



a pagan paradise
cursed by desire

Drums of Darkness

Elizabeth Lane

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AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

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To My Parents

The character of Pedro Prestan is based upon a man of the same name and similar background who led the uprising that burned the town of Col—n in 1885. Except for Ferdinand de Lesseps, his wife Helene, and other well-known historical personages, the rest of the characters in this story are fictional.

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One

No one who has ever known Panama can think of it without remembering the rain. Panama's rain is God's own temper tantrum, a pelting, passionate outburst of nature. Like a fit of melancholy, it sweeps down from the clouds in torrents, covering the corrugated tin roofs in the slums of Colón and Panama City with sheets of running water, turning the old cobblestone streets to rivers and the rivers to boiling brown cauldrons. The wind whips about the iron cock that keeps its vigil atop an ancient obelisk above the seawall at Las Bovedas, and whispers in the ears of the heroic bronze statue of Balboa that gazes out over Panama Bay toward the Pacific. It whistles through the windows of the empty bell tower in the ruins of Old Panama, sighing songs of long-dead conquistadors and pirates, of gold, galleons, and glory. Out in the bay, the shrimp trawlers huddle in clusters, awaiting the end of the downpour. The gulls and pelicans crouch on the beaches or stoically ride the waves, eyes closed against the stinging drops.

The rain mists the dense green of the jungle and runs down the slopes into the swollen Chagres River that empties now into man-made Gatun Lake. It hammers the steel tracks of the Panama Railroad where it parallels the canal all the way from Panama City on the Pacific side of the Isthmus, to its Atlantic terminus at Colón.

Running south from Colón, a narrow stretch of water threads its lonely way through the mangroves to lose itself just short of the massive Gatun Dam. Almost abandoned, except by the rain and the birds, this silent passage is all that visibly remains of the French Canal.

A disaster, people called it; a failure, this abortive effort that cost billions of francs and more than twenty thousand human lives. Yet, did

the French truly fail? Or did they merely begin too soon — when man's technology was too feeble to conquer the fearsome obstacles of disease, floods, landslides, political turmoil, and discouragement that lay like hidden serpents across the deceptively narrow fifty-mile Isthmus of Panama? Did they fail, or did they only succeed in beginning the titanic project that the Americans were to finish almost thirty years later?

The rain does not know or care. It only washes down on the hills and jungles, on the docks, the cantinas, the stores and tenements of Col—n, on the dark, rubble-strewn beaches and the glistening sea beyond.

Even today, there are secluded corners beyond the towns, silent, green places where hundreds of lichen-covered stone crosses inscribed with French names — or simple iron markers stamped with numbers — still stand. Each grave has its own story, its own buried dreams and hopes. These are places of memory, and here even the rain seems to walk softly.

It was raining on the afternoon of that January day in 1885 when Claire sat in a straight-backed cane chair beside her husband's hospital bed and watched him die. His face was gaunt and yellowish; his lips crusted with blood. He'd been retching all that morning, ghastly black stuff that gave the disease its Spanish name: *el v—mito negro*. Yellow fever.

She smoothed the stringy, brown hair away from his forehead and bit back the pain of remembering the robust young man who'd kissed her good-bye in Paris less than ten months earlier. They'd clung together on the stoop that morning, touching each other's faces, wanting to remember. It had been less than a week since they'd been married by a magistrate in the registry building.

On the other side of the door, Claire's sister-in-law, Denise petulantly pregnant and impatient for Claire to come in and help, had rattled the breakfast dishes insistently. Claire had made her wait while Paul held her in his arms for the last time.

"I'll send for you as soon as I can save up the money," he'd whispered before the carriage took him down to the Seine where he would take the boat to Le Havre and from there catch a steamer for Panama. And he had been true to his word, as she'd known he would. Still it had taken months — months that had limped past like crippled beg-

gars — before the envelope with her steamship ticket for Panama had finally arrived.

And so she had made the long sea voyage alone. She had come to Panama at last — just in time to see him die. Yellow, stinking, hardly aware that she'd come. Paul lay on the narrow bed. The fat little nun, wearing the white habit of the order of St. Vincent de Paul, squeezed past Claire and leaned over to sponge his face with something from an enamel bowl. It was the nun who had met her at the foot of the gangplank on the docks of the Panamanian town that the world knew as Aspinwall, but which the ruling Colombian government doggedly called Col—n, the Spanish name for Columbus.

Fluttering up and down the pier like a white moth, she'd waited while the Negro porters had carried Claire's baggage off the steamer and deposited it on the dock. Only then had she broken the news. "Your husband is down with fever, Madame You're to come with me at once." And she'd driven Claire to Col—n hospital herself in one of the buggies that served as an ambulance.

Claire leaned over and rested her head against his thin, bare shoulder. She was numb. This sticky, steamy world where everything seemed to move slowly was still so new to her that it hardly seemed real. And this human wreck laid out on the bed before her. Was this really Paul? Laughing Paul with a brand new engineering degree and his breathless talk of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the plan to dig a sea-level canal across the Isthmus of Panama?

She remembered his letters, so full of enthusiasm in the beginning. Then the disillusionment had crept in, subtly at first. He'd begun to agree with the other engineers on the project who felt that a sea-level canal like the one de Lesseps had pushed through at Suez in 1869 was impractical in Panama. Later on, the word "impractical" had changed to "impossible." De Lesseps had moved sand at Suez. French engineers and laborers were chopping away at jungle, earth, and rock in Panama. The proposed route of the canal would cut through a range of hills — part of the continental divide — that approached six hundred feet in height. It would intersect twenty-three times with an irascible devil of a river, the Chagres, that could rise forty feet in a storm.

"The only way we'll ever get ships across this cursed fifty miles of hell is with locks!" he'd declared in one of his last letters. "De Lesseps is a dreamer!" Then, in his very last letter, "De Lesseps is a fool!

Many's the time I've wanted to pack my bags and take the next boat back to France, but I'm committed to staying. Somebody's got to do this! Heaven knows, Claire, this is no place for a woman, but I gave you my word. Having you with me will make life bearable again."

The nun laid a hand on Claire's shoulder. With her round, white face, she resembled a flour-dusted yeast bun, risen to plumpness and ready to pop into the oven. "I can get the priest for you, Madame," she said.

Claire shook her head. Paul had not believed in anything he could not see, hear, or touch.

His hand lay limp in hers. His eyes were closed. Only the slightest flutter of his nostrils told her he was still breathing. There was no hope. The nun had made that clear as gently as she could. So Claire waited helplessly, her heart a lump of lead. The numbness, the sense that all this was a bad dream and that she would soon wake up again to find herself back in Paris was, she supposed, a mercy. Claire had always known that her own emotional equilibrium was delicate, and over the years she had learned to cushion her feelings, to avoid extremes of shock, anger, fear, or sadness. Paul had understood her completely, and in this he was more than just the man she loved. He was her dearest friend, her brother, her harbor against the storms of life.

Closing her eyes momentarily, she forced herself to think of what her life had been before Paul. It was never easy to remember those buried years at the Bicêtre Asylum in Paris. It was only in dreams that they came back to haunt her — the barred windows, the whitewashed walls, eternally long, maddeningly blank, and the old woman screaming, her gray hair standing out in all directions like the ends of an unraveled rope, her eyes rolling white in her head, and her mouth drizzling saliva.

Claire had been a child then, the only child in a ward of fifty female patients. When the old woman screamed, she would watch from her corner, huddled like a rat, her thin arms wrapped around her body under the yellowed shift. She did not wonder why the old woman was screaming, for those screams had been part of her world for as long as she could remember. She only watched, as she always did. Her huge, gray eyes did not blink. She did not speak. She never spoke.

On her better days, the old woman could be gentle. She would smile then, and sing to the gray-eyed child. Sometimes she would

even take the young girl in her arms and rock her, squatting on the tiles and crooning senselessly, her eyes closed. Claire would wriggle like a captive kitten, torn between the need to be cuddled and the desire to free herself from that stifling embrace, for the old woman was not bathed often and she reeked of sweat and urine.

One day the old woman had begun to scream again, had thrown herself on the floor, jerked for a time, shuddered, and lay still. The other patients, long accustomed to such scenes, had ignored her, but Claire had crept out of her corner to the old woman's side where she lay, unmoving, face-down on the cold tiles. She had run her frail finger along the crepelike skin of one extended forearm. The flesh had felt cool, devoid of response. She had fingered the wild, gray hair, pressed a cheek, opened and closed one of the eyelids. Even when Claire had bitten the weathered hand in a fury of frustration, the old woman did not flinch.

Several of the other patients, women ranging in age from the teens to the eighties, had gathered in a circle, whispering.

"She's dead," announced one of them, a pretty girl with a tangled mat of red hair and razor scars running up the insides of her arms. Another woman had begun to cackle hysterically. "She's dead, I tell you," the red-haired girl had said again. "Come away, child."

But Claire would not be moved. She had only locked her fingers into the old woman's ragged shift and clung there until the doctors made their evening rounds.

Even when they stood around her, a ring of dark trouser legs, spats, and white coats, she had not raised her eyes. One of them, a young one with a short-clipped beard, had knelt to feel for the old woman's pulse. "Gone," he'd said in a flat voice. "We'd best call for the cart and a couple of attendants. She'll be heavy."

"What's the matter with the child?" The voice was one Claire did not recognize. Someone new.

"They found her four years ago in an alley in Montmartre. Mother had been stabbed. The little girl was sitting beside the corpse, almost the way she is now." It was Dr. Jean-Batiste Sagan, one of the senior physicians, who spoke. "Must have seen it happen, the poor mite, and she'd been there for days. It was summer and the body was beginning to decompose. The child was in shock, of course, and half-dead from thirst and hunger . . . "

"But *here!* Lord, couldn't she have been put in some foundling home?"

"They wouldn't have her," answered Dr. Sagan. "She wouldn't talk, you see. And they claimed she frightened the other children, the way she stared. In the meantime, the police had done some tracing. They'd found she had an older brother who was living with an aunt. But the aunt wouldn't take her either."

"So they brought her here?"

"Yes. We'll take anyone, you know." The doctor sighed. "She was about six years old when she came to us. She's ten now, though she doesn't look it. Once I had real hopes of a cure for this one, but she's never spoken. Not a word. She never smiles, never laughs, never even cries . . . "

"Never cries . . . ?" It was the young doctor, still kneeling on the floor beside the old woman's body. "But Doctor Sagan, look at her face! She's crying now — there are tears — "

Claire smoothed the sheet that covered Paul's bed. Even now tears did not come easily to her, but she respected them, for she knew their value. It was with those tears, shed for a nameless old woman, that her new life had begun.

It was her good fortune to have been housed at Bicêtre. Even in France there were other asylums where the inmates were chained to the walls and left to die in their own filth. And less than twenty years earlier, places such as the infamous Bedlam in London and the Lunatics' Tower in Vienna had still been putting their patients on public display in cages, like zoo animals. Bicêtre, however, had been blessed with the pioneering efforts of Dr. Philippe Pinel who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had been the first to advocate and practice humane treatment for the insane.

A frail child like Claire would have perished within weeks under the old conditions. Thus, in a very real sense, she owed her life to Dr. Pinel. The good man had died before she was born, but his student and disciple, Dr. Jean-Batiste Sagan, had kept his work alive. Bicêtre was, for its time, a model of cleanliness and innovative methods of treatment.

Dr. Sagan, a portly man with flowing, gray-flecked whiskers, beetling eyebrows, and amber eyes that burned with zeal and kindness, took the little waif into his heart and his home. In the weeks following her tears he worked with her, talking to her, reading her stories, playing simple games that a normal child of three or four could

have mastered, praising her every effort to learn. One day he decided that she was ready to exchange her dismal surroundings for a brighter, more loving world. He led her to his carriage and drove through the teeming streets of Paris to his own house.

She had clung to his arm as the traffic rattled past — cabs and vegetable carts, elegant buggies where ladies sat with perfumed silk handkerchiefs pressed to their noses to hide the stench of the streets, their little beribboned hats perched atop heaps of false curls; begrimed junk wagons, their drivers cursing volubly; pushcart vendors, shrieking the merits of their cheeses, their eels and lobsters, their apples, their crepes, their cabbages.

When the narrow avenue had opened up into the Place de l'Étoile where a great river of horses and carriages clattered around and around the colossal Arc de Triomphe, she had pressed her face into his coat-sleeve and begun to whimper. The doctor had not yet coaxed her to speak, but she was capable of making tiny mewls of fear.

He'd patted her, encouraging her to look, but she had burrowed her head into his coat, refusing to open her eyes until the carriage had at last come to a stop in the courtyard of the doctor's modest but comfortable home.

He had lifted her from the carriage then, her face still pushed into his coat, and carried her into the garden. "Open your eyes, Claire," he'd commanded gently.

Claire had blinked in the bright sunlight and rubbed her eyes, totally stupefied. She was surrounded by flowers — lilacs descending in fragrant lavender clouds, tulips and daffodils, golden sprays of forsythia. After four years in the gray and white world of Bicêtre, she found herself drowning in a sea of colors whose existence she had all but forgotten. Awestruck, she had buried her face against Dr. Sagan's lapels once more.

The doctor had carried her to a wooden bench and sat down with her on his knee. When she found the courage to open her eyes again she saw that a young boy with light brown hair and golden eyes like the doctor's was sitting beside them, holding a black and white kitten in his arms. Smiling, he held the kitten toward her, but she drew back. She had no memory of animals, and the little creature was strange. The boy, however, had fascinated her at once — another human being who was almost as small as herself!

Dr. Sagan had put a plump, manicured hand on the boy's shoulder. "Claire," he'd said softly, for she was still trembling, "this is your new brother. My son, Paul."

Claire took Paul's hand and pressed it hard against her lips, feeling the bones through the thin, blue-veined skin that tasted of rubbing alcohol. The room reeked of antiseptic. On entering the two-story Col—n hospital, she'd glanced down hallways into wards of perhaps thirty or forty beds, all of them full and placed so close together that there was barely room to stand between them. Paul, as an engineer, and therefore a person of some importance, had rated a private room. It was clean at least. The sheets were bleached white, if somewhat threadbare from scrubbing. The door too had been scoured until the grain of wood stood out. The walls were freshly painted in a bilious shade of green. The legs of the bed rested in four shallow pans of water to discourage the ever-present ants from climbing up them and into the bedding. Years later, Claire would shudder to think of it. No one suspected at the time that these very pans provided breeding places for the mosquitoes that hosted and spread malaria and yellow fever.

"I'm sorry, Madame. He's dead."

A little sob cut its way up through her throat. It was the doctor who'd spoken the words. He was standing on the other side of the bed, still holding Paul's flaccid left wrist at pulse point between his thumb and forefinger. "I'm sorry," he said again. His face was darkly dispassionate. Was this the hundredth such death he'd seen over the past month? The thousandth? In all likelihood, Claire reflected numbly, he'd lost count. He let go of Paul's wrist and the hand fell soundlessly to the coverlet like the body of a bird. The nun, smelling of sweat and talcum, leaned past Claire to draw the sheet up over Paul's face.

"No!" She clung to the limp, cooling fingers, willing her own life to flow through them and into Paul's body.

The doctor's hand nudged her elbow, gently but insistently. "You can't stay here. It's cooler on the porch."

Still grasping Paul's lifeless hand, she remembered how she had sat beside her mother's body for days without moving, watching the flesh swell and crack in the summer heat. She remembered how she had squatted all afternoon on the cold gray tiles at Bicêtre, refus-

ing to leave the old woman's side until the attendants came to take her away.

Through the blur of her pain, she fought for the strength to let go of Paul's hand, to stand up, to leave him there and walk out of the room. She was no longer insane, she told herself firmly. And Paul was gone. The hand she held was no longer truly his. She could not help him; he could not help her.

Finger by finger she withdrew her hand from his. Then, like a sleep-walker, she let the doctor guide her through the doorway and down the hall. They passed a long, narrow cart on wheels that clacked along under the power of a lethargic little Panamanian in a white jacket. He had such a hunched-over, vulturine look that Claire had to avert her face from him. Behind them, the cart turned into Paul's room. How mechanical it all seemed. How routine in this place. There was probably a waiting list for Paul's bed, she thought bitterly.

Even on the veranda it was sticky. A curtain of rain cascaded off the edge of the roof, giving the porch a walled-in effect. The hospital, like nearly all the buildings in the dual town of Cristobal-Col—n, was a frame structure — or structures, since it consisted of several buildings — not old, but already mildewing in air that was like the inside of a Turkish bath. The porch extended past the water's edge, supported by concrete blocks on pilings. Below the boards on which they stood, they could hear the lapping of the Caribbean.

Dr. Philippe Henri Jarnac gazed out at the rain-pocked waves and pondered the girl's dilemma. His hands tightened and loosened themselves against the wooden railing. They were huge hands, stevedore hands; certainly not the sensitive, fine-boned hands of a surgeon.

Obliquely, he studied the girl as she stood beside him staring into the rain. She was smaller than he'd expected, and perhaps not quite so pretty as Paul Sagan had described her to him before the fever took his mind. Yet there was no mistaking those huge gray eyes and that wealth of chestnut hair that descended in two glossy wings from a simple center part, to be caught in a low coil on the back of her neck. He would have known her anywhere.

"When will they bury him?" she asked in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"In the morning, Early. If you want to be there, I can arrange it."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd be grateful."

There were no tears in her eyes. Well, that was not surprising either, after what Sagan had told him about her life in Bicêtre, how she'd gone for years without speaking and how his father, the eminent Dr. Jean-Batiste Sagan, had brought her home and raised her as his own daughter. The poor, dying devil had talked about her for hours — how they'd grown up together and fallen in love; how, when his father had died in debt (a consequence of his generosity), she'd been forced to go and live as a servant to the brother she had not seen for years and his spoiled young wife; how they'd married impulsively, days before his departure for Panama.

Yes, Philippe Jarnac reflected, he already knew a good deal about her. But there was one thing that puzzled him: Paul Sagan had told him that she'd decided not to come.

She was standing so close to him that he could hear her breathing — deep, quiet gulps of humid air, her chest tight with anguish. She stood straight and stiff, dressed in a blue serge traveling gown that, in the eighty-five degree heat, must have been torture with its high mandarin collar, long pointed sleeves edged with ribbon, and a bustle — Lord! Were those monstrosities back in fashion again?

She looked so out of place, so waiflike, so damnably, determinedly brave that he was worried about her. The girl'd had a bad shock, and he knew she was delicate.

He wondered what to say to her. There was no reason for him to be timid. He was thirty-four years old and blue of blood; he'd graduated with honors from the best medical school in France and, for what it was worth, won the hand of the most beautiful woman in Paris. When the occasion demanded it, he could bubble over with charming sympathy. Why then, damn it, just when he wanted to put her at ease, had his tongue become a muttonchop in his mouth?

"I knew him . . . " He looked at her sharply, then gazed up at the open beams of the roof, the sight of that agonized face too painful to bear. "You shouldn't have come. Panama's no place for a woman. I know, I brought my wife here . . . " He trailed off, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

"Paul knew that too. But he couldn't have stopped me." She glanced over at her trunks, which were piled next to the wall where the porter had dumped them.

The doctor opened his white coat, took a long Cuban panatela out of his vest pocket, looked at it thoughtfully, and then replaced it. "I never smoked the things before I came down here. They're supposed to keep the mosquitoes away. I even know women who smoke them. Like them too, so they tell me." He pondered what he'd just said to her and decided it was asinine. Well, he'd made a bad enough beginning. Perhaps there was no point in putting off the news he'd dreaded giving her. He had a feeling she'd want it that way.

"There's something I have to say to you." His fingers tightened awkwardly on the rail. "If I could just send you back without your knowing . . . " He shook his dark head and touched the spot where his hair was just beginning to gray at the temple. "No, someone's bound to tell you, and it may as well be me."

She looked at him, the way a woman would look when someone had just handed her a telegram in wartime. "Go on," she said.

"Your husband," he began as if each word had to be forced out, "your Paul was in some serious trouble before he died." He paused and let the words sink in. Her hand crept to her throat as she stood still, waiting for the unknown blade to fall.

"He was transferred here to the hospital from a Panamanian jail."

She swayed a little, and he reached out to steady her arm. Her bones were like a sparrow's.

"He'd been arrested for smuggling explosives. I'm sorry."

She found her voice. "Not Paul," she whispered. "I know him — knew him — " She buried her face in her palms. He could see the nails pressing into the white skin of her forehead. She was trembling. Fighting for control, she took a deep breath and lowered her hands. "I don't understand it. You'd best explain it to me."

"The Colombian police found a cache of dynamite under his bunk."

"But that was his job — in his letters he said he was in charge of blasting for a new section of the canal — "

"That's right," the doctor nodded. "But no one's allowed to take it away from the site. Not even the engineers. There's good reason for it. The stuff's in demand by people who'll pay well for it."

Still quaking, she let her gray eyes ask the questions.

"For the mines in Colombia," he explained, the words flowing like a torrent now that the dam was broken. "Silver, gold, emeralds. They need dynamite down there and the Colombian government's slapped

a high duty on every stick that comes into the country. It's a good source of revenue. A legitimate one. But it's opened up a black market. Smugglers are getting rich on contraband dynamite."

"And you think Paul — "

"What I think doesn't carry much weight. But yes, the police had reason to think he was involved."

"Not Paul!" She shook her head until her face blurred. "Not Paul! You said you knew him! If you did, you know he wouldn't — !" Her fingers were digging into his sleeve like little talons. He loosened them gently. He should have waited, he lashed himself. She'd had too much of a shock already.

"The police went through his things. They found your letters. They knew he wanted to bring you over, that he needed money . . . "

Her pale face flushed; she bit her lip in suppressed anger. Undoubtedly she was thinking of the police — of those impersonal brown hands rifling through the letters she'd penned with such feeling. She turned then, and gripped the rail until her knuckles whitened. A flock of gulls winged its way through the rain toward the dim horizon. "It's too late now, isn't it?" she said in a voice that was scarcely audible.

The doctor nodded slowly. "The fever took care of that. Still, it was a dirty shame. For a man to die like that, no chance to clear himself — "

"And what if he'd lived?"

"Who knows? The police had finished their investigation, but the case hadn't come to trial." Yes, he could tell her that much. But he'd spare her a description of the local jail, a filthy hellhole that often saved the judges the bother of a trial. "As I told you, I knew him. I made a few inquiries on my own. It didn't look good for him, Madame Sagan."

Her eyes widened as she looked at him, searching for some glimmer of hope in his expression. Finding none, she lowered her thick lashes and looked down at her hands. "But you must know he couldn't have — "

"Yes." Philippe Jarnac found himself pacing along the porch like a lion. The floorboards creaked under his shoes. "I felt the way you do. Dishonesty just didn't seem part of his nature. But the evidence — it's just that I don't want to raise false hopes. Do you understand?"

She did not raise her eyes. "Couldn't he have been framed by someone else?"

"Possibly. But the police are only interested in facts. I told you, I did what I could." Absently he drew the cigar out of his vest again and balanced it between his thumb and forefinger. "Now that he's dead, it's finished as far as the local authorities are concerned, but a board of inquiry for the canal company's scheduled for the end of next month. Among other things, they'll make the final pronouncement on his guilt or innocence. It's in their hands now. But don't get your hopes up." He shook his head and jammed the cigar back into his pocket. "The next boat back to France leaves in a week. You'll be on it. I expect."

In answer, she only stared out through the rain at the choppy sea. She probably had no money, he reminded himself, and she'd had no time to make her plans.

"If you haven't the fare," he offered, "allow me to buy your ticket. Call it a last favor to my friend in there. I can afford it."

She shook her head.

"No?" He raised an eyebrow that was a black smudge against his skin. "Well, call it a loan then. You can send me the money from France. In any case, my conscience won't allow me to let you stay."

She shook her head again and bit her lip, showing a trace of stubbornness. Good Lord! he realized. She was thinking of staying to clear poor Sagan's name!

"There's nothing you can do," he protested. "I have a few . . . connections, if you will. Knowing how strongly you feel, I can try to find out more. But for you to involve yourself — " he glared at her to emphasize the seriousness of it — "foolish, pointless, and dangerous! Go back to France before it's too late."

"How can I?" she said softly. "I've got to find out all I can. I owe Paul that much, don't you think?"

"You owe him nothing. He's beyond your help. And wouldn't he want you to think of your own safety?"

"It's not just Paul," she continued in that same whispery voice. "The Sagan name is honored in France. If nothing else, I owe it to the memory of our father to do what I can — " She caught her breath, her poise crumbling a little as she realized that her use of the word "our" was likely to confuse him. "You see . . . " she murmured. "Paul's father . . . It's a bit complicated, I'm afraid."

"Don't trouble yourself," he came to her rescue. "Your Paul told me about you."

"Even Bicêtre?" There was no hesitation, no shame when she spoke.

"That, too."

"Then you must understand. I can't leave yet. Not until I've made an effort — "

The doctor rubbed the back of his neck. Paul Sagan had said she was a stubborn girl. "How are you going to live?" he challenged her.

"Somehow." She drew herself up, chin thrust forward. "For one thing, Doctor, I'm an accomplished pianist. I could give lessons. Surely there must be people who'd pay to learn — "

"My dear Madame, why don't you try giving harp lessons in hell? I could guarantee you more pupils!"

The way she looked at him made him feel as if he'd just slapped a puppy. "Let me explain," he mellowed his voice. "I'm in a position to know because I happen to have one of the only pianos on the Isthmus. Had it shipped over four years ago for my wife. She plays very well — used to, at least." He gazed at her levelly. "Madame, to bring a piano to Panama is to sign its death warrant! It's the dampness. The wood swells. The wires rust. You wait long enough, and the varnish and glue begin to dissolve — then, finally, the termites . . . " He looked out over the water. The rain had nearly stopped. "Pianos and women," he said. "They just don't hold up in this climate. Believe me, there's hardly a decent instrument in the whole country. Let me buy your ticket."

She stared down at her hands, humbled but unmoving.

"Think about it at least," he urged. "You have a week to make up your mind. Maybe by then — " He broke off suddenly. "You don't even have a place to stay, do you?"

"I'll find someplace. A boardinghouse, maybe."

"Good Lord!" he exploded. "You don't know this town! They'd steal you naked the first night — and that's if you were lucky. Now, don't argue with me. You're spending the week at my house. I have a wife and child, a brother and three nosy servants, so it will be quite proper, believe me!"

The rain stopped and the sun came out. Not with the gentle transition that follows rainstorms in the rest of the world, but abruptly, the sun shoving the clouds aside as if to say, "Go away! It's my turn now!" The waves gleamed so brightly that the girl put up a hand to shield her aching eyes. She looked unspeakably tired. "Very well," she whispered. "Just for the week. And thank you."

Two

She sat on a trunk and waited while the doctor finished his rounds. From time to time he dropped back to make sure she was all right. She had not moved, only sat there looking as if she wanted very much to cry; but the tears had refused to come.

Philippe Jarnac drove the carriage himself, a smart, black-hooded chaise with a single seat. The horse, in contrast, was a spiritless creature, small, tough, and sinewy. "Blooded horses don't fare any better down here than pianos do, although some people have them," he explained, guessing at her thoughts. "The dampness again. And the parasites. These Panamanian ponies aren't much to look at, but they've been here since the conquistadors. You can count on their being alive when you go out to hitch them up in the morning. For me, that's important."

He had hesitated at the hospital gate, then deliberately turned the chaise away from the breezy, pleasant waterfront drive and headed for downtown Col—n. Let her see what she's getting into, he thought as the horse plodded along fetlock deep in fetid black muck that slapped rhythmically off the wheels. In the railroad-building days of the 1850s, Col—n had sprouted helter-skelter out of a mile-square, coral-bottomed swamp that sat like a wart on Panama's Caribbean coastline. The houses and shops had been constructed hastily, on stilts above the mire. The filling in of the land underneath had been a halfhearted exercise in futility. There were still many streets where, in the rainy season, pedestrians waded thigh-deep in a rank mixture of sewage and mud or skittered across the streets on boards laid out atop the stinking ooze. Only on a few of the better fortified streets were carriages able to pass at all.

Col—n had no drainage system. There were no sewers except those flowing, foul-smelling streets where fat, black flies swarmed up out of the mud. Disease was rampant; the rate of infant death appalling. Philippe Jarnac had harangued himself hoarse, pleaded, threatened, in an effort to get the French Canal Company to do something about the wretched filth, all to no avail. There was money available to pay preposterously high salaries to the company's directors, to buy champagne and vintage wines for the bacchanalian feasts that went on in the lavish company mansion known as the de Lesseps Palace; even money to squander on huge quantities of items which no one needed (someone had told him of discovering a whole carload of rusting pen points in one of the warehouses). But to clean up the stinking horror of Col—n — not one sou could be spared.

The buildings, most of them dating from railroad construction days, were, for the most part, spindly, two-story frame affairs that leaned against one another like scarecrows suffering from heat prostration. Balconies, doors, and windows were open to catch any tentative breeze. Bars, casinos, ramshackle hotels, and oriental shops jostled each other for space, their Spanish names a study in absurdity — “The Dragon’s Eye” . . . “Sacred Heart of Mary Bar and Casino” . . . and Philippe’s favorite among the titles, “*La Cantina donde Lloran los Valientes*” — “Where the Brave Weep.”

A vulture with a baggy, black hood tittered from a rooftop, then left its companions and glided down to snatch a rotting fish from the mud. Philippe heard the girl beside him gasp. “Horrible!”

He followed her staring eyes to the peak of a battered tin roof, where half a dozen of the big black birds hunched like hooded monks, chattering amiably as they gazed down at the street, waiting their turn.

“Horrible?” he said, feeling despicably smug. “That’s just because you don’t know. In truth, they’re the most beautiful creatures in Panama.”

“What?” She stared at him, shaken out of her lethargy.

“Beautiful. Because they help clean up the filth, which is more than you can say for the humans. The vultures are a blessing to this place. There’s even a law against killing them.”

“It’s easy to misjudge on the basis of appearances, isn’t it?” She gave him a wan smile, the first he had seen on her face. Smiling — yes, she was lovely, as lovely as Paul Sagan had said she was.

She was looking at the people now, where they crowded the narrow boardwalks. The people of Col—n. A human stew! Husky blacks from Martinique, Barbados, and Haiti, who'd mostly come to work on the canal; tough-looking little Hindus with turbans; Chinamen with queues dangling down their backs; Spanish Panamanians, talking with their hands; Cuna Indians, small and dark, carrying their black palmwood fishing spears. They lived on the San Blas Islands down the coast and had come in to trade coconuts, most likely.

A slender Hindu woman in a purple sari, with a red caste mark in the center of her forehead, minced past a shop where a stocky Chinaman was skinning a shark in the doorway, A Frenchman in a white suit peered out of a casino with a deck of cards in his hand, snarling at the one-legged beggar who'd had the effrontery to touch him. Above their heads, a huge man of uncertain race leaned against the edge of a balcony, unbuttoned his trousers, and urinated into the street. The girl gasped and dropped her face, twisting her wedding band in an agony of disgust. Philippe Jarnac looked at her and was not sorry she had seen the man. It was a kindness, really, to let her know just what sort of place she'd come to.

She was silent for a time, pressing her lips together as she looked at the people and the moldering buildings they passed. At last she touched his arm. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" He kept his eyes on the narrow street ahead.

"For not turning me loose in this place. Even if I deserved it."

Philippe did not look at her. He knew that if he did, he would see her smiling, and that smile would win him. And he did not want to be won by her. "Are you ready to accept that steamship ticket now?" he asked gruffly.

"No. That's different. I've already taken too much charity in my life." She was silent for a moment, thinking. "What about the hospital?" she asked brightly. "Couldn't you find work for me there?"

"You could be dead in a month!" he growled.

"But the nuns — "

"Twenty-seven of those nuns came here two years ago. Eight of them are still alive. Little Sister Gertrude, the one who met you at the boat, she came down with the fever the first month. Almost died like the rest of them. But now that she's had it, she seems to be immune."

"And you?"

"The same. I've had it too. Maybe half the people who get it survive — not very good odds, and worse for women and children. Not everyone down here gets it, by any means, but in the hospital, your chances . . . " He trailed off, lost in thought. "The damnable thing is that nobody knows how it spreads. I know people, Panamanians mostly, who've worked in the hospital since it was built, and they swear they've never had the disease. Then again, I've known others, newcomers especially, who've taken the fever without ever having been near a sick person."

They were passing through a street so narrow that the balconies almost closed off the light. Some of them were hung with laundry in a futile effort to get clothing dry before the next rain. Sounds of life — bickering, laughter, the caterwauling of babies — bubbled from the open doorways and windows. A blue and yellow macaw on a balcony pecked at the leg ring that held it to its perch. Except for the smell, the scene might have been almost pleasant.

"Isn't there some way to treat the fever?" She was pressing a lace handkerchief to her nose.

"Quinine. It helps some, but it's not really much good for yellow fever. Works best with malaria, but then malaria isn't usually fatal. It can make you wish you'd die from it, but chances are you won't."

"Then, there's really nothing you can do for yellow fever?"

"Very little." Gingerly he guided the carriage around the body of a dead dog. Col—n was a sewer, always had been. That's why he'd built his own house well away from it. He'd wanted to protect Angélique from the din, the squalor. Strange, he thought bitterly, looking back on more than four years in Panama — in spite of everything he'd done, she'd been irreparably hurt here.

Claire ran one finger around the high, itching collar of her dress. She'd chosen to wear the blue serge because it had been one of Paul's favorites. The decision had been sheer idiocy. Under the stylishly cut gown, under the heavy muslin petticoat and tightly laced corset, her chemise was drenched in perspiration. She'd packed her clothes in wintertime Paris. That such wet, pressing heat could exist had been beyond the realm of her imagination at the time.

Paul — no, she couldn't think about him. She lacked the courage to cut the tight band of restraint she had woven around her own emo-

tions. Instead she sat stiffly as the carriage jounced along through the thinning outskirts of Col—n, staring at the shanties, the thin, dirty, ragged children. Many of them showed evidence of their mixed blood — coffee-colored skin. kinky red-blond hair, strangely pale eyes. They flocked around the carriage, stretching out their small hands, begging “*Se—or . . . Se—ora . . . por favor . . .*” The doctor ignored them, even when she nudged his arm. “Every day it’s the same,” he said, with no hint of apology in his voice. “After a while you realize it doesn’t do any good to give them money. You can’t even scratch the surface of their misery. And most of what they do get goes to buy liquor or opium for the mothers and their men.”

The town had dribbled down to occasional shacks, their thatched roofs sprouting like mushrooms out of the tall green grass. Some of them were set high on stilt legs. Chickens, pigs, and naked brown toddlers shared the space beneath them. Out of the corner of her eye, Claire studied the arrogant profile of Dr. Philippe Jarnac. His hair was black as a gypsy’s, touched with silver at the temples; his face long-jawed and swarthy; his eyes dark and deep set, divided by a high, haughty, narrow nose. When he had introduced himself, something about his name had struck a familiar chord in her mind. Was it possible that she’d seen him before?

Her eyes traced the lines that flowed downward from the corners of his eyes and mouth. He looked tired — no, something beyond tired. Those deeply-etched furrows would not be wiped out by a night’s rest. Philippe Jarnac, she sensed, was not a happy man.

He was staring ahead now, at the rutted road, at the horse’s bony, bobbing rump. “It’s occurred to me,” he said, “that if you’re determined to stay until the hearing, I could use your help at home. How do you get on with children? Any younger brothers or sisters?”

“Only an older brother,” she answered. “But I like children. Who doesn’t?”

“I have a three-year-old daughter,” he said. “She’s bright; old enough to begin learning some manners, some music, perhaps, drawing and such things. We’ve really no one who’s qualified to teach her.”

“Your wife . . . ?”

“Angélique — isn’t well,” he replied, his voice closing the door on that subject. “I’d pay you generously.”

"I'm not asking for generosity," she said, inserting just the proper note of indignation into her voice. "I want no more than what's fair."

Was he amused? His expression told her nothing. "I'll be the judge of that," he said. "And there's no need to decide right away. My offer to buy your ticket still stands."

"Thank you," she said stiffly. "I'll keep it in mind."

The horse turned off the road of its own accord, onto a graveled lane that was better maintained than the main thoroughfare. Within a few yards the jungle had closed over the carriage like a wet, green mouth. It was cooler here, and dark, but the darkness was translucent. Claire leaned forward to peer out into that glowing, green world. It reminded her of the inside of an aquarium. She half-expected to see fish floating through the liquid air. Instead there were birds, tiny green parakeets, hummingbirds, golden honey creepers, and the glowing red tanagers called *sangre del toro* — bull's blood. They gleamed like jewels against the shadows. Orchids nestled into the curves of mossy limbs and tree trunks. Lianas, some as thick as a man's thumb, festooned the trees like streamers at a ball, and mistletoe crept its parasitic way along the higher branches.

Claire closed her eyes and, for the first time since her arrival in Panama, allowed herself to take a deep breath, filling her lungs with the mossy perfume of the jungle. With her eyes shut, her ears came to life. She was aware of the whirl and click of beetles, the scolding of parrots and monkeys, an oratorio of frog voices. She willed herself not to think about Paul. Not yet.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

"Now you know why I chose not to live in town. Some say it's dangerous out here . . ." He trailed off, as he had a habit of doing. "That doesn't bother you, does it, Madame Sagan?"

She shook her head. "Compared to Col—n, it's paradise! And since I'm to be a guest in your house, won't you please call me Claire?"

"If you'll do me the honor of returning the favor." He did not look at her, did not smile. Preoccupied, he flicked the reins against the horse's withers, urging the beast to a trot as the carriage rounded the last bend in the road. The jungle opened up into a clearing in whose center, surrounded by a high stone wall, an enormous house loomed against the trees.

She gasped with awe. Paul had sent her a photograph of the mansion that the company maintained for Ferdinand de Lesseps and other dignitaries. The doctor's house was no less grand and built in the same fashion: two stories, white-painted frame construction with a pillared porch across the front.

At her astonishment, he smiled wryly. His voice was dull and bitter. "Welcome," he said, "to what my brother André calls *Château Jarnac del ouest*. Civilization in the wilds!"

Château Jarnac! As Claire stared at him, a door opened in her mind. Her thoughts swirled back to Paris, to the concerts, the operas that she and Paul had saved every sou to attend. From their gallery seats, they could look down into the Jarnac box, almost into the wintry face of the man who'd sat there beside his plump, bejeweled wife, applauding politely with his white gloves. Elegantly bored, fashionably blasé, he'd nonetheless never missed a performance. And she remembered drives in the country, passing the splendid estate that the man called home: Château Jarnac. But especially now she thought of his face — the darkly graying hair, the imperious nose, the brooding eyes — because she found herself staring into a face that was startling in its similarity.

"Is something wrong?" he asked her.

"The count," she said. "Count Jarnac."

"My older brother," he answered without changing the tone of his voice. "Do you know him?"

"No. I've only seen him. He looks very much like you."

"So they say." Philippe Jarnac paused before a wooden gate that swung ponderously open ahead of the carriage as the horse trotted up to the house. The man who'd opened the gate slid the bar into place behind them and sprinted across the yard to grasp the harness. He was a small, wiry Negro, sooty black, and it was only when he turned away from them that Claire noticed the hump on his spine.

"Rub him down, Bertrand." Philippe nodded toward the horse while he helped Claire out of the carriage. "Then you may take Madame's trunks upstairs. Stop by the kitchen and tell Lizette we'll be having a guest."

"Yes, M'sieu'." Bertrand patted the horse's neck. He had a bright, ugly face, like a monkey's. His black eyes regarded her with open curiosity for a moment before he turned his attention back to the horse.

Philippe glanced at Claire's bags. "Which will you be needing first? I'll take it now, and Bertrand can bring the rest later."

"Only this." She indicated a black Morocco leather portmanteau which he plucked easily from among the rest of her things.

"M'sieu' — " Bertrand had spoken so furtively that Claire had scarcely heard him, but Philippe's head whipped around.

"M'sieu' Philippe, I found . . . " He peered thoughtfully at Claire. Evidently she was not to be trusted. "M'sieu', when can we talk?"

"Can it wait until I get Madame settled?"

"Maybe."

"Before dinner, then?"

Bertrand nodded. Claire saw that his hands, like his back, were oddly twisted. Yet he vaulted onto the carriage seat with the ease of an acrobat, clucked to the horse, and headed the carriage toward the stable, a low, tile-roofed building that was painted white to match the house.

At close range, the house looked bigger than ever. Claire placed a timid foot on the bottom step of the front porch, then hesitated.

"Come along," the doctor took her arm. "You're not walking into a lion's den. No one's going to bite you."

The door was centered with frosted glass, exquisitely etched, and framed in mahogany. Philippe reached in front of her, turned the knob, then bumped the door open with his shoulder. "It sticks when it's damp," he explained, standing back to let her enter ahead of him.

The foyer, Claire reflected, would have held the entirety of the Paris apartment she'd shared with her brother and his wife. Her eyes roamed to the ceiling where a crystal chandelier descended like a waterfall from the shadowy heights. The entryway was decorated in blues and greens, accented by dark brown mahogany walls and wrought iron jardinieres that contained a myriad of ferns, palms, and ivy, echoing the jungle itself.

A broad, curving staircase with a railing of intricately wrought iron, the house's most dramatic feature, rose just in front of where she stood and swept grandly upward toward the second floor. An architectural masterpiece, she mused. The stairway was open on both sides, strong, yet curling as gracefully as a, dangling piece of lace. Claire's gaze was drawn up and along its contours, up and up, to a figure at the head of the stairs.

She was looking down at them. A woman in a white peignoir trimmed with pink ribbons. Against the sky-blue ceiling, she looked for all the world like an angel gazing down from heaven. Hair the color of sun-kissed wheat hung to her waist in loose curls and stole around her face to form a halo of glossy tendrils. Claire had seen the Botticelli Venus at the Louvre in Paris. The woman who looked down at her, an enchanting half-smile on her closed lips, was not a whit less lovely. Claire could picture her standing naked in the hollow of a shell, rising perfect from sea-foam like the pagan goddess. Yet her beauty was more spiritual than pagan, more Madonna than Venus. She carried something in her arms, an indistinct form wrapped in a pink baby blanket. Tenderly she cradled it, smiling.

Then, still smiling, she moved a step closer to the edge of the stairway. She let the pink bundle slide from her arms and roll from one step to the next, gaining momentum, bouncing with each succeeding plunge. The blanket fell away. Claire glimpsed the blur of tiny flailing arms and legs. Her control snapped; she screamed.

Soundlessly, the little form plummeted toward her. Its head struck a support of the iron railing. Something cracked. Down, down it flew until at last it had stopped at her feet.

Her heart hammering, Claire bent over it. She saw a chipped china face with a hole in the forehead that revealed the backs of two glass eyes, blue eyes, and a head of yellow, glued-on mohair curls. A doll.

And from the top of the stairs, the beautiful woman was still smiling.

Three

"Angélique!" Philippe Jarnac's voice rasped as he bolted up the steps two at a time. "Angélique!" There was no one at the top of the staircase now. The pale figure had vanished like a wisp of fog.

He hesitated for an instant and glanced back down at the girl where she stood at the foot of the stairs, gazing at the broken china doll. She'd be all right, he reassured himself as he rounded the last curve of the stairway and strode across the landing. Curse it, where was Simone when he needed her?

The door of the sitting room was closed. He paused outside, wondering as usual whether he should knock. To hell with it! he thought angrily as he grasped the knob and jerked the door open. It was his house! Even this perfumed sanctuary of hers —

The big Negress was waiting for him, standing in the middle of the blue-patterned Persian carpet, arms folded, eyes narrowed to slits. Philippe himself was above average height for a man, and she towered over him by half a head. Her strength matched her size. She was indispensable to him, for he doubted that any other woman alive could have handled his wife the way Simone did.

"M'sieu' Philippe?" Her voice was a lion's purr.

"Where is she, Simone?"

"In her bedroom. I wouldn't go in if I were you, M'sieu'. She's . . . upset."

"You think she'll be all right?"

Simone shrugged. "If she gets worse, I'll tell you." She was wearing a long black dress. She wore black frequently, in spite of the hot climate. Her white headcloth gleamed against her licorice skin.

"Damn it, Simone, you've got to watch her. I brought a guest home, some poor girl whose husband just died of the fever. Angélique scared her out of her wits . . . yes, the doll again." His eyes moved to the ominously closed door at one end of the room. "She's too quiet . . . Here, take this." He handed her the black medical bag he'd carried upstairs with him; she followed him to the door.

There was no lock. Philippe nudged the door open cautiously, knowing from long experience what to expect. The small bedroom, all pink and white, intensely feminine with its ruffled canopy bed, was apparently empty. He stepped inside. From behind the door, she flew at him in a cloud of white, scented silk, her long hair twining about his neck, catching on his buttons. Silent except for her breathing, she kicked him furiously with her little pink satin mules, pounding his chest and shoulders, raking his cheek with her nails before he caught her delicate wrists in his hands. Under the peignoir and gown she was naked. The press of her wild, thrashing body stung him with memories, but that was all. She no longer aroused him.

Simone had opened the black bag and taken out a small vial and a sterilized hypodermic. With expert fingers she soaked a wad of cotton in alcohol and put it down on the dresser.

"Take her," said Philippe.

Using her powerful arms and body as much as her hands, Simone caught the quivering Angélique against her and enfolded her like a python, imprisoning her against her ample breasts until she was gently but totally immobilized.

Philippe took the hypodermic and filled it from the vial, measuring carefully. It was only a sedative, known to be harmless, but still . . . Sweet God, if there'd been some other solution — but there was no Bicêtre in Panama. Freezing his emotions, he took the alcohol-soaked cotton, lifted Angélique's loose lacy sleeve, and swabbed her white flesh. Then with one hand he raised the hypodermic, held it poised in midair . . .

Simone's small, wide-spaced eyes were glittering with tears.

Claire stood in the foyer with the shattered doll at her feet, her heartbeat slowly returning to normal. She thought back on Philippe Jarnac's oblique references to his wife and realized she should not have been so shocked to discover that the poor woman was insane.

Insane. Strange, how comfortable she was, both with the word and with the condition. But then while she was growing up, Dr. Sagan had discussed his cases openly with her, including her own.

She picked up the pieces of the doll and placed them at the corner of the stairway in a neat pile. Then she stood and waited for Philippe to reappear, twisting the chain on her beaded handbag and feeling like an intruder. When he did not come back, she began to turn this way and that, gazing nervously at her surroundings, looking for some graceful means of escape.

It was then that she heard the singing. It was a man's voice, soft and lilting, chanting a naughty little music hall ditty that had been popular in Paris six or seven years earlier. Clutching at any excuse to get out of the foyer, she followed the sound. It led her to the left, down a long hallway which must have passed through the width of the house, to a set of double doors. One door was ajar. She pushed at it tentatively. It swung all the way open and the singing stopped.

Claire was in a garden — a beautifully tended riot of ferns, flowers, and palms. She could see no one. Except for the chirp of birds and crickets, the garden was silent. A cobblestone path wound invitingly among the palms and clumps of bushes. Straining her ears and stepping on tiptoe, she followed the path around a clump of magnolias and found herself staring into the eyes of a squat, brown-skinned Indian. In one hand, the point balanced against the opposite forefinger, he gripped a machete that was as long as a man's arm. Claire stumbled backward over her own feet.

Someone laughed. "Well! What have we here!" She recognized the voice of the singer. Composing herself, Claire looked past the Indian and saw, him, a man in his mid-twenties, seated at an easel. He was grinning at her, flashing perfect, white teeth. His hair, dark brown and curly, tumbled rebelliously onto his forehead. His eyes were brown as well, and they twinkled, brimming over with merry secrets. His right hand held a thin brush; his left balanced a palette. Putting them both down on a nearby bench, he rose to his feet and greeted her with a bow. "Did you fall out of the sky, lovely lady? Or has my brother brought home a foundling from the hospital?" He extended his hand; then, noticing that it was smeared with paint, withdrew it with a smile. "Allow me to introduce myself. André Jarnac."

"Claire Sagan," she said. "And your guess about my being a foundling's as good as any."

At the sound of her name, she thought she saw a shadow pass across his face, but then he chuckled. "Don't mind our friend there. It's not you he's carrying that bush chopper for. It's me. Come see." He beckoned her over to the easel so that she could see the nearly finished canvas. It was only then that Claire noticed the Indian woman seated on a low stool in the shadow of a vine. She caught her breath in wonder. If a tropical bird had metamorphosed into human form, it would have looked exactly like this small person whose image was reproduced in the painting. The woman was wearing a blouse of the most intricate needlework Claire had ever seen — bright cotton cloth, cut and sewn in layers to make a convoluted design that shimmered with color. Glossy black bangs covered her forehead, crowned by a long red and gold scarf. Her skirt was a simple wrap of dark blue patterned cotton. Her wrists and ankles were constricted by bands of tiny woven white and orange beads. She wore huge, flat gold earrings and even a gold ring in her nose. How, Claire found herself wondering, could she have lived her life in France for so long, never knowing that such exotic beings as this existed?

"Lovely, isn't she?" said André Jarnac. "She's a Cuna. They live on the islands off the coast. The chap over there — " he jerked his thumb toward the man — "he's her husband. *Mon Dieu*, what I had to pay him to bring her here! They're funny about their women. They catch a foreigner on one of their islands after sundown — they'll kill him!" He gave a nod toward the glowering Indian. "He's still not convinced I only want to paint her. One move in her direction and *whissh!*" He drew his finger in a swift line across his throat. "Good-bye, André, dear old fellow!"

Claire studied the painting. It was good. She'd seen the works of the masters in Paris, and she knew. The light caught the sheen of the woman's hair and her high cheekbones subtly, in just the right spots. Half her face was in shadow. The other half glowed with tiny flecks of color that blended at a distance.

"You approve?" He smiled as she looked back over her shoulder at him.

"It's very fine," she murmured. "You don't paint like an amateur."

"Amateur! Indeed not! I'm very serious about my work!" He edged past her to highlight the lips of the woman in the painting with a touch

of carmine from the tip of his brush. "I'll tell you what, Claire," he said. "You look tired and I've got to work fast because the light's going. Sit down and watch me and we'll see how much we can find out about each other before Philippe finds you."

His open, relaxed manner had put her at ease. She moved to the stone bench and sank down gratefully. Her knees, she realized, had been trembling. "Thank you," she said. "It's been a long day and I'm afraid I've had quite a shock." She smoothed her auburn hair. Maybe she could confide in him, she thought. It would be good for her to talk to someone about Paul. It might help dissolve that tight knot inside her that had choked off all feeling. Philippe Jarnac had seemed rather forbidding, but André . . . As she looked at his broad back, which tapered down to hips that were narrow as a bullfighter's, she felt an urge to weep in his arms. Then, she caught herself and shuddered with guilt.

"A shock, you say? Well, I don't wonder. I heard the commotion in there when you arrived." He'd misunderstood her, she realized, but she let him go on. "When I heard you scream and heard Philippe go charging up the stairs like a bull, I figured Angélique must be up to her tricks again."

He glanced around and caught her puzzled expression. "Angélique," he said, dabbing at the palette with his brush. "Philippe's wife, in case he hasn't told you. He had this house built for her. Wanted to shut her off from the world."

"What's the matter with her?"

"It's her head. She took a fall down that long staircase and struck it on one of the supports — struck it just so. Part of her brain was injured. Philippe has a name for what happened to her, but I can never remember it myself."

Claire leaned forward, intrigued. A brain injury. And brain injuries had been known to heal. Why, there'd been a woman at Bicêtre . . . "When did it happen?" she asked softly.

"Oh . . . three, three and a half years ago. Before little Marie-Thérèse was born. In some ways, she seems all right. But she never speaks. And she does crazy things. You saw that."

"Never speaks . . . " It was a whispered echo, not a question. Claire remembered the doll, the flying arms and legs, the shattered china head at her feet. The eyes had been blue, the hair golden, just like Angélique's.

André cocked his head at the painting and put a tiny white dot in the center of the pupil of the eye. "That trick with the doll is something she does . . . oh, every few weeks, when the fancy strikes her. It's usually a sign of a bad spell. Philippe thinks it's her way of reliving the accident. He's taken it all pretty well, I must say, considering how he felt about her. Treats her just like one of his hospital patients."

Claire remembered the lines chiseled so deeply into Philippe's face. "He must have loved her very much," she mused. "She's so beautiful."

"Yes, that she is. At least that much hasn't changed." He dipped his brush into the turpentine and wiped it off with a cloth. "There. It's finished. What do you think?" He stepped back to give her a full view.

She studied the painting for a long, appreciative moment. "What can I say? It's marvelous!" She glanced from the glowing canvas to the tiny Indian woman who'd risen from her seat. Beyond her, she saw that Philippe had come into the garden and was striding toward them.

"Forgive me," he said as soon as he was within speaking range. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and when he came closer. Claire noticed a pink scratch running the length of his left cheek. "You must think me rude, running off and leaving you standing there like that. I'm happy to see you've found some company." He glanced at the painting. "Very nice work, André. One of your best, I think."

"Not really," André demurred. "But with such a striking subject, you don't notice the flaws." He gave Claire a beguiling grin. "It's like this, Claire. Anyone can paint a pretty picture of a flower. If you want a real test of your talent, you try painting a picture of a potato!" He winked at his brother. "You can go back to whatever you were doing, Philippe. The young lady's in the best of hands, I assure you."

Philippe frowned. "She's had a tiring day. I came to tell her that her room was ready if she wanted to rest awhile before dinner."

"I — I'd like that, I think." She glanced from brother to brother, conscious of an invisible tug of war between the two. Philippe, she sensed, represented the immovable object; the younger, more dashing André the irresistible force.

"Well, then," declared André. "I'm looking forward to seeing you at dinner, Claire. Meanwhile, I'll clean up this mess and drive our Cunas back to the docks." With a smile, he bent over her hand. Noticing her wedding ring, he raised his eyebrows, but said nothing more. Philippe

coolly offered her his arm. With her fingers resting tensely on his sleeve, he guided her back toward the double doors.

"Again I must apologize," he said. "I'd planned to tell you about my wife's . . . disability later. I shouldn't have waited."

"You should have known," she whispered, "that I, of all people, would have understood. What a tragedy for you. Isn't there any hope she might recover?"

"I don't know." His voice was suddenly icy. He did not look at her. "Nobody knows. I'm still willing to buy your steamer ticket if you'd rather not stay. If you do stay, you may as well know from the beginning that certain things in this house are none of your affair. Angélique is one of them. Stay away from her."

His abruptness chilled her into silence. Claire could only guess that she'd touched a raw wound. It was clear that Philippe had been deeply affected by his wife's accident. A slender Negro girl in a maid's uniform stood at the foot of the stairs, looking at them expectantly.

"Lizette will show you to your room." Philippe nodded toward her. The girl smiled until her eyes crinkled at the corners. She was about seventeen, Claire guessed, and pretty in an elfin way.

"This way, Mam'selle," she chattered in a lilting patois that suggested one of the Caribbean islands. "M'sieu' Philippe said to put you in the yellow room. That's the nicest one."

Claire glanced back over her shoulder as she followed the girl up the stairway. Philippe had disappeared.

"M'sieu' Philippe says you might stay to help with the little mam'selle. Lord, we could use it! I'm tied up with the kitchen and the cleaning, and Simone has all she can do just taking care of Madame. That child's going to grow up wild as a little kinkajou if nobody takes her in hand!"

They'd rounded the top of the stairs. Claire followed Lizette along the gleaming parquet floor of the hallway. "Aren't there any other servants?"

"Just Simone, Bertrand, and me. Nobody else will stay," she said, opening the door of what was to be Claire's bedroom. "There. You like it, Mam'selle?"

The room was bright and cheerful, with a yellow chintz counterpane that matched the curtains at the two tall windows. The bed was veiled by a canopy of mosquito netting. "It's the nicest room I ever

had," Claire assured her. "But I'm not a Mademoiselle. I'm mar — I'm a widow." The word tore her apart inside. Sweet heaven, she'd have to get used to saying it! Quickly, she changed the subject. "You said no one else could stay. Why's that?"

Lizette pulled her into the room and quietly closed the door. Leaning close, she whispered, "It's Simone. They're all afraid of her!"

Claire's widening eyes asked her why.

"She's a *mambu*!" Lizette leaned even closer. "A vodun priestess!"

Claire stared at her blankly.

"Vodun! Voodoo — that's what outsiders call it!" Lizette glanced around as if some unseen spirit might be watching. "Simone's from Haiti. So's Madame. Her father had a big sugar plantation there, and Simone's taken care of Madame since she was a baby. Her mama died birthing her, you see. Then she went to Paris and met M'sieu' Philippe and they got married." Her big brown eyes grew even bigger. "When Madame fell, M'sieu' Philippe brought Simone over from Haiti, and Simone brought her vodun. Everybody in Col—n knows she's a *mambu*! They're all afraid of her!"

"That's foolishness," Claire protested, trying to dismiss the prickling at the back of her neck.

"No, Mam'selle!" Lizette, forgetting Claire's marital status, shook her head till her pigtailed quivered. Her eyes bugged out like two marbles in her dark face. "Never say that! I could tell you what I've seen — " Twitching like a little bird, she glanced around again.

"But you're here," Claire protested. "And Bertrand."

"Bertrand's her cousin. They came from the same plantation. Me, I'd never run off and leave M'sieu' Philippe after what he did for my mama. She was sick, Mam'selle. Like to die. I went to the hospital to get help, and M'sieu' Philippe was the only doctor who'd come. In the rain. With all that mud! After he saved her, we found out he needed someone to cook and clean at his house, so Mama sent me. Been here a year. Pay's better than most."

"And you're not afraid?" Claire's voice was whisper soft, but challenging.

"Not anymore. I'll show you why if you won't tell anybody." She fumbled with the top buttons of her high-necked dress, reached down into her bodice, and pulled out an object attached to a leather thong. She thrust it out for Claire's inspection.

Claire studied the finger-sized bundle of bone and red feathers. A foul-looking thing it was, wound with some kind of raw sinew. Gingerly she touched it with a fingertip. "What is it?" she asked politely, trying not to show her distaste.

Lizette tucked the object reverently back between her little breasts and began to slip the buttons back through the buttonholes. "It's a *garde*," she said. "When my mama found out about Simone, she went to a *hungan* — that's a vodun priest, Mam'selle — and she paid him four chickens to make this. It's a charm to protect me against Simone's power, case she ever tries to use it against me. For a little money, he'll make you one."

"You're from Haiti, Lizette?"

"Martinique. We have vodun there, too, but not like in Haiti!" She picked up one of Claire's bags and put it on the bed. Claire decided the girl must be curious about whatever finery she had inside and was probably hoping she'd open it, but suddenly Lizette sprang toward the door like a singed cat. "*Mon Dieu!* The fish!" she yelped, and the next thing Claire heard was the sound of her sandals, skittering down the hall and, more faintly, down the curved staircase. Then the kitchen door slammed. Claire was alone. The moment she'd dreaded had come.

She looked about the room, her eyes clutching at anything that might divert her mind, might delay her a little longer in coming full face with her desolation. Against the far wall was a prettily carved oaken dresser with a round mirror so broad that she could barely have spanned it with her outstretched arms. Trembling, she walked toward it and sank down on the matching chintz-skirted stool. Someone, probably Lizette, had placed a bouquet of tropical flowers before the mirror. Strange blooms. Claire recognized none of them. Bizarre, alien things, almost vulgar in their flamboyance. And they had no scent. She gazed blankly into the mirror, remembering the dainty, perfumed roses and lilacs of France and realizing that she, not the flowers, was the alien here. Beyond the reflected scarlet and fuschia, her face was ghostly. She leaned toward the mirror, seeing herself for the first time since she'd performed that giddy, last-minute primping aboard the steamer in anticipation of Paul's welcome.

Her hair was disheveled now, drooping about her face in forlorn tendrils that had worked their way loose from the knot at the back of her head. Her face was so dead-white that she scarcely recognized it as her

own. The little constellation of freckles that swept across her nose — cinnamon sprinkles, Paul had called them — stood out like a handful of dirt specks in milk. Claire had never considered herself a beauty, and the reflection that stared back at her bore that out. Her eyes were too big, her mouth too generous for her thin face. Her neck was too long, her body too bony, too angular. Yet, while Paul had loved her, she had been as beautiful as any woman on the face of the earth.

She buried her face on her arms, but the tears did not come. The tenacious mind that had kept her beside the body of her mother for days, that had shackled her to the side of the old woman for hours, would not let Paul go. Her heart would not grant her the balm of grief. Thinking back on Bicêtre, Claire remembered one middle-aged woman who'd clung to a yellowed wedding gown and a tattered veil that floated about her face like a spider web. Her fiancé had been drowned on the day of their wedding, and she'd waited for him twenty years, unwilling and unable to accept the reality of his loss. Claire pressed her eyes into the blue serge of her sleeve and prayed for tears. Dear God, to believe it, to accept it . . .

Paul had been her first playmate, her first friend. And when, after many months in the Sagan household, she had finally broken her long silence, the first word she'd uttered had been his name.

Their love had grown day by day, from a childish devotion to a deep, secure affection that would rightly culminate in marriage. There'd been no need for a formal proposal from him. The understanding that they would spend their lives together had been a part of their relationship for years.

They'd have married sooner, perhaps, if Paul's father had not died, leaving him penniless. The house had been sold to pay the good man's debts; the servants, even the housekeeper who'd raised Paul in place of a mother, dismissed out of necessity. Paul had been in his final year of engineering studies at the university. A nighttime job had given him barely enough to finish his education, but he could not have furnished a household or supported a wife. Claire had had no choice except to move in with the brother she scarcely knew, cleaning and cooking for her room and board, and giving piano lessons for pin money.

Claire thought of her brother, Jacques, and of the apartment — small and cramped, but expensively furnished on credit. His young wife Denise had come from a well-to-do family of shopkeepers and

insisted that the place be outfitted in style, even though Jacques, as a fledgling lawyer, could ill afford it.

Jacques was tall, beanpole thin, and dark-skinned. He looked so unlike his pale sister that people often questioned their relationship. The truth was hushed and concealed, confined to the family and to Paul. Yet, in any conflict between the two of them, Jacques would invariably drag it out and use it as a weapon: their mother had been married to Jacques's father, a young naval lieutenant who'd been lost at sea; Claire's father had played the piano in the cabaret where she'd been a dancer. That was the reason the paternal aunt who'd raised and educated Jacques had refused to take in his little sister. "No kin of mine!" she'd huffed.

Claire's own memory of their mother had been wiped from her mind by the trauma of those horrible days and nights in the Montmartre alley. She spent hours studying the murky daguerreotype that was stuck into the back of an old album, a picture showing a sweet-faced young woman holding two dark-haired babies in her arms. One of the twins was Jacques. The other, a girl, had died soon after the picture had been taken.

"Why are you always looking at it?" Jacques's voice had a perpetually sharp edge to it. He'd make a good prosecutor, she thought.

"I want to know her, Jacques."

"Why? She pawned me off on my papa's sister and ran off with some man! And after that, there was another man, and another. She died in the gutter, where she belonged."

Claire's cheeks flamed. "She was your mother, too!"

"She gave birth to me. That's all."

"And to me — and I won't stand for — "

"It's my house." Jacques leaned on the mantel and took a sip of cognac. "And if you don't like what I say, you can marry your precious Paul and leave!"

That eighteen months with Jacques and Denise had been longer than the four years at Bicêtre rolled into one. There were times when Claire would have fallen on her knees and begged Paul to marry her if she had not realized how crucial it was for him to finish his schooling and establish himself in his profession.

But with graduation had come Panama. Aside from the romance of the project, the excitement of being involved in a monumental under-

taking instead of building roads in the Pyrenees, the lure of money had been irresistible. The pay offered was more than twice as much as a beginning engineer could make in France or even in Algiers. Paul, fired by the de Lesseps dream, had been eager to go.

"You can't come with me, Claire, my sweet," he'd murmured against her hair as he held her close in the rented hack. "Not at first . . . I've heard it's no good for a woman . . . "

"Paul, I can't live without you," she'd whispered, pressing her face against the collar of his well-worn greatcoat. "And I'm frightened for you. It's dangerous."

"But worth the chance, Claire." He kissed the tip of her nose. The Seine was edged with ice and the stars gleamed like cold, distant pinpoints. He unbuttoned his coat, held it open. She slipped out of her own jacket and came in against the warmth of his chest, feeling the beat of his heart through the thin cotton shirt. She'd heard about Panama. Heard too much. Malaria, yellow fever, landslides, floods, snakes . . . Sick with dread, she'd calculated the odds against his returning alive. "Marry me, Paul," she'd whispered. "Tomorrow . . . tonight, if we can find someone! Oh, Paul, leave me with that much at least!"

And he'd clasped her so tightly that her body had blended against his in one aching, longing whole.

The rain had begun again. Claire was not sure how long she'd been sitting there with her face pressed against her sleeves, but she heard it beating a murderous staccato against the tile roof, rumbling, grumbling from one end of the sky to the other. The twilight had begun to dim.

Suddenly — was it something she'd heard or was it only a shadow on the mirror? — she sensed that she was not alone in the room. Someone — or something — was behind her.

Slowly, trying not to seem afraid, she raised her eyes once more to the mirror. Her face showed ghastly in the faint light. Her eyes were two dark holes. There was nothing behind her but the open doorway. Nothing to be seen within its frame but blackness. Nothing, until the lightning zigzagged down the sky, flashing blue through the two tall windows.

There, illuminated in the doorway, was an immense figure all in black. Black dress. Black hair. Black, black skin. Tall and broad it

loomed, seeming to fill the entire doorway. In the mirror, she saw the light flicker across the strong planes of an expressionless face. Small, white-rimmed eyes regarded her as coldly as a snake's. Then the sky and the room crashed into darkness once more.

She had just seen Simone. That much she knew. But she was an educated Frenchwoman, not some superstitious housemaid. She could dismiss Lizette's trepidations with a shrug. She could and would. Why, then, was she trembling? She would turn and face her, show her that she wasn't afraid of her or her vodun! Deliberately, Claire swung her legs around to the back of the stool and rose to her feet.

The doorway was empty.

Four

The dining room table was ostentatiously long, and bare except for the square of white cloth at one end where three places were set. The blue-edged Limoges plates, the silver, and the crystal goblets were of superb quality, but they had been plunked haphazardly onto the table by Lizette's busy hands. There were no flowers, only a pair of overused and underpolished silver candlesticks with hardened wax cascading down their sides. It was a table set in the haste of duty.

André Jarnac had held the girl's chair, and now he reached across Lizette's scorched fish and patted her hand. "Philippe told me about your husband. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

He wondered if she'd been crying. Her eyes were bloodshot, but her face was very white. She looked strained and exhausted. Claire, was that her name? His artist's eye studied her face, measuring proportion, line, and color. No, she was not a great beauty. But she'd struck him as attractive earlier in the garden, with the sun gleaming on that chestnut hair. And she had unusual eyes. Gray. Almost violet. Perhaps she'd let him paint her sometime. The possibilities were intriguing, he reflected, watching her stare down at her plate where the fish, brown rice, and fried plantain blended into monochromatic lumps.

Philippe's chair, at the head of the table, was empty. André had decided not to wait for him. The two brothers seldom observed formalities.

"What a rotten shame," André said to the silent girl. "You coming all the way down here on the steamer . . . then finding out . . . " He shook his head, letting his eyes rest on her face. So this was Paul Sagan's wife.

"Did you know Paul?" Her voice was a husky whisper that made him want to lean closer.

"Only by sight. We'd never spoken more than a word or two. I've a small commission from the company, you know, to do some sketches and paintings of the work on the canal as it goes along."

"I'd like to see them sometime," she said, her interest visibly quickening. She'd changed from that hot-looking blue serge to a white linen shirtwaist with a lace jabot at the throat and a dark, twill skirt. White, André observed, was not her color. She was too pale. Green, he decided, would set off her hair and eyes to best advantage.

"Did you know about the trouble he was in?"

"A little," said André. "Rotten luck."

"Luck? Then you don't think he was at fault?" She leaned toward him, the candle flame reflecting in her eyes.

"My dear girl, I didn't say that. To tell you the truth, I don't know. The evidence — " Her face had fallen. He cocked his head and looked hard at her. "But I've disappointed you. What were you thinking?"

"Only that you might know something."

"My poor Claire. Wouldn't I have told you if I did?"

She pushed the food around on her plate in silence. She probably didn't feel much like eating, and in any case, Lizette was a poor excuse for a cook. André had given up on the meal altogether and sat leaning back in his chair, watching her, amusedly aware that his scrutiny was making her uncomfortable. Her skin had pinked becomingly. Now, that was better. Her eyes wandered rather desperately around the room, avoiding his, until they came to rest on a large painting that hung on the wall behind Philippe's empty chair.

André had always hated that painting. It was a portrait of the Jarnac family, executed some twenty-odd years before. The old count, dead some seven years now, his beauteous younger wife who'd been André's mother, and his three sons, Marcel, Philippe, and André.

No man likes to display pictures of himself as a child, and the sight of this particular portrait had always made André cringe. He was shown on his mother's lap, a little boy of four, wearing a lace-trimmed dress and curly hair as long as a girl's. Philippe appeared with more dignity as a somber lad of twelve in schoolboy uniform, his hand on the head of the family greyhound. Marcel, the present Count Jarnac,

his father's stern, high-nosed image even at seventeen, wore riding breeches and carried a crop.

"It's a horror, isn't it?" André smiled at Claire.

"The painting?"

"Look at it! The composition! The lighting! The figures look like paper cutouts! Sometimes I think Philippe keeps it hanging there just to annoy me!" He shook his head ruefully. "If I ever catch up with the charlatan who painted it, I'll see him hanged!"

Her gray eyes rested on the woman in the painting, a delicate creature with a rosy, heart-shaped face, her hair cascading in light brown curls from the crown of her head and her hooped skirt floating about her in a cloud of white.

"Your mother?" she asked him.

"Yes. My mother. Not Marcel's or Philippe's. Dear Papa was married twice." André studied the portrait. The presence of his mother was its one redeeming virtue, for she was lovely. The young countess had been an actress and one of the most glamorous women of her day before marrying the widowed Count Jarnac who'd been old enough to be her father. André's resemblance to her was strong, and her affection for her own little son radiated from the portrait. In the grouping and the appearance of the figures in the painting, it was almost as if two family groups existed within the same frame: the count and his two older sons; André and his mother.

The girl sat there straight in her chair. Too tense, André thought. Too pale. But the candlelight glowed red on her hair, a charming effect. She made an effort to smile. "Tell me about your family," she said.

"Not much to tell. There you see us as we used to be. And now —" He spread his hands wide and shrugged. "Marcel was always the snooty one, even as a boy. A born aristocrat! Such flawless manners, my dear!" André affected a foppish pose, one hand raised to hold an imaginary lorgnette. "Now Philippe, on the other hand, never cared a fig for fine clothes or etiquette. He lived in his own world of books, pets . . . The intellectual of the family. The gloomy idealist! Ugh! Still is, you know."

"And you?" She'd picked up her wine glass and was looking at him over the rim.

"Me?" André laughed. "I was the only one who had any fun. Sports, games, parties — I've never had any serious interests except

for my painting." His eyes wandered from the girl back to the portrait. Yes, he thought. He had his painting, which was damned lucky because he had little else. His father'd disowned him; Marcel hated him; Philippe patronized him, and for the devil, he couldn't decide which was worse. But no one could deny André Jarnac the one gift he had. He was an artist, a superb artist; and one day, if he had his way, he would be counted among the great ones.

"You don't get along with your brothers, do you?" She was still looking at him over the edge of the glass, her gray eyes sad and knowing. Extraordinary eyes. And her voice was little more than a whisper, husky and compelling. Strange, how he'd thought her plain just a few moments ago.

"Mon Dieu! Does it show that much?"

She shook her head. "It's just that I felt something . . . "

André looked back at the portrait. Even the forgotten artist, incompetent wretch that he was, had sensed the antagonism in Marcel's eyes and captured it on canvas. Curious, it was, that for all his growing-up years, André had not known why his eldest brother had hated him so. Well, he knew now. He'd finally learned the reason the night of his father's death, the last time all three Jarnac brothers had been together.

He'd been nineteen, and he'd left Château Jarnac in a rage some two months earlier, vowing he'd never speak to the old man again. The quarrel had been over the usual matter: André's determination to pursue a career as an artist. The seventy-year-old count had declared he wouldn't hear of it. Law, perhaps; medicine, like Philippe, even engineering or architecture — but no son of his was going to be a painter! One hot word led to another. The old count had been well known for his volcanic temper, and by then André had lost his closest and best ally, his mother, to death. Thus, he'd stood alone against his father's towering wrath, whipped and goaded until, white with fury, he'd shouted at the old man, "You can go to hell! I never want to see you again!" And he'd stormed out of the house, swearing that he'd never return.

It was Philippe who'd come to him one winter night in the small garret he'd found in the Latin Quarter. Philippe, stomping the snow off his boots and getting the floor wet, shaking himself in his coat like some great, shaggy dog.

André had looked up from a sketch he was reworking. "So you've torn yourself away from your medical books long enough to come see me, eh? Did Papa put you up to it?"

Philippe shook his head. There were unmelted snowflakes in his black hair, for the little room was not warm. André could spare no money even for coal. Philippe glanced about the dingy surroundings and drew in his breath. "He's dying, André."

"So? The old bastard deserves it . . . Did he ask for me?"

"No." Philippe stood there awkwardly, without taking off his coat or his gloves. "I thought you might want to come anyway."

"And make my peace? You're very droll, Philippe. Think he remembered me in his will?"

"I've no idea."

"Maybe I'd best come with you and find out about that, at least."

"At least." Philippe's voice was expressionless. He waited while André put on his coat, boots, and scarf. They said little as the carriage took them through the whirling snow, out into the shrouded French countryside, where the two-hundred-year-old Château Jarnac loomed like a mountain of granite. The only lights visible were on the second floor.

They'd shed their dripping wraps in the lower entryway, tossing them onto chairs for the servants to retrieve and dry, then climbed the long, curving staircase their feet had known since babyhood. Marcel was waiting for them in the wide corridor outside their father's chamber.

"I told you not to bring him, Philippe." Lean and elegant in a maroon silk dressing gown, he already looked the part of the count he was soon destined to become.

"And I thought that should be his decision, not yours, Marcel." Philippe's brown cheeks were still flushed from the cold. His hair was wet. At twenty-seven and in his last year of medical training, he still had the open, awkward innocence of a schoolboy. In his genuine pre-occupation with his father's illness, he'd neglected to shave, leaving the lower part of his face in black shadow.

"He forfeited the right to that decision when he left this house." Arms folded, Marcel stood between André and the chamber door. His physical resemblance to Philippe was striking, but no one ever confused André's two elder brothers. Marcel was already thirty-two years old, married, and the father of two sons.

His wife Jeanette emerged from the old count's chamber now, the two little boys in tow. Her pretty, plump face was streaked with tears — out of place, André reflected, in a woman who was about to become a full-fledged countess. "They've kissed their grandfather good-bye," she announced in a wavering, high-pitched voice. "Now I'm taking them to bed." With a sniff and a nod to André and Philippe, she herded her sons down the hall. She was wearing a bright pink peignoir that clashed with her red hair and did little to hide the advanced stage of her latest pregnancy. André watched her go and decided she walked like a big pink duck. A good soul, Jeanette. Soft, tender, generally inane. Perfect wife for Marcel.

The door was still ajar. Well, get it over with, André told himself, striding grimly toward it.

Marcel closed the door and stepped in front of it. "You don't deserve to see him. It was your going that brought him to this as much as anything!"

"Well, what the hell then!" André shrugged and turned away. He would have left if Philippe hadn't stepped forward and put one huge hand on Marcel's arm.

"This is no time to be hard," he whispered to both of them. "Let him go in, Marcel." His black eyes were so intense that the older brother stepped aside. Philippe opened the door for André. "He's awake, but he may not know you."

André stepped through the door and approached the vast white bed like a condemned man walking to the gallows. For all his outward show of cynicism, his very soul trembled at the thought of what awaited him.

The only other person in the room was an elderly doctor who blended into the background like a piece of furniture. André felt very much alone with his father except for the two life-sized, identically framed portraits that hung on the far wall of the bedroom: the old count's two wives. On the left, the black-eyed Gypsy girl he'd married in his headstrong youth and by whom he'd fathered Marcel and Philippe; on the right, costumed as Shakespeare's Juliet, André's own mother.

Count Jarnac, wasted away to bones and transparent skin, lay on his back in the middle of the snowy bed. His eyes stared straight ahead, seeing nothing. His breathing was thunderous in the quiet

room, for his lungs were full of the fluids of disease and the air bubbled painfully in and out.

André stared down at the pathetic figure and felt such a rush of intermingled love, hate, and fear that it brought tears to his eyes. Here was the man who had given him the seed of life, who had spoiled him, pushed him, bullied him, beaten him, and ultimately rejected him because he refused to become the kind of son the old man wanted. The count's hair fell back from his face in silver waves, giving the waxen face, with its jutting bone structure, an unearthly beauty.

André's throat ached. "Die . . ." he whispered between clenched teeth. "Die, you old bastard, and good riddance to you!" Then, before emotion could overcome him, he wheeled and left the room.

Philippe and Marcel were waiting in the hall. "You were right," André said curtly. "He didn't know me." He turned to take his leave.

"And that's all you feel," Marcel said very slowly. "I'll wager you're not even sorry!"

Up to this point, André had considered himself well under control, but Marcel's remark had added the final grain that upset the scale. Something snapped in him. He whirled, striking out with his words. "I'm not sorry! Look at you! You're about to become Count Jarnac! Are *you* sorry, Marcel? Are *you* sorry that you'll be getting the title and the house and the land? Look me in the eye and tell me!"

"Stop it, André. That's not fair!" Philippe had stepped between them. Marcel was as pale and rigid as death itself.

"Take him out of here, Philippe," he said in a thin, tight voice. "I told you, he has no right!"

"No right!" André pushed Philippe aside. "Why I've as much right as you, you sanctimonious —"

"Prove it, then," Marcel's face was like marble. "You know what your mother was. Prove you're his son!"

Only Philippe's restraining arms kept André from tearing into his brother with both fists, "Damn you . . ." he breathed. "Damn you to hell for that, Marcel! She was a good woman! She was faithful to him! She swore it to me on her deathbed! I'm as much a Jarnac as you are!" He straightened, his chest heaving. "Let me go, Philippe. I'm not going to touch him!" As he felt Philippe's arms release him from behind, he took a deep breath. "You always hated her, Marcel. She was

kind to you. She tried to be a good mother to you, but you'd have none of her. It broke her heart."

"She deserved it. That and worse." Marcel's face was a knot of anguish. He paused in silence, hands clenched as if he'd been holding a loaded gun, trying to decide whether or not to fire the fatal shot. "She killed our mother. My mother and yours, Philippe," he said at last.

The cold words hit André like a doubled-up fist in the stomach. Behind him, he heard Philippe gasp. There was no other sound.

"I've never told anyone," Marcel said slowly. "Not for all these years. Not even you, Philippe."

André glanced back at his second brother. Philippe, a lonely child of seven at the time of the count's second marriage, had accepted his new stepmother with the openness that was a part of his nature, withholding nothing in the way of love. He looked as stricken as André.

Again, Marcel's voice broke the long silence. "Our mother was only seventeen when Papa married her, you know. Seventeen and a Gypsy. He could have had his pick of noble ladies, but he wanted her, and he'd listen to no one who told him he was a fool." André and Philippe stood stiff and silent as the future count twisted the sash of his dressing gown with agitated hands. "They were happy the first few years. But she wasn't educated. She had no fine manners, no sharp wit to entertain guests, no comprehension of how to manage a large household When her beauty began to fade, she had nothing left. Papa tired of her. He took a mistress, a young actress" Here, he looked pointedly at André who writhed beneath his gaze, feeling sick.

Marcel's voice was hard. "This mistress, it seemed, wanted to be the countess. But Papa was not anxious for a divorce. He was getting what he wanted from her *without* marriage. Why go through the humiliation of a public scandal . . . ? So, he put her off."

André stepped toward him. He felt heavy, sodden with disgust and futile disbelief. "How do you know all this?" he asked hoarsely.

"Because one day, when Papa wasn't home, she came here to the house and told my mother everything." Marcel's voice had dropped to a whisper. To his credit, he did not seem to be enjoying the revelation. "I was hiding outside the door of her sitting room," he said. "I heard it all, even the lies about how much Papa wanted a divorce"

Marcel closed his eyes and pressed his fist against the bridge of his high nose. "I was the first to go to her room the next morning .

. . . I found her . . . and the poison she'd taken. Papa didn't want a scandal. The Jarnac name, you know. The honor that had to be preserved. He buried the stuff in the yard and bribed the doctor into announcing that she'd died of heart failure. After the shortest decent interval, he married . . . your mother, André. And you wonder why I hated her."

"And me," André concluded in a hollow voice. "Well, I'll not trouble you any longer, Marcel. When you've become the new count — " He broke off and stared at Philippe who stood beside him, ashen with shock. No, André calculated, his second brother had not known. Marcel's story had jarred the mask of innocence from his face and now it lay in shattered pieces around him. Philippe was openly devastated.

The door of their father's chamber had opened, and the doctor had come out, shaking his head . . .

André had been staring silently at the portrait for several minutes, and Claire had begun to wonder whether the painted figures had bewitched him. "André?" She leaned forward and touched his arm. He blinked at her and smiled.

"That painting today," she said. "You have talent. I know. You belong in Paris with the real masters. Who's to see your work here?"

André straightened in his chair. "My sweet Claire," he said, "believe me, I know. I've asked myself the same question many times."

"Then why do you stay?"

He shrugged. "Circumstances — " He broke off at the sound of the front door opening and closing. Philippe strode into the room, his face a storm cloud.

With an impersonal nod to both of them, he seated himself at the head of the table. Lizette scurried in with his dinner. He nibbled at it, apparently so preoccupied as to be unaware that it was inedible.

The silence made Claire uncomfortable. "I've been talking to André about Paul's situation," she ventured. "When he told me he'd done some sketches at the construction sites, I thought maybe — "

"Stay out of it, Claire!" Philippe cut her off with a growl. "And keep André out of it. You don't know how dangerous the situation could be. I can't stop you from staying in Panama till the hearing, but I can't allow you to go risking — "

"Now, just a minute, Philippe — " André interjected.

"He didn't know anything, Philippe," protested Claire. "I asked him and he didn't know. That's all there was to it."

"That's right, big brother," André twisted his napkin in his tapering fingers. "There's no need to jump on her so! But he's right, Claire. These smugglers can get nasty with anyone they think's nosing into their business. Best leave it to the police."

"From what I've heard about the police — " Claire huffed; then her voice died in her throat. A black shadow had fallen across the tablecloth, engulfing her in its vastness.

"M'sieu?" The voice behind her was like the lowest tone of a cello. Philippe glanced up.

"You asked me to bring her, M'sieu' Philippe."

"Hm?" Philippe looked puzzled. "Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten. Come over here, Simone, where Madame can see the child." He beckoned with a slight motion of his hand. The shadow migrated from Claire's place to Philippe's. Quivering, Claire willed herself to look up.

It was impossible not to stare. Simone was a huge woman, taller than either of the men in the house. Her body did not run to fat as did so many mature Negresses Claire had seen, but was muscular, massively boned. Yet, for all her size, there was nothing mannish about her. Her ample bosom and spreading hips clearly proclaimed her womanhood. Her skin was that deep, purplish black that comes of pure African descent. Her age could have been thirty-five or sixty, but since Claire knew she'd raised Angélique from babyhood, she judged her to be in her mid-forties at least.

Simone's eyes avoided Claire's. She seemed to look through her, past her; reluctant, for some reason, to acknowledge her existence. The bold gaze that had impaled Claire from the doorway of her room was gone now. In its place, the impassive mask of a servant had settled over Simone's features. She was wearing the same black dress, but she'd put on a white apron and tied a white cloth around her head. Resting in her arms, like a bit of fluff, was a tiny three-year-old girl.

"Don't stare, Marie-Thérèse. It isn't polite." Philippe's voice was stern. Claire flinched. Even though he hadn't spoken her name, his words could have been directed at her as well as the child. "Marie-Thérèse, this is Madame Sagan. She's a guest in our house."

The child gazed at Claire with a baby animal's trembling curiosity. Her eyes were blue. As blue as the eyes of the china doll that had fall-

en shattered at Claire's feet. As blue as Angélique's. Golden curls tumbled about her face. Her mother's daughter. Claire saw nothing of Philippe in her.

"Hello, Marie-Thérèse," she whispered, not wanting to startle her.

The child stared at her. One finger crept to the corner of her mouth.

"Well," said Philippe. "Are you going to say hello to Madame, eh?"

She stirred in Simone's arms. Simone bent low and Marie-Thérèse, in her white nightgown, spilled lightly onto the floor. She danced over to Philippe and held out her arms.

"Papa!" she chirped.

With a finger on each of her shoulders, Philippe turned her in Claire's direction. His expression was firm. "First you give a proper greeting to Madame."

"Mam . . . Mam'selle." She curtsied stiffly, like a string puppet. Philippe opened his mouth to correct her.

"That's all right," Claire said. "Lizette has the same trouble and I've already given up on her. I may as well be Mademoiselle to both of them."

Marie-Thérèse had straightened and stood staring at her again, her little finger in the corner of her mouth. Claire held out her hand. The child frowned. Well, at least she'd gotten that scowl from her father!

"You'll have to excuse her," said Philippe. "She doesn't meet many strangers."

"She was born in this house," added André. "Except for her christening, she's never been past the gate. Never."

"True," Philippe admitted. "The diseases, the dangers — " He shook his head. "But she needs to know something of the outside world. That's why, when you needed a place to stay, Claire — " As he looked at her, she caught a flash of pleading in his dark eyes.

Cautiously she held out her two hands. "Come here, Marie-Thérèse," she whispered. "Come and see me . . . please . . . "

Slowly, like an unfolding petal, Marie-Thérèse lowered her finger from her mouth and edged toward Claire until she stood between her outstretched arms. Claire reached out, rested her hand on the small head, and stroked the satiny curls. The child closed her eyes, the way a kitten does when you scratch its ears. Carefully, Claire gathered her close and lifted her onto her lap, felt her squirm a bit, then settle contentedly against the curve of her body.

"Look at that!" chuckled André. "You've charmed her already!"

Claire snuggled her closer, suddenly aware of her own aching need for warmth, for physical comforting. Philippe's eyes were on her, their expression unreadable.

"Mam'selle," she piped softly.

"Yes, little one?"

"You smell nice, Mam'selle." Her accent was decidedly Haitian, like Bertrand's and Simone's. It was not hard to imagine who had taught her to speak. Claire glanced up at Simone and caught her off guard. Her brows were meshed, her eyes blazing with what Claire could only guess to be resentment. She fought the urge to look away, battled the tide of cold fear that crept inexplicably up her back. She kept her eyes on Simone's face until she saw it change, saw some invisible hand place that stiff mask over her countenance once more. Claire was perspiring. Her little victory had left her drained.

"Perhaps it's time for her to go to bed," she said to Philippe in a tight voice.

"I suppose — " he said, giving no indication that he'd been aware of what had passed between the two women. Claire gave Marie-Thérèse a squeeze and lowered her to the floor.

Simone snatched her up like a stray wisp of thistledown. "Come along, *ti fi*," she said.

Claire raised her eyebrows at Simone's unfamiliar expression of endearment. "*Ti fi*?"

André fingered the stem of his glass and smiled. "*Petite fille*," he explained in a low voice, "what the Haitians would call a little girl."

Claire nodded her understanding as her eyes met Philippe's across the table. No, she realized, it would not do at all for the daughter of a French aristocrat to grow up speaking her native tongue like a black Haitian.

"Say good night to your papa, *ti fi*," Simone commanded her tiny charge.

"Good night, Papa," she said in a little mechanical voice, blowing him a puppet's kiss.

"Good night, Marie-Thérèse." Philippe's tone was formal. He looked at her expectantly. "And who else . . . ?"

"Good night, Uncle André," she chirped dutifully. André acknowledged her with a nod of his head. Marie-Thérèse yawned.

"You're forgetting someone," Philippe prodded her.

Her nose crinkled with the effort of her concentration. Then she laughed, a miniature explosion of tinkling music. "Mam'selle!" she exclaimed. "Good night, Mam'selle!" Leaning outward from Simone's grasp she opened her arms.

Hesitantly, Claire pulled back her chair and stood up. Simone towered over her. She stretched on tiptoe and brushed a kiss onto Marie-Thérèse's warm, pink cheek. The little arms locked tight around her neck. "Good night, Mam'selle," she whispered again, hugging her fiercely. Claire felt Simone's eyes burning into the top of her head, scented the tension in that huge body as she stood close to her. After what seemed like a very long time, Marie-Thérèse let her go.

Claire eased back down into her seat. It was so hot in the room that her petticoat clung damply to her legs. Simone had turned to leave. Philippe was watching her with narrowed eyes.

"Simone," he called her just as she reached the doorway. She swung around slowly, majestic as an Amazon queen.

"Yes?"

"Would you remind Bertrand to double-check the lock on the gate? I understand he found it unfastened this morning." The words were spoken with studied casualness. He leaned back in his chair, eyes on her face.

"Eh?" Simone shrugged. "Maybe Bertrand's getting forgetful. He's not so young anymore."

Philippe shook his head. "He swears he locked it last night. But we can't afford that kind of mistake. Not when Prestan's renegades are rumored to be in the neighborhood." He said it evenly, emphasizing the name. Simone's placid expression did not waver.

"I'll tell him. Is that all, M'sieu'?"

"That's all, Simone."

She nodded silently, then stalked out of the room like a huge jungle cat, Marie-Thérèse nestled in the crook of her arm.

The room was silent again. "Prestan?" Claire finally asked. "What is he, a bandit?"

"That's a good word for him," said Philippe. "A bandit masquerading as a patriot!"

"Let me explain, Claire," André broke in. "Panama's not the lazy tropical paradise you might think it is." He winked at her as he said it. Panama was no paradise, and they knew it. "The place is a damned

smoking volcano, ready to erupt. The Panamanians are itching to break loose from Colombia and form their own government. Some groups are ready to fight about it."

"It's not just Colombia they're against," Philippe added.

"Some of the rebel factions would like to drive all foreigners out of Panama, including the French."

"Panama for the Panamanians!" André exclaimed mockingly. "A bunch of puffed-up idealists! Well, I'm not worried, big brother! Most of those hotheads are nothing but talk, including Pedro Prestan!"

"Prestan!" Philippe snorted. "You'd put him in the same class as the rest? Listen, André, most of your hotheads, as you call them, are decent men. I've talked with them. They're sincere. They mean well. But Pedro Prestan?" He opened up his coat and took the cigar out of his vest pocket again. Instead of lighting it, he used it to tap on the tabletop for emphasis. "He's only in it for himself! He steals and murders for his own gain in the name of some nonexistent revolution. Prestan!" He thumped the cigar down so forcefully that he blunted the end of it. "He's not even Panamanian!"

Claire leaned forward. "Then what — ?"

Philippe jabbed the cigar back into his pocket. "He's from Haiti. Only been here a few years, I understand."

Claire felt an inexplicable chill at the base of her spine. André looked over at her and laughed.

"That's enough, Philippe! You're scaring the poor girl!" He reached out and patted her hand. "You're quite safe, Claire. My word on it! Why, Prestan wouldn't dare — " He flicked his eyes toward his brother. "Would he, Philippe?"

Philippe was looking down. His hands were pressed together at the fingertips. When he answered at last, his voice seemed detached from his thoughts. "No," he said. "Of course not."

They finished the meal, or what little of it they could, and sipped their after-dinner wine, speaking only trivialities. Afterward, Philippe returned to the library and André, excusing himself, disappeared upstairs. Claire welcomed the solitude. She needed time alone to think, to find the shattered pieces of her life and reassemble them in some kind of order. Without Paul.

She sat on the edge of her chair and gazed up at the Jarnac family portrait without really seeing it. What she was seeing was Paul's face;

his golden eyes; the shock of straight, brown hair that always fell onto his forehead; the little cleft in his chin that she had loved. Her throat tightened.

Lizette bustled in to clear away the dishes. Her step slowed as she saw Claire. Her eyes lowered when she looked at her.

"Mam'selle," she murmured politely. She knows about Paul, Claire thought. She didn't know before, but she knows now. And she doesn't know what to say to me.

Mumbling an excuse, Claire got up from the table. She remembered the garden, the stone bench. No one would bother her there. A set of double glass doors separated the garden and the dining room. They were locked, but there was a key in the lock. Lizette, her arms laden with dishes, had gone back into the kitchen. Turning the key, Claire opened one of the doors a little way and slipped out into the night.

The house had been stuffy, still filled with the day's hot, wet air. The coolness of the garden was delicious. Claire inhaled deeply as her feet wandered down the cobblestone path. White lilies gleamed in the moonlight. Crickets sang from the ferns. Outside the wall, the night quivered with jungle sounds. The chatter of frogs and monkeys, the breathy snort of a tapir, the squeal of a wild pig, and the distant cough of some big hunting cat. Claire shivered. Stars swam in the sky overhead. New constellations, unheard-of in the familiar northern heavens. She nearly stumbled over the bench.

Sinking down, she buried her face in her hands to shut out the beauty of the night. How could she still be breathing, feeling, when Paul's empty body lay cold in some room of the hospital? She thought of praying for his soul, then scorned the idea. She had heard Paul say many times that the idea of an afterlife was for fools and cowards. He himself had expected nothing after death except oblivion. Had he found his oblivion? The idea tormented her.

A cloud had stolen across the face of the moon. Surprised by the sudden blackness, she lifted her head. Her ears caught the sound of voices coming from the direction of the house. Curious, she moved back along the path. The dining room was dark. Lizette had blown out the candles. The only light came from Philippe's library, whose windows, she realized, also opened onto the garden.

"I've never lied to you, M'sieu' Philippe." Moving closer, she recognized Simone's bass tones. "If I say I know nothing, you can believe me."

There were no curtains at the windows. Claire could see Philippe seated at his desk. Simone stood before him, hands behind her back.

"Then why didn't you tell me before that you'd known Prestan in Haiti?" Philippe demanded. He sounded annoyed.

"It wasn't important. Plenty people knew him." She shrugged her massive shoulders.

"Bertrand told me you were a close friend of his family."

"His mother and sister, not him. He was no good. No good in Haiti; no good here in Panama. You think I leave the gate open for him?"

"I didn't say that, Simone." Philippe's tone was gentler.

"His mother was a good woman. Black like me. A good woman! His father was white. No good. He raped her. That's how she got a half-white son! M'sieu' Philippe, you think I leave the gate open for a scum like Prestan? You think Simone do that? Then I go! On the next boat! Back to Haiti!"

It was interesting, Claire noticed, the way Simone's speech, quite proper when she was in command of herself, degenerated into patois when she became agitated. Now she towered before Philippe's desk, outraged and quivering. Philippe sighed deeply.

"All right, Simone. I believe you. I apologize Yes?"

She glared down her broad, flat nose at him and finally mumbled her assent.

"Then who do you think could have opened the gate, Simone? Was it Lizette? Bertrand?"

Simone shrugged again. "Maybe Bertrand only thought he closed it."

"Then we're right back where we started. That will be all, Simone. You'll look in on Angélique before you go to bed?"

She nodded, turned, and moved silently out of the room. Philippe got up and strode toward the open window where Claire was standing. Crimson with embarrassment, she realized that she'd been eavesdropping. Not that what she'd heard made much sense to her, but she'd be humiliated nonetheless if Philippe caught her. Flattening herself against the side of the house, she held her breath, heard the window creak shut and the latch slide into place. Then the library windows darkened as Philippe blew out the lamp. She heard his footsteps and heard the door close behind him.

Claire crept back along the wall to the place where the double doors from the dining room opened onto the garden. Stealthily she tugged at the knobs. The doors were locked.

She cursed under her breath. Now she was faced with having to make enough of a racket to draw the attention of everyone in the house, including Philippe. Well, why not? she chided herself. After all, there was no law against being in the garden at night. Still, the thought of Philippe's scowling face —

There had to be other ways into the house. The kitchen, perhaps, where Lizette might still be washing dishes. She paced the length of the garden, but could find no sign of a light or another open door. She sat down on the bench again to think. She could circle to the front door, but it would probably be locked as well. She gazed up at the second floor windows. If only she knew which one was André's, she thought, she could toss a pebble against the window. Somehow, André seemed less formidable than his brother. He would only laugh at her.

But she was being silly! She had only to call out, to rattle the doors loudly enough. She'd made a perfectly natural mistake. Why should Philippe or anyone else have reason to be angry with her? Resolutely she stood up and began to walk back toward the double doors.

From somewhere outside the wall, a monkey screamed. She hurried her footsteps. Something warm whizzed past her face. A bat. She'd read about vampire bats in the tropics, and her imagination took flight. She lifted her skirt and began to run. Behind her, her footfalls echoed with a rhythm of their own. She paused. The sound of footsteps continued for an instant, then ceased as well. Someone was in the garden! Someone was following her!

Urging herself not to panic, Claire crouched low for a split second. Then she sprang to one side and flattened herself against the thickly gnarled trunk of a tree. The footsteps hesitated, then continued toward her, rapidly now, with no attempt at concealment. She edged around the tree. From where she stood, she could see the double doors of the dining room. She could run to them. She could scream, pound on the glass. Someone would hear her . . .

The moon stole out from behind its veil of clouds. The blue light glinted on the twin brass doorknobs. The footsteps, oddly gaited, brushed down the path toward her. Claire crouched low, ready to sprint for her life toward the house.

"Mam'selle!" The whispered voice at her elbow sent her lurching forward. Something heavy and metallic clattered to the pavement. She caught her breath to scream and felt a leathery hand clap over her mouth, another hand seize her wrists. The musky scent of horseflesh filled her nostrils. Struggling, she freed one hand and clawed at the fingers that were choking off her breath. They were twisted, knotted at the joints. She stiffened.

"Mam'selle! Don't be afraid! I won't hurt you!"

The hand loosened its grip over her mouth. She gulped for air.

"It's Bertrand, Mam'selle!" The black monkey-face peered at her. The whites of his eyes stood out in the darkness. Claire leaned back against the tree, limp with relief.

"I heard someone in the garden, Mam'selle, and thought perhaps . . . " he lowered his eyes to the walk where a long machete lay gleaming in the moonlight. "*Mon Dieu!*" he breathed. "I could have killed you! If the moon hadn't come out — "

Claire pictured him stalking her through the garden, the machete clutched in his hand. Her knees began to give way.

"Sit down." He led her to the bench. "What were you doing out here?"

She found her voice. "Walking, thinking. I just wanted to be alone. They didn't know I was out here and they locked the doors."

A flicker of a smile passed across his homely face. He sat down on the end of the bench and leaned forward, accentuating the hump on his back. "It's not safe out here at night, Mam'selle. There are . . . enemies. Stay in the house after dark."

"Enemies . . . ? What kind?" she whispered, wondering what fear could have driven him to strike her down with the machete even before he'd found out who she was.

He lowered his face and shifted his position on the bench so that she could no longer see the hump. He was self-conscious about his appearance, she realized. "Snakes," he said. "Panthers. Blood-sucking bats. Mostly the human kind. Don't ask me any more questions, Mam'selle."

He fell into an uneasy silence. Claire sat stiffly at the opposite end of the bench, thinking that she ought to ask him how to get back into the house.

Suddenly he swung toward her again, his words coming in a rush. "Mam'selle, do you believe Bertrand is your friend?"

She tried not to look directly at him. "Yes. I think so."

"Then listen to a friend. Get out of Panama. On the next boat."

"Why?" she challenged him. "Give me a reason."

"Don't ask me, Mam'selle. Dangerous for you here."

"I have to stay," she insisted. "For Paul. At least until the hearing. After that, it doesn't matter."

Bertrand nodded. "M'sieu' Philippe told me about your young man. Nothing you can do. Best you leave." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, mouth set hard as if he were trying to keep some terrible secret from escaping. Claire waited quietly, hoping he would say more.

At last he sighed. "I will tell you one thing, Mam'selle. But only for the peace of your own heart. First you must make me a promise."

"Yes . . . ?"

"You will not tell anybody. Not M'sieu' Philippe. Not M'sieu André. Not the police. *Not anybody*, that you talked to me. If you do — " he cast a piercing glance into her eyes — "I will tell them you are lying!"

Claire's heart was thudding against her eardrums. "I . . . promise."

He shifted a little toward her on the bench. "Your young man. Your Paul," he whispered, his eyes darting about him. "What they say he did, Mam'selle . . . " He paused. Claire's fingers twisted at the folds of her skirt.

"For the peace of your own heart, Mam'selle. Remember." Bertrand took a deep breath. "He did not do it. He was innocent."

"Bertrand!" She grasped his arm. "How do you know?"

"I can't tell you."

"But you know who did it! You know who — "

He shook his head. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"You can tell me — "

"No, Mam'selle," he drew back. "Too dangerous for you. I told you, remember, for the peace of your own heart. Now you can take what you know and leave Panama."

"But the hearing — " She wanted to get down on her knees and beg him.

Again he shook his head. "What I told you is not for the hearing. Remember your promise."

"I remember," she murmured. "Thank you, Bertrand."

"Will you go away now?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully. "I need time to think."

"Think wisely, Mam'selle. Best you go inside now." He rose from the bench.

"I can't," she said. "I'm locked out, remember?"

Without answering her, he reached into the pocket of his faded trousers and pulled out a key. "Come on," he whispered, moving toward the doors. The key turned in the lock. In a moment, she had slipped inside. "Thank you," she whispered back through a crack in the closing door. Then, stealthily, she skirted the dining room table and turned the knob of the door that opened into the foyer.

Moonlight drifted in through the tall windows. The ferns and ivy in their native pots cast living shadows on the walls. The house was still. Claire stole across the inlaid wooden squares of the parquet floor, which creaked under her shoes. "That infernal dampness!" she could almost imagine Philippe saying. Her mind echoed his sentiments.

She gained the foot of the stairs, relieved that no one had seemed to hear her come in. No encounters. No awkward explanations. No one would have to know she had spoken with Bertrand.

Lifting her skirt with one hand, she placed the other on the curving iron banister. The stairs wound upward before her. Pausing, she let her eyes travel its length to the top, remembering how Angélique had stood there looking down at her.

Claire's breath caught in her throat. There, at the top of the stairs, arms folded across his chest, stood Philippe Jarnac.

Five

Claire saw Philippe take two or three hurried steps down toward her, then slow his descent, as if he were pulling back hard on his own invisible reins. "There you are," he said when he'd come close enough to be heard in a low voice. "When you weren't in your room — " He broke off in midsentence and stared at her. "Where have you been?"

She realized then that she was clinging to the banister like a scared monkey. Scolding herself for looking so foolish, she let go of the railing, took a deep breath and tried, for an instant, to think of a good lie. "Outside," she said at last. The truth, after all, was simpler.

"The garden?" His voice was sharp.

"Yes."

He frowned, his black eyebrows almost touching. "Lizette had orders to lock the door after dinner."

"She didn't see me go outside. She locked me out. I'm sorry if it caused any problems."

He ignored her apology. "How long were you out there?"

"Not long." She anticipated his next question. "Bertrand let me in."

"And that's all?" he demanded, descending until he stood on the step above her. "This isn't France, Claire. It's not safe to be out alone after dark. Kindly remember that!" He stood looking down at her, his strong features starkly outlined by the moonlight. His eyes were two black hollows below the plane of his high forehead. Suddenly he laughed, bitterly and very softly. "Poor Claire! I do believe I've frightened you!"

"That's not so!" she drew herself up, startled by his frankness.

"Oh, deny it if you will." He relaxed a little, leaning against the banister. "But I'm a grim sort, and I know it. Sometimes I blame it on the

kind of work I do, but — ” He shrugged. Even without a jacket, his shoulders were wide and square. “But I’d almost forgotten why I wanted to talk with you. Is that the coolest thing you have to wear?”

Claire looked down at her long-sleeved, high-necked blouse of heavy white linen, trimmed with lace, and her flaring skirt of navy blue twill. She thought of the alternatives in her trunks: tight-sleeved gowns of ottoman silk, serges, velvets, failles, tweeds . . . Feeling foolish, she gave him a timid nod. “I’m afraid so,” she whispered.

He shook his head. A smile played about his narrow lips. “You’ll be miserable here. But I have a solution, if you’ll hear me out. My wife has a closetful of tropical dresses she no longer wears, since she never goes out. There’s no reason you shouldn’t make use of them.”

“Oh, but I couldn’t — ”

“Nonsense! Why suffer in this heat? And why spend your money for things you won’t need once you return to Paris? It’s the only way!” He looked her up and down, his brow wrinkling in the moonlight. “Angélique’s taller than you are, and not so slender. Simone could alter them for you . . . ”

“You’re very kind,” she said. “And you’re right. I’d be a fool not to accept them. But I can sew. Don’t trouble Simone.”

“Very well. They’ll be brought to your room in the morning — ” He broke off at the sound of a door creaking open in the upstairs hallway. The floorboards complained as Simone appeared on the landing.

“It’s your wife, M’sieu’ Philippe.” She glowered down at them, accentuating the words, “your wife.” “She’s restless, can’t sleep. Getting hard to manage, M’sieu’.”

Philippe suddenly looked tired. “All right, Simone. I’ll get her something.” He turned away from Claire and walked slowly back up the steps. When he and Simone had gone, Claire snatched up her skirt and swept up the stairs to her room.

Tired as she was, Claire could not sleep. The air in the room was sticky. Even the bedclothes felt damp. She lay on her back, eyes open, staring up into the ghostly mosquito netting as she tried to sort out the jumbled events of the day. Bertrand’s pug-nosed, black face swam before her. “Your young man . . . your Paul . . . he was innocent . . . for the peace of your own heart, Mam’selle . . . ” His words droned in her memory. Merciful heaven, how did he know? “You will

not tell anybody . . . not M'sieu' Philippe . . . not M'sieu' André . . . " Why not? she tortured her reasoning. It was true that both the Jarnac brothers had discouraged her from trying to investigate Paul's arrest; but was there more behind their attitudes than concern for her safety? Was there some sinister link between Paul's entanglement and this gloomy household?

She contemplated the terror that lurked outside the locked gate in the darkness, the fear that had sent Bertrand into the garden with the deadly machete when he'd heard her walking there. "Enemies, Mam'selle . . . " his hoarse whisper echoed in her head. She remembered Philippe's conversation with Simone in the library. Prestan, the Haitian renegade. Vodun. The grotesque little charm that hung between Lizette's breasts . . . Bits and pieces! Were they broken, scattered links of a chain?

She turned over, twisting her body inside her long muslin nightdress, and punched the shape back into her pillow. Run, something whispered inside her. Leave this house, this hot, hostile land . . . When the boat comes . . . Mercifully, she was drifting away at last. Paul's face swirled up into her dreams. Her aching arms reached out for him. Bertrand's voice . . . "Your young man . . . innocent . . . innocent . . . "

It was André who drove her to the cemetery the next morning in a hooded chaise that matched the one Philippe had taken to the hospital before dawn. The place where the French Canal Company buried their dead was on the slope of a jungle-covered elevation known incongruously as Monkey Hill, which lay a mile or so inland from the flat semi-island that was Col—n.

At least, thank God, it wasn't raining. He could stand beside her in the hot sunshine, her fingers clutching his arm as the crew of shabbily dressed gravediggers lowered Paul Sagan's coffin into the earth. There were four of those identical, oblong wooden boxes. Yesterday's victims of a land that sucked away men's lives. André counted himself among the lucky. He'd survived a blessedly mild case of yellow fever not long after his arrival on the Isthmus, and daily doses of quinine seemed adequate to keep the malaria away.

Gazing at those blank wooden lids, André wondered morbidly whether here, where death was so commonplace, anyone had even

bothered to keep boxes and bodies properly designated, and whether it was really Sagan, the poor unlucky devil, lying in the casket that was tagged with his name.

The girl stood stiff and dry-eyed beside him, shaded by a dainty blue parasol. He heard her breath catch as the priest administered a quick blessing to Catholic, Protestant, and nonbeliever alike, but that was all. André took her arm and led her away quickly, so that she would not hear the hollow thud of dirt clods hitting the lid of the coffin.

They climbed into the carriage and she sat tight-lipped as he drove back toward the house. He wondered whether she was thinking about the smuggling charge. Sagan had been a decent sort, and it was a bad break for him. Perhaps if he'd lived, he'd have been able to clear himself, but pinning crimes on the dead was a simple business. The matter would soon be closed, and all to the good.

The horse, a more elegant animal than the one Philippe used to get himself to the hospital, had slowed to a walk. Shaded by the hood of the chaise, the girl had put down her parasol. André leaned toward her. "What are you thinking, Claire?"

She blinked herself back into focus. "Nothing," she said softly. "Nothing I could put into words. Just memories. We didn't have much time together, Paul and I. Not as husband and wife."

André reached out and gave her arm a sympathetic squeeze. She responded with the faintest of smiles. "We didn't finish our conversation last night, André," she said, with a brightness that was as false as tinsel. "You didn't get a chance to tell me why you stay here in Panama."

He tugged at the reins and the horse stood still except for the swishing of its tail. "I've a bargain for you. I'll tell you anything you want to know about André Jarnac on one condition!"

"Name it!" Her mouth laughed. Her eyes were gray pools of tragedy.

"That you don't make me take you back to the house. Let me show you Col—n instead."

She wrinkled her nose. "Your brother already showed me Col—n. I've seen all I want to."

"Philippe showed you Col—n?" André began to chuckle. "Showed you Col—n, did he? *Mon Dieu!* Knowing Philippe, I can imagine!" The chuckle swelled to a roar. André laughed until the tears squeezed out

of his eyes. "That rascal! Took you right through the middle of Col—n, did he?"

"As far as I could tell."

"My sweet Claire, that's the most squalid part of the whole damned town! The devil himself wouldn't live there!"

She sat silent and bemused for a time. "I believe Philippe meant it as a kindness," she said at last.

"Or as a joke! My brother has a bizarre sense of humor!" André shifted his position on the seat so that he was facing her. "Trust me," he said. "Parts of this godforsaken place are almost worth seeing. Let me show them to you."

Slowly she nodded. "But we made a bargain, remember?"

André flicked the reins against the horse's flanks and they were off once more. She listened as he told her about himself, his parents, his two brothers, and about growing up in Château Jarnac.

"I still don't understand why you're not in Paris," she said. "For an artist, André . . . why it's the only place on earth!"

He hunched over the reins. "It's easy to say that, Claire. But in truth . . . " He lapsed into a brooding silence. "It's Philippe," he said at last, frowning. "My jailer! He has it in his power to keep me here, and he chooses to do so."

"Then you *do* want to go back to Paris!"

"I'd give ten years of my life to go back!" The words exploded out of him. There was frustration in the set of his broad shoulders, in the way his long fingers gripped the leather.

He gave a long sigh. "My father, as I told you, didn't always approve of me. My friends. The life I'd chosen for myself. The very idea of a son of his becoming an artist made him cringe!" André closed his eyes and gnawed on his lower lip. "To tell you the truth, I don't think the old man was ever really sure that I was his son. I didn't look like him. And my mother was years younger than he was. She had droves of admirers, and he was jealous." He opened his eyes and looked straight at her. "But my mother was faithful to him. Swore it on her deathbed. I'm as much a Jarnac as Marcel and Philippe!"

They were coming into the outskirts of Col—n. Negro women, strong and graceful, undulated along the sides of the road, baskets on their heads piled high with pineapples, coconuts, and even live chickens. A wizened little mestizo strutted past them, a hooded fighting

cock under each arm. Naked children, round-bellied and spindly-legged, stared at them from the edges of the road. André tossed a small coin and laughed as they scrambled for it in the mud.

A mangy white dog with a crippled foot worried the spokes of the rear carriage wheel. The horse danced nervously.

Cursing under his breath. André slapped the reins down and speeded the horse to a trot. The carriage jounced through the ruts, splattering through the mud puddles. Claire clung to the seat.

When the dog was no more than a dirty white speck against the greens and browns behind them. André slowed the carriage and resumed his story. He told her about the quarrel, about his return to Château Jarnac on the night of his father's death. He left out Marcel's bitter revelation about his mother. That was something he never told anyone.

"How sad for you, André." She touched the sleeve of his tropical white suit with her hand.

He turned and gave her a wry smile. "Oh, I can't say it hurt me much. Not till they read his will, at least. Now, that was the bad news!" He shook his head. An acid chuckle escaped his tight lips.

"He'd had it changed before he died. Marcel got the title, naturally, and the house. Philippe got a hefty share of the old man's money. Used some of it to finish medical school."

"And you — ?"

"Nothing! *Nada*, as they say down here! Afterward, Marcel wouldn't even speak to me! Claimed I'd forced dear Papa into an early grave. The self-righteous prig! He'd wanted Papa there himself, I'll wager!"

"So that's why Philippe — "

"That's right. Took me in like a lost urchin. We'd never been close, but he'd always liked my paintings. Thought I had something to offer the world, maybe. He offered to support me for as long as I continued to paint."

"And you *do* have something to offer! A great deal, André! But here — ?"

The tension in André's hands transmitted itself to the reins. The horse quickened its gait again. André grinned sarcastically. "Here! Wherever my brother happens to be! You see, Claire, his offer was contingent upon my remaining under his roof!"

They passed beneath the huge green umbrella of a tree dripping with golden mangoes, hanging by their long stems like balloons on strings. Dozens of them had fallen to the road where, crushed and rotting, they sent up their fermented perfume. Their odd, flat, fibrous pits lay thick along the roadsides.

Claire took a deep breath. "But why not in Paris? Philippe could have a fine life there, a wealthy, comfortable practice. What's a man of his background doing in a place like Panama?"

"I've asked myself the same question." André shrugged. "In my blacker moments I sometimes think he stays just to torment me and poor Angélique. But I suppose pride — Philippe's colossal pride — is the real reason. Vanity . . . ambition . . . call it what you like. In Paris, he'd never be anything but the younger brother of Count Jarnac. Here he can make a name for himself as an authority on tropical medicine."

"But how can Philippe make you stay, André?" Her voice brushed his ear like velvet.

"Ha! If you knew Philippe, you wouldn't have to ask! He likes to be in control! Has to have people in the palm of his hand! Even keeps me on an allowance, like a damned schoolboy in knee breeches!" He leaned back on the reins, bringing the horse back to a brisk walk again as they came into town. "And Angélique! Look what he did to her!"

She stared at him, perplexed.

He answered her as if she'd asked a question. "That's right. Oh, he didn't actually push her down those stairs. Wasn't even there when it happened. But he might as well have! With his own hands!"

He regarded her gravely. She looked so shocked that he burst into an explosion of laughter. "You have the grayest eyes, Claire," he said. "And your hair is pure burnt sienna. Say you'll let me paint you!"

She smiled at the unexpected change of subject. Yes, he was bringing her out of it. Good. "So you're ready to try a potato now, are you?" she asked.

"Claire!" He shut his eyes and groaned in mock dismay. His hand closed over hers for an instant. Her skin was cool; and what small bones she had! "You'll be quite the loveliest potato I've ever painted."

Discreetly, he let her hand go and turned the carriage toward town, moving along Col—n's mangrove-fringed southern edge. It was time she saw the canal, he thought. Everyone who came to Panama want-

ed to see that first. Funny how disappointed they generally were, after all the hullabaloo back in France.

Like the Suez Canal, which the French had finished sixteen years earlier, the Panama Canal was a private, commercial venture. Count Ferdinand de Lesseps, past eighty now, was neither engineer nor financial expert. He was a name, a charismatic figurehead for a project conceived and executed by lesser men, a promoter who excelled in coaxing hidden francs out of closet corners, rolled-up stockings, china sugar bowls, and mattresses.

Even now those who knew were calling the venture the de Lesseps Folly. André had heard the whispers. The project had already drained billions of francs from French pockets and was well on its way to bankruptcy. Despite the continued fury of the attack against Panama's hills, rocks, and jungles, an atmosphere of doom hung over the canal. Graft, corruption, and outright thievery flourished. "Get what you can and get out!" seemed to be the prevalent philosophy of the day.

Slow from the beginning, construction progress now lagged woefully behind de Lesseps's wildly optimistic schedule. The rainy season brought landslides that could wipe out the work of months in a matter of minutes. Storms carried silt into the canal, so that even the finished segments had to be continually dredged. Fever deaths were commonplace, with blacks being the most resistant, Europeans the most susceptible. In spite of this inborn resistance, the workers who poured in from Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Barbados, and the other Caribbean islands died by the hundreds and thousands. Malaria, typhoid, cholera, amoebic dysentery, yaws, and accidents shared in this grisly toll.

Still, there was an *ambiance* about the place, a gaiety born of desperation, that André found more or less pleasing. Money and liquor flowed freely, and there was always a card game or a cockfight to be found. The casinos bubbled with life around the clock; and as for the women — ah, but here one had to be cautious. Diseases were rampant among Panama's ladies of the night, and even friendly amateurs were not safe. For a man with lust in his veins and no thought of tomorrow, there was pleasure to be had in abundance. But the prudent were wary, and André counted himself among the prudent. He'd known a man in Paris, an artist like himself, profoundly gifted, who'd gone blind from the effects of such youthful encounters. André remembered

the man well — Marat, that was his name, a grand-nephew of the revolutionist who'd been stabbed to death in his bathtub by the fair Citizen Corday. He could still hear the poor, blind devil cursing, raging against fate and against women; he could still see the tears running out of those sightless eyes, the hands smearing paint onto canvases, splintering the brushes in a fury of hopelessness. And so whenever he saw an especially appealing *poule* in some Front Street bar or casino, André would recall the picture of poor Marat and resolve anew to limit his fun to less risky games of chance.

Claire sat quietly beside him as André drove along the edge of Lim—n Bay where the beach was littered with coconut husks and mango pits. Col—n was a near-island, attached on the south to its mainland mother by a tenuous umbilical cord of land. It was bounded on the north by the open Caribbean, on the west by Lim—n Bay, and on the east by the smaller Manzanillo Bay. At its southwest extremity, the new French-built section of Cristobal looked out over the turbulent water. Here the more elite of the French Canal Company lived in airy bungalows washed by the freshness of the sea breeze. A little inland were the administration buildings, offices, machine shops, and warehouses. The hospital where Philippe worked sat at Col—n's northern tip where it caught the wind from the Caribbean. Cristobal was much cleaner than the sewer pot that was downtown Col—n, but even here the air carried the faint whiff of fish and refuse. Sea gulls jabbered and wheeled above the distant docks. A skinny female dog, nipples dangling, snuffled for tidbits along the beach.

"Look!" Stopping the carriage, André extended his arm and pointed out across an inlet to the south. "There it is! The de Lesseps pipe dream! The whole damned reason we've come to this stinkhole!"

The canal! Her eyes followed his pointing finger, across the distance to where a narrow expanse of water led off like a road through the mangroves. There were those bucket dredges at work along its shores, chugging methodically as they filled the waiting barges with liquid mud. A tugboat pulling a string of mud barges puffed its leisurely way across the inlet. She stood beside him, saying nothing.

André nudged her arm. "Disappointed?"

She groped for words. "It's just that I expected it to be more — "

"Spectacular?" André's eyes glinted with a hardness born of natural cynicism and four years in Panama. "I know what you mean. Most

people are disappointed when they see it for the first time. Of course, there's more to it than this . . . "

"The Culebra Cut?" she asked. Of course she'd know about that, André reminded himself. That's where Paul Sagan had been working before his arrest. He'd been in charge of the blasting for the most formidable section of the canal, which ran across Panama's hilly spine, an area notorious for its landslides.

"That's over toward the Pacific side. About two-thirds of the way across the Isthmus. I was up there sketching last week. Now, talk about spectacular! But it's not what they've done. It's what they've yet to do. *Mon Dieu!* Like digging away the Rock of Gibraltar with a dinner fork!" He ran his fingers through his unruly curls. "I'll show you my sketches when we get home. Better yet, I'll show you the cut in person one of these days! It's an easy trip on the railroad!"

Claire had only half-heard him. She was staring out across the inlet at the spot where the canal parted the mangroves. Her rival. An oversized trench that at that distance appeared only a little larger than the barge canals that crisscrossed the French countryside. She could not look to the Culebra Cut, where men and machines strained and labored to sever two continents. She lacked the ability to see into the future, to see visions of the canal's completion. She only knew that she had lost Paul. Lost him to this cursed, filthy ditch; to this suffocating country. At that moment, Claire hated the Panama Canal.

"Claire?" André brushed her shoulder with his hand.

"Paul died for this," she said in a choked voice.

"Hundreds of your Pauls. Sons of good mothers, all of them!" Inexplicably, he tossed off a laugh. "Let's go! This is depressing you!"

They wheeled around the point, where the company-owned de Lesseps mansion, its namesake back in France scrambling for funds, faced the bay. It was a grand, airy-looking house, two-storied and trimmed with lacy porches and balconies across the front. A stone monument rose from the lawn — Christopher Columbus, with an Indian maiden huddled under the protection of his extended arm. The statue had been a gift to the Colombian government from the French Empress Eugénie.

They trotted north along the breezy, palm-edged avenue lined with neat frame houses where many of the canal's engineers and administrators lived. The waves licked the gray beach on the other side of the

low seawall. The palms, tall and lush, waved like oriental fans in the breeze that loosened strands of Claire's hair and swept them across her face. Looking at André, she saw his back stiffen like a hunting dog's. "Here we are!" he announced. "Front Street!"

Her eyes leaped ahead with his to the bustling waterfront thoroughfare that was the business and social center of Col—n. She had crossed it with the nun the day before, but she had been so agitated at the time that she barely remembered seeing it. On their left, the piers jutted out over the water, everything tied to them from steamships to native canoes. Square-riggers from Boston and New York mingled with new steel-hulled steamers from Europe; schooners from the Caribbean islands were tied beside chunky tugs, fishing boats, and luggers. A group of Cuna men were climbing out of their *cayuco*, a long, broad dugout canoe carved from a single huge mahogany log that would have brought several thousand francs on the dock at Le Havre. Sweating blacks trotted down the gangplanks, their heads laden with boxes, bales, and bundles. One cargo ship from France was unloading cases of champagne; another, disassembled chunks of machinery which were hoisted off the deck with cranes. The place smelled of tar and coal dust, of tobacco and perspiration, of salt water and rotting fish.

The docks were separated from the street by the railroad, which ran down to the imposing stone terminal at the other end of Front Street. Here, at least, some semblance of cleanliness existed. The shops, hotels, and casinos were smartly painted in browns, reds, and whites. The signs, most of them, were in French. "Not so bad, is it now?" said André. "See, even the streetwalkers dress better in this part of town."

The carriage stopped with a little jerk in front of a wine-red edifice whose gilt-edged marquee proclaimed it to be the Hotel Universel. "Ever gambled?" André cocked his head at her. His eyes were dancing. "No. I can tell that by looking at you. Come on! Let me show you a thing or two!" He vaulted out of the carriage, picked his way through the muck without getting a speck on his white trousers, and offered his arm to assist her down onto the boardwalk that ran along the edge of the street. A little black boy took the reins of the horse and snapped out his hand to catch the coin André tossed him.

The Universel was dim inside, like a cave, complete with crystal chandelier stalactites. Red plush chairs lined the walls. The floor was

marble, its color obliterated by muddy tracks. The air was thick as cheese with the smoke of Havana cigars, an oppressive haze through which the clink of glasses, the papery shuffle of cards, the whirl of the balls in the roulette wheels, and the growl of masculine voices oozed comfortably. Claire tugged at André's sleeve. "You're sure it's all right for me to be here?"

He winked and patted her hand. "Only if you bring me luck!" He picked up a stack of chips and went at once to the roulette wheel. The attendant gave him a nod of recognition. "What's your favorite color, Claire?"

"André, I'm no good at this!" she whispered.

"Not black. Not today, my sweet. Red."

He bet on the red and lost. Bet and lost again. "Black!" he said cheerfully. This time he won a little. He placed another bet.

Claire leaned against the edge of the table. The smoke curled up and around her as she watched his handsome face, intent on the ball and the wheel. Her heat-swollen feet made her feel as if she were standing on balloons. André kept on playing. Her eyes wandered to the other faces around the table, most of them white and youthful. Panama was no place for old Frenchmen. With the exception of André, none of them looked happy. Their mouths were set in grim, desperate smiles. Their eyes were lowered to hide the loneliness, the vulnerability of grown-up children in an alien land where death panted down their necks, where the faces of loved ones were no more than photographs with the edges worn from handling. Where boredom was king and danger was prime minister. She thought of Paul and wondered how many hours he'd spent in places like this. She brushed a lock of hair back from her face and tried to smile at André when he looked at her.

An orange-haired woman in a purple satin gown that clung tight across her buttocks ambled up the stairs. A youth with a downy fringe across his upper lip followed her, combing his hair with his fingers. Claire turned her eyes away from them. She and Paul had had only those few warm, clinging nights together, and it hurt her inside to see the profanation of something that to her had been sacred and beautiful. Paul. She could not think of him now. Not in this place.

Her attention had wandered from André and his game. Suddenly she felt him stiffen beside her. She glanced across the table. A squat,

broad-shouldered man who looked more Spanish than French was glaring at André, his hands thrust into the pockets of his tropical suit. The man's skin stretched across the hawkish bones of his face, brown and tough as leather. A jagged scar ran like a streak of yellow lightning down one side of his head, from temple to chin. His black hair shone like polished jet in the dim light. His thin lips were drawn back in a snarl, exposing two gold teeth. "*Ladr—n,*" he hissed. "*Hijo de puta!*"

Bristling, André shot back a terse reply in Spanish: The other men around the table leaned forward, dull eyes suddenly glittering with interest, nostrils quivering, like a circle of wolves on a new scent. Claire's eyes darted from the man's face to André's. André's skin was pale, his cheeks two patches of hot color. His eyes glared back at the man through narrow slits.

Some insult, she guessed. Some accusation, a slur on someone's honor. André's? Hers, even? How she wished she could understand Spanish. André stepped back from the table. His left arm pressed her away from him, into the crowd that had widened to form a ring around the two antagonists.

On the balls of his feet, he leaped clear of the table. Something glinted in his hand. A small dagger. Had he had it with him all the time, or had someone given it to him? The hawk-faced man crouched low. His tawny fingers gripped the handle of his own knife. Claire caught her breath to stifle a cry. The jungle, she thought. It didn't end with trees and vines. It crept invisibly all through Col—n, all through this wretched place, turning men into beasts.

The circle of spectators widened as André and the dark Spaniard stalked each other like two fighting cocks, the man slinking low, looking for an opening, André weaving lightly, moving like a dancer on the balls of his feet.

A grunt, a spring, a flurry of movement. The two leaped together, knives flashing. They lurched backward. André's white sleeve was running scarlet. Claire gasped. Someone behind her caught her arm and held her back when she tried to go to him. Grinning, the man came at André again. André sidestepped. Then his arm came down on the man's wrist in a powerful chop that sent the knife spinning into the crowd.

The man was unarmed now. André was deathly white. He circled his prey, muttering something under his breath about teaching the

man a lesson once and for all. The Spaniard edged backward. His eyes were wide, lips parted. The gold teeth gleamed in the lamplight. His hand crept to his vest, thrust in, and jerked out a black derringer. A murmur rustled its way through the watchers.

Now it was André who drew back. Straightening to his full height, he glared at the man. "*Cobarde!*" he spat out of the corner of his mouth. "Filthy, stinking coward!" A trickle of blood oozed down his left wrist and made a pattern of red droplets on the muddy floor.

The Spaniard raised the derringer and cocked it. André stood motionless, glowering. Claire noticed that he had moved his body so its lean profile was exposed to his adversary, providing a less vulnerable target. "*Cobarde!*" he hissed. "Go ahead! Show them all how brave you are!"

They waited in a stillness that froze time. The Spaniard squinted at André as he aimed the little derringer. Claire strained against the hands that held her back, afraid to breathe.

A door at the rear of the room creaked open, spilling light into the dimness. The only sound was the heavy, rapid tread of footsteps across the marble floor. A tall man whose powerful shoulders threatened to burst the stitches of his pearl-gray jacket, thrust through the crowd to plant himself directly in front of the Spaniard.

"Don't be a fool, Lopez!" he barked in French. His voice was authoritative, but oddly high-pitched. Its thick accent was — Claire searched her memory — Haitian. Like Bertrand's. His back was turned to her. She could see only a squared-off head and wavy black hair. His muscular frame bulged beneath the tight-fitting suit.

"Idiot!" he snapped at the man. "You want to spoil it all? Eh?" He held out a well-manicured hand. "You give me that!" Without waiting for the quivering Spaniard to comply, he snatched the derringer away. "Now, get out of here! You want to work for me? Then you don't cause trouble!"

He swung away from the man and turned toward Claire for just an instant. He was surprisingly young, no more than thirty. His face, an odd melange of black features and white, was the color of coffee with cream, the eyes fiercely dark, the lips full and crowned by a fussily waxed moustache. His eyes flickered coldly over André. Then he turned on his heel and strode from the room. The crowd melted and flowed together, bubbling with nervous laughter. Claire's knees felt

ready to dissolve. She fought her way to André's side and clutched his arm.

Someone patted André on the back as they made their way toward the door. He grinned weakly as they stepped out into the blinding daylight.

"I'll drive." Claire volunteered. "We'd best get you home!"

"My poor, dear Claire! It's only a scratch! I can drive!" He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a blue silk handkerchief. "Just tie this around my arm. Tight. That'll do till we get back to the house."

The horse trotted its way back around the point, past the de Lesseps mansion. André's lips were drawn into a tense little smile, but he said nothing.

"André, in the name of heaven, what happened back there?" Claire demanded at last.

"Old Lopez!" he chuckled, giving her a wink. "All bile and no guts! I beat him at faro last week. A trifle! A few hundred francs!" André shrugged. "So today he accused me of cheating him."

His flippancy astounded her. "He almost killed you!" she blustered.

"Lopez!?" André adjusted the tightness of the kerchief about his sleeve. "Don't make me laugh!"

"If it hadn't been for that man — "

"No-o-o," he rumbled the word around in his throat. "Lopez wouldn't have shot me. Lopez couldn't shoot a rabbit if he had to look it in the eye. In the back! In the dark! That's how he works! Not in front of fifty witnesses!"

Claire blinked at André in wonder. He had just escaped death. By right, he should at least have been shaken. Instead he was treating the matter as a joke. "Who was that man?" she asked him.

"That man — ?" He turned and looked at her. The color had come back to his face.

"The one who came in and took the gun."

"Oh. That one." He grinned broadly. "Something for you to write home about, Claire. That was Pedro Prestan."

Six

Prestan. Stunned into silence. Claire gazed at André. His eyes twinkled as he looked back at her.

"You were expecting horns and a tail, *chérie*?"

She shook her head. "But right there in town! With all those people! Why isn't he hiding in the jungle?"

"Oh, Prestan's smarter than that. He doesn't let himself get caught breaking the law. So — " André flexed his broad shoulders — "he goes where he likes."

"But you've made an enemy, André. If that man, Lopez, works for him — "

"Ha! Half the riffraff in Col—n works for Prestan! What a little worrier you are!" His hand brushed the back of her shoulders, then returned to his knee. "Do me a favor, Claire. Don't tell my brother what happened back there."

No. Philippe wouldn't approve. Claire reflected. And there was nothing surprising about that. "But someone's bound to tell him, André. The place was full of people."

"Not the kind of people who'd be talking to Philippe. He spends all his time between the hospital and the house. Besides . . . " André moved closer to her. "That sort of thing's not so unusual down here. It's hardly worth the telling."

"Then how are you going to explain — that?" She pointed to his kerchief-swathed arm. The sleeve of his coat was ripped and stained with red that was fast turning brown in the heat.

"He doesn't have to see it. He won't be home yet, and I've some bandages in my room." André's eyes were warm. They caught hers and held them like magnets. "You'll help me, won't you?"

Claire studied him. In the course of the morning she had learned some surprising things about André Jarnac. She remembered his cool, reckless courage, his familiarity with the shadowy world of the Universel. A world in which he was obviously accepted. And he knew the canal. With his sketching commission, he had access to all parts of it. Carefully, she played her card. "You're not the only one who needs help. André," she said quietly.

He flashed her a questioning look that melted quickly into comprehension. "So you're trying to drive a bargain with me, is that it?" He stopped the carriage in the little patch of shade made by a frangipani tree. The white blossoms cascaded around them, filling the air with dizzying fragrance. "When I told you last night that I knew nothing about your Paul's problems. I was telling the truth, Claire."

She was tempted then to tell him about her conversation with Bertrand, but she remembered her promise. She had given the man her word and she would not break it. "You could help me learn as much as possible," she said. "I'm not asking you to risk your life, André. Just keep your eyes open. Ask a few questions if you can . . . "

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you trying to blackmail me, Claire?"

Blackmail. That hadn't occurred to her. But if it came to that, then, yes, she was ready. She would do anything for Paul. But she calculated her answer. "If I have to resort to blackmail, then I'm disappointed in you."

"Well — " André flicked the reins against the horse's withers and they jerked forward again. "Blackmail's such an ugly word. Shall we call it an agreement? A sort of mutual assistance, eh?" The dimples deepened at the corners of his mouth. "Come on," he urged. "Smile at me! Let me know it's all right!"

She smiled at him. André was a difficult man to resist. "I've already thought of a way to get you into the house," she said. Reaching under the seat, she pulled out her blue parasol. After she'd opened it, she held the top against his arm. The bloodied sleeve was nicely covered.

André reached over and squeezed her hand. "You little schemer!" he said.

Simone opened the door of the Chinese teak wardrobe where Angélique's long-unused dresses hung, her brows weaving into a scowl as the delicate scent of lavender rose to meet her nostrils. Her

baby's dresses! Why, if anyone except M'sieu' Philippe had asked her to get them out and lend them to a stranger —

The girl should be wearing black, she thought as she fingered the sheer organdies, the India muslins and foulards trimmed with guipure lace. It wasn't decent! Not even in the tropics! And her husband only gone a day!

She held up one exquisite gown of pale green shantung silk, edged with rows of matching grosgrain ribbon, and huffed with indignation. At least the girl hadn't expected her to do the alterations. That much was to her credit. But for all her polite, quiet ways, Claire Sagan was an interloper, and Simone bristled with instinctive wariness.

Lifting the hangers off the bar one at a time, Simone laid each dress reverently over her arm. Angélique had always been partial to white or pastel hues. They enhanced her coloring, her fairy princess loveliness. Simone had her orders, but the thought of seeing another woman in those beautiful gowns struck her as near sacrilege.

Simone did not know the date of her own birth, except that it occurred approximately forty-seven years ago near the tip of the long, narrow peninsula that juts westward from Haiti like the thumb of a mitten. Like her mother before her, she was freeborn. The Haitian blacks, in a series of bloody uprisings, had cast off the yoke of slavery and butchered or driven away most of their white masters more than seventy years before the emancipation of their American brothers. They had sacked and burned the great sugar plantations that were the economic mainstay of the little country, heedless of the fact that they might have been able to use the land and equipment for their own benefit. The vast cane fields had been broken up into small subsistence farms, and the former slaves had settled into lives of freedom and abject poverty.

Yet, here and there, a handful of white plantation owners had dug in and held on, first by force of arms, and later by major concessions of land and privileges to their former slaves. One such man had been feisty, one-eyed Adolphe Lafrenière, whose son, Dominique, was to become Angélique's father.

Adolphe Lafrenière had been a firm but just master, and many of his slaves had stayed on with him as paid hands after the rebellion. Simone's mother had been born on the Lafrenière plantation to a freed slave woman, a black giantess from Dahomey who could cut cane like a man.

Simone herself had been born at the edge of one of the Lafrenière cane fields. Her father — but that mattered little. Simone's people counted their generations from mother to daughter. Men, like drones, performed none of a father's function beyond the moment of conception.

Adolphe Lafrenière had been respected, even liked, by his blacks, and this respect had saved his life during the times when the Haitian soil had been soaked by French blood. His son, Dominique, handsome, arrogant, and reckless, was merely tolerated.

Despite his dashing looks and devilish charm, Dominique Lafrenière did not marry for many years. Single French girls were rare in Haiti, and those few who were available did not suit him. Instead he took his pleasure in deflowering the supple young Negresses of his plantation, often passing them on, when he'd tired of them, to his unkempt, foul-mouthed white overseer, Raoul Prestan.

The Lafrenière blacks were no longer slaves. Dominique Lafrenière could not command the presence of the girls as his male ancestors might have done. But he had his ways of persuasion. He was known to be generous in return for favors. Girls who had pleased him returned to their families laden with gifts — gaudy silks and perfumed soaps from Paris, strings of glass beads, smoked hams from the Lafrenière cellar. And the girls were well-treated — perhaps as well-treated as they would ever be in their lives. They came back to their humble shacks whispering of soft beds with silk sheets, of wine in crystal glasses and scented baths in a deep brass tub.

Prestan's tactics were less refined. For the girl who spurned him, there were dozens of ways to make life more difficult. She and the members of her family would be assigned the filthiest and most back-breaking jobs on the plantation. When payday came they would have to wait at the end of the line, and they might find that Prestan had conveniently run out of cash by the time their turn came to be paid and they would have to wait until another day for their wages. When all other measures failed, he would simply take the girl by force. Dominique Lafrenière turned his back on such offenses. Prestan was an efficient overseer and his personal life was his own business. Any worker who had the temerity to complain could find himself packing his belongings for departure.

Simone had little to fear from either of them. White men, even with French silks and glass beads, held no appeal for her, and she

was not considered attractive enough by either Lafrenière or Prestan for them to brave her formidable size and strength. But she'd had a sister, an ebony goddess, slim and graceful as a vine, who'd caught the lustful Lafrenière eye when she was just fifteen. After a week in his bed, she'd returned to the hut she shared with Simone, carrying a bundle that contained a fringed shawl from Paris and some bars of scented soap.

Raoul Prestan had wasted no time in stepping forward to collect what he considered his due. Lafrenière had finished with the girl, and by custom she was his for the taking.

Remembering, Simone drew in her breath sharply. Her sister had hated Raoul Prestan — hated him so much that none of the usual pressures worked. The girl managed to elude him for fifteen days by staying in the company of the other women. At last, he'd caught her alone in a remote corner of the cane field and raped her so brutally that she'd dragged herself home with blood trickling down her legs. Nine months later, to the very day, she'd given birth to a strapping son that she'd name Pierre. A strutting Raoul Prestan had magnanimously awarded the child his last name and gotten roaring drunk on Jamaican rum to celebrate.

Simone and her sister had kept their silence. Prestan would have killed the poor girl for making such a fool of him if he'd known the truth.

They had counted the days that had passed since the young mother's last time of blood; they had examined the child meticulously, feature by feature, and had come to a final conclusion: the baby had been born late. It had been Dominique Lafrenière, not Prestan, who had fathered him.

Simone lifted the last of Angélique's dresses, a peach-colored organdy sewn with tiny pleats across the bodice, out of the closet, and draped it over her massive arm with the others. She had told M'sieu' Philippe only half the truth last night in the library. As for the rest of it, that was her secret. In all of Panama, only she, Bertrand, and Pedro Prestan himself knew that the rebel leader from Haiti was the son of her own sister. And she had taken a sacred oath on the altar of Gede never to reveal to anyone, especially to Philippe, the darkest secret of all: that Pedro Prestan was also the half-brother of her beautiful, golden-haired Angélique.

Dominique Lafrenière had been in Paris at the time of his son's birth. He'd returned a few weeks later with a bride, a laughing, dancing, enchanting little creature with deep blue eyes, wheaten hair, and a porcelain complexion that even the Haitian sun could not mar. Lafrenière was totally smitten with her. He abandoned his forays among the black virgins, leaving the field to Raoul Prestan. The bars and gambling dens of Port-au-Prince mourned his absence. His adoring little wife had become the center of his existence.

When, after a few months in Haiti, she became pregnant, his joy was complete. He hovered over her, watching her every move, ordering special dishes for her — and for his “son.” He had married with one purpose in mind: the begetting of an heir. That his marriage itself should bring him such bliss was a surprise from which he never quite recovered. He had become the butt of some crude humor among his blacks and his former cronies, but he was too happy to care.

Simone, too, was with child by then, the fruit of an impulsive coupling after a Saturday night vodun ceremony. She accepted the pregnancy as a natural event in the progress of her life, and as she worked in the fields, chopping the cane, bundling and loading it onto the wagons, she looked ahead happily to the birth of her baby. A daughter, she hoped. Tall and strong, but not pretty enough to attract the likes of Dominique Lafrenière and Raoul Prestan. With such a child, her life would be complete, her generation fulfilled.

She would never know what went wrong. Except that the gods might have willed it, she would never understand why the daughter she had wanted so was pulled from her body dead. After washing the child and dressing her in black, Simone had buried her in a small grave beside her own mother's. For someone older, there would have been an elaborate funeral ceremony, a novena, and a *dernière prière*, a feast for friends and relatives, to be followed by months of mourning. But the death of an infant merited none of these things. Simone wept alone, saddened in the knowledge that her baby's spirit would join with the *lutins*, the wild ghosts of children who had died without baptism and were doomed to roam the countryside, leaping onto the backs of young colts to ride them in the night, leaving their manes in tangles.

The next day her milk had come in, turning her breasts to swollen black melons, so tender that she was unable to return to her work in

the cane fields. She had sat all day in her hut, pounding rice, weeping for the tiny dead mouth that would never suckle milk from her throbbing nipples.

Simone never went back to the cane fields. It was just before the following dawn that the cook from the Lafrenière mansion, a squat, hardened woman with her front teeth missing, had come to her hut to shake her out of a fitful sleep.

"Wash yourself and come!" she'd commanded tersely, mindful of the gap in status between field hand and house servant. "They need you!"

Stumbling in the darkness, Simone had followed the woman up to the big house, which was strangely ablaze with lights. They'd entered through the hushed kitchen, its floor of Spanish tile cool under her big, bare feet. The coals of the banked fire glowed red in the black hole of the fireplace. "Come!" the woman hissed, tugging her toward the narrow back stairway, leading her up and out into a hallway whose walls were covered with cream brocade. Simone blinked at the brightness of the lamps where they sat in ornate brass sconces along the walls. In all her life she had known only the fields, her own drab hut and those of her neighbors. Even in her most fanciful dreams, she could not have imagined the inside of such a house as this.

"Keep still, now!" The cook stealthily opened one of the darkly polished doors. "I've brought her," she whispered to someone inside the room.

"Let her come in, then." Simone recognized the voice of the white woman who acted as midwife to the wealthier families in the region. Fearfully, she stepped into the room. A grand room, yes, but it was Dominique Lafrenière who caught her eye first. He was huddled in a red, plush armchair, sobbing like a child.

Beyond him, the still, white figure of his petite girl-wife lay sprawled in her own blood on the four-poster bed. The lifeless form of a tiny male child, still wet from birth, was stretched out beside her.

Simone glanced back at the cook, bewildered as to the reason she should be called to view such a tragedy. Perhaps they wanted her to wash the bodies —

Then, in the next instant, she knew. Her ears caught the sound of a thin cry; her eyes found the white-swathed bundle in the midwife's arms; and the pieces of Simone's life fell into place and locked.

Wordlessly, she held out her hands and received the weightless warmth of that squirming bit of life. As her trembling fingers tugged at the buttons of her blouse, she felt the milk surge up in her taut breasts.

The midwife turned to Dominique Lafrenière, where he sat slumped in the chair. "You have a daughter, Monsieur, and I think she'll live. You can thank God for that, at least."

Lafrenière had burrowed his face against the red plush arm. "My wife is dead. My son is dead. I have nothing at all."

Simone closed her eyes for a moment, remembering her first sight of that small, pinched face, the long, rosy, clutching fingers. She remembered the first tug of that groping little mouth. A woman child! And a twin!

She closed the empty teak wardrobe where Angélique's dresses had hung and walked slowly down the corridor to Claire Sagan's room. Her baby's dresses on a stranger!

The parasol had proved to be unnecessary. Bertrand was busy in the garden when Claire and André arrived at the house, so André left the horse and carriage hitched outside the stable. As they entered the house, they could hear Lizette rattling pans in the kitchen. There was no sign of Simone, Angélique, or Marie-Thérèse.

André's wound was messy, but not deep. He winced as Claire sponged the blood away with a cloth dipped in a mixture of alcohol and water. Then she began wrapping the arm with a clean bandage.

"You're a good nurse." He sat on a dressing stool as she fiddled with the knot. His bare skin was as smooth and pale as ivory, his athlete's body lithely muscled, like a cat's. Absently, she studied the way his dark hair curled low on his neck.

André's room, which doubled as bedroom and studio, was sunny and two or three times as big as her own. Claire's eyes wandered from the easel where the painting of the Cuna woman was still drying, to the open shelves stocked with paints and unused canvases, to the dozens of brushes standing on end in pottery jars. André's finished paintings, perhaps a hundred of them, cluttered the corners and walls. A brilliant sunset over Lim—n Bay. A rusting piece of machinery, abandoned in the jungle. A street girl, leaning sad-eyed against a windowsill.

"André, they're good," she said. "They're so good. Take them back to Paris. You don't need Philippe!"

Sadly he shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. I want to paint. Not just dabble at it on Sunday afternoons in the park. I want to *paint*! Like Leonardo! Rembrandt! Renoir! So I leave Philippe and go back to Paris — " He extended his open hand and clenched it slowly into a closed fist. "Not another sou! That's Philippe!" He lifted his shoulders and dropped them, making the sunlight dance on his marble skin. "Don't misunderstand me, Claire. I'm not afraid of work. But if I have to work in order to live, I'll have only the leftovers to give to my painting. That's not enough."

"I could talk to Philippe," she volunteered. "Maybe . . . "

André stood up impatiently and paced over to the big, rumpled bed that stood in one corner of the room. "You could try, but it wouldn't help. I know. Even Angélique tried — " His mouth twisted into a quick grimace. "You mean well, Claire, and I thank you for that. But I'm resigned to living here as Philippe's pet rabbit for a little longer at least. When the time comes — " He spun on his heel and glared stormily out the window at the darkening sky. "When the time comes, even Philippe won't be able to stop me!"

He stood with his broad back to her, arms folded across his chest. Without her willing it, her eyes followed the curving bands of muscle that ran along both sides of his spine, to where they disappeared beneath the waistband of his white, linen trousers. With a liquid movement, he turned and sat down on the edge of the bed. His eyes were amber. "Don't move!" he commanded.

Standing beside the dressing stool, Claire wet her lips with her tongue. Something was pounding on the inside of her ears. André rose to his feet and glided toward her. "Perfect," he murmured. "Almost." Reaching out with his hand, he lifted her trembling chin, tilting her face up toward his. "Don't be frightened, little bird," he whispered. "Don't fly away . . . there!" He stepped back, beaming mysteriously. "Now, don't move!" Swinging toward a nearby table, he seized a pad of paper and a stick of charcoal and sat back down on the bed, balancing the pad on one knee.

"I just had to catch you like that," he said. "The light on your hair, your hands against your waist . . . " With a few quick strokes, he set up the outlines of his sketch.

Claire's heart slid back into its proper place. For that moment when his long fingers had lifted her chin, she had actually thought that André was going to kiss her. And with the earth still fresh on Paul's grave! Suddenly she felt very tired, very much at the mercy of her circumstances. She wanted to break and run, to hide in the warm cocoon of Paul's love that had been there for her all these years. But she was alone. She was a widow now. And the comfort of a man's arms could only be bought at the price of excruciating shame.

André concentrated on his work, saying little. From time to time he allowed her to rest and to see the progress of the sketch. The likeness was perfect. More than perfect. Were her eyes really so alive? Her neck so long and so gracefully bent?

Outside, the sky blackened and erupted into a boiling tempest that set the palm fronds to flying like feathers in the wind and turned the yard below into a dancing sea of raindrops. The rain pounded the roof and the windows with a symphony of hammer blows. As André got up to fasten the windows, there was a faint shout from outside. "Philippe's home," he said with a frown. He went to the wardrobe and pulled out a clean shirt to cover the evidence of his bandaged arm. As he fastened the final button, the front door slammed shut below. André winked at Claire. "If you'd rather not have my brother catch you in a gentleman's bedroom — "

"Oh — !" Her hand went to her mouth and André laughed out loud. "You're right!" she murmured, edging toward the door.

"Well, then, *hasta luego*, as they say down here. See you at dinner, Claire." He seemed cheerfully determined to see her out and she went willingly. The thought of Philippe's finding them together in André's room was, to say the least, an uncomfortable one, although she was not sure why.

The yellow chintz bedroom welcomed her. She leaned against the closed door and studied her reflection in the oval mirror above the dresser. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair whipped into becoming tendrils that wreathed her face with softness. She looked like André's sketch. Pretty, she thought guiltily. She had no right to look pretty when Paul was dead. In more primitive societies, widows rolled in the ashes. They cut off their hair and gouged their cheeks with their nails. Claire sighed. For the first time, she could see that such barbarities served a good purpose.

Angélique's clothes were laid across the back of a chair. Claire brushed through them absently, stopping to finger a pale pink voile edged with tiny tucks. Airy, floating dresses, made for a fairy princess. She would feel strange in them, she thought, like a little girl playing dress-up.

Paul had deplored the practice of wearing black for mourning. He'd said so many times, with the smug detachment that the young and healthy have toward the idea of their own deaths. He would never have wanted her to put on black crepe and a bonnet with streamers. Would he know the difference now? Claire tormented herself. Did any sort of afterlife consciousness exist for those who did not believe in it?

Her head ached. She'd sleep awhile before dinner, she told herself as she plucked the tortoiseshell combs from her hair and let it fall loose to her waist. She was tired, that was all. Too tired to think. Stretching her hands above her head, she turned toward the waiting bed and parted the mosquito netting.

The snake was coiled in the hollow between the pillows. So still and so pretty that it could have been a child's hair ribbon or some exotic bracelet, glossily banded in red, yellow, and black. Then it moved. It flicked its forked tongue, uncoiled its body, and slithered along the edge of the bed and down onto the floor.

Seven

André heard her scream and burst into the room first, with Philippe and a bug-eyed Lizette just behind her.

"Good God!" he whispered as his eyes followed her trembling finger to where the snake had taken a defensive coil on the floor, its scarlet-tipped head swaying delicately.

With a lightning movement, André seized a heavily carved chair from its place beside the bed. He edged toward the snake, crouching. A vision of the Universel flashed before Claire's eyes, of André in that same light-footed posture, circling the Spaniard with a knife. The snake struck out, slicing thin air as André danced backward. Swiftly, then, he jabbed down at it. Claire heard the thin crunch of its skull as one thick wooden chair leg found its mark. Gritting his teeth, André ground the snake's head into the floor, leaving a bloody little smear at one end of the twitching body.

"You're not bitten?" Philippe had eased Claire into a sitting position on the bed and his dark eyes scanned her anxiously. His black hair was still wet from the rain.

"N-no." She buried her face in her shaking hands. "But I feel like a fool! I didn't have to scream like that!"

"Well, I don't blame you!" André nudged the dead snake with his toe. "First Angélique's display on the stairs . . . now this! How in hell's name — ?" He glanced around the room. "The window's open. There's a tree outside — "

"Impossible!" snapped Philippe.

"It was on the bed," Claire whispered. "Right there!"

"Well, it couldn't have climbed up there by itself," André declared. "Somebody had to put it there."

"Who?" Her voice quavered as she challenged him. "And why? A joke?"

"Not a funny one!" Philippe's big hands still rested on her shoulders. He glanced down at them, suddenly self-conscious, and released her awkwardly. "You'll be all right?"

Claire nodded. She wanted to smile, to reassure him that she really *was* all right. But she was still jelly inside. Her facial muscles refused to do their work.

"Then we'd best get to the bottom of this." Philippe strode over to the dead snake, bent down and picked it up by the tip of the tail. The remnants of its crushed head clung to the floor. "You'll clean this up please, Lizette?"

Lizette, her eyes two white marbles, nodded mutely and backed out of the room.

"André?" Philippe turned in the doorway, scowling. "Coming?"

"Uh . . . yes." André gave Claire a vague pat on the shoulder and followed his brother down the hall. This time, at least, he had not challenged Philippe.

Claire lay back on the bed, listening to the sound of her own heart. Yes, she was all right. Shock, that was what Dr. Sagan had warned her to avoid. The critical mixture of trauma and fear that could send her delicate mind reeling back into its old shell of withdrawal. Over the years since her recovery, she had built a protective wall around her emotions. She had not allowed herself to feel anything to its fullest, perhaps not even love. The reality of Paul's death, she knew, had yet to penetrate that wall. Ultimately, it would. It would have to. And then the test of her inner strength would come.

Lizette had returned with a sponge and a pail and was scrubbing gingerly at the spot where the snake's blood had soaked into the wood. Claire let her eyes wander over the open-beamed ceiling, tracing the patterns of the knotholes. "What do you think, Lizette?" she mused. "How did that snake get onto the bed?"

"Mam'selle?"

"Who could have done it? Angélique was here. And Simone. And so were you, Lizette."

"I?" The sponge dropped into the bucket with a splash. "A thing like that?" Lizette picked up the sponge again and wrung it out, indignation showing in every twist of her hands. "If you wish to count

those who were here. Mam'selle, you mustn't forget Bertrand." She hesitated. "And even M'sieu' Philippe and the little mam'selle. Only M'sieu' André was with you all day." She spat out the last declaration with a triumphant little toss of her head, as if to let Claire know that nothing had escaped her.

"Philippe had just arrived, Lizette. And I think we can eliminate Marie-Thérèse, don't you?"

"Yes, Mam'selle."

"And Bertrand?"

Lizette answered slowly. "I think so, Mam'selle. He only comes into the kitchen to eat. He never goes upstairs."

"You said it wasn't you, Lizette." Claire turned and focused her gray eyes on Lizette's face. To her surprise, the girl was trembling. "That leaves Angélique and Simone."

"Yes, Mam'selle." Her eyes were enormous. She scrambled to her feet. "Floor's clean," she said quickly, "and I smell the chicken burning. Burned fish last night. Burned chicken tonight. M'sieu' Philippe won't like that!" She was edging toward the door, carrying the bucket.

Claire sat up so quickly that the blood in her head blacked out her vision for a few seconds. "You know who did it. Don't you, Lizette?"

"No, Mam'selle! I don't know — anything!" And then she was gone.

Dinner that night was a tense affair. The chicken was decidedly undercooked; the rice gluey. Claire, André, and Philippe nudged at the food with their forks, none of them hungry. Philippe's brooding silence was enough to tell Claire that he had not been able to learn who had put the snake on her bed. She sat and watched the grease congeal on her plate, remembering the books on tropical America that she'd pored over so eagerly back in Paris. How could she forget the picture of the glossy little coral snake, so prettily striped, an Indian bead necklace come to life? Deadly. The printed words flashed on and off in her brain. Venomous. Poisonous. If she had failed to see it . . . if she'd come closer to the bed . . . She shuddered, nauseated by the sight of the hunk of pink, dead chicken meat on her plate.

Simone entered the room just then with Marie-Thérèse for what was evidently the nightly ritual. Her cold eyes looked through Claire rather than at her as she bent down to put the little girl on the floor. Her handsome countenance was a mask. Had Claire been a sculptor,

she thought, she would have carved Simone naked out of ebony. She studied the hands, their grace, their power. She tried to picture those long, black fingers opening a basket or a pot, releasing the snake onto the yellow chintz counterpane. What reason could Simone have to hate her so much?

"Good night, Marie-Thérèse." Philippe ruffled the golden curls.

Marie-Thérèse blew a kiss to André across the table. Then she skipped over to Claire's seat and wriggled her way onto her lap. Defying Simone's glare, Claire drew her close. The child snuggled against her body like a little animal.

"Perhaps Madame will have some time to spend with you tomorrow, Marie-Thérèse." Philippe's tone was politely questioning.

"Yes." Claire hugged her. "Tomorrow, little one. May I take her up to her bed now?" She glanced from Philippe to Simone, determined to let that towering hulk know she wasn't intimidated.

"Certainly." Philippe picked up his wineglass and took a sip of the golden liquid. Simone turned and glided out of the room without a sound. Claire stood up with Marie-Thérèse in her arms. André hurried around the table to pull out her chair.

"You'll be back, won't you?"

"I'm tired." Claire shook her head and smiled at him. "Point the way to your room, Marie-Thérèse."

As Claire climbed the winding stairs, the little arms clung to her very tightly.

Claire's own aching head kept her awake. She tossed on her bed for what must have been hours, listening to the distant cacophony of jungle sounds and the warm, wet breath of the wind. Her nightdress clung to her sweating body, puckering into uncomfortable wads where she lay on it.

The linen sheet was like burlap against her skin. She kicked it off and lay staring into the blackness above her face. Paul should have been with her, she thought, Paul. Warm, strong, comforting in the night, pulling her close to him, his skin smooth against her own. Four nights, that was all they'd had together. And giving herself to him, even that first time, had been as natural as breathing.

She bit her lip, twisted by a longing as sharp as the stab of a knife. She was alone now. She would need all the strength that she had

drawn from Paul's love — a love that no longer existed. She had no one except herself. No resources except her own.

The windows were closed to keep out insects, as well as the night air, which was said to cause malaria. But she was stifling. In France, she'd always slept with the windows open in summer. Malaria be damned! She had to have some fresh air! With a sigh, she swung her legs to the floor, parted the netting, pattered over to the window, and slid open the bolt.

The night breeze was heaven. Claire leaned far out of the open window, letting the coolness flow through her sweat-dampened hair, flinging her arms wide to catch every precious breath. Below, she could see the yard, the stable, the front gate, all silvered by moonlight. She closed her eyes and filled her lungs. Malaria be damned! she thought again.

From somewhere beyond the wall, a monkey screamed. The night was alive with its own music, with the woodwind piping of frog calls and the chirp of crickets.

Down in the yard someone in white was walking. It was André. He paced slowly from the stable to the gate and back again. Was he restless? Claire wondered. Like herself?

"André!" Her whisper floated down to him. Startled, he looked up.

The moment their eyes met, she heard it for the first time. The swift staccato of fingers on a drumskin. A rhythmic flurry of notes that paused, repeated, and paused again. A sound born of the darkness itself.

Below her. André's moonlit face looked pale. Then he smiled. "Well, so it's Juliet, is it?" he said loudly. The drumbeats died in midcadence. "If you're looking for Romeo, look no more! I'm here!"

How light he made her feel. "You clown!" she called softly. "What are you doing down there?"

André chuckled wryly. "My cuff link! I know it sounds silly to be out here looking for it like this, but it's one of a set I had made out of my mother's gold earrings. It was missing, I noticed, when I went to bed. I've lain awake for hours just wondering about it." He scanned the moonlit gravel of the yard. "If I lost it in town, of course, then it's hopeless, but I just had a feeling — " He took a step forward and bent down to examine something on the ground, then rose, shaking his head. "What's the use? It's gone, I suppose." He shrugged. "But the night's not a total loss! *You're here!*" He fell to one knee in a melodramatic pose. "Let down your hair, Rapunzel! I'm coming up!"

"You'll wake the whole house! André, did you hear the drum?"

"The drum? . . . Oh. I've heard it before. Some *ni-os* playing games in the bushes probably."

"At this hour? It's spooky."

"I'll protect you! Are you coming down or am I coming up?"

"Silly! I'm going to bed! I'll see you tomorrow!" She felt strangely frivolous, beautiful almost. The way she'd felt with Paul.

"Lock your door," he twinkled. "I'm not responsible for the things I do by moonlight!"

She pulled a face at him, shut the window all but a crack, and walked slowly back to the bed. This time she slept soundly. An hour, perhaps two hours passed. Then the sound of a light scratching against her doorway roused her like a shot. Something was outside in the hallway. She sat straight up, the hair on the back of her neck bristling. "Who's there?" she whispered hoarsely. There was no answer. Only the faint pawing, low down on the door.

"Who's there?" She swung her legs off the bed. Her feet prickled as they touched the coolness of the floor. On the nightstand was a massive silver candlestick, its candle long melted down to a waxen pool in the base. Quivering, she grasped it with her right hand.

"Answer me! Who's there?" Holding the candlestick ready, she unfastened the bolt with her left hand and swung the door wide.

Marie-Thérèse was huddled there on the floor. "Mam'selle," she whimpered. Claire bent down and gathered her up in her arms. The small face was wet against her check. The little body shook like a fawn's. She'd been sobbing.

"Hush," Claire said, stroking her head, her back. "What's the matter, *chérie*?"

"Dream . . . " she hiccupped, "bad . . . falling . . . "

Claire rocked her in her arms. "Hush. It's all right now. I'll take you back to your bed."

"No!" Marie-Thérèse locked her arms around Claire's neck. "Stay with you . . . "

"All right . . . there, my sweet." Claire lowered her to the bed. Still the little arms clung as she stretched out beside her and pulled the sheet over them both. Warm, soft, fragrant, they wrapped around her neck. Marie-Thérèse lay close to her until she drifted off to sleep.

Outside the wall, the jungle was dark. With a shrug of his wide shoulders. Pedro Prestan rose to his feet, stretched his cramped legs, and tucked the small drum under his arm. It would not be safe to make contact with the house tonight. Not with the possibility that the girl might still be awake.

There was plenty of time, he reassured himself. No need to risk disaster by taking foolish chances. His Colombian connections were impatient for their dynamite, but they could wait. He had moved slowly and carefully in setting up his system, and the Jarnac house was a vital part of it. One mistake could ruin everything.

The girl's presence worried him. It was enough that she seemed to be a light sleeper and that she occupied a room that looked down on the gate and the stable. It was enough that she was an unknown element in his elaborate scheme; but when his contact had told him she was Paul Sagan's widow, Prestan's blood had run cold.

With one last backward glance at the silent house, he strode off down the winding jungle path, confident of his step even in the darkness. Prestan knew every foot of the wild country that ran across Panama's Isthmus. He was as much at home in the jungle as the snakes and monkeys, as comfortable as the sloths and tapirs and the huge, flesh-eating stone frogs that were as big as dinner plates.

Without breaking his catlike stride, he stepped across a gurgling stream. He was wearing sandals and a *montuna*, the familiar peasant costume of Panama that consisted of a loose-fitting white shirt and white trousers fringed at the knee. Even the wearing of the *montuna* figured in his plans. So had the changing of his name from the French Pierre to the Spanish Pedro.

Pedro Prestan had been born too late for his time in Haiti. The fiery days of such figures as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Dessalines, Pétion, and Christophe were long gone. The reins of Haitian power sat firmly in the hands of a ruthless circle of men who, no matter how they might battle among themselves, had no use for an ambitious young newcomer.

But Panama was a ripe mango, ready to fall into the lap of the man who could shake the tree hard enough. The Colombian government was far away, the people restless, discontented, ready to follow any leader who could promise them freedom and a slice of the wealth that

the French displayed so lavishly. Pedro Prestan was determined to be that leader.

From the days of his childhood, he had been driven by some inner fury that even he could not explain. The cane fields of the Lafrenière plantation had always been too small for him. When he had rebelled against a projected lifetime of cutting and hauling cane, his mother and his aunt had scraped up enough money to send him to a convent school in Port-au-Prince, where he had quickly learned to read and write. From there, he had advanced to the head of his class, devouring books on history and politics — in particular, the history and tactics of revolution.

With his schooling finished, he'd returned to the plantation at the age of eighteen, a thoroughbred now made to wear a broken-down harness, brash, arrogant, unfit for any sort of ordinary work. He'd begun to quarrel with his mother, and it was during one of these quarrels that he had learned the truth about his birth: that except for his mother's circumstances and the color of her skin, he might have been Pierre Lafrenière, growing up as heir to the sweeping fields of cane, the sugar mill, and the great house on the bluff.

That fateful revelation had forged him, had tempered and hardened him with the fire of hate. Where once he had looked upon Dominique Lafrenière, the boss man, with a mixture of awe and envy, he suddenly saw the father who would never acknowledge him. And Lafrenière's beautiful, golden-haired daughter, too proud to even spit on him — she was his sister, his *younger* sister, possessing all the wealth, position, and advantages that should have been his.

Surreptitiously, in the ways he had studied so well, he began to agitate against the man who had sired him. With little more than a few well-placed whispers and promises of loot, he had soon gathered about him a band of restless young bucks with empty pockets. Night after night, he stirred them up with bloody tales of how, in the 1790s, their ancestors had risen up against their white masters in an orgy of killing, burning, looting, and rape that had driven most of the whites from Haiti. Night after night, he increased the pitch of their excitement, jabbing, prodding, tantalizing until at last the dam of their lust had burst. Brandishing torches and machetes, they had stormed the Lafrenière mansion.

Prestan himself had thrown the first torch to the roof. Amid the flames and smoke and the screams of the servants, they had hacked at

the walls and doorways, slashed the draperies and paintings with their machetes, and carried off clothes, dishes, silver, and furniture. In the library they had come upon the splendid grand piano that Lafrenière had imported from France for his daughter. Swarming over it in a frenzy of destruction, they'd chopped, kicked, and pounded the thing to pieces until, by the time the flames had reached the room, not one key was left touching another.

The house had burned to the ground. A number of the servants had died in the melee. The white overseer who had given his name to the son he'd thought was his had been among them. Young Prestan had sliced him from neck to hip with one savage blow of his razor-sharp machete. He had never killed a man before, and the horror of it sent a sweet-hot sense of power surging through his limbs. He had taken a life — an act that his gentle mother had told him should be left only to God.

Dominique Lafrenière and his daughter had escaped. Protected by Prestan's own formidable aunt, the towering Simone, they had fled to Port-au-Prince with enough money and jewels to buy their way to France.

And when the police had come to the ruined Lafrenière plantation. Prestan and his cohorts had fled as well — from Haiti to Panama.

The prick of a thorn against his bare leg jerked Prestan's thoughts back to the present. He thought of the house he had just left and smiled at the irony of it: that the life of Angélique Lafrenière Jarnac, his father's daughter, was about to fall so neatly into his hands.

True. Angélique herself was beyond his revenge. He knew what that tumble down the stairs had done to her mind. But he hated everything she touched. It was not enough for him to see her mad. He wanted her destitute, outcast, her house in flames and her people brought down with her. Maybe then he would be satisfied.

Prestan had studied each member of the Jarnac household, and he knew them well: the habits, the desires, the weaknesses of each of them. One of them was already under his spell, another close . . . the rest would follow before long. Some would be more difficult than others, he knew, but soon all of them, even Angélique, would be in the palm of his hand.

The girl, however, Sagan's widow, disturbed him, for he could not predict what she might do. Get rid of her, that was the safe solution. Try to frighten her away, and if she did not go . . .

Prestan cursed as he stepped out of the jungle and onto the gravelled road where his white stallion was tied to a clump of bamboo. Nothing must go wrong. Not now, when he was so close to the culmination of his plans. If the Sagan girl could be won over or driven away, well and good. If not, then she would have to be eliminated.

Slowly he mounted his horse. The saddle seat was wet with dew. Somewhere down the road, a dog howled at the full moon. Prestan's leg smarted where the thorn had pricked it. Bending in the saddle, he brushed the spot with his hand. His palm came away smeared with blood.

Claire awoke with the sun streaming into the room. Marie-Thérèse lay sleeping on the pillow beside her, limp and rosy. She slipped quietly out of bed. A white piece of paper had been thrust under the door. Her pulse stirring, she snatched it up and unfolded it.

Come to the library as soon as you're dressed.
I have something to show you.

Philippe

Hurriedly she dressed, splashed water on her face, and brushed and pinned her hair into its customary coil on the back of her neck. Philippe was in the library, seated at his big oaken desk. He turned his head as she bustled in.

"I thought you'd be at the hospital before now," she said.

"I'm going at noon. I'll be there till midnight. Come over here."

She crossed the floor and stood at his shoulder. He was wearing a cream-colored linen shirt, rolled up at the sleeves. The hair on his forearms gleamed like black silk in the morning sun. Amid the clutter of papers on the desk, Claire noticed a heavy, leather-bound book and a long thin object covered with a white cloth.

"I took another look at our snake," he said. "Felt like a fool when I did. Look." He opened the book to the page marked with a scrap of paper. Claire glanced at the title: *Reptiles of the World*.

Philippe pointed to a hand-colored illustration labeled "coral snake." "Now, look at this," he said. He lifted the cloth. The faded, battered body of the snake lay stretched out on a board. "I know it's not pretty, but you have to see this. Look at the snake. Look at the picture. Let's see how sharp you are."

Gulping down her revulsion. Claire studied both carefully. She shook her head.

"The bands of color," he urged. "I could tell you, but I want you to see it. Name them for me!" With the tip of his pen he pointed to one of the rings on the dead snake's body. "What color?"

"Red." She felt ridiculous. He moved the pen point to the next ring.

"Black," she said. "Yellow; black; red; black . . . "

"Fine," he said. "Now the one in the book." He pointed again with the pen. "Red," she said a little impatiently. "Yellow; black; yellow; red; yellow . . . Philippe! They aren't the same!"

Claire had never really seen him smile before. "That's right," he said softly. "It wasn't a coral snake."

"It wasn't poisonous?"

"Absolutely not." He covered the snake again. "We still don't know who put it on your bed, but whoever it was may not have been trying to harm you after all, thank heaven." He closed the book and rubbed at the cover with his handkerchief. "Damned mildew! You have to wipe off every book in the house at least once a month or they all turn green! Books, pianos, horses, and women!" His brows lifted above his haughty nose, wrinkling his forehead. "The boat for France leaves in four days. You're to be on it!"

"And Paul . . . ?" she flared defensively.

"What can you do for him now? Last night I was so worried about you I couldn't sleep! This is no place for you! You can't stay!"

Claire turned her back on him and paced the length of the room. Philippe was, after all, her host. He had a right to end his hospitality whenever he chose. But she was rankled by his insinuation that she was unfit for the rigors of life in Panama. Philippe had flung down a gauntlet and Claire, strained by the ordeal of the past two days, pounced on it eagerly.

"That's not fair," she whispered in a tight voice. "Just because Panama destroyed your wife — maybe I'm stronger than she was."

She could tell by the way he glared at her that she had gone too far. "You don't know what you're talking about," he said coldly. "No one was stronger than Angélique. Not even I." He rose to his feet. "Come over by the window. I want to show you something."

She followed him. In one corner of the room, partly hidden by an overstuffed armchair, sat a bulky form. All except its outline was con-

cealed by a dark brown drape, but Claire knew at once what it was. Philippe tugged at the drape and swept it to the floor.

With a gasp, Claire reached out and ran her fingers over the cracked finish and the yellowed keys of the grand piano. "A Bechstein!" she breathed. "The finest —!"

"Yes," Philippe nodded. "And so was Angélique. When I married her. I took her away from what could have been a brilliant career as a concert pianist. She was superb. She had everything. Talent, beauty, ambition, discipline . . . " His eyes were hard as flints. "I took all that away from her. I and Panama. Go on. Play something."

"You're sure . . . ?" Hesitantly she slid onto the bench.

"Go ahead. It's a piano, not a shrine."

Claire's mind was spinning. Chopin, she thought frantically; a waltz . . . something light . . . Her hands poised above the keys, then dropped into the first familiar notes.

The twangy, dissonant clinks that flew from beneath her fingers were scarcely recognizable as music. She remembered what Philippe had told her about pianos on the Isthmus. Eyes stinging, she let her hands slide into her lap. "That was cruel, Philippe," she said.

"No," he replied in a dead voice, "that was kind." He leaned into the curve of the piano. "Nothing fine or beautiful or even decent survives long in this place. That's why I want you to leave, Claire. Before it's too late."

Claire did not know how to answer him. She sat on the bench and stared down at her clasped hands, at the yellowed keys of the Bechstein.

"Mam'selle . . . " Marie-Thérèse's voice piped down the stairs. "Mam'selle. I want you!" Her voice echoed through the foyer, the dining room. The next moment, she popped through the door of the library. "Why did you go. Mam'selle? I don't like it when you go!" Still in her nightdress, she ran to Claire where she sat at the piano, sprang onto her lap, and flung her arms around her neck. "Don't go anymore!" she exclaimed.

Leaning back against the piano, Philippe regarded them with the expression of a defeated general. He shook his head. "It seems, Claire," he said, "that you've found yourself an ally against me."

For the rest of the morning, Claire was the captive of Marie-Thérèse. The little girl treated her like a new toy, giggling as she led her through the garden, racing back to her room to bring Claire her treasures — a

glowing abalone shell, a blue butterfly encased in glass, a string of Cuna beads, a French doll in a lavender dress. Philippe watched them from a distance, his face a mask. His apparent lack of involvement with his little daughter perturbed Claire. It was clear to her that Marie-Thérèse, even though she was immaculately cared for, was hungry for attention, for physical love. It was difficult to picture the reserved Philippe romping with her or cuddling her. Claire could imagine how little love the child received from Angélique. Marie-Thérèse's thickly accented French led Claire to conclude that it was almost exclusively Simone who cared for her. And could that black hulk be capable of anything that even came close to laughter or love?

After Philippe had left for the hospital, they lunched alone at the dining room table, where Claire instructed Marie-Thérèse in the proper use of knives, spoons, and forks. André, Claire had learned from Lizette after a few discreet questions, had gone to the beach at dawn to paint, something he often did.

"Come see my room, Mam'selle!" Marie-Thérèse had finished her crepes and was tugging at Claire's arm. "You only saw it in the dark before!"

"First." Claire said, "you wipe your mouth with the napkin, like so — you have marmalade on your chin — and then you say 'excuse me.'"

"Excuse me. Come on, Mam'selle!" She pulled at Claire's hand until Claire followed her up the stairs. "Want to see Papa's room first?"

Claire tingled with curiosity. "Just for a minute. It's not polite to go into other people's rooms when they're not there, you know."

The upstairs of the Jarnac house was laid out with Claire's room, Marie-Thérèse's nursery, and André's studio-bedroom to the right of the landing. Philippe's, Angélique's, and Simone's rooms to the left. Claire realized that she had never walked down the left corridor before. The back of her neck tightened inexplicably.

"Papa sleeps in here." Marie-Thérèse nudged open the first door on the right. Warily, Claire peered inside. Philippe's bedroom was monk-like in its austerity. White walls, brown curtains. Under the ever-present mosquito netting, a brown counterpane was spread over the bed. A double bed, Claire observed. A door in the side wall apparently led to the adjoining bedroom. Seeing it. Claire couldn't help wondering about the state of Philippe and Angélique's marriage. Apart from her

mind, Angélique appeared to be in good health, and she was beautiful. Claire glanced at the bed again and quickly blinked away the picture that had taken shape in her imagination.

The one superfluous element in Philippe's room was the tall bookcase that stood between the windows. It was crammed with a motley assortment of well-worn volumes — everything from Molière, Rabelais, and Victor Hugo to texts on medicine, astronomy, botany, history, and philosophy. The only other human touch was lent by the presence of his razor and shaving mug on the washstand.

Feeling like an intruder in an alien male domain, Claire backed out into the hall and shut the door. Marie-Thérèse had disappeared. Claire glanced around, fighting a growing panic; a senseless panic, she reminded herself, since the little girl was in her own house and could not have gone far.

"Marie-Thérèse!" she whispered, shivering at the echo of her own voice, wondering if anyone's ears had heard her. No one answered. Then she saw that the door on the other side of the corridor was ajar.

"Marie-Thérèse!" She edged toward it.

Someone inside was singing, softly, indistinctly, in a low voice that Claire imagined to be like the purr of a black panther.

"Marie-Thérèse!" she hissed, moving as close to the door as she dared. The singing stopped.

"Come in, Mam'selle. Why are you afraid?" That voice again. That deep, velvety rumble. Slowly Claire opened the door.

The sitting room was spacious, elegantly furnished with French chairs and a settee upholstered in pale blue velvet. The windows were heavily covered by blue damask draperies trimmed in gold braid; candles, even though it was midday, flickered in the crystal chandelier.

At the room's exact center, Simone sat in a huge mahogany rocker, her needlepoint in her lap and her eyes resting calmly on Claire. Marie-Thérèse was curled on a hassock at her feet. Beyond her, Angélique sat at a small table. Her eyes, which matched the shade of the drapes and furnishings, stared vacantly at the opposite wall.

Eight

Simone leaned back in her rocker and regarded Claire the way you'd expect a duchess to look at some scruffy urchin who'd wandered into her salon. "Well, sit down," she said calmly. Then she turned to Marie-Thérèse. "Get Mam'selle a chair, *ti fi*. She looks . . . tired, no?" There was no trace of a servant's meekness in her voice or in her manner. Clearly, in this room, Simone was the unchallenged mistress. Marie-Thérèse jumped up at her bidding and came back dragging a lightweight chair with its seat done in floral petit point.

"Simone was singing," she chirped as Claire sat down. "Sing some more, Simone." She plopped onto the hassock once more and clasped her hands around her pink knees. Simone's eyes flicked over Claire. She nodded slightly, as if to convey to her that the decision was her own and took up the musical purr that Claire had heard just before she entered. The melody, an eerie strain in a minor key, floated up from the depths of her throat with liquid ease, flowing like melted butter from notes so low that they were little more than growls to tones so high that they tinkled like chimes. The husky timbre of her voice sent shivers down Claire's back. The words were strange — some Haitian dialect of French, Claire guessed, as she took good advantage of the opportunity to study the huge black woman.

Some people might have called Simone ugly — people who measured beauty in terms of delicacy and classic proportion. And she *was* ugly, in the same way a gorilla or a lion is ugly when examined feature by feature. Her astounding beauty lay in the grace of her powerful body, in the strength of a voice that was like dark honey, in the far-off wildness that flashed in her eyes. Claire had never seen anyone like her. She would never see anyone like her again.

"You're staring." Simone had spoken and Claire realized the song had ended.

The music had lulled Claire into boldness. "Is it true that you're a vodun priestess?" she asked Simone.

The thick lips curled back from her teeth. "Who told you that?"

"Lizette." Claire felt herself trembling inside.

"And did you believe her, Mam'selle?"

"I don't know."

"Do you believe in vodun? In the *loa*, the spirits that come into men's bodies to work their will?" She impaled Claire with her eyes.

"No," Claire replied honestly. "I'm a Christian."

Simone smiled like a black Mona Lisa. "Well, so am I," she said.

Claire was bewildered, but she was determined not to be intimidated. "You still haven't answered my question, Simone."

"You don't believe." Simone picked up her needlepoint. "So what difference would it make to you?"

Claire sat and watched her in silence for a time, as her black fingers wove the needle skillfully in and out of the mesh. She sensed a waiting in the woman, a rare welling up of some desire to reveal a little of herself.

At last Simone glanced down at Marie-Thérèse, who had dropped off to sleep with her legs dangling over the side of the hassock.

"The child's fond of you, Mam'selle."

"I'm fond of her."

"In Haiti . . . " She shifted in her chair. "Long time ago, I had a baby of my own. Little girl. She died."

"How sad for you — and your husband." Claire did not know what else to say.

"Husband! You don't need a husband to get a baby. Mam'selle! Only a man!" She gave Claire a look that made her feel like an imbecile. "He didn't even know about her. She was *mine*. But she died; left me full of milk."

Simone cast her eyes over at Angélique who was still seated at the table, staring past her untouched lunch. Her blue eyes were glazed. Settling back in her chair once more, Simone kept her gaze intent on her needlepoint as she talked.

"Up in the big house, just after my baby died, the Madame died too. She died having twins. She and one of the babies." Simone plucked a

strand of blue wool from a skein in her lap and threaded it through her needle. "In the night they came and got me and took me up to the big house. They gave me another baby. The live one." She glanced purposefully at Angélique. "That one."

Angélique was dressed in a frilly peignoir of the palest pink silk. Her hair was swept back from her face and held by a matching pink ribbon. She looked unreal, like someone's prized doll, enshrined under a glass dome.

"They gave her to me," said Simone. "Such a little, red, scrawny thing she was! I stayed on in the big house and fed her. Fed her with the milk from my own body! She was my baby. Her Papa never got married again, so Simone was the only mother that girl had!"

Simone sighed. "Then her Papa took her to France. She married M'sieu' Philippe and didn't come back to Haiti. Lonely time for Simone, Mam'selle." She jabbed the needle in and out of the mesh fabric. "Then she fell on the stairs. M'sieu' Philippe, he sent to Haiti for me." She lowered the work to her lap and gazed at Claire intently. "Simone's got her baby back again, Mam'selle. Nobody's going to hurt her anymore. Never again. Anybody hurts my baby —" She did not finish the sentence, but there was no need to. Watching her flex those powerful hands, Claire had no doubt that Simone was capable of killing anyone who harmed her mistress. But why, she wondered, did the woman's words sound so much like a warning? Certainly Simone would know that she meant no harm to Angélique.

Angélique got up from the table and strolled listlessly toward them. She moved like a sleepwalker.

"No, child!" Simone was out of her chair with amazing quickness for her size. "You go back and eat your dinner. Listen to Simone!" She took one pale hand in her great black one.

Angélique ripped her hand loose. She shook her head until her golden hair swung back and forth like the tail of an angry cat. She was staring at Claire with those lovely, dead eyes. Slowly, she drifted closer.

"Come on! Come, child!" Simone cajoled, tugging gently at her sleeve. "Back to the table . . . like a good girl . . . Stay where you are, Mam'selle," she hissed at Claire. "Best not to move!"

Angélique's feet, in pink satin mules, glided along the floor toward Claire. One step, then another, until she was looking straight down at her. Philippe's wife was taller than Claire had realized. Even without

lacings, her figure, silhouetted through the translucent silk, was splendid. Her skin had the rosy, almost poreless perfection of a tiny child's. "She had everything . . . " Philippe's voice echoed in Claire's head.

Now Angélique was reaching out toward Claire's face. "Don't move, Mam'selle," Simone droned at her. The tapering fingers rested against her cheeks. Glancing cautiously at her other hand. Claire saw the nails, long and pointed. She remembered the scratch marks on Philippe's face from that first day in the garden . . .

"Don't move, Mam'selle . . . "

Angélique's other hand rose until Claire's cheeks were cradled between the cold, satiny palms. Her fingertips pressed into Claire's flesh, deeper and deeper until Claire could feel the pressure of the nails against her skin. Her own fingers had begun to dig into her knees.

She looked into Angélique's face, as lovely and serene as the face of the Botticelli Venus. Slowly, with her mouth closed, Angélique smiled. Her fingers relaxed against Claire's cheeks and slid down her neck on both sides, to rest on her shoulders for a moment. Then, still smiling, she turned away and drifted back toward the table as though she'd dismissed Claire as an object of interest.

The breath slid out of Simone. She bustled over to the table and helped Angélique back into her chair. She handed her a spoon. Angélique put the spoon into her soup and stirred it dreamily.

"Maybe I'd better go," Claire whispered.

"Best you stay a little longer," answered Simone. "She accepts you now. You go — maybe she won't like it."

Angélique took a sip of her broth and Simone smiled approvingly. Claire settled back in her chair. "You eat too, Simone," she said noticing that another place had been set next to Angélique's at the table. "Don't let me keep you from your lunch."

Simone glanced at the table. "That's not for me," she grunted. Then, seeing Claire's puzzled face, she added, "Old Haitian custom, Mam'selle. Always we set a place for her twin. The dead one." Her massive shoulders rose and fell. "Just a custom."

"That's interesting," Claire smiled, leaning forward. "We could have done that in my family too."

"Oh?" Simone's brows rose.

"My older brother was born a twin. His twin sister died when they were about a year old. I never saw her." Claire had intended the

remark as a pleasantry, as something that would fill up the awkward silence in the room. The intensity of Simone's reaction startled her.

"You tell me!" Simone demanded, whirling toward her, planting herself in front of her and impaling her with her white-rimmed eyes. "How many brothers and sisters you got?"

Claire shivered under her gaze. "Just one brother. His name is Jacques. He's . . . a lawyer back in Paris."

Simone peered at her. "No babies born between you and the twins? No dead ones?"

Claire shook her head nervously.

"Aaah!" Simone breathed, and Claire thought she detected a note of dismay in her voice. She turned away and muttered something under her breath. "Best you leave this house, Mam'selle. Best you leave Panama."

First Philippe; now Simone. "Why?" Claire challenged her.

Simone's features drooped. "No place for you, Mam'selle. No place for any young lady."

"I have to stay," Claire said firmly. "I have a reason."

"You have your reason to stay," Simone insisted. "I have my reason to know you'd best go."

They glared at each other, Claire and Simone, at an impasse of wills. Finally it was Claire who broke the silence. With a little snuff of exasperation, she stood up and bent down to gather up the sleeping Marie-Thérèse in her arms.

"Leave her," Simone said gruffly. "I took care of her before you came. She's safe here." Her eyes regarded Claire coldly. Claire thought of the snake. Yet she saw no reason to defy that towering figure. She left Marie-Thérèse curled on the hassock and walked stiffly back to her room to stare at her pale reflection in the mirror. She had met Simone on her own ground and had come away more or less unscathed, she told herself. She felt more confidence now. The woman was no more and no less than what she had expected: strong, wild, and hostile.

It was Angélique who intrigued her most. Those vacant blue eyes and the gifts of mind and spirit that slumbered behind them. What a waste, Claire thought. What magnificent potential had died when those slender feet had slipped at the top of the winding staircase.

Claire pondered her own past, those silent years at Bicêtre. What if she had remained as she was, withdrawn and lifeless? What if there

had been no Dr. Sagan to awaken her? Claire looked deep into the reflection of her own gray eyes. She felt a curious kinship with the beautiful Angélique. A sisterhood of silence.

With a sigh, she turned to the pastel rainbow that Angélique's gowns made across the back of the chair. She would wear them, she told herself, some of them at least, as a token of the sympathy she felt toward their lovely owner.

The one on top was nice. Light green voile, edged with ribbon, elegant in its simplicity. She examined the seams. Taking them in would not be difficult. She could have the job finished before dinner. Grateful for the distraction, she opened her trunk and began to feel for her sewing box.

André came in at dusk, sunburned, smiling, and cradling a magnificent seascape under one arm.

"It's yours!" he exclaimed to Claire over dinner. "Every brushstroke of it! I thought about you all the time I was painting it! See that cloud?" He pointed to where the painting was propped against a chair for Claire's inspection. "The exact — " he reached over, tilted up her chin with one finger and gazed into her face — "the exact color of your eyes. I've got a good memory, no?" He took her hand. It was trembling slightly. "Would you like to have it, Claire?"

He could see the warmth flowing into her face. He'd been right about the color green on her. It was perfect. "I'm overwhelmed," she whispered. "But, André, how can I accept such a lovely gift?"

"Gift!" He crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Ha! André Jarnac never gives away anything! It has its price!"

"A price? Can I afford it?" She twinkled at him over the edge of her wineglass. Yes, she was enchanting when she smiled.

"I hope so. Pose for me again. Let me paint you. Starting tomorrow, if you've time."

"That depends." She glanced down at Marie-Thérèse who was seated next to her devouring a watery custard. "I have to earn my keep, you know. You'd best ask my mistress here."

"What about it, *ti fi*?" André leaned over toward her chair. "Mind if I paint Mademoiselle on your time?"

"I want to watch," said Marie-Thérèse, squishing the custard to one side of her mouth.

"Ah, but you'll be bored, *chérie*," André protested, frowning.

"I want to be with Mam'selle!"

"Let her, André," Claire coaxed him. "Otherwise I shouldn't do it. I promised Philippe —"

"Philippe!" André exploded. "He has to have everyone under his thumb! And now he's got you too!" He scowled down at Marie-Thérèse's golden head. "And she'll get in the paints. She's done it before."

"I won't," insisted Marie-Thérèse. "Promise!"

André leaned his chin on his fist until his eyes were level with the child's. "You little witch," he teased. "You know I want to be alone with your precious Mam'selle and you won't let me. Why don't you just turn me into a toad and be done with it, eh? Then you'd have her all to yourself!"

Marie-Thérèse giggled. Her laughter was Angélique's, the way he remembered it. André rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I surrender," he moaned. "Two against one, and two females at that! It's not fair!"

Claire was looking at his hands, her gray eyes suddenly intent on something. "What beautiful cuff links!" she exclaimed. "Were you looking for one of these, that night in the yard?"

"Why, yes," he beamed, holding his wrist up for her inspection. "You have a good memory. Claire. I found the missing cuff link in the carriage the next morning. What luck, eh?"

"Yes . . . it would have been such a shame . . ." She turned his hand to see the cuff link better. He let his fingers slip around hers and tighten softly, briefly. The color flared up in her cheeks, but she did not pull her hand away until André released her. He was encouraged.

While Claire was putting Marie-Thérèse to bed. André waited for her in the garden, where he stood staring up at the sky. The day had been rainless. Now black clouds were boiling up into the evening sky with ominous, distant rumblings. The palms rustled silkenly, like expensive petticoats.

His thoughts drifted easily to Claire, her delicate face and slim, ladylike body. As a rule, he liked his women tall and voluptuous, like some of the models he and his friends had painted and shared so long ago in Paris. But Claire was charming. He would win her because he could and because he must.

"Doesn't it ever stop raining, André?" She had come to stand beside him, under his upraised arm which was braced against a slanting tree limb. Her hair smelled of French soap.

"In the dry season it stops. You'd think it would be bliss to have it stop, but you soon get to missing the rain, when the hot sun turns the hills to tinder."

"When does it come?" The breeze lifted the loose tendrils of hair around her face.

"Soon. This time last year it had already started." His hand slipped down the side of the tree and came to rest on her shoulder. Breathing deeply, deliberately, he drew her close until she stood quivering in the circle of his arms. His lips nuzzled the softness of her hair, her forehead. He could feel the tenuous thread of her resistance dissolving.

"André!"

"Ssh! Don't spoil it, Claire." His tongue flickered like a flame against her closed eyelid. His own pulse was quickening.

"André, it's too soon!" Her forearms stiffened against his chest. "I mean it!"

Slowly he released her. "Maybe you ought to be wearing black," he said.

She had stepped back, away from him. "Paul hated the idea of mourning. But that doesn't mean I don't — " She drew her breath in and let it out in a ragged, nervous sigh. "And I have an obligation to Paul's memory. It's something I feel." She was struggling for words. "Until I've done all I can to clear him — I've no right to — "

"To enjoy your own life? Is that it?" André's palm slapped impatiently against the side of his leg. "Are you trying to bribe me again, Claire?"

"I don't know what you mean!" she protested shakily.

"Yes you do. No touching the merchandise, André, old fellow. Not till you've paid the price. Are those your terms, Claire?"

"Don't be silly!" she retorted.

"So, now you're angry!" He leaned back against the tree and studied the way the moonlight turned the highlights of her hair to a deep mauve. "Well, maybe you'll hold your fire if I tell you that I talked to one of my contacts today."

In an instant she was at his mercy. André laughed inwardly at the change in her. "André!" she whispered. "Don't make me beg you! Tell me!"

He smiled at her. "Not much to tell. I'm afraid. But the man did agree with the idea that your Paul might have been framed."

"That's all?"

"So far. But I did tell him I'd make it worth his while to keep his eyes open."

"Thank you," she said meekly.

"Nothing to thank me for yet," he said. "But don't think I'm trying to buy you, Claire. Paul's one thing. You . . . me . . . that's something apart. At least to me it is."

"André, I'm sorry," she breathed. "It's not you. It's me. I'm still so confused . . ."

"Look," he said, retreating strategically, "let's leave it for now, Claire. It's late. Blame it on the moonlight." He offered her his arm. "Come on. I'll walk you to your room. Tomorrow's another day."

They mounted the stairs and he stopped at her bedroom door. She stood there in Angélique's green dress, wide-eyed, vulnerable, fawn-like. He took her hand and pressed her fingers to his lips. "When your heart's tired of black, *chérie*," he said softly, "let me know!" Then, before the moment could be spoiled, he withdrew, leaving her there in the hallway with one trembling hand on the doorknob.

There were no snakes in her room this time. Claire had checked carefully before getting into bed. Wide awake, she lay there between the sheets. It was too soon, she told herself over and over. Too soon to feel that palpitating insanity of the heart that had overtaken her when André had held her in his arms. The fingers of her right hand went to her wedding band, and she twisted it in an agony of guilt. She'd loved Paul — surely she had! And yet, she could not be faithful to his memory for more than a day now that he was gone. Was she wicked, she asked herself, or was she just weak? Paul had been dead for only two days, and yet it had been more than ten months since he'd left her in Paris. Ten months since she'd lain close to him in the night, since the warmth of his love had fulfilled her. Was it in Panama or in Paris that the time of her bereavement had begun?

The room was stifling from the heat of the day. Remembering the coolness of the garden, she tiptoed over and opened the window just the width of her hand. The rain-freshened air came pouring into the

room. She gulped it hungrily. Then she walked back to the bed and slid wearily between the sheets. Very soon she was asleep.

It must have been hours later when she awoke to the sound of the front gate banging. The rain was ripping out of the sky in full fury, blowing in through the window and soaking the curtains. As Claire leaped out of bed to close it, she heard Philippe's voice over the roar of the storm, calling for Bertrand. He'd planned to be at the hospital until midnight, she remembered. Peering through the rain-pocked glass, she saw the little hunchback come out of the stable to take the horse. Then Philippe came sloshing up the walk, ankle deep in water, his black oilskin streaming. Just short of the porch, he stopped, stood still for a moment as if he'd forgotten something, and then he strode on back to the stable and disappeared inside. Claire caught the flicker of a lantern through the cracks in the door.

She pressed her nose against the coolness of the glass and waited for Philippe to reappear. Finally, when he did not, she began to yawn. Wondering foggily whether he'd decided to spend the night in the stable with Bertrand, she tottered back to bed. Sleep had nearly flooded her mind when she heard the front door open and close softly; heard the familiar heavy tread on the stairs and the click of the latch on the door of Philippe's room. Oddly comforted, she drifted into slumber.

She dreamed senselessly. She was a china doll falling down an endless spiral staircase. Simone's huge face was laughing at her, but no sound came out of her mouth. The face became Angélique's; then André's; then Paul's. Even Paul was laughing. She screamed silently. Then she was floating in quiet, quiet darkness. The faces had disappeared. She was in a void, without light, without sound. Then, soft but deafening in the stillness, she heard the ripple of skilled fingertips on the skin of a drum.

Claire sat up in bed, her scalp tingling. The rain had stopped. Even the crickets were still. She was fully awake when she heard it again. The rapid staccato, like the flutter of a bird's wing, from somewhere beyond the wall.

The clock in the foyer downstairs struck three. "Just some *ni-os* playing . . ." André had said. Children playing at three in the morning? Claire slipped out of bed, opened the window a crack, and looked out. The house was shrouded in fog. She could not see the stable, the wall, or even the ground. She strained her ears for the sound

of the drum, but the world outside was as silent as her dream. The night fog pressed in on her like wet black velvet. She began to wonder if she'd imagined the drumbeats after all. Shutting the window, she went back to bed.

Bertrand flattened his body against the inside of the stable door, his heart pounding with terror. It had been two days since he'd discovered the cases of dynamite buried in the jungle just outside the wall. Two days of wavering uncertainty before he'd worked up the courage to tell M'sieu' Philippe about it. That part had not been easy. The whole affair smelled strongly of Pedro Prestan, and Prestan was a man to be feared. He had eyes and ears everywhere. Even so, Bertrand had imagined it would be safe enough to discuss it with Philippe in the dark seclusion of the stable at midnight with a storm raging outside. He was just beginning to learn how wrong he had been.

It was Simone who had brought him the plate of Lizette's fish stew and hominy for supper. The stuff had been so badly prepared that Bertrand had not been able to eat it. Lizette was a sweet child, though, and well-meaning: so not wanting to hurt her feelings, he had scraped it off his plate under a hibiscus in the garden where he knew the ants would clean it up in a matter of a day or so. It was by no means the first time he'd done such a thing. Pity the poor girl's future husband!

He had made no connection later that night between his empty stomach and his unusual sleeplessness. The storm, perhaps. He'd never liked thunder and lightning. When Philippe had come home, he'd still been wide awake. Even then he'd kept quiet at first. Philippe was tired. Probably anxious to get to bed.

Philippe had gone on up to the house, turned, and come back to the stable. "I can tell when something's bothering you, Bertrand," he'd said. "Need to talk about it?"

So while Philippe had sat on a bale of straw, smoking a cigar and being careful of the ashes, Bertrand had told him how he'd found the dynamite, ten cases of it, buried beneath a pile of rocks, not far from where he'd told Philippe earlier that he'd found a shovel.

Philippe had frowned, black brows knotting above his deep-set eyes. "Why this place, Bertrand? Why not some other part of the jungle? What do you think?"

It had taken Bertrand a long, reluctant time to answer. "Prestan, I think, M'sieu'. And maybe somebody close by's helping him."

"Any idea who? Someone in this house?"

Bertrand had shaken his head. "I don't know. Haven't heard anything out there, M'sieu'."

Philippe had kicked the straw away to bare floor and snubbed out the stump of his cigar. His oilskin was steaming in the glow of the lantern. "I don't like it. But there's not much we can do tonight, in the dark and the rain. I'll come down for you tomorrow morning. Then we'll go and look at it. All right?"

"Yes, M'sieu." After watching Philippe splash his way back to the house through the diminishing night rain, Bertrand had stretched out on his bunk in his little room behind the stalls. On and off he had slept, but his nerves were jumping. Even the familiar night noises were sinister to his ears. He sat on the edge of the bunk, reached for his tobacco tin, drew out the pouch and one of the thin papers, and rolled himself a cigarette. The brick floor was cold against his bare feet. He lit the cigarette and inhaled the pungent smoke, comforted by the glow of the red tip in the darkness.

The voices were far away when he first heard them. As they came closer, he ground out his cigarette on the floor and pressed his ear against the wall.

"The hunchback's in the stable?" Bertrand had no trouble recognizing the incongruously high-pitched voice of Pedro Prestan. His heart plummeted.

"Yes, but he's asleep. I told you I took care of him." The speaker was a woman. Bertrand gasped. Sweet mother, who'd ever have thought *she'd* be mixed up in this. The bitch!

"You saw him eat it all?" Prestan demanded.

"Yes. In the garden. Brought his plate in empty! He's asleep — "

"He's not asleep. He's been awake most of the night and he knows what's going on. I heard the little devil say so with my own ears!" The sound of the third voice chilled Bertrand's quaking flesh to the bone. It was a voice he knew only too well, and when he heard it he realized that not keeping his mouth shut about the dynamite had been the worst mistake of his life!

"You've got a key to the stable?" Prestan's voice was thin and as rapid-fire as a Gatling gun.

"Here. Always keep it with me . . . " The key rattled in the lock. Bertrand flung himself onto the bunk, jerked up the blanket and closed his eyes. If he could fool them . . .

The stable door creaked open. He heard their footsteps scuffing across the bricks of the floor, heard the snort and stamp of one of the horses in its stall. Then they came into his room.

"See," the woman whispered. "He's asleep. Leave him alone."

Bertrand held his breath and prayed as he had never prayed before, to the Christian saints and the entire vodun pantheon. The room was silent.

Prestan's breath rasped as he bent over. "Asleep, is he? Look at this! A cigarette! And it's still smoldering!"

The early morning sun awakened Claire. The sun and the sound of Lizette screaming out in the yard. Half-awake and already too hot, she lay there and let the screams wash over her for a few seconds before she realized that something was terribly wrong. Then she was out of bed like a shot, pulling on her wrapper and racing downstairs.

André caught up with her on the porch. "*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered under his breath. "Somebody shut that girl up!"

Lizette was standing outside the stable, shrieking at the top of her lungs, her cries punctuated by prayers and oaths. Claire was the first one to reach her.

"Lizette!" The girl was hysterical. Claire shook her shoulders until her head snapped back and forth. "Tell us what it is! Lizette!"

"Mam'selle!" She blinked at Claire. Her teeth were chattering. "In the . . . stable. Mam'selle . . . Bertrand . . . Get M'sieu' Philippe!" She collapsed in Claire's arms, sobbing.

By then André had run into the stable. A rumpled, unshaven Philippe was hurrying down the walk toward them. He paused to give Lizette a worried glance, "She's all right?"

"I think so." Claire patted Lizette's back. "She says it's Bertrand — in the stable!" She pulled herself loose from the sobbing girl to follow him.

"No! Mustn't look, Mam'selle!" Lizette clawed at her arm.

"I've got to!" Claire jerked away from her and ran to the stable.

Philippe was bending over something in the straw. "Get her out of here, André!" he snapped. "No need for you to see him. Claire!"

"Why not?" André seemed to have purposely chosen to contradict his brother. "Claire's not a child!"

He stepped aside for her. Bertrand lay on his twisted back in the straw, glazed eyes staring upward, mouth askew. His face — Claire caught her breath in a gasp of horror — was covered with long, bloody scratches.

"Dead?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Dead," said Philippe. "Get out of here. Claire." He was probing Bertrand's body with practiced fingers.

Lizette brushed past André and Claire. She was still shaking. "How'd he die, M'sieu' Philippe? I . . . got to know!"

"No wounds except on his face," Philippe muttered. "No broken bones. Strangled, maybe. Or smothered. I'm not finished yet. Damn it, André, get them out of here!"

Claire had begun to back toward the door, but Lizette, with a little cry, flew to Bertrand's side and seized one tightly closed fist. "Something . . . in his hand!" she choked, prying open the clenched fingers.

"Blessed Mother! No!" She drew back sharply. There on Bertrand's open palm lay a small twisted bundle of feathers and bone, bound with black hair that could have been Bertrand's. It was not unlike the one Lizette wore on a thong around her own neck.

"Sweet Saint Mary!" she groaned. "It's a *wanga*! A bad charm!" She clutched at Philippe's sleeve. "Somebody wanted him dead! Somebody killed him . . . with *this*!"

Nine

Lizette wrapped herself in her own arms and began to cry jerkily, emitting piercing little squeals.

"Good Lord, get her out of here!" growled Philippe. André was staring down at Bertrand's body. The flies were already trying to swarm onto the bloody face. Claire took Lizette by the shoulders and pushed her bodily out into the hot morning sun. The girl was quaking violently.

"Si — Simone!" she gasped. "Simone . . . she did it!" Eyes rolling, she pawed at the neck of her blouse until she found her own vodun charm. She clutched it, moaning deep in her throat.

"Lizette!" The flesh of Lizette's forearms was rigid under Claire's fingers. "Stop it! Stop it or I'll slap you!" she threatened. "That's silly! Simone and Bertrand were cousins!"

Biting back sobs. Lizette shook her head. "Sh-she did it, Mam'selle! She could do it! She would!"

"Stop it!" Claire could feel Lizette's hysteria creeping into her own fingers, her own arms. Her throat began to constrict. She fought the desire to shake the girl back and forth, back and forth until her stupid little head rolled loose on her neck. She tried to be calm. "Think, Lizette! Why would Simone do it?"

"His . . . his b-body! For his body, Mam'selle!" She choked out the words.

Claire's hands dropped from her shoulders and hung limp at her sides. She stared at Lizette, dumbfounded.

"For a zombi, Mam'selle! A servant! She'd leave his grave open. Then he'd come out at night and do anything she wanted him to! Simone would say, 'You kill somebody!'" Lizette swayed toward Claire

until their faces were inches apart. "And Bertrand's body would do it! He'd be her slave until the day when he would have died if . . . " She twisted the charm until the leather thong dug into her skin.

"Stop it, Lizette! That's . . . " Claire's voice died in her throat. Over Lizette's shoulder she had seen Simone come out of the house, her long, red skirt flying as she ran. Paying no heed to the two younger women, she swept past, hurrying toward the stable. At the sight of her, Lizette froze into trembling silence.

Simone had entered the stable. The air hung heavy with oppressive silence. Even the birds had hushed their chattering. A white butterfly landed on a wisp of wet straw in the courtyard, fluttered its wings, and drifted away.

The low wail bubbled up from Simone's throat, wavered, and broke into a tearing crescendo that jelled Claire's blood. At the sound, a flock of grackles erupted from a bamboo clump, spreading into a jabbering black swarm above the stable.

Leaving Lizette outside, Claire turned and slipped back to where she could see through the stable doorway. Simone was crouched in the straw, cradling Bertrand's head between her knees. Her face was thrown back toward the rafters, her features as twisted as a gargoyle's. Claire listened as the waves of her voice rose and fell — not in a random, spontaneous wailing, but in a savage melody interwoven with strange words. Simone sang a death chant that bridged years, generations, and oceans in its ancient poignancy. The sound filled Claire's head to bursting. Clinging to the frame of the stable door, she let her eyes close. When she opened them, Philippe was looking at her.

"Claire, are you all right?" He spoke softly. He was kneeling in the straw next to Bertrand's bare feet. His black eyes were in shadow, his hair tousled, his cheeks and chin dark with the night's growth of beard. His shirt hung open, haphazardly buttoned only at bottom. It was obvious that he'd still been in bed when Lizette's screams had roused the household. André, standing back a little, was his usual, immaculate self, washed, combed, shaved, and dressed for the day.

"I'm all right," she whispered. Her eyes moved back to Simone. Tears were gleaming on the ebony face. If Lizette had been right about her having caused Bertrand's death, then Claire was watching the performance of a superbly gifted actress.

"I suppose," Philippe said wearily, "that we should send for the police."

Simone stopped in midcry. "No!" she grunted.

"She's right," said André. "They never do anything. Why involve them?"

"Because they'll find out anyway," insisted Philippe. "And if we haven't told them ourselves by the time they do, they'll make trouble. You know how they are. This is their country. We have to do things their way."

"No!" Simone had lowered her cousin's bloodied head back to the straw. "They'll take him away. M'sieu' Philippe. They'll take his body and they'll — " She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"They'll what, Simone?"

Her voice dropped to a rough whisper. "They'll sell the parts of it, M'sieu'. The hair. The fingernails. The drops of spit from inside his mouth There are bad men, M'sieu' Philippe. *Bocors*. They use these things to make evil medicine. They pay the police — " She leaned across Bertrand's body and gripped Philippe's arm. "Let me have him! Let me bury him in our own way. In a secret place where no *bocor* will find him!"

"Someone killed him, Simone. We have to find out who did it."

Simone gazed down at the *wanga* which still lay in Bertrand's half-opened hand. "Baron Samedi knows," she muttered. "I ask him. He will tell me, maybe."

André caught Claire's eye. "One of her gods," he explained in a whisper.

"Look at his face," Philippe argued. "Whoever it was who got in here and killed him, they wanted it known that his death was no accident. The police will hear about it. We've got to bring them in, Simone."

Simone took the *wanga*, closing her fist tight around it. "This I burn!" she declared stubbornly. "Then I will bury him with *hoholi* seeds in his coffin and a cross of pinewood . . . " She stroked Bertrand's arm with the tip of her finger. Her eyes would not look at Philippe again.

In the end, a compromise was reached. The police would be summoned, but Philippe would perform the required examination on the body himself. No one else would be allowed to touch Bertrand. Afterward, Philippe would prepare and sign the necessary papers, releasing Bertrand's body to Simone, his only living relative, for bur-

ial as she saw fit. It would be an easy matter of a few hundred francs to the officer in charge.

They filed out of the stable, André, Philippe, and Claire. Simone remained behind, still kneeling beside Bertrand's body. Claire caught up with Philippe as they walked back to the house.

"What really killed him, Philippe?"

"I don't know yet. The marks on his face are superficial. No other wounds. No broken bones. That leaves strangulation, or poison, or the possibility that he could have died from shock."

"What about the *wanga*? Is there anything to that?"

Philippe shrugged. "Nothing physical. But for those who believe in it, the power of suggestion can do — almost anything. I've seen some strange cases involving vodun black magic."

"Simone believes in it, doesn't she?" Claire slowed her step to keep pace with him. André had gone on ahead and had already reached the house. "Philippe?"

"Mmm?" He was frowning, not fully listening to her.

"Simone really *is* a vodun priestess, isn't she?"

"I've never questioned Simone about her beliefs." His voice was suddenly cold.

Claire was taken aback. "She takes care of your wife and child — !"

"Most competently." His manner softened. He stopped walking and turned to face her. "Vodun isn't necessarily evil, Claire. It's an old set of beliefs and an honorable one. Goes all the way back to Africa. It came to the West Indies with the slave trade." He shoved his hands into his pockets and began to walk again. "Vodun exists side by side with Christianity. In fact, most of the folk you'd see at a vodun rite on Saturday night will be at mass on Sunday morning. And you know what they do with their new drums? They dress them up in white and baptize them!"

Philippe was talking with a sort of grim desperation, skirting the horrible reality of Bertrand's body lying in the stable with the face a mass of bloody scratches. "Not that vodun doesn't have its dark side," he was saying. "But so does Christianity. Think of the Inquisition, the Crusades, the pogroms . . . the devilry that's been done in the poor name of Christ! And then we look down our noses at vodun for a few — " He stopped in midsentence, suddenly pale. "Good Lord!" he murmured.

He spun around as if he'd been shot and bolted back toward the stable. "Simone!" he shouted. Dumbfounded, Claire raced after him.

Simone was still crouching in the straw beside Bertrand's body. Her hands were raised high above her head and in them she gripped a long hunting knife.

"Simone!" Philippe gasped, hurling himself through the doorway. "Don't do it, Simone!"

She swung her face toward them. Her black cheeks were streaming with tears. "Stay back. M'sieu' Philippe! I got to do it! Got to set his soul free, or they'll steal it!"

"Simone!" Philippe edged toward her.

"Stay back, M'sieu' Philippe!" The knife quivered in her upraised hands. She was a leopardess, a crouching, wild-eyed animal. So intense was her ferocity that even Philippe dared not approach her.

Claire caught his sleeve. He pushed her back behind him. "Get out of here, Claire!" he muttered.

Simone stretched her arms to their full height, steadied the quivering knife. Then with a sob she plunged the weight of her arms and body downward, thrusting the knife hilt-deep into Bertrand's chest.

Claire gasped, choking on her own horror. Philippe swung her around and pressed her face into his shoulder. She felt the jerking of his chest muscles as he breathed.

After a few seconds he let her go. The handle of the knife protruded through Bertrand's shirt. There was no blood. Simone was sitting back on her heels, eyes streaming, a triumphant, faraway look on her face.

As they moved closer, they could hear her whispering, crooning. "Go home now . . . Go home, my Bertrand . . . "

It was evening. The police had come and gone. Claire sat in one of the big chairs in the library with Marie-Thérèse on her lap, leafing through a picture book.

The police had found nothing. Since the yard was all grass and cobblestone, there'd been no tracks. They'd left soon after they came, their manner indicating in language stronger than words that the murder of a black, hunchbacked stablehand was hardly worth their time.

Strange, Claire thought, they had done her an unknowing favor. To make sure that no one in the house fled the country, they had confis-

cated all of their passports. No matter how badly he might want to, Philippe would not be sending her back to France on the next boat.

Simone had been busy all day with funeral preparations. Claire had watched her trek back and forth from the house to the gate and into the jungle beyond, carrying an assortment of mysterious bags and bundles, as well as a pick and shovel. Finally, just at dusk, Claire had seen her go out the gate with the puny Bertrand cradled in her arms like a baby.

Lizette, bug-eyed and still shaken, had told her about the vodun funeral ceremony. Bertrand would be dressed all in black, sewn into clothing from which the buttons had been removed. His head would be shaved, his nails cut, and the hair and clippings put into the coffin to keep them from being used for evil magic. His jaw would be bound shut to keep the precious drops of moisture from escaping his mouth.

Because witchcraft was so strongly suspect in his death, some additional precautions would be taken. Simone's stabbing of the corpse was meant to liberate the soul that the use of black magic had trapped inside the body. For greater protection, a small wooden cross carved from a single piece of pine would be placed in the casket, along with bunches of a plant called *hoholi*. "The evil one who comes to take the body must count the *hoholi* seeds first," Lizette had explained. "The *hoholi*, it has so many seeds that the bad one can never finish counting them before morning, and by then it's too late." Lizette had leaned close and clutched Claire's arm. "But if Simone killed him, she will only pretend to do those things. Then his body will be her servant, her zombi, until the time when Bertrand would have died if she had not killed him, Mam'selle."

Claire had dismissed her after that, and refused to listen to any more. Her own heart was heavy. Not so much because she had known Bertrand well enough to be deeply grieved by his death, but because he had become so vital to her as her most important link in proving Paul's innocence. Now he was out of reach forever. He would never be able to tell her what he knew. Claire shivered. She had reason to believe that the secrets he'd held from her had provided someone with a reason to kill him.

Marie-Thérèse had been bewildered by the day's events. Bertrand, Claire learned, had been her friend. Before Claire had come, the little girl had often gone to visit him in the stable where he would carve whistles and little animals for her out of bamboo, play his harmonica

for her, or let her feed the horses. She had not yet realized that he was gone, but the strained atmosphere had upset her. Her three-year-old mind understood that something was wrong.

Philippe, his face drawn, had taken Claire aside after breakfast. "Help me tell her," he'd pleaded.

So they'd taken Marie-Thérèse into the garden and sat down on the stone bench with her between them. In spite of Philippe's initial hesitation, he'd taken on the burden of telling her himself that her friend was dead.

Marie-Thérèse had never seen death, except in birds and insects. She had only gazed at him, her blue eyes wide and uncomprehending.

After a few frustrating moments of trying to come up with an explanation that she would understand, Philippe had excused himself, gone into the house, and come back with a cream-colored kidskin glove. "Marie-Thérèse," he began, slipping the glove onto his right hand. "Pretend this glove is Bertrand. Now there are two parts to him, just as there are to you and to me and to your Mademoiselle here." He held up the hand. She watched him, one finger creeping to the corner of her mouth. "There's the outside part, the part that you see; and there's the part inside, the part that makes him move — " Philippe opened and closed his gloved hand, moving each finger — "that makes him see and hear and talk and think. Do you understand?" He paused while she nodded soberly.

"Good. Now something very sad has happened to Bertrand." Slowly, Philippe slipped the glove off his hand. "The part of him that we can see is empty now . . . and the part of that made him live has gone out of him. That's what we call death, my little one . . . " He laid the empty glove across her lap. She stroked it with her fingers, almost as if it had been Bertrand himself. Then she reached out and touched Philippe's right hand, the hand that had worn the glove.

"This part can still move," she whispered. "Can't it, Papa?"

"That's right. But we can't see it anymore; we can't hear it or touch it or make it come back again. You see, my sweet?" His left hand stroked her curls. Marie-Thérèse picked up his right hand and laid her cheek against the palm, her face pale pink against Philippe's dark skin. Claire felt a rush of warm emotion.

Philippe looked at her over Marie-Thérèse's golden head. "When my own mother died, they told me she'd gone away on a long jour-

ney," he whispered. "I kept waiting for her to come back . . . When I got older, I promised myself that no child of mine . . . " His words trailed off into a long sigh as Marie-Thérèse began to weep.

As she held the little girl in her arms, with Philippe clumsily patting her hair, Claire had studied his imperious profile, marveling at yet another facet of this complicated man. She had pictured him bending over Paul's bed, as he had the first time she'd seen him. Her mind had visualized him fumbling with the cigar that he never seemed to light, cursing as he wiped the mildew from his precious books, wading from the carriage to the house in the midnight rain . . .

And it was only then that she'd remembered how, in the night, Philippe had come as far as the porch, then stopped, turned, and gone back to the stable. Back to Bertrand.

Now she sat in the big armchair in the library with Marie-Thérèse snuggled in her lap. They were alone. André had gone into town and had not returned. Lizette, still too flighty to be of use to anyone, had been allowed to go and stay with her mother for the night.

Overhead she could hear the sound of Philippe's footsteps walking back and forth. Cancelling his hospital duties for the day, he had offered to stay with Angélique while Simone carried out the arrangements for her cousin's burial rites. Philippe and Angélique. Claire pictured them together. Her ethereal fairness. His intense, gypsylike darkness. What a striking couple they must have been in the days before fate had sent her tumbling down the spiral staircase, before that blow against the wrought-iron support had blotted out her mind. How he must have loved her.

Now he cared for her " . . . like one of his hospital cases," André had said. Claire glanced over to the desk where Philippe's black medical bag sat amid the clutter of books and papers. Voices whirled eerily inside her head: André's: "Philippe has to be in control . . . has to have everyone under his thumb . . . look what he did to Angélique . . . " Philippe's: "All right, Simone, I'll get her something . . . something . . . " Claire clasped her palms against the sides of her head. "Stop it!" she commanded her brain.

Philippe had carried that black bag with him when he'd gone into the stable. Who knows what kind of drugs and poisons he had inside! It would have been so easy . . . a quick injection into some hidden

part of Bertrand's body. And then Philippe had performed the examination for the police himself.

"But why?" she tormented herself. If Philippe had really killed Bertrand, there had to be a reason for it. A family matter? Bertrand had been with the Jarnacs for more than three years, for he had come over from Haiti with Simone. Why had he died on the second night after Claire's arrival unless his death had some sinister connection with her coming? She had kept her promise to Bertrand. She had told no one about their conversation in the garden. Only Philippe knew that she had even been outside, that Bertrand had let her back into the house. Only Philippe.

Where were her thoughts taking her? She struggled against them like an exhausted swimmer caught in an undertow. If Philippe had killed Bertrand, killed him because of what the little hunchback had told *her*, then he could be connected with whatever forces had brought calamity upon Paul. And Paul had died under his care. Ideas and images swirled in her mind, taking shape and dissolving, beyond her control.

Then there were the scratches. Beastly . . . horrible, as if Bertrand's face had been raked by the claws of a wild animal. And they had bled. They would not have bled like that if they'd been put there after he died. Bertrand had suffered.

She groped for a reason. Had Bertrand been killed and left as an example to anyone who might be tempted to meddle with that unknown, evil thing that lurked about the house, the town, and the jungle? "Enemies. Mam'selle . . ." She heard his ghostly whisper in the wind outside as it rustled through the blades of the palm fronds. "Enemies . . ."

For several reasons. Claire had ruled out the possibility of going to the police with her suspicions. She had no evidence. The police themselves, with their surly manners and ludicrously big pistols, had aroused her distrust. The police had arrested Paul. She could expect no real help from them. With Bertrand gone, Claire's most important link to proving Paul's innocence lay in the person who had killed him. If that person had been Philippe, then it was possible that he might slip, might give her the key to some evidence that would clear Paul. She could not afford to let the police take him away from her.

Marie-Thérèse was so still that Claire thought she might have drifted off to sleep. Finally she stirred. "Mam'selle . . . ?"

"Yes — " Claire stroked her curls. Poor baby, she thought.

"I want Bertrand."

"Bertrand can't come, sweetest. Remember what your Papa told you."

Her lower lip thrust out. "I want Bertrand." She began to sniffle.

Claire gathered her close as she grasped for some way to distract her. Her frantic eyes darted to the covered piano. "Do you want to hear some funny music, Marie-Thérèse? Come on!" She stood up before the child could protest and carried her over to the bench. "Look at this!"

She slipped the cover back far enough to expose the keyboard. "Listen!" She gave Marie-Thérèse an exaggerated wink and plunged into her flashiest rendition of Strauss's "Blue Danube." With the piano's dilapidated innards, the piece sounded like a broken-down merry-go-round. After a few measures, she paused and glanced at Marie-Thérèse.

Marie-Thérèse was scowling. "Play some more," she said.

"Play some more, *please*," Claire corrected her.

"Please, Mam'selle." She gave a little bounce on the bench.

Claire began again, wincing inwardly as her fingers touched the notes. By the time she'd finished with an elaborate glissando, Marie-Thérèse was giggling.

"Bravo!" The sound of clapping jerked her around on the bench. Philippe was standing in the doorway. He was not smiling. "Bravo, Mademoiselle," he said curtly. "And now, don't you think this young lady's had enough excitement today? I see it's past her bedtime."

Claire stood up, trying not to tremble. "Come along, Marie-Thérèse," she said.

"Play some more tomorrow," Marie-Thérèse dimpled. "Please?"

Claire looked at Philippe. "Is it all right?"

He nodded. "I told you, it's a piano, not a shrine." He turned to leave the room.

"Philippe!" She'd called to him impulsively. When he stopped and moved back toward her, she felt her heart thudding. She looked quickly down at his hands. The fingernails were cut square and blunt. What did you expect, she chided herself. Claws?

He was watching her, his dark eyes full of questions. Scrambling for some reason to detain him, she nodded toward Marie-Thérèse. "She's

still so upset. Maybe it would help if you went upstairs with me to put her to bed."

"Very well." He strode over to Marie-Thérèse and lifted her in his arms. She nestled against him with a little yawn. Claire followed them up the stairs, carrying a candle. In her room, he lowered her to the crib and stood awkwardly by while she knelt on the pillow and mumbled her prayers.

Claire bent over to kiss her forehead, suddenly wondering. "Who taught you to pray, Marie-Thérèse?"

"Simone. Good night, Mam'selle." Her rosebud lips brushed Claire's cheek. She held out her arms toward Philippe. "Papa?" Her tiny fingers wriggled appealingly.

Rather stiffly, Philippe leaned over the crib. Marie-Thérèse locked her arms around his neck and pulled his head down with the weight of her little body. "Papa!" she sighed happily, giving his cheek a resounding kiss.

Philippe squeezed her with one arm. When he straightened up to close the netting around her bed, he kept his face turned away from Claire.

They paused at the top of the stairs. Philippe carrying the candle to light their way. The house was deathly still. He had not spoken to her since they'd left Marie-Thérèse's room. His was a bursting sort of silence, a torrent held back by a dam of his own making. She wondered what he could tell her if he chose to. Was she standing beside a murderer?

As her foot brushed the top step, a sound from outside stopped her like a bullet. The distant flutter of drumbeats in the night. One drum, its tone high and thin like the voice of a little frog, was answered by the rumble of another, then still another in different key and rhythm. The hair on the back of Claire's neck rose like a cat's.

"It's beginning," said Philippe.

"What's beginning?" Claire was tingling all over.

"The funeral. Out in the jungle somewhere. Simone and her friends."

"Her friends?"

"Other Haitians. They come to Panama to work and they bring their vodun rites with them. Doesn't take long for them to get together."

"Have you ever seen — ?" Claire's throat was strangely tight.

"One of their ceremonies? No. But Angélique used to tell me about them. They sound harmless enough. A little *clairin* to drink . . . some chicken blood . . . a goat at the worst . . . people possessed by spirits . . ."

Angélique. Claire tried to picture her as she'd been before the accident. Laughing, gifted, her lost voice whispering to Philippe about Simone and her shocking rituals, her blue eyes sparkling with mystery — and with love.

"Where is Angélique?" she asked him.

"Asleep." His voice slammed a door between them.

She decided to change the subject. "Lizette told me it was Simone who killed Bertrand. Do you think that's possible?" In truth, she had not believed a word of Lizette's hysterical rantings, but she wanted to test Philippe's reaction.

"How?" he snapped. "The *wanga*? And you believed her?" He reached out and spun her around to face him. His hand gripped her shoulder. "Listen, my curious little friend! Vodun or no. Simone's a good woman! Bertrand was all the family she had! She's in deep, genuine mourning for him! You saw that for yourself, and that kind of talk —"

"I'm sorry!" She drew back stunned by his vehemence. "How can I know whether to believe what I hear unless I ask?"

The breath eased out of him. He reached up and kneaded the back of his neck with his fingers. "Forgive me, Claire," he said. "It's been a long day."

"It's been a long day for all of us," she said, not wanting to drive him away. She had to learn all she could from him. "How did he die, Philippe? What did you find?"

"Asphyxiation. His lungs were collapsed."

"Someone . . . smothered him?"

"I didn't say that, but yes, it's possible."

"But who? Who could get in?"

"Who knows? The gate was locked, but it's not impossible to scale the wall. Anyone could have done it."

"Even someone who was already inside," she said, astounded by her own boldness. In the scathing look he gave her, Claire sensed danger.

"Don't be silly!" he growled. "And leave the people in this house alone! You remember my telling you that certain things in this place were none of your affair. That hasn't changed."

"Maybe not," Claire retorted. "But some things in this house have *become* my affair. Like the snake on my bed! I think Simone put it

there!" Now she *had* gone too far. She'd gotten drunk on her own audacity. Thrusting out her chin, she waited for Philippe's retaliation.

He only looked at her, a long, quiet time. "You're right about that," he said at last. "It was Simone. I've been wondering how best to tell you."

Claire's hands rose to her face, fingers cold against her cheeks. "How long have you known?"

"She told me this afternoon. She said she wanted her heart to be at peace for the burial ceremony."

"Why, Philippe?"

"Why do you think?" The hostility had gone from him. He spoke softly. The flame of the candle, flickering on his face, made black hollows of his eyes.

Claire clenched and unclenched her hands, more uncomfortable with this gentle side of him than with his anger. "It's Marie-Thérèse," she said finally. "Simone's jealous, isn't she?"

"That's right. She felt you'd come to take the child away from her. We talked about it. I don't think there'll be any more trouble."

"Thank you," Claire murmured. He stood disturbingly near to her. She was fearfully aware of the sound of his breathing, the rise and fall of his chest, remembering how he had caught and held her against him at the instant Simone had plunged the knife into Bertrand's body. A warm panic began to surge through her. "Excuse me," she whispered, "it's late. I think I'll go to my room now." She could not look up into his eyes. As she turned away from him, something white at the bottom of the staircase caught her eye. Philippe stiffened; he had seen it too. He walked down the stairs slowly, his shoulders drooping.

There on the parquet squares of the foyer, in a heap of lace and broken china, lay the shattered remains of another of Angélique's dolls.

Philippe knelt at the foot of the stairs and picked up the fragments of china, putting each sharp little piece on the doll's lacy white skirt. Only the doll's hands and head were made of china. The rest of the doll was stuffed cloth, soft and unbreakable. Like Angélique, he thought, smiling bitterly at the irony of it. Only her head was subject to damage.

The blue glass eyes had broken loose this time and rolled under the stairway. Tilting the candle, he reached down and scooped them both

up in his hand. Claire had offered to help him, but he had dismissed her gruffly. Too gruffly, perhaps, the way she had turned and fled to her room. He'd been hard on her today. Philippe reflected, and she hadn't deserved it.

It was just that the sight of her, sitting there on the piano bench with Marie-Thérèse beside her, her fingers dancing through that ridiculous music, had so torn at his heart that his defenses had surged to attention, throwing up the necessary barricades against any form of emotion. He cursed himself, remembering her softness when he had jerked her against him there in the stable, tasting again the fragrance of her hair. Claire. Damn her! He was beginning to feel again. After years of blessed nonfeeling, the frozen springs within him were beginning to thaw. And, by heaven, he did not wish it!

Gathering up the doll so that the skin contained the loose pieces, he slowly mounted the stairs. He had thought Angélique was safely asleep. Either she had deceived him — she did that from time to time — or something, the piano perhaps, had awakened her. She would be waiting for him, up there in her blue sitting room or her pink and white boudoir, ready to attack him like some snarling, spitting wild-cat. And Simone was gone. He would have to hold her fast with one arm and handle the hypodermic with the other, no easy feat. Angélique, when enraged, was a strong woman.

Briefly he considered the possibility of simply locking her in her room and leaving her for the night, then dismissed it. He'd tried that before, and she'd become so violent that she'd hurled pieces of furniture through the windows, cutting herself on the glass and leaving her arms and legs black and blue where she'd pounded and kicked the door. Claire could help him. He could have asked her — but no. Claire was small, and he had no wish to involve her — not with any of it. Not with Angélique, not with the dynamite, and certainly not in any way with Prestan. Let Paul Sagan rot! He was dead and buried, the matter of his guilt or innocence reduced to an academic question. And he *was* innocent. Knowing Prestan's tactics, Philippe had little doubt of that. But if the proving of it endangered one hair of Claire's delicate head . . . Damn her! he thought again as he rounded the topmost curve of the staircase and looked down the hall at the door of the room where, crouching in the darkness, Angélique waited for him.

Ten

The broken doll, Claire learned in time, was one of many. Philippe ordered them from Paris by the dozen, each identical to the others, with blond curls and vacant blue eyes. Given one doll at a time, Angélique would mother the thing as she had never mothered her own child. She would wrap it in the pink, satin-edged blanket and sit in the rocking chair for hours, cuddling the pink bundle and humming deep down in her throat.

Then, at unpredictable intervals of days or even weeks, some frustration, some twisted instinct would erupt in her and the doll would go flying and bouncing down the spiral staircase to land in a shattered heap on the parquet floor. For hours afterward Angélique would be twitchy, restless, often violent. Finally she would withdraw into herself, moping in her blue-cushioned rocker. Then it would be time to bring her another doll. It was a cycle with which Claire soon became familiar.

Angélique never spoke. That faint humming was the only sound Claire had ever heard her make. At first, having heard her for no more than a few seconds at a time, on those occasions when necessity forced her to invade the domain of the blue sitting room, she thought little of it. Angélique's melody seemed to be random and formless, the musical wanderings of a child's mind. And she hummed softly, almost imperceptibly to the unlistening ear.

Three weeks had passed since Bertrand's death. Claire had slowly settled into becoming a member of the Jarnac household. Usually she would take charge of Marie-Thérèse from breakfast until after lunch. Already she had taught the little girl some badly needed table manners, the colors, the letters of the alphabet, and some nursery rhymes.

She was astonishingly bright and hungry to learn. In light of this, Claire had even begun some music and drawing lessons, to which Marie-Thérèse was responding ecstatically. From her naptime until early evening, she spent her hours with Simone, a compromise worked out by Philippe and agreed upon by both women. Then she would rejoin Claire for a short while to hear a story or two before she was put to bed.

Simone had accepted Claire's presence grumpily. Although the big Negress still eyed her with resentment, speaking to her only when necessary, she'd committed no more overt acts of mischief. Claire had found no more snakes in her bed, and for that she counted herself lucky.

After that first reaction, Angélique had ignored Claire. Like Lizette, Claire had become a mere fixture of the house, having little to do with that lovely creature's own narrow existence. The blue sitting room was Angélique's world, just as the hospital was Philippe's. She seldom left it except for her doll-flinging walks to the head of the staircase. She never went outside. "Angélique hated Panama," André had explained to Claire. "Shut up in that blue room, she could be back in Paris for all she knows. But outside — " he'd jerked his thumb toward the window — "Panama! I only wish it were that easy for me!"

Arranging Marie-Thérèse's schedule with Philippe and Simone had been one thing. Imposing it on Marie-Thérèse was quite another. Many were the times when, during the afternoons she was supposed to be with Simone, Claire would glance up from her sewing or reading to find her peeking out from some doorway or corner, giggling like a little elf. And equal in number were the occasions when she would have to retrieve the child from the blue sitting room for her morning lessons.

Such was the situation when, one day during the latter part of the morning, Claire went in search of Marie-Thérèse so that she could give her some instruction on the clinky piano. Even at three, the little girl had shown a remarkable aptitude for the instrument. Her sense of pitch was nearly perfect and she could already pick out some of the little nursery tunes Claire had taught her. The piano's dilapidated condition did not bother her. She had never heard it any other way.

After checking the kitchen and garden for her, Claire climbed the stairs with a sigh. She always dreaded entering the blue sitting room.

The way Simone looked at her, she could almost imagine the woman baring her teeth and snarling the way some great, dark mastiff would growl at an intruder.

She opened the door cautiously. Simone was not in sight, but Marie-Thérèse was curled up on the love seat, fast asleep. Angélique sat in her rocker, her eyes far away, the pink-bundled doll in her lap. It was odd, Claire reflected, the relationship between mother and daughter. Angélique paid no attention whatever to her little girl, and Marie-Thérèse accepted this withdrawal as a natural part of life. To her, *Maman* was just a beautiful someone who was meant to be left alone.

Claire tiptoed to the love seat, sat down and stroked her curls, trying to rouse her gently. Still half-asleep, Marie-Thérèse simply crawled onto Claire's lap and settled down again. Well, Claire thought, if she's this tired, I'd best let her sleep a while longer. She wrapped her arms around the warm little body and settled back on the love seat.

Angélique was humming, a sound that Claire had come to accept as part of her surroundings, like the blue needlepoint chairs and the flickering candles. At first Claire paid no attention. But today she was a captive audience. Marie-Thérèse's sleeping body held her prisoner. That soft humming cut through her thoughts like a blade of a saw. She began to listen.

Angélique's exquisite face was blank. All her mental energy was focused inward, on the humming. Slowly Claire began to detect melodies, strong, clear rhythms, punctuated by tiny bass notes deep in her throat. Claire let herself drift into the music, spellbound. With a lurch of the heart, she realized what she was hearing. Angélique was humming, note-for-note perfect, the entirety of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata!

Claire listened, straining forward against Marie-Thérèse to catch every nuance of tone and rhythm. Angélique came to the end of the Sonata and, with barely a pause for breath, floated into a Mozart symphony, as precise, as crisp and clear as Claire had ever heard it played by an orchestra.

For an hour, Claire sat hypnotized, through Schubert, Liszt, and Tchaikovsky, marveling at the genius that flickered within the slumbering brain. She stayed until Simone came back into the room to fix her with her baleful gaze. Simone lacked the guile to feign a liking where there was none. Claire began to squirm uncomfortably. Finally,

in desperation, she gave Marie-Thérèse a tiny, secretive pinch. With a little whimper, she opened her eyes.

"I'm hungry, Mam'selle," she announced.

Relieved. Claire peeled the child off her sweating lap. Marie-Thérèse took her hand, tugged her to her feet, and led her out of the room. Angélique, immersed in Mendelssohn, did not even watch them go.

Claire was so charged with excitement over her discovery of the secret behind Angélique's humming that she even told Philippe about it over dinner that night. His only reaction was a cold lifting of the eyebrows.

"Haven't you noticed it? Haven't you listened?" she demanded, dismayed by his lack of enthusiasm.

"Not really. But it doesn't surprise me. I told you she was gifted. Only a small part of her brain was injured when she fell. The rest . . . " He trailed off and stared morosely into his wineglass.

"I don't know very much about these things," Claire persisted doggedly. "But I'd think you'd look on it as a sign of hope."

"Hope?" He took a sip of white wine. "After the accident I took Angélique to the United States. Closer than France, and I've quite as much confidence in American doctors as in our own. The best physicians in the country examined her. They all said the same thing. Medically, there's nothing can be done for her. No one knows how to heal the brain."

"But doesn't the brain ever heal itself?"

In answer he set the wineglass back down onto the tablecloth. She noticed that his fingertips were white where they gripped the delicate stem. "I've some work to do in the library," he said abruptly. "Please instruct Lizette to see that I'm not disturbed." His chair grated against the floor. He rose to his feet and stalked out of the room without another word.

Perturbed, Claire watched him go. Since Bertrand's death, Philippe had become more taciturn than ever, and given to quick flares of irritation. His behavior only reinforced her suspicion that he had been involved in Bertrand's murder. But she'd been unable to find one chink of vulnerability in that armor of bitterness he wore. Though she'd watched him closely, he'd given her not the slightest clue, not the least iota of evidence that he might be guilty.

André leaned back in the chair and twirled the stem of his glass in his long fingers, smiling. "Careful, *ma chérie*. You touched a nerve. Philippe doesn't like to talk about his wife."

"I think I understand, André. False hope only hurts. I shouldn't have pushed him like that."

"False hope?" He gave a little snort. "How sweet you are, Claire. How naive. False hope? The truth is, my dear, Philippe doesn't want her to get well."

"I don't believe you." Claire said, surprised to find herself defending a man that she suspected of murder.

"Then you don't really know my brother. I've told you how he has to have everyone under his control. Well, now he has Angélique. For good."

Claire just sat and looked at him.

"You should have known Angélique before," André said. "She was so . . . alive! She loved people . . . parties . . . dancing. They worshipped her in Paris! Can't blame poor Philippe for losing his head over her, can you?" He poured himself another glass of wine and stared into the bubbles. "She liked company. Needed it. Philippe was jealous. In that way, he's not so different from dear Papa. Anyway, he took her away from Paris and brought her to this hellhole. *Mon Dieu*, even now, but back then especially, you could count the decent women on your fingers! And culture! You saw the peak of it at the Universel!"

Claire twisted her linen napkin, trying not to judge. "It must have been difficult for her, André."

"Difficult!" He spat the word off his tongue syllable by syllable. "Difficult! It was miserable! And then Philippe wouldn't even live in Colon! He built this pretty cage for his little bird, clear out here in the jungle! Complete with the best piano money could buy."

"And no one to hear her play," Claire added, feeling sorrier for Angélique by the minute. "No one except Philippe."

"And me. And a string of Panamanian servants who wouldn't know Beethoven from a hurdy-gurdy! What that poor girl gave up to marry my brother!"

"Maybe she loved him."

André shrugged. "Does it matter now?"

"Haven't any of you been back to France since then? Even for a visit?"

"Philippe has." André's handsome features darkened. "He went back for a medical conference. Wouldn't even take her with him! What do you think of that?"

"André, there must have been a reason."

"Reason? Oh, there was, all right. He didn't want her to see the friends he'd taken her away from! He didn't approve."

"So he left her here."

"For almost three months! That's when Angélique took her fall."

"So when you said he may as well have pushed her — "

"That's exactly what I meant. If he'd let her go back to Paris with him, it wouldn't have happened." André leaned back until his chair rested on its rear legs. His eyes glittered through narrow slits. "And now," he said slowly, "you know why I hate him."

Once a week, usually on Fridays, Lizette took the buggy into town to do the marketing. She liked to make an occasion of it, Claire noted with amusement, for she always put on her white Sunday dress and braided red ribbons into her multiple pigtails. The girl had a beau in town, Claire guessed, smiling at the thought of it.

How young and untroubled she was. Claire envied her for that. How sweet it would be — to have one's love and happiness waiting in the future instead of lying buried in some mossy Panamanian graveyard. If only she could go back in time, she thought, back to Paris, to the days when Paul had been a student at the university; when a loaf of French bread and a bottle of inexpensive Beaujolais with two glasses made a banquet; when they'd strolled the parks and plazas in the evening, sitting on the edges of the fountains and rippling their fingers in the water. If she could go back — oh, she would never let him go to Panama!

"Come to town with me, Mam'selle! You've never seen the market!" Lizette flashed a grin at her as she danced past the breakfast table.

"Could we take Marie-Thérèse?" Claire reached over and patted the little blond head.

"Oh, no. M'sieu' Philippe wouldn't like that. He doesn't want her going out. But Simone could watch her. You stay home too much, Mam'selle."

Lizette was right, Claire reflected quickly. She had not left the house since that first trip into Col—n with André. An outing might be good for her spirits.

Soon they were jogging along the deep ruts of the road to Colon in the oldest of the three Jarnac carriages. Lizette sang as she guided the tough, runty little horse, pausing to wave and chatter at the people they passed.

Claire had chosen to wear one of Angélique's more simple dresses, a light blue muslin embroidered at the bodice and hem with tiny white flowers. Instead of her parasol, she'd settled for a wide-brimmed straw hat — out of style in Paris, but quite practical against the Panamanian sun. She felt like a young girl in it, and as she looked past Lizette's elfin profile with its turned-up nose and pointed chin, she found herself smiling effortlessly for the first time since Paul's death.

"You're so happy today, Lizette. Look. It's catching."

Lizette looked around over her shoulder and grinned broadly. "I told you, Mam'selle!" She speeded the horse and stared thoughtfully ahead for a few silent moments. "I'm happy for a special reason," she said. "Promise you won't tell if I say what it is?"

"I promise," laughed Claire, anticipating Lizette's revelation. What other such happy secret could a seventeen-year-old girl have?

Lizette took a deep breath. "Mam'selle, I'm going to be queen of Panama."

"Lizette! What are you talking about?"

"That's all I can tell you. I'm going to be queen of Panama. Just wait and see."

Very well, Claire thought. She would go along with the girl's joke. "And when's your coronation to be, child?"

"Soon. Right after carnival, maybe. And then I'll wear beautiful dresses and sit on a gold throne. I'll have twenty servants and I'll never have to cook or wash or scrub again!"

Was the girl out of her mind, or was she merely being fanciful? "And who's going to be your king, Lizette?" Claire asked her.

Lizette touched her parted lips with her fingers, as if she were suddenly afraid of having said too much. "Oh! That's a secret, Mam'selle!" She gazed at Claire nervously, thin brows knotted with worry. "You won't tell, will you?"

"I promised, didn't I?" Claire was totally bemused. "Wouldn't you like to tell me more about it?"

Lizette shook her head until her pigtails danced. "It's a secret, Mam'selle. Can't tell you any more. Look! There's Front Street. We'll have to leave the carriage by the docks . . . "

Col—n's market was crammed into a little avenue that ran east from Front Street, giving it access to the docks. Claire followed Lizette's lead as they wormed their way through the crowd of shoppers. The girl had brought a huge straw basket which she'd taken out of the carriage and placed neatly on her head, balancing it as she walked with a studied, hip-swinging grace. Her crown. The queen of Panama. What an imagination, Claire commented to herself as Lizette slithered her way between the stalls, making a show of picking out the best red peppers, the ripest mangoes. There were tomatoes in the vegetable section too, little ones, no bigger than plums. There were yams and cassava roots, mung beans, bamboo shoots, avocados, and some twisted brown sticks that she later learned were ginseng roots, prized by the Chinese as a tonic. Onions and garlic hung in strings, like beaded curtains above the stalls. Farther along were the coconuts, still in their golden husks, and the tropical fruits. Lizette bought a pineapple, two lumpy green papayas, and a bunch of plantains, the big, dark cooking bananas. She haggled masterfully in Spanish with the vendor over the price.

There was no hawking of wares, as Claire was accustomed to hearing in France. The sellers crouched behind the low tables, glaring at the customers almost as if they did not want to be bothered. A small, dark boy nudged Claire's arm and held up a sweet — raw sugar wrapped in corn husks like a tamale. She smiled and shook her head.

Lizette had moved on down toward the fish, her basket piled high with fruits and vegetables and the wonderfully crusty hard rolls that looked like miniature loaves of French bread — *miches*, they called them. Brushing away the flies, she selected one gleaming corvina which the vendor wrapped in newspaper. By the time Claire had caught up with her, she was edging past tables heaped with more exotic delicacies — octopus tentacles whacked into sections; tiny dried squids, thin as paper; *langostinos*, which looked like small, clawless lobsters.

Chickens were sold alive and squawking or cleaned, plucked, and strung up by the feet, feathered heads hanging down and naked bodies dotted with flyspecks. Claire took one look at them and swore that

she would never eat chicken in Panama again. Live iguanas, spiny lizards that were as big as cats, lay in a line on a low bench, their tails cut off and their scaly legs twisted behind their back, fastened together by thrusting the claws of one foot through the fleshy part of the other. No parts of them moved except their blinking eyes.

Claire gasped with horror. "Lizette! What do people do with them?"

"They eat them, Mam'selle. Make good stew."

"But, in the name of heaven, why don't they kill them? Look at the poor creatures! It's awful!"

Lizette shrugged her shoulders. "Keeps them fresh this way, Mam'selle. Guana meat goes bad before long."

Claire fought down waves of sickness. "Can't we go, Lizette?"

"Soon, Mam'selle. I just want to buy a lottery ticket."

"A what?" The crowd had thickened now and was sweeping them both through the narrow funnel of the market and out into the next street.

"A lottery ticket!" Lizette raised her voice to be heard above the babble of the crowd. "Last night I dreamed about the number thirty-one! I've got to see if it's for sale! Come on, Mam'selle!"

But Claire could scarcely hear her. She had been swept away by a surge of the crowd as it moved in a solid mass toward the door of a plain, brown building with no windows. She fought the press of the mob around her; then, seeing that it was hopeless to struggle, she let the human current carry her toward and through the door of the building.

Inside, the crowd thinned out. Claire blinked. She was in some sort of arena, looking down at the rows of seats that circled downward and inward around a small ring. A lanky Negro brushed her as he strode by, carrying a bamboo cage under each arm. In each cage, bristling and fussing like a prima donna, was a trim fighting cock.

Claire glanced around her. There were men everywhere, cabbies, dockhands, beggars, gamblers, well-heeled Spanish businessmen; but she saw no other women. Embarrassed, she made a lunge for the entrance, but the crowd was still flowing in, flooding into the seats a row at a time. She could not even get near the door; but she did manage to reach one of the walls. Flattening herself against it, she waited.

A man in a straw hat stepped into the ring to announce the first match and take the bets. All eyes except Claire's were riveted down-

ward, on that narrow circle of sawdust, as the first two combatants, a black cock and a glossy brown with green hackles, circled each other, crowing and making little springs into the air, the lamplight flashing on the long, sharp steel spurs that had been tied to their feet. The arena was nearly full. Still, the crowd continued to pour through the door. Half the men in Panama must be here, Claire thought as she inched her way toward the door. Then she caught her breath and froze against the wall.

Philippe Jarnac had stepped through the door; he walked past her so closely that she could have reached out and touched him.

It was soon evident that Philippe had not come to see the cockfight. He was looking for someone. Claire shrank down as his black eyes darted about the arena. She sighed with relief when at last he sighted his quarry, nodded his head in greeting or acknowledgment, and walked unhurriedly over to the top row of seats where a broad-shouldered man in a white suit, his hair dark and tightly curling, was sitting alone. At Philippe's approach, the man turned.

It was Pedro Prestan.

Neither of them spoke. Philippe fumbled for his billfold, drew out what looked like several hundred-franc notes, and thrust them down past Prestan's shoulder. Without even looking up, Prestan took the money, folded it, and slipped it into his vest. By the time he'd turned his attention back to the cockfight, Philippe had disappeared.

Claire pressed her back against the wall, knees braced against the trembling that threatened to overcome her as she contemplated what she had just seen. There *was* a connection between Philippe and Prestan. She had witnessed it with her own eyes. She had the beginning of her proof against him; and with courage, alertness, and patience, she would gain the end. She would have him! Dear heaven, why was she trembling so?

The dry season had begun at last. One day the rain had stopped as usual; the sun had come out and stayed. That rain which turned Colón's filthy streets to rivers, which poured off the eaves in heavy curtains, which pounded the roof and pounded into Claire's dreams at night, was gone. The days were even warmer now. The sky gleamed hot and hard like flawless blue glass above the Caribbean and Limón Bay.

André had been right. She did miss that devil rain. With astounding swiftness the grass turned brown in the heat. It crack-

led under Claire's shoes when she went to the cemetery to visit Paul's grave. The trees, reaching deep into the soil for moisture, remained green as ever, as did the sheltered undergrowth in the jungles, but the exposed, shallow-rooted plants wilted in the sun. Dust swirled under the carriage wheels and soon coated the leaves of the trees that overhung the roads. Already Claire found herself staring into that sky of blazing turquoise and longing for clouds. At times there were fires on the dry hillsides that glowed like distant torches at night, leaving vast, black scars behind them. Houses, even entire villages, had been known to be consumed by such blazes.

The dry season was not without its compensations. The trade winds swept off the Caribbean, across the Isthmus to the Pacific, stirring the torpid air to freshness. Nights were deliciously cool. The bogs and puddles dried up. The whining, biting mosquitoes subsided in number and, for reasons no one understood at the time, so did the incidence of malaria and yellow fever. Philippe's workload at the hospital lightened noticeably. His spirits did not.

Trees that had been merely green in the rainy season burst into explosions of scarlet, white, pink, purple, and yellow blossoms — frangipani, golden shower, African tulip tree, jacaranda, ilang-ilang, poinciana — Lizette taught Claire each of their names. In Panama it was the "safe time." Time for picnics and fiestas. Panamanian families moved out of doors to laugh, eat, and dance. The jungles of ever-dripping laundry vanished from the porches and balconies of Col—n.

Unhampered by rainstorms and mudslides and with the incidence of fever reduced, work on the canal rose to a new pitch. André was gone from dawn to dusk, busy with his commission. Every evening Claire viewed his new sketches of the work on the canal with a sense of wonder.

"André, what a gift you have!" She held up a pen-and-ink rendering of a huge dredge silhouetted against the sky. "Maybe it was your destiny to come to Panama, even if you didn't wish it! Look! You've captured the whole country to take back to Paris!"

He glowed at her praise. "There's something else I'd like to capture," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "What about your portrait?"

Her portrait. Claire had almost forgotten it. In the heat of the uproar that had followed Bertrand's death, André's plans for painting her had somehow evaporated.

"You're busy with the canal sketches," she protested. "How can I take you away from them?"

He laughed at that. "My little Claire! If only you knew how much more beautiful you are than some rusty old steam dredge or locomotive! No, I need a change from the sketches. We can do it in the afternoon, when that little curly-headed tyrant is with Simone! The light . . . will be all right, I think."

They were in his studio room, where she'd come to see the sketches. Philippe was shut up in the library. André moved toward her and seized her chin between his thumb and forefinger. This time she knew what to expect. He tilted her face this way and that, cocking his head and squinting until she had to laugh at him.

"Green," he said. "To set off that hair and those eyes. I have a length of pale green silk . . . drape it across your shoulders like so . . . Just a minute! Don't move!" He strode over to a drawer, opened it, whipped out a long piece of silk, and arranged it over Claire's white shirtwaist. "Softly, like this, if you don't mind baring your shoulders a little . . . " He paused. His hand went to her chin again, tilting her face up until he was looking into her eyes. "You must have lovely shoulders, Claire," he murmured. "I've never seen them. Those damnable high collars . . . A woman should show her throat . . . "

His eyes were brown whirlpools, wonderfully deep. Pulled into them, she swayed forward. His hands moved down onto her shoulders.

"Dinner, M'sieu' André! Dinner, Mam'selle!" Lizette was standing in the doorway, biting her own cheeks to keep from smirking. Claire wondered how long she'd been there. André flashed her a glare that sent her scampering off like a kinkajou.

"Let's go!" He released her with a chuckle. "We'll talk about this tomorrow!"

"André?"

"You look as if you're ready to spring a trap on me! What is it, Claire?"

"You're the one who puts prices on things," she teased him. "If I pose for you, will you take me to see more of the canal?"

"On the train? But of course! I've been wanting to. Now that the dry season's come, why not?"

"Could we take Marie-Thérèse with us? I think I could persuade Philippe to let her come."

His face fell. "I think you're wrong. He never lets her leave this place. That's how he is. Doesn't want to let anybody out of his grasp."

"That's just why she should come. Sooner or later, she's got to get out. Leave it to me, André. I can talk him into it."

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling with a little groan. "No doubt you can! And there goes my day alone with you!"

Philippe had agreed reluctantly to Marie-Thérèse's making the trip across the Isthmus. "Yes. I know you're right, Claire," he'd muttered, twisting the unlighted cigar in his fingers till tiny flakes of tobacco came loose and drifted to lie like freckles on the tablecloth. "She can't stay shut up and protected forever. I know this country and how dangerous it can be. I've wanted to keep her safe. Yet, I realize she needs the stimulation of new sights, new experiences." He jammed the cigar roughly back into his pocket, something he often did once he'd made a decision. "Just be careful, for the love of heaven. That's all I ask."

Actually, it wasn't quite all he'd asked. He'd insisted that they take Lizette along with them as well.

"Damned chaperone!" André had cursed under his breath. "What does Philippe think we're up to, eh? If he wants to make a fool party of it, why doesn't he come himself?"

So it was that Lizette was with them when they boarded the trans-Isthmian train at the Front Street station. Marie-Thérèse was beside herself — a newly hatched chick, blinking astonished eyes at the world for the first time. The jungle, the town, the bay. She had never seen pelicans before, nor even dogs or cats; because of the danger of rabies, not one of them had been brought inside the confines of the wall that had bound her world. They had been only flat figures in her picture books, lacking texture, lacking sound and movement. Now she squealed and bounced with delight at everything she saw. The signs on Front Street were a wonder to her. Straining against Claire's arms, she pointed out A's and B's, M's, R's, S's, and the other letters Claire had taught her to recognize.

Philippe, who had offered to drive them to the train, looked at Claire with gratitude in his eyes. "You're quite the teacher," he said

softly. "I didn't know what Marie-Thérèse was missing before you came. Thank you, Claire."

"And thank you for the compliment," Claire murmured, withdrawing under his open gaze, struggling to reconcile this gentle person with what she had seen, heard, and pieced together in her mind.

It had occurred to her that if Bertrand had truly been killed because of his connection with Paul, then she could be in danger too. Since she would not, indeed, could not, run away, she had resolved to be careful. She locked her room at night and when she left it during the day. And she avoided being alone, especially with Philippe.

The train was already puffing clouds of steam like an iron dragon. Marie-Thérèse buried her face against Claire's neck, whimpering. "It's all right, sweet," Claire soothed her. "It won't hurt us."

Flatcars stretched out behind the three of four passenger cars. They were loaded with dark-faced laborers headed for their shift at the Culebra Cut. The higher-ranking engineers, surveyors, and supervisors, most of them French, filed into the passenger cars. The street was already bustling with carriages and shoppers, taking advantages of the dawn's coolness to do their errand-running.

"Let's go!" André swung down from the carriage and helped Claire get out. With Marie-Thérèse still clinging to her like a monkey. Lizette clambered out the other side, clutching the picnic hamper.

"Take care!" Philippe shouted over the hissing steam as they climbed aboard. They found an empty set of facing rattan-seated benches. Marie-Thérèse and Claire sat down on one with André and Lizette opposite them. The train lurched forward. Marie-Thérèse began to cry.

"Hush, little one," Claire whispered. "It's all right. This is fun! Look! Wave to your Papa!"

Uncurling like a frightened caterpillar, she raised her golden head. Philippe was still sitting in the open carriage on the platform, gazing uneasily after them, the big, stone railway terminal looming behind him. Marie-Thérèse watched him, waving until he was out of sight.

The railroad followed the canal for several miles or, more correctly, the canal followed the railroad, since the tracks had been laid by an American company thirty years earlier, during the California Gold Rush days. Claire had heard that the building of the railroad had cost a life for every tie; and there were so many ties. André had told her how the project had been completed in 1855 at the price of seven mil-

lion American dollars, more than one hundred fifty thousand dollars per mile. Men had labored up to their waists in the slimy ooze of the swamps to prepare the railroad bed. In some places, flatcars had been sunk to make a floating support for the tracks. How marvelous it was, Claire reflected, to be speeding along through those same, black swamps in such comfort and ease.

They chugged past the older parts of the canal, already filled with water, where big ladder dredges reared their heads above the horizon like brontosauria, widening, deepening the channel and removing the silt that had washed down with the rains. Mud-filled barges floated beside the dredges, waiting to be pulled out to sea and dumped. In some long-past season, all the trees had been cut down between the canal and the railroad. Their dead trunks lay white against the sun-dried grass, bleached like ancient bones. Beyond the canal, the tin roofs of a workers' village glinted against the hillside.

They passed the little town of Matachin, where six hundred Chinese coolies, homesick, ill, and deprived of the opium to which they were addicted, had perished within a few weeks of their arrival. Many of them had died by their own hands, hanging themselves by their queues, drowning themselves in the river, shooting or stabbing themselves, or merely sitting down and willing themselves to die. Matachin. The name. Claire had been told, meant "Chinaman-killer."

André said little except to point out places of interest. The train was noisy, and it was awkward at best to talk of anything personal with Lizette's bright, knowing eyes watching them. Claire concentrated on Marie-Thérèse, trying to see the canal as she saw it, without forethought or prejudice.

The water ended. For an hour or so, they passed through jungle, with no sign of the canal or any activity. Then they began to climb. "We're going up to the cut now," said André. "This is where you'll see the real digging!"

Claire looked ahead nervously. The Culebra Cut. The Serpent Cut. This was where Paul had been working at the time of his arrest. This was where, the irrational hope nagged at her, she might learn something that would aid her in her frustrating quest to prove his innocence.

After the flatness of Col—n. Claire was amazed at the hilliness of the rest of the Isthmus. The train was laboring now, climbing more

slowly. She stared at the undulating countryside, thickly blanketed in green. Her eyes examined the underbrush as the train crawled past it. To cut through all this! To cut away the jungle, dig away the dirt, rocks, and mud, down, down, and down hundreds of feet until the water flowed from ocean to ocean — Paul had been right. De Lesseps was a fool! Why, even with locks — !

Claire's thoughts were shattered by a blast that rattled the windows of the train. Marie-Thérèse seized her neck and began to whimper.

"Dynamite," said André. "We're coming up on the cut. You'll see it in a minute."

Another blast. "Hush, my little love. It's only noise. It won't hurt you." She stroked the blond curls and felt the little body relax against her. The train, chuffing laboriously, reached the top of the rise and leveled off with a steamy sigh of relief.

Claire's eyes widened as she gazed out at the huge, red gash that had been opened up into the land's green skin. For the first time, she was genuinely awestruck, amazed at the courage and audacity of men who would attempt such a feat. A formidable amount of work had already been done. But the years of work that remained! No wonder Paul had been so discouraged!

The train creaked to a stop. "We have a few minutes here," said André. "Want to get out, Claire?" She nodded quickly and he took her hand. Leaving Lizette on the train with Marie-Thérèse, they descended the steps and walked as far as the line where the grass ended and the raw earth began.

They looked down into a man-made valley that was perhaps a hundred feet deep and several times as far across. Below them, men moved like insects, swinging picks and shovels into the mounds of dirt that had been loosened by the blasting. The big steam shovels and earth loaders labored beside them with saurian patience, taking great, insignificant bites of earth which they disgorged into the waiting strings of dumper cars that moved along on narrow tracks.

"Your Paul was working on this very section before he was arrested," André said. "Now, see, way over there, those men who are drilling? They make deep holes, just wide enough for the dynamite sticks. Then they shove in the dynamite and blast it loose."

"And Paul was in charge of that?"

"That's right. The blasting for this whole area was under his supervision."

"André, haven't you been able to find out anything more?"

"You know I haven't. If I had, you'd have been the first to know. Face it, *chérie*, he could well have been guilty. He certainly had his reasons for wanting the extra money." André turned toward her a little and ran his hand up her arm. "Heaven knows, Claire, you'd be reason enough for any man," he murmured.

"André, please." She pulled away from him. "Lizette's watching us!"

"To hell with Lizette! Let her watch!" His arm slipped insistently around Claire's waist. He drew her closer to him.

There was a sudden shout from below, cut off by a deafening blast that shook the earth beneath them. Flung off balance, Claire was thrown against André and they hit the ground together. His arm sheltered her head against the rain of dirt and rocks that pelted them for terrifying seconds.

André raised his head and looked around. "*Dieu!* That was close! Damn them! They've no business blasting so near the train!" He helped Claire to her feet. She was shaken and dusty, but not hurt.

Men were shouting below them. The blast had evidently been an accident. Someone cursed loudly. "Over here!" another voice called. "Some poor bastard's buried Good God! It's Duval! Get a shovel!" "Shovel, hell!" came the growling answer. "Get a duffel bag! You'll need it to put him in!"

"Stay back, Claire!" Brushing the dirt from his white suit. André strode to the edge of the cut. In a moment he was back beside her, his face grim. "Poor devil!" he muttered. "It was Henri Duval, the new engineer in charge of blasting. You'd think he'd know enough — "

Claire felt the blood drain out of her face. "You mean, he was the man who replaced Paul?"

"That's right."

"And he's . . . dead?"

"Very. Come on. Let's go."

Marie-Thérèse was sobbing when they reached the train. Claire sat down on the bench and gathered the warm little body close, needing the child as much as Marie-Thérèse needed her. "Shhh . . . " she soothed her. "It was only a big noise. It's all right, love . . . " Claire rocked her back and forth as she hiccuped into her

shoulder. Lizette had not spoken. She only stared ahead with frightened eyes.

Other commuters who had left the car drifted back in through the doors, speaking in agitated whispers. Death, Claire realized, was commonplace on the canal. Yet rarely did it occur so dramatically. Trying to quiet her own thudding heart, she looked around the coach at the other passengers. Most of them appeared to be upper-class canal personnel, Frenchmen in tropical suits. There were a few Panamanian types scattered among them and one obviously wealthy Chinese merchant. Lizette, Marie-Thérèse and Claire herself were the only females in the car.

Most of the passengers were familiar. She'd had ample time to study them on the way up to the cut. One man, however, was new. Claire realized that he must have boarded the train for the first time at the cut. His back was turned toward her, but she could see that he was stocky and dark. A finely woven Panama hat covered his shiny black hair.

The train began to move once more. Evidently disliking his position, the man shifted to the opposite seat so that Claire was now looking at his face.

Her heart jumped into her throat. How could she ever forget those tanned, hawkish features, that yellow scar, running like jagged lightning down the side of his face? Noticing her, the man tipped his hat and grinned mockingly, drawing his thin lips back over two gold teeth. It was Lopez, the man from the Universel! Prestan's man!

Eleven

Claire tried to keep her features composed, but André, facing her, had noticed the widening of her eyes. His back was turned to the man, so he had not seen him. "What's wrong, Claire?" he whispered.

She did not want to speak. That dark weasel would know she was talking about him. Finally she reached for André's hand. *L*, she traced the letter on his soft, white palm. *O, P, E, and Z*.

André stiffened. "Where?" he whispered. "Behind me?" Claire nodded slightly. Lopez smiled again. Her heart pounding, she looked down at the top of Marie-Thérèse's head.

"It's all right, Claire. He wouldn't try anything here, with all these people watching. And I put him in his place once, remember?"

There was no way she could explain it to him now. Lopez, here at the cut, at the precise moment in which the man who had taken Paul's job had died in a so-called accident. Paul. The dynamite. The smuggling. Poor Duval. Lopez and Prestan. Somehow they had to be linked. She ached to talk with André alone.

The train rolled down out of the hills and into Panama City, an unimpressive place for someone who'd seen Paris and London, but not without its own charm. It was considerably bigger than ramshackle Col—n. The two and three story buildings that lined the plazas were mostly of stone or masonry. The narrow streets were cool and inviting and, wonder of wonders, they were paved with cobblestones.

"What do you think of it?" André beamed at her.

"It's — rather nice," Claire said, still casting furtive glances at Lopez, who pretended to be asleep.

"After Colon, anything looks good!"

Lopez disappeared as soon as the train had panted to a stop along one side of a triangular plaza filled with cabs and carriages. They hired a hack and let themselves be driven slowly through streets so narrow that the balconies nearly met above their heads, around sleepy plazas filled with trees, flowers, and fountains, where derelicts dozed on the benches. They passed through bustling thoroughfares lined with casinos and oriental shops, open-air markets where vendors squatted beside heaps of mangoes, plantain, papayas, coconuts, beans, rice, live chickens, and fresh fish. Such beautiful fish! Red snappers, gleaming scarlet next to swordlike barracudas: amberjacks with their delicate forked tails, yellow pompano, mackerel, corvina, and chunky, big-scaled tarpon. On a long wooden table, a Japanese fishmonger was chopping a huge sawfish into sections with a cleaver, pausing now and again to brush away swarms of flies.

"It stinks!" Marie-Thérèse complained, wrinkling her nose. "Let's go, Uncle André!"

So they drove down to the seawall where the tide was out, revealing the nakedness of a rubbish-strewn beach that was all rocks and ugly, black mud. Still, the view of the Bay of Panama, dotted with fishing boats, and the tiny, green islands beyond was lovely. They shared the seawall with a flock of black-hooded vultures that hopped companionably out of their way when they came too near.

Claire held Marie-Thérèse's hand and let her run along the top of the wall, squealing with delight as the big, black birds squawked and flapped out of her path.

"I'm hungry!" she announced next. "Let's have our picnic here!"

"Here?" André recoiled in mock horror. "And share it with all these charming black fellows? Not on your life! I know just the place! Into the carriage with you!"

"Where are we going, André?" The breeze had loosened the hair around Claire's face. She felt pretty and a little reckless.

In answer to her question, André only smiled mysteriously.

"I know!" Lizette gave a bounce on the seat. "*Panama viejo*, eh, M'sieu' André? Oh, wait till you see it, Mam'selle!"

Panama viejo. Old Panama. They trotted along the edge of the bay, through the outskirts of town and beyond until they saw what looked like the ruined tower of an ancient church looming up out of the horizon.

"It's a castle!" laughed Marie-Thérèse, remembering her picture books.

"Well, hardly . . . but I think you and your Mademoiselle will like it!" said André.

The hack driver pulled the horse to a stop beneath the spreading shade of a tulip tree that was aflame with red blossoms. Marie-Thérèse was already clambering out of the carriage. To be sure, the ruined site of Old Panama was no fairy castle, but it would do. Claire caught her breath as André helped her out of the carriage, leaving Lizette to wrestle with the picnic basket.

The ruins were set on an attractive patch of land, surrounded by palms and flowering trees. Not much was left of the old city, Panama's original capital that had been sacked and destroyed by Henry Morgan in 1671 and never rebuilt. Time-etched skeletons of old Spanish-colonial buildings rose out of the greenery — here a crumbling stone wall; there an archway, a well. The four-story bell tower of the cathedral stared at the sea through its empty windows. Claire gazed up at the place where the missing bells had hung and she could almost hear them ringing for the last time, pealing out a warning to the doomed town below as Morgan's cannons smashed into the walls. She heard the screams, the running feet, the falling stones . . . she could almost feel the flames.

"Where are you, Claire?" André's voice next to her ear brought her back to the present. "Your eyes had such a faraway look . . . "

"It's this place," she said. "So beautiful, and yet, thinking about what happened here — " She shrugged. "I'm in a black frame of mind. Maybe it was that death out there at the cut — "

"Come on. Let me give you a tour of the place while our little slave driver's helping Lizette."

Claire took his arm, grateful that he understood her need to talk with him alone. André was her friend, she felt. Perhaps her only real friend in Panama.

The hack driver napped on the seat of the carriage as his horse stood patiently, swishing flies away with its tail. A bubbling Marie-Thérèse was helping Lizette spread the picnic cloth on the dry grass. André led Claire along a cobbled path that circled the old cathedral.

"We live with death down here, Claire," he was saying. "You get to the point where you realize that you just can't let it bother you."

"If you've reached that point, then I envy you, André," she answered. "Paul, Bertrand. That poor man out at the cut . . . " She felt herself strangling in a web of death. Her hand reached out for André's and found it.

"That explosion," she began timidly. "Are you sure it was just an accident?"

"So! You're thinking of Lopez, aren't you, my little detective! You saw him and you're thinking he had something to do with it!"

"Don't, André. You're making the whole thing sound like a joke, and it isn't."

"I know that, *chérie*. And I'm sorry. Tell me what you think."

"Prestan," she said. "Don't you think he's involved in the smuggling?"

"Think? My dear girl, of course he's involved! Everybody knows that! It's just that they can't prove it. Too many loyal accomplices to do his dirty work for him!"

"Duval could have found out something."

"So Prestan sent Lopez out to arrange that accident?" André stroked her shoulder in a patronizing way that made Claire want to hit him.

"André, it all fits! Duval . . . Bertrand . . . Paul . . . Don't you see it?"

"Duval, maybe yes. But your Paul wasn't murdered. And Bertrand? Why, he hardly ever left the yard, Claire. Didn't like to have people looking at him. What an imagination you have!"

"Damn it, André," she sputtered. "They didn't have to kill Paul! The fever did it for them!"

André led her to a low wall overgrown with flowering vines and cleared away a place there they could sit. "If I could paint you here, Claire . . . those little white flowers all around you . . . in your hair . . . " He reached back and plucked out the combs that held her chignon in place. "Like this . . . " His fingers invaded her hair, pulling it softly, tugging it loose around her face. He seized a spray of white blossoms and twisted it quickly, severing the tough stem. Then bracing her chin with one hand, he arranged the flowers above her ear. "There," he breathed. "Perfect!" He lifted her chin and bent his head down.

"André . . . " she protested weakly.

"Shhh!" His mouth came down on hers, swift and crushing. His arms pulled her hard against his chest. She took his long kiss passive-

ly, neither responding nor resisting. It wasn't that she didn't like him, she told herself. No, not that at all! She found André fascinating, delightful. But that spark of desire that had once burned inside her had died with Paul. Now she sat lifeless in André's arms.

"What's the matter?" He drew back, looking hurt.

"I'm sorry, André. It's still too soon."

"It's been more than a month! Are you going to mourn him forever?" His arms released her and dropped to his sides.

"André . . ." She tried to explain something she did not fully understand herself. "Just give me the chance to finish this. To — to leave him at peace. I loved Paul. I owe that much to what we had."

André's lower lip jutted out in a pout. At that moment, he reminded her very much of Marie-Thérèse. "So!" he grumbled. "I was right the first time. It's a pretty price you've set on yourself, Claire!" She opened her mouth to protest, but he stopped her with a wave of his hand. "Well, I've tried to meet your price! I've nosed around the cut and around Prestan's lair in town! I've asked questions that'll probably get my throat slit in some alley! And what have I found out? Nothing!" He turned away from her and gazed up at the old bell tower. "Nothing!" he muttered. "Face the truth, Claire. Chances are your Paul was guilty! Why is it you think he was some kind of saint?"

Claire took the spray of white flowers from behind her ear and twirled it between her fingers. "I know he was innocent, André," she said at last. "I know because someone told me. Someone who had no reason to lie."

"Oh?" His brows lifted. Then he smiled and slipped an arm around her shoulders. "And who was that, eh? You've hardly been away from the house except with me. Did Simone ask one of her voodoo gods for you?"

She shook him loose, exasperated. "It's not funny, André! You're not taking me seriously, and I'm very serious!"

"All right. Who told you then?"

She hesitated, remembering her promise. But what did it matter now? She'd made that promise to a dead man. Nothing could hurt him now. "It was Bertrand," she said. "My first night here. He told me in the garden."

"Bertrand? But how would he know?"

"He wouldn't tell me, André."

"And that's all? He didn't say anything else?"

Claire shook her head. "He said it was only for the peace of my own heart. That's all he'd tell me. But I think that might be the reason he died. He knew something — enough to make someone want to kill him."

"But to kill him like that — Claire, why didn't you tell me?"

She clenched her hands tight. "I promised Bertrand."

André swung around until he was crouching at her knees, looking up into her face. He took both her hands in his. "My poor, dear Claire," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I believe you. But you've got to trust me. Heaven knows, you've got to trust someone, my sweet."

Claire gripped his smooth fingers. "I trust you," she said in a small voice.

"Then . . . is there anything you haven't told me? Did Bertrand say anything — have you seen anything — that would give you any idea who killed him?"

"No." She said it much too quickly. She was not ready to tell André about Philippe. Not until she had proof against him.

"All right, then." He pulled her to her feet. "If you see anything, if you hear anything, you tell me. At once. Promise?"

"Promise." She gave him a weak smile.

"Come on then, sweet Claire. Let's go see if our picnic's ready!"

In the evening they rode the train back across the Isthmus. The exhausted Marie-Thérèse had fallen asleep in Claire's arms almost as soon as they'd found their seats, and Lizette soon followed her. Claire sat there in the moving darkness with André across from her in the facing seat, his knees pressing against hers. They did not speak. It was difficult to be heard above the click of the wheels without raising their voices, but she was glad she had confided in him. She felt safe with André. Protected.

Philippe was waiting with the carriage when the train pulled into Col—n. He looked drawn, Claire thought. Painfully tired. "You had a good time?" he asked, taking the limp Marie-Thérèse from Claire and cradling her until Claire had settled herself in the carriage, then slipping the little girl back into her arms.

"We had a fine time," Claire said. "You should have come with us. It was fun."

"Philippe never has any fun," laughed André. "His idea of fun is setting somebody's broken leg, isn't it, Philippe?"

Philippe merely shrugged and flicked the reins against the horse's withers. Claire was to learn later that there had been five fever deaths at the hospital that day — unusually high for the dry season — and one more at the house of one of the canal company's directors: the man's four-year-old son.

By the time they'd pulled into the yard and Léon, Bertrand's bashful young replacement (who spent his nights at home in a nearby village) had bolted the gate behind them, Claire was almost asleep herself. The bed felt delicious. She stretched out between the sheets and shut her eyes. Her mind drifted back to that tremulous moment when André's lips had closed over hers. Drowsily, she examined her own reactions. She had liked it, she admitted to herself; liked it very much. If only she had not been so knotted up inside with guilt . . .

Was it fair? she asked herself. Was it some misguided loyalty that bound her to a memory and a little stone cross out at Monkey Hill? Paul would not have wanted to hold her to him under such conditions. He'd always been such a practical person, she told herself as she lay there in the warm emptiness of the night. Did she have the courage to break with the past and go on with her life? Her thoughts began to flicker, then died into senselessness. She was sound asleep.

Simone stood in the candlelight beside the ruffled dressing stool, brushing Angélique's hair. She hummed as she lifted the golden cascade and let it slide through her black hands. Angélique's hair was beautiful, but Simone had never envied it. She was proud of Angélique's pearl-like loveliness, but she had never wanted it for herself. She was content to be as she was, a woman in her prime, tall, strong, and gifted with *connaissance*, a personal acquaintance with the spirits, the *loa*, of the vodun world. In her ancestral Dahomey, no doubt, she would have been a powerful chieftain, a priestess and matriarch of a great family. Here in the new world she was only a servant. But this did not in any way demean her. Whatever she might do to earn her bread, she was Simone. And being Simone was enough for any woman.

The worship of the *loa* had been part of Simone's life from the day of her birth, but she had not really come into her own as a *mambu* until

Angélique and her father had fled Haiti for France leaving her to make her own way. It was then she found that her inborn gifts could be put to profitable use. She'd begun by brewing curative herbs and concocting charms. Her reputation and influence had grown rapidly and soon she was in demand at birth ceremonies, funerals, weddings, and vodun rites, where her ability to call the spirits to come and possess their devotees was legendary.

In Haiti, vodun and Catholicism are closely interwoven, and Simone also considered herself a good Catholic. She attended Mass whenever she could be spared from her duties, and she kept a small portrait of the Virgin in her room. But her heart was vodun, and the *loa* were like members of her own family: Legba, the god of the cross-roads who guarded the threshold of each house; Damballa, the serpent god who brought the rain; Erzilie, the water goddess; scarlet Ogun, god of war; Simbi, Lemba, Cede, and Simone's own personal *loa*, Baron Samedi, the little old man of the cemetery. There were dozens of others, carried from Mother Africa in the hearts of her children, all the way to the new world.

Each *loa* had its own personality, its own preferred foods and methods of worship, and Simone knew them all. They were kind spirits, who worked much good when properly persuaded, but they were like children, sensitive and capricious. One had to be very careful to please them. At the proper times, she sacrificed white pigeons to Damballa and Erzilie, red cocks and red beans with rice to Ogun, and salt herring with hot peppers to Gede. On Baron Samedi's special days, Simone wore black, his favorite color.

It had been — she paused in thought for a moment, letting the hairbrush hang in midair — three weeks since she had taken the jar of consecrated water to the tiny graveyard where Bertrand was buried and placed it on his grave. First she had slit the throat of a black rooster and mixed its blood with earth from the grave. Then she had knelt in the darkness with the jar between her knees, peered down into the water, and petitioned Baron Samedi to show her the face of the man who had killed Bertrand.

The *loa* had not come easily. She had remained motionless for half the night, chanting, pleading, her legs cramped, her head swimming, before she felt the power of Baron's spirit moving into her, before she knew that she was no longer Simone but Baron Samedi himself in

Simone's body. Through her eyes, he had looked down into the water and had seen not one face but two reflected there in the moonlight. With Simone's hand, he'd picked up the long knife that was still wet with the cock's blood and thrust the blade into the water, turning it bright red and sealing the curse of death upon Bertrand's murderers.

When Simone had come to herself, she was lying prostrate on the grave, the water from the overturned jar soaking into the earth around her. With profound sadness and surprise, she remembered the two faces that her eyes had seen, familiar faces, both of them.

Life was cruel, she'd reminded herself as she rose to her feet and brushed the dirt from her long black dress. Then, as she walked back toward the house, she'd wept. Never before, in all her life, had she called upon the powers of her *loa* to work magic against any person.

Angélique's hair shone like melted gold. With a sigh, Simone put the brush down on the dresser and bent over to turn down the coverlet on the canopied bed. Angélique slipped out of her pale blue peignoir and slithered down between the sheets like an obedient child. Simone drew the rose-printed coverlet up to her chin and smoothed out the wrinkles with her hand. Angélique had closed her eyes and was already breathing deeply and evenly, beautiful as moonlight on a lily, when Simone blew out the candle and closed the door.

Suddenly it was morning. Lizette was screaming again, this time in the hallway, right outside Claire's door. "Mam'selle! Mam'sel-l-l-e!"

Claire bolted out of bed, fearing the worst, whatever it might be. "Mam'sel-l-l-e!"

She raced across the floor in her bare feet, her long, white night-dress streaming behind her, threw back the bolt, and flung open the door. Lizette was standing in the hallway, eyes bulging.

"Mam'selle! There!" She thrust her finger down toward the floor. There on the threshold lay a misshapen wad of feathers and bone. Claire bent down to pick it up.

"No! Don't touch it!" Lizette lunged forward, knocking Claire off balance. She clawed at the doorframe to keep from falling.

"Don't be silly, Lizette!" she snapped. "Now, either be quiet or go downstairs! It isn't going to hurt us!" Keeping her at bay with her eyes, Claire bent down and scooped up the thing in her hand.

It was a *wanga*. She knew this time. The bone was a small piece that looked as if it could have come from a human finger or toe, although she could not be sure. The soft feathers of a red hen were stuck to the middle of it with some sort of tree gum.

"The hair, Mam'selle!" Lizette whispered. "Look at it!"

Claire could see that the *wanga* had been made for her. Twisted among the feathers and gum was a long, red-brown hair that could only have come from her own head.

Claire's first reaction was a chill of fear, followed by a quick, hot burst of anger. Simone! It made sense. She'd taken Marie-Thérèse away from the woman for an entire day, and Simone didn't like it. Claire was tempted to storm the blue sitting room and tell her just what she thought of her and her *wanga*!

"She did it, Mam'selle!" Lizette was dancing with excitement. "She hates you!"

"Maybe," said Claire. "What's this supposed to mean?"

"*Wanga*. Mam'selle. A death charm! You get this — you die!"

"Don't be silly, Lizette."

"You got to leave, Mam'selle! Get out of Panama! You go away — maybe then the magic can't reach you!"

Claire took a deep breath. "Lizette, this was meant to frighten me. I don't intend to let it. Now, you're to say nothing about this. Not to anyone. Understand?"

Lizette swallowed hard and nodded, her eyes glued on the *wanga*.

"Go downstairs and finish your work," Claire said. "If anyone asks you why you were screaming, tell them you saw a big spider run under my door."

Lizette scurried away. Claire examined the *wanga*. The hair was unquestionably hers. It could have come from her brush, which she left on the washstand, or from her clothes, which she regularly put out for Lizette to wash. Simone. She was an intelligent woman, Claire was sure. She was also sure that she took her vodun very seriously. But what had possessed the woman to think that she could intimidate her with anything as foolish as this bit of bone, hair, and feathers?

Claire shrugged and slipped the *wanga* into an open dresser drawer.

Lizette had evidently done as she'd been told, because no one ever questioned Claire about the *wanga*, although Philippe did ask her

about the spider at breakfast. She told him, wincing at the lie, that she'd crushed it with her shoe and thrown it out the window.

André had left early to catch the Front Street train for the cut where he planned to do some sketching. Philippe apparently planned to spend the morning at home. On the usual days when he went to the hospital, he was almost always gone by the time Claire came downstairs.

"I usually give Marie-Thérèse her piano lesson after breakfast." Claire said to him as Lizette pattered in to clear away the dishes. "That's the best time, because she's fresh. But if you've work to do in the library, Philippe, we can put the lesson off till you've finished."

"Go ahead," he said. "I haven't much to do. It won't bother me. In fact, I'd rather like to hear how she's coming along."

Claire waited until Marie-Thérèse had finished eating. Then they went to the library. Philippe, immersed in a book on tropical medicine, studiously ignored them as they came in and sat down together on the piano bench.

"Listen to me, Papa," chirped Marie-Thérèse.

" . . . listening . . . " Philippe mumbled as he scribbled notes into the margins of the pages. "I could rewrite this damned book myself "

"*Au Clair de la Lune*, Mam'selle?" Marie-Thérèse gave Claire the name of a little tune she'd taught her. At Claire's nod, she positioned her hands — which already showed promise of being long and slender — above and below middle C. She'd tinkled out two or three measures before they both realized that something was different. She lifted her fingers and gazed up at Claire with wide eyes. "Mam'selle?"

"Play it again, Marie-Thérèse," Claire whispered.

The notes danced out from under her fingers, true and clear. To be sure, the twangy quality, a consequence of the dampness, had not entirely disappeared, but the pitch was wonderfully correct. "Again," Claire whispered. There was no mistaking it. The piano had been tuned.

Claire glanced over at Philippe, who was making a great show of concentrating on the book. His face was beaming.

"You!" she exclaimed, pointing a finger at him and realizing that she was laughing with surprise and delight. "When did you have this done?"

"Yesterday, while you were in Panama City. I know a man in Col—
n who used to tune it when Angélique was . . . " he trailed off, his

face suddenly clouded. "It won't last long. Has to be redone every few weeks, especially during the rainy season."

Claire got up from the bench and walked over to where he was sitting. Reaching out, she touched the back of his hand where it lay on the open page. "Thank you, Philippe," she said softly; and at the same time she stared at those strong brown fingers and wondered how they could have killed Bertrand.

"Will you play something for us, Claire? After Marie-Thérèse is through, of course."

"Of course."

Marie-Thérèse finished her little recital for her father, who smiled and applauded. Then he took her on his lap while Claire played *Liebestraum* and then some Hungarian Dances by Brahms, her fingers straining with the joy of making music once more. She had never been able to bring herself to play seriously before, with the piano's twangy discordance making mockery of the pieces she loved.

She concluded with a waltz by Tchaikovsky, and then she told Marie-Thérèse and Philippe how she'd met the composer at a reception in Paris. "Such a sad, gentle man. Such pain in those eyes. And he even kissed my hand."

"Oho!" Philippe's eyes twinkled. "That's why you have such a lovely touch, is it? The kiss of a master!" He looked so relaxed, sitting there in the big armchair with Marie-Thérèse on his knee. So contented. Philippe Jarnac, the betrayer, the murderer. "Would you play one more thing for us, Claire?"

"If I can."

"Chopin. The *Revolutionary Étude*."

The *Étude*. How well she knew it! She'd struggled week after week with those rumbling left-hand arpeggios. Yet she'd never really cared for the piece. It was all drama, all one passionate, headlong rush of music. She nodded. As she poised her hands above the keyboard, she thought she saw Philippe tense.

Claire plunged into the *Etude* like a swimmer into the maelstrom, fighting for mastery of the flowing current of notes. She had not played it for some time, and she was not playing particularly well. She felt her fingers missing keys in their flight as the music carried her recklessly, relentlessly toward its climax. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Philippe's hands, clenching and unclenching on

the arm of the chair. The music rose to a crescendo pitch . . . only to be shattered, as she should have known it would be, by the sound of a porcelain doll crashing against the foot of the stairs. Her hands froze on the keys.

"Keep playing," Philippe commanded in a low voice.

Fumbling, she continued, driven by a will stronger than her own. The *Étude* was not a long piece, and she soon came to the crash of minor chords that marked its end. As the notes died away, she heard Simone calling from the landing. "M'sieu' Philippe! Quick! It's all I can do to hold her!" Philippe rose to his feet. "Keep her here!" he commanded gruffly, placing the wide-eyed Marie-Thérèse in Claire's arms. Then he strode out into the foyer.

"M'sieu' Philippe! Love of heaven, give her something!"

Philippe walked up the stairs with an oddly measured slowness. Claire held Marie-Thérèse tight against her as the sounds of a violent struggle raged above their heads. The crash of stamping, kicking feet, and tumbling furniture shook the ceiling. After long moments, the tumult lessened, then died away into silence.

Philippe sat on the edge of his bed, his shoulders still rising and falling heavily from the strain of having subdued his wife's latest frenzy. His hands were clenched against his knees to keep them from trembling as he pondered the realization that Claire Sagan's slender fingers held the key to the gates of hell.

What strange perversity had prompted him to ask for the *Étude*? An unconscious whim, perhaps? An instinctive feeling that the music might penetrate the barriers that surrounded Angélique's mind? He remembered how earlier, after Claire played the "Blue Danube" for Marie-Thérèse he had discovered one of Angélique's dolls at the foot of the stairs. Lord! He buried his face in his hands and pleaded with heaven for the courage to face it.

The physicians who had examined Angélique after her accident had agreed that the actual damage to her brain was not extensive, and that the chances of healing were fairly good. But nearly four years had passed and her condition had not changed. Could it be, Philippe dared to ask himself at last, that Angélique's affliction was other than physical?

Claire's playing had already brought on a violent response from Angélique. Philippe was master in his house; Claire was his guest and

his employee. It would be simple enough to forbid her to play the piano. Then his life would remain as it was. He sighed painfully, for he had long since come to the realization that he loved her. He would lose her. He would lose her in any case, for what could he offer her? She was not the sort of woman who would become a man's mistress, and he, much as he wanted her, would never consent to having her brought down to that level.

The notes of the *Étude* drifted through his mind, rising and breaking like waves upon a cold, black beach as he faced the most enormous truth of all: he had no right to play God with his wife's sanity.

If any possibility of curing her existed, however remote, he had no choice except to exhaust that possibility, the consequences and his own future happiness be damned!

He buried his face in his hands. Claire was playing once more, a Chopin Nocturne, as gentle and soothing as she was. She would be his tool, he told himself fiercely. Yes, she would be the key that might unlock the doors of Angélique's mind. And if she succeeded, then heaven help them all!

Claire did not play the *Revolutionary Étude* again, but the Bechstein drew her like a magnet. The urge to run her fingers over the yellow keys became a near-obsession. She spent most of her afternoons, when Marie-Thérèse was napping or with Simone, at the piano.

It was Dr. Sagan who had first given her piano lessons as a form of therapy, and the piano had subsequently become one of the loves of her life. Claire was an excellent pianist, but not a brilliant one. That was why she had made her living in Paris as a teacher, and not on the concert stage. Although her fingers functioned perfectly on the keyboard and she'd been in high demand among her friends as an accompanist, she lacked that special fire, that bravura, that makes a great solo performer, and she knew it. Nevertheless, she loved playing. She was quick to discover a cache of sheet music in the piano bench and, with Philippe's approval, she made good use of it. Playing, she came to find, was an excellent substitute for tears. She poured out her loneliness, her guilt, her love for Paul through her fingers and, slowly, she felt her wounds beginning to heal.

Something was stirring in Angélique. The broken dolls appeared at the foot of the stairs with increasing frequency, usually followed by

periods of violence in which she flung chairs, lamps, or dishes at anyone who tried to approach her. When she hummed now, it was more audibly, more determinedly. Perhaps her new restlessness had been brought on by the piano, Claire told herself, or perhaps by Philippe's abrupt refusal to continue sedating her.

Claire longed to take Philippe aside and tell him that she knew what he was trying to accomplish and that she was willing to help, but on the subject of Angélique he was unapproachable. If Claire as much as mentioned her name, his gaze would chill her into silence.

She thought often of her days at Bicêtre, of the patience and the love that had pulled her up out of her own well of silence. Music had been Angélique's life once. And music, if nothing else, could penetrate the walls that held her prisoner. Yet, Claire knew, there were risks. Angélique might recover, true, but with too much stimulation she might also plummet into complete madness.

Philippe was using her, and Claire let him. He was more restless than ever now, and given to long silences. Often she would look up from her playing to find him watching her with his tormented black eyes. He encouraged her to play. Even pressured her. Yet he never again asked for the *Étude* and she never offered to play it. Instead she selected lyrical pieces — Mendelssohn, Schubert — or works of delicate, passionless precision like Haydn or Bach. Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt at his most fiery — these she soon learned to avoid because they tended to upset Angélique.

It was inevitable that matters should come to a head. Claire had been with the Jarnac family for six weeks on that well-remembered day when she sat down at the piano bench for her usual afternoon hour of practice. She was quite alone. Philippe was at the hospital; André was at the cut. Lizette was busy in the kitchen and Marie-Thérèse was out in the yard with Simone.

Feeling the need for a challenge, she decided upon the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto in B-flat, a long and difficult piece that had often frustrated her as a student in Paris. After finding the music in the bench, flexing her fingers, and running a few quick scales, she began.

Claire had never been satisfied with her performance of the Tchaikovsky Concerto, and neither had her teacher. She could almost see him — a pompous little man with a silvery moustache and a strong Polish accent — beating time with a baton on the top of the

piano, and saying. "Your hands are too small. Mademoiselle Claire . . . reach for those octaves . . . ! Stretch!"

She put the weight and strength of her arms into the ascending chords, the way he'd taught her, concentrating fiercely on the rapid changes of the hand positions. Stretch . . . reach for it . . . reach . . . put your whole body into it . . . like this. Claire . . . yes . . .

She was immersed in the music, in the discipline of her hands. For Claire, at that moment, nothing existed except herself, the Bechstein, and the Tchaikovsky. Perhaps that was why she was taken so completely by surprise.

In the midst of a long cadenza, she suddenly felt her shoulders seized by a pair of hands that gripped her like claws. Her arms were jerked from the keyboard and pulled backward until they threatened to wrench from their sockets. Then she was struggling in a web of perfumed silk, against a slim body that had the strength of ten devils.

Angélique. She was incredibly strong. Her eyes were wild as she tore and clawed at Claire, trying to drag her from the bench. Claire flew into a panic, flailing away with her fists, tangling her fingers in that silken mane of hair and pulling hard. In her frenzy, Angélique did not even seem to feel the pain. One hand reached up for Claire's face. She saw the long, thin fingers, the daggerlike nails. Her whirling mind saw Bertrand's mutilated cheeks, in a last, desperate thrust of energy, she lurched upward and backward. Something struck her head and then a black, bloodshot curtain closed out the world.

Twelve

Claire opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor of the library, between the big armchair and Philippe's desk, where Angélique had dragged her. At first, the throbbing at the back of her head so dulled the rest of her senses that she was aware of little else, but as the room came into focus she realized that Angélique was seated at the Bechstein, bent over the keyboard in a fury of concentration.

She was picking out the notes of the Concerto, clumsily, one or two at a time. Her silken hair was rumpled, her peignoir torn from the struggle. Seen in profile, her beautiful face was rapt as she wrestled with her memory and her long-unused fingers. Her breath came in excited little gasps.

Cautiously, Claire rose to her knees and ran a hand across her face. She was not scratched, at least, but the sleeve of her dress was ripped loose and several buttons were missing. The tortoiseshell combs hung loose in her disheveled hair. The back of her head bore a welt where, as nearly as she could tell, she had struck it on a corner of the piano.

Outside she heard the creak of the gate and the sound of a carriage rolling into the yard. "Papa!" Marie-Thérèse was shouting.

Philippe would be alarmed if he saw her, she thought, rubbing her head — unless he'd planned it all. Maybe he'd been waiting for Angélique to be pushed to the point of driving her off the bench and beginning to play again. In that case, she thought, with a sudden burst of irritation, she did not want to give him the satisfaction of knowing she'd been his dupe, even though she'd willingly gone along with him. How was she to know it would come to this?

She had no choice except the race across the foyer, up the stairs, and into her room before he came through the door. Angélique was obliv-

ious to everything except the piano and the music. Claire crept past her and sprinted across the entry as Philippe's footsteps echoed across the porch. As the doorknob clicked, she lifted her skirt and dashed up the stairs.

"Claire!" She had not been fast enough. Philippe was standing at the foot of the stairs, his hand on the newel post. "Claire! What's the matter? Come down here!"

Slowly she turned around and walked back down toward him. As she came closer, his face paled. "Good Lord!" he whispered. "What — ?" Then his voice caught in his throat as he heard the sound of the Bechstein coming from the open door of the library. He closed his eyes for an instant. His fingers whitened against the top of the newel post. By then Claire had reached him.

"It's my fault," he said. "Having the piano tuned, encouraging you to play . . . I'm sorry Claire. If I'd ever thought she'd hurt you — " He met her eyes guiltily. No, she decided. He had not known what was going to happen. The sarcasm she'd been about to utter died in her throat.

"Are you all right, Claire?"

"I'm fine! Only ruffled a little. And I hit the back of my head on the piano. It knocked me out for a minute, but now it only hurts."

He caught his breath and shook his head. "You child! Don't you know a blow on the head can be serious?" He took her shoulders and turned her until her back was toward him. "Hold still. Let me see . . . " His big, blunt fingers moved up into her hair, massaging her skull until they touched the swollen soreness. Claire winced.

"So it hurts, does it?" He gave a wry chuckle. "I don't wonder. There's a nice lump here. But I've seen worse." His hands parted her hair in back and he touched the bruise gently. "Doesn't look like anything to worry about, but turn around. Let's check your eyes." When she was facing him again, he cupped her face in his two hands. "Look at me, Claire," he said.

She stood very still, trembling a little as he peered into the depths of her eyes, trying not to focus on the dark face that was so near to her own.

"Well, they're not dilated," he said. "You should be fine, but let's not take chances. If you feel like lying down in the next couple of hours, don't do it. That's when the damage comes. Stay awake. Keep moving. Tell me if it gets any worse."

He sounded so solemn, so very medical that Claire had to laugh.

His hands rested on her shoulders for an instant; his eyes were melancholy. "That's a beautiful sound, Claire," he whispered. "Promise me you'll never forget how to laugh at life."

She stood looking up into his black eyes, his hands still touching her. "Philippe, you wanted this to happen, didn't you? You want to bring her back?" For a moment she almost forgot that he could be a smuggler and a murderer.

He dropped his hands. "I didn't plan it this way, Claire; but I saw what was happening and didn't try to prevent it. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? I'm *glad* it happened, Philippe. You *do* want her to get well; I know it! After what André said — " She broke off. She had told him too much.

"And what did André say?"

She could not wriggle out of it now. "He said you wanted to — keep her the way she was."

His expression darkened. "André," he said coldly, "doesn't know what he's talking about."

The sound of the front doorknob turning drew them quickly apart. Simone came with Marie-Thérèse nestled in the crook of her arm. As the first clumsy notes of the Concerto reached her ears, Simone's eyes darted to Claire where she stood beside Philippe at the foot of the stairs. Then she froze like an ebony statue.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she breathed. "She's playing again! M'sieu' Philippe, my baby's playing again!" She made a lunge toward the library door.

Philippe stepped in front of her. "Leave her to it, Simone. Don't interfere."

Simone beamed. "She's getting well, isn't she, M'sieu' Philippe!"

Philippe's hand grasped the newel post. For the first time, Claire noticed that drops of perspiration were standing out on his forehead. Without another word, he turned away and walked slowly up the stairs to his room.

André's portrait of Claire was coming along nicely. She was flattered and pleased at the few glimpses he'd given her of it. He had posed her on a love seat upholstered in burgundy velvet, with the pale green drape about her bare shoulders. Since the portrait was to be of her head and shoulders only, the drape was sufficient costume. She

accommodated André by privately unfastening her high collar and the first few buttons of her shirtwaist and pulling the whole thing far enough that it would not show above the drape.

"A little lower on the left, I think. That's the way it was when I sketched you the first time." He stood beside the easel and cocked his head at her, one eyebrow raised critically. "No . . . that's not quite it . . . Here. Let me see!" He paced over to where she was sitting and delicately adjusted the pale green folds. Claire shivered as his fingers brushed her bare skin. Noticing her discomfort, he chuckled.

"Don't be frightened, my pretty! I had a teacher once — an old man who'd lived long and well! He always told me, 'Never try to make love to a woman when you're painting her. Throws your whole damned perspective off!'" He scratched his ear and grinned at her. "Or was it. 'Never try to paint a woman when you're making love to her'? I forget which, but I've always followed his advice!" He gave her a devilish wink. "Of course, *afterward* . . . Now don't blush like that! You keep that up and I'll have to put more red in my skin tones!"

He was delightful. Just naughty enough to make her giggle, but never offensive. Sometimes, in a pleasant but untrained voice he sang outrageous little street ditties that he'd picked up in Paris. Posing for him was never tedious, and Claire looked forward to the two or three afternoons a week that he set aside to paint her.

He was so seldom serious during these afternoon sessions that it surprised her the day she came into his studio to find him Staring at her portrait, a preoccupied frown on his face.

Greeting him cheerfully, she went at once to the screen which stood in one corner of the room and stepped behind it to undo her collar and arrange the drape.

"Let's not bother today," he said abruptly. "I need to talk to you."

"What is it?" She came out buttoning her collar and wondering why he seemed so disturbed. The sounds of the piano floated up through the floor. Angélique played several hours every day now, and she was improving rapidly as a pianist. Very soon, Claire realized, her technique would overtake and surpass her own.

"Come here," André said, motioning to the love seat.

Claire sat down beside him. "What is it, André?" she repeated.

He leaned toward her and took her hands in his, a natural, comfortable gesture. "I've been keeping something from you," he said.

"Something I found out about more than a week ago. I've waited this long to tell you for two reasons."

She gripped his hands hard. "André . . . is it about Paul?"

"Yes, it is," he said. "But listen to me! I've waited for two reasons. First of all, I had to make certain that what I'd found out was true. Then, even since I've been sure of it, it's been hard to work up the courage to tell you. I care for you, my sweetest Claire, and it's not easy to reveal something that's going to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" She blinked at him in disbelief.

"Hurt you. Deeply."

She let go of his hands with her own and folded them in her lap. "Tell me," she said.

He shook his head. "You might not believe me. That's why I've decided to show you. Can you come with me in the carriage this afternoon?"

"Of course. I'll get my parasol."

The carriage was hitched and waiting by the time she came downstairs. André helped her in and the unsmiling Léon closed the gate behind them as the carriage clattered out of the yard.

André was quiet and unnaturally grim.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked him.

"Col—n. There's someone I want you to meet."

He would say little else. Claire sat beside him in uneasy silence, her hands twisting the handle strap on her parasol.

Instead of turning onto Front Street as she'd expected, André headed the horse and carriage up a narrow alleyway where red peppers hung drying in the windows and dusty children tumbled out of their path. The little street, though dirty as any, had a moldy sort of charm to it. As André helped her down from the carriage, Claire peered upward through the rusting wrought iron of the balconies, wondering what sort of surprise awaited her behind those flowered curtains.

"Can't you tell me anything? Not even now?" She clutched at André's sleeve.

"Yes, I could tell you, I could have told you sooner, but I don't want you to hear this from me. I want you to hear it from *her*." Taking Claire's hand firmly in his, he led her up the rickety wooden staircase that ran up the outside of one of the houses. He had said she would be hurt, deeply hurt, by what she was about to learn. She steeled her-

self for the ordeal as he rapped on the thin, weathered door at the top of the stairs. She knew that the news, whatever it was, would be about Paul.

The door opened a crack. A wizened face peeped out at them. "*Qué quieren?*" came the brittle whisper.

André answered the old woman in Spanish. Claire could not follow his words. She caught only a name: Marta.

The old woman, a shrunken figure in black, opened the door just wide enough to admit them. "Marta!" she shrilled, followed by a crackling burst of Spanish. "Marta!"

The room was dim. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Claire could make out a dilapidated rattan chair with a fringed shawl thrown over it, a basket of plantain and mangoes on the small table, a paper cutout of the Virgin pasted to one wall with burnt-out candles and withering flowers on the stand in front of it. Marta. Even before she saw her, Claire knew why André had brought her here. Paul had been untrue to her.

Her hand dropped from André's arm and she closed her eyes for an instant. When she breathed deeply, her nose drew in a potpourri of spices, drying fish, overripe mangoes, and the stench of the gutter outside. She felt sick.

When she opened her eyes, a girl was standing between the parted curtains that divided the bedroom from the rest of the house. Marta. She was little more than a child. Sixteen, Claire guessed; seventeen at the most. Had Marta been standing next to her, the top of her head would scarcely have reached the tip of Claire's nose. Her black hair was parted in the middle and drawn back against a pair of eyes that seemed to encompass her whole face. They were beautiful eyes, huge, dark, and frightened, like a fawn's. Claire's gaze crept downward to the embroidered white smock she wore, to the unmistakably growing bulge that rounded outward beneath it; she felt something slicing into her heart.

Visibly gulping down her fear, the girl came forward and took Claire's hand in her tiny, fine-boned one. "The *se-or* said you would come." She spoke accented French interlaced with Spanish, in a voice that was like a little bell.

"Show her the picture. The one you showed me," André commanded. She turned, went into the bedroom, and came back with a

red-lacquered Chinese jewel box, which she placed in Claire's shaking hands.

Fighting to control her fingers, Claire raised the lid. The first thing she saw was a photograph that might have been taken by an itinerant street photographer at a fiesta. It showed Marta, doll-like and adorable, in a *pollera*, the exquisite folk-costume of Panama. The billowing, multitiered white skirt, gathered, appliqued in black scrollwork, and trimmed with yards of lace, matched the rows of flounces that covered her shoulders. Her hair was wound high on her head and interwoven with beaded butterflies and flowers, known as *tembleques*. A smiling Paul stood beside her, his arm around her waist.

"I loved him too," she said softly. "He told me he was *cusado* — how you say — married? But he was so alone, *Se-ora*. And I loved him so much. Don't be angry with him. He could not help it."

Claire's gaze flickered downward, taking in Malta's rounded body.

"That's right." Maria's huge dark eyes burned into hers. "I gave myself to him and I am not ashamed." Even her tears were fierce and proud. "I know what you are thinking, *Se-ora*. I am not a *puta*. He was the only one. The only one before. The only one after. This baby is his."

Choking, Claire thrust the box back at her, turned, and blundered toward the door. She wanted only to escape those eyes, that innocent child-face. André seized her arm and pulled her back toward Marta.

"I want you to hear it all, Claire! No matter how much it hurts!" He kept a painful grip on her upper arm. "Tell her the rest!" he ordered Marta. "Tell her what you told me!"

Her huge eyes widened as she looked at André. She clutched the red lacquered box tight against her chest.

"Tell her! I brought her here so she could hear it from you!"

Marta lowered her long lashes and stared down at her growing little body. "When I told him about the *ni-o*, about the baby, he said he would get money — enough to take care of us for a long time. He said he could get dynamite. That there were men who would buy it . . . " Her voice faded to a whisper. "Please, *Se-or*, that's all I know . . . "

"I want to go, André." Claire was sick inside. "Take me back to the house, please."

When they left her, Marta was still standing in the middle of the floor, the red Chinese box clutched to her like a treasure. Her eyes refused to look up to see them go.

Claire sat stiffly in the carriage as André drove back along Colon's southern edge. Gulls wheeled and squabbled above the bay. Their cries mocked her. How blind she'd been! What a fool, to think that Paul was beyond the weaknesses of other men!

The carriage passed two West Indian women with shopping baskets on their heads and babies balanced on their hips. She thought of Marta and envied her. In a few more months, Marta would have Paul's baby. Paul and Marta, wedded forever in every cell of their child's body. Marta would always have a part of Paul — would always *be* a part of him. Claire had nothing but his memory. Biting back the bitterness, she remembered those brief nights they'd had together. She remembered how she had wept when, after he had gone, her period had come, bringing with it the sign that Paul had not left her with a child. That was the last time she had cried. Marta. Claire hated her. At that moment, she even hated Paul.

"Would you rather I hadn't told you?" André reached out and touched her arm. "Would you rather have gone on worshipping at his grave?"

"No," she said. "I've made enough of a fool of myself already." She didn't want to talk to André. What she wanted was to will herself out of existence, body and spirit: to deaden the ghastly gray pain that had taken possession of her. She could not rightly blame Marta for loving Paul. Claire had loved him herself. And even if Marta had not loved him, a handsome, gentle Frenchman, wealthy by her pitiful standards, that alone would have been enough to draw most Panamanian girls. He'd likely given her presents — she shivered — maybe that was why it had taken him ten months to set aside enough for her passage. She thought of his letters. The loneliness, the sense of isolation from everyone and everything he'd loved. How anxious he'd seemed to have her come!

When the carriage rolled into the yard once more and stopped outside the stable. Claire got down by herself without saying another word to André — although she had no reason to be angry with him: he had only shown her the truth, she realized — and walked into the house.

Angélique was playing Franz Liszt with a brilliance and dash that Claire herself achieved only in rare moments. The stabbing rhythms of his Hungarian Rhapsody followed her as she climbed the stairs,

opened and closed the door of her room, and lay down flat on the bed, staring up at the mosquito netting.

She let the music tingle through her senses as she tried to clear the turbulence from her mind. But she could only think of Paul. Paul and fragile Marta. If he'd chosen to ease his loneliness with someone like the orange-haired woman she'd seen at the Universel — that she might have understood and, in time, even forgiven. Panama could be hell for a man alone. She could see that. But little Marta! She was only a child! Had every drop of decency in him dried up in the tropic heat?

She was not sure how long she'd been lying there, catatonic, except that Angélique was thundering out Brahms when she heard her door open softly and felt the springs sag and creak with the weight of someone sitting down beside her.

"Go away!" she said, without even bothering to look and see who it was.

"Give me a little time, Claire. Then I'll do whatever you wish." She tensed. The voice was Philippe's. "André told me. I can't say I approve of the way he handled it —"

"Would you have kept it from me, Philippe?" she challenged him.

"Perhaps." He cleared his throat. "I knew about the girl, Claire. She came to the hospital a time or two when he was sick. That sort of thing happens all the time down here; no one paid much attention . . . I didn't know she was pregnant at the time, or that he'd told her about the dynamite. That part surprises me, in fact. I was so sure he hadn't done it. I only knew there was a girl. And I chose not to tell you. Now, have you gained anything from knowing except unhappiness?"

"I want to go home," she said. "Back to Paris. On the next boat."

"What about your passport? The police still have it."

"You can get it back. I've seen what you can do, Philippe. And I've saved the price of the fare. You've paid me much too generously."

"The hearing's only two weeks away."

"What difference does that make now? I just want to go home."

"I won't stand in your way." He shifted his weight on the bed. "I knew you'd be wanting to leave now. That's one of the reasons I'm here."

For the first time, she let herself look at him. He was leaning over her, the weight of his shoulders resting on one hand. His white shirt was rolled up at the sleeves and softly open at the neck, showing a

little of the dense black mat of hair on his chest. He looked strangely vulnerable.

"I never thought I'd say what I'm about to say to you, Claire. I know you've been hurt. You want to run away. That's only natural. And if you must, yes, I can probably get your passport back."

Philippe let his words hang on the air as he stared out the window at the trees. "You've worked wonders with Marie-Thérèse. And she adores you. She's never had a *real* mother, you know. Angélique . . . " He trailed off and shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Angélique's getting better, Philippe. Listen." A torrent of notes poured up clearly from the library below. Chopin. The *Revolutionary Étude*. Angélique was playing it brilliantly. Philippe paled under the darkness of his skin.

"That was always her favorite piece," he said. "She played it at a party the night I met her."

"She's coming back, Philippe. She has to be. Soon — Marie Thérèse won't need me anymore. She'll have a real mother."

Philippe's fingers dug into the yellow chinz counterpane. "You think" he rasped, "that a mother's love is built in? You think that just because Angélique's playing again, she's going to emerge loving that child?"

Abruptly, he stood up and paced to the window. "You know that her accident took place before Marie-Thérèse was born. That birth! Good Lord! She didn't even know what was happening to her! We had to drug her senseless with laudanum to keep her on the bed! Afterward — " he took a deep, painful breath — "we couldn't trust her with the baby. One day, after she'd almost thrown Marie-Thérèse down the stairs, we substituted a doll. And that satisfied her. She's never *known* Marie-Thérèse in the capacity of a mother!" He stared darkly out through the windowpane. "Damn!" he exploded suddenly. "It's taking me all day to say it! I want you to stay, Claire! If you will; if you can bear it! And I think you can if you make up your mind to."

She sat up and looked at him. Stay? Stay in this land that had stolen not only Paul's life but his love for her? Stay in this tragedy-ridden house that was inhabited by a madwoman, a vodun priestess, and a possible murderer?

"You can make anything you choose out of what happened today," Philippe was saying. "If you're determined to let it ruin your

life, then it will. But if you make up your mind to understand, to learn . . . to forgive . . . ”

Claire turned her face away from him. She was in no mood for a lecture. She wanted Philippe to leave her alone with her misery. To sink into an ocean of self-pity — that was what she wanted.

“Something came for you on the boat today,” he said, turning to leave. “It’s there on your nightstand.” He went out and closed the door without another word, leaving her wondering suddenly if she had hurt him.

A little brown packet bound with jute string lay on the nightstand. As she picked it up, Claire recognized her brother’s handwriting on the outside. She pulled off the string and tore the brown paper with her fingers.

The three letters inside were in separate, sealed envelopes, tied together with a yellow ribbon. The first was from her brother, Jacques, the second from a girlhood friend of hers, and the third — she caught her breath when she saw it — carried Colombian postage stamps. It had apparently been mailed in Panama and received in France after her departure. Jacques, without opening it, had sent it on to her.

It was from Paul.

Thirteen

Perversely, she decided to read the letters from her brother and her friend first. After Paul's letter, she knew she wouldn't feel like reading the others. Jacques wrote that his law practice was doing well and that he might have a chance at a partnership in a new firm.

"I can't imagine why you persist in staying in Panama . . . " his letter continued. "Denise's baby is due next month, and she could use your help. What's the point in your staying so long, to the endangerment of your own life and health . . . ?"

Claire smiled bitterly at the thought of what awaited her in Paris. If she wished, she could probably spend the rest of her days as a nurse to her brother's wife and their future children. Denise had come from a well-off family and she had that petulant, demanding quality so peculiar to girls who've been pampered too much. On her husband's income as a fledgling lawyer, they could never afford a professional nanny, but she, Claire, could be expected to perform the same function for her room and board. She sighed and tore open the letter from her friend Diane.

Diane was engaged, her fluttery handwriting proclaimed, to a boy from their class whom Claire had secretly thought of as being stupid. She so hoped that Claire would be back in Paris in time for her April wedding.

"Charles has a cousin you'd like. He's fond of concerts . . . Oh, Claire, I just couldn't believe it about Paul I envied you so before I knew. Panama sounds like such a romantic place . . . "

Enough of that, Claire thought, as she put Diane's letter face down on the nightstand and, with shaking fingers, broke the seal of the envelope that contained the letter from Paul. It was dated

December 1, 1884, which meant that Paul had written it before she had left Paris.

"My dearest Claire," the letter began as all his letters had.

For an instant she was back in Paris again, in her brother's apartment, and Paul was in Panama and alive. She eagerly read on.

For so many months I have looked forward to you coming, as you, I know, have wanted to be at my side again.

Now I find that I must ask you to be patient a little longer. Much as I want you with me, I cannot allow you to come to Panama.

Doubtless you've received your steamer ticket by now and you are making plans to leave. That is why the writing of this letter fills me with such pain. This is no place for you, Claire. It's no place for any woman, and I should have realized it sooner.

Forgive me, my love, and try to understand. You'll be disappointed, I know, but trust me. It's for the best.

I have given notice to the canal company that I will be leaving in about six months. After that, I plan to return to you in Paris. Wait for me at home, where you'll be safe.

The ticket can be cashed in at the steamship agency for a full refund of the price. Do that, love, if you're in need of the money. If not, I'd be grateful if you'd return it to me, as I could use it myself. The cost of living is high here in Panama, which more than makes up for the wages they pay us.

Remember that I love you. Claire, and always will. Hold my love with you, keep it safe until I return.

Paul

Claire read the letter again, looking for the hidden meanings. It was easy to guess that he had learned Marta was pregnant. The six months — he had planned to stay in Panama until the baby was born, and then . . . Would he ever have come back to her?

"Wait for me at home, where you'll be safe." What irony! She had come to Panama for nothing. Paul was dead; he had betrayed their love, and he was probably guilty of the smuggling accusation as well.

She would read the letter one last time. Then she would tear it to pieces, forget about Paul, and make her plans to return to Paris.

Claire's eyes moved down the page, line by line. She could feel the ice freezing over her emotions. The old safeguards were slipping back into place, the barriers that she had learned to build against any feelings that might go deep enough to hurt her. She would go back to France. She would move in with Jacques and Denise and become Dear Auntie to their children. Dear Auntie who had been hurt only once and would never be hurt again.

"Forgive me, my love, and try to understand." Would she ever understand? And if she did, would she forgive him?

"Wait for me at home . . . " What if she'd received the letter in time? What if she'd waited? Then she'd never have known about the smuggling or about Marta. Her memories of Paul, at least, would have been happy ones. What a fool she'd been!

" . . . I'd be grateful if you'd return it to me, as I could use it myself . . . " She blinked, then read the line again " . . . could use it myself." Paul had never been stingy. He would not have asked for the ticket back if he had not genuinely needed the money. She felt a strange contraction at the base of her spine. He would not have needed the money if he'd been, or planned to be, involved in the smuggling.

She put the letter down on the counterpane and stared numbly at the windows while she weighed the facts. Someone, either Bertrand or Marta, had lied to her. Bertrand had come to her of his own will and volunteered information which, judging from his words and actions, he should have kept to himself. Aside from sympathy, he'd had no reason to tell her Paul was innocent.

Marta, on the other hand, with a baby coming would need money. Someone could have paid her to tell André, and later to tell Claire herself, that Paul had been involved in the dynamite smuggling.

Someone. But who? That was the question. Claire picked up Paul's letter, folded it, and suddenly the answer fell into place like the dropping of a guillotine blade. Philippe. He had even admitted to Claire that he'd known about Marta — to cover himself, most likely, in case anyone discovered a connection between the two of them.

But Philippe had just asked her to stay. She buried her face in her hands, totally confused. Maybe he was clever, asking her to stay,

knowing full well she would leave, and that his very asking would remove him from suspicion.

Well, she didn't have to leave. Not when she still had reason to believe Paul was innocent. She twisted the folded letter and remembered Dr. Sagan. Perhaps she owed nothing to Paul; but she owed everything she had to his father. Even in view of what Paul had done, she would not feel right about leaving Panama until she'd done everything she could to clear the Sagan name.

She needed to talk to someone. Resolutely she got up from the bed, walked out of the room, closed and locked the door behind her, and tiptoed down the hall to André's studio.

He answered her secretive knock with a surprised look on his face. He was bare-chested, his shin flung across the rumpled bed. "Come in," he smiled. "I've been putting some touches on your portrait. Wanted to get it done before the light goes . . . Come on!" He took her hand, pulled her quickly inside, and closed the door. "You're ready to forgive me for this afternoon, eh? Is that why you've come? Well, sit down!" He led her to the edge of the bed, still keeping her hand in his.

"André, I've decided to stay," she announced.

"Stay?" He stared at her, then recovered his poise. "I'm happy for that, of course. But you've learned what you set out to, *chérie*. Your precious Paul wasn't worth your grief!"

She shook her head. "The letter. His last one. It just came. He told me not to come to Panama; and he wanted me to return the ticket. He needed the money. André, he needed the money!"

"So? He was still unfaithful to you."

"I know that. What's done is done. It's the rest that still matters. The part about the dynamite!"

His hand tightened around hers. "You little fool," he whispered. "He was guilty, Claire. You heard it from the girl with your own ears."

"I don't believe her, André."

He let go of her hand and looked at her with bewildered eyes.

"How did you find out about Marta?" she asked him.

"Someone at the Universel. I told you I'd been asking."

"She could have been paid to say what she did, André. Paul was weak, yes, but I still don't think he was dishonest. I knew him."

André sighed. "All right, my little detective! Then who would pay her, if you know so much? Tell me that!"

"The person who framed Paul! They wanted us to give up!"

"But who, *chérie*?"

She lowered her eyes. No, she could not tell him yet.

He leaned toward her and rested his hand on her knee.

"Stop torturing yourself. Claire, I think you're wrong. Why not admit it and go on with your life?"

"Does that mean you won't help me anymore?"

André sighed impatiently. The bedsprings creaked as he stood up.

"I'll do what I can . . . until you're satisfied."

Lizette's skittering footsteps echoed down the hall. Claire heard her rap on her own closed door. "Dinner, Mam'selle!" she warbled. Her footfalls rang closer until, without knocking, she boldly opened André's door and stepped into the room. Her bright little eyes, brimming with knowing laughter, flashed from Claire to André and back again.

"Dinner, Mam'selle," she said in a slow, insolent voice. "Dinner, M'sieu' André." Then, with a little twitch of the hips, she was gone.

That night Claire could not sleep. She thrashed and twisted between the sheets for hours before she gave up at last and lay on her back staring up at the mosquito netting.

Philippe, at dinner, had greeted the news of her decision to stay with such undisguised pleasure that she'd been thrown off guard. He had actually beamed at her over his plate of rice and undercooked beans. "Thank you, Claire," he'd said so softly that no one else could hear him.

She thought about Philippe and about the question of his guilt. Why was it that every new scrap of evidence against him filled her with dismay? Whenever she traced one of the mysterious threads in the tangle of intrigue that surrounded Paul and this tragic household, only to find one more "coincidence" that pointed to Philippe, why wasn't she jubilant?

She turned over and buried her face in the pillow. She liked Philippe, she admitted grudgingly. Despite his gruffness, his absent-mindedness, his preoccupation with his work, and his long silent spells, she found his presence comforting. Beneath that stony exterior, she sensed an almost childlike vulnerability that showed through in off-guard moments. Perhaps she would trap him. Perhaps she would find a way to prove his guilt, but there would be no pleasure in it.

And André — poor, exasperated André. He was so determined to win her away from Paul's memory.

She remembered Old Panama. The wall. André's arms. That long, passionate kiss. If anyone could ever make her forget Paul, it was André. And it was strange how, in the light of Paul's involvement with Marta, her own guilt had all but evaporated.

She could marry him, she told herself. If she stayed, if she let things develop naturally, gave him a little encouragement — the possibilities were intriguing. Charming talented André. And those paintings would make him the toast of Paris one day.

Stretching her legs, she let her fantasies wander. She saw herself in Paris, in the fashionable salons, the elegant wife of that renowned artist, André Jarnac. She could picture a fine, big studio with a skylight and a grand piano in one corner where she could practice while André created his masterpieces. She laughed at her own temerity.

But she was using fantasy as a means of escape, and she knew it. Reality was here and now. Paul had betrayed her. He had fathered the child of a girl who was as young and poor as she was pretty. Yet, Claire had loved him — loved him enough to stay in Panama, at the risk of her own life, in an effort to prove his innocence. Would she have done the same, she asked herself, if Paul had been André?

She did not know what time it was except that it was very late, midnight at least. Still awake, she lay there listening to the night sounds. Life in the tropics is mostly nocturnal. The jungle comes alive when the sun goes down, as the reptiles and mammals that hide from the heat of the sun awaken to prowl, hunt, and fight. The denizens of the day, the birds and monkeys, cling to their places in the trees, dozing nervously, alert for the telltale snap of a twig or rustle of a leaf.

By now Claire's ears could identify many of the sounds she heard: the bark of a tapir, the outlandish screech of a red howler monkey, the shrill of a bird, the faraway cough of a hunting jaguar. She was grateful for the stone wall that kept the jungle at a safe distance.

The sound of the drum outside the wall startled her, but only a little. She had heard it a number of times before and, though its source remained a mystery, it had proven to be a thing of no consequence. Yet she could not help wondering what sort of human creature squatted there in the darkness, the small West Indian drum braced between his knees, to mingle its rhythms with the symphony of the night. Perhaps

it was some vodun cohort of Simone's; or some demented, grown-up child playing solitary games.

Abruptly, the drum stopped. The silence was more frightening than the sound. Wide-eyed, she listened, waiting for it to begin again. Then her straining ears caught the unmistakable faint creak of the front gate.

Softly she crept out of bed, stole across the floor to the window, and pressed her face against the panes.

The tropic moon was full that night, flooding the yard with its blue-violet glow. Through the restricted angle of the glass, Claire could see little more than the sky, the trees, and the top of the wall. In order to see down into the yard, she would have to open the window at least a foot. Inch by inch, she pulled the frame inward until she could see a portion of the stable, the wall, and the ground.

She bit her lip to keep from gasping out loud as a tall, dark man in a white shirt strode into her narrow slice of vision. His face was turned away from her. She could not recognize him. But the set of those wide shoulders, that easy, pantherine grace when he moved, struck a familiar note in her mind. In her excitement, she leaned against the edge of the window. The hinges on the frame squeaked softly. The man stiffened, then turned cautiously in her direction.

Leaving the window as it was, she dropped to the floor. For long minutes she crouched there, her heart pounding.

When she dared to look again, the man was gone.

Lizette gave a little cry as her lover's strong hand jerked her back against the side of the house.

"Quiet!" he growled. "There's somebody up there!"

"Did they see you?" Lizette moved closer to him, feeling the warm contours of his muscles through her nightgown.

"I don't know. That's *her* window up there, isn't it? The devil take her! How much longer before she leaves?"

"Can't say. The *wanga* didn't work. She wasn't afraid of it." Lizette shrugged and slid one hand up his arm. "Tonight I heard her say she was staying until her husband's hearing."

He cursed under his breath. "Well, then, she's had her last chance — "

"No!" Lizette clutched his wrist. Claire Sagan had been kind to her.

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Do you want to be queen of Panama or don't you?"

In answer she stretched up on tiptoe, looped an arm around his neck, and pulled his head down to hers. Her mouth opened as he kissed her; her little pointed tongue darted between his teeth like a snake, teasing, tantalizing. He lifted her off her feet and she rolled her pelvis inward until she could feel him pressing hard against her through the thin layers of cloth. With a little groan of ecstasy she began to rotate her hips in a circle. Oh, he was her man!

He put her down and kissed the tip of her nose. "Not so fast, *chérie*. First we have to make our plans!"

Lizette yawned as he talked. She did not want to make plans. The night was cool, the moon was full, and she only wanted to make love. But she would remember everything he said, for she was going to have to repeat all of it. Killing Claire Sagan would not be easy; even she could see that. The police had been all too happy to forget a poor little hunchback like Bertrand, but a pretty young Frenchwoman — that was a different matter. Claire's death would have to look like an accident.

Her mother had raised her to be a good girl, Lizette reminded herself, and if the poor woman had known the kind of things her daughter was doing, she wouldn't have liked it. But then her mother had never heard the thrilling stories of revolution, of liberation, of how the slaves — *her* people — had risen up and driven the rich, white landowners out of Haiti and set up their own kingdom . . . of how Pedro Prestan, born a slave himself, had sacked and burned the Lafrenière mansion, and how the same things were going to happen in Panama. Lizette sighed as her lover's voice droned on in the shadows beside her. One day, she sighed, she would be the most important woman in the country. She would buy her mother a new dress for every day of the week and build her a house as grand as the Jarnac home. Lizette and her man would live in the de Lesseps palace. That was what he had told her. Oh, but it was so hard to keep it all a secret!

"You'll remember it all?" he said, the moonlight gleaming on his dark hair.

"I'll remember. Come on!"

"Come on? Where, you little minx?"

She sprang up and kissed his mouth. "The stable!"

"She'll see us!"

"No! We'll circle around! I've looked out that window enough to know where you can see and where you can't — come on!" She tugged at his hand and he followed her as she slipped like a phantom along the edge of the house, giggling softly.

The small side door of the stable, where Bertrand's room had been, was unlocked. Lizette opened it and pulled him inside after her. Then she stood in the beam of moonlight that came through the one high window, unbuttoned her high-necked nightgown with impatient fingers, and let it fall in a circle around her feet. She was proud of her body, especially her firm, pointed breasts, and she was careful to stand where the moonlight would cast them into silhouette.

He was unfastening his trousers. "Hurry!" she whispered.

He came to her then, still wearing his shirt and his shoes, and wrapped her in his arms. "Oh, yes . . . " she moaned. "Hurry . . . hurry . . . "

The next morning, after debating the wisdom of it, Claire decided to ask Lizette whether she had seen or heard the man in the yard. Her reasoning was simple enough. Lizette was the only member of the household who had a room on the ground floor. If anyone besides herself had seen or heard him, it would probably have been Lizette.

"Mam'selle!" She went rigid at Claire's question and her eyes opened wide. One hand reached up to touch the little bump that the vodun charm made under her dress.

"What's the matter, Lizette?"

She opened her mouth and at first no sound would come out. "Bertrand . . . !" she whispered hoarsely. "I told you . . . !"

"Oh, horsefeathers!" Claire snapped, completely out of patience with her. "I saw him, Lizette! He was tall! With no hump on his back!"

She shook her head adamantly. "Bertrand. Simone could make his body straight!"

"Simone? Don't be — "

"Yes, Mam'selle!" She clutched Claire's arm so tightly that it hurt. "Simone can do anything!"

Claire gave up on Lizette after that. Either she was lying, or she was the flightiest, most superstitious ninny she had ever met.

She told one other person about the man in the yard: André. They were in his studio and she was posing for her portrait, the green drape wrapped around her shoulders.

"You're sure you saw someone, Claire?" He was dabbing cautiously at a spot on the canvas with an umber-tipped brush.

She nodded. "He was tall and dark, and he was wearing a white shirt, and white trousers, too, I think."

"Sounds like it might have been Philippe. Maybe he couldn't sleep. Have you asked him?"

"No." It had already occurred to her that she might have seen Philippe, and that was one of the reasons she had *not* asked him. Yet she was not at all sure. The man in the yard had not walked with Philippe's determined, somewhat ponderous stride. He moved like a cat.

"Want me to ask him for you?"

"I don't know, André," she hedged. "Lately he's seemed so — well, strange. Worried."

"It's Angélique. I told you. He doesn't want her to get well." André paused to listen as the strains of *Revolutionary Étude* rumbled up from the study below. The arpeggios rippled from under Angélique's fingers with dazzling smoothness and velocity. She was a brilliant musician. Claire had heard world-renowned pianists perform in France. Angélique already surpassed many of them in technique and expressiveness.

She no longer hummed. Now, when she sat in her rocker with the pink-bundled doll, her eyes were alive, darting about the room, following sound and unexpected motion. She still did not speak, but at times she looked as if she could.

Claire had expected Philippe to be elated with her progress. Instead he looked like a man under torture. He was increasingly silent at dinner, increasingly absent from the house.

"He doesn't want her to get well," André repeated.

"I thought he loved her." Claire shifted the weight of her hips on the settee. She'd been posing for an hour and she was getting tired.

"Oh, he did in his way — did and does, I suppose." André stood back from the canvas with a critical cock of his head. "But he can cope with her now. He never really could before the accident. Angélique had such a splendid spirit — a mind of her own! Poor Philippe just

couldn't manage her. And he didn't like that. He likes to manage everyone."

"Then why did he encourage me to play, knowing that she might react to it? Why has he stopped sedating her?"

"My dear," said André a little impatiently, "I really don't know. Come here. How does this look?"

She got up quickly. So quickly, in fact, that she experienced the brief visual blackout that often comes when one does not rise gradually. She swayed a little and brushed a hand across her eyes.

"Claire!" André was at her side, supporting her with his arms. "You're ill?"

"Silly, I just stood up too fast. That's all."

He was standing behind her, and he kept his hands around her waist, pulling her closer to him. She felt his lips, hot and damp against the back of her bare shoulder. She began to tremble.

"André . . . Someone might come in . . . "

"Shhh . . . door's locked . . . " he murmured against her neck. His hands slid upward and cupped under her breasts.

"André!"

As he turned her in his arms, she twisted away from him and fell back against the love seat. "André . . . please!" she whispered. She wanted to say more. She wanted to beg him — Please understand; I like you; I could love you. But give me time . . . give me comfort, tenderness . . . André, I'm not ready . . .

But the words would not come. She could only stare at him like a cringing animal as he stood over her, his legs planted wide apart, his chest rising and falling, his handsome face dark with frustration.

"Get out of here, Claire!" He spat out the words. "Get out of this room! Out of this house! Get out of Panama while you've still got your precious virtue! Hang onto it! It just may be all you'll ever have!" He swung around, paced over to the easel, and glared at her portrait. He raised one arm. For a breathless instant she thought he was going to strike the painting, to tear into it and destroy it. Then he lowered his arm and the breath went out of him. "Good God!" he muttered. "I can see what drove your Paul to another woman!"

With a gasp of horror that ripped all the way to the bottom of her lungs, Claire flung away the pale green drape and clutched her collar tight around her neck. Choking with rage and humiliation, she stum-

bled to the door, opened it — it really *had* been locked — and plunged down the hallway to her room where she slammed the door shut behind her and flung herself onto the bed.

André's words had cut her like a lead-tipped lash. And why? Was it because they'd rung true? Was it really her fault that Paul had turned to Marta?

She thought of Paul and Paris, of those four nights when his love had been her world. There was nothing she'd knowingly held back from him, nothing she had not eagerly given. She turned over on her back and lay there biting her lip. Was something missing from her? Some physical or emotional ingredient that other women had and she did not? Had she disappointed him? Perhaps that was why, in this hot, lonely land, with death and despair all around him, he had turned in his need — to Marta.

Claire probed her own nature. Perhaps she was shallow. Perhaps she was so afraid of the kind of hurt that had closed a door in her mind that she'd lost the capacity to respond deeply. She had loved Paul — at least, she thought she had. Was it possible that she had not loved him enough?

She turned over again and pressed her eyes against her hands. André was attractive. She liked him. She'd even dreamed of the kind of future they could have together. Why then, whenever he touched her, did she freeze like a terrified animal?

Bewildered and shaken to the roots of her soul, Claire lay on the bed with her face buried in her arms. The room grew dim, then dark. When Lizette, who must have known what had happened because she knew everything that went on in the house, rapped on her door to announce dinner, Claire ignored her. "Mam'selle?" Her high voice dripped curiosity. "Mam'selle?" she rapped again. When Claire did not answer she gave up at last and skipped down the hall to André's room. Claire heard his footsteps as he followed her back toward the stairs. They passed her doorway without a pause.

Feeling more desolate than ever, she lay there staring into the darkness where the moonlight shining through the window turned the edges of the mosquito netting to silver. She tried to remember Paul's face — the coloring, the details of the contours. To her dismay, she found that his image was fading in her mind. She could not even remember exactly how he had looked.

She must have drifted off to sleep, because the next thing she knew she heard her door creak softly open and close again. Then she felt the barely perceptible weight of Marie-Thérèse on the bed beside her.

"Mam'selle . . . " She was tired and a little whiny. "Where were you? I wanted you to tuck me in." She snuggled down beside Claire, warm and soft as a baby rabbit. Her hair was damp and smelled of scented soap from the bath Simone had given her. Still half-asleep, Claire put her arms around her and pulled her close.

"Mam'selle . . . I love you," she whispered in her ear.

A lump welled up in Claire's throat. "I love you, too, you precious little thing," she murmured; and in the next moment she realized that Marie-Thérèse had already fallen asleep. She felt herself drifting off as well, comforted by that warm little presence. Through the darkening mists of sleep, she heard the sound of Philippe's footsteps coming down the hall toward her room. Very softly he opened the door. She closed her eyes tightly as he stood over the bed looking down at them, his breath catching in his throat. After a long time he turned away. Closing the door behind him, he walked slowly back down the hall to his own room.

Was he going to Angélique? Claire remembered the wide bed, the adjoining door in the wall of his bedroom. Angélique was so beautiful; and at that moment, Claire held in her arms the living evidence of their love: little Marie-Thérèse.

Yet, she reflected, there was nothing of wifeliness in Angélique's behavior. Not outwardly at least. She lived in her own world. Claire had never seen in her any indication of affection toward anyone or anything except the china dolls which she ultimately destroyed. And as for Philippe — it was odd, Claire suddenly realized, that in all her time in the Jarnac household, she had never actually seen the two of them together. She could only speculate the whole of their relationship on the basis of what she knew about the separate parts. Angélique had scratched Philippe's face during some of her violent spells, but that in itself meant little. Was Philippe gentle with her? Was he warm? Claire wondered. Did he still love her?

She dozed for a time before she forced herself to open her eyes. Lying on top of the counterpane in her clothes would guarantee her an

uncomfortable night. She resolved to get up, put on her nightdress, and take Marie-Thérèse under the covers with her.

She swung her legs cautiously over the edge of the bed. As her stocking feet brushed the floor, she heard it again: the drum, singing its secret song in the night. On tiptoe, she ran to the window. This time, perhaps, she would learn its secret.

Fourteen

The coolness of the night breeze struck Claire's face as she eased the window open. The full moon shone down on the empty yard, and the stable where Bertrand had died. Léon, Bertrand's replacement, had taken the position as gardener-stablehand on condition that he be allowed to spend his nights at home with his young wife. In any case, after what had happened to Bertrand, no one would have consented to sleep in that stable.

The sound of the drum sang out subtly in the night, as much a part of the darkness as the calls of the frogs and crickets. Claire watched the yard and waited, wondering if the drumbeats would herald the appearance of the dark stranger she'd seen the night before. Maybe she was wrong; maybe there was no connection between the drum and the man. But she was soon to find out.

Mingled with the night sounds, she heard the kitchen door open and close. Lizette, her white nightgown flying, ran lightly across the yard to the gate. She stood there in the moonlight for a moment, fumbling at the lock with anxious fingers. The drum had stopped. Impatiently, she jerked back the bolt and moved the big gate open just far enough to accommodate the shoulders of the tall, husky man who slipped through the opening. She shut the gate hastily and flung herself into his arms.

He gathered her close and swung her off her feet, his hands and arms almost black against her white nightgown. Claire studied his build, his movements. No doubt about it, he was the man she had seen in the yard the night before.

Lizette! That Jezebel! Claire almost laughed out loud as she pictured the girl's fear-widened eyes, her fingers groping at the vodun charm, her hushed voice stammering. "B-Bertrand, Mam'selle!" What

a performance! Bravo, Lizette, she thought. Her secret, at least for the present, would be safe. After all, what was the harm in it? Lizette was young, pretty, and full of life. It was neither surprising nor unjust that she should have a lover.

With a sigh, Claire turned from the window, put on her nightdress, and went back to bed, leaving the two of them in the moonlight.

The next morning Claire slept till way past sunup. She awoke with Marie-Thérèse still slumbering beside her, curled against the side of her body. As she remembered yesterday's scene with André, her cheeks flamed hot. This day would not be an easy one to face.

She slid away from Marie-Thérèse's warmth and got out of bed. After she had dressed, washed, and combed her hair, she opened the door and peered down the hallway. No one was in sight. Then she noticed a cream-colored envelope at her feet.

Picking it up, she broke the wax seal and drew out a folded note.

After my unpardonable behavior of yesterday. I can do no more than beg you to forgive me. I am not a patient man, my Claire, and I have a deplorable tendency to be ruled by my passions. You are very much a lady. I, unfortunately, was anything but a gentleman.

I have gone to the cut to paint — a wise move in view of everything, wouldn't you say? You have all day to be angry with me!

If you can endure me once more by tomorrow, I should like to take you to Portobelo, an old Spanish fortress-town that lies on the sea not far from here. Fascinating place. Promise to behave myself.

Yours,

André

With something that was half-sigh, half-chuckle, Claire folded the note and slipped it into the drawer where the mysterious *wanga* still lay, its leather thong coiled like a snake. Yes, she would forgive him. Who could hold anything against such a charming rascal?

There were no roads leading to Portobelo, which lay some twenty miles up the coast from Col—n, so they would be taking a boat from

the Front Street docks. They'd made their departure before dawn, so early that even Léon had not arrived at the house. It was Philippe who'd fed the horses and hitched up the two of them to the larger carriage. To André's open displeasure, he'd insisted on coming along as soon as he'd heard their plans. "Even a doctor needs a holiday now and then," he'd said, and although Claire had thought it strange in view of his dedication to his work, she'd been relieved. She was not quite ready for a day alone with André.

Marie-Thérèse, who'd been clambering for another outing ever since the trip to Panama City, was included, of course, and so was Lizette. Simone, who would have to stay at home with Angélique, had prepared the picnic lunch for them — a cause for rejoicing, since she was a true artist in the kitchen. Once Claire had suggested to Philippe that Simone exchange her duties with Lizette, whose culinary ineptness was legendary in the house. "Impossible," he'd answered gruffly. "No one but Simone can manage Angélique, and there's not enough time left for her to cook."

Still, every now and then, they were treated to one of Simone's masterpieces — fish so crisp and flaky that it fell apart at the touch of a fork, biscuits that almost dissolved on the tongue, rice cooked with local vegetables, scintillatingly seasoned. Since coming to Panama, she had conquered *seviche*, that unique blend of raw fish or scallops, onions, and hot peppers, marinated in lime juice, which "cooked" the fish. She usually served it in tiny pastry shells that were as light and thin as bubbles.

Claire lifted the lid of the picnic hamper, which was on the seat beside her, and took a furtive sniff. When she raised her eyes, she caught Philippe looking at her, a little half-smile on his tired face. He gave her a conspiratorial wink, a surprising gesture coming from him.

"Chicken," she whispered. "And rice, of course. *Patacones*, I think, and biscuits with marmalade. And, oh, *seviche*, I'm sure of it, in that little jar with the lid. We're all going to pop!"

"I could use that." He leaned back in the seat beside André, who was handling the reins. Lizette, Marie-Thérèse, and Claire shared the back scat with the picnic basket. André had brought his paints, brushes, and a couple of canvases.

They drove through a yawning Col—n, just beginning to bustle with vendors on their way, to market and housewives out for pre-

breakfast shopping. A grizzled fishmonger hawked his freshly caught red snappers on a street corner. Buzzards flapped up from the rooftops to begin their daytime circling on the rising currents of air.

The small schooner, which also carried mail from Colon to Portobelo and back, was tied up alongside one of the Front Street docks, its barefoot, sixtyish owner just downing a breakfast of fresh corn, mashed into patties and fried, and thick, black Colombian coffee in a tin mug. While Philippe saw to the tending of the horses and carriage, André helped the others aboard the schooner. He was cheerful, but forcedly so. His manner made it plain that he had hoped to make the trip alone with Claire.

Marie-Thérèse had never been in a boat before. At first she clung to Claire like an octopus, all arms and legs, but she soon forgot her fear, and it was all Claire could do to keep her from leaning too far through the rail to catch the spray with her hands.

"It's salty, Mam'selle! Taste it, Papa!" She held out a sea-wet hand to Philippe, who smiled and obligingly touched her fingertips with his tongue.

"So it is!" he exclaimed.

From her place beside André, Claire studied Philippe. He had been at the hospital most of the night, she knew, tending to the victims of a fire aboard a boat. That he had still wanted to come with them was surprising in view of how tired he was. The hollows under his eyes had deepened, the creases at the corners sharpened. He looked old.

The prow of the little schooner cut laboriously through the choppy, wind-whipped sea. Although Portobelo lay a scant twenty miles up the coast, they would not arrive there until lunchtime because they were running into the wind and the craft had to tack — to angle sharply to the right, then the left, in a zigzag pattern that would carry them several times the original distance of the journey. Claire fought an annoying nausea that would not go away no matter how much she willed it, and consoled herself with the knowledge that the return trip, with the wind at their backs, would take little more than two hours.

They stayed close to the mangrove-fringed shore, where they glimpsed occasional grass huts and canoes tied up on the dark sands of the beaches. At times they saw flashes of chocolate brown coral reef against the white froth of the pounding waves. The sun was high and

hot when they sighted the black stone fortifications that lined the harbor of Portobelo.

"The Inca gold from Peru passed through this place," André was telling Claire. "For years and years — all the wealth from South America — it tunneled right up through Portobelo and off to Spain."

"There's not much left of the place now," added Philippe. "Just a little town and the ruins of the old forts, the church, and the customs house. Morgan did his share of damage in the mid-1600s and finally in 1739 the British took the town and blew up the main fort."

They sailed into the sudden calm of the harbor, just as such towering figures as Columbus, Pizarro, Sir Francis Drake, and Henry Morgan had done before them. The sleepy little settlement of Portobelo lolled around its shoreline, protected by the ghosts of Spanish defenders who still prowled its ruined walls. The roofless skeleton of the massive, two-storied customs house that had known the gold, emeralds, pearls, and slaves of an entire continent rose above it.

When the schooner had been secured at the rickety quay, they disembarked. Everyone was hungry, and Marie-Thérèse was hot and cranky as well. Claire held her parasol carefully above the little girl to keep the sun off her fair skin. The sky was glassy and the sunlight reflected off the water with blistering intensity.

Instead of going into town, they wandered down along the old seawall where Spanish cannons, pitted with age, their carriages long rotted away, still lay poised to meet the invaders that no longer came.

Their skipper had left at once and set off to cool his throat at a nearby cantina. On a little rise, beneath the canopy of a tamarind tree, the rest of them spread their blanket with the tablecloth in the middle. Then they fell upon Simone's banquet and ate until every last delicious crumb had disappeared.

André was the first to finish, and he announced that he was going to a spot further down along the seawall to paint. "Want to come, Claire?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Not just yet," she said, noticing how his face fell. Marie-Thérèse was still eating and was so cross that Claire neither wished to leave her with anyone else nor to take her along to watch André paint. "Give me a little time to see if I can get her settled," she said. "Then I'll come. You go ahead."

He gathered up his easel, canvases, and paints, which he carried in a leather pouch, and set off at a trot. Soon he was out of sight.

Lizette was gathering up the last of the dishes, napkins, and debris. "M'sieu' Philippe," she said, "when I told my mama we were going to Portobelo, she asked me to light a candle for her at the Shrine of the Black Christ. You'll let me go, yes?"

"Certainly," answered Philippe. "Just don't be too long. We'll need to be leaving by midafternoon."

"It won't take long," she chirped, smoothing her hair and straightening the scarf that was tied loosely about her neck and which would go on her head when she entered the church. She stood up, brushed the crumbs from her skirt, and set off down the path toward the main part of town, her little rump swinging enticingly.

Except for Marie-Thérèse, who had put her head in Claire's lap and closed her eyes. Claire was alone with Philippe. He leaned back on one elbow and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "Sir Francis Drake's buried out there, you know," he said. "Right out there at the entrance to the harbor. He was on his way to attack Portobelo and died just before he reached the place. His men lowered his body down into the water in a lead coffin. It's still there."

Claire looked out at the placid waters. Her spine tingled as she imagined England's legendary pirate-hero sleeping beneath them in his casket of lead. For the first time, she experienced a sense of Panama's historical richness. Sitting there with Marie-Thérèse's head on her knees, she pictured Spanish galleons under full sail, gliding into the harbor laden with their cargoes of gold, jewels, slaves, exotic birds and animals, all destined for the royal court of Spain. In her mind, she visualized the customs house, bustling with trade from many lands; she saw the chest of gold, the proud Incas in chains, the long trains of burros that carted the fabulous burdens from the Pacific side of the Isthmus through the jungle to Portobelo for shipment to Europe. Bearded men in steel armor, long cutlasses dangling at their hips; dark-eyed women in ruffled skirts and mantillas; pirates, soldiers of fortune . . .

Claire gazed at the weathered cannons, still holding place at the gaps in the walls. "I can almost hear them firing," she said to Philippe. There was no answer. When she looked back at him, she saw that he had fallen asleep with his head pillowed on his arm, his profile dark

against the white of his shirt-sleeve. She sat and watched the rise and fall of his back as he breathed in and out, the faint flutter of black lashes against his golden-brown cheeks. She studied the weariness that lay in every line and shadow of his face. Such a strong face it was. No trace of delicacy or softness in those harsh, jutting features. Even in the innocence of sleep, Philippe Jarnac had the look of a man who might be capable of murder.

She stayed beside him, looking out at the sea, until Lizette came back — not from the direction of the town but from the direction André had gone. “M’sieu’ André, he wants you to come,” she said saucily, strutting up to the blanket. There was a new string of glass beads around her neck with a crudely carved wooden crucifix dangling from it, a souvenir, no doubt, of the shrine. She glanced quickly down at the sleeping Marie-Thérèse in Claire’s lap. “I’ll mind her,” she said. “M’sieu’ André wants you to come right away. He asked me why you took so long, Mam’selle.”

Claire eased her knees out from under the golden head and stood up, brushing the creases from the skirt of Angélique’s pale yellow organdy. “Be careful not to wake Monsieur Philippe,” she warned Lizette. “He’s very tired.”

“Mmm-hmm. I know, Mam’selle. Now you go. Shoo!” She laughed nervously, showing her little pointed teeth. Lizette, you minx, Claire thought.

She followed the seawall and found André at the foot of a knoll, his easel set up in front of him. He was working on a half-finished painting of the harbor. His work, she noticed, was not up to its usual fine standard. The paints looked as if they’d been smeared hastily onto the canvas, without André’s usual meticulousness. “Look at it!” he scowled as she came up beside him. “Everything’s wrong! I can’t even get the perspective right!”

“It’s not so bad,” Claire soothed him. “But for you — ”

“For André Jarnac it’s not good enough! A ten-year-old could do better!” He stepped back from the canvas and frowned until his eyebrows met above his nose. Then he gave her a heart-melting smile. “But with you here, *chérie*, maybe I will do better, eh? Inspiration! That’s what I need!”

While Claire sat on a handy block of stone beside him, he dabbed away at the painting, cocking his head at it periodically, still frowning.

"I wanted some time alone with you," he said. "When I invited you to come here, I didn't mean to make a family outing of it."

"We're alone now," she said, her heart picking up speed. "The others can't see or hear us." She was wary, wondering whether André's performance would be a repeat of yesterday's.

He studied the canvas for a long time, his brown eyes focused inward on his own thoughts. "I've never met a girl like you, Claire," he said at last. "You're such a lady. And it's genuine. It's not the kind of act that so many women put on. You're a real lady."

"Thank you, André."

"I haven't always kept the best company in my life," he went on. "Maybe that's why I couldn't believe you were different. Maybe that's why I've fallen in love with you."

She sat welded to the block of stone, her heart thudding. What did André want from her?

"If you've nothing to say to that, Claire, well, I can't blame you. I've behaved like — a beast! This time I'm coming to you on your own terms. I'll be anything you want me to be. I just don't want to lose you."

Strangely numb, she sat and looked at him. Was it true? Had André really just told her he loved her? And did he mean it? "May I have a little time to get used to it, André?" she whispered.

"Anything you say, *chérie*. Your terms. That's what I said." He exploded with a nervous chuckle. "Well, with that out of my system, maybe I can finish my painting. Don't you move, lovely lady! Not unless it's to come over here and kiss me!"

Claire sat and watched him paint, wondering why she did not get up, walk the distance between them, and touch his arm. Was it the old self-doubt? That same old fear of being hurt, of finding out that he'd only said what he had because he wanted something from her?

André made a show of concentrating on his work. "Part of the problem with this thing," he muttered, "is this cursed brush! Too coarse! Claire, my sweet, you could do me a favor. There's a good sable brush at the bottom of my pouch, under the tubes of paint. Would you get it for me?"

She nodded and stood up. "Where did you say the pouch was?"

"Over to your left. In the grass."

Claire found the leather pouch, sitting in the long, dry grass. "Here it is," she said. "You say the brush is in the bottom?"

"That's right. Under the paints. You may have to feel around for it a little, but I'm sure I put it there."

Claire picked up the pouch. It was deep and its opening was not wide. Seeing down into the dark interior was difficult, so she reached in with her hand, moving aside the tubes of paint with their rolled-up bottoms, groping for the hard slenderness of the brush.

Something moved against her fingers. Something cool and slightly rough that contained a life of its own. With a little gasp, she jerked her hand out of the pouch.

"What's the matter, Claire?"

"There's something in here, André. I don't know . . . a lizard, maybe . . . "

"Can you see it?"

She shook her head. "It's dark down there!"

André sighed. "Well, bring it to me then. We'll see what it is."

She brought him the pouch. He put it down on the ground with the flap open. Gingerly, he nudged it with his foot. Nothing happened. "You're imagining things," he said, bending over to pick up the pouch.

"No!" She pushed his hand away. "There's something in there! I felt it move!" Kneeling down quickly, before he could stop her, she picked up the pouch by its bottom seam and carefully shook it. Tubes of oil paint began to tumble out.

"See," said André. "I told you — " He choked on his own words as something small and bright slithered out of the pouch. It was an exquisite little snake. Its head was black; its slender body, no bigger around than Claire's smallest finger and no longer than her forearm, was banded like a string of Indian beads, in rings of yellow, black, yellow again, red . . . by the time she'd remembered the details of Philippe's lesson on snake differentiation, the deadly little creature had wriggled off into the grass. Claire's knees began to wilt.

"*Mon . . . Dieu!*" André breathed. "Claire!" His arms went around her and he pulled her close to him. She was shaking now, her breath coming in gasps. "If you'd been bitten . . . " He held her tightly. She clung to him until the shaking had stopped.

"André, how did it get in there?"

He shook his head. "I was stupid enough to leave the pouch open in the grass. They like to crawl into dark places. Claire, if you'd been bitten, it would have been my fault — "

"Shhh!" She reached up to stop his lips with her finger. He clasped her hand and kissed it. "Don't talk about it, André. Nothing happened. I'm all right." She put her head against his chest. Her thoughts raced with dizzying speed. She pictured the coral snake crawling into André's leather pouch, and then she thought of the snake on her bed. She remembered how Simone had placed it there, between the pillows.

It didn't make sense. The coral snake had been found in André's pouch, not in something of hers. Would Simone want to kill André? She fought to clear her mind. Simone. Those long, black hands . . .

Then it hit her with a shock that it might not have been Simone at all. Anyone in the house could have put the snake in André's paint pouch. Lizette, Philippe, even Angélique. But why should anyone want to harm André? It didn't make sense. In the end, she returned to the only logical conclusion: that the snake had crawled from the grass into André's pouch on its own.

With his arms about Claire's shoulders. André guided her back to the stone block where she'd been sitting. "Sit down," he commanded. "I have to talk to you."

She lowered herself to the stone and he crouched at her feet, his hands holding hers. "Claire," he began slowly, "we just can't stay in Panama. It's not safe."

The questions flared up into her eyes.

"It's Prestan's organization," he said. "They've gotten wind of the fact that I've been helping you investigate Paul's problem. They don't like it. And they play rough, my sweet."

"What can we do?"

"We can get out of here and go back to France. You, right away. On the next boat. I — as soon as I can arrange it."

"Philippe — "

"Philippe doesn't own me. I can leave when I wish. It's just that things will be a little harder without his support. I'll tell him to go to the devil! Then I'll just take my paintings and leave!"

"The hearing — " she protested.

"Forget the hearing! Damn it, forget Paul! He's beyond your help! He wasn't even faithful to you!" He gripped her hands hard. "Claire, do you love me? Even a little?"

"André . . . " she began painfully. He was pushing her feelings faster than she could understand them herself.

"Even a little?" He squeezed her hands.

"André," she whispered, "I think that in time I could grow to love you very much."

With a sigh he pressed her fingers to his lips. "Then, for now, that's enough," he murmured. "Will you go back then? And will you wait until I come to Paris? And after that —"

"After that, we'll see what happens, André. It's too soon to make promises," she said softly. "But the hearing — I've already been through so much for it. I want to see it to the end. Then I'll go."

"But why?" His eyes pled with her. "*Chérie*, I want you safe!"

"Is it so dangerous, André? Is my staying so critical that they'd harm me?"

"Why take a chance on it? I want you out of here, Claire!"

She weighed his words. Maybe she was being foolish, but the threat of Prestan and his henchmen did not really frighten her. Maybe that was because she could not believe that they considered her a danger to them. Her attempts to prove Paul's innocence had met with frustration at every turn. She felt little closer to the truth than she had during her first days in Panama. Yet, if André had drawn the attention of the renegade leader, perhaps they were closer to the answer than either of them suspected.

"I've made up my mind, André." She let go of his hands and rose to her feet. "I'm staying. And I'm not giving up hope."

He sighed wearily. "Then heaven help us both, Claire."

"Will you see it through with me?"

"Yes, but only because I love you." He put his hands on her shoulders and drew her close. Grateful, she let herself go to him until her head was resting against his shoulder. He cradled her tenderly. "My poor, brave little girl," he said.

He might have kissed her then, but she happened to raise her head and look back over his shoulder. There at the top of the knoll, not more than twenty yards away, Philippe stood looking down at them.

His gaze met Claire's. Even at that distance, she could read the distress in those black eyes. Abruptly, he turned and strode away, back down the other side of the knoll, in the direction of the town.

Two frigate birds dropped from the sky and skimmed low over the water of the harbor, the sun glinting on their dark plumage and long,

scissorlike tails. Philippe, his cheeks still burning, followed them with his eyes.

He should have guessed about Claire and André, he lashed himself. It was the most natural thing in the world. She was lonely, and André could be charming when he put his mind to it.

With his hands in his pockets, he strode back up the quay toward the brown coral sand of the beach. The thin boards creaked and trembled under his feet. What luck, he told himself bitterly, that sleep had kept him from making a fool of himself.

It was Sister Gertrude, the little nun at the hospital, who'd pushed him to the brink of it. Sister Gertrude. If she'd lived in ancient Greece, the woman would have been revered as an oracle; if she'd been plunked on earth in a biblical setting, no doubt she'd have been hailed as a prophetess; if she'd been born in time for the French Revolution, she'd have made a superb spy. Coupled with the curiosity of a cat and the tenacity of a badger. Sister Gertrude had an uncanny ability to strip away a man's facade and see into the very recesses of his soul. In the two years Philippe had worked with her, she had managed to pry most of his secrets out of him, including the state of his relationship with Angélique.

"And our little widow, the poor child . . . Claire? Is that her name? She broke my heart that day How's she getting on with your daughter?" She'd asked him about Claire almost every morning, her ferret's mind taking careful record of his answers, both spoken and unspoken. Nothing escaped her eyes or ears. She collected fragments, a word here, a shrug or a glance there, saving them all until she had enough to piece together an accurate picture of the whole. The futility of trying to keep anything from her was almost frightening.

Philippe came to the end of the quay and sat down on its edge. He closed his eyes briefly, still exquisitely weary after the sleepless night before. Some fool on a freighter out in Lim—n Bay had dropped a lantern into a hold that contained, among other things, a supply of blasting powder. The explosion had created a nightmare of smoke, flames, screaming men, and burned bodies that had kept the entire staff at the hospital until dawn, binding wounds, dressing burns, and administering morphine to those who were so badly injured that they could not stand the pain. Only two men had died; it could have been worse, Philippe reminded himself. He saw death and pain every day,

so much that he'd numbed himself to the touch of it. He'd become an automaton, moving through his paces without thinking or feeling, applying one more dressing, giving one more injection, one more dose of quinine, covering one more still face with the bedsheet . . .

The night had been interminably long. Toward its end, Philippe had wanted nothing more than to go home, fling himself onto his bed, and sleep; but sleep, he knew, would not be enough. He needed to get away, to escape for a time to the freshness of sea wind and salt spray, to Portobelo and to Claire.

Sister Gertrude had worked at his side through the night, functioning like an extra pair of his own arms. They'd moved from one fire victim to the next, stopping only to scrub their hands and to rest by leaning against the wall, gulping mugs of black coffee to keep themselves alert. At last, toward dawn, the work had begun to thin out. They'd had time to step onto the porch for a few precious minutes of fresh air and quiet. With the little nun beside him, he'd leaned on the railing. As he breathed deeply, clearing his lungs of the stink of burnt flesh and antiseptic, he'd looked east to the gray dawn and found in its clouds the color of Claire's eyes.

"Why don't you speak to her, Philippe?" The words could have come from his own tired mind, but it was Sister Gertrude who had spoken them, and he knew it would be useless to deny that he knew what she meant. Her use of his first name was unconventional, but then she was an unconventional woman, especially for a nun.

"You know why I don't. I can't."

She was silent for a few moments; then she moved her plump hand along the porch railing until it rested on his. Again, an unconventional gesture, but she was fifty years old and her attitude toward him was almost motherly. "Philippe," she spoke softly, "when Our Lord ordained marriage as holy, I can't imagine that He intended any man to suffer the kind of misery that you have." She touched the gold ring on her own finger. "I'm speaking to you now as a friend, not as a nun. You're not Catholic. You're not tied to her." She gazed up at him earnestly, with small eyes that were as deep blue as sapphires. "Must I say it?"

He shook his head. "I've thought of it. But I feel responsible for her, Sister. And now that she seems to be getting better . . . Until I know what's going to happen, I'm in no position to speak to anyone."

"But does the girl care for you? Has she given you any indication —?"

He put his elbows on the rail and listened to the waves of the Caribbean as they lapped against the pilings below their feet. "She's still grieving for her husband."

Sister Gertrude gave an impatient little sniff. "And I'll wager all you've done is growl at her! I know you, Philippe Jarnac! You'll never find out anything that way!" She turned her face toward him and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Give yourself a chance! Don't be afraid to let your feelings show a little. Get her alone and *talk* with her . . . she might surprise you!"

Philippe had taken her advice — almost. He got up from the quay, brushed the sand from his trousers, and walked back toward the town to find the captain of the schooner. What a bumpkin he'd been! He'd finally found himself alone with her; then he'd mumbled some inanity about Sir Francis Drake and promptly gone to sleep. Well, that was for the best in view of the fact that he'd awakened, gone looking for her, and found her in André's arms.

He examined his own feelings, trying to be as detached as possible. He was desolate, yes, because he had not fully realized how much he needed her until she had slipped out of his reach. And he was hurt. He had his pride. But the more he thought about it, the more Philippe realized that his strongest feeling was one of concern. André, the André he knew —

A flock of sandpipers drifted across his path, exploding into peeping flight at the sound of his footsteps. He watched them as they scattered into the wind. André was charming. He was handsome. He was remarkably gifted, so gifted that his paintings might make him famous one day. But — Philippe shook his head — God help the girl who married him!

Fifteen

The boat trip back to Col—n was a nervous ordeal. Marie-Thérèse, who had not had her sleep out, was as cranky as a little owl. Philippe had immersed himself in a cold silence that was broken only by impersonal comments on the birds and fish they saw. André squirmed uncomfortably in his icy presence, avoiding Claire's eyes. Only Lizette seemed to be enjoying herself. She leaned back against the side of the boat, taking in the three of them with mischievous glances and laughing behind her face.

Out of the corner of her eye, Claire contemplated Philippe's stern features. He was disturbed, that was evident. But she could only guess at the reason. Perhaps he was upset because he considered her an unfit match for his brother.

She wondered why he had come to the knoll just in time to see them together. He might have awakened and missed her, she reflected, but surely he would have known that she would be with André.

Marie-Thérèse shifted and whimpered on her lap. "Shhh, little love," Claire quieted her. "Close your eyes. We'll be home soon." She looked down at her hands where they lay clasped around the little body, and she remembered how near the snake had come to biting her finger. Since the episode of the snake on the bed, she had done some reading from Philippe's book on reptiles. The coral snake, like its relative the cobra, injected its victim with a poison that attacked and paralyzed the nerves. More often than not, death came when the paralysis reached the diaphragm and rib muscles. The victim, unable to breathe, would die of asphyxiation.

Like Bertrand.

Her imagination was running wild now. Blinking her eyes, she tried to blot away the vision of Bertrand's lacerated face. Her mind had

stumbled onto an idea so heinous that she could hardly stand to think of it, yet so logical that she could not dismiss it as her own fantasy. Bertrand had died of snakebite — or at least of a dose of venom. The scratches could have been put on his face to draw attention from the real death wound, or even to hide it.

Her mind careened on. She was powerless to stop it as it raced to its next awful conclusion. If a snake had been used as an instrument of murder once, then why not again? The killer could have slipped the reptile into André's paint pouch at any time, knowing that sooner or later André would be reaching inside to get a tube of paint or a brush. Claire shivered in the hot sun of late afternoon. If her idea was correct, André had already taken enough tubes of paint out of the pouch to begin his painting, without disturbing the snake. It was by pure luck that she had felt the sleek body move beneath her fingers. André might not have been so fortunate. Afterward, the two of them had agreed to say nothing to the others about the snake. Claire had no doubt of it now that they had made a wise decision.

She looked at Philippe again. His eyes were following the flight of an albatross as it disappeared into the setting sun. Once more, she returned to the question of his appearance on the knoll. She had already established his connection with Prestan, and that explained a great deal, especially since Prestan knew that André was helping her. Claire felt a chill envelop her body. Perhaps Philippe had come to the knoll expecting to find André already dead or dying. Maybe that was why he had looked so disturbed. The pieces fit together neatly. Almost too neatly, she told herself as she studied his imperious profile against the glow of the sky. Was Philippe the victim of too many unpleasant coincidences, or was she looking at a man who had murdered his servant and who had just tried to kill his own brother?

By the time they reached the house, darkness had fallen. Léon was waiting to see to the horse and carriage. Simone stood at the foot of the stairs, her face impassive as Claire deposited the sleeping Marie-Thérèse in her arms. Philippe had already disappeared into the library.

A large white envelope, sealed with wax and bearing the stamp of the French Canal Company, lay on the dining room table. André, who was still with Claire, picked it up, glanced at the name on the outside, then broke the seal and drew out an engraved card.

"Well, look at this, Claire. You're in luck!" he exclaimed. "Old Man de Lesseps himself will be passing through Panama next week. We've been invited to a ball and reception in his honor."

"We . . . ?"

"You. Me. Philippe. These sort of things don't generally include the children or the blacks. And nobody invites Angélique anymore."

De Lesseps. Claire had missed seeing him in Paris, but she had always wanted to meet the man who was responsible for the promotion of the canal. "When?" she asked eagerly.

"Week from tonight. And you wear your fanciest, Madame!"

"André?"

"Mmm?" He squeezed her shoulder.

"Does that mean you've accepted the idea of my staying in Panama until the hearing?" She wondered whether she should warn him about Philippe, then decided to wait.

"Claire, my sweet," he beamed, "I'll accept anything if you want it badly enough. Even against my better judgment." And he drew her close with one arm and kissed her lightly on the lips.

The week passed uneventfully — that is, it did unless Angélique's growing interest in Marie-Thérèse could be counted as an event. Philippe's beautiful wife was making dramatic strides toward recovery. Her playing was brilliant; her memory astounding. She often played entire concertos without the aid of sheet music, her flying fingers never missing a note.

Still she did not speak. Her gaze was bright and alert. She seemed to understand everything that was said in her presence. But her voice remained silent. It was almost as if she were holding back, deliberately waiting and watching.

Claire followed her progress with amazement. André regarded it with a surprising lack of interest. Philippe reacted to the changes in his wife's condition by fleeing to the hospital, where he had spent most of his time since the outing to Portobelo. Claire saw little of him.

It was with a surge of triumph that she noted the growing interaction between Angélique and her daughter. Philippe had been wrong, she told herself, when he had disparaged the idea of his wife's becoming a real mother to the child.

At first Angélique only watched Marie-Thérèse from a distance. That in itself was significant, since she had not paid the slightest attention to her before. Whenever the little girl came into the blue sitting room. Angélique's eyes would flash with life and she would watch her the way a cat watches the birds in the trees from behind a glass window.

Marie-Thérèse was drawn to the library by the sound of her mother's playing. Often Claire would find her curled in Philippe's big armchair after Angélique had finished, lulled to sleep by the music. There was no sign of affection between the two of them; only a curiosity that was shy on Marie-Thérèse's part and open on Angélique's. Yet Claire regarded that much as a good sign of things to come.

Simone, too, seemed to look upon the change in her mistress as a happy one. Even her attitude toward Claire had grown less harsh. Together they watched Angélique unfold like a flower, each petal lovelier than the last. Claire waited anxiously for the bud that was Angélique's closed-off mind to open completely. By now, she was certain that it would.

Claire had stopped wearing Angélique's clothes when Angélique began to look at them with flickers of recognition in her eyes. In her spare time, she had let the seams out again and taken the lovely, airy things back to Simone. Her own clothes, prim and uncomfortable as they might be, would do her for the short time that remained.

Claire had brought one gown with her from Paris that she judged elegant enough for the de Lesseps ball: ottoman silk in a deep shade of amber that matched the highlights in her hair. It was amply cut at the neck to show the tops of her shoulders, pinched in at the tiny middle, and gathered high in back to form a graceful cascade from waist to floor. The sleeves were short and puffed, designed to be worn with long, white gloves, and she had a pair of dangling topaz earrings Paul's mother had worn that matched the dress perfectly. It had been one of Paul's favorites and when she unpacked it from the trunk a few days before the ball to let the creases hang out of it, her throat tightened. She remembered the parties and musical receptions in Paris, her hand on Paul's arm, his eyes laughing down into hers. Never again, she reminded herself, as she thought of Marta and wondered how the mother of Paul's child remembered him.

On the afternoon before the ball, she had gone looking for Marie-Thérèse and found the little girl, as she often did, in the blue sitting room. Angélique was eating her lunch from the blue Limoges plates on her little table, and Marie-Thérèse sat across from her, not eating, but watching her mother's every bite with her big eyes. The table was set, as usual, with an extra place for Angélique's dead twin, and there were small portions of rice and plantain piled on the plate.

As Claire entered the room, she saw Marie-Thérèse climb down from her chair, walk over to the extra plate, and pick up a slice of plantain in her fingers.

Simone erupted from her rocking chair. "No child!" she snapped. "That's not for you! Put it back!" She snatched away the hand of the bewildered Marie-Thérèse, who began to wail. Simone glanced around and saw Claire. "Best you take her out of here, Mam'selle!"

Claire gathered Marie-Thérèse into her arms, carried her into her room, and snuggled her on the bed until she stopped crying. It had been a long time since she'd given any thought to Simone's custom of setting a place for Angélique's dead twin. Her curiosity piqued, she remembered to ask Lizette about the matter that evening as, in preparation for the ball, the girl helped her with the long row of buttons that ran up the back of her dress.

"The vodun worship twins, Mam'selle," she answered in a whisper as she fumbled with the buttons at the waist. "The *marassa*, they call them. They pray to them . . . give them presents. So you see, Mam'selle, Madame Angélique is almost like — a goddess to Simone!" Her nimble fingers worked their way up the middle of Claire's back, pulling each loop over its minuscule, silk-covered button. "Only one thing stronger than twins, Mam'selle. A *dosu*!" She paused for an instant to stretch her cramped hands. "A *dosu* is the baby born next after twins. It has the power of the twins and its own power too. Nothing makes for stronger magic than a *dosu*!"

Claire stood still, tingling eerily as she remembered Simone's reaction when she'd remarked to the woman that her older brother was a twin. She remembered Simone's attitude toward her, cold, but grudgingly respectful, most fearful at times. She was a *dosu*! And Simone had known it all along!

What was the matter with her? She held no belief in the superstitions of vodun. She had always dismissed them as drivel. Yet she had

just felt a sudden surge of power. She, Claire Sagan, was a *dosu*! A being of great strength! She felt like laughing.

"Tell me, Lizette — " she smiled benignly down at the girl — "you're a good Catholic. You paid a visit to the Black Christ of Portobelo for your mother. Do you really believe in vodun?"

Lizette was caught off guard by the question. Her bright eyes grew large. Instinctively, one hand flew to the little bulge that the charm made under her blouse. "Mam'selle," she whispered. "I don't *like* vodun. It can be a bad thing, and my mama didn't raise me that way. But I can tell you things I've seen . . . " She glanced around as if she were afraid someone might be listening. "Don't make me talk about it, Mam'selle. I don't want to!" With her lips pressed tightly together, she finished buttoning the back of Claire's dress. Then she stepped back a little to survey the results.

"Ahhh!" she breathed. "Beautiful, Mam'selle! M'sieu' André, he's going to pop off his buttons!" She cocked her pert head to one side. "Now you tell *me* something. You going to marry M'sieu' André, eh?"

Claire felt the blood flowing into her face. "It's — much too soon to know, Lizette," she said, trying to sound stern. "Besides, that's none of your affair!"

At her answer, Lizette threw back her head and laughed. She was still laughing as she twirled out of the door and skipped down the stairs to the kitchen.

Both Philippe and André were waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. Claire descended slowly, step by step, watching André's smile broaden at the sight of her. As always, he was dressed in white, in a lightweight tropical suit that was perhaps a bit informal for the occasion, but which became him marvelously. With his perfectly chiseled features and tousled curls, he reminded Claire of a portrait of the young Lord Byron that she'd seen once in London. Philippe, in more traditional black, was elegant in his lean, wolflike way. She compared the two brothers as she came down the stairs toward them. In evening clothes, Philippe was the more striking of the pair. He was taller and more slender than André and, with his lordly features, he looked every inch the aristocrat he was. André looked like an artist. Beaming, he stepped forward and offered Claire his arm. With Philippe leading the way, they swept out into the tropical darkness.

The de Lesseps mansion glowed like a jewel in the night. By Parisian standards the big house, with its pillared porches and lacy balconies, would not have been considered so grand. But here in Panama, it represented the peak of style and luxury. Vacant much of the year, it blazed to life when de Lesseps or some other important dignitary chose to visit the canal. Then the lights flared on; the crystal and silver were polished till they gleamed, and the music and champagne flowed in abundance.

Claire blinked her eyes as they entered, dazzled by the brilliance of light reflecting off the thousand tiny prisms of the crystal chandeliers. In the middle of the hall, a few couples were dancing a lively waltz to the music of a string quartet that had, arrived on the boat with the de Lesseps party. She wondered at first why more couples were not dancing, but she soon guessed the reason. The men in the hall outnumbered the women at least four to one. Every girl, no matter how plain, was a belle here. As she stood between André and Philippe, Claire studied the faces of the women as they swirled past. Some of them were fresh and young, dressed in the latest Paris modes. These were new arrivals, brides, sweethearts, adventuresses, just off the boat. Other faces, equally lovely, wore the patina of endurance and suffering. These women had come early with their men to Panama. They had battled heat, insects, disease; seen loved ones die and dreams vanish. These, Claire reflected, were the true nobility of this strange society.

She gazed out at the polished dance floor where couples glided past, creating a rainbow in motion. The picture looked so inviting. It had been more than a year since she'd attended a dance. The last time had been with Paul, back in Paris. As if he had read Claire's thoughts, André offered her his arm with a little bow and led her out into the whirling maze of dancers, leaving Philippe standing at the sidelines.

She smiled up at him. "This is wonderful," she said. "Thank you for bringing me, André."

"Wait till we're back in Paris! I'll take you to all the balls!" He gave the small of her back a little pinch where he held her. He danced superbly — but then he did most things superbly.

"Paris . . . " she whispered. "Do you think we'll ever see Paris again?"

"Seems far away, doesn't it? But I'm making my plans, Claire. For both of us." He laughed down into her eyes and she waited for the

surge of happy warmth that did not come. She glanced over to the corner of the room where Philippe was involved in an intense conversation with the dapper, balding Philippe Buneau Varilla, the canal's chief engineer.

"You know, André," she said, "I think your brother would miss you if you left."

"Philippe?" André gave a bitter chuckle. "Ah, yes, he'll miss me! He'll have one less life to run! That's how he'll miss me! But don't worry about him, *chérie*. He'll have his precious hospital for company. And this damned canal, for as long as it lasts."

"As long as it lasts?"

"You haven't heard? The canal's in trouble! They're running out of funds! Even Old Man de Lesseps can't pull francs out of thin air, my dear!"

Claire had heard rumors of financial problems with the canal, even back in Paris. "But it can't be that serious! Surely the canal will be finished! Isn't that what de Lesseps always says?"

"My sweet Claire! You're as naive as the rest of them. De Lesseps is an old man! He's gone soft in the head! Investors in the canal have lost millions of francs. They've lost confidence in de Lesseps and in this whole cursed project! Give it a few more months. A year or two at the very most! Then it's all going to collapse! Just wait and see!"

In silence she moved with him to the rhythm of the waltz. What a cynical prediction. Yet painful as it was, she had to admit that André was probably right. The canal could not be finished without the investment of staggering sums of money and, apparently, there was little money to be had.

Not that Claire had any love for the canal. It had stolen Paul's heart and life from her. But when she thought of the millions already spent, the time, the effort, the lost lives . . . to throw it all away!

She looked at the dancers around her — men who had washed off the thick, Panamanian mud, slicked down their hair, and dressed in their finest for an evening of forgetting, of pretending that all was well and that they were engaged in a triumphant undertaking that could not help but succeed. She looked at the women, fighting defeat and despair behind their pretty, tired faces. Suddenly she wanted to weep for them all.

But the music was lively and gay. A stranger, young, with red hair and freckles, asked her to dance and André graciously released her.

The stranger was followed by another, then another, all of them youthful, polite, and pleasant, until she had lost track of the number of men who had whirled her around the dance floor. She was tired and a little dizzy by the time she realized that the arms holding her had become Philippe's. Her heart stopped as she looked up into those deep black eyes. Her skin tingled.

For the first few minutes he said nothing. Although his dancing lacked the expertise of André's, Philippe moved with an easy grace on the dance floor, so that she was almost unaware of the steps of the waltz. She was conscious only of his tall, cool presence, of the pressure of his fingers against the small of her back, her right hand resting in the hollow of his big palm. There was a tightness in him that she could feel.

"So it's you and André, is it?" he asked at last, in a casual tone that did not fool her at all.

"Maybe," she answered, feigning a lightness which, she suspected, did not fool him either. "Does that bother you?"

"Not if you love him. Not if he can make you happy." His eyes were as melancholy as she'd ever seen them. Claire tilted her head back to study him as they drifted around the dance floor. The hall, the dancers, even the music seemed to recede into the distance until she felt very much alone with him.

"It . . . does bother you, Philippe," she whispered. "Doesn't it? Why?"

Something hard slid into place inside his eyes and his vulnerability retreated behind it. He did not answer her.

"Is it because I'm not highborn like you? Is it . . . because of Bicêtre?"

"Good Lord!"

"Well, then, what is it?"

He looked trapped. She could feel him groping for words. "André's an artist," he began awkwardly. "And most artists have their . . . peculiarities. It won't be an easy life for a woman, Claire."

"I know that."

"He hasn't any money of his own. Our father disinherited him."

"I've known that from the beginning," she snapped, irritated that he might suspect her of being a fortune hunter.

He caught his breath. "Forgive me! I didn't mean to . . . I'm saying it all so badly! All I really wanted to tell you, Claire, is that you may need a friend. If you do, I just want you to know that I'll be here."

She looked up at him. How she needed a friend in this place. How she wanted to trust him! Then she remembered Bertrand, lying dead in the straw with his face ripped to shreds. She remembered the snake at the bottom of the leather pouch, and she froze in Philippe's arms.

He seemed to sense that she was uncomfortable. "Come with me," he said, leading her off the floor. "I want you to meet someone."

With her hand resting gingerly on his sleeve, Claire followed the path he made around the side of the hall to where the crowd was the heaviest. There, in one corner of the room, surrounded by people, was the handsomest old man she had ever seen.

He was past eighty years old, she knew. Yet he was erect and vigorous. His thick hair and moustache were like white silk, his face tanned by the sun. Beside him stood his wife, a dark-eyed, Mauritian beauty he had married after Suez when he was sixty-four, she a mere twenty. Claire was later to learn that she was expecting their twelfth child.

He smiled at Claire and Philippe as they came closer. "Doctor Jarnac!" he exclaimed, beaming. "It's been some time, hasn't it! And you've brought your lovely wife! I'd heard she was ill!"

"She is," said Philippe. "My wife is at home. This is our house guest, Claire Sagan. Claire, may I have the honor to present Count Ferdinand de Lesseps."

De Lesseps bent over Claire's hand, giving her a view of his leonine head with its abundant thatch of white hair. "A pleasure, my dear," he murmured. Then he introduced his wife, who greeted them with a practiced smile. In a bejeweled dress of the deepest emerald color, she glowed like a peacock. Suddenly she looked beyond the dancers, toward the entrance, and her pretty face turned to stone.

"Look at that!" she whispered. "How dare he?"

Claire followed her stunned gaze to the open doorway where a tall, broad-shouldered man in a white suit had just entered. It was Pedro Prestan.

Madame de Lesseps gripped her husband's arm. "Who invited him?"

"My dear, I can't imagine," said the old count in a calm voice.

"Prestan doesn't wait for invitations," said Philippe. "Something tells me he couldn't resist a chance to make a show of himself tonight. Look at him!"

Pedro Prestan swaggered into the hall, conscious that every eye was on him. Clinging to his arm, trembling, was a pretty Spanish girl in a formal *pollera* dress, her skirt a mass of appliquéd ruffles, her upswept hair glittering with clusters of jeweled *tembleques*. She was beautiful, but she looked terrified as her long-lashed eyes darted about the circle of faces. Prestan patted her hand and thrust out his chest like a strutting cock.

"By my grandfather's beard!" exclaimed Ferdinand de Lesseps. "The gall of the man! You've almost got to admire the wretch for it!"

"Look at him," whispered Philippe. "With Panama on his arm! I'd say he was trying to tell us something, and in a none-too-subtle way!"

He was right. The symbolism of the girl in the Panamanian dress was all too clear. Prestan and Panama. Prestan jerked his head in the direction of the string quartet and gave an impatient wave of his hand, an indication that they were to resume playing. Fresh from Paris and unused to such scenes, they gaped at him, their instruments poised in midair. Their leader glanced desperately at de Lesseps.

"Get rid of him!" Madame de Lesseps nudged her husband's arm. "He'll ruin everything! Call the guards!"

"Get rid of him?" The old count's dark eyes twinkled with amusement. "Why look at the life he's brought into this place! Just when I was getting bored with it all! And what harm can he do?" He nodded to the perspiring musicians and they swung into a lilting polka. Prestan took the girl, who looked ready to faint or bolt, in his arms, and began to dance alone around the floor.

"Helene, my dear," smiled Count de Lesseps, "it's time we put an end to his one-man show, don't you think?" Bowing from the waist, he offered his arm to his exotic wife and, with the agility of a much younger man, led her out onto the dance floor.

"Come on," said Philippe, taking Claire's arm and drawing her to him. She felt a new lightness in his step as they danced. He held her closer than before.

"You're smiling," she said. "What are you thinking, Philippe?"

By now the other couples had joined in the dance. Prestan and his partner were lost in the whirling maze of faces and gowns. Philippe looked down at her and laughed softly.

"De Lesseps," he said. "He's beaten Prestan at his own game!"

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do. Prestan came in expecting to be thrown out of here! Great excuse to raise a fuss, to call attention to himself! De Lesseps was right! What can he do now except dance?"

"Someone told me de Lesseps was getting feeble," she said. That someone had been André, but she didn't mention it to Philippe. "But he's an old fox, isn't he!"

"Oh, he's sharper than men half his age! Don't you believe it when you hear his mind is slipping away! It isn't so!"

Claire looked up at Philippe and realized that he was one of the most elegant men in the hall. "You admire him very much, don't you?" she asked.

"More than that, Claire. I like him. He's decent to the, core! He's done all he can to save the canal. Pity it isn't enough."

"It's true then. They're running out of money."

"Yes, it's true. Even de Lesseps can't pry any more francs out of the investors' pockets. The public's lost faith in the canal and in him as well." He shook his head. "Claire, this project is doomed. And when it dies, I fear the old man will die with it — of heartbreak."

"And you, Philippe? You've worked so hard. Why haven't you left?"

Philippe was silent for a moment. His hand tightened warmly against the small of her back, pulling her closer to him. "I'm a dreamer," he said at last. "Ferdinand de Lesseps has said time after time that the canal will be built. I believe him."

Claire gazed up at him, mystified. His eyes were glowing like a child's. "But you just said —"

"I didn't say it would be built now. I didn't say it would be built by us. But the canal *will* be finished someday, Claire. By someone who has the money, the manpower, and the technology to do it. It may take years, but de Lesseps is right. The canal will be built." He held her hand very tightly. "And every shovelful of dirt we haul out of that cursed cut brings that day a little closer. That's why I stay."

Claire could not speak. She only bit back the surge of feeling and wished with all her heart that she could believe Philippe was not guilty of Bertrand's murder.

The tempo of the music slowed. Philippe was silent now, but his arms did not release her. Moving with him. Claire let her eyes wander about the dance floor. De Lesseps and his wife had retired to the sidelines. His distinguished old face was flushed and happy.

His opponent in this tactical game, Pedro Prestan, was still dancing, his arms around the girl in the *pollera* who was smiling nervously up into his face. Claire studied him out of the corner of her eye as they passed her on the dance floor. He was not handsome. But his features possessed a strong magnetism that many women would have found difficult to resist. His back was turned toward her now. His shoulders were so broad and muscular that they made his squared-off head seem small by comparison. He danced with ease and confidence, with a pantherine grace that struck an odd note in her memory. She had seen him before. Oh, she had seen him at the cockfight and that day with André in the Universel. That part was clear. But she had seen him another time — almost as she was seeing him now — from the back, with his arms around a girl. Her mind flailed away at the cobwebs of memory, brushing them back one at a time until she suddenly remembered.

Pedro Prestan was the man she had seen in the yard with Lizette.

Sixteen

"Claire, what's the matter?" Philippe had felt her stiffen in his arms. He had stopped dancing and was looking down at her.

"I — don't know," she mumbled awkwardly. "I feel strange. Something from dinner, maybe . . . "

"Well, the way Lizette cooks, I don't wonder!" He lifted her chin with two fingers and peered into her face with the critical eye of a physician. "Let's sit down. Or would you rather get some air?"

"No!" she said much too quickly, angry at herself for being so flustered. "Philippe, I need to be alone. Just for a little while. Would you please excuse me?"

Without waiting for an answer, she pulled away and lost herself in the crowd that milled around the perimeter of the dance floor. Her eyes darted frantically from one side of the room to the other. She had to find André.

As she searched for him, Claire's mind raced ahead of her pulse. She could almost feel the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle falling into place. Prestan. Lizette. The drum. The stable. Bertrand and his whispered "enemies." She wondered where the piece marked with Philippe's name fit into the picture. Perhaps she would know soon. She had established a connection between Philippe and Prestan, and now between Prestan and the Jarnac house. Was she coming close to the final answers at last?

One person in that gloomy house knew those answers. Claire was sure of it now, and she cursed herself for not having realized it sooner. Lizette.

She made her way through the tightly packed crowd at the edge of the dance floor, dodging champagne glasses and trying not to make

herself conspicuous by hurrying. At first she was afraid Philippe had tried to follow her, but she soon reassured herself that she had lost him. He was nowhere to be seen.

She found André at last, standing alone in one corner of the room, balancing the stem of an empty glass between his fingers as he watched the dancers.

"There you are!" he grinned. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten all about me! Why, even Philippe — "

"André, I have to talk to you!"

"*Mon Dieu!* It must be serious! Well, tell me!"

"Not here," she whispered. "Where can we be alone?"

"Alone?" He raised his eyebrows puckishly. "The garden, I suppose, if I can keep my mind on what you're telling me, with all that moonlight . . . "

"André, this is important! Let's go out, please."

She took his arm and he led her through the double doors and into the garden at the rear of the house. She kept silent as he led her down the path to where the waves of Lim—n Bay lapped softly at the foot of the low wall. They were alone with the breeze and the stars.

"Now, what is it, *chérie*?" He looped his arm around her waist and pulled her close to him until she stood rigid in his arms.

"Remember the man in the yard?" she began in a whisper. "The one I told you about?"

"I remember, sweet. Always thought you'd let yourself become a bit overwrought about it. Probably just Philippe."

"It wasn't! Listen to me, André! I saw him again later — with Lizette! She let him in! He's her lover!"

"Lizette!" he laughed. "Why that little vixen! Claire, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't want to get her into trouble. But I know who he is now! I saw him tonight and recognized him!"

"Lizette's lover in a place like this? Not likely, sweet. But who do you think it is?"

"André . . . " She gripped his arm so hard that she could feel her nails digging into his sleeve. "It's Prestan!"

Under her fingertips she felt his muscles harden. "You're out of your head, Claire," he said.

"I'm not! André, I *know*! I'm sure of it!"

"Have you told Philippe?"

"No."

"Then no one knows but us?" He had pulled her close against him. His hands were caressing her back, moving up to her bare shoulders.

"No," she whispered. "No one else. What can we do, André?"

"My poor, sweet Claire . . . " His lips nuzzled her forehead. His hands moved up to the back of her neck until they cradled the base of her skull. "We've got to do this right," he murmured. "You're sure no one else knows?" His face was very close to hers.

"Yes," she gasped. "André, what's the matter?"

She felt him stiffen as the ferns parted with a rustle and Philippe stepped into sight.

"She's wrong, you know," he said in a low, tight voice. "Someone else knows now. I do." As he walked toward them, André's arms released Claire and dropped to his side.

The moonlight gleamed blue on Philippe's black hair. His face was in shadow. Claire was glad of that because she was afraid to look into those eyes. "Claire," he said, "I don't know why you chose not to tell me what you just told André, but I suppose that's your own business. Right now, I think we ought to go home and talk to Lizette. She may have the answers to some questions I've been asking myself for a long time." He stood back to indicate that they should go back inside ahead of him. "I want both of you with me," he said, and the icy undertone to his voice made Claire shiver.

After a servant had summoned their carriage, Philippe drove them home. He was silent, but there was a suppressed rage in his hands as they held the thin leather lines. Although she had long suspected him of Bertrand's murder and worse, Claire had never really been afraid of him until now. She huddled against André, who was as quiet as his brother, while the carriage jounced and lurched along through the dried-up puddle beds on the road. From somewhere out in the darkness, a dog bayed at their passing.

Lizette was sitting on the front steps when they arrived, wearing the white dress that she usually saved for Sundays and market days. Her hair had been carefully combed and braided. Annoyance was written all over her pert face.

"You're home early," she greeted them with a little sigh. "Didn't you have a good time?" Then she saw the expression on Philippe's face and

her eyes widened. She slid back up to the next step. "Something's wrong, M'sieu' Philippe?"

"Maybe, Lizette." Philippe's voice was soft and controlled, but Lizette, sensing a note of menace, shrank into herself even more. "Tell me the truth and nothing's going to happen to you," he said. "I understand you've been opening the gate at night and letting a man into the yard."

"M'sieu' Philippe!" Her horror appeared genuine until Claire remembered her talent for play-acting. "Who told you such a thing?"

"Never mind that. Is it true?"

She sat hunched on the steps and twisted the edge of her skirt in her hands. For a long time she did not speak, and Claire began to get impatient.

"I told him, Lizette," she said. "And it won't do you any good to lie. I saw you with him."

She looked up at them, her eyelids quivering, her mouth in a childish pout. "It's lonely out here!" she whined in a little-girl voice. "Nothing to do at night, M'sieu' Philippe. This boy I met at church. He wants to see me. What does it hurt?"

"Nothing." Philippe frowned. "Not if you'd let us know. Why doesn't he come around at some decent hour?" He was making a show of being patient. He would never, Claire told herself, let her admit that the man had been Prestan. Not when he was connected with Prestan himself.

"Lizette," she broke in, determined to make the girl confess. "I know who he is. I recognized him."

"How could you, Mam'selle? Just some boy from Col—n. That's all. You don't know him." She looked Claire up and down. Her eyes flashed like a cornered cat's. "What you want with me, Mam'selle? You jealous, eh? You lie up there alone in your bed and want somebody to come for you?"

Claire fought back the rising tide of anger. That was what Lizette wanted, she reminded herself — to bait her, to draw attention away from herself. Lizette was tougher than she appeared to be, and smarter. Mentally, Claire circled her, searching for a weak spot. And then, suddenly she found it.

She came up the steps and sat down beside Lizette, so that her eyes were on a level with the girl's own. "Listen to me, Lizette," she said

quietly. "There's something you don't know about me." She took the quivering hand in hers. "Back in France I have an older brother. He's my only brother, Lizette, and I'm his only sister, but he was born a twin. His twin sister died." Claire sat and watched Lizette's face as the realization dawned in her. "You know why I'm telling you this," she said, "don't you, Lizette?"

Lizette pulled back her hand and edged away. "You're lying! You remember what I told you about the *dosu* and now you want to scare me!"

"It's true." Claire moved closer to her. "Ask Simone. We'll wake her up if you don't believe me. She knows."

Lizette shook her head till her pigtails quivered. "I believe you then, Mam'selle. But it doesn't make any difference. I already told you everything."

For a few moments Claire just sat and looked at her. Philippe and André had moved in so close that she could hear both of them breathing. At last she played her final card.

"You've waiting for him tonight, aren't you? Look at you! You don't wear that pretty dress just to sit on the porch! Well, he's not coming!"

Lizette's lips parted. For that instant she was vulnerable, and Claire thrust in hard and fast. "We saw him at the ball tonight. With a Spanish girl in a *pollera*. He came in with her on his arm and they danced . . . oh, but she was beautiful. It's a pity he didn't ask you to such a grand place. Maybe he doesn't think you're good enough to go to the ball, Lizette! Maybe he only sneaks around to see you late at night!"

Lizette was quivering now. Her hands were twisting her skirt so hard that Claire thought she was going to rip it. "You're lying, Mam'selle!"

"Ask anyone, Lizette! Why should you protect him? Look how little he cares for you!" Claire leaned toward the girl until their eyes were a hand's breadth apart. "It's Prestan, isn't it! You'd best save yourself! What do you owe him that's worth your freedom or your life?"

For a long, vibrating moment Lizette stared up at her. Then she burst into tears. She buried her face in her lap and wailed like a child, her body heaving with uncontrolled sobs. Claire put her arms around the shaking shoulders, hurting with the poor girl in spite of her victory. Philippe and André looked on stoically, helplessly.

Finally she began to strain at words through her sobbing. "I . . . loved him!" she hiccupped. "He . . . said he was going to . . . marry me, and I'd be queen of Panama someday if I didn't tell . . . !"

"Didn't tell what, Lizette?"

She broke into a new crescendo of wails and sobs. "Th-the dynamite, Mam'selle! In the jungle! Not . . . not very far from here. He was selling it to some men who came on boats!"

Claire raised the tear-streaked face. "You know about my Paul," she said. "Did Prestan frame him?"

Lizette glanced up at the two men where they stood behind Claire. "Yes, Mam'selle. He had someone — one of his men — hide some boxes of dynamite under your Paul's bunk. He had to. The people at the cut had found out some of the dynamite was gone. They knew somebody was taking it."

"And you knew this all the time. From the first day I came here."

"Yes, Mam'selle . . . He said he'd kill me if I told you."

Claire looked at Philippe. He was leaning forward, listening intently. André stood a little back from him, his face unreadable. Claire could feel the hair on the back of her neck stiffen as she readied the next question.

"And Bertrand?"

"Oh, Lord, Mam'selle! Don't make me tell you *that*! Don't make me!" She covered her face with her clenched hands.

"Prestan killed him?"

"Oh, Lord, Mam'selle! Don't make me tell! It was . . . awful!"

"Lizette, you've got to tell us." Claire took hold of her hands. The girl gripped her fingers like a drowning person.

"No, Mam'selle!"

"The police will come," Claire said. "They'll *make* you tell! Then they'll lock you up or hang you! Do you want that?"

"No, Mam'selle!" She clutched Claire's knees. She was shaking all over. Claire put her arms around her. "He made me watch it!" she sobbed into Claire's shoulder. "He said the same thing would happen to me if I told. Bertrand found the dynamite, you see. That's why they killed him!" Claire could feel Lizette's heart pounding against the ribs of her back. "After Bertrand was dead, he took me into one of the stalls and he told me I was his woman now and . . . he made love to me. With Bertrand's dried blood all over his hands! Oh, Lord, Mam'selle! Am I going to hell?"

Claire rocked her like a child. "No. Lizette," she whispered. "I don't think so. Not if you're sorry. But you've got to tell us everything."

"Bertrand was my friend," she sobbed. "He was good to me. I begged them . . . Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him! Then they killed him."

They. Claire sat very still. Yes, Lizette had said it. They. Prestan and someone else. "Who helped him, Lizette? You said 'they' killed him."

Lizette looked up then, with wide, terrified eyes, back past Claire's shoulder to where Philippe stood beside André. Claire felt her quivering. "Just . . . a man, Mam'selle. I didn't know him. Never saw him before."

Lizette was a good liar, Claire reminded herself. "What did he look like? Was he black or white?"

Lizette looked up again. She was trembling so hard that Claire could barely hold her. "Black!" she whispered. "Black with . . . with a scar on his cheek! I never saw him again!"

Claire let her go and sank back onto the steps, afraid to go further. She had let Lizette tell her a lie, she was sure, but it was a lie she had no way of disproving. Not with Philippe standing there glowering down at her. "How did they kill him, Lizette?"

"Ay!" she moaned, clutching the sides of her face. "Don't make me tell you that, Mam'selle! I can't!"

Claire gripped her arm, deciding to gamble. "Lizette," she said, "remember that I'm a *dosu*. If you lie to me, I will know it, just as I know you lied to me about the man who helped Prestan being black. He wasn't black; was he?"

Lizette's eyes bugged out in her face. "No, Mam'selle," came the awed whisper. "He wasn't black!"

Claire decided it would not be wise to push her any further about the man's identity. Not with Philippe there. Lizette's fear of him might call the bluff on her powers as a *dosu*. "Then tell me how Bertrand died," she commanded. "And this time you're not to lie!"

Lizette slumped on the step, almost doubled over with the pain of the memory. "They tied me up," she said in a thin voice. "And they tied a handkerchief over my mouth so I couldn't scream. They said they'd kill me if I ever told — oh, Mam'selle, and they will! You've got to help me!"

"Don't be afraid," Claire soothed her, putting her arm around the girl's waist.

"Pedro held him down," she said. "Bertrand wasn't big, but he was strong. While Pedro held him — the other man got a bag that had a little snake in it. A snake with the bite of death, Mam'selle! He held the snake with one hand, like this . . . " Lizette demonstrated by twisting her fingers at an angle. "Behind its head, so it wouldn't bite him. And he pinched out Bertrand's face, like this . . . " She reached up and squeezed her own cheek until a part of it bulged out between her thumb and forefinger. "That was because the snake was a little one, Mam'selle. It had a little mouth . . . and they let it . . . Oh, Lord! I can't say it!" She curled up in a tight ball where she sat. "They let it bite Bertrand. Here . . . and here . . . and here . . . Then they put the snake back and they laughed about it . . . " Her voice subsided into sobs of anguish. Claire sat there beside her, feeling sick. She could not look at Philippe or at André.

"Lizette, what about the scratches?" she whispered at last.

"They held him down while he died," she said in a voice that was drained of life. "He took a long time to die. They'd stuffed his mouth with a rag so he couldn't scream, and then the other man said, 'Let's really make them wonder.' . . . So while Pedro held Bertrand down, he went outside and broke a piece off the thorn bush and he came back and they . . . " Her voice began to break again. Claire squeezed her hard with her arm around her shoulders. "They took the thorns and scratched his face, over and over . . . while he was still alive! They scratched his face till the bites from the snake were all covered up. By the time they got through, he was dead. Oh, Lord . . . don't leave me. Mam'selle!"

Claire looked up at André and Philippe, wanting to be sick but knowing that she could not. "Did you hear her?" she asked them in a whisper.

"I did." Philippe's voice was tight and hard. André said nothing until he had knelt down beside them.

"Lizette," he touched her shoulder. "The other man. You say he had a scar?"

"Yes, M'sieu' André."

"Was he Spanish? He was, wasn't he?"

"Yes . . . he was Sp-Spanish." Claire felt Lizette pull away from her as she said it, and wondered again if she was lying.

"And he had a gold tooth?"

"Yes, M'sieu' André. A gold tooth!"

"Lopez!" André concluded with a satisfied expression. "It had to be! You remember the scar, Claire. And he was Prestan's man."

"That's right," Claire admitted. "It *could* have been Lopez." She thought about what Lizette had said, and for a moment she almost believed it. Heaven knows, she wanted to. But why would she start off by saying the man was black? Why would she lie to protect Lopez? Claire thought about that, and she remembered the sight of Philippe coming out of the stable in the rain on the night that Bertrand had died.

Philippe moved closer to them. "Claire, take her into the library. I'll give you a pen and ink and paper, and you can write down everything she told you. Then read it back to her. If she agrees it's true, she can sign it. She can't read, but she can make her mark. After that we can decide what's to be done with her."

"M'sieu' Philippe!" Lizette suddenly tore herself loose from Claire and flung herself against his legs, her arms around his knees. "Don't send me back to Col—n, M'sieu' Philippe! He'll kill me! He'll kill my mama! Lord, you got to get us out of here! Send us home! Back to Martinique!"

Philippe touched her hair. "Don't be afraid, Lizette," he said in a strange, hushed voice. "We'll do what we can." Claire stood there and watched him as he lifted her to her feet. She saw the way the girl clung to Philippe's sleeve as he led her up the steps and onto the porch. Claire stared at their backs, still wondering whether she had lied to protect herself from him.

André had come up beside her. He slipped his arm around her waist. "What is it, *chérie*?"

"Lopez," Claire said. "André, I'm still not sure."

They followed Philippe and Lizette into the house and into the library where Claire sat down at the desk and began to write, rapidly, the things the girl had told her. Lizette sat huddled on the edge of the desk watching her write, even though Claire knew she could not read. From time to time she asked Lizette questions which the girl answered in scarcely audible whispers.

Philippe leaned back in the overstuffed chair and closed his eyes for a brief rest. André prowled the floor like a cat. Finally he turned and planted himself in front of his brother's chair, legs braced deter-

minedly apart. "As long as we're here," he announced, "I have something to tell you, Philippe."

Philippe opened his eyes and sat up.

"The hearing is next week," André said. "Thanks to Lizette's confession, it should be favorable. After that — " he glanced over at Claire — "when Claire goes back to Paris, I plan to go with her, my paintings and all."

Philippe sat a little straighter in his chair. "Am I to understand that you're asking my permission?" he said in an icy voice.

"Understand what you like," André snapped. "With or without your damned permission, I'm going. I don't need to beg you for the fare. I've saved up enough and more out of that piddling allowance you give me!"

"Even that will end if you leave," said Philippe. "Remember what I told you."

"It's not worth it, Philippe. It's not worth my spending one more month under this cursed roof!"

"And if I won't let you leave?" Philippe's voice was like cold granite. He sounded as if he had measured each syllable and scrubbed it clean of emotion before putting it into place.

"You can't stop me!" André retorted hotly.

"The police still have your passport."

"I'll get it back now that the murder's solved."

"Maybe." Philippe leaned back in his chair and regarded his brother through half-closed eyes. The tension between the two of them was so strong that Claire could feel it like ice crystals in the tropical air.

"I can see it now!" André snarled. "It would be just like you to pay the police a little something to hang on to it."

"If I did that," Philippe answered, "it would be because I'm afraid of what might happen to you back in Paris — and especially of what might happen to Claire."

"What happens to me after I leave here is none of your damned business! And for that matter, neither is Claire! She's a grown woman! She can make her own decisions! Stop trying to run our lives!"

Claire had been writing away studiously, pretending to ignore the angry exchange, but at the mention of her name, she raised her head. "I'm finished!" she announced, scribbling off the last few words of

Lizette's confession. "Why don't I let one of you read this back to her while I go into the kitchen and make some tea?"

She stood up with the paper and, after a moment's hesitation, gave it to Philippe. André, his face a storm, was staring out of the window. Claire thought perhaps she should go to him, try to soothe him. Then she saw that Philippe was watching her and, suddenly self-conscious, decided to go directly to the kitchen. Changing the path of her steps abruptly, she swung toward the closed door and pulled it open.

Simone stood there before her, her hugeness filling the doorway. She appeared to have been listening, but her ebony face gave no hint of what was taking place in her mind. Without any trace of embarrassment or apology in her manner, she looked past Claire and into the library.

It was Philippe who broke the awkward silence. "Come in, Simone. You may as well be part of this, since Bertrand was your cousin."

She glided into the library. As her eyes swept around the room, Lizette shrank back against the desk.

"I heard," Simone announced in that deep wild-honey voice of hers.

"Then there's no need to tell you, is there. Simone?" said Philippe.

"If you've been listening, you know who killed Bertrand."

Simone grunted down in her throat. "Hmmp! I knew it long time ago!"

No one said anything. They just looked at her — André, Philippe, Lizette, and Claire. She gazed down at them all from her great height. "Baron Samedi told me," she said. "The *loa* who rules the cemetery. He showed me their faces in a pot of water."

"Why didn't you tell us?" On this wild night, Claire was ready to believe in anything, even vodun.

Simone gave her a little half-smile. "Would you have believed a woman like me, eh? Besides, no need to tell anybody. Baron Samedi, he put the death curse on them. Soon they will both be . . . dead!" Suddenly she turned toward Lizette, pointing at the trembling girl with her massive arm, hand, and finger.

"Get this child away from here, M'sieu' Philippe! Not safe for her! Send her and her mama back to Martinique like she wants!"

"That's just what I plan to do," said Philippe. "Unless the police won't let her go."

"You *make* them let her! Unless you want her dead, M'sieu' Philippe! She's not safe. Not even in this house!"

"Exactly," said Philippe. "And this house isn't safe with her in it. The boat for the Indies leaves tomorrow at midday. That should be time enough to clear her confession with the police and get her and her mother permission to leave."

"Why wait?" André volunteered suddenly. "Let me carry it into town tonight. Prestan could still be at the ball. They'd only have to go there and take him!"

Claire thought she heard a gasp from Lizette, but when she looked down at the girl, she was still huddled with her face buried against the arm of Philippe's chair. Philippe pondered the situation for what seemed like a long time. At last he shook his head. "It can wait till morning. It's late. Dangerous out for anyone. Besides, someone could get hurt if the police tried to take Prestan at the ball."

Although Claire questioned Philippe's motives, she could not argue with the practicality of his reasoning. "He's right," she said to André. "And no one knows but us. It can wait until morning."

André gave an impatient huff and turned his back.

"Mam'selle?" Lizette's hand reached out and shakily touched Claire's arm. "I don't want to stay in my room tonight. I'm afraid. Would you let me stay with you?"

"Is it all right?" Claire asked Philippe, wondering if he'd refuse.

"Yes, but lock your door and keep the key right on you. If she's foolish enough to want to leave on her own —"

"Oh, no, M'sieu' Philippe!" she exclaimed. "I wouldn't do that! I'll be safe with Mam'selle! She's a *dosu*!"

Awkwardly, Claire started to explain. Then, to her total confusion, she realized that Philippe was smiling at her. Of course having married a girl from Haiti, he would know what a *dosu* was. And, she remembered, he had been present when she herself told Lizette she was a *dosu*.

"Well," he said. "I'm not surprised. Not at all."

Even after Lizette had sobbed herself to sleep. Claire lay beside her, wide-eyed in the darkness, staring up at the mosquito netting, the tension of the night still vibrating through her body, flowing into her fingers and toes.

She looked back on her own performance with a degree of awe — she who had treated herself for so long like one of Angélique's porcelain-headed dolls, who would shatter if she were jolted hard enough.

Now she had lived through Paul's death and the shock of his infidelity, through Bertrand's murder. Angélique's attack on her, and the two harrowing experiences with the snakes. She had survived to step in and take control of a precarious situation, to break through Lizette's wall of resistance, to clear away the blot on Paul's name. All this — and she had emerged strong, sure of herself, and still able to smile. Doctor Sagan would have been proud of her; he would have pronounced her cured. She would never go back to Bicêtre. She had no more need to insulate herself from shock, from pain, from fear, from life.

Carefully, without disturbing Lizette, she turned over and wrapped her arms around her pillow. She felt strong. Yes, she even felt whole. But oh, sweet heaven, where were her tears?

Lizette's signed confession would clear Paul of the smuggling charge. Claire could leave it at that and go home. She'd accomplished her goal; she'd done enough. Yet, when she closed her eyes, it was Philippe she saw, coming out of the stable in the rain on the night of the murder. Philippe, standing on the stairs that earlier night when she'd come in from talking with Bertrand. Philippe, staring down at her and André from the top of the knoll at Portobelo. She questioned his real reason for refusing André's offer to take Lizette's confession directly to the police. Was it a reason or an excuse? Was he only trying to buy enough time to warn Prestan of the danger?

Philippe was wealthy enough to maintain this grand house, to hire a limited staff of servants, and support his wife, his child, and his brother. That was not surprising in view of his inheritance and his work, which surely paid him well. It did not seem likely that he would need money unless he was like some men for whom there was no such thing as "enough money."

She remembered the argument in the library and wondered why he was so reluctant to let André leave. Power, she thought. "Philippe has to have everyone in the palm of his hand . . ." Those had been André's words. Perhaps they held the answer.

Claire was beginning to drift. A waltz floated like mist into her mind. She was at the ball again in her amber gown, whirling slowly amid a blurred mass of rainbow colors as she gazed up into Philippe's black, black eyes. Those eyes drew her in, became her world until she was surrounded by them, lost and wandering in their darkness . . .

It was the drum that awakened her. Fluttering taps on the tight, hollow drumskin, subtle as raindrops, yet penetrating as knife jabs. Claire sat up. Lizette, conditioned to the sound, jerked herself awake beside her. "It's him!" she whispered.

"Prestan?"

Lizette did not answer. Instead she suddenly leaped out of bed and flung herself at the door. It was locked. Claire felt the reassuring weight of the key where it hung on a string around her neck. Lizette darted toward the window and flung it wide open.

"Claire hit her then, with the entire weight and velocity of her own body, carrying them both to the floor. Sobbing, thrashing, the girl struggled as Claire tried to hold her down. "Don't be a fool, Lizette!" she gasped. Lizette was no heavier than she was, but the girl was strong. She kicked and scratched and tried to bite. Gathering all her strength, Claire raised her hand high and brought it down across her cheeks in a stinging slap that hurt her palm. Lizette went limp just long enough for Claire to pin her to the floor. Tears were streaming down her dark face.

"Don't be a fool, Lizette! He'll kill you!"

"They'll catch him, Mam'selle! They'll hang him! Got to warn him!" She was trembling and jerking all over. "I love him, Mam'selle!"

"Stop it! How could you love a man like Prestan?"

The fight had gone out of Lizette. She rolled her head back and forth against the floor. "I want to go home," she moaned.

Claire decided to take one more chance. "Tell me the truth, Lizette! The other man who killed Bertrand. Was it really Lopez?"

"Yes, Mam'selle!" Her eyes shone white in the thin moonlight.

"He was Spanish, and he had a scar on his face?"

"Yes, Mam'selle!"

"He was tall, wasn't he? And very thin?"

"Yes, Mam'selle! Let me up! I won't fight you anymore!"

Claire rolled off her and sat up, her pulse echoing against the inside of her skull. "You're lying," she said. "Lopez is short. He's so stocky he's almost square."

"Somebody else, then. Somebody tall and thin. Spanish. With a scar. I didn't know him, Mam'selle!"

"Lizette," Claire's voice was shaking. "Was it Monsieur Philippe?"

"Oh, Lord, no! No, Mam'selle! Not M'sieu' Philippe!" Her answer had come too quickly, perhaps, but Claire could not be sure. She

sighed. She had learned only one thing from her. The man had not been Lopez. "You have crazy ideas, Mam'selle!" Lizette whispered. "I told you, I didn't know him."

"Let's go to bed," Claire said wearily.

They both stood up and Claire closed the window and locked it. Outside in the darkness, in the jungle, the drumbeats had ceased.

Lizette lay down on the bed beside Claire and stared up at the open beams of the ceiling. "If only you could have heard him, Mam'selle . . . " she whispered into the darkness. "He was going to set Panama free . . . to burn the rich white men's houses and drive them out, the way they did back in Haiti He said he'd make me his queen, Mam'selle . . . "

"Hush. Lizette. It's over now. You'd best forget him."

"I'm afraid . . . " she whispered. "When Pedro finds out what I've done — "

"Hush. We won't let him hurt you. We won't leave you till you're safe on the boat for Martinique." Claire felt herself drifting away. The night's events had exhausted her. "Go to sleep, Lizette," she murmured. "We'll talk about it in the morning . . . "

The room was gray with early dawn when Claire opened her eyes again. She had slept deeply, she realized, in spite of last night's excitement. If Lizette had stirred at all, she had not heard it. The morning was strangely hushed. Even the birds outside had not yet erupted into song.

Lizette was not beside her. The slight hollow where she had lain was cool. Claire's heart lurched as she felt for the key around her neck. It was still there.

She glanced about the room. Nothing was out of place, but there was a shadow on the counterpane that she had not noticed on other mornings. Claire looked up.

Lizette hung in one corner, from one of the open beams of the ceiling, the sash from her white dress knotted about her neck. Her little bare feet, their light-colored soles showing, dangled gracefully above the floor.

Seventeen

Even after a week had gone by, Claire could not close her eyes without seeing Lizette's dead face. She remembered the way the pretty little head had lolled to one side, the eyes slightly open, the mouth twisted. She pictured the small hands, clenched in the agony of those last seconds.

"Don't blame yourself, Claire. Lizette created her own troubles. Sooner or later they'd have caught up with her." Philippe had reached both hands out to her across the table where they were sipping the tea on that awful morning, an uncharacteristic gesture for him, she thought. His hands were cool and so huge that they completely covered her own.

Suddenly drawn to him, she had turned her hands and opened them so that her palms were touching his, trembling a little. "If only I hadn't pressed her so hard! If only I hadn't frightened her that way! And I was feeling so proud of myself last night! Philippe — !" She had gripped his hands hard, letting her anguish and her aching need override her suspicions of him.

"There was no way out for her." He was talking fast, in a very low voice, as he looked down at the place on the white tablecloth where their hands were joined. "She was afraid of Prestan. It came down to that. She'd have been very lucky to make it back to Martinique alive, and she knew it. Prestan has men almost everywhere. You're in no way to blame for that. Stop torturing yourself." He had looked up at her and his black eyes had been full of pain, her own pain.

"But if I hadn't been asleep . . . if I'd heard her . . . "

"Stop it, Claire. It's not your fault." He had released her hands and looked away, breaking the tenuous bond that had spun itself between

them. "Lord, what do you want? Some kind of edict from heaven absolving you?" He got up and paced the length of the table. She'd sat and watched him, her cheeks hot and her hands still tingling from his touch.

Then she remembered a small, green, wild-growing plant that André had shown her once in the garden. The sensitive mimosa it was called, for when it was touched, it folded its leaves and shrank into quivering green stalks. Philippe was like that, she had reflected, as she studied his broad back. And so was she. Her lips parted with surprise at the sudden realization that the two of them were so much alike, stretching out tender, anxious fingers to the world, then shrinking inside themselves as soon as someone came too close. Perhaps that was why Philippe seemed so uncomfortable at the prospect of his wife's getting well. Perhaps that was why she flew into an inner panic every time André put his arms around her.

André had gone into town to summon the police. They returned toward midmorning, their expressionless faces and big pistols bringing back memories of the day Bertrand had been found dead. They had nosed about the house and stable, taken a statement from Claire, and departed an hour later with Philippe, André, Lizette's body, and her signed confession. Claire had remained behind to comfort the agitated Marie-Thérèse.

André and Philippe had returned that night with the news that Pedro Prestan was nowhere to be found in Col—n. The police had combed the town and toward evening, in an alley behind the Universel, had found Lopez dead with a knife wound in his back. But Prestan, by then, had vanished into the tangled maze of towns, jungles, and waterways that was Panama, like a drop of rain melts into the Chagres.

"Do they know who killed Lopez?" Claire had asked André.

He'd shrugged. "Lopez had an enemy for every hair of his head. Nobody's going to miss him. As for who killed him, I doubt if anyone cares, even the police."

They'd sat at the dining room table after everyone else had gone to bed. His hand crept across the cloth and closed over hers. "André," she whispered. "I'm still not sure it was Lopez who killed Bertrand."

She felt his hand stiffen and relax. "You've been playing detective again!" he said with a wink. "What have you dug up this time?"

She told him about her conversation with Lizette and how the girl had been unable to describe Lopez correctly. "Either the man really *was* tall and thin," she continued, "or Lizette was lying."

"She was just overwrought! She didn't know *what* she was seeing. Would you, under the same circumstances?"

"Perhaps not, André. I don't know."

"It had to be Lopez, *chérie*. She mentioned the scar, at least, remember? Besides, that would give Prestan a good reason for killing him. He couldn't risk leaving Lopez around to sing to the police if he was caught, could he?" He ran his finger up the inner surface of Claire's arm, making her tingle. "Let's go back to Paris and forget this nightmare. It's over as far as I'm concerned."

It should have been over for her as well, Claire told herself again and again, especially when, the next day, Philippe came in beaming with the report that the canal company had exonerated Paul of all blame in the matter of the dynamite smuggling.

"I came right home to tell you as soon as I knew," he said.

Claire and Marie-Thérèse were sunning themselves on the stone bench in the garden. He stood in the doorway, uncertain, hesitant to come to them. Claire got up, walked swiftly over to him and impulsively lifted one of his big hands in hers, grateful in spite of her suspicions. Marie-Thérèse, giggling, skipped over and twined herself around his legs and they stood there, the three of them.

"I hope that doesn't mean you'll be leaving us soon." Philippe reached down and ruffled his daughter's curls.

Claire released his hand. She had never planned to stay beyond the hearing. Now that it was over . . . "When does the next boat leave for France?" she asked him.

"One left a couple of days ago. That means there won't be another for nearly two weeks." He cleared his throat. "Marie-Thérèse and I both wish you'd stay longer."

Claire stood there beside Philippe and his tiny, golden daughter, thinking how needed she felt with them. She pondered the life that awaited her in Paris and wondered whether André would be a part of that life.

The garden was beautiful in the mottled shade of afternoon. The frangipani trees that lined the walkways had hung out fragrant lace curtains of white blossoms. Fern and hibiscus filled the corners and

hollows; bougainvillea spread pink splashes of color up and down the walls.

Angélique was playing Mozart. The tinkling melody floated out onto the afternoon air and blended with the scent of the flowers. Her style was exquisite and had gained in precision and refinement — gained so noticeably that Claire could not help but believe that the same clarity existed in her mind. She was increasingly alert and astute. Her blue eyes took in everything around her. Now, though she still did not speak, it almost appeared to be by her own choice. There was no denying it. Philippe's wife was getting well.

Marie-Thérèse tugged at Philippe's pants leg. "I want to go and listen to *Maman*," she chirped. When her father nodded his head, she skipped into the house in the direction of the library. Claire stood beside Philippe for a long time, watching a pair of hummingbirds flash about the garden.

"I think it best that I leave here as soon as possible," she said. "Marie-Thérèse will have a real mother soon."

Philippe did not answer her.

Claire missed Lizette. She was haunted by the memory of that impish grin, the cheerful, high-pitched Martinique patois of her conversation. She held nothing against the poor girl for what she'd done. After all, Lizette had been little more than a child, innocent and easily led to the point where love and terror had made her Prestan's slave. If only — so many of her thoughts began that way — if only she'd stayed awake with her, Claire's conscience whipped her. If only she'd realized the depths of the girl's despair. But Philippe was right, she concluded at last after days of self-torment. She was foolish to blame herself.

Simone, with the burden of Angélique's care growing increasingly light, had taken over Lizette's duties in the kitchen. For the first time since her coming to Panama, Claire looked forward to meals: chicken cooked to just the right stage of succulent crispness: fresh mangoes, papaya, and melon cut into tiny slices; sauces to make the fluffy rice that was standard fare seem like a brand new dish every day; fried plantain sweetened with honey; scallops marinated in lime juice and served in their own shells . . . and *seviche*, of course, which Claire had come to crave.

When Claire tried to compliment Simone on her cooking, the huge black Haitian ignored her. Simone's attitude toward her was one of grudging respect. Yet whenever those small, white-rimmed eyes looked at her, Claire could sense her counting the days that remained until her departure. Claire never really knew why. She only knew that Simone did not like her, had never liked her, and probably never would.

The time Simone spent in the kitchen left Angélique unattended and also gave Claire more hours with Marie-Thérèse. Since she would be leaving soon, Claire was trying to sever the little girl's attachment to her as gently as she could. She encouraged Marie-Thérèse to spend her time in the blue sitting room, where her mother would smile at her from her rocker, or to go to the library and listen when she played the piano.

The day after Paul's hearing, Claire was in the yard with her. They were tossing a ball back and forth.

Marie-Thérèse laughed as she caught it against her body. "Mam'selle," she said, "don't ever go away. I love you."

Claire fought back a surge of feeling. Since a three-year-old cannot throw a ball very far, Marie-Thérèse was close enough that she could reach out and gather the little girl into her arms. "I can't stay here, sweet," she whispered against her golden curls. "When I came, it was to be only for a short time. Before long, I'll have to leave."

Marie-Thérèse's lower lip crept outward and she drew back to look up at Claire. "I don't like that. I'll be alone."

"Nonsense!" Claire pulled her close again. "You'll have your papa. And Simone. And your *maman*."

"Papa goes to the hospital. Simone goes to the kitchen. *Maman* . . . " She trailed off and gazed up at Claire with Angélique's blue eyes.

"Your mother has been very ill," Claire explained gently. "But she's getting better. Remember how she plays the piano and how she smiles at you?"

"*Maman* doesn't play with me. She doesn't hold me."

"She will, my cherub. She will when she gets better, I'm sure of it." Claire rocked her, holding her tightly, and felt those hungry little arms lock around her neck. You poor little mouse, she thought. Your mother's just got to love you!

So it was that Claire was delighted a day or two later when she walked into the blue sitting room to find Marie-Thérèse on her moth-

er's lap. Angélique was rocking and humming a little French nursery rhyme. Her long hair hung down, surrounding her little daughter like a curtain of gold. Her arms held the child lightly, barely supporting her weight while Marie-Thérèse gazed up at her with wide, wondering eyes. Without saying anything, Claire stole out of the room and closed the door silently behind her.

Claire decided not to tell Philippe just yet. Not till the bond between mother and daughter had had time to grow stronger. He would know soon enough that he had been wrong about Angélique's ability to be a loving mother to her child.

In the meantime, there was André. He had returned to work on her portrait and now it was nearly finished.

"I want to give this time to dry before we leave," he smiled at her over the easel. "I plan to take all these paintings back to Paris and give an exhibition as soon as I can find a suitable gallery. Then, once I get a few wealthy patrons, I can open my own studio."

Without moving her head, Claire let her eyes wander around the room. Painted canvases were piled on shelves, in corners, under the bed. There must have been more than a hundred of them. "You could fill a fair-sized gallery with these," she said. "André, I still haven't seen all of them. Would you let me before you pack them?"

"Maybe," he teased. "Some are better than others, you know. Now this one . . ." He backed up a few steps and cocked his head at her portrait. "This one will be the star of the whole collection. You'll be famous, *chérie*. You'll have all Paris at your feet! You'll be the new Mona Lisa!"

Claire pulled a face at him. "Go on! Flatter me! I love it!"

He scowled. "Now look what you've done! You've moved your head the tiniest bit and changed the light on your face! . . . No, hold still. I'll have to come and fix you . . ." He wiped the brush, put it down on the palette, and walked toward her. Claire knew what would happen next. He would bend over her, pretending to be very critical, and then swiftly he would lean down and kiss her. She knew what he was thinking because of the way he had wiped the paint off his brush before putting it down. He did not plan to use it again right away.

But she was not in the mood for a kiss, nor for the playful struggle that would inevitably follow. As of late, Claire had felt a restlessness

in André's company that she could not explain. She stood up before he reached the love seat.

"I haven't checked on Marie-Thérèse for at least twenty minutes," she said hastily. "I'd best go and see what she's up to." With the green drape still about her shoulders, she slipped past him and opened the door into the hallway. André did not follow her.

The house was very quiet. Simone had driven into town with Léon to do the marketing. Philippe was at the hospital. Claire could neither see nor hear any sign of Marie-Thérèse, so she went to the blue sitting room and quietly opened the door.

Angélique, half-turned away so that she did not see Claire, was seated in her rocker, humming softly as the chair creaked back and forth. Marie-Thérèse, wrapped in the pink blanket, was asleep in her mother's arms. Claire stood and contemplated them for a moment. How beautiful they were, the two of them together, like some lovely old Renaissance painting of the Madonna and Child. How she wished that Philippe could see them that way. His wife. His daughter.

With a sigh, she closed the door behind her, holding on to the knob so that the latch would make no sound. André was waiting for her in his studio, but she did not want to go back to him. Not just yet. She wanted to be alone.

Claire slipped the green drape off her shoulders, hung it on the doorknob of her room, and buttoned her shirtwaist up again. Then, hoping André would not follow her, she went down the stairs and out through the back of the house into the garden.

She sat down on the stone bench and gazed up into the sky where a pair of vultures circled lazily, spreading their splendid wings to catch the lifting currents of air. She remembered how once, when she had remarked about their ugliness, Philippe had told her that the big, black birds were the most beautiful creatures in Panama because their scavenging prevented so much filth and disease. Strange, even the birds in the sky made her think of him.

Philippe had defeated her. She had all but abandoned her quest to implicate him in the crimes of Paul's ordeal and Bertrand's death. Not that she believed any less in his guilt, but she was beginning to recognize the futility of proving her suspicions. She had found no evidence beyond what she had seen. Then, too, she was beginning to rationalize, Philippe was needed here. Except to satisfy her own vengeance,

what end would it serve to see him hanged or imprisoned? She had little choice, she realized, except to leave Panama and leave Philippe to the judgment of heaven.

His wife would be well soon, she reminded herself. Then Philippe, Angélique, and Marie-Thérèse would be a family again, and perhaps the sadness would depart from those haunted, black eyes.

Once more Claire pondered her own relationship with Philippe. In spite of her suspicions, in spite of everything, she had felt a frightening intimacy growing between the two of them — almost as if, in slipping into the role of a mother for Marie-Thérèse, she had become a surrogate wife to Philippe as well. Perhaps her presence was even more intrusive than she'd suspected.

Simone, she suddenly realized, had been aware of it all along. The great black woman's hostility was too strong to be rooted in mere jealousy over Marie-Thérèse. She was fearful for Angélique's position — for the security of her "baby." Claire shivered, remembering the snake, remembering the *wanga*, remembering Simone's intimation that she would kill anyone who tried to harm Angélique.

Shifting on the warmth of the stone bench, she sighed. Simone had nothing to worry about. She would never come between a man and his wife, Claire resolved, and soon she would be gone. If Philippe and Angélique did not find happiness together, the fault would not be hers.

She picked a pink hibiscus bloom and cradled it in her hands. The pistil and stamens in its center were golden, like Angélique's hair and like Marie-Thérèse's. The petals, she reflected idly, were nearly the same shade of pink as the blanket in which the little girl was bundled as she lay sleeping in her mother's arms. She pictured them again, both of them exquisite in the faint afternoon light that filtered through the curtains of the blue sitting room. The beautiful mother and the beautiful child.

And suddenly Claire knew that something was terribly wrong.

"Oh, dear God!" she said out loud, and she shot up from the bench and bolted for the house, her mind seeing visions of shattered china dolls with blue eyes and golden hair, of scattered fragments on the parquet floor at the foot of the staircase.

She raced through the hallway and into the foyer. As she rounded the corner where the stairs rose up from the floor, she looked up and

saw Angélique on the landing, a pink bundle in her arms. She was smiling.

Marie-Thérèse must have been asleep, for she had not moved or cried out. Claire stood frozen at the foot of the steps for an instant, thinking perhaps that if she did not startle her —

Angélique took another step toward the edge of the stairs.

"No!" Claire cried out as she charged toward her, taking the steps two at a time. "Angélique! No!"

Marie-Thérèse woke up and began to whimper. Angélique moved closer to the stairway, lifting her in her arms. She was on the very brink now, the pink bundle poised for its headlong plunge.

Claire raced toward them, cursing every curve of that long stairway. Her shoes caught in her skirt. She went sprawling and clawed her way to her feet again.

Angélique did not even seem to notice her. But Marie-Thérèse was fully awake now. Sensing the danger, she began to cry. Wrapped in the blanket as she was, she could not even get her hands out to cling to her mother.

Still smiling, Angélique lifted her high. Claire was not going to reach them in time. "André!" she screamed. "André!"

Time froze as she heard the door of his studio open, heard his running footsteps in the corridor. She clambered upward, still shouting his name.

Angélique saw him coming and she dropped Marie-Thérèse. With a shriek, the pink bundle struck the stairs and began to bounce and roll from one step to the next. Claire fought her way toward it with what seemed like the leaden slowness that sometimes weighted her down in her dreams when she tried to run from some nameless horror. Gasping, she stretched her arms upward and clutched at her as she fell. Then at last, she caught her hard against her chest.

Marie-Thérèse was screaming. Claire pulled away the pink blanket and felt her all over, her heart pounding. The child was unhurt, but she was wild with fright. Claire held her close, rocking her back and forth, as Marie-Thérèse shrieked and sobbed into her shoulder.

André had reached Angélique. She crouched against the side of the banister, eyeing him like a cornered animal. He paused, as if uncertain what to do next, and suddenly she sprang at him, clawing. Claire saw her nails rake his cheeks, leaving streaks of red. Suddenly

furious, he grabbed both her wrists in his hands and held her off at arms' length, where she hung, twisting and gasping. Claire marveled at his strength. An enraged Angélique, as she well knew, was as powerful as most men. As Claire watched, Angélique's eyes met André's, and a transformation came over Angélique's beautiful face. It was as if someone had snatched a veil from her eyes. She stared at André with a gaze that was clear, true, and intense. Claire could almost feel the tension in her as she breathed deeply, silently, staring into André's face.

Then André moved her wrists so that one of his hands was holding both of hers. He raised his other hand high and brought it down across her face in a resounding slap that sent her crumpling to the floor. She lay there, trembling and looking at him with wild, cold eyes.

Marie-Thérèse was still screaming. Claire held her close and rubbed her back, sick with remorse. How presumptuous she had been, to encourage the child's association with her mother. How naive, to think that the sharpening of Angélique's faculties indicated that her emotional injuries were healing with equal speed. She was recovering, yes, Claire told herself, but not as fast as she had hoped. She buried her face against the blond curls. Philippe had been right. Angélique, as she came back to the world of reality, would have to learn little by little to love her own child.

André, his face pale, came slowly down the stairs toward them. His cheeks wore thin, red ribbons. "You're all right, Claire?"

"Yes, and so's Marie-Thérèse. She's just frightened. But your face — "

"It'll be all right," he said. "But you'd best get her out of here. Take her to her room and keep her there. It won't do for Angélique to see her for a while."

Nodding her agreement, Claire gathered up the little girl and carried her to her room where she sponged her face with water and rocked her on her knees. Marie-Thérèse cried for a very long time until, at last, she fell asleep.

In the early evening Philippe came home. Claire went to him at once and told him what had happened.

"It was my fault," she said. "I encouraged Marie-Thérèse to be with her."

He took a deep breath. "You meant well, Claire," was all he said. At the foot of the steps he paused and stood for a moment with his hand

on the newel post, his eyes circling the curve of the long, winding stairway. "Maybe now you know why I asked you to stay."

Claire did not answer him at first. "The longer I stay," she said at last, "the more it will hurt Marie-Thérèse when I go."

He had no reply to that. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Asleep in her bed."

"And Angélique?"

"In the sitting room, Simone's with her." Claire remembered how, after she'd left Marie-Thérèse asleep, she had looked in very quietly on Angélique. Philippe's wife had been standing at the far side of the room, staring intently out through the open window. It had struck Claire that the window had been open. Always, the drapes in the blue sitting room had been kept closed. André, she remembered, had told her how Angélique hated Panama, how she never went — or even looked — outside. Yet there she was, staring down into the garden. Claire had closed the door without disturbing her.

Simone had come back from town about an hour later. "Oh, Lord!" was all she'd said when she heard what had happened. She had gone upstairs at once and had not come down again. Claire had finally gone into the kitchen and readied a simple meal of rice, eggs, and crusty Panamanian *miche* rolls, which was now waiting to be served.

"And where's my brother?" Philippe asked her.

"Upstairs packing his paintings. He said he didn't want to leave them until the last minute."

Philippe turned from the stairway and faced her. She saw weariness and despair etched in every line of his face. "Claire," he said, "André's not going back to France with you. For reasons of my own, I can't allow it."

"And why not?" André had told her that Philippe was a possessive tyrant. Until now, she had not really believed him.

"That's something between André and me," he said, without changing the tone of his voice. "I can only tell you that if he goes back to Paris there's a good chance he'll ruin his own life and yours too if you let him."

"How are you going to stop him, Philippe?" It wasn't fair, she thought, his keeping André here against his will when a bright future as an artist awaited him in France.

"Any way I have to, Claire." He turned and started slowly up the stairs. She walked a little behind him, her mouth set.

"Have you told André?"

"He knows. This isn't the first time he's tried to leave." Philippe's voice rang hollowly down the corridor as they rounded the top of the landing and walked toward Marie-Thérèse's room.

"How long has she been asleep?"

"A couple of hours. She wasn't hurt, as I told you, but she was frightened half to death. I thought it might be best to let her sleep."

"Fine," he said. "I'd just like to check and make sure she's all right." Cautiously he opened the door.

The room was dim in the twilight, throwing into soft outline the child-sized furniture, the dresser and wardrobe, the toys and dolls perched haphazardly on the handiest flat surfaces. Claire tiptoed across the Oriental rug to the corner where the crib stood and drew aside the rumpled pile of blankets. The bed was empty.

At first they looked around the room, calling her name softly. Only silence answered. "Check the rest of the house," said Philippe.

While Claire looked into her own room, Philippe inquired in André's studio. "André hasn't seen her," he said as he came back down the hall.

Claire opened the door of the blue sitting room. Angélique was pacing the floor, a golden, caged feline. Simone was watching her from the rocker. "Have you seen Marie-Thérèse?" Claire asked softly.

"She isn't here," Simone grunted, without taking her eyes off Angélique.

After that they searched the library, the parlor, the kitchen, the entire downstairs, including the garden. Léon probed every corner of the stable, even thrashing through the piles of loose straw in the hope that she might be hiding there. Claire felt a sickness growing inside her. Marie-Thérèse was nowhere to be found.

Dumbfounded, the three of them — Philippe, Léon, and Claire, faced each other on the front porch. "She's just not here," Claire said. "And the gate's been locked, hasn't it?"

"Except for when I came in," said Philippe. "Léon, how soon after you let me in did you lock it again?"

Léon rubbed his close-clipped head. "I put the horse away," he said slowly. "Then . . . I came back out and closed the gate." He looked stricken. "M'sieu' Philippe, she could have gone out then . . . ?"

Philippe patted his shoulder. "You couldn't have known, Léon." He straightened and cleared his throat. "Get André and Simone. We're going to need everybody if we're to find her before night."

It was nearly dark already, so they took lanterns. The plan was to search around the wall in five concentric rings. Since Claire was the least familiar with the jungle, she would stay within sight of the wall. Simone would make her circle a dozen yards farther away, with the men toward the outside.

They spread out and began to move, keeping each other's lanterns in sight, calling as they searched. Claire moved slowly around the wall, listening to the hushed sounds of the jungle night and the voices of the others. It was as much her fault as anyone's, she told herself. She could have stayed with her. She could have realized how upset the child was and watched her instead of going to the kitchen to make supper. Yet Philippe had not spoken one word of rebuke, neither to her nor to Léon. The night was black by now. Claire made her way around the wall, stumbling a little on the uneven ground, praying as she went.

At last, it was Léon who found Marie-Thérèse huddled beneath a clump of bushes, too frightened to speak. A silent Philippe carried her back to the house, where they could look at her in a stronger light.

She sat on the edge of the dining room table, dressed only in her soiled chemise, while he examined her.

"I went for a walk, Papa," she stated, her eyes as huge and round as blue china saucers. She was scratched and dirty, but appeared unharmed.

"You should have taken me with you, love." Claire was almost weeping with relief. "Where's your dress?"

"Caught it on a bush. Couldn't get it loose." She scratched at her arm where several red bumps had risen.

"Looks like you got some mosquito bites," said Philippe, ruffling her curls. "Let's get some supper down you. Then Simone can put you in your bath, you little owl!"

She clung to his hand, her fingers pink as baby shells against his bronzed skin. "Papa, *Maman* dropped me on the stairs. I didn't like it."

He looked at Claire across the top of her golden head, and Claire thought she had never seen such pain in a pair of eyes. "Your mother's ill," he said softly. "Sometimes her illness makes her do things

like that. You must leave her alone, Marie-Thérèse. Promise me you'll do it."

"Yes, Papa."

Claire served supper, which by now was cold and not very good, while Simone warmed the water for Marie-Thérèse's bath. Afterward, André announced that he was going into town for a few hours.

"In case you need to know, I'll be at the Universel." He glared across the table at Philippe, his voice carrying a note of challenge. Philippe merely shrugged.

"Well — " André rose to his feet — "what else is there to do in this wilderness, eh, big brother?"

"If you're asking my permission, you have it," said Philippe.

"And do I have your permission to go back to Paris? Or do you want me to get down on my knees and beg you?" André's words dripped acid.

"You know better than that. You're not going. There's nothing more to say."

André was pale in the candlelight. His lips were tightly set. "We'll see about that!" he said. Then he turned on his heel and stalked out of the house. Claire heard the sound of the stable door creaking open.

"Why not let him go, Philippe?" she asked. "He's so unhappy here."

"Are you concerned for his future, Claire? Is that it? Or is it just that you want him with you?" They were alone at the table now. He was leaning forward in his chair, looking directly at her, his voice low and intense.

"I'm concerned for him," she said slowly. "That much I know. As for the rest . . . I'm not sure yet, Philippe."

"If you really care about him, then trust me. He's better off here in Panama. I can't let him go back to Paris."

"At least you can tell me why."

"No," he said. "That's something I've never told anyone. If you want him with you so badly, you'll stay here."

"He'd never be happy here."

"He'd never be happy in Paris, Claire, not unless you were strong enough to change him. Has he asked you to marry him?"

"No. But it wouldn't surprise me if he did."

Philippe had moved so that his face was in shadow. Claire could not see the expression in his eyes. "If it comes to that," he said at last,

"I'll tell you what you want to know. Otherwise . . . no need for it. All right?"

"All right." They sat there in silence and listened as the sound of André's horse and carriage died away in the distance.

"I've been thinking about this for a long time," Philippe said at last, "but what happened tonight's brought it to a head. Panama's no place for Marie-Thérèse. Especially if you still plan on leaving. When the child's in mortal danger from her own mother — " He took a cigar out of his pocket and stared at it as he balanced it between his fingertips. "My brother Marcel's written to me a number of times about this. I know André's told you he's something of a snob, but he's a good man. A fine man, really. He and his wife have four sons. They'd love a little girl. They've offered to take her until I return to France."

He fell into silence. Claire sat with him and listened to the soft tapping of the cigar against the top of the table and the relentless ticking of the grandfather clock out in the foyer. "I've put it off again and again; but after tonight . . . I can't put it off any longer. She'll be safe in France, and she'll have opportunities that she can't have here."

"She loves you," Claire said. "It won't be easy for either of you, will it?"

"No. But you can help, Claire. You could let her make the trip back to France with you, and perhaps afterward you could spend some time with her until she adjusts to my brother's family." He shook his head. "France is so far away and she's so little."

"I'll be happy to help," said Claire.

He looked down at the cigar in his hands. "Don't think I'm pressuring you to do it. Sister Gertrude — she met you when you arrived, remember? She's going back to France too. She can look after Marie-Thérèse if you can't. It's just that the child's grown so attached to you . . . "

"And I've grown attached to her. I *want* to do it, Philippe."

His big hand reached across the table and, for just an instant, closed over hers, completely covering it. "Thank you," he said.

The next few days passed uneventfully except for one thing: Angélique had stopped playing. The eerie silence filled the house like a fog. Claire found herself listening, straining her ears for the now-familiar sound of the piano, but Angélique had totally abandoned it. Instead she prowled the halls, staring at her surroundings with eyes that

seemed to be seeing them for the first time. She had opened the drapes of the sitting room, and she spent hours just looking out at the yard, the wall, and the jungle beyond. Yet she did not venture outside. And she did not speak, although Claire felt, with a spine-tingling certainty, that she could do it if she chose to. She drifted about the house on silent feet, watching all of them, Philippe, André, Simone, Marie-Thérèse, and Claire, the way a cat watches the movement of the fish in an aquarium.

Marie-Thérèse would not go near her mother. She clung to Claire constantly, following her about the house wherever she went, whimpering when she was out of her sight.

So it was that, when she came to Claire's lap one afternoon and began to complain, "Mam'selle, my head hurts," Claire dismissed it at first as a bid for attention. Marie-Thérèse had been unusually whiny since her ordeal.

"You're tired, love," Claire kissed her cheek. "It's time for your nap. You'll feel better when you wake up."

Claire put her to bed and she went to sleep at once. An hour later she heard Marie-Thérèse crying.

"What is it, sweet?" She lifted the little girl out of her crib. Her skin was flushed and she felt warm.

"My head, Mam'selle!" She rolled her face back and forth against the hollow of Claire's shoulder. "It hurts! Hurts, hurts, hurts!" Her voice subsided to a whimper. Her face was hot against Claire's neck. Claire slid her hand up under her chemise and felt the little body. It was burning with fever.

"Hold me, Mam'selle! Make it stop! It *hurts*!" She began to tremble all over.

Alarmed. Claire sent Léon into town on horseback to summon Philippe. Then she filled a basin with water and began to sponge her face, arms, and legs to cool her. By now, Marie-Thérèse was frantic with pain and fear. Claire took her to her own room and lay on the bed with her, holding her tight in her arms.

After what seemed like a very long time, although it could not have been more than an hour, she heard the sound of the carriage clattering into the yard. A moment later, Philippe was beside them.

"Let me see her." His tone was grave. Claire sat up and held Marie-Thérèse as he felt her skin, looked at her eyes and her tongue, and ran his hands along her arms and legs to feel the joints.

"That hurts!" she whimpered as he flexed her knees. "Don't, Papa!"

He picked her up in his arms and walked to the window. Claire saw him bend and kiss the top of her head. When he turned to Claire again, his face was desolate.

"What is it?" Claire whispered.

"It's too soon to know for certain," he said in a dull voice. "But she has all the symptoms of yellow fever."

Eighteen

The nights and days, three or four of them — Claire had lost count — passed in a slow blur of anguish. Simone, Claire, and Philippe took turns tending Marie-Thérèse, sponging her hot little body, holding her as she whimpered incoherently, feeding her thin broth and water to keep her from dehydrating. She was lost in a haze of fever and pain, pain in her head, neck, back, and joints. These, Philippe had explained, were the early symptoms of yellow fever. The yellowing of the skin and the ghastly black vomit — a sign that the body's internal membranes were bleeding — came in the late stages of the disease.

"I keep telling myself we can't be sure it's yellow fever," he'd said. "Not this soon. We can only expect the worst and pray for less."

He'd been holding her as he said it, her head lolling against his chest in the merciful half-stupor of the fever. His shirt clung damply to his skin in the places where her warmth pressed against him.

"You mean there's something else it could be?" Claire had asked him.

He'd lowered Marie-Thérèse to the clean sheets Claire had just put over the mattress of her crib, straightened up, and run a hand through his rumpled black hair. His face was gaunt and unshaven, for he'd scarcely slept or left his daughter's side since the beginning of her illness. "Dengue," he'd said. "The symptoms are the same at first. Headache . . . high fever . . . But there's one difference. Dengue's not so serious. It's very seldom — fatal." He choked on the last word.

"When will we know?" Claire had pulled the clean sheet up over Marie-Thérèse and smoothed the curls back from her pink forehead.

"Soon, if it's dengue. She'll break out in a rash after three or four days of the fever. If not . . ." He trailed off and looked down at his hands where they rested on the railing of the crib.

"Philippe, what day is it?"

"Tuesday."

They had gazed at each other in mutual despair. Marie-Thérèse had come down with the fever on Friday. The critical four days had already passed.

And now it had been five days. Five days without any change. Claire had inspected her almost hourly, praying for a sign of the rash, but her skin remained an even, flushed red-pink. She was growing weaker with each day. Claire sat on a chair beside her bed, listening to her breathing. Her toys and treasures kept silent vigil from their shelves — the wax doll from Paris, the little Cuna doll from the San Blas Islands, carved from balsa wood; the silver piggy bank inscribed with her name and birth date: November 17, 1881.

"You need a rest, Claire." André stood in the doorway. "Let me take you into town tonight. What good can you do here? Simone can watch her." He strolled into the room, took Claire's hands, and lifted her to her feet. "Look at you! Your eyes are all red; your hair's hanging down around your face in strings! You look like you've just spent the week in hell!"

Claire shook her head. "I can't leave her, André."

"Then at least get some sleep. How is the poor little mite?" He walked over to the crib, bent his head, and looked down at her where she lay. "About the same, I see. Where's Philippe?"

"He went to the hospital to check on his patients there. I promised him I'd stay with her."

"You promised him! See, he has you under his thumb, too!"

"That's not so," Claire said quietly. "André, why won't he let you go back to Paris?"

"He hasn't told you?"

"No. Not even when I asked him to."

"Well, it's a simple matter. I have some good friends in Paris. Artists, like me. Philippe doesn't approve of the way they live. He's afraid they'll — " he gave a bitter chuckle — "corrupt me if I go back."

"That's all?" Claire asked, thinking that there must be more to the matter than what André had told her.

"That's all, *chérie*. Philippe — he's just being stubborn." He was standing behind her, and he slipped both hands around her waist, lifted her hair, and kissed her on the back of her neck. "You could help

me change his mind, Claire. Philippe likes you. He listens to you. Tell him I've got to go back to Paris if I ever want to amount to anything as an artist." His lips nuzzled her earlobe. "Will you do that for me?"

"I'll try," she said, "because it's true." She pulled away from him a little. "I'm tired, André."

He took hold of her shoulders and turned her around to face him. "When you talk to Philippe, I want you to be able to tell him that you'll be with me in Paris, Claire. As my wife. Maybe that will make a difference."

She blinked up at him, stunned.

He grinned. "You funny little girl! Don't you know when a man's proposing to you?"

"André — "

"Let me put it more simply, then. Claire, will you marry me?"

She stood and looked at him, wondering why she was feeling the things she felt. Hadn't she dreamed of marrying André? Hadn't she imagined the life they could have together? By all rights, she should be ecstatic, she thought. Instead, she was only tired, confused, and oddly resentful that he should put the pressure of such a decision on her when she was so worried about Marie-Thérèse. "André," she said, "give me some time. I can't answer you now, with so many things . . . "

"But you'll think about it?" He was still smiling.

"Yes."

"And you'll talk to Philippe?"

"I'll talk to him, André. Even if my answer is no."

He lifted her chin with his fingers and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "It won't be no, *chérie*. It can't be. Now, call Simone and tell her you're going into Col—n with me."

She shook her head. He released her from his arms, blew her a kiss from the doorway, and then he was gone.

Philippe came in an hour later, after it was dark. "No change?" He leaned over the crib, hollow-eyed from lack of sleep.

"No change," Claire said, aching for him. "I got a half-cup of broth down her tonight. Simone has your supper in the kitchen. You might as well eat something."

"Later," he said, and Claire knew that he would probably forget.

"Philippe . . . " He looked at her and she could not even ask the awful question that was in her mind. It had been five days since

Marie-Thérèse had come down with the fever. The rash of dengue had not appeared. Yellow fever had killed strong, healthy men many times her weight. Claire had read enough by now to know what could be expected. Soon Marie-Thérèse's pulse rate would drop; the structure of her blood cells would begin to break down; her skin and eyes would turn yellow and she would begin to vomit — blood-streaked matter at first, becoming darker and thicker until it took on the texture and color of coffee grounds. Delirium would overcome her senses. The probability was fearfully high that in a few more days Marie-Thérèse would be dead.

Philippe sank down on the chair beside her crib and buried his face in his hands. Several minutes passed in silence. "This won't do, will it?" he said finally, sitting up and looking at her. "Do me a favor, Claire. Several years ago I went to Paris for a two-month symposium on tropical medicine. I took notes while I was there and I have them in a journal on my desk downstairs. Maybe something in them will tell us . . . " He shrugged helplessly. "Would you go down and get it for me? It's a big green folder, quite thick."

Taking a candle, Claire went downstairs to the library. From the kitchen she could hear the sounds of Simone washing the dishes.

Claire opened the library door. The green folder was on the desk, its closed cover labeled in Philippe's sprawling hand: "Notes taken at Symposium on Tropical Medicine — January 25-March 16, 1881." She picked up the folder and as she tucked it under her arm she remembered something André had told her. Philippe had been at a medical convention in Paris when Angélique had taken her tragic plunge down the winding staircase. The hair prickled on the back of her neck. It had to be the same convention, the one at which he had taken these notes. She put the folder down and looked at the dates again. January 25-March 16, 1881. The year Marie Thérèse had been born. Claire remembered her birthdate as it was engraved on the silver piggy bank: November 17 of that same year. Something about those dates bothered her. Then, suddenly, she knew why. She put the candle down on the desk and eased herself into Philippe's chair, trembling. Very slowly, using her fingers, she began to count the months, backward from the 17th of November, until she had counted nine months and arrived at the 17th of February, 1881, a date falling into the middle of the

time when Philippe had been in Paris and Angélique had been here in Panama.

She took the journal and went back upstairs. Philippe was leaning over the crib when she walked into the room with the green folder in her hands. She had not planned to say anything to him, but one look at her face was enough to alert him to the fact that something was wrong.

"What is it, Claire?" he asked, raising his dark head. Then his eyes flickered from the green folder to the silver piggy bank on the dresser and he guessed. "So you know," he said very softly.

Claire could not lie to him or play games of evasion. "Yes, I know," she said. "I know that Marie-Thérèse isn't your child."

He straightened to his full height, but he continued to look down at the little girl's sleeping face. "Isn't she?" was all he said.

And as Claire stood there and watched the two of them, she knew that he was right. In every way save one, Philippe was Marie-Thérèse's father.

"I know what you're wondering," he said after a while. "I don't know who her natural father was. When I got back from Paris in mid-April, Angélique had just had her accident and was in no condition to tell me. I didn't even realize she was pregnant until she began to show signs of it." He picked up the silver bank in his big hands and cradled it for a moment before putting it down on the dresser again. "For a time, I wondered too. Then, after Marie-Thérèse was born, I realized that I could ruin her life if I didn't acknowledge her as mine. Before long, it didn't matter anymore. I didn't *want* to know. She'd *become* mine, and I didn't want anyone else's claim on her. I've never even tried to find out." He took a step toward her. "Claire, don't. Don't cry!"

Claire pressed her hands to her face. When she took them away, her fingers were dry. "I'm not," she said in a choked voice. Strange, she had felt the tears welling up inside her, but she had not cried. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm not much help, am I?"

Wearily, Philippe sank into the armchair. Claire stood looking down at his dark head, her mind spinning with the growing awareness that they shared common tragedies of betrayal, she and Philippe. Impulsively she lowered herself to the rug until she was sitting at his feet, gazing up at him.

"Philippe," she said softly, "I'm sorry . . . I know how you must have felt, because the same thing happened to me, with Paul . . . "

He leaned toward her, his arms resting on his knees. "Not quite the same, Claire," he said in a voice that rang with bitterness. "You see, it was no surprise to me. I'd long since accepted the fact that Angélique couldn't be faithful. She just wasn't capable of it."

Claire caught her breath.

"But . . . it must have hurt you."

"Of course it did." He straightened and shifted his weight in the chair, then settled back again. "I lost my head over Angélique in the beginning. What man wouldn't? I was dazzled that she'd chosen me over all the admirers she had. I didn't come to my senses until after we were married. Then I looked around at the others and realized that they were either single but poor or wealthy but married. I was the only one who could offer her the right combination of money and respectability."

Claire sat in silence while Philippe found the words to go on. Behind her she could hear the labored sound of Marie-Thérèse's breathing.

"That in itself wasn't so bad," Philippe continued. "Plenty of women marry for money and manage to make a good thing of it. No, the real blow came when I found out that the poor girl was incapable of loving one man. That was when the nightmare really began . . . "

Philippe looked down into the grave sweetness of Claire's face. No, he reflected, he could not tell her everything. He would never be able to talk about his wedding night, about the moment when, warm with anticipation, he'd sat on the edge of the bed and gazed at his beautiful bride where she lay on the ivory satin sheets, her long, golden hair perfectly arranged on the pillow. She had held out her arms and he had buried his face in the fragrant hollow of her neck.

"Dearest Philippe . . . " she'd murmured. "There's something I must tell you . . . it may make you angry . . . "

"Nothing could make me angry tonight, Angélique."

"Philippe — " she stroked his hair — "I'm not a virgin."

He'd tensed, then relaxed again. "That doesn't matter, love. It's all in the past." He was disappointed, but not devastated. Some things couldn't be helped, he told himself philosophically.

"It wasn't the way you might think, Philippe. I was . . . forced."

Yes, he now thought cynically. They all were. "You needn't tell me, sweet. It doesn't matter. We'll never speak of it again." His arms slipped around her.

"No," she whispered. "I want to tell you. If I don't you'll always wonder . . ." She lifted his face with her hands so that she could look into his eyes. "It was in Haiti. The night those horrible men burned our house. One of them came into my room and locked the door behind him. I'd seen him in the cane fields. He was tall, Philippe, and very black, with great, broad shoulders . . ." Her breathing quickened. "He ripped off the blankets, and then he caught me —"

"Stop it, darling . . ." He closed her lips with his own. "Don't tell me this. It's not necessary . . ."

She shook her golden head. "I fought him . . . but he was too strong for me. After he'd finished, just as he was pulling up his trousers, my father broke down the door with an ax and shot him dead. Right through the chest, Philippe, with his pistol." Her eyes were huge in the candlelight. "We got out of the house with the rafters burning over our heads and falling down in pieces all around us. Afterward, my father wouldn't even look at me. As if it had been my fault, Philippe . . ." She pulled him down to her and pressed her face against his chest where his dressing gown hung open. "And now, maybe you won't want to look at me either . . ."

"Angélique! Don't even say it!" And he'd gathered her close. He would take her gently, he resolved; not brutally as she had been taken the first time, but lovingly, with infinite tenderness . . .

Afterward, she'd moved away from him, leaned back into her satin pillow and laughed.

"What is it, Angélique?" He propped himself on one elbow to look at her.

She laughed again, flinging her golden head back and forth. "I'm laughing at myself, Philippe! I thought that maybe with you it might be good enough to make me forget — but I was wrong. I should have known better. And it's funny!"

He'd been too shocked to speak. He could only lie there and stare at her.

"Poor Philippe! It's not your fault. For an ordinary woman, you'd have been more than adequate. It's just that there's one thing I didn't tell you about that night in Haiti."

She sat up a little more and pulled up the sheet so that her splendid breasts were well-covered. "I liked it," she announced. "I'd never been touched by a man before — never even been kissed. And it *thrilled* me! He was so strong . . . so deliciously cruel. And I *liked* it, Philippe. I liked it so much that I couldn't wait to try it again. Only the second time wasn't the same as the first, or the third time, or the time after that, or any of the others. Not even with you, my dear husband."

Philippe lay there and let the full, awful impact of what she was saying sink into his senses. He lay there for a long time.

"Then you'll be wanting a divorce, I suppose," he said coldly.

"Of course not!" Her laughter bubbled like hot acid.

"And if I do?"

"You won't, dearest Philippe. I know you. The scandal of it, your good old family name . . . You won't divorce me, my love. You're much too decent. You'll put on a nice facade, and so will I."

"And behind the facade?" He'd sat up, suddenly ashamed of his own nakedness, and slipped on the dressing gown.

"I like you, Philippe. You can have me whenever you want. But you must understand that I intend to keep on looking — discreetly of course — for that thrill. And if I find it — " she tossed her silken mane of hair and gave a high-pitched, nervous chuckle — "heaven help me then!"

Philippe had stood up, knotted the sash of his dressing gown, turned his back on her, and walked out of the room.

Claire was still gazing up at him, her huge, gray eyes full of questions, as he tried to summarize three years of pure hell in a few short, simple sentences. "Back in Haiti, before I met her," he began awkwardly, "a man attacked her. It affected her mind, I believe. She had so many lovers that I stopped counting after the first few months. I moved out of our bedroom — she didn't care! I offered her a divorce — she said she didn't want one. I had my pride; I had our family honor and reputation to think of — what could I do?"

Philippe sighed. "When I was offered this position in Panama, I thought it might be the answer. I was still fool enough to hope that if I could just get her away from Paris, away from the people she knew . . . " He shook his head bitterly. "I should have known better.

Angélique hated Panama. She hated the house. She was like a caged wildcat.

"That medical convention in Paris . . . I'd planned to take her. Then I stumbled across a letter she'd been writing to one of her old lovers — a man I hated — making arrangements to meet the night after our arrival. It was the final indignity! I refused to take her with me. I won't go into Angélique's reaction, or what she called me when she found out she wasn't going back to Paris, but I'd made up my mind — "

He broke off as the nursery door opened and Simone glided into the room. Without a word, Claire stood up and handed him the green folder she'd brought from the library. Philippe took it from her, settled back in his chair, and tried to read.

Claire stepped aside as Simone lumbered over to the bed, stared down at Marie-Thérèse, and shook her head.

"Poor little Mam'selle," she murmured in her velvety voice. Then she turned around and glowered at Claire, her face suddenly hard. "Best you go to bed. We can watch her, M'sieu' Philippe and I."

"I wouldn't be able to sleep," Claire answered.

"You look tired, Mam'selle. You go now. Yes?"

"No," Claire insisted. "I don't want to leave her, Simone."

The glazed, guarded expression veiled Simone's eyes and she retreated behind it, remembering, perhaps, that one does not interfere with the wishes of a *dosu*. "I will stay too," she announced doggedly, as she seated herself on a large, leather-bound chest, glaring at Claire like a bull mastiff. Claire picked out a fur rug in the middle of the floor and settled herself on it as comfortably as possible. They sat there silently for a time, Philippe poring over the pages of the journal, Simone and Claire staring at opposite walls of the room.

Then Simone lay her head back, closed her eyes, and began to croon low in her throat, in a voice that was as rich, dark, and sweet as sorghum. Her full mouth began to form words — bits and pieces of some remote ancestral tongue, flowing out as naturally as the melody. She sang effortlessly, as if she had become part of the song, as if she had become the song itself. Claire listened to Simone sing, and she felt her own pulse beating out its accompaniment.

She glanced over at Philippe, where he sat in the chair, absorbed in his reading. Her eyes traced the outline of his jutting profile, caressed

the touch of silver at his temples and moved downward to the wide shoulders and those ludicrously big hands that held the pages of his journal. With a feeling of awe, she examined the things she had learned about his relationship with Angélique, sifted and pondered, making an effort not to judge either of them . . .

Claire sat and let Simone's song wash over her. She was tired — so tired that the fetters of convention that bound her mind became slack; her thoughts began to wander on paths of their own choosing. And each path, however devious, led her back to Philippe.

Something welled up inside her, a sensation so painfully sweet that she had to close her eyes, and she knew that she would never marry André. Perhaps she would never marry anyone, for she had lost her heart to a man she could never have.

She remembered him that first day, leaning on the rail beside her in the rain, so gruff, so ill at ease. She saw his face, the way he had looked when she'd discovered that he'd had the piano tuned for her, felt his heart, the way it had felt when he'd clasped her against his shoulder for that moment in the stable. Philippe, she thought. My dear, tormented Philippe . . . when did I first begin to love you?

Philippe did not look at her. He was absorbed in his papers.

What a fine mess she'd made of it! Philippe was married to a beautiful woman, and he loved her — at least he had, enough to keep her with him even when she'd been unfaithful. Not only that, but she still had reason to believe he was both a smuggler and a murderer. What a fool she was!

Yet, she loved him. And beside the intensity of that love, everything else — Paul, Angélique, André, Prestan, even Bertrand's death paled to insignificance.

Simone had stopped singing. With a sudden stab of guilt, Claire wondered if she had read her mind. Startled by the silence, Philippe glanced up at both of them.

Simone rose to her towering height. "I can't sit here anymore," she said. "I got to do something. M'sieu' Philippe, will you let me go down into the yard and make *verver* for the little Mam'selle?"

Philippe pondered her request for a moment. "Do it, Simone, with my blessing," he answered. "Right now I'd welcome help from any source."

After she'd gone, he explained to Claire. "It's a ceremony. Nothing too elaborate. She just traces a pattern on the ground with

a mixture of flour and ashes, and then she sings. You could call it a form of prayer."

Claire could not let him know how she felt about him. She could never let him know. "Sometimes I think you almost believe in it yourself," she said, speaking as if nothing had happened.

"I don't, of course. But if Simone wants to think she's doing something to help, what's the harm?" He stood up and looked down into the crib at the little girl who was not really his daughter. His hand reached down and smoothed her hair back from her face.

"Did André go into town tonight?" he asked.

"Yes," Claire said, remembering her promise to André. "The Universel again. Don't you think he gambles too much?"

"Perhaps. But he hasn't much else to do at night, so I don't try to prevent it. He seems to win about as much as he loses . . . " Philippe trailed off and shrugged his shoulders.

"Philippe — " she began awkwardly.

He frowned at her. "Now, Claire, I know what you're leading up to. You want me to let him go back to Paris. You're going to tell me that he'll be stifled as an artist if he stays in Panama, that he needs to meet people who can advance his career. Isn't that what you're going to say to me?"

"Yes," she said, surprised that he could irritate her in spite of the way she felt about him. "That's exactly what I was going to say! I can't believe you could be so stubborn, Philippe!"

He walked over to her and put his hand on her arm. His touch made her pulse race. "It's not just stubbornness, Claire. Believe me. I have my reasons for keeping André here."

"And you won't tell me?"

"Only under one condition. You know that."

Claire turned away from him so that he could not see her face. "Then you can tell me, Philippe," she said. "That condition has been met."

She heard him catch his breath. "André's proposed to you?" he said in a soft, tight voice.

"Yes." She forced herself to turn and face him.

"And you've accepted?"

"No. Not yet." Oh, Philippe, she thought, don't look at me like that!

"All right," he said. "It's best you know what you'll be taking on if you say yes." He walked back to the crib and looked down at Marie-

Thérèse. "When André was about nineteen he had a quarrel with our father and he moved out of the house."

"I know," she said. "He told me he went to live with some friends."

Philippe took a deep breath. "Friends! They got him addicted to morphine, Claire."

Claire sank down onto the chest and put her hands over her mouth to keep from crying out.

"He was still using it when I had the opportunity to go to Panama. I went and found him and forced him to come with me. It was his only chance." Philippe began to walk back and forth as he talked, reliving the experience. "I put him in a cabin on the ship — took out all the furniture except the mattress from the bed. He went berserk from the pain. Tore the paint off the wall. By the time we got to Panama, he was all right."

"Can't he get morphine here?" Claire was sick inside at the thought of it.

"Oh, it can be had. Anything can, down here. But Pedro Prestan controls most of the drug traffic here in Col—n. You'd never believe this, Claire, but I pay him — I *pay* Prestan to make certain that no one sells André any morphine."

Claire felt dizzy. Philippe and Prestan! He paid him! Oh, Philippe, I believe you! She fought to keep herself from throwing her arms around him.

"One dose of the stuff, Claire," Philippe was saying, "and André would be right back where he was before. That's why I won't risk letting him go back to Paris."

Outside, Simone had begun her ceremony. They heard the flutter of her hands on the *bula*, the smallest of the three vodun drums, and the faraway rise and fall of her magnificent voice, from notes so deep that they scarcely sounded human, to high, birdlike trills.

"If you decide to marry my brother, you'll have to be very strong, Claire," Philippe was saying. "I'll help you all I can as long as you're here, but if you take him back to Paris — God protect you both!"

How she wanted to tell him then that she could never marry André, that she could never love anyone but him. No — Claire caught herself. It would never do to let him know. "You can't control André's life forever, Philippe," she said.

"I know. But can he control his own life? That's the question. Maybe you'll be part of the answer, Claire." He straightened the sheaf

of papers, put them back inside the green folder, and closed the cover. "I may as well have thrown these notes out a long time ago. With what I've learned since these were taken . . . " He sat back down in the chair and let the folder slide to the floor. His head dropped into his open hands. "And it's not enough," he murmured. "Dear God, it's not enough."

It took all Claire's strength to keep herself from going to him. Simone's voice and the sound of the drum floated up from the yard like a chant of death. Claire thought of Marie-Thérèse, her sweetness, her soft, round, pink little face. She pictured it pinched and yellowish, the way Paul's had been when he died. Philippe had seen hundreds of such deaths. He knew even more vividly than she did what was going to happen.

The house was so still that Claire could hear the clock ticking from the downstairs hall. She could hear Angélique walking back and forth in her room like a caged leopardess. Outside, Simone was still singing, but even her song had fallen into a soft, repetitive chant.

Philippe had dozed with his head in his hands. Claire sat on the chest, watching the rise and fall of his back. Marie-Thérèse began to whimper. He opened his eyes.

"Stay where you are," Claire whispered, getting lip quickly. "I'll check her." She hurried to the crib and felt Marie-Thérèse. Her skin was warm and moist. Taking the candlestick from the dresser, Claire held it above her with one hand while her other hand drew back the sheet and lifted Marie-Thérèse's nightgown.

Her little body was covered with a fine, scarlet rash.

"Philippe!" He was on his feet the instant he heard Claire gasp. She held the candle high so he could look at Marie-Thérèse as he ran his hand over her skin.

"Claire . . . it's . . . it's dengue! It's not yellow fever! It's dengue! With this rash, it has to be!"

"She's going to be all right?" Claire's voice was a jubilant whisper. She put the candlestick down on the dresser.

"Perhaps . . . yes, there's a good chance." He was almost choking with relief.

They were bending over the crib, side by side, both of them reaching out to touch Marie-Thérèse. He straightened; their eyes met, and suddenly it seemed the most natural thing in the world that she should fall into his open arms.

"Philippe — !" Feverish with longing, she melted against him. Her arms went around his back, binding him to her. Her face pressed hard against his chest. She could hear the drumming of his heart against her ear as he pulled her closer.

"Don't, Claire . . . don't, love . . . " he was murmuring, but he was holding her as hungrily as she was holding him, brushing his lips against her hair, her forehead, her closed eyelids. "Don't you know how long I've fought you? How I've needed you from the first moment you walked into this house . . . ?" His hands had begun to trace the contours of her back, moving up and down, drawing her inward against him and sending shivers of desire shooting down into her thighs. She wanted him, she realized with a sense of wonder. More than she had ever wanted André; more, even, than she had ever wanted Paul. Her arms tightened around him, locking his body against hers. "Claire . . . " he whispered, his lips against her ear. "It's been so long for me . . . too long . . . "

She turned her face and knew the heaven of his mouth closing onto hers, warm, strong, moving, opening her soul like a flower. She lifted herself against him, felt his body stiffen, felt his arms easing her gently away from him until the two of them stood apart once more.

"Listen to me, Claire." His voice was hoarse. "Turn around and run. Don't stop running until you're back in France. I can't be any good for you . . . I can't promise you any kind of life . . . It's not fair to ask you . . . " He had run out of words. He stood there before her, his eyes two deep black shadows.

The candle sputtered and died. Claire stood in the sudden darkness, filled with the sensation of being suspended in midair. The next step she took, she knew, could determine the course of the rest of her life.

Looking up at him, she shook her head. "I love you, Philippe," she said in a soft, clear voice.

"Claire — " He hesitated a moment; then his resolve crumbled and he swept her into his arms again, bruising her lips with his kisses, crushing her close until they stood fused like two flames in the darkness, hot blood coursing through their veins. Philippe's fingers moved up her back to her hair, pulled away the tortoiseshell combs, and sent the chestnut cascade tumbling down over his hands.

She was trembling, weak, totally willing as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the big chair. Her resistance was gone. Were those her own hands, pulling loose the high collar of her shirtwaist so that his lips could find her throat? Her own mouth, opening shamelessly under his, wanting, welcoming the thrust of his tongue? Whatever he willed he would do with her, she knew, for she was completely his. She drew his head down toward her and pressed his face against her breasts, whispering his name, whispering all the words that she had kept buried inside herself for so long.

From downstairs, they heard the sound of the front door opening. Philippe tensed. "Simone," he said softly. "Or André. It's best that they don't come in and find you here like this, love."

Claire sat up, warm, disheveled, still glowing from her discovery of him. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her very gently. "You're so beautiful, Claire," he whispered. "Run, now! Quickly! In the morning we'll talk."

She slipped reluctantly out of his arms, found the floor with her feet, and reached back to clasp his hands one last time. "Tomorrow . . ." she murmured. And in the next moment she was gone from him.

As the echo of Claire's footsteps died away, Philippe sat with his head in his hands, totally shaken. He had loved her, he realized, almost from the moment he'd met her, but with a love that was so wistful, so remote, so much with her own best interest at heart, he'd assured himself . . . He shook his head and got up to look at Marie-Thérèse. Yes, thank God, the rash was in full bloom and she was slumbering peacefully.

He sank down again, wondering how he could have let his own feelings about Claire deceive him so. He wanted her — wanted her with every nerve and fiber in his body. And if she stayed, he would have her he knew. The poor girl loved him enough to give herself to him, and he, monster that he was, would take her and ultimately destroy her. He would make her his *querida*, as they put it down here. His kept woman. He would buy her a house, elegantly furnished, give her expensive presents, give her everything except the respectability of his name, and in return, her lovely little body would be his whenever he wished. She would not be able to appear in public with him —

no, he'd not subject her to that. And if any children came of their love, they would be branded with that foul epithet that no innocent child ever deserved: bastard.

Something burst inside him, so painfully that he moaned out loud. "Oh, Claire . . . " he whispered.

The hours of the night crept past until the sky turned to pearl. As if by signal, all the birds awakened at once and began to sing. Claire had not even closed her eyes. She lay there on her back under the thin sheet, warm even in the coolness of the dawn.

She had always held herself a touch above other women, she realized abashedly. She had always considered herself too moral, too strong to fall into the kind of temptations that were whispered about behind fans in drawing rooms. Why, even with Paul, much as she'd loved him, she had not let him put an out-of-place hand on her until they were married.

She'd been so genuinely shocked at his betrayal of their vows. She'd felt so hurt, so sinned against, so innocent herself. And last night when she'd learned the secret behind Marie-Thérèse's birth, she'd experienced a tug of that same, smug, self-righteous indignation toward poor Angélique. Then Philippe had held her in his arms and proved to her that she was no different from any other woman.

He could have taken her, she realized, her cheeks flaming. If they'd been alone, if no one had opened the front door, she would have given herself to him without a moment's hesitation, and like Marta she would not have been ashamed. Claire could cast no stones now. She was no better than Marta; no better than Angélique. And Philippe, perhaps, was no stronger in the face of temptation than Paul had been.

In an effort to view the picture more clearly, she moved her mind to a distant point and looked back at herself and at Philippe. Both of them had been betrayed. Did that justify their becoming in turn the betrayers?

Claire stretched her legs and threw back the sheet. Angélique was Philippe's wife and the mother of Marie-Thérèse. Claire was only an interloper, someone who had slipped into another woman's place for a few precious weeks. Now that Angélique's sleeping mind was emerging from its cocoon, she told herself,

there would be no place for her here. She had no right to come between a man and his wife, between a mother and her child. If she loved Philippe, if she wanted his happiness, she would go and go quickly. Perhaps Philippe and Angélique could never be happy together, but while they were husband and wife, she had no right to interfere.

Claire sat up and put her feet on the coolness of the floor. She had made her decision — the only decision possible.

Philippe was in the garden. When Claire came downstairs she could see him through the glass panes of the double doors. Squaring her shoulders, she opened one of the doors and stepped out into the dawn.

He was standing beside the stone bench, still wearing the same white shirt and gray trousers he had worn the night before. He looked as if he had not even been to bed. At the sound of her approaching footsteps, he turned. She forced herself to look into his eyes.

"How's Marie-Thérèse?" she asked him.

"Much better. The fever's broken. She'll be wanting you when she wakes up." His voice was slightly distant. Claire sensed that after the long, sleepless night, they had both come to the same decision.

"She'll be weak for some time," he said, "but I think she's out of danger." He stared down at the cobblestones. His shoulders rose and fell. "Claire . . ." he began and trailed off helplessly. She ached to feel his arms around her again.

"Philippe," she said, steeling herself, "I'm going back to France. As soon as possible."

"The boat leaves in four days." He spoke evenly, without any outward show of emotion. "If Marie-Thérèse is well enough to be moved, would you still be willing to take her back with you?"

"Of course."

"The sea air will be good for her, I think." He took a few steps down the path, paused, and gazed at the top of a tamarind tree that grew in one corner of the garden. "Claire?"

"Yes, Philippe?"

"If you still want André to go back to France with you, I won't stand in the way."

"Philippe," she answered, drawing a painful breath, "I never wanted him to go back with me. Not even before I knew."

The sun broke over the top of the wall, flooding the garden with dancing patterns of light and shadow. A pair of macaws, twin flashes of brilliant color, darted low across the sky.

"Do you want me to tell him for you, Claire?" He thrust his hands into his pockets and looked up at the tree again.

"No," said Claire. "That wouldn't be fair. I'll tell him myself."

Nineteen

André's fingers closed around the handle of the long, thin brush and bent the brittle wood until it snapped like a small explosion in the silence of the studio.

"So, he told you."

"Somebody had to tell me, André. You didn't," Claire said softly.

"Would you have understood, Claire? Or would I have lost you?"

"You could have given me a chance to understand, André. It's your not having told me that disturbs me most, not your having been a morphine addict."

He shook his head. His curls had tumbled down onto his brow and he looked like a vulnerable young boy. "With you by my side I could have beaten it, Claire. I could have gone back to Paris with you and never even thought about the stuff again! There'd have been no *need* for you to know. Now it's too late." He tossed the pieces of the brush to the floor. "I have lost you, haven't I?"

"Let me be your friend, André." What an empty, trite thing to say, Claire berated herself. She'd handled the whole matter badly from beginning to end. Now she'd hurt him.

"That's not what I need, Claire. I need you with me. In Paris. With you, I can be a success. Without you — " He sighed and looked down at his hands.

"Don't, André." She shifted her weight on the love seat where she'd been sitting. "Don't place that kind of burden on me. It's not fair. You've got to be responsible for yourself."

André walked back and forth in front of the easel, his mouth set hard.

"All right," he said at last. "If that's what it takes to win you, I'll go back on my own. I'll prove to you that I don't need morphine any-

more. Maybe then, *chérie* . . . ” He ran his fingers through his curls and sat down beside her. “But I didn’t think I’d have to prove any of those things to you! I thought you loved me! What a disappointment!”

Anxious to end the encounter, she stood up. “I’m sorry, André. I wish I could have found an easier way to tell you.” She took a step toward the door.

André was staring at her. “Wait!” he commanded, seizing her hand and pulling her back down beside him. “I’m not finished!” He folded his arms across his chest and looked at her intently. “I’ll be damned!” He whistled softly. “I’ve been a blind fool not to see it! Look at me!”

Claire sat frozen to the spot. He shook his head and begun to chuckle.

“It’s Philippe, isn’t it! You’re in love with him!” When Claire tried to get up, he took hold of her hand and would not let it loose. “Don’t deny it! It’s written all over you!”

“Let me go, André.” She twisted her hand.

“Not till I’ve drummed some sense into that pretty little head. Look at you! You’re a fool! You can never have him!”

“I don’t intend to! Let me go!”

He put both his hands on her shoulders and held her still. “Listen to me, you child,” he said. “Angélique’s Catholic. They were married in her church. Maybe she couldn’t fight a divorce, but her father would. He’d never let Philippe out of it! So unless you’re prepared to be his mistress — ”

“Stop it, André!”

“Not till I’ve finished what I have to say! I tried to tell you what kind of man he was, but you wouldn’t listen. Well, you’re going to listen now!”

“Let me go, André! I don’t want to hear it!” Claire’s lips spoke the words, but she remained where she was. She had spent more than two months in this bewildering household, and if André was about to supply her with new pieces of the puzzle, then she would listen.

“You’ve seen Angélique,” he said. “You’ve seen what she is. If you could have seen what she *was* . . . If you could have known what my brother put that lovely woman through!”

“I know about Marie-Thérèse, if that’s what you’re trying to tell me,” she said coldly.

“Do you, Claire? Do you know that whatever Angélique did, Philippe drove her to it? Do you know that he all but pushed her

down that staircase with his own hands?" André raised her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. They were two hard chips of amber.

"Philippe met her in Paris, when she was just beginning her career as a pianist. She already had quite a following — with her gift and her beauty, you can see why. They married much too soon, before either of them had a chance to know what the other was like." André spread his hands. "Disaster! From the very beginning!"

"Why?" Claire had heard Philippe's side of the story. If there was more to the truth than what he'd told her, it was time she found out.

"Why? Jealousy, *ma chérie*! Philippe was so insanely jealous he wouldn't let her out of his sight! He resented her friends, and he drove them away one by one. When he was offered a position in Panama, it was the perfect opportunity for him to take her away from everything that was dear to her! He brought her to Col—n, had this house built out here in the jungle, and kept her prisoner in it!"

Claire looked down at her hands where they gripped the edges of the burgundy velvet cushions. "You've told me most of this before, André."

"Yes, and you should have listened the first time," he said. "The topper was when Philippe had the chance to go back to Paris and he wouldn't take her! She was stifling out here! She was dying of loneliness, and he wouldn't take her!" André shook his head, "I don't know how it happened. Some man — it's not important anymore. Whoever he was, Philippe had driven her to him!"

"Go on," Claire whispered, her heart pounding louder than her voice.

"When she learned that she was pregnant, she was terrified. She was certain Philippe would kill her when he found out. She was desperate, ready to do *anything*!" André moved toward Claire until his face was only a few inches from her own. She could see the throbbing of the pulse in his left temple. "Claire," he said, "Angélique didn't *fall* down the stairway. She *jumped*! She was trying to lose the baby!" He turned away from Claire and clasped his hands on his knees. "As you can see, she wasn't successful."

Horried, Claire groped for some shred of doubt. "And you, André? How do you know all this?"

"I was there. I tried to stop her, but I couldn't get to her fast enough." The room was silent except for the sound of his breathing. "I picked her up at the foot of the stairs. She was unconscious. When she awakened, she was — as you saw her when you came."

Claire sat there on the love seat, watching a fly buzzing about the ceiling and fumbling for something to say. "If Angélique was so miserable, why didn't she leave him?" she asked feebly.

"I told you, she's Catholic. Philippe's not, but that doesn't make much difference. He'd never have let her go."

"She's getting well, André. She may recover completely. What then?"

"Then, my dear Claire, she can go back to living in the private hell my brother created for her. And if you're smart, you'll get yourself back to Paris and leave them to their own peculiar game of torturing each other." André stood up and rested his hands on Claire's shoulders. "You see, Claire, I care about you. I hate to see you making a fool of yourself and getting hurt in the process." His hand crept up her shoulder to caress the back of her neck, to stroke her hair . . .

"Stop it, André," she said softly.

"Oho! You used to like it! What happened? Is it that you're too good to be touched by someone who's sniffed morphine a few times? Or is it just that I'm not Philippe?" He was rubbing her shoulders, slowly, sensuously.

"Stop it, André!" She tried to stand up, but the pressure of his hands held her fast. "Let me go."

"That's enough, André. Let her go." It was Philippe, standing in the open doorway. His voice was icy. "Please leave us, Claire," he commanded.

Claire rose to her feet and, moving like a sleepwalker, made her way to the doorway where he stood. One glimpse of his eyes was enough to tell her that he'd heard most of what had been said.

"Is it true, Philippe?" she whispered.

"Yes, Claire. I'm afraid it is." His face was stony.

Wordlessly, she brushed her way past him and walked back down the hallway to her room.

In the four days that passed before the scheduled departure of the boat for France, Claire saw little of anyone except Marie-Thérèse. Philippe threw himself into his work at the hospital with a grim fury, leaving the house before dawn and returning late at night. Claire saw him only when he came to check on Marie-Thérèse, who was making a rapid recovery now that her fever had broken. It was painful, being with him those few moments each day, both of them talking to Marie-

Thérèse about the voyage and the family that awaited her in France, yet saying very little to each other, avoiding the poignancy of meeting one another's eyes.

André, too, spent most of his time in Col—n. Claire felt as if she had driven both him and Philippe out of the house. Yet their absences came as a respite from the strain of the past days. Matters and feelings had become so intense that she could not feel comfortable in the presence of either of the two brothers.

When she was not with Marie-Thérèse, she spent most of her time in her room packing. She lay the folded garments in their trunks, remembering how eagerly she had filled those trunks less than three months earlier. How long ago that day seemed. When she looked back at the girl who had stood at the rail of the ship, so eager for her first glimpse of Panama and for Paul's embrace, Claire scarcely recognized her.

She folded the amber ball gown gently and placed it at the bottom of the large steamer trunk. She would not be wearing it again for a long time, she told herself. The topaz earrings that matched it so beautifully, the ones that had belonged to Paul's mother, these she would ask André to take to Marta.

On the last day, Claire had Léon drive her to Monkey Hill for a final visit to Paul's grave. The long grass in the cemetery was dry, but the tiny bouquet of violets that she found on the grave was nearly fresh. Marta, she thought, and the memory of that small face no longer pained her. A part of Paul would live on, and that was as it should be. Claire looked down at the little stone cross with his name on it and felt at last a sense of peace. She had preserved the honor of that name. She had kept faith with the love they had shared. "Good-bye, Paul," she whispered, slipping off her wedding band and pressing it into the earth. Then she rose and turned away. The part of her life that had belonged to him was over.

On the morning of departure, it was Philippe who readied the carriage for the drive to the docks. Silently, tenderly, he carried Marie-Thérèse down the winding staircase and placed her on Claire's lap in the carriage. The little girl was still too weak to walk, but she was alert now, and feeling well enough to be excited about the journey.

André was not even there to say good-bye. She had hurt his pride, Claire realized, but she had not wounded him deeply. Perhaps she'd been nothing more to him than a tool to help him get back to Paris.

Had he really loved her? She would never know, and perhaps it was just as well, she told herself as she watched Simone lean over the edge of the carriage to kiss Marie-Thérèse on the cheek.

"Good-bye, *ti fi*," she murmured in her cello voice. Her eyes were wet. "You be a good girl in France and you remember Simone. Hear?"

Slowly then, Simone lifted her face. She was so tall that even though Claire was sitting in the carriage their gazes were nearly level. She did not speak. She only locked her eyes with Claire's for the briefest of moments; and Claire could not tell whether the flash of dark fire she saw in their depths was a curse or a salute.

When the carriage rolled out of the yard, it was Simone who swung the gate shut behind it. "Where's Léon?" Claire asked Philippe. "Isn't he usually here by this time?"

"I gave him a holiday," Philippe answered. "It's carnival. He wanted to take his wife to the celebration."

Philippe was very quiet on the way into town. Claire held Marie-Thérèse close to her and drank in his profile with her eyes as he looked ahead at the road. Even though it was so early that the last stars were melting away in the sky, the way into Col—n was already crowded. Men and women in their carnival costumes grinned and waved from the roadside. They carried masks, drums, rattles, little horns, whatever they'd been able to find to lend to the melee of color and noise. Already the sound of the drum echoed up and down the road as the people moved to the primeval rhythms, hips swaying, knees jerking in time.

Some of the costumes were amazingly lavish, dripping with rows of lace, glittering with sequins and golden chains, aglow with the sheen of brocades and satins. "These are poor people, Philippe." Claire wondered aloud. "How can they afford to dress like this?"

"They can't. I've seen them spend one or two months' wages on their carnival costumes." Philippe watched a contingent of dancers, all dressed in red satin, going through their paces at the side of the road. "The different villages and districts compete for prizes," he explained. "It's a real honor to win. They practice for weeks. It's that important to them." He gazed ahead down the road at the thickening crowd. "They look forward to carnival time all year," he added. "It's the only real holiday they have. After carnival comes Lent, and another long year of work and poverty. But for today, any man can be a king if he wants to."

With a twinge of pain. Claire remembered Lizette and how the girl had told her she would be queen of Panama after carnival time. "What a pity I can't stay to see the celebration," she said.

"It's just as well. It doesn't take long for things to get out of hand. We generally have a busy day at the hospital — accidents, knife fights, rapes, murders . . . You're better off on the boat."

Philippe looked ahead at the road and did not say any more. Claire watched the people they passed — a smiling old man with no teeth and a fighting cock under each arm; a young girl in a *pollera*; a gangly black man dressed as a Spanish conquistador; a troop of ragged children with garlands of flowers on their heads. They passed another village group, dressed identically in tunics of purple velvet with varicolored tarlatan streamers flowing from the shoulders. At the edge of the road, a three-legged brown dog hopped jauntily along behind its master.

By the time they got into town, the roads were so jammed that the carriage moved through the crowd by inches. Front Street was a solid mass of laughing, dancing people. Even so, it was not difficult to spot Sister Gertrude, immaculate in her white habit, standing on the gangplank of the steamer. She smiled and waved to them.

Philippe paid a boy to watch the carriage, and two more to carry the trunks onto the steamer. Then he took Marie-Thérèse in his arms and shouldered his way through the crowd with Claire close behind him.

"What a day to leave!" Sister Gertrude, her face shining with perspiration, greeted them as they finally reached her side. "Looks as if the whole town's come to say good-bye to us!" She took Claire's hand in her plump one and squeezed it. "So we meet again, my dear. Under happier circumstances this time, I hope." She stretched up to kiss Claire's cheek; the smell of talcum filled Claire's nostrils, bringing back for a moment the sharp memory of the hospital room where Paul had died and where she had seen Philippe the first time.

The porters carried the trunks up the gangplank, and Claire followed Philippe and Sister Gertrude out onto the deck of the steamer. "What a little dumpling!" the nun exclaimed, patting Marie-Thérèse's cheek. "You've had a hard time of it, haven't you, love? Your papa's been worried about you!"

Claire glanced at Sister Gertrude and realized that this little woman probably knew Philippe better than she herself did. The nun had

worked side by side with him at the hospital for the past two years, seen him at his best and possibly at his worst. It might be a good thing to talk with her during the voyage. It would sharpen her own understanding and enrich the picture of Philippe that her heart would carry back to France.

Claire saw him look at the nun, saw something very subtle pass between them. Yes, they understood each other well, these two. Sister Gertrude held out her arms to Marie-Thérèse. "Come here, child. Let me show you our ship! It's such a wonderful place!" Marie-Thérèse, who had taken to the nun at once, allowed herself to be lifted from Philippe's arms. In a moment she was clinging to Sister Gertrude's plump, white shoulder, giggling as they bounced about the deck.

Philippe turned to Claire. "I'll show you to your cabin."

Claire parted her lips to protest that she could just as easily find the way to the cabin herself, then thought the better of it. Philippe had his reasons. They wound their way down the stairway and through the corridors that ran below the deck. The sounds of the carnival grew muffled and died away behind them. They reached the door that matched the number on Claire's ticket. Philippe opened it for her and they stepped inside.

The cabin was small, but comfortably furnished with two bunks, a dresser, and a nightstand. Light shone dimly through the closed porthole.

"Will it do?" Philippe's eyes roamed from one side to the other.

"Oh, it will do very well! I only had a second class on the way over, and this one's ever so much nicer! I'll try to spend as much time as possible on deck with Marie-Thérèse. The fresh air will be so good for her, don't you think? And I brought along her favorite books — "

"Stop chattering and sit down," Philippe said gruffly. "I want to talk to you."

Claire realized she'd been babbling. Sitting down on one of the beds, she folded her hands in her lap. Philippe stood with one arm on top of the dresser.

"Perhaps I should just let this lie," he began awkwardly. "Heaven knows, I've considered it. Just letting you go, without saying anything more . . . But that wouldn't be fair to either of us, would it?"

"Philippe — " She made a motion to rise and go to him.

"Stay where you are, Claire. And just listen. Try not to judge me till you've heard me out. Not if you can help it."

Claire pressed her lips together tightly and waited.

"I've told you about my marriage to Angélique," he said. "You heard my version of the story and you heard André's. Which one of us you choose to believe is up to you, Claire, but I want you to know that I felt justified in not taking Angélique back to Paris with me. And I want you to know that I lied to you about one thing that night in Marie-Thérèse's room. I *do* know who fathered Marie-Thérèse. But I've never told anyone, and I never will. Making it known would only hurt her."

Claire parted her lips to speak, but Philippe's eyes silenced her. From outside she could hear the muffled sounds of the carnival and, from inside, the faint drip and splash of water somewhere in the ship's innards.

"André told you how Angélique fell," he said. "Since I wasn't there, I've no choice except to believe what he told me: that her fear of me drove her to throw herself down those stairs No, stay there. I'm not finished. You haven't heard the worst of it." Philippe paced over to the porthole, glared out at the limpet-encrusted pillars supporting the dock, and turned back to face Claire.

"I came home and — God forgive me, Claire — bad as the situation was, it was no worse than the one I'd left. At least Angélique wasn't cavorting with everything in pants, the way she'd done before. At least she wasn't raging and screaming at me, accusing me of keeping her prisoner Oh, I did my duty. I took her to the best doctors that could be found — and when they told me there was nothing they could do, I was relieved. So help me, Claire, I was *relieved*! André's right when he says I didn't want her to get well! I'm every bit as much a monster as he says I am!"

Claire stared at him, pity and horror churning a tempest inside her. "Philippe, that's enough," she murmured, rising to her feet.

"You've heard this much. You're going to hear the rest. Sit down." He glowered at her; then his expression softened. "Please, Claire."

She sat back down on the bunk. Philippe took a deep, tearing breath and continued his story.

"I settled into a kind of — oh, anesthetized existence after that. I found that for the first time since I'd married her, I could function; I could concentrate on my work. My work became my life. When Marie-Thérèse was born, she added just enough sweetness to make it all bearable. In an odd sort of way, I was contented."

Philippe shifted his feet and forced himself to look directly at her. "This isn't easy for me to say, Claire. I could have gone on indefinitely if you hadn't come into my life. But there you were — young, warm, vital — and suddenly I was a man again, with a man's needs and a man's feelings." The color rose subtly in his dark face. "I fell in love with you . . . "

Then Claire did get up. She reached out to him, put her hand on his arm. He took her gently by the shoulders and steered her back to the bunk. "Stay there," he said. "Don't make this any harder than it is."

He retreated to his position at the dresser. "I used you, Claire. I encouraged you to play, knowing she'd react, afraid to face it, almost, when she reacted so strongly . . . " He looked down, as if his eyes were tracing the intricacies of the rug on the floor. "It confirmed what I'd long suspected: that the physical injury to her brain had largely healed; that it was her *mind*, her own stubborn, perverse *will* that kept her as she was."

Philippe paced to the porthole again and ran his fingers along the brass edging. Claire waited tensely until he turned to face her. "Claire, I'll do anything — take her anywhere, to anyone who might be able to cure her. To America again, perhaps, to Europe." He paused and took a deep breath. "If Angélique can be cured, I intend to divorce her, as I should have done years ago."

Claire sat on the edge of the bunk, her fingers gripping the counterpane. "And if she can't be cured, Philippe . . . ?"

He met her eyes with his and saw the torment in their depths. "Claire, I can't ask you to wait. If I'd done things differently, Angélique would never have thrown herself down that staircase. I can't enter into another marriage, or into any sort of relationship, carrying the burden of guilt that I would bear if I were to leave her as she is. Do you understand?"

From her position on the bed, Claire studied him. She weighed his words, weighed the things he said against the things he did not say. In spite of what he had told her, she sensed that he was waiting for a word from her, a touch, anything that would give him hope. But she could not bind him to her with false ties. She could not subject either Philippe or herself to the frustration of letting their love depend on Angélique's getting well. In her mind, she could see the passing of months, of years, while he took his wife from one doctor to another.

She could feel the rise and fall of her hopes while she waited for him, feel his despair when each new treatment failed. No, the choice was clear: cast aside all shame and go to him now, or bid him good-bye.

Claire forced herself to look down at the floor. She could not say the thing she had to say while she was gazing into his face. "I understand," she whispered. "Leave me, Philippe. Now. Don't make me say good-bye to you on deck."

"Claire . . . "

She would not look at him again. "Good-bye, Philippe," she murmured.

He remained where he was for a long moment. Then abruptly, he turned and went out of the cabin, closing the door softly behind him. Claire heard his footsteps in the corridor. Her ears clung to them as they grew fainter and faded away.

She was alone. Claire buried her face in her hands and let the flood of Philippe's memory sweep through her senses. She remembered every line and shadow of his face, the set of his eyes, the pattern of the veins in his big, brown hands. While her ears still held his voice, she pressed it upon her mind, its tone, its inflection, its intensity. She remembered the way he sounded when he was angry, when he was tired, and when he told her that he loved her. His hair, she recalled, smelled of clean, plain soap, his hands were slightly rough from the frequent scrubblings at the hospital; and his beard grew so heavily that it shadowed his face by nightfall unless he shaved twice a day. All this and so much more she remembered, etching every detail into her mind before time made his image faint. She did not want to forget him.

It was hot and stuffy in the cabin, but Claire stayed until she was sure that he had taken his leave of Sister Gertrude and Marie-Thérèse. With her face in her hands, she sat huddled in the semidarkness, thoroughly wretched and already sick with longing for him. She tried to grasp the reality that she was leaving Panama at last — leaving that oppressive house and all it contained, leaving Paul's grave, his memory, his sweetheart and his child, leaving André and leaving Philippe. The eager young girl who had stepped off the gangplank less than three months ago was gone. In her place was a woman who had known tragedy, terror, and a love that would warm her for the rest of her life. Philippe. No, she told herself as she raised her face and stared

at the blurred porthole, she was not sorry. She would never be sorry for having loved him.

Her hands were wet. She closed and opened them, then pressed them to her face, her heart pounding with disbelief. She was crying. The tears were flowing down her face with the sweet release of rain after a long, barren time of drought. Claire let them come, for Paul, for Bertrand, for Lizette, for Philippe and herself; for the years of loneliness that would lie ahead for them both. She gave herself up to her tears, let them drain her, let them wash away the hard wall that she had built around herself, until she lay back on the bed, open, vulnerable, and physically spent.

At last she sat up. There was a pitcher of water on the nightstand. She would pour a little on her handkerchief, Claire thought, and wipe her tear-streaked face. Then she would go back up onto the deck. At least there was a breeze there, and she could watch the carnival until the time came for the ship to leave.

Her handkerchief was in her handbag, which lay on the bed beside her. When she opened the clasp and reached inside, her fingers touched the unfamiliar stiffness of folded paper. Catching her breath, she drew the paper out, opened it, and saw that it was a note.

Claire —

When I want something as much as I want you, I don't give up easily. Don't be too surprised when I appear on your doorstep in Paris, ready to take up where we left off.

Lick your wounds, *chérie*. Give your heart time to heal. Then watch for me. I won't be long in coming.

Yours,

André

She read the note a second time. Then she folded it up and tucked it into her bag again. She would think about it later, during the long days of the voyage, she told herself as she sprinkled water on the handkerchief and sponged her cheeks and forehead. Yes, André could wait.

On the deck, the little nun greeted her with a concerned smile. "I thought perhaps you'd gone to sleep, my dear. Are you ill?" Her penetrating glance took in Claire's red eyes.

Claire shook her head and gazed out over the rail of the ship to Front Street, where the bright costumes of the dancing revelers swam like dots of color through the heat waves. Already they, and Panama, seemed to have withdrawn themselves from her.

Sister Gertrude settled Marie-Thérèse in a nest of plump cushions on one of the deck chairs. Then she joined Claire at the rail. "The doctor left us some time ago," she said. "I must say, I've seen him look unhappy before, but not like today." She squinted up at Claire in the sunlight with her small, piercing blue eyes. "He's a proud man, dear. Much too proud to let on how your going's hurt him." She continued to gaze at her with those eyes — eyes that Claire fancied could look through stone walls if she chose to let them. No secret was safe from her.

"Sister Gertrude," Claire whispered, fighting back a new surge of tears, "he has a wife."

"Yes, child. That I know. For all the misery she's brought him, yes, he has a wife." She reached over and covered Claire's hand with her smooth, pink fingers. "Do you love him?"

Claire did not answer. She pressed her lips together hard, saw the vision of Front Street blur before her eyes, and felt something wet sliding down her cheek. "I'm never going to see him again," she said.

Those cool fingers pressed Claire's hand against the brass rail. "Then, child, may God comfort you both," said Sister Gertrude.

Claire stood beside her, rigid and still. Yes, she thought bitterly, God comfort them both. They had made the only right decision, she and Philippe. They deserved God's comfort in abundance. They would have little else. She would go back to Paris, move in with her brother and his wife, and divide her time between caring for their children and giving piano lessons. Philippe would stay out his tenure at the hospital, and then spend the next months, even years, taking Angélique from one doctor to the next in the hope of curing her.

She let her eyes travel along Front Street, in the direction that Philippe would have taken to round the northwestern corner of Col—
n, skirt the shore of the Caribbean, and arrive at the hospital. For the first time in many days, she let herself think about Bertrand. She would never know, now, whether Philippe had killed him, not unless Prestan was caught and confessed. But why should it matter to her anymore? She had cleared Paul's name and she would never see Philippe again.

Marie-Thérèse lay back on the cushions, looking up at her. Claire leaned over and kissed the top of her golden head. "I want Papa," the little girl said.

"He's gone to the hospital, sweet. He can't come with us." Marie-Thérèse's lower lip crept outward. Claire crouched down and put her arms around her. "You'll miss your Papa, won't you, love?"

She nestled her head against Claire's shoulder. "Oh, yes, Mam'selle! My papa's such a good man!"

Claire blinked away the tears. How simple the world was for children. They saw everything in black and white. Only adults saw things in confusing tones of gray. Claire pressed Marie-Thérèse close to her and tried to see her life as a child would see it. Either Philippe was a good man, as Marie-Thérèse had said, or he was a bad man. Either he had killed Bertrand, or he had not — and if he had not, then Claire's suspicions were foolish. Either she loved him, or she did not — and if she loved him, she would trust him; she would do anything to be with him; she would wait, for years if necessary, forever if need be, for him to be free.

Sister Gertrude was looking at her. "How soon do we sail?" Claire asked her, a little breathlessly.

"Not for an hour." The nun eyed her like some all-knowing oracle. "You'd have time to get to the hospital and back if you wanted to."

Claire gripped her hand. "You'll take care of Marie-Thérèse?"

"Certainly, child! We're great friends already!" The blue eyes narrowed. "Mind you, in my position I can't condone what you're about to do. But if you're not aboard by the time the boat's ready to cast off, I'll have the porter leave your trunks in the customs house."

"Thank you," Claire whispered, hugging her quickly. Then she kissed Marie-Thérèse, and almost flew back down the gangplank.

Front Street was jammed with people, hot musky bodies quivering like warm jelly to the beat of the pulsating drums. The parade had begun. Gaudy floats decorated with bunting and tissue paper swept down the street, interspersed with dancing groups from the villages and districts of the area, all of them giddy from the excitement of the morning. It was frightening to be in the midst of them, pressed and jostled from all sides, swept back and forth like a twig in the surf. Claire saw the Universel in the distance and wondered if André was there. She could use the strength of his broad shoul-

ders, she thought, as she was nearly swept off her feet by another surge of the crowd. Hot and determined, she somehow punched and clawed her way to the boardwalk and managed to find an empty cab.

The driver was Spanish, a small, thin man wearing a smudged gray shirt and a carnival hat with a red feather in it. He was slouched on the seat, but when he saw Claire he stood up and reached down with one hand to pull her up into the carriage.

"*Se-orita?*"

"The hospital!" Claire said, collapsing on the passenger seat. "Quickly!"

"You are sick, *Se-orita?*"

"No. Just hurry, please."

He shrugged, flicked the reins over the horse's withers, and proceeded to turn the cab around so that they were traveling away from the hospital.

"It's that way!" Claire tugged at his arm and pointed back behind them.

"I know, *Se-orita*. We can't go that way. Too many people on Front Street. We go through the middle of town. Yes?"

"All right." Claire settled back on the seat, her heart pounding. Soon she would be with Philippe.

The inner streets of Col—n were relatively quiet. Most of the merry-makers had gone to Front Street for the celebration. Despite Claire's impatience, the carriage plodded along through the narrow streets, its wheels sifting through the dust. "Can't we go faster?" she urged.

"Not here, *Se-orita*. The women wash their clothes and clean their houses. We come through and make big dust . . . " He leaned over and clapped his hand to the side of his face. "They kill me!"

Mud in the rainy season; dust in the dry season. Claire sighed. They were moving so slowly that she would be lucky to even find Philippe at the hospital, let alone have any time to spend with him, before the boat left. She did not know exactly what she would say to Philippe, except that she would be completely honest with him. She would lay bare her feelings, her fears, even her suspicions. Then, if he still wanted her, she would promise to wait for him.

"Faster!" she prodded the driver. He only shrugged, so she opened her handbag and seized a handful of franc notes. "Faster!" she said, thrusting them under his nose. "Yes?"

"Yes, *Se-orita!*" He brought the reins down across the horse's rump with a slap. The animal lurched forward and bolted, jerking the carriage wildly through the rutted streets, leaving huge clouds of dust in its wake. Grimly jubilant, Claire clung to the edge of the seat. They had swung north now, in the proper direction. Soon . . . she thought.

The explosion rattled windows all around them and sent the horse into a paroxysm of terror. It reared and bucked, throwing Claire off the seat and onto the floor. The driver clawed at his perch and hung there until the horse had quieted. Gathering her wits, Claire grasped the edge of the seat, pulled herself up, and looked around. A huge plume of smoke was rising from a building two or three blocks away. Men were shouting, running. A dark figure on a white horse came pounding down the street toward the carriage. Then, seeing that his path was blocked, he wheeled his horse, reared, and clattered off in the other direction, but not before Claire had caught a glimpse of his face. It was Pedro Prestan.

The driver had recognized him too. "*Di—s m'o!*" he breathed, crossing himself. "That devil's blown up the police station! Some of his friends were locked up in there Ay! If the prisoners are loose, *Se-orita* . . . Come!" He jerked the reins to one side, causing the horse to turn back the way they'd come. "Let's get out of here, eh?"

"No!" Claire scrambled up beside him and seized his hands where they gripped the reins. "I have to get to the hospital!"

"Then we go some other way, *Se-orita!*" He clung stubbornly to the leather lines. Claire looked back over her shoulder through the smoke and the rising dust and saw that flames had begun to dance in the windows of the smoking building. "Loose prisoners! They would kill us for the horse! Keep your money. *Se-orita!* I want to get out of here!"

"Take some other street then! But I have to go to the hospital!"

"Too dangerous!" he argued, a comic figure in the midst of the pandemonium. "Not for all the money in the world" As he talked, he maneuvered the terrified horse around a narrow corner and then, once the carriage was straightened out, brought the reins down with a stinging slap, causing the animal to bolt again.

Gripping the heaving seat with her knees, Claire fumbled in her handbag. Philippe had paid her generously. She had more than enough francs to buy his rickety cab and horse. "Here!" She thrust the

money in his face. "Let me have the carriage! You can buy it back at the hospital!"

He hesitated. She shoved the money into his hand. The carriage rounded a corner, slowed, and tilted to her advantage. Claire threw her weight against the man. He lost his balance and tumbled out into the dust, cursing. In a moment she had left him behind.

The streets were so narrow here that it was impossible to turn the carriage around in one spot. Claire drove around the block, talking to the horse, soothing it. When they had righted themselves, she headed north again, in the direction of the hospital.

The smoke from the explosion rose ahead of her, higher, darker, thicker than ever. The fire was growing, spreading to the wooden buildings that surrounded the police station.

The wind was blowing from the north, carrying the acrid smoke into her nostrils. The flames would follow it swiftly, sweeping from one tinder-dry building to the next, cutting a burning swath of horror across Col—n separating Claire from the hospital and from Philippe.

She shouted encouragement to the horse, urging it on with the reins as they raced north against the fire and the wind.

Twenty

The streets were beginning to fill with people fleeing from the fire, many of them in their carnival costumes. Women ran, clutching their children and their prized possessions. Babies were crying, dogs yapping with fear as their noses caught the scent of the smoke. Most of the people, intent on their own safety, ignored Claire; but there were those who stared askance at her — a lone woman heading into the line of the fire. There were even a few who shouted at her, and others, men with hard faces, who eyed the horse and cab covetously. She tried to keep moving too rapidly for anyone to approach her easily, but as the crowds grew thicker her progress grew slower. Soon she was picking her way through a stream of people, all of them moving in the opposite direction.

Looters darted boldly in and out of the open doorways, helping themselves to whatever they could find in the way of clothes, dishes, silver, furniture, What did it matter? The fire would get what they didn't take. A skinny man with a pale, unshaven face and hollow eyes seized the harness of Claire's horse and dragged it to a halt. "I'll be taking this rig, Mademoiselle," he said, as casually and as confidently as if he'd asked her to pass the salt at the dinner table. He stared up at her with an insolent grin on his face; she saw the big knife that was jammed beneath his belt.

"Very well," she said in a tight voice. "Come here. I'll hand you the lines." The man hesitated, then began to edge toward her. As he reached out, Claire grabbed the buggy whip and brought it down across his face once, twice. He fell back, cursing and fumbling for the knife. Claire lashed away at the horse; the animal reared and lurched forward into the crowd. People scrambled to get out of the way, creat-

ing a human seal between Claire and the man with the knife. Plunging through the throng, she had soon lost him.

The air was filled with smoke now, and the streets here were nearly deserted. The sky was black and red above Claire's head; the wind blew sparks into her hair. The fire was just a block or two ahead, so she turned east, prodding the reluctant horse with the end of the buggy whip, racing the wind that lifted the burning sparks high into the air. Where they landed, the dry, old wooden roofs smoldered and burst into roaring flame. At the last street, she turned north again, praying that she would be able to pass through ahead of the fast-moving fire.

The horse was terrified. It stamped and tossed its head, laid back its ears, rolled its eyes, and refused to go on. Remembering an old story she had heard. Claire ripped off a section of her petticoat, jumped down carefully from the cab without letting go of the reins, and caught the harness. As she spoke softly to the horse, she tied the torn cloth over its eyes. Then, still walking and gripping the harness, she led it forward.

They had not traveled swiftly enough. Up ahead, a solid wall of fire had closed across the path, cutting off her last access to the hospital and to Philippe. Claire went as far as she dared, defying the flames until they forced her to stop. Then she pressed her face against the horse's poor, singed neck and sobbed with weariness and frustration.

It was impossible to get to the hospital, and it would be equally foolhardy to try and make it back to Front Street. Claire had no choice except to flee south with the townspeople. With luck, she might be able to find the road that led back to the Jarnac house.

The horse needed no urging once she'd gotten the cab turned around. They moved rapidly away from the smoke and flames. Soon Claire began to catch up with the refugees from the fire.

She passed an old woman carrying a screaming baby. The woman looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Get in," Claire said, stopping the cab. Soon the old woman was joined by an old man, then by a boy with a puppy under his arm. Before long, the small carriage was creaking with the weight of perhaps a dozen people, their arms, legs, and possessions dangling over the sides.

They were passing through an area of town that seemed familiar to Claire. She did not remember why until she saw the forlorn little fig-

ure trudging down the street ahead of them with a huge bundle on her head.

"Marta!" Claire pulled the carriage to a halt. Marta peered up at her from beneath the bundle, her dark eyes enormous in her child-face. The roundness of her body had increased since Claire had last seen her. The white smock clung wetly, soaked with perspiration from the heat and from the effort of carrying the heavy bundle.

"Come," Claire reached down to her. "Get in."

"There's no room!" the old woman shrieked.

"We'll make room! Come on, Marta!" Claire gripped her hand and pulled her up onto the driver's seat. Marta sat there in silence, holding the bundle tight against her body as the carriage rolled and creaked through the narrow streets, through the thinning rows of houses, and into the outskirts of Col—n. With a little prayer of thanksgiving, Claire recognized the road that led to the Jarnac house.

One of her passengers touched her on the shoulder. "This is far enough, *Se-orita*. We can get out now." Claire stopped the carriage and the people began to pile out of it. Marta remained on the seat beside her.

"I have some friends who live a little way down the road," she whispered. "If you would be so kind . . . "

"But of course." Claire gave her a feeble smile.

When the cab was empty, they drove on. Marta shifted her bundle to the rear and smoothed the cotton smock over her rounded body. "How you must hate me," she said softly.

Claire's eyes stung. Impulsively, she reached for Marta's tiny hand. "No one could hate you, Marta."

"Not even for . . . this?" She looked down at her body where the bulk that was Paul's child rose beneath her smock.

Claire shook her head. "Paul did not believe in immortality," she said. "But you have given it to him, little Marta. Through this child, something of Paul will live on. I'm grateful for that." She squeezed the thin fingers and released them.

Marta covered her face with her hands. "*Se-ora*, I lied to you."

"I know, Marta. You lied about Paul and the dynamite."

"I needed money for the baby — Paul's baby; that part wasn't a lie. I was paid to tell you the rest."

"Marta . . . " Claire could hear her own heart pounding in her ears. "Who paid you?"

"*Se-or* Jarnac."

Claire's face and hands went cold. "The doctor?" She choked out the question.

"No, *Se-ora*. It was the man who brought you to see me. It was *Se-or* André."

André. Claire looked at the pieces of the puzzle as she had put them together, and suddenly they did not fit. Mentally she pulled them apart and began to rearrange them.

"Marta, do you know *why* he paid you to lie to me?"

"He told me he wanted to marry you. He said you wouldn't have him as long as you believed Paul was innocent. That's all I know." She touched Claire's arm as they came to a modest little house with a thatched roof. "This is the house of my friends. You can let me out."

Claire stopped the carriage and reached back for her bundle. "Marta, if you need help when the baby comes, send for Doctor Jarnac. He's a good man."

"Everyone knows that, *Se-ora*." She embraced Claire and climbed down from the carriage. "Ask for me here if you want to see me again."

Claire handed her the bundle. "Good-bye, Marta."

"Go with God. *Se-ora*."

When Claire looked back again, Marta was walking toward the house, dragging her bundle on the dry grass.

Behind her, the sky itself seemed to be on fire as the flames engulfed the old central section of Col—n. The French area of Cristobal, separated from the main part of town by the railroad tracks and the switchyard, appeared to be safe. The hospital, upwind from the fire, was isolated at Col—n's northernmost end, placed so that the rooms would catch the breezes from the sea. The roof was metal, and if the fire came close, the walls could be soaked with seawater, Claire reassured herself. Yet she could not help worrying as she drove on into the country. At the place where the lane that led up to the house turned off the main road, she paused long enough to whisper a quick prayer for Philippe's safety.

André Jarnac pulled the buggy up to the house, looked back over his shoulder at the red sky, and cursed softly under his breath. So Prestan had done it! A stupid, futile gesture that would accomplish nothing.

The fool! André shook his head. Prestan should have taken the money from the dynamite and gone back to Haiti or one of the other

islands where he could have lived like a king — but no, that wasn't enough! The idiot had to have power. He had wanted Panama, and when Lizette's confession had made him a fugitive, he had taken revenge on Col—n. What he could not have, he destroyed.

Even at this distance, the air smelled of smoke. André brushed a fleck of ash off his white suit and thanked his stars that this time he had not been involved. He had broken with Prestan once and for all. Let the hothead have his revolution. André had what he wanted: enough money to return to France and live in style for the months, even years, that it might take to establish himself as an artist.

With a spring to his step, he swung down from the carriage, mounted the porch, and opened the front door. He had washed his hands of the whole dirty mess after he'd warned Prestan that Lizette's signed confession had named him as Bertrand's murderer.

Prestan's eyes had glittered. "And she said nothing about you, friend? What luck! I've got the police on my tail and you still smell sweet as a rosebud!" He'd spat onto the marble floor of his room at the Universel. "Well, Lizette can't talk anymore. But you damned well better make sure the police don't catch me, or we'll hang together!"

André would have killed him then if he'd had a gun. But he'd been carrying only his little dagger, and no one bested Prestan in a knife fight. So he'd done the only thing he could. He'd given the man an hour to get out of Col—n before he took Lizette's confession to the police. To have done anything more for Prestan would have cast suspicion on himself. As he rounded the first curve of the staircase, he contemplated the odds against Prestan's getting caught. The man was clever, and he knew Panama, but anger made him reckless. He took too many chances.

There was a boat leaving for the islands that afternoon. André planned to be on it. From Martinique, Haiti, or Guadeloupe, he could catch a steamer for France at his leisure. He had only to pack his paintings — the best ones, at least — and a few clothes, and load them into the buggy. Then, soon, he would be free.

Maybe he would see Claire in Paris. He smiled at the thought of it. She was charming, and she'd stirred his blood when he'd held her in his arms. Yes, there were possibilities. Now that she was safely out of Panama, he was glad that he had not succeeded in killing her.

André's thoughts were far away as he circled the familiar rounds of the stairway. Paris . . . sniffing morphine with his old friends . . .

Philippe was wrong. André told himself. Those days were gone forever. He would never use morphine again. He had money now, and he intended to move into higher social circles. An advantageous marriage, perhaps . . . The world would be his!

“André!”

The voice stopped him like a gunshot. He looked up. Angélique, exquisite in a white silk peignoir, was standing above him at the top of the stairs. She was laughing at him.

The gate had been left open. Claire drove into the yard and saw the horse and buggy tied up beside the stable. Wondering if André had returned, she got out of the cab, drew some water from the well for her exhausted horse, and then, trembling a little, went up the steps and opened the door into the foyer. She felt wary, ill at ease. Something was wrong.

The house was quiet. She listened carefully and heard nothing except the faint sounds of someone — most likely Simone — working in the kitchen. Slowly she walked up the stairs. The door to her old bedroom was open, but no one was inside. The rest of the doors all along the hallway were closed.

Claire went down to André’s studio and knocked with a quivering hand. There was no answer. Cautiously she opened the door. André was not there; but he had been there. He had been sorting his paintings. They were scattered about the room, propped against the furniture, laid out on the floor and the bed. Many of them were paintings Claire had never seen before. In spite of her uneasiness, she could not help stopping to admire them — landscapes that glowed with color; paintings of shells, birds, and butterflies; portraits of Indians, lovely Hindu women in saris, streetwalkers, grizzled old sailors . . . all of them so real that they looked as if they were about to speak. What a magnificent gift André had!

Then, in the very center of the bed, she saw his masterpiece: a full-length painting of a beautiful woman standing in the shadow of a vine, surrounded by ferns and flowers. Her face was demurely lowered, but her blue eyes, just glancing up, were sparkling with lively, devilish mystery. Her full lips were parted in a sensuous little smile. Except for a mane of golden hair, which fell in enticing waves over her breasts, she was unashamedly naked. Eve, Claire thought, after her encounter with the tempter.

It was the most splendid painting she had ever seen. It radiated light and color, with a soft diffusion of tones that was worthy of the greatest master.

It was Angélique.

Claire stood at the foot of the bed, stunned as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. Angélique and André. She thought of Marie-Thérèse — her intelligence, her curly hair, her dimpled charm — and there was no doubt in Claire's mind as to who had fathered her. Philippe had been betrayed in his own house, by his own brother.

She could not even look at the painting again. Sick at heart, she turned away from it and opened the door of the studio to go out into the hall.

It was then that she heard the laughter, coming from behind the closed door of the blue sitting room — the harsh, mocking laughter of a woman whose voice she had heard, and yet never really heard before.

"Stop it!" André's voice growled. "Be still or I'll slap you!"

"But it's *funny*, André! Imagine, after all these years, having you right where I want you!" Her voice rose and fell in another peal of laughter. It was not a particularly attractive voice, considering the physical beauty of its owner. In addition to being too high pitched, it had a strident quality to it. "Come, now. What will you give me not to go to Philippe and tell him everything before you can get away, hm?"

"Don't threaten me, Angélique! What could Philippe do?"

Angélique paused for a moment. "What would *you* do, André, if you were Philippe, and you found out that your brother had gotten your wife pregnant and then pushed her down the stairs?"

"It's not funny, Angélique!"

"No," she said, her voice suddenly cold and hard, "it's not funny at all, André. You *pushed* me! When I told you I was going to have your baby, you were afraid Philippe would throw you out! You were afraid you'd have to *work* for a living! You dragged me to the top of that staircase and you *pushed* me, you bastard! You cost me four years of my life, and now you're going to pay for it!"

"You blond witch! I wish I'd killed you!"

Angélique laughed again, from deep down in her throat, her laughter rising and falling in waves. "Do you know what I'm going to do?" she said. "I'm going to get dressed and go into town! I'm going to play roulette and drink champagne! I've been wanting to do it for weeks,

but I thought it best to save my debut until after that meddling little governess had left!"

"Go ahead," said André. "You'll have a hot time of it! Pedro Prestan just blew up the police station and set half the town on fire!"

"Damn!" There was the sound of a chair being kicked over. "And I suppose you're still mixed up with him!"

"You think I'd tell you?"

"Ha! You don't have to, André! I've got eyes! I've seen you sneaking out at night! I've seen Prestan in the yard with the maid, and I've seen him with you!"

"Well, that's over," said André. "I've told him he can find someone else to do his dirty work! I've got enough money to go back to Paris, and I'm going!"

"Not unless I let you, André, my love! With what I've seen and heard, I could *hang* you if I chose to!"

André's voice was lower, quieter. "Then in that case, my dear, you've opened your pretty mouth for the last time." The floor creaked ominously as he moved toward her.

"André . . . " Her voice was thin with terror. "Get away from me!"

Claire heard the sounds of a scuffle, then running feet, as Angélique burst into the hallway. The door swung outward, pinning Claire behind it against the wall of the corridor.

André caught Angélique on the landing. He pressed her back against the railing of the stairway, his fingers locked around her throat.

"You won't get away with it . . . " she gasped.

"Won't I? They'll find you at the bottom of the stairs. They'll think you jumped again, and broke your lovely neck this time!" He bent her backward, pressing his thumbs into her throat until she stopped gasping and struggling and went limp in his arms.

Claire was trapped. She watched helplessly from behind the door as André lifted Angélique's body high. The golden stream of her hair hung back over his arm, her white peignoir trailed on the floor. Then he hurled her out into the space above the stairway. Claire heard the sound of silk tearing as she rolled and slid all the way to the bottom.

André stood there looking down. Claire clung to the wall behind the door, praying that he would go downstairs or to his room and give her a chance to get away.

He turned and walked back toward the door, grasped the door-knob, and swung it shut. Claire sprang out of his way and darted toward the stairs.

"Claire!" It took him only an instant to recover from his shock. Then he was after her. His hand caught the tip of her fingers and swung her around, away from the stairway and her best chance of escape. She ran down the hall because there was no other place to run. But the corridor was a dead end. If she could not find a way out, André would have her cornered.

Claire flew down the hallway to André's studio and slammed the door behind her. The key was in the lock on the inside; she turned it and felt the bolt slip into the place just as André reached the door.

"Claire?" He tried the knob, rattled it. She leaned against the wall, breathing deeply.

"Claire, it won't do you any good. I have another key."

She ran to the window, opened it, and looked down. The ground was very far away, and there was nothing to break her fall. Still, as a last resort —

André had begun to rattle the lock on the door. The key in Claire's side of the keyhole was jamming his, but it would not take long for him to force it out. Frantically, Claire pushed on the side of the big wardrobe. It was too heavy for her to move as far as the door. The bed — it, too, refused to budge. The love seat was too light to be of any use. The cabinets and shelves were built into the walls. The key was shaking. Claire raced to the door, seized the key, and held it in its lock.

"Let me in, Claire. It won't do you any good to hold that key."

She tried to stall him. "You killed Bertrand, didn't you?"

"We had to, *chérie*. He wouldn't cooperate. He was going to tell Philippe — in fact, he did tell Philippe he'd found the dynamite outside the wall."

Something lifted in Claire's heart. "In the stable . . . the night Bertrand was killed . . . "

"That's right. I was hiding and I heard them. Philippe's damned lucky we didn't kill him too, but that would have drawn too much attention. So we waited until he'd left, and then we got Bertrand . . . "

There was a faint note of pleasure in his voice. Claire shuddered.

"What about poor Lizette? Couldn't you have left her out of it?"

"We needed her. Needed someone who wouldn't be questioned, to listen for the signals, open the gate, and keep watch . . . Prestan took care of that. It was easy. She fell for him right off . . . "

"And you killed Lopez?"

"I had to make sure he didn't live to prove that he wasn't with Prestan that night. Killing Lopez was a pleasure." André tested the lock again, probing into it with a knife, or some kind of metal tool that scraped against the key. The lock was a simple one and not particularly strong, the kind designed more to ensure privacy than to provide protection. "You know, we could have had a good life together, Claire, if you hadn't been so stubborn. I really cared for you! That's why I only tried to scare you away at first."

"The *wanga* . . . ?"

"That's right. I left it in front of your door. But I'd underestimated you." He was turning the screws that held the lock to the door. Claire could hear the faint crunch of the wood as they moved. "I could break the door down and be in there in an instant, you know."

"And leave everybody wondering why you'd break down the door to your own room when you had a key? You're not that stupid, André."

"It doesn't make much difference. I'll have this lock apart in a minute."

Claire's ears caught the faint click of one of the screws falling to the floor. "The snake," she said. "You put it in your paint pouch, and then you had me reach inside."

"You were getting too close to the truth, my dear. Prestan was getting nervous. It was his idea. Pity it didn't work."

"And that night at the ball! When I told you I'd recognized Prestan! You were going to kill me, and throw my body into the bay!"

"That's right. If Philippe hadn't come along . . . "

Another screw fell to the floor. Claire's eyes searched the room frantically for some kind of weapon, something that she could hit him with when he came through. Except for his magnificent canvases, which covered the walls, the floor, and the furniture, she could see nothing. It struck her with a chill of fresh horror that André could kill her, dispose of her body somehow, and she would not be missed. Philippe would think she had left on the steamer. Sister Gertrude and Marie-Thérèse would believe her safe in Panama. No one in France was expecting her to arrive. No one in Panama except André and

Marta knew she had stayed; and Marta had no reason to expect to see her again.

The third screw dropped to the floor and the fourth one was ripped out of the splintered wood as André pried at the lock from his side and tore it loose. The key went slack in Claire's fingers. She ran to the window as the door swung open.

André walked slowly toward her, crouching on the balls of his feet, swaying lightly as she had seen him do that long-ago day in the Universel. Claire clung to the edge of the window.

"Go ahead and jump, Claire," he taunted her. "Save me the trouble. When Philippe comes home, I'll tell him that I couldn't get into the room in time to keep you from killing yourself over him! What a joke, eh?"

He came closer. Claire edged up onto the windowsill, calculating the odds of her overcoming André's strength and skill long enough to escape against the odds of her surviving the two-story fall.

"The dynamite," she groped for words. "Tell me how you did that."

"Easy," he replied. "I'd go out to the cut to paint, and there were men there who would put it into the carriage. Worked just fine, until the authorities began to miss the stuff and suspect someone was taking it. That's where your Paul came in . . . " He took another step toward her. "Jump, Claire. If the fall doesn't kill you, I can go down and finish you off in the yard, and no one will be the wiser. Go on . . . jump . . . " He was moving closer. In a moment he would be reaching for her throat. "What a pity," he whispered, "when I could have loved you so . . . "

Suddenly a huge, dark shape exploded through the door and hurtled itself against him, knocking him off balance. It was Simone, wild-eyed, black as the pit, and stronger than a legion of devils. André fought to break free from her as she seized his arms. He was a powerful man, but even he was no match for her immense size and strength. She held him fast, twisting his arm behind his back until something snapped and he screamed with pain. Then, while he was still limp with shock, she lifted him in her arms like a child and began to twist his back.

Claire gathered her wits and skirted the edge of the room, circling Simone and André until she reached the doorway, where she stood, paralyzed with horror, as Simone bent the shrieking André backward

against the curve of her own body. She gave his head a sharp, brutal twist and let him fall to the floor where he lay gasping, nothing moving except his face. Simone had broken his neck.

For a moment she towered erect above him. Her calm gaze met Claire's. "For my baby," she whispered, and her eyes were streaming tears.

Claire flew then, spinning down the corridor, wild with fear. The floor groaned under Simone's heavy steps as she came after her. Snatching up her skirt, Claire ran down the stairs. Perhaps she could run out into the yard, she thought, and reach one of the carriages before Simone caught her. She sped toward the front door and nearly stumbled over Angélique's body, which had come to rest in the entryway. Since the door opened inward, Claire would have to move her out of the way. But there was no time. Simone was pounding down the stairs. Claire raced through the house to the back double doors, the ones that opened onto the garden. They were locked. She was trapped.

Then, in the hall, she noticed a small door that had escaped her attention earlier. It was her only hope! Simone was almost upon her. Certain that Simone wanted to kill her, Claire snatched at the small door. It was unlocked. She jerked it open, slipped through, and slammed it shut in Simone's face.

Claire was in a closet. Her eyes, unused to the darkness, could see nothing at all. She braced herself against the door, surprised when Simone did not try to force it open.

As Claire listened, her heart pounding, she heard the jingle of the ring of keys that hung at Simone's waist. She heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. When she pushed timidly at the door, she found that it would not open. She was locked in.

"Maybe you listen now, Mam'selle." Simone's deep voice rumbled through the wooden door. "I don't want to hurt you. I only want to go away, and you mustn't know where. You understand, Mam'selle?"

"I understand, Simone," Claire said in a shaking voice. "I won't tell anybody what you did! I promise! Just let me out!"

"Better this way, Mam'selle. Better if you don't see me go. You stay here till M'sieu' Philippe comes home tonight. He'll let you out." She hesitated so long that Claire thought she had left. "You take care of M'sieu' Philippe," she said, and her voice sounded far away. "He needs a good woman . . . " Her words faded. Claire heard a door open and close. She was alone.

Her eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness now; she could see shelves around the walls of her little prison — shelves stacked with dozens of identical cardboard boxes. Groping for anything to distract her from her plight, she reached out, took one of them off the shelf, and opened the lid.

Her fingers touched the rustling crispness of tissue paper. Her nose caught the scent of newness — or was it mothballs? Claire put her hand gingerly into the box and took out a doll. An expensive French doll with a china face, glass eyes, and soft, curly hair. Her heart thudding, she took another box, and a third box — they too contained dolls. Identical dolls. She began to laugh nervously. She was locked into the closet with nothing except Angélique's supply of dolls!

Claire found herself giggling. What fun! If she just had some little cups and saucers, she could have a tea party, just herself and twenty or thirty china dolls with blond hair and blue eyes like Angélique. She began to laugh out loud. She was hysterical and she knew it, but she could not stop. She sat down in the corner of the closet, buried her face against her knees, and laughed until she realized she was sobbing. Dear God! Angélique was dead. André was upstairs in his studio with his neck broken and no one to hear him scream — if he could scream at all. It struck Claire that even if he lived he would never be able to paint again. Simone had consigned him to a living hell. It would have been less cruel to have killed him.

Philippe — how she wanted him! But he was at the hospital, and it was possible that the aftermath of the fire might keep him there for days. She could starve or go mad, Claire told herself, by the time he found her.

She stood up, backed off, and hurled herself against the door. It was thick and solid and showed no sign of yielding to her feeble efforts.

Physically and emotionally exhausted, Claire slumped to the floor in a forlorn huddle. Her shoulder throbbed where she had thrown it against the door.

With her ear against the floor, she detected the sound of hoofbeats in the yard. She jumped up and began to pound on the door with all her strength. "Philippe!" she screamed. "Philippe!"

But no one came in through the front door. Claire waited through long moments of agonizing silence. Then, suddenly, a huge explosion shook the house, knocking the boxes off the shelf and throwing her to

the floor again. She lay there bewildered and too frightened to move. Then she began to collect her thoughts. Dynamite, she speculated. Prestan had dynamite. He had used it to blow up the police station and set fire to the town. Bitter, no doubt, over his recent falling-out with André and over Lizette's betrayal, he would have ample reason to take his revenge by dynamiting the house. Claire could think of no other explanation.

Perhaps he and his men would come inside now, to loot and plunder. She pressed her back against the door and sat there quivering, listening for any telltale creak of the floorboards, any sound of an opening door. Even the stillness was terrifying.

Several minutes passed. No, she decided, they were not coming inside after all. She took a deep breath, another; then she froze with horror. Her nostrils had caught the scent of smoke.

It was growing stronger. Pressing her ear to the door, Claire heard the faint crackle and hiss of the flames from somewhere above her. The house was burning.

She pounded on the door and screamed, but there were no ears to hear her except André's — and André was lying paralyzed on the floor of his studio. Sick with dread, Claire pictured the flames dancing around him, reflecting in his brown eyes as they consumed the walls, the ceiling, all of his beautiful paintings. She even thought she heard him cry out above the roar of the inferno, but it may have been only her imagination. She beat helplessly on the door until her strength was gone and she slumped back against the wall in despair. She could hear the crackling flames now, above her head. Wisps of smoke were beginning to drift in through the cracks, between the boards of the ceiling, and underneath the door. Claire pressed backward against the shelves, choking for want of fresh air . . .

Then the darkness whirled and came crashing in on her, and she remembered nothing more.

Simone had been traveling fast, moving off through the jungle in long, easy strides, when she heard the explosion. At the top of a small rise, she paused long enough to gaze back at the column of smoke that billowed up over the treetops and drifted south with the wind. Off to the west, the sky above Col—n glowed black and red.

Prestan. She had no doubt that he was responsible. He was capable of such things, and he had done them before. But the whole town of

Col—n this time! Simone shuddered. Perhaps if she'd gone to the police with what she knew about him — she dismissed the idea with a shrug of her massive shoulders. She did not trust the police. She had more faith in Baron Samedi's curse than in Panamanian justice. But this time Prestan had gone too far. Even the police would not overlook what he had done. Sooner or later they would catch him, she knew, and he would finish his life at the end of a rope, Baron's curse fulfilled. Simone closed her eyes briefly, and the vision that her *loa* gave her confirmed what she had been thinking. Pedro Prestan would hang for his crimes. Satisfied, she dismissed him from her mind.

The smoke from the house was darker now, and intermingled with hot, red sparks. Yes, the house was burning. There were lamps filled with coal oil in each of the bedrooms. The fire would spread rapidly, consuming all evidence of what had taken place there.

André Jarnac would die. Baron's curse would finish what Simone herself had begun. She turned her back on the smoky sky and continued on her way, her steps less hurried now. She had considered taking Angélique's body with her, then decided that the risks of being stopped and questioned were too great. Philippe would see that his wife had last rites and a proper burial. Simone glanced back over her shoulder at the blackening smoke. Now, perhaps, even the burial would be unnecessary. The frame house would go up like a torch, cremating everything inside. Perhaps the flames had already reached the closet where Claire Sagan was imprisoned.

Simone trudged determinedly down the other side of the rise. She did not regret what she had done to André. She made it a point never to regret anything she did. She could have opened that closet door and strangled Claire with one hand, ensuring that the girl would not live to tell anyone what she had seen. Instead she had left her there, at great risk, Simone realized, to her own safety. A moment of softness, a flash of admiration, even fear, had made her lock that door and go away, leaving Claire alive. Well, fate had made up for her lapse. Fate — and Pedro Prestan — had decreed that the girl would die. Simone was no longer responsible, she told herself.

A small boa, exquisitely mottled, slithered out of her path as Simone splashed across a shallow stream, heedless of the water soaking the bottom of her long skirt. She had no ties to anyone now that Angélique was dead. It was time she put her own needs first. She

knew a secluded fishing village up the coast where there were friends who would give her shelter and a boat. One way or another, she would make her way to Haiti again, and she would not look back.

Still there were two — and only two — whom she would remember with fondness: the child, Marie-Thérèse, who had filled a gloomy house with the sunshine of her innocence, and Philippe, who had been a kind, fair, and generous employer and who had borne his wife's affliction with inestimable patience. These two — her eyes blurred until she could no longer see the path ahead — these two, she had almost loved.

And both Marie-Thérèse and Philippe had loved Claire.

Simone's feet were no longer stepping ahead down the trail. She could not move. Some force stronger than herself was holding her. "No!" she said out loud. "It's too late! I can't go back!"

The force gripped her, and she knew then that it was her *loa*. Baron Samedi, the master of the cemetery, who marked men for death, had never before come into her body without her willing it, but she felt him now, taking possession of her mind, her limbs, her hands and feet. Against her will, she heard her own voice speaking his thoughts:

"The man has given me the woman. The fire has given me the man. That is enough. I do not want the girl. Gede has not dug her grave. She belongs to life."

"No!" the small part of her that was still Simone cried out. "It's too late! The fire — !"

"I cannot stop the flames. But I will hold back my hand from her for as long as I can. You must hurry!"

"And from me?" Simone whispered. "You will hold back your hand from me also?"

There was no answer. She felt Baron's spirit withdrawing from her.

"Stay with me," she pleaded. "If you are with me, I won't be afraid."

Baron did not reply. He had left her alone, to do what she must.

Trembling but resolute, Simone turned back in the direction of the burning house. She took one long, forceful stride, then another until, suddenly, she realized she was running.

The house was already crowned in solid flames. The roof was gone, its remnants crumbling redly and falling into the yard. The fire was creeping downward and had already engulfed the front of the

house. Simone circled around to the garden. The pressure of the heat inside the house had shattered the panes of the glass doors. Beyond them she could see flames dancing down the walls, but the entry, at least, was clear.

Stopping at the well, Simone took the bucket and drenched her clothes with water. Then she took off her apron, soaked it, and used it to cover her head and shoulders.

The doorknob was too hot to touch. She kicked one of the doors open with her sandaled foot and, covering her face with the apron, plunged into the blazing house.

The hallway lay ahead of her with the closet door on the right; she could find it without uncovering her eyes. Yes, there it was, and the door itself was only scorched. Simone cursed. She had left her key ring in the kitchen and there was no way to get it. The door, she knew, was solid mahogany, and thick. The hinges and the frame would be more vulnerable than the wood itself.

The hallway was filled with smoke. Choking, Simone gathered her strength and lunged at the point where the hinges screwed into the doorframe. Nothing moved. With a second shoulder-bruising lunge, she heard the sound of splintering wood. She flung herself against the spot a third time and felt the hinges give way. The door loosened and she pushed it to one side. Through the smoke, Simone could make out a huddled form on the floor of the closet. Claire Sagan was not moving.

Overhead, the ceiling was burning. A piece of it had fallen onto Claire's skirt and was beginning to blaze. Simone flung her water-soaked body onto the fire, smothering it, but the fire had already burned through the skin and petticoat. Claire's leg was red and blistered. Simone bent low and pressed an ear to the girl's chest. The heart was beating. Baron Samedi had kept his promise. He had held back his hand.

Simone scooped her up in her strong arms almost as easily as if Claire had been Marie-Thérèse. The closet was sheltered; the flames had only begun to reach it, but the hallway was a searing inferno. Simone looked down at Claire's tender, white, exposed skin, paused, then wrapped her wet skirt up and around the girl to protect her from the heat.

Since the fire was burning downward, the floor was the safest place. Simone sank to her knees, the unconscious Claire still in her arms. On

her knees she moved out into the hallway. Sparks and coals from the blazing ceiling had fallen onto the floor. Simone cried out with pain as they burned into the flesh of her legs, but she did not drop her precious burden and she did not stop moving. With her arms full, she could not use her hands to hold the apron to her face. She felt her skin blistering, smelled the singeing of her hair and eyebrows.

At last her knees touched the threshold. She took a deep breath of air, stumbled to her feet, and ran clear of the house.

She laid Claire on a patch of grass next to the stable. The girl was still unconscious, but she was breathing normally. Behind them, the house folded inward as the second floor caved in upon the first, sending up a great fountain of sparks.

The color was beginning to return to Claire's face. She would be all right. Simone assured herself as she rose to her feet and gazed down at the still form on the grass.

Above the roar and crackle of the flames, she heard the whinny of a horse and the crunch of hooves on the graveled road outside the wall. Someone was coming.

Simone glanced around her. Escape through the gate was impossible. Strong and swift as a lion, she ran to the garden. The wall was higher than her head, but with the help of the stone bench . . . She tugged the bench loose from where it sat. The hoofbeats rang closer. She shoved the bench against the wall, stood on it, and grasped the ironwork that ran along the top. With the strength of her hands and arms, she began to pull herself upward, inch by inch. The roughness of the stones was agony against her burned skin. Her elbows gained the top of the wall, then her blistered knees. She could hear voices in the front yard. For an instant she crouched catlike at the top of the wall; then she pushed off with her hands and feet, dropped downward, and landed unhurt on the mossy carpet of the jungle.

She scrambled to her feet and began to run, a graceful lope that carried her swiftly away from the wall. Her seared flesh burned in the wind, but the pain would go away. There would be scars, but they would not matter. She was free now. She had done Baron's will, and her *loa* would be with her.

Claire was outside. She knew because she felt a faint breeze caress her face. She blinked and stirred. Her head ached, her throat felt raw,

and her nostrils stung when she inhaled the fresh air. From somewhere in the region of her legs, a throbbing, searing pain radiated upward through her body. She moaned softly, and felt strong arms tighten around her. As her senses cleared, she became aware that she was being held.

She opened her eyes and Philippe's dear, smoke-streaked face swam into focus. He had come. Everything would be all right. Then she remembered.

"Angélique . . . " she murmured. "André . . . "

"I know, love. Léon and I found what was left of their bodies." He lifted her against him and pressed his face into her shoulder. She held him tightly, feeling him tremble in her arms.

"Philippe — " She tried to sit up and felt an intense flash of pain shoot up her right leg. "What is it?" she whispered, looking up at him with hurt, frightened eyes.

"Your leg's been burned, Claire. Lie still . . . " Philippe brushed the hair back from her face. "It's not so bad. It will mend, love. You'll be fine — " Suddenly overcome, he clasped her hard against him and buried his face in the hollow of her neck. She felt him quivering, drawing as much from her strength as she drew from his. "Claire — " he whispered.

She stopped his words with a kiss. "Let's not talk," she breathed. "Not now . . . just hold me, Philippe . . . " She closed her eyes and lost herself in the circle of his arms. For a time she let his closeness become her world, her whole existence.

Claire looked past Philippe's shoulder to where the blackened ruins of the house were still shooting up fingers of flame here and there. Only the staircase remained standing, a gaunt, black skeleton amid the ashes, winding its way up and up through the smoke to end in nothing. "Philippe," she said, suddenly perplexed, "how did you find me in time? How did you know enough to look for me in that closet?"

Philippe rubbed his cheek against her hair. "The closet? Your mind must still be foggy, love. Léon came to the hospital and told me he'd heard the house was burning. By the time we got here the upper floor had caved in and the place was solid flames. No one could have gotten inside."

She stared at him, bewildered.

"We found you outside, Claire. Right here by the stable."

Claire closed her eyes again and tried to remember. The explosion . . . then the fire . . .

"Simone . . . ?" she whispered.

"Not a trace of her yet. Perhaps when the ashes cool — "

She touched his lips with her finger. "Let's talk about it later," she said softly. Yes, later, she thought. Later she would tell him everything.

Epilogue

Paris, France
May 5, 1904

Claire awakened in Philippe's arms, just as she had on that heart rending day more than nineteen years ago. She yawned and smiled up at him. His hair, silver now, contrasted glowingly with the bronze of his skin. The dawn made a halo around him as he sat on the bed and leaned over her. He had been at the hospital all night.

"What time is it?" she murmured sleepily.

"Nearly five. We had a long night of it. The morning papers are already out. Look, Claire!"

He unfolded the newspaper and smoothed it out on her knees. "I've only seen the headline," he said. "Read it to me while I get undressed, love, if you can see it."

Claire fluffed a pillow behind her back and tilted the newspaper so that the early morning light fell across the headline: AMERICANS TAKE OVER PANAMA CANAL PROJECT. She caught her breath. So it had come to pass at last, after all those long months of negotiations.

"Can you read it?" Philippe was unfastening his cuff links.

"I think so — " Claire's eyes crept down the page and she read him the account of how Marke Brooke, a young second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, had walked into the old French Company Hotel in Panama City and signed his name to the document that transferred all French rights and holdings in Panama to the United States of America.

After Claire had come to the end of the column, she sat quietly for a moment, watching Philippe lay his clothes over the back of a chair. "Do you think they can finish it, Philippe?" she asked him at last.

"The Americans?" He laughed, a little sardonically. "With all that government money? With all the technological advances of the past twenty years at their disposal, and with that great, bombastic bear of a President backing the effort? Of course they will, love." He strode over to the bed, comfortably naked. "I always did believe de Lesseps when he said the canal would be built. I only wish we could have finished it ourselves."

A shadow of sadness crossed Claire's thoughts. The collapse of the French Canal Company had crushed the mind of the old count. Ferdinand de Lesseps had died in an asylum at the age of eighty-nine, hopelessly insane.

"It was the fever that beat us, Philippe," she said softly. "That and the money."

"Well, the money will be no problem for the Americans. And as for the fever — now that they know enough to keep the mosquitos down — " He shook his head vigorously. "Lord, we were children, then, Claire! We knew so little! We were using matches to fight a dragon!"

Claire turned down the covers on his side of the bed and held out her arms to him. His lean, brown body slipped between the sheets. She closed her eyes and laughed with pure happiness as he drew her close. Even after nineteen years, she still sang inside when Philippe made love to her.

When at last she lay beside him, spent and fulfilled in the newness of dawn, she let her mind drift back to those turbulent times in Panama. She remembered the rain, the flowering trees, the sounds of the jungle at night. She remembered the sight of Pedro Prestan's body, hanging from the gallows in the central plaza of Col—n, strangely completing the death curse that Simone's Baron Samedi had placed on the men who killed Bertrand. Ironically, Prestan had died on Claire and Philippe's wedding day.

Parisian tongues would have wagged at the suddenness of their marriage, but in Panama, where life and death were such constant uncertainties, no one had questioned it. They had remained in Col—n for nearly two years. Then, with the much-expected collapse of the French Canal Company, they returned to Paris. What a joy it had been to have Marie-Thérèse with them once more.

Marie-Thérèse was in Vienna now, with her violinist husband, appearing as guest soloist with one of the great orchestras there.

Her brilliance as a pianist was surpassed only by the sweetness and constancy of her nature, and for that Claire and Philippe were quietly grateful.

Claire also remembered Marta, especially now, because only yesterday she and Philippe had welcomed young Pablo Sagan, Marta's son and Paul's, into their home. He would be living with them while he studied engineering at the same university his father had attended. With Paul's eyes and something of his mother's delicacy, he was a delightful young man. The Jarnac children had already accepted him as a big brother.

As for André. Claire seldom thought of him, except when she visited an art gallery and saw the paintings of Monet, Cézanne, Renoir, Degas, and the other new masters. Then, sometimes, she would brush away a tear, remembering that the wonderful work of André Jarnac could not be among them where it belonged.

Philippe was sleeping. Half-consciously, Claire reached down and touched the long, puckered, white scar that ran up the side of her right leg. As long as she carried that scar, she would never forget the debt she owed to the dark giantess who had saved her life twice on that day of horror — who, Claire later realized, had come back into the burning house, found her unconscious in the closet full of dolls, and carried her to safety.

Neither Claire nor Philippe had ever seen Simone again. They supposed that she must have gone back to Haiti, or disappeared into the interior of Panama. Yet, Claire had always felt her presence with them, hovering close like some sinister guardian angel. Even now, she often awakened from her dreams to the sound of Simone singing in that haunting, velvety voice; and sometimes, from out of the deepest corners of the night, she still heard, ever so faintly, the flutter of fingertips on the taut skin of a drum.

Biography

Elizabeth Lane

Elizabeth Lane's travels in Latin America, Europe, and China manifest themselves in the exotic locales seen in her writing, but she also finds her home state of Utah and other areas of the American West to be fascinating sources for historical romance. Lane loves such diverse activities as hiking and playing the piano, not to mention her latest hobby-belly dancing.