'

'Molly, don't be an ass!' Jill jumped to her feet and, grabbed her damp coat off the bed, where it was creasing. 'I want the adventure of going to the States, and it's a marvellous opportunity for me to advance

myself. Norlund's is a famous shop, and Santa Felicia is a gay, exciting place.'

'You've never said before that you had a yen to go and work abroad.' Molly still looked suspicious. 'Sure now, you've always seemed pretty content with your job at the boutique, and now this Norlund man has come along and disrupted you--'

'Our little ruts always seem comfortable until someone comes and unsettles them and shows us that we want something more than placid routine, day after day,' Jill pointed out. 'I've enjoyed working at the boutique bar, but I've always had a longing to travel.'

'You'll have to be havin' jabs in your arm, and there's all sorts of formalities to go through,' Molly warned. 'A cousin of mine went to work in the States and there was a devil of a palaver before they'd let him in.'

'Mr. Norlund is going with me to the American Embassy, so I shouldn't have much trouble getting the necessary papers,' Jill smiled, 'I expect he's pretty influential wherever he goes, and for him to want to employ me is a recommendation on its own.'

'Don't you call him Erik, being a close friend of his?' Molly asked with a sudden flash of Irish mischief.

She received a cushion at her curly head for that one, then at the bedroom door she stood fiddling with the knob, uncertain, plainly concerned about this venture of Jill's. They were the same age, but Jill seemed more vulnerable, more likely to be hurt by life and what it could hand out.

'Don't look so worried, Molly—I know what I'm doing,' Jill laughed. 'I'm going to the States to do the same job I've been doing here, only

I'll be getting more money and I'll be seeing something of the world. Aren't you going to wish me luck?'

'I suppose so.' Molly's Irish mouth curled into a wry smile. 'I'll miss you, Jill.'

'Och, away with you, when you'll be marrying your Michael in a few months!'

Molly fondled her engagement ring. 'I hoped you'd be here to carry a bouquet for me, and that I'd soon be doing the same for you. Don't go falling for a Californian, otherwise we'll never get to see each other again.'

'You'll have me in tears in a minute, Molly.' Though Jill smiled as she spoke, there was a sudden tightness about her throat. Molly was a good sort and Jill valued her friendship, which had made these past months at the hostel far more bearable than they might otherwise have been.

She went to bed, but the excited clamour of her heartbeats made sleep impossible and she lay listening to the rain, going over and over in her mind everything that had been said this evening.

Fall for a Californian? She smiled in the darkness, but she didn't kid herself she was one of those self-sufficient girls who didn't need love . . . and in theory, like most girls, she knew what love was.

It was a need and a despair; a clash of cymbals, the chill of rain, and the languor of sunshine melting through to your very bones... sunshine... Santa Felicia. She bit upon the thought of them and it spilled sweet like a grape. She cradled her cheek into her pillow and captured again the sensation of a muscular shoulder and the security of being shut in out of the beating rain. Her eyelids began to grow

heavy and as she drifted off to sleep she was thinking of the man who had said he no longer believed in romance ... for himself.

The next few days passed in such a whirl of preparations that Jill hadn't much time in which to feel more than a passing irritation at Mrs. Naylor's arch looks and innuendoes. It troubled Jill that she had had to give Monsieur Paquin such short notice, but he was a good-humoured little man and he gallantly presented her with a bottle of lily-of-the-valley perfume—as it would be the first of May on Friday .and French people regard the flower as a good luck token if given on that day—and said that if things did not work out for her in the States she was not to hesitate to approach him about a job on her return to England.

Jill warmly thanked him, but she naturally hoped that the big step she was taking was going to lead to happiness and success. Linda was thrilled at the idea of Jill working at Norlund's, and on Wednesday evening a vaguely troubling problem was solved for Jill when Erik Norlund mentioned that several of the store's employees lived at a nearby lanai, which was a sort of cabana court, or in more English language a colony of gaily painted bungalows set round a communal swimming pool. The cabanas were fairly reasonable to rent, and it was mainly young people who set up home in them. Jill could, if she wished, probably share with another girl.

The minutes and the hours gathered momentum, and in a flash, it seemed, Friday evening had come upon Jill. Her goodbyes had been said, her new suitcases held alt" her worldly possessions, and clad in a honey-jersey suit set off by slim-heeled cherry shoes, velvet cap and matching clutch bag, she was on her way with the Manets and her new employer to London Airport.

In the sliding lights of passing cars on the Great West Road, Jill was pale, with eyes that glimmered and a heart that hammered. She was leaving England in a slight mist of rain and knew that this time tomorrow she would be in Los Angeles, where the sun would no doubt be shining and the hours would have shifted backwards. She would be in another time, another sphere, about to begin the adventure of a new life. Her fingers clenched the nap of her bag and she was dry-mouthed with tension as the Jaguar swung into the airport entrance and headed down the traffic tunnel.

After leaving the car—which would be freighted to the States—they proceeded to be checked, ticketed, passed through Customs and, in Jill's case, through Immigration. Afterwards, with their baggage on a porter's trolley and on its way to the loading bay, they made their way to the Departure Lounge. Linda clung to the arm of her uncle's dice-check weathercoat, as though, Jill thought irresistibly, to the lead of a loping pet tiger. The girl was looking big-eyed and rather pinched about the nostrils and Mrs. Manet worriedly remarked to Jill that she hoped Linda wasn't going to be airsick, for Erik would fume and that would make matters worse.

T suggested we bring along a scrabble-board,' Jill said:-T've got it in my overnight bag and it might help take Linda's mind off our first hour to Shannon. After that she might be all right.'

'You're a thoughtful girl, you know.' Mrs. Manet looked at Jill, now, as though at another woman instead of someone her daughter's age. 'When Erik said he was going to ask you to work at the store, I very much hoped you'd agree—for Linda's sake. But you do understand that it wouldn't be altogether wise for me to let her live away from him. She isn't one of the fittest, nor has she had to fend for herself in any way. But our house is open to you at any time, Jill. I want you to be friends with my little Lin.'

'I want that as well, Mrs. Manet.' But as Jill smiled at Linda's rather misguided mother—slender and lovely as a model in a pale fawn leopard coat with brown rosettes—she was resolving to do all she could to help Linda toughen up and shake off her tendency to bad nerves. They could get the upper hand of her and turn her into a fretful near-invalid if she wasn't shaken out of them, and she was so likeable and pretty when she forgot herself and relaxed.

One of the big jets came in to land, rattling the windows near where the foursome sat with their cups of coffee, causing Linda's hands to give such a jump that some of hers spilled on to her coat. Erik frowned and handed her a handkerchief so she could mop herself up. 'You're worse than those two youngsters over there,' he crisped.

'You don't expect me to play with toy motors on the floor, do you?' his niece said sulkily. 'I can't help it if I don't care for flying, and that I haven't got your cast-iron nerves—Jill's just as nervous as I am.'

Jill, clutching *Time Magazine* and a *Vogue*, her share of the magazines Erik had bought at the news-stand, was feeling tensed up but in no way fearful of the journey ahead of them. She felt the skimming glance of grey eyes and it was somehow easier to meet the nearby gaze of a pair of husky sweatered young men who looked as though they were flying home after a skiing holiday. Their smiles flashed against chestnut tans, and the taller of the two was cocking his sandy head and plainly trying to get a look at the flight tag on Jill's overnight bag.

As it turned out they were travelling on the same? Pan-American plane, and Jill was conscious of the loud twang of their voices and their assured laughter above the tannoy echo as the next flight was announced.

'That's us.' Erik killed his cigarette in the pedestal ashtray and they rose to join the people thronging towards the departure door.

The two young skiers took the seats immediately across the aisle from Jill and Linda, and Jill saw a blond head swivel for a lazy scrutiny when the tall boy leaned across to introduce himself. 'Roy Scott is the name,' he drawled. 'I've been having a bet with my buddy that you're British. Do I win my bet?'

Jill wasn't interested in casual flirtations as a rule, but upon this occasion it occurred to her that if she encouraged these boys to talk about their holiday, Linda might perk up and forget her flying fears.

'I've been having a bet with myself that you two have been on a skiing holiday,' Jill smiled back at Roy Scott. 'Linda and I would enjoy hearing all about it.'

Her remark must have carried to the seat ahead, for Mrs. Manet peered over the **Seat** back at the two boys. 'Are you feeling all right, my baby?' she said to Linda. 'Do you want to come and sit next to me?'

'No, Mom.' Linda shook her head and flushed under the amused scrutiny of Roy Scott's dark, compact- looking friend.

'Chewing-gum—Linda?' He gave a stick to Roy, who handed it on. Jill was listening to the deep rumble of Erik's voice. 'Read your magazine, Mouche, and relax those apron strings,' she heard him say. 'Linda won't break in half if a guy breathes on her.'

'But they look such a—a tough pair,' his sister rejoined. 'I must say I wouldn't have taken Jill for a flirt.'

Jill bit her lip at that one, and whatever Erik Norlund said in answer was lost to her as a vibrating purr swept through the plane and the four big jets began to fire. Belt and cigarette signs flashed on. Belt-ends clicked together and the jet taxied along the runway, its purr increasing to a hum as the concrete strip dropped away and they

were airborne ... on the first lap of Jill's exciting journey to Santa Felicia.

CHAPTER THREE

DURING the course of dinner Erik refrained from an open comment about the young skiers, but Jill didn't miss the twinkle in his eyes, and when their Irish coffee had been brought to the table, laced with whiskey and topped by an inch of cream, he said: 'Can we change seats after dinner? The dark boy looked as though he was getting a crick in his neck straining across the aisle to talk.'

'If Linda wants to change over, then I don't mind,' Jill said, dabbing cream from her upper lip and not quite meeting Norlund's quizzical eyes.

'I don't think you ought to, baby.' Mrs. Manet spoke rather sharply.

'It'll only be for an hour or so, Mom,' Linda appealed. 'We have sleeping berths, but Keefe and Roy have to bed down in their seats and they'll need all the room they can get. I—if Jill and I sit next to them, that will give them extra room when we go to our berths.'

Erik was studying his niece over his coffee goblet. 'His name's Keefe, huh? Where's he from, honey?'

'The Sacramento Valley, where his people have a winery. He's part French, Uncle Erik, and the family name is Launay. H-he's very nice,' she added nervously. 'He is nice, isn't he, Jill?'

'They both are.' Jill spoke with a touch of defiance that had a tingling root in Mrs. Manet's reference to her as-a flirt.

'And where does the other Romeo hail from?' Erik drawled. 'Is he also a limb off a French tree?'

'His home is at Oakland, but he's due to start work in Los, Angeles and he'll be living there,' Jill replied, bracing herself for a dry

response from her cynical boss, such as wouldn't that be cosy. But he was seemingly preoccupied in putting the flame of his buffalo-hide lighter against the tip of a cigarette—with that devilish groove in his left cheek so clear-cut that Jill knew there was a funny remark in his mind even if he hadn't aired it.

'What are you grinning at, Erik?' His sister eyed him in a rather annoyed fashion, plainly out of sorts with him because he was encouraging Linda in her jetboard friendship with this half-French boy from the Sacramento Valley.

'I was just thinking about human instincts, they're pretty fascinating, you know.' He snapped shut his lighter and puffed a cloud of smoke. 'When a man wants something he goes straight for a woman's maternal instinct, have you noticed? Just like a dog to a dish, or a kitten to a cushion.'

'Because of the boys wanting to sit next to us and getting us to agree by saying they could use our seats later on—is that what you mean, Uncle Erik?' Linda propped her chin on her palm and watched his face. She smiled at him, and he nodded lazily, lounging sideways in his chair so he was able to cross his long legs. He was the kind of man, Jill had noticed, whose well-tailored clothes were comfortably worn and at ease on him. His ties were always of dark knitted silk, but he seemed to like unusual cuff-links and his present set were of crystal laid over miniature masonic symbols. There was something curiously beguiling, she realised, in this big, rugged, rather ugly man's liking for a touch of the exotic. It revealed the boy in him.

Jill and Linda settled down into their berths about an hour later, and Mrs. Manet came in to say goodnight to her daughter. Jill could hear them talking in low voices, and though she tried not to listen she couldn't help overhearing one or two remarks, such as: 'You can't know anybody after only a few hours, baby . . . now don't give me that

instinct bit. Your uncle is full of theories, feels he has to be because of the store and having so many people to manage.'

'I wasn't mistaken about Jill,' Linda pointed out.

'I'm beginning to wonder.' Mrs. Manet spoke speculatively, and though Jill had her face to the wall and was pretending to be asleep, she felt the sharp glance that was directed at her and was hurt by it. She hotly told herself that it was all very well for a woman to love her child, but there was a difference between mothering and smothering. Linda needed to grow up and acquire some independence, and Keefe Launay was just the person to help her. Though he was only twenty-two, his French blood made him more mature than the all-American Roy. Added to that he *was* nice.

Jill slept quite well, but when shafts of sunlight began to pierce into the plane she slipped from her bed and made her way to the powder-room for a wash. The morning sky shimmered now and Jill felt excitement tingling in her veins when she returned along the carpeted aisle, her well combed hair swinging lightly on her shoulders, small nose powdered, quietly-gay mouth agleam with rose lipstick.

Crumpled seat sleepers were beginning to stretch and yawn, while from the direction of the pantry there stole the mouth-watering aromas of coffee and bacon. Jill was so absorbed by all this that she ran full tilt into someone heading for the washroom, a large, hard-muscled figure with tousled hair and blond bristles glinting in the sunlight. The shot-steel of his gaze impaled her for a moment, then ran over her shining bell of hair, the honey sheath of her suit, right down to the small cherry shoes with two-inch heels that made no difference to the tilt her head had to take in order to allow her a direct look at him.

'*God morgen,*' he smiled. 'How did you sleep?'

'I think the excitement rocked me off.' She gave him a smile, but felt her fingers tightening on the grip of her overnight bag. 'Look at the sun, Mr. Norlund! It's a good omen, I hope.'

'Do you believe in omens, young Jill?' His mouth quirked as he fingered his bristles. 'In the pagan lore of the sun and moon?'

'You know far too much about women not to know the answer to that one,' she rejoined.

'It that so?' A blond eyebrow followed the quirk of his mouth. 'Do you speak from your vast knowledge of the male sex, Miss Pride?'

She flushed, for it still rankled that she had been tagged a flirt by his sister, and Norlund rubbed salt in the wound by adding: 'I can see young Scott panting to say good morning to you. I guess he wants to make the most of the few hours before we reach Frisco.'

A hazy barrier overhung the bay of San Francisco when they began their descent, then all of a sudden the haze cleared and they hung above the golden-looking, fretwork bridges spanning the bay and skimmed down smoothly towards the white towers of the International Airport. They landed in sunshine, to an un-English smell in the air, to a balmy warmth, and to voices that drawled and people who pushed and hurried with the aggressiveness of a nation whose resemblance to the British was only superficial. Jill saw that now she was on Californian soil. She breathed it in the atmosphere and felt its vibrations as she and her party went through the landing formalities.

Roy and Keefe were ahead of them in the queue and they waited to say goodbye and to get an assurance from the two girls that they would keep in touch. 'Don't forget to let me have your address, Jill,' Roy said. 'I'll be out on the coast in a couple of weeks, and I intend to look you up.'

'I shan't forget,' Jill had to promise with Norlund and his sister looking on. Keefe and Linda seemed awkward with each other now they were down to earth, but that could have been Mrs. Manet's fault. Clad in another of her stylish suits, Bute tweed in a soft green interwoven with blue, she looked so elegant and unapproachable that Keefe was plainly put off. He could tell she didn't want him writing to Linda or phoning her, but Jill saw purpose flash in his dark eyes when the two young men finally departed, toting their skis over the shoulders of their noisy sweaters.

Jill and her companions still had some flying time ahead of them, but before boarding their plane for Los Angeles they drove in a cab to the Fontaine Hotel for a meal. It was quite a place, rather like a French chateau on the outside and with an interior to match.

San Francisco is probably one of the most romantic cities in the world, with its wrought bridges that seem to hang in the clouds, its many hills set with fine old houses, and the old-fashioned charm of its cable-cars and clanging bells. Jill was enchanted by her brief glimpse of the city of hills and bells, her gaze fixed on the window beside her as she spooned her Pears Portuguese. So much was happening so quickly, and she could hardly take it all in.

Linda didn't make much of a meal and was looking pallid when they settled into their seats on the Los Angeles plane. Jill fastened both their belts, and at once Erik leant across the aisle and urged his niece to pull herself together. 'We're on the last lap of our journey, honey,' he said. 'You've been fine—keep it up.'

'I want to be sick,' Linda wailed, both hands clutching the arms of her seat, a sheen of moisture on her forehead.

'We haven't taken off yet,' her uncle growled. 'You imagine yourself into a nauseated state--'

'What is it, Erik?' His sister was craning forward anxiously, and Jill saw the aircraft hostess advancing towards them. Linda was now trembling, a genuine case of air tension as far as Jill could tell, and receiving scant sympathy from her uncle. 'The child gets herself worked up, Karen,' he snapped, looking as though he wanted to shake the girl. 'She gives in to her nerves.'

'For goodness' sake don't lecture, Erik.' His sister pushed past him and came over to her daughter. Jill at once unbuckled her seat belt, anticipating Mrs. Manet's request that she change places with her, and moved across the aisle to sit beside Erik. Looking imperturbable, he put her near the window. 'Comfortable?' he asked.

She nodded, for she could hardly tell him the truth— though he might well have guessed it—that when she was close to him she rarely felt at ease. The plane took off and for almost an hour the man beside Jill, wearing for the first time in her experience a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, sat absorbed in a batch of figure- covered papers. Those severely framed spectacles gave him a very executive look, and his nose was so jutting and stern that she felt her heart slowly turn over. This was her employer, and right now she was glimpsing something of the formidable man he was in that role— then she hastily resumed her serial story as he glanced up. She heard him shuffle his papers into order, then came the click of his briefcase clasp. He screwed on the cap of his pen and slipped it into his inside breast pocket.

'What are you reading?' Jill was engulfed in *Petit Nobel* smoke as he leant over to take a look. 'Do you go much for all that love-hate stuff in romantic fiction?' he asked. 'Doesn't it strike you as a bit on the phoney side?'

'Not really,' she replied. 'I daresay plenty of real life romances would read much along the same lines if put in print, maybe they'd be even more highly coloured.'

'Except that the hero wouldn't be an athletic Adonis or the heroine a sugar-plum without a little bitter to and spice.' He lounged back in his seat as he spoke and the light from the window played on the lenses of his spectacles and obscured the expression in his eyes. Jill found this disconcerting, for she knew he could read her own face clearly.

'What a pity the two boy-friends weren't travelling on to L.A.,' he drawled. 'The Launay boy certainly kept Linda from thinking about herself and getting into the flap she's in right now.'

'Yes,' Jill agreed, faintly needled by that 'boy-friend' dig. 'Bad nerves are terrible things to cope with.'

'And you don't consider that I cope very sympathetically, do you?' He extended a long arm and stubbed his dark *cigarillo*. 'I'm not the soul of compassion, I'll admit, but few of us are perfect.'

'Perfection's only meant to be found in heaven, isn't it?' Jill couldn't control a smile, for if there was compassion in this man it was well dug in under his rocky exterior.

'According to Balzac we're unlikely to find a taste of heaven here on earth—yes, I have read a few good books,' Norlund added dryly. 'There are more things in a businessman's life than ledgers and board meetings, you know.'

'I'm sure of it.' She couldn't imagine this man agreeing with Balzac's tenet that love was 'the poetry of the senses, sublime or nothing,' but there was no doubt that he liked to relax from his business cares with a woman who could give him an evening of sophisticated fun . . . with no clinging hands to shake off when the party was over; no innocent reproaches to follow him when he walked away, back to his executive suite and the loneliness he had assuaged for a while.

'You're sitting there summing me up,' he drawled, 'but it kind of surprised me to see you so ready to be friendly with those two boys. Are you a flirt, Miss Pride from Liphook?'

'No, I'm not!' She gave him a straight look out of her clear hazel eyes. 'I thought their company and their conversation good therapeutic treatment for Linda's bad nerves—and that's the truth.'

'I'm sure of it,' he grinned. 'With me you're as prickly as a bristle-cone, aren't you? Yet according to the gangling Mr. Scott, British girls are kinda cute—more reserved than American girls, of course, with a suggestion of ice over fire--'

'You shouldn't eavesdrop,' Jill said, flushing at the mockery she knew full well was in his grey eyes. 'Anyway, I don't suppose you believe it.'

'Why should I be any different in my reactions to British girls—unless you consider me a bit past it when it comes to those kind of feelings?'

'I don't think anything of the sort,' Jill said frigidly. 'I just happen to know that your taste runs to more sophisticated, worldly types.'

'You've really got me taped, haven't you?' He appraised the faint flush in her cheeks and the tawny bell of hair that swung with her slight head movement. 'At my age, young lady, I'd look mighty silly making passes at tawny kittens—now wouldn't I?'

'I suppose so,' Jill said, though she didn't consider him old, just not the type to want to dandle tawny kittens on his knee—a picture so devastating that she didn't know whether to laugh or escape for a few quiet minutes to the powder-room. Never, never had there been so unsettling a man; never anyone who made her feel so prickly, and so aware of the many differences between a girl and a male. His lighter

clicked, and Jill wondered just how lonely a man he was ... not at work, but in the privacy of his wifeless home.

'What are you thinking, Miss Pride and virtue?' He quirked a flaxen brow. 'That I smoke too much?'

'It's a dangerous habit,' she reminded him.

'All the best things in life are dangerous.' He savoured a deep lungful of smoke. 'Innocence is far more dangerous than awareness, and that is a *double entendre* you're maybe too young to figure out.'

She could figure it, but knew Norlund to be in no danger from her innocence. 'I'm only young in years,' she replied. 'I feel much older than Linda, though we're the same age.'

'Your grandmother gave you the gift of independence,' he said. 'She couldn't have given you anything better.'

He was laughing at her, but she knew that if she could have read his eyes she would have glimpsed a certain gentleness in them . . . and she backed away, mentally, from anything like that. Don't go nice on me, you Viking, she thought. I'm going to feel lonely here to start off with and I don't want things complicated by a crush on you, of all men!

Jill glanced out at the airy clouds through which the silver wings of the plane were cutting, her brow puckered by the thought that had just crossed her mind. 'We haven't far to go now.' Her companion leaned over—disturbingly large and near—and directed her attention to a far-down glint of blue that was the Pacific Ocean. She craned eagerly forward to see, all young angles and sensitive areas, mouth, nape of her neck, young hollowed temples from which her tawny hair tumbled. Her heart beat fast, and she felt one of Norlund's hands impersonally curved at the side of her waist, the long fingers reaching

to her middle where nerves of apprehension and excitement were having a frolic.

'The old stakes have been pulled up, Jill,' his grating voice was near her left ear, carrying his warm breath against her neck, 'and you're about to put down new ones. Are you alarmed at the prospect?'

Yes, she realised, with a new and disturbing sense of alarm. And because to be young is to be defiant of the things that scare you, she ran for cover into flippancy.

There's always the chance that my transplantation won't take,' she said. 'What will you do with me in that case, Mr. Norlund?'

'I don't allow things like that to happen,' he drawled, tightening his fingers on her waist and forcing her to turn and face him. 'When I invest in a judgment I expect a return for my money.'

'Not *your* money,' she said sharply. 'You said the firm was paying my way.'

'I am the firm.' A sudden ruthless note rang in his voice, and she saw etched in his face the arrogance of a man who had fought hard for what he had and who knew beyond any doubt that it was *his*. He and Norlund's were one. The pride and the possession were plain to see—and they frightened Jill, brought home forcibly to her that it was into the power of a supreme egoist that she had placed her future. Her breath caught, and as Norlund took off his spectacles and slid them into his breast pocket she saw from the knowing glint of his eyes that he was reading her mind as easily as he might a sales report.

'Don't be so touchy about the matter,' he crisped. 'You won't receive V.I.P. treatment at the store because you happen to be a pal of my niece's. I don't operate along those lines. You'll be just another employee, and 'it might put your mind at ease to know that I'm not

often in the vicinity of the Speciality Shop, nor do I live at my sister's. There, do you feel better?'

'Very much better,' she replied, and as their glances clashed and held she wondered if she had made an awful mistake in travelling all this way to work for so complex a man. Anyway, there was no time right now for speculating on that point; the plane was escalating down out of the clouds and descent signs were flashing on. They were flying above the West Coast, a gigantic arm embracing the shimmering blue of the Pacific, and Jill's hands were shaking as she locked the ends of her seat belt and felt the pressure of descent against her eardrums. For the first time since leaving England she, could have wept; just as Molly had warned she now felt far from the old country and very much alone among comparative strangers.

They were met at the airport by a uniformed coloured man, who drove them in a sleek Impala to the Manets' home at Ocean Bluff. Like most people who have enjoyed an assortment of films depicting America and its way of life, Jill had her preconceived ideas about the country, especially of Los Angeles, the legendary home of film stars and film tycoons. She expected it to be beautiful, and discovered instead, as the air-cooled Impala sped towards the suburbs, that it was very, much a business area with its blocks of offices and shops, its restaurant and apartment houses. But her spirit lifted when the car climbed into the hills on to a highway overlooking the ocean, where molten rays of the late afternoon sun were blending with the blue water, and the wings of low-flying gulls were etched. In the distance the mountains of California were purple peaked, and Jill saw pretty clifftop villas whose occupants were enjoying sundowners in their tropical patios, and boat motels towards which various sorts of seacraft were chugging homeward.

Linda was now looking much perkier and Jill was glad when she began to chatter and point out places of interest. They were nearing Ocean Bluff, which was the highest point of Santa Felicia, and Jill noticed a sign cautioning motorists to watch out for jay-walking peacocks. A few minutes later several of the graceful birds wandered by, and Linda said with a laugh that they looked nicer than they were.

'They look too beautiful to be aggressive.' Jill turned to gaze back at them from the rear window, and she caught her breath. Her eyes shone, for there was an enchantment about peacocks and tall palms crested against an horizon where threads of gold and rose were sewing a pattern ... a propitious welcome, surely, to Santa Felicia?

Palmy and terraced, it seemed to rise out of the sea, aglow with neons and very Southern in aspect with cypresses rising above white walls and bougainvillea trailing over wrought grilles. To a dreamer like Jill the town was perfection in her first glimpse of it, but it was alluring in a different way for the sophisticated, who came in their yachts and their fan-tailed cars to dine in the hotels and gamble away the midnight hours under the illuminated dome of its casino.

'We're about to pass the store, Jill,' Erik suddenly threw over his shoulder, and the chauffeur slowed the car so that Jill could get a good look at Norlund's—its steel, concrete and glass jutting like the huge prow of a liner thrusting through the adventurous, sometimes stormy waters of commerce. Its front-street windows were angled slabs of plate-glass set with stylish displays of sportswear, beachwear, high fashion, kiddywear, men's wear, and a sparkling bridal layout. Jill also caught glimpses of travel goods, soft furnishings, gardening tools, and a variety of sports equipment. All the goods were arranged in an *avant-garde* way that was decidedly in tune with the personality of the man who stood at the helm of the business—they magnetised the eye, and it was more than likely that the display staff were hand-picked artists who knew exactly how to express the forceful selling ideas of their boss.

'How does it strike you?' Norlund was quizzing her over a broad shoulder.

'You captain a lot of store, Mr. Norlund,' Jill said, breathlessly. 'I'm very impressed.'

'Does the prospect of working there unnerve you?' he queried.

'I can feel you trembling, Jill.' Linda looked at her with concern. 'You're not to worry. Uncle Erik will look out for you.'

'I don't expect, or want, preferential treatment.' Jill had the jitters all right, but she hadn't wanted *him* to know.

'I've already said that I don't intend to give it, so there's no need to get on your high horse,' he drawled unsympathetically.

'What a mean thing to say, Uncle Erik!' Linda exclaimed. 'I'm glad I'm not going to work for you.'

'There's always a job if you ever get the yen, kitten,' he chuckled. 'Do you good to join in the activities of the store, and I bet you'd even enjoy them.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Erik,' his sister put in sharply. 'Linda is in no way fitted to stand for hours behind a counter, catering to the whims of customers who can be tough as well as aggravating.'

'Jill's going to do it, and there isn't so much of her,' Linda said, a half-excited note in her voice.

'Jill's used to working for her living; it's a necessity in her case.' Karen Manet was definitely not letting her coddled chick out from under her wing, but Jill, with Linda's fine-boned fingers pecking at hers, had an idea the girl could be coaxed out, carefully, gradually, until she felt her wings and knew an independent desire to try them. But that could

come later, right now the car had shifted into climbing gear and they were passing the houses set at intervals up the incline of Ocean Bluff. The attractive Tudor, Spanish and Colonial residences were set in broad lawns where concealed lighting played its colours over white hydrangeas and camellia bushes, and revealed like fruits of wax the tiny lemons and big peaches on the trees. Katydids and tree-frogs had come out to sing now dusk had fallen, and there was a scent of wild sage drifting down from the hills.

Jill took deep breaths of it when they climbed out of the car; wild sage and the piney rustle of the surf far down over the bluff on which stood the house where she was spending her first night in Santa Felicia.

More correctly it was a villa, rather Latin in design, with a tiled hallway that led through lacy iron doors into a spacious lounge. Jill had expected the Manets' home to be elegant, and she wasn't disappointed as she took in, shyly, a lovely delft-blue fireplace matching in colour a pair of settees facing each other in front of it, and the floor-length drapes at the big picture windows. The furniture was of sycamore, with a soft grey finish that blended with the carpet of Chinese blue. There were several local landscapes to add colour, and ruby silk shades on the lamps. Chinese lacquer ashtrays and cigarette boxes stood on a pair of delicate tables, and there were jacquard chairs of blue and butterfly-gold. A creamy bloom jetted from delft vases, but the room, though lovely, was the kind you couldn't really feel at home in.

Jill could feel her heels sinking into the carpet, and she fidgeted with her handbag as Mrs. Manet gave orders to a houseman in a white jacket, one of which was that Miss Pride's suitcase be taken up to a guest room.

'You will be staying to dinner, Erik?' she queried of her brother, who had immersed himself in an evening newspaper he had brought in from the hallway.

He said he would stay, then added: 'I want to get away directly afterwards. I have some paper work to catch up .on—by the way, Jill,' he swung to face the young figure perched on the edge of a chair, the light from a ruby-shaped lamp somehow intensifying the paleness of her face. Norlund's eyes narrowed as he looked down at her. 'Are you all right?' he demanded.

'Yes, thank you,' she said. What else could she say? He wouldn't appreciate that now the adventure of flying here was over, she was feeling cold with nerves, and scared. She was facing the alarming prospect of working among strangers in a vast store, something that had seemed easy enough to do when she had talked about it with Molly, back in England. Then she had felt fairly confident, but right now a sense of melancholy was gripping her—even Linda had deserted her, having dashed upstairs the moment they had entered the house.

'You look peaky, but no doubt it's a reaction from all that travelling. A drink might put you right.' Norlund walked over to the cocktail trolley, and now his sister had gone from the room Jill was very conscious of being alone with him. She watched his profile as he poured a pink gin for herself, then measured Johnny Walker scotch into a chunky glass into which he dropped several rocks of ice.

'What I was going to say is that I'll call for you some time tomorrow to get you settled in at that lanai.' He handed her the pink gin, quizzed the jacquard chairs and sat down on the piano bench. 'It's only about ten minutes' walk from the store and convenient for the time being. Maybe later on, when you've grown used to Santa Felicia and its way of life, you'll go in for a small car. Most people hereabouts run one.

We Californians only believe in walking when we're on a golf course.'

'It will seem strange at first, not walking through Hyde Park to work.' Jill managed a shaky smile. 'Do you play much golf, Mr. Norlund?'

'Golf is a business necessity, but squash is my favourite form of keeping fit. I don't want to put on a spare tyre.' He thumped his middle, hard and flat as a board so far, and told her to drink her gin. 'It'll quieten those jumping nerves.'

She sipped carefully, while he went on to say that she would have to get fixed up with a social security card and that it would also be obligatory for her to join the union. 'I hope you haven't any objections to that?' he added.

'It's a little late in the day for anything like that,' she said. 'Objections, I mean.'

'Too true,' he agreed. 'The store routine and the people are bound to seem strange at first, but I'm sure you'll settle down all right. Norlund's has always been very selective about its staff and our working atmosphere is a good one. Besides,* a gleam of devilry lit his eyes, 'young Scott will be out on the coast in a couple of weeks and I'm sure you're looking forward to seeing him again.'

'Why not?' Jill flushed slightly. 'He's an extremely nice boy and good fun to talk to—also, when you're new to a place, it helps to have a—a friend on hand.'

'A friend, eh?' Norlund rattled the ice in his drink and looked faintly unkind. 'Have my niece and I taken second place to Scott already?'

'Of course not—well, not as far as Linda's concerned.' Jill could feel the deepening warmth of the flush in her cheeks. 'You are my

employer, Mr. Norlund, and in a different category from either Linda or Roy.'

'Meaning *we* keep our distance with each other, eh?' His lips quirked into a smile that had an edge of mockery to it. 'But that would be on working premises only. You see, my penthouse over the store hasn't the benefit of a swimming pool and I often drive up here to my sister's for a dip in her pool. Will it make you feel embarrassed if you happen to swim into your boss one weekend?'

It was all very well for him to treat the matter as a joke, Jill told herself, but it was going to be awkward— like leading a double life—to be one of his junior assistants all the week, then of a weekend the girl who came to Ocean Bluff to frolic with his niece. Also there had flashed into Jill's mind—like a negative that had got into an innocuous roll of film by some devilish chance —a picture of her boss in sportive mood, and she shied from it, mentally, like a startled doe. Norlund's trigger perceptions must have sensed that mental withdrawal, for he gave a slightly impatient laugh and went back behind the pages of his newspaper. Jill bit her lip, and was glad when the yap of a dog scattered thoughts that made her feel uneasy. She glanced up from the blue carpet as Linda came into the room carrying a coffee- coloured poodle. 'I've brought Candy to meet you,' Linda smiled. 'He isn't supposed to come in here, but Mom's busy giving orders in the kitchen. Poor Candy- baby, he's missed *his* mom, haven't you, darling?'

Jill had to laugh, then she abruptly stopped as Mrs. Manet came into the room. 'Lin, I will not have that dog in here,' her mother exclaimed. 'He sheds hairs over the carpet and I'm always afraid he'll break one of the ornaments. Now do take him out, and show Jill her room.'

It was a pretty room with an adjoining bathroom, but something in Mrs. Manet's manner had made Jill feel like an intruder and she knew it would be a relief when tomorrow came and Erik Norlund got her

settled in at the lanai. She had a wash and changed for dinner, and if she looked somewhat pensive it was understandable. Almost on the spur of the moment she had quitted a pleasant little job to come and work in a strange country . . . and she hardly knew what kind of madness had got into her.

Dinner was served at a table set with flowers and silverware, and though the chilled Bortsch, the lamb cutlets with peppered jelly, and the peach pie with cream inserted under its crisp pastry, were all superlative, Jill ate for politeness' sake rather than because she felt hungry. A dose of nerves laced with doubt had stolen away her appetite, and she even found it difficult responding to Linda's chatter with a show of interest. She was emotionally tired out now, while the other girl appeared to have got her second wind and was full of plans for the future—though she refrained from mentioning Keefe Launay in front of her mother. She would take Jill to see the Planetarium in L.A. Then there was Disneyland, and the Marineland was a must. 'It's real fun, Jill,' she enthused. 'You'll be crazy about the dolphins and the whales. You'd never believe the tricks they get up to. They're almost human, aren't they, Uncle Erik?'

'Don't libel them, honey,' he drawled. 'Human beings get up to tricks and leap through hoops, even fiery ones, for every reason but the one that would dignify the act —simple appetite.'

His niece laughed lightly at the remark, for she was probably well used to a verbal expression of the cynicism that was written on his face, but Jill gave a little shiver and felt as though chilly fingers had touched her skin. Again, as on the plane coming here, she realised her employer was a cynic and an egoist ... a man who could charm people into leaping through hoops for him.

They were now in the lounge having coffee. Jill had just accepted a third cup, and Erik, seated on the facing settee in drifting eddies of

cigar smoke, suddenly said to her: 'Don't drink too much of our coffee straight off. It will make you feel liverish.'

'I-I'm dry,' Jill said, flushing slightly at the way Mrs. Manet glanced from her brother to his new assistant as though debating the extent of his personal interest in her. Jill, though she was quite unaware of the fact, had a fragile air when she was tired, and in looking downwards her lashes were not only absurdly long but the ruby-shaded lamp at the couchside caught and fired their tawny tips. Her laurel green dress, with bands of tiny white flowers edging the neckline and cap sleeves, was cut so nicely that it could have cost a lot more money than it had. Jill, without being anywhere near as pretty as Linda, yet had something that was lacking in the expensively-dressed girl. A promise of depth. A woodland, waiting quality ... fen-fire that came at one moment close enough to be captured in a net, and then the next moment had eluded touch.

Erik finished his cigar and his brandy and then rose to leave. While his sister buzzed her chauffeur to bring round the car, he stood quizzing a white pearwood dove on a small table, tall and Vulcanite himself in the ruby lamplight. Impressive and pagan, even in the modernity of tailored dice-check, with a kind of controlled aggression about him. He swung a flickering glance at Jill as though feeling her scrutiny; he confronted her, straddling the antique carpet, ruthlessness and challenge in every hard line of him. The sheer vitality of his gaze made her want to curl down among the settee cushions with a whimper of exhaustion. Vikings and longboats; steel, smoke and the noise of battle were all mixed up in her tired mind. She felt—absurdly—as though she had been hooked out of a calm tank and plunged into a stormy sea.

'I'll call for you some time tomorrow morning,' Erik said to her. 'I know you're eager to get settled into a place of your own.'

'Can I come to the lanai with you?' Linda asked eagerly.

'We're driving into Pasadena to see your grandmother,' Mrs. Manet said firmly. 'Now don't look mulish, Lin. Grand'mere has been extremely worried about you, which is only natural, and I've already telephoned to say we'll be coming.'

'But Mom——'

'Your *own* family comes first, Lin, and I will not be argued with over the matter. You know I'm right about this, Erik, so please say so!'

'Your mother's right, honey,' he said obligingly. 'I daresay your grandmother wants to assure herself that you're now quite well.'

'That is overstating it, Erik. Linda still needs her rest.' As his sister spoke, he narrowed his eyes but refrained from further comment. Jill knew what he was thinking; she saw it herself in the tremor of Karen Manet's left hand as she smoothed her Titian upsweep. The third finger bore an engraved gold band and a turquoise set in diamonds, once the symbols of her wifehood and now the bonds that she (a failing of widows) was securing around her child. Binding her close, too close, because she was afraid of losing what she loved a second time. How often it happened, Jill sighed. How abused love so often was—in the name of love!

Norlund said goodnight and went home to his penthouse set in the tower of the store. It would have wide windows letting in the stars, Jill thought as she prepared for bed. Her own windows were open and she could smell the sage and the manzanita out on the rugged slopes of Ocean Bluff. She heard the sea riffing to the shore, and she stood in her pyjamas at the long windows and absorbed the new sounds in her life. Sounds were important; they could bring back memories as potently as, say, the smell of corn harvested by the glow of the hunter's moon at Liphook; or the smoke of autumn bonfires in the woods near the cottage. Jill closed her eyes in order to savour the

music of the sea and she knew that each detail of today would always return whenever she heard the sea at night.

Jill had just tumbled into bed and was reaching to turn out the lamp when the door opened and Linda's fair head came poking round it. 'Can I come in for a natter?' she pleaded. 'I'm not a bit sleepy and I hate tossing and turning all alone in the dark.'

She was in the room and making herself comfortable in a slipper chair before Jill could plead tiredness. Jill smiled resignedly and rested her tawny head against the quilted satin of the bedhead. 'Well, what's on your mind?' she asked.

'I-I guess you could say it's Keefe Launay.' Linda flushed and ringed her fingers with the sash of her robe. 'Mom didn't exactly take to him, did she? I suppose she still thinks of me as a little girl and can't get out of the habit.'

'It's a dangerous habit,' Jill said. 'You're nineteen, and that's an adult age these days. Your mother must accept the fact that you want and need a life of your own.'

'It's funny,' Linda said, 'but I've never felt rebellious before about being—well, over-protected. I love Mom and she's a widow, it's natural we should be close--'

'This may sound a little hard to take, Linda, but it's more important, especially these days, for a girl to be self-sufficient.' Jill had to speak out, for in her philosophy loving was giving and it seemed to her that Karen Manet, charming as she could be, was gradually stealing from her daughter the will to be a person in her own right. An adult person, who wanted to love a man and be loved in return.

Linda played with her sash and looked, indeed, like a little girl curled up there in the low chair. By inclination she was the clinging sort and

her mother had so cultivated the tendency that it would take some rooting out, Jill reasoned. 'Do you think Uncle Erik meant what he said about my working at the store?' Linda asked.

'I'm certain he meant it,' Jill said staunchly. 'You're part of the Norlund set-up, and I should think it would be fun—working for the fun of it. It's knowing you depend on a wage that makes work a bit of a bind at times.'

'You're saying that to make me feel good,' Linda spoke *on* a sigh, 'but we both know it wouldn't work. The staff would resent me as the boss's niece, always supposing I persuaded Mom to let me--'

'Mix with the hoi-polloi?' Jill put in, quickly.

Linda gave a rueful laugh. The Manets are what are known in the States as *emigri* aristocracy. I guess Mom would have fits if I took my uncle at his word and asked him to give me a job.'

'How do *you* feel about being *emigre* aristocracy?' Jill asked. '*You*, Linda, as a separate entity from your mother? As a person in your own right, with thoughts and inclinations of your own?'

'Oh, me? I'm a willow who bends with the stronger wind.' Linda uncurled her legs and wandered to the vanity-table, where she took into her hands a framed family group Jill had noticed earlier. 'I wish I was like you, Jill. Nothing and no one would keep you from seeing Keefe whenever you wanted to, but I'm the daughter of Marius Manet and I could never be sure, anyway, that it wasn't my fortune he was hunting.'

'Linda, that isn't you talking!' Jill said, shocked. 'It's an idea that's been planted in your mind.'

Linda swung round from the vanity-table, the framed picture pressed against her slight young figure. 'Look at me,' she said. 'What have I got for someone as attractive as Keefe, apart from a quarter of a million dollars?'

'You've been learning cynicism from that uncle of yours,' Jill rejoined, with an exasperated laugh. 'Anyone could see Keefe liked you, and from one or two things Ray said I gathered that the Launay vineyards were pretty flourishing.'

'Do you really think he liked me?' Linda's large, smoky eyes were fixed eagerly on Jill. 'I liked him, terribly. Did you notice his tinge of an accent, and how white his teeth looked when he smiled? H-he had a sort of grave smile, didn't he? Do you know what he said, that the French believe that love can strike like lightning. More often it's a shock wave that passes, but sometimes a *coup de foudre*.'

'Flash of lightning,' Jill murmured, her vivid imagination caught by the expression and the idea behind it.

'Do you believe it's possible, Jill, to fall for someone at a first meeting?' Linda traced with a finger the faces in the photograph she held. The dark Semitic face of the man, such a sensitive foil for the blond Danish looks of the young woman who was Erik Norlund's younger sister, and those of their three children. 'Aunt Vivi had family trouble when she wanted to marry David Bergen. They eloped with Uncle Erik's help, you know, and it's turned out a marvellous marriage. Uncle Erik has absolutely no race or religious prejudices, but his father- well, I guess Mom is the one who takes after Grandpa Norlund. Vivi and Uncle Erik are even alike in their looks, as you can see from this photograph.'

Linda brought it over to Jill, and told her that the little girl's name was Tove, while the two boys were called Chris and Simon. Simon took after his father in looks, but the other two children were unmistakably

the niece and nephew of Erik Norlund. Jill smiled and thought they looked a pair of rascals.

'David's an architect,' Linda explained. 'They've the most lovely house at Palm Springs, just above the Tauquitz Canyon. I bet you'd like those two, they're your kind of people.'

'What exactly are my kind of people?' Jill couldn't resist asking.

'The sort who live for each other and their children,' Linda said, without hesitation. 'The majority of Americans are terrific go-getters; their creed is to get ahead and be a big success, which is why our men seem so aggressive. Look at Uncle Erik! He's work mad, and even has his apartment above the store.'

'His ivory tower,' Jill murmured. 'The main room has enormous windows, hasn't it?'

'Why, yes,' Linda exclaimed. 'The sort that seem to give a "room in the sky" impression. You could almost reach out and pluck the stars.'

Jill's heart felt strangely squeezed at the thought of Norlund alone among the stars. It was from choice, she knew that, but did he never hear in the laughter of Vivi's children the lonely beat of his own uninvaded heart? Had he closed out of his life, completely, the yearning to share himself with just one woman? What about a son to follow in his footsteps? That urge was usually strong in men who sat in the seats of power, so perhaps the day would come when he would take a wife. A cool, probably beautiful sophisticate who would give him his son in exchange for furs, jewels, and the prestige of his position in big business. Love would probably not be mentioned in the contract.

'Jill, how do you define love?' Linda wanted to know, as though its vibrations were in the room and she was feeling them.

'That's quite a question,' Jill said, her gaze fixed on the *toile de Jouy* wallpaper. 'I suppose it's complete trust between a man and a woman. A kind of mutual blending in the big things, with a margin for individuality when it comes to preferences for books, food, and music, etc. I don't think a woman should completely submerge her personality in her husband's, for that would lead to dullness. No man, surely, likes a doormat.'

'I wonder if you'll meet someone over here, and marry him?' Linda stood watching Jill curiously. 'I don't think it will be Roy Scott. He's too young, isn't he?'

'A mere boy,' Jill agreed, with a yawn. 'And now do be a honey and let me get some shut-eye. Norlund won't be pleased if I'm dozy tomorrow. He's bound to be full of his usual get-up-and-go.'

Linda laughed and returned Vivi and her family to the vanity-table. 'Sleep tight, Jill,' she said. 'I'm off to dream about Keefe.'

'Don't just dream about him.' Jill spoke meaningfully. 'He could be a reality—it's up to you.'

'We'll see.' Linda spoke in a wistful way that made Jill want to shake her. 'Goodnight, *cherie*.' *Cherie*, indeed! Jill clicked off her lamp as the door closed, and automatically thumped a pastel pink pillow that was airy as a breeze. How habits grew on one, Jill thought, settling down to sleep. At the hostel, late- running buses had frequently passed in the night; here in Santa Felicia she was crooned into slumber by the rippling of the sea, and she slept deeply and dreamlessly.

Erik Norlund turned up to claim her soon after lunch the following day. Linda and her mother had already left to visit Madame Manet at

Pasadena, and Jill was sitting alone on the patio overlooking the pool. She felt her nerves, even her bones, alerting as brisk footsteps approached across the tiles to this secluded spot where she had chosen to await him. Her fingers clenched the magazine on her lap, and though her gaze strove to stay fixed on the sparkle of the pool, it was drawn away and upwards to the tall figure who halted beside her siesta chair. The sun flared on his hair, and his eyes caught the bright rays like crystal. Eyes of grey—stay away!

The thought flashed through her mind even as she responded to his greeting and rose to her feet. One of the lime cushions bounced out of the chair at her abrupt movement and Erik bent to retrieve it. Some nervous reflex made her step backwards and swiftly he caught at her wrist. 'You'll be in the pool in a minute,' he warned, a mocking note in his voice. 'Do I make you jittery?'

'No!' she denied, feeling the hard warmth of his fingers about her wrist and controlling an urge to jerk free of his touch. If she did that he would indeed guess that her nerves were on edge from his closeness. It was so exasperating, for he was just a man like any other man—but no other man had ever put her heart in her mouth just by a touch, or by looking so clean, so *sea-washed*, in narrow sailcloth trousers and blue-haze sport shirt with cropped sleeves. She saw the hairs glint on his forearms and hurriedly dropped her glance to his rope-soled sandals.

Something within her, female and traitorous, was exulting in his Viking fairness and vitality—but this was Erik Norlund, her boss! A frost-giant without a heart, and for her own peace of mind she had to find the strength from somewhere to play it cool.

'My suitcase is in the hall,' she said. 'Shall we go?'

'By all means.' She caught the glint of a rather caustic amusement in his eyes as he released her and stepped aside so she could precede

him into the hall. Her ziptop suitcase and the jacket of her suit were together on a table, and Erik picked up both of them. 'You won't need the jacket,' he said. 'Today's a scorcher—do you like the heat?'

'It's marvellous. I can feel it going right through to my bones,' she replied, as they walked side by side down the driveway between the lawns of the villa, where sprinklers were revolving with a cool swishing sound. In daylight Jill saw that the villa was attractively roofed with curly French tiles, while stylish jalousies were closed against the afternoon glare. Bougainvillea cloaked the garage and there were carefully groomed azalea hedges fringing the lawns. The hot, still air held in its amber the butterflies that winged to the flower beds and the geraniums trailing over the lacy verandas.

Jill stood gazing at the picture the villa made as Erik put her case and her coat on the back seat of the black Mercury in which he had come for her. 'Isn't it a charming house?' she said, turning to slide in beside the driving seat. She smiled as she smoothed her skirt and met his eyes with a shy, trusting look. His eyes—and grey ones are possibly the most enigmatic by reason of their piercing clarity—flicked the honey silk of her blouse and the cream of her throat and arms.

'I wonder if I did right to pluck you out of your own environment?' His voice seemed extra deep and grating, as though in bending his head to look in at her speech thickened in his throat. 'You're so very young and full of starry illusions, aren't you? A peach on whom the fuzz has only been ruffled----

'I came to Santa Felicia of my own free will, not because you—you forced me in any way.' Jill's words and her colour ran high. 'I was feeling nervous last night, but I'm fine today—look, my hand is as steady as a rock.'

She held out a slender hand, on which glimmered her mother's garnet ring, but it hovered in the air only a moment before it was captured

and held in her employer's large one. 'If anything troubles you—or anyone—then come to me and we'll sort it out.' A crooked grin lifted the corner of his mouth. 'I know you think of me as Erik Blood-Axe, but I don't think you'll find me too hard a boss to get along with.'

'Whoever was he?' Laughter caught in her throat.

'A Norse warrior who plundered the shores of Britain round about the tenth century, and doubtless carried off quite a few charming British girls for his delectation.' Norlund's grin was now clefting his hard brown cheek, and there sprang irresistibly into Jill's mind a picture of him eagle-cloaked, helmeted, and quaffing mead from a drinking horn.

'It's all right,' his eyes, shaded by the car and readable for once, held a merciless amusement as they dwelt on her upraised, transparent face, 'I may have carried you away from your homeland shores, but I shan't give way to a piratical urge to sample your innocent charms. As you've remarked, my taste runs to more worldly sophisticated types.'

The door clicked shut beside her and he strode round the car and climbed in behind the wheel. There came a second click, overloud in the siesta hat that held all things still but the crickets creaking in the wild oats and the manzanita clumping the bluff that browsed, sun-hot, above the blue Pacific. The car headed down the incline * that met the road into town, and the dazzle of the ocean made Jill blink as she stared at it. She felt moisture in the corners of her eyes and scoffed, self-scornfully, at the tears that came so readily to the young for all sorts of silly reasons.

These had come because for a fleeting moment the man beside her had been kind and she had forgotten he could be cruel. Dangerous to forget! It left you unguarded, as she had been just now, and she resolved never again to let Erik Norlund get close enough to hurt her.

'There's a girl who models for the store—Corah Bennet,' he said. 'I've been in touch with her this morning and she's willing to share her cabana with you. She's slightly older than you and not the usual self-absorbed type of model. I think youH like her.'

Corah Bennet! The svelte, contemporary beauty whom Jill had admired on the cover of a fashion magazine only a couple of weeks ago. Jill recalled a wide, gay mouth agleam with vermilion, gilt hair that was attractively casual, and champagne-gold lace sheathing a figure that was perfect. Models looked unreal on the covers of magazines, but this one was real enough, for Erik Norlund had asked her to take his English protegee under her wing!

'I think it will be better for you to share a cabana to start off with.' He spoke crisply. 'I don't much fancy tossing a *kylling* like you among the Californian wolves without a mother-hen around to cluck them off.'

'I've seen pictures of Corah Bennet and she didn't look much like a mother-hen to me,' Jill rejoined, warm-cheeked at being called a 'chick among the wolves'.

'Appearances can be deceptive,' he drawled, and now they were driving along the marina, past the front sweep of Norlund's canopy-shielded windows, and someminutes later along a road where there were palm trees reaching arrogantly for the sun, and motels looking like Spanish haciendas. Big road hoardings warned of the coming of Retribution, which seemed not to worry at all the brown-skinned youths and girls who sped past in crazy cars, bound for the beach. A drive-in was doing a roaring trade in refreshments, and Erik pulled in for a couple of egg-nog ice-creams, which were delicious. At the rear of the drive-in were lanes of grapefruit and orange trees, and the fragrance of them made Jill intoxicatingly aware of the strangeness of this new country; the touch of the exotic and the brazen; the mingling of innocence with sophistication. The pioneers

still came; the hicks from the west and the south, and the jaded from the big cities.

Santa Felicia, bathed in a sunshine that made the shadows deep as pools under the trees .. . deep enough for a small thing like Jill to get lost in.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE cabana was painted lemon and white, with fairly large windows and a wooden sun-trap overlooking the lime green pool where other occupants of the lanai lazed and swam. Erik carried Jill's suitcase into the living-room, and rucked with a large sandal one of the brilliantly dyed rugs on the lightwood floor. 'Now mind my plunder from Corfu,' Corah laughed, and though fairly tall she didn't look it beside Erik.

'Thought I hadn't seen those before,' he said. 'Well, how did the trip go? Everything satisfactory?'

'It was an inspired idea of yours, Erik, to send us to Corfu so Roger could create a layout to match the Grecian lines of those new summer outfits.' Corah poured iced tea into tall glasses and added strips of pineapple. 'They'll sell like crazy when they get into the store, for Roger knows his job—and how!'

Jill was half aware of this "store" talk as she perched on a white Dutch stool and took in her colourful surroundings. The few pieces of furniture had something of Corah's own *avant-garde* lines, and there were yucca blossoms printed on the sunshades. The walls were hung with a kind of Japanese rush in a cool pine-forest green. A giant sea-cone, probably filled with sand, held open the screen door so that talk and laughter drifted in from the pool round which the gay little cabanas were grouped. It was exciting to realise that from now on this 'holiday camp' atmosphere would be a natural accompaniment to each day. The people Jill had come to live among were obviously a happy-go-lucky bunch in their free time and made up of store assistants, office personnel, and a smattering of models, TV workers, and writers. Out there beside the pool they had all looked so tanned and fit that Jill hadn't been surprised by the stares her own pale looks had evoked.

'Like the place, Jill?' Erik finished his tea, and when Jill realised that he was about to leave her alone among strangers, she panicked and wanted—of all things! — to clutch at his hand. Instead she had to tilt her small square chin and put on a smile. 'I didn't know a cabana was this pretty,' she said. 'I'm sure I shall be happy here.'

'I'll see that Jill settles down all right and clicks with the gang,' Corah assured him. 'They're a nice crowd on the whole.'

'*Mange tak*, Corah,' he said in Danish, his fingers tweaking the golden hair bunched at her nape. 'I know I can rely on you.'

Green eyes locked with grey—it was a long, meaning look, Jill couldn't help noticing—and Corah smiled at him as she said: 'Hi-hi, skipper.' A different smile from the one that hovered in her eyes in the fashion magazines; a warmly intimate one, expressing more clearly than words that there was something deeper than a model-boss relationship between them. And why not? Photographs of Corah Bennet had not lied; from her fingertips to her matching peach toe-nails she was smoothly tanned, whipped up out of every delectable titbit most men appreciate . . .

'I'll see you at the store tomorrow,' Erik's eyes probed the smile on Jill's face. 'Corah will show you to my office.'

'Yes, Mr. Norlund.' Jill spoke politely, and now it seemed that only in a dream had she once begged him not be cynical, and with the English rain beating on the roof of his car had snuggled, sleepily, against his shoulder. He held out his hand and she put hers into it, briefly, then withdrew and stood alone in the cabana when he and Corah walked out into the sunshine together. They went a short way down the path and their voices were low-pitched as they talked for a minute or so. A sense of loneliness was gripping Jill even before she heard him say goodbye, then Corah strolled back into the living-room.

'So you're the Viking's little protegee?' Hands in the pockets of her stretch pants, the other girl took Jill's measure. 'Scared we're all as pouncy and primitive as we look?'

Jill smiled, for she did feel rather like a kitten among a pride of tawny lions, then Corah gave her shoulder a friendly squeeze and said to come and see the rest of the cabana. The kitchenette was small but functional, with a snack-counter at which stood a pair of foam-seated stools, an electric stove, an icebox, and a stainless steel sink complete with a garbage disposal unit. 'Can you cook, honey?' Corah wanted to know, and was delighted when Jill promptly offered to prove it by grilling the chops Corah had bought for dinner and making chips and a green salad to go with them.

'If you're not too diet-conscious I could also make a cherry flan,' Jill added, noticing a tin of cherries in the larderette.

'Well now,' Corah felt her hips, which had more of a curve than was strictly regulation in models, Jill would have thought, but no doubt an 'in' with the big boss worked wonders, 'I guess a slice of home-cooked pie wouldn't hurt for once, though I'm already a client at Slenderella. That's a kind of snazzy female gym, honey, and one place I don't think you'll ever need to visit. Ever done any modelling yourself—you're slim-hipped as a boy?'

'I'd trip all over my own feet and wouldn't know what to do with my hands,' Jill laughed. 'Counter work is more my mark, and I actually enjoy it.'

'You really get a kick out of working for your living?' Corah looked impressed. 'Well, you and the Viking are chips off the same block. I don't think there's anything that guy appreciates more than a desk piled high with " sales reports, production ideas, and what not. The big wheel, around which we all revolve.'

'I notice you call him the Viking,' Jill said, gazing round the bedroom which was more spacious than the kitchen. The twin divans were covered by candlewick throw-overs with curly scatter rugs beside them, the make-up table was like a film star's with a row of lights round the mirror and a hoard of bottles and jars cluttering its surface.

'It sort of seems natural to think of a big, forceful Dane like the boss as a Viking.' Corah lounged against the make-up table and tinkered with the chain of charms on her wrist. Sunlight found her hair through the slats of the blinds and lit it to the gilt brightness of new pennies; she was smiling, secretly, as she fingered a quaint seal on her wrist chain. Jill, watching her, thought of the 'goddess of the fire of the hawks' in Norse mythology and wondered if Corah, this modern goddess whom men worshipped on the covers of magazines, had a crush on Norlund and how seriously he reciprocated it. There was *something* between them. It had been in the atmosphere in that other room and a man had to be pretty sure of a woman before asking her to share board and bed with another woman.

Woman? Jill felt the wryness of her own smile, for beside Corah she knew how unworldly she looked.

'Have you left any swains back in England?' Corah's green eyes studied Jill, twinkles in them. 'My, I haven't seen one of those in years!'

'One of what?' Jill looked flustered and unzipped her case on the foot of the bed she was to have.

'The blush, sweetie,' Corah laughed, and it matched her smooth, honey looks. 'You don't know a terrible lot about men, do you? With you it's mainly supposition, with some idealisation thrown in along with a tot or two apprehension. Heigh-ho, to think I was like you, once upon a time.'

'I'm beginning to think that cynicism is to the Americans what rheumatism is to the British, a national complaint,' Jill remarked, slipping into mules that curled round her small feet like sandy kittens.

'Mmm, clever,' Corah drawled. 'I can see there's more to you than an obliging disposition and "eyes of brown, never let you down." I think we're going to get along together, Jill Pride.'

'You had doubts about that, hm?' Jill pressed to her cheek the Gaelic floss of the sweater she had bought before leaving London, unable to resist its deep amber colour though it had been pricey.

'Quite frankly,' Corah quizzed the peach lacquer on her long fingernails, 'I backed away from the idea of having you stay here when Erik phoned to ask me. I—I thought you'd be some kind of superior British Miss—you know, a deb working for kicks. But he's the big boss, and there's another reason why I—anyway, I said I'd go along with the idea on the understanding I could shoo you out if we didn't take to each other. He laughed—now I know why!'

A smile of gay good humour lit Corah's face. 'You are just a *kylling* and welcome to stay as long as you like. I shan't shoo you off my curly Corfu rugs—besides, you can cook and I can only whip up a grill. I'm strictly the type, honey, born for chinchilla and caviar; real estate and real diamonds.'

Jill wondered how true that was,, for Corah struck her as being essentially nice, (funny how sure you were about that with some people) with nothing calculating and cold about her to indicate the born gold-digger. It was probably the competitive life of modelling which had laid a surface glaze over her essential warmth, while the job of showing *haute couture* gowns and furs had imbued, in her a natural enough desire to possess them. But even a model who had reached cover girl status did not earn the kind of money that bought

more than a chinchilla collar, therefore they would have to be acquired through marriage with a man of means.

Erik Norlund had the means, and Corah had plainly intimated that some personal reason made her susceptible to his wishes. What nicer, if Corah truly wanted *haute couture* and caviar, to get them from a man she also cared for?

'That's an old-fashioned look you're giving me,' Corah grinned. 'You are now in the land of go-getters, Jill, where few people stand still to count the stars or to listen to the birds.'

'I've always understood that Americans long to be loved.' Jill folded her underwear into the drawer Corah indicated. There were little perfumed sachets in the drawer, a further sign of the sentimental heart lurking beneath the model's sophistication, or a habit brought from her country home. Erik Norlund had told Jill in the car coming here that Corah hailed from Carolina. She had learned to modify her Southern speech, but her voice was still a cream-and-honey drawl that men would find irresistible.

'Now love is a very profound subject.' Corah's wrist charms made a jangling sound, as though her hand clenched. 'Everyone gets around to discussing it and longing for it, but actually finding it is like delving to the bottom of Pandora's box in search of hope. We delve and come up with everything but the shining reality. Oh, my stars,' Corah gave a gusty sigh, 'you're one of *those* people, Jill Pride! The deep, listening kind to whom one spills it all out, securely aware that it will all sink in and not get dredged up at a coffee and chatter party. Tell me, how do you make out with the queen swan?'

Queen swan? Long elegant neck, a cool beauty, and a possessive eye on the cygnets! Jill smiled. 'If you're referring to Karen Manet, then I'm not making out too well. You see, there were these two young skiers on the plane . .

Jill told the story as she and Corah drifted back into the living-room. Corah knew Linda slightly, and she agreed that the girl needed to be pried out from under Momma's wing. 'When—and if—I have any kids, I'm going to love them and let them go,' she said, feelingly. 'Oh—*love*! There I go again!'

The model's lips were suddenly clenched about a cigarette she plucked out of a driftwood box. Her hand shook, more than a little, as she fired the tip.

'How does Erik strike you, honey?' Corah spoke casually enough, but Jill caught the glint of her green eyes behind her cigarette smoke and knew it was natural she should feel curious about the girl he had brought back with him from England.

'May I?' Jill poured another glass of the iced tea she had enjoyed earlier and braced herself with a few cool sips at the slim-jim. 'I'm terribly grateful to him for this chance to work at a store like Norlund's, but to tell you the truth I find him rather intimidating as a person. W-we've hardly a thought or an emotion in common, and his main reason for bringing me to Santa Felicia was because Linda and I had struck up a friendship and I seemed to be helping her to come out of her shell. He seemed very fond of her, and he obviously disapproves of his sister's possessiveness.'

Corah nodded and relaxed on one of her Dutch stools, a colourful figure in her orange pants and cream shirt, open at her throat to reveal on a slim chain a seal like the one on her bracelet. She fingered it and smiled to herself. 'The Viking is an overpowering guy, isn't he? Dynamite, to be handled with care.' She laughed, then gave a husky little cough as smoke caught in her throat. 'He's strides ahead of many of the other merchant princes. Inborn know-how they call it, but more likely it's lightning in the blood from the old sea-roving days when Norsemen set out in longboats to plunder whatever took their fancy.'

Anyway, men were born to be aggressive and I say hall to the male who isn't afraid to be one. What do you say, Jill?

Jill nibbled her pineapple strip and gave a smile and a shrug. 'As you said earlier on, I don't know very much about men.'

'Least of all about men like Erik Norlund, huh?'

Jill nodded and wandered to the window overlooking the pool and its occupants. The nostril-pinching smell of chlorine came to her, and she saw the plaited trunks of palms rearing above bright banks of tropic-sized flowers. A sense of strangeness gripped her, such as she had known during her early days in London. But falling into the routine of the lanai was obviously going to be much more pleasant and exciting than the weaving of herself into the drab daily life of the hostel. There her loneliness—and who are lonelier than the shy girls and the green youths who leave their country homes for the big city?—would have been insupportable at times but for her occasional outings with Molly Connors.

She must write to Molly later on and tell her all about the air trip, and what fun life at the lanai looked like being. She would describe Corah to her, for Molly would be relieved to know she was sharing a cabana with someone so friendly.

Jill learned that afternoon that the occupants of a Californian lanai are extremely sociable and very interested in each other's doings. A new member of the flock, and a British one at that, had got them buzzing with curiosity and they began to drift into Corah's cabana to say how-do to Jill. The girls were self-aware, but in a wholly charming way, with skins tanned to shades varying from pale honey to a smooth teak according to whether they were blonde or brunette. Jill listened bemused to their chatter and obligingly answered their strings of questions. Californians love to ask questions, not out of nosiness but

because they enjoy life and people and are keen to learn all they can about each other.

They were all good to look upon, healthy-limbed from the sea and the sun. They had a zest for living such as Jill had not encountered before—a bunch of long-stemmed American Beauty roses who made her feel colourless and plain. She resolved to get herself a tan as quickly as possible, and found herself smiling, shyly, at Ben Childers. His fair hair was balding, and his blue eyes were networked by lines of humour. He was a TV jingle-writer, and having worked in London a couple of years back he somehow blunted the edge of Jill's inevitable far-from-home feeling as the day waned and dusk began to come down over the lanai.

'How about you two girls coming out to dinner with me?' Ben invited. 'We could go to the Retreat. It's homey there; no need to dress up.'

'We're having chops, Ben.' Corah barely looked at him; he seemed, as far as she was concerned, just a hazy speck on the horizon. 'I'd invite you to stay, but we've only the two--'

'I could make do with an omelette,' Jill put in.

'No!' There was a sharp note in Corah's voice. 'Ben will let us take a rain-check on his invite—besides, you look tired and will be wanting an early night.'

'Sure, there's always another eve,' Ben drawled, turning to the door. The others had already drifted back to their cabanas and lights twinkled among the trees and danced on the surface of the pool. Katydid's had begun to chirp and flower scents were released in the evening coolness. 'So long for now,' said Ben, and he walked away down the terracotta path, a heaviness in his tread.

'Let's get dinner,' Corah said, and she hastily shut the cabana door—as though there was something intrusive out there; something she was afraid of. They had dinner, then Jill wrote her letter to Molly while Corah did her slimming drill; shoulders pinned to the floor, she took alternate swivels to left and right in order to subdue the curve of her hips. Jill had just written that Corah was one of the most naturally lovely girls she had ever seen, and upon glancing up from these words she smiled to see Corah wriggling her toes on her curly rugs. She wore a white toga-nightie, her gilt hair was looped back at the nape of her neck, and there was a faint sheen on her golden skin, ah incandescence that combined with her jewel-green eyes to make her the answer to every man's dream. With careless grace she drew towards her the giant sea-cone that acted as a doorstep and flowed into an unstudied pose. She blinked tilt-tipped lashes at Jill. 'Do you think I look like the Little Mermaid?' she enquired impishly.

'More like the Lorelei,' Jill laughed, 'luring the sailors from her rock in the sea.'

'Lorelei, hm?' Corah wrinkled her nose. 'She was a destructive force—is that how I strike you?'

'No.' Jill had uncoiled out of the tenseness which had held her most of the day and now, in her relaxation, she looked winsome and elfish, perched on a Dutch stool with a writing-pad on her knee and a smudge of ball-point on the tip of her nose. 'Under the allure the real you is warm—and vulnerable, Corah.'

'I'm just a glamour symbol!' Corah tossed back her gilt hair, and her lovely face, with its feline eyes and thrusting cheekbones, its wide-lipped mouth set in a jawline that was almost classic, wore a sudden sweet- sad mask of a smile. She could have been posing again, for fifty per cent of a model is drama student, but somehow Jill knew her bittersweet smile was genuine; something was holding a dagger at Corah's heart and pain was streaking through her shapely

body as she thrust the sea-cone against her in an effort to override the inner j)ain with an outer one.

Jill was young and untried, but she knew the fundamental truth about women—that love can torment them even as it gives them the moon and the stars to play with.

From out of the transistor, no larger than a pack of fortune-cards, stole music and song. The voice was smooth as silk, warm as mink. 'Love's Funny and Sad' crooned Tom Jones, and Corah's head jerked up. Her smile was a thin flicker of cynicism as she listened to the words. 'Oh, man, how right you are!' she murmured. There was a feline flash of green as she swung her glance to Jill. 'This is how I get sometimes,' she warned, 'as moody and out of tune as a cold harp, so beware.'

'We all get that way at times,' Jill said bracingly. 'After all, it's human to err, and we're all pretty earthy when you come to think of it.'

'Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom,' Corah drawled, her glance slipping over Jill from her tawny head to her furry foot-cuddlers. The older girl overshadowed the younger one like the sun-glitter on a pool, but there was something about Jill... a diffidence that had its charm, as though like the duckling she could turn into a swan all unaware. Corah's eyes narrowed, then she said half-mockingly: 'You're nice, aren't you, Jill Pride, and niceness is honesty with no sham, no posturing? Niceness is a smile that begins in the eyes; it's simplicity and a giving heart. Niceness could be prim, but it isn't, for the nicest people always have a sense of humour—say, I'm peckish! How about you?'

Jill shook her head, pink-cheeked, as Corah jumped to her feet and wandered through the stripcurtains into the kitchen. She came back with a jar of baby beets, and cuddling the jar on her lap she proceeded to munch them off a cocktail fork. 'I shouldn't eat these,' she said. 'I'm

already pushing a hundred and thirty pounds, and jf it wasn't for the fact that Frenais photographs like an angel, I'd come out looking hippy. Another two years—I'm now twenty-six—and I'll have passed the Rubicon of models.'

That relentless word—marriage—hung in the air between the two girls, and Jill suddenly said: 'Is Roger Frenais as attractive as the magazines say he is?'

'Mmm, attractive as the devil, sweetie. A gay cavalier, pleasantly dissipated, with an eye for the cuties. He's notched up quite a few *kyllings* in his time, so you watch out when you run into him. He will be *enchante* with those sherry-brown eyes of yours.'

'Corah, really!'

'Jill, *really*!' Corah wagged a baby beet on her cocktail fork. 'He has temperament, brilliance, a kind of inner suffering overlaid by a small-boy mischief. He's *absinthe* beneath the chestnut trees of Paris, a Pan out of the forest of Chantilly, with all the *dernier cri* of the Rue Saint-Honore at his fingertips. He adores me through the eye of a camera, but there's no personal chemistry between us—unless you say that like oil and water we don't blend. He believes that the feast of youth should be thoroughly enjoyed, with himself as the chief *bon viveur*.' Corah was looking at Jill with a 'mother hen' concern, but the effect was ludicrous in view of the baby beets and the sheer nightie. Jill broke into a smile and Corah said darkly: 'You watch out for Roger, he's a wolf who likes them softly feathered.'

'You and Mr. Norlund seem to think I'm just out of the egg,' Jill rejoined—and then sudden hot colour ran to her temples as she remembered what Karen Manet had called her on the plane. 'Has Mr. Norlund implied that I—I'm a flirt?' she demanded.

'He—um—said to look out for you.' Corah was looking downwards and dabbing at a beet stain on her nightie.

'Well, I don't want you to think of me as a responsibility.' Jill couldn't keep a sudden stiffness out of her voice. 'It's unfair of Mr. Norlund to impose on you the idea that I—I need supervision.'

Corah glanced up sharply. 'It's good of him to take an interest. To the majority of big wheels, the workers are just so many cogs rattling around in the machinery. Erik is something special.' Corah's eyes glowed, like emeralds with fires at the heart of them. 'The Norlund ledgers were a red mess when Erik took over the business but within a few years he had put Norlund's back on its feet. He breathed new life into the business, made it bristle with fresh young minds and go-ahead ideas. People say he's a lot like old Sven Norlund, who started the store. A rare old pirate, as a business man had to be in the American nineties. It was crossed cutlasses in the raw in those days, now the competition is more sophisticated but equally bloodthirsty. If you give a quarter, you'll give a half, but nothing doing with Erik.- He knows what he wants and he knows how to get it, with no compromises. People have learned not to expect compromise from him, and so they call him a hard, insensitive catalyst—but he isn't that.'

Corah pressed her cheek to her knees and the lamplight found the tilt-tips of her lashes—there were tears on her lashes.

'No, he isn't that,' she murmured huskily. 'I'm one of the few people who knows—I have reason to know.'

The room was quiet, and yet loud with what Corah had said. A wind stirred outside in the fronds of the palms and Jill found herself on her feet, goosebumps of emotion prickling her arms. She fumbled with her writing-pad and her pen. Her letter was still unfinished, and the clock warned how late it was. Why had Corah said that about an early

night? And as the question took form in Jill's mind, she knew it had been hovering about all the evening—Corah had wanted an excuse to get rid of Ben Childers. He liked Corah. You'd have to be a fool not to see it, but Corah, sitting down there like a lovely, tearful child, was eating her heart out for a man who would never care about her—or about any other woman ...

'Would you like something hot to drink?' Jill asked gently.

'You've talked me into it!' Corah followed Jill into the kitchen and they made hot chocolate and took it to bed with them.

* * *

Jill awoke to a warm finger of sunshine stroking her through the slats of the bedroom blinds. Always an early riser, she was quickly dressed and in the kitchen frying eggs and hickory-smoked ham. While the coffee perked and the eggs and bacon spluttered cheerfully in the pan, she stood at the screen door, looking at the pool and the palms and the other gaily painted cabanas. A blue jay hopped to the branch of a pepper tree, and a glorious clump of tea-rose begonias scented the morning air. Jill's eyes sparkled, and whatever her doubts yesterday they now seemed to fade away and she tingled - with optimism.

Corah soon got a whiff of the bacon and wandered in, chiffon-robed, exclaiming her delight at the homey picture of coffee on the perk and Jill, aproned, scooping sunny-faced eggs from pan to plates.

'You're a dish,' Corah said, sitting down at the snack-bar and buttering a Ry-Krisp. 'Mmm, lovely gooey eggs! How did you know! liked them this way?'

Jill took the other stool and sugared her coffee, noticing how much larger American spoons were than British ones. 'I've got second sight,' she quipped.

'You're second to none in the cooking department.' Corah munched appreciatively. 'You've got to promise to stay around here a long, long time. No sneaking out on me to get married.'

'That's one promise I can certainly make,' Jill laughed. 'I don't intend to get married—always supposing someone wants me—for a long, long time.'

'When the gal said it, she believed it,' Corah cracked at the ceiling, in a light-hearted mood that certainly helped Jill to face the coming ordeal of walking into Norlund's as a new member of the staff, who were bound to be curious to begin with. No doubt their curiosity would be all the keener because she was British and had been brought to America by Norlund himself. A certain amount of speculation would buzz for a day or so, then fizzle put when they saw that his only interest in her lay in her ability to do a satisfactory job of work.

Jill was confident on that score. Handling customers imparted confidence to her and she knew she was at her best behind a counter.

She had put on a navy suit with a marine-blue and white inset, debated French-pleating her hair, then decided to leave it tilt-ended and shining from a good brushing. She pink-iced her lips and stood reflected in Corah's glamour mirror . . . neat, clean, and very British, she thought, and absently picked up the charm bracelet Corah had removed while taking her shower. A thread of curiosity insinuated itself and Jill took a look at the seal Corah was in the habit of fingering. It was jade enamel on silver, depicting on one side a flowering beech tree, on the other side a dragon-tail ship. The design was obviously Nordic; the beech tree was the national tree of Denmark, and it was in the dragon-tail ships that the Vikings had roved the seas ...

The chain of charms made a tinkling sound as Jill slid it out of her palm on to the glass top of the vanity- table, and she picked up her

handbag and went out to the sun-trap to sit and wait for Corah. It was now eight- thirty and the store opened at nine. Corah was going in to model for some re-takes of the Corfu layout. Roger Frenais, she said, was a perfectionist when it came to his work, this being the only virtue he and Norlund had in common.

'Hullo there!' Ben Childers stood on the path looking up at Jill, his blue-grey eyes crinkled against the sunshine and a black zip-folder tucked under the arm of his check jacket.

'Hullo, Ben.' Jill rose and went down the four steps to him. 'Isn't it a gorgeous morning?'

'A bit different from waking to a London drizzle, eh?' he twinkled. 'You start work today, huh?'

She nodded and pressed a hand to her midriff. 'I've got the flutters, to tell you the truth. I've never worked in a mammoth store like Norlund's and there are so many things I've got to get used to. The different currency, the American speech, the people who will be curious about me--'

'Because *he* brought you to Santa Felicia?' The warm light of humour had gone out in Ben's eyes. 'I shouldn't worry about that. You're a nice kid, anyone can see it, and Norlund doesn't get himself involved ' Ben broke off and scuffed the path with the toe of a latched casual, colour staining his throat. 'H-how are you making out with Corah?' he blundered.

'She's quite a person, isn't she?' Jill felt the sudden strain at the back of her smile. 'I'm one of her fans already.'

'Yeah, Corah's quite a gal,' he agreed, 'but I'm afraid she hasn't a lot of time for Childers and his jingles. To her I'm just a joke--'

'Oh, Ben, I'm sure that isn't true!' Jill put a hand on his check sleeve and was gazing up at him when Corah stepped over the sill of the cabana. She raised an eyebrow above a discreetly tinted eye, lovely—in that faintly unreal way of models—in a jersey silk skimmer the colour of sandalwood, bare feet in thonged scarlet sandals, a Jacqmar scarf tied pirate-fashion over her hair. She carried a cosmetic-box in one hand.

'I never took you for such a fast worker, Ben,' she drawled, her lips curved in a faintly derisive smile.

'I stopped by to offer Jill a lift into town.' The colour had gone from under Ben's tan and there was a twist to *his* mouth, as though he scorned the feelings Corah aroused in him. 'Jill was just saying what a nice person you are. Corah. Maybe she's rushing her fences, huh?'

'Meaning?' Corah stood looking down at him, coolly, smiling in a way that rejected him as a man and enjoyed his discomfiture.

'Meaning that you take pleasure in hurting all men but the one who can't be hurt by you—the one as cold- hearted as yourself!' Ben wheeled. 'Good luck with your first day, Jill,' he said, and strode off. Jill stood biting her lip in distress, while Corah, who had caused the scene, came laughing down the steps to the careless jingle of her car keys.

Her car was garaged at the lanai, a sleek convertible that she drove with assured ease, as though the lanes of busy morning traffic accorded her not a moment's concern. Her scarf fluttered its filmy tails and she hummed a snatch of the music drifting from the car radio, all jumbled up with traffic warnings from the helicopter overhead, home and cookery hints, and weather forecasts.

'Hysterical America—a bit different, huh, from historical Britain?' Corah said, as she parked in the car-pool at the rear of the store.

'I'm reserving judgment,' Jill replied, and as they walked towards the staff entrance, she was aware of the side-glance Corah gave her, as though she thought Jill was hinting at something, maybe Ben's advice about getting closer acquainted with people before forming too-hasty judgments. She was right to a certain extent, for Corah's behaviour that morning had shaken her. She didn't like to see people hurt, and Ben had looked heart-stricken when he had walked away from the cabana. There was a group of girls at the clocking-machine just inside the staff entrance, and they chorused, 'Good morning, Miss Bennet,' when Corah walked in, their eyes filled with admiration for the tall, casually beautiful deity who actually returned their smiles.

'Meet Jill Pride, kids,' she said. 'She's your new workmate.'

'Glad to know you,' they said, watching Jill with curiosity as she followed Corah into a lift that swooped through the various layers of the store to the executive floor.

'I don't have to make excuses to anyone,' Corah's voice was overloud in the chrome intimacy of the lift, 'but let's get something straight. Because I'm a model and I know how to wear my clothes and apply make-up so I look glamorous and adventurous, I attract men. I don't do it intentionally, and I certainly never wanted Ben Childers to get all soulful and tormented about me.'

'But knowing he cares for you shouldn't make you angry—and cruel,' Jill protested. 'He deserves better than that.'

'If I act soft with the guy, he'll think I'm encouraging him.' Corah's profile was chiselled, as on a coin, and she wouldn't meet Jill's eyes. 'It's like stray dogs, Jill. If you encourage them, they're under your feet all the time begging to be patted. I—I can't expect you to understand--'

'Why, because I'm plain and ordinary?' Jill broke into a smile. 'I realise that it isn't all honey to be as attractive as you are, Corah, but you—you seemed to get pleasure out of hurting Ben. You weren't just shooin' him away.'

'Mydear, didn't you catch what he said about me and my heart?' Corah pressed a hand there, her fingernails like flames, her smile a cynical flicker.

Yes, Jill had caught the remark and she knew who the m^an was who couldn't be hurt as other men were hurt. Maybe it was Norlund's invulnerability that drove Corah to unkindness to other, gentler men, for there wasn't any doubt in Jill's mind that the model was emotionally strung up under her surface glamour and assurance.

The lift settled and they walked along a wide- carpeted corridor, past the big, quiet offices of the senior managers, the legal eagles, the chief accountant and the personnel supervisor. The drew level with the double doors of the executive conference room, where high-powered conclaves went on. Corah said, pushing open the doors so Jill could have a look at the impressive room, with panelling from a wrecked clipper-ship. 'In old Sven Norlund's day the windjammers used to bring in goods from foreign ports and he'd gallop down to the docks on horseback and bargain in person for the teak- wood boxes of lovely Asian silk, shawls and fans. . .

'It must have been kind of romantic in those days,' Corah added, her sandals patterning on the parquet floor as she walked to the high-backed chair at the head of the long table. The room held the smell of cigar smoke and male cologne, and above the mantelpiece there was a massive portrait of the resourceful Dane who had founded the great store. The grey eyes gazed with challenge upon the world, the bold head, thin blade of a nose, and the mouth in which strength blended with resolve ... all of these, along with temperament, had been handed on to the present 'captain' of Norlund's, and there

seemed to be a lurking light of satisfaction in old Sven's eyes. He knew, the old sea-hawk, that all was well with the store now Erik was at the helm.

On the mantel under the portrait there were a pair of silver-mounted, antique drinking horns set either side of a model of a Viking longboat complete with helmeted oarsmen. On another wall hung several hunting trophies, including a reindeer head and pictures of a dragon racing-yacht in action. On a carved table between the windows stood a bronze of Tegner's wonderful sculpture, Victory.

'An addition of Erik's,' Corah said, touching a finger to the vanquished figure held over the head of the victor. 'He's fond of Denmark and he often visits his aunt and cousins at their farm in Tjele.'

'Giving away all my secrets?' grated a voice from the doorway.

Jill swung round and saw Erik framed there, against the dark wood, and as always it came as a shock that anyone could be so big, so fair, so grey-eyed. There wasn't a lax line to the man as he stood there, one hand in the pocket of his jacket, imperious, hard-pushing, completely in charge of himself.

'I always find this room fascinating,' Corah smiled at him. 'It reeks of the past.'

'Also of cigars and Lentheric,' he drawled. 'Good morning, Jill. All set to tackle your first day at Norlund's?'

She nodded, battling with a shyness that seemed to be squeezing the breath out of her throat.

'I'd better be on my way to the studio,' said Corah. 'Shall I see you later, Erik?'

'You can lunch with me if you like.' His grey glance took her in with appreciation. 'We'll exchange impressions of Corfu and London.'

'It's a date.' Corah smiled at Jill, then sauntered out of the conference room, her silk-clad shoulder brushing Erik as she passed him so closely.

She was gone, leaving behind a whiff of 'Bandit'. 'Let's go to my office,' said Erik, and Jill walked beside him to a door marked 'Private'. She went in, absorbing the spaciousness and the wide expanse of carpeting to the big desk and the wide-shouldered swivel chair. There were big windows, a cluster of telephones, an intercom and a dictaphone. Natural hide chairs and pedestal ashtrays were provided for his visitors, on the tooled leather top of his desk there was a mess of papers, a large flip-back memo pad, and a large bronze ashtray beside a leather cigarette box. Several good paintings on the walls did not soften to any great extent the hard, businesslike atmosphere of Norlund's private office.

'You appear to be getting along all right with Corah.' He pushed aside a clutter of letters, memos and publicity roughouts, and lounged against a corner of his desk, indicating that Jill sit in the chair his secretaries probably used to take dictation. 'On the surface the pair of you seem entirely different, but I've an idea you've both been pleasantly surprised. There are unexpected depths to Corah, eh? She isn't all sugar-ice and sophistication?'

'Far from it, Mr. Norlund,' Jill agreed politely, her gaze caught by the wink of his nearest cat's-eye cufflink. 'Corah told me she was doubtful about having me at the cabana—she thought I might be a—bit superior--'

'Good lord!' he gave his deep-throated laugh, and when Jill looked up at him she saw the cleft of amusement in his cheek, while his grey

eyes were slipping from the tilt ends of her hair down to her mini-heeled walkabouts, primly disposed side by side.

'I assured Corah you were young, shy, barely fledged,' he drawled, 'but like all women, I guess she mistrusts a male opinion of another one. Why are you women so suspicious of each other? We men aren't like that.'

'You men aren't women,' she rejoined, with a flash of the spirit he could always spark off when he wished. 'We're involved so closely in the process of nature that we react towards everything in a more elemental way.'

'Women, in short, are vari-coloured cocktails of mixed-up emotions, strange fears, mystery, sentiment, and—if a man's extra lucky—humour.' He laughed quietly 'Am I right?—but of course, I can see it in your eyes. They're already telling me that I know too much about women.'

Jill immediately looked away from him, relieved when there was a knock on the door and a woman in a neat navy dress came into the room. She carried a tray on which stood a large cup of coffee and a plate of smorrebrod, the open sandwiches so beloved by Danes, and she gave Jill a friendly smile as she brought the tray to the big desk and set it down. 'Miss Trevor from Speciality is waiting to take charge of Miss Pride,' she said to Norlund.

'Good.' He spoke crisply and went round behind his desk. 'Jill, meet Annie Loder, one of my indispensables.'

'How do you do, my dear?' Miss Loder had keen, warm eyes and a manner that suggested deep affection for her job and unswerving loyalty towards the man she worked for. 'You have a meeting with the department heads at ten o'clock, Mr. Norlund,' she reminded him.

'And I've arranged an appointment with Mr. Hardrey of Hardwear Textiles for twelve o'clock tomorrow.'

'Hardrey, eh?' Norlund fingered his chin. 'I ought to give him lunch—yes, good idea! Miss Bennet may help swing the deal for that new fabric of his. He likes them blonde, as Mrs. Hardrey will testify.'

His secretary looked rather reproving at that one, and he grinned cheekily at her as he popped a piece of smoked cheese into his mouth. Jill stood by in a quiet fret to be out of his unsettling presence and among the fripperies of the Speciality Shop, and as though aware of this he told Anne Loder to let Miss Trevor in so that he could formally introduce her new assistant to her.

'Miss Trevor will coach you in currency, and handling the cash-register and receipt-writer,' he said to Jill, adding to the woman she was to work with: 'Miss Pride is an experienced sales assistant and you haven't got to teach her very much about sales technique. She's a natural, like yourself, Miss Trevor.'

The woman went pink with pride, and travelling down in the lift with her, Jill reflected that Norlund certainly knew how to exact loyalty—if that was the word?—from the women he had around him. Was it the lionesque vigour they couldn't resist, or the gravelly voice that imparted a certain foreign flavour to your name when he spoke it? Did he pick up those foreign intonations at Tjele, when, the cares of big business put aside, he plunged into the rustic joys of cornfields, windmills, and candlelit *afpens* beneath the beams of his aunt's Danish parlour? Did he sing 'I Love The Green Woods' as he strode through the pine forests, or some salty old sea ballad as he boated across the lovely, rushing fjords?

At this point Jill gave herself a mental shake. Norlund was not a sentimental man, and she had come here to work, not to indulge in fancies that were no doubt far removed from the truth. His singing

voice was probably quite mediocre, and his relatives' farm run on the most modern Danish lines ... as the store was run.

It was a complex building, studded with huge showrooms, intriguing boutiques, fur and fashion salons, *colifichets*, beauty care and pharmacy, books and records, rooftop restaurant and wine cellar. The store 'uniform' was a dark blue shirtwaister set off by crisp polka-dot collar and cuffs; an extremely attractive dress that seemed to suit most of the assistants. The majority of them were around Jill's age, wide-awake and sociable girls with whom she couldn't long be shy.

Several of them lived at the lanai, and she fell into the habit of riding home in their jalopy. Corah wasn't always modelling at the store and Jill had sensibly decided that sharing a cabana with Corah did not mean living in her pocket. Between them they established a friendly and workable routine. Jill cooked their meals, the shopping being done by Corah in her car, and tidied up the model's scattered clothing. She attended a beach barbecue and saw *Love Story* again at the drive-in movies. And one evening she was introduced to the delights of scampi at the Retreat, a restaurant tucked above the cliffs where the Pacific breakers pounded.

The lanai crowd were good fun now and again, and the boys, bold and gay as brass buttons, soon recognised that there was no getting familiar with Jill; unlike the other girls she did not invite an arm around her waist at the movies, or a kiss under the cabana palms.

She often walked to work, taking a beach route that treated her to heady vistas of the ocean, where she found rock pools, quaint shells, and sometimes saw a lone surfer riding the huge rollers that surged to the deserted sands. She would stand and watch him, marvelling at the grace of his lean, sun-dark figure as he skimmed so effortlessly down the shining walls of water.

When she arrived at the store, her eyes would be breeze-bright, her hair ruffled touched to an extra lightness here and there by the sunshine of Santa Felicia, and she would stroll the entire length of the front street windows, so excitingly set out and separated by revolving doors bound in chrome. Along the marina, palms waved above glass pagodas where during the day senior citizens sat chatting and enjoying the sea air. The rigging of racing yachts and fishing craft, the swoop of gulls, added magic to a scene Jill enjoyed each morning before she turned into the staff entrance, clocked her card, and walked between the aisles of glass-fronted counters to Speciality. She had to pass the nose-tingling doorway of Leather Goods, then Sports and Casual where there was a sweater dress in pear-green that was tempting her. Next came the lovely Floral Shop, which was close enough to Speciality to waft in fresh breaths of roses, carnations and ferns.

Chrome escalators carried customers to the various departments, and though the air-conditioning struck chill on the skin first thing, it was more than welcome when the sun mounted in the sky outside and the store began to fill up with people. A feeling of excitement would take hold of Jill when the buzz of voices, shuffling feet and whir of the escalators all blended together, like a great beating heart. Then she would be glad she had travelled all this way to work; the job had been worth coming for, and she was happy . . . happy enough . . .

Jill soon found that American women customers were slightly tougher to deal with than Englishwomen; chic, tint-haired women who were prepared to spend quite a bit on knick-knacks for lounge, patio or poolside terrace, provided they were exclusives. Various ceramic and wrought-iron craftsmen worked on commission for the store, and though some of their designs were gimmicky, there were other pieces Jill loved handling for their symmetry and fey appeal.

Miss Trevor wasn't long in discovering that her new assistant was a willing worker and a quick learner, and the two of them got along

quite well. It was already common knowledge at the store that Jill was a friend of Linda Manet's, and though she underwent a certain amount of ribbing she took it in good part and made it plain to the other girls that she didn't consider it gave her an 'in' with the boss just because she was friendly with his niece. Speculation died like a doused fire when the days went by and he wasn't seen anywhere near Speciality . . . besides, as one girl pointed out, he and Corah Bennet were old friends.

'She's got about everything,' the girl added. 'Gorgeous looks, a fabulous job, and the Viking in tow. What more could anyone want?'

'I bet he'll take some handling,' someone laughed. 'What do you think of him, Jill?'

'Positively terrifying,' she said lightly, and the conversation, which was taking part in the Cafeteria, veered to other subjects.

One Sunday Jill attended morning service with Corah at the Santa Felicia Mission, its white walls cloaked deep in bougainvillea, and afterwards Corah gave her a lift as far as the Manet house. Linda had telephoned Jill the evening before and pressed her to come. Jill had agreed, with some reluctance, nervous of seeing Norlund at the house. She didn't want to meet him socially, preferring things the way they stood at the store.

But he didn't show up at the house and Jill was able to relax and enjoy herself. Linda was eager to hear all about her first few weeks at Norlund's and her impressions of the place, and in the afternoon they drove to Palos Verdes to see the performing dolphins and whales in the Marineland there. It was fascinating and amusing to watch the blue dolphins performing a ballet, while the agility of the great whales had to be seen to be believed. The seals and porpoises had the audience in fits, and there was also a big grotto where octopuses swam eerily close to the glass windows. Exotic fish of all sorts

mingled their colours in aquariums, and Jill was particularly enchanted by the little sea-horses that swam about like glass ornaments.

Enjoyably whacked out, the two girls made their way to the restaurant and cooled off with iced lemon drinks decorated with mint and tiny strawberries. As they nibbled their strawberries off the spoons of their plastic straws, they smiled across at each other. Linda looked flushed and pretty, and all afternoon she had seemed on the verge of confiding something to Jill. But it wasn't until they were driving through the dusk to the lanai that she said, too casually:

'Heard at all from Roy Scott?'

'Why, no!' There had been so much else to occupy Jill's mind that she had quite forgotten him. Poor boy, he'd hardly be flattered!

'I—I've had a letter from Keefe.' There was an excited tremor in Linda's voice. 'As luck would have it the letter came while Mom was out to lunch on Friday. Jill, he wants to come and see me! He says Roy will be moving to the coast next weekend and he's driving out with him. Jill, what ought I to say in reply to him?'

'A big fat *yes* if you want to see him,' Jill said at once. 'I am glad he wrote to you. There, I told you he was smitten, didn't I?'

'I want to see him,' Linda admitted, 'but the snag is—I couldn't ask him to come to the house--'

'Why ever not?' Jill demanded. 'You have me there.'

'You're different, Jill.' Linda caught at her hand. 'Look, if you invited the boys to the lanai I could come there a-and Mom needn't know that I've seen Keefe--'

'I don't think it would be wise to start meeting secretly,' Jill broke in. 'Look, you aren't a baby, Linda. You're a grown-up and entitled to invite a young man to your home if you like him.'

'I know,' Linda sighed. 'But if Mom and Keefe were antagonistic towards each other, it would spoil things. He might decide not to see me any more—you can see he has plenty of pride--'

'Oh, I don't think Keefe Launay looks the sort to be frightened off by a possessive mother—yes, she is possessive, Linda,' Jill added as Linda's hand clenched nervously over hers. 'You're her baby and no man could possibly love you as she does, or give you the same kind of devotion! She may believe it, but it isn't true, you know. A man's love is the kind a girl needs when she grows up, and her life is pretty incomplete without it.'

There was a troubled silence, and Jill forced herself to further blunt truths. 'You don't owe your mother undivided devotion because she's a widow, Linda. She's also a beautiful woman, and she might start thinking about some romance of her own if you show her that you want a life of your own.'

'When I'm with you, Jill, I begin to feel confident of finding the right words to say to her, but they'll all go out of my head when I get home.' Linda slumped back against the leather of the seat and worried the brooch on her lapel. 'Loving someone puts you so at the mercy of your feelings ... it seems so wrong to cause them pain.'

'You'll hurt her in the long run if you let her possessiveness get a real grip on you and the things you want now are lost for good. You'll blame her and grow embittered,' Jill warned.

And as if to underline how easily damaged are things of beauty—such as love—Linda's brooch broke loose from its pin and fell to the carpeted floor of the car.

'What a shame!' Jill picked up the amethyst meshed in seed pearls, a family keepsake given to Linda by her grandmother. 'Would you like me to get it repaired at the store?'

'Norlund's for quality and quick service,' Linda laughed. 'I can't think of a single service that uncle of mine hasn't laid on for the fortunate citizens of Santa Felicia.'

'Well, we don't perform marriages, though we lay on the catering, the cars and the honeymoon trip,' Jill said dryly. 'It is a remarkable place, isn't it?'

'And you really like working there, Jill? No regrets about leaving the boutique in London?'

'No regrets yet,' Jill smiled. 'The work is interesting, the girls are friendly, and I like living at the lanai with Corah. Life's never dull when she's around.'

'She's wonderful-looking, isn't she? I wonder.' Linda murmured, 'if there's anything between her and Uncle Erik? Has she said anything to suggest there might be?'

'Well, they're pretty close friends,' Jill said cautiously, stowing Linda's brooch in a corner of her handbag. 'I know they've dined together at the Palmquist.'

Linda gave a whistle, for the Palmquist was the most exclusive and elegant restaurant in Santa Felicia, 'with carpeting so deep it sucks the heels clean off your pumps,' Corah had told Jill

ecstatically, 'and a wine cellar where Erik went with the steward to select a Meursault called *Goutte d'or*.'

Drop of gold! A subtle compliment a man might pay his golden companion.

'Do you see much of him, Jill?' Linda wanted to know.

'He's much too busy to bother with small fry like me,' Jill said in a dry tone of voice. 'Miss Trevor did mention that he phoned down the other afternoon to ask how I was tackling the work. She told him I was doing all right.'

'You find Uncle Erik a bit hard to take, don't you, Jill? What is it about him you don't like, or are you scared to say in case I pass your opinion on to him?' Linda gave a laugh. 'You needn't be scared. He doesn't care a brass penny what people think of him.'

And with those words Linda answered her own question—it was Norlund's cynicism that Jill found hard to take. She thought of Corah with tears clinging to her lashes, and the way she tossed in her sleep and sometimes cried out loud enough to wake Jill. The things she said made little sense and Jill never mentioned them, but when Corah sauntered into Norlund's looking as though she hadn't a care in the world, Jill knew it to be just a pose. A pose of insouciance to cover the disquiet of loving Norlund?

The two girls parted at the lanai, and Jill, too soft-hearted to resist any longer, agreed to Linda inviting Keefe and Roy to the lanai next weekend. 'I shouldn't encourage you to meet him here,' she added. 'Corah will have to be told and she's likely to tell your uncle. If he lets it out to your mother, she'll be annoyed with good reason. A straightforward invitation to your home would be much better in the long run.'

'I don't want to see-him at the house.' Linda had pulled Jill well away from the car and the chauffeur. 'I—I won't see him at all if I can't see him here—'

'All right,' Jill pacified. 'Invite them for Sunday. I'll make up a picnic and we'll take it to the beach. How's that?'

'Dreamy! Thanks, Jill!' With a hug and a wave Linda dived into the car before Jill could change her mind.

With a half-worried shake of her head Jill made her way to the cabana and let herself in. Corah wasn't yet back from a jaunt of her own and the place was wrapped in silence and darkness. Jill quickly switched on the lights, flipped on the radio, and went into the kitchen to see what the icebox had to offer in the way of a light meal. Hm, scrambled eggs and toast, she decided, with a slice of blueberry pie to follow, and a nice big cup of coffee. She hummed a few bars of the Sinatra number that was weaving its magic from out of the transistor, then found herself just looking at things. The primrose-coloured toaster that matched the snack-bar and the seats of the stools, the tall blue coffee-pot and the cooking utensil of Scandinavian design. She had known and used them for weeks and they had become familiar to her ...

But it was the merry chirp of katydids in the evening, the tinkle of the seashell windchimes in the porch, the whistling of the carrier boy tossing the morning papers against the mesh door, that had become part of her life in an almost poignant way. If she closed her eyes tightly, these homey sounds, could almost waft her back to the cottage at Liphook. An indulgence in home-pining no one knew about—but then no one had bother to ask.

Jill, quietly fashioned, unassuming, valiant as the poor learn too soon to become, was there to listen to others she never presumed to talk of her own heartaches. .

CHAPTER FIVE

THE Jewellery Department was on the third floor of the store and Jill took Linda's brooch to be repaired during her coffee break the following morning. Coming out of the department* her attention on an attractive display' of ceramic jewellery, she collided with a tall lean figure who quickly steadied her with one hand, while removing his cigarette with the other one. '*Mille pardons, petite!*' His accent was French and when Jill looked up at him she was immediately aware that there was something familiar about him.

'You're the surfer!' she exclaimed, as she recognised him.

'And you are the nymph who appears from among the rocks each morning, and then vanishes when I cease to surf and approach the beach.' He stood smiling down at her, clad casually in a longline sweater over tapered slacks. Smoke spiralled lazily from the end of his Gauloise, his eyes were deep-set, elongated, and the colour of rich dark sherry. A strip of silver cut a path through his dark hair, his features were lean and swarthy, the lazy virility of the man emphasised by the small cleft in the centre of his chin.

'So fate has arranged that we meet!' He took her hand and when she stiffened, his smile grew puckish and he gave a formal bow over her .taut, shy fingers. 'You are the girl from London, *hein?* Did you find yourself liking America—or are you lonely here?'

'Of course I'm not,' she denied, with reserve. Watching him down on the beach didn't give him the right to get personal!

'But yes—a little lonely. I see it when you stand on the beach and watch me.' He gestured significantly, then added with a twinkle: 'Must a British girl be told a man's name before speaking to him?'

'I—I suppose we are a bit formal.' Her smile was constrained under his Latin appraisal. She wanted to dart away and yet stood hesitant and fascinated as on the beach, when she had run from him only when he had come out of the water.

'It is a little sad that we must exchange names and so break the spell of *l'inconnu*, eh?' His smile was both subtle and frank as he took in her hair, her eyes, and the store frock that sheathed her slim figure in its dark blue. She realised that in all innocence she had aroused curiosity in a man who looked as though he had "gone beyond all curiosity about women; it was no real surprise to her when he said: 'My name is Roger Frenais.'

'I'm Jill Pride.' She clenched her hands behind her in case he—well, he was French, and he was Roger Frenais, and according to Corah he was a pretty fast worker.

'A very English name, Jill, and it suits you.' His eyes were agleam with amusement and his accent did strange Gallic things to her name. 'I am *enchante* to know you, but it is clear that you remain uncertain about me. What has Corah told you, that I am a wolf who eats charming *jeunes filles*?'"

'It wouldn't have been necessary for Corah to tell me, *monsieur*.' Jill darted her tawny smile into his eyes. 'Most men play the wolf, given half a chance.'

'And I am not to be given even this much of a chance, eh?' He pinched the air between his fingertips, grinning rakishly, then taking a sudden step forward to avoid a group of customers and making it necessary for Jill to step backwards against the wall. They stood close for a moment only, but it lasted long enough for Jill to catch beyond the Frenchman's shoulder a tall, striding figure with hair like corn stubble, whose cold grey eyes looked directly into hers for a chilling second. Then the doors of China and Glassware had swung shut

behind the head of Norlund's and Jill was saying hurriedly that she had to get back to work.

'A moment, please!' Roger Frenais caught at her elbow as she went to dart away. 'Do you like the theatre? I have tickets for a play at the Dome in Montecito and I should like to take you this coming Friday—if you are free and interested?'

'Oh!' said Jill, which wasn't very complimentary.

But he seemed to have a sense of humour and her reaction brought twinkles to his eyes. 'You look the kind of girl who enjoys the drama, and our beach idyll should not have a *triste* ending.'

Our beach idyll! Jill caught her breath and knew that wise girls ran from this Latin charmer while they still had the will to do so. 'It's kind of you to ask me, Mr. Frenais,' she gave him a shy smile, 'but I've promised Corah to shampoo the bedroom rugs on Friday.'

'How industrious of you,' he murmured, then he deliberately leant close again and the smoke of his Gauloise tickled her nose. 'But you know you should not believe all that Corah tells you. She carries on her shoulder a big chip of disillusion with regard to men and you are, perhaps, too *ingenue* to have noticed. You see only that Corah is beautiful and successful, but there is in her nature this torment which, perversely, makes her fey and subtle through the eye of the camera. She is assuredly the model I like best to work with, but there is in her personal life a failure to find contentment, call it what you will—even love, and so a Freudian wish to inflict punishment on all men.

'Jill,' his Gallic smile stole back, 'you will not punish me, no? I am not to blame for your friend's unhappiness.'

This jabbed, and reminded, and Jill darted a glance at the doors of China and Glassware. Any minute now, Erik Norlund would stride

out and see her talking still to Roger Frenais! 'AH right,' she said, in a driven way. 'I should like to come to the theatre with you.'

'I will call for you at seven-thirty.' He smiled down at her, whimsically. 'You will not change your mind?'

She shook her head and darted to the escalator. He watched, she knew, as she ran down the moving chrome steps. It wasn't until she was back behind the shield of her counter and showing a customer a selection of sea- shell wall-plaques that it came fully home to her what she had done. Out of unreasonable fear of Erik Norlund she had let herself be rushed into a date with a rakish and attractive Frenchman—a man who had run through the whole gamut of types, so he had thought, only to find himself confronted by a new one in Jill Pride.

Oh gosh, she thought, recalling the glorious strip of highway that joined Santa Felicia to Montecito. It curved above the smoke-blue Pacific and the moon would be halfway to heaven on Friday night!

'I rather like these,' said her customer, admiring some conch shell plant-holders. 'They're kind of cute.'

'Yes, madam,' Jill smiled, a trifle absently, 'they have a novelty appeal.'

'They'd go with those plaques, wouldn't they? Quite make my coffee-corner . . .'

The sale was clinched and Speciality fell quiet as the woman departed and all that was left was the buzz and shuffle from the other parts of the store. Miss Trevor was in the stockroom going through some P.M. that was sitting on the racks, and Jill gazed slowly round at the displays of pewter, polished wood and porcelain. There were lifelike dolls in peasant costumes, fierce Spanish-bulls and flirtatious cats.

Ornaments made from semi-precious Californian rocks, and quite a selection of Scandinavian art works, including a pair of paintings Jill often wished she could afford. One was of the Bridal Veil, a waterfall on a fjord in Norway, the other of Lyse Fjord with its towering Pulpit Rock. They had a clean breathlessness about them, a rustic magic, a something that caught at Jill's imagination.

She walked across to where they hung and, hands clasped lightly behind her, studied the paintings. Corn- gold sunlight was trapped in the lovely veil of water and the tang of the blue-grey spray could almost be felt. There was a rugged strength in the towering, pulpit-like rock, also a strange loneliness in the way it stood suspended between the fleecy sky and the deep, whirling waters. Nature is in man, and man in nature, and Jill felt certain the artist had meant to signify that—a reflection that was cut short as she heard the swoosh of the doors opening behind her.

She swung round, her nerves tightening up as she saw Erik Norlund stepping into the shop. She gazed wordlessly at him, assailed by the thought that here among the peasant dolls and the glass knick-knacks his maleness was like a burr on flowery chiffon. Oh lord, his chin was hard and his eyes without a glimmer of a smile! He was evidently going to have a go at her for loitering about in working hours with Roger Frenais!

His glance flickered round the shop, taking in the well-arranged displays on the islands and tiers of mirror-glass. His gaze dwelt rather longer on the two paintings just above Jill's tawny head, then he was looking at her, taking in her lance-slimness in the navy shirtwaister with the polka-dot collar and cuffs. 'Well, Miss Pride, how are you getting along as a member of my staff?' He strolled over and immediately dwarfed her. 'Are you settling down all right—and getting acquainted with your fellow workers?'

Ouch, that was a sarcastic one!

'Yes, thank you, Mr. Norlund,' she said, wishing fervently that Miss Trevor would come bustling in. 'I find the work very interesting.'

'You've not run up against any snags—or snares?' he drawled.

Her head went back at that one and she met the full impact of his sardonic grey eyes. 'What are you implying, Mr. Norlund?' The words were out before she could stop them.

'Am I implying something?' He peaked a flaxen eyebrow. 'Surely that would mean I was taking more than a general interest in a member of my staff—do you consider that's what I'm doing?'

She flushed at the bite to his words and shook her head. 'You saw me with Mr. Frenais—I know you thought I was loitering about.'

'You take a coffee break at ten-thirty, don't you? During that time you're free to do almost as you please, though I will add a word of warning as you seem to be expecting one,' his gaze held a faint contempt. 'Our Latin photographer is an expert when it comes to playing about with vulnerable young hearts and it might be safer, if less entertaining, if you took your coffee breaks in the Cafeteria along with the other girls.'

Jill gave a small gasp and was about to protest that she had been doing his niece a good turn when she had bumped into Frenais, when other, more reckless words took over. 'Have I broken a departmental rule, Mr. Norlund?' she flashed. 'Don't you permit any fraternising between the sexes on working premises?'

Norlund regarded her with a cool objectivity for about half a minute, then the ice in his eyes shattered into shards of amusement. 'You really are a child,' he chuckled. 'Did you enjoy the seals and dolphins at the Marineland yesterday? I know Linda had made plans to take-you to see them.'

'They were fun,' Jill said stiffly, wondering what he would say if he knew what she and Linda had planned for next Sunday. He was too forthright to appreciate his niece going behind her mother's back in order to see Keefe Launay, and Jill felt a dart of apprehension. Corah wouldn't say anything about the boys' visit if Jill asked her not to, but if Norlund found out through some other source, then *she* would be the one to bear the brunt of his anger. Somehow it was inevitable that they clash—a matter of opposing temperaments, she supposed—and she didn't wish to clash with him over something they were both concerned about, Linda's happiness.

I'll tell him, she decided, and then it was too late! Miss Trevor came in with a slip of paper in her hand. 'Oh, Mr. Norlund,' she swooped on him with her rather toothy smile, 'how very good of you to come down in person to see me! I've made out a list of the P.M. on our racks and it really is a mixed bag. Mainly single items which are now out of vogue and which I would like to get out of the way.'

'They've a similar clutter up in China and Glassware,' he said, adding with a quirk to his mouth: 'I think we might lay on a sale, don't you?'

'Oh dear,' Miss Trevor exclaimed, '*my* customers wouldn't like that. After all, this is the Speciality Shop . . .'

'The stuff can be carted down to Bon Marche,' he broke in. 'I'll arrange for a couple of lads to collect it.'

Miss Trevor beamed again and added, somewhat coyly: 'You wouldn't like to come and check that I'm not throwing out anything *too* good, Mr. Norlund?'

'I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing, Miss Trevor.' He smiled, held open a leaf of the glass doors for a trio of incoming customers and after bidding them good morning went off about his business. In a bit of a flutter the ladies watched his tall,

wide-shouldered figure go striding across the tiled rotunda round which these special boutiques were grouped; Jill had flutters of a different sort as she realised that she wouldn't get an-other chance to tell him about Sunday's picnic. She worriedly nipped the tip of her forefinger, then had to pull herself together as one of her customers, plump neck encircled by pearls, tinted hair bepetalled by a Manet hat, peremptorily asked to be shown the Bridal Veil and the Pulpit Rock!

Jill went over and lifted them off the wall, foolishly close to tears when the plump woman bought the paintings . . . not, Jill was sure, because they had a kind of magic but because the Scandinavian artist had been lionised by the New York art critics.

A busy morning merged into a slower afternoon, and Jill wasn't sorry when a couple of boys trundled a trolley through the rear door of Speciality and said they had come to collect the passed-up merchandise. Miss Trevor wasn't too keen on gum-chewing youths and she put Jill in charge of the proceedings, which meant that the boys did so much larking about that the job wasn't finished until close on five-thirty. Jill got tough then and hustled them to the service lift. 'I'm going to see a film,' she said. 'Do you want me to be late?'

'I wouldn't mind coming with you,' one of them offered. 'I've got the money for a bag of popcorn.'

'Come back in a few years' time,' Jill laughed, and made her way to the powder-room for a hasty wash. She and three of the lanai girls had decided at lunch to go and see an old art film, at a drive-in movie and Jill was looking forward to it.

She wasn't disappointed. Brilliantly directed by Ingmar Bergman, it held her absorbed until the final scene, though now and again she was aware that the voices of the actors held notes and cadences that were curiously disturbing. Of course, she realised, as the jalopy bounced homewards under the stars and the little boat of a moon, she had

heard such Nordic tones before . . . crackling with ice off the wintry fjords of the North lands! There had been ice in *his* voice that morning when he had suggested that in future she take her coffee breaks with the other girls. Darn cheek! She was glad, now, that she had agreed to go to the theatre with Roger Frenais. The man might have a bit of a reputation, but he had asked her if she felt a little lonely in America ... which was more than anyone else had done!

'You're quiet, Jill,' said the girl sitting beside her. 'Still thinking about the film, or was the Viking on the rampage this morning? Maisie said he looked a bit grim when she spotted him going past the Floral Shop and heading in the direction of Speciality.'

'He came down to see Miss Trevor about some P.M.' Jill contrived to speak lightly. 'He always looks a bit grim to me.'

'I bet Trevvy was in a flutter,' giggled Jill's companion. 'She thinks he's the tiger's whiskers.'

'Maybe he is, Sue, to older women,' Jill rejoined.

'Corah Bennet wouldn't care to hear you putting her in the same age-group with Trewy,' Sue laughed. 'Not that Corah's any teenager, and she's been around. I don't suppose you know that when she first came to model for the store there was a rumour that she'd had a baby but not a husband. The baby died, so it was said.'

There are some things that hit you with the impact of a blow, and Jill gave a pained gasp and felt as though she had been punched over the heart. 'I—I can't believe it!' she exclaimed.

'Keep your voice down.' Sue gave her a nudge in the ribs and indicated one of the girls in the front seat of the jalopy; Toni liked to gossip and Sue was evidently passing on to Jill a piece of brush fire

that had long since died down at the store—if you wanted to keep your job!

'I guess it was only a rumour, but all the same she's been seen more than once going into that pretty cemetery at the Santa Felicia Mission, and she's unlikely to have a relative buried there. Her folks live down South,' Sue added.

'It could be a friend.' Jill was reluctant to believe such a thing of Corah ... not that Jill was priggish and thought only good-time girls made those sort of mistakes. She knew full well that it was mainly good girls who landed in trouble out of love for some selfish, cynical man ...

If it was true that Corah had borne and lost a baby, it could account for the pain and disillusion from which she plainly suffered. Why she had those restless nights, and was so uncaring of male feelings. Norlund was the exception! He had undoubtedly helped over a bad patch some time or other—hadn't she said, with tears in her eyes, that she had reason to know he was more than a hard-headed catalyst?

'You won't go saying anything to Corah?' Sue spoke urgently. 'I don't suppose it's true—the big boss is hardly the type to want passed-up merchandise, and we all know how thick he is with Corah. D'you reckon she's in love with him, Jill? You share her cabana and she might have said something--'

'Corah doesn't confide her private business to me,' Jill broke in, firmly. 'We don't see all that much of one another, for she's kept tremendously busy by the various modelling agencies.'

'Gosh, don't I wish I had her looks and her job!' Sue gave a sigh of envy. 'It's more exciting than being tucked behind a counter.'

'It's hard work, and tiring,' Jill said, 'apart from the dates with merchant princes. Think of all those dozens of different ensembles a model has to change into when a fashion show is on, and those endless posings for a photographic layout. Corah often comes home looking whacked out.'

'But a girl stands the chance of landing a rich husband when slje's a model,' Sue pointed out. 'Wouldn't you like sleek cars, long sunny cruises, and a kidney pool in the back garden?'

'I'm old-fashioned,' Jill laughed. 'I happen to want— love.'

The jalopy bounced into the lanai garage, and Jill said she felt too tired for coffee and called goodnight from among the trees as she made her way to Corah's 'cabana. On her way she had to pass the one in which Ben Childers lived all alone. Though like most bachelors he was adept at looking after himself, Jill often felt a bit of a concern for Ben. It was true he went out on dates now and again, but they didn't seem to do much for that look of loneliness he had. Tonight he sat smoking a pipe on the top step of his cabana and Jill paused to say goodnight. 'I suppose,' he puffed smoke, 'you wouldn't care to come and cheer up a lonely old man for ten minutes?'

'You aren't a Daddy Moses, so stop talking like one,' Jill reproved, running up the steps and sitting down beside him. 'You're at the interesting age.'

'How would you know that, an infant like you?'

She could see the amusement glimmering in his eyes in the porch lamplight, and breathed with sudden pleasure the nutty smoke of his pipe and the scent of the tobacco plants twining against the supports of his sun-trap. Ben was a peaceful sort of person; you could talk to him without any sort of tension creeping in. 'I'm nineteen,' she said. 'Girls mature much faster these days.'

'You could be my daughter,' he smiled, 'if I had been precocious enough to marry at the age of eighteen. But I was never a dashing blade, just a steady old plodderer who had dreams of writing music like Irving Berlin's and ended up providing the mood music for TV serials and commercials.'

'You're talking as though your life is behind you instead of ahead of you, Ben,' she protested. 'There's still heaps of time for you to write the score of a fabulous show that will run on Broadway for years.'

'Ha, ha!' he scoffed. 'You should write the jokes for it!'

'Stop being a defeatist,' she gave his ribs a poke. 'I loved that song you played to me the other evening.'

'I've sent it to a music publisher in New York,' he admitted. 'Ballads are not all that popular these days, but you were so enthusiastic that I decided to take a chance. You really liked it?'

'Yes. And I'll tell you something else.' She wrapped her arms about her knees and met his eyes in the porch-light. 'Corah heard your piano and she wanted to know if it was something of your own you were playing. Lousy voice, nice song, she said.'

He gave a laugh that held a sigh in it. 'Don't make me talk about Corah,' he pleaded. 'I get angry—I get all sorts of things when I talk about her, and you can blame your insistence on maturity for that glimpse into my private hell!'

'I'm sorry, Ben--' Jill gave a sudden shiver, while a solitary, honey-winged moth flitted past her shoulder towards the incandescence of the porch-lamp, where it began to knock its heart out against the wall of glass about the glow it desired.

'Don't be sorry,' Ben growled, his pipe pushed hard into a corner of his mouth. 'But be warned that falling in love is being dependent on another person for every scrap of joy this side of living. You grab a smile from that person like a hungry bird a crumb of cake. You take a frown or an unkind word like a knife through a nerve. Oh, Jilly,' he jerked his pipe out of his mouth, 'I shouldn't be saying things like this to you. You're still young enough to have illusions, and I'm shattering them.'

'No, Ben.' She tucked a hand through his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. 'I know that love isn't always kind, and I can imagine how much it must hurt to offer your heart only to have it rejected. But that's all part of living, isn't it? We're stronger for it, we must be.'

'I guess we are,' he said, after a moment of reflection. 'We've come to grips with one of the fundamental truths when we've faced the cold light of rejection in a pair of eyes that grow warm for someone else. But I wouldn't want it to happen to you, Jilly—say; have you been out on a date with someone this evening?'

She shook her head and told him a little bit about *Wild Strawberries*.

' "The strawberry grows under the nettle,"' he quoted. 'True of a good many people, "but not of Jill Pride. Come on, sleepyhead, I can feel you yawning against my shoulder.' He got to his feet and helped her to rise. They strolled together as far as Corah's cabana, and when he said goodnight the male timbre of his voice must have carried up the steps, for Jill was met by a frown from Corah as she walked into the living-room. Corah was curled among the couch cushions, a tray of cigarette stubs and a decanter with a used glass on the table beside her. Her glance swept over Jill, heavy-lidded and strained, taking in the ruffled tawny hair and the enlarged pupils of the tawny-brown eyes. 'You're late getting in,' the ruby taffeta of Corah's housecoat

made a swishing sound as she got to her feet. 'Have you been with Ben—I thought I heard his voice?'

It was unlike Corah to question Jill so sharply, but it was obvious she was in a blue mood, and Jill answered casually that she had been to a drive-in movie with several of the girls and had spent a few pleasant minutes chatting to Ben.

'You might have phoned to let me know you were going out straight from work,' Corah snapped. 'You are in my charge, remember.'

'I'm living here,' Jill protested, 'but I don't expect you to wait up and worry about me. Good lord, I'm not a child!'

'You've little conception of what some men can be like.' Corah lit another cigarette, clicking the lighter impatiently and puffing a plume of smoke with an arrogant toss of her head.

'Are you referring to *Ben*?' Jill gazed at the other girl half in anger, half in incredulity. Ben hadn't the heart to hurt anyone but himself—by staying here at the lanai in the hope of catching a glimpse of Corah, or of winning an occasional frosty smile from her. The defencelessness of Ben and his Jove put a note of hostility into Jill's voice when she added: 'He's a nice person, and a lonely one. All he asks of me is a little conversation and sociability.'

'The one leads to the other.' Corah spoke in a cynical, brittle voice, adding with a laugh that left her eyes quite cold: 'I must say your taste in men is pretty free-ranging, my pet. My, what a leap for a kitten to take, •from suave Lancelot in the morning to Sir Galahad in the evening! I will say it's safer to meet them in that order, sweetie.'

Jill stopped nonplussed, then Corah's meaning hit home to her. So someone had told her that Roger Frenais had now made her acquaintance. Norlund, without a doubt!

'Erik Norlund can mind his own business about what I do when I'm off working premises,' she flared. 'What does he take me for, a green kid without a scrap of common sense? Well, if he's told you to warn me off Roger, then he's a bit too late. I've already promised to go to the theatre with him--'

'Simmer down, you little hothead,' Corah suddenly laughed. 'It was Roger who told me he'd met you—you don't imagine Erik takes any personal interest in his assistants, do you?'

And the searching look Corah gave Jill sparked off a quick, almost painful blush which she hurriedly took into the kitchen, where she began to make herself a couple of butter and honey sandwiches. Corah came and lounged-in the doorway, the strip curtaining framing her ruby-clad figure. The ruby colour made her skin glow like the deep cream on the milk Jill poured into a blue beaker. 'Want some?' she asked.

'Not my tippie,' Corah drawled, turning back into the living-room and pacing about, restless as a cat and just as graceful, while Jill perched on a stool and nibbled her sandwiches. The constraint between the two girls was broken suddenly, raggedly, by Corah. She stubbed her cigarette, sat down with a swish of taffeta and leant towards Jill. 'If I worry about you, honey,' she said, 'it's because, without looking anything like me, you are in a sense the kid I was at nineteen. The kid bought up on a small farm down South, who left home one evening on a Greyhound bus bound for Hollywood. My story isn't a very original one, Jill, but it's personal, and that's what makes it important. Shall I go on?'

Yes, oh yes, Jill thought, as she quickly nodded. She was startled by her own eagerness, but knew it was not occasioned by a petty desire to be told secrets. She liked Corah, cared that she was unhappy and wanted to participate in her need to unburden herself.

'I'd won a couple of local beauty competitions,' Corah went on, 'and they gave me the idea I was a cinch for the movies. My dear, you talk about being green—I was fey-green! I really believed that a head of wild- honey hair, a nice figure and good teeth were all I needed to get into pictures. I came West with my prize money and within two months every bean had been shelled out on my digs, my agent, and photographic still to send round to the studios. Not a mogul grabbed at the chance to put Corah Lee Bennet into a wide-screen epic. I was just one more blonde moth drawn irresistibly to the neon lights of the Hollywood dream factory.'

Corah swung one long bare leg over the other and indicated its shape with a sweep of her hand. 'These stems of mine got me a job in a club called the Black Cat, where the cigarette girls were dressed up like saucy cats in mesh stockings, black velvet costumes and cat's ears. I was still buoyed up at this time by the hope that I'd get a call from one of the studios to go along for a film test, and the club was quite a smart place on the Sunset Strip. The men who dined there were the maturely attractive sort, you know. They were friendly and I dated one or two of them—and then one night I met a man called Duarte Foster.

'For me, from the moment I looked at him, it was *cherchez l'homme* all the way, even though something prodded my brain and warned me that he would put me through such a mill of emotion that I'd end up with all caring squeezed out of my heart. He wasn't young any more, and he had the kind of money and background that I'd seen down South but had never known myself. He was one of the F.F.V.s, which means First Families of Virginia. He knew the world, and I was mad about him, too fast, too wildly, all my dreams of being a movie star scattered like so much dust on the tail of a comet. " 'Tis fame I crave, 'tis fame I must have." That was never me, I guess. It was Duarte I wanted. I loved him, and I thought he loved me ... '

That cynical flicker of a smile distorted for a moment the wide, warm shape of Corah's mouth. She shrugged and looked at her painted fingernails, studying them so closely that Jill knew, with sympathy clutching at her throat, that Corah was fighting the weakness of tears.

'H-he ran a racy Impala,' she continued, 'and he knew how to get a girl with the small attentions—if you can call trifles like Fauchon foods, Chanel perfume, a Gucci handbag, the small attentions. I didn't. I thought of them as *gages d'amour*. I was a country lemon of nineteen and crazy about his Sulka ties, handcut suits, and the blue cornflower that always glowed in his buttonhole. The image was of far more importance to me than the truth behind it, for I didn't know then that real love is an affinity between the minds and bodies of two people, a perfect meeting, resulting in physical *and* mental unity. But in the flattery of candlelit dining, wearing his camellias, the he^rt charmed out of me by his voice, his manners, his worldliness, I was up on cloud nine—and flying straight into the path of lightning like a lost bird.'

Corah rose restlessly and bent to the driftwood box for a cigarette. Her hand shook as she carried the lighter to the tip of it. Her face was pale, so that her eyes looked like twin jades. She looked her age, tonight, with the cosmetics washed off her skin and the little lines of trouble showing beside her mouth and her eyes.

'Duarte had a built-in resistance to marriage,' she said, puffing a cloud of smoke. 'I should have guessed, a man his age and still unmarried despite all that devilish charm of his. But I didn't guess, because when you're up to your ears in an infatuation you see nothing but what you want to see; hear nothing but the voice of the enticer in your garden of Eden. Happy marriage, he once laughed, as only he could laugh, as though you were the sweetest, silliest little thing on earth. You mean mirage, my pet. When you get close to it, you find it's just an illusion. It's love that's the reality. Nothing is more important than love . . .

'He took me to Europe,' ash flew off the end of Corah's cigarette and landed on one of her Corfu rugs. 'Paris in the spring with the acacias in bloom along the banks of the Seine. Then on to Florence where we stayed at a romantic old palazzo. From there to Rome and a taste of the crazy night-life, and on to Seville and the bull-fights ... it was in Spain, on one of the roads that sweep round the mountains like corkscrews, that Duarte crashed his car!'

Jill caught her breath, and saw that the only colour in Corah's face was the deep green of her eyes. 'By then a certain amount of disillusion had crept into what I felt for Duarte, but I still wanted to marry him—I hated the way we were living, you see! The car had crashed near a Spanish convent and some field workers helped carry Duarte there on the leaf of an old, torn-off door. I can remember the nuns to this day, in their enormous starched wimples, being so kind to me. Duarte was dying, you see! I knelt beside him on the stone floor of the chapel and asked him to marry me. There was a visiting priest at the convent and I thought, now, that Duarte would do this one last thing for me. He lay looking up at me. He had a disturbing face, the kind that haunted, and there was a locked in, swearing look about it when he said, quite deliberately, though his body was shaking with pain: "The Fosters don't marry little girls from off hillbilly farms. I've given you more fun in six months than any other man will ever give you again—and with your farm girl's robust constitution you'll probably live to be eighty!" Th-the nuns didn't understand what he was saying to me and I was so thankful about that—then all at once he spoke in Spanish to one of them and she rustled away in her long robe and returned with the priest.

' "All right, I'll marry you," Duarte said to me—and he laughed, Jill, though it must have been agony the way he was all busted up inside. "It will give me something to chuckle about as I go to perdition—the look on the faces of the Fosters when they meet my little hillbilly bride. You must present yourself to them, honey. Promise me you'll do that little thing for me."

Corah mashed out her cigarette, her face a mask of pain as she remembered that evening in the hills of Spain, when the man she had loved had died as he had lived, with irony on his lips and no love for anyone in his cold, cynical heart. 'Towards the end of the marriage service,' she continued, 'Duarte was so exhausted and weak that I had to put his ring on my own finger. It was his signet ring with his family crest on it, and I wore it only that one time. After he died, I had him buried in Spain, then I flew home to the States. I had promised to go and see his people, but I never kept that promise. Nor did I return to Carolina. Somehow I couldn't face my people after that sojourn in Europe—my upbringing had been strict and I had always attended church. I had believed in being good, but for months, with Duarte, I had been what my folks would call "bad".

'For several weeks after Duarte died I lived rather aimlessly on the money I got from selling some jewellery he had bought me, then I realised that I was going to have a child. I was stunned. I didn't want a perpetual reminder of him, and the things he had said to me at the last. I fought the idea of bearing a child to him and I tried to ignore what lay under my heart, where love had ruled and died and left only disillusion. But when you're carrying a child, it's too much with you to be ignored. One night as you lie alone you feel its first movement, and feeling for the new, incredible life wipes out everything else. A child, *yours*, whom you can live for, love, and if a girl rear not to make your mistake.'

A sad little smile ran across Corah's face as she looked at Jill, and Jill saw tonight that it had marked her lovely face, the tragedy of loving and losing. 'As love grew in me for the baby, I grew confident that I could be a good mother to it. I could work—hadn't I a farm girl's constitution?—and I took a job in a supermarket, working a cash register. I bought things for my baby and made my two rented rooms look cosy and nice. I was still only nineteen and trying hard not to be hurt because I had let the chance of real married love slip out of my

grasp . . . then when I had been carrying the baby seven months, he decided to get born . . .'

Corah shuddered, and Jill reached out and held her hand, tightly. 'That car crash in Spain had done more than kill Duarte, it had caused some sort of injury to the baby when I had been thrown forward against the gears,' these words were wrung out, as though never before had Corah been able to say them. 'It was a little boy. He lived just eight hours and then he died. He was like a small wax doll I used to play with when I was a kid down on the farm, with petals closed down over his eyes and a tiny bud of a mouth ...'

Tears stole out of Corah's eyes and ran down her cheeks. The awful part was that I had to lose him all alone, far from home, with the things Duarte had said still burning into my mind like acid. Forget the past year, the nurses said to me. Start anew with the slate wiped clean. It sounded easy enough, to walk out of the hospital and leave all bitterness behind me, but at the age of twenty I was soured on life. Duarte had been taken from me—cruel as he had been—and now my baby, my hope, had gone as well. I had no money. My hospital bills had taken the last of my sayings and I couldn't make the effort to go back to the supermarket. One night I—I walked down, to the seashore and I decided to walk way out into the clean sea and not stop until it came over my head and shut out the sound of Duarte's last bitter words and killed the aching in my heart and my arms for the baby I had held so briefly.

'It was late in the year and the water was cold. I thought I was all alone, but there was someone else on the beach that night—someone who often walked there, a man as lonely in *his* way as I was in mine. I couldn't swim, and it would have been so easy to die, there in the deep, secret ocean, if Erik Norlund hadn't spotted me. He swam out after me and I fought so hard he had to knock me out. When I came to, I was sprawled on the sand and he was pummeling out of me the water I had swallowed. He looked grim and fearful to me, with the

weird light of the clouded moon playing over his face, his silver hair and great shoulders. I mewed there on the sand like a frightened kitten, and as though I were a kitten he hoisted me up, carried me to his car and drove me to his penthouse above the store. He said he had no use for quitters, as he stood me under the shower. He went on with that theme as he towelled me like an infant and made me drink hot rum and milk. He was like a strong, clean wind sweeping over the desolation of my life, and he showed me the way back to sanity.'

Corah turned Jill's hand and studied its smallness and neat, unvarnished nails. 'Now you know, sweetie, why I feel as I do about Erik, and why I worry about the other kittens he takes under his wing. I owe him my life and my career. I consider him the finest man I've ever met—oh, not because he's an angel, but because he has an earthy humanity about him that makes it impossible for him to ever hurt a woman. If he laughs at us, it's because we tickle his sense of humour. He doesn't laugh from cruelty, or mock just to be sadistic. He's a real man,' Corah gave Jill a meaningful smile, 'and the woman he makes his wife will be very fortunate indeed.'

She rose to her feet. Jill watched her comb her fingers through her wild-honey hair and knew, now that there was no obstacle to her marriage with the man she had every reason to love. He was probably waiting for the last bitter dregs to drain out of Corah's heart, and something seemed to tell Jill, tonight, that he hadn't much longer to wait.

'Say, I didn't mean to make you feel sad.' Corah cupped Jill's chin and smiled down at her. 'I just don't want you to part with your illusions as easily as I did. You're the age I was when I came to this part of the world, and there are men here who are thoroughly skilled in all the gambits of the love game. Don't get hurt, my *kylling*. Give your heart where it will be in safe keeping, not in pawn to a man who lives only for kicks.'

Corah slept sounder for having talked about her unhappy marriage, but Jill lay wakeful. The chirp of the katydids and the night-time rustle of leaves could not lull her off to sleep, or soothe a haunting sense of guilt. She had blamed Norlund in her mind for Corah's unhappiness, and all the time he waited to give her what she had not found with Duarte Foster. With the patience of the strong he held in check the emotions which Foster had taught Corah to hate and distrust. He held them in check because he had been the solitary observer of Corah's deep despair at the time her child had died.

He must love her, mustn't he? And on that thought Jill drifted off to sleep and dreamed of a mountain, high and insurmountable, casting such a dense shadow that it blocked the sunshine into which she wanted to run and play. As she cooked breakfast the following morning, she thought of her dream and absently turned Corah's eggs on their golden faces. To dream of a mountain was said to indicate a barrier ... but what possible barrier was stopping Jill Pride from enjoying her new life in sunny Santa Felicia?

That evening Jill felt like being on her own and she slipped away from the lanai and made for a nearby beach. The horizon was a jag of fire where the sun was going into the sea, a group of pelicans stood among some rocks; weird-looking in the falling dusk, while the long curving lines of the distant surf set a scene of loneliness Jill felt very much a part of as she wandered along. It had been warm all day, but now a wind was rising, combing Jill's hair back from her temples and playing-cool over her throat. Damp driftwood had been washed to the beach and she picked up a piece, smoothly polished by the sea and dark as the night that was filling the sky. It was old, tossed down the years, perhaps from a wrecked windjammer, those exotic sailing ships of long ago, their great sails billowing in the wind as they set a course for the China Seas or the icy waters of the far North.

Jill smiled at her thoughts, as she stood at the edge of the sands, gazing out at the strange sea-light. The sea was never quite dark, as though like the sky over a city it held the radiance of a civilisation far down on the ocean bottom. A silver Eldorado, Jill decided, where men in the modern armour of diving-suit and helmet would go exploring through the forests and jungles of the sea in search of leaves made of emeralds and roses made of rubies. Jill smiled again at her own nonsense, but always, from a child, she had had a tendency to let her mind go wandering off into a world of fantasy. She knew it to be a form of escape—why, tonight, did she wish to escape from reality?

She turned her gaze to the pelicans that stood so still, like grave old salts gazing far out to sea where their memories sailed in the ships of their youth. You could understand, she thought, why the lonely were drawn to the sea, and why the despairing sought it out when there seemed nothing left to live for. A reflection that led inevitably to Corah and the story she had related last night.

Jill gave a shiver, and as she nestled her chin into the amber floss of her sweater, she wondered if it was along this beach Erik Norlund had been strolling when the moon had broken free of the clouds and he had seen a woman wading into the sea, her long hair streaming in the night wind. He had plunged in after her, brought her to the shore, and helped her find the way back to life, laughter—and love.

Who was right about him, really? His niece who said he had little patience with the foibles of women, or Corah who thought him incapable of hurting one? Jill only knew that for her he was unpredictable as a hurricane. Since being caught in his eye, her life had been turned topsy-turvy, and though there had been times when she had almost liked him, she could never really believe that he ever had a gentle thought or felt a tender emotion . . .

Or could it be—she tensed in her jersey of soft floss, olive trews and laced loafers—that she feared to think of him in a gentle, beguiling, relaxed mood?

'What is it you are enjoying, the moon trails on the sea, or the *pelikanen*?' drawled a voice above the back of her head.

Think of the devil and you'll conjure him! That was what flashed through Jill's mind a second before she turned to confront Erik Norlund in the moonglow. She looked up into the swashbuckling eyes in the tough, authoritative face, saw the glimmer of his teeth, and felt a swift urge to run away . . . whether from him or herself she wasn't sure!

He wore a turtle-neck sweater and corded trousers; his night-stalking gear, presumably. The moonlight was kind to the lines in his face and he looked a curiously younger edition of the man who ruled Norlund's. 'Good evening, Mr. Norlund,' Jill said. 'I had heard that you liked walking alone on the seashore.'

'It is something we have in common, eh, a love of the sea?' He fell into step beside her and took out of her hand for an amused appraisal the piece of driftwood she had picked up. 'Time and tide have given this quite a patina. Going to keep it?'

She nodded and took it into her own hands again, slanting him a shy smile. 'I'm curious about the many shores it has drifted to before coming to rest on the sands of Santa Felicia, and I'm determined to believe that it once formed part of a pirate galleon.'

'The romantic ideas you *kvinder* get into your heads,' he laughed.

'What does that word mean?' she asked. 'Is it Danish?'

'Yes, it's Danish for "women",' he said. 'It's a much kinder word, I think, but then I'm prejudiced. Denmark is in my blood and I never lose an opportunity to flaunt my love of the language.'

'And what is Danish for man?' They stopped walking and Jill perched on a mooring bollard, while Erik lounged against a cobbled wall beyond which lay fishing boats, sheds where the fish was unloaded and a twinkle of lights from the harbour taverns and chalets. Moon shadows patterned the sand like guipure lace, while the surface of the sea shimmered with coins of silver.

'Were we in Denmark,' Erik cupped his hands to shield his lighter flame from the breeze blowing off the sea, 'I should be a *Danske mand*, and you would be referred to as *lille froken*.'

'*Lille* must mean little,' Jill smiled, and fingered the knots and seams of the bollard.

'*Froken* is a maiden, a girl without a husband,' he puffed the strong smoke of one of his *cigarillos*, and when Jill met his eyes she saw moonlight and a smile in them. 'Perched there, as though on a sea rock, you look like *Den Lille Havefrue*.'

Jill had read her Hans Andersen and her heart gave an odd little skip at Erik's reference to her as The Little Mermaid—it was quite a compliment coming from such a man! The Viking past was so stamped on him, physically, that you forgot that he might also have a touch of the fey charm of his grandfather's country.

'Corah was telling me the other day, Mr. Norlund, that you often take trips to Denmark.' Jill could hear herself speaking *so* politely, and knew in her heart that she was warding off the kind of talk that had led to his casual and rather charming compliment. 'You have relatives there, haven't you?'

He didn't answer directly and her glance found his face, so curiously altered and gentle in the moonlight, his light hair sheened to a cap of silver as she had seen it once before in London, in the glow of the neons. His glance met hers, a faint smile was tugging at his lips, as though her politeness had amused him, then he looked away from her towards the sea.

'Yes, there is a branch of the Norlund tree still flourishing in Jutland,' he said. 'I have two married cousins there who have several children, and I like to visit their farm. I go also to enjoy the things that America can't offer.'

A pause followed his words; it was as though, like a boy, he needed encouragement before revealing the things that gave him special pleasure. Jill knew there was a layer of reserve in this man, and she said gently: 'Won't you tell me about them?' "

And so she learned about the torchlight sleigh rides on the frozen lakes. Fey-green Copenhagen where the salt in the air turned the copper roofs and steeples a pale green. Old miming theatres, the music of Grieg and Nielsen performed by candlelight in the halls of old castles, and how the beechwoods were filled with songbirds when the trees were budding in the spring and hundreds of white anemones lay like snow on the ground.

'Denmark for me is like taking a deep, necessary breath after much running. I guess it's my homeland as America can never be.'

These words drifted out on the silky shuffle of the sea, while blown on the wind came the, faint, merry wheezing of a concertina from one of the harbour taverns. Jill was very aware of the man beside her, of her aloneness with him among the shifting-shadows of the beach, and she felt a sense of wonderment that, tomorrow she would see him striding through the store clad faultlessly in his business grey, a different person entirely from the one who enjoyed old castles and

music by candlelight; sleigh rides on the ice-locked lakes with cressets blowing their sparks back in the rush of the wind ...

'Denmark sounds very lovely,' she murmured. 'Like a fairytale land.'

'Why not take your vacation there, when it comes round?' The gravelly warmth had gone out of his voice, and it had grown distant, as though he was pulling himself up for speaking of personal enchantment to an employee.

Jill felt the enchantment slip out of her grasp and let it go with a feeling of loss. 'As a newcomer to the store,' she said, 'I suppose I must take my holiday towards the end of the year?'

'I'm afraid so.' He flicked the stub of his *cigarillo* from his fingers. 'In fairness to the other girls, I can't allow you any preferential treatment. But winter holidays can be a lot of fun, and if you should decide to go to Denmark, I can put you in touch with some charming people who speak English and with whom you can stay.'

'Thank you, Mr. Norlund. I'm sure I should enjoy the things you've described to me.' Jill slipped off the bollard and dusted sand from her trews. There was a sudden ache at the base of her throat, and the wind had grown cold. She must make her way home—if you could call an empty cabana by that warm, welcoming word? Corah had gone to Palm Springs to model beachwear and Jill would be spending a couple of nights alone.

'Corah's away for a day or so, isn't she?' Norlund spoke abruptly. 'Which no doubt means you'll be feeding yourself on peanut-butter sandwiches and scrambled eggs. Come on, come with me and get stoked up on the kind of food folks eat in Denmark.'

He caught at her hand, and Jill, feeling the hard clasp of his fingers, had to fight with herself not to fight him and so make a drama out of a

casual invitation to a meal. She had gone out eating with him before tonight, and experienced his swift changes of mood without getting all emotional. 'W-where are we going?' she asked, trotting along beside his striding figure, leaping with him over a line of upturned boats.

'To the *Falkehuset*, the Falcon's House,' he told her, taking her round the waist and swinging her from the beach to the cobbled pavement above the harbour sheds. With lithe ease he leapt to join her and they crossed the road towards an alleyway. Jill was a stranger to this part of town, the old part, where smuggling had once flourished and men had been slipped knockout drops in their rum, to wake up on the outward-bound whalers and schooners, in the service of their tough masters.

'And what kind of things can I expect to eat at the Falcon's House?' Her heart had lightened again, like a kite that bobbed skyward after almost zooming down to earth. She didn't dare confess, even to herself, that it hadn't been entirely the thought of that empty cabana which had made her feel so flat not so many minutes ago.

'How about a bear steak or a reindeer tongue?' he said, in his drollest tone of voice. 'Helped down by mead out of a skull, with wild grapes for dessert?'

'The reindeer tongue sounds tasty,' she said, falling in with his mood, 'but I don't fancy my mead out of a skull.'

'Sissy!' He laughed almost in her hair as he bent his tall head under a low archway and they went down a flight of lamplit steps into a cellar restaurant. Candles burned on the tables and flickered in many reflections in the shields, axe-blades and pewter plaques hanging on the crude brick walls. Old clocks ticked in shadowy corners, and on the sills below the uneven windows there were *lurs*, and brass boxes that could have held coins out of a Viking's purse, or the pins from the

long hair of his stolen bride. A pair of red clogs, small enough to fit a child, reposed on the sill near the table to which Jill and Erik were shown.

'*Hvordan har De det, Invar?*' Erik enquired of their waiter, as he set matches to the candles in a pair of smoke-glass holders in the centre of the table. 'The sciatica is troubling you less?'

'*Ingen arsag, Herr Norlund!*' Shoulders, hands and eyes were lifted to the smoke-black beams of the ceiling. 'Is it an ache of the bones, or of the heart?— that is what I ask myself. *Hvad en prisen* when a man leaves his *gronholml* Do you not think?'

'Are there not compensations, Invar?' Erik sat looking at the waiter, but for a second Jill had felt the silvery flick of his eyes. Her heart turned, as it does when a bus sweeps you down a hill. Did it concern him, after all, that her heart might ache now and again for the green island she had left?

'I make a good living, and I have seen how the Americans live,' Invar said, 'but I think I will go home —soon. And now,' his smile swept from Erik to Jill, 'what will you order?'

'Smorrebrød?' Erik quizzed Jill. 'The real thing, with Schnapps and Pilsen, eh?'

'Sounds lovely and Danish,' she said, her face delicately hollowed in the candleglow, young and eager.

'Well, what do you think of the *Falkehuset*?' Erik asked, when their waiter went to fetch their food and drink.

She gazed round at the Nordic faces in the candlelight, and the savage glories and follies were alive again within these smoky walls, the modern world shut out and the past locked in with the smell of

herrings, pickles, strong lager, and the smoke of *kungspipan* and dark *cigarillos*. 'It's like a smoky hall of Valhalla,' she said to Erik. 'I can just imagine the Danish chieftains in their helmets and long cloaks patterned with falcons, laughing like devils—and looking like you.'

She fingered the ironstone ashtray and bore his grey-eyed scrutiny with a mixture of humour and tension.

Well, *they* had looked exactly like him, full of a rustic strength, with thin-bladed noses and eyes that gleamed with all the danger of their swords!

' "Man is a substance clad in shadows," he murmured. 'I wonder if woman is a shadow clad in substance?'

'Meaning?' She copied his habit and quirked an eyebrow.

'That what a man sees when he looks at a woman is in his mind only.'

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'Now you're talking like a cynic instead of a Viking,' she reproved.

'Which do you prefer, *lille froken*—as if I didn't know!' He laughed and for a moment his fingers touched hers across the table—a flash of need in him to reach across the gulf of human separateness for warm contact with someone else. That was how it was between two people in love, Jill thought, and the woman he loved was out of physical touch tonight, and he was in the mood for company!

She warmed, unexpectedly, to his receptive mood and wanted to pretend that he was a sea-roving stranger who had invited her to have supper with him while his ship refuelled for further voyaging.

'You must be thinking me very much at home among these pagan reminders of the Vikings?' He gestured round at the broad-blades, the

winged helmets and *lurs*, the Viking horns from which the sea-rovers quaffed drink as strong and potent as the *aquavit* of present-day Scandinavia.

She nodded, faintly smiling and unable to contradict him.

'Do I look and behave so differently from other men?' He raised his shaggy brows at her and had a lift to his head that was as arrogant as an elk's.

She could almost have laughed aloud at the question and thought of how it was expressed in the Bible— 'fearfully and wonderfully made.' The hefty sweater that gloved him to the throat was a dull green, and it threw into startling contrast his Nordic hair and eyes. Feeling her eyes widening and locking with his, she said hurriedly: 'You're like your grandfather to look at—I mean I'm judging from that big portrait of him in the conference room at the store.'

'He was a mighty tough old bird.' A quick smile of affection slashed lines beside Erik's mouth and eyes, and he went on to tell her how his grandfather had striven to help banish the old sweatshop system of years ago, until the garment game had assumed the respect and dignity that it deserved. It had been a battle, an exciting but terrifying one at times, for there had been ruthless factions that had reaped enormous profits out of sweating their labour. 'No man ever got on in big business by being sentimental,' Erik added, 'but it pays bigger dividends in the long run to provide good working conditions for one's employees.'

'Is that the only reason why you do it?' She glanced down with a smile and knew from the things Corah had told her that Norlund wasn't quite so hard and cool as he made out.

'Ah, here comes our food!' She heard him rub his hands together. 'I hope you're feeling hungry?'

'I'm ravenous.' She had not bothered to cook anything after getting in from work and her eyes feasted on the large platter which Invar set down on the table. There were silvery fishes rolled round pieces of onion, slices of smoked salmon, chunks of pickles and cheeses, stuffed eggs, mushrooms and meatballs. There was also a plate of seeded rye bread, a dish of creamy butler, and pale Schnapps and golden lager. Invar poured the *aquavit* into small glasses and the lager into tall, slender ones, then he wished them happy eating and left them to their colourful feast.

'You must toss back your Schnapps in one gulp,' Erik warned, his eyes wicked with twinkles, 'and don't you dare choke over it!'

'Then don't look at me,' she said. 'You always manage to unnerve me just as I'm about to drink something.'

'It's the custom to look at one's table companion as the Schnapps is tossed back. According to the Scandinavians,' a deep cleft sprang into his left cheek, 'it keeps love alive and the stork a-flying. *Skål!*' Back went his blond head, and Jill took the plunge and followed suit, their empty glasses hitting the table in unison.

'Douse the fire with your lager,' he laughed at the tears in her eyes as she hurriedly gulped at her lager. 'Feels good, eh?'

'I feel as though I've swallowed fire and ice,' she said, breathlessly. 'Anyway, I didn't choke.'

'You must be growing up,' he drawled.

The open sandwiches were made by buttering a slice of bread and piling on its surface whatever ingredients took your fancy. Made hungry and daring by the spicy Schnapps, Jill experimented with various mixtures and thoroughly enjoyed them. After strawberries with wild honey, she still had room for a creamy *wienerbrød* with her

aftenskaffe, and wanted to know how she thanked him in Danish for such a Valhallan meal.

'You say *tak for maten*, if you feel you must say it,' he smiled. 'It means thank you for the food.'

'*Tak for maten*' she repeated after him, solemnly, with a passable good accent.

'*Velbekomme*.' He inclined his head in a foreign way that yet seemed natural in him. His eyes drowsed behind half-lowered lids and shadows were deepening over his strong face as one by one the candles flickered out round "the dining-room."

'You must come here often, Mr. Norlund.' Jill spoke brightly as she looked round her, as though suddenly wary of the intimate shadows and the low voices they had been using. 'People keep bowing and raising their glasses to you—and looking at me. I think they're wondering where your real girl is tonight.'

'My *real* girl?' He peaked a rather mocking eyebrow. 'Aren't you real after all, *lille hons*? I had thought there was a pixie quality about you and that you might vanish before I could stop you. Are you planning to give me the slip?'

She shook her head and felt her smile put a strain on her lips. 'I shall be back behind my counter in the morning. I'm Jill Pride, remember, not a sea-pixie who takes form when the moon is full and there are silver trails to follow to the beach.'

'I've heard that you like the beach just as much in the mornings,' there was a sudden cynical note of meaning in his voice. 'You know, when a slight mist drifts along the sands and the breakers thunder to the shore like chariots.'

Chariots—with a Delphi bronze riding one of them! Jill caught her underlip between her teeth and realised that Erik had seen her, or been informed that she sometimes watched Roger Frenais surfing of a morning. It chilled her that he should know, and mention it! She watched him settle the supper bill and she didn't like the hard jut to his chin.

CHAPTER SIX

JOVIAL remarks in Danish accompanied them to the door, to which Erik responded in the same tongue. Jill smiled and said, '*God nat*,' but once outside in the night air, all that smoky, candlelit friendliness left behind, she felt her smile stiffening and fading. A nearby tavern had ejected a few merry fishermen into the alleyway, and when one of them lurched towards Jill, Erik took her by the arm. Obeying a reflex she couldn't control, she tried to draw free of him, and his fingers at once tightened, letting her feel their strength without actually hurting her.

'What are you sulking about?' he enquired.

'As if you didn't know!' Her voice had a shake to it. 'I resent being treated like a child—I'm not one! I don't have to be warned about every step I take and every person I speak to.'

'I act merely *in loco parentis*.' His voice was quite unruffled. 'Especially right now, with Corah at Palm Springs. It's a pity Frenais wasn't booked for the assignment.'

Jill's nerves gave a jump, for his deliberate mention of Roger confirmed her suspicion that in asking her to have supper with him he had been paving the way for further warning that wise little girls steered clear of dark and dangerous Latins. *In loco parentis*, indeed? He just wanted to impose his bossy will upon her!

'Your spies keep you well informed, don't they?' she said, cuttingly.

He gave a deep-throated laugh above her head. 'I happen to know, my child, that Frenais surfs of a morning and that you take the beach route to work.'

Corah mentioned it to me. She was overwhelmed by your energy, being a typical American who prefers driving everywhere. Does Frenais look very *seduisant* riding the waves?'

'You've got a darn cheek if you're insinuating I walk to work in order to see Mr. Frenais surfing!' Jill vibrated with indignation, made all the more acute because she had so enjoyed eating *Danske* food with him, absorbed in his tales of Denmark.

'The fellow's a Latin and a handsome one,' Norlund's voice was gravelly and mocking. 'I'm sure he has impressed you with his looks and his surfing skill—has he dated you?'

'Aren't you quite so sure about that?' she flared. 'Don't you consider that I rate a *real* date from a man?'

She heard him catch his breath, then caught hers in quick alarm as he swung her back against the door of one of the harbour sheds and imprisoned her within the compass of his arms. 'You're asking for trouble if you tangle with me, young lady,' he warned. 'If you can't see for yourself that Frenais is a notorious girl-chaser, then it's got to be pointed out to you.'

'I-I don't judge people from the say-so of others, I make up my own mind,' Jill said, straining back against the hut door, her nostrils quivering nervously and assailed by a masculine mixture of strong tobacco, *aquavit*, and skin-warmed wool. 'I happen to like Roger—is that a crime?' she asked defiantly.

'It could be, if you took him seriously.' Contempt edged Norlund's voice. 'He's the kind of guy who changes girls as often as he changes his shirts, definitely not the sort I'd trust with a kid sister of mine—and I suppose I regard you more or less in that light.'

'How overwhelmingly charitable of you, Mr. Norlund!'

'Sarcasm in the young is as nauseating as kitten-talk in the mature,' he crisped. 'Cut it out, infant, and stick to being sweet and charming.'

'Now who's being sarcastic?' she enquired,, then felt her knuckles bruise themselves against the roughness of the hut door as he came a step closer and she saw the dangerous glinting of his eyes. Then he gripped her by the shoulders and she tautened into a slim lance of panic. 'Let me go!' Her grazed knuckles swung in self- defence against his hard chest, 'It's late and I want to go home--'

'What are you suddenly afraid of?' Her hands were puny as moths flying against him and she felt the heat from the *aquavit* of his low, laughing breath. 'That I am what you implied—a pagan? Are you realising how alone we are right here, with only the moon and the sea to bear witness to whatever I do? The moon and the sea—pagan deities, little one, which the Norsemen worshipped as gods in their temples--'

'Oh, stop it!' Jill forced herself to stop struggling and met his eyes in the moonlight. 'Y-you couldn't be so scornful of Roger a-and then behave like a rake yourself--'

'Could be I had a spanking in mind.' His glance stroked her, mockingly. 'What else do you imagine I was talking about—a kissing?'

'Oh!' The very idea shocked the breath out of her, then she heard him laughing with real amusement, felt its vibration in his chest under her hands, and suddenly he was so unbearable in his mockery that she had to find relief in a hard smack across his clefted cheek. "Laughter stopped dead in him, while Jill gasped from the painful tingle in her fingers and from the jolt of apprehension that shook her heart. *What had she done?*

'That had to happen some time, eh?' His voice was low, with a silky danger to it. Then his left hand curved about the nape of her neck and her hair tumbled over his fingers as he tilted her head in helplessness in the large palm of his hand. The rake of his eyes from her lips to her throat made her shake like a rabbit—she had never felt so afraid, so incapable of movement. In a dream, or a nightmare, she heard him say:

'Well, I'm darned if you or anyone else will play paddy-whack on my face, young lady!' The moon was directly overhead, and then it was out of sight and the cry on Jill's lips was lost under the punishing warmth of Erik's mouth ...

Half an eternity later she was conscious of breaking free of him and running . . . running and not stopping until she reached the lanai and fled among the trees to Corah's cabana. She fumbled the key out of the pocket of her trews, unlocked the door with a shaking hand and hurried in out of the night. The door slammed behind her, and then she sank down in a chair and burst into tears. She had never felt so miserable. She wanted **to** go home to England, and she didn't care a thread of cotton if she got her cards first thing in the morning!

Jill learned the following morning, however, that Norlund had flown to New York to attend several trade conferences. They would probably keep him there a week or more. Miss Trevor said, adding with a sigh that the store was never the same with Mr. Norlund away.

For Jill it was a blissful relief that she wouldn't have **to** see him for at least a week. When he returned he would be too full of business talks and trade agreements **to** remember their brush on the beach. She flushed wildly, remembering it, The flush had died right away when she turned to the counter, and Miss Trevor remarked that she was

looking rather pale. 'You look as though you didn't have much sleep last night,' she said curiously.

'I-I didn't.' Jill ran the tip of her tongue along a lip that still throbbed a little. 'Corah's away on a modelling job and the cabana seems empty and strange without her.'

'Oh, yes!' Miss Trevor's eyes went gossip-bright. 'She's at Palm Spring^, isn't she? I wonder if she'll fly on to New York for a round of the clubs with Mr. Norlund and return with him next week? Perhaps they'll get engaged and she'll come back with a big Tiffany diamond on her third finger—what excitement there will be here when Mr. Norlund decides to get married! Oh, the fortune of the few and the fortitude of the many,' sighed Miss Trevor. 'He'll make a thrilling husband.'

Jill thought it wise not to comment, and had a good excuse in the arrival of a customer. Wednesday was half-closing day and it was around twelve o'clock when a tall, dark figure passed outside the glass doors of Speciality and peered in at Jill. It was Roger! He smiled, gestured at the dial of his wristwatch and tipped a hand in imitation of a wine glass. Jill guessed at once that he was asking her to have lunch with him. She hesitated, then shook her head. He shrugged regretfully and went on his way.

But Jill hadn't bargained for Latin persistence, and when she left off work and was crossing to the marina for a solitary lunch at the Sea Bird, a little seafood restaurant, she noticed a sleek ivory roadster parked near one of the glass pagodas. In the driver's seat sat a lean Latin in a sports jacket, a red silk scarf fluttering at his throat and a brown hand beating time on the car wheel to the tune he was whistling—*Pour Pierrette et Pierrot*.

Jill was debating dodging into the pagoda when he spotted her. He swung long legs over the low-slung side of the car and came striding

towards her. Jill watched his approach with a quick-beating heart, far too feminine not to feel the swarthy attractiveness of the man. '*Salut et bonne chance*/' he said, wickedly pretending that he had not been waiting about on the marina in the hope of seeing her. His russet-lit eyes ran over her—and in the eyes of a Frenchman there usually lurks a warm appreciation of womankind—taking in her cool linen two-piece with a scalloped neckline and short sleeves.

'You look *ravissante*,' he smiled. 'Are you on your way to luncheon alone?'

'Yes, alone, *monsieur*,' she couldn't help smiling back at him, the eternal charmer who would have told a girl she looked enchanting if he had come upon her ankle-deep in housework, with her hair in rollers and dust on her face.

'Ah, but it would be a crime for two people to eat alone when they might eat together. I have a table booked at the Charisse, and it would be so much better for my digestion if I had a charming companion to talk to.'

As she stood hesitant, he added: 'Come, lunch with me for the sake of my *amour-propre*.'

'I don't think your self-love is so easily injured,' she fenced.

'Then to maintain the *entente cordiale* between the English and French.' His eyes were amused, and though she suspected that he was unused to all this wheedling before getting his own way, he seemed to be enjoying the novelty of it. He really was rather charming, that red neckscarf fluttering at his throat, long legs in tapered fawn gabardine, his hair very dark but not slicked down as the women's magazines always depicted Latins . . .

With a little murmur of surrender she walked with him to his car. He turned for a smiling scrutiny when she was settled against the ivory leather, her apricot two-piece and tawny hair making a nice contrast. 'Does it make you shy that I like how you look?' he asked. 'Should I not say it and pretend you are the English sport, or is it comrade?'

'It's neither,' she laughed. 'The word you mean is pal.' 'Ah, yes—pal. The cool Englishman, he calls you this, eh, and you trot at his heels like a pretty and obedient poodle?'

'Not quite.' She indicated the clock set in the dashboard. 'The time's getting on, Mr. Frenais. You'll lose your table if you don't watch out.'

'Will you do me one more favour?' He cocked a dark, wheedling eyebrow. 'Will you call me Roger?'

'Very well—Ro-jay,' she smiled, imitating his accent.

'Ah, I like the flash of gaiety.' He nodded, as though well satisfied, and the tailpiece of his car gave a cough like a powerful singer clearing her throat before hitting a high C, and they shot away from the kerb. 'You are relaxing with me—a good sign.'

'I relax just so far,' she warned, the sea wind whipping through her hair as they raced beside the long, palm-lined marina. She heard him laugh, and thought of the various warnings she had received about him ... a thought which led in a direction from which she hurriedly retreated.

The Charisse was a French restaurant, the walls mirrored, the mirrors straddled by pert cupids, the tables set in front of red leather banquettes. 'Do you like French food, Jill?' Roger and the waiter were regarding her with gourmet gleams in their eyes, and she at once closed her large, incomprehensible menu and laughingly told Roger that she was in his hands—as far as lunch went—but all she asked

was that he didn't order snails for her. 'I'd imagine them crawling about in the garden of the cottage in which I used to live, toting their little houses on their backs!'

'So the British can be romantic,' his eyes smiled directly into hers, then he turned to the waiter and Jill sat back on the comfortable banquette and listened to the rapid and enthusiastic exchange of French at her side. She could see herself reflected in a mirror across the room, small, big-eyed, hopelessly unsophisticated, and it came to her that she was certainly meeting all types here in America. The blond, rawboned Danes of the *Falkehuset* last night, and today the well-dressed Continentals of Roger's kind of world.

She didn't make any comparisons, but she was aware of a lack of tension with the Frenchman. Maybe she needed a balm after last night's brush with Erik Norlund, for in every way Roger was the opposite of that craggy, unpredictable, *savage* Dane—like suave lager he chased away the shock and lire of a dose of Schnapps!

With this reflection in mind—it rather amused her —she proceeded to enjoy Roger's sophisticated choice of food. Pomelo grapefruit as a starter, pink and juicy. Then salmon cutlets in aspic with a dry white San Patricio wine; Steak Diane with *coeurs d'artichaut*, *pommes soujjeles* and mushrooms broiled in butter, this course accompanied by a rose wine, glowing in wide- bowled glasses.

'There is a warmth and sweetness to this wine.' Roger turned the stem of his glass and eyed Jill reflectively. 'Lovers must have trod the grapes. You have never seen the grape-treading, eh, Jill?'

She shook her head. 'I've heard that it's very exciting,' she said. 'From which part of France do you come, *monsieur*?'

'Ro-jay, remember!' He shook a reproving head at her. 'The home of my parents is in the Basque hills, which is no doubt a surprise to you.'

I think you have me tabbed as a Parisian sophisticate, yet my background is a simple one. My parents are *vignerons*, people of the soil, and I grew up with my sisters and brothers in very earthy surroundings. We had no bathroom and we made our ablutions in a mountain stream, fun in the summer, not so when the ice over the water had to be broken. The working of the soil never appealed to me and, a dreamer as a youth, I decided to be a painter and I made my way to Paris.

'It soon became apparent, however,' Roger shrugged and broke a breadstick with his lean fingers, 'that I had more of a knack with a camera than a paintbrush, and I found work as a photographer for the chic magazines. There was a mannequin of much beauty, Zdlie of the House of Delusine, and I took a selection of photographs of her that won me a coveted award. Offers of employment followed from New York, so,' he gave a shrug of sheer cynicism this time, 'I came in pursuit of *le pot au lait*. To be poor as a child drives a saint to heaven, and a devil to various hells. I am rich now, but I had ambitions, you understand, to be a true *artiste*.'

'But I think you are,' Jill exclaimed warmly. 'So many photographers strive for outlandish effects, but you achieve yours so naturally, without making models look as though they're riding a clothes-horse.'

He laughed with delight at that one, then laid his long brown fingers on her wrist. 'You are winsome and sympathetic, *petite*. I thought you would be so even before we spoke together. You are glad now that you allowed yourself this luncheon with me?'

'The meal is delicious,' she said, taking note of the darkness of his fingers against her skin and feeling their warmth.

'And the company?' he pursued.

'Not exactly delicious,' her fugitive dimple made its appearance, 'but definitely entertaining.'

'You are both,' he murmured, and added on the ' low crest of a laugh: 'Does the *couleur de rose* of the wine reflect itself in your cheeks, or are you blushing? *Tres bien*, it suits you to blush, for I had the thought when we met on the marina that you looked pale, with a cloud of despondency in your eyes. You were a little distressed about something, eh?'

'Oh, nothing important, Roger.' She quickly drew her hand from under his as the waiter brought their dessert, a meringue filled with ice-cream and masked in hot chocolate sauce. As the fugitive mouthfuls melted on her tongue, she reflected that Roger's charm and Gallic good looks had helped to cheer her up. She had been depressed to the point of tears all morning and once or twice had had to give real hard blinks in an effort to stop them from filling her eyes. There had been days of hot, quick tears following her loss of Grandma Pride, and she couldn't quite understand why much of that unhappiness had come stealing back.

As lunch with Roger drew to a close, he said he would have asked her to spend the afternoon with him if he had not been booked for some photographic work. 'We could have gone as far as Pretty Bird Lake for a swim. You would have liked that?' he asked.

'I still have our bedroom rugs to shampoo,' she reminded him. 'Would you have me neglect my household duties?'

'Are you very domesticated, Jill?' His smile was amused but gentle. 'Domesticity in women is a virtue much admired by Frenchmen.'

'Even you, Roger?'

'Even I—with my so terrible reputation.' He gestured with Gallic indignation. 'Why is it automatically assumed of Latins that their main objective in life is to charm *la femme* into the mood for love?'

'Isn't it, *monsieur*?' Her smile over the rim of her coffee cup was innocently demure.

He held her eyes with his and suddenly his smile was raffish. 'I think after all that I will take a holiday this afternoon,' he spoke deliberately, 'and your bedroom rugs can await their shampoo a while longer. We *will* drive to the lake and swim together. There is a loghouse restaurant set among pine trees where we will dine, then we will drive home under the moon--"Aren't you taking rather a lot for granted?' she broke in.

'Are you afraid of me, after all?' he taunted. 'Come, j do you believe all that you are told about a man? Cannot you judge these things for yourself?'

'Of course I can, it's just--'

'That it would be highly *indecent* to drive into the hills with a man!' The amusement in his eyes had grown unkind. 'I should remember, of course, that you are British, but does it not get boring to always play it safe and cool? Tell me,' he suddenly captured her fingers and held them still within his, 'have you never had a boy-friend?'

'Doesn't it show?' Suddenly she was tired—tired of him and all men, and she just wanted to be alone. 'You said you were booked for some work, and I really think you ought to go and do it.'

'There has really been no romance in your life?'

'As I just said, *monsieur*, doesn't it show that I am quite without worldly experience—naive, in fact?'

'Ah, you grow angry with me, *petite!*' His fingers tightened around hers. 'I did not mean to anger you, but what negligence on the part of all Englishmen that not one of them has told you that you have the charm of glens and rock pools, and a most wonderful pair of eyes.'

'Please, *monsieur--*'

'Very well, my little goose, I will take you home to shampoo your rugs, and then like a man of duty I will return to my studio to work. *Mon dieu*, you will have me with my nose to the stone grinder like our *tres formidable* boss, is this not so?'

Jill laughed outright, for she just couldn't imagine this gay and flirtatious Latin ever working as hard as their *tres formidable* boss. Life in Roger's philosophy was to be enjoyed, as much and as often as possible, whereas Erik Norlund was driven in the other direction by inner loneliness and its far from easy assuagement. His pleasures were totally different from Roger's. He liked the sea at night, quaint Viking cellars, and ice-locked lakes with the men and girls singing the songs of Nielsen as they raced along in their sledges or their yachts . . .

'*Bon*, I have made you laugh and now we are friends again, eh?' Roger smiled at her, and then with a total disregard for who might be looking in their direction he raised her hand and kissed her wrist very lightly—and it wasn't until they were on their way out of the Charisse that Jill noticed a woman in a smart chenille suit and a cloche hat made of tiny feathers. Karen Manet... her eyes like blue-green stones as they dwelt on Jill's startled face.

'Hullo, Jill!' Ice edged the graciousness of her voice, but being a female her smile warmed when she looked at Roger. 'And how are you, Mr. Frenais? Did you like Corfu?'

They talked together for a few minutes, then said goodbye, Jill acutely conscious of tingling earlobes when she sat in Roger's car and it was speeding away from the restaurant. She worried the tip of her forefinger and knew without a doubt that Karen had seen Roger kiss her wrist—a little scene she would be bound to relate to her brother when he returned from New York! She would tell him to boost her argument that Jill, after all was not quite the right sort of person for her 'little girl' to associate with. He would think that she was openly defying him in letting Roger Frenais kiss her—in a public dining-room of all places!

Anyway, it had been a civilised kiss. Roger hadn't pushed her against a harbour shed door and left her with an aching mouth and bruises on her waist from a large hand forgetful of its strength!

'Karen Manet is an attractive woman,' Roger remarked. 'It seems to me that she and her brother have little in common.'

'Linda once told me that the younger sister, Vivi, is more like Mr. Norlund in looks and ways,' said Jill. 'But then you must have seen her some time or other at the store, Roger.'

'Ah, yes! She, too, is large-boned and very Nordic. Me, I do not like women to be large in anything but the eyes and the heart. I prefer them *petite*,' Jill felt his side-glance, 'with wrist and ankle bones one might snap between the fingers.'

'How sadistic of you, Roger!'

'Are you not aware that there is a streak of small- boy cruelty in men which is never quite subdued?' Roger chuckled. 'To us, upon occasion, a woman is like a small soft kitten to a boy and we have the urge to stroke her fur the wrong way. It is, you understand, a kind of rough petting, or in more Freudian terms a manifestation of the fact that love can be as cruel as it can be kind.'

'Jill,' he spoke thoughtfully, 'do you ever think about falling in love and marrying?'

'Well,' she gave a laugh, 'if love can be as rough as you say, then I think I'll stay single and safe.'

'It can also be exciting,' he murmured.

'Have you been in love many times?' She spoke lightly, and when he pulled into the kerb in front of the flower-scaped lawn of the lanai and sat facing her with an elbow on the wheel, she knew from his wry French smile that many women had fallen for him like leaves in autumn. But he was not like the man who had hurt Corah so much, and left her so distrustful of other men. Roger had known poverty as a boy, and though the poor have vices like everyone else, they rarely have the vice of utter selfishness.

'You look at the lines in my face and the silver in my hair and you think I am the gay one, eh?' He gave an eloquent shrug. 'A man is a man, I am afraid, but as Donne said: "If ever any beauty I did see which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.'"

'Roger--' his quote had shafted a little dart of alarm into her heart, but before she could say any more he pressed a finger to her lips.

'Be *tranquille*,' he smiled. 'I realise that you must be given time to get to know me, but I find you very attractive, Jill. There is a youthful vulnerability about you which makes unattractive the hard self-assurance of too many women a man meets these days. But you want me for a while as a big brother, no? Then a big brother I will try to be.'

'You're very kind, Roger,' she said sincerely.

'Everyone should be kind to you,' he rejoined, 'but I noticed a coldness in the eyes of Karen Manet when she spoke to you. Are you not a friend of her daughter's?'

Jill nodded. 'Yes, Linda and I are friends, but Mrs. Manet is possessive of her and inclined to resent Linda's need for other people in her life.'

'One should try not to be possessive of those one loves,' Roger agreed, 'but love is like hate, and when driven by it, I suppose we are not always ourselves. It is easy to see that the beautiful Karen is a woman of feeling—her brother, the big Nordmann, he is something else. There is a man who enjoys conflict and power—but love?' The trim, check-clad shoulders lifted in a Gallic shrug. 'It must take second place in the life of a man who gives so much of himself to his work. He lives at the store, breathes the place day and night! Can any woman hope to compete with such a rival! No! And he knows, and he will marry a woman who will never attract his attention away from his great, glittering *grande dame* of a store.'

Roger's argument was a sound one, Jill reasoned, for no man wild with love would have waited several years for a woman to get over her first love. Erik Norlund had waited, and when Corah married him she would know she was taking on a rival, the store. A situation, surely, that held the seeds of another kind of heartbreak, for no woman capable of deep love was going to be satisfied until she held the whole of a man's devotion.

'You agree with me that Norlund is a man of power rather than passion?' Roger asked.

'I-I think there's passion in him,' said Jill, remembering arms that had reduced her to helplessness, and lips that had felt warm enough to shut out all the chills that a woman feels, 'but I believe he does put the store before everything else. He's set it up as a rock in a shifting

world, for rightly or wrongly he has lost faith in any values but business values; he thinks life nowadays is so materialistic that there's no point in bothering to love his fellow men.'

'But such a loss of belief would happen only in a man of deep sensitivity,' Roger exclaimed.

'Erik Norlund is such a man,' Jill said, without a shadow of doubt in her eyes. 'He's barricaded himself into his fortress, the store, and he refuses to let down the portcullis that would allow an invasion of his heart.'

'Then the help of *le bon dieu* is going to be needed by the woman who marries him,' Roger said, and he touched a quick kiss to each of Jill's hands. 'Now at your insistence, my wise little pixie, I depart for work and leave you to your household duties. Who taught you to be so wise and dutiful?'

'A little old lady who must, I think, have been akin to the *vignerons* of your Basque hills,' Jill smiled. 'My grandmother.'

'God bless your grandmother!' Roger said, adding with his raffish smile: 'The Basque gallants borrowed the saying from the Spaniards across the border, who say it whenever a pretty girl passes by. But you are not just passing by, eh? We meet again Friday evening?'

She nodded, then slipped her hands free of his and let herself out of the car. She smiled down into his eyes, which had the slant and attraction of a cat's. '*Adieu* until Friday,' she said, and watched the car speed away like a fox with a hound after it. She smiled to herself and knew that a friendship with Roger would hurt neither of them. Love? She didn't think he would let himself go that far unless he thought she could love him in return. He was too Gallic, too practical, too worldly to go in for the drama of unrequited love, and it would be fun to have

him for a friend. He was entertaining and sophisticated. A girl could acquire polish from such a man.

Jill walked along the path that led to the cabanas, hearing youthful laughter in and around the pool even before she reached it. 'Get into your bikini and come on in,' someone called out. But she laughingly shook her head. She wanted to shampoo her hair as well as the bedroom rugs, both of which would dry quickly in this gorgeous sunshine.

She unlocked the cabana door and stepped inside, spotting at once the little yellow envelope on the mat. She quickly picked it up, noticing with a heart flutter that it was a telegram. Her hand trembled as she opened it, It was from Corah. 'Won't be home till Monday,' she had wired. 'Flying to New York. Watch your step with Lancelot, kiddo!'

Jill stared at the sunshine edging through the blinds and striping Corah's rugs in lines of gold; she heard, as in the hollow of a shell, the sounds of laughter and banter from the bathing pool and felt curiously detached from the play of the young; from the light-hearted flirtations and quick-sprung romances that lasted a week, a petal falling each day until there was nothing left, not even heartbreak. Jill had never been young, except in years, and with a flash of premonition —women do have them, and strange and inexplicable as they are, they nearly always come true—she knewthat in New York, Corah *would* decide to get married again and she *would* return to Santa Felicia with an engagement ring on her finger!

For such a momentous occasion, Jill decided, she would have the cabana looking spanking bright. After a cup of coffee, and with the new record she had bought spinning on the turntable of the record-player, she set to work, quite unaware that women all over the world turn to housework for an alleviation of heartache, anger, even grief..

Jill's burst of energy gradually ebbed away into a spent but not exhausted tiredness. She had washed her hair and even baked a couple of small fruit pies, one for herself and one for Ben Childers, who liked a bit of home cooking.

It was now dusky outside, and with her tubbed hair covered by a scarf and the pie under a teacloth, she made her way to Ben's cabana. She mounted the steps and pressed the bell, but several minutes later he still hadn't answered her ring, then sudden light shafted from the doorway of the adjacent cabana. 'Hi there!' the occupant called across. 'Ben's away, honey. Something about a new job he's been offered. I guess he'd have told you, but you weren't home from work when he left—that would have been around one o'clock. He took a holdall with him, so I guess he won't be back until tomorrow, or maybe Friday.'

'A—new job?' Jill felt pleased for him, but was also surprised by the suddenness of his decision.

'It came like a bolt out of the blue, I understand,' the woman went on. 'A phone call, the chance of an interview, you know how it is. Say, I hope you didn't want him for anything special—he didn't say where he could be reached.'

'No, I just baked him a pie for his supper,' Jill called back. 'Thank you for letting me know he's away.'

'You're welcome, honey. I know you and Ben are good friends and that you often visit with him—he's a nice guy, and it's lonesome for a man when he hasn't got a woman around all the time. Don't you think so?'

'I do indeed,' said Jill, adding a hasty goodnight and retreating from the friendly curiosity of Ben's neighbour. The cabana court was a hive of lively, innocuous gossip, and Jill aroused speculation because she

was British, inclined to be shy, and clearly uninterested in the boys who were part of the small community. All too soon her name would be linked with Roger Frenais', and she didn't want Ben's on the list as well!

Back in her own cabana she had a meal and sat reading for an hour or so, then on impulse she carried the portable TV into the bedroom and lay in bed watching the late-night movie, an old gangster epic which was so noisy that she finally switched it off. With the room invaded by darkness and the chirp of katydids, it was inevitable that her restless thoughts should start to unwind like a roll of film, some of the scenes blurry and unimportant, others clear-cut, significant.

Tired but unable to sleep, she let her thoughts unwind, lived again through the apprehension with which she had gone to work that morning, and the relief she had felt upon learning that Norlund had flown to New York on business. The fingers that had slapped him clenched the coverlet of her bed, but in all probability he would not have done anything further to punish her for the indignity. He had paid her back with a kiss equally angry and undignified, and there was no one ever to know that either scene had occurred . . .

But I know, she thought, and he knows. We share the secretiveness of being there in the shadows of a harbour shed, like—like quarrelling lovers. I know, now, what it feels like when he holds a woman close, the shape of his mouth is imprinted on mine, the strong feel of his shoulders remains remembered by my hands. .;

There, at that point, she toppled through a dark chasm of realisation. In the midst of his angry kiss she had put her arms across his shoulders, and no woman does that in fear, she does it in protectiveness, the age- old gesture of acceptance and comfort and understanding. You are but a boy, the gesture seems to say, and I have been a mother through all the ages. Hurt me, even hate me, but I'll always find it in my heart to— to--

Jill turned her head wildly into her pillows and stifled the rest.

The two days that followed were busy ones, and Jill enjoyed very much the play which she saw on Friday evening with Roger. They discussed it as the car whipped along the Pacific Highway, with stars in the sea, and the moon gliding along overhead. They had supper at the Chez Willow, where with practised ease Roger guided her through the pleasant intricacies of a foxtrot. Back at their table his glance dwelt on the smooth pallor of her arms under the lantern sleeves of midnight- blue chiffon, but he said lightly that he was glad she was not a girl who went in for modern dancing—St. Vitus dancing, he termed it.

Jill laughed and sipped her brandy and benedictine, which made her feel pleasantly drowsy on the way home. 'You have enjoyed this evening?' Roger asked, before they said goodnight. 'You liked the play, our supper *a deux*, and being in my arms by the so kind permission of a dance orchestra?'

'The play was lovely,' she smiled, her head lazily at rest against the leather of his Lancia. 'So was supper— and you dance superbly, Monsieur Frenais.'

'Dancing with you was the best part of the evening for me.' He growled the words in his throat, but when she saw the glimmer of his teeth in a smile she knew he was testing her reaction to a possible change in the brotherly behaviour he had maintained most of the evening. She played it cool and remained just as she was, well aware that to retreat from a wolf was to invite a sudden pounce.

'Ah!' he said, and there was comprehension in his dark eyes under the slanting brows and silver-streaked hair. 'In just a few days you have grown up, it seems to me. Gone is the candid look of a child, now

your lashes half shield your eyes as though they hide a secret.' He leant a little closer in order to peer into her eyes and she turned her gaze from his curiosity to the blandness of the moon.

'Are you being provocative?' For the very first time there was an unsure note in his voice. 'If I come closer to look into your eyes, I shall be closer to your lips. Do you want that?'

'I want us to be friends,' she' said. It wasn't a plea, for he didn't frighten her, but if he kissed her, something tenuously promising would be snapped between them.

'There was something my grandmother used to say,' Jill smiled, an echo of Grandma Pride's snap and crackle in her voice, 'that you can no more compel love than you can tell a fly to buzz out of a window.'

'*Mon dieu*,' he drew in his breath sharply, 'there is no *finesse* about the British, is there, only bluntness? So, my frail Melisande-in the moonlight, you are telling me to buzz off?'

'Just for now, *mon vieux*.' She chuckled at his wry expression and lightly touched his sleeve. 'We are, after all, a pair of adults. We both know that if you grab for the stars you end up with a handful of dust.'

'Or a handful of snow!' He groaned and dropped a kiss on her wrist. 'Now leave my car, you piece of British ice—perhaps I might decide to chance your company another time.'

She laughed and her silver shoes twinkled as she slipped out of the Lancia. She had told Roger earlier that she didn't wish him to accompany her to the cabana, and with a wave and a smile she left him. She glanced round when she reached the trees and watched him lighting a cigarette. He tossed back his head and smoke plumed into the air; a dark satyr but a likeable one, Jill thought, then he saluted her as in the days of rapiers and gallantry and the silence was shattered as

his modern charger roared off into the night. When the silence resettled, the trees had enclosed Jill in their shadow.

The following day Jill had a telephone call from Linda. She had written to tell Keefe about the picnic and he had written back to say he and Ron were' looking forward to it. Roy sent regards and apologies to Jill. Things had been in a regular hustle, what with arranging about his job and getting fixed up with digs, but he would make up for his tardiness when they met. Jill, who had just come out of the pool, felt her bare toes gripping a rug. Oh, darn this picnic! She felt like putting it off .

'Have you told your mother you're coming to the lanai tomorrow?'

she asked.

'No—and I'm not going to.' Linda's voice went high with defiance. 'I'm phoning you right now from a call-

box.'

'Any particular reason?' Jill could feel her heart thudding under her damp swimsuit.

'Mom said I wasn't to see you any more.'

'That's fine with me!' Jill's cheeks were blazing. 'I didn't want to get involved in this picnic idea, so it's probably best if we forget all about it--'

'Jill, no!' Linda sounded now on the verge of hysteria. 'You can't let me down. You won't! I know you care whether I'm happy or miserable, and if I don't get to see--Keefe tomorrow—*Jill*, just this

once! I shan't ask you to let us meet at the lanai, i-if you're against the idea, but I'm so looking forward to the picnic--'

'But your mother's told you to keep away from me.' Jill's voice was cold and shaking. 'She thinks I'm a bad influence on you, and if she gets to hear about Keefe coming here to meet you, it could mean the sack for me at the store.'

'Uncle Erik wouldn't be that unfair!' Linda exclaimed. 'He wouldn't think it a crime for us to go on a picnic with a couple of boys. He liked them when he met them--'

'He likes things out in the open and above board,' Jill spoke in a very certain voice. 'He wouldn't add his endorsement to any secret meetings with Keefe, and you know it, Linda.'

'I think you're scared of him,' Linda cried back. 'You surprise me, Jill. I thought you had the gumption to stand up to anyone.'

'When I know I'm in the right,' Jill said tiredly. 'Linda, promise me if we go on the picnic tomorrow that you'll tell your mother about it afterwards. Try to make her understand that you need to get to know Keefe properly, with her sanction. Will you promise?'

'Anything!' Linda said extravagantly. 'You dish, Jill! I knew you wouldn't let me down.'

'Don't you let me down. 'Bye, now!' Jill cradled the phone and reflected that the most hampering thing a person could be landed with was a soft heart. No matter how badly she felt about this picnic, she would have felt worse if she had stuck out for its cancellation. She gave a little shiver and was pushing the damp straps of her swimsuit off her shoulders as she made for the bathroom and a hot shower.

She awoke early the following morning and spent two hours preparing eats for this outing that closed strange chilly fingers around her heart each time she thought about it. What nonsense! Was she really so scared of Erik Norlund that she had to keep getting this odd, apprehensive feeling? He was miles away in New York. - He wouldn't suddenly come striding along the beach as he had the other night, looking grim, with those knots of muscle showing beside his mouth, and accuse her of encouraging his niece to defy her mother.

Into the sisal hamper went sliced salami, hard-boiled eggs, giant tomatoes and Queen Green olives, potato salad and tuna mould, pumpernickel bread and a box of cheese spread. She would fix coffee and juice flasks later, and put in half a pound of raw frankfurters for a beach cook-out; they could buy rolls at a bakery—ah, and she mustn't forget the mustard! She was whipping fresh made cheesecakes out of the oven when Linda arrived. She was flushed, breathless, and said she had come **all** the way from Pasadena by bus. 'Part of the plot, Jill.' She threw herself down in a chair with a puff, a smile, and a pleading pout. 'Mom thinks I'm there for the entire weekend. I believe Grand'mere suspects that I'm up to something, but she's a good sport and she won't phone Mom and split on me.'

'Quite a plot!' said Jill, surveying Linda with her hands on the hips of her rust-coloured trews. 'I suppose you do realise that I shall be regarded as the villainess of the drama?'

'Don't exaggerate.' Linda could laugh now she had got her own way and was actually here, with the loaded hamper, the beach rugs and a collapsible playball to testify that the picnic was actually going to take place. 'You said yourself that it's no crime to go out with a nice boy. Actually,' Linda looked impish and curious at the same time, 'I'm saving you from the clutches of a wolf in encouraging you to see that loping lamb of a Roy Scott.'

'Roger isn't a wolf—well, not where I'm concerned.' Jill's cheeks felt suddenly hot and she turned to the table and- began to wrap the cheesecakes in paper napkins. 'I suppose it's because I've been seeing Roger Frenais that you've been warned off me?'

'Mom was looking for an excuse,' Linda mumbled. 'Jill, I shouldn't have thought Roger Frenais was your sort.'

'We're just good friends,' Jill rejoined, 'and though it might sound like a cliché, it happens to be true. I think it's a case of strangers in a strange land converging for mutual sympathy.'

'Jill.' Linda jumped to her feet and took the other girl by the waist, 'something's not quite right with you— I can tell! It isn't only the picnic and the fact that I've fibbed to Mom—you seem unhappy about something. Aren't things going right at the store, or are you just pining for England?'

'I guess I miss the green fields and the sound of English voices,' Jill admitted, 'but that's beside the point. You will tell your mother about today, won't you?'

'I-I suppose I will, fuss-bucket.' Linda fingered the pine green scarf knotted at the neck of Jill's cream and honey print shirt. 'And now I've relieved your mind on that point, won't you tell me what else is troubling you? We're friends, Jill. Right from that first time I walked into the boutique we liked each other, and I know you far better than Mom does. I know you aren't a flirt, but quite honestly I shouldn't like to see you—falling for a guy like Roger Frenais—'

'I'm not falling for Roger!' Jill gave a laugh at the idea. 'What preposterous nonsense!'

'Mom said he was kissing you, quite openly.'

'On the wrist, because he's a Frenchman and they think it no more than a handshake. Now how about helping me to make coffee and juice for the flasks? The boys will be here before we know where we are.'

Mention of the boys successfully switched the trend of Linda's thoughts. 'Jill, you'll have to lend me some beach gear,' she said. 'I didn't dare take any to Grand' mere's in case Mom saw it in my overnight bag.'

'Let's go and sort something out.' They went into the bedroom, recalling the evening in London when Jill had borrowed Linda's white chiffon dress in order to go to the theatre with her and her uncle. 'Seems ages ago,' said Linda, slipping out of her neat suit into rowan-red hipsters and a strawberry-pink shirt. Jill handed her a pair of straw espadrilles and agreed that the time had flown.

'That's better,' said Linda, after fixing her hair in a pony-tail. 'Now I feel ready for fun and games.'

The two girls returned to the kitchen to prepare the drinks, and Jill was about to put another orange in the juicer when she gave a sudden laugh. 'I bet the boys will bring Pepsi and beer with them,' she said. 'They won't want juice!'

'Oh, aren't we nitwits?' Linda laughed, and then her cheeks went quite white as in that moment the gay sound of young masculine voices approached the cabana. Linda was holding the bubbling coffee percolator midway between the stove and the table, where a flask stood uncapped and waiting to be filled, and as Jill saw the percolator tilting dangerously over the scant protection of Linda's espadrilles, she leapt and grabbed it out of her nerveless hand. Most of the hot coffee jolted harmlessly to the floor, but several splashes had seared Jill's hands before she could set the percolator safely down on the table. Then she stood back, gasping with pain and shaking the hands

as if to shake off the growing red weals. Linda stood looking at her in speechless horror. 'Hi there!' A sandy head came poking round the open kitchen door. 'Anyone for volley-ball— say, Jill girl, what in the name of thunder have you gone and done to yourself?'

Roy Scott leapt over the sill of the door, quickly followed-by Keefe, and the next few minutes were for Jill a confusion of throbbing pain, voices high with alarm, and sudden action. Someone thrust her hands beneath the cold water tap in order to wash off the sticky coffee, someone else said that scalds had to be quickly treated, and very carefully her hands were wrapped in a clean tea-cloth and she was hurried out of the cabana into the blazing sunshine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'ARE you all right, Jill?' Roy's voice was shaky with concern as the four of them hurried down the front path of the lanai to a parked convertible. She gave him a little nod, and when he said that it was best that she get her hands treated at the hospital, it came to her that it had somehow been inevitable that the picnic should end in a catastrophe of some sort.

Roy helped her into the back seat of the car, where Linda joined her, still looking white-faced and shocked. The two boys slid into the front seats, and then they were off—but not to enjoy themselves on the beach playing volley-ball and roasting frankfurters.

'Poor Jill,' Linda sighed, 'it's all my stupid fault that you got scalded. Do—do your hands hurt horribly?'

'They're stinging a bit, that's all,' Jill lied cheerfully. 'The doctor will put grease and gauze on them and I daresay they'll be as right as ninepence in a few days.'

But already the scalds were blistering, and Jill finally emerged from the hospital treatment room with swath-ings of gauze on both hands, a shot in the arm to relieve the pain, and a white card tucked into the front pocket of her trews. 'I've got to come back in the morning,' she said ruefully to her waiting companions. She held up her gauzy mittens. 'Look how they've done me up!'

'You'll never be able to manage on your own at the cabana,' Linda spoke with sudden, tilt-chinned decision. 'You're coming home with me, Jill. You boys as well! We'll spend the day at my house.'

Jill didn't argue with Linda. In the first place she was beginning to feel very drowsy, and in the second . . . she gave a yawn and rested her cheek against the leather of the car seat . . . well, it was only right

that Keefe be invited openly to the Manet house. Linda's mother would see that her daughter was determined to go on meeting Keefe, and Jill knew that when you were face to face with the inevitable you somehow found the pluck to face it cheerfully.

Karen, after all, was a Norlund and there was a fundamental fineness in the blood, inherited from the tough old Dane who had been so mindful of the comfort and rights of his employees . . .

Jill dozed with Linda's arm around her, and roused when up front Roy exclaimed: 'Wow, Linda, that's some shack to live in!'

'Your mother will be surprised to see us,' said Keefe, as he swung the car between the open gates of the drive. 'You're sure you want Roy and myself to stay?'

'Yes.' Linda spoke firmly. 'You're my friends and welcome to stay.'

Mrs. Manet was Out on the patio when the four young people entered the house. She must have heard their voices almost directly, for she came hurrying indoors, slender and elegant in grey tie-silk. 'Linda!' Her astounded gaze swept her daughter from head to heel, then she looked at the two tall boys, and finally at Jill. Jill, pale-faced, her hands mittened in gauze, coffee- stains dark against the cream and honey of her shirt, was enough to arouse anyone's 'sympathy. 'My dear child?' Karen exclaimed, 'whatever has happened to you?'

'I-I was silly enough to spill some coffee---' Jill began.

'Jill means that *I* nearly tilted a whole percolator of boiling coffee over myself,' Linda broke in. 'Jill snatched it out of my hand and got scalded herself. We've been to the hospital and she's had a shot in the arm and ought to go to bed right away——'

'My baby--' 'I'm not a baby, Mom.' Again there was that new, admirable note of firmness in Linda's voice. 'I brought Jill back here with me because she's all alone at the cabana and hasn't anybody to look after her. I want her to stay with us until her hands are healed—they wouldn't be in such a state if I'd been more careful!'

'But I don't understand,' her mother looked shaken, and a little angry. 'You were at your grandmother's--'

'I left Gran's early this morning and went over to the lanai by bus. The four of us had a picnic planned.' Linda tilted her chin and looked directly at her mother. 'I didn't tell you because you'd have made a fuss. Jill wanted me to tell you--'

'A picnic?' Karen's nostrils were pinched in as she took in Linda's carefree attire once more. 'If you hadn't been so underhanded, Linda, it seems to me that this accident could have been avoided.'

'Please, I don't want to be any bother.' Jill felt sick and it was showing in her face. 'I-I have a couple of workmates at the lanai and they'll help me until Corah returned from New York.'

'New York?' Linda and her mother exclaimed in unison.

Jill nodded. 'She wired to say she was going there. She'll probably be back tomorrow some time, so I'll be perfectly all right at the cabana--'

'I'll be darned if you'll go back there until you're better,' said Linda, v/rapping a determined arm about her waist. 'You're shivering and you're going straight up to bed. Mom, be nice to the boys and give them a drink while I tuck Jill into bed—I guess they could do with one.'

'You can say that again, honey,' Keefe said feelingly.

Mrs. Manet shot him a rather sharp look, but with a controlled grace that had to be admired, she said: 'Yes, do come with me and we'll have a drink together. The names are Roy—and Keefe, aren't they?'

'That's right, Mrs. Manet.' Keefe had his hands pushed into the pockets of his canvas trousers; he was still brown-skinned as a gipsy, his dark eyes keen and challenging as they met Karen's. 'It's nice of you to be so gracious after the surprise the four of us have sprung on you.'

'Oh, that all right—Keefe.' She stood looking at him for several seconds, then she waved the boys ahead of her in the direction of the patio and turned to the girls. 'I'll send up some coffee for you two,' she said, then added much as her brother would have done: 'Don't go spilling it this time, Lin. Jill's too tied up right now to be able to help you.'

A remark that made Jill feel more welcome here than all the sympathetic gush in the world. She broke into a quick smile; it would take time for Karen to think of her daughter as a grown woman, but she had made a beginning.

It was just after four o'clock when Jill awoke from deep, drugged sleep. The siesta blinds were still closed and the room was dim, strange to Jill in the first moments of her awakening. Then she felt a slight throbbing in her hands and remembered the events of the morning and that she was now a somewhat reluctant guest at the Manet house. Her reluctance, like the throb in her hands, was palpable but not unbearable, and she surveyed her bandages with rueful eyes as she heard sounds of merriment rising from the swimming pool which this bedroom overlooked.

So the boys were still here. That was good. It proved that Linda's mother had not said anything to discourage them from staying.

A little later Karen came in to ask Jill how she was feeling and whether she would like to come downstairs in a while.

'I feel heaps better and I'd like to come down,' said Jill, watching Karen as she turned from opening the blinds and came back across the carpeted floor to the bed. The sun followed her and picked out the gold in her hair, and for the first time Jill saw a resemblance to Erik in the width of Karen's forehead and the generosity of her mouth.

'My dear,' Karen sat down on the foot of Jill's bed and fingered the rings on her left hand, 'I owe you an apology. I tried to break up your friendship with Linda, and I clutched at the most absurd and untruthful reason for doing so. I told myself, and Lin, that you were crazy about men. The child laughed. She's far too loyal to you, Jill, to believe such an absurdity even had it been true. I know of course that it isn't true.'

'Even though you saw Roger Frenais kiss my hand?' Jill smiled.

'You were looking very pretty that day,' Karen smiled back. 'He couldn't be blamed for wanting to kiss you, but knowing Roger's reputation I should have issued a warning instead of using the kiss to—to belittle you to Linda. I'm deeply ashamed, Jill. Even more so in view of those.' She gestured nervously at Jill's bandaged hands. 'Are you in pain with them?'

'They sting a bit,' Jill said, 'but they'll be okay in a day or so.'

'Lin told me she almost tipped the entire contents of the percolator over her feet—whatever was she thinking about?' Karen's voice went high, and it was obvious she was visualising her daughter with badly scalded feet. v..

'She was about to pour the coffee into a flask,' Jill explained, 'then we heard the boys coming towards the cabana. She was very excited about seeing Keefe, you see.'

Karen drew in her breath, ^s one does at the dart of pain, then she let it out slowly. She got to her feet, realised that she was tugging at her rings and drew her hands apart. 'You'll need a dress, Jill. I'll plunder Lin's wardrobe and send my maid, Rose, to help you bath and dress.' She went to the door, opened it, then added: 'I think I'll invite those two boys to stay to dinner.'

The evening that followed was a pleasant one. Karen went next door to play bridge after dinner, and Linda and Keefe danced while Roy sat talking to Jill about his new job. 'I'll be able to come and see you at the lanai,' he said. 'Do you want me to come?'

'If you think you'd enjoy it.' Her tone was friendly but non-committal.

His eyes came to her face, exploring it in the warm glow of the pine logs that spluttered in the fireplace. The Californian evenings often grew chilly and Karen had had the fire lit because she said it made a room look cosy. 'Yoq know,' Roy fiddled with a pack of Luckies, then slowly extracted one, 'you seem kind of different from the last time we met. Sort of—of more grown up.'

'Well, on the plane, Roy, I was a nervous kid being whisked to a strange new land,' she said as he held the table lighter to his cigarette. 'I guess my tender youth was showing.'

He laughed, but in a rather bewildered way, and when he and Keefe left at nine o'clock he didn't say when he'd be calling on her. On the way up to bed, Linda told Jill that Keefe was coming again the following Sunday. 'My idea,' she added, 'but I don't think Mom will object. She was talking to him quite nicely at dinner, wasn't she? Oh,

Jill,' Linda stretched her arms and gave a yawning laugh, 'hasn't this been a day of days?'

Jill heartily agreed.

Linda drove her to the hospital the following morning and afterwards they went to the lanai to collect some necessities and to leave a note for Corah. 'Why do you suppose she went on to New York?' Linda mused, heading the car in the direction of the store. Jill wanted to pop in and explain the reason for her absence to Miss Trevor.

'I think we both know the answer to that question,' Jill said succinctly.

'Uncle Erik!'

'Exactly!'

'No, silly girl.' Linda gave her a quick, laughing side- glance. 'I've just spotted his Jag—it went tearing past, but I know it was his because of its dark colour. Haven't you noticed how most of the other Santa Felicians go in for pastel colours?'

Jill absently nodded, while under the jacket of her suit her heart was suddenly banging away.

'I'm almost sure he was alone in the car,' said Linda. 'I guess he and Corah have just got back from New York. If he dropped Corah off at the lanai, then we missed them by only a few minutes.'

'I-I could phone Miss Trevor,' Jill said. 'It would save us stopping off at the store--'

'Not on your sweet life!' Linda tapped the wheel impatiently as they were forced to wait at the marina traffic lights. 'I want to see that uncle of mine and get all the gen of his trip—the part that has obviously included our glamorous Corah.'

'I won't come up to the penthouse with you,' said Jill. 'I'll go straight along to Speciality.'

'He won't eat you, my pet.' Linda stared rather hard at Jill, and though it was no real surprise that she was still looking pale after yesterday, that didn't quite account for the fact that she was gnawing all the lipstick off her underlip. 'If I don't take you up with me, he'll come down and fetch you. You know he will, for I'll have to tell him that you've been hurt and you aren't working.'

'He'll find out soon enough,' Jill argued faintly. 'I'm only another employee—it isn't important to him what happens to me.'"

"That's unfair,' Linda exclaimed. 'Uncle Erik takes a lot of interest in the people who work for him—besides, you got hurt helping me and he'll want to thank you. He's like that!'

'Very well,' Jill acquiesced, and as the car headed into the store parking lot and the cinders crunched under the wheels, she felt a rising wave of panic. It lifted her, swept over her, plunged her into the frightening depths of self-realisation. She wanted to see the man, and she also wanted to run a thousand miles away from him. The immensity of both desires drained what vitality she had left under the pain and shock of getting scalded. Oh no! Her teeth clamped her lip to breaking point. Not love—for Erik Norlund!

Her heart clutched for a reason why she should love him, and there was every reason in the world and not a hope that she was having delirium tremens or something similar!

Linda slipped out of the car and came round to open the door beside Jill. They went into the store through the staff entrance and stood together in the lift that swept up and up to the penthouse floor. This was the first time Jill had been up as far as her boss's eyrie . . . where he would not be dwelling alone for very much longer. Of course, Jill

reasoned, Corah might want to start off her married life in a house. Most women wanted a house and a garden in which to bring up their children . . .

Jill's heart turned over, a sensation that wasn't caused by the abrupt stopping of the lift. Erik would want children, she was sure of that, and they'd be startlingly blond-mopped in view of the fact that he and Corah were both so fair.

A white-jacketed houseman opened the door to Linda's ring, and they were shown into a spacious lounge and told that Mr. Erik was showering and changing after his air flight from New York. 'Shall I bring in some snacks. Miss Linda?' the houseman was smiling but not obsequious; a Dane like his employer.

'That would be nice, Holger.' Linda tossed her jockey cap to a chair and glanced round her with a much more confident smile than the one Jill was able to conjure. When the houseman left the room, Linda gestured at the immense window that filled one wall of the room. 'Well, there it is, Jill,' she said. 'The window from which Uncle Erik watches the world and the stars sail by.'

Jill walked to the window and saw that it took in a breathtaking view of Santa Felicia, and beyond the marina the sea stretched away until it was lost in the sky. There were sit-back lounges set in front of the window, with a table in between, and Jill sat down and took stock of the rest of the lounge. It was high, wide, Nordic and uncluttered, like the man who used the well-stocked blond-wood bar, and threw logs from a wrought-iron basket into the roughstone fireplace.

'It's quite a room isn't it?' Linda said.

Jill nodded, and wouldn't have had an ashtray, a pewter tankard or a fold of the curtains any different from how they were in this her first glimpse into his home. She loved its spaciousness and its fey touches

... she hardly knew how she kept her seat as he came striding into the room.

'Hullo., you two!' He wore an olive green cardigan jacket, smooth brown slacks and leather slippers. His hair was damp, like corn after a rainstorm, he was freshly shaved, and suddenly his quick, grey eyes were on the bandages covering Jill's hands.

'That's why she isn't slaving away downstairs,' said Linda, 'in case you were about to ask.'

'I am about to ask!' He stood over Jill. 'What have you done to yourself?' he demanded. 'Can't I leave for a few days without you have to go and get hurt in some way? What the devil has happened?'

'It's all right.' Jill was half smiling, half scared of the deep lines of anxiety which had sprung into being in his face. 'I've got a few minor scalds, but they're mending and I should be back at work before the end of the week.'

,'And how come you got them in the first place, my girl?'

Jill gestured helplessly, and then had an hysterical impulse to laugh. Her hands were swathed in enough snowy gauze to pad a dressing-gown, so it was no wonder Erik was looking at them so anxiously. It was nice of him to look like that ... it was unbearable, and she had to look away from him, out of the great window, as Linda explained how the accident had happened. 'I see.' He sat down and Jill heard the lid of a cigarette box snap back as he took one, then the table lighter clicked impatiently as he lit his cigarette. Smoke brushed her cheek while his niece told him all about the stillborn picnic, the dash to the hospital and her mother's dawning acceptance of Keefe.

'The two of you really had a field day, didn't you?' he drawled. Then he spoke Jill's name and she had to look at him. 'How do your hands feel?' he asked, more gently.

'Quite comfortable, Mr. Norlund,' she said politely.

'You relieve my mind.' He looked, she thought, rather worried, then his attention was diverted from her by the entrance of his manservant with a trolley on which there was coffee and a board of appetising open sandwiches.

'Mmm, I'm starving!' Linda said. 'Holger, those sandwiches look almost too pretty to eat.'

He smiled and poured out the coffee; Linda shot a rather worried look at Jill's bandaged hands, which Erik intercepted. 'Tuck in, Lin,' her uncle said. 'This wouldn't be the first time I've helped to feed a baby.'

Jill looked at him, startled, and he smiled mockingly and sat down on the arm of her chair with her coffee cup in his hand. 'Come on, child, it's hours since you had breakfast and you must be parched,' he said, and, uncontrollably trembling, she took sips at the coffee while he held the cup. Linda, busily tucking into sandwiches, accepted quite naturally the spectacle of Norlund's boss performing such a service for one of his junior assistants.

'Now how about something to eat?' he said, when Jill had finished her coffee.

She shook her head, so emphatically that he burst out laughing. 'Are you actually shy of me?' he demanded, suddenly leaning so close to her that she felt the warmth of his skin. 'Are you, Jill?' he murmured. 'Or is it sheer dislike that makes it impossible for you to eat out of my hand?'

'I-I'm just not hungry,' she replied. 'Thank you for the coffee, Mr. Norlund.'

He studied her taut, pale face, and then his glance dropped to her hands and she saw his lips twitch. What was he thinking? That his teasing couldn't produce a slap this time even if he provoked her to one? 'Will you let Lin feed you?' he asked.

'I-I'm not hungry--' She was beginning to feel rather desperate, and wished to goodness Linda would stop eating and he would say he had some work to do and would they get out and leave him to it.

Anyway, he got up from the arm of his chair and sat down beside his niece with a cup of coffee of his own. 'How was New York?' Linda eyed him with innocence.

'Did you enjoy yourself?'

'Oh, sure! There's a drought on and everything smells of parched concrete dried under the Hudson River water they're using to clean down the street. It was real fun being three whole days in conference without any air-conditioning to cool the heat of the room and the arguments.'

'Uncle dear, don't tell me you spent all your time in a board-room.' Linda reached over and smoothed the sudden deep crevice between his flaxen eyebrows, 'Corah Bennet wired Jill from New York—is it true she's back in Santa Felicia wearing an engagement ring?'

'Yes,' he said shortly, and he was suddenly looking at Jill, exploring her face with his eyes as he fed sugar into his cup of black coffee. Then he smiled as wickedly as a boy, sat back in his chair and comfortably crossed his legs. 'Yes, Corah's engaged, but contrary to what you're both thinking, I did not put the ring on her finger. I am not the man she's going to marry.'

'You're not?' Linda exclaimed. 'Then who--'

'A guy by the name of Ben Childers,' Jill heard him say, her dazed mind barely able to credit the two incredible facts that Erik was not going to marry 'Corah—that it was Ben, after all, whom she had chosen.

Ben! Who had not returned to the lanai on Friday or over the weekend, but who had been in New York all the time—with Corah!

'You maddening man,' Linda said to her uncle. 'Jill and I were positive you'd got caught at last.'

'Sorry to disappoint you both,' he drawled.

'How come you know about Corah's engagement?' Linda wanted to know. 'Did you see her in New York?'

'Well, as you implied, it wasn't all board meetings while I was there. I went to the El Morocco with some people and ran into Corah and her beau. It seems he got up the nerve to telephone her while she was at Palm Springs, to suggest she come and help him celebrate the offer he had received to write the music for a new show. " Corah said she decided on the spur of the moment to see Ben in New York. Suddenly the thought of him alone in the big city, shy as an owl and in need of someone to take care of him, was more than she could bear.'

'That's love!' Linda sighed, and cupped her chin in her palm. 'When you get the feeling that you want to care for a guy, that's *it*.'

'No words of condolence for my broken heart?' her uncle queried.

'You haven't got a heart,' Linda rejoined. 'Any man with a heart would have married Corah ages ago. She is rather beautiful, and I expect the

truth of the matter is that she's got tired of waiting for you to pop the question.'

'The truth of the matter, young lady, is that Corah and I did not fall in love. If it doesn't happen right away, it rarely happens at all.'

Linda gazed at him, wide-eyed. 'That's true,' she said.

'And didn't you expect me, a mere lad of thirty-six, to know it?' He grinned wickedly, and disposed of a smorrebrød in two bites. 'Corah's a fine person and I hope very much that her second marriage turns out happier than her first one.'

'Did you know, Jill, that she'd been married before?' Linda asked.

'Yes, she told me all about it . . .'

'Maybe talking it out helped her to make up her mind with regard to Ben,' said Erik.

Jill looked at him and still it was unbelievable that Corah was not going to marry the man who had helped her so much after Duarte Foster's death, and then the loss of her baby. 'Now you know,' she had said to Jill, 'why I feel as I do about Erik.' But she had not been saying she was *in* love with him, she had been talking about the love one feels for a brother or a friend. Jill, incapable of thinking of him as a brother or a friend, had leapt blindly to the wrong conclusion.

A smile tugged at her lips. Ben must be up on cloud nine; he had scooped the pool, Corah and the realisation of his ambition to write the music for a Broadway show!

'We must be off, Jill.' Linda jumped to her feet and brushed crumbs from her skirt. 'I don't want to let Mom down after promising to go with her to that hat show.'

'Are you going as well, Jill?' Erik was on his feet, large and formidable above Jill. His query could have been a mere politeness, except that when she met his eyes she found them so grey, so lonely, that sheer pain knifed through her bones.

'No--' she rose to her feet, holding her gauze-mittened hands awkwardly at her sides. 'I thought I'd read in the garden after lunch--'

'Stay and lunch here.' It was an order, but a gruff, uncertain one. 'I found something in a Third Avenue antique shop that I'd like to show you. I'll drive you home to Karen's later.'

'What about the store?' she faltered.

'Blast the store!' He swung round to Linda. 'Tell your mother Jill's lunching here, and have fun at the hat show.'

'Oh, all right. 'Bye, Jill!' His niece waved round his bulk at Jill. 'He'll have you eating out of his hand!'

He was doing that already, Jill thought, and she . turned to gaze out of his immense window as he escorted Linda to the door of his penthouse. Big white clouds floated by in the blue sky, a steer's head, a bearded old man, a white horse leaping out of a crater . . . she gave a shiver as large warm hands closed over her shoulders. They turned her around from the window and she saw the lines that networked the sides of Erik's eyes; furrows of tiredness, of toil, that wiped youth from his face.

'I suppose you've realised what we were doing down on the beach the other night,' he said, his voice grating in his throat. 'We were quarrelling—but not like friends. And we were kissing—like lovers.'

The words ran through her, a thrill, a shock, leaving her limp in his hands.

'You ran away because of Corah, didn't you?' he said. 'And I went to New York because, after kissing you, I wanted to race after you and say to the devil with the difference in our ages. I had to fight with myself not to do that--'

'Why, Erik?' she asked simply.

'Because I'm thirty-six and tough as all-get-out,' he said. 'You're a mere kid of nineteen and you haven't yet begun to live.'

'No one really begins to live until they fall in love,' she pointed out.

'My wise and foolish girl,' he touched her hair and his eyes were so gentle it was hard to believe they were Norlund's eyes, 'do you think I'm going to rob you of a gay and fresh-hearted companionship with a boy like Roy Scott? He's something like the lad I used to be, and maybe this infatuation you've developed for me stems from that--'

'Stop talking rubbish!' Jill ordered, and then gave a gasping laugh at the way his eyebrows shot towards his hairline. 'No one's dared to say that to you for years, have they, darling? You've always had the last say in everything, because you're the big boss who gives all the orders. Well, just this once, I'm giving you an order —kiss me, Erik!'

'My dear girl--'

'Go on, I dare you,' she said, flushes high on her cheekbones and a fighting light in her eyes. 'Of course, if you're scared '

'Scared of you, you whippet?' He gave a laugh. 'That'll be the day.'

'And the day's come,' she accused. 'You're afraid to kiss me, and I can't provoke you this time by giving you a slap.'

'You —you little devil!' Suddenly he pulled her close, and with a little croon of delight she nuzzled her face against his cardigan. Tentatively

she put her sore hands across his shoulders, and feeling the caress that must have caused her pain he pressed his cheek to her hair and whispered that it was the devil he hadn't met her ten years ago.

'It wouldn't have done you a lot of good,' she chuckled. 'I was more interested in skipping ropes and painting books when I was nine, and I didn't like boys because they pulled my hair.'

Erik smoothed her hair with a large hand and she went even closer to him in growing confidence. 'If you throw your kite over the moon and marry me, my love,' he said, a wicked lilt in his voice, 'you'll probably have the sort of rogues who will pull girlish plaits right and left—have you thought of that?'

'It did kind of drift across my mind,' she laughed softly, and the joy in her heart was in her eyes as she looked up at him. 'I do love you, Erik. I love your strength, your will to work, and most especially your eyes--'

'Jill--' he gave a gruff laugh and colour moved under his brown skin, 'no one ever said anything as nice as that to me.'

'There's more where that came from,' she assured him.

He kissed her for that, a long, blissful kiss against which she didn't have to struggle because she thought him angry and lonely for another woman. 'I know exactly where we're going for our honeymoon,' he said. 'There's only one place in the world for us, Jill.'

'Denmark,' she whispered eagerly. 'I want to see your homeland so much, Erik, with you.'

'You will, my *kylling*,' he promised warmly. 'As soon as your hands are better we'll be off.'

'But what about the store?' she asked, and knew that his answer was extremely relevant to their future happiness. She wanted him, on any terms, but it would be wonderful if his love for her was greater than his devotion to the store.

'The store won't fall apart if I take a honeymoon trip,' he said, without a shade of hesitation in his voice. 'A long trip, just the two of us, all the way to the land of the Midnight Sun where we'll toast our future in cloudberry wine.'

'I can't wait for the trip to begin. Erik,' her eyes were shining straight into his. 'You *do* love me, don't you?'

'I love you dearly, my girl. Right from the very beginning—want some more proof?'

She nodded, sparkling with sheer happiness as she met the warm, demanding ardour of his mouth. She was going to get a trip over the rainbow after all!