

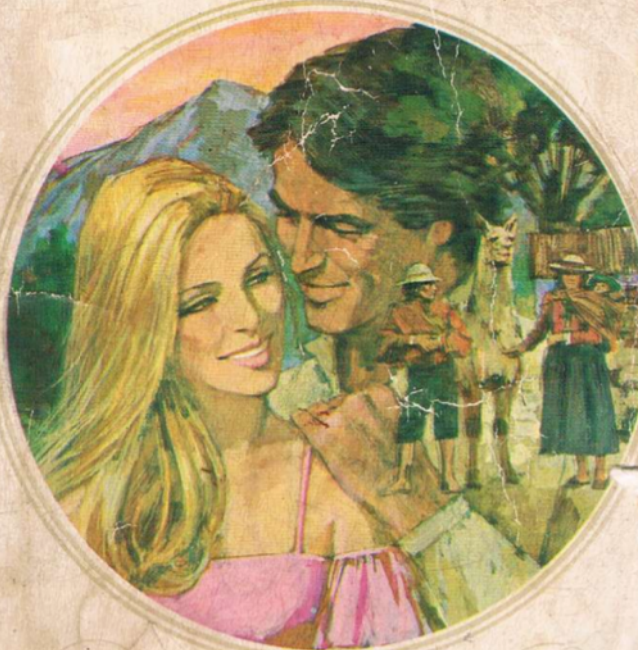
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Harlequin Presents...

ANNE
MATHER

lure of eagles



Domine meet your cousin-my fiancée."

Domine could hardly believe the cool, polite words of introduction Luis spoke. Dear God, Lisel was his fiancée! How could he do this to her?

When she questioned him about it later he said flatly, "I did try to tell you. Last night. But-" he shrugged "-I didn't do it."

"Was that before or after you kissed me?" demanded Domine tightly.

He continued in the same level tone. "I realize my behavior was... unforgivable, but I must assure you that it was not typical. Your cousin need never have any doubts about my fidelity once we're married. What happened—happened. It will not occur again."

Domine gasped and stared at him. That was the cruelest cut of all—that it would never happen again.



LURE OF EAGLES

CHAPTER ONE

HE really was the most disturbing man she had ever met, Domine reflected broodingly. It was not that he was good-looking, though she had to admit his dark-skinned features were not unpleasing. But no one could call that aggressive nose and those hooded eyes handsome, or compliment the thin-lipped cruelty of his mouth. His eyes, too, were a contradiction of the melting Latin eyes she had expected. Dark, so as to appear almost black at times, and without any conceivable warmth that she could see. He wore his clothes well, of course, and the dark suits he favoured accentuated the lean strength of his body, the long legs so casually crossed as he spoke politely to her brother.

Yet it was something more than that which prompted Domine's conclusion. Perhaps it was inherent in the man himself, she considered. A combination of the charm he could wield when he chose, the air of indolence which they had learned could be so quickly discarded, and the ruthlessness of purpose he could exhibit when he spoke of his reasons for being in England. When he spoke, Domine always seemed to find herself listening, which was disconcerting to someone accustomed to finding the opposite sex somewhat boring and immature. But then what else could she expect, when from her earliest years she had been cosseted and admired by every male she came into contact with?

Was that it? She pondered, her thoughts fastening to this possibility. Was his lack of apparent interest responsible for the strange fascination he had for her? It was possible, she supposed, but hardly likely. He was not the kind of man she would have expected herself to be attracted to. She was a modern girl, with modern ideals, while he came from one of the most ancient civilisations of the Western World, with all its conventionality and taboos, and it was obvious to her, if not to her brother, that he had no intention of relaxing his rigid control of the situation.

He was an alien being in that very English room, she thought, her nerves tightening a little when she contemplated the uncertainty of their future. When Grandpa was alive, everything had seemed so safe and secure, their lives stretching ahead of them smoothly, without any sign of difficulty or upheaval. Of course, Grandpa and Mark had rowed a lot, particularly when Mark went on one of his gambling sprees and lost a

month's allowance in one night, but Domine had never seriously believed that Grandpa would deprive her brother of the cotton mills from which he had made his fortune. It was all a little unreal—Grandpa's will had been unreal, the existence of their cousin seemed unreal, and the presence here in their drawing room of *Señor Luis Delgado Aguilar* was the most unreal of all.

Trying not to listen too blatantly to what Mark was saying, Domine forced her attention back to the room. It was a nice room, a pleasant room, the room she remembered from that awful morning when she was six years old, and Grandpa broke the news that her father's yacht had capsized in the South Atlantic. Then it had not seemed at all a pleasant room, but Grandpa had held her close in his arms and told her that from now on she and Mark must consider Griffons their home, and the terror had receded. She had never known her mother. She had died a few weeks after Domine was born, and although her father had recovered from the blow, he had not married again. Consequently, Grandpa had become the pivot, the focal point of their whole world, and only Mark's excesses had served to create trouble between them.

When Domine was younger, she had not understood all that Grandpa accused Mark of, Mark was ten years older than she was, and had already seemed grown up when their father was drowned. She had not known who 'Edward' was, or why Mark should so continually be identified with him. Later, she had learned that Edward was, or had been, their uncle, Grandpa's eldest son, who he had disinherited when he ran away and married some flibbertigibbet showgirl, or at least, that was how Grandpa had described her. Apparently he had given up his studies at the university, and taken to painting birds and wild flowers, encouraged, it appeared, by his feckless wife.

Of course, Grandpa never had any time for artistic things. Brains and brass, he used to say, they were all that mattered, and naturally Mark's penchant for the good things of life had given birth to the friction between them. Perhaps Mark was more like his uncle than his father. Certainly, James Temple had never disappointed his father. His only weakness had been sailing, and the holiday he had taken when his yacht capsized had been his first for many years.

It was strange that they had never heard what had happened to Edward and his wife, but then why should they? They had never imagined Grandpa would relent. In his considered opinion, Mark was as irresponsible as Edward used to be, therefore any change of heart was highly unlikely. What they had not known, but which Grandpa had, apparently, was that Edward and his wife had been killed some eight years ago in an earthquake in Pom, and their only child, a daughter, Lisel, had been put in the care of the nuns at the convent of the Holy Sceptre in Puerto Limas. What Edward and his wife had been doing in Peru had not been explained, but obviously their grandfather had kept in touch with the Sisters at the convent, and assured himself regularly of the girl's welfare. Why he had left the mills and their considerable income to Edward's daughter was not so easy to understand, or forgive, but Domine still felt too stunned to nourish any resentment. Only Griffons remained, as a bulwark against the future, given to herself and Mark jointly, to live in or sell as they wished. Mark had been left an income, but knowing his extravagant life-style, it would hardly be sufficient to keep him in pocket money, and although Domine's own allowance was to be increased to one thousand pounds a year, it would hardly be enough to pay the rates on Griffons, let alone support and feed her. Grandpa had left her a message, something about expecting her to use the education he had given her, and not to let Mark sponge upon her, as he had done frequently in the past. She guessed, rather wryly, that even if her grandfather had been tempted to leave the mills to her, he would never have done so. He distrusted Mark, and he distrusted his influence over her. He would never believe that she had a will of her own, strong enough to stand up to Mark, when she chose to do so. The trouble was, she had seldom felt inclined to oppose him, and no doubt that had been her downfall.

She sighed, somewhat cynically. Well, it was too late now. Their cousin Lisel was the heiress, and in a curious way Domine was relieved she had not been burdened with the responsibility for so many lives. There were three thousand men and women who relied on the Temple Mills for employment, and in her more generous moments she sympathised with Mark in his rebellion against such responsibility. Their grandfather had never understood why Mark had felt that way. He had thrived on work, and responsibility, and up until the day he died he had been ordering the day-to-day life of the mill offices.

Even so, that did not alter the fact- that things were bound to change now, and not necessarily for the better. Her education had been sound, as Grandpa had pointed out in his last words to her, but an ability to write good English and understand half a dozen other languages was not in itself a qualification. She had never considered going to university. She had been a bright and willing pupil, but when at seventeen she had succeeded in passing her 'A' level examinations, she had happily left the schoolroom behind, and devoted herself to enjoyment.

Last summer she and Aunt Barbara, her great-aunt really, from her mother's side, had toured Italy, and the countries of the Mediterranean, and at Christmas she and Mark had joined a group of other young people at a sky resort in the Bavarian Alps. This summer she was hoping to persuade her aunt to chaperon herself and a friend on a camper holiday from the east to the west coast of North America, but somehow that no longer appealed. It wasn't just that now that Grandpa was dead there was no one to demand she take a chaperon along. It was simply that she felt too uncertain of her future to contemplate a holiday, and her longed-for independence seemed curiously fiat now that it had been realised.

She could see Mark's face getting redder and redder, and wondered what Señor Aguilar was saying to him. This morning in the solicitor's office she thought Mark had handled himself remarkably calmly, considering the predicament he was in, but in private he was furious, and seething with resentment, an emotion he was trying hard to hide in the face of such implacable opposition.

Would it have been easier if Lisel had come herself? Domine frowned, adjusting the folds of her long velvet skirt. Of course it would. But equally, it would not have been so easy for Lisel. For one thing, she had been living with the nuns for more than eight years, since she was eleven or twelve, and naturally she was rather unworldly— or at least, that was Señor Aguilar's description. She was, in his words, a shy retiring sort of person, a charming personality, much admired by the Peruvian Indians she served. The convent where she had been living was also a small hospital, catering to the needs of the villages around Puerto Links, and she had recently completed her training as a nurse. Her visits away from the convent had been few and far between, except to visit the villages, and

the small town of Aguilas close by, and the idea of travelling to England to meet the lawyers who presently controlled her inheritance, was naturally a terrifying proposition. That was why Señor Aguilar had come in her stead. To attend to the outstanding business on her behalf, and to meet the relatives from whom Lisel would have to learn so much.

Personally, Mark had been infuriated when they first received Aguilar's cable. 'Damned cheek!' he had fumed, stamping around the house for days, and threatening to walk out before the man even arrived. 'What the hell does he mean by interfering? Inquisitive old so-and-so! I bet he wants to see what's in it for him, before he gives her his advice about what to do next! What in heaven's name will he know about running a mill, or the price of wool, or where the next pay rise is coming from?'

Well, Señor Luis Delgado Aguilar was not old, at least not by Mark's 'standards. He was probably thirty-five or thirty-six, at the most, and contrary to their beliefs, he knew a lot about wool and its value. He had staggered Mark by explaining that wool was in fact one of the most important exports of Peru, and continued to add that if he didn't know that, he knew less about the wool industry than he claimed. Of course, Mark had blustered, and said that he had had better things to do than worry where the wool was coming from, and Señor Aguilar had countered this by remarking that it was just as well his grandfather had not felt the same way.

That had been at dinner. Since then, Mark had calmed down a lot. Domine guessed it had occurred to him that by incurring *Señor* Aguilar's antipathy, he might also incur the antipathy of their cousin, before he had even met her, and Domine also knew that Mark was not going to walk away from a small fortune without making a fight of it. How he intended to proceed she was not quite sure, but she was convinced it must have occurred to him, as it had to her, that if Lisel was young and unmarried, she might well look with favour on a sympathetic and handsome cousin who wanted to help her.

Pressing her lips together, Domine returned her attention to the tall Peruvian, lounging with evident ease in the armchair opposite Mark. What was his interest in all this? Why had he come all this way on Lisel's behalf? Was it merely philanthropy, or had

he other motives for his generosity? Obviously Lisel had complete confidence in him, but she could hardly be experienced in the ways of the world.

Domine frowned, subjecting their guest to another puzzled appraisal. He was obviously an educated man—he spoke English with only the faintest trace of an accent—and his clothes were tailor-made and expensive. Yet for all that he was not like any man of her acquaintance. There was a single-mindedness of purpose about him that belied his studied courtesy, and although he exhibited all the refinements of Western society, Domine wondered what lay beneath the veneer. He exuded a powerful aura of cold strength and hostility, that no amount of charm or politeness could hide, and she doubted Mark's ability to fool him about anything. He had all the contempt of the conquistadors for their victims, and recalling the little she had learned of the Spanish conquest, she knew she ought not to imagine his courteous facade was anything more than that.

Chiding herself for being so imaginative, she looked up then and found his eyes upon her. It was a disconcerting experience, particularly after her thoughts of a few moments ago, but she managed to return his stare without flinching, determined not to be intimidated by his scrutiny. He would not reduce her to the stammering wreck he had made of Mark. She had done nothing to be ashamed of, and just because he was different from the men she usually met, it did not mean he was any the less susceptible to her beauty. The conceit of her thoughts did not occur to her. She was so used to admiration, it never crossed her mind that the Peruvian might not find eyes the colour of violets appealing, or be enchanted by the coil of silvery hair that was presently confined at the nape of her slender neck.

'Can I get you another brandy, señor?' she suggested, meeting his gaze with enquiry, but *Señor* Aguilar was already rising to his feet.

'I regret I must be leaving, Miss Temple,' he refused politely, the faint smile that played about his thin lips belying the bland courtesy. 'I have a long day tomorrow. There are matters which must be attended to, before I return to Peru. But perhaps you will both...' he glanced at her brother, 'dine with me at my hotel tomorrow evening—'

Domine badly wanted to refuse. Not because she had any objection to dining with him, or indeed because she had made other arrangements, but simply to thwart him in some way. However, Mark was already accepting on their behalf, and she inclined her head with reluctant grace to signify her own acceptance of the invitation.

'Good.' The Peruvian walked across the room, and Mark hastened after him to open the double-panelled doors. 'I shall look forward to it.'

His glance licked Domine like an abrasive tongue, but she was obliged to accompany them into the hall, and waited while Bayliss produced *Señor* Aguilar's overcoat. His choice of dark colours accentuated the dark cast of his skin, the thick dark hair that lay smoothly over his forehead and brushed the collar of his overcoat. A kind of Mephistophelean character, she thought, giving in to her imagination again, and then stiffened when those dark eyes swept her from head to toe in a look that was as contemptuous as it was devastating. Immediately she was conscious of the off-the-shoulder neckline of her smock, and of how the belt she had tightened round her waist drew attention to the swelling fullness of her breasts. Only the long velvet skirt seemed acceptable, hiding the long slender length of her legs.

'Until tomorrow, then.'

Señor Aguilar was already descending the flight of steps which led up to the heavy oak door with its iron facings, and Mark was acting the perfect host. She heard the sound of the hire car's engine, and presently Mark's words of farewell, and then, as she endeavoured to recover from the state of frozen immobility that scornful appraisal had induced, her brother came back into the hall and slammed the door with unconcealed fury. He scarcely looked at Domine. He passed her, muttering to himself, and presently she heard the sound of the decanter rattling against the rim of his glass.

Bayliss, who had been at Griffons almost as long as her grandfather and was equally old, was waiting for her in sanctions, and after reassuring him that there was nothing else they would need that night, Domine turned back in the drawing room. As she had anticipated, Mark had poured himself a generous measure of brandy and he thrown himself down on to the couch where she had been sitting, one leg draped carelessly over

the arm. He looked up at her entrance, then swallowed the remainder of the spirit in the glass and held it out to Domine to be refilled.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" she asked shortly in no mood to suffer his self-pitying recriminations, and he pulled an angry face.

'Don't try to organise me,' he directed, 'just fill the glass!' but she ignored him and went to sit in the armchair which earlier their guest had occupied.

Muttering once more, Mark levered himself up from the couch and refilled his own glass, swallowing another generous portion before returning to his previous position. Then he looked moodily at Domine across the room, the tightness of his lips belied by the anxiety in his eyes.

"What the hell are we going to do?" he demanded, and was more of an appeal than a question. 'Dom, tell me what we're going to do!'

Domine shrugged, running her palms over the arms the chair, flinching a little as they encountered a trace warmth left by its last occupant. It was odd why she had chosen to sit in this particular chair, but thoughts like that were not acceptable, and she tried instead to concentrate on what her brother was saying.

'You could get a job,' she pointed out now, trying to practical, but Mark only snorted with impatience.

'*A job!*' he echoed. 'What kind of job? At the mill, you mean? If you think I'm going to work in my own mills—' 'They're not your mills,' retorted Domine firmly. 'They belong to Lisel—'

'To hell with Lisel!'

'That's not going to get you very far.' She sighed. 'Mark, you had a good education...'

'A good education!'

'Well, you did. We both did. We should be able to find some kind of work.'

'Where? In Manchester? What on earth is there to do in Manchester? You know the job situation.'

Domine shook her head. 'You're just being obstructive.'

'If it was London, now ...'

'But it's not. This is our home, Mark. If you went to London, we would have to sell Griffons.'

Mark grimaced. 'Well, I expect we will anyway.'

'No!'

'Yes, Domine. Be reasonable. How can we afford to keep a place like this going? Heavens, we can't even afford Mrs Radcliffe's wages anymore.'

'We could do without Mrs Radcliffe,' exclaimed Domine, her heart plummeting at the thought of selling their home. 'We could manage ...'

'Oh, yes?' Mark was sceptical. 'And who will do the housework? You? You've never picked up a duster in your life.'

'That's not true.' Domine pursed her lips. 'I've looked after my own room for years.'

'Big deal.' Mark hunched his shoulders. 'That means you only have half a dozen other bedrooms to look after. Oh, and three reception rooms, of course, and the dining room, and the kitchen -'

'All right,' Domine broke in on him then. 'All right, so we need some help in the house. Why shouldn't we be able to afford it, if we both had jobs?'

Mark sniffed. 'I do not intend taking some grubby little job, just to keep this place in cleaning fluid!'

'Mark!'

'I'm sorry, but I'm not.' He was adamant. 'All the same, something has to be done.' He frowned. 'I wonder what Lisel is like. Really like, I mean. Not this sainted creature Aguilar talks about.'

Domine moved her shoulders uncertainly. 'She can't like Uncle Edward, or Grandpa wouldn't have had a good word for her.'

'She can't be like me, you mean?'

Domine half smiled. 'No one could be like you.'

'Thanks!'

'Oh, Mark ...' She got up from the chair and move slowly across the room. 'Couldn't you try...'

'Don't say it,' he interposed quickly. 'Accept it. Griffon is going to have to be sold.'

'No!'

'Yes. Unless I can work something out.'

'Like what?' Domine was sceptical now.

'I don't know.' Mark looked thoughtful. 'If only I could get to meet Lisel! If only I could talk to her. I bet she's not as virginal as Aguilar makes her out to be.'

'Mark!' Domine stared at him impatiently. 'Can't you ever consider practical solutions? It doesn't really matter what Lisel is like, so far as I'm concerned. I have no interest Dom of asking her for money.'

'Not for money, no,' remarked Mark slowly. 'But a job perhaps. A legal adviser. How's that? A sort of—right hand man.'

'*Señor* Aguilar will never allow that.'

'But *Señor* Aguilar won't be here, will he? Lisel will.'

'Did *Señor* Aguilar say that?'

'Well—no.' Mark was evasive. 'But she's got to come England, hasn't she? I mean, how else is she going to run the business?'

Domine raised her dark eyebrows. 'I suppose she could appoint a—legal adviser, as you say.'

Mark jack-knifed off the couch, a white line appeared round his lips. 'You don't think—no! She couldn't.'

'Couldn't what?'

'Appoint Aguilar as—her legal adviser?'

Domine hesitated. 'Well, I shouldn't think so. I mean, probably has an occupation of his own. In Lima, or where ever he lives.'

'Then why has she sent him over here?'

'Mark, don't ask me, ask him! I don't know, do I? He says he came because Lisel was too shocked by the news to make the journey, that naturally, for someone like her, making a trip to England needed to be thought about, considered

'I know what he said,' snapped Mark irritably. 'But is anybody that unworldly? In this day and age?'

'I expect so,' said Domine. 'After all, she does live in a rural area. Why shouldn't she be shy and retiring?'

'Because, if she's Uncle Edward's daughter, she would be more like him!'

'Why? You're not at all like Daddy.'

"No. But you are.'

'Oh, Mark ...' Domine was tired. 'I don't want to talk about this anymore tonight. I want to go to bed.' She walked towards the door. 'Are you coming?'

'Shortly,' replied Mark, resuming his position on the couch. 'You go on up. See you in the morning.'

"Yes.' Domine was reluctant to leave him, but she really had no choice. When Mark was in this mood, he was better left alone. 'Goodnight, then.'

'Goodnight.'

With the doors closed behind him, Domine mounted the stairs slowly, absorbing the peace and beauty of the building. The staircase had been hand-carved by a master of his craft, and the chandelier which illuminated the square hall below was a brilliant example of cut glass. The portrait at the head of the stairs was Grandpa's with a smaller one of Grandmama and her two sons further along the gallery, but Domine's favourite was the painting of her horse, Minstrel, that Grandpa had bought her for her fourteenth birthday. She supposed he would have to be sold, too, and she made a mental note to speak to Mrs Grant at the riding school, to see if she would take him. He was a gentle creature, and she would rather he was sold to someone she knew so that she might see him again from time to time. And then she remembered what Mark had said about selling Griffons, and a lump came unbidden to her throat. If the house was sold she didn't think she would be able to bear living in neighbourhood, so it didn't really matter who bought Minstrel.

Her bedroom was a quiet sanctuary, and she closed door wearily, leaning back against it as she surveyed her domain. It was a spacious room, made the more so by use of light colours and pale wood. Her bed was wide and comfortable, its sprigged coverlet a hangover from the days of her childhood. The old-fashioned wardrobes she had once had had been replaced by a modern vanity unit, and there was a walnut desk where she used to do her homework, and a stereo music centre, with speakers set up in the ceiling. She had always been given everything she wanted, but she realised, too, how much she had taken granted.

Moving away from the door, she tugged off her belt and then, on impulse, surveyed herself in the long mirrors. The outfit was not so outrageous. At least the smock was not transparent, and she had worn a strapless bra. She dreaded to think what he might have thought of her in tight jeans and a skinny-knit sweater, and then decided she would have the opportunity to find out. It might be quite amusing to shock a man like him, to show him exactly how far she dared go. What had she to lose, after all? After tomorrow she might never see him again. No, tomorrow evening she would wear the black satin jump-suit she had been saving for a suitable occasion. Then let him look at her with that supercilious, holier-than-thou expression!

Of course, by the next day her indignation had wandered. The cold light of a February morning was sobering, and once more the immediate anxiety of deciding her future dispelled her aggression of the night before. Mr Holland, her grandfather's solicitor, had asked her to come and see him at ten o'clock, and in the activity of preparing for the appointment she had little time to think of childish retaliations. She dressed in a brown suede pants suit, with leather fringe at the cuffs and hem, and was gathering up her handbag preparatory to leaving the house when the telephone rang.

As she was right beside it, she answered it, picking up the receiver automatically and giving their number.

'I would like to speak to Miss Temple, please,' said the deep accented tones which had haunted her dreams, and she was tempted to drop the receiver there and then, and get Mrs Radcliffe to tell him that she had already left. But before she could formulate any defence, he added: 'That is Miss Temple, is it not? How fortunate that I have caught you.'

'Caught me?' Domine spoke faintly. 'I—don't understand...'

'You have an appointment with Holland this morning, do you not?' he suggested. 'I hoped to reach you before you left for his office.'

'Oh?' Domine was gathering herself with difficulty, holding the phone with both hands to disguise the tremor of her wrist. 'Why?'

'Because I wanted to invite you to have lunch with me,' he replied smoothly. 'And because I also wanted to ask you not to make any decisions about your future until you have spoken to me.'

Domine was aghast. 'But we're having dinner together—'

"With your brother, yes, I know,' he interrupted flatly. 'However, what I wish to discuss with you I would prefer to discuss in private, therefore I am requesting you join me here, at the hotel, at one o'clock.'

'I'm afraid—' Domine was beginning coldly, when she became aware of a movement behind her, and glancing round she found her brother coming stealthily down the stairs, still in his pyjamas.

'Aguilar?' he mouthed silently, and half impatiently, she nodded.

'Are you still there, Miss Temple?'

The Peruvian's voice was coldly demanding, but Mark was gesticulating urgently. Obviously he had heard her responses to what was being said, and had guessed what Señor Aguilar wanted.

"Go!' he mouthed, gesturing positively. 'Find out what he wants.'

Domine sighed, and shaking her head uneasily, she said, 'I'm still here, señor.'

'Well?' He was impatient now. 'Will you join me for lunch?'

Mark was nodding vigorously, and much against her better judgment Domine found herself agreeing. The remanent was made, but when the receiver was returned, she turned on Mark with angry resentment.

'Don't you ever do that to me again!' she exclaimed aware that her palms were still moist and her heart beating twice as fast as it should have done. 'I didn't want to have lunch with him, as it happens. I'd promised to see Susie at half past twelve in Lewis's.'

'I'll meet her, if you like,' declared Mark laconic sinking down on to a stair about a third of the way up, Domine repudiated his offer.

'Thanks, but that won't be necessary,' she retorted toping the strap of her handbag over her shoulder, 'I'll phone her—later.'

'What you mean is, you don't really have an arrangement at all,' Mark commented, with wry humour. 'Anyway, what did he say?'

'Don't you know?' Domine moved towards the door.

'I heard the phone ring, that was all,' Mark replied 'Then as I came downstairs I heard what you were saying.'

'Mmm!' Domine was still infuriated at her own admission. 'Well, I'm late. I have to go...

'Do you think he fancies you?'

Mark could be infuriatingly sensitive at times, Domine was glad she could turn away and swing open door to cool her heated cheeks. 'I think that's the last thing he's aware of,' she remarked, stepping out into the damp misty air, and the annoying thing was, she was almost certain she was right.

'Lunch?'

CHAPTER TWO

THE four-star Crillon Hotel stood in a side street, just off Manchester's main square. Domine did wonder why he had not checked into the five-star Piccadilly, but perhaps he preferred the less hectic conservatism of the smaller hotel. In any event, it was nothing to do with her where he chose to stay, inasmuch as neither she nor Mark was expected to foot the bill.

She was still absently considering the things Mr Holland had told her, and finding the Crillon car park was full, she spent several fruitless minutes driving round and round the square, trying to find somewhere else to leave the small Porsche which her grandfather had given her six months ago on her eighteenth birthday. Eventually she managed to ease it into a limited-period parking area, and hurried across the park, aware that she was going to be rather late. It was all very well telling herself that she didn't care whether he had waited for her or not, but the fact that she was virtually obliged to see him again this evening quickened her step, realising as she did that Mark might well be made to suffer for her tardiness.

One of several hall porters opened the swing glass doors for her as she mounted the shallow steps, and thanking him she looked apprehensively round the reception area. There seemed to be no sign of Señor Aguilar, and she looked anxiously at her watch. It was already after quarter past, and she wondered if he had gone into the restaurant without her.

She was just considering what she ought to do next when a voice said: 'Miss Temple?' and she looked up to find herself confronted by a black-coated waiter.

'Yes?' she nodded, swallowing her alarm, and he gave her a polite smile.

'Mr Aguilar is waiting for you in the bar, Miss Temple the man said, indicating the archway behind him. 'If you follow me ...'

With as much self-possession as she could muster Domine followed the man through the archway and into a discreetly lit bar-lounge. There were tables and armchair in low banquettes upholstered in red leather, and tall stool the bar, with circular red seats. There were several people in the room, some seated at the tables, others just standing around, and others occupying the stools at the bar. She saw Aguilar at once. He was seated at the bar, but at her approach he slid off his stool and came to greet her.

'Miss Temple,' he said, bowing over her hand. 'How good of you to come.' Almost as if he had doubted she might.

Domine waited until he had released her hand and then thrust it awkwardly into the hip pocket of her pants, saw his gaze flick over her, and wondered what his opinion was today, but then he was asking her what she would to drink and she endeavoured to concentrate on the mood of the moment.

He looked very little different from the previous evening He had discarded his dinner jacket, of course, but his lounge suit was just as dark, the grey silk tie he wore with it matching his shirt. She couldn't help noticing that he attracted the attention of other women in the bar, and when he seated himself on the adjoining stool and his knee brushed her thigh, she was made disturbingly aware of effect he had on her.

Having accepted her usual Martini, Domine allowed gaze to move sideways, alighting on his dark profile, trying to guess why he had invited her for lunch. It would have been flattering to think he was attracted to her, but after look he had given her the night before, she distrusted his suave courtesy. Whatever he wanted, it was not personal, though the remembrance of that fleeting contempt rekindled her desire to make him squirm.

With this in mind she rested one elbow on the bar, and turning towards him, gave him the full benefit of her most winning smile. As she moved, the tantalising fragrance she wore drifted to his nostrils, her hair a silky silver curtain about her shoulders.

'It was—kind of you to invite me to lunch,' she said now, allowing the fingers of her other hand to lightly touch his sleeve. Her nails gleamed with polish, long and silvery, like her hair, her lips parting over even white teeth. 'It was so unexpected, Señor—or may I call you Luis?'

His sleeve was withdrawn from her fingers, and she was subjected to a glacial scrutiny. 'I think you misunderstand my motives, Miss Temple,' he declared harshly.

'My reasons for inviting you to lunch were not—personal ones.'

"No?" She pretended disappointment. 'Then what?'

He raised his glass to his lips, swallowed a mouthful of the pale lager he was drinking before replying. Then he said severely: 'I wanted to speak with you about your cousin.'

'Lisel?'

'Lisel, yes.'

Domine was intrigued. This was not what she had expected. 'What about her?'

Aguilar frowned, and sought about in his pocket until he brought out a small cigar case. Putting one of the narrow cheroots between his teeth, he continued: 'You will recall what I have told you about her already? She is—how shall I say?—not used to meeting strangers.'" He paused as he lit the cheroot with a slim gold lighter. 'Coming to England, if indeed she ever does, will be a terrifying experience for her.'

Domine pulled a wry face. 'So?'

His mouth tightened, the lines that bracketed it deepening. 'You are not at all like her, are you? You do not begin to understand how she might be feeling.'

Domine felt indignant. 'How could I? Does she know how I'm feeling right now? Of course not. We're two different people. We've had a different upbringing.'

'That, alas, is true,' he responded curtly, and she did not misunderstand his preference. 'But it may be that you could —help her.'

'*Me?*' Domine was astounded. 'How could I help a—a paragon?'

It was hardly wise to taunt him, but his evident admiration for her cousin was irritating, and Domine was not used to being ignored. Besides, he was expecting too much if he thought she could stick around, knowing Griffons would have to be sold, seeing everything she had ever loved come under the auction hammer, just to help the one

person who was responsible for destroying her and Mark's life 'You are bitter,' Luis Aguilar said now, irritating her even more. 'That is understandable. But I must point that your cousin cannot be held responsible for your grandfather's aberrations.'

Domine glared at him. 'Thank you, but I don't require a lecture from you concerning my grandfather's behaviour aberrant or otherwise! And while we're on the subject, I am not bitter; sad, perhaps, but not bitter!'

Her outburst had annoyed him, she could see that, his next words confirmed it. 'It seems to me that Sir George knew what he was doing when he made his last will and testament,' he commented crushingly. 'Neither you nor your brother seemed to have any self-discipline whatsoever and behave for the most part like a pair of irresponsible children!'

Domine clenched her fists. 'Then what could we possibly do to help Lisel?' she demanded, uncaring in the heat the moment what Mark might think of her behaviour, and was almost gratified when he retorted:

'I cannot for the life of me imagine!' he said in cold chilling tones. Of course, after that there was nothing more to say thought Domine rather tremulously. Deciding she would not wait for him to walk out on her, she would walk out on him, she made to slide off her stool, but to her astonishment his hand came out and gripped her arms, prevent her from making her escape. She parted her lips to make an angry objection, and then closed them again when he turned those night-dark eyes in her direction. She did not comprehend the meaning in their hypnotic depths, but: could not move under that paralysing appraisal, her breath coming in shallow gulps as she returned his stare.

'Wait!' he commanded, and she realised how close he had been to losing his temper. 'Perhaps my words were— careless, reckless; call them what you will. However, I tell myself, I would rather you were honest with me than— than merely paying lip service to my position.'

His position! Domine gazed at him in bewilderment. What position? What did he mean? As Lisel's friend? Her adviser? Or was he hinting that he had power of attorney to act on her behalf?

She became aware that his fingers were numbing her wrist, but she had no desire for him to relax them. On the contrary, she liked him touching her, and there was the growing realisation that she was arousing him to show emotion. Until that moment he had displayed a singular lack of any kind of feeling, except perhaps contempt, and there was a curious satisfaction in knowing she had succeeded where Mark, even at his most objectionable, had not.

As if he was aware of what she was thinking, his hand was immediately withdrawn, and she looked down at the livid marks his fingers had left on her skin. She did not bruise easily, but she would be surprised if she had nothing to show for this afternoon's violence, and his warring expression revealed his consciousness of that fact. No doubt he was regretting his behaviour bitterly, and the opportunity it had given her to expose his lack of self-control.

'I am sorry,' he said now, not looking at her, but hunching his shoulders over his glass, staring concentratedly at the row of coloured bottles which highlighted the back of the bar. 'I did not mean to hurt you. I simply wanted— time to explain why I had brought you here.'

'Yes?'

She refused to help him, and he went on more slowly: 'My intention was to ask whether you would be agreeable to visiting your cousin. I would like you to come to Puerto? Limas, to stay near your cousin, to befriend her. To prepare her, if you can, for the way of life she will be expected contend with if she comes to England.'

He looked at her then, but now Domine was so shocked she found it impossible to sustain the advantage she had gained. 'You—want me to—to come to Peru?' she gasped and when a movement of his head implied his consent: 'You can't be serious!'

'Why not?' The dark features were a mask hiding his true feelings. 'She is your cousin, after all, a blood relation. Surely that must mean something to you.'

'We probably don't put as much emphasis on blood relationships as you do,' replied Domine dazedly, trying to come to terms with his new disclosure. He was asking her to visit Peru, she kept telling herself incredulously, he was actually suggesting she should travel more than six thousand miles to stay with a cousin she had not even met!

Shaking her head, she looked at him doubtfully, trying to understand his reasoning. 'But you don't even like me,' she protested, incredulity giving way to practicality. 'Do you?'

His hesitation was scarcely flattering. 'I would rather not discuss personalities, Miss Temple,' he declared at length 'I am prepared to concede that the women of my acquaintance do not behave as you do, but I am equally disposed to admit that Englishmen do not treat their women with the same—respect. Therefore no analogy can be made.'

Domine's indignation was superseded by her curiosity 'Are you married?' she asked, unable to use the *forma señor* as she asked the unpalatable question, and his dart brows ascended with evident impatience.

'I suggest we go and have lunch,' he essayed firmly, making no attempt to satisfy her inquisitiveness. 'I took the liberty of ordering for us both when you were delayed, and the waiter has just signalled that all is now prepared.' The dining room of the Crillon was all ornate carving and fine lace curtains. The tablecloths were lace, too, and their table was set against the wall, partially concealed by a huge rubber plant. The head waiter himself saw them seated, and after the smoked salmon had been served Domine spent some little time looking about her.

'It's very—Victorian, isn't it?' she remarked absently, not really thinking to whom she was speaking, and then grimaced when she realised she had his undivided attention. 'I mean ...' she shrugged awkwardly, 'all lace curtains and potted palms. Or in this case, a potted rubber plant.'

'You don't like it?' he queried, watching her with an intentness that was unnerving, and she hastened to correct his impression.

'It's not that. It's just—well, different, that's all.'

'From reinforced steel and plate glass?' he suggested drily. 'Yes, I thought so, too. Although the plant looks out of place to me. I am used to seeing them in the wild. I regret this is a puny thing at best.'

'You have rubber plants in Peru?' Domine was interested.

'Trees, mostly,' he amended. 'They grow wild in all parts of South America, most particularly in the rain forests of the Amazon basin.'

'That's in Brazil, isn't it?' Domine's geography was not brilliant, but she knew a few elemental facts. 'Have you been to Brazil?'

A faint smile touched the corners of his mouth, increasing the disturbing activity of Domine's nervous system. 'Oh, yes,' he replied tolerantly. 'I have been to Brazil. And to the Amazon basin.'

Domine was fascinated. 'Have you seen the Angel Falls?' she asked, resting her elbows on the table and cupping her chin in her hands. 'It's the highest waterfall in the world, isn't it? I saw a programme about it on television. It looked beautiful!'

'It is,' he agreed quietly. 'But the falls are not in Brazil. It's Venezuela you're thinking of. Not the Amazon at all, but the Churun river.'

'Is it?' Domine pulled a wry face. 'I'm sorry, I'm afraid geography was not my strong point.'

He shook his head. 'South America is a long way from Manchester. I doubt, for instance, if I could tell you the source of the river Thames.'

'I doubt if I could either!' confessed Domine, with a gurgle of laughter, and for a moment their eyes met without either hostility or antagonism. He smiled, and it was miraculous how much younger he looked, the deeply-etched lines ironed away, his mouth mobile and sensitive. She wanted to go on looking at him, and a crazy impulse made her say: 'you're not disliking me so much now, are you, Luis?' but as soon as the words were uttered she knew she had gone too far.

'Whether or not I like you, Miss Temple, is not in question,' he told her severely. 'I suggest we return to the real reason for this meeting. Have you considered the suggestion I made to you?'

Domine pressed her lips together, irritated by his apparent ability to switch off any human feelings. For a second time she had had a brief glimpse of another side to his character, but he seemed determined not to allow anything to colour his judgment.

"You didn't answer my question," she said now, refusing to be coerced. "And my name is Domine, as you know very well."

"You don't call Lisel, Miss Temple, and yet that's her name as well."

He gave her an impatient look, but the arrival of the waiter to clear their plates created a diversion. By the time their chicken casserole had been served, Domine had had to wish she hadn't brought Lisel's name into their conversation, and she applied herself to the meal without expecting any response.

"I have known—Lisel for a number of years," he surprised her by remarking, after the waiter had departed. Filling her glass with the mildly sweet hock he had chosen go with the meal, he added: "I knew her father and her mother, and when they were killed, naturally I did what I could for the child."

Domine's eyes were wide. "You knew Uncle Edward, then?" His mouth twisted. "As Edward Temple was Lisel's father, that seems an unnecessary question."

Domine flushed. "I was surprised, that's all. I shouldn't have thought Uncle Edward was your type." She paused.

"Mark's supposed to be very like him."

"Really?" He raised his wine glass to his lips. "I find that hard to believe. When I knew Edward Temple, he was not at all like your brother. For one thing, he had abandoned the material world. Money meant nothing to him. He wrote poetry—and he painted; I have two of his water-colours myself. He seemed totally out of touch with your society, as I know it."

Domine forked a piece of chicken into her mouth before replying. Then, thoughtfully, she said: "Perhaps it would be more to the point to say that the material world had abandoned him. My grandfather never forgave him for running away to get married, and I believe he never had a steady job for years. Writing poetry and painting water-colours might be very pleasant, but it seldom pays the bills."

She produced a smug smile. "Grandpa's words, not mine."

"I see." A frown drew his dark brows together for a moment, then he seemed to dismiss the thought that had caused it. "Well, it is of no matter. Lisel's parents are dead

now, and beyond the reach of any retribution but God's. However, the problem of your cousin still remains.'

Domine shrugged. 'Why do you think I might be able to influence her? Aren't you afraid I might—contaminate her?'

The downward curve of his mouth revealed the irritation he was keeping in check, and pressing on, she exclaimed restlessly: 'All right, tell me about Peru, then. I know the capital is Lima, but that's about all. Do you live in Lima? Does Lisel? Is this place—what did you call it?—Puerto Limas?—is that near Lima?'

Helping himself to more wine, he said: 'Puerto Limas is almost six hundred miles from Lima. I told you, it is a village, in the mountains. With very little civilisation as you know it within easy reach. However, there is an air service between Lima and Arequipa and road links to the outlying villages.'

'Six hundred miles!' Domine was amazed. She had not imagined it was so far. It was almost frightening contemplating the implications of its remoteness, and isolation. Then she realised he had still told her nothing about himself, and her lips tightened with impatience.

'That disturbs you?' he enquired now, misunderstanding her expression, and she held up her head, regarding him frustratedly.

'You disturb me, señor," she declared, emphasising the 'title... 'What do I know about you? What have you told me t yourself? Nothing! I think that's rather disturbing, do I know what you tell me about Lisel is true? She could be dead, for all we know, and you—'

'I advise you stop there,' he interrupted her sharply, his glittering coldly, like black ice. 'Your solicitor, Mr Holland, verified my position long before I came to England, if you have any doubts about my reputation, I say you take them up with him.'

Domine was unrepentant. 'Well, why are you so reticent? Why don't you tell me about yourself? Or is there some ghastly skeleton in your family cupboard that you're afraid is going to come out?'

She did not think he was going to answer her, and she beginning to wish she had not spoken so recklessly he said harshly:

'I am inclined to regret issuing that invitation, Miss Temple. My motives seemed simple enough—that you should get to know your cousin, so that when she comes to England she will have at least one friend. But you seem to think that gives you the right to question me about my private affairs. I assure you, it does not.'

Domine played with the handle of her fork for several moments after his quelling injunction, and then, deciding she might as well damn her chances completely, she replied:

'You're a bore, do you know that? And just too conventional to be true! Why shouldn't I be curious about you? I don't know what the people are like in that way-out country you come from, but if they're like you, then believe me, I don't want to come!'

His features were rigid after this little assertion, and a peculiar shiver of fear ran through her. It was not so much that she was afraid of him, rather that she was afraid she had destroyed forever her chances of getting to know him better. He would never forgive her for this, and no doubt he was already thinking of ways he could leave the table without arousing any unnecessary comment. She hunched her shoulders, telling herself she had been justified in her outburst, that he had been absurdly reserved and uncommunicative, and that she had no wish to go to Peru anyway. But the feeling of disaster persisted, and she knew she would have given anything to retract what she had said.

'Is that your final word?'

She lifted her lids to find him looking at her, and immediately a wave of hot colour surged into her cheeks. 'You mean—I have a choice?' she gasped.

His expression was not flattering. 'As I regard your outburst in much the same way as I would any irresponsible statement, the question does not arise,' he retorted, making her feel ridiculously childish. 'You are young. You lack self-discipline, as I stated earlier. But you do not dissemble, as I believe your brother does, and I am persuaded that Lisel may teach you as much as you can teach her.'

Domine stared at him indignantly, but she made no attempt to defend herself. The opportunity she had thought lost had been restored to her, and for the moment that was enough.

'Very well,' she said, moving her shoulders in an offhand gesture. 'I will come to Peru—to Puerto Limas. But I won't promise to behave like one of your Peruvian maidens, all demure and sweetly biddable!'

There was a moment's pause while he digested this, and; then he said, surprisingly: 'I would not expect you to, Miss Temple.'

To Domine's surprise, Mark was not enthusiastic.

'What the hell is the point of travelling all the way to Peru to meet someone who's eventually going to have to come to England anyway?' he demanded. 'Making friends with her! Why do you want to make friends with her? I thought you weren't interested.'

Domine helped herself to a cup of tea from the tray Mrs Fadcliffe had left on the low table on the hearth. It was a gray day outside, with a fine drizzle dampening the tiles around the fountain, but the drawing room was warm and comfortable, an open fire supplementing the heat converted from the radiators. Spooning sugar into her cup, she said: 'I thought you would approve. After all, you were the one who wished you could get to know her.'

'Me, yes! You, no.' Mark was sullen. 'Why did he ask you that's what I'd like to know? Why not me? After all, I am—the man of the family, now that Grandpa's dead. Surely I'm the one he should have asked.'

Domine sipped her tea reflectively. 'I expect he thought Lisel would respond more easily to another woman,' she suggested. 'Having lived with these nuns for years, she probably doesn't know many men.'

'Huh!' Mark paced aggressively about the room. 'All the same, I am her cousin.'

Domine shrugged, deciding it would not be politic at this time to point out that she was, too, and eventually Mark got around to asking her when she planned to leave.

'I'm not sure,' she admitted doubtfully. 'But soon, I suppose. I called at the library on my way home, and apparently it's summer in Lima at the moment. Summer is the time to visit. Though where Lisel lives, the temperatures don't vary too much from winter to summer. They have a rainy season—'

'Save it!' interposed Mark impatiently, his lower lip jutting angrily. 'I don't want a geographical run-down of the country. I only wanted to know whether you planned to travel back with Aguilar.'

'No.' Domine could be certain of this anyway. 'Mr Holland told me he plans to leave the day after tomorrow. I couldn't possibly be ready in that time.'

'Holland? Oh, yes ...' Mark nodded. 'You went to see him. What did he have to say?'

Domine put down her cup, choosing her next words with care. 'Well,' she began slowly, 'he suggested that we ought to think carefully before selling Griffons.'

'Oh, did he?'

'Yes.' Domine hesitated. 'He also suggested that we might consider—offering Lisel a home here, until—until she finds her feet.'

Mark scowled, but she could see the agile brain working. 'Offer Lisel a home here,' he echoed broodingly. 'While we do—what?'

'You know Mr Villiers would give you a job,' Domine ventured cautiously, but Mark vetoed that suggestion straight away.

'What? Me work for old Villiers! You've got to be joking!'

'Why?' Domine stuck to her guns. 'Despite Grandpa's opinion of you, you do know quite a lot about the business. If you went to work for Mr Villiers, you would eventually get his job. And in a few years——'

'Oh, yes.' Mark's tone was ironic. 'In a few years, I might work myself into the position I occupy now!'

'No.' Domine pursed her lips. 'Mark, you don't have an; position now, and you know it.'

'Lisel doesn't.'

'What do you mean?'

'You remember what I said last night? Lisel know nothing about the mills. As you've just pointed out, I do.'

'Why shouldn't I become her managing director? Boss everything but name.'

The board would never agree.'

Mark's scowl returned. 'Why not? They won't be able to stop me, if I have Lisel's backing.'

Domine shook her head. 'You're completely unscrupulous, aren't you?'

Mark shrugged. 'Just practical, that's all. Exactly who you asked me to be.'

Domine made a frustrated gesture. 'Aren't you forgetting Señor Aguilar. We still don't know what his interest. What if he plans to come back to England with Lisel?'

'Help her—'

Mark's balled fist smote the palm of his hand. 'You don't believe that, any more than I do. In any case, it's up to you now, to persuade Lisel that she doesn't need any outside help. That her—long-lost family are more than willing to do everything they can to make things easy for her.'

"Me?" exclaimed Domine in dismay. Up to me? Oh, my Mark. You can't expect me to persuade her to put her trust in you. Besides, I don't suppose she'd believe me. She knows Grandpa left the business to her because he didn't trust you. She's not a fool, you know, only shy.'

Mark snorted. 'I doubt whether the subtleties of the situation have even occurred to her,' he retorted. 'And your friend—Aguilar doesn't seem the type to spread that kind of rumour.'

"He's not my friend," said Domine crossly, munching a ginger biscuit with more vehemence than enjoyment.

'Isn't he?' Mark was guessing again. 'It was you he asked to lunch, not me.'

"He invited us both for dinner," Domine countered abruptly, remembering her intention of wearing the black satin— jump-suit. That could wait, however, she decided sensibly. She would take it with her to Peru, though. There might be another occasion. They drove to the hotel that evening in Mark's Mercedes. His enthusiasm for her trip was increasing by the minute, but Domine's doubts were just as fertile. It might have been easier if she had felt some emotion towards the girl she was going to meet; resentment or curiosity, or both. But being absolutely honest with herself, she had to admit that without Luis Delgado Aguilar's intervention, she would never have agreed to such a request.

Her choice of gown that evening mirrored her intention to show him that she was not the tiresome child he so obviously thought her. Like the jump-suit, it was black, but its draped chiffon bodice and flowing skirts were unmistakably feminine. It left most of her

slender arms bare, and she wore a broad slave bracelet on her forearm, to complement the slim gold chain about her neck. Her hair was coiled into a swathed knot on top of her head, and even Mark had commented on the elegance of her appearance.

Luis Aguilar was waiting for them in the foyer this evening, suave and immaculate in his dinner jacket, the long powerful legs carrying him swiftly to greet them.

If he found Domine's appearance appealing, he made no show of it, summoning an attendant to take her velvet cape before leading the way into the dining room.

'You will forgive me if I do not offer you a drink first Miss Temple,' he said, as they approached a table set for four. 'But my other guest does not drink alcohol, and I do not care to keep her waiting.'

It was then that Domine saw the other woman already seated at the table. She was also dark, like their host, with the same kind of sheen to her cap of dark hair. Domine estimated her age to be around thirty, but she had one of those ageless Spanish faces that could have been any as from thirty to forty. High cheekbones, and a finely-sculpt mouth, a black gown, like Domine's, only different in a respect that she showed very little of her magnolia pale skin and a tall slender body as she rose, that dwarfed Domine's five feet and four inches.

Whoever she was, she would curtail Mark's plans to spend the evening ingratiating him with Luis Aguilar, Domine thought rather spitefully angry herself that he should show so much respect to this woman, and so little to her. "Allow me to present Lisel's cousins, Inez,' he was say: as the woman's lips parted in a polite smile. 'This is my sister, Miss Temple,' he explained, meeting Domine's incredulity with sardonic eyes. 'She is staying in London at the moment, and I invited her to join us this evening.' Inez Aguilar—Domine could only think of her as unmarried, as she did not mention a husband—had little to say herself. When she did speak, she addressed herself to asking him about his likes and dislikes in the way of food and entertainment, emitting little about her own activities. She seemed quite content to sit back and allow her brother to dominate the conversation, and he did so, about general things mostly, giving Mark little opportunity to introduce a more personal note. The meal was excellent. Domine had seafood, and steak, and finished with puree of strawberries, served with ice-cream. She had a good appetite, and seldom

had to worry about her figure. Occasionally, if she thought she was gaining an extra inch, she went on a diet of crackers and lemon for a couple of days, but she was always glad when she reverted to her normal eating habits. She was aware of Inez Aguilar watching her from time to time throughout the meal, but it was not until the coffee was served that she addressed herself to her.

Then she said: 'My brother tells me you are to visit Peru, Miss Temple. To meet with your cousin, no? I am sure Lisel will be delighted to meet one of her own country—' Domine felt this was open to discussion, but she nodded, and answered: 'That's right. I'm—er—I'm looking forward to it. I've never visited South America before.' Inez wiped her lips with her napkin and then dropped it on the table. 'You—you will probably find it much different from your expectations,' she said at last. "Not only are we in another hemisphere, we seem also to be in another century.

'I think Miss Temple is aware of that, Inez,' remarked her brother drily. 'Will you have some cognac, Miss Temple, I can recommend the St Helena. Napoleon's best, I believe.'

Domine cast a resentful look in his direction, but he was summoning the waiter, and taking the opportunity, she asked: 'Do you and your brother live in Puerto Lima; *señora*?'

If he had heard her question there was nothing he could do about it, for the waiter had taken his full attention, and Inez answered without hesitation.

'My brother's house is just outside Aguilas, which is some three miles from Puerto Limas, Miss Temple,' she said. 'I, of course, live at Puerto Limas.'

Of course? Domine shrugged to herself, and as she did so she saw she now had their host's undivided attention. However, she pretended not to notice this silent intimidation as she went on: 'Aguilas? Oh, yes. Er—Luis told me that's the nearest town to Puerto Limas, isn't it?'

It was difficult to decide who was the most annoyed by her deliberately casual reference. Inez was obviously taken aback, and even Mark was regarding her with a mixture of amusement and irritation. The silence around the table was itself intimidating, but above the murmur of conversation around them, Domine could hear the distinct sound of music. It was a lifeline, she thought, looking appealing to Mark for deliverance, and holding his indifferent gaze she said:

'There must be a dance going on next door. Shall we have our coffee in there?'

Before Mark could answer however, Luis interposed, 'Regretfully, my sister does not dance,' he said, pushing back his chair. 'But if your brother will be so kind as keep Inez company, I will show you the ballroom.'

It was the last thing Domine wanted, but her silent signals to Mark produced only the most resigned of apologies.

No doubt he was not too overjoyed at the prospect of keeping Inez's company, and he probably thought she deserved all she got. Luis was standing now, waiting for her to get to her feet and with a determined stiffening of her shoulders she did so. Mark made a perfunctory gesture of rising, and then she was walking swiftly across the floor, trying to keep up to Luis's longer strides. Outside the restaurant he turned sharp right, and now she could see the small ballroom that opened at the end of the corridor. The sound of music was louder-now, predominately violins, with none of the throbbing rhythm of guitars that Domine was used to dancing to. "So,' he said, as they halted in the open doorway to the ballroom, 'you seek to inquisition my sister with your questions.' His voice was low and angry, and Domine felt the increasingly familiar feeling of frustration where he was concerned.

'There's no such verb as inquisition,' she declared crossly, glancing up at his taut profile. 'Inquisition is a noun. One can conduct an inquisition, but one doesn't "Inquisition anyone.' She pursed her lips. 'You should know that coming from the race of people who introduced the word.'

His antagonism was palpable, but she knew there was no point in trying to reason with him. Someone, perhaps this sister of his, had given him this inflated opinion he had of himself, and it was time he realised that not all female bowed before his rampant superiority.

"Thank you for that lesson in English, Miss Temple,' he said now, his eyes narrowed and hostile. 'But I beg to correct you, on one point at least. The Spaniards introduced the inquisition, and I consider myself Peruvian, no European!'

Domine shrugged. "You speak Spanish in Peru, don't you?'

'They speak English in the United States, but I doubt if consider themselves British,' he retorted brusquely, and then made a sound of impatience. 'But this is ridiculous. I am allowing myself to be drawn into one of the pointless arguments that you seem to thrive on. I didn't bring you out here to discuss my poor grasp of the English language.'

'*You know your English is faultless,*' exclaimed Domini indignantly, and suffered another of those belittling stares.

'That tempts me to an obvious retort, does it not?' he demanded, shaking his head. 'But I refuse to make it. My reasons for bringing you out here were—'

'—to show me the ballroom,' interposed Domine wickedly, and the thin lines of his mouth relaxed into reluctant humour.

'You are incorrigible!' he affirmed, with resignation. 'Did your mother never teach you that it is unfeminine to be so presumptuous?'

Domine hesitated. 'My mother died soon after I born,' she replied slowly. 'Grandpa was the only parent I've ever known.'

'Your father?'

'He was drowned, when I was six.'

'*Pardone!*' For the first time since she had known him she heard him lapse into his own language for a moment and the betraying sensitivity was disturbing. But he quickly recovered himself. 'I regret,' he said, his words still a little shaken, 'I mean not to pry into your private affairs.'

'That's all right.' Domine was offhand. 'I don't mind, I have nothing to hide.'

The ironic twist to his lips revealed his understanding her last statement, and with an inclination of his head said: 'No more than do I, Miss Temple,' but he made no attempt to elaborate.

Deciding to take the initiative yet again, Domine stepped through the doorway into the small ballroom. It was not an attractive room, unless one liked Gothic mirrors and gilt decoration, but in spite of its heavy carving and gloomy lighting, the acoustics were remarkably good. There were few people circling the floor to the music of the string quartet playing on a dais at the far end, and the musicians themselves were making hard work of a popular tune of the day. Most of the guests present seemed quite content to sit

at the tables surrounding the dance floor, or congregate together near the doorway where Domine was standing. It was a typical gathering of middle-aged to elderly people, and she wondered what Luis's reactions were to this collection of Englishmen taking their leisure. Glancing round, she saw he had come to join her, standing slightly behind her, surveying the scene with enigmatic eyes. Domine wondered if they had dances like this in Lima, or whether the young people were allowed to indulge in more exciting rhythms than the jerky quickstep at present being executed. "Do you dance—Luis?" she enquired irrepressibly, and he regarded her tolerantly. 'I do not recall giving you permission to call me by my given name,' he said without heat. 'My sister was most shocked, as you may have noticed. In Peru, one does not do such things. It may seem terribly old-fashioned to you, but we are brought up to respect our elders.' Domine couldn't suppress a gurgle of laughter. '*Elders?*' she echoed. 'Are you saying that you are my elder?'

'I am much older than you are,' he agreed smoothly pushing his hands into the pockets of his jacket. 'Shall we return to the others?'

'No.' Domine was mutinous. 'I want to clear up this point about names here and now. Are you saying, if I know you in Peru, I would be expected to call you Señor Aguilar all the time?'

He sighed. 'No. Once we had been introduced, you might call me simply señor, or perhaps *Don Luis*.'

'*Don Luis?*' Domine shook her head. 'But why? Why shouldn't I call you Luis? That's your name, isn't it?' He gave a resigned shrug of his shoulders. 'Why can you accept that that is our way? It is not your way, I know, but I cannot help that.'

Domine hunched her slim shoulders. 'Well, if you think I'm going to call you Señor Aguilar, you're mistaken. It's too archaic for words. This is the twentieth century—the fourth quarter of the twentieth century! I'm not some Victorian miss, meeting a man for the first time!'

'No one could doubt that,' Luis retorted drily, and she knew an unexpected impulse to please him.

The rhythm of the music had changed to a slow waltz, and the musicians were evidently more capable in this tempo. The tune was one of Domine's favourites, usually sung by a group with their guitars, but still as haunting, played by the Percy Manfield quartet.

With an appealing eagerness she turned to Luis, putting a hand on his sleeve and saying: 'Dance with me!' in low breathy tones.

His reaction was predictable. 'You do not give up, do you, Miss Temple,' he exclaimed tersely. 'And even in this liberated country of yours, surely it is still the prerogative of the male to invite the female to dance?'

'Are you inviting me?' she enquired, arching her eyebrows interrogatively, and he expelled his breath with impatience.

'No,' he retorted, and she could see the way his fists had balled in his pockets. 'But as I know you will persist in this foolishness until you get your own way, I am forced to the conclusion that it might be easier to give in to you.'

Domine's expression mirrored her delight. 'Then you will?'

'If you insist,' he conceded shortly, and she cast him a mischievous smile as she preceded him on to the dance floor.

However, her ideas of dancing and his were as converse as their opinions. Luis held her stiffly, with one hand in the small of her back and at least six inches of space between them. His other hand held hers at the required angle, and although his fingers were firm around hers, there was no feeling of intimacy between them.

'Can't you relax?' she demanded, removing her hand from his shoulder and twisting it around her back to shift his fingers from her spine. 'Hold me closer, for heaven' sake!' She looked up at him appeasingly. 'I won't explode you know!'

Luis permitted her to draw a little nearer, but he made no response to her teasing provocation. Nor did he relax the stiffness of his body, and driven beyond reason, Domine drew back from him abruptly, right into the path of another couple. The man's hard heel crunched painfully down on to Domine's sandal-clad instep, and she could hardly suppress the cry of agony that rose into her throat. The man's immediate

apologies were sincere, and she managed to assure him that it was really her fault, but she had to limp off the floor, refusing as she did to take Luis' arm once more.

But once they had gained the comparative privacy of the corridor, his fingers gripped her upper arm without her volition. 'Let me see it,' he commanded, gesturing toward her foot, and in spite of her previous intentions, she extended it for his inspection. '*Idiota! Imbecil!*' he muttered savagely, squatting down beside her and massaging her foot with exquisite gentleness, and Domine caught her breath.

'Who?' she asked jerkily. 'Me? It wasn't my fault really It was an accident—'

'I did not say I meant you, did I?' he objected, looking up at her with those dark enigmatic eyes. 'Perhaps I meant myself, for allowing such a thing to happen.'

Domine's breathing felt constricted suddenly. It—it wasn't anybody's fault,' she got out unevenly. 'I—will it be all right?'

'Nothing seems to be broken,' he reassured her, making a final searching examination. 'It may be a little stiff tomorrow, but that is all.'

'Thank you.' Domine slipped her foot back into her sandal as he rose to his feet. Already most of the stinging pain had left it, and only the bruising of the flesh remained to remind her of the incident. That, and the disruptive tenderness of Luis's hands upon her skin. 'I—I suppose we'd better go back to the restaurant now.'

'I suppose we better had,' he agreed gravely, supporting himself against the panelled wall of the corridor, but he made no attempt to move away, and Domine's pulses raced. 'Tell me,' he added, the hooded lids shading his expression, 'how soon can you be ready to leave for Lima? One week? Two? I myself must return in a day or so, but I should like to know when you expect to make the journey.'

Domine's smile was quizzical. 'Do you really care?' Then, when he made no effort to answer her, she continued: 'I don't really know—I haven't thought about it yet. Will I need a visa? And are there injections I should have?'

Luis frowned. 'You will not need a tourist card, but as for inoculations—yes, I suppose there are certain precautions you should take. Yellow fever, smallpox and tetanus, certainly. And perhaps typhus, too, although that is not absolutely essential.'

Domine grimaced. 'So many!'

Luis's expression softened. 'But necessary, do you not agree?' His eyes moved over her face to the creamy skin rising from the folds of black chiffon. "You would not like to see that smooth skin scarred with pockmarks, would you? And I assure you, typhus has equally unpleasant symptoms.'

'All right.' Domine adjusted her sandal strap under his intent gaze. 'I'll make the necessary appointments.' She hesitated. 'I just wish you weren't leaving so soon.'

'Why?'

For once he responded to her wistful anxiety, and she looked up at him with appealing candour. 'Because—well, because I've never made such a long journey alone. In fact, I haven't made any journeys alone before. Grandpa always insisted I had a companion, usually my mother's Aunt Barbara. She came with me to Italy last summer.'

His expression was thoughtful now, the finely-chiselled lips drawn into a considering line. 'Your grandfather,' he said, as if speaking his thoughts aloud. 'You feel no antagonism towards him, do you? Do you not feel any resentment towards your cousin either?'

'Why should I?' Domine was philosophical. 'Grandpa did what he thought was best. Perhaps he was right. If he'd left me the mills, he knew Mark would have—'

But she broke off there, realising suddenly what she was saying, and to whom she was saying it. She was not supposed to take sides, and certainly not with the man who represented her cousin. If Mark could hear her...

'I see.' Luis straightened away from the wall now, and she could tell from his expression that he understood very well what she had been about to say. 'So you will come in two weeks, yes? And your brother shall remain here, and we will see what kind of success he has in running the mills.'

Domine gulped. 'You're leaving Mark in charge?'

'Temporarily,' he agreed. 'Answerable to Mr Holland and ultimately to his own board of directors, of course.'

Domine shook her head. 'I don't believe it.'

'You do not recommend me to do this thing?' he enquired, and she made a helpless movement of her shoulders.

'No! Yes! I mean, why are you doing this?'

'We have a saying in my country,' he said, beginning to walk back to the restaurant, and she had, perforce, to accompany him. They reached the glass doors, and through them she could see Mark and Inez still sitting stiffly at their table. 'It is: *if a man can float, he will not drown; but if he can swim, he will reach the shore safely.*'

Domine sighed. 'You—expect Mark to—prove himself?'

'Or not, as the case may be.'

'You don't trust him, do you?'

Luis put a hand on the glass door. '*I trust you,*' he said quietly, and Domine would never have believed those three words could be instilled with so much meaning for her.

CHAPTER THREE

IT had been a long and frustrating journey.

The flight left London in the middle of the morning, but although they reached Antigua in the Caribbean afternoon on schedule, there was a three-hour delay at St Johns before their take-off for Caracas. Consequently, it was quite late in the evening when they landed at Maiquetia, the narrow airstrip that served the capital of Venezuela.

Domine was exhausted. Her initial enchantment with vistas of blue skies and even bluer waters had given way to weariness, and she was almost relieved when she learned that the flight for Lima had been postponed until the following morning. Darkness had fallen during the trip from Antigua, and now wrapped around the airport like a velvety blanket, reminding her acutely that in England it was already the middle of the night.

Yet it was not only the time change that made her welcome the delay. She was travelling alone for the first time, but that had not really worried her. The feeling of doubt and uncertainty that had gripped her ever since Luis had returned home owed little to her nerves about flying. She was more concerned with the consequences of what she was doing, and the unsettling realisation that her anticipation was not to meet her cousin for the first time, but to see Luis Aguilar again.

Mark thought she was mad for making the trip, but then Mark was unaware of her feelings, feelings she scarcely understood herself. He thought she saw the whole thing as a chance holiday, a break before she was obliged to seek some kind of employment, and fortunately he was too wrapped up in the affairs of the mill to see through her carefully erected defences. He seemed to regard the opportunity he had been given as a challenge, and she guessed Luis's contempt had achieved what her grandfather's anger had not. Mark was determined to succeed, and she supposed she ought to be grateful for that.

For her own part, she had been occupied with arranging the necessary injections, and indulging in last-minute bouts of shopping for clothes suitable to a Peruvian summer. She had refused to brood over the rights and wrongs of what she was doing, or allow the doubts she cherished to interfere with her sleep. Whatever happened, she was committed to spending at least two weeks in Peru, and at the end of that time she would know exactly where she stood.

It had taken longer than she had expected to arrange her departure. For one thing, her vaccination against smallpox had reacted painfully on her, and she felt so ill, her doctor had advised her to wait the recommended three weeks before having her typhus inoculation. Consequently, it was three weeks, instead of two, since Luis had departed, and each succeeding day had strengthened her need to see him again, while weakening any faith she had in his attitude towards her. He had treated her politely at the last, show sympathy when she hurt herself, and interest in her travel arrangements—but that was all! Anything else was pure fantasy on her behalf, and she knew part of her desire to prolong the journey was compounded of the knowledge that she could delude herself for a little longer.

In fact, Domine had little time the following morning to feel any kind of apprehension. Awakening early, her body still attuned to European time, she watched the sun gild the waters of the Caribbean, visible from the window of her hotel room while she ate breakfast. There was freshly squeezed orange juice, recommended by the black waiter who served her supper the night before, hot rolls with jelly, and strongly-flavoured coffee.

She even had a good meal, in spite of her lack of appetite on the flight out the previous day.

She was glad of the opportunity it had given her to change. The jersey suit she had worn in London was stowed in her case, and out came cotton pants and a short-sleeved cotton shirt. Even her hair felt heavy in the humidity of the coastal plain, and she listened with interest when the elderly English man who sat beside her in the Boeing explained that it was much cooler in Caracas itself.

'It's the altitude,' he explained, 'or in this case, the lack of it. Caracas is over three thousand feet above sea level. They call it the city of eternal spring.'

Domine was intrigued and tempted to ask whether he knew Lima as well, but she decided against it. She would see the city for herself soon enough, and besides, she would not be staying there. Her destination was Puerto Limas.

Luis had left instructions that she should communicate the date and time of her arrival to a firm of solicitors in Lima, who were acting on her cousin's behalf. They in their turn would make the onward arrangements for her trip south, and no doubt Lisel herself would meet her at the airport in Arequipa.

The flight from Caracas to Lima was the most spectacular stage of her journey, and she could understand any pilot not wishing to make the trip without having complete confidence in the reliability of his aircraft. Climbing out of Caracas, the awesome majesty of the Guayana highlands gave way to the foothills of the Andes, looming before them like an insurmountable barrier to the west. Range upon range of the most treacherous mountains in the world, their snow-capped peaks possessing a terrifying fascination, a cruel beauty, that both excited and repelled. The high plateau and deep gorges were clearly visible once the shield of rain-cloud rising from the Amazon basin in the south had disappeared; but their size was encapsulated, their vastness condensed, so that the scene was represented in miniature, a compact landscape of mountains and valleys, hiding the jagged rock formations, the icy citadels, where man was as helpless as a lamb in a snowstorm.

Plunging down towards the coast was like awakening from a nightmare to find a world of colour again after the black and white wilderness of the high sierras. The Pacific

swept before them, benign beneath a belt of sunshine cooled by the upward surge of the Humboldt current. The desert lay beneath them, irrigated now in an attempt to wards cultivation, and the man beside her spoke again to comment on Peru's economy.

'They actually have rice-fields down there,' he remarked, surprising Domine. 'In the desert, you know. It never rains there, of course. It's the driest desert in the world. And did you know, it has preserved intact the mummified bodies of people buried centuries ago?'

Domine shook her head, deciding she would never eat rice again without thinking of his words, but she managed to smile and concede that it was fascinating.

'It's a land of contrasts,' he went on expansively, now that he had her attention. 'Not only geologically, but economically and socially. Unfortunately, the very rich and the very poor still exist, despite Bolivar's efforts, and it's comparatively recently since education was made compulsory.'

Domine nodded, but she was more interested in the city spreading towards the coastline, its towers and skyscrapers glistening in the noonday sun. It was much bigger than she had expected, and much more modern, and she was almost disappointed when it disappeared behind them and they swept down to the landing strip at Callao.

The ocean looked very inviting, arid emerging from the plane she was delighted to find the air was remarkably fresh. 'The Humboldt current,' remarked her travelling companion, observing her reaction. 'At this time of the year, it's very pleasant. Unfortunately in the winter months we get a constant sea fog along this coast, and when it rolls inland it's not very pleasant.'

Domine acknowledged this information with a sympathetic smile, but her excitement at actually having landed at last obliterated all other considerations. Only now did she give in to the expectation that perhaps Luis might be at the airport to meet her, or even Lisel, if she could be persuaded from her mountain retreat. Surely someone must be there, and not just a message for her at the information desk.

Formalities were soon completed. Her passport was presented, and her reasons for being in Peru explained, and then she was free to collect her luggage and make for the arrivals lounge. Her hands were trembling as she followed the sullen-faced Indian porter

she had summoned to handle her cases, and she found herself praying silently that Luis would be waiting for her.

But he was not. There were men waiting beyond the Customs gate, some of them with his dark-skinned features, and others with the flat characteristics of the Indian handling her luggage, but none of them was Luis. Whatever hopes she had nurtured were instantly shattered, and she looked about her helplessly, wondering what she ought to do.

'Miss Temple?'

The use of her name brought her head round with a start, and although she was relieved that someone had recognised her, this man was certainly not either Spanish or Indian. Tall and slim and fair, he looked English, but his accent proclaimed his American ancestry.

'Yes?' she said now, halting the Indian with a hasty: '*Parese, por favor!*' and turned to the young American. 'I'm Domine Temple. Who are you?'

'Lister,' he said at once, his smile indicating that he was delighted with the identification. 'Benjamin Lister, but you can call me Ben. Señor Villegas sent me to meet you. I've been camping out at the airport since yesterday evening.'

'You haven't!' Domine was horrified. 'Oh, but they assured us that the delay had been reported.'

Ben Lister laughed. 'Yes, it was. I'm only joking really. Although I was here yesterday evening as well. How was the flight? Boring as usual, I guess. Those in-flight movies only make me go to sleep.'

He kept up a cheerful flow of conversation as Domine accompanied him outside, into the brilliant sunshine that tinted all the white-painted buildings gold. It was dazzling, there was so much colour, and she wished she had thought to take her sunglasses out of her suitcase, but even packing them had seemed optimistic in the damp chill of an English spring.

She had recognised the name of the man he mentioned, Señor Villegas. The firm of Diaz, Villegas and del Rey was the one handling her cousin's affairs, and obviously they had felt it incumbent upon them to make some effort on her behalf. But Lisel hadn't,

acknowledged Domine wryly, unwilling to let her cousin's defection influence her mood. All the same, the fact that Luis also had been prepared to leave her arrival in the hands of the solicitors was painful though she managed to keep a sense of proportion as she answered Ben Lister's quick-fire questions.

The drive into the city was incredible. There was plenty to see, the barren coastal plain quickly giving way to the suburbs of Lima. But what suburbs! Acres of shanties erected haphazardly over a wide area, that scented the air with their poverty and desperation. Domine had never seen such degradation, never seen children, clothed in rags playing games around the piles of rubbish that no one seemed to clear.

Ben, noticing her horror, made light of the situation 'All big cities have their slums,' he said, the battered Chevrolet easily overtaking one of the bone-shaking taxis that plied between the city and the airport. 'I come from New York, and believe me, I know.'

'But not slums like these,' protested Domine, looking back over her shoulder as the suburbs became more civilised, as uncultivated scrubland gave way to resident avenues, and corrugated roofs to neat red pantiles. 'London had slums, too, but no one goes barefoot anymore.'

'It wouldn't be practical in London, would it?' Ben pointed out mildly. 'It's much too cold. Besides, these things are all relative. You must look at how the middle classes live, before you judge the poorer ones. England is a civilised country, it's been so for a thousand years. Until the Spanish conquest of Peru in the sixteenth century, these people were ruled by the Incas, and believe me, it was not civilisation as we know it. Give them time. They've got an administration now, of sorts. Things are getting better. Remember what England was like before the industrial revolution.'

'I suppose so,' Domine was doubtful. 'It's just that...'

'I know. Coming from your society to this is startling at first, but you'll get used to it. It's amazing how easily you can overlook the *barriadas*, once you realise there's nothing you, personally, can do about them.'

Domine glanced at him. 'That sounds very cynical.'

'Oh, I am,' he assured her, grinning unrepentantly. 'You would be, too, if you'd lived in Peru as long as I have. The place, the people—they really get to you. You begin to think like a Peruvian, then you're really hooked.'

Domine laughed. 'And you work for Señor Villegas?'

'That's right. After I left college, I had a yen to travel, and I knocked around Mexico and the islands for a bit before coming to Lima. I've been here eight years, and I guess I'll be here eight more.'

'Really?' Domine was surprised. 'You don't look old enough.' And he didn't. She'd have thought he was around twenty-three or twenty-four, but a hasty estimate put his age nearer thirty.

'Well, thank you, kind lady,' he teased now, halting at a set of traffic lights, and Domine gazed up at the sculptured stone facade of an old church, set behind wrought-iron railings. She had not expected to see so many old buildings in a city where earthquakes were a constant hazard. But there seemed little evidence of devastation of that kind, and she was intrigued by the almost geometrical uniformity of the streets.

'That was Pizarro's plan,' Ben explained, when she commented on this. 'You've heard of Francisco Pizarro, haven't you? The conqueror of Peru? It was he who designed the original layout of the city. One hundred seventeen blocks, all equally divided, with the great square, the *Plaza de Armas*, as its nucleus.'

'I think my knowledge of the Spanish conquest begins and ends with Cortes,' she admitted ruefully. 'I've vaguely heard of Pizarro, but that's about all. Was it he who defeated the Incas?'

'That's right. He built himself a palace, here in Lima and the present House of Government is built on the same site. It's the official residence of the President of Peru, but it's never called anything other than the Palacio.'

'He must have been quite a man,' Domine commented reflectively, but Ben shook his head.

'He was murdered—by a band of his own followers, as a matter of fact. But in spite of that, it's his reputation that has lasted.'

'And the *Plaza de Armas*? I've heard of that. That's the main square, isn't it, still?'

'You'll see it soon enough,' agreed Ben, nodding. 'Your hotel is close by the square, and you'll see that nearly all the old buildings of Lima are within a few blocks of the plaza.'

'My hotel?' Domine frowned now. 'But I thought- that is, my destination is Puerto Limas.'

'I know.' Ben was reassuring. 'But *Don Luis* suggested that you might like a few days in Lima, to see the tourist sites, and acclimatise yourself to the country, before going south.'

'Don Luis?' Domine licked her dry lips. 'You mean—*Señor Aguilar*?'

Ben pulled a wry face. 'No, I mean *Don Luis Delgado Aguilar, el Patrón de Los Aguilas*.'

Domine stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

Ben laughed. 'Oh, just that *Señor Aguilar* hardly describes the power of the man!'

Domine frowned. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't you? No—well, perhaps not. You haven't met him on his own ground.' He snorted. 'Do you know, the Aguilar's can trace their ancestry back to the time of Pizarro? Some distant relative of theirs was reputed to be an adviser of Philip of Spain! Can you beat that?' He moved his shoulders impatiently. 'Oh, I take it all with a pinch of salt, of course, but there's no denying the fact that without the Aguilar's, Aguilas would never have existed.'

Domine blinked. 'Aguilas?' she echoed slowly. 'The town nearest to Puerto Limas?'

'That's right. You'll like it, it's a gem of a place. Fairly Spanish in influence, of course, and with the backdrop of the Cordillera ...' He shook his head. 'Anyone could feel a god in those surroundings.'

Domine hesitated. 'Are you saying that—that *Señor Aguilar* considers himself a—god?'

'Hell, no!' Ben was discomfited now, his face red with embarrassment. 'I like the guy. I was just—well, warning you that you might find things—different than you expect.'

'Difficult, you mean?' Domine's nerves were tense.

'No.' Ben's tongue circled his lips, and then, as if immensely relieved at the realisation, he added: 'Here we are. This is the *Plaza de Armas*, and that's the Cathedral where Pizarro's body is preserved in a glass-walled coffin.'

The gruesome image this created diverted Domine's attention, as she later guessed he had intended, but in any case, she was so enthralled by the Spanish architecture of the street arcades, and the intricately-carved wooden balconies above, that she was quickly absorbed by her surroundings. This was the great square, conceived by Francisco Pizarro, but whose colonial appearance owed little to the sixteenth century. She remembered the earthquakes which had decimated Peru's population, and guessed that many of these buildings were the result of careful reconstruction. It was much bigger than she had anticipated, and the towers of the Spanish churches, which had once dominated Lima's skyline, might have been superseded by the business blocks of steel and reinforced concrete, but in the *Plaza de Armas* one could still imagine oneself in that more gracious, if not more civilised, era.

'Impressive, isn't it?' Ben had kept a fleeting watch on her expressive features as he negotiated the traffic common to any city at lunchtime, and Domine nodded.

'I like it,' she said simply, and he was pleased.

'You must let me show you something of the city while you're here,' he insisted, but Domine reserved acceptance unwilling to commit herself until she had had time to gather her thoughts.

Her hotel, the *El Prado*, was situated in the *Plaza de Los Inocentes*, just off the main square. It was a colonial style hotel, with wrought-iron balconies, and white-painted shutters, and a canopied entrance beneath which Ben parked the car. A uniformed commissionaire opened the door for her, and Domine stepped out on to real most tiles of red, blue and yellow.

Inside, the foyer was air-conditioned and impersonal, it could have been an hotel anywhere, thought Domine, half disappointedly, were it not for the intricately-designed Spanish tiles she was walking on, and the taciturn features of the Indian receptionist.

After unloading her luggage, Ben reluctantly took his departure. 'You're sure you'll be okay?' he probed, after learning she had a reasonable grasp of the language. 'Señor

Villegas said you might like to come into the office tomorrow, but I'll give you a ring later to make sure you're comfortable.' He handed her a card. 'That's the address and telephone number of the office, should you need any assistance, and that's my number on the back. I have an apartment in one of the suburbs, and you can get me there, any time after six.'

'Thank you.' Domine was grateful for his concern, but she was already beginning to feel the effects of not yet having a proper meal that day, her own metabolism protesting that it was past tea-time. 'I'm going to order some lunch, and then I think I'll jest for a while. I probably won't feel much like going out today.'

Ben sighed and gave a philosophic shrug of his shoulders. 'Okay. But I'll ring you anyway. Take care, you hear?'

Someone had taken the trouble to book her a suite of rooms. There was a lounge, with stiffly-striped armchair and a writing bureau, a bedroom, containing two beds, and several small tables, that vied with an enormous wardrobe for space, and a bathroom furnished in pallid white porcelain. It was clean, and functional, but hardly attractive, though she felt too weary to pay it a lot of attention. She ordered herself a salad, and more of the strong black coffee she had sampled that morning, and then, after satisfying the immediate pangs of hunger, she flung herself on one of the beds.

She was tired, she thought depressingly, but it wasn't just the change of time and temperature that had sapped her strength. It was the things Ben had told her, on the journey from the airport that troubled her most. She was realising just what a fool she had been, imagining her relationship with Luis would be the same in Peru as it had been in England. She had had such high hopes of seeing him again, but now it appeared, he was some kind of feudal landowner, a sort of local squire, as removed from the inmates of the convent as it was possible to be. No doubt Lisel, brought up to respect their codes of behaviour, regarded him with a certain amount of awe, and his efforts on her behalf were the considerate actions of an indulgent landlord. No wonder his sister had looked so shocked when she had called him Luis. Inez probably regarded such insolent behaviour as little short of heresy.

That did nothing to remove the weight of depression pressing upon her. She knew the most ridiculous desire to drive to the airport again, and catch the next flight back to England. Oh, Mark, she thought miserably, you were right! I shouldn't have come here. I don't belong here. I should have waited until Lisel came to England, and then, if Luis had accompanied her, I could have viewed things more—objectively.

She sighed. But she hadn't. Luis had invited her out here, and like a fool she had come, without really giving herself time to think about what she was doing, and inevitably, she was going to suffer for it.

She must have slept, because she recovered consciousness to the insistent ringing of the telephone bell, and the subsequent realisation that night had fallen and she hadn't the first idea where the light switch was.

She rolled over drowsily, groping about in the semi darkness for the lamp beside the bed, and succeeded in knocking the telephone receiver off its rest. It clattered noisily against the leg of the bedside table, dispelling Domine's somnolent mood at a stroke, and she mutters irritably to herself as she sought the button on the base of the lamp. At last the unfamiliar room was flooded with light, and blinking she grabbed the swinging receiver, putting it to her ear, and saying: '*¿Sí? ¿Que quiere usted?*' in a curt impatient voice.

'Miss Temple?'

His accent was unmistakable, and Domine jack-knifed on to her knees, holding the receiver now in hands that shook a little. 'I—Señor Aguilar!' she managed jerkily, finding herself unable to say Luis in those moments of stress. 'How—how nice of you to call.'

There was a moment's silence, and then he said: 'Not at all. I wished to ascertain for myself that you had arrived safely, and that your rooms are comfortable. The journey was not too tiring, I hope.'

'Er—no.' Domine endeavoured to disguise her emotional upheaval. 'The—plane was delayed in Caracas overnight but it landed here just about lunchtime today.'

'Yes. I learned of the delay when I telephoned Villegas last evening,' he remarked. 'I trust I did not disturb you when I rang just now. I thought perhaps you might be glad to hear a familiar voice.'

Domine caught her breath. 'I was. I am.' She sought for some way to detain him. 'I was lying on my bed, that's all and the noise of the bell startled me. I thought it might be Ben Lister. I never dreamt it would be you.'

There was another pause. 'Mr Lister?' he questioned at last. 'This is the American Villegas sent to meet you?'

'That's right.' Domine could sense the slight withdrawal in his voice, and hastened on. 'He said he would ring me later, to make sure I had everything I need. That was why I thought it might be him.'

'I see.'

Domine sighed frustratedly, wishing she could see his face. It was impossible to tell from those clipped tones exactly what he was thinking, and she wished she had never mentioned Ben's name. Realising she had to say something or he would hang up on her, she ventured cautiously: 'He told me that you had suggested I might like to spend several days in Lima, before coming to Puerto Limas. It's very kind of you to suggest it, but I think perhaps I'd rather get the meeting with Lisel over.'

'You would?' Definitely a downward stroke there.

'Yes.' Domine could feel anxiety gnawing at her. 'I mean—I'm not familiar with Lima. And—although I'm sure it's a beautiful city, sightseeing alone doesn't appeal to me.'

There was another moment's hesitation, and then he said quietly: 'Did not the good Señor Lister offer to show you the city? I understand he is a charming young man, and Señor Villegas thinks highly of him.'

Domine sighed. 'Well—yes, he did offer to show me around,' she admitted reluctantly. 'But I didn't accept.'

'Why not?'

A feeling of resentment began to disperse her anxiety. He asked her questions without a qualm, but when she returned the compliment, he was always evasive.

Countering his query, she said pointedly: 'Why do you want to know?' and heard his sudden intake of breath.

'I am—concerned—for your wellbeing,' he informed her at last. 'And I am sorry you do not find my country's capital sufficiently interesting to warrant a short delay.'

'It's not that.' Domine was indignant, and finding it increasingly hard to hide her feelings. She took a deep breath. 'I know I probably shouldn't say such a thing, but I had hoped to see you again, and the idea of spending several days in Lima with some young man you've chosen to escort me is no substitute!'

The silence that followed this outburst was nothing more than she had expected, and she waited dauntedly for the censure which she was sure would follow.

But after what seemed ages, though was probably only about half a minute, all he said was: 'Have you eaten dinner?'

'Dinner?' The thought of food was furthest from her mind. It might be only eight o'clock in Lima, but her body was telling her a vastly different story, and his words seemed singularly unfeeling. 'No, I haven't eaten dinner,' she retorted coldly. 'I'm not particularly hungry. And if that's all you can think of to say to me, then I suggest we terminate this call so that I can go to bed!'

It had taken a lot of courage to say that to him, but she closed her eyes after the words were uttered, wishing he had never contacted her. So long as they remained out of touch, she could have continued to anticipate their eventual meeting with some feeling of excitement. There would have been some point to her journey to Puerto Limas, and how ever foolish her aspirations, they would have remained intact. Now this call had destroyed all that, had shown her exactly how he regarded her, and she was compounding his opinion by behaving like the hysterical child he thought she was.

'I was about to ask you to have dinner with me.'

His words seemed to come from a great distance, and she realised that was because she had removed the phone from her ear and was staring at it with incredulous eyes.

Gathering herself with difficulty, she jerked it to her ear again, and said: 'What did you say?' in a cracked, disbelieving voice.

'I said, I was about to ask you to dine with me. But if you are tired—'

'I'm not tired!' Her response was almost aggressive... 'But where are you? I thought your sister said you lived near Puerto Limas!'

'My home is there, yes,' he agreed evenly. 'But I also own an apartment in Miraflores.'

'But that's in Lima!' exclaimed Domine breathlessly, recognising the name of one of the attractive residential suburbs Ben had pointed out on their way into the city.

'That is correct,' he agreed dryly. 'About dinner—'

'But why didn't you say so?' she interrupted him gripping the receiver with both hands. 'I thought—oh, I thought you were phoning from Puerto Limas!'

'I am sorry.' He paused. 'So—will you join me for dinner?'

'Please!' She was pathetically eager, but she couldn't help it. 'Can you give me three-quarters of an hour?'

'You can take an hour, if you like,' he conceded. 'You will find most Peruvians do not dine until quite late in the evening.'

Domine slid her legs off the bed and got to her feet. 'Will you come here for dinner? Or must I meet you somewhere?'

'I will meet you downstairs, in the foyer, at nine-fifteen,' he told her calmly. 'Bring a wrap. It can be cool here after dark.'

'All right.' Domine pressed her lips together.

'Good. Until later, then. *Adios!*'

'*Adios!*'

The Spanish word sounded so much different on his lips, and she held the receiver for several seconds after he had rung off, hardly able to believe that in an hour's time she would see him again. The harassed voice of the hotel receptionist asking whether she wished to make a call interrupted her meditation, and with a word of apology she replaced the receiver and hurried urgently towards the bathroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT was annoying that her clothes had been lying in the suit cases for more than forty-eight hours, but with the resilience of a man-made fibre, the dress she had chosen emerged virtually uncreased. It was a simple gown of turquoise silk jersey, halter-necked, and low in the back, its smooth, revealing lines exposing the rounded fullness of her

breasts The skirt was calf-length and slightly flared, and swung about her slender legs when she moved, and with it she wore high-heeled patent sandals, that accentuated the slimness of her ankles. She carried a black silk scarf, as he had suggested, and left her hair loose and silvery pale about her shoulders.

It was barely nine-fifteen when she took the lift down to the ground floor. She had been ready much too early, and had spent some minutes at her window watching the light of the city. The *Plaza de Los Inocentes* was not as busy as the *Plaza de Armas*, but she could see there were stores across from the hotel, that were still open despite the lateness of the hour.

The hotel foyer was not crowded, and her heart was palpitating alarmingly as she stepped from the lift. Groups of people were standing around, and there was a low buzz of conversation, but although no one stared at her outright she was aware of the covert interest cast in her direction. She guessed it was her colouring that was so unusual among so many darker skins, and ignored completely the fact that she was a beautiful woman by anyone's standards.

She saw Luis immediately. He was standing by an enormous bowl of lustrous calla lilies, their fleshy leaves; rushing the leg of his pants. He appeared to be in conversation with another man and a woman standing close by and for an awful moment she thought they were not to dine alone. But then he glanced towards the lifts and saw her, and his perfunctory word of apology denoted his detachment.

Domine halted, unable to do anything but watch his approach, her eyes devouring his lean muscular body. It was so good to see him again that she wanted to absorb the moment, squeeze every ounce of excitement out of the anticipation of the evening ahead. Instead of a dinner jacket he was wearing a dark blue velvet suit, and his silk tie matched the paler blue texture of his shirt. He looked dark and alien—and just as disturbing as she remembered; and she no longer questioned her reasons for making the six-thousand-mile trip.

He stopped some two feet from her, surveying her with those darkly hooded eyes, and her knees felt as weak as jellies. With anyone else she could have greeted them casually, she thought, irritated by her own gaucherie. She could have made some

offhand remark about the weather, or commented that it was already the middle of the night in England—but with Luis she could do none of these things. Her brain refused to function and her mouth went dry, and when he held out his hand politely to shake hers, she just shook her head and gazed mutely at him.

'Miss Temple?' he said, courteous as ever. 'Is something wrong? Are you not feeling well? I am not late, am I?'

Domine made a convulsive effort to speak. 'I—no, no. I'm fine, honestly. It's just—well—oh, God!' And to her complete and utter humiliation, she felt tears running down her cheeks.

She would have turned away then, rummaging in her evening bag for a tissue, but Luis's firm fingers beneath her elbow prevented her from doing so. Conscious of little but her own embarrassment, she was hardly aware of him escorting her across the foyer, and when the soft night air brushed her cheeks, enveloping in its cloak of concealment, she looked up in surprise.

'My car is just round the corner,' Luis advised, guiding her across the pavement, and presently he released her to take his keys from his pocket and unlock the door of a sleek white Mercedes.

With her safely installed in the front seat, he circled the bonnet to get in beside her, and without giving her a chance to apologise he set the car in motion.

Domine extracted a tissue from her bag and blotted her damp cheeks. She had never done such a thing before, and she was already berating herself for her own stupidity. What must he be thinking of her? She wondered miserably, casting him a sidelong glance, and then quickly looking away again before he embarrassed her still further by observing her watching him.

She didn't know where he was taking her, and she didn't particularly care. She had already spoiled any chance of enjoying the evening, and she wondered that he hadn't allowed her to escape him in the lobby, and thus save them both further ignominy.

The windows of the car were open, and as they drove through the suburbs, the warm air was scented with jasmine and other night-flowering shrubs. In other circumstances, the almost tropical smell of the vegetation would have delighted Domine, and the

excitement of knowing where she was and who she was with. But, right now, all she could think of was that she had embarrassed him, there in the hotel, and remembering his observance of propriety, she felt sure what she had done was unforgivable.

A sudden change in the air made her realise that Lima was only a few miles from the ocean. There was a salty tang touching her lips now, and their descent to the coast had been accomplished almost without her being aware of it. She could hear the muted thunder of the breakers she had glimpsed earlier in the day from the air, and presently they bumped down a rocky road to a deserted sand-descending on the very edge of the Pacific. There was no moon, but the brilliance of the ocean reflected a pale luminescence, and when Luis turned off the engine she could see the dark angle of his profile.

The silence that followed the cutting of the motor was unnerving, but Domine knew it was up to her to say something. 'I—I'm sorry,' she got out at last. 'I'm sorry for what happened—back there. I—I don't know what came over me.'

'Do you not?' Luis lodged his head against the rest. 'It would seem to me that you are—perhaps more tired than you imagine. Travelling such great distances can be an—emotional experience, a breaking down of mental, as well as physical, barriers. Naturally, you feel—confused, disorientated—'

'No!' The word was torn from her, disrupting his calm dismissal of her breakdown, destroying any attempt he might be making, no matter how well-intentioned, to excuse her behaviour, and his chin lowered.

'What do you mean—no?'

'It wasn't like that at all,' she protested desperately. 'And —and you know it.'

'What do I know?' he enquired curtly. 'What am I supposed to comprehend from that remark?' He shook his head. 'I think the incident is best forgotten, and—'

'Have you got no feelings? No feelings at all?' she demanded, spring at his shadowy outline. 'Doesn't it even occur to you that I might have been—upset—at—at seeing you again? That I might feel emotional—about you?'

She had not intended to say that, but her tongue had just run away with her. Grandpa had always been warning her that one day it would get her into a situation she couldn't get out of, and right now she felt that moment had come.

The seconds passed, and then Luis reached out and started the engine again, reversing expertly round until they were facing in the opposite direction, before accelerating up the stony track. The lights of the main highway were directly ahead of them, the occasional passing of a car arousing a cloud of dust where sand had blown on to the road. Domine's nails were digging into the palms of her hands, and she dreaded the thought that perhaps he was about to drive her straight back to her hotel. She felt sure that if he did so she would never see him again, and sure she was facing Armageddon, she exclaimed:

'Can't you say something? Anything!'

'My dear Miss Temple—'

'I'm not "your dear Miss Temple"! she retorted sniffing. 'On the contrary, I seem to be nothing but a nuisance to you! I annoy you, I embarrass you, I say things that obviously irritate you! Why don't you either treat me as an adult or—or leave me alone?'

'Do you think I have not asked myself that question?' he countered then, and she was startled by the vehemence in his voice. Then, more evenly, he added: 'The reservation I had made for dinner is long overdue. I suggest, if you are still hungry, that we dine at your hotel.'

Domine's spirits slumped. 'Must we?' she implored. 'Couldn't we—go somewhere else? Another restaurant, anywhere. Just so long as it's not the hotel.'

'Why not? Is it not comfortable?'

'Oh, yes. Yes, of course. It's just—I don't want to go back there.' She paused, and then said hesitantly: 'Couldn't we eat at your apartment?'

'No.'

He was uncompromisingly abrupt, and she sighed. 'Why not? I'd like to see where you live. Is that so unreasonable? Or is it—not defensible to do such a thing?'

Luis's jaw hardened. She could see his expression quite clearly now in the well-lit illumination of the boulevards and avenues, and his impatience was evident. 'Lima is not

London, Miss Temple,' he told her grimly. 'Nor am I some callow youth, responsive to all your innuendoes. But, if you persist in being personal, I must add that compared to the maturity of your cousin, you seem very young—and very imaginative.'

Domine caught her breath painfully. 'Thank you.'

He sighed then, stepping on his brakes and swinging abruptly round a corner, accelerating along an avenue lined with trees. 'Why do you do this to me?' he demanded, but she had a feeling he did not expect a reply. 'A fondo, we will go to my apartment. I do not know what we will eat there, but I have no doubt that my housekeeper will have left something edible in the refrigerator.'

'Thank you.' Domine's words were the same, but they had a different meaning, and they both knew it. She uncurled her fingers in an attempt to relax, but that was impossible, so she contented herself with casting covert looks in his direction, wondering what he was really thinking now.

To her surprise, Luis drove up and over a ramp, and then down into an underground parking area before bringing the Mercedes to a smooth halt. Then, turning to her, he said: 'For the convenience of the tenants,' and she realised they were beneath the block of apartments where he lived.

Luis locked the car, and Domine pulled her scarf about her shoulders as they walked towards a lighted sign which indicated '*Ascensor*'. It was chilly in the damp atmosphere below ground, and she was glad when they stepped into the lighted cubicle.

Immediately, however, she was conscious that the stains of her tears must be evident on her cheeks, and she averted her head, looking down at his booted feet, avoiding the contempt she was sure she would see in his eyes.

They seemed to travel upwards for a long way, but when the lift eventually stopped she saw they were only at the eighth level. However, this was the penthouse floor, the tower blocks in Lima restraining themselves to a more modest height, and Luis indicated that his apartment was just along the corridor.

Domine did not know exactly what she had expected after the functional austerity of her hotel room, but the apartment he preceded her into was the most airy and spacious she had ever seen. Luis went ahead, switching on wall lights set behind antique copper

shades, illuminating a living area that was both comfortable and luxurious. A galleried entrance descended to an expansive stretch of polished wooden tiles, strewn with jewel-shaded alpaca rugs. There were squashy couches of creamy leather leather-topped tables and richly carved wall chests, bookshelves and cabinets, and several items in gold and silver that were obviously as valuable as they were beautiful. Long windows gave a panoramic view of the city and the mountains beyond, and Domine half smiled to herself to think of Mark's reactions to all this. He had suspected Luis of fortune-hunting; whereas nothing could have been further from the truth.

She was hardly aware that Luis had closed the door behind her, until he descended to the lower level beside her and said: 'Something amuses you?' in clipped, interrogative tones.

Domine turned to him then, eager to allay his suspicions and found herself closer than she had anticipated. He was actually close enough for his breath to fan her forehead and when she looked up she could see the short thickness of his lashes, and the firm definition of his lips. Her finger; itched to stroke back the heavy strand of dark hair which had fallen across his forehead, rich and smooth and virile without any trace of hair-dressing, and the urge she had to touch him was only equalled by the longing she had for him to touch her.

Maybe a little of her feelings had revealed themselves in her expression, for with a stifled word of dismissal, he brushed past her, crossing the room to where another door gave access to the other departments of the penthouse.

Domine found she was trembling, as much from an awareness of his reactions as from her own. That word he had used when he left her: she had recognised it, and it was not usually used in polite company. Gradually his reserve towards her was being eroded, and while she wanted this to happen, it also filled her with anxiety that she might let herself down. He had been right to call her young, but was she as immature as he imagined? She acknowledged that he was not like the young men she had associated with all her life, but were the differences really so great? Grandpa had grumbled all the time about young people climbing in and out of bed with one another, but although Domine knew some of her friends had slept with their boyfriends, it was by Clean's a

general concept. They had fun together and probably they talked more freely than their parents; and grandparents had done, but like every-thing else, the media, who so often directed public opinion, concentrated on the more libidinous aspects of the situation and ignored the majority. That was not to say that she was skewed or disapproved of promiscuity, Domine told herself firmly. If one was seriously committed to some man, engaged even, then making love seemed like a natural extension of their feelings for one another. But casual sex was something she had never experienced, and although she had had her share of boy-friends, her sense of humour had always come to the rescue when she was faced with demands of a physical nature. Perhaps that was why she felt a little wary of her attraction to Luis. He was older, more mature, and it was highly unlikely that he had achieved that state without going to bed with at least one woman...

Shrugging her anxieties aside, she made a determined effort to interest herself in her surroundings. It was not difficult. There was so much to see and admire, and she guessed some of the masks and weapons that adorned the walls were of genuine Inca origin.

There was a silver-framed photograph standing on the bureau by the windows, and on impulse she went and picked it up. It was the picture of a woman, a young and beautiful woman, with the magnolia-pale features of the true Creole, the central parting of her dark hair giving her face a Madonna-like purity. Domine felt a pain deep in her stomach. Who was she, this exotic creature whose portrait claimed such a place of honour in the apartment? It was not Inez, although her eyes held a little of his sister's detachment, but she must be some relation, surely, to warrant such exclusive treatment. It was the only photograph in the room, and with a sinking heart she acknowledged that she must be his wife.

His wife!

Domine felt as if all the strength had been drained out of her. She had never thought of that. His reticence, his reservation about talking about himself, she had never associated that with the possibility of his being married. She had assumed he was merely evasive. She had even got impatient with his reluctance to speak about himself.

Oh, he was right, she thought bitterly. She was immature and presumptuous. And he had every right to deplore her curiosity.

The door behind her swung open abruptly, and almost guiltily she turned from replacing the photograph. He saw at once what she had been doing, and with a gesture of confusion she said:

'I hope you don't mind—I've been admiring the bureau. You have so many beautiful things, it's difficult to find words to'

'You were looking at my wife's portrait,' he cut in harshly, and at his words, Domine's last hopes died. 'There is no need to pretend otherwise.'

'She's—she's very beautiful,' stammered Domine nervously, not at all decided about what she should do with her hands, and his lips twisted.

'She was," he amended, allowing the door to swing closed behind him. 'She died two years after our marriage. She suffered from a bone marrow deficiency, and she was always an invalid.'

'I'm sorry.' Domine felt terrible. 'I always seem to be saying that to you. You didn't want to bring me here, did you? I can understand that now. You don't like talking about your wife, and I'm so tackless...'

'On the contrary,' a muscle jerked at his jawline, 'I have no objections to talking about Maria. It is eight years since she died, and the outcome of her illness was never in doubt.'

'Even so—'

Domine started to speak, but he interrupted her again. 'Señora Lopez, my housekeeper, has left a tray of *anticucios* in the fridge, a precaution, I suspect, in case I did not eat dinner. But if you would prefer, there are some steaks in the freezer. She indulges my liking for American food.'

This speech was delivered in crisp, impersonal tones, and Domine felt even worse. 'Look,' she said awkwardly, 'we can eat out. I should never have insisted you bring me here. I just wanted to see where you lived, that was all. I didn't mean to intrude ...'

'You are not intruding,' he contradicted her smoothly, and then added: 'Which is it to be? *Anticuchos*—or steak and salad?'

Domine dropped her scarf on to the bureau, and made a determined effort to recover her dwindling self-confidence. 'What are—*anticuchos*?' she asked, with a rueful smile. 'I'm afraid I know very little about Peruvian food.'

'I am sorry.' He shook his head rather impatiently, as if deploring his own lack of consideration. 'Of course you do not know. They are the shish-kebabs of South America. They can be made with beef, or chicken, or fish. The ones Señora Lopez has prepared are beef, and I can hear them under the grill while the rice is cooking.'

'They sound delicious.' Domine hesitated. 'Señora Lopez is not here, then?'

'No.' He ran a long finger inside the collar of his shirt before allowing his hand to rest at the back of his neck. The casual gesture parted his jacket, exposing the muscular darkness of his chest, visible beneath the fine pale silk of his shirt. It also drew Domine's eyes to the silver buckle of the belt that fastened his pants, low on his hips as his arm stretched upward. 'She is—what you would call a part-time housekeeper only,' he was saying, and she dragged her gaze back to his face. 'When I am staying at the apartment, she comes in every morning to wash and clean, but unless I have informed her I am having guests, she returns to her home in the afternoon.' He glanced thoughtfully behind him. 'And now, if you will excuse me ...'

'Let me do it!' Domine spoke impulsively, extending her hand and then withdrawing it again. 'I—I can cook. I did a domestic science course at my school. Not through choice, I will admit, but Grandpa always insisted that a woman should learn how to feed a family.' She gave a nervous little laugh. 'I promise—I won't poison you.'

Luis looked at her for a long paralysing moment, and then he shook his head. 'That would not be at all suitable,' he demurred. 'One does not allow one's guests to cook their own supper.'

'I don't mind, honestly.' Domine caught her lower lip between her teeth. 'I can't just sit in here while you—'

She broke off helplessly. 'Please!'

He looked at her again, his eyes strangely guarded as he viewed her tremulous anticipation. Then, with a shrug of what might have been relief or resignation, he turned

away, opening the door behind him and indicating that she should precede him through it.

The narrow hallway was only partially illuminated, but she saw at once the double doors into the kitchen. They were of the swing variety, ideal for anyone serving a meal and needing to pass through them with both hands full. Beyond was a small but serviceable cooking area, with steel and Formica units, and a split-level oven. There was a tall, American-style refrigerator, with a large frozen food compartment, a microwave heater and defroster, and an automatic dish-washer. Despite its size, it contained all the essentials necessary to any kitchen, and Domine was impressed.

'The *anticuchos* are still in the refrigerator,' Luis said, as she opened various drawers and doors with the inquisitive admiration of a child with a new toy. 'I believe Señora Lopez keeps the rice in that cupboard there, and you will find serving dishes below the hob.'

'I'll find them.' Domine was not alarmed, but she was intensely conscious of him standing there watching her, looking as out of place in this environment as it was possible to be. 'Why don't you go and sit in the other room? Have a drink. I don't think I'll encounter any great difficulty.'

Luis hesitated now, looking at her gown. 'Do you not need an overall to protect your clothes?' he enquired doubtfully, a frown drawing his brows together. He sighed. 'I still feel that you should not be doing this.'

'Why not?' She forced a smile. 'Didn't your wife—well, no,' she flushed in embarrassment, 'I suppose not.' She made an awkward gesture. 'I'm sorry. I'm being tackless again, but—oh, didn't your mother—or your sister—'

'The women of my acquaintance do not do their own cooking,' he conceded drily. 'They would not know how. They employ maids—housekeepers—whose job it is. Besides,' his features relaxed a little, 'they have no wish to— toil over a hot stove.'

Domine grimaced. 'They don't know what they're missing.' She paused, as he continued to watch her and added with great daring: 'You can fetch me a drink, if you like. The cook is usually permitted to taste the sherry, you know.'

Luis's eyes narrowed, but it was not a forbidding gesture. 'Very well,' he agreed, half turning away from her. 'Is it sherry you would like? Or something more potent?'

'Sherry would be fine,' she assured him eagerly, and with a thoughtful shrug he left her.

By the time he returned she had donned a plastic apron she had found behind the door, set the kebabs rotating under the grill, and the rice was already boiling. She had also found some avocados in the fridge, and she was busily preparing a vinaigrette sauce to go with them when Luis came back into the kitchen.

'What is this?' he questioned, indicating the sauce, and she quickly explained what she was doing. 'You are experienced in these matters?' he frowned, inhaling the fragrance of the herbs she was using, and Domine was glad to bury her nose in the schooner of sherry he had given her.

'I thought you might like something to start with,' she explained, when it was no longer possible to take refuge in the glass, and he tilted his head admiringly, and made no objections. 'Where do we eat?' she asked, as an after thought, not remembering seeing a dining table and chairs in the living room, and she followed his lead into a square room across the hall, panelled in maplewood, and furnished with an oblong dining table and six comfortably-upholstered chairs.

'It is small,' he remarked, making an expansive gesture with the hand in which he was holding his glass, and Domine had to accept that it was perhaps, by his standards. But by her own, even by the standards of Griffons, it was of a reasonable size, certainly big enough to accommodate a small dinner party, and extremely well designed. A low central light could be pulled down above the table, or there were slender candlesticks for use as an alternative, and the long serving sideboard glittered with the silver dishes set upon it. It was intimidating, but she couldn't say so, so instead she said nothing.

'Is it not to your liking?' he asked, showing his usual astuteness where she was concerned, but Domine managed to avoid an answer.

'I can smell the kebabs,' she exclaimed, and indeed the aroma of the meat was drifting through to them. As she hurried back into the kitchen, she said over her shoulder: 'Perhaps you could lay the table for me!' and left him to make what he liked of that.

When she returned some few minutes later, it was to find the table set with woven mats and silver cutlery, napkins pristine white against its polished surface. Fragile-stemmed wine glasses marked each place, and the silver candelabrum had been lit to cast a mellow light on the scene. Without the central illumination, the room was much less awesome, its shadowy corners only hinting at the wealth that had acquired it. There was no sign of Luis, however, so she served the avocados, and left the hot kebabs lying on their bed of rice in the middle of the table. Then she went back into the kitchen, removed her apron, and finished her sherry. Both the wine and the heat from the stove had left her feeling a little flushed, and she wished she knew where the bathroom was so that she might check her appearance.

The doors that opened on to the hall outside were all anonymously closed, however, and she did not have the courage to go exploring. Instead, she contented herself by going back into the living room and rescuing her handbag, the mirror of her compact providing a reasonably competent reflection of her features. Luis was not in the living room either, and after assuring herself that she would not disgrace the elegant beauty of the dining table, she went in search of her host.

He was in the dining room, uncorking a bottle of wine, and when he poured some into her glass, Domine could not help but admire its ruby red clarity. 'I trust you have no objection to claret,' he remarked politely, 'but I was not prepared, and there is nothing more unpalatable than warm white wine.'

'It looks delicious,' said Domine, shaking her head, and took her seat opposite him as he filled her glass.

The meal was delicious, too, thought Domine, complimenting herself rather wryly. The avocados were ripe and chilled, the rice was firm but fluffy, and the kebabs, despite Señora Lopez's contribution, were grilled to perfection. It was already after eleven o'clock, Peruvian time, and much later than that in England, but she found she was hungry, although she couldn't help noticing that Luis did not seem to share her enthusiasm. He ate sparingly, filling his glass frequently, and subjecting her to a disturbing appraisal when he thought she was not aware of it.

When the meal was over, he insisted that he would prepare the coffee, and as the dish-washer would make short work of their plates, Domine had no alternative but to return to the living room.

Maria Aguilar's photograph watched her from the bureau, the eyes as remote and autocratic as Luis's own. Why had he married her? Had he known about her illness beforehand? Had they lived a normal married life? And if so, had he never thought of getting married again? There was a tantalising excitement in thinking of Luis in those terms, without the cloak of courtesy and detachment he wore like a shield. She had never even seen him without his jacket, let alone thinking of anything more intimate, and yet she knew a curious desire to do so. It seemed ludicrous in the light of the fact that the young men she had known in England and elsewhere had often gone around in only shorts or swimming trunks, but Luis was not like them, and the way he made her feel was not like the reactions she had had to their half nude bodies.

There was a music centre set on a heavy carved table on wheels, and Domine approached it rather abstractedly. It was an oblong table, the compartments beneath obviously intended for storing plates or dishes, but it adapted well to its use as a record rack. For the need of something to do rather than anything else, she knelt down beside it, riffling through the sleeves. The authors on the bookshelves had meant nothing to her, but the record sleeves were more revealing, and her eyebrows arched disbelievingly when she found the music of some of her favourite groups. There were even the film scores of two particularly popular musicals, produced by Robert Stigwood, and on impulse she pulled one of these out of its folder and put it on the turntable.

Immediately the apartment was filled with the throbbing beat of the Bee Gees' music, and she got to her feet and walked slowly across the floor, allowing the seductive rhythm to get to her. As she looked down on the glitter of lights that was the city, she wondered if she would ever hear this music again without thinking of Luis, and the poignant drift of her thoughts made her head turn quickly back towards the turntable.

'I see you find my niece's albums more to your taste than mine.'

Domine had been so absorbed with her own feelings, she had been unaware of Luis's return, but now, seeing him straightening from setting a tray on one of the leather-topped tables, she halted awkwardly, thwarted in her attempt to stop the record playing.

'Your—niece's albums?' she faltered, and he nodded, pushing his hands into his jacket pockets as he viewed the sleeve she was holding.

'Eleni is a great fan of your popular music, and whenever she goes to the United States she always returns with some new favourite.'

Domine moved her shoulders uncomfortably. 'Eleni? That is your sister's daughter?'

'No. My brother's,' he amended dryly. 'Inez is not married.'

'Oh.' Domine gestured towards the turntable. 'I'll take it off, then ...'

'No, do not bother. It is quite pleasant, and I am used to Eleni making free with this apartment. Besides, the coffee is ready. Do you take cream and sugar?'

Domine agreed that she did, and approached, the tray rather nervously, putting down the record sleeve and accepting the cup he offered. Then, unwilling to sit down, she wandered to the windows again, thinking how lucky Eleni must be to feel so relaxed with her uncle. It was another side to his character, and she thought in frustration that he probably regarded her in much the same light as he regarded his niece.

'You are eager to leave?'

His voice came from just behind her, and she turned, startled, to confront his brooding interrogative stare. If he had had any coffee, he had already drunk it, for his hands were back in his jacket pockets. He stood before her, legs slightly apart, regarding her with vague hostility, and the brief familiarity they had shared earlier might never have been.

'I'm—not eager to leave, no,' she protested, indicating the cup she was holding. 'I—was just enjoying my coffee.'

'Were you?' He sounded unconvinced. 'Then why do you not sit down?'

'All right.' Domine would have done as he asked, but when she went to go past him, he withdrew his hand from his pocket, and his fingers brushed her arm before fastening almost convulsively on her shoulder.

'I—' It was the first time she had known him at a lot for words. 'I have something to tell you.'

'Yes?' She turned her head, and his face was disturbingly close.

'Yes.' His fingers were restless, moving as if without his volition, unknowingly caressing against her soft flesh. 'I—I want to—thank you for—for that most excellent meal you prepared for us.'

'Oh ...' Domine quivered a little, half relieved that that was all. 'It was nothing. I—I liked doing it.'

'Did you?'

His eyes fell from hers, resting for a long disruptive moment on the parted contours of her mouth, before dropping to where his fingers were probing the fine bones of her shoulder. He made no effort to release her, however, and she wondered if he was as aware of the effect he was having on her as she was. No, he couldn't be, she told herself desperately, or he wouldn't be doing this! But nevertheless: there was no denying that the longer his hand rested on her shoulder, the more intentional the situation became.

'You have such fair skin,' he said at last, as if the words were torn from him. 'Such soft fair skin! My hand looks almost negroid in comparison.'

'I'm quite tanned really,' Domine hastened, her lungs feeling totally deprived of air. 'You—you ought to see my Aunt Barbara. She's really pale. But that's because she doesn't like to sit in the sun'

'You know I am not interested in your Aunt Barbara,' he interrupted her huskily, and her heart skipped a beat. Then, with an evident effort to control himself, he withdrew his hand and added stiffly: 'I was making an objective observation, that is all, Miss Temple.'

'Were you?' Domine felt suddenly so bereft, she could hardly think straight. 'And I gather I am not to presume from your remarks that you are interested in me?'

'*Basta!*' His jaw hardened in response to her impertinence. 'Is it not possible to make a comment, without you taking my remarks personally?' He glanced half impatiently towards the turntable now, and she guessed the almost aggressive statement of emotion it was making no longer suited his mood. 'Come: I think it is time to take you back to your hotel. It is late, and no doubt you are tired. I know I am.'

Domine knew a feeling of depression so strong she had to shake her head to dispel its intensity. Hardly thinking what she was saying, she looked down at the fragile cup and saucer in her hand, and mumbled: 'I tire you? Is that what you mean? Has this evening been such a total disaster?'

'Dios, Domine, this has got to stop!'

His tormented words brought her head up with a jerk, and as she gazed disbelievingly at him he paced restlessly away from her, rounding one of the hide-covered couches, and massaging the back of his neck with agitated fingers. She had never seen him so disturbed before, and half nervously she looked for somewhere to put down her coffee cup as it rattled betrayingly in its saucer.

Then he turned and looked at her, and she forgot all about the cup in her hand. His eyes were not enigmatic now. They smouldered with sultry fire, but whether that was because he was angry with her, or for some other reason, she could not be absolutely sure. The lines on his face were more deeply ingrained as he fought to control the feelings that battled within him, and Domine knew an overwhelming sense of inadequacy when faced with such a responsibility. She was to blame for this totally uncharacteristic display of emotion, and he would never forgive her for seeing him this way.

'I—I'll go,' she began, glancing about her for her scarf, but with a stifled expletive he covered the space between them. His hand at the nape of her neck, jerked her towards him, -and then his firm lips fastened on her mouth, with brutal and bruising force. The coffee cup clattered heedlessly to the floor, shattering against the wood, but her muffled protest went unheard beneath the pressure of his mouth. He obviously did not care about the destruction of its fragile symmetry, and Domine, fighting against his superior strength, felt just as helpless in his arms. She did not like his angry possession, or the bruising grip of his fingers at her nape, and she thought how foolish she had been to invite his alien advances. He was kissing her coldly, cruelly, and without consideration for anything but his own lust. She should have known better than to taunt him. He was not like the young men she had known, and she should have suspected his autocratic manner was designed to hide this brutal side of his nature.

She pressed her lips together, determined not to give him that satisfaction, and presently he let her fight free of him, though still retaining his hold on her shoulders. 'What is wrong?' He was taunting now. 'Is this not what you wanted of me?'

'You know it's not,' she denied tremulously, aware of her chafed lips and flushed cheeks. 'I'm sorry you thought it was. Obviously, your customs and mine are vastly different.'

'Indeed,' he agreed grimly, but he did not let her go, and she started to panic at the thought that he might be considering something else. All her earlier attraction to him was melting, and all she could see now was his thin lips and burning eyes. Why had she imagined she had the experience to handle a man like this? He was a brute, and a barbarian, and she despised him for treating her no better than an instrument to satisfy his own selfish appetites.

'I'd like to go home,' she said now, hiding her fears to the best of her ability, and a curiously tortured expression crossed his face.

'I frightened you, did I not?' he demanded, and deciding there was no point in lying to him, she nodded. Then, he surprised her by adding: 'Would it do any good to say I am sorry?'

'You don't have to apologise,' she gulped, only wanting to be free of him, but he was not finished yet.

'I am sorry,' he said, causing her to panic anew by drawing her to him again. 'I wanted to frighten you—but now I find I have only frightened myself.'

'Wh—what do you mean?'

Domine struggled, aware of the muscles of his legs against hers, and found her hands crushed against the smooth silk of his shirt. She knew she had to keep her face down, to avoid the bruising humiliation of his mouth, but his hand imprisoned her chin, forcing her face upward, and his mouth found the yielding softness of hers.

Only this time it was different, so different that at first Domine still fought against it. She hardly understood what he was doing to her. His hands were in the small of her back, caressing but firm against her bare skin, holding her close, but not close enough to feel every hardening contour between his thighs. And she wanted to feel his body

against hers, she found, as her lips parted and his mouth taught her the subtle art of seduction. She wanted to be closer to him, much closer, and the blood in her veins ran fire to every nerve and sinew.

'Luis ...' she breathed in wonderment when at last he released her mouth to seek the creamy skin of her shoulder with his lips, and his murmur of acquiescence was both anguished and rueful.

'I know,' he muttered against her ear, his tongue circling its sensitive hollows. 'You see now why I tried so hard to make you hate me? Holding you like this—it is madness. Madness! But I had to do it. I had to prove to myself and to you that I am not the unprincipled savage I allowed you to think me.'

'Luis...' Her arms were round his waist, but even his shirt was an unbearable barrier between them, and she longed to tear it aside. 'Luis, hold me closer!'

'Domine!' Now it was he who drew back and she who protested. 'Domine, *niña*, this foolishness must end.' He made a determined effort, and turned aside from her, checking his tie and running smoothing fingers over his hair. "Come. I must take you back to *El Prado*.'

Domine trembled. 'But—will I see you tomorrow?' she whispered, touching his sleeve, and he gave her a strange, regretful glance before striding towards the steps leading up the gallery, where they had entered.

'I gather you have changed your mind. You would like to stay in Lima for a few days?' he commented, and a little of his earlier hauteur was back in his voice.

'Of course.' Domine picked up her scarf, looking unhappily at the shattered remnants of her coffee cup. 'Will you show me the city? Will you be my guide, instead of Ben Lister?'

Luis sighed now, and opened the door. 'If that is what you wish,' he conceded politely, and for a moment Domine was struck with unease at his manner. It was as if the past few moments had never existed, and to reassure herself, she ran lightly up the steps towards him and touched his cheek with her fingers.

'Luis,' she breathed, puzzled at the way he recoiled from her caress. 'Luis, you're not still angry with me, are you?'

'Angry? With you?' His expression was ironic now, but he shook his head, and she had to be content. 'No, I'm not angry with you,' he assured her, but all the way back to her hotel the awful feeling grew that he was.

When he brought the Mercedes to a halt beneath the canopy of the El Prado, however, and made to get out to assist her, she stopped him with daring fingers gripping his thigh.

'Luis ...' she began, and at his lifting eyebrows, she added: 'Kiss me! Kiss me again, before I begin to believe it was all a dream.'

'It was *all* a dream, Domine,' he told her, and she was chilled by his detachment. Lifting her hand from his leg, he dropped it on to the seat and got out, and all Domine's self-confidence crumbled at his harsh, unfeeling words.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT was difficult the next morning to immediately remember why she should awaken with such a feeling of impending disaster hanging over her. She was here, in Peru, in her room at the hotel El Prado, and she should have felt full of anticipation—but she didn't. For some reason, she felt confused and apprehensive, and her subconscious awareness of that fact was deliberately clouding her vision.

Of course, that morpheric numbness was only temporary. As her thoughts gained coherence, so they also gained understanding, and by the time she slid her legs out of bed, she had recalled the previous night's events in all their disturbing detail.

Padding over to her windows, she opened the blinds to look down on the plaza below her. For a few moments its sunlit symmetry restored her sense of balance, and she could admire the intricately-carved facade of a spired church across the square, and wonder at the identity of the bronze horseman whose statue graced the simplicity of a small, enclosed garden set in the centre of the plaza. It was a glorious morning of misty translucence, and after the greyness of winter in England it was doubly enchanting.

Refusing to let only half-formed fears direct her mood, Domine went determinedly into the bathroom. Perhaps she had misunderstood Luis's motives the night before. Perhaps her anxieties were all unfounded. His attitudes were different from hers, she knew that already, and just because he had drawn back it did not necessarily mean he found her any less desirable. On the Contrary, for a while at least he had been unable to prevent his emotions from ruling his head, and the smouldering flame she had ignited had almost engulfed her. She ought to be grateful he had recovered his control, even if his reactions afterwards were less easy to understand. He had treated her with respect, she told herself firmly, but she still had that awful hollow feeling deep inside her.

After sluicing her face and arms in lukewarm water, she used the bottled water provided to clean her teeth, and then dressed in a thin denim pants suit. The almost masculine attire accentuated her extreme femininity, the mud- coloured cotton shirt exposing the rounded contours of her breasts. She wore little make-up other than an eyeliner, and gathered back the heavy weight of her hair with a dark brown ribbon.

Luis had said he would arrive to take her sightseeing at eleven o'clock. It had seemed rather late to her, but he had explained rather brusquely that he had other matters to attend to first. In consequence, after eating a breakfast of rolls and coffee, accompanied by the rather disappointing taste of mango jelly, Domine found herself with over an hour to kill before his appearance.

She decided to take a walk around the square. There was an assortment of small shops that had taken her eye, and she was too excited, and too nervous, to spend the time in her room. Besides, the maids would be wanting to clean the room and make the bed, and she saw no reason why she should hang about the hotel like some unchaperoned doncella.

All the wide variety of Peruvian craft goods was exhibited around the square. Alpaca wool sweaters, dolls in national costume, llama rugs and stuffed animals—Domine was enchanted by their range and diversity, gazing entranced at grotesque Indian masks and magnificently carved caskets and jewellery. There were many examples of reproduction Inca adornments in gold and silver, and the headdresses, glinting with rubies and emeralds, were a fascinating indication of how richly clothed the ruling Incas had been.

The leather goods, including some hand-stitched waistcoats, caught her attention, and soon she found herself inside one of the stores, buying a handbag for Aunt Barbara, and an attractively embroidered jerkin for herself. There was so much to choose from, and the work was of such a high quality that she forgot the time as she admired alpaca shawls and soft sweaters, fur slippers and tooled leather wallets, carved gourds and hand-painted pottery.

It was after eleven before she knew it, and she hastened back across the plaza, her arms full of packages. She had not bought everything she would have liked, but she had got a key-case for Mark, as well as the present for Aunt Barbara, and the jerkin she had bought herself.

She reassured herself with the thought that Luis would understand once she told him where she had been, but her cheeks were flushed as she hurried through the doors of the El Prado, and she couldn't deny the pricking sense of apprehension that was becoming an irritation to her. She remembered that other occasion when she had been late for their appointment and his coldness towards her then. But it was different now, she insisted to herself, and then felt her mouth go dry when she saw him waiting for her.

He was more casually dressed than she had seen him. Instead of the suits she was used to him wearing, he wore close-fitting suede pants and a matching shirt, opened an inch or two at the neck, the cuffs turned back to expose tanned wrists, shadowed by dark hair. The fact that the outfit was black only added to his attraction, and Domine felt her heart turn over in anticipation.

Lips parting, she hurried eagerly towards him. His narrowed eyes watched her approach, but his expression displayed no pleasure in the charming picture she made, and apologies spilled automatically from her tongue.

'Oh, Luis,' she exclaimed, as she came up to him, tempted to go up on her toes and touch his rather grim mouth with her lips. 'I'm sorry. I know I'm late, but I went shopping——'

Her words came to an abrupt halt when, to her astonishment, a girl, who until that moment had been half concealed behind Luis, turned towards them, and sliding her arm possessively through his, regarded Domine with studied arrogance.

There was one of those silences that probably only lasted a couple of seconds but which seemed at the time to stretch for ever, and then, coolly and politely, Luis said:

'I should like to introduce you two, if I may. Lisel, I want you to meet your cousin, Domine Temple. Miss Temple, this is Lisel. *Your cousin, and—my fiancée!*'

Domine wished her arms were not so full of packages. Apart from the obvious disadvantage of not being able to shake the hand Lisel languidly offered, she felt she needed to reach out and clutch at the spiky cactus plant beside them for support, anything to strengthen the suddenly jelly-like consistency of her legs. Dear God, Lisel was Luis's fiancée. His fiancée! She couldn't believe it. She didn't want to believe it. He couldn't do this to her!

And yet it explained so much. His visit to England, his concern for Lisel's welfare, his knowledge of her character and personality. It even helped to explain his behaviour of the night before, although Domine felt physically sick at the thought. No wonder he had been so loath to take her to his apartment! Not because of his wife, not because of the woman who had died so many years ago, but because of this girl, because of Lisel, and the indisputable fact of their relationship.

It was difficult to turn to her cousin then and pretended enthusiasm she was far from feeling. Looking at Lisel, all she could think of was that she was going to marry Luis, she was going to become his wife, the mother of his children— that cold reality was tearing her to pieces. She couldn't look at Luis—she dared not. She was afraid that her emotions might get the better of her once again. 'Did you have a good journey?'

Lisel was speaking, albeit a trifle indifferently, and with supreme effort Domine forced a smile to her stiff lips. It was not Lisel's fault, after all, and meeting Lisel was why she was here, no matter what her innermost feelings might be.

'It—it was prolonged,' she managed now, taking note of her cousin's appearance. Lisel was not at all as she had expected, and she wondered how Mark would have reacted to the Madonna-like parting of dark hair, drawn back into a severe chignon, and features that had something of the impassivity of the Indian about them. Had Lisel lived so long with the Indians she had become like them, or was she a throwback to her mother's side of the family? Domine had known nothing of Uncle Edward's wife, but if

Lisel was like her mother, that would explain why she looked so little like herself or Mark. Her clothes too bore the imprint of a Spanish hand—a plain white blouse, with a round, lace-edged collar, a pencil-slim black skirt, and low-heeled black sandals. She made Domine, in her Levis and denim shirt, feel almost undepressed. It didn't help Domine either to realise that her skin felt damp from rushing, or that the humidity outside had moistened the tendrils of hair that coiled about her shoulders. Lisel looked cool and collected, while she felt hot and embarrassed, and totally defeated.

'It was kind of you to come,' Lisel said now, but without conviction, and Domine tried to concentrate on what she was saying. 'We—' she glanced possessively at her fiancé, 'we are delighted to welcome you to our country.'

'Thank you.'

There was irony in Domine's tone now, but Lisel didn't seem to notice it as she went on: 'Er—Luis told me he had spoken to you on the telephone yesterday, but he explained that he had not told you that I was here in Lima. It was his surprise.'

'Was it?' Domine knew she should be more enthusiastic, but she was too dazed to make any suitable rejoinder.

'Yes.' Lisel's fingers lingered possessively on Luis's sleeve. 'Besides, the telephone is such an inadequate medium for conveying information, and we knew you would be too tired to join us last evening.'

'Oh!'

Domine's lips formed a small circle. She was beginning to understand. Lisel knew nothing of their meeting last evening, and now her eyes shifted to Luis's, searching for his reaction. But his expression told her nothing. It was remote, guarded; the way it had been when she first met him. And she despised herself for not exposing him there and then.

Forcing this painful admission aside, she tried to behave naturally. 'I—well, as you can see, I'm rather loaded down with parcels at the moment. If—er—if you would excuse me for a few moments, I'll take them up to my room ...'

'I will help you.'

Luis spoke to her then, directly, and for the first time without waiting for her permission, he relieved her of the bulkier of her packages and waited patiently for her to lead me way.

Domine hesitated. She had wanted to escape, if only briefly. She had wanted time to assimilate what she had to face, time to accent this new state of affairs, and an opportunity to control the choking turmoil of her thoughts. Tears were not far away, but she determined he would not witness them, and with an offhand shake of her head, she said: 'There's no need, thank you—señor. I can manage myself. You—you stay with your fiancée.'

'I have said *I will help you.*' he essayed crisply, the dark eyes daring her to argue with him. 'Come! Lisel will remain here. We will only be five minutes, *pequeña?* If Lisel was annoyed, and Domine sensed she was, she hid it admirably from her fiancée. With a little shake of her head, she seated herself on one of the added banquettes that surrounded the central display of flowering plants and folded her hands in her lap. Demure, she certainly looked but Domine had felt the hostility in the eyes cast in her direction, and some inner instinct warned her that Lisel was as adept at disguising her emotions as Luis was himself.

For her part, Domine had as little choice in the matter. With Lisel prepared to wait for them, she had no alternative but to lead the way into the lift, standing stiffly as the doors closed, giving Luis the number of her floor through taut lips.

As the narrow cubicle ascended, Domine's tightly-controlled emotions expanded. Was he not going to say anything? She asked herself bitterly, staring at the fluted inserts of the doors, that gave a fleeting glimpse of illumination at every floor they passed. Did he expect she would not say anything either? And if so, why should he make such a sweeping assumption? Did he think she was afraid of him? That she might stay silent because of what he had done for Mark? Or simply out of respect for her cousin? He was asking a lot, she thought mutinously, her mouth pursing and unpursing in silent condemnation, and she almost jumped out of her skin when he said flatly:

'I did try to tell you, you know. Last night. After we had had supper. But—' he shrugged, 'I—did not do it.'

'Was that before or after you kissed me?' demanded Domine tightly, refusing to respond to the calm reasonableness of his tones, and she heard his sharp intake of breath.

Even so, he continued levelly: 'I realise my behaviour was—unforgivable, but I must assure you that it was not typical, and that your cousin need never have any doubts about my fidelity once we are married.'

Domine gasped, and turned to stare at him with eyes whose purple depths were dark and wounded, when the lift doors opened at her floor. The mechanism jolted a little, and dragging her gaze from his, she stumbled out on to the landing, looking from left to right a trifle bewilderedly, before moving off towards the direction of her room.

Her key was still in her handbag, and she rummaged about for it urgently as they approached her door. If she could open the door and take the parcels from him, she thought, she could gain a brief respite by telling him she would meet them downstairs. Then she might invent a headache—or a bout of nausea; anything to avoid spending the day in their company...

But even as she produced the key to insert in the lock Luis took it from her, ignoring her protest and turning it smoothly. The door swung inward, and before she had the chance to make her excuses he had propelled her inside and closed the door behind them.

She turned on him then, anger and resentment, and bitter humiliation, falling over themselves in her attempt to tell him what she thought of him. 'Aren't you taking a chance, coming in here? Aren't you afraid your—fiancé will find out? And what makes you think I won't tell her? You're counting on that, aren't you? You think I'm too— too polite—too well-bred—to make that kind of a scene! Well, don't be too sure!'

Luis let her go on until she had exhausted herself, while he deposited her parcels on one of the armchairs, and then moved to the windows to stand looking out, hands pushed deeply into his trouser pockets. He made no response, no retaliation, no defence

of what she was accusing him. He just stood there, waiting for her to finish, and Domine felt the ignominious prick of tears as her angry tirade petered to its close.

'I don't feel well,' she mumbled at last, and it wasn't altogether untrue. She did feel sick, sick and disillusioned and she wished she had heeded Mark's advice for the first time in her life.

Luis turned then, and she realised she had been mistaken in her thinking her outburst had left him unmoved. His expression was grim, and there was a certain weariness about him which she had not noticed earlier.

'So?' he said, and his voice still had the power to weaken her resistance against him. 'Are you going to tell Lisel?'

Domine flung her bag down on to a low chest, and spread her hands in a helpless gesture. 'You know I—can't do that.'

'Why not?' He seemed determined to pursue it to its inevitable conclusion. Perhaps you should. Perhaps Lisel deserves to know the truth.'

Domine's gaze was tremulous. "You're only saying that because you know I won't do it!' she declared.

'I—I couldn't hurt her. I hardly know her. Besides,' she bent her head, 'I—I suppose I was partly to blame...'

'*Domine!*' Her name was torn from him, and she looked up to find him staring at her with darkly disturbed eyes. '*Por dios*, Domine, there is no need for us to apportion blame. What happened—happened. It will not occur again.'

Domine's tongue appeared, to moisten her lips. That was the cruellest cut of all, she thought bitterly. The realisation that he was right. That it would never happen again.

'You're so certain of that,' she declared challengingly, lifting her head and meeting his gaze. 'How can you be so sure? How can you anticipate the future with such conviction?'

'Because I will not allow it to happen again,' he stated now, taking his hands out of his pockets and moving towards the door. 'Last night—was a moment out of time, out of reason. I am only sorry that I may have—hurt you.'

'Hurt me?' Domine's response was shrill and automatic. It was one thing to arouse his anger, and quite another to arouse his compassion. She didn't want his sympathy, she

didn't want his pity. But she was beginning to realise that her reaction might well arouse both. Her stomach contracted at the possibility that Lisel might suspect how she felt, might even discuss it with her fiancé, and the idea of them discussing her in that way was beyond bearing.

All right—so she had been hurt, and shocked. She could not deny that. But it was not the end of the world: Luis was right. She was inexperienced and probably immature, too. This was her first real let-down. She had built up their relationship over these weeks they had been apart into something it never was nor ever could be, and last night had been both a climax and an anti-climax. But it was over now. She had to accept that. And two weeks would soon pass...

Even so, it took all her stamina to add, deliberately: 'You flatter yourself, Luis, do you know that? Just because I was angry with you—and resentful, you imagine you're the first man to make me feel this way. Well, you're not. There have been others, and no doubt there'll be more. You lead an unreal life in this country, I told you that. My world is much less—intense.'

There was a moment when she, thought he was going to take her up on that, when the muscles of his face revealed the anger he was suppressing, and when his clenching fists. It seemed to indicate a desire to make her regret those words. Even his eyes darkened with ominous opacity, and she trembled in anticipation of whatever retribution he chose to give.

But then, with admirable restraint, he jerked open the door and indicated the corridor outside, waiting with predatorily resolution for her to precede him.

'I—er—I have a headache,' she said, bending to pick up her handbag. 'I'll join you later. Perhaps after lunch—'

'Now,' said Luis, without compromise. 'You will accompany me downstairs.' He paused. 'And there will be no more talk about the unrealities of my life.'

Domine still hesitated. 'I'd like to wash—to change my clothes—'

'Why?'

'Because—oh, because these things aren't suitable.'

'They appear eminently suitable to me,' he retorted impatience harshening his tones, and with a sigh of resignation, she preceded him through the door.

It had not been an enjoyable day. By no stretch of the imagination could Domine have said it had. And in all honesty, it was not her fault. She had tried her hardest to be friendly with Lisel, but her cousin seemed disinclined to meet any overtures she tried to make. Maybe it was just her way, Domine conceded to herself that evening, as she lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, but Lisel was not the shy, retiring innocent Luis had made her out to be.

Oh, she was reserved, her attitudes were very much those of any Spanish girl faced with an unknown contemporary but there was no gentleness there, no timidity, no attempt made to reinforce the obvious bonds of their relationship. She did not treat Domine with envy for her social sophistication, she did not even treat her as an equal. Lisel seemed to regard herself as something better than the granddaughter of a northern England industrialist, and Domine wondered if it was her engagement to Luis which had given her such an inflated opinion of herself.

She tried to make allowances. Lisel had lived the past eight or nine years in a convent. Perhaps her behaviour was just a way of defending herself, of combating what she saw as a very modern, and possibly shocking, attitude to living, and her hauteur was simply a means of disguising her inadequacies. But it didn't ring true. Lisel's disdainful air was too convincing, she did consider herself superior to her English cousin.

Things had deteriorated over lunch.

During the morning, Luis had driven them to several of the tourist haunts, including the Cathedral, where they viewed the grisly remains of Pizarro's mummified body in its glass coffin, and the lesser-known church of San Augustin, where the wood-carving of 'Death' in the vestry was supposed to have frightened its artist, Baltazar Gavilan, to death. Luis explained that legend had it that the Liman wood-carver had come upon it one night while walking through the church, with only a candle for illumination, and looking upon its terrifying features, Domine felt a shiver of apprehension even in the sunlit vestry.

The most fascinating thing about all the churches-they visited was their sumptuous attention to detail. Golden altars, intricately carved woodwork by master craftsmen, the exquisite blending of iron and tile; and the magnificent paintings and statuary, that depicted Christianity in all its distinctive antiquity.

They visited the catacombs of San Francisco, whose macabre mysteries had been rediscovered comparatively recently, they saw the twin towers of Santo Domingo, and mingled with the shoppers in La Merced, Lima's main shopping precinct. Luis explained how Lima was in fact a corruption of the word Rimac, the Indian word for the shallow river that flowed through the city, and how Francisco Pizarro had christened it Ciudad de los Reyes, or the City of the Kings.

Domine had found the tour interesting, if a little discomfiting. It was all right so long as she could keep all personal influences at bay, and could enjoy the sights she was seeing on a purely objective level. But Lisel's attitude made objectivity difficult, and some of her remarks were deliberately offensive. Or at least, Domine thought so.

When she exclaimed at how old the two towers of Santo Domingo were, for example, Lisel was quick to point out that it was not only the British who could trace their history back hundreds of years. Domine's hasty explanation that she had been referring to their defiance of earthquakes and the like brought little reassurance, and only Luis's quite insertion that nowadays buildings were built to withstand the meiotic earth tremors saved the situation.

Even Domine's tentative sympathy for Atahualpa, the last Inca ruler, who had been kidnapped by Francisco Pizarro for a vast ransom and then strangled by his captors, even though the ransom was paid in full, had been scorned by her cousin. Lisel lost no time in pointing out that in spite of the reported barbarity of the Spanish conquest, they had not captured the Indians only to sell them for slavery as the British had done in Africa, and the people's lot under Spanish government had only improved. It was obvious that Lisel did not consider herself English, and even her speech had the slightly stilted formality of a second language.

They ate lunch at a restaurant called La Fiesta. It was a converted colonial mansion in the suburbs, furnished in the period, where the food was typically Peruvian. Rice

appeared in various forms on the menu, sometimes accompanied by chicken or duck, *arroz con pato*, sometimes with eggs, *arroz con huevos*, and sometimes as a dessert, flavoured with orange rind, cinnamon and milk, *arroz con leche*. There was a variety of fish and shellfish items, such as *picante de camarones*, which were spiced shrimps, and a speciality called *ceviche*, which was, amazingly, raw fish marinated in lemon juice, with onions and red peppers.

They were prevaillingly rich dishes, spiced with pepper and garlic, and Domine hesitated some time over choosing what she wanted. It was her hesitation which irritated Lisel and precipitated their argument.

'What is wrong?' she demanded, when Domine sighed her indecision. 'Is the food not to your liking? Did you know that Peruvian food is some of the best in the world? We do not share your passion for bland dishes, without taste or identity.'

Domine put her menu aside, controlling her temper with difficulty. 'As I have just arrived from England, I should hate to upset my bland digestion by eating something I couldn't stomach,' she remarked carefully. 'What would you recommend?'

Lisel glanced across the table at Luis, who was lying back in his chair, regarding the wine list with the air of a man bored by the undiluted company of females. Then she said:

'Try the noodle soup. That one there.' She indicated her choice on the menu. 'That's a typically Peruvian dish, which ought to—please you.'

Domine shrugged. 'All right,' she said, not really caring what they brought. She wasn't particularly hungry, and even the narrow-eyed look Luis exchanged with his fiancée did not trouble her unduly. If she didn't like the *sopa*, she would leave it, and there was nothing Lisel could do about it.

They had an appetiser of fish, skewered and dipped in a piquant sauce, which Domine found delightfully palatable, and then the soup was served. It was rich and thick, with noodles floating to the surface, but it did not smell too spicy, and Domine took a mouthful.

She knew at once why Lisel had chosen this particular item. It was flavoured with hot chilli peppers, and to someone unused to their distinctive pungency, it had a biting sharpness. She felt as if someone had given her a spoonful of some burning liquid to

drink, that attacked the roof of her mouth with scalding thoroughness. Her lips parted in silent protest as she fought for breath, groping for the glass of wine beside her plate to relieve the pain. The wine brought little respite however, and her face was suffused with blood as she fumbled for her handkerchief.

'*You—you bitch!*' she exclaimed, turning to Lisel with angry eyes, and shocking her by speaking so plainly. 'You spiteful cat! You did that deliberately!'

Lisel was shocked, there was no doubt about it. Obviously, she had never expected Domine to react so positively, and in her world women did not speak so plainly or so frankly.

'I—I beg your—your pardon—' she began, stammering over her words, and then Luis came to the rescue once again.

'I am sure Lisel did not mean to—distress you, Miss Temple,' he assured her smoothly, but meeting his eyes, Domine could see the warning signals there. He was telling her she had overreached herself, that she was behaving childishly by retaliating, and that to accept his judgment would be the adult thing to do.

She didn't want to respond to his censure. She didn't want to give Lisel the satisfaction of believing she had gotten away with it. It would have given her the greatest pleasure to tell the other girl exactly what she thought of her, and she knew that when it came to that kind of confrontation, she would win every time. Grandpa had always teased her about her tongue, but he had been the first to admit she could handle herself in a verbal affray.

But common sense was vying with indignation, and humour with resentment. Maybe her attitudes seemed objectionable to Lisel, as Lisel's did to her. And she was guest in this country, after all. With the heat of her mouth subsiding, she turned back to her cousin, and with a rueful sigh she said drily:

'I'm sorry, I spoke—rather impulsively. But when one's eyes are watering, and one's mouth feels as if someone has just exploded a bomb in there, one isn't always in control of one's tongue.'

It was Lisel's opportunity to respond then, to make some small overture of her own, and reassure her cousin that her intentions had been honourable, whether Domine

believed her or not. Domine felt she would have respected Lisel more if she had admitted to a certain enjoyment in her cousin's plight, but that, she supposed, was asking too much.

In the event, neither of these two occurrences prevailed. Instead, Lisel maintained a stony silence throughout the rest of the meal, acknowledging Domine's apology with only the faintest inclination of her head, and rekindling all her cousin's indignation against her. It was as if she resented Domine's being in Lima at all, which seemed ridiculous when on the face of it, she was here for Lisel's sake.

During the afternoon they attended a concert at the conservatory, but when evening came Domine was determined to opt out of any arrangement Luis might have made. She had had more than enough of Lisel's company for one day, and she was almost relieved when she heard Luis suggesting that they might return to Puerto Limas the following afternoon.

'You may wish to do some shopping in the morning, Miss Temple,' he remarked, with the studied politeness that irritated her so much. 'I suggest we lunch together at your hotel, if you do not feel up to joining us this evening, and we will leave about two o'clock.'

'Yes. Yes, all right.'

Domine was eager to get away, and the strain of keeping up appearances for more than six hours was beginning to tell. She didn't understand Lisel, and she certainly didn't understand Luis, and she knew she would never understand herself for caring for a man like him...

CHAPTER SIX

THE telephone beside her rang, and all her previous doubt evaporated. It was Luis, it had to be Luis, ringing to apologise, she thought eagerly, reaching for the receiver and in spite of an awareness that what she was thinking was futile, that he saw her as nothing more than an attractive diversion, her voice trembled as she said: 'Hello?'

'Miss Temple? Domine?'

The confident transatlantic accent was harshly abrasive in the past twenty-four hours, she had forgotten all about the friendly American, and it was with a sense of crushing disappointment that she swung her feet to the floor and sat up.

'Hello, Ben,' she greeted him flatly. 'What a pleasant surprise.'

'It sounds like it.' His tone was dry. 'Did I ring at an awkward time or something? I did try to get to you last night, and again during today, and I was beginning to think you'd checked out on me.'

'Oh, no. No.' Domine struggled to compose herself. 'I— er—Señor Aguilar rang. He—he and my cousin are in Lima at the moment. I've been—spending my time with them.'

It was nothing less than the truth, but she felt guilty all the same. What a blessing he had not come to the hotel and witnessed her reunion with Luis!

'Ah!' Ben sounded as if he was satisfied with her explanation. 'So you've met the other Miss Temple. I expect that was quite a thrill for you both. Finding a long-lost relative—it must be quite something. I guess you have a lot to say to one another.'

Domine closed her eyes against the images his words evoked, and allowed him to interpret her silence as acquiescence. She could hardly admit to disliking her cousin intensely, particularly as she had convinced herself that it must be her own attraction to Luis which was colouring her judgment.

'So,' Ben sounded a little disappointed himself now, 'I guess you'll be tied up with our illustrious client and your cousin from now on. I'm sorry about that. I had hoped—'

'What?' Domine straightened her spine, as the quelling prospect of spending the evening alone was suddenly not so certain, and she heard his half-hearted murmur of protest.

'Well, I had hoped that perhaps we might have had a chance to meet again, before you left for Puerto Limas, but I guess that's out of the question now.'

Domine took a deep breath. 'Not necessarily,' she replied, ignoring the protesting censure of her conscience, that reminded her she had already turned down Luis's invitation. 'If—er—if you're free this evening—'

'If I'm free!' Ben sounded stunned. 'Say, you mean you'll have dinner with me?'

'If that's what you'd like.'

'Hell, you know I would.' Ben was jubilant. 'How soon can you be ready? Fifteen minutes? Thirty?'

'Yes. Give me thirty minutes,' Domine agreed, swallowing any lingering doubts that still remained, and Ben said he would be waiting downstairs in twenty-five.

She wore a chemise dress, of cream cotton with an apricot printed design. It left her neck and arms bare, and she draped a gauze wrap about her shoulders as she descended in the lift. She felt a certain apprehensiveness, walking across the hotel lobby, and she had the ominous feeling of dark eyes upon her, but there was no sign of Luis and she breathed again.

Ben's evening attire was much different from the Peruvians'. He wore a cream lounge suit, and his shirt was striped in blue, green and yellow. He wore no tie, and the bronzed column of his throat was exposed in the unbuttoned neckline of his shirt. But his welcome was reassuringly enthusiastic after the stressful day she had spent, and Domine was grateful. Taking both her hands in his, he surveyed her appearance with admiring eyes, and retained his hold on her as they walked out the glass doors.

'So here we are,' he murmured, after seating her in the front of the battered Chevrolet and sliding in beside her. 'You've made my day, do you know that?' He grinned, reaching for the ignition. 'Although I must say for someone whose just spent the day with a newly discovered relative, you don't seem overjoyed with life.'

Domine grimaced. 'Is it that obvious?'

Ben shrugged. 'You look—fed-up, if you want my honest opinion. I trust that has nothing to do with your acceptance of my invitation.'

'Oh, no.' Domine was quick to reassure him. 'I—as a matter of fact, I'm delighted you rang. I was—dreading spending the evening alone.'

Ben frowned. 'Didn't our mutual friend invite you to join him and his fiancée?'

Domine started. 'You know!'

'What? About your cousin and *Don Luis*?' He nodded. 'Sure. Didn't you?'

'I—why, no.' Domine turned to look out at the lighted boulevard they were passing, striving for composure. 'Not until today. But it wasn't my concern, was it?'

"N-o," Ben agreed slowly. "But I'm surprised he didn't tell you. I guess he was saving it as a surprise."

"I guess," said Domine tightly, and Ben looked thoughtful as they turned into the car park of a brightly-lit restaurant.

It was a different kind of restaurant from the one Luis had taken her to at lunchtime. It was newer, more brash, and the music emanating from its open windows was as exciting and rhythmic as Domine could have wished.

They ate French food, and afterwards they danced in the adjoining discotheque. It was modern and cosmopolitan, the kind of place one might find in any capital city, and it was exactly what Domine needed to take her mind off her problems.

Ben was a good companion. He had a dry wit, and he could be very amusing, particularly when he imitated the stiff manners of his employers. He made her laugh, which she hadn't done for some days now, and their common interest in books and films meant they were never short of something to say.

It was quite late in the evening when Luis's name came into the conversation again. It was Ben who brought him up, as they were moving slowly round the dance floor to a haunting melody, that reminded Domine of home.

"You didn't tell me why you're not dining with Aguilar this evening," he remarked, his fingers on her spine, unpleasantly hot through the thin material of her camisole. "Don't tell me he didn't ask you, because I don't believe it."

Domine sighed, drawing back from the rather suffocating circle of his embrace. "All right. I won't," she said. "He did ask me. I don't deny it. Only—only Lisel is his *fiancée*, and I'd had enough of feeling—an unwanted third."

"Really?" Ben grimaced. "Unwanted—by whom?"

Domine shook her head. "Does it matter?"

"I think so. Didn't you like your cousin?"

Domine hesitated. "I think—I think she didn't like me," she admitted reluctantly.

"Mmm." Ben seemed more inclined to believe this. "Is she like you? I mean—does she look like you?"

'Not at all.' Domine shrugged. 'I was surprised really. She doesn't look at all like our side of the family.'

'What was her mother like?'

'I don't know. I never met her.'

'I see. She really is a long-lost relative, then.'

'Yes.' Domine paused. 'My uncle left home before I was born. He and my grandfather didn't get along. I suppose it's a common enough story.'

'Yes.' Ben nodded. 'So you never met your uncle either?'

'No.'

'But—Miss Temple, Miss Lisel Temple, that is—she's your grandfather's heir?'

'Yes.' Domine's tone was rather flat. 'Can we leave it, please? I'd really rather not think about it until I have to.'

'I can understand that.'

Ben's understanding, however, caught Domine on the raw. 'I doubt that you can,' she declared, a trifle irritably 'I'm not—jealous of my cousin's good fortune, if that what you're thinking. I don't want Grandpa's money, never did. And I think it's time I went back to my hotel.'

'Oh, Domine!' Ben caught her wrist as she would have charged away. 'I wasn't implying that at all. And I'm sorry if you think I was. I—it's just—these cases—interest me! I don't know if I can explain exactly, but—well, it always intrigues me, when a family splits up and then something like this happens to bring them together again. I mean there are all sorts of connotations, aren't there? You never knew your uncle—or your aunt. Yet your grandfather must have kept in contact. Doesn't that intrigue you, too?'

Domine's shoulders sagged. 'I haven't really thought about it,' she admitted honestly. 'In any case, it's too late in the evening to start this kind of debate. I'm tired. I really am tired. Would you mind if I went back to the hotel now?'

But in her hotel room later, with a promise to telephone Ben should she need anything at all that her hosts could not provide behind her, she could not help speculating about what he had said. Was it only curiosity on his part, that he found Lisel's situation so interesting? Or was he perhaps aware of other aspects, not least the fact that she was

virtually an heiress? Would Lisel look at a man like Ben Domine wondered, unhooking her dress and stepping out of it. Somehow she doubted it. He was much too brash and over-confident for her tastes. In any case, why would any woman look at Ben, when she was already bound to a man who had everything he had, and so much more besides... The phone rang the next morning before Domine had ever opened her eyes. She had not slept at all well, and it was almost dawn before oblivion rescued her from the night-haunted misery of her thoughts. Consequently, the ringing of the telephone bell at a little after eight-thirty was an unwanted jarring of senses still weakened by exhaustion, and she clutched the receiver without enthusiasm.

'Yes?' she said wearily. 'What do you want?' And then, remembering her whereabouts, added: '*Que quiere usted?*'

'I have awakened you?' The deep male tones sent a shudder of anticipation right through her, and the lingering shreds of inertia fled.

'*Luis!*' she breathed, blinking rapidly. 'I—is—is there something wrong? Some change in the arrangements—'

'No change,' he interrupted her shortly, and then, with harsh aggression, he added: 'Where were you last night? I called—several times. But the receptionist said there was no reply from your room. I gave up just before midnight.' He paused. 'Were you with Lister?'

The initial thrill which had accompanied hearing his voice again, and knowing he had tried to telephone her the night before, sank beneath the wave of indignation that swept over her. His voice, his tone-, he was behaving as if it was some concern to him who she spent her time with, and while she accepted he might feel irritated that she had chosen Ben's company instead of his and Lisel's, it did not justify the raw anger she could sense he was barely suppressing.

'As—as a matter of fact, I did have dinner with Ben,' she conceded now, pushing up the pillows behind her, and propping herself upon them. 'He—he took me to a discotheque, and believe me, it was quite a relief to discover that there are young people in Lima who behave in a very similar way to young people in Eng—'

'I am not interested in where Lister chose to take you!' retorted Luis coldly. 'But your attitude appalls me! Apparently you feel no shame about going out with this man, even though you knew that the only reason I excused you from joining Lisel and myself was because I thought you were tired!'

'You—excused me!' Domine almost choked. 'Did you honestly expect me to spend the evening with you after the day I'd had?'

'I think it would have been the courteous thing to do," he essayed bleakly, and Domine wondered how he could so unfeeling.

'Well, I'm sorry,' she said now, annoyed to find she was trembling. 'I—I had had enough.'

'So you went out with Lister.'

'Yes.'

'I see.'

Domine drew an unsteady breath. 'So? Is that why you rang? To satisfy yourself that I am the—the irresponsible teenager, you think me? Or did you perhaps speculate whether I might have spent the night at Ben's apartment!'

She didn't know what made her say such outrageous things to him, but she was unprepared for his reaction. 'Did you go to Lister's apartment?' he demanded, in a tortured voice, and with a shattering sense of disbelief, she wondered if he was jealous.

'I—I—no! No, of course I didn't,' she got out jerkily, trying to assimilate this new development, and she heard a heavy expellation of breath.

'Are you seeing him again?' he asked now, his voice low and heavy, and she desperately wanted to reassure him. But she couldn't, and she was probably imagining it anyway, she decided, as she responded:

'I don't know. Not before I come back from Puerto Limas, in any case.' Then she paused, before adding 'Why? What right have you to ask?'

He did not answer this. Instead he said: 'Spend the morning with me. We could go to the beach. The water is magnificent at this time of the year. And much more pleasant than the hot streets of the city.'

Domine hesitated. 'You mean—the three of us could- go to the beach together?'

'No.' His denial was harsh. 'I think you know what I mean.'

It was a temptation, a glorious temptation, and one she had never expected to be offered. The prospect of spending several hours alone with Luis, and at the beach, was almost irresistible, particularly away from the confining influences of society, and its conventions ...

But what about Lisel? What about her cousin—and his fiancée? Had he no compunction about deceiving her? She guessed he had, so what was forcing him to offer her his company? What did he really expect of her? She disturbed him, that much was obvious, but she doubted it was more than that. He probably imagined that because she belonged to a free-thinking society, she embraced all its dictates, not least that of free love. Perhaps, his intention was to get her out of his system once and for all, and in her society there was only one accepted way of doing that...

'I'm sorry,' she said now, making what she thought was the most momentous decision of her life. 'I—I may not like Lisel, but I won't hurt her. And—and besides, I want to go shopping. I think it would be best if—if we stuck to the original arrangements, don't you?'

She would not have been surprised if he had hung up on her then, but he didn't, and the natural moisture of her mouth dried up.

'Domine!' Her name on his lips was a plea for sanity. 'Domine, I want to see you.'

How much of this could she take? Domine pushed back her hair with an unsteady hand. 'Then—then you'll have to come shopping with me,' she murmured, never expecting him to agree, but he did.

'Nine-thirty. In the foyer,' he declared brusquely, and rang off before she could change her mind.

Bathing and dressing, she was all thumbs, and she spent far too long deciding what she would wear. The rest of her belongings had to be packed, too, ready to take to the airport later, and her choice had to suit both shopping and travelling.

Eventually she decided on a white cotton suit, with a semi-flared skirt, and a bloused top that tied with cords at her waist. It was threaded with red beading, and the wide elbow-length sleeves were cool as well as feminine.

She took coffee in the dining room, and was finishing her second cup when a shadow darkened the tablecloth. It was Luis, tall and lean and disturbing, in a thin silk lounge suit its deep brown colouring relieved by a shiny bronze shirt. It was unfair to compare him to Ben Lister, but she couldn't help it, and when he helped her to her feet and her finger slid automatically between his, she wondered how she had had the strength to deny him anything.

'Good morning,' he greeted her politely, though she thought his dark pupils held a much more intimate message 'I hope I have not spoiled your breakfast.'

Domine denied this, though she withdrew her hand from his as they walked towards the exit, forcing a smile for the waiter, and trying not to be aware that Luis was watching her every move.

Beyond the glass doors the sunlight was dazzling, and Domine slid dark glasses on to her nose, glad of the slight anonymity they provided. The white Mercedes was waiting at the entrance, but when she insisted that she wanted to walk, Luis tossed his keys to the commissionaire and declared he would have the car collected later in the day.

'You're not—driving to Puerto Limas, then,' Domine offered, as he adjusted his longer stride to hers, and he shook his head as he explained that he kept the Mercedes permanently in the city.

Domine soon discovered, however, that few of the shops were open so early in the morning, and turning to Luis, she exclaimed, 'You must have known this. Why didn't you tell me? Or didn't you intend to go shopping at all?'

Luis's lean mouth turned down at the corners. 'Is that the opinion you have of me?' he asked tautly. Then, more coolly, he added: 'My intention was to take you to visit a jeweller friend of mine in San Isidro, but as you insisted we did not use the car, I had to revise my plans. No obstante, we can hire a taxi, if you wish it, and return to finish your shopping later.'

Domine hesitated. She wanted to go with him, but that was not the point. She had determined to go shopping, to avoid any chance of being alone with Luis.

'Who—who is this—friend of yours?' she ventured at last, stopping to look in the window of a small boutique. 'Why should you want to take me to meet him?'

Luis's reflection mirrored his impatience. '*Por Dios*, what do you expect of me?' he demanded roughly. 'I simply want you to see this man's work. If you do not wish to travel alone with me in a taxi, we can take a colectivo, no? Would that satisfy you?'

Colectivos were the very cheap taxis that plied about the streets of Lima, carrying five passengers at a time, and picking up and putting down at set points through the city. Domine had seen some of them the previous day, and she had no particular desire to trust herself to their dubious reliability.

'We'll take a taxi,' she said after a moment's pause, and Luis turned abruptly aside to hail one, so that again she had no time for second thoughts.

Juan Miguel Copera's workshop adjoined his house. He lived in one of Peru's attractive garden suburbs, and its wide tree-lined avenues and wealth of colourful plants and flowers were a suitable setting for the residential villas and apartment buildings they passed. The jeweller's wife offered them coffee, and then her husband took them into his workshop to view the gold and silverwork for which Luis said he was famous.

It was a cluttered little room, and in the limited light it was difficult to appreciate all he had to show them. But it was impossible not to appreciate the craftsman's skill which had shaped a gold ring into an eagle's crest and coiled another, like a snake. There were heavy bracelets, and fragile bangles, plaited chains, and intricately carved medallions, gold and silver masks, and ornamental weapons, and goblets and tableware Domine felt sure she would never dare use. Still, she was fascinated, and glad that Luis had chosen to bring her.

While Luis contracted some business of his own, Domine examined the collection of clocks and watches that filled a glass case to one side of the workshop. Some of the pieces there were obviously very old, and she was admiring the workings of a French ormolu chronometer when Luis came to tell her it was time to leave.

'You will have gathered that Juan is something of an enthusiast when it comes to timepieces,' he remarked. 'His collects antique clocks and restores them to their original condition.' A half smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, 'Sometimes they work more efficiently after his treatment than they did before.'

He looked into her eyes as he spoke, and for a few breathtaking seconds she was riveted by his gaze. There were no barriers between them in those moments, and when his lids drooped it was only to concentrate his attention on her mouth. It was as if he had touched her, and her hand went out automatically towards him, as if to ward him off. But he captured her hand in his, and raised it deliberately to his lips, bestowing a kiss on her palm that had all the intimacy that his tongue against her flesh could evoke.

Then Señor Copera spoke, and Luis dropped her hand and turned away, leaving her feeling more drained than she would have thought possible after such an open display.

Señor Copera arranged for a taxi to take them back to the city, but once inside the vehicle, Domine shifted as far into her corner as it was possible to go. Luis, after giving the driver instructions to take them to La Union, seated himself beside her, and when she determinedly stared out of the window, he said huskily:

'You do not have to be afraid of me, Domine. I know that I must do, and I will do it. Nevertheless,' he paused, and she guessed she was not making it any easier for him, 'I cannot allow you to go to Puerto Limas thinking the worst of me.'

Domine drew an unsteady breath, but she still didn't look at him. 'You—you said what you had to say yesterday morning,' she pointed out jerkily. 'You don't have to say any more. What—what happened between us—it wasn't important. You don't have to go on appeasing me.'

'*Dios*, Domine, I am not appeasing you!' he swore harshly, and almost without his volition, his fingers fastened about her forearm, bringing her head round to stare at him in dismay. 'I know what I said yesterday morning, and we both know how futile that was.' He sighed. 'You are so—different from the women I have known. Different— *Dios!*' He smote his forehead with the palm of his hand. 'You are not a woman even. A girl, *no bien*. But I find myself thinking of you when I should be thinking of other things, and last night, when I could not reach you, I was almost out of my mind—'

'Luis—'

"No, listen to me. I am going to marry Lisel. That is my commitment. But I want you to know that had things been different ...'

'Please don't go on.' Domine didn't want to hear any more. Somehow, it was worse having it put into words, not cold-bloodedly exactly, but logically and reasonably, as if emotions could be controlled as easily as that. 'I—I'm sure you'll make Lisel an admirable husband.'

'Don't mock me, Domine!' He glanced half impatiently towards the driver as she spoke, as if aware that he might be able to overhear their low-voiced conversation. 'I am trying to be honest with you, and with myself. But as this may be our last opportunity of being alone together, I wanted to give you something to—'

'No!' Now Domine wrenched her arm from his grasp and gazed at him with pained eyes. 'I won't take anything.'

'Not even this?' he persisted, overriding her protest and drawing a delicate filigee chain from his pocket. It was gold, a circlet of finely sculpted metal, with the hallmark of a master craftsman. She had no doubt that Juan Copera was responsible for its execution, and while she could admire its skilled interpretation, she wanted nothing from Luis, nothing at all. 'It is beautiful, is it not?'

'No!' she repeated, refusing to take it from his hand. 'I don't want anything of yours.'

'It is not mine, it is yours,' he insisted huskily. 'I bought it for you. Wear it. It would give me so much satisfaction.'

'No.' Domine continued to shake her head. 'You have no right to buy me things, and I have no right to take them. Lisel—'

'Let us leave Lisel out of this!'

'How can we?' Her eyes were wide and indignant. 'What possible justification can you make for buying something like that? What do you think I am? Is it intended as some kind of blackmail? To ensure my silence on matters you would rather not have discussed? Or is it perhaps a down-payment for services yet to be rendered?'

'Be silent!' His violent interjection brought an inquisitive stare from the driver, but Luis was past caring. 'Why does it seem so unreasonable to you that I might want to buy you something—some small thing—as a memento of your visit to Peru? Am I not to be given even the smallest consideration? If I told you—you could show the chain to Lisel, and

explain the circumstances of its purchase, would that satisfy you? Or do you expect me to shout the truth of my attraction to you from the rooftops of Lima?'

'Oh, Luis!'

She gazed at him then, unable to hide the emotion in her eyes, and he was not proof against the unknowing sensuality of her parted lips. Moving closer, so that his thigh was against hers, he pressed her back into her corner, covering her mouth with his own while his body concealed the hand that cupped her breast from the driver's curious attention.

'Luis, no ...' she choked, when she could get her mouth free. The touch of his fingers through her thin blouse was causing her nipple to harden against his palm, evoking the most abandoned feelings inside her, and with a hardening of his jawbone he obeyed her.

'You see,' he said harshly, turning his head away from her. 'I do exactly as you say. Why can you not offer me the same courtesy?'

'Because it's not fair to ask me,' she retorted, pressing a hand to her throat, and with a savage expletive he leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

'*Parese aqui!*' he ordered, directing the man to stop at the kerb. Then, as Domine watched with startled eyes, he got out and slammed the door behind him, stopping only to pay the fare and order the driver to take her back to the *El Prado*.

'Wait...Domine leaned forward as the cab set away once more, but Luis ignored her, striding away down a narrow side-street that opened off the main thoroughfare, leaving her feeling sick and miserable, and intensely alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT was a Moorish-style villa, with white-painted shutters, and columns dripping with red and purple bougainvilleas. There were wrought iron balconies, and a spiral staircase that gave access to the first floor, and a central patio, where a stone fountain sprayed water into a mosaic-tiled basin. It was big, much bigger than she had expected, and its split-level halls and terraces spread over half an acre. It stood in a formal garden of magnolia

and cypress trees, interspersed with flowering plants and cactus, and they formed a green backcloth for its pastel-coloured walls.

Arriving just before nightfall, Domine was unable to prevent a gasp of pure wonderment at its sprawling beauty, the petals of a magnolia blossom drooping at her feet as Luis's chauffeur helped her out of the car.

It had been a long and, at times, hairy journey from Lima. The flight to Arequipa had been efficient enough, although the air currents as the plane came in to land had made the landing itself that much more bumpy, and Domine's knees had shaken a little as she made her way down the steps and on to the tarmac.

They had had little chance to see the town that dominated this department of Peru, but high above them the snowcapped peak of El Misti, the extinct volcano that brooded over the area capital, was an unmistakable landmark. Luis had remarked, in the taut controlled tones he had adopted since meeting Domine and his fiancée for lunch at the hotel, that Arequipa was known as the white city, because of its buildings, made out of the white, or pink, volcanic rock that was quarried locally.

Domine's first impression was marred by a faint feeling of breathlessness, which she knew was due to the increase in altitude. Luis had warned her that while Arequipa was not as elevated as Cuzco, nevertheless it was quite a transformation from the afternoon humidity of Lima, and she was glad to get into the chauffeur-driven limousine that was waiting for them.

Carlos, Luis's chauffeur, had brought another Mercedes, a dark green model this time, whose dust-streaked elegance spoke of sun-parched earth and dried-up roads. Luis took over the wheel of the vehicle himself, however, and Carlos was ousted from the front of the car, and joined Domine in the back.

It was an incredible journey. The day had clouded a little, and the landscape had a softness that she had not seen in the north of the country. The road was narrow, winding precipitately between enormous wedges of rock, and once the outskirts of the city had fallen behind them, habitations were few and far between. Domine saw a government forestry school, where considerable irrigation was necessary to keep the seedlings alive, and electricity pylons, stretching across the hillside, that seemed totally out of keeping

with their surroundings. There were occasional villages, adobe houses thatched with wood, where children appeared to watch their progress, and women sat in doorways, weaving the brightly-coloured alpaca shawls Domine had admired in the shops in Lima. They saw hogs, and a man driving a herd of llama from one pasture to another, which made Domine's head turn, as she was forced to acknowledge the increasing alienation of her surroundings.

Once a truck came hurtling at them round one of the hairpin bends, and Luis was forced to pull over to the very edge of the road to accommodate it. Below them, a ravine stretched in all its savage starkness, and Domine's mouth was dry when they began to move again. They seemed to be travelling a great distance, although she guessed the range and quality of the terrain was responsible for this feeling, and she had scarcely recovered from their confrontation with the truck before they crossed one of the narrow ravines on a suspension that seemed as insubstantial as a rope-bridge. It swayed as they crossed it, and her fingers gripped the seat, her nails biting into the leather.

'Nervous, *señorita?*' mocked Lisel, from the front seat, turning to survey her cousin with malicious eyes. 'Do not alarm yourself. My fiancé is a most-careful motorist, and I am assured he will not drive us into the abyss.'

'Perhaps Domine does not have the faith in me that you have, Lisel,' Luis commented at this, and his fiancée's expression mirrored a certain puzzlement at his unexpected words.

No doubt she was also wondering when he had decided to call her by her Christian name, thought Domine uneasily, realising that Luis's remark was meant for her ears as well.

It was dusk when they reached Puerto Limas. They came down a steep pass that grew lusher as they descended, widening into a grassy valley, watered by several deep *quebradas*. It was so unexpected, finding such civilised countryside within the arm of the mountains, overlooked by the ice-fields of the high sierras.

The village itself was tiny, nothing more than a collection of adobe dwellings and a church set about a square, or plaza, as they were called here, but Luis did not stop in the village. He drove on to where a gentle slope gave access to the gates of a private estate

and the winding drive, shadowed by trees Domine could not begin to identify, hid the Villa Aguilas from prying eyes.

An Indian woman appeared as they were getting out of the car. She came hurrying out of the villa to greet them, speaking to Luis first, and then acknowledging Lisel's presence with the most perfunctory of curtseys. Luis, who had been assisting his fiancée from the vehicle, turned to Domine at the Indian woman's approach and said stiffly:

'Allow me to present my housekeeper, Consuelo. Consuelo, this is Miss Temple's cousin from England, who has come to stay with *la Señora*.'

Domine managed to greet Consuelo politely, but her eyes turned back to Luis at his final words. '*La Señora*?' she echoed faintly, not understanding, and Lisel chose to make the explanations.

'*La Señora* is my fiancé's mother,' she said, as Carlo: extracted their suitcases from the boot of the car. 'Naturally, it would not be suitable for you to stay in Luis's house He is unmarried—for the moment,' she flashed him a dazzling smile, 'and unfortunately, we cannot accommodate you at the convent.'

Domine, tired from the journey, felt an intense weariness sweep over her. 'But where does your mother live?' she exclaimed, appealing to Luis, and as if relenting a little, he replied:

'Not far from here. In the grounds of the villa. In the house I built for her when my father died.'

'Oh.' Domine's relief was palpable. She didn't think she could travel any further that night. Weakness was making her emotional, and she wondered how she might have felt if Luis had not been engaged to Lisel, and she could have visited his home without this sense of feeling an interloper. As it was, she felt drained and tearful, and not at all up to meeting the new source of hostility that Luis's mother must represent.

'We will go inside and you may freshen up before dinner,' Luis was saying now, and she had to force herself to concentrate. 'Afterwards, I will escort you to the *Casa de Flores* and introduce you to your hostess.'

'*Casa de Flores*,' Domine repeated to herself, as she stood in one of the villa's luxurious bathrooms, and soaked her hot cheeks with cool water. 'The House of Flowers,' she

murmured, grimacing at her reflection, and in spite of the beauty of its name, she felt only apprehensive of her reception.

A young maid, whose name she discovered was Leah, escorted her to the salon, after she had renewed her makeup. Lisel was there, sipping a glass of orange juice, but of Luis there was no sign. However, her cousin invited her to take a seat in one of the comfortable leather armchairs, and then offered her a drink from the comprehensive array visible in the fitted cabinet beside a stone-faced fireplace.

Domine chose sherry, and while Lisel was pouring the amber-coloured liquid, she took a determined interest in her surroundings. This really was a beautiful room, she thought, just as the living room at his apartment had been, but without any apparent reminder of his first wife's existence. Its spacious appearance was enhanced by pale walls, and light wood, and shallow steps leading up to a garden balcony spilled geranium and hibiscus flowers from pedestals of alabaster. Chairs and sofas were arranged about the room, vivid with jewel-bright cushions, and although there were paintings on the walls, there were no portraits here of Maria Aguilar—and perhaps that was how it should be.

Lisel turned and came back to her as Domine was leaning forward to touch the intricate carving of the small table beside her. Taking the delicately-fluted glass, Domine thanked her, but then stiffened a little when Lisel seated herself beside her. There was no friendly overture hidden in that assured action, and somewhat apprehensively Domine raised her glass to her lips.

'Tell me,' Lisel wasted no time, and now that they were alone together, her hostility was unmistakable, 'why did you come to Peru? Who invited you? What possible reason can you have for wanting to promote a relationship between us, where none has existed all these years?'

To say that Domine was disturbed was an understatement. She had known that Lisel was not enthusiastic about her visit, but she had never suspected her cousin actually objected to her being there. In truth, she had believed Luis when he had said that Lisel would welcome her friendship, and in spite of her attraction towards him, she had seen the logic of that.

Now, however, she had to defend herself, and running the tip of her finger round the rim of her glass, she asked quietly: 'Why do you think I've come, Lisel? That's really more to the point, isn't it?'

Lisel's lips tightened. 'Oh, I know why you are here,' she declared, and Domine's brows arched in surprise. 'Your grandfather has cut you out of his will. Naturally, you wanted to make my acquaintance. And the sooner the better.'

Domine gasped. She was tired, it was true, and weary, and the last thing she wanted was to argue with Lisel tonight, but she could not let that go unchallenged.

'You think I've come out here for some ulterior motives of my own?' she protested. "You think that because Grandpa made you his heiress I'm hoping to sponge off you?'

'Sponge?' Lisel scowled. 'What is this word—sponge?'

'It means someone trying to—to live off someone else. A sponger. A person who lives by his wits.'

'Mmm,' Lisel nodded, 'I understand.' She pursed her lips. 'Well, it will do, I suppose. I know what I mean. You—and your brother, you have lived off your grandfather all these years. Now you hope for me to support you.'

'That's not true!' Domine sprang to her feet, unable to sit still under such an accusation.

'Your—your fiancé invited me out here. I didn't want to come—'

'Then why did you?'

'Because I—I felt sorry for you.'

'You felt sorry for me?'

'Yes.'

'Why should you feel sorry for me?' Lisel was clearly not convinced.

'Because Luis—because your fiancé—said that as you had lived in the convent for so many years, you were out of touch with modern society. He thought I might be able to tell you about England, prepare you, if you like. He said you were—shy, and that leaving Peru after all these years would be quite an ordeal!'

Lisel sniffed, rather rudely Domine thought, and then she made a sound of impatience. 'As I have no intention of leaving Peru for the time being, the situation does not arise,' she stated flatly. 'Why else do you suppose I asked Luis to go to England in

the first place? I may visit the country at some future date, but not until after the mills are sold!

Domine swayed a little unsteadily. 'You mean—to sell the mills?'

'Of course. Did not Luis explain? You cannot imagine I might choose to live in that cold climate, when I was— when I was brought up in much warmer climes.'

Domine put down her glass and tried to behave composedly. But all she could think of was Grandpa, and Mark, and all the people whose lives revolved around the Temple Mills, and she wanted to scream at Lisel for putting all that in jeopardy.

'Consuelo informs me that dinner is ready.'

Luis's voice from the doorway broke into Domine's numbed emotional state, and she swung round to stare at him with dark accusing eyes. His brows drew together only perceptibly, as he registered her distress, then Lisel had left her chair to join him, sliding her arm through his, and saying:

'We are ready, *querido*. And then afterwards you can drive me back to the hospital, while Carlos delivers—my cousin—to your mother.'

'I don't want any dinner,' stated Domine clearly, not really caring how impolite that might sound. 'I'd like to go to my room straight away, so if you'd tell me how to get to your mother's——'

'I will take you.'

Luis's decision was swift and brooked no argument, and Lisel stood aside obediently when he indicated that Domine should accompany him. But as Domine passed the other girl, she saw the faint smile of contempt in her eyes and guessed that Lisel thought she held all the cards.

A small vehicle stood on the drive, to one side of the huge Mercedes. It was a kind of open jeep, the sort of thing Domine had seen used on beaches back home. Obviously, Carlos had left it there to transport her to the house of Luis's mother, for her suitcases were in the back, one piled upon the other.

Luis hesitated only a moment before indicating that she should climb into the jeep, and then swung himself in beside her, starting the engine in one lithe fluid movement.

Beyond the lights of the villa, the track they were following led between trees and bushes, pungent with the smell of earth and vegetation. The petals of a camellia brushed the bonnet of the vehicle as they passed, and the exotic perfume of the passionflower vine mingled with the more delicate scents of roses and lobelia. It was an odd experience driving through the darkness, oppressed on all sides by the lushness of nature, but Domine felt too raw to respond to its sensual appeal.

Then, when she thought Luis was not going to mention anything about what had happened back at the villa, he slowed the jeep to a crawl and said tightly: 'What did Lisel tell you, that you have to look at me as an enemy? Whatever happens between us, I can never be that, and you should know it.'

Domine hesitated, loath to confide in him—but without him she had nobody. 'She told me she plans to sell the mills,' she admitted tremulously. 'That she doesn't intend to go to England at present, and that that was why you had gone in her place.'

'I see.' Luis inclined his head. 'And you, of course, had no reason not to believe her.'

Domine twisted her head sideways. 'What do you mean?' His profile was very dark in the shadowy illumination thrown back by the headlights, and she wished she could see his expression.

'Lisel is afraid of England,' said Luis at last, and ignoring her gasp of disbelief, he went on: 'It is true. I did go to England in her place, but you knew that. So far as selling the mills is concerned, I have advised her to wait. Her instincts are to dispose of them, because they represent a threat to her security here. That is all.'

Domine shook her head. 'It's not that simple.'

'You misunderstand her,' he averred firmly. 'Oh, I admit, you two have not taken to one another as I could have wished, but perhaps that was asking too much.' He paused. 'But there is plenty of time. That is the purpose of bringing you here—to give us time.'

'Us?' Domine hunched her shoulders.

'Domine ...' he spoke her name urgently, 'don't make this any more difficult for me than it is already. Our time in Lima—that is over. Here, I am *Don Luis Delgado Aguilar, el Patrón*, and whatever my personal feelings may be, I will not betray the trust that has been placed in me.'

The jeep picked up speed, and Domine forced aside the feelings of self-pity that were gripping her. If he could assume that mask of detachment, then so would she. She would not give Lisel any further reason to suspect her motives, and despite all Luis had said, she reserved her opinion as to her cousin's intentions.

The *Casa de Flores* suited its name. Set amidst flowering trees and shrubs, its lattice-worked porch overhung with honeysuckle, it looked a little like the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. Hidden among the vines and foliage, it was a charming little retreat, vastly different in size and scale from the Villa Aguilas.

Luis stopped the jeep, and swung himself to the ground as the door opened, and a dark-clad woman appeared in the aperture. The light was behind her, so Domine could not see her face, but from the shawl about her shoulders, she thought she must be quite old.

'Luis, *mi hijo*,' she heard her say, as Luis went to greet her, and she did not need to see the affectionate kisses he bestowed on either cheek to know that this was his mother. Domine's nerves jangled a little as, forestalling his assistance, she also climbed out of the jeep, and she went to meet the woman they called *la Señora*, with undisguised apprehension.

Luis introduced them, and Domine felt ridiculously like curtsying before this small but regal lady. Señora Aguilar was every inch the Spanish aristocrat, from the top of her head with its mantilla comb, to the toes of her neat patent shoes. Yet for all that, she was charming, and so unexpectedly friendly, that Domine could have cried with the relief she experienced. Here was none of Lisel's autocracy, or the hostility she had steeled herself to expect. *La Señora* was sympathetic, and kind, and once her lace mantilla had been identified, not half as old as Domine had thought her.

The *Casa de Flores* also was deceptive. An oval hall, with panels of mahogany between its many arches, gave access to several other rooms: a drawing room and salon, a library and a music room, and a delightfully unusual garden room, with lots of climbing plants. A wrought iron staircase gave access to the first floor, with an almost circular balcony looking down on the hall beneath, and Domine guessed she ought to have realised that Luis would not permit his mother to live in less comfort than himself.

Luis had brought her suitcases into the hall, and now he turned to his mother and said: 'I must not stay. Consuelo has a meal all ready for us, but unfortunately Miss Temple did not feel up to eating it. However, I must not disappoint Lisel, and I am persuaded you will ensure that our guest does not go hungry.'

He had spoken in English, out of respect for Domine, and his mother replied in kind, her accent almost as good as her son's. 'Of course,' she said, glancing thoughtfully at the girl beside her. 'We will see you tomorrow, no doubt. *Hasta la vista!*'

Luis moved towards the door. 'Until tomorrow, then,' he said, smiling politely. '*Buenas noches!*'

'*Buenas noches, caro,*' his mother replied, and Domine managed a terse: 'Goodnight, *señor!*' as he closed the panelled door behind him.

Alone with *Señora* Aguilar, there was a moment when they each surveyed the other, almost warily, and then the older woman smiled, banishing any trace of awkwardness that remained.

'Come,' she said. 'You look tired. I will show you your room, and while Gomez brings up your luggage, Cristina will make you some tea. You would like that? A cup of tea?'

'Oh, please!' Domine could think of nothing she would like better and with a snap of her fingers *Señora* Aguilar summoned a middle-aged maidservant, neatly attired in black.

As they climbed the stairs together, Luis's mother explained that Gomez and Cristina were her only servants, that they were husband and wife, and had been with her a great number of years.

'We have grown old together, Cristina and I,' she declared, with one of the mischievous smiles Domine found so difficult to resist. 'And you must forgive us if we seem a little out of date, no?'

'I am sure I'm going to enjoy staying here, *señora,*' Domine asserted sincerely, realising she was almost glad she was not staying in Luis's house. 'It's very kind of you to put up with me. I—I suppose I assumed I should be staying at a hotel.'

'Did you? Or perhaps at the Villa Aguilar,' remarked Señora Aguilar shrewdly, leading the way into an attractive room that opened off the balcony. 'I am sure in England it would not be considered an outrageous thing to stay in the house of an unmarried man as it is here.'

Domine hesitated, allowing her delight in the sprigged linen flounces of the bedspread that exactly matched the linen paper on the walls to distract her answer. It was not difficult. The cream curtains with their mint and apricot design were so attractive, and the feminine touches of dusting powder on the dressing table and a bowl of roses on the table beside the bed did not go unobserved.

'It's beautiful!' she said, and it was by no means an undeserved superlative. 'I don't know how to thank you.'

'The roses were Cristina's idea,' remarked her hostess unconcernedly, 'although I picked them myself. Do you really like it? It used to be my youngest daughter's room. After my husband died, I did not want to go on living in the villa, so we—Aha and I—moved into this house Luis had built for us.'

'I see.' Domine nodded. Perhaps that explained why there was no evidence of Maria's presence at the villa. Possibly she had never lived there.

'So,' Señora Aguilar spread her hands, 'you have everything you need? The bathroom is through that door there, and if you want anything you have only to pull this cord.'

'Thank you.'

Señora Aguilar smiled again, but as she moved towards the door she hesitated. 'Tell me,' she said, 'I do not mean to pry, but when you arrived here with my son, you seemed—distract.' She paused. 'Is there anything wrong? Did my son—or Lisel—do anything to upset you?'

Domine knew the almost overwhelming desire to confess, to tell this kind and compassionate woman exactly what had happened to her since she came to Peru, but she couldn't do it. Apart from anything else, this woman was Luis's mother, soon to be Lisel's mother-in-law, and she would never condone the expectations Domine had had, whether or not they were justified.

'I'm tired, señora,' she said now, moving her shoulders expressively. 'I—er—I didn't sleep well last night, and today—travelling ...'

'I understand.' Señora Aguilar nodded, though her eyes were still thoughtful. 'We will talk more fully in the morning. I want to know what you think of my country, of its capital city, and of course, I want to hear about England.'

Domine's smile was a little forced. 'I—I'm very grateful.'

'De nada,' insisted Señora Aguilar gently, and left her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AWAKENING in the morning to the excited chatter of the birds outside her window, Domine felt more prepared to face the day ahead. Whether it was simply that she had slept well, and in consequence felt more refreshed, she could not be sure, but certainly the realisation that she was in Luis's mother's house accounted for a little of the restored confidence she was feeling.

She was cleaning her teeth in the bathroom when someone knocked at the door, and her muffled *'Adelante!'* brought Cristina with her breakfast on a tray.

'La Señora thought you might like to take breakfast in bed this morning, *señorita,'* she told her, speaking in Spanish, and Domine did not hesitate before replying in that language.

'That was very kind of her,' she exclaimed, examining the tray Cristina had set down on the bedside table. 'Mmm, peach conserve! Delicious! Will you thank her for me, Cristina, and tell her you are both spoiling me!'

Cristina laughed. Already Domine felt that they were friends. The night before, the dark-skinned Indian woman had brought her cakes and sandwiches, as well as the tea Señora Aguilar had ordered, and once she knew that Domine could speak her language, she had chattered away quite happily. While she unpacked the cases that her husky husband had brought upstairs, she had told Domine how good it was to have a young person in the house again. She had explained that Señorita Ana was married herself

now, with two small babies of her own, and that Señora Aguilar was never happier than when her youngest daughter visited and brought the babies to see her. Domine had been unable to prevent the thought that perhaps his mother was encouraging Luis, too. With his children on the doorstep, so to speak, she need never feel lonely again.

Now, Cristina departed to deliver her message, and Domine sat down on the edge of the bed and tackled the tray. She had eaten little of the previous night's offering, but this morning she was hungry, and she ate several of the crisp slices of bread, and drank three cups of strong black coffee.

She dressed a little more formally than she might have done at home—although her loose, flowing smock dress was beautifully cool—and looped her hair into a coil slightly above her neck, to allow the breeze to fan her nape.

It was after ten o'clock when she went downstairs, and she came upon Cristina first, polishing the silver lamp sconces in the hall.

'You'll find *Doña* Elena in the garden room,' she directed, waving her duster. 'She's usually there at this time of day, watering her plants.'

'Thank you.'

Domine crossed the hall quickly, the high heels of her cork sandals clattering on the wooden tiles, and Señora Aguilar came to the archway that gave access to her domain.

'So there you are, *señorita*,' she greeted her warmly, and Domine automatically transferred to English. 'Did you sleep well? Was the bed comfortable? You must tell me if there is anything that you need, anything at all I—'

'I slept very well, *señora*,' Domine assured her smilingly. 'And thank you for sending me breakfast.'

Señora Aguilar nodded her greying head in satisfaction. This morning, her garb of black was relieved by a floral overall, and Domine wondered whether the older woman secretly cherished a wish to wear brighter colours occasionally. She was carrying a watering can in one hand, and now she turned back to her task, saying comfortably:

'Cristina will look after you, I am sure. She misses having young people about the house.'

Domine acknowledged this with a wry humour. Obviously, the two women had grown more alike than they knew.

'I will just finish here, and then I will show you my garden,' Señora Aguilar was condoning. 'Do you like gardening, Miss Temple? I find such satisfaction in the propagation of plants, and it compensates me somewhat for my lack of grandchildren.'

'Oh, but—' Domine broke off in embarrassment, about to admit that Cristina had been gossiping, and Señora Aguilar gave her a knowing look.

'Yes,' she said, pulling on gardening gloves to protect her hands as she weeded the soil around a sturdy hydrangea. 'Cristina has told you, no doubt, that Ana has twins whom I dote upon. And my younger son, Felipe, has a daughter of fourteen, whom I also love dearly. But it is Luis's children I want about me, his sons or daughters to comfort me in my old age. Let us hope that this marriage he is planning will bring me my dearest wish, and that he will find some happiness at last.'

Domine did not know how to answer her, but as some answer was obviously expected, she said: 'His—that is, your son's first wife died, didn't she?'

'You know about that?'

Too late, Domine realised that it was hardly the sort of thing Luis might be expected to tell her, and moving her shoulders awkwardly, she admitted:

'I—I asked him— whether or not he was married, and—and he told me his wife was dead.'

'I see.' Señora Aguilar straightened, rubbing the earth from her fingers, and meeting that penetrating gaze, Domine had no doubt who she resembled at that moment. 'Yes. Poor Maria,' she averred regretfully. 'But she would never have made a good wife for Luis.'

'No?' Domine's response was faint, but the older woman didn't seem to notice. 'She was an invalid, you know,' she went on. 'Luis knew this, of course, before he married her.' She sighed. 'You might wonder why he did so. But their marriage was arranged more than thirty years ago, by my husband and Maria's father, and Luis would not deny his obligations, despite the obvious outcome.'

Domine could believe that. He had not changed. He still respected honour above all else.

'Of course,' Señora Aguilar continued, 'these days young people are not so—how would you say?—biddable? They read the newspapers, and they listen to the radio, and they begin to ask for independence. Independence! The right to choose their own partners!' She shook her head. 'It is the way of the world, always to change—everything.'

The gardens immediately surrounding the *Casa de Flores* were tended by Gomez, but Señora Aguilar shared his task. The formal lawns at the back of the house were manicure-smooth, but beyond the neatly-boxed hedges, an explosion of sub-tropical growth threatened the quaintly paved footpaths that wound between. Domine saw flame trees and passion-flowers, bougainvillaea on trellises, and poinsettias, red and exotic. She saw a profusion of plants and flowers she couldn't identify, and not even her grasp of Latin could help her to absorb a half of what Señora Aguilar told her.

Towering above it all, the purple-shrouded peaks cast their shadow over the valley. It was incredible to stand here among this lush vegetation and look up towards ice-fields where the snow never relented, where glaciers, steel-blue against the morning sky, thrust their pinnacles towards the sun. Of course, from below they looked innocent enough, but Domine had seen enough of those craggy peaks to distrust their savage beauty.

Down in the valley, all that could be heard were the birds and the insects, and the tinkle of a cowbell in the pasture. As they walked, Señora Aguilar explained that the villagers relied on agriculture for their livelihood, and the flocks of llama and alpaca that roamed the lower slopes were a primary source of wealth to the people. The production of wool was an important industry, although the fine skin of the alpaca was far superior to that of its commoner relative.

'But of course, you know all about wool, do you not,' Señora Aguilar commented, giving her companion a sympathetic glance. 'Your grandfather founded his fortune in woollen mills, did he not? You must feel a little sad that you are no longer to be involved.'

Sad? Domine thought about that. Yes, she supposed she was sad. It was a good description of her feelings. Not angry or envious, but sad that Temples would no longer run the Temple Mills.

'My grandfather was a—proud man,' she replied now. 'You would have liked him, *señora*. He appreciated the old-fashioned values. Unfortunately my brother Mark seldom showed any interest in the company, and Grandpa chose the only way he knew to bring him to his senses.'

Yet she couldn't help wondering how Grandpa would feel now if he knew that Lisel was contemplating selling the company. That really depressed her. That her grandfather's life's work should be sold to some huge consortium.

'You're not bitter?'

Domine shook her head. 'No. Why should I be?'

'I can think of a number of reasons,' remarked Señora Aguilar dryly.

'Well,' Domine shrugged, 'I'm healthy, and I've had a good education. I should be able to find some kind of employment. And working doesn't worry me. It should be quite a challenge.'

Señora Aguilar regarded her compassionately. 'You are an unusual girl, Miss Temple,' she said quietly. 'A most unusual girl. And I am glad you have come to stay with me.'

'Thank you.' Domine was touched. 'But please—do you think you could call me Domine, instead of Miss Temple? That's one formality I don't subscribe to.'

'Very well.' Señora Aguilar bowed her head. 'And I think you must call me *Doña* Elena, as Lisel does.'

By the time they returned to the house Domine realised that there was little about herself that Luis's mother had not learned. By a series of astute observations she had encouraged Domine to talk about herself, her childhood at Griffons, her father's tragic death, and her subsequent education at the convent grammar school, and ultimately Grandpa's death, and its consequent effect on her future.

'So you never knew your mother,' Doña Elena remarked thoughtfully. 'Have you not missed having a woman to talk to, someone to discuss your problems with, someone to explain to you the things that every young girl should know?'

Domine smiled at this. 'I think young girls in England are quite knowledgeable enough,' she said, teasing a little 'But yes, I suppose it's only natural that I miss having a mother to discuss boy-friends with, or to turn to in times of stress. Aunt Barbara, that's my mother's aunt Barbara really, she's been a brick, but she's never been married herself, and consequently she sees things differently.'

'I imagine she would,' agreed Doña Elena drily. 'Now shall we have some coffee, and we'll talk about your impressions of my country.'

Luis was waiting for them when they returned. He was pacing rather restlessly up and down the verandah that ran along the back of the house, and when he saw them crossing the lawns he came to meet them. Doña Elena was obviously delighted to see her son, but Domine, relaxed after their walk, felt the familiar tenseness in her stomach that his disturbing appearance promoted. In mud-coloured slacks and a matching shirt, the collar unbuttoned its regulation two inches, he looked lean and powerful, the narrow cut of his trousers exposing the muscular strength of his legs.

'Buenos dias, Mama,' he greeted his mother gently, bestowing the usual kiss on her cheek. 'How are you? And how is our guest this morning?'

His eyes shifted to Domine's averted face, as his mother replied for both of them. 'We're very well, thank you, Luis I have been showing Domine my garden, and she has been telling me about England. It is so long since your father took me to London. I feel quite out of touch with European society.'

If Luis registered that casual use of Domine's name, he made no mention of it speaking to her deliberately, forcing her to look up and acknowledge him. 'You think you are going to be comfortable here, Miss Temple?' he enquired brusquely, and she raised dark lashes to expose the violet beauty of her eyes.

'Very comfortable, thank you, señor,' she essayed, more calmly than she felt, and witnessed the momentary flicker of impatience that crossed his face.

'You will join us for coffee, of course, Luis,' Doña Elena said now, as they climbed the shallow steps to the verandah. 'I will tell Cristina. Domine, we will sit here.' She indicated the bamboo chairs and tables, set beneath the thatched canopy. 'Please, relax. I shall not be a moment.'

She disappeared into the house, and Domine turned to find Luis looking at her, his eyes dark in the tanned hollows of his face. He looked a little drawn, she thought, and wondered how late it had been before he took Lisel home, then chided herself for wondering about something so personal.

'You seem to be getting on well with my mother,' he said at last, the muscles around his mouth revealing a certain amount of tension. 'I am sorry you had to leave us so abruptly last evening. Consuelo had gone to a lot of trouble on our behalf.'

'I'm sorry, too,' said Domine, and she meant it, she told herself, if only for Consuelo's sake. 'Please apologise to her for me, will you? I'd hate her to think I was rude. But—well, I couldn't have eaten dinner.'

'No.' Luis's tone was clipped. 'Cristina tells me you did better at breakfast.'

'You've spoken to Cristina about me?'

'Only in passing,' he admitted dourly. 'You appear to have won her sympathies, too. She was quick to tell me how pleased she was to find you could speak her language.'

'Oh!' Domine shrugged. 'Languages were always my strong point at school. My only strong point,' she admitted wryly.

'You are too modest,' he retorted shortly, and then, more restrainedly, he added: 'Inez would like me to bring you to the convent tomorrow afternoon. Maybe when you see Lisel in her usual surroundings you will find you have never in common with her.'

Domine licked her lips. 'Inez?' she murmured questioningly. 'But I—you mean your sister Inez?'

'Of course.' Luis pushed his fingers into the back of the low belt that circled his pants.

'You're not making sense,' she declared confusedly 'What does Inez have to do with the convent?'

'Did I not explain?'

'Did you ever?' she countered pointedly, and his mouth compressed.

'Inez is in charge of the hospital the Sisters run at the Holy Sceptre,' he informed her crisply. 'I thought you knew that. Certainly your solicitor—what was his name?—Holland?—he knew.'

'Well, I'm sorry, I didn't.'

'It is of no matter.' Luis lifted his shoulders expressively and let them fall. 'You will come?' 'Do I have any choice?' Domine was resigned. Then she added quietly: 'This is not going to work, you know.'

'What?' He turned to her sharply, eyes narrowing. 'I thought we were succeeding in having a conversation without any personal overtones clouding the issue.'

'Did you?' Domine's tone was dry. 'Nevertheless, I have to say that I don't think Lisel and I will ever be friends It—it's not just you. It's simply not possible.'

'*Domine!*'

He spoke her name in a strangled voice, but she had to go on. 'It's true,' she insisted. 'Perhaps I'm even aggravating the situation by staying here. I—I—she doesn't like me she doesn't need me—'

'No. But I do,' he asserted hoarsely. 'In the name of all the saints, Domine, do not talk of leaving. Not yet. Please!'

She was shocked by the anguish of his words, and her lips moved in silent protest before she managed to say 'This isn't going to make things any easier, Luis.'

'Isn't it?'

His mother's reappearance forestalled whatever else he might have been going to say, and with a smothered expletive he turned away, resting his balled fists on the verandah rail and staring towards the trees that hedged the garden with bitter intensity.

Doña Elena, seating herself at one of the bamboo tables, regarded her son's uncharacteristic discourtesy with rather anxious eyes, but then she turned to Domine and asked her somewhat absently whether she had visited the Cathedral while she was in Lima. Domine said she had, but she didn't elaborate, and Doña Elena conducted a rather onesided conversation until Cristina appeared with their coffee.

Luis was forced to join them then, and taking a cup from his mother's hands, he forced a tight smile for her benefit.

'You look tired, my son,' Doña Elena remarked, her gaze holding speculation as well as concern. 'Are you not sleeping well? Or is it that you are not eating enough, no? Consuelo was telling me only the other day that since your return from England you have little or no appetite.'

Domine's eyes darted to Luis at his mother's words, and for a brief spell they locked with his. It was a heart-stopping experience, but after only a few seconds she dragged her gaze away, aware of the quickened rise and fall of her breathing.

Luis, for his part, took several more moments to reply, and then he said tersely: 'I have work to do, Mama. Sometimes I work late into the night. And Consuelo is an old woman. She worries unnecessarily, and you know it.'

'Do I??' Doña Elena raised aristocratic eyebrows. 'I can see with my own eyes that you are losing weight.'

Luis put down his cup after taking only the most perfunctory of tastes. 'I do not think Miss Temple is interested in this conversation, *Mama*. And I must be leaving.'

'So soon?'

Luis squared his shoulders. 'I came to ensure that our guest had settled in satisfactorily, and to offer her Inez's invitation to visit the hospital tomorrow afternoon. This I have done, and now I must go.'

'Wait ...' Doña Elena rose to her feet. 'Will you and Lisel not join us for dinner this evening?'

'This evening?' Luis half turned away from them, clearly disconcerted by the suggestion. 'I—er—I regret, Lisel told me she is working this evening. She is very conscientious, as you know, and since she has been away for several days, she feels obliged to take her share of the burden from Inez's shoulders.'

'Very commendable.' Doña Elena's voice was only slightly ironic. 'Bien, you will come tomorrow evening, then. Can you manage that?'

'Tomorrow evening I am dining with Pere Lucien,' replied Luis stiffly. 'I am sorry, but the arrangements are made.'

'So it would seem.' His mother sounded sceptical. 'So, the following evening.'

Luis sighed. 'May I come back to you on this? It may be that Lisel has some other arrangements.'

'And you, Luis? What other arrangements do you have?'

'Why, none.'

'Then, I shall expect you to join us, no obstante.'

'Mama—'

Doña Elena's dark eyes flashed. 'What is wrong? Does not your fiancée wish to dine at the *Casa de Flores*?'

Luis's nostrils flared. 'Is that so surprising?' he demanded, shocking Domine more than his mother by his vehemence. 'The last time Lisel was here, you were most—argumentative!'

Doña Elena snorted. 'Why? Because I questioned her vocation?'

'Lisel has worked hard at the convent.'

'Oh, I agree.' His mother held up her head. 'She has worked incredibly hard. But to what end?'

Luis sighed. 'I really cannot permit you to abuse my fiancée, Mama.' He raked long fingers through his hair, disturbing its smooth thickness. 'And now I really must go for the present, Miss Temple—*Mama!*'

Doña Elena did not answer him, and with an impatient shrug he descended the steps, circling the house through the gardens, and quickly disappearing from view.

After his departure Domine applied herself with some concentration to the coffee in her cup, not wishing to get involved in this particular argument; but she need not have worried. Doña Elena took a few minutes to control herself, but when she spoke her voice was quite calm, as she said:

'Are not these biscuits delicious? Have you tasted them? They are one of Cristina's specialities. My youngest daughter used to love them.'

CHAPTER NINE

In the event, it was Carlos who took Domine to the convent.

Luis sent a message that he had had to go into Aguilas on business, and in consequence Domine went alone to the small community set on the hillside above the village.

The Convent of the Holy Sceptre was painted white, distinctive against the grassy hillside, and there was an ancient vespers bell set in a tiny belltower above the arched gateway. Within the walls, a stone-flagged courtyard gave access to the various buildings that made up the settlement, with the chapel and cloisters, the nuns' dormitory and dining room, and the hospital buildings themselves forming an E-shape without the central projection.

There was a well in the middle of the courtyard, and Domine learned that it had once been their only source of water. But apparently Luis had paid for plumbing to be installed, and his further beneficence had provided food and bedding, and all the surgical equipment necessary to maintain the simple service the nuns offered.

To Domine's relief it was Inez who showed her around, a different Inez, and yet the same, shedding the formal evening attire for the dark habit of her calling, surprising Domine, who had not really considered that Inez might belong to the order.

'I was given special dispensation to go to England,' she explained, as she showed Domine into the main ward of the hospital. 'I was permitted to wear conventional clothes, but naturally here, I prefer the vestments of my faith.'

'Naturally,' Domine agreed, though she privately thought that the full skirts of the habit must be uncomfortably warm in this climate.

In spite of her apprehensions, Domine enjoyed her tour of the wards. The patients were in many cases children, and she spent some time coaxing smiles from pathetically thin little faces. Few of them would actually speak to her, but they seemed sorry when she had to go and she promised she would come and see them again.

Even Inez thawed sufficiently to compliment her on her success with one of their most difficult patients, a small boy who was suffering from a blood deficiency, and who persistently refused to respond to any overtures. Domine made him laugh by doing a

mock-ventriloquist's act with a rag doll that sat at the end of his bed, and by the time she left him he had lost most of his reserve.

Lisel worked in the labour ward. Inez explained that through her efforts, many more of the Indian women came to the hospital to have their babies, which meant that their mortality rate was much lower. Unlike her superior, Lisel wore an ordinary nurse's uniform, the wings of her hair folded smoothly beneath the starched nearness of her cap, the white overall enhancing her air of calm efficiency. No doubt she did inspire confidence in the women in her charge, but Domine couldn't help thinking that if she was going through the agonies of having a baby, she would prefer a more sympathetic hand to guide her.

The three women had tea together in Sister Inez's office, but Lisel wasted no time in idle chatter. After listening rather sceptically to Inez's remarks concerning the little boy Domine had befriended, she said, rather unfeelingly:

'I do not think it is a good thing to create personal relationships with patients. It is bad for the patient, and it is bad for the nurse. We have to maintain a certain objectivity in our profession, and making favourites alienates the rest of the ward.'

Domine made no comment, aware that Lisel was probably right, but refusing to enter into any argument with her. However, Inez was sufficiently sympathetic to add: 'What you say is true, Lisel—however, there is a little difference between ourselves as nurses and Miss Temple, who is, after all, only a visitor.' She smiled. 'I for one am delighted that the boy made some reaction. It shows he is responding to treatment.'

'Of course.' Lisel made an unexpected apologetic gesture. 'You must forgive me if I seem a little thoughtless, Domine. But I have been working for almost fourteen hours, and I am a little tired.'

Domine shook her head, unconvinced by Lisel's sudden volte-face, but Inez changed the subject to discuss the assistance Luis had given to the hospital, and how, without his support, they would have had to close their doors to all but the most needy cases.

'Yes, he is a marvellous man!' inserted Lisel warmly, though her eyes on her cousin were frankly malicious. 'What a pity you will not be here for the wedding, Domine. You would have seen then what love these people have for him.'

Domine bent her head. 'I'm sure you're right,' she said, refusing to give Lisel the satisfaction of thinking her jealous. 'When is the happy day to be, or hasn't that been decided?'

'But yes, it has been decided,' Lisel affirmed smugly. 'Luis expects to be free of commitments by the end of next month, and we are planning to honeymoon in Bermuda in May.'

Domine's stomach contracted at this news, but she forced herself to look up at the other girl and smile. 'How nice,' she said, trying to sound sincere. 'And perhaps you'll come to England once the honeymoon's over. I think you owe it to our grandfather to see the mills at least once before they're sold, don't you?'

It was like throwing down the gauntlet, but emulating her own example earlier, Lisel did not take her up on it. 'Maybe,' was all she said, though her eyes were somewhat guarded. 'If that is what my husband advises me to do.'

It was late afternoon when Domine left the convent, and driving back in the Mercedes with Carlos, she tried not to think about what Lisel had said. Imagining Luis married to her cousin was the purest kind of torture, and she wondered if anything was worth the sacrifices she was making. She ought to pack up and go back to England now, before the threads of her attraction grew strong enough to strangle her.

Yet, in spite of everything, in the days that followed Domine could not deny that her association with Doña Elena made up for a great deal of mental discomfort. The older woman was so kind and understanding, encouraging her to talk about herself and her brother, giving her the kind of fellowship she might have had with her mother had she lived. And considering there were subjects which they both silently acknowledged to be taboo, they seemed to find plenty to talk about.

Domine discovered that as well as her interest in gardening, Doña Elena liked painting, and some of her water colours decorated the walls of the *Casa*. She was delighted when her guest admired them, but when Domine mentioned that her uncle had also been interested in painting the older lady's mouth snapped shut, and she looked more irritated than Domine had seen her.

'I would rather not discuss Lisel's parents, my dear,' she explained, taking pity on Domine's discomfited expression. 'Now, shall we have some tea? Or would you prefer chocolate?'

The following evening Luis came to dinner.

He had not appeared on any of the evenings his mother had suggested, sending messages with Carlos, and allowing his mother to make what she liked of them. But that afternoon Doña Elena had sent a message of her own, advising her son that she had invited Pere Lucien to join them, and that his absence would not be tolerated without a reasonable excuse.

So Luis came, just as they were preparing to sit down for the meal, and Domine could not quell the feeling of satisfaction it gave her, just seeing him again.

She had taken particular trouble with her own toilette, choosing a dress of midnight blue chiffon, whose bodice was bloused above a narrow belt, with a full, flowing skirt that ended just below her knee. She knew it provided a vivid contrast to the silver-paleness of her hair, which she had deliberately left loose, and Pere Lucien had already been embarrassed when she caught his eyes lingering upon her. The elderly priest was a Frenchman who had settled in Peru, and he had lost none of his race's appreciation of beauty.

Luis, dark and broodingly attractive, in a dark blue corded jacket and navy blue pants, bowed over his mother's hand, and then seated himself opposite Domine with only the most perfunctory inclination of his head.

'So, my friend, where is your charming fiancée this evening?' Pere Lucien asked, after Cristina had served the soup, and Luis crumbled the roll on his plate with a certain amount of aggression.

'She is working, *padre*,' he replied evenly, glancing at his mother. 'I understand they are particularly busy at this time, and Lisel enjoys being useful.'

'I am sure she does,' agreed the priest comfortably, and the undertones of that statement went over his head.

Domine drank little of her soup. The awareness of Luis across the polished table was a powerful drain on her resources, and even when she looked up and found him

watching her, she could feel no reassurance in his presence. He had not wanted to come, that much was obvious, and his plea to her, several days ago, not to leave the valley seemed an unreal affection.

The *churrasco* that followed, a kind of kebab of grilled meats, seemed tasteless, and Cristina looked at her sharply when she came to clear.

'You are not hungry, señorita!' she hissed, as she gathered the soiled dishes, and Domine flushed scarlet as the rest of the table heard that audible stage whisper.

'I—er—it's a very warm evening,' she murmured in embarrassment, and Doña Elena flashed her a sympathetic smile as she served the dessert.

Coffee was served in the salon, and after Luis had helped himself and Pere Lucien to some cognac, his mother asked if he would be kind enough to entertain Domine while she showed the priest the success she was having with her indoor gardening.

'You and Domine have seen it all before,' she exclaimed with a mischievous smile. 'Now I will bore our other guest with my green hands.'

'Green fingers,' corrected Luis automatically, and noticing his set face, Domine intervened.

'There—there's really no need for anyone to entertain me, Doña Elena,' she protested. 'I'm quite content sitting here ...'

'Oh, but I insist,' replied her hostess firmly, and Luis gave a polite bow of his head.

'Perhaps you would care to walk in the garden, Miss Temple,' he commented, and his mother seconded his suggestion by adding that their younger guest had not yet seen the waterfall.

'A *waterfall*?' Domine's eyes widened in surprise, and Doña Elena nodded, well pleased that her proposal had aroused interest.

'You did not know we had our own private waterfall, did you, Domine?' she teased. 'And as it is a moonlit night there is no better time to see it.'

'I do not think Miss Temple would appreciate pushing through the undergrowth in that dress, Mama,' Luis put in deterningly. 'Perhaps some other time ...'

'You exaggerate, Luis,' retorted his mother smoothly. 'Why do you not ask her? Let Domine decide for herself.'

'Very well!' But he was not pleased, and Domine knew it. 'Do you wish to see the waterfall by moonlight, Miss Temple? Or will you wait until daylight, when one can judge the terrain more easily?'

Tch! Doña Elena burst in before Domine could reply. 'What a way to phrase an invitation! Domine, my son is singularly lacking in imagination. But do not let his prosaic words discourage you. You will love it, I promise you. And were I younger, and less inclined to lose my breath, I would come with you myself.'

Domine glanced uncomfortably at Luis, aware that he was waiting for her reply. Doña Elena's attitude was not typical and she was a little surprised at her insistence, but if they were to be alone together, why shouldn't they visit the waterfall? If his mother did not object why should he?

With another hesitant look in his direction, she said: 'I should like to see the waterfall,' and Doña Elena's gurgle of triumph drowned any sound of impatience Luis might have made.

'We will have to go in the Range-Rover,' was his only comment and his mother essayed her consent.

'It is not far,' she added for Domine's benefit, but the girl couldn't help wondering exactly what she had let herself in for.

She collected a wrap and joined Luis, who was waiting for her at the side of the dust-smeared automobile that had brought him to the *Casa*. It was a powerful four-wheel-drive vehicle, with the kind of comfort usually associated with a saloon car, and Domine was soon ensconced in the seat beside the driver.

'You didn't want to take me, did you?' she commented, as Luis swung himself in beside her, and he subjected her to an exasperated appraisal before starting the motor.

'It did not make any difference, though, did it?' he commented, pulling away from the house. And as she tried to protest, he continued:

'Do not concern yourself. My mother is a determined lady. I should know better by now than to attempt to argue with her.'

Domine sighed. 'I don't see the difference between walking in the garden and visiting this waterfall,' she declared.

'Do you not?' Luis's fingers tightened on the wheel. 'No—well, perhaps you are right. In either case, the situation is untenable to both of us, and I shall attempt to keep it as short as possible.'

They drove through the grounds of the estate. Once Domine saw fights ahead of them, and she guessed it was the Villa, but Luis turned aside and soon they were left behind. The drive took them up the hillside for some distance, and then dipped again into a rocky chasm where the sound of falling water indicated they were near their destination. Domine could see little, however, in the overhanging shadow of the bushes that nudged the vehicle, and when Luis brought it abruptly to a halt, she looked about her in surprise, unable to distinguish anything in the gloom.

'What have you got on your feet?' Luis enquired, his tone flat and impatient, and her fingers probed the straps of her sandals.

'Nothing suitable,' she confessed, realising what he meant, and he swung round in his seat and hoisted a pair of men's rubber boots from the back of the Range-Rover.

'Put these on,' he ordered, swinging open his door, and the words of protest died on her lips as she saw his expression in the courtesy light that he illuminated.

They were far too big, of course, great men's welling tons, flapping about her calves without any regard to style or elegance. She felt like a cartoon character as she stepped down from the vehicle, and she suspected Luis was enjoying her discomfort.

'Here, you had better put this on as well,' he suggested offering her a chunky parka, but here she demurred.

'We're not going mountaineering, are we?' she protested with an edge to her voice, and he shrugged as he slung the garment back into the automobile.

She soon found that she was glad of the rubber boots. Her high-heeled sandals would never have survived the trek through the undergrowth to the edge of a ravine, and it was well worth the effort. The falls, glinting in the moonlight, tumbled down the hillside to fall some thirty feet into a rocky pool. The pool looked dark and mysterious, shadowy in the pale light, and as there appeared no apparent outlet, Domine wondered how deep it could be. And when she voiced her query to Luis, he confirmed that no one actually knew.

'There must be a draining system,' he remarked, pushing his hands into the back of his pants, pushing his jacket aside as he did so. 'These hills are riddled with underground channels, and the water will eventually emerge again. It is not something anyone has ever tried to find out, although I admit, when I was a boy, I used to swim here.'

'You did?' Domine turned to him, sliding a little on the grassy surface, moistened by the mist from the falls. 'Do you still?'

Luis looked down at her broodingly, and then shook his head. 'No. It would not do for *el Patrón* to be seen disporting himself in such a manner,' he replied.

Domine sighed. What a shame!' She paused. 'But you like swimming, don't you?'

'Why do you say that?'

Domine shrugged. 'You invited me to the beach.'

'We will not talk about that.'

'No?'

'No.'

'All right.' Domine made a helpless gesture. 'I expect you will find plenty of time for swimming in May.'

'In May?' Luis frowned. 'Why then?'

'You'll be on honeymoon, won't you?' Domine had to say it. She had to tell him she knew. 'I've never been to Bermuda, but I'm sure it's a beautiful place.'

'We will go back to the car,' he declared abruptly, turning away, and she had no choice but to follow him, or run the risk of getting lost. But the boots were clumsy, and he walked more quickly now than he had done before, and once she had to grab a twig to save herself. It stung abominably as she continued on her way, and she guessed she had torn the skin. But she refused to ask him to help her, and she eventually stumbled into the Range-Rover with a weak sense of relief.

Luis switched on the light as she fumbled to remove the boots and replace her sandals, and his swift intake of breath was accompanied by a muffled oath that was not difficult to identify.

'What have you done to your arm?' he demanded, gripping her forearm as she would have reached for her sandal and examining the scratch that ran its length with angry eyes. 'How has this happened?'

Domine looked at the scratch and then at him, moving her shoulders defensively. 'I expect I caught it on a bush,' she replied, aware that his fingers were bruising in their strength. 'It's nothing much. I—er—I'll put some antiseptic on it when I get back to the *Casa*.'

'Hmm.' Luis looked at the scratch more closely, then let her go, swinging back to the wheel with obvious irritation. He was probably thinking that it was all her own fault, Domine reflected, and just before he turned out the light she took a surreptitious glance at her hand.

Compared to the oozing cut on her palm, the scratch was nothing. Blood was smeared all over her hand, between her fingers, and even on her dress, although fortunately its dark colour disguised the worst of the damage. Well, it was her own fault, she thought bitterly. She should have taken the escape route Luis had offered her, and agreed to visit the falls in daylight, but his mother had been so adamant, and she had not realised they were so inaccessible.

The Range-Rover bumped up the ravine, and began the descend to the Villa. The scent of woodbine was intoxicating, and Domine wondered if she would ever be able to forget these days at Puerto Limas. Mark—the mills—even Minstrel—seemed as remote from her life now as the moon, dancing coquetishly with the shreds of cloud that sped across its mottled surface. Even the pain of her palm, and the knowledge of Luis's impatience with her, were things printed indelibly on her mind, and her heart ached at the awareness of how little time she had left.

She saw the lights of the Villa and closed her eyes, unwilling to feel the familiar pangs of depression she experienced whenever she thought of Lisel sharing his home, and then opened them again, when she felt the crunch of gravel beneath the Range-Rover's wheels. Luis was drawing the vehicle to a halt in front of the Villa, and the housekeeper came bustling out to offer her services.

'De nada, Consuelo,' declared Luis crisply, levering himself from behind the wheel. *'Señorita Temple ha cortado la arma, es todo.'*

'Si, señor.'

Consuelo obviously wanted to help, but Luis dismissed her and Domine climbed down from the Range-Rover with a doubtful look on her face.

'What must she be thinking?' she exclaimed, limping a little as her heels, which had been rubbed raw by the rubber boots protested against the narrow straps of her sandals.

'Does it matter?' he queried, the dark eyes hooded as he surveyed her drooping gait, and with a sound of impatience he bent and swung her up into his arms.

'Oh, please—' she began, her breath fanning his cheek, but when he turned cold eyes in her direction she became silent.

He took her across the hall, up several stairs, and along a corridor. The several levels of the Villa developed an intricate series of passageways, and by the time he had turned half a dozen corners she was completely lost. Instead she gave herself up to the undeniable excitement of being carried in his arms, the steady beat of his heart drumming in her ears, and the warm scent of his body filling her nostrils.

If she turned her head, his face was only inches from hers, and she wondered whether he was as aware as she was that he had only to bend his head to touch her lips with his. There was no great effort asserted in carrying her. She was not heavy, and the powerful muscles she could feel around her back and beneath her legs were not being overtaxed. It was incredibly difficult not to imagine how it would be if she had a right to be here, and the idea of Luis carrying her to bed filled her body with heat. She had to force herself to concentrate on the real reasons why she was here, and she counted the coiled silver wall-lights in an effort to keep a hold on reality.

He stopped before double doors that formed an arched entrance, and asked her if she would turn the handle. It meant using the injured hand, which she had cradled in her lap to protect it from his gaze, but she really had no alternative. Stretching down, she fiddled with the knob, but she still left a bloodstained mark where her fingers had touched it.

Luis saw the blood and his mouth tightened ominously, but he said nothing. Instead he carried her inside, into the most impressive bedroom she had ever seen in her life, and set her on her feet on a lambswool rug beside the bed.

Then, before she could turn away, he grasped her wrist, turning her palm uppermost, and examining the gaping cut with an intense scrutiny.

'Why did you not tell me?' he asked, his voice grim and restrained, and she pulled her arm away.

'It's nothing,' she said. 'Like you told Consuelo. Now, do you have a bathroom where I can wash my hands?'

Luis stiffened. 'Do you mean—to wash your hands—or something else?'

Domine gulped. Even in the depths of despair, she could see the humour of that. 'I really do want to wash my hands,' she said, her lips trembling a little. 'I—is it through there?'

She pointed to a door across the room, and Luis nodded, going ahead of her and switching on the lights in a huge gold and green bathroom, with a massive sunken bath, and a glass-panelled shower cubicle. There was a pale green handbasin, with mixer taps, and a row of thick yellow towels that matched the gold motif on taps and wall tiles. Domine was impressed, but she limped quickly to the handbasin, wincing a little as her blood stained the porcelain. Luis was behind her, and she was very much aware of him as she used the soap and water, then dabbed the outer surface dry with a corner of a towel.

'Basta, give me that!' he snapped, as she carefully avoided soiling the linen, and uncaring that the cut was still oozing, Luis bound the towel closely round her hand. Then, commanding her to hold it in place, he opened a bathroom cabinet and extracted lint and bandages and a tube of antiseptic ointment. 'Come,' he said, indicating the bedroom behind her, and Domine submitted to being seated on the bed, while he cut the dressings to his satisfaction.

He shed his jacket before squatting down before her, and although her eyes were drawn to the broadness of his shoulders, outlined beneath the cream silk of his shirt, she forced herself to look elsewhere while he unbound the towel and examined the wound. It

was impossible not to notice the shadow of fine hair that darkened his chest beneath the dark blue formality of his tie, or find her eyes drifting irresistibly to the bulging power of his thighs and the muscular length of his legs.

Instead she looked at the room—at the plain walls hung with Indian prints and copper etchings, at the carved mahogany chest and heavy oak cabinets, at the huge bed, with its gold-printed velvet quilt, and the thick velvet curtains that screened the two long windows.

There were men's brushes on a dresser between the windows, and a man's navy silk dressing gown hung over the rail at the end of the bed. She wondered suddenly if this could be Luis's bedroom, but surely he would not bring her there. And yet she sensed it was his room, and when she turned to look at him and found his eyes upon her, she was no longer in any doubt. There was a brooding intensity about his gaze that belied the brusqueness of his attitude towards her, and she was aware of feelings held too long in control, and emotions demanding to be freed.

He finished bandaging her hand and straightened, putting the ointment aside and saying harshly: 'I suggest you visit the hospital tomorrow and let one of the Sisters take a look at it,' as if the mention of the hospital and its association with his fiancée could salvage the situation, and Domine quivered.

'Yes,' she said, getting up from the bed and looking down at her fingers massaging the neat folds of the bandage. 'Thank you.'

'It was nothing,' he assured her stiffly, and stepped back when she began to move towards the end of the bed and the double doors across the room.

Her fingers brushed the silk robe, and unable to resist the words, she said: 'This is your bedroom, isn't it, Luis?'

'It is.'

His reply was clipped, and on impulse she added: 'I thought so. This robe—and those brushes; it's very—impressive.'

'You think so?'

Again the control, and Domine's nerves screamed their protest. What was she doing here, talking to him like this? What did she want him to do? The reasons why he had

brought her to his bedroom, to his bathroom, were no concern of hers. If he chose to—amuse himself in that way, it was nothing to do with her. Maybe he liked self-flagellation, but she didn't, and she was only tormenting herself by prolonging this interlude. He was going to marry Lisel, and no matter how abhorrent that might seem to her, he would not change his mind. Had he not said so?

With a feeling of impotence she kicked off her sandals and picked them up, realising she would look less pitiful if she was not limping. Then she padded across the rugs that were spread over the wooden blocks of the floor, reaching for the handle of the door just as a hand reached over her shoulder and prevented her from opening it.

She turned on her heels, pressing herself back against the panels of the door as Luis supported himself with one hand at either side of her. His eyes were narrowed, but she could see the smouldering passion in the little lights that danced there, and the frankly sensual twist of his mouth as he looked down into her startled face.

'*Pues, Domine,*' he said, and his voice was hoarse now, 'did you really think I could bring you here and let you go again without touching you?'

Domine's tongue appeared, to moisten her upper lip. 'You—you can't be serious. Luis, you'll only hate yourself for this—'

'Very probably,' he agreed, withdrawing one hand to stroke his knuckles down her cheek to her shoulder, but she had the feeling he was not really listening to her. '*Bella, bellissima, te deseo.*'

'Luis—'

Her frantic appeal brought his eyes from the dusky hollow between her breasts, and a look of faint regret entered their stormy depths. 'I know,' he said, his fingers insinuating themselves beneath the strap of her gown and sliding it from her shoulder. 'I should not be doing this, but a man can stand only so much.'

'Oh, Luis '

Domine wriggled away from him, looking down at the sandals she still held in her hand with desperate eyes. The beauty of the room, its tranquility and silence, were powerful intoxicants, but how could she justify his need of her when that was all it was?

She looked about her helplessly, but there was nowhere to run. The bathroom was behind her, but it offered no escape, and Luis was still standing by the bedroom door.

'Domine ...'

He came towards her, but she backed away from him, glancing over her shoulder to ensure she did not trip over the rugs with her bare feet. It would be ignominious to fall, to grovel before him like some supplicating slave.

Watching her, his eyes were caressing, but she was afraid to respond to him. She did not trust herself in his arms, and if he kissed her ... She glanced again at the bathroom. Perhaps if she showed him she would not submit, he would let her go. Surely he could not keep her here for long. His mother would become suspicious, and he would not permit that. As it was, he would have to explain why he had brought her to the Villa, instead of back to the *Casa* and further explanations might be difficult.

The bathroom was what—six, eight feet away? Surely no more than ten. She could move quickly. If she could close the door and secure it, she might bring him to his senses.

Breathing shallowly, she turned, dropping the sandals and sprinting towards the bathroom door. She had made it, she thought, turning to confront him, and saw that in fact he had not moved, but was standing watching her with bitter despair.

'*Dios!*' he exclaimed, spreading his hands in a gesture of defeat. 'Do you think I would rape you? Is that what you are afraid of? Run—run to safety behind a locked door. I will not assault you!'

'*Oh, God!*' Domine gazed at him through tear-filled eyes. Whatever she did, however she behaved, he always made her feel the guilty one. On heavy feet, she trudged back to where her sandals were lying, and then looked up at him through drooping lashes. 'I'm sorry ...'

Luis shrugged. 'I am to blame. I should not have brought you here. But I could not prevent myself.'

'Oh, Luis...Domine went to him then, gazing up into his tormented face in helpless adoration. 'What are we going to do?'

'You are going home,' he declared, turning her towards the door, but his hands clung to her creamy flesh and with a groan of self-disgust he pulled her back against him. 'Just one minute,' he said, bending his lips to her nape, and she felt the tantalising touch of his tongue against her flesh. 'Just one minute, and then I will take you home.'

She knew she should resist, but it was impossible. A terrifying weakness was taking possession of her, and time began to lose meaning. She loved him—oh, how she loved him! How could confessing that love be wrong?

'Domine...!' He spoke her name emotively, and with an urgency that spelled his own hunger he twisted her round in his arms and looked down at her with dark, demanding eyes. 'Domine ...!' His thumbs probed her lips, and she realised with a pang that he was not holding her now. She could draw away whenever she wished. But did she wish it? Didn't she want to go on pressing herself nearer, inciting an intimacy that twisted like a knife in her stomach and weakened her legs?

'Luis,' she whispered helplessly, but she couldn't go on. Instead her fingers went towards his tie, pulling it free of his collar and loosening it completely before tossing it to the floor, and when he made no move to stop her hands sought the buttons of his shirt, unfastening them one by one, until the muscular expanse of his chest was exposed, the dark hair rough beneath her palms. 'Oh, Luis,' she breathed, aware of the intimacy of what she was doing, and its implications. 'Luis, you should stop me ...'

'Why?' he demanded, tipping her face up to his. 'Do you think I have not wanted you to touch me, to caress me, to undress me? *Dios*, Domine, you know I am beyond sense when it comes to my feeling for you, and how can I stop you when I have always been yours, to do with as you will?'

Her lips parted in protest, but the words were never uttered. His mouth covered hers, sweetly bruising, searching and exploring, and demanding a response she had no will to resist. He was dominating her with his hunger, possessing her soul, destroying any opposition she might try to make. With a little sigh, she slid her arms around his neck, delighting in the feel of his smooth skin beneath her fingers. Her nails raked his hair at his nape, pressing his head closer, equalling his passion with an eagerness born of an instinctive desire to please him.

When he swung her off her feet and carried her to the bed, his mouth still possessing hers, she sank down on to the soft coverlet without protest, welcoming the urgent weight of his body with a helpless feeling of destiny fulfilled. He pushed the chiffon bodice of her dress from her shoulders, and his mouth found the rose-tipped nipples exposed to his burning gaze. Then his chest crushed their fullness as his mouth sought hers again, and she felt the thrusting hardness of his body through the fine barrier that separated them.

'*Te amo,*' he muttered, against her lips, his breath filling her mouth with a suffocating sweetness, and a little moan escaped her as he drew back to remove the rest of her dress. 'I love you, Domine, and I have never said that to any woman before, except my mother. And that is not the same thing—not the same thing at all...'

Domine lifted her face to his, finding his lips and outlining them with her tongue, until he sank down with her again, the hair on his chest an intoxicating abrasive on her breasts, his unbuckled belt no longer digging into her stomach, only the velvety smoothness of his flesh against hers...

The tentative tapping at the door was only a mild irritation at first. Luis's mouth was burning a path from her ears, and the sensitive little hollows at her nape, to the burgeoning fullness of her breasts, when its insistency inevitably got through to him, and his hoarse protest was uttered against her shoulder.

'*Dios,*' he muttered, lifting his head, as the tapping was accompanied now by a whispered: '*Señor? Señor Aguilar? Doñ Luis? Siento molestarle, señor, mas Doña Elena...*

'Consuelo!' Luis groaned harshly, dragging himself up from the bed. 'Consuelo—with a message from my mother!'

Domine blinked, unaware of the languorous sensuality of her appeal as Luis hesitated a moment, bending over her, his face tormented by his thwarted desires. 'I must speak to Consuelo,' he said, even as she reached for him, and his mouth found the parted sweetness of hers once more.

'*Madre de Dios,*' he muttered, reaching for his shirt, then he crossed the room to Consuelo's continuing knocking, and her unhappy words of apology.

Domine's sense of lethargy dissolved a little as Luis opened the door and stepped outside to speak to the housekeeper. His concern for their privacy was all very well, but she disliked the feeling of conspiracy it gave her. Sitting up, she reached for the coverlet to protect her, and then stiffened as she overheard Consuelo's excited protest.

'I am sorry, *señor*,' she was insisting in the Casdlian dialect they used. 'I knew you would not wish to be disturbed, but Doña Elena is on the telephone, and she insisted I come to find you. She was most concerned when you did not return to the *Casa de Flores!*'

'That is all right, Consuelo,' Domine heard Luis say in reply. 'Miss—er—Miss Temple has cut her hand, as I told you, and unfortunately my shirt was stained with blood!'

Domine gulped at these words. That was the first she had heard of it, and an increasing sense of unease gripped her.

'Naturally I have had to change,' Luis was continuing reasonably, 'but you may tell my mother that we will return very shortly, no?'

'Yes, *señor*.'

Domine could imagine Consuelo dipping her curtsey, and with a feeling close to panic she crawled off the bed and hastily pulled on the chiffon gown. Fortunately it slipped over her head easily, and by the time Luis had entered the room again and closed the door behind him, she had approached the dresser and was using his comb to bring some order to her hair.

He frowned when he saw her, his mouth turning down at the corners as he surveyed her mutinous reflection in the mirror in front of her.

'You are leaving?' he enquired coldly and she turned to him in angry retaliation.

'Don't you think I should?' she demanded, her breast rising and falling in her agitation. 'That was your mother wanting to know where we were, wasn't it? And you've told Consuelo to tell her we'll be back directly, haven't you? What did you expect me to do? Lie there and wait for you to finish what you started?'

His expression scarcely revealed his reactions to her angry denunciation, but his fists balled at his sides. "I could hardly tell Consuelo the truth, could I?" he countered stiffly, and Domine's lips curled.

'Not if you intend to go through with your marriage to Lisel,' she agreed acidly.

'Lisel does not come into this—'

'Oh, doesn't she? I disagree. Wasn't she the reason why you told Consuelo those lies?'

He uttered an explosive. 'Even you would not wish my mother to be so informed.'

'Would I not? And Consuelo, of course, had her instructions not to disturb you!'

'You heard what I said to Consuelo when we arrived!'

'When we arrived, yes. How do I know what you said to her earlier?'

He stared at her disbelievingly. 'You think I arranged this?'

'I—oh, I don't know.' Domine put an unsteady hand to her head. 'Your mother will think—'

'So? What would you have had me say to her?' he interposed harshly. 'I am sorry, Mama, but I cannot bring Domine back yet? I want to make love to—'

He broke off abruptly, but the pallor of his cheeks betrayed the terrible strain this was putting on him, and suddenly all the anger went out of her, leaving only pain and torment, and a mordant despair.

'Oh, Luis!' she exclaimed, dropping the comb and turning to him. 'Luis darling—I love you!' And she flung herself into his arms without waiting for his response.

His arms came around her, but only to prevent her from falling. With a grim determination he detached himself from her, making sure she could balance herself before withdraw his support.

'It is no use, Domine,' he said heavily, turning aside from her. 'Our relationship—it is tearing us both to pieces.'

'It needn't—'

'Listen to me.' He sounded weary. 'You knew what I had to offer before you came to Puerto Limas. You knew I would not betray my commitment to Lisel—'

'And isn't this betraying your commitment?' Domine demanded, stung by his apparent lack of normal feeling. 'My God, what do you have to do to betray it? How can you delude yourself——'

'I do not delude myself,' he retorted savagely. 'I know my weaknesses better than you do. Do you think I want to do this? Do you think I don't know what I'm giving up?'

Domine gulped. 'How can you justify a marriage, feeling like that? What kind of a marriage will it be? Without love—without affection!'

'You misunderstand me.' Luis sighed, raking back his hair with unsteady fingers. 'There will be—feeling. There must be. If we have children—'

'*Children!*' Domine almost choked. '*Oh, Luis, take me back to the Casa de Flores. I don't think I ever want to speak to you again!*'

CHAPTER TEN

IT was two days before Doña Elena brought up the subject of Domine's visit to the falls, and her subsequent treatment at Luis's villa.

Luis had driven Domine back to the *Casa de Flores*, after that disturbing scene in his bedroom, but he had declined to stay, merely attending long enough to wish his mother and the *padre* a polite goodnight, before making his departure. Perhaps it was fortunate that Pere Lucien chose to leave also, for it meant Domine could make her escape upstairs before Doña Elena returned to the salon. She was in the bathroom, bathing her burning cheeks, when the lady came to find her, but after assuring herself that there was nothing the girl needed, Doña Elena did not persist.

The following morning a car, driven by Carlos, arrived to take Domine to the hospital, and again Luis's mother refrained from interfering. She made a polite enquiry as to the extent of the injury, and she did not pry, but Domine was left with the distinct impression that Doña Elena suspected there were undercurrents here which she did not understand.

Cristina was less reticent. When Domine refused lunch after her visit to the hospital, she was generous with her disapproval. But she was gentle, too, when Domine said she would like to lie down for a while, and it was she who closed the curtains and turned down the bed for her young charge to rest upon.

Domine, for her part, was glad to relax after the tensions of the morning. She had been half afraid she would see Luis or Lisel or both, but in fact she had seen neither. A Sister Teresa had attended to her hand, removing the bandage Luis had put on and

replacing it with another. Then Doctor Tomaso, a young general practitioner from Aguilas, who visited the hospital as part of his duties, had given her an injection as a protection against disease, and she had returned to the *Casa* feeling completely drained of all energy.

The next morning Cristina brought two letters on her breakfast tray.

'One is from England,' she declared, setting the tray across Domine's knees, 'but the other is from Lima. I think the *Señora* is wondering who could be writing to you from there.'

'As you are too, I suppose, Cristina,' remarked Domine, looking at the envelopes curiously, feeling a little less fragile today. 'This one's from Mark—that's my brother, you know. The other one—I don't know.'

'Why don't you open it and see?' suggested Cristina, fussing about the room, opening the shutters and folding a pair of tights she found on the floor.

Domine smiled. 'All right. I can see you're not going to leave until I do,' she said, pulling a face at Cristina's indignant expression. 'Oh, it's from the solicitors. Lisel's solicitors. Or at least, from one of them.'

'*Ach!*' Cristina was obviously disappointed. 'And we thought you must have an admirer!' she declared. '*Solicitors! Pff!*'

'No, wait-' Domine looked up, a small frown puckering her brow. 'Actually, this is from the young man who met me at Callao. When I arrived from England. He— we—well, I went out with him once, while I was in Lima.'

'Ah!' Cristina sounded more interested. 'So?'

Domine hesitated. 'He—well, he says he'd like to come and see me,' she murmured doubtfully. 'He says he's flying to Arequipa on the fourth, and he'll contact me after he gets there. Why, that's tomorrow!'

'So it is.' Cristina grimaced. 'He must be very sure of his welcome, this young man.'

'But he's not.' Domine flushed. 'That is—I never gave him any reason to think—'

'Perhaps his blood is hotter,' suggested Cristina humorously. '*Creole men—*'

'But he's not a *Creole!*' exclaimed Domine uncomfortably. 'He's an American. His name's Ben Lister. And— and I don't know that I want to see him again.'

Cristina shrugged. 'Ah well, that is for you to decide. I will tell Doña Elena that we were not mistaken, after all, that you do have an admirer in Lima.'

After Cristina had gone, chuckling as she closed the door, Domine turned to the other letter. She felt a bit ashamed as she opened the closely written pages, particularly as she had made no attempt to write to Mark since the perfunctory note she had sent from Lima on her arrival. But still, from the tone of his letter, he did not seem to mind, and his main reason for writing seemed to be a desire for her to tell Luis—and their cousin—that he was coping admirably with the demands of the Temple Mills. It was remarkable really, she thought, reading how he had succeeded in clinching a new order with a large chain of department stores, that it had taken their grandfather's death to bring him to his senses. But it was too late, she thought dully. Soon now he would learn of Lisel's intentions to sell, and she dreaded the effect such a move might have on him. With Luis's encouragement, he might have made his own place in the company. Without it, he could easily lose all self-respect.

She was pouring herself another cup of coffee when there was a tap at her door, and expecting it to be Cristina again, she called: 'Come in!'

But it wasn't Cristina. It was Doña Elena, dressed in the long black hostess gown she sometimes wore in the mornings, and Domine looked at her in surprise when she came to stand beside the bed.

'How are you feeling this morning?' she asked, and Domine looked down at her bandaged hand with faintly embarrassed eyes.

'It's nothing really,' she protested. 'Just a cut. Lu—that is, your son—he was more concerned about it than I was.'

Doña Elena nodded, then glancing behind her she said: 'May I sit down for a while? I'd like to talk to you.'

'Of course. Please do!' Domine felt tardy in not offering her hostess a seat. 'Is—er—is anything wrong? Would you rather I got dressed and we talked downstairs?'

'Not at all.' Doña Elena drew a padded basketwork chair to the foot of the bed, and seated herself comfortably. 'There, that's better. I hate having to look up at people, don't you?'

Domine's smile was a trifle forced, but she managed a word of compliance, and Doña Elena nodded before saying:

'Tell me, my dear—are you happy here?'

The question was so unexpected that Domine could only look at her for a moment. Then she gathered herself and answered: 'Er—very happy, Doña Elena.'

'Really.' Her hostess looked doubtful. "You do not find the life—boring? Quiet? Uneventful?'

Uneventful! Domine felt a sob of hysteria rising in her throat, but she managed to fight it back.

"No, Doña Elena.' She paused. 'You've been so kind to me. I don't know how to thank you.'

'I do not want your thanks,' exclaimed the older woman vehemently. "You have given me as much in return. Cristina and I—we love having you here. We dread the prospect of your leaving.'

Domine bent her head. 'But of course I must. And—and quite soon now.'

'Yes.' Doña Elena hesitated. 'Is that why your brother has written to you? To ask you to return home?'

'Oh, no.' Domine shook her head. 'On the contrary, Mark wants me to—to let—to let everyone know that he's managing very well on his own.'

'Really? That is interesting.' Doña Elena frowned. 'But I thought the reason your grandfather did not leave the mills to your brother was because he showed so little interest in their well-being.'

'That's right.' Domine sighed. 'Mark used to drive Grandpa crazy with his wild antics. But—I don't know, since Grandpa died, since Mark learned the mills weren't ours any longer, he's changed. It's a pity he waited until it was too late to show what he can do.'

'Yes.' Doña Elena sounded intrigued. 'But apart from your brother, have you any other reason for returning to England?'

Domine blinked. 'I don't understand...'

Doña Elena sighed, and rephrased her question. 'What I mean is—is there anyone else in England who demands your—loyalty?'

'A boy-friend, you mean?'

'I suppose that is what I was suggesting.'

'Well—no.' Domine could not meet the other woman's eyes. 'I've had boy-friends, of course, but—but nothing serious.'

'I see.' Doña Elena paused. 'So really, if you decide to remain in Peru ...'

Domine's long lashes lifted. 'Why—why should I do that?'

Doña Elena linked her fingers together. 'When we spoke together some days ago, you told me you were going to look for a job when you returned to England, no?'

'Well—yes.'

'So what if I could offer you a job here?'

'Here?' Domine was confused. 'I don't think—'

'I mean here,' said Doña Elena firmly. 'In this house. At the *Casa de Flores*. As—my companion.'

'Your companion!' Domine gasped. 'But—Doña Elena—'

'What is it? You do not like the idea of being companion to an old woman? Go on—say it, if it is true! I shall not object. Be honest with me, Domine. Please, do not insult me by making excuses.'

It's not that.' Domine spread her hands helplessly. 'I mean—the idea of being your companion—well, I think it's a wonderful idea—'

'You do?'

'Yes. But I couldn't do it.'

'Why not?'

'Because—oh, because you don't need a companion, Doña Elena! You have Cristina, and Luis—that is, your son '

'Why don't you just say Luis?' enquired Doña Elena drily. 'That is what you call him when you are alone, is it not?'

Domine's cheeks burned. 'Per—perhaps.'

'You know it is.' Doña Elena clicked her tongue. 'Oh, I realise I am not the quickest thinking of individuals, but I am not yet blind or in my dotage. *I have seen the way you*

look at him. I have seen the way he looks at you. And it is a revealing exercise, Domine, believe me! I have never seen Luis look at any woman as he looks at you!

Domine pushed the breakfast tray aside, so that she could draw up her knees beneath the silk sheets. She was not immune to this kind of conversation, and Doña Elena's words were at once agony and ecstasy. To hear Luis's reactions to her described in those terms was both inflammatory and terrifying, and her hands trembled as she linked them around her legs.

'So?' Doña Elena was waiting for some response. 'I am right, am I not? Luis is not indifferent to you, and your visit to the falls the other evening brought matters to a head, no?'

Domine sighed. 'You could say that.'

'But there is no future in it, is that what you are saying?' Doña Elena was very shrewd. 'Luis is an honourable man. I know that, to my cost. And Lisel is a very determined young woman.'

A shiver of apprehension slid down Domine's spine. 'Then perhaps you can see why I could not accept the job you offered,' she ventured slowly. 'Much—much as I would like to.'

'Why not?' Doña Elena was persistent. 'Luis will not prevent you from living here. And you know how little we have seen of him these past few days. The *Casa de Flores* is a separate establishment from the Villa Aguilas. Once Luis and Lisel are married, I will seldom see them.'

Domine shook her head. 'I don't think I could do that.'

'What? Stay here after Luis is married?' Doña Elena leant towards her. 'My dear, will it be any easier for you in England? Once they are married, you will learn to forget. I will see that you are not lonely. There are families in the district, young men, just as attractive as my son. Naturally I hope you will not leave me too soon, but I should like to think that you could talk to me as you might have talked to your mother.'

'You know I can.'

'So?'

'It's not that simple, Doña Elena.'

'Why not?'

'There's Mark! The mills! What will he do if Lisel does sell?'

'Ah, you have heard of that?' Doña Elena shook her head. 'Your grandfather would not have approved, I think.'

Domine rested her chin on her hands. 'He wouldn't.'

'No.' Doña Elena looked thoughtful. 'It seems both our families must continue to suffer for the earthquake of 1970.'

Domine frowned. 'I don't understand ...'

Do you not? Did not Luis explain that Lisel's parents were killed in an earthquake?'

Well, yes, but——'

It was in 1970.' Doña Elena nibbled at her lips. That was when Luis made himself the girl's guardian.'

'Lisel?'

'Yes, Lisel.' Doña Elena held up her head. I know she is your cousin, Domine, but I find it very difficult to like her.'

'Oh!' Domine said nothing, reluctant to get involved in that kind of a discussion, but Doña Elena would not be deterred.

What did you know of your uncle or your aunt?' she asked now. 'Did you ever meet them?'

'No.' Domine spoke cautiously. 'Uncle Edward left home before I was born. He—he and grandfather didn't get on.'

'Much like your grandfather and your brother.'

'Yes.'

'So you never met his wife?'

'No.'

'Mmm.' Doña Elena considered her next words carefully. 'You know, of course, that they came to Peru?'

'Well—yes.'

'Yes.' Doña Elena paused. 'They spent some time in Aguilas. Your uncle did some painting. He was quite good. Naturally, when I heard about his work, I went to see it.'

'You did?' Domine's brows arched. 'Then you knew him, too?'

Doña Elena leant back in her chair. 'Yes,' she said, and Domine couldn't understand the bitter note in her voice now. 'I knew Edward Temple. And Isabella. But I cannot say I liked his wife.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, my dear ...' Doña Elena shifted restlessly in her seat. 'I do not know if I should tell you all this. I do not know if it will help you to understand Luis's position. But I feel you should know that it was Luis who wrote to your grandfather after your uncle was killed.'

'Luis?' Domine was astonished, and Doña Elena sighed again.

'As I have told you, your uncle and aunt lived for some months in Aguilas. Isabella did some secretarial work at the museum there, and Edward studied the birds and flowers he loved to paint. Lisel began to attend the convent. Inez gives lessons to some of the children from the village in the morning, and Isabella asked if Lisel could join them. She was older than most of the village children, but she seemed to be a conscientious scholar.'

'And—and that was how you got to know them?'

Doña Elena nodded. 'Inez brought the girl to the Villa one afternoon, and she took an immediate liking for Luis. I think he felt sorry for her. Neither of her parents spared much time for her, and she had been shifted around from place to place since she was a baby.'

'I see.'

Doña Elena heaved a deep breath. 'Myself, I never took to her. She was too—forward, too ingenuous—if that is not a contradiction in terms. She seemed always to be playing a part.' She shrugged. 'An old woman's fantasy maybe, but she tried too hard to ingratiate herself with us all. In your English literature there is a character, in Dickens, who always insisted he was a very inferior fellow ...'

'You mean—in David Copperfield? Uriah Heep?' Domine couldn't help a trace of humour from lifting her lips.

'So,' agreed Doña Elena. 'That is how Lisel affects me. I am sure she really considers herself far superior to us, but so far it has suited her purpose to behave otherwise.'

Domine shook her head, remembering her own feelings about Lisel's character. 'Even so ...'

'Of course,' Doña Elena nodded. 'I have not finished my story, have I? Where was I? Oh, yes, I must explain that eventually Lisel's parents were forced to move on to Lima. Some problem with money, I think. The museum closed, and Isabella could not get work. Whatever it was, they decided to return to Lima—but they left Lisel here.'

'They did?'

'Yes.' Doña Elena's lips tightened. 'She was—what? I suppose twelve, thirteen years of age. Old enough to help Inez in the hospital, and as you probably know, Inez dotes on Lisel.'

'Yes?'

'Yes.' Doña Elena moved her shoulders dismissively. 'But none of us expected what was to happen. Exactly a week before the disaster struck, Edward and Isabella moved to a place called Yungay. Oh, I doubt if the name means anything to you, but it was one of the towns which was buried when an avalanche from Mount Huascarán swept down and killed more than twenty thousand people. It was the thirty-first of May. I shall never forget that day so long as I live.'

Domine tried to imagine how terrible it must have been, but it was impossible to visualise so many dead, so many bodies...

Doña Elena allowed herself a few moments to recover, and then she went on: 'Of course, Edward and Isabella were killed. Luis eventually identified their remains, and explained what had happened to Lisel. She was distressed—of course she was distressed. But her life was at the convent, and she did not miss her parents as she might have done in other circumstances. Luis, naturally, took her support upon himself, encouraged by Inez, of course. It was Inez who told Luis what Lisel had told her—that the girl had a grandfather in England, who ought to be informed of his son and daughter-in-law's death. So Luis wrote, and in time your grandfather replied.'

'He never told us,' exclaimed Domine wonderingly, and Doña Elena pulled a wry face. 'Maybe he was cautious. Maybe he doubted the validity of the girl's claim. Certainly, to begin with, Luis had to furnish him with all the information he possessed. The girl had no

documents, her parents' marriage certificate was no doubt destroyed with them. But she did have photographs, and it was proved beyond doubt that Edward Temple was your grandfather's eldest son.'

Domine heaved a sigh. 'And then Luis decided to marry her,' she murmured, half to herself, and Doña Elena inclined her head.

'Again, I blame Inez for what happened. Maria died just a few weeks before the earthquake, and naturally, to start with, Lisel was too young to regard him as anything more than a—a favourite uncle, no? But eventually Inez started implying that Luis ought to get married again—that he owed it to the estate to provide an heir. My younger son has only daughters, and I admit I would like a grandson. 'But I never dreamed that Inez had Lisel in mind as a possible wife for him.'

'And—and Luis?'

Doña Elena's smile was resigned. 'You know my son. He had compassion for the girl, and she used his sympathy to gain his confidence. It would be uncharitable to suggest that his position as *el patrón* had anything to do with her affection for him. He is an attractive man, and there have always been women ready and willing to accept his attentions. But Lisel was clever. By ingratiating herself with Inez, she had constant access to Luis's home.'

'Oh, *Doña Elena!*'

'Yes. It is quite an indictment, is it not? But can you honestly tell me that I am wrong? After what she has threatened to do with the company that has been in your family for years and years?'

'I don't know ...'

Doña Elena shook her head now, and with a little gesture of frustration she rose to her feet and pushed the chair back against the wall.

'So,' she said. 'Now you know my reasons for disliking Lisel.'

Domine licked her lips. 'I'm sorry ...'

'It is not your concern. At least, only indirectly.' Doña Elena hesitated. 'Tell me, if your brother's situation was secure, might you change your mind—about staying here?'

Domine moved her shoulders helplessly. 'I—really don't see how—'

'We must keep the mills in the family,' declared Doña Elena firmly. 'Luis must buy them—from his wife. And keep your brother on as his managing director.'

Domine caught her breath. 'You can't be serious!'

'No?'

'No. *Doña* Elena, do you have any idea what the mills are worth?'

Doña Elena shrugged. 'I leave finances to accountants. But Luis is not a poor man. He will know what to do.'

'Doña Elena—'

'No.' The older woman held up her hand and silenced her. 'Do not say anything more at the present. Wait a few days. Give my suggestion time to—to germinate, no?'

Domine gave a wistful smile. 'I wish you were my mother, *Doña* Elena,' she sighed regretfully, and Luis's mother chuckled.

'So do I, my dear,' she agreed gently, 'though I beg leave to doubt your sincerity.' And at Domine's indignant look, she added: 'If I were your mother, Luis would be *your brother, my child*. Would you really want that— *truthfully?*' And Domine had no answer for her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEN LISTER telephoned the following afternoon, from Arequipa.

Domine was reading aloud to her hostess on the verandah, when Luis's chauffeur arrived with the message, and Doña Elena had him come out to speak to them.

'Mr Lister?' she said, arching her brows at Domine. 'This is the young American Cristina was speaking about? The one who wrote to you from Lima?'

'That's right.' Domine was tense, wondering who had taken the call, what had been said. 'Ben. He said he was coming south to see me. I—er—I certainly didn't invite him.'

Doña Elena frowned. 'And what is the message, Carlos?' she enquired, as imperious as any of her ancestors in that moment. 'You have a note from Don Luis?'

'No, *señora*.' Carlos looked discomfited. '*Don Luis* simply asked me to inform *Señorita* Temple that *Señor* Lister will call again in an hour. If she wishes to take the call, I am to drive her to the Villa.'

'I see.' Doña Elena grimaced. 'Well, Domine? What do you want to do?'

'I'm not sure.' Domine disliked the ambiguous position in which Ben had placed her. 'I mean, if he's flown six hundred miles to see me ...'

'I take your point,' Doña Elena nodded. 'It would seem ungracious to ignore him.'

'Yes.' Domine sighed. 'I suppose I'd better go with Carlos.'

'Very well.' Doña Elena looked at the chauffeur. 'How long ago did *Señor* Lister call?'

'*Don Luis* said it was about thirty minutes since he called, *señora*.'

'Thirty minutes!' Doña Elena seemed vaguely amused. 'All right, Carlos. Cristina will give you a drink in the kitchen, if you go and ask her, and *Señorita* Temple will join you shortly.'

'*Señora*.'

Carlos left them, and Domine found the older woman's eyes upon her. 'It would seem that Luis is no more enthusiastic of your association with this young American than you are,' she remarked drily. 'Run along now and prepare yourself. We will finish the book another day.'

In her room, Domine cooled her cheeks with water and smoothed a pale lustre over her lips. Then, dissatisfied with her appearance in the simple halter-neck she was wearing.

She unzipped the dress and stepped into purple denims and a matching purple vest, that unashamedly emphasised her curving figure. She swept up her hair with an elastic band, securing it on top of her head with pins, and allowed several tendrils to fall delectably over her ears, realising as she did so that she was deliberately dressing to provoke Luis. So what? She asked herself defensively. He continually provoked her.

Carlos gave her an admiring look as he helped her into the jeep, but his manners were circumspect as he drove her along the track that wound its way to the villa. The drive reminded Domine painfully of the night Luis had taken her to the waterfall, but she determined not to think about that or about what had happened after. She would treat

Luis coolly, she decided, as coolly as he had treated her, and she would not allow her emotions to colour her judgment.

What she was not prepared for, however, was the sight of Lisel relaxing on the patio beside the fountain. Her cousin was seated comfortably on a cushioned lounge, impeccably elegant as usual in a navy blue dress, with white collar and cuffs, and high-heeled white sandals. Her hair was Madonna-smooth, and she wore the minimum of make-up. Inez was with her, like a black crow in her flapping habit, but Luis himself was not in evidence.

Carlos escorted Domine on to the patio, and then bowed his departure, leaving Domine to face her mentors, and with a determined effort she said: 'Good afternoon.'

Inez spoke first, indicating a chair nearby that Domine could take. 'It is a beautiful afternoon, Miss Temple,' she averred politely. 'I trust you have had no further trouble with your hand?'

'Oh ...' Domine glanced awkwardly down at the plaster which was all that remained of the bandage she had once worn. 'It's fine now, thank you. It was only a scratch.'

'Like you have on your arm?' queried Lisel coldly, noticing the faint red line that had first attracted Luis's attentive to her injuries. 'I understand *Doña* Elena suggested Luis take you to the falls. Had you known what the outcome would be, I expect you would have had what they call— second thoughts, hmm?'

Domine pushed her thumbs into the low waistband of her jeans. 'It was worth the effort,' she retorted pleasantly. 'It was my own fault that I got hurt.'

'I am sure it was.' Lisel's eyes were narrowed. 'But then you had been warned.'

The double entendre was obvious, and Domine wondered if she knew, or was only guessing. It would be devastating to think that Luis might have discussed what happened with his fiancée, and she refused to believe he had. Lisel was simply letting her know that she was aware of the outing, and cautioning her not to get involved.

'Would you like some tea, Miss Temple?' Inez asked now, as if attempting to lighten the mood. 'I cannot promise you it will be as good as English tea, but it is passably enjoyable.'

Domine shook her head. 'Thank you, but no,' she said, making no attempt to sit down, but wandering instead to the fountain, trailing her fingers in its delicious coolness. She was nervous and on edge, and she wished Ben would ring and she could get away without encountering her unwilling host.

But, as if in deliberate contrast to her silent prayers, Lisel's next words condemned their justification.

'Luis!' she exclaimed. *'Caro!'* And Domine turned with reluctance to face the man she loved.

He had apparently been taking a shower, for drops of water still sparkled on his dark hair and gathered in wet strands at his nape. The image of him taking a shower in the green and gold luxury of his bathroom was all too memorable, and as Domine's eyes slipped over his bronze silk shirt and darker brown pants, she had no difficulty in recalling the intimacy of their last meeting.

His eyes, when they encountered hers, were as cold as chipped ice, however, and although his response to his fiancée was polite as ever, he seemed absorbed with some inner conflict that stiffened his facial muscles and set a pulse beating at his jawline.

'Good afternoon, Miss Temple,' he said at last, freeing himself from Lisel's clinging fingers and crossing the patio to take Domine's hand. 'I see you came promptly to answer Lister's call,' he added, the low murmur of his voice scarcely audible to the two women seated behind him. 'Would it be presumptuous of me to enquire why he is telephoning you?'

'It would be presumptuous,' replied Domine tightly fighting the urge to appeal against this arbitrary denial of their relationship. 'But I'll tell you. Ben wrote to me, saying he was coming to Arequipa, and asking if he could see me.'

'And do you intend to see him?' demanded Luis harshly and she realised what she had mistaken for anger was purely and simply, jealousy.

'I—might,' she said now, aware that their exchanged being closely observed. 'Why not? I like Ben. He makes me laugh.'

Without another word Luis turned away, and trembling a little, Domine turned to the fountain, finding support in the smooth marbling of its basin. Her words had been

deliberately cruel, she knew, but why not? She defended herself. Luis had hurt her—on more than one occasion. Why shouldn't she take a leaf out of his book?

In the stillness, the telephone bell was an insistently discordant sound, and the young maid who appeared to inform them that the call was for Señorita Temple looked vaguely uneasy, as if aware that her announcement would not please the master of the house.

Domine adopted an enforced air of nonchalance and followed the maid into the villa, hesitating only once when the girl indicated that she should take the call in Don Luis's study. To speak to Ben in this room, which was so essentially Luis's, seemed a betrayal, even to her, but short of causing an altercation there was nothing she could do about it. Nevertheless, she refrained from sitting in Luis's chair and contented herself with resting against his desk, with its carved panels and tooled leather surface.

'Domine?' Ben's English was reassuring after so much Spanish, and she felt herself relax a little. 'Domine, it's good to hear your voice.'

'It's good to hear from you, too, Ben,' she returned, and meant it. 'What a surprise, your visiting Arequipa. I didn't know your firm had offices there.'

'They don't. But I am here on business, and I thought ...' He paused. 'I'd like to see you, Domine. Is there any chance of you joining me for dinner this evening?'

'This evening?' Domine was doubtful. 'You mean—in Arequipa? I'm afraid—'

'I mean Aguilas,' interrupted Ben quickly. 'I'm staying at the hotel there. It's not much of a place, but the food's not bad.'

'Aguilas!' echoed Domine in surprise, and as she did so she heard a footstep on the polished floor behind her. Swinging round, she saw that Luis was standing in the doorway, propped against the jamb, listening to every word of her conversation.

'Yes, Aguilas,' Ben was saying in her ear. 'You didn't think I'd expect you to drive to Arequipa, did you? Well, how about it? Can you get away?'

Domine dragged her gaze from Luis's set face and tried to concentrate on what Ben was saying. 'Aguilas?' she said again", striving for coherence. 'Well, I—'

'Why do you not invite Mr Lister to dine at the villa?' Luis inserted smoothly. 'Consuelo can easily accommodate two extra guests. Inez is joining us, of course, and

Pere Lucien. You may even invite my mother, if you wish, although I doubt she would take you up on it.'

'Domine?'

Ben sounded a little harassed now, and she realised he could not hear what Luis was saying. But she could, and while Luis's suggestion provided an outlet from her association with the American, she knew she could not spend an evening watching him being attentive to Lisel, showing her all the charm and consideration due to the woman he intended to marry.

'I'm here, Ben,' she said now. 'Er—someone has just come in.' She flashed a defiant look at Luis. 'About tonight ... I don't know.'

Ben sighed. 'Look, I don't want to talk about it over the phone, Domine, but—well, I do have something to discuss with you.' He paused. 'It's important, and I'd like to see you alone. I'm afraid it wasn't just those sexy eyes of yours that brought me all this way.'

'Oh!' Domine chewed on her lower lip. 'Well ...' she murmured, wishing Luis couldn't overhear everything she said. 'Where is it you're staying? What time do you want me to meet you?'

Luis sucked in his breath as Ben gave her instructions, and when she put the phone down she found he had moved to stand right behind her.

'What are you trying to do to me?' he demanded, his voice low and tortured, his breath fanning her nape. *'What does this man Lister mean to you? Why do you choose to meet him in Aguilas, when I invited him here?'*

Domine turned to face him, holding up her head. 'It's nothing to do with you, Luis,' she said. 'You and I—we're just—acquaintances, aren't we? Not even friends! Why should I have to explain my actions to an acquaintance?'

'Domine...' Her name was torn from him, and the familiar emotions he aroused inside her made her weak. 'Domine,' his hand touched her cheek almost as if he could not prevent it, 'don't do this to me! To either of us!'

'And what are you doing to me?' she cried, pushing his hand away, but he captured her fingers in his and carried them to his lips. He kissed each of her fingers in turn, but when his lips found her palm she tore her hand away.

'No, Luis!' she said, stepping away from him. 'I—I won't let you ruin my life!' and with a suppressed sob she hurried out of the room. It was like walking on a volcano—she thought, as she crossed the cool beauty of the hall, not knowing when it was likely to erupt.

Carlos drove Domine into Aguilas.

Doña Elena had been no more enthusiastic than her son at Domine's decision to join the young American for dinner, and she insisted Carlos remained at the hotel while they ate, ready to bring her back to the *Casa de Flores* whenever she chose. In one way it infuriated Domine, being treated like a child, but in another she acknowledged that Doña Elena's concern for her welfare was exactly like Grandpa's had been.

Ben's hotel was small, as he had said, but clean and not unattractive, with a tiny dining room overlooking an inner patio. The trailing fronds of fern and hibiscus made a garden of the stone-flagged courtyard, and the strategic use of coloured lights made it pretty after dark.

They were served beef soup, and a kind of doughnut, with molasses, and finished with ice-cream flavoured with nuts. It was all very hot and appetising, but Domine ate little, and it was left to Ben to show he had enjoyed it.

'I gather all is not well at the Villa Aguilas,' he remarked, lighting a cigarette after the meal, and Domine lay back in her chair, and made no attempt to contradict him.

'You look well anyway,' she commented, realising that she could relax with him. 'This climate obviously suits you. I wonder what the weather's like in England. I shall be finding out for myself soon enough.'

'You're going home? When?' Ben frowned, and Domine moved her shoulders in an offhand gesture.

'In a couple of days, I think,' she said, coming to a decision. '*Doña* Elena—that is, *Señora* Aguilar——'

'I know who *Doña* Elena is!'

'Well, she had invited me to stay on, but I think I ought to go home.'

Ben pulled a face. 'Shame!'

Domine sighed. 'Yes, isn't it?' she murmured drily. Then: 'Why did you come here, Ben? What did you really have to say to me? I can't believe we have anything so important to discuss.'

'Can't you?' Ben quirked his eyebrows. "No, well, perhaps you can't. Which just goes to prove how wrong you can be.'

'Ben!'

'All right, I'll get to the point.' He pulled a cablegram out of his pocket and handed it to her. 'Read that, then I'll explain.'

The cable was from Domine's solicitors in London to Lisel's solicitors in Lima. It was quite straightforward, and shocking in its simplicity:

LISEL BOURNE NOT HENRY TEMPLE'S GRANDDAUGHTER STOP HER MOTHER ISABELLA TEMPLE'S SISTER STOP BROUGHT UP BY AUNT AND UNCLE WHEN MOTHER DIED AT BIRTH STOP CHILD BORN TO EDWARD AND ISABELLA TEMPLE DIED AGED TWO YEARS STOP PROBATE SUSPENDED PENDING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS STOP

Domine read the cable at least three times, then she blinked and looked up at Ben disbelievingly. 'Is this true?'

'Yes, I'm afraid it is.'

'But—but that means—'

'You and your brother will inherit the mills, yes.' Domine felt sick. 'I can't believe it.' 'I assure you it's valid.'

'But Lisel—'

'She probably never knew. Like it says, her mother died at birth. The Temples had lost their daughter. It was natural that they should take responsibility for her. Unfortunately for Lisel, a formal adoption was never attempted.'

'*God!*' Domine rested her elbows on the table, supporting her head on her hands.

'What a mess!'

'Aren't you pleased?' Ben looked hurt. 'I made – the trip to tell you myself because I wanted to be the one to see your face when you heard. But you seem—disappointed.'

'Do I?'

Domine sighed. How could she explain how she really felt? Luis would never desert Lisel now, not when her chance of becoming an heiress was being denied to her. Always before, in the background of her thoughts, Domine had hoped that Lisel might change her mind, might decide that she wanted more out of life than marriage to a man who did not love her. Of course, Lisel might believe he did, but there was still the possibility that she might meet someone else, someone who really cared about her, and realise that she could afford to pick and choose. Now that was over, and she would resume her role as Cinderella, and Luis would honour his responsibilities.

'What's wrong?' asked Ben, speaking to her again, and she forced herself to lift her head.

'When do you intend to tell her?' she queried, trying to picture Mark's delight when he heard the news. But then he probably did know by now, and was already making his plans.

'Tomorrow,' Ben replied, pressing out his cigarette in the ashtray. 'I'll go to the convent. Then she'll probably want me to tell her fiancé, too.'

'Yes.' Domine tried to think constructively, but her brain felt fuddled, and it was difficult to concentrate. 'Thank you for letting me know.'

'A pleasure,' remarked Ben drily. 'But not for you, I gather. Why? Did you fall in love with the autocratic patron yourself?'

It was Domine pushing back her chair and standing up that convinced him. 'My God!' he said, staring at her. 'So that's it. No wonder there's a lack of elation! And I fooled myself you liked me. Oh, boy, what an evening this has been—for both of us!' Domine slept badly that night, plagued with dreams of Luis and Lisel, wondering how the girl would react when she learned that not only was she not an heiress, but that Edward Temple had not been her father. If there had been some way she could have concealed that fact from her, Domine felt she would have done so. It seemed so callous to destroy the girl's hopes and her parentage all in one killing blow.

Not that she had any illusions about Lisel's reactions, had the situation been reversed. And she still had Luis, which to Domine was the most important thing of all.

She was up and dressed by half past seven, and startled Cristina by appearing in the kitchen doorway, asking if she might have a cup of coffee.

'Coffee?' Cristina seemed on edge. 'Is something wrong with you, too, *pequeña*? Can nobody sleep?'

Domine frowned. 'What do you mean?' she asked doubtfully. 'Where is *Doña* Elena? She's still in bed, isn't she?'

'No.' Cristina shook her head. 'Don Luis sent a message at seven o'clock. Apparently Miss Lisel has disappeared.'

'*Lisel!*' Domine grasped the fitted units for support. 'What do you mean, she's disappeared? When did she disappear? Where could she have gone?'

'If we knew, she would not be missing, would she?' pointed out Cristina drily. 'Who knows? When Doña Inez went to wake her at six, her bed was empty. She at once telephoned Don Luis.'

Domine couldn't take this in. 'And—and where is Doña Elena now?'

'At the Villa Aguilas,' replied Cristina, pulling a face. 'Lisel would not run away from Don Luis, would she?'

Domine shrugged helplessly. 'I don't know. Why should she?'

'Indeed!' Cristina made a typically continental gesture. 'So here is your coffee. Drink it, and be thankful it is not your problem.'

Domine sipped the revitalising black liquid without really tasting it. She couldn't understand this. Why should Lisel have run away today? It didn't make sense. Tomorrow perhaps, when she found she was not the heiress she had imagined herself to be, but even then...

Domine was perplexed. Lisel had never struck her as a particularly sensitive person. Surely, even if she had learned—somehow—that she was not her grandfather's heir, she had no reason to run away. The situation had not really changed, so far as she was concerned. She was still going to marry a man whose wealth was far in excess of any expectation she might have had.

Finishing her coffee, she put down the cup and wandered outside on to the verandah at the back of the house. It was a moist morning, with the sun causing little spirals of mist

to rise from the trees, a promise of a warmer day to come. The scent of vegetation was overpowering, and she flung herself on to one of the loungers, trying to think of some reason for Lisel's uncharacteristic behaviour. But no matter how she looked at it, it didn't add up, and her head ached with the intensity of her concentration.

Trying to think of other things, she found it hard to feel enthusiastic about her changed status. She had got used to the idea that she would have to get a job, and after this demoralising affair with Luis, she really needed the challenge. She would still get a job, she decided firmly. At least that way she would have something to think about, something to take her mind from Luis and the *matrimonio de conveniencia* he planned to make.

She heard the sound of a vehicle and started to her feet, only to sink back again as she heard voices. It was Doña Elena and Inez, and she guessed they would not expect her to be up and about at this hour.

Unfortunately they chose to conduct the argument they were having in the garden room, and Domine, trapped on the verandah, was obliged to listen to what was being said.

'Luis deserves everything he gets!' Inez stated coldly, her words shocking Domine by their angry vehemence. 'Leading that poor girl on! Encouraging her to think—'

'Please Inez ...' That was Doña Elena's weary tones. 'You heard what Luis said. Lisel was not planning to run away when she left the Villa.'

'If that is to be believed,' inserted Inez sharply, and then, as if regretting her outburst, she added: 'Well, Mama, you must admit Lisel's behaviour was not typical.'

'That is as may be.' Doña Elena was not conceding anything. 'The fact remains that I do believe Luis, and while I naturally regret the upheaval this will cause, I cannot help but think that their marriage would not have been a success.'

Domine blinked. What did Doña Elena mean? Did she imagine that because Lisel had run away, Luis would abandon his responsibilities? It did not seem likely, and she could only assume the shock of the girl's action had temporarily deranged her powers of reasoning.

'Nevertheless, if anything happens to Lisel—'

'Oh, Inez! What can? She left of her own free will. Sister Teresa says she saw her drive away in your car. Surely that proves she knew what she was doing.'

'But where has she gone?'

'That we do not know. But we shall.' Doña Elena sounded very certain. 'And now, I think, I would like some coffee. Will you ask Cristina for me, my dear?'

Domine drew a deep breath and got to her feet as Inez disappeared to find the housekeeper. Then, with a resigned little movement of her shoulders, she moved into the French doorway of the garden room.

Doña Elena, who was tending to one of her plants, looked up in surprise when the girl's shadow darkened the room, and then her expression gentled when she saw who it was.

'Domine! My child! What are you doing up so early?'

'I couldn't sleep.' Domine sighed. 'I didn't intend to eavesdrop, but I overheard your conversation with Inez just now. Cristina told me Lisel had run away.'

'Ah, yes.' Luis's mother glanced reflectively over her shoulder. "You will have realised that so far as Inez is concerned, it is a major disaster.'

Domine shook her head. 'But why would she do such a thing?'

'Who knows?' Doña Elena shrugged. Then, with another conspiratorial look over her shoulder, she touched Domine's wrist. 'My dear, would you think me very rude if I asked you to leave us now? Inez is not herself, and I should hate her to upset you. She will be leaving soon, and then we can talk again.'

'Very well.'

Feeling a little hurt, Domine slipped out of the room and mounted the stairs just as Inez appeared from the kitchen. She disappeared into the garden room, and the door swung closed behind her. It successfully cut Domine off from any involvement in their affairs, and she went up to her room with a heavy heart.

On impulse, she pulled her cases from the back of the cupboard. She might as well pack, she thought bitterly. There was nothing left for her here. It might be simpler for everyone if she left right away. Doña Elena liked her, she might even have been serious

when she offered her a job, but when it came to family matters she was excluded, even though they still believed Lisel was her cousin.

She had just about finished when there was a tap at her door, and quickly throwing the bedspread over her suitcases she went to open it.

It was Cristina, with a message from Doña Elena. Don Luis had sent Carlos to fetch her, and would Domine excuse her for the rest of the morning.

'And—and Doña Inez?' Domine ventured, biting her lip.

'Naturally she has gone with her mother,' declared Cristina impatiently. 'Tch! Such a fuss! What is the world coming to?'

Domine managed a faint smile, but when the housekeeper had gone, she paced rather distraughtly across the room. What was she going to do? Wait here until Lisel was found, and then explain that she had been disinherited? Hang about in the hope that if she was not found, Luis would mm to her? Or leave now, with dignity, allowing the solicitor's cable to speak for itself?

Ben would be coming soon, she realised with a pang, but she didn't want to see him either. He could explain what had happened, and Luis would think that now she was independent again she had rushed back to England, and the dolce vita. It didn't really matter what Luis thought of her. And perhaps it would be easier to bear his contempt than his pity.

The solution as to how she could reach Arequipa and the air terminal there was solved for her. When she came downstairs again she saw that the Range-Rover which had brought Doña Elena and Inez from the Villa was standing idly at the door. Obviously Carlos had come to fetch them, and the Range-Rover would be collected later.

Dry-mouthed, she went upstairs again, and carried her cases down, one by one. She could hear Cristina's voice from the kitchen, cajolling Gomez about some misdemeanour or other, and she hastened across the hall and stowed the cases in the back of the vehicle.

This done, she went upstairs again and wrote a note to Doña Elena. It was quite short, just a brief apology for leaving so precipitately, and asking for her forgiveness.

After a moment's hesitation, she added that she had been very- happy at the *Casa de Flores*, and she would miss Doña Elena, and Cristina, very much.

When she came downstairs again, however, Cristina herself was waiting for her in the hall.

'What is the meaning of this?' she demanded, as Domine haltingly stepped down into the hall. 'First your cousin disappears, and now I find you hiding your suitcases in the Range-Rover! What is going on?'

Domine's face flamed. 'I'm leaving, Cristina.'

'Oh?' Cristina put her hands on her hips. 'And does Doña Elena know this?'

'No.' Domine sighed, indicating the envelope in her hand. 'I've written her a note.'

'A note?' Cristina was obviously furious. 'And you think that is sufficient recompense for all Doña Elena has done for you?'

'I—no! No, of course not.' Domine put a hand to her head. 'Oh, Cristina, you don't understand...'

'No, I do not.' Cristina's temper fairly bristled. 'What is wrong with everybody? Sneaking away, like thieves in the night!'

'It's not like that, Cristina.'

'Then what is it like? How will Doña Elena feel when she finds you too have run away?'

'My running has nothing to do with Lisel's,' insisted Domine, wearily. 'Oh, Cristina, can't you just forget you've seen me? I didn't intend to steal the Range-Rover. I should have left it at the airport in Arequipa, and handed the keys to the security people there. They would have seen it was returned.'

'The Range-Rover! Hah!' Cristina snorted. 'Do you think I am interested in the Range-Rover? No! I am only concerned with my mistress, with Doña Elena. She likes you, she cares for you! She will be distraught if you disappear without even having the decency to tell her you are leaving!'

Domine's shoulders sagged. 'All right, all right.'

'What is this—all right?'

'It means—all right, I'll stay. At least, until I've spoken to Doña Elena.'

Cristina's face cleared. 'You will?'

'I've said so, haven't I?'

'Ah, good girl!' To Domine's astonishment, the other woman snatched her into her arms and subjected her to a bear-hug. 'I knew you would not let me down. Doña Elena is right, you are a good girl!'

Domine thought Cristina was exaggerating her importance, but she had agreed to stay, and she would not break her word. However, the prospect of spending the next few hours in a fever of impatience filled her with despair. There was always the possibility that Luis would come back with his mother, and she dreaded seeing him again. If he appealed to her to stay, she might not be able to refuse him, and that would be an even greater humiliation.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE day drained away. It was a curiously airless day, with periods of low-hanging cloud, purpling over the mountains. Once there was a low rumble, like thunder, and Domine wondered apprehensively whether they were due for another earth tremor, but the spasmodic flicker of lightning that accompanied it seemed to indicate an electrical storm.

Cristina served lunch for one in the dining room, but Domine scarcely did justice to it, and the housekeeper took the food away again, muttering under her breath.

As the afternoon wore on Domine became progressively more depressed. Where was Doña Elena? Where was Lisel? Why hadn't Ben arrived? So many questions without answers. So many hours to fill with restless despair.

The storm broke around five o'clock. The distant rumblings had been getting persistently stronger and closer together, and after a particularly violent flash of lightning, large spots of rain came to wet the windows.

Cristina bustled about, closing shutters, fastening windows, generally preparing for a torrential downpour, and Domine wandered out into the hall, hands pushed into the pockets of her jeans, unable to deny the anxiety of wondering if Luis was out on the mountain roads in this. She remembered too well those hairpin bends, the narrowness of

the track, and the precipitous drop beneath. With water flooding freely under the wheels of a vehicle, what chance would it have if it went into a skid?

Thinking of vehicles reminded her that her suitcases were still in the Range-Rover, standing at the front of the *Casa*. It also jogged her memory that the windows of the Range-Rover were wide open, and the rain was likely to drive inside and soak everything.

Cristina was upstairs, attending to the windows there, so Domine hesitated only a moment before wrenching open the door and looking out at the drenched garden. As she had thought, the windows of the vehicle were open, and with a sigh she darted out from the porch to close them.

She was soaked in seconds, her thin cotton tee-shirt no match for the weather. But she managed to roll the windows upwards, and then reached inside to pull out her cases. She would not be leaving that evening, she reasoned practically, and she would need her nightgown and toilet things.

She was in the process of pulling the case out of the back of the Range-Rover when another vehicle came swiftly along the track to the house, braking in a squeal of protesting tyres as she turned her head to stare at it. Luis thrust open the door of his mud-splattered saloon, getting out quickly and coming towards her with undisguised aggression before she had time to register her dismay.

"What do you think you are doing?" he grated, snatching the case from her unresisting fingers and gazing at her with open disgust. "Where are you going in this storm? Are you mad? Do you not know the mountain roads are flooded?"

"I—well, yes—that is—you don't understand, Luis—"

"No, I do not," he snapped furiously, giving her a compelling push towards the porch. "Get inside at once! You are soaked to the skin! *Madre de Dios*, I could kill you for this!"

Domine knew there was no point in arguing with him in the pouring rain. His shoulders were already soaked, too, and his dark shirt was sticking to his damp skin. With a helpless backward glance, she moved obediently indoors, and he came after her, carrying both her cases. He slammed them down on the polished tiles and closed the door with more force than was necessary, then glared at Domine as if he would have liked to do her some personal injury.

"Where were you going?' he demanded again. "You might as well tell me. I mean to know. Were you going to meet Lister? Had you made that arrangement last evening? Or is there someone else you are so eager to see that you must leave in the middle of a thunderstorm!"

Domine sighed, aware that her shirt outlined the agitate contours of her body, but she knew Luis would not be content until she had given him some explanation.

'I was not leaving,' she said now, carefully. 'At least not at this moment—'

'What do you mean?'

'I—I did plan to leave. This morning. But—but Cristina persuaded me to wait and see your mother. Where is she by the way? Did you come alone?'

'Yes, I came alone,' he snapped, pushing back his wet hair with hands that she saw to her astonishment were trembling. '*Por Dios!* What were you planning to do? Were you intending to return to England?'

'Why not?' Domine lifted her wet shirt away from her midriff. 'I can't stay here for ever. Not now—'

'No, particularly not now when you are obviously eager to accept your grandfather's mistake!' Luis countered coldly.

'You know about that?'

'But of course. Your—Mr Lister came to see me this morning. Was that not what you expected him to do?'

'Well, yes, but—I mean—Lisel—'

'Lisel!' Luis's tone was harsh. 'Oh, yes, Lisel! I must not forget her!'

'She has been found?'

'Yes, she has been found.'

'But where?'

'Where would you imagine? In Arequipa, naturally. Waiting for a plane to take her to Lima.'

Domine blinked. 'But why?'

'It is a long story,' declared Luis wearily. 'And it need not concern you.'

Domine sighed. 'But of course it does concern me!' she protested. 'Why did Lisel run away? Why would she do such a thing?'

Luis looked defeatedly round the hall, and then back at her again. 'You are cold,' he said, moving his shoulders in a dismissing gesture. 'Go and get out of those wet things before you catch a chill.'

'You're wet, too—'

'This?' He touched his shoulders scornfully. 'This is nothing. I will change when I get back to the Villa.'

Domine gulped. 'You're not leaving!'

Luis's lids lowered. 'There is no reason for me to stay.'

'You're wrong! I mean, you were going to tell me about Lisel.'

He shrugged. 'It can wait. Be assured, she is safe and well. That is all that you need know.'

Domine stared at him impotently. "Why? What else is there?" She made a sound of exasperation. 'Luis, please! Don't I deserve to know at least why you are here? Now?'

The clatter of Cristina's footsteps on the stairs silenced any response he might have made, and after greeting her mistress's son Cristina turned horrified eyes in Domine's direction.

'You must change—at once!' she exclaimed vigorously. 'You are wet through to the skin!'

'I have been telling her that,' remarked Luis heavily. Then: 'I will get a drink, Cristina, then I will leave. Doña Elena is at the Villa, and I shall bring her back later.'

'Yes, *señor*.'

Cristina bobbed and left them, and without looking at Domine Luis turned and walked into the salon. The girl hesitated a moment, unsure of what she should do, and then she hurried quickly up the stairs, unfastening the zip and buttons of her jeans as she went.

In her bathroom, Domine towelled her hair and stripped off the rest of her clothes. But it was only as she dropped the sopping tee-shirt into the bath that she remembered all her clothes were locked in the suitcases in the hall.

Frustradon almost overwhelmed her, but then she remembered there was a towelling bathrobe hanging behind the bathroom door. Jerking it off its hook, she wrapped herself in it, uncaring that the sleeves were too long, or that the hem trailed somewhere near her ankles. It was a covering, it would do, and she dared not wait a moment longer.

As it was, Luis was already crossing the hall as she came down the stairs. His intention of leaving was apparent, and in her haste Domine stumbled. She managed to stop herself from falling full length, but her gasp of dismay attracted Luis's attention, and with an oath he leapt up the stairs to save her. His arms went around her, warm and eager and totally protective, and with a little sigh, she gave herself up to his strength, and buried her face against the damp muscles of his chest.

'Oh, Domine!' he muttered, swinging her up into his arms, as he had done once before, and carrying her down the stairs again. *'Te amo, te adoro! No me deje!'*

His tortured words were almost more than she could bear. Winding her arms about his neck, she whispered: 'I love you, Luis—you know that. But I can't share you with Lisel. What you're asking is impossible!'

Luis set her on her feet in the salon, holding her before him and gazing at her through troubled eyes. 'But you know!' he exclaimed. 'You know Lisel and I—it is over!'

'Over!' Domine could scarcely believe her ears. 'Over?'

Luis shook her gently. 'You mean you did not know?' he demanded. 'But—my mother—she said you overheard her conversation with Inez!'

'Some of it, yes.' Domine quivered. 'But they said nothing about—about you and Lisel—'

'Did they not?' Luis stared at her. 'But Mama said she sent you away, that she explained it would not be politic to speak with Inez at that moment!'

'Well, yes.' Domine was confused. 'But I thought—that is—what was she afraid Inez might say to me?'

'Dios!' Luis's lips parted in amazement. 'You really do not know, do you? Oh, *querida*, does that mean you were not leaving me? That you did not know that I intended to ask you to marry me?'

'To—marry—you?'

Domine swayed, and with a groan of impatience he caught her up in his arms, parting her lips with his mouth and holding her slim body close against the muscular hardness of his. His kiss plundered her sweetness, robbing her of all sense and reason, awakening her to the full awareness of her femininity. She had no need now to yearn for a closer fulfillment, to ache for the aggressive maleness of his demands. With her arms around his neck, and her breasts crushed against his chest, she was fully aroused to the hungry urgency of his desire. Not even the storm raging outside could equal the storm of their need for one another, but once again it was Luis who drew back, putting her away from him, albeit only to the length of his arms, as he said huskily:

'We must talk. There are things that need to be said, and I cannot think when I am holding you in my arms.'

Domine's eyes were wide and questioning, and with a muffled oath he turned from her, seating himself in an armchair and looking up at her with caressing eyes. Then, as if compelled to keep his hands on her, he leant forward and caught her wrist, pulling her down on to his knees, burying his face in the scented hollow of her throat.

'Oh, Domine,' he said, and there was agony as well as an eager satisfaction in his voice. 'You must marry me soon. This week—tomorrow! I cannot wait much longer to make you mine.'

Domine cupped his face in her hands, revelling in the unfamiliar intimacy, and stroked his lashes with her thumbs. Then she said doubtfully: 'Did I drive Lisel away? Is that what you're saying? Because if it is—'

'No!' He said the word firmly and definitely. 'No, neither of us drove Lisel away. Although I admit I thought at first I had, and so did Inez. That was why—' He broke off abruptly, and coiled a strand of silver silk around his finger. 'But I must explain. Last night, after you had left to keep your engagement with Lister, I was—how shall I say it—?'

'Jealous?' suggested Domine softly, and he nodded, carrying the strand of hair to his lips, and tasting its perfume.

'Crazily,' he agreed unevenly. 'Madly and crazily jealous and totally incapable of fooling myself any longer. I knew I could not marry Lisel feeling as I do. It would not have been fair to either of us. And I knew I must tell her so.'

'And—you did?'

'Yes.' Luis heaved a sigh. 'It was after dinner, when Inez and Pere Lucien were enjoying a game of chess. I took Lisel into the study, and I told her that I loved you.'

Domine hesitated. 'What did she say?'

'A lot,' he admitted heavily. 'Things I would never have expected her to say. Bitter things, angry things, things; about being patronised all her life, and being fed-up with it.'

'Oh!'

Domine was silent, and he went on: 'Apparently she resented everything that had been done for her. She expressed no love for Inez, or for me. Only a contemptuous denunciation of my feelings for you, and an indictment that she would sue me for breach of promise if I chose to walk out on her.'

'Luis!'

'Yes.' He touched her cheek almost absently, remembering the unpleasant scene. 'I could not believe it at first. I thought she must be ill, deranged, any excuse but the real one, I am afraid. She left the Villa threatening to blacken my name throughout the department, and although I had sympathy for her, there was no way I could help her.'

'So that was what you told Inez?'

'This morning, yes. When it was discovered that Lisel was missing, naturally I blamed myself.'

Domine frowned. 'I'm sorry ...'

'So am I,' agreed Luis, nuzzling her shoulder. 'But only because I feel sorry for her. She need not have suffered by it. I would have seen that she was admirably recompensed.'

'But there was something else?'

He nodded. 'Eventually we discovered what it was. Your Mr Lister supplied the answer—at least, indirectly.'

'He's not my Mr Lister,' protested Domine, and Luis's lips curved upward.

'No, he is not,' he agreed huskily. 'I will see to that.' Domine submitted to his searching kiss in helpless delight, but when his fingers probed the neckline of her gown, she halted them with a determined: 'Luis! Go on with what you were saying!'

'Very well.' The humour in his eyes belied the impatience of his words, and he frowned as he sought to explain. 'Mr Lister told us that he had contacted Lisel the previous evening. Apparently you had cut short your evening together, and he had decided to delay no longer before making the situation known to her. He had a taxi drive him out to the convent, and he spoke to her there at about nine o'clock.'

'So?'

'So—' Luis hesitated. 'Here the story becomes a little more complicated, I am afraid. We did not think that learning of these changed circumstances would have inspired a desire to run away. On the contrary, from what I had learned of Lisel in the past twenty-four hours, I would have expected her to stay. But she had gone, and it was up to me to find out why.'

'How could you do that?'

'Well, the most obvious place to look for clues was the convent. Lisel had left in a hurry, that much was obvious. She had not taken her clothes or any but the most necessary of her belongings. She had even left behind the wallet containing her father's—pardon me, your uncle's— photograph, and that of your aunt. Their marriage certificate was there, although she had denied having it, and can you guess what else?' Domine shook her head. Luis sighed. 'This!'

He pushed his hand into his hip pocket and pulled out a folded paper. He handed it to Domine and she looked at him doubtfully before opening it out. It was a birth certificate, Lisel's birth certificate, delineating clearly the names of Elizabeth and Charles Boume.

'Then—then she knew!'

Luis nodded 'All along.'

'But—but—'

'I suppose she thought that if your grandfather believed that she was his granddaughter, why should she disillusion him!'

'And—and when Ben told her the mistake had been discovered ...'

'I suppose she thought it would come out, that she had known all along.'

'But would it?'

'Only if it was proved that she had a copy of the birth certificate.'

'Oh, Luis!'

'I know, I know.' He pressed her head against his shoulder. 'She must have panicked. Maybe something Lister said made her think they knew the whole story. Anyway, she imagined she might be charged with some offence, and she ran.'

'And—and you've brought her back?'

'Temporarily,' Luis agreed. 'Inez is going to arrange for her to join a hospital in Lima. We are both agreed that she will not want to stay in the valley now, even if no charges are brought against her.'

'I—I shan't bring any charges,' declared Domine firmly. 'And I'm sure Mark won't either.' She shook her head. 'He must be so pleased!'

'Yes. Your brother is certainly making an effort to prove himself,' Luis agreed drily. 'You know, if your grandfather was as shrewd as you say he was, he may have known about this all along. He knew that the claim would have to be investigated, and perhaps he thought it might prove beneficial for both of you.'

Oh, he couldn't be so cruel!' exclaimed Domine, but remembering how he had treated Mark and herself, she could not be absolutely certain. Pressing her lips to Luis's neck, she whispered: 'I can't believe this is happening!'

'I will make you believe it,' he said forcefully, and for several minutes he succeeded. Then he lifted his head, saying rather thickly: 'If Cristina comes in and finds us like this, your reputation will be in shreds!'

'Then you'll have to marry me, won't you?' Domine whispered mischievously, and he had no will to resist.

'So,' he said, 'I want to know why you felt the need to leave so hastily. Did you not realise how I would feel when I found you had gone?'

Domine pressed her lips to his throat, and a shudder ran through him. 'I thought I couldn't bear to stay here, believing our love was hopeless,' she explained. 'I felt sure that you would never leave Lisel, and I just wanted to run away and hide.'

'Oh, querida!' His efforts to comfort her were delightful, but when they began to get out of hand he said huskily: 'So what do you plan to do about the mills? Will you wish to return to England, now you are a rich young woman?'

'Is that what you want me to do?' she murmured, loosening the buttons of his shirt and snuggling against his chest.

'Dios!' You know what I want to do,' he groaned. 'I want to marry you. I want to live with you at the Villa Aguilas, and I want our children to play where I used to play. I love you, Domine. You cannot doubt it. You are all I have ever wanted in a woman.'

'Then I'll accept your proposal,' she breathed. 'Because it's what I want, too. As for the mills, Mark can take charge of them, as he has been doing. I think he'll be successful. I'll be a silent partner. He can make the decisions.' She paused. 'Unless you'd like to join the firm?'

'Me?' Luis shook his head. 'I have everything I need right here.' He smiled tenderly down at her. 'You know, of course, that Mama will feel she has had a hand in all this. She suspected my feelings for you right from the start, and although she is usually practical in these matters, I have discovered she is quite a romantic at heart.' He nuzzled her shoulder. 'She knew, after that night at the Villa, I could not get you out of my mind!'

'How very astute of her,' murmured Domine happily, and Luis's laughter was echoed in the dying thunder of the storm.