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Original hardcover edition published in 1979
by Mills & Boon Limited

ISBN 0-373-02362-6

Harlequin edition published October 1980

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Printed in the U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

EVEN at midnight the airport was as crowded as a midday shopping centre. To a girl accustomed to doing her shopping—and indeed her travelling—in luxurious privacy the sight was alarming. Olivia Lightfellow shrank behind a pillar as an enterprising child of six or seven swept past with his badminton racquet at an aggressive angle.

She had been full of trepidation about coming to Mexico in the first place, and the gruelling flight had not increased her optimism. Not, she assured herself, that she had any cause to worry. Indeed, most girls transported from a wet rural English landscape to Mexico for a holiday with a loving family would have counted themselves very lucky. But Olivia was nervous of meeting her family. Though she had encountered uncle and cousins briefly before, she had not met her aunt. There had been, too, an insistence on her making the trip which suggested that her uncle had more in mind than a relaxing holiday for his English niece.

As so often in her life before, Olivia felt that she ought to brace herself to resist some further erosion of her independence, without being quite sure of whence the specific threat would come. And, as she knew full well, it would come in the guise of so much love and family concern that she would feel guilty about even wanting to resist.

Chiding herself for being incompetent, she contrasted herself with the stout infant wading purposefully between her skirts and the collection of boxes and suitcases that someone had dumped beside her.

‘Carlitos!’ screamed a voice, and the seven-year-old halted instantly, catching Olivia a smart backhander in his praiseworthy obedience. For a moment he looked utterly

crestfallen. Sufficiently fascinated to forget her own tiredness Olivia watched his head droop, the racquet slip sadly back and through his fingers and his whole aspect change from bright interest to despondency. Only for a moment, however. The call was not repeated and Carlitos clearly took this as a sign that the gods were smiling. Once more taking a manful grip on his racquet he whirled about—this time connecting briefly and painfully with Olivia's shins—and set off once more into the crowd.

Olivia watched him in admiration quite untinged with malice. She rubbed her bruised shins in some amusement, unaware that she was in her turn being watched. She was speedily awakened out of her preoccupation.

'Oh, Livvy, there you are,' said her aunt, stopping breathlessly beside her. 'I thought you must have got lost in this dreadful crowd. Did that little ruffian hurt you?'

Olivia who, in those few seconds, had conceived no small respect for Carlitos, was bewildered.

'What ruffian?' she said, looking round vaguely for a sharp-suited thug that the epithet suggested to her.

'That dreadful child,' said Aunt Betty who, having spent most of her life, before her sister-in-law died and she took over the care of Olivia, as headmistress of a junior school, had no great opinion of children.

Olivia looked surprised and then, suddenly, laughed. It was an attractive laugh and not often heard. Her aunt's eyes narrowed.

'Oh, he wasn't a ruffian,' Olivia assured her. 'In fact I think he was probably something of a hero. He was running away from the grown-ups.'

Aunt Betty looked as if this proved all her worst fears, but before she could reply a man appeared at her elbow. He was tall and very dark and apparently as fascinated by Olivia as she had been by Carlitos.

'You didn't think it would be a good idea to stop him and hand him back to his mother?' he asked quizzically, staring at her, as she afterwards complained crossly to Aunt Betty, as if she were a newly imported exotic animal.

'Good heavens, no,' she exclaimed. 'He'd got clean away,

you see. It would have been very unsporting to have interfered.'

He threw back his head and laughed aloud at that, but Aunt Betty was not amused.

'Oh really, Livvy, I despair of you. When will you grow up? You seem to get more childish instead of less. Can't you see that it was very irresponsible of you to let him get away? Why, he could lose himself permanently among all these people. And it would be your fault.'

As always when rebuked in public Olivia flinched. To the man's watchful eyes it seemed as if she lost colour. Certainly the interest which had animated her in the encounter with the child evaporated and her original tiredness reasserted itself. He had been told she was delicate, and now he was presented with incontrovertible evidence. As the sparkle died he saw that her mouth was pale and pinched with exhaustion and there were great shadows like bruises under her eyes.

'I'm sorry. I'm afraid I didn't think of that,' Olivia murmured.

He was aware of an urge to comfort her. 'There is no need to worry, Miss Lightfellow. The airport may be busy, but it is correspondingly efficient. It would be virtually impossible for him to get lost. If he can't find his way back to his mother himself—and he looked to me an eminently capable child—I'm sure one of the ground staff will locate her for him. And he certainly won't be allowed out of the Customs hall, so you can banish any fears of him stowing away to Tierra del Fuego.'

Olivia looked at him in surprise. She was not used to being championed in her frequent disagreements with Aunt Betty and she was quite as startled by as grateful for this intervention. Very slightly she raised her brows.

Seeing it, Aunt Betty said hastily, 'Livvy, I haven't introduced you—this is Senor Luis Escobar who works for your uncle. Octavio wasn't able to get away to meet us.'

Olivia's eyebrows rose even higher. 'Get away from what, for heaven's sake?' she demanded. 'It's the middle of the night. I don't believe that even my perfectionist Uncle

Octavio works all through the night as well as eighteen hours a day.'

'That's not a nice way to talk about your uncle,' reproved her aunt.

Luis Escobar, however, seemed unoffended by the implied insult to his employer. 'No, certainly he is not working,' he assured Olivia soothingly. 'He has gone to his house in Cuernavaca. There will be things to see to on the estate, of course, but it is principally a holiday. He has not been in Mexico City for a week, which is why he asked me to meet you. As soon as you have recovered from your flight he wants you to join him in the country.'

'I see.' Olivia passed a hand that had begun to shake with weariness over her eyes. 'Thank you.'

The other two exchanged glances, Luis Escobar enquiring, Miss Lightfellow anxious.

'You're tired,' said the latter accusingly. 'It was that dreadful flight. I *told* your uncle we ought to have had a private plane. You're just not strong enough for all this hurly-burly.'

'Miss Lightfellow would still have had to go through Customs,' pointed out Luis Escobar gently. 'Even Don Octavio could not have laid on a specially chartered Customs officer. But if you will give me your passports and cases I will see what I can do to speed things up. Wait here for me, please.'

Aunt Betty bridled at the note of command, but Olivia was too tired (and, as she privately admitted, too used to being ordered about) to take offence. It was with the deepest gratitude that she saw him conjure a couple of porters out of nowhere and make purposefully for a Customs bench.

'He seems to have no qualms about queue-jumping,' she murmured to Aunt Betty.

'Just as well, with you in your present state,' returned her aunt. 'How do you feel?'

Olivia considered the question. It was one to which she was accustomed and knew perfectly well that her aunt would insist on a full and detailed reply.

'I really don't think I feel anything but sleepy,' she said at

last. 'I shall be glad to get to bed.'

Aunt Betty tutted, her concern not unmingled with triumph.

'I told your uncle,' she repeated. 'Those seats are much too uncomfortable for anyone to rest in.'

Olivia was moved to protest. 'We had more room in the first class cabin than most people, and nobody else seemed to have trouble in sleeping.'

'You,' said Aunt Betty coldly, 'are not just anybody.'

Olivia was well acquainted with her aunt's unshakeable belief that to be the head of the Lightfellow family was to be considerably more important than any head of state since Elizabeth I. She therefore said mildly, 'I don't think the Princess and the Pea principle is still functioning, Aunt Betty. In fact, I would think any present-day princess would be so used to travelling she could sleep anywhere,' she added thoughtfully.

'Oh, don't be silly, Livvy. I never said a word about princesses,' said Aunt Betty, whose mind was of a literal turn. She surveyed her niece with a severity practised to perfection in twenty years of junior school teaching. 'I think you must be jet-lagged,' she decided.

They had been travelling for twenty-two hours, and Olivia had in that time come to the conclusion that a good deal of her weariness was directly attributable to the strain of Aunt Betty's conversation rather than the discomforts of the journey. She now sighed and began to scan the Customs hall for her uncle's appointee. It was with relief bordering on desperation that she saw him threading his way back towards them.

'There, that didn't take long, did it?' he said to Aunt Betty. He cast a quick, frowning glance at Olivia's tense form and drew his own conclusions. 'Miss Lightfellow doesn't look well. I think I will take her straight back to the house. If you don't mind travelling in Don Octavio's car, Miss Betty? The chauffeur has gone to fetch it now and the porters are waiting outside with the luggage so they can pack everything into it as soon as it draws up to the-door. We have terrible parking problems here, you see. I've got my car parked on the tarmac.' He added with disarming mischief,

'I was at school with the airport engineer. He has his parking place reserved, of course, but he's not here at this hour. So I took advantage of our friendship and his absence.' He took Olivia's arm and guided her gently away from her speechless aunt. 'Don't disturb yourself, Miss Betty. The porter will come and fetch you when the car arrives,' he tossed over his shoulder.

Feeling that some protest was in order Olivia said feebly, 'But I could wait with the luggage. Or it could go on its own.'

'Certainly it could,' he agreed, taking her solicitously through automatic doors into a windy night. 'But we have to: my car only takes two. Don Octavio's car, on the other hand, could take a boy scout troop.'

Olivia was still giggling when they reached the car. He opened the door for her and helped her into a sizeable vehicle.

'That's better,' he said approvingly, before he closed the door.

Open-mouthed, Olivia watched him walk round the bonnet and get in beside her.

'What is?' she demanded. 'Better, I mean.'

He turned a smile of singular charm on her. 'To hear you laughing. I thought you were going to dissolve into tears in the Customs hall.'

'Really?' She was rather appalled and gave a little shiver. 'How embarrassing for you! I'm sorry.'

He was switching on the engine but gave her a quick look at that. 'You don't have to apologise. In fact if apologies are due they should probably come from me for keeping you waiting so long that you overtired yourself.'

Intrigued by this lopsided reasoning, Olivia said, 'But if I'm tired it's hardly anyone's fault but my own. You weren't to know.'

'Ah, but I did know. I had been specifically told that yours was a delicate constitution,' his primmed mouth invited her to laugh with him at the pompous phrase which could only have originated with Aunt Betty.

She was torn between loyalty to her aunt and a strong inclination to laugh.

'My aunt has always had a tendency to take a rather extreme view of my health,' she said carefully.

The car began to ease forward in expensive silence. Startled into a new train of thought, Olivia said, 'Haven't you switched the engine on?'

'Yes, of course.'

They were coming out of the 'airport gates and he negotiated the press of taxis and minibuses in silence. Olivia, feeling snubbed, subsided into the depths of her seat, pulling her coat collar round her ears.

'Cold?' he asked, noticing the movement. He found a switch and a blast of warm air hit the interior so that Olivia gasped. He chuckled. 'I must say you're a very flattering passenger.'

'This is a very impressive car,' she returned, letting her collar fall and taking off her gloves. 'I've never met one like it. I can't hear the engine, I get a blast of Caribbean air when I say I'm cold and it goes faster than anything I've travelled in on the ground before.'

'Very flattering,' he said in amusement. 'Do you like cars?'

Olivia was disconcerted. 'I don't know. I suppose I must do. I've never thought about it.'

'No?' He took them neatly into a slipway and on to a six-lane highway with the minimum fuss and maximum acceleration. 'What do you have at home?'

'I'm not at all sure. I know that either,' said Olivia in a bewildered voice. 'I mean, there are always cars in the garage, but as neither Aunt Betty nor I drive, I've never asked what they're called.'

'You don't drive?' he said in a voice of amazement.

'No.' She was ever so slightly defensive. 'After I was ill my father didn't want me to learn. And then—when he died—there seemed so much else to do . . .' she bit her lip, recalling how little in fact she had done. Aunt Betty had seen to everything. Olivia had had almost nothing to do but sign a few papers and mourn.

'So you've never even learned,' he said as if storing up the information for use in some future project. 'You ought to take the opportunity to learn while you're here. The roads

are empty enough and Don Octavio has plenty of cars for you to borrow.'

Olivia looked at the traffic past which they were gliding, averted her eyes to the tall illuminated signs ahead of them, and shuddered.

'I couldn't possibly,' she said with exceptional firmness. 'I'd be terrified.'

'Of course you would,' he agreed. 'Everyone is terrified to begin with. But you'd soon overcome it.'

'And drive like those people out there?' she asked with great irony.

He chuckled. 'Eventually, perhaps.' A lorry pulled out in front of them. He neither braked nor lifted his foot from the accelerator, contenting himself with flashing his lights at the offender until, at the moment when Olivia had decided that disaster was inescapable and was bracing herself for impact, the lorry pulled reluctantly over to his right, and they shot past unimpeded.

She let out her breath very slowly. 'Never,' she said with conviction.

'Oh, but you're so wrong. It would take about six months, perhaps. But in the end you'd adapt to the customs of the country. And here driving is the last great adventure.'

'I'm not in the least adventurous,' Olivia told him hastily.

'You'll have to be to survive,' he informed her. Another of those glancing sideways looks that said the world was mad and she might just as well laugh at it with him.

'There is of course also the possibility that I just might not survive,' she pointed out.

'I doubt it,' he said drily, 'the will to survive is fairly strong in most of us. You'd be surprised.'

Detecting censure in his tone, Olivia looked at him curiously. She was not unused to disapproval. Aunt Betty frequently pointed out that Olivia was selfish, spiritless and totally incompetent and Olivia herself had never challenged that judgment. Her father's advisers, lawyers, accountants and their kind, treated her with a mixture of condescension and impatience that made only the barest concession to courtesy. So Olivia was not really surprised that this

obviously efficient man should despise her. It merely occurred to her that he had summed up 'her character with depressing rapidity.

She sighed, unconsciously clasping her hands together, a trick she had never lost from childhood when feeling herself under attack. After her mother's death her father had frequently expressed his dissatisfaction with his daughter. Quiet, timid and thoughtful, she was the antithesis of her mother. That lady's energy had been as phenomenal as her beauty, as Olivia had been ceaselessly reminded. Even her unknown Mexican uncle, on the one occasion he had visited England, had remarked how unlike Carmen her daughter was.

She wondered whether Senor Escobar was making a similar comparison with the inevitable, unflattering reflections upon herself and sighed. She would, she found, rather like to stand well with him. It would be nice to have earned for oneself the respect of just one fellow adult during one's life. Although, she acknowledged to herself ruefully, he had probably already been well primed on her failings, and anyway she had never been known to do anything sufficiently independent to entitle her to be thought of as an adult, much less respected by one. Whereas at her present age her mother had uprooted herself from her native land, married a foreigner and borne a child. At the thought of such enterprise Olivia shuddered. To be cast adrift from family and her careful guardians, and in a foreign language too, seemed to her the height of terror. She sighed again, this time audibly, which earned her a lifted eyebrow.

'Did you know my mother?' she asked, following her own train of thought.

He was quite undisconcerted by the apparent irrelevance. Indeed, she had the oddest feeling that he understood how she had arrived at the question from the care he took over his reply.

'No, I never met her. I have worked closely with Octavio for about a year only. Before that I only saw him from a distance. We are not such old friends. But of course I have heard a great deal about her. She must have been,' he

hesitated briefly before choosing his adjective, 'a powerful personality.'

'I suppose she was,' said her daughter, rather surprised. 'I don't remember thinking about her in quite that way before. Everyone always says how vivacious she was, of course. But powerful really describes her much better. She made things happen. Do you know what **I** mean?'

Luis Escobar was concentrating hard on the road ahead and gave the appearance of bestowing only the barest attention necessitated by ordinary politeness on Olivia's conversation. She did not mind this. Rather she felt freed by it. She was used to her few confidences being seized upon with avidity by Aunt Betty or one of her aunt's fellow trustees. That their eagerness was the result of a very real affection, Olivia constantly reminded herself. Nevertheless to meet with this not unfriendly indifference was refreshing, and she was, almost unconsciously, lured into revelation by it.

'It was always exciting when Mama was coming home,' she said dreamily, more than half to herself. 'You never knew who or what she'd bring with her. Or what sort of mood she'd be in when she arrived,' she added with remembered wryness. 'Sometimes it would be splendid and she'd be full of enthusiasm for something and just carry you along with her. Of course, you were always partly willing to follow her lead because it was such a relief that she wasn't feeling black. But even if she was miserable it was thrilling, because she used to bang doors and throw things and the house was suddenly allowed to be untidy.'

Olivia chuckled. '**I** think secretly my father used to look forward to it as much as I did. Most of the time he was very proper and Mama used to torpedo his routine in about five minutes. He grumbled, but **I** think he wanted it. After she died the house was a lot quieter and neater, but he didn't come home so much and when he did he brought work with him.' She chuckled again appreciatively. 'Nobody could possibly have done any work in a house with Mama in it.'

'Your father stayed at home while your mother travelled?

asked Luis Escobar lightly. 'That's a reversal of the usual role, isn't it?'

Olivia looked at him quickly. She had been almost certain he wasn't listening. At least not sufficiently closely to be able to ask relevant questions of her rambling discourse.

'Mama had so many relatives abroad,' she replied absently, studying his profile. 'Italy, Spain. She was always travelling while my father didn't like to leave the Works too often—at least not in those days. He never minded her going, though. We used to have a sort of ceremony when she came home. I'd be allowed to stay up for instance, a great concession that.' Olivia smiled reminiscently, stretching as she tried and failed to hide a yawn. 'I suppose she was a sort of engine. When she died everything just ran down.'

Luis Escobar was driving with concentration, not quite ignoring Olivia, but as if he knew she was talking more to herself than to him and did not want to intrude. Now he gave her a quick unsmiling glance in which concern and curiosity were nicely mingled.

'Tired?' he asked. 'Or have you got a cramp?'

Amused, Olivia lifted her arms above her head in a pantomime of exhaustion. 'Absolutely dead beat,' she confessed.

'Good,' was his somewhat surprising reply.

'Good?' she echoed. 'In what way?'

'I wondered why you were stretching. If it's because you're tired that's no problem. We'll be at the house in ten minutes. If it's because you're tense, that's bad. I have never,' he said in a clinical tone which robbed the remark of any personal undercurrent, 'seen a woman so tense in all my life. I thought so at the airport.'

Olivia was startled and a little wary by this further evidence of his perception. She was used to her bodily comforts being attended to with overpowering attention, but her thoughts had hitherto been her private property. She registered a determination to be careful what she revealed to the talented Senor Escobar.

'Oh, I hate flying,' she replied lightly, after a slight hesitation. 'Yet another thing in which I am unlike my

mother. According to my uncle no woman ever had an offspring more unlike herself.'

He considered that with perfect seriousness. 'Oh, I don't know,' he murmured. 'She was very beautiful.'

It was only at the kindly teasing glance which followed the remark that Olivia discerned the implied compliment. Unused to compliments of any kind, let alone those delivered with such unobtrusive economy, she gasped, blushed, looked down at her hands and found she had nothing to say.

He returned to his driving, a slight smile playing about his mouth.

'At least the portrait that Don Octavio has in the country makes her look beautiful. It may have been flattering, of course?'

Olivia took a firm grip of herself and answered him with only the slightest flurry in her voice.

'The Hallam one? In a long green dress?'

He nodded, the smile growing at her valiant attempts at composure. Olivia noted the smile, was nearly sure he was laughing at her gaucherie, and found to her amazement that she did not resent his laughter. Rather, it made her feel warm and reassured. Half turning to him, she gave him her own shy smile in return.

'It's not a bad likeness,' she said consideringly. 'Though Aunt Betty always said it made her look younger than she was. I remember it. It was done for my grandfather as a sixtieth birthday present. Hallam came to the house for Mama to sit for him. Actually he was rather nice to me. That was when I first decided I wanted to be a painter—pure hero-worship!'

Luis Escobar was too subtle a man to miss the wryness in her tone.

'I'm sure there's a spirit of emulation in most people's earliest ambitions,' he observed. 'Myself I wanted to be a big game hunter like my father. Fortunately, for the big game, before I committed my future to the African continent I discovered that I must be quite the worst shot in the world. If you have the same gifts as your idol, however, it might be

different. Have you any talent for painting?'

Olivia's sense of well-being died sharply. Although she was now reconciled to her family's unfaltering conviction that the Lightfellow heiress should not dabble with unnecessary and possibly exhausting occupations, her father's refusal to allow her to take up the place she had won at art college had been a bitter blow at the time.

'Very little,' she now said therefore with undue coldness.

Luis Escobar glanced at her again before turning his eyes ostentatiously to the traffic lights suspended above the highway.

'I see. And what there was you didn't care to do anything about?'

Olivia flinched at the imputed criticism and drew a long breath to steady herself. It was an old trick she had learned and practised from her childhood; to use deliberately slow respiration to fight tears. It surprised her that a stranger's criticisms, and relatively gentle and polite ones at that, could induce tears where Aunt Betty's far more outspoken remonstrances failed. She folded her hands on her bag and kept her eyes steadfastly on the car ahead of them.

'It was thought not to be a good thing,' she said carefully. 'My talent was never anything much to speak of anyway, and after I was ill . . .' she let the words fall away and swallowed hard. For a brief horrible moment she had felt a resurgence of the furious disappointment she had felt six years ago and could have wept anew. When she was seventeen she had wept over it incessantly in the privacy of her bedroom. To all outward appearances, however she had bowed to her father's decree with truly philosophical docility. If she had wept in public, or made one of the scenes he so much detested, he would have been coldly angry and Aunt Betty would have been instructed to take her on an expensive holiday in Switzerland to recover her nerves. But he would never have relented.

It was said that Sir Rowland had been as putty in his pretty wife's hands. If that was so, and Olivia could never remember having seen any evidence of it, the softness had disappeared when she died. In Olivia's experience he had

never been anything other than selfish, headstrong and domineering, the last a characteristic he shared with his sister.

But Luis Escobar put an end to these musings. 'That was hard,' he said sympathetically. 'Were you ill long?'

'Tor ever after, they tell me,' she replied with painful self-mockery. 'I seem to have attached doctors for life anyhow. Sometimes I wonder if they'd be quite so solicitous if there weren't all that money ailing with me. No, that's not fair,' she caught herself quickly. 'Everyone has been very good to me and it must be boring to hang around a permanent not-quite invalid. Especially when there's not even an interesting medical discovery to be made out of me.' She gave a small unhappy laugh and then concluded in a neutral tone, 'I had rheumatic fever, you see. And it's said to have affected my heart.'

For all its careful lack of expression her tone made it plain that she did not want to discuss the matter further and he did not pursue it. After conventional murmurs of sympathy he embarked on an account of the city, pointing out places of interest as they passed.

'We are now on Insurgentes,' he said. 'This is one of the major highways that divide the city. It is built on what was once the ancient Aztec causeway into the city.'

Grateful for the turn of the conversation into less private and painful channels, Olivia did her best to respond intelligently. However, she found the remark bewildering.

'Causeway?' she echoed. 'But surely—I mean, there isn't any *water*. Don't causeways have to go over water? Or can they go over another road instead, like a viaduct?'

Luis Escobar laughed. 'No, you're perfectly right. **It** crossed water. There used to be a great deal of water. Indeed some of it is still left in a sort of floating gardens. **I** will take you there one day, if you like. When you come back from Cuernavaca and if you have time. But it has receded to the far corner, as it were. Mexico itself was originally a floating city in the middle of a lake. When the Spaniards came there were only three roads into it, all crossing water. Strategically—it was in the textbook an optimum defensive

position. It should have been able to repel any invaders—or to withstand a siege, because they could fish the lake for food. And anyway the lake was too large to be surrounded successfully, at least by a sixteenth-century army.'

Olivia was amazed. 'Then how did Cortés win?' she demanded, with vague memories of history classes on the conquest of New Spain. 'I mean, he can't have brought a huge army with him from Spain. He didn't know what he was going to find. The continent might have been empty.'

'He probably thought it was,' agreed Luis Escobar. 'Or that there were a few illiterate natives living in the jungle. He certainly can't have been prepared for one of the most advanced cities in the contemporary world.'

Olivia was fascinated. 'It was so advanced? I had no idea. But in that case I understand even less how the Spanish conquest succeeded—if the city was sophisticated and its position impregnable.'

'People aren't impregnable,' he replied drily. 'The Aztecs welcomed the Spaniards into Mexico. They thought they were gods.'

'But—but why?'

'Basically because of their physical difference from the Indians. There was a very important god in the Aztec mythology called Quetzalcoatl who was supposed to have fair hair and blue eyes. By all accounts Cortés fitted the description reasonably enough to satisfy Montezuma, the Aztec Emperor. By the time his people realised that the Emperor had been duped it was too late and Cortés was able to raise an armed invasion with the help of some other disaffected local tribes.'

Olivia pondered this tale of gross ingratitude and found she was shocked. 'You mean Cortés betrayed the Emperor? What was his name? Montezuma—?'

'Montezuma. Yes, effectively. Eventually. The Aztecs had quantities of priceless treasure, you see. They were the local super power and received tribute from all the subordinate surrounding nations. Their treasure houses must have been phenomenal. And the Spaniards were all gold-

hungry. 'They weren't really interested in conquest at all except as a sideline.'

They had left the shops and lights behind them and for some time had been on a wide road with tropical palms along the central division. The lights on the road hardly illuminated the sidewalk and all Olivia had been aware of was a succession of high walls with the silhouettes of tree tops behind them.

Her companion now began to slow the car. He turned it, with no more noise than a faint swish of tires on wet tarmac into the driveway of a walled and gated residence. The gates remained shut, but Luis Escobar did not get out to open them. After a couple of seconds they swung apart with a ghostly automatism and the car passed silently through.

'Electrically operated,' he told her, assuming her amazement. 'Once you're in the light there is an eye which scans the car and opens the gates if it recognizes the number. It's very convenient.'

'It must be,' agreed Olivia in a subdued voice.

Once again she was feeling very alone and on foreign territory. These mechanical toys unnerved her and the bloodthirsty tale of the original conquest had disturbed her deeply. She could not put out of her mind the image of the trusting Aztec Emperor. Indeed she could imagine herself in his place, offering all to a being whose authority one recognized only to find that the authority was a sham and the being in question the meanest kind of cheat. She shivered.

They swept up a curved drive amid dense vegetation and stopped in front of a door that would not have disgraced a Bavarian castle. Its ornate spiked wooden dimensions were a further indication of how far she was from home. Olivia began to feel like a deported prisoner.

Stopping, Luis Escobar turned to her and caught her expression.

'Why, what's the matter?' he asked gently. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, you know. This is your uncle's house and everyone here is very happy to welcome you. And you'll be with Octavio in Cuernavaca tomorrow.'

Olivia shook herself. 'Of course. It's not that. I was just

—haunted—for a moment. Your Aztec Emperor has depressed me, poor man.'

'Don't take it to heart, Miss Lightfellow,' he said in kindly amusement. He touched a gentle finger to her drooping Mouth. 'The Aztecs weren't altogether lovely people. They went in for human sacrifice and were fairly unspeakable to their vanquished enemies. No doubt they got what was coming to them.'

He leant across to open her door for her and she had a sudden new perspective of his face. It made him look far removed from the courteously indifferent deputy for her uncle that she had first thought him. By some hitherto unrealised combination of light and attitude he was revealed, in that brief moment, to be capable of an expression of savagery comparable with that he had claimed for his Aztec predecessors.

Olivia drew back a little in her seat, a little alarmed. There was no reason for it, she knew perfectly well. He was not threatening her, merely remarking that most people came by their just deserts. The door was open and he returned to his own side of the car. He had not missed that instinctive recoil of hers, she was sure, and when he turned his gaze on her she held her breath.

But he hardly seemed to be looking at her at all and whoever he was addressing she was sure it was not herself.

'Most of us,' he concluded obscurely, 'do.'

CHAPTER TWO

IN England Olivia was accustomed at this season to wake up to sunshine and birdsong. She seldom spent a night away from the house in Shropshire that she had inherited from her father. It was therefore something of a shock to wake up in a strange—and enormous—bed in near total darkness. The only sounds she could make out were busy urban ones—distant traffic, some heavy machinery even further away, punctuated by an odd jungle bird call. It was this last which coaxed her from her bed and across to the deeply curtained windows. Flinging aside twenty-odd feet of worked damask, she encountered a light so bright that she gasped and staggered.

As if she had been listening for just such sounds of life a small maid in uniform appeared at the door.

'*Buenos días, senorita,*' she said, smiling. She looked about sixteen, but there was no shyness in the blatantly interested survey to which she subjected Olivia, only a friendliness to which Olivia instantly responded.

'Good morning,' she replied in careful Spanish. She gave another puzzled look out of the window. 'What time is it, for heaven's sake? It looks like full afternoon.'

'Oh no,' was the serene reply. 'It is only half past ten.'

The girl advanced into the room and began to fold the clothes that Olivia had scrambled out of the night before.

'Half past ten!' gasped Olivia, retreating from the window and beginning to fumble at the locks on the over-night case which she had ignored last night, falling exhausted into bed without so much as brushing her teeth. 'But we're going to Cuernavaca today. I shall be dreadfully late and keep everyone waiting.'

The maid was mildly surprised. 'But what does it matter,

senorita? You are the reason they are going, after all. Senor Escobar will wait until you are ready. There is no rush.'

'Senor Escobar might,' said Olivia mordantly. 'My Aunt Betty is another matter, however.'

'Señorita Lightfellow is still asleep,' the maid told her soothingly. She gave a bright-eyed look at the hastily thrown back bedclothes. 'Would you like to go back to bed and eat your breakfast before you get up, *senorita*? I can easily bring you up a tray and the table swivels round over the bed,' she added proudly, demonstrating.

'So it does,' said Olivia, more impressed by being offered breakfast in bed than by the wonders of Mexican furniture design. 'But I think I'd better get dressed first. If I could have a tray up here after my bath, I would be very grateful. Over there,' she added, waving at a walnut table of a size to serve a family of six with room to spare.

'Certainly, *senorita*. And shall I take what you were wearing yesterday? They can be laundered at once if you wish to have those clothes in Cuernavaca with you?'

'Take—' Olivia boggled. Rich she undoubtedly was by most ordinary European standards, rich enough to cause her some qualms of conscience at times, but she had never known the luxury of having her laundry removed for her with its return promised within hours. Normally she washed her own underwear herself, and frequently assisted in the household's weekly wash. Such pampering as was now being offered her seemed positively shocking. 'Oh—oh, thank you,' she said weakly. 'But don't bother about doing them at once. I mean, I've got trunks of clothes to take to Cuernavaca. I shan't need anything more. And I've got a change in my overnight case to wear on the journey today.'

'Very well, *senorita*. If you give them to me I will have them pressed.'

In the face of such determined indulgence, Olivia rather helplessly surrendered her keys and watched the maid unpack the little case with speed and expertise.

She perched on the side of the bed and watched the proceedings. 'What's your name?' she asked.

'Carmelita, *senorita*,' was the smiling reply. She turned

with an armful of underclothes and a very pretty frou-frou housecoat which Olivia had bought in some trepidation and been duly scolded for on its impracticability. Carmelita had no such reservations, however. 'This is beautiful,' she said, quite without envy. She stroked its fragile sleeve. 'Shall I run your bath now, *senorita*?'

Without waiting for assent she went to what looked like a cupboard, opened double doors and walked into a mirrored, marbled bathroom.

Olivia gaped. She had discovered the wardrobe last night. The whole of one wall was covered in silk-panelled doors behind which were rails and shelves and drawers enough to house all her belongings, not just her clothes. This final refinement, however, she had not discovered.

She wandered into the bathroom to find Carmelita inspecting an impressive array of perfumed bottles.

'Bath oil?' asked the handmaiden briskly. 'Milk-bath? Bubbles?'

Olivia sank on to a quilted chair. 'This is all very luxurious,' she said faintly.

'Of course.' Carmelita again looked surprised. 'Don Octavio is a very important man and you are his only niece. You are a very honoured guest, *senorita*.'

'Milk bath, then,' said the honoured guest, deciding that it would be wasteful to deny herself.

Satisfied, Carmelita added the selected substance, whisked fleecy sweet-smelling towels from a cupboard beneath the wash basin and retreated with a bob of the head that denoted as much complacency with her own efficiency as respect for Olivia. The latter, feeling somewhat smaller and younger than she usually did even with her Aunt Betty, took the scented bath as she had been wordlessly instructed and found that she was enjoying herself.

It would not of course be healthy to be treated as if one were a singularly idle mediaeval princess for long, but, just for the moment, it was agreeable. She felt pampered, relaxed and just a little mischievous when she eventually emerged from her suite.

The house was a large one built on hacienda lines, though

evidently modern. It had a central courtyard out of which ascended a curved marble staircase, with enormous pots of jungle green plants on every landing. The courtyard itself had a fountain and a profusion of trees so that the staircase was effectively hidden from the main entrance.

Descending the stairs, Olivia heard voices behind the tinkling fountain and paused to see if she could identify the figures through foliage. And was so poised when Luis Escobar, for it was he who had just arrived, came round the trunks and lianas. He stopped and his eyes widened as if in shock or pain.

Olivia was puzzled at this reaction and stayed where she was, looking troubled, wondering what there was in her appearance that could have caused this unlooked-for reaction. She stared down at him, quite unconscious of the picture she presented.

To the man looking up at her it seemed as if he had suddenly been presented with a new image, not just of the girl whom he knew only slightly by reputation and less by acquaintance, but also of the life that Octavio Villa lived and to which all his assistants aspired. Olivia looked totally out of place on the imposing staircase. Its clear white stone and carved pillars suddenly looked cardboard as if they had come from a film set. A nineteen-forties musical, he thought wryly, when the lady poised between potted palms and hanging baskets of leather-leaved exotica would have been wearing heavy make-up and full evening dress. Indeed he had seen Elena Cisneros, Octavio's married daughter, and her sister-in-law Anamargarita gowned in just such a fashion, posing on those marble steps only a week before. Both were very fashionable young women and he had been in the party they had made up to go to a visiting opera company's performance.

Deliberately he contrasted the remembered image with the picture now presented to him. Olivia was wearing trousers, a style eschewed by the elegant Anamargarita as unfeminine. They were slim and well tailored but very plain, a creamy oatmeal colour that lent warmth to her pale skin. Her shirt was the same colour, relieved only slightly

by a touch of white thread embroidery on the collar. Her hands were innocent of rings and as far as he could see the only ornament she wore was a serviceably-sized watch on an ivory strap. Used to the diamond glitter of the Villa women he was taken aback to realise that the only glimmer of richness about her was in her hair, and that, as he now saw her in full sunlight, was a blazing auburn. He had called her beautiful last night, partly from kindness because she had looked so tired and defeated, partly in pursuance of his own private schemes. Now he began to wonder if it might not be true.

He gave himself a little shake and stepped forward.

'Good morning.' His voice sounded constrained. 'You look very—fresh. I did not expect to find you up yet after your late night. I trust everyone looked after you and that you slept well.'

'Everyone has been very kind,' Olivia answered slowly.

'I'm glad.' He came up the steps towards her. 'Not that I doubted it. They were all consumed with curiosity. You will have to put up with a good deal of that in Cuernavaca too, I'm afraid. In this country we keep our servants through generations. It won't just be Octavio who wants to talk to you about your mother.'

'I haven't met any family retainers yet,' she replied, still guarded. 'I had a charming maid this morning who insisted that I have a positively voluptuous scented bath and wanted me to have breakfast in bed to boot. Other than that I've only spoken to an old man upstairs in the salon who was carrying a trayful of candlesticks, presumably to clean them. I was on my way to find the housekeeper and say thank you.'

He laughed and the last vestiges of his constraint vanished. 'How very English,' he mocked gently. 'She will be flattered. I'll introduce you if you like.'

'Thank you,' said Olivia composedly. 'Tut don't you want to be off? I mean now you're here—' She spread her hands. 'a long way to Cuernavaca, I understand.'

Luis Escobar took the hands lightly but firmly. 'Not so far by helicopter. And I merely arrived at this hour to see that everything was in order and there were no last-minute

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messages from Octavio. He's quite capable of phoning to say he wants a briefcase full of papers brought down to him, even though he's supposed to be on holiday. As for our departure,' he shook her hands a little to emphasise his point, 'we await your convenience.'

'You're very kind,' murmured Olivia, staggered anew by this consideration for her comfort. 'I'd better see what my aunt says.'

'Your aunt finds travelling as trying as you do?' he asked with lifted brows.

'Oh no. She's quite at home in aeroplanes. I think she enjoys it. She's wonderful for her age,' said Olivia, only half conscious of repeating an inculcated formula.

He bowed his head in /courteous if somewhat reserved assent and tucked one of Olivia's hands through his arm.

'I'm sure she is. And so I think it is more important to be sure that you are feeling up to another flight than to fit in with Miss Lightfellow's inclinations.'

'But I can't just say I'll set out at two, say, without consulting her,' protested Olivia, quite scandalised.

'Of course you can,' he said with perfect sangfroid. 'If she is too tired, she is perfectly welcome to stay here until she wishes to make the journey, either by car or in another helicopter.'

Olivia thought of trying to explain to him that it was less the precise arrangements for the journey that would worry Aunt Betty than the erosion of her authority and decided that the task was impossible.

'But it wouldn't be very kind,' she said weakly. 'After all, she has had the trouble of looking after me so far . . .

He laughed. 'A trouble of which I am now very willing to relieve her,' he said fluently. 'You must not let yourself be bullied, Miss Olivia. What is the point of all this money if it cannot buy you freedom from bullying?'

'I rather think money invites bullying,' she sighed. 'At least in the hands of cowards like me.'

Luis Escobar gave her another of his sharp-eyed looks, but he said no more on the subject, merely indicating a wooden door at the end of the tiled passage.

'The domestic quarters,' he said, the thread of mockery still running through his voice. 'Behind that door you will find a labyrinth of kitchens and pantries and larders, as if this were a fortress housing at least a battalion instead of the now much depleted family.'

Olivia hesitated. 'Depleted?'

'Since your grandfather died, your grandmother moved to Cuernavaca, your cousin Elena married and your cousin Diego found himself an apartment of his own. There are now only your Uncle Octavio and Aunt Isabel living here. And Isabel stays more and more in Cuernavaca so that there are whole weeks when Octavio lives here on his own.'

'Tut it's a mansion!' gasped Olivia.

'You are unused to large houses, Miss Olivia?' he asked ironically.

She blushed as if at an accusation. 'Well, no, of course not. My family home is very big, I suppose, but my father lived there all the time and drove into the Works every morning. And anyway it was attached to a farm. Half the buildings in the place weren't anything to do with the house. They kept the generator and the farm offices. And all the staff were the farm workers' family. We only had one servant who actually lived in. She used to be my nurse and became a sort of housekeeper after my mother died. There were au pair girls from time to time when my father wanted to give parties in the summer, but never anything like this. He had his flat in London, but I never saw it. I don't think it was more than a couple of rooms.'

Luis Escobar halted. 'You never saw it?' he echoed, amazed.

'It was where he went to get away from us,' explained Olivia quietly. 'My father and I were not—close.'

He resumed his progress towards the kitchen, his brows knit as if at some private and disturbing thoughts, but all he said was, 'Very English again.'

The meeting with the housekeeper was something of a revelation to Olivia. She found that the household's friendliness was by no means restricted to the younger generation and that Luis Escobar had been right when he

foretold that she would be bombarded with reminiscences of her mother. The housekeeper had apparently been Senorita Carlotta's personal maid in the days when that lady had been setting Mexico City by the ears. She was very willing to go into details of the lady's exploits and the times that she, Manuela, had covered up for the young mistress, even going to the lengths of tiptoeing downstairs after she was officially in bed and the butler had locked up to unlock the garden door for Senorita Carlotta's clandestine early morning return.

Olivia was slightly alarmed by this heritage.

'Well, I shan't be asking you to do any such thing,' she told Manuela, and found Luis Escobar's eyes on her thoughtfully.

Manuela said that she was quite sure the *senorita* had more sense, but the virtuous pronouncement was slightly tempered by a lingering disappointment and Olivia felt guiltily that she had not come up to expectations. In spite of the warm kitchen welcome she was glad when Luis Escobar made an excuse to leave.

'Have you packed?' he asked her.

'There was nothing to do. I didn't touch my cases, just my overnight bag,' she replied.

He frowned. 'We can't take too much heavy stuff in the helicopter—there isn't room. Have you a case that is smaller than the others that you can take with you on the flight? The rest of the bags can come by road and you will have them tomorrow.'

'You mean I need to pack an overnight case again,' interpreted Olivia.

'Well, yes, that would be easier, if it's not a nuisance for you,' he agreed. 'Carmelita will help you.'

Olivia snorted. 'However useless and incompetent you may think me to be, Senor Escobar, I am perfectly capable of packing a suitcase on my own.'

He seemed amused rather than anything else by her sudden attack.

'I have never called you incompetent, Miss Olivia. And certainly not useless. You are much too decorative for that.'

Olivia was not in a mood to see the rider as a compliment and told him so. All her feelings of inadequacy which had been simmering all day came suddenly to boiling-point and she faced Luis Escobar squarely.

'I suppose you don't think a woman can ever be anything other than decorative,' she concluded her diatribe bitterly.

His mouth twisted wryly. 'On the contrary, some of them are extremely undecorative. And whether they're decorative or not they are, without exception, a damned nuisance.'

In gentler moments Olivia would have been inclined to agree with this remark at least insofar as it referred to herself. Now, however, she was sizzling with an anger which only needed an object in order to catch fire.

'How dare you!' she snapped.

Luis Escobar retreated, mock-terrified. 'Indeed I don't know. Except I wasn't aware I was in the presence of such an Amazon,' he pleaded outrageously. He turned his head and addressed a large rubber plant conspiratorially. 'Not only is she extremely warlike but she can pack her own suitcases!' he told it in awed tones. 'Imagine that!'

'You're laughing at me,' Olivia cried, almost dancing on the spot with irritation.

'No, no,' he said soothingly. 'I'm not foolhardy enough to do any such thing. I couldn't take the consequences.' And he shuddered, retreating behind the large stone pot and peering ridiculously through its leaves.

'Oh, you're—you're *impossible!*' Against her will Olivia spluttered into laughter.

He emerged cautiously from behind his barrier.

'You mean I'm forgiven?'

'Oh, I suppose so.' Olivia regarded him severely. 'Though you will please not talk about or to me in future as if I'm made of lace and china and can't do a thing for myself.'

'You're over twenty-one, you're British and you're on dry land?' he murmured sardonically.

'What?' Olivia, in the act of turning to go up to her room and pack the disputed case, was arrested.

'The Englishwoman's creed,' he said innocently. 'All those ancestors of yours who went rioting round the British

Empire as governesses and nannies and things. They always knew they were perfectly secure because of their own superior capabilities.'

'Certainly,' said Olivia, her nose in the air, 'the English have a well deserved reputation for common sense, of which I hope I have my fair share.'

'I'm sure you have,' he said suavely. 'You would never do anything as silly and naughty as your mama used to, would you? You told Manuela so and I believe you.'

'Mama,' said Olivia unwisely, but she was not a widely-experienced girl and did not catch the challenging gleam in his eye, 'was very susceptible.'

In the split second after she had said it she became aware of two things. First, the remark sounded insufferably priggish. Second, Luis Escobar was unaccountably closer to her than he had been at the start of the dialogue.

'And of course you're not?' he said with wicked softness.

In panic Olivia compounded her original error. 'Of course not,' she blurted.

His hands slid from her clenched fists to her elbows while she stared at him like a rabbit caught in headlights such as she had often seen on the Shropshire roads at night. She was, in spite of the brilliant sunshine, cold and shaking. His eyes fixed themselves on her trembling mouth. His hands travelled to her shoulders and then, slowly but very determinedly, drew her close to him.

Upstairs Aunt Betty called querulously livvy! Livvy !'

He hesitated, even questioning, but Olivia was quite incapable of moving. The kiss was long, leisurely and expert—even Olivia, infrequently and unpleasurably kissed, recognised that. If possible it intimidated her even further and drove the last vestige of defiant self-respect out of her.

She stood mute and shamefaced while her aunt continued to call her name.

Luis Escobar looked down at her seriously. 'As you say, *not* very susceptible,' he agreed, and Olivia hung her head as if that too were a failing.

He took her chin and forced it up. 'Don't look so glum,'

he said gently. 'You've just put me nicely in my place, which I fully deserved.'

Olivia looked dumbly at him.

! screamed her aunt.

'Livvy?' he asked, brows raised. 'Seems rather a classical name for such a Renaissance article.'

She gave a little watery chuckle. 'It's short for Olivia. Mama called me Olivia because she said it couldn't be shortened to anything. But Aunt Betty found a way.' She gave a stage sigh and looked him in the eyes. 'Shortening names—yet *another* unpleasant English habit. You're meeting a lot of them today.'

Whether it was the unexpected demure teasing, or the sudden view of her rather remarkable eyes, still filmed with traces of sternly unshed tears, something made him pause. He caught his breath and then, not slowly at all, pulled her hard against him and kissed her forcefully. It was as if he had been shaken out of his previous self-command and Olivia found it suspiciously exhilarating. It was not a sensation she could disguise and they were both trembling by the time he raised his head.

'Over twenty-one and British, possibly,' said Olivia, clinging tightly. She felt as if the world was reeling and also that what had happened was rather more important to her than a casual kiss on the stairs had any right to be. It needed a lighter touch to bring the situation back to an ordinary plain. 'Where's the dry land, then?'

He laughed and hugged her, a spontaneously affectionate gesture which warmed her to her heart. When she drew back he was smiling.

'Definitely not Livvy. I shall call you Olivia.' He kissed the end of her nose. 'And my name is Luis. You will please remember it. The next time, I don't want any cries of "Senor Escobar, this is so sudden."'

Olivia raised her eyebrows. 'Oh, there's going to be a next time?'

'Most certainly,' he said with a coolness she could only envy. She contrived to look sceptical and he took another pace towards her, still laughing.

'If,' he warned her, 'you don't stop being mischievous the next time will coincide with your aunt's descent of those stairs.' A heavy tread could already be heard above their heads. It seemed probable that Miss Lightfellow had reached the second floor. 'And you wouldn't like that, would you? Not having asked Aunt Betty first whether you were allowed to kiss me.'

Olivia backed up the stairs away from him. 'I already know her views on the subject,' she said loftily. 'She is quite definite that kissing strange men is Not A Good Thing.'

Luis followed her. 'She is, of course, an expert?' he queried politely.

Olivia smothered a giggle. 'Oh, surely? I mean, it's a sound academic principle that she has always drummed into me that one should not judge anything without having amassed a reasonable body of evidence.'

Aunt Betty appeared at the head of the flight of stairs.

'Oh, Livvy, there you are,' she said peevishly. 'I've been calling you all over the place, I hope you haven't been wasting Señor Escobar's time.'

Luis looked up limpidly. 'Not at all, Miss Lightfellow,' he said courteously. 'I have just been introducing Miss Olivia to some aspects of the Mexican way of life.'

Olivia kept a commendably straight face, but the look she sent Luis Escobar was distinctly reproachful.

'We visited the kitchen and she has met Manuela,' he continued blandly.

'Oh. Well, I suppose it had to be done some time,' said Aunt Betty disagreeably. 'But I wish you had waited for me, Livvy. You never know what to say to servants.'

'On the contrary,' said Luis with murderous politeness, 'Miss Olivia's Spanish is excellent. We were all very impressed.'

'Well, I dare say it is. She's, half Mexican after all,' snapped Aunt Betty. 'You'd better go and pack, Livvy. I'm sure Senor Escobar wants to be off, and I certainly don't intend to spend all day hanging around in this great empty house.'

'Yes, Aunt Betty,' Olivia murmured, surprised and touched by his championship. She gave him a grateful smile.

'No hurry,' he told her, ignoring Aunt Betty's glare. 'We have plenty of time. And there's lots of time for more evidence when you continue your studies, which you will do in Cuernavaca, I hope.'

'Studies?' said Aunt Betty suspiciously.

In spite of her boast, Olivia was no little time in packing. This might to some extent have been due to the fact that she found it impossible to choose which clothes she would take from the cases that had suddenly appeared in her suite. Would the family expect her to wear a long dress in the evening? she wondered. Her father had liked her to do so, but it was a habit she had dropped after he died. She had no idea what Luis would expect or prefer. She could have kicked herself for not having asked him when she had the opportunity—at least of asking him what was the custom. She supposed she would have had to elicit his own preference in the matter by rather more subtle means than an outright question.

She caught sight of herself in the dressing table mirror, looking peeved and undecided and laughed unwillingly. It was too ridiculous, she told herself. There was no way she could guess at what Luis Escobar's tastes in clothes or ladies would lead him to favour, but her own common sense was pointing out that he was both older and immeasurably more sophisticated than herself and probably used to a degree of refinement in both to which she could not aspire.

Olivia knew herself to be a rather simple creature. In spite of virtually unlimited allowances, she spent very little money and rather less time on clothes. Aunt Betty, who had an uncharacteristic weakness for fine clothes, had taken to following her dead sister-in-law's example and going to Paris most seasons for the Collections. Sometimes she took Olivia, but her niece was uneasy in the company of the super-sophisticated, and, it must be admitted, generally

ageing ladies who made up the majority of the audience of the designers patronised by Aunt Betty. She made no complaint over paying her aunt's dress bills, which indeed she looked upon as yet another household expense, but she had never shown any inclination to join in Aunt Betty's quarterly orgy.

Now she was aware of a quite unprecedented discontent with her modest wardrobe. It was not that she wanted to dazzle Luis (or the family, she added conscientiously; she was choosing clothes for a weekend with her *family*) in figured satin and diamonds. Her nose wrinkled at the thought. But she would have liked to possess a wider choice than was at her command at the moment. There were pretty dresses, as she very well knew, but all had been selected with the aid of Aunt Betty and all emphasised her youth. Besides, Aunt Betty's notion of suitable clothing for a girl of Olivia's age was both staid and unadventurous. Olivia knew that the little sleeves and high round necks did not flatter her, while Aunt Betty's favourite pale flowered smocks detracted from Olivia's brilliant colouring and often made her look haggard.

Indeed, Olivia sometimes wondered whether Aunt Betty advised such persistently drab colours for herself because they assisted in the demonstration of that lady's ongoing thesis that her niece needed constant surveillance because of her failing health. Olivia had any ordinary girl's liking for pretty clothes and a good eye for style to boot, but she valued the peace of her house more than finery. When crossed, even on so trifling a matter as the colour of Olivia's winter coat, Aunt Betty was apt to sulk. Her retaliation for such slights either took the form of constant nagging criticism of Olivia's rival choice, which was bearable, or martyred silences, which weren't.

Now Olivia cursed herself for her lack of backbone in the matter. It seemed terrible to her that she should have to appear before Luis in Aunt Betty's dowdy choice. Her casual clothes, trousers and shirts and such did not attract her aunt's interest and she was allowed to have her way. But if she had, as she phrased it to herself, to dress up, he would

see the aunt-inspired image : a neat doll in clothes a little too circumspect, a little too conservative, like some youthful royalty dressed by Court advisers. She found herself hoping that Uncle Octavio did not insist on dressing for dinner, and reflecting in a comforting but cowardly fashion that if he did she could always plead exhaustion and retire to her room before the evening meal, at least as long as Luis was one of the party.

She stopped in her tracks. She had of course been assuming that Luis was a messenger entrusted to conveying her to Cuernavaca and so subsequently to be released to return to his own concerns. It suddenly occurred to her that if he were a friend as well as a colleague he might be staying for longer than the weekend. She could hardly lurk in her bedroom every evening of her stay with Uncle Octavio, if that were so.

'Oh, how ridiculous I am,' Olivia told herself fiercely, sinking on to a quilted velvet stool and thumping one clenched fist into the palm of her other hand. 'I only met the man last night! I'm behaving like a schoolgirl. I shall put him out of my mind.'

After which brave words of course she did nothing of the kind and would never have finished her packing at all had not Carmelita, returning to make the bed, taken a friendly interest. She bulldozed Olivia out of her dilemma by seizing one of her prettier frocks and saying, 'Oh, the yellow one, *senorita*. You must take the yellow one. *Senorita Elena*, *Senora de Cisneros*, I should say, has a dress that colour but darker. She wore it last week when they all went to the opera and Don Luis told Dona Anamargarita that she gets one as well, *Senorita Elena* looked so sweet.'

'Don Luis? You mean *Senor Escobar*?' asked Olivia with what she thought was well assumed indifference.

She received a dry look from Carmelita. 'There is only one Don Luis in this house, *senorita*. He is like a son to Don Octavio. It was even thought at one time that he would marry *Senorita Elena*, but she wanted to marry Pepe Cisneros since she was a child and would not change even to please her father.' Carmelita sounded rather shocked at this evidence of unfilial feeling. 'And anyway, the Cisneros are

an important family. It was a good match,' she shrugged. 'And now Don Luis interests himself in Dona Anamargarita.'

'Oh,' said Olivia a trifle hollowly. She had never until that moment heard the name of her cousin's sister-in-law and knew nothing of the lady, but she could imagine her. A pert, curly-haired minx like Elena whom she remembered as a flirtatious fourteen-year-old with a charm which had warmed Sir Ronald Lightfellow more than all his daughter's conscientious unobtrusiveness could do. Olivia had been jealous, as she now reminded herself, and also hurt. She had put so much thought into trying to be close to her father after Mama died, not simply because she was lonely herself, but because she could see that he was and her gentle heart had yearned to comfort him. But gentleness was not a quality prized by the Lightfellows and both her father and Aunt Betty had, in their different ways, been enchanted by Elena. The thought of Luis Escobar having been her acknowledged even if unfavoured suitor was depressing in the extreme.

'Will they marry, do you suppose?' she asked Carmelita.

The maid was dusting the hardly disarrayed dressing table. She shrugged. 'Who can tell?' She looked at Olivia under her lashes and suddenly seemed much older. 'As I said, the Cisneros family is very powerful. And Don Luis has nothing except what he has made for himself. Oh, his family is very old. His father came here in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. He was a *conde--very* elegant, very educated. But,' said Carmelita with finality, giving the New World's judgment, 'no money. And wild.' She shook her head. 'They are all wild,' she went on, not looking at Olivia as she busily stripped pillows of their unsullied linen cases. 'The Conde was killed in Africa and there is an elder brother who climbed mountains. He is in a wheelchair now. Don Luis used to be the same. And then when his brother fell off the mountain and his father died within weeks of each other and there was no money, he had to change. He was at university then. He wanted to leave, but his mother would not let him. But once he graduated he worked hard so that now he has one of the best houses in Mexico. His

mother and brother still live in the Conde's old house in San Angel. It is a very good house. It must cost a fortune to keep. All of that Don Luis pays.'

'He hardly sounds very wild,' sniffed Olivia, offended on his behalf at the girl's prattle. She knew she ought to stop her, that it was unbecoming to gossip with servants. However, she felt that Carmelita was essentially charitable and would not tell malicious tales. Indeed, she put rather more trust in her veracity than in that of her uncle and aunt. Her Mexican relatives had always shown a tendency to doctor the truth, either to suit their own convenience or to tell a story which they thought their listener wanted to hear. Olivia certainly did not want to hear tales out of school about Luis Escobar, but she had a feeling which she hardly acknowledged even to herself that Carmelita was deliberately, and with the kindest of motives, warning her against him.

'In general he is not,' allowed Carmelita, pausing in her work to consider Olivia's observation. She rested her hand on her hips and tilted her head thoughtfully. 'Tut sometimes it comes out,' she decided darkly. 'He will go off and do something completely mad. That is what Don Octavio says,' she added with an apologetic look at Olivia. She went back to her work. 'He says Don Luis will go far,' she went on carelessly. 'Tut he needs capital. He has gone as far as he can without it. So now he must marry well. That is why it is thought that perhaps there will be a match with Doña Anamargarita, you see *senorita*. Don Luis must have a rich wife.'

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER Carmelita had retired with her bundle of washing and the basket of cloths and polishes that she had brought with her to clean the already immaculate room, Olivia subsided on to a window seat. The windows were very tall, virtually floor to ceiling, and opened on to a balcony decorated with brilliantly coloured flowers. The further prospect was of trees so that it was impossible to believe that the house was really in a city. Only the roofs of the neighbouring villa, dimly discernible between the conifers, reminded Olivia that she was not as removed from populous streets as she was accustomed to be.

She felt restless. In spite of the sunshine and the flowers, she felt enclosed. There was a gnawing discomfort which she unhesitatingly diagnosed as homesickness. Carmelita's confidences about her escort had not, she assured herself, had the slightest effect upon her mood. While she found him interesting, she was no more deeply concerned with him than any other of the young men, lawyers, accountants, agents, that she met from time to time. He worked for her uncle and hence their relationship was strictly professional.

Olivia played with the blind cord. Naturally a shy girl, she found it very difficult to believe that anyone would concern themselves with her quiet self were it not part of their job to do so. This crippling idea she had temporarily relinquished in Luis Escobar's bracing presence, but now it was back in full force. Carmelita, in the kindness of her simplicity had tried to warn Olivia that he was a fortune-hunter, albeit a very distinguished one. Olivia however had understood something different. She was not to encroach on native territory: Don Luis was already earmarked for

Anamargarita Cisneros and the foreigner would only get hurt if she tried to interfere.

After that she packed very quickly without any of the debate that had previously exercised her mind. With the efficiency of the much travelled she swept her belongings neatly into their various cases. Within minutes the cases were standing neatly by the door, she had her safari jacket over her arm and an overnight case in her hand and prepared to descend. One last look round the room, restored to its former luxurious anonymity, and she whisked silently out of the door.

Too silently, as it turned out. Not hearing her bedroom door close, Aunt Betty was holding forth with unabated voice in the first floor salon. Olivia paused. She could of course have run downstairs; her heels on the marble would have advertised her presence sufficiently to have warned Aunt Betty. But Olivia was not feeling in a mood to allow such a concession. If Aunt Betty's conversation was about herself then she deserved to be embarrassed when her niece walked into the middle of it. She had no business to be discussing family matters outside the family. Besides, Olivia was very nearly sure that Aunt Betty's companion in the salon was Luis Escobar. She was unaccountably angry with him and felt that he too deserved to be taught a lesson. Flirting with innocent visitors was not a habit to be encouraged.

She trod delicately downstairs between the plants.

'Of course Olivia is hardly her own mistress,' Aunt Betty was saying in a deceptively academic tone. Carmelita was not the only attendant to be issuing warnings this morning.

'Really?' returned Luis Escobar. He did not, to Olivia's ears, sound deceived. In fact, he sounded rather amused.

'Her fortune was left in trust. Don Octavio is one of the trustees.'

'I was aware of that,' he murmured. 'I have had some witnessing of his signature to do in this matter. I suppose you are another trustee?'

'Me? Good heavens, no!' Aunt Betty gave a false tinkling laugh, for this was a sore point. She had felt that she ought

to have been a trustee and was bitterly offended that she had not been appointed. Indeed, her expenditure had had to be presented to the trustees, quite as much as had Olivia's own until Olivia was twenty-one. And for the last two years she had received an allowance from Olivia herself and had had to send her incidental bills to Olivia's accountant. While she did not for a moment imagine that Olivia would ever deny her anything, it was galling to be forever receiving support from one whom she regarded as little better than a school-girl. Olivia knew of these feelings and to some extent sympathised with them. She thought it very tactless of her father not to have left Aunt Betty an annuity independently. Presumably he had been endeavouring to ensure that Aunt Betty did not leave Olivia's side until his daughter replaced her with a husband. It was out of Olivia's power to make a settlement on Aunt Betty until she gained control of her own money, and this could not take place until she was thirty unless she married in the meantime. Sir Ronald had had a very low opinion of his daughter's ability to direct her own destiny.

'My brother,' Aunt Betty was explaining carefully, 'was old-fashioned in some things. He thought that it was unfeminine to know anything about money.' This was untrue. Sir Ronald's experience had been based upon the expenditure of his dazzling but improvident wife, and she had been by no means economical, so his sister had perhaps some justification for his view that women weren't to be trusted with money. But that was not to say that he thought they should not be knowledgable. Indeed he had frequently complained of Aunt Betty's inability to keep household accounts in any recognisable form. He would have been very glad to delegate the management of his domestic finances into her hands, had he dared.

Luis Escobar laughed. 'There are many men in Mexico who would agree with him.'

'Really?' said Aunt Betty with something of a snap. 'Are you one of them?'

'I have no grounds for saying so,' he responded, still with that laughing undercurrent. 'I am an engineer, not a banker.'

I know nothing of ladies' financial capabilities.'

'An engineer?' said Aunt Betty, momentarily sidetracked. 'Then what are you doing working for Octavio?'

'I have a small company which Don Octavio has used on a number of projects in the south. It was decided that it would be to our mutual advantage if we were part of the same financial group. It is no more sinister than that,' he told her, a shade frostily. 'I work with Octavio,' the proposition was emphasised ever so slightly, 'because at the moment it suits us both. But the partnership can be dissolved at any time. I have no desire to become a businessman like Octavio, spending all his time in board rooms. I like to get out on to the site.'

'Yes, I can see you are very different types,' said Aunt Betty sweetly.

Luis Escobar laughed. 'We are different generations for a start,' he observed.

'But you have no ambitions to follow in Octavio's footsteps?' pressed his interrogator.

'Miss Betty, if you are asking me whether I have any plans to take over the Villa empire I should point out that if I had, I would be unlikely to tell you. Also, it already has an heir apparent. Diego may only seem to be interested in polo and aeroplanes at the moment, but he is still very young. Octavio is not going to disinherit him for a few schoolboy extravagances.'

'Oh.' Aunt Betty's voice was pregnant with carefully considered revelation. 'You know Diego?'

'Not well,' said Luis, a trifle impatiently, thought the shamelessly eavesdropping Olivia. 'We are hardly intimate.'

'Then he hasn't told you of his marriage plans,' said Aunt Betty with satisfaction.

There was a pause. And then Luis Escobar said incredulously: '*Marriage? Diego?* Forgive me, Miss Betty, but if you imagine Diego is about to marry I think you are even less intimate with him than I am.'

'On the contrary,' the answer was odiously smug, thought Olivia, putting down her suitcase and sitting on one of the stairs. There seemed no point in eavesdropping uncomfort-

ably since if she were discovered there would be no disguising her guilt anyway. She propped her chin on her hand, wondering why Aunt Betty was bothering to discuss the affairs of a boy she could hardly remember.

'Then it has been a very well-kept secret,' said Luis Escobar drily.

'You are very slow for a man of your intelligence,' observed Aunt Betty. 'Why else do you think we are here?'

There was another, longer pause. Olivia's bewilderment grew. Had they come to attend Diego's wedding? Why had she not been told? And how on earth was she to buy him a wedding present if she were to be whisked out of Mexico City this afternoon?

Luis was saying slowly: 'I do not think you can mean what I think you mean.'

'No?' Aunt Betty sounded cheerful at this triumph.

'They haven't met for years,' he protested.

'What does that matter? Marriages are often arranged in Mexico, or so Octavio tells me. And *she* cannot hope to find anyone as suitable.'

'*Suitable!*' It was a snort.

'Of course. He's of good family, well-educated. Not her equal in fortune, of course, but not exactly a pauper either. Nothing dubious about him, as there might well be about someone we knew nothing about. She can't be trusted to choose for herself, you know. Not when there's so much more than just her personal happiness involved. Though I doubt if she could even be trusted to choose for herself if all she was looking for was a husband to make her happy, for a more foolishly blind girl I have never met.'

Olivia, who had gone perfectly white during this speech, put a hand against her suddenly galloping heart.

'At least,' said Aunt Betty, clinching it, 'Diego is reliable.'

'Reliable!' There were sounds of rapid movement, as if he had pushed away some furniture and was striding about the mosaic floor. 'Miss Betty, you are either wilfully blind or have been seriously misled. Diego is a number of things, including a very charming young man. I'm quite fond of him. But his best friend would not call him reliable.'

'Oh, a young man's wild oats,' dismissed Aunt Betty. 'I don't take that very seriously. It's all over now.'

'Is it?' said Luis grimly.

'If not it will be when he has married Olivia,' Aunt Betty assured him. 'He just needs a little responsibility to steady him. And she needs someone to take care of her. I,' in a vigorous tone which belied the statement, 'am an old woman. I would like to see her settled.'

'Yes, perhaps,' with impatience, 'but surely Miss Lightfellow must have friends of her own.'

'How could one be sure of their suitability, though? She is a very rich young woman and she is in delicate health. She needs to be treated carefully. How many men would be prepared for that? Or rather how many men would be prepared to do that permanently? I don't want Olivia to marry some fortune-hunter, have her heart broken, and then divorce him within a couple of years.'

'She must know people other than fortune-hunters,' Luis Escobar objected.

Aunt Betty sighed. 'You haven't been listening. I told you—she is delicate. Most men would expect their wives to make a home for them, entertain their friends, travel with them if necessary, that sort of thing. Olivia wouldn't ever be able to be a normal wife in that way. She hasn't the stamina.'

'You make marriage sound like a marathon race,' he said wryly. 'Surely it is not so trying?'

'It would be for Olivia,' said Aunt Betty with sublime confidence. 'She has never been taught how to make a home. She can barely cook enough to feed herself if she is left without servants for an evening.' 'This was a downright falsehood which Olivia heard with a dull surprise which barely registered itself in her general shock.'

'She could learn,' said Luis. 'Everyone does at some point. A knowledge of cookery is hardly bred into the genes.'

'But she has other things to do. She has to administer her father's estate—or rather she has to endorse the administration that other people effect for her. She is much too delicate and retiring to run things for herself.'

'You make her sound like a zombie,' he said distastefully.

Olivia flinched and put her arms tight round herself. She had a pain in her chest, always an indication of strong emotion and one of the principal reasons for the manifold prohibitions of her adolescence. Hating the weakness, she pressed her arm against her side, feeling the pain stab and perversely glad of it.

Not a zombie, that's not fair. She just needs more care than most of us,' said Aunt Betty with odious tolerance. 'It is a great responsibility, after all. All that money, so many people working in her father's companies. She has to think of many more people than herself all the time, and her health has never been strong. Since her father died it has deteriorated. Her doctor in London seemed to think she has a sort of creeping melancholia. That's why we decided, Octavio and I, that it was time to get her married. She has always been stupidly shy, but now she is showing signs of retiring into her shell completely. That has to be stopped.'

'It's incredible,' Luis Escobar said, sounding nauseated.

Olivia felt as if she had been beaten. Tears came flooding to her eyes.

'That's why Diego is so suitable. Olivia needs a husband who will look after her, who knows something of her background, and who is prepared to make her and her concerns his whole career. How many other men would or could do that?'

There was a longer pause. Luis Escobar's pacing steps were still and, strain as she might, Olivia could make out no sounds.

Then she heard him draw a heavy breath before he said, 'None, I should think. The whole thing is disgusting.'

Olivia's fist flew to her mouth to silence her instinctive protest. Furiously hurt, she scrambled to her feet, careless of whatever noise she might make. Fortunately Aunt Betty was loudly resenting his comment and neither of the people in the salon heard her headlong flight down the remaining stairs as a result.

With her overnight case bumping against her legs and tears creeping down cheeks from which she had no free hand to brush them away, Olivia flew across the plant-filled court

and out into the main drive.

She only lessened her pace outside, partly because of the pain in her chest, partly because the noonday sun striking her unprepared skin gave her a shock. She was soon out of breath and most unbelievably hot. Slipping amongst the cool of the trees, she put down her little case, extracted a handkerchief from her handbag and dried her eyes and her forehead at the same time.

Clearly she had to consider her position. Her flight had been pure instinct. She knew that Aunt Betty had a low opinion of her abilities and was in general amused at that lady's lack of capacity to see her niece as anything other than a recalcitrant child. This morning, however, the picture her aunt had painted had not been amusing. Olivia had sounded like a die-away parasite whose only excuse for existence was her financial endowments. She had been shocked to have **it** revealed so cruelly, but she could not deny the substance of what her aunt said. She was shy, she was retiring, she had no practical skills at all that would enable her to make her own way in the world if she were not bolstered by the vast fortune inherited from her father.

All of this, of course, she had already known, though she had not realised that her family considered her case so hopeless that she had to be married off to some willing beast of burden. That of course assumed that Diego was willing. Perhaps he wasn't. Indeed, Luis Escobar's astonishment at the news suggested that he well might, not be., Could his father have forced him into the role of family sacrifice? Olivia winced.

No wonder Luis Escobar thought it was disgusting. She agreed with him. She was bitterly ashamed of herself and furious with Aunt Betty for turning her into the mindless leech that she now saw herself to be. It would be a long time before Luis Escobar's contempt ceased to ring in her ears.

Suddenly she began to be angry. How dared he? What right, raged Olivia in an inner monologue of considerable eloquence, had Luis Escobar to despise her? She saw no inconsistency between her fury at him and her own recent endorsement of his views. If she thought she was a wishy-

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washy moppet with no backbone, that was quite her own affair. Luis Escobar, a stranger, had no right to an opinion.

And how dared her family, either? Wrapping her up in cotton wool all her life and then blaming her because she was fragile. Whose fault was it? They had been older and wiser (and more numerous) than the orphaned seventeen-year-old. Of course she had listened to them and taken their advice. And this was what happened as a result: they wrote her off as a person.

Quivering with anger, she told herself that she would show them. She would go, now. Simply walk out, find herself a job, live quietly in Mexico for a bit and then, when she had proved she was not a halfwit or a schoolgirl, get in touch with them again. She contemplated the scene, smiling at the fancy. She would be very dignified. She would tell Aunt Betty that she was very grateful for everything that had been done for her, but she was grown up now and able to look after herself.

Even while she planned the speech, however, she knew the daydream was impossible to achieve. Aunt Betty was capable of mobilising the entire Mexican police force to look for her, even if she could get out of Uncle Octavio's electrically secure gates.

Olivia leaned tiredly against the gnarled bark of the nearest tree. Its trunk was as wrinkled and horny as a rhinoceros's skin. Its very strangeness reminded her of her position. She was in a foreign country without recourse to friends or even to such indifferent guardians as her accountant or her bank manager. She spoke the language only very roughly. Her father had insisted on her studying her mother's language, but proficiency in gently literary classes in England was a very different thing from the fluency necessary to make her way in Mexico, she was sure. And anyway she never had made her way on her own in any country in the world.

Turning her head against the rough bark, Olivia felt despairing tears slip down her hot cheeks. She couldn't run away, she could see that. Her first instinct had been a stupid one. All that she could do was to dry her tears, slip

back unobtrusively into the house, wash her face and pretend she had overheard nothing. If she didn't pretend very well and was unduly silent on the journey to Cuernavaca her aunt would only assume that she was still exhausted from the journey and, though she might despise her, would not cross-question her.

A great weight seemed to settle on her heart. She bent to pick up her case as if it were Atlas's burden itself. A few dragging steps brought her to the metalled edge of the drive. There she stopped.

How could she go back in there? Luis thought she was disgusting. As she said it to herself her whole body jerked and she felt shamed blood rise in her cheeks. Sick with indecision, she looked wildly from the house, with its assurance of protection, to the inviting terrifying gate.

Olivia had already half turned back towards the house when she stopped again, an arrested expression on her face, and swung back to look down the drive. Yes, it was true, what she had thought she had seen. The gates, so imposingly fastened last night, opening only at the recognition of an electronic eye, were now flung wide. She quivered with excitement—so much so, indeed, that she reminded herself of a terrier pup that had once been hers. Most of the time Mops had been confined to the house, a torment to his adventurous spirit which his basically obliging nature had forced him to endure. Just once or twice, however, when a french window had been left open, or Nanny had released his lead when they were out for their walks, he had scented freedom. And like Olivia now, he had stood shivering with excitement at the offered liberation.

Remembering Mops, ultimately banished to the Home Farm for his ratting proclivities, Olivia felt obscurely encouraged. The look she cast down the drive was almost mischievous and the tears ceased to flow. It was, she assured herself, an omen that the gates were so conveniently open. The gods were offering her a sporting chance. She would kick herself for ever if she did not take advantage of it.

Clutching a suddenly infinitely lighter case, she made

off down the drive with a speed which was only partly due to apprehension of a challenge from one of her uncle's henchmen. Had she been younger or without her suitcase, she might have skipped its entire length.

The euphoria carried her out into the tree-fringed avenue and some considerable distance along its length before it occurred to her that she had no idea where she was going. Slowing to a more sedate pace, she began to look about her.

Obviously she was in a very exclusive residential area. Mansions behind protective walls rose along both sides of the road. There was a fair flow of traffic, much of it long, expensive sedans, but nobody else on foot, as far as she could see. This was partly due, although Olivia did not then know it, to the time of day. At noon the sun is at its hottest in Mexico City and few would choose to go out into it. Even in the central shopping area, whither Olivia eventually penetrated, by dint of boarding a passing bus whose driver amiably waved her aboard, there were few people on the streets. Anyone who was not lunching in a cool, dim restaurant or shopping stepped carefully from shadow to shadow.

Olivia observed this behaviour with interest, although she was far from understanding the reasons for it. It amused her too that nobody seemed to move faster than an elegant stroll and she was irresistibly reminded of the pace that her mother had thought ladylike whenever the family had ventured on an expedition together. It had suited little Olivia very well to stop whenever her interest was caught, but it had driven Sir Ronald into silent fury—by which, with her usual regal assurance, Mama had not been in the least disturbed.

It was thus reassuring to find the people about her moving at the leisurely pace she had always associated with her mother and Olivia began to feel almost at home. The kindly bus driver had encouraged her, and his evident ability to follow her careful Spanish encouraged her even more. He had put her down in Insurgentes, the street that Luis Escobar had told her about the night before, with a fatherly injunction to enjoy herself shopping. There was certainly an

inordinate number of exciting-looking shops and Olivia was almost tempted.

In the end, however, she decided to have a cup of coffee and consider her position. She found what looked like a very superior tea-shop with a rather beguiling owl that was obviously its trademark above the door. A little hesitantly she went in, wondering whether at this time of day the bustling waitresses would refuse to serve her with less than a substantial meal, as so frequently happened in London. However, no surprise greeted her timid request for coffee and, as she looked round, she saw a variety of meals, from what looked like breakfast to a distinctly sticky afternoon tea, being served and consumed. The waitresses all wore brilliant striped skirts with white blouses and a vivid peaked collar arrangement that reminded Olivia of Holland rather than Mexico. They seemed friendly too.

The outside world, thought Olivia, ordering a second pot of coffee, had not proved too hostile so far.

She began to consider her position rather more calmly. She had very little money. Aunt Betty had had charge of all such arrangements and had provided her with no more than five pounds' worth of Mexican pesos for airport purchases. Normally she would not have carried her own passport either, but Luis Escobar, not being aware of this tradition, had returned it to her the night before. Remembering him, she flinched and blushed, her hand clenching on the cup. It felt as if she was bright red and she glanced round, half ashamed, half defiant, but encountered complete indifference in the faces about her.

Olivia relaxed and sipped her coffee with deliberate calm. The flush subsided. She began to feel as if she had won another victory.

So continued her inner inventory, she had passport **and** travellers' cheques but very little currency. She must therefore decide whether she would take the next plane home or see something of Mexico before she did so. After all, if she wanted to prove her independence to Aunt Betty she could as well do so in her mother's country as her father's. Indeed, she did not see why she should be driven away by her

family's distasteful plans. She had never wanted to be married off, argued Olivia, a strong sense of injustice rising in her with her growing confidence. She had come to Mexico, or so she believed, to see something of the country. There was no reason for her to allow Aunt Betty and Uncle Octavio, to say nothing of the abominable Luis Escobar (Olivia was getting a little carried away at this point), and their beastly plots to drive her into headlong flight. She would have her holiday. She would travel a little. And then—she savoured the imagined scene—she would go to Cuernavaca and call on Uncle Octavio just before she flew home. She would thank him for his kindness in arranging her future, regret that he had gone to so much unnecessary trouble, and sweep out. Feeling thoroughly, and maliciously, pleased with life, she paid her bill, enquired for a bank and a travel agent and left the café on a wave of confidence.

Both bank and agency only increased her confidence. Her Spanish became less halting as she found people taking immense pains to follow, for which she was hugely grateful. It did not occur to her that her gentle manners and fair, foreign appearance were as much responsible for this as her obvious hesitancy with the language. She was merely convinced that all Mexico was peopled by helpful creatures with strangers' welfare at heart and developed a strong affection for her mother's city, as a result.

The travel agent was particularly enthusiastic in planning her adventure. After producing an itinerary which, as far as Olivia could see, would take her at least a year to complete, he grudgingly allowed himself to be persuaded that she only wanted to travel for a week or two. In such circumstances, he said, nearly crying with disappointment, or so it seemed to Olivia, she would do very much better to take a bus than to fly. She would see more of the countryside, meet more people, have more opportunity to speak Spanish. Of course—with an experienced glance at her clothes—she would take the de luxe class buses.

Olivia left his office with a small library of pamphlets, a good deal of enthusiasm and directions to take her to the terminal. Refusing to take a taxi, she sought and boarded a

metropolitan bus, whose destination was clearly labelled 'Terminal Norte,' and settled back in a steel-upholstered seat to read her brochures.

The ride was a revelation and cost her a considerable amount of her previous confidence. In contrast to her earlier bus driver, this one was taciturn and unfriendly with a wildly aggressive style of driving that did not promise well for his personal relationships. He had snatched her proffered fare and responded with no more than a grunt to her timid request to have the bus terminal identified for her. Other passengers came and went and the bus became increasingly crowded, but he continued to ignore Olivia, sitting more and more anxiously on the edge of her seat, all thought of reading her pamphlets finally abandoned.

When the bus eventually stopped with a loud squealing of brakes, like the rest of the passengers Olivia was flung violently forward. Unlike the rest of them, however, she was unprepared for it and crashed her cheek painfully against the railing in front of her. Her neighbour thought it was a very good joke and rubbed his cheek, indicating, she supposed, sympathy with her plight. She smiled, with a strained civility. But no amount of self-control, nor a lifetime of meticulous politeness, could disguise her anxiety now.

She turned round in her seat, hardly noticing her smarting cheek. All of the other passengers seemed, in their disorderly way, to be getting off. There was no clear filtering system, she thought ruefully, and people seemed to get off only to reappear again, causing no inconsiderable clogging of the bus's narrow central artery, but in general the movement seemed to be one of exodus. This was finally confirmed by the driver who motioned her off his bus with an impatient wave of the hand.

During the journey Olivia had come to entertain a very lively dislike of the driver. He seemed to stop the bus only when inclined, and that seldom coincided with the wishes of his passengers—or those unfortunates grouped at bus stops who were never granted the opportunity to become his passengers. Olivia had been shocked, even in her own

preoccupation with the unknown geography, by such blatantly disobliging behaviour. But his other passengers were, she found, philosophical. However, in twenty minutes she had succeeded in whipping up a profound hostility towards him. So when the moustachioed individual at the wheel dismissed her summarily from his vehicle, pride forbade that she follow her first instinct, which was to burst into tears. Accordingly she gathered her case, handbag and pamphlets and left the bus with truly praiseworthy dignity.

They were outside an extensive semi-circular building which she at first took for the airport and turned back in instinctive protest. But the driver had slammed into gear and driven off the moment her front foot touched the ground and she was left abandoned. Olivia looked round a little helplessly. There was an enormous car park in front of the building and taxis swept up at reassuring intervals. Well, at least if she had been deposited at the wrong place she could take a taxi to her desired destination. After her disquieting ride she was by no means sure that the best destination was not Uncle Octavio's safe villa after all.

Squaring her shoulders, she walked into one of the many entrances. It proved indeed to be the bus station—much larger than Olivia, who had never travelled by long-distance coach in her life, would have believed possible. Moreover, it seemed efficient. Every bus company had its own desk with routes and fares published clearly above. To be sure, there was a loud and energetic throng in the huge hall, as well, and Olivia was jostled every time she paused to peruse a waybill. But not unkindly.

At first she had been taken aback by the crowd. For the first time the possibility of pursuit occurred to her and she found herself looking nervously over her shoulder every few paces. But the crowd seemed to be exclusively Mexican. Olivia, who normally withdrew into shy silence in the presence of even the best behaved crowds, uncharacteristically found this press of people reassuring. She began to walk from one end of the hall to the other, scanning the itinerary boards with increasing confidence.

At length, after one or two careful enquiries, she estab-

fished that there were two buses with seats available leaving within the next twenty minutes. She found that she did not want to linger in the bus terminal any longer than was strictly necessary. It would ruin everything if she were hauled back from her expedition before she had proved that she was capable of looking after herself—or rather, she thought wryly, proving it to her own satisfaction. There was no mode of convincing Aunt Betty, she was sure.

Of the two buses she had identified, one was bound for Acapulco, one for a place she had never heard of. She hesitated, biting one fingertip, the picture of indecision. In Acapulco, an international seaside resort, she should encounter no language difficulties and was bound to find an hotel for the night with reasonable ease. Against this indisputable advantage had to be set the possibility of Aunt Betty following her thither. Although Olivia in her present circumstances could hardly afford to do so—she had considerably fewer travellers' cheques than she had hoped—it was possible to fly to Acapulco from Mexico City. And Aunt Betty still had access to the Lightfellow coffers, which would no doubt disgorge substantial sums to mount a search for the missing heiress. At the thought of the forces which could be mustered against her, Olivia began to tremble again.

It was nonsense, she told herself firmly, to be so upset by her own imagination. She must be resolute. Her decision was made. She would go to the place she had never heard of and trust to her schoolroom Spanish to get her out of any scrape into which she fell.

She made her way back to the desk designated, somewhat hopefully she suspected, by the scarlet arrow. The individuals milling about it all seemed to be requiring different information from the single, harassed booking clerk, and Olivia's own diffident request for a first class seat was ignored. She received a ticket, had a seat number briskly inked on to it, and paid over a tiny sum for the privilege so tiny indeed that she began to feel uneasy. Could this be just the booking charge, while the actual fare was collected on the bus itself? It seemed less than two pounds.

'Excuse me,' she said carefully, to the clerk who had dealt

with four or five persons during her- hesitation. 'Is this enough?

The booking clerk looked at her as if she was mad. He was more used to his customers complaining about the rising cost of road transport.

'I mean,' went on Olivia, flustered and not altogether coherent, 'it's so little for a journey of any distance. It *is* some distance, I hope? It's not just a city tour, or anything?

The clerk gave her a wintry smile. 'It takes seven or eight hours, *senorita*. The bus arrives in Guanajuato at ten. It is the last bus today.'

Olivia backed away, apologising. Her fellow passengers were all making for a crowded lounge area which gave directly on to the place where the buses were lined up. The vehicles with scarlet arrows painted on their sides were indubitably the oldest and rustiest. They had ancient corrugated iron snouts that reminded Olivia of old war films she had seen. Surely lorries with faces like that had ploughed through the Western Desert in the forties?

Never a good traveller, she began to feel her stomach heave in anticipation. She looked at her watch. Ten minutes left before departure. She still had time to go and smoke a cigarette and think about it.

She found a plastic seat, wedged between a woman with two babies and a toothless grandfather carrying an enormous carpet roll. Her hand was shaking so much she had difficulty in extracting and lighting the cigarette and once she had done so, the tip wavered pitifully. However, a few long inhalations steadied her.

She was on the point of deciding to tear up her scruffy ticket and take the other coach to Acapulco when she cast an idle glance round the hall and froze. Some distance away, by the booths selling tickets, was Luis Escobar. He was looking impatient and was clearly trying to attract the attention of the clerk. With rather more success than Olivia had had, he pushed past the multitude round the desk, snapped out what appeared to be a couple of questions, inclined his head in acknowledgement, and strode away. But not before Olivia had seen some notes change hands.

Shrinking deeper into her inadequate seat, she watched him go to the next booth where the procedure was repeated. She had no doubt whatsoever that he was asking whether anyone had seen her.

Torn between panic and a perverse admiration at his efficiency, she took a frantic grab at her cases and pamphlets. Throwing the cigarette to the floor, a filthy habit it would normally never have occurred to her to indulge, she barely paused to grind it out under her heel before scuttling to the door in front of the red arrow coach. No more thoughts as to its unsoundness disturbed her. She would have taken a coach with wooden wheels and a pair of horses at that moment.

A shaking hand offered her ticket to the inspector, and she scrambled into the noxious vehicle as if she were escaping from hell itself, into a chariot of gold.

CHAPTER FOUR

Olivia only relaxed when they were out on the plain highway. Although the coach had remained no more than ten minutes at its place in the bus station, she had every moment expected to see Luis Escobar mount its rusting steps. As a result she had alternately skulked down in her seat behind the substantial grandmother in the seat in front, and bobbed up, peering anxiously between seats, with an occasional frightened glance cast out of the window. Not, she assured herself, once the danger of Luis Escobar's appearance was past, that he could have forced her to go with him anyway. She was a free individual and if she wanted to go travelling it was none of his business. But he could have made a scene, the imagined proportions of which made Olivia's blood run cold.

It was with great relief therefore that she saw the suburbs fall behind them, as the bus gathered speed.

To begin with she was agreeably surprised by the comfort of the seats and the room she had to stretch her legs, which compared very favourably with the aeroplanes on which she was accustomed to travelling. She quite forgot the fact that she had no luggage and that most of the other people on the bus had quantities of it wedged about their legs. Moreover although the bus was full to capacity when they set off she very soon found that they made frequent stops on the road out of the city, at each of which some other passengers, usually loaded with large and unwieldy bundles, got on. There were at least five people standing and a positive wedge of luggage in the gangway when the bus finally took to the highway.

Although the outside temperature had modified from its earlier noon height, the bus was very stuffy. This was because

all the windows were shut and the air-conditioning, so proudly advertised by the company at its booth in the bus station, proved to be a little electric fan operated off the engine and wedged on a corner shelf by the driver's left ear. While it therefore stirred his curls like a full-blown gale it hardly permeated further and the interior was soon pervaded by a not unpleasant smell of foreign food. This was quickly superseded by a less pleasant odour of warm bodies, and Olivia found herself breathing carefully and shallowly with many anxious looks at the window. The large Mexican beside her in the window seat remained, however, sunk in torpor which the window's rattling failed to rouse. Indeed, muffled to the eyebrows in a native poncho, he was snoring. It was of course unthinkable of Olivia to lean across the aged fellow and open the window forcibly. So she suffered.

And as the journey progressed she suffered more. There were three stops at each of which no one got off but more and more peasants crowded on with their wares for market. The bus, as she discovered, rapidly deteriorated into a local pony express. She was a trifle surprised to have a heavy and by no means clean basket of apricots dumped on her knee. It was eventually withdrawn, but by a countryman so loaded down with other merchandise that she ended by offering to look after it for him. The offer was accepted with smiles—by this time the local accent was so strong that Olivia had difficulty both in understanding and making herself understood.

The bus rocked along at a pace for which Olivia was at first grateful because it took her away from Aunt Betty and Luis Escobar. Soon, however, she began to feel less grateful. The bus was by no means new and its springs were not really up to the racetrack notions of the driver. Soon she began to ache and then to feel queasy.

She rested her head back against the seat and watched the landscape through half-shut eyes. The plains, interspersed with hillocks so abrupt that she was convinced they must be man-made mounds of some kind, eventually gave way to scenery at first gently hilly, then downright mountainous.

The vegetation on the whole confined itself to scrub, with the odd spindly tree standing out for miles against the horizon. Every so often the bus passed a group of shacks or the end of a dust trail along which could sometimes be seen an ambling mule, or a peasant clad in white shin-length trousers, a loose shirt and sombrero. It reminded Olivia more than anything else of the settings of some of the Western films she had seen on television. She began to have a slight feeling of unreality. Without precisely falling asleep she contrived to doze sufficiently to forget her unhappy digestion.

The last stop—or at least the last scheduled stop, as the driver had an unorthodox but friendly habit of stopping whenever anyone at the roadside waved to him—was well after dark. They turned off the metalled road on to the usual dust track, as Olivia could tell, not only by the increased swaying of the vehicle but by the clouds of yellow particules that entered through such windows as were open. The bus struggled for some minutes and then, with a final, effortful wallow, heaved itself on to cobbles.

The change of motion was sufficiently extreme not only to cause Olivia to sit bolt upright but also to waken her companion.

'Donde estamos?' he demanded blearily but with so pugnacious a thrust of the chin that Olivia, who had no more idea of where they were than if they had been on the moon, clung to her apricot basket for protection.

Fortunately there were plenty of other passengers able and very willing to enlighten him. When he had assimilated the information he appeared both indignant and inclined to blame Olivia for not waking him earlier, having apparently overshot his destination by some hundred miles or so. Olivia was much too taken aback to defend herself and when he gathered his ragged bundle and pushed irritably past her, could only murmur halting apologies. It was not until some minutes after his departure that she realised that she had not been at all at fault and had merely been adopting the behaviour she habitually used with Aunt Betty.

This so annoyed her that she stirred herself sufficiently

to move into the vacated window seat and to ask the woman who sat down beside her where they were.

The apricots had been removed by their owner who had left the coach, and indeed the whole population of the coach was much depleted. It was now about half-past seven and San Miguel Allende, for that she learned was the name of the town, was clearly the last stop for so many of the market traders who had travelled with her.

Her new neighbour was immensely fat, with a baby of about eighteen months on her knee and another child of four or five, huge-eyed with weariness, clinging to her skirts. She was as expansive as she was large and had moreover a slow way of talking that made it possible for Olivia to follow her, in spite of the heavy accent.

It was, she told Olivia, the custom for the more well-to-do merchants to take the bus and visit whichever of the surrounding towns was holding a market. She clearly did not number herself among the well-to-do. For most people, she explained, the cost was too high. From one town to the other, unless one was a friend of the driver, of course, one could pay as much as twenty pesos. Olivia, working this out roughly in her head, came to a figure of about fifty pence and was shocked. It did not seem to her to be an unreasonable amount to pay for a journey of perhaps a hundred miles, but it did seem dreadful that such a price should be beyond the means of anyone.

'So you don't go to market regularly?' she asked.

The woman smiled. 'Oh, we have a market in Guanajuato. An enormous one. *We*,' the prideful emphasis was only just not scornful at Olivia's ignorance, 'don't need to. I have not been to market. I have been with my mother who is sick.'

Olivia expressed sympathy and also admiration that the lady could make the uncomfortable, expensive journey twice in one day to see the old lady.

'Oh, I have not been in Guanajuato for three months,' returned her companion cheerfully. She hoisted the drooping four-year-old upright against her voluminous skirts again. 'My mother had a fever. She makes clothes'—here

she used a word with which Olivia was unfamiliar and seeing her puzzlement she plucked at her own rough cardigan in illustration.

'Oh, she knits,' explained Olivia, enlightened.

'Yes, she makes up shawls and ponchos and sometimes jumpers and sells them, and of course when she was ill she couldn't work. So my sister and three brothers and I went home to help her. I left all the other children with my husband, because they are old enough to help, but these are too young, and besides, he could not earn enough to feed all, so I brought them with me.'

Olivia was astonished and impressed by such pragmatism.

'But have you not seen your husband for three months?' she demanded, the inhibitions of English polite behaviour wholly obliterated by curiosity.

The woman shrugged amiably. 'The journey is too expensive, and anyway, what could he do with the rest of the children? He could not bring them all with him and though they are very good,' the maternal pride was almost tangible, 'they could not keep themselves for long. And when they go out to earn they do not go to school. And it is very important for them to go to school or they will never be any better than we are now.'

Olivia, accustomed to a philosophy that no improvement on her father's generation could be expected, was silenced. As they were about to leave her lack of response went unnoticed. With a jerk and a despairing lunge of its ancient accelerator the bus began to rumble out of the main square where it had deposited its passengers and received new ones, up a cobbled hill to the main highway again.

It was very dark and there were no street lights. The only illumination, apart from that provided by the bus's own erratic interior light bulbs, was the rear light of an occasional bicycle. Olivia's companion had already informed her that the road they were to take through the mountains was steep and dangerous, but Olivia realised with some relief that she would be able to see very little of it.

Although the overall ratio of persons to air-space had been decreased in San Miguel Allende, the population of the bus

had been augmented by a basket of pigeons and a small kid on a string. This last bleated pitifully for the ten minutes it took the vehicle to reach the road, after which, presumably soothed by the comparatively easier motion, it went to sleep with its head on a sack of meal and its legs wound inextricably about the gear lever. Nobody, least of all the driver, seemed in the least concerned about the possible hazards of this latter proceeding.

Olivia's neighbour began to rummage in one of the baskets at her feet until she produced a greasy packet. Unwrapped, this proved to be a number of shapeless comestibles most nearly resembling sandwiches. They had a piquant odour and Olivia did her best to disguise her instinctive reaction by appearing interested in this local dish. Her interest was not unappreciated. She was hospitably offered a handful, torn from one of which the rest was given to the older child. It was a concoction of brown, strong-smelling paste wrapped in a thick cold pancake. Olivia, whose stomach was feeling more and more fragile, looked hurriedly away and then, fearful of giving offence when it had been so kindly offered, as hurriedly turned back.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I mean, you're very kind, but I'm not hungry.'

The woman nodded understandingly. 'It will be the coach,' she said. 'It is not natural.' And she swayed exaggeratedly from side to side in illustration of her point. 'Have you been travelling long?'

Olivia reflected just how long she had been travelling and gave a wry laugh. 'Well, today since about twelve, I suppose. But I only arrived in Mexico yesterday.'

'I thought you had come from the capital,' said the woman, well satisfied with her own powers of deduction. 'It is a long way.' She took a comprehensive bite from her pancake. 'Do you live there?'

'No. I come from England.'

The announcement caused astonishment. The woman abandoned her pancake to the elder child and swung round to inform passengers behind her that the *senorita* came from England. Olivia, astonished to find herself the centre of

attention, was bombarded with questions, few of which she understood and fewer of which she could answer. The general surprise was due, she gathered, to the fact that the few fair-skinned *gringas* who travelled on second class Mexican buses were all North American. Her immediate neighbour, however, had other cause for admiration.

'But you speak Spanish,' she pointed out, as if this characteristic prohibited Olivia from being anything but Mexican.

That was a comment that Olivia could answer and she did so gratefully.

'My mother came from Mexico. Only my father was English, although I have lived all my life in England.'

'Ah, of course. If you speak English with your mama.. .'

'Spoke,' said Olivia. 'My mother is dead.'

The woman paused. She gave a little shiver and, almost imperceptibly, tightened her arms round the baby. 'That is sad,' she said. 'And you so young. But you must be a comfort to your papa.'

Olivia, who was quite certain that her father had never regarded her as anything more than a baffling nuisance, flinched. 'My father is dead too,' she said. 'He died five years ago.'

'Oh, that is very sad. Is that why you are on your own? Have you come to live in Mexico with your family? Are they in Guanajuato?'

Warmed by this display of interest and enchanted by the unselfconsciousness with which the questions were pressed upon her, Olivia answered literally.

'No, I am just visiting Guanajuato. I wanted to see something of Mexico before I went to stay with my uncle.'

'But you are travelling on your own?' The woman sounded shocked, not as if the proceeding were discreditable, which would have been Aunt Betty's reaction, but as if it were somehow dangerous. 'You do not have family to stay with? No friends in Guanajuato?'

'No, I'm a pure tourist,' responded Olivia. She found she was rather proud of herself, so evident was the woman's opinion that her enterprise was remarkable.

The woman looked at her for a considering moment. Then she said, with an air of taking a decision, 'What is your name?'

Olivia told her.

'And I am Pepita Gonzalez. My husband is Paco, the stone cutter. We have seven children and my husband's mother lives with us. We have a simple house on the hill, on the road to the mines. It is an hour's walk from the coach station.'

There was something formal about this delivery of personal details and Olivia inclined her head as if she were being introduced for the first time.

'It is not a big house,' pursued the woman. Not grand. And a long way from where the tourists go.' Her brows were knitted and she was obviously making painful calculations. 'But there would be room if you slept with my daughters. They have a big bed. And it is better than being lost.'

The way she said the final adjective, '*perdita*', made Olivia catch her breath. It seemed to sum up her own feeling of being abandoned. It had grown rapidly in Mexico, and culminated in the humiliation of overhearing the family's plans for her future. But it had been there long before that, before, as she was coming to realise, even her father's death. There had not for years been anyone to whom she could go with the certainty of being welcome. She had been lost, indeed, and although she feared the practical difficulties ahead of her in Guanajuato she was not alarmed at the prospect of loneliness which the kindly neighbour so deplored. She was, she realised, more than accustomed to loneliness. She would not know how to behave if she were suddenly plunged into intimacy with this friendly family.

So she declined, gently and politely, and was relieved to see that the woman was not only not offended but somewhat relieved in her turn. The invitation was blatantly genuine, but its acceptance would have obviously put no inconsiderable strain on housekeeping arrangements.

'Well, if things go badly you can still come to us,' Pepita informed her. Now you have a friend in Guanajuato.' She was still puzzled over the conduct of Olivia's family. 'What

does your uncle think about your travelling like this?'`

`Oh, he doesn't know I ran away before I saw him,' said Olivia unguardedly. 'He lives in Cuernavaca, not Mexico City.'

It was clear that both Cuernavaca and Mexico might have been on the moon for all their relevance to Pepita's life. She barely noted the geographical detail and pounced on Olivia's admission of escape.

`Ran away?' she echoed. 'Why?'

`Oh well, I'd never had any freedom and I'd never been to Mexico before. I wanted to be independent for a bit before they buried me in the country...'

Pepita surveyed her with an experienced eye and even to herself her plethora of excuses sounded unconvincing.

`They wanted me to marry my cousin,' she admitted in a low voice.

This was a reason Pepita could understand and even, with due allowance made for the fact that -disobedience to family injunction was to be deplored, sympathised with.

`What is wrong with him?' she asked, settling down into her seat with the look of one prepared to enjoy a lengthy discussion. 'Is he too old? Doesn't he have any money? Don't you like him?'

`No, no, I'm sure he's very nice. I just don't know him very well.'

Pepita sniffed. To her that was no sound reason for rejecting an otherwise acceptable match.

`He's very young and sociable,' pleaded Olivia. 'He's got lots of friends and I know I would fit in with them. When I met him in England he went out every night to visit someone.'

Pepita shrugged. Men did go out and leave the womenfolk at home. She saw nothing objectionable in that. Olivia, said her severe demeanour, was making a fuss about nothing.

Olivia cast round in her mind for further details about Diego which would illustrate their incompatibility.

`He doesn't work,' she said at last, desperately. 'He just . . .'

But she needed to say no more. In Pepita's experience

men who did not work were a liability of monumental proportions. Olivia was quite right to run away. One had one's obligations to one's family, of course, but they had occasionally to be set aside. She gave Olivia her full approval and allowed the subject to drop.

They continued to converse—about the town, about Pepita's family, about the numerous tourists that came—until first the child, then the baby and eventually Pepita herself fell asleep and Olivia was left to her solitary reflections for the last part of the journey.

The bus station in Guanajuato was an altogether different proposition from that in Mexico City. There were, about twenty buses in varying states of disrepair lined up side by side to the rear of a sprawling stone single-storey building. They all looked very much as if they had settled down for the night. Indeed, Olivia's own bus filled the last empty bay.

In spite of the lack of travelling activity there was a large number of persons within the building. The few plastic chairs distributed about its central hall were all occupied and the floor was rendered hazardous by an assortment of piled luggage ranging from knapsacks to livestock. As there was no bus advertised to leave the city before six-thirty in the morning Olivia could only deduce that a good many of the people she saw were prepared to sleep in the bus station. This boded ill for her own chances of finding an hotel and she felt again the faint quiver of panic that had stood waiting to assail her throughout her journey.

Her friend from the bus had departed into the arms of her husband and manifold offspring and Olivia was reduced to asking assistance somewhat hesitantly from an ancient tucked in a corner nodding over his crossed knees.

'Excuse me,' she said hesitantly, in her best Spanish, 'can you tell me if there is an hotel here?'

His look of astonished surprise was eloquent. She wondered in a flustered manner whether she had been guilty of some gross insult in approaching him and began to retreat. However, after initial blankness he proved eloquent enough.

Certainly there was an hotel. There Were a million hotels.

The town was all hotels. There was nowhere for an honest man to build his house because all the sites were filled with hotels. The *gringos* came here in hordes for their vacations. And for their convenience there was no building in the whole place that was not an hotel.

He refrained from spitting, though Olivia was not quite sure why. It was certainly not out of consideration for her. He had made it perfectly plain that she was numbered among the despised *gringos*. His monkey face, the colour of oiled teak under a battered panama, expressed a malevolence which quite unnerved Olivia. Hitherto she had received only the friendliest of treatment in her mother's country and was quite unprepared for hostility.

Trying to ignore it, and telling herself firmly that she was reassured by the evident provision of facilities for tourists, she backed away from him.

The front of the bus station was, she discovered, more impressive than the bus yard. The building had a portico of Victorian Gothic proportions and a cobbled slipway, now filled with stalls and lit by picturesque tapers, on to the main street. There seemed to be some sort of candlelit market going on.

It was here that Olivia made her major mistake. Had she hired a taxi and directed it to an hotel, any hotel, she would have escaped having to thread her way through the crowd. Alternatively, if she had engaged one of the innumerable children who offered to carry her bag for her, he too could have guided her to a hostelry with equal security if less celerity. But she could not see a taxi and could not make out what the children were saying. She had some vague idea that they were begging, and consciousness of her limited funds, coupled with the English embarrassment where money is concerned, caused her to frown horribly at them as she pushed her way outside.

The air was thick with smoke from the tapers and the smell of spiced food. In the distance there was music, more rhythmic than tuneful with a percussive accompaniment that suggested riotous dancing. The impression was reinforced by the occasional high-pitched whoop. To Olivia

the distant revelling sounded terrifying. She tried to quicken her pace, without success. However, her activities caught the attention of a group of youths by a stall.

They were considerably younger than Olivia herself, probably no more than twenty, and they had already drunk a fair amount, she judged. It was Saturday evening, it was fiesta, and they were in a mood to tease an over-anxious foreigner. All of which Olivia told herself, as they barred her path, without succeeding in reducing her fright one iota.

She was by far too agitated to make out their words, but as far as she could gather they were pressing her to join them. They paid her one or two compliments, bold-eyed, so that she shrank mistrustfully, casting an anxious glance over her shoulder. But there was no help to be had in the crowd. Everyone was too busy enjoying himself to take notice of what was happening to an isolated stranger.

One of the boys slipped a hand through the handle of her little case and neatly removed it. She made to snatch it back, to which they responded with gales of laughter. The tallest, who appeared to be their leader, buffed her cheek lightly with his closed fist, in a mock blow. Olivia flinched. One of the others waved a hand at the food stall. Clearly he wanted her to eat, as they were doing, one of the sludge-filled pancakes she had already met on the bus. She shook her head vigorously, and their good humour began to fade.

'You're very haughty,' said the leader.

He took a step forward so that Olivia had to tilt her head to look at him, her eyes distended with panic. Seeing her expression he laughed with satisfaction.

'Very haughty,' he repeated, one hand ungentle raising her chin. 'What's the matter, *gringa*? Is Mexican food too strong for you?'

'No, no!' gasped Olivia, turning her head this way and that in a vain attempt to escape his grip. 'It's not that. It's just that I've only arrived here this moment and I haven't got anywhere to stay and I have to find an hotel . . .

The moment she said it she realised how foolish the admission had been. Nothing could have served more forcefully to underline her unprotected state.

'No hotel?' said one of the other boys. 'You won't need a hotel tonight, *senorita*,' he told her with a leer which all his other companions seemed to find highly amusing. 'There is a fiesta. You will dance all night.'

'Oh no!' she exclaimed in undisguised horror. 'I mean, I couldn't possibly!'

The leader wrenched her head round to him again and thrust his own face very close to hers.

'You are not polite,' he told her, his voice melodramatically low and threatening. The other boys were impressed and gathered closer about their two figures. 'You don't want to eat Mexican food. You don't want to do Mexican dances. You shouldn't come here, *turista*, if you don't like Mexicans. I think we're going to teach you to like Mexicans.'

Olivia was trembling so much she could hardly stand up, but she now found pride coming to her rescue. It struck her that it was deeply undignified to allow herself to be bullied by a pack of schoolboys. She therefore stiffened her recalcitrant spine, looked her tormentor straight between the eyes and said in a precise little voice which dripped icicles.

'There is no need. Every Mexican I have met so far has been perfectly charming. Except you. I find you,' her gaze swept them all with disdain, 'utterly detestable.'

It was a good line, but it was not, given their precarious mood, perhaps very wise. They were nonplussed and so took refuge in savage mimicry.

'Perfectly charming,' they mouthed at each other. 'Utterly detestable!'

Olivia could feel them pressing on all sides. A bottle was produced.

'If the lady doesn't like our food, try her with Mexican drink,' said a boy who had hitherto been silent. He had a quiff of greasy hair falling across his eyes which gave him a particularly unsavoury appearance. Olivia quailed inwardly but, having found her courage at last, refused to show her trepidation.

'No, thank you,' she said, as the bottle was unstopped and thrust at her.

But they would not be gainsaid. The leader had his fingers entwined in her hair and pulled her head back hard. She gave a little gasp of pain and her eyes watered. They laughed in satisfaction and the other boy tipped the bottle against her lips. She kept her teeth tightly closed, but could not wholly exclude the fiery liquid. It tasted like tar on her tongue and she gave a whimper of distress as it caught her throat and she choked. They laughed again, now thoroughly excited by their success in baiting her, and her hair was once again tugged at savagely. She closed her eyes in despair and, when she had given up all hope of being released, found herself free.

Gasping, she staggered sideways against the corner of the stall. The taper at the top of the support flickered wildly at the impact. In the flaring shadows she could see a man, one hand on the shoulder of the boy who had forced her to drink, but she was too bewildered and the light was too uncertain for her to identify more than the fact that he was taller than the boys. Then, with a vague feeling that she ought to find her suitcase and a conviction that she would be utterly incapable of doing so, she folded both hands about the stall pole and sank down it like a flag lowered to conclude proceedings.

There then followed a nasty few minutes in which she was neither in command of her senses nor wholly unconscious. She felt as if she had been transported into a flying boat that she had once seen on a roundabout at the village fair. The world lurched about her in a kaleidoscope of colours and she cried out in alarm.

'Miss Lightfellow—Olivia. Hush now! You're quite safe.'

Olivia barely heard the words, but the tone was soothing. Obediently she quietened and the world stopped whirling and settled down to a comprehensible place. She opened her eyes.

She was being carried at shoulder height through the throng. It was an unnerving sensation and she jumped, clutching at her rescuer's, shoulders convulsively.

'Careful,' he said. 'If you make me fall into the gutter I'll sue you.'

'Oh *dear*,' she said, with feeling.

Encouraged by this reassuring threat, Olivia dared at last to raise her eyes to his face. The light of so many tapers was brilliant but fitful, so she could see little more than an impression. Indeed, his face looked like a bronze mask, with great shadows for eyes and gleaming cheekbones. But, she comforted herself, he did not sound angry, in spite of this warlike aspect.

He flung back his fiery head and gave a shout of laughter.

It is difficult to be dignified when you are being borne along in the manner of a recalcitrant four-year-old being put to bed. It is even more difficult to be crushing when the person you wish to subdue is the one who is carrying you. Olivia, however, did her best.

'No indeed. I followed you. For the whole of today. And extremely inconvenient it has been,' he pointed out.

He shouldered his way between two stalls, across a crowded pavement and in through two doors so impressive that Olivia at first thought they were entering a church. His heels rang on a stone floor and the interior was lit by candles, reinforcing her initial image. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, though, she perceived that they were in a courtyard. It seemed full of very tall plants which half hid a stone fountain, playing in the centre of the hall. The jungle vegetation and ecclesiastical light produced a shadow play

which had Olivia shrinking against Luis Escobar, all dignity forgotten.

'Where—where are we?' she faltered.

He lowered her carefully to the floor and she stood swaying for a moment in the erratic light. Luis Escobar thoughtfully retained hold of her elbow.

'This is the house of a friend of mine,' he told her. 'When you've got your sea legs we'll go upstairs and meet her.'

'This is a *house*?' gasped Olivia.

He was amused. 'Yes, of course. What did you think it was? A municipal home for waifs and strays?'

Olivia's look was reproachful. 'That,' she informed him, 'is not kind.'

There was a silence. Luis never took his eyes from her face, but his expression was unreadable. Olivia was just beginning to stir uncomfortably under it, when he gave a sharp little sigh.

No, you're right, it was not kind. And you've had a hard day, haven't you? I apologise.'

His unexpected kindness moved her. Almost without realising she was doing it and in total contravention of her usually reserved habit she hugged his arm. She was already holding on to him to steady herself and it was the slightest of movement, but they both recognised it. Luis became very still. Then, with deliberation, he placed his hand over hers.

'That was a nasty little scene out there,' he said.

Olivia shuddered. 'I've never met anything like it.'

Luis's mouth twisted. 'I don't suppose you have,' he agreed wryly.

Olivia hung her head. 'It was probably partly my fault,' she admitted. 'I think—to begin with—they just wanted to be friendly. Only they frightened me. So I lost my head a bit and offended them.'

'Too much frightens you, I think,' Luis commented. He held her hand more tightly. 'Come along. We'll go upstairs and meet your hostess and then you can tell me the whole terrifying saga of your bolt for freedom.' The mockery in his voice was gentle.

Olivia laughed, albeit shakily, and they began to mount the stairs.

'Who am I to meet?' she asked.

'A friend of mine—or to be more precise a friend of my mother's. She has been expecting you all afternoon. I wasn't at all sure that you'd take the bus as far as Guanajuato, so I had to follow the coach to see if you got off earlier. That seemed a rather insecure way of preparing for your reception, so I telephoned ahead and asked Barbarita to have you met. Just in case I missed you or had a puncture, you understand.'

Olivia flinched. 'I have given you a dreadful amount of trouble,' she repeated mournfully.

He gave her hand a shake. Now don't start apologising again, for God's sake! Yes, you have, but it was worth it

Olivia stopped on the stairs. 'How can you possibly say that? When you've spent the day chasing me; probably had Aunt Betty bellowing at you; wasted the time you intended to spend in Cuernavaca; and then had to rescue me from a bunch of thugs.'

Luis stopped also, turned her to face him and put his hands on her shoulders.

'Your version,' he teased, 'is a trifle melodramatic. The drunken boys outside were hardly thugs, Cuernavaca is overrated, and your Aunt Betty knows better than to bellow at me. The emphasis on the last word was only just short of arrogant. 'And as for chasing you,' his smile grew, 'as I said, it was worth it.'

Olivia searched his face but could detect nothing beyond amusement.

'I think you mean that,' she said at last slowly.

'I never say what I don't mean,' Luis told her. 'There was an edge to the words which confused her even more.'

'But why should it matter to you what happens to me?' she demanded.

'Because, if for no other reason, I'm paid to care,' he said in a burst of anger which drove her back against the banisters in shock.

Olivia did not know what to say and began to twist her

hands together in front of her. She was hurt but not resentful. It seemed to her perfectly logical that he should regard his guardianship as an obligation conferred upon him by the salary her uncle paid him. And she had interrupted his schedule and diverted him from whatever was his proper work.

'Are you very angry with me?' she whispered, voicing her greatest fear.

Luis, who had been starting to climb the stairs again, stopped as if she had struck him. He took a deep breath. Then he said in a controlled voice, which made her think he was polite rather than truthful, 'If I am angry it's not with you. You could never make me angry. I've never met such *an* inoffensive creature in my life.'

Such reassurance was hardly flattering and Olivia winked away the instinctive tears that flooded her eyes at the curt announcement.

He saw it. *Wow* what's wrong?' he demanded.

'Nothing,' she denied. 'Of course nothing's wrong. I—I'm very grateful to you. And to—to--' she hesitated. 'I'm sorry, I don't know the name of my hostess. What did you call her? Barbara?'

'Barbarita. She is the Señora Vasconcellos. But she will ask you to call her Barbarita. Everyone does. She used to be a dancer and that was her professional name. Now that she's in her eighties and lives quietly she still likes to be reminded of the old days. She was very kind to my mother when my father and she escaped from Spain during the Civil War. And she will be kind to you now. So don't,' his voice rasped, 'be afraid of her.'

'm—' Olivia caught herself on another apology and bit her lip.

But he understood. 'Sorry?' he offered.

She detected impatience, wholly justified impatience, as she told herself, and shrank.

Luis took her face between his hands. 'Look,' he said, 'you're an ordinary human being like anyone else—your Aunt Betty, your Uncle Octavio, me. No one is going to be specially horrible to you. And if they are, you're as capable

of defending yourself as any other able-bodied, not stupid young woman. You don't need any special dispensations.' He gave her a little shake. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Olivia obediently and unconvincingly.

He gave a sharp sigh. 'And you don't believe a word of it, do you?'

'I might *believe* it. I probably could, in time,' said Olivia with a lopsided smile. 'But it won't make any difference to the way I *feel*. I just am frightened of things, particularly of strangers. I know it's unreasonable and very boring for everyone else, but I can't help it.'

Luis gave her a long searching look and then threw up his hands. 'All right,' he conceded at last. 'You're frightened and you can't help it. Well, we'll just have to face what you're frightened of and beat it on its home ground.'

The pronoun both startled and touched Olivia. 'We?' she repeated.

He laughed and gave her a quick hug. 'If I left you to do it on your own I'd bite my nails down to nothing,' he told her. 'Come along, we'll start with Barbarita.'

He took her hand and ran with her up the rest of the curving flight of stairs. Olivia followed, willing but breathless, and when he stopped, leant, laughing, against a balustrade, one hand to her side.

'I've got a stitch,' she protested.

'No excuses,' Luis was only half teasing. Beneath the casual manner she detected a firmness of purpose which, while it did not alarm her as Aunt Betty's fits of determination did, puzzled her. He seemed to be promising to see her through much more than the immediate ordeal of meeting her hostess. And Olivia, a modest girl, could see neither why he should make such an undertaking, nor how he intended to carry it out. She was, *however*, grateful and smiled at him.

'Very well. No excuses.' She gave him her hand trustfully. 'As long as you promise to lead me out of it again, I'll follow you into the dragon's cave.'

He took a moment to answer. Then he said, 'You may rely on me. Domestic dragons are my speciality. And this one is a pet.'

They crossed a tiled, candlelit hall and he flung open two high carved doors. Olivia, hovering behind him, saw at first only a blaze of light which made her shut her eyes instinctively. When she opened them she perceived a long and immensely high room, stone-flagged like a cathedral, hung with twenty-foot tapestries and lit by a chandelier which hung from a domed, painted ceiling. At the far end—and it seemed an enormous distance from where they stood—there was a fire of mediaeval proportions beside which was set a winged chair. All that could be seen of the occupant, who was facing the fire, was a fall of long, dark skirt. Beside her, however, was a profusion of books, newspapers, tables, embroidery frames; in fact all the paraphernalia which would suggest prolonged residence of the same spot. Olivia had only time to deduce that her hostess was chair-bound, before Luis was urging her forward.

'We arrive at last, Barbarita,' he remarked, strolling to the fireplace and bending to kiss the hidden cheek. 'There was no one about downstairs, so we came straight up.'

He held out a hand to Olivia who, somewhat hesitantly, went to stand beside him in front of the lady thus addressed. It felt as if they were two culprits called for retribution to the headmistress's study, as all the guilt she had hitherto suppressed rose in her throat again.

'The servants have all gone to the fiesta. I told them to,' remarked Barbarita in a clear voice. She was very old, but she had a distinctly unheadmistressy twinkle and she smiled at Olivia very kindly. 'Except for Emilio, and I sent him down to the bus station to meet your Miss Lightfellow in case you missed her.'

'As you see, I did not,' he replied. 'Let me introduce you, Olivia,' with a mock heroic bow, 'Barbarita.'

'It is very kind of you to have me,' murmured Olivia. 'But your poor Emilio should not have been sent out to retrieve me. I do hope he's not still waiting. Shouldn't someone go and tell him that I've been found?' She appealed to Luis. 'I could wait here with Senora Vasconcellos while you look for him.'

The old lady leant forward. 'Barbarita,' she said. 'Señora

Vasconcellos was my mother-in-law—a terrifying woman. I still dream about her whenever I've done something particularly extravagant. It intimidates me to be called by her name. You will be doing me a great kindness to forget I have any other name but Barbarita.'

Olivia gave a choke of laughter at this unexpected pronouncement. 'I'll try to remember,' she promised.

'Excellent.' The old lady leant back and surveyed her with shrewd black cherry eyes. 'And do not worry about Emilio. He will be back as soon as the passengers from the last bus have dispersed. Luis would undoubtedly miss him if he went back. The crowds during fiesta get worse every year. Or better and better, I suppose I should say, because I love the people and the music and the noise. I always have done. My mother-in-law thought it very frivolous of me. Are you frivolous, my dear?'

She patted an upholstered stool at her side. Olivia accepted the mute invitation and sat down. She was relieved and amused by her reception. Not only was Barbarita quite unperturbed by the nuisance of an unprepared-for guest, she seemed equally incurious about her unconventional arrival with Luis, as she clearly knew he had been in pursuit of Olivia across the countryside. And now she appeared to want to settle down to a gossip exchange as if Olivia was a well-loved granddaughter rather than a stranger.

Impressed, Olivia answered her question literally. 'I don't think I am, no,' she responded, having considered the matter. 'At least, I haven't really had much opportunity to be frivolous, I suppose.'

Barbarita was moved. 'Poor child,' she said, patting her cheek. 'So young and pretty too. But you mustn't let Luis bully you. He may seem serious enough now, but I remember him when he was as wild as you please.'

'Oh come, Barbarita,' said the object of her accusation. 'I never reached your standards of wildness.'

The old lady laughed, wrinkling her nose at him. 'Well, perhaps not,' she allowed. 'But I have known you when you were a lot less dull and worthy than you are now. And I shall tell Olivia all about it.'

Luis cast his eyes heavenwards. 'Then God help me! You will please bear in mind,' *he* instructed Olivia, 'that Barbarita has the artist's talent for embroidering the truth. Where my history is insufficiently dramatic she may allow herself—just a little—licence.'

A speaking look full of confidence and affection passed between them. Olivia saw it and felt that, although he had claimed Barbarita was his mother's rather than his own friend, there was considerable affinity between the pair.

Barbarita chuckled. 'But it is only recently that your history has become insufficiently exciting,' she pointed out. She turned to Olivia and said in conspiratorial tones, 'You will have to make sure that he doesn't get stuffy. Men can become tedious when they're married. Luis, you are not to deprive this child of frivolity.'

'Such was not my intention,' he returned, his deep voice threaded with amusement.

Olivia was bewildered. If Luis Escobar was planning to marry she did not see how it could possibly affect herself. Unless his care of her during her sojourn in Mexico meant he had to postpone his wedding. She turned enquiring eyes on him and found him rueful.

'Then you must take her dancing,' said Barbarita firmly.

'Now?' Luis laughed down at her. 'She's had a long journey. Look at her. She's appalled at the thought of dancing. All she wants is supper and sleep. Am I not right?'

Thus appealed to, Olivia said in confusion, 'Yes, of course. I mean, I don't want to be rude and it's very kind of you to want to take me dancing—if you do, I mean—though I don't see why you should——'

Barbarita halted the tide of half phrases by stroking Olivia's less than immaculate hair with a soothing hand. 'Of course, my dear, you shall do exactly as you please. It was thoughtless of me to have forgotten that you must be tired. There is no need to distress yourself.'

'Thank you. I'm sorry,' mumbled Olivia.

Luis made an impatient noise and Barbarita looked from one to the other in enquiry.

'I have told Olivia to stop apologising,' he explained. 'It is her major vice.'

There was a pause. Then Barbarita said austere, 'If you snort at her like a Spanish warhorse, I'm not surprised. It is not pleasant. If you continually complain about her behaviour—especially when she is tired and a long way from her friends—of course she feels intimidated.'

Olivia had never encountered two champions in one evening before and was mildly amused to discover one determined to protect her from the other.

No, Luis is right,' she told Barbarita, as the old lady bristled. 'I am a terrible coward and I say I'm sorry far too easily. It's simpler than standing up for oneself, you see.'

'You should not,' announced Barbarita, sitting very erect in her chair, 'have to stand up for yourself unaided. If you're going to marry Luis that's part of the bargain.'

'What?' Olivia's confusion gave place to straightforward terror at this assured statement. She looked wildly at Luis, but his expression was enigmatic. She turned back to Barbarita with something approaching desperation, all her previous doubts coagulating into a cloud of black panic.

'But that's impossible!'

'Nonsense,' responded the other lady, uncomprehending. 'Oh, I daresay you have a lot of fine notions about independence within marriage. I read articles about them in the American magazines and they're rubbish. Of course you are independent, everyone is. But marriage is a sharing of things like self-defence. And if you don't need or want to share it, then there's no need to marry. You won't be in Luis's debt, my dear, as these stupid magazines say. It's a mutual arrangement. You defend each other. It can,' said Barbarita, descending briefly from her philosophical plane, 'be rather fun.'

'But—but. . . .' Finding no words, Olivia sprang to her feet in agitation.

She was physically and emotionally exhausted and she had had no food for some hours. She had moreover been badly frightened not half an hour previously and was now thrown into a state of uncertainty quite new in her experience. All

of which, coupled with the sudden movement, upset her precarious balance. For the second time that evening, and with considerably greater dramatic effect, Olivia Lightfellow fainted gracefully away.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE rest of the evening passed in turmoil. Olivia had no opportunity of seeing Luis alone, a circumstance for which she was not sure she was ungrateful. Barbarita's assumption that they were to marry was an embarrassing mistake for which Olivia, predictably, felt she was to blame. She was afraid that Luis would if not be angry, at least despise her as much as she despised herself for her inability to make the truth plain. She therefore clung to her exhaustion as to a lifeline.

She was apparently carried up to bed by Luis, a proceeding which she was informed of by the housekeeper. This personage, conjured out of the fiesta by the returning Emilio in order to look after her, was by far too interested in

Escobar's promised wife to complain at being asked to forgo the evening's festivities. Fortunately for her peace of mind Olivia did not know this. She was in no case to speculate on the reasons for the kindness she encountered in Barbarita's house; contenting herself with being thankful.

The housekeeper, descending to the salon, informed her mistress that the *señorita* was a frail little thing with pretty manners who was worn out.

'But she still remembered to say thank you, though she could hardly keep her poor eyes open,' said the good lady sentimentally.

'She is certainly very tired,' agreed Barbarita, a frown between her brows.

'*Señora?*' The housekeeper was bending to make up the fire, but the troubled tone of voice brought her upright again to turn an anxious eye on her mistress.

'She seemed so—subdued,' mused Barbarita, more than half to herself. 'I hope Luis knows what he is doing. He

forgets everyone hasn't his energy. She's a foreigner, after all, for all her mother was Mexican, and she looks very young. I think she might be more vulnerable than he has allowed for.' She broke off, staring into the dulled fire, biting her lip. 'I'm afraid she may be badly hurt,' she said in a low voice. 'I must talk to her. Would you ask her to come and see me first thing tomorrow, as soon as she's awake? I don't want to interfere, but if I can help—' she stopped. 'Men,' she concluded savagely, 'can be very stupid!'

Sadly for Barbarita's good intentions, she awoke late and in pain the following morning. While the doctor was sent for and an enormous fire lit in her third floor boudoir, Luis had already lured Olivia from her bed by offering to show her the town.

He was waiting for her in the hall as she came downstairs, and she approached him shyly.

'I slept dreadfully late,' she began.

'And you're sorry,' he finished, laughing at her. He took her hand. 'Look, I'll give you a dispensation for the day and forgive you everything as long as, just for eight hours or so, you can stop apologising.'

Olivia laughed back at him, feeling more at ease. 'Very well, it's a bargain. Today I can do no wrong.'

'Right.' He looked at her narrowly. 'Have you eaten? You're very pale. Didn't you sleep?'

'Yes to both questions. I always sleep like a log,' said Olivia, charmed by his concern. 'If I'm pale—well, yesterday was hectic by my standards.'

'I'm sure it was,' he agreed, amused. He ushered her out of the house and she found the light in the street blinding. As she stood with watering eyes he said, 'It's rather special, isn't it? The air is very clear here. There's quite a colony of artists, or there used to be. The colours don't fade, you see. When a house is painted shocking pink, it stays shocking pink for fifty years.'

'What a terrible responsibility,' said Olivia, awed. 'One would never dare to paint a wall without consulting the town council in case other people didn't like it.'

She fell into step beside him and they strolled in silence.

Although it was very far from midday the heat was remarkable. The unshaded pavement was empty as everyone walked on the shadowy side of the road. They walked past a pink cathedral of a building which he told her was the covered market and past a church into a shady square.

'The Jardin de la Union,' he announced. 'Not much grass by English standards, is it?' indicating two immaculate but patchwork-sized squares of turf under the trees.

Olivia, whose Shropshire home boasted five acres of lawn, demurred.

'It's beautifully cool.'

'You're tired,' he observed, not making it a question. 'We'll sit down. This is the centre of the town, so you're quite entitled to. That,' pointing to his left, 'is the showplace. It was built by Eiffel.'

Olivia followed his finger. It was an imposing theatre, approached by stone steps, guarded by imaginatively muscled statuary, and supported **by** classic columns. Anything less like the foursquare house or Gothic market would have been hard to imagine.

'Not Eiffel, of Tower fame?' she said doubtfully.

'The same. He was very fashionable in Latin America for a time, particularly Mexico. It must have been something to do with the Empire.' She looked blank and he explained, 'We had an Emperor for a few years, you know, in the 1860s. His name was Maximilian and he was some sort of minor European royalty. He was put on the throne with French support, but he was soon deposed, and anyway Louis Napoleon lost his own throne in 1870, so he didn't get much help from France in the end. And all that's left is one or two buildings like this and rather a lot of Second Empire furniture in the antique shops. Your Uncle Octavio has a taste for it, You'll find a lot in Cuemavaca.'

Olivia was intrigued. 'Don't you like it? I can imagine old things not appealing to you very much.'

Luis led her to an ironwork seat shaded by evergreens before he answered.

'I don't think I dislike old things. My mother has one or two that she brought from Spain with her and I suppose I'm

fond of them. But they have been in the family a long time. I don't quite know that I can explain.'

'You mean you feel that they are part of the family's history,' offered Olivia. 'That they belong.'

'Yes, I do, I think.' He looked at her with respect. 'That's very perspicacious of you.'

'No, it's not, it's rather what I feel myself. My father had a habit of buying things as an investment.' Olivia did not even try to disguise her distaste. 'He got them from the best dealers in London and Shrewsbury and I'm sure they are very good pieces. But they never seemed to be ours, somehow. I used to feel it was disrespectful to sit on them. They already had a history and it was nothing to do with us, we were so much newer than they were. And of course one never knew anything about the people who had owned them before. It used to be like living surrounded by other people's furniture. I never got used to it. But my father used to enjoy telling people where he found things and how much he paid for them. I believe he was very knowledgeable and picked up a number of bargains.'

'He sounds very like your Uncle Octavio,' said Luis at his driest.

He rested one arm along the back of the seat and sat surveying the theatre with his eyes half closed against the sun. Olivia shivered.

'I haven't seen my uncle for some time, but he writes—more to Aunt Betty than to me.' She was recalling their plan to marry her to Diego. Shame filled her that Luis should know of the family conspiracy and the fool they thought her. She withdrew a little, sitting on the edge of the ironwork. 'I don't want to go to Cuernavaca,' she burst out. 'I want to stay here and not bother anybody.'

He turned his head and looked at her.

'Poor little one,' he said at last. 'Is that why you ran away?'

Olivia gulped. She felt her colour rise. She dared a quick look at him and found him grave but uncensorious.

'They—they—that is, it's thought to be a good idea that I—that Diego—' she faltered.

'I know they plan a marriage,' he told her.

'Yes, I know you do.' She looked away and her shoulders drooped. 'That's when I found out too. I heard Aunt Betty telling you. Until then I just thought I was coming here for a holiday. I had no idea——'

There was no disguising the pleading note and he frowned over her bowed head.

But when he spoke his voice was light enough. 'Any moment now you'll be saying you're sorry.'

'Well, I heard you say it was disgusting,' Olivia muttered. 'That was when I realised. I mean, I know they've always treated me as a bit of a child and I've never been brave enough to do anything about it. But I hadn't seen myself as quite such a liability. You were right—it is disgusting.'

There was a pause, a long one, while she surveyed her inner misery. She did not notice the alert look on his face or the sudden tension in the arm along the seat behind her.

Eventually he said, 'If I used such a word, and I don't remember doing so, I was quite certainly not referring to you or your behaviour. You mustn't imagine that I was. It was probably none of my business, but I did not like you being parcelled up like that and handed over to Diego. And there's no need to tell me you were in ignorance—that was

'I don't want to marry Diego,' avowed Olivia, not attending. 'He's too young and sociable and I couldn't keep up with him. Besides, he does exactly what he's told by Uncle Octavio. I mean, that makes him no different from me, does it? After all, we can't both be spineless. I don't see the point in marrying him if we're identical.'

'No indeed,' agreed Luis, amusement creeping back.

Olivia hardly heard him. 'Besides, Diego's got lots of girl friends, or so his mother's always telling Aunt Betty, and he doesn't want to marry me. Why should he?'

'I could think,' said Luis airily, 'of one or two reasons.'

'And I don't want to leave England and live in Mexico and change my whole life. If I was going to do something as drastic as that I'd want to be free, free from Aunt Betty

and the family and everything. I don't want to *marry* anyone'.

'That would be a pity.'

There was something in his voice which arrested the monologue. Olivia turned drowned eyes on him.

'That's what I thought I was doing when I ran away,' she said sorrowfully. She gave a hiccup, quickly suppressed. 'I thought if I could show them how well I could manage on my own they'd let me go away and not bother me. Only I couldn't, could I? You had to come and drag me away from those boys last night.'

'You'd managed most admirably up to then,' he assured her.

'No, I hadn't. I forgot to eat and then I felt sick in the bus and I fainted,' snorted Olivia, disgusted with herself.

'The heat,' he waved an excusing hand. 'The height. All that activity. You can't be expected to go straight into an eighteen-hour day after an international flight either.'

'Don't be kind to me,' she exclaimed, hands clenched in fury. 'I made a complete mess of everything. Heaven knows what would have happened to me if you hadn't turned up!'

'Olivia, stop it!' Luis said sharply. 'You're much too hard on yourself. Nothing would have happened. You'd have found an hotel, I have no doubt.'

'Or been trodden underfoot at the fiesta,' she returned, refusing to be comforted. 'And now I've got to go back to Cuernavaca with you and say I'm sorry.'

'That at least shouldn't be difficult for you,' he observed wryly, and was rewarded with a fierce look.

'They'll talk and talk at me and I'll probably end up marrying Diego after all because I'm not fit to do anything else.' She buried her face in her hands, heedless of passers-by. 'I've had my chance for freedom and I blew it. I'll have to do what I'm told now.'

'Not necessarily,' he drawled.

'How can you be so blind? Of course I will. I haven't a leg to stand on when they start arguing. I am unfit to look after myself, just as Aunt Betty's always said. Unless Diego can talk them out of it, I shall have to go back to Cuernavaca

and marry him.' She drummed clasped fists against her knees. 'What else can I do?'

It was a rhetorical question. Staring bleakly ahead with tears drying on her pale cheeks, Olivia had all but forgotten her companion. She was certainly not expecting an answer to her problem from him and when he spoke she could not have been more startled if one of the statues had got off **Mr** Eiffel's plinth and asked her to dance.

'You can,' said Luis Escobar, placing both hands on her shoulders and turning her round to face him squarely, 'marry me.'

She stared at him as blankly as if he had suddenly addressed her in a foreign language. He was amused.

'As you seem bent on marriage,' he teased gently, 'and I agree with you about Diego.'

Olivia opened her mouth, found there was nothing to say, and shut it again. She brushed a hand childishly across her eyes and sniffed.

'I think you must be mad,' she informed him.

He laughed. 'That's not very civil of you when I've just asked you to marry me!'

'You *must* be mad.' Suspicious that she was being laughed at, Olivia glowered at him. 'I'm nothing to do with you. At least Diego's family, and I suppose he himself, feels he's got some sort of responsibility. . .

'I, on the other hand, have no such feeling,' he interrupted, looking displeased. 'When I suggested that you marry me, I did so because I thought the idea might appeal to you as much as it does to me. There is no question of any misplaced sense of responsibility. You are your 'own mistress and take responsibility for your own actions—including marrying me or Diego, whichever you choose.'

Olivia searched his face but, beyond the fact that his proposal was sincere and not, as she had first thought, an obscure joke, it told her nothing. She took refuge in retreat.

'I don't want to marry anyone,' she repeated sulkily.

'Then you don't have to. That too is your decision.'

She flung away from him. 'Oh, you don't understand d'

'Yes, I do perfectly. You've talked yourself into the belief

that you can't do anything on your own. That is very wrong. It is an abdication of personal responsibility amounting to emotional suicide.'

Olivia went rigid. She felt as if she had been kicked when she least expected it from a quarter she had never anticipated. The hurt was so sudden and so surprising that she felt sick. She swallowed.

'And don't,' said Luis, his voice roughening, 'say you're sorry. Or I shall probably hit you.'

They were attracting a good deal of attention and Olivia now began to realise it. As it was Sunday there was a fair number of persons perambulating the garden after Mass. The buzz of their conversation and the noise made by children running among the trees and hiding behind hedges had hitherto served to disguise from Olivia that their companions were not exclusively going about their own affairs. Now, however, she began to perceive the curious looks. The children, indeed, were largely uninterested in anything but their own games. The adults, however, sensing a drama, were watching their bench with undisguised avidity. Olivia was grateful that Luis had throughout conducted the conversation in English.

She felt herself colour and directed a reproachful look at him. Luis, though, was unaware of his audience.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said. 'You know perfectly well I wouldn't dream of hitting you. Though it would probably be very good for you.'

Olivia was stung. 'Why are you being so nasty to me?'

'You haven't exactly been nice to me,' he pointed out, returning with a palpable effort to his earlier bantering tone. 'I wonder,' he mused, 'whether all girls are as rude as you when they receive proposals of marriage?'

That touched her conscience. 'I didn't mean to be rude,' she offered contritely. 'I was just surprised.'

He sighed. 'And that is understandable, I suppose.'

'I don't know you,' pursued Olivia. 'We only met the day before yesterday. How could I possibly know you? Or expect you to want to marry me? Of course it was a surprise.'

A strong sense of injury took hold of her. She rose to her

feet and began to walk purposefully round the garden to where a little road led off up a hill. It did not occur to her that he would follow and, although her pace was necessarily modified by the increasing steepness of the hill, it was with surprise that she heard him speak at her elbow.

'You haven't,' said Luis mildly, 'actually answered me. Though that may also come as a surprise to you. I'm sorry to bother you with a mere administrative matter like that, but one does like to know whether one's proposals have been accepted or not. It's not the sort of thing one really wants hanging around as an open offer.'

Olivia was breathless and still somewhat bemused, but the violent exercise had walked her into a more balanced frame of mind. She paused and when he fell into step beside her, surveyed him from under her lashes. He bore it with unruffled calm, though a certain twitch of his lips indicated that he was aware of her furtive regard and was amused by it.

At last she said, 'Do you really want to marry me? Or was it a spur-of-the-moment thing?'

He seemed to be choosing his words carefully.

'Of course it could be both,' he pointed out. 'They are not mutually exclusive states.'

Nor equally reliable.' Olivia was wry.

Luis bent his head in acknowledgement of the point.

'What would your friends say?' she demanded with apparent irrelevance.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Congratulations, I presume. Isn't that what they normally say?'

'But—' she broke off, at a loss to put her doubts into words. 'Nobody knows me. They would think you were mad.'

'Barbarita,' he observed in a detached tone, 'already thinks that we are to be married. And if she thinks either of us is making a mistake it is you she is worried about, not me.'

Olivia was much struck. 'Yes, of course she does think so, doesn't she? I was so embarrassed last night. . . . Why does she think so?'

Luis shrugged again expressively. 'Why not? She's a

romantic soul and I haven't ever brought any other girl here with me. And she obviously realised that I —' he hesitated almost imperceptibly—'was very fond of you.'

Olivia pounced on that. 'But are you? How can you be? **In** two days?'

'It's supposed to be possible in two minutes,' he told her.

She was not sure whether he was mocking her or himself. There was a distinct edge to his voice that she could not account for and so was silenced. They walked on round the hill and then he spoke again.

'Look, I haven't put it very well and I know you were shocked. But think about it. Don't answer me now. We have the whole of today without disturbance. I phoned Cuernavaca and they are sending the helicopter for us, but your uncle had taken it up-country today so we can't leave until Monday. So you don't have to tell me until then.'

Olivia said 'That is extraordinarily generous of you.' The thought of Cuernavaca made her shiver although they were standing in blazing sunlight in the middle of a cobbled street. It was empty except for a tabby cat, swaying on a doorstep, its eyes half closed with pleasure.

Concentrating hard on that cat, Olivia said, 'I wish I knew why you wanted to marry me.'

It was not a question and it was not even said very loudly. He had the option to ignore it if he chose. But Luis, as she was coming to recognise, was not one to sidle past awkward moments.

He said, 'To be honest it's not a spur-of-the-moment decision. I've been thinking about getting married for some time. There are various reasons, personal and professional, why it would be a good idea. But Mexican girls are very tied into the parental home. They never really leave their mother behind—or their sisters or their aunts either, quite often. A man marries and suddenly finds himself in the middle of a monstrous feminine conspiracy to change his life-style. Can you understand that?'

Olivia nodded. 'I think so. Mama didn't have any sisters, but she often travelled with Grandmother and there were always aunts in the house.'

'Perhaps your father didn't mind. Or perhaps he thought it was a reasonable price to pay. I don't and I never have. I like and respect my own mother, but I wouldn't want her underfoot all the time, and the same goes for my wife's mother. Does that seem very hard-hearted to you?'

Olivia considered it. 'I don't think so, no. In fact, it sounds rather normal.'

Luis chuckled. 'Now that's exactly why I want to marry you and not a Mexican girl. Here it would be the height of abnormality.'

Olivia pondered. They were walking very slowly up the street, for the slope was now prodigious. At the very top of the hill she could see a large statue of a man which dominated the town which she had seen from various angles and vantage points throughout the morning. As they approached she realised how sizeable the landmark really was. Like so much else in Mexico it impressed her not merely by its quality but by its unexpectedness. Though it was no more surprising than the unpredictable stranger at her side. Now he was laughing.

'What is it?' she demanded suspiciously. 'Are you laughing at me again?'

'At both of us,' Luis assured her.

She was not sure that the answer was reassuring. 'Why?'

'Well, we're hardly traditional, are we? If I'd said I'd fallen madly in love with you, you wouldn't have hesitated a moment before turning me down. But because I've shown myself to be calculating and rather unflattering you're prepared to listen. Doesn't that strike you as funny?'

'If you said you'd fallen madly in love with me, I shouldn't have believed you,' said Olivia calmly.

Luis sobered. 'No, I realise that.' He took her hand companionably. The path had become more and more rugged and the houses had fallen away. Now they were walking in more or less open landscape with little showers of stones whenever Olivia took an unwary step. She accepted his help thankfully.

When they got to the top and the ground flattened out to a plateau she put a hand to her side to ease her breathing. **He**

left her and wandered round the statue with a critical expression. It had an ugly square-jawed look which was both impressive and repellent. Olivia spared it a glance and decided she disliked it. When she had mastered her breathing sufficiently to speak, she said:

Señor Escobar——

He laughed at her, mobile eyebrows flying comically upwards.

'Surely you could manage to call me Luis, by now. I know you haven't known me long, but we seem to have packed a lot into a short acquaintance.'

Reluctantly Olivia smiled.

'Yes, I suppose so. Very well then, Luis—I don't know what to say. I'm terrified of going to Cuernavaca without any defence, as I imagine you've guessed. My defence should have been my independent exploit of yesterday, but——' she bit her lip, then, with an effort at lightness, went on, 'Today it doesn't seem very convincing, even to me. But marriage seems even more alarming.'

He nodded in grave agreement. 'More alarming than marriage to Diego?' he murmured.

Olivia flung up a hand, acknowledging the point.

'There you have me. I don't know. Could I—I mean, you said I didn't have to tell you till tomorrow—could I think about it?'

'Of course.' He gave her a sudden warm smile. 'But don't worry about it. If you don't want to, I shan't be offended. I just hoped you might like the idea. I'll tell you what—now that I'm here I ought to go out and see Barbarita's farm manager this afternoon, which will leave you time to rest and think things over. Then we'll go dancing this evening just as Barbarita suggested. There's always a dance on Sunday night and you'll enjoy it. So even if you don't want to marry me, you can forget about your family until tomorrow and let your hair down tonight.'

Olivia was deeply touched. 'You're so kind to me,' she said in a wondering tone.

'Naturally. I'm showing off to prove what a good husband I'd be,' he teased. 'Come on, we'd better be going back.'

You'll want something to eat and I want to be off before the sun is full. It's a pretty unsheltered road to the hacienda.'

'Yes, of course,' she said, following him down another, better made up path than that by which they had made the ascent. 'Is it far?

'Barbarita's property?' They were almost immediately on to metalled road and walking side by side. Olivia would have liked him to take her hand, but he did not. 'No, not very. I shall be back in time to take you dancing.'

Olivia gave an excited skip. 'Oh, lovely! I don't think I've ever been dancing before.'

'What?' Luis stopped dead and stared at her. 'You can't be serious.'

'Yes, I am.' She gave him an enquiring look.

'But you must have been. How old are you?'

'Twenty-three,' said Olivia, not at all put out. 'But I've never really known anyone to go dancing with. Don't forget I've lived in the country since I was seventeen.'

'But not an entirely depopulated country,' protested Luis. He was looking deeply perturbed.

'It might just as well have been. I was never allowed to go out because it was thought I might be ill. That's why they wouldn't let me go back to school or to college or anything. Old school friends used to ask me to their parties, but they were usually too far away. And even if they were in the neighbourhood, I wasn't allowed to stay up late and Aunt Betty used to come with me. I soon gave up going.'

'You poor sweet!' He appeared strongly moved. 'I shall take you to the lushest, grandest ball Mexico City can provide. And that's a promise. You have been undeservedly deprived'

'I don't want to go to a grand ball, but I shall be perfectly happy with the dance this evening.' Olivia gave a hop and then stopped, struck by an unpleasant thought. 'Always assuming I can dance,' she said uneasily. 'After all, I've never really tried, so I don't know. Perhaps I can't.'

'You'll be able to dance well enough for this evening's jamboree,' he assured her. He tucked her hand through his arm and moved on. 'The tone of the evening,' he went on

informatively, 'is neither elegant nor restrained, and the dancing matches it. Basically you just jig about to the music, doing whatever you fancy.'

'Oh,' said Olivia, relieved. 'It's not very formal and traditional, then?'

He gave a crack of laughter. 'Traditional Mexican home entertainment, yes. Ballet Folklórico standard, no. When they start playing local music, you'll find they do a sort of cross between Tyrolean clog dancing and an Irish reel. It's highly bucolic and lots of fun.'

'It sounds nice,' said Olivia. She gave a long sigh. 'I do like you, Luis.'

'Just for taking you to a country hop?' He sounded, she thought, very grand and assured, and she withdrew her hand. He hardly seemed to notice, being bent on some inner contemplation—a knotty problem, apparently, from his concerned expression. She was silenced, and they made their way back to Barbarita's by unpeopled back streets at a downhill pace which brought them home inside fifteen minutes.

Luis ushered her into the plant-filled hallway and halted.

'Thank you for showing me around,' said Olivia.

He ignored that. 'You're so unwary,' he said in troubled tones. 'Like a child. But you don't have a child's instinctive defences, do you? What am I going to do with you, little Olivia?'

'As you have pointed out,' said Olivia, a shade stiffly, 'I am my own responsibility. I shall do something with me, without your interference.'

His face broke into the quick laughter with which she was becoming familiar.

'Oh, I hope marriage doesn't count as interference,' he returned. He blew her a kiss from his fingertips before departing. 'Because I still want to marry you—very much.'

When he had gone Olivia expelled a long breath and went slowly upstairs. It was quite extraordinary the way a few minutes with Luis Escobar could stir a normally timid soul into revolt. She wondered whether it was because he had so much vitality that it was infectious. But then Aunt Betty

was very energetic too and she never provoked Olivia- into following suit. Indeed, Aunt Betty's exhortations only produced a paralysing sense of inadequacy while Luis really had, for a few minutes, made her feel as if she could be captain of her own fate with just a little resolution.

It was exhilarating but also rather alarming to find in herself such instincts for rebellion. She wondered if they were enough to sustain her through a prolonged refusal to marry her cousin and decided regretfully that it was unlikely. Which left the incredible possibility.

Olivia had never thought very much about marriage. Or rather she had thought about it in the same category as she thought of a number of other things such as college or walking holidays or a small apartment in London—in- finitely desirable and attainable only by other people. School friends had written and told her about their studies, their boy-friends, their jobs, and eventually their weddings. It had always seemed to Olivia that the rest of the world grew up and changed and moved on while she was foredoomed to spend her life for ever a not-quite-schoolgirl, the nominal guardian of a fortune which effectively wrenched from her all power of controlling her own life. If you had asked Olivia whether she liked being rich she would honestly have said that she thought not. On the other hand, and she would have admitted it just as readily, she had very little idea of what she could have done to support herself if she were not rich.

She sat in a basket chair looking out of the window for a long time before she noticed that her overnight case had been placed on the table. It was shut. Barbarita had lent her a lacy nightdress into which she had been introduced during her unconsciousness on the previous night, and this was now laid out at the foot of the newly-made bed. Olivia had loved it. Of hand-woven linen, it had yellowed from its original white with age and washing so that it was now ivory. It had smelt freshly of herbs. Indeed the whole room, plain and furnished with old wood and tapestries, smelt of herbs and sunshine. It was a peaceful place. Olivia found herself glaring at her smart case for its intrusion.

However, it would be a good idea to brush her hair, she supposed, and crossed to it. There was a note on the lid in beautiful pothangered script.

'Emilio has retrieved your suitcase, as you see. The boys were worried when they saw Luis bring you here and so they left it at the taco stall,' Barbarita had written. 'I hope you slept well. Luis has said he will attend to some business for me, so if you cared to join me for luncheon in my room, we would be quite alone. Unfortunately I have to see the doctor this morning, but Emilio will come to tell you when he has gone. I hope,' she had ended formally, as if Olivia was likely to have a hundred alternative calls on her time, 'that you will be able to come.'

Olivia stood pondering this missive for no little time. On the one hand it seemed welcoming and a kind thought for a stranger in her house. On the other its formality of language hinted at some undisclosed purpose. Olivia had the feeling that it was a little like being summoned to appear before a judge. She had a suspicion she would be called upon to give an account of herself. She also had rather more than a suspicion that Luis had deliberately been sent away so that she would have her evidence alone and unaided.

She chided herself for these suspicions. Barbarita had been charming last night. And if her note was a little stiff that could surely be put down to her age and the fact that she was not writing in her native language. If the doctor were here she was probably unwell. Of course it was natural that, in such a case, she should want Luis to conduct any business that was pending. Equally it was understandable that she should look forward to the company of a new face at lunch. She was obviously gregarious and the town was hardly big enough to provide a large society for Barbarita. She probably wanted to gossip about fashion or theatre and was not to know that Olivia had very little acquaintance with either.

Olivia seated herself at the inlaid dressing table. In the mirror her face looked as serene as always. Even when

panicking she had the air of calm. It deceived many people, though seldom her nearest and dearest. Presumably, mused Olivia, staring at her own reflection with detachment, because they were the cause of the panic more often than not. It would be interesting to see whether she could disguise her inner trepidation from Barbarita.

She began to brush her hair with deliberately slow strokes, a calming activity, while she waited for Emilio's knock upon the door.

CHAPTER SIX

BARBARITA was sitting up in bed looking bright-eyed and not in the least alarming. Ushered in by the smiling Emilio, Olivia hesitated in the doorway. There was a fire laid in the grate but unlit as the room was basking in sunlight. It came pouring through the windows which stretched from floor to ceiling and fell in a great bar across Barbarita's bed. The latter was a fourposter of dark wood and impressive proportions so that the old lady looked like a puppet in the middle of her cushions and pillows. It was not unlike being hailed into the presence of a dowager empress.

'Good day. How nice you look. Come over here and kiss me,' said Barbarita imperiously but with great kindness. 'I hope you feel recovered after all the fuss of yesterday.'

Olivia crossed to her side and did as she was bid. A chair had been placed suggestively beside the bed and she sank into it at Barbarita's mute command.

'Thank you, I'm much better,' she said in her soft voice. 'But how are you? Has the doctor been to see you yet?'

Barbarita grimaced. 'Oh yes, he came on his way to church. He doesn't leave me waiting long when I call for him.' This regal announcement was somewhat tempered by her adding reflectively, 'I must be one of the few patients who pays their bills round here. Apart from the tourists, of course.' She suddenly looked mischievous. 'They come here, eat too much highly spiced food and then go to him because they think they are dying. He charges them a week's wages for a stomach powder. How do you like Mexican food, my dear?'

A little breathless at the myriad turns the speech had taken, Olivia said, 'I've never really eaten very much. We.

used to have Mexican dishes at home sometimes when Mama was alive, but I don't really remember them. And anyway she always had to cook them because our cook got offended if she was asked to and Mama didn't often cook. Since I've been here—' she gave a little laugh, 'I've hardly eaten anything,' she amazed herself at the fact. 'I had a snack yesterday in Mexico, but it was the sort of thing one could buy anywhere in the world. A woman did offer me a sort of pancake on the bus, but I wasn't feeling very well.'

Barbarita looked at her sharply, but the door opened and Emilio entered with a trolley full of dishes. Olivia jumped up to make room for him beside the bed. The array of food filled her with admiration. Everything was presented on beautiful silver dishes with an insignia which, though she could not quite make it out, was identical on each plate. There was fluffy rice, a stew of some kind smelling delicious, a dish of white fish garnished with red and green peppers, an aromatic salad and a bowl of some brown solid substance like pease pudding.

'*Frijoles*, said Barbarita. She pointed with an elegantly-kept finger at the brown goo. 'Beans. They're a peasant dish to which I am very partial. I hope you like them. You must be very hungry.'

'I didn't think I was, but this all smells so good I suppose I must be,' replied Olivia.

Emilio arranged a tray cloth over the bed covers, on which he placed a sizeable wooden tray and began to serve Barbarita. In spite of the enormous quantities in each dish it was noticeable that he gave her no more than a spoonful of each. He ladled some salad on to a side plate, poured water into a crystal goblet and handed Barbarita a heavy linen napkin.

Then he carried a table from beside the window and placed it in front of Olivia.

'Give the *señorita* a taste of everything, but not too much,' instructed Barbarita. 'Then she can see what she likes. She is not used to our cooking yet.'

'There is nothing very strongly spiced,' Emilio assured her. 'We took great care.'

IS it often a problem?' asked Olivia, amused.

'To foreigners, all the time,' said Barbarita. 'We use a lot of chilli peppers in our kitchen and that makes our food very hot. Some of it anyway. And most of our tourists are North Americans. You know the rubbish they eat, with all taste frozen out of it. So they find our food too hot. I don't myself like a great deal of chilli. Of course the peasants use it to disguise the tough old meat, quite often. But even a little can be quite a shock if you don't expect it. The fish has chilli in it, but that's all, isn't that true, Emilio?'

The manservant agreed. 'But only a little, *señorita*. Don Luis told us that you are new to Mexico. So welcome.' He put the plate in front of her with a certain stately enthusiasm.

'And *buen apetito*.'

'Thank you, Emilio. We don't need you any more—the *señorita* can serve herself now. We will ring.'

He bowed and retreated, leaving Barbarita reviewing Olivia with sharp eyes.

'That's very interesting,' she murmured. Then with a flourish of a fork she encouraged Olivia, 'Well, eat up, child, eat up! If you're going to marry Luis you'll have to get used to Mexican cuisine.'

Olivia started and blushed; a fact which was not lost on Barbarita.

'Er—yes,' she said, making great play with tasting the fish. It was certainly highly spiced and she gasped in spite of having been warned. Emilio had left her two glasses, one with wine and one with water, and she took a long gulp of the latter. However, there was a pleasant aftertaste to the fish and when she had swallowed the shock and her eyes had stopped watering she tasted another small piece, albeit cautiously.

Barbarita continued with her own meal, watching her narrowly, a fact of which Olivia was entirely conscious. She had not forgotten that Barbarita thought she was going to marry Luis. Yet again it occurred to her to wonder how the old lady had come to make such an assumption. It seemed very strange, even if Luis did not normally bring girls to visit her, unless she had been told by someone that such was

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the case. And the only person who could have told her was Luis. Could it be that he was so determined to marry her that he had informed Barbarita before actually asking herself? And if so, why?

The little maid in Mexico had more or less told her that he was courting another girl. In her preoccupation Olivia forgot both Barbarita's stare and the food in front of her. Her fork dropped and she sat staring ahead with a perplexed and worried expression.

There was even a name—Anna something. But that could be servants' gossip. The little maid might not have known anything very much, especially as Luis did not live in the house. But it was all very strange and puzzling.

She found she was no longer hungry and pushed the plate away.

'Is it too hot for you?' asked Barbarita, the perfect hostess.

'What?' A thousand miles away, Olivia jumped as she was thus recalled to her surroundings. 'Oh no, not at all. It's delicious. I just don't seem to be as hungry as I thought I was. I hope Emilio won't be offended.'

'It is more likely to be the cook who minds,' said Barbarita drily, and then, relenting at Olivia's conscience-stricken expression, 'No, really, my dear, it could not matter less. We are quite used to it, as you have heard. And no doubt you will become accustomed to the food in time. Of course,' she went on airily, 'Luis's mother is Spanish and they have never really adopted the local culinary style, so you will have no difficulties at home with Luis. It is only when you go out that you will have to brace yourself.'

'But it truly is delicious,' protested Olivia, her colour rising again.

'You are very kind to say so, my dear. You must tell Emilio. All the servants are very interested in Luis and they wanted to do their best for his future wife. Of course if we had had more notice that you were coming. . . .' She let the remark hang delicately in the air.

There was not going to be any way of avoiding discussion of Luis Escobar. Feeling a little sick, Olivia realised that she had no idea what he had told Barbarita or how much of his

story he expected her to support. Deciding that attack was therefore the only feasible method of defence, she looked levelly at her inquisitor.

'What is it that you want to know, *señora*?'

The old hands ascribed a graceful arc. 'Barbarita, please. And I would not dream of enquiring into your private affairs.'

'Oh, of course not,' agreed Olivia, relieved. Perhaps she was to be let off after all.

'It is just that I am very fond of Luis.' Barbarita stared rapturously at the window. 'The sunshine is truly beautiful, don't you agree? I had the windows altered specially so that it would come into the room. Mexicans build their houses so dark, as a rule. Where was I?'

'With your fondness for Luis,' prompted Olivia, faltering slightly over his name.

Barbarita narrowed her eyes and contemplated the curtains of her bed.

'Yes, of course. I have known him since he was a child. He was born in my house. When they arrived here they had nothing, you know. It was during the Civil War. Luis's father, Eduardo, he was not much more than a boy—just out of university with a lot of silly republican ideas. It broke his poor father's heart, because they were a very old family and Eduardo would inherit the title eventually.'

'Title?' said Olivia, startled. 'Do you mean that Luis . . .?'

'Oh no. Luis is not the eldest son and anyway they never used the title here. It is too stupid to be calling yourself a Conde of some place that you can never go back to and don't own any more anyway. But it is Luis's elder brother who is the Conde now—Victor.'

'Oh, I see. I didn't know.'

'About the title or about his brother?' Barbarita withdrew her gaze from the curtains and subjected Olivia to a piercing survey that, while it was not malicious, was sufficiently powerful to make her quail. 'Tell me, Olivia, how much do you know about Luis?'

Olivia hung her head. 'Very little,' she acknowledged, defeated. She hoped that he had not lied to Barbarita and

that she was now exposing him by this admission. 'I only met him on Friday—no, Saturday morning. The flight arrived after midnight.'

Barbarita sat bolt upright in bed and the tray slid off her knees to the edge of the bed. Olivia caught it and transferred it to Emilio's trolley.

'Two days !' exclaimed Barbarita, stupefied. 'But how on earth can you be prepared to marry him on an acquaintance like that?'

'I'm not sure that I am,' Olivia defended herself.

'Is this something that Octavio has put together?' snapped Barbarita. 'Yes, yes, I know you're his niece. It's all very well Luis saying Octavio has been kind to him. I've known Octavio all my life and he never does anything except for profit'

Olivia blinked, not so much at the accusation which was very much what she had heard from other sources on her Uncle Octavio, but that Barbarita was so closely acquainted with him.

'No, no,' she assured her. 'In fact my uncle wants me to marry his son. That was why he insisted that I come to Mexico. I didn't realise—what a liability I was and how they were going to have to secure my future so that I could be looked after—' She stopped. 'Which meant that poor old Diego had to marry me.' She looked up at Barbarita. 'I was furious,' she said simply. 'I mean, I know I'm not the last of the great adventurers or anything but I'm not *helpless*. So I walked out. I thought I'd show them I could look after myself. I thought they were very impertinent to be arranging things like marriage for me.' She sagged suddenly and the fire went out of her. 'Only of course, as Luis successfully proved yesterday evening, I'm *not* capable of looking after myself.' A rueful note made itself heard. 'It was all words and wind, and I need looking after quite as much as **my** damnably conscientious family thinks I do.'

There was an unconscious pathos in the statement which moved Barbarita more than tears or protestations would have done.

'You'd better tell me all about it,' said that lady. She

patted the bed invitingly. 'Come and sit down here and begin.'

Olivia was horrified. Aunt Betty had never sat on the edge of beds herself, nor ever allowed anyone else to do so. 'But the springs 1' she protested.

'I think the springs are strong enough after all these years to survive a little extra pressure. Especially from a little thing like you.' And, as Olivia still hesitated, 'Stop hovering, child, and do what you're told!'

Olivia did so. She also poured out her story in not very coherent form, but at length. Barbarita seemed to find little wrong with it. From time to time, when the account became too involved for human understanding to decipher, she would interpolate a clarifying question, but otherwise she left Olivia severely alone in her narrative. Once or twice she exclaimed in surprise. And when Olivia explained how she had overheard Aunt Betty telling Luis about the plans for her future she became deeply thoughtful.

'Did she know you were listening?' she asked.

Olivia stared. No, of course not. Or at least . . . I don't know, but I shouldn't think so. It would be stupid, wouldn't it? To break it to me like that.'

'Somewhat undiplomatic,' agreed Barbarita. 'So why Luis?' she mused. 'What was it to do with him? Unless,' with a sharp glance at Olivia, 'he had already shown signs of wanting to carry you off.'

'Oh no,' said Olivia with complete conviction. 'He can't possibly have done. We'd hardly met.'

Ilmm. Well, carry on.'

And she did so. The account of her bus journey amused Barbarita a good deal and elicited such warm admiration from her that Olivia's spirits began irrationally to lift.

When she came to the end of her tale she sat looking at her hostess hopefully.

'It sounds to me,' opined that lady, 'as if you have had a rather adventurous few hours. Topped off with a proposal of marriage which you say was completely unexpected.'

'Totally,' agreed Olivia.

'And you had never met Luis before this weekend.'

'Never.'

Barbarita pondered, tapping her forefinger against her chin in a pantomime of a quandary. Then she said with apparent irrelevance, 'How much do you know about Luis? About his family and his circumstances, I mean?'

'Why, nothing.' Olivia was at a loss. 'I told you, we've only just met.'

'Yes, I know that, but didn't he tell you anything at all—not even when he proposed?'

Olivia frowned in thought. 'He said his father was a big game hunter. He said that on the first night, I think. And that he admired him tremendously.'

Barbarita sank back against her pillows, sighing. 'Yes, he did,' she said. 'Everyone loved Eduardo. He was so full of life—like Luis, only much more reckless. He used to go off for weeks into the jungles of Yucatan and Eloisa and the boys never knew where he was. He was killed in Africa in the end, hunting lions. A beast that should have been dead was only wounded and when he went up to it, it mauled him. Luis was seventeen then.'

'How terrible!' said Olivia, her tender heart touched.

'Yes, it was,' said Barbarita with irony. 'There was no money; Eduardo had been disinherited by his father for his political opinions and Eloisa never had much anyway. For a while they got by. They had plenty of friends who helped them and Eloisa gave music lessons. And then Victor had begun to work about a year before his father's death. It all should have been all right. But——'

She broke off, sighing, her face twisted with remembered distress. Olivia deduced that she was one of the friends who had helped the Escobar family. She leant forward and patted Barbarita's hand comfortingly. It was taken and held in a surprisingly firm clasp.

'But Victor was just like this father. Show him danger and he was off like a donkey after a carrot. Only he didn't shoot animals, he climbed mountains. One day he was careless or the weather was bad, who knows? He fell, anyway. It was in Peru.' The hands tightened on Olivia's. 'At first they thought he would die. They didn't bring him home, they flew him

straight to Texas. Do you know how much medicine costs in the United States, Olivia? And Luis was still at university! Victor was insured, but not for enough. So his mother went to his employer—your uncle Octavio?

'Nobody told me,' said Olivia in a small voice.

'They should have done. It was principally your mother who helped, by all accounts. It must be nearly fifteen years ago now, but Eloisa told me that when she arrived the family was at dinner. Everyone—your grandfather, your aunt—there was a celebration because your mother was home. Octavio didn't want to help, but your mother persuaded him. She said they were all so happy they could afford to spread some happiness among those who weren't. Not that there was any way to make Eloisa happy, with a dead husband and a paralysed son. But she was always grateful to Carlotta for that.'

'I'm glad,' said Olivia. She turned her head away so that Barbarita should not see she was weeping. 'Did he—recover?'

Barbarita sighed. 'Oh yes. Paralysed, of course. He's been in a wheelchair ever since. He and Eloisa live together. Luis bought them a house in San Angel, that's the old part of Mexico City. It has a garden and everything. Victor has a man to look after him and a bedroom on the ground floor. Like his mother he's a musician—he composes for the guitar. It's not a bad life, since Luis became successful. At the start when they all lived together in a poky little flat it was dreadful.'

'So Luis is responsible for them?'

'Wholly.' Barbarita's tone was unequivocal. 'And that's why he still works for your uncle when he should have struck out on his own years ago. You see, Octavio put him through university, although he wanted to leave at once and get a job to support his mother and brother. But Eloisa insisted that he stay on and Victor backed her up. Luis has always listened to his brother. And when he left, of course, he went to Octavio's company. He's a first class engineer with a brilliant inventive mind,' Barbarita became bitter, 'and they take all his designs and market them under

the company's name. Oh, they've promoted him now, and Octavio lent him some money to start a company about eighteen months ago, but it took a long time. And now that they call him Octavio's personal assistant, he's used like a lapdog. For instance, making him meet you at the airport. That's a job for a chauffeur, not a professional engineer. But Octavio knew it would humiliate him. Octavio has never forgiven him for being a better engineer than he is.'

Olivia shrank at the suppressed fury.

'Do you—do you know my uncle?'

Barbarita shot her a look. 'Rather better than you, I suspect. I knew him very well when Luis first went to work for him. Recently—oh, I don't see many people, but here in Guanajuato, and I'm quite happy not to. Your uncle was never one of my fervent admirers anyway. I was always urging Luis to leave and he didn't like that.'

'Why did you want him to leave?'

Barbarita pounded her fists on the sheets. 'He was too young to waste himself. He never told his family, of course, but I knew how frustrated he used to feel. There were weekends when he went off on his own and went wild.'

Olivia was feeling more and more out of her depth. She could fully appreciate how tied down Luis must have felt by his obligation to her uncle. And she knew her uncle well enough to be sure that, if Luis ever showed signs of resentment, he would have been reminded of that obligation. It was not unlike her own situation. But she could not imagine how a man of such strength of character had tolerated it and began to fear that he might take refuge in excesses which terrified her by the very fact of their being unimaginable.

'How do you mean, "wild"? ' she therefore asked in no little unease.

Barbarita shrugged. 'Oh, as young men usually are I suppose. Fast cars, wine, girls. . . . And with Luis there was always this passion for danger, too, like his father. I used to dread what would happen. But he has a strong sense of responsibility and he knew Eloisa and Victor depended on him. So he always came back. Octavio probably never even knew he'd been away. Octavio thinks he's as tame as a

rabbit,' said Barbarita with ineffable scorn.

Olivia shuddered. 'Then why does he want to marry *me*?' she wailed.

'I wonder.' Barbarita settled among her pillows, plumping them up on either side so that they dwarfed her. She considered the girl perched beside her and a smile dawned.

'Perhaps he's in love with you,' she suggested.

It was instantly repudiated. 'Oh no, impossible. Besides, he said he wasn't.' Olivia sighed. 'After all they've done to him, I shouldn't think he'd want to marry into my Uncle Octavio's family, I mean, we've been taking advantage of him long enough.'

'You are hardly to be blamed for your Uncle Octavio's activities. If Luis was attracted to you he would not bother that you were Octavio's niece.'

Olivia stood up. She felt that the interview should be brought to a close, as much for Barbarita's sake as her own. The old lady's face was paper-white and she was breathing shallowly. Only her eyes still looked alive and they were vivid.

'I think perhaps you should sleep,' Olivia told her gently. 'You have talked for a long time and I am not sure that you haven't over-excited yourself.' She gave a wry smile of self-mockery. 'You've certainly set me over endways, at least. I need some time to recover.'

Her hostess considered her benevolently, with the oddest look of mischief about an otherwise prim mouth.

'I suppose I've given you food for thought,' she acknowledged, not without satisfaction. 'You'd better go away and sort it out.' She reached for a silver handbell on the bedside table and shook it with surprising vigour. 'I'll tell Emilio you're resting and not to be disturbed.'

'Oh, but I'm going out with Luis, this evening,' protested Olivia. Then the bald statement sounded rude and she added, 'If you don't mind, of course. We are your guests and——'

'If Luis wants to take you out,' said Barbarita with obscure relish, 'I shall reserve my reproaches for him.' And then, as Olivia looked troubled, she relented and said, 'What

nonsense, my dear, as if I would dream of preventing you. Didn't I tell Luis last night that he should have taken you to the fiesta? Go and enjoy yourself. If you're off to Cuernavaca tomorrow you'll have precious little chance of fun there.'

Olivia shuddered. 'You may be right.'

'I know I'm right. I know Octavio—a pompous killjoy. You'll have to make tonight last for a long time. Dance till the last moment. Go and sleep now so you don't fall asleep tonight.'

Olivia laughed. 'I don't know that I shall be able to sleep, exactly,' she demurred.

Barbarita waved a hand. 'Well, go and dream daydreams and paint your nails. That's what I always used to do when I was going out with a delicious young man.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Olivia, and curtsied.

Barbarita's smile widened. 'You are a good girl,' she informed her. 'And Olivia—' Her guest paused, arrested in the doorway. 'You are not just Octavio's niece,' said Barbarita in a voice of profound wisdom. 'You are also your mother's daughter. Don't forget that, child.'

Olivia returned to her room without seeing anyone. There were no signs of life in any of the rooms she passed, nor could she hear any noises indicative of housework or cooking rising from the lower stories. She might almost have been alone in the building.

In her room she went to the window. It looked out over a courtyard, small and surrounded by a high wall, full of climbing plants in tubs. There was no sign of anyone there either. She supposed it was the siesta hour and decided to obey Barbarita's dictates and rest.

She undressed, showered, and put on the nightdress she had been loaned the night before. Now she was able to appreciate how soft it was against the skin. It had long, full sleeves, gathered to the wrist and trimmed with lace and a drawstring at the neck. Surveying herself in the bathroom mirror, Olivia decided that she looked as prim as an Edwardian schoolgirl.

'How appropriate,' she thought, and wrinkled her nose at

her image. For the first time in her life she was not wholly displeased with what she saw in the mirror. This in its turn led to self-accusations of vanity. Flushed and bright-eyed, she twirled in front of the mirror admiring the swirling nightdress. The pallor of the ancient material highlighted her own subtle colouring and its fullness made her look unexpectedly tall and graceful. She wondered whether Luis would like it, stopped twirling, blushed deeply and returned to the bedroom with subdued gait.

For a time she sat looking into the courtyard, but soon she began to wander about the room picking up objects and examining them with perfunctory interest before replacing them. In this she was unwise. Barbarita had been a noted artist in her day and had received many presents from admirers all over the world. The dark forest green paperweight that Olivia returned disparagingly to its place beside the blotter was a Colombian emerald set in glass. The blotter itself was the finest tooled Argentine leather and the desk came from Java, the gift of a besotted diplomat who had hoped, by presenting Barbarita with this elegant piece of furniture, to persuade her to write to him when *he* left Mexico for other capitals—without success, because Barbarita never wrote letters except to her family and, though she thanked him charmingly, never really understood the purpose of the present. Most of her admiring audience showered her with flowers or chocolates and, if they wanted to present her with a lasting token, jewels. Furniture had been new and bewildering in Barbarita's experience, which was why it was promptly banished to a seldom used guest room rather than her own boudoir.

All this Emilio could have told Olivia. But he had been given incontrovertible instructions not to disturb the *señorita* with offers of tea or rambling stories about the mistress. So Emilio, together with the rest of the staff, curbed his curiosity and Olivia was left alone to meditate.

Her conclusions were confused and in many cases contradictory. Part of her wanted to return home without delay, leaving Mexico, Uncle Octavio, Luis and Barbarita well behind. She became almost indignant when she thought of

the quandary she had been cast into by the machinations of these people. On the other hand, if she were allowed to return it would not be alone and Aunt Betty's comments would be neither kind nor easy to rebuff. Olivia shivered and felt sick at the very thought of them.

However, she felt even more sick when she considered the alternative of being pitchforked into marriage with Diego. She remembered him only as an adolescent, cheerful enough but remote. She could not imagine ever growing sufficiently close to him for their marriage to be anything but a social arrangement. There again, on the other side, Aunt Betty and probably Uncle Octavio as well would say that she had never really been close to anyone. It was not simply that she had never had boy-friends, there had been no intimate relationship within the family or outside it since little Olivia's first governess had left. Mama had been too magnificent and Father too unpredictable, while the staff had come and gone. Olivia's companions had been books and, in so far as she was allowed to see them, animals. And though there was a strong body of rural Shropshire opinion that held that she had been treated shamefully by Sir Ronald and that there sister of his, Olivia did not know it and had never been able to take advantage of it as a result.

Which brought Olivia to the third impossible possibility. Indeed, it was so improbable that she wondered why she contemplated it at all except as a fairytale solution to her dilemma. There were in real life no fairy princes who wandered up in the nick of time to carry off afflicted maidens from under the noses of wicked stepmothers and roaring tyrants. It was sheer fantasy.

And yet Luis had offered to do so. Olivia had not dreamed that she could call on anyone else and would certainly never have turned to an associate of her uncle's for assistance. But then, just as she thought the walls of family were finally closing round her to stifle whatever independence of mind she had left, a sudden escape route had been offered as if by divine dispensation. And while she was still breathless at her good luck she was still alarmed by it.

Marriage to Luis was not, she realised in some surprise,

an unattractive prospect. Although it would never have occurred to her to wish for it, once offered the idea seemed enticing. In two days they had become closer than she and Diego could manage in twenty years. Olivia sighed. Whatever else she doubted, she was positive on that score. He laughed at her, but not unkindly; he looked after her, but not officiously. She decided that he was quite perfect and went off into a prolonged daydream as Barbarita had predicted.

But in the end she had to come back to her inner debate. It hardly seemed fair, when he already carried such burdens, to add herself to the list of his responsibilities. And although she would make great efforts not to be a burden, she recognised that it was inevitable that she should be, at least to begin with. Olivia began to pace about the room. Of course, she could free him from his obligation to Uncle Octavio, financially if not morally. But money alone was not very much to bring to marriage. And what else had she? Unless you counted the fact that they had both, for very different reasons, had the power of self-determination wrested from them at an early age. She sat down, biting a finger. Luis would recognise that. He was a subtle man and he had shown every sign of comprehending her relationship with Aunt Betty and the rest of the family from their earliest acquaintance.

He was not in love with her, she could not expect it, and he did not make any such avowal, but perhaps he did feel, on this point at least, a certain sense of fellowship. So that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, she might actually have something to contribute to this marriage.

The final point then was, did she dare to do it? However alike they might be in some ways, nothing could disguise their divergence. He was considerably older not just in years, which might be ten or so, but in experience which, as far as she could judge, might just as well have been centuries. Olivia quailed at the thought of the differences that experience would entail in the assumptions they made about each other and their relationship.

But I can talk to him, she told her palpitating self crossly.

I like him. I'm not afraid of him crushing me if I'm being silly or sending me to a doctor if I want to do something like go somewhere alone. Aunt Betty thinks foolishness is a crime, but when did I ever have the opportunity to learn sense? And any desire for solitude is suspect and has to be treated with drugs. Luis is more like me, over that. He wouldn't bully me.

No, he won't bully you, said the other, shrinking Olivia. He'll probably just lose interest. Think of all the other girls he has known. They've all told you about them. *And* he's an attractive man, not just someone that you find attractive, but the sort of man any girl, even a sophisticated, efficient girl, could fall in love with. Why should he bother with you? And even if he's sorry for you now, why should he stay with you later?

Well, I won't expect him to, said Olivia stoutly. Or rather, she temporised, I won't *rely* on him staying with me. Then I won't get hurt if he leaves me.

When he leaves you, said the other one discouragingly.

All right, when he leaves me, snapped Olivia. It will have been worth it.

Just to get away from your Uncle Octavio? said timid Olivia. If you can't get away on your own, how do you think you can get away at all? When Luis leaves you you'll be bolting back home like a runaway horse.

There was no answer to that one. Olivia closed the debate and tried to sleep, but without remarkable success. She was no nearer a decision than she had been in the morning, when Emilio eventually scratched on the door to say that Señor Luis had returned and would wait for her downstairs.

Emilio, in fact, was rather pleased with the turn events were taking. Luis had returned from the farm much earlier than was his usual practice, whereby he stayed till dark and had supper with the estate manager. In this way he could transact not only Barbarita's immediate business but also bring himself up to date on the recent events. As he kept a watching brief on Barbarita's affairs this was always useful. Her manager was a steady and reliable sort of man, but Barbarita never left the house at all nowadays and it would

have been all too easy to deceive her on the farm's progress. But there was a considerable disincentive when a man of Luis Escobar's perception might at any time be paying an inspectorial visit.

This was known to all the servants in the house, whose devotion to Luis was a direct result of their affection for Barbarita. The fact that he skimped this self-imposed task on this occasion augured well for the little English *senorita*. Lovers, in Emilio's opinion, ought to be impatient, and he was pleased to see Luis did not despise the convention. When he went to tell him that the *señorita* was changing and would be down as soon as possible he was quite, fatherly. And, as Luis began to prowl round the fountain, his eyes unwaveringly on the stairs, Emilio's benevolence became positively blatant.

'They'll be married within the month,' he told the kitchen, approvingly.

Luis himself, when face to face with Olivia across a check-clothed table, said much the same thing.

'A month,' he told her. 'Unless you wanted a monster wedding, of course. We could have it all over and done with in a month and then we would be on our own.'

Olivia said in a low voice, 'Do you think it's a good idea? I mean really?' She raised her eyes quickly, caught his intent look, and lowered them again, confused. 'I'm so muddled,' she told him. 'I don't know what I ought to say. I've been arguing it out with myself all afternoon until I've almost got a split personality and I still don't know what to do.'

'What,' said Luis very gently, 'do you want to do?'

But she shook her head and did not answer. The meal progressed. Both were preoccupied, but the tension or, worse, exasperation, that Olivia had feared were not forthcoming. Once or twice she found him looking at her consideringly as if wondering what to do, but he did not press her and indeed maintained a flow of objective conversation which it was quite beyond Olivia's powers to respond to. She was, however, grateful for it.

When they had finished eating and only a bottle of wine

and their two glasses were left on the table, they danced. As Luis had foretold, it was an energetic but unregulated form of exercise. The floor was crowded and of only medium size and the group of musicians had amplification equipment which must have carried their rendering of 'Dixie' across the border. It was all very friendly and Luis was known to a number of the other participants. Olivia deduced that he was held in some awe, but whether this was because he was only an occasional visitor and therefore not familiar, or for some other reason, she could not make out. It was manifest, however, when any of the other men asked her to dance. They first asked Luis's permission and, while dancing with her, maintained a covert surveillance of Luis himself. What Olivia did not know was that he had never before brought a girl to such a party, though he had frequently attended them himself, and the neighbours were speculating.

Eventually, at past three in the morning, the lights were dimmed, the band modified their guitars, and the music became more homespun. Luis took Olivia a-waltzing to the melancholy tale of a miner's last journey.

'Well?' he said into her hair. The note of amusement was still present. 'You can't put it off much longer. They'll pack up in about half an hour and we'll all have to go home. And if you don't make your decision tonight, you won't sleep a wink, will you?'

Shamed, Olivia shook her head. Her face was buried in his shirtfront.

'So?'

They were in one of the darkest corners. The floor, which had thinned out towards the end of the beat recital, was now full again. People were absorbed in their own partners and no one, thought Olivia innocently, was looking at Luis and herself. They had almost stopped dancing and were swaying gently to the music.

'I'm frightened,' she said unhelpfully but with commendable honesty.

He did not reply for a second. Then he said, 'Look at me.'

She did. He kissed her—carefully, deliberately and with an effect for which she was wholly unprepared. When he at

last raised his head, Olivia opened her eyes, shook a dazed head, and found she was clinging to him so tightly that her fingers' ends were numb.

'I don't,' said Luis, 'want to hear any more about you being frightened. Stop dithering and tell me what you want to do. Then you can leave everything else to me and forget it.'

This course of events, attractive as it sounded, seemed to Olivia to be somewhat unlikely. She would have told him so had she possessed any command at all over her voice.

'What,' repeated Luis, 'do you want to do?'

Olivia gulped, shut her eyes and then said with a conviction bordering on the desperate, 'Marry you.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

TILEY arrived in Cuernavaca about two in the afternoon on the following day. Olivia, who had been afraid that some embarrassment would follow her bald acceptance of Luis's proposal, was tense. True, there was nothing in his bearing to alarm her. He had been the pattern of consideration when they returned to Barbarita's house, neither teasing her nor ignoring her confusion.

He had seen Barbarita himself that morning and, during an extended interview, apparently had confirmed that the old lady's assumptions about their relationship were correct. He had then, as he subsequently informed Olivia, been treated to a homily on marriage and the proper treatment of prospective brides so that he was almost afraid to address a word to her.

'What nonsense!' protested Olivia.

'Well, according to Barbarita, virtually anything I do between now and when we get married is a slight, an insult, or unwarrantably selfish,' he reported with a droll sigh. 'I think the sooner we get married the better. I wasn't prepared for all these social subtleties and I don't think I can support them.'

Olivia was grateful for this good sense. And she was even more grateful for his companionship on the flight to her uncle's house. The pilot was a dour individual who inspected Olivia with more curiosity than kindness and was inclined to be curt with her softly voiced requests. Luis's presence, when he arrived, produced a marked increase in the man's respect and he actually unbent so far as to instruct Olivia in the use of the complicated seat belt. It almost seemed as if he was prepared to buckle it for her, as she struggled in vain, but Luis stopped him.

'My privilege,' he said, which earned him a grateful look from Olivia.

He bent over the back of his own seat and extracted a length of heavy petersham which had wound itself about the bracing struts of the seat. Thus freed, the heavy buckle proved easier to manage, although the spring was still too stiff for Olivia's small hands.

'These things were obviously not built for a lady,' remarked Luis, giving her a singularly sweet smile.

Olivia, who was about to apologise for her clumsiness, relaxed while the pilot volunteered that Don Octavio did not often carry passengers and the back seat was hardly ever used.

After that the flight was reasonably harmonious. The noise of the machine made conversation an effort and, although Luis was prepared to exchange remarks with the pilot, Olivia found the struggle to shout above the din too much. Inevitably she sank into silence, and thence to contemplation. Much of her embarrassment, which had been dispelled by Luis earlier, now returned. She could not help thinking how annoyed Aunt Betty would be at her escapade. And when she announced her intention of marrying a virtual stranger—Olivia shuddered.

By the time they arrived she had talked herself into a stew. When the pilot put the craft down on a back lawn and said with some degree of friendliness that she had arrived and the family were coming out of the house to welcome her, she said only,

'Oh dear!'

Luis, taking in the situation after one look at her white face, chuckled.

'You couldn't sound less ready to be welcomed,' he told her in his teasing voice. 'It's all right, you won't have to make a speech.'

'I think I'm going to be sick,' returned Olivia.

'Well, that would certainly make a memorable arrival.' He turned round. 'Come along. Or can't you unbuckle yourself? It's not as difficult as doing the thing up. You only have to press the button.'

But her hands were shaking too much. Her physical agitation was such that she actually appeared to be breathless and her finger ends had gone white, as if in severe cold.

He undid the belt, saying in a voice for her ear alone, 'It won't take long. And no one is going to berate you the moment you touch down. Don't say anything and stay with me. I'll get you through this and then, when you've been hauled off to rest by your aunt, I'll tell Octavio. Just don't let your aunt start anything.'

Olivia nodded mutely, by no means sure of her ability to follow instructions. In her own home she was reasonably good at taking evasive action when Aunt Betty was on the warpath, but in a strange house where she did not know the attics and quiet corners, she would be more easily pinned down. And once brought face to face with Aunt Betty she knew of no way of stemming the tide of that lady's eloquence.

Fortunately for her the problem did not present itself. When she was eventually coaxed out of the helicopter she staggered, as much from the after-effects of flying as anything else, but the family could not be convinced of this. And she did look very pale and troubled. Aunt Betty, who beneath her bullying had a very real affection for her niece, took one look at her and discerned exhaustion.

Olivia's escapade had been foolish and had caused everyone a lot of worry, but she did not look as if she had exactly enjoyed it herself. Indeed she looked so chastened that it occurred to Aunt Betty that Luis Escobar had taken her to task. As this was a privilege reserved for her aunt, the mere possibility caused offence. Aunt Betty, who had travelled to Cuernavaca as scheduled, had had to endure the complaints of the entire Villa family about Olivia's self-will and lack of consideration. She was therefore in a mood to take on the entire Mexican nation, should it breathe another word of criticism.

As a result Olivia was tenderly borne off to the room prepared for her after the briefest salutations from her uncle, aunt and grandmother. The latter, terrifyingly ungrandmotherly with peroxide hair and silver-painted nails, was the only one who referred to her adventure.

'I hope you enjoyed yourself,' she remarked, offering an expensive layer of powder for Olivia to kiss. 'do think you chose well. If I were your age I would certainly have made off with Luis.'

Olivia, detecting mockery with that over-sensitivity which was Luis's bane, cringed. She thought that her grandmother was saying that Luis would not normally waste his time with a girl so very different from the sophisticated inmates of the Villa mansion.

They were certainly all very elegant. Her aunt Isabel was wearing a flowered silk suit, which made Aunt Betty's own tailored skirt and shirt look homespun. While even Grandmother, very daring in jewel-coloured trousers and smock, could have been featuring on the front page of a fashion magazine rather than spending a quiet day with the family in the country.

When Aunt Betty swept her into the house and away from all that terrifying elegance, Olivia was grateful.

The peace of course did not last. Olivia, left in her third strange bedroom in three days, was too perturbed to rest as she was instructed and prowled instead round and round the apartment's spacious proportions. Her ears were permanently stretched for the slightest sound of commotion which would indicate that Luis had made his announcement. But she could detect nothing. The house drowsed on in well-bred calm.

Olivia was on the point of quitting the room and running upon her fate when there came the sound of rapid footsteps and the door was flung open. Aunt Betty stood on the threshold, her eyes flashing. For a moment Olivia was so appalled that she was rooted to the spot. Then she perceived that, though her aunt was indubitably and strongly moved, her anger was not directed at herself.

'That man!' began Miss Lightfellow, with loathing.

Her niece, who had seldom before seen her driven out of her headmistressy habit of self-command and then only by mechanical rather than human failures, was impressed. The last time she had seen Aunt Betty in what the good lady herself would have described as such a taking was when the

Lightfellow chariot had broken down on the way to London, thereby ensuring that Aunt Betty lost her flight to Paris. The reflection caused Olivia some amusement and no little relief. Aunt Betty serenely mistress of herself and quite determined to guide Olivia was a formidable opponent. Aunt Betty spitting like a dispossessed cat, she could handle.

'Luis?' she asked, with rather more ease than she might otherwise have found.

'Your uncle.' Aunt Betty very nearly ground her teeth. 'he has had the—the impertinence—the insolence—oh, words fail me!'

'I can see they do.' Olivia pushed forward a velvet-covered chaise-longue and spoke in soothing tones. 'Why don't you sit down? What has my uncle done?'

Aunt Betty took the proffered seat, but her bosom continued to heave and her eyes to dart sparks.

'He had the gall to tell me—me, how to—oh, I could scream, I am so angry!'

'How to . . .?' prompted Olivia. She was curious to discover on what subject her uncle had been so daring as to instruct her aunt. She was not left long in ignorance.

'How to bring you up,' spat her aunt. Her own vehemence seemed to startle her and brought her up short. 'Oh, I'm sorry, Livvy, I shouldn't come and shout at you because Octavio has annoyed me. But a more pompous, overbearing, self-satisfied *stick*, I have never met.'

Olivia made sympathetic noises. 'What did he actually say?'

'Oh, that I should have told you that we had arranged a marriage between you and Diego so that you would have been quite prepared to behave when you got here,' said Aunt Betty disparagingly. 'Good God, the man is mediaeval, and so I told him.' She paused, considering the memory with a pleased expression. 'He went purple and puffed. I don't think he had ever been spoken to like that before in his life. Indeed that's what he told me. He's obviously become a complete despot. Your aunt Isabel has let him get away with far too much.'

It was becoming apparent to Olivia that she could count

on her aunt's support in the coming conflict with her uncle, if for no other reason than that the lady had an inbred dislike of being patronised. Uncle Octavio, did he but know it, had made a fatal mistake. —

'I'm sorry you quarrelled over me,' said Olivia with smug untruth.

She received a sharp-eyed look in return.

'You knew, didn't you? About the project with Diego, I mean? *How* did you know? Did you read one of Octavio's letters?'

'Aunt!' Olivia was really shocked. 'Of course not. I overheard something you were saying to—to Luis,' she went pink at the name, but Aunt Betty, still seething from her own Homeric encounter, did not notice the fact. 'I hadn't the slightest suspicion. It would never have occurred to me. I didn't want to get married and I didn't realise that anyone else wanted me to. No one has ever said anything.'

'Well, we didn't want you to get married to just anybody,' averred her aunt. 'Diego seemed suitable, and you'd met him when he spent that summer with us the year your father died.'

'That hardly counts as knowing him, though. I hardly saw him. What time he didn't spend with my father he was out entertaining himself. I don't suppose I've had more than an hour's conversation with him in my life.'

'No,' agreed Aunt Betty, sighing. 'And that,' returning to the attack on the absent Octavio, 'is exactly why I didn't say anything to you. I thought that if you met Diego and liked him, well and good. But your uncle seems to think that I should have simply informed you you were about to be married and left it at that. I told him,' concluded Aunt Betty with relish, 'that women weren't slaves in England any longer, no matter what they might have to put up with in Mexico.'

Olivia hugged her. 'Oh, you are so brave,' she said. 'How did you dare to talk to Uncle Octavio like that?'

Aunt Betty sniffed. 'Tinpot tyrant! What could he do except look sour and say he was very displeased? I'll bet he was,' she said, descending into a cheerful vulgarity that was

wholly out of character under ordinary circumstances. 'He looked as if he'd got acute dyspepsia.'

'What do you think he'll do?' asked Olivia in trepidation.

Her aunt subjected her to a searching scrutiny.

'livvy, do you really want to marry this man?' she asked, not with obvious relevance.

The question had been uppermost in Olivia's own mind since she had woken that morning. It had engaged her throughout the flight and given her no peace since she arrived. Turning it over and over in her head, she had achieved a lengthy inner monologue and a migraine of historic proportions. But she still did not know the answer. She did know, however, that she had made him a promise and was not, under any circumstances, going to let him down. She had been prepared for bullying and was all set to withstand Aunt Betty's peculiarly paralysing habit of assuming that she knew best and Olivia could not possibly be serious in her intention to follow her own course. Without auntly sanction. To be met with something approaching understanding was a surprise, but it did not weaken her resolve. Luis had offered to hold her hand and she would not betray him while he was doing that very thing.

So she nodded. 'Yes, I'm quite sure.'

'But you only met him the day before yesterday.'

'It was—well, a sort of instant thing,' said Olivia, acutely uncomfortable.

'Do you,' demanded Aunt Betty, 'love him?'

The question bereft her niece of words. In her experience Aunt Betty was neither sentimental nor inclined to tolerate sentiment in others. Olivia would have expected her to warn against the unwisdom of marriage for love, rather than demand that passion as a preliminary necessity.

Uncle Octavio, when she was eventually summoned to his presence, wasted no time in such dillydallying.

'Well, you've got yourself into a fine mess,' he greeted her, the moment the door had shut behind the servant who escorted her to his study.

Octavio Villa was a short, square man. He had a broad head, with hardly any neck at all, before he broadened out

into a barrel. For this twenty years of good living was partly responsible but, though he was portly, he was not flabby and he exuded an air of forcefulness only just short of brutality. To this unfortunate image his sporting of a tooth-brush moustache above thin lips added not a little.

As Miss Lightfellow had deduced, he was used to having his own way in all things. From being a highly indulged only son he had gone, young, into marriage with a gentle, conventional lady whose one idea, throughout her apologetic life, had been to keep the peace. As Octavio's temper was as uncontrolled as his temperament was despotic, this was not an easy task. When her children began to grow up and to argue with their father poor Aunt Isabel had thought wistfully of retiring to a convent. Fortunately, at the point when she was quite convinced life was unbearable, Elena had married suitably and one source of dissension was removed from the household. When Diego subsequently bought a flat in Mexico City and visited his parents only on odd weekends she began to think that peace had come at last to her troubled existence.

Octavio, however, lacking objects at home over whom to exercise dictatorship, had spent more and more time at work. So while his wife thought that he was growing sweeter-tempered with the years, his employees had the reverse impression. Now that the Englishwoman had arrived and the girl was proving recalcitrant as far as Octavio's plans for her welfare were concerned, there had been a household eruption the like of which Isabel had not seen in ten years and prayed never to see again. She was therefore less than welcoming to Olivia whom she blamed, not unnaturally, for the upset.

While Olivia was prepared for her uncle's hostility, she had been so cheered by the reasonable attitude of her Aunt Betty that she quite thought Uncle Octavio would be the last stumbling block to her freedom. She had always been rather fond of her Aunt Isabel, who, although they had not even met, never forgot birthdays or Christmas presents and sent her long rambling detters in the intervals. So Olivia was hurt by Aunt Isabel's coldness when she came to ask Olivia

to go to her uncle, and as a result, entered the study in no very good order. •

have you to say for yourself?' he demanded, moustache quivering.

It was clearly a rhetorical question because he went on at length, without pausing for Olivia to reply, on the subject of her foolishness and headstrong ingratitude.

The last accusation stung Olivia out of her trembling silence.

'Ingratitude?' she gasped.

Uncle Octavio eyed her coldly. 'Certainly. When we put ourselves out sufficiently to invite you here. When we have put ourselves out for years to concern our lives with your affairs ! I have very many better things to do with my time, let me tell you, than act as trustee to a selfish girl half a world away. And then, when in our care and consideration for you,' he was working himself up into a torrent of injured outrage, 'we propose a match with our own son, you have not the common courtesy to listen to the proposal, much less the common sense to wait until you meet him before running headlong into another alliance. We are very disappointed in you, Olivia.'

It was not clear whether he included the rest of the family in his remarks or whether he was using the royal 'we', but in either event, its effect upon Olivia was the same. Normally, as Luis had pointed out, she was inoffensive to the point of timidity. Never easily roused, she had, since her father's death, resisted few of Aunt Betty's opinions and none of her dictates. However, all this windy abuse roused her to long-delayed resistance. The suspicion that Uncle Octavio was enjoying himself as he ranted at her infuriated her. Moreover, while she was perfectly certain that Aunt Betty's occasional bullying sessions were the result of a real if sometimes misplaced concern for her niece's welfare she was very nearly sure that Uncle Octavio had no such disinterested objective. He was simply a dictatorial man who was not used to being crossed and, like a child, was quite happy to make himself thoroughly unpleasant as a result.

That must surely account for Aunt Isabel's shattered

look. What he wanted, decided Olivia in a crusading spirit, was a lesson.

So she now replied, 'You can hardly be more disappointed than I am, Uncle Octavio. I came to Mexico expecting to have an agreeable holiday among my family. I didn't think I was to be bludgeoned into a marriage that was distasteful to me.'

Uncle Octavio began to gobble and his sallow features were suffused with colour.

'How dare you speak to me like that, miss?' he hissed.

Olivia drew herself to her full height and fixed a disdainful eye upon him. 'You sound like the villain out of a Chicago gangster film,' she told him. 'Of course I dare. It's my life, isn't it? Something you seem to forget.'

There was a pregnant pause while their eyes locked. Uncle Octavio, having beaten a lively son and daughter into submission, was unprepared for defiance from this English mouse and was, although he would have died rather than admit it, somewhat at a loss as a result. He took refuge in reproachful bluster.

'Have you forgotten what is due to your elders? Don't you remember that we are all the relatives that you have in the world? Now that your father is dead, naturally you must turn to me for guidance.'

'Why naturally?' retorted Olivia, bristling. 'What about Aunt Betty? She's a relative too, you know. And she knows me a good deal better than you do.'

His wave of the hand said without need of words that Aunt Betty was a woman and therefore did not count, which annoyed Olivia almost more than anything that had gone before. She took an impatient step to his desk. He had not risen when she entered and he did not rise now, merely staring up at her with his jaw outthrust like a belligerent baby.

'I am going to marry Luis Escobar,' said Olivia with growing resolution. 'You may be my trustee, but you're not my guardian and you can't stop me. What's more, when I marry my husband will take over the duties you have found so onerous as far as my affairs are concerned. You, as I'm

sure I needn't remind you, cease to be a trustee on the day I marry.'

On which Parthian shot she turned on her heel and quitted the room, leaving the man behind her bubbling like a stew-pot but incapable for several minutes after her departure of putting words to his sentiments.

Luis, when informed by Olivia with modest pride of her Amazonian encounter with her uncle, roared with laughter.

'He had it coming to him,' he remarked, 'though he probably didn't expect it from such a quiet quarter.' He gave her a hug. 'I hope you feel pleased with yourself.'

'Oh, I do,' Olivia assured him sunnily. 'I feel as if a whole new life has opened up to me. I can go round slaying dragons now—or at least preventing taxi drivers from overcharging me!'

This diminution in her ambitions also amused him. They were sitting in a swinging garden seat, hung between orange trees in the orchard. It was the next morning and they had arranged to meet there before anyone was up. It was nearly eleven, but apart from Aunt Betty, luxuriously reading a novel in bed, no one else in the family was even awake.

It was very agreeable, this feeling of fellowship against the rest of the world, and Olivia was finding herself more and more enthusiastic at the idea of its continuance. Luis had been thoroughly charming both to the disapproving family and to an undecided Aunt Betty, so that, after her initial skirmishes, Olivia had found the fighting was in the most civilised way being done for her. As a result she confided more and more in him and her evident pleasure in his company encouraged Aunt Betty to hope for the best.

By the end of the week it was an established fact that Luis and Olivia were to marry, though not without predictions of disaster from Uncle Octavio.

As Luis had promised her, it seemed that the marriage could take place fairly soon. Aunt Betty encouraged speed because she disliked living under Octavio's roof and wanted to stay in Mexico no longer than for the wedding. Aunt Isabel, her house roaring about her ears with her husband's

fury, wanted the whole business concluded and no longer a subject of debate as quickly as possible. The wedding was therefore set for the end of the month, just giving the local seamstress time to make the white wedding dress that all the female members of the family insisted upon.

Proceedings were slightly hindered by the fact that Uncle Octavio, presenting the difference in Luis's and Olivia's nominal religion as his reason, insisted on a civil wedding only.

"Then if it doesn't work out they can divorce without any difficulty," he told his wife, rubbing his hands with satisfaction at his own shrewdness.

Knowing how much he wanted not only the Lightfellow money but his own sister's inheritance back in the family with Diego, Aunt Isabel heard this assertion with some anxiety. It would be fairly possible for him to engineer some disaster to Luis's career, she thought with compunction. However, Olivia had enough money for both of them and if Octavio did carry his malice so far, she was convinced that the affection between the two of them could only be strengthened by it. She did not contemplate the possibility of Octavio causing disagreements within the marriage.

In this, she underrated him. Uncle Octavio was feeling hard done by. Luis, a pauper for all his superior family, had ignored his obligations and run off with a Villa bride. And Olivia had flouted every duty in choosing for herself, ignoring her uncle's expressed wishes, and finally insulting him. If he could make their path uneasy it was no more than they deserved. Accordingly he insisted that his wife invite for the weekend before the wedding not only Luis's mother and brother as she had intended but Diego, Elena and Elena's sister-in-law.

Now there had been, as he well knew, several tender passages between Luis and Anamargarita Cisneros, but when his wife tried to point this out he had pooh-poohed her objections. Anamargarita was family—well, nearly family, they hadn't seen the child for a long time and she would be company for Diego who had been cheated of his promised wife. Uncle Octavio had a limitless capacity for

presenting himself—even occasionally to himself—as thoroughly reasonable. His wife understood his real motive but was too cowed to accuse him of it.

She did however try to warn Olivia, which did not have the precise result that kind Aunt Isabel had intended. Instead of grasping that Anamargarita was a force to be reckoned with who might make life briefly but severely uncomfortable, Olivia thought her aunt was telling her that Luis was in love with the lady. This did not altogether surprise her, but it did make her feel low. She had passed the optimum point where she revelled in Luis's support and affection. Ever since he had returned to the capital to his work Olivia's confidence had been sliding downhill. The more she thought of it the more impossible it seemed that a man such as he could care for her, or even come to do so later. She had nothing to offer. And he, kind and funny and attentive, sending her letters three times a week and telephoning whenever he was in a place sufficiently civilised to possess a telephone, was becoming increasingly necessary to her. In fact, as Olivia now admitted, though only to herself, she was in a very fair way to falling in love with him.

The sight of Señorita Cisneros, therefore, depressed her totally. Anamargarita arrived with her brother and sister-in-law in a large American car in the middle of Friday afternoon. Neither Diego nor Luis and his family had put in an appearance and, while Elena was swept off upstairs to hear her mother's woes and her husband went down to the paddock to look at Octavio's new mare, Olivia was left to entertain her.

She was classically beautiful, with dark hair and large, liquid golden eyes. It was a hot day and she wore a scarlet sundress, cut away daringly at the shoulders and back but coming to a high collar at the throat. She was beautifully and evenly tanned and her toe and fingernails were lacquered the same Chinese red as her dress. Olivia in pale linen, felt herself outclassed.

'So you're the little cousin,' said Anamargarita patronisingly, though she was no taller than Olivia and very

probably younger. 'I've heard about you, of course, poor child.'

Olivia raised her brows. She was not quite so accommodating to that sort of thing as she used to be. 'In what way do I excite your pity?' she asked pleasantly, taking a seat on the porch.

It was a wooden shaded balcony that ran right the way round the house, off which many of the principal rooms opened. The drawing room door was open now and in front of it was placed a wooden table bearing drinks and snacks.

'I'm sure you're thirsty,' pursued Olivia. 'Can I give you something to drink? Whisky?' which as she had discovered was the fashionable aperitif. 'Sherry? Sangria? There's an iced jug of it here and Aunt Isabel has a special recipe.'

'I know that perfectly well,' snapped Anamargarita, seating herself with a flounce of scarlet and a darkling look at Olivia. 'I'm not quite a stranger here, you know.'

She was offended by Olivia's assumptions of a hostess's duty. Olivia saw it, and was contrite. However, there was little she could do to atone and she had broken herself of the habit of apologising at all eventualities which caused offence, whether they were her fault or not.

And however offended Anamargarita might be, she still liked to be waited on.

'I'll have sangria,' she said, holding out a languid hand to receive it.

Olivia poured her a glass. It was delicious stuff, made from local wine and fresh fruit juices. Aunt Isabel's recipe prescribed quantities of fresh lime and Olivia had spent a morning pressing the latest crop from the orchard so that there should be enough for the weekend's sangria. She pondered remarking so to Anamargarita and decided against it, in case that too underlined her usurper's status.

The sangria was received without thanks and swallowed without comment. Olivia, taking a wooden chair opposite the guest, began to rack her brains for a subject of conversation.

'Did you have a good journey?' she asked.

'Oh, reasonable. Dusty, of course, it always is **at** this time

of year. I never come in a car if I can avoid it.'

'Do you use the helicopter, then?' asked Olivia, feeling that here was a neutral subject. 'I had never flown in one before.'

Anamargarita's eyes narrowed. 'I suppose Luis flew you out here.'

'Oh no, there was a pilot. I didn't know Luis could fly.'

'Helicopters hardly count as flying,' she was informed loftily. 'But of course he can pilot one. How would he get around, otherwise? Most of his on-site work is done at great distance from Mexico City and from the other projects. He couldn't get around to all of them if he only used a car. Besides, he often goes into the jungle and you can't take a car in there for most of the year. Didn't you know that?'

Olivia admitted that she did not and Anamargarita began to look more cheerful.

'Oh, Luis has been piloting me out here for ages. I always try to come when he's available. Cars are such a nuisance and they take so long.'

'I suppose so,' said Olivia doubtfully.

The tone of her guest's remarks hardly sounded as if she were in love with Luis. From her expression she might have been talking about some favoured servant.

'Does Luis like flying?'

Anamargarita gave her a look of ineffable scorn. 'He doesn't fly for fun, you know. He's not a sportsman like Diego. I don't suppose he knows any of the finer points at all. He flies when he's paid to.'

'He could still like it,' murmured Olivia.

The other girl shrugged. 'Possibly he does, then. I can't say I've ever asked him.'

'I thought,' said Olivia, a frown between her brows, 'that you were friends.'

This was not a wholly sensible remark and if Olivia had been less humble and more aware of the demands of personal vanity she would have realised that Anamargarita felt herself to have been slighted by the announcement of Luis's betrothal. Having satisfied herself that there were no indications that Señorita Cisneros was personally hurt by

his defection, Olivia had innocently but unwisely assumed that the affair had been misinterpreted by the onlookers. Anamargarita had wanted a chauffeur and Luis had been available and obliging. There was therefore no danger in discussing one with the other.

Such an unworldly approach would have been disbelieved by Anamargarita. The latter had got used to Luis's attentions and, though she had been far from committed to him, she had found him useful. It was always a good thing to have a handsome and agreeable man to carry one's stole, escort one to parties or the theatre, drive one's car when one was too tired and generally do the hundred and one things which it was boring to do for oneself. In particular she had liked figuring, though very discreetly of course, in the society pages of magazines, as having attached one of Mexico's most distinguished bachelors. Of course it was tedious that he had to work, and to tell the truth Anamargarita rather despised him for it. But it was undeniably thrilling to have such a man at one's feet. She had not quite decided whether to marry him because he was so much older than she and not wealthy. But, until her mother had read her the engagement notice in the newspaper, however unsure she was of her own intentions she had not doubted his for a moment. The flaw in his devotion thus manifest had hit her cruelly and she was, as her old nurse phrased it, fighting mad. And, naturally enough, she held Olivia to blame.

Olivia, not guessing this from her own experience, had no clue to it from the lady's demeanour. After a brief pause, during which Anamargarita summoned all her resources of self-control, she gave Olivia a charming smile.

'Did he tell you that?' she asked.

'No. My Aunt Isabel suggested it,' said Olivia with incautious frankness.

'Alt yes. Poor Isabel. They were worried about it, though quite unnecessarily.'

Anamargarita folded her exquisite hands and sighed. Olivia, she discovered from under her lashes, was looking puzzled and rather uneasy. That afforded her some comfort.

Not that I'm as close a member of the family as you, my

dear,' she went on charmingly. 'But still, I am related by marriage and I suppose they felt responsible, as I'd met Luis here.'

She paused for effect and gave a histrionic little gasp.

'Oh, but you didn't know, did you? I can see that you don't know what I'm talking about. I'm sorry, I thought when you said Isabel had suggested that Luis and I had been friends that you knew all about it.'

'All about what?' asked innocent Olivia, and gave her antagonist exactly the opening she had been looking for.

Anamargarita leant forward and said very seriously, 'Luis and me. I wouldn't have told you, but now that it's slipped out, I will. The whole truth is so much better than suspicions, don't you agree? The trouble is that Luis wanted to marry me,' said Anamargarita with enjoyment. 'Of course he's very attractive and I had let him take me out once or twice,' conveniently forgetting that these occasions had been organised by herself or the Villa family at her instigation and were only as frequent as Luis's job permitted, 'but there was nothing else in it. My family would never permit him to marry me. He has nothing. He has been looking for a rich wife for years, and for some reason it is particularly urgent now. Perhaps he has some scheme he wants financing, I don't know.' Her tone of indifference was not assumed. Luis's work had never been more than a bore to Anamargarita. 'Anyway, I had to tell him that there was no prospect of it.'

Olivia had gone perfectly white. Señorita Cisneros, having unloaded some of her own distress on to another, sat back well satisfied.

'Just as well as it has turned out,' she said with a spiteful smile at the English girl. 'Since he has now met and fallen in love with you, I mean.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE Villa family, though not large, was noisy and Olivia's silence throughout the evening therefore went unnoticed particularly after Diego's arrival. The embarrassment which Olivia had anticipated feeling at her first encounter with the latter was wholly swamped by other emotions. Her cousin's behaviour, too, was exemplary. He kissed her cheek, greeted her kindly and kept up a flow of amusing small talk in which he neither singled her out nor ignored her. Nor did he refer, by the remotest implication or a single rueful look, to the fact that she had, by her engagement, effectively rejected himself.

Olivia, a child in these matters, no more realised that Diego was suffering from pique than she recognised that state in Señorita Cisneros. She was merely grateful for his forbearance and smiled on him rather more frequently than she might otherwise have done as a result. Olivia's smile was one of her most attractive characteristics. Wholly spontaneous, it lit her eyes and gave her entire face the look of a mischievous elf. Luis had noticed it and noticed, too, that she was quite unaware of her own charm. Her cousin, while his perception did not extend so far, did acknowledge to himself in a rather startled fashion that, if properly dressed and if she were less shy, she could be a very pretty girl. From being a distinct liability and the last woman in the world he wanted to marry, she was transformed into a highly desirable object.

When his father had announced the plans for his marriage Diego had been both reluctant and indignant. However, a series of blameworthy (and expensive) misdemeanours in the previous twelve months had weakened his bargaining

position. His mother had sympathised, but both she and her son knew well enough that her influence with her husband was minimal. Diego had capitulated with very bad grace and had told his closest friends that martyrdom was upon him. Now that Olivia was no longer being foisted into his arms by his father he began to see for himself exactly how great was the prize he was missing. Not only was she prettier than he remembered and rich, she had a gentleness of manner which Diego, whose girl-friends tended to be as temperamental as they were vivacious, found unexpectedly attractive.

She had, too, delivered a severe blow to his ego by her headstrong refusal to contemplate him as her husband. Diego began to plot mischief. But he was by far too experienced a campaigner to announce it, even to his doting mother. Olivia was treated to a display of gentlemanlike tact which amazed her and impressed even his family.

Diego's good manners were thrown into even greater relief by the absence of Luis and his mother and brother. Though they had been originally expected on Friday night, no message beyond a brief telephone call that they had been delayed was received until well into dinner. By ten o'clock Olivia was receiving pitying looks from her cousins and downright triumph from Anamargarita Cisneros. Then, however, the butler appeared, whispered something to Aunt Isabel and stood back expectantly.

'Oh dear,' said Aunt Isabel, patently flustered. 'Are you sure? I mean, didn't he ask to speak to Octavio? Oh well.' She cast a scared look down the table at her husband who was engaged in a vitriolic debate with his son-in-law and not attending. 'But it would be more proper if Don Octavio. . . . But I don't think. . . .' Receiving no help from such members of the company as were listening, she let her tangled phrases fall into silence and made a fresh effort. 'Livvy, there is a telephone call from Luis. Apparently he wishes to speak to you. You may take it in my sitting room. Be sure instructed Aunt Isabel, with a last attempt to reassert her husband's claim to the consultation, 'to ask if he wants to speak to your uncle.'

Olivia jumped and went pale, a fact that Diego noted. However, she rose composedly enough and followed the butler to her aunt's boudoir. There she was directed to an ornate telephone of gilt and ebony which looked as if it had been imported from a Hollywood musical. She picked up the receiver cautiously and said, 'Hello!'

'Olivia! Olivia, is that you?' Luis sounded very urgent and very far away.

'Yes,' she agreed.

'Thank heavens for that! You were so long I thought they were refusing to let me talk to you. Are you all right?'

'Yes,' repeated Olivia in a wooden voice.

'You don't sound all right. What has happened?'

She was intimidated as much by the telephone and the distance between them as by Anamargarita's barbs of the afternoon. The hovering servant was further impediment to frankness.

'Nothing.'

Luis was dissatisfied but not in any position to demand further elucidation. The line was crackling audibly and her voice only reached him in bursts, interspersed with static.

'Look, I'm sorry about this evening. I had to fly south this morning—a job that needed my attention. I don't know how long I shall be here. It looks as if the team have come across some underground waterways that we weren't prepared for. I've phoned Mama and told her and Victor to make their own way to the hacienda. I'll join you as soon as I can, but I really can't tell yet when that will be.'

As there was no response he paused. He could not tell whether Olivia was genuinely silent or if her comments were being drowned by electrical interference.

'I hope you're not angry with me,' he finished.

Olivia, who would have been touched by such an admission not twelve hours previously, reflected with some bitterness on his powers of deception. He almost sounded anxious and that tone of warm affection was very well done. She gave a wintry smile which the butler, still helpfully arranging furniture in the boudoir, stored up to tell his

cronies. All did not seem to be going too well with Don Luis's wooing.

'Of course not,' said Olivia.

'You sound so remote,' said Luis uncertainly

Olivia shook herself. Dignity, after all, required that one put some sort of face on things. She could not scream at him for deceiving her with an old family retainer as auditor. Nor could she really accuse him of deceit. It was she who had read into his manner more affection than was there. Luis, to do him justice, had never tried to mislead her.

'You must blame the telephone system for the remoteness,' she therefore said with an attempt at lightness which convinced him.

The butler could have enlightened him as to its hollowness, but Luis, being without such on-the-spot assistance, trusted the evidence, however fluctuating, of his ears.

'That's all right, then,' he said cheerfully. 'Look after Mama for me. And give her my love. See you soon.'

He rang off, she noted, without a word of love to herself. And though, had he sent her tender messages, she would instantly have discounted them as flattery or worse, she was perverse enough to be hurt by the oversight. She blew her nose hard and went back to the dining room.

An expectant silence greeted her entry. Even Uncle Octavio had wound himself down in his peroration sufficiently to notice her absence. He half rose from his seat as she entered, offering to go to the telephone, but she stopped him with a shake of the head.

'Luis has rung off,' she informed them. 'He sounded a long way away. He was on a site somewhere in the south.' She looked enquiringly at Uncle Octavio, who nodded. 'He said he didn't know how soon he would be able to get away,' she reported, 'and so he has told his mother and brother to come here on their own. I don't know how,' she concluded. 'He didn't say.'

Her uncle clicked his tongue impatiently.

'You should have had a word with him, my dear,' he reproved his wife. 'Really, this is most inconsiderate!'

'Oh, I don't think so, Octavio—after all, Señora Escobar is not to blame. . .

Uncle Octavio closed his eyes, with the air of a patient magistrate listening to extenuating circumstances. 'Very well, my dear, as you say. And as it is you who will be inconvenienced, **I** have no further comment.' But the spiteful look he cast Olivia was eloquent, before he assumed a demeanour of saintly resignation.

'I shan't be inconvenienced, Octavio,' protested his wife, surprised by his unwonted consideration for her into opposition for once. 'Their rooms are all prepared and it cannot matter to me what time or even which day they arrive. The servants will do everything.'

A shade of annoyance crossed Uncle Octavio's patient expression.

'Always the perfect housekeeper,' he told her with a fondness which far from flattering her made Aunt Isabel send a bewildered, not to say scared, look at the butler.

The elder Miss Lightfellow was under no illusion as to where the oblique remark was aimed and she bristled.

'Are you suggesting that Olivia is at fault because Luis Escobar is late for your party?' she demanded. 'May **I** ask whose business he is on now, miles from anywhere?'

This was unanswerable and even Octavio Villa had the sense to recognise it. It was beneath his dignity to admit such a thing, however, so he pretended he had not heard Miss Lightfellow's broadside, returning with magnificent unconsciousness to his conversation with his son-in-law.

'So Luis is delayed?' asked Diego, bright-eyed. He came to a decision. 'Well, in that case, Livvy, **I** must take you riding tomorrow. It's the best way to see the country and you'll enjoy it. You do ride?'

Olivia agreed to it, though without much spirit. Diego gave her a guileless smile.

'Your father showed me Shropshire, after all. It's only fair that **I** introduce his daughter to this little corner of Cuernavaca at least. It's beautiful—very green, just like England and not at all like the nasty jungly bits where poor

old Luis is at the moment.' His smile was infectious and his voice was caressing. 'You're very much better off here with us.'

There was a somewhat startled pause. His mother, who was well acquainted with her son's vagaries, recognised the tone as one in which he habitually began his numerous flirtations. The thought alarmed her and she directed at him a look that was half admonitory, half pleading. Octavio, coming to the same conclusion but without his wife's scruples, allowed a smile to grow, without interrupting his monologue.

All unaware of these undercurrents, Olivia thanked her cousin in a depressed voice, found she had no appetite and picked over the rest of the meal in a manner bearing only the slightest resemblance to eating.

A sleepless night did little to restore her equilibrium. Anamargarita's announcement that Luis needed a rich wife had taken strong possession of her mind. Why she should mind so much she was not quite sure. Had not she herself, when counting up the pitifully few contributions she could make to the partnership, included her wealth?

Well, yes, she might have included it, but she had not realised that it was her sole or even her major attraction. All her life she had been schooled in the dread of being married for her money. That was precisely the reason that her father and then her trustees had kept her sheltered from ordinary social activities. With the result, she told herself bitterly, that she was so unfit for adult society that she could not form any relationship without the Lightfellow millions to back it up.

But the real sting, though she shied away from recognising it, was the inescapable corollary to Anamargarita's remarks. Luis had really wanted to marry her, but would never have been permitted to do so by the Cisneros family! In all possible senses, then, Olivia was second best.

She went riding with Diego in a mood of painful uncertainty. On the one hand she was so hurt that she was strongly tempted to flee the hacienda before Luis arrived.

On the other, there was a perverse hope that he would deny Anamargarita's assertions—though what good that would do, when Olivia would not believe his denials, she was forced to admit she could not imagine. There remained only the determination to disguise her distress. Olivia had always had more pride than her family had given her credit for and was, besides, highly accomplished at dissimulation. For so long feelings had been a weakness she had grown expert in pretending, even to herself, did not exist, at least in public.

Diego, therefore, had no clue as to her state of mind. Indeed, provoked by her inner humiliation, Olivia joked and chatted with more ease than she would normally have shown in the presence of one who was effectively a stranger. He was no less surprised than charmed and decided at last to discount his father's view of her. She was considerably prettier than he had been prepared for and, further contradicting Octavio's opinion, she was neither dull nor stupid. Quiet she might be, but with a little expert handling could be coaxed out of her shell. Of course his father had always treated people roughly and that would by no means get the best out of elusive Cousin Olivia. He began to feel that she offered a challenge to his skill to which the latter was by no means unequal.

By the time they returned to the house Olivia was chattering brightly and Diego was very well pleased with himself. He would have been astonished to be told that her mind was more than half elsewhere and that she did not even hear most of his graceful compliments.

They trotted up from the orchard to all appearances deep in amusing conversation. The party on the veranda viewed their arrival with mixed feelings.

'Ah, here comes my niece now,' said Uncle Octavio with complacency. 'My son has been showing her round the place. Young things get on so much better without the old folks by, don't you agree, Señora Escobar?'

The lady made no reply beyond a slight tightening of the fine mouth, but the look she directed at Olivia's graceful figure was speculative in the extreme.

To begin with Olivia had been rather alarmed at the thought of meeting her prospective mother-in-law. Quite apart from the traditional difficulties attendant upon the relationship, the lady herself sounded formidable. The daughter of a peasant who had won a series of scholarships to the university where she met her husband, according to Luis it was she who had got her husband away from his dangerous political activities into Mexico and then supported him by giving music lessons until he had eventually come to terms with the necessity of finding a job. Clearly Luis admired and loved her, and clearly too she was a woman of strong character. Olivia had wondered how much influence she still had with Luis and how much she would resent a foreign wife for her younger son.

Now, however, she was so deeply wrapped in her own thoughts that she quite forgot to be wary. She greeted Señora Escobar with her usual shy courtesy which made that lady put up her brows and think deeply.

'She looks like a Titian and sounds like a mouse,' she told her elder son later.

Victor had borne the long car journey with fortitude, but it had shaken his spine considerably and he had been grateful to retire to bed as his hospitable hostess suggested. His mother woke him in the late afternoon after what had proved to her a rather frustrating first meeting with Olivia.

Her son laughed at her with affection. 'Quite a combination,' he remarked.

'Possibly. But I don't like it,' said Señora Escobar, frowning.

Prejudiced against red hair, Mama? mocked Victor.

'Not her hair, stupid,' returned his mother, aiming a maternal buffet at his chest in indignation. 'The whole set-up. There's something fishy about it.'

He chuckled. 'Always sensing intrigue! How dull life would be without your nose for the sinister. Very well, Mama dearest, what is fishy about your Titian-haired beauty?

'Well, she doesn't *behave* like a beauty,' said his mother, fumbling for words to match her unease. 'I mean, she's

quite stunning and everyone here treats her like some **up-country** hick and she accepts it. She's too humble.'

'Just modest,' diagnosed Victor. 'She's been taught that looks aren't everything—a very sound principle.'

'Perhaps.' His mother was not satisfied. 'But there's something else to it. I can't cut out of my mind what Luis said that day. .

Victor grimaced. 'You mean the day he made Villa invest in his company?'

'It was hardly an investment,' said his mother indignantly.

'It was a loan on some of the stiffest terms ever heard of. And as long as he's got to pay it off, the company is hardly Luis's either. Octavio could foreclose at any time and then the blueprints would belong to him just as much as if they'd been filed under his company's copyright in the first place.'

'True,' agreed Victor. 'And Luis knew that when he accepted the loan.'

Knitting her fingers together in a cat's cradle, an habitual trick when she was worried, his mother said, 'I know. I pointed it out to him, too. But he said he wouldn't need the money for long, that he was going to re-finance from his own resources within the year and Octavio wouldn't have any opportunity to foreclose. And then we'd all be independent. He's always wanted to be free of Octavio. Sometimes I think I did wrong in going to him for help. But it seemed the obvious thing. . .

'Of course it was, Mama,' said Victor soothingly. This was a debate in which he had played a part before. He knew his mother blamed herself for, as she saw it, mortgaging her younger son's future in order to ensure the survival of her elder. That Luis did not subscribe to her opinion, and had told her so forcefully on a number of occasions, did not affect her self-reproaches a whit. And Victor, who had a healthy respect for his brother's ability to run his own life, had tried in his turn to dissuade her from this line of reasoning.

'When he said that, I was worried,' she confessed. 'I mean, how could he re-finance it? Octavio lent the company

thousands of dollars and Luis is wealthy enough as engineers go, but he hasn't got that sort of capital.'

'Perhaps he'll go to a bank,' said Victor patiently. 'Believe me, Mama, Luis knows what he's doing.'

'The bank won't lend unless he's got more security than an untested machine,' averred his mother with some shrewdness. 'Not unless he's got some sort of financial backing. You don't suppose, do you, that he's marrying this girl so that he can go to a bank and say Octavio Villa is my uncle by marriage—use that for security?'

'Well, what if he is?' countered Victor.

His mother gave him a look in which scorn was compounded with despair.

'That's no reason for marriage,' she announced.

'I think it's an excellent reason,' opined Victor, his head on one side. 'Concrete, if you know what I mean. Clearcut. None of your emotional mish-mash.'

'You,' said his mother with measured hostility, 'are as bad as Luis.'

'Tell that to Luis,' said Victor, unimpressed.

Victor could certainly not imagine his mother tackling Luis on the subject of his intended marriage. Luis was a devoted son, but he had long since passed the age of allowing his mother to comment upon his private affairs. In general she contented herself with describing to Victor at length the dangers that Luis was courting with every step, but as none of her dire predictions ever came to pass and Luis continued serenely (and successfully) along his way, she had never had the excuse to repeat her warnings to her younger son. Indeed he had a cold way with one whenever one overstepped the mark and ventured into his private territory. Victor, whose bond with his brother was none the less close for being unobtrusive, recognised this and did a good deal in his quiet way to head his mother away from interference which Luis would not forgive.

On this occasion he did not think he had any need to worry about where his mother's impetuosity might lead her. She had a very real respect for Luis's privacy which she would

have recalled by the time his brother arrived. What he left out of his calculations, because the situation was a new one to him, was the fact that there was another possible victim, more accessible than Luis. As his valet began the painful process of dressing him it was just as well for Victor's peace of mind that he did not know that his mother had gone in search of Olivia.

She finally ran her to earth in the music room. None of the Villa family was musical, but when Grandfather Villa built the hacienda, the fashionable standards of the time had dictated the inclusion of a music room. It therefore stood, magnificent and largely unused, at one corner of the house. It had a virtually unworn Aubusson carpet, a grand piano specially imported from Germany before the First World War and a number of spindly but elegant chairs that were, as the few music parties ever held there had discovered, a punishment to sit on.

'Oh!' said Señora Escobar, pausing in the door with a little theatrical start. 'I'm so sorry, I thought this room was empty.' She had in fact enquired where Miss Lightfellow was to be found from at least three servants that she had encountered in the hallways.

Olivia, who had been looking rather drearily out of the window at the charming rural vista, stood up courteously.

'There is no need to apologise, *señora*. I'm only wasting time. If you want to play, I can go away.'

She made for the door, but was halted by the other.

'Please don't leave on my account. I shouldn't dream of playing. There's hardly time before dinner, and anyway, that instrument,' looking somewhat disdainfully at the highly polished Bechstein whose main function in life had for the last twenty years been to bear one of Doña Isabel's dainty flower arrangements, 'is probably out of tune I think I can afford to leave my practice until I get back to Mexico City. Besides, this is an excellent opportunity for us to get to know each other.'

It was a not unfriendly speech. Señora Escobar was trying hard to keep an open mind. Olivia gave herself a little shake

and did her best to respond suitably.

'How long have you known Luis?' asked his mother, taking the seat in front of the piano with a swish of silk skirt.

The Villa household expected to dress formally for dinner and Olivia had felt distinctly put in the shade by the glittering creations of her aunt and her grandmother. Señora Escobar, however, was a different matter. In purple so deep that it was almost black, the only jewellery she wore was a Victorian pendant of amethysts and pearls. Her dark hair, with only a wisp of grey at the sides, was cut to its natural wave, framing and softening a face that would otherwise have been too austere. It made Olivia realise how grotesque were the elaborate curled and lacquered creations of her grandmother. Señora Escobar was a beautiful woman with the intelligence not to disguise her age and the style to wear it gracefully. Olivia found her intimidating.

As she hesitated, she realised that she was the object of a scrutiny that reminded her of Luis. It was as if her interlocutor was engaged in an inner debate at which she could not guess.

'You're very shy, aren't you?' mused Señora Escobar. 'And yet it all seems to have happened so quickly. A month ago—forgive me—Luis had not even mentioned you.'

'A month ago I had only just met him,' said Olivia wryly. She seated herself on one of the spindly chairs. 'That's how long I've been in Mexico.'

'I see.' Señora Escobar was shaken, but she was far too well bred to show it. 'Luis did mention something of the kind, but I assumed you must have met each other abroad, in England perhaps. I had not realised that everything happened so suddenly. It is very romantic, of course, **but** also very unlike my son. He usually—plans—' said Señora Escobar, choosing her words, 'with more care.'

Olivia reflected bitterly that that was true. He had probably had his plans well laid before she even arrived—as mon as it was obvious that he would not be permitted to marry the girl he loved, in fact. She said nothing.

Señora Escobar fell to studying her hands. 'Of course when men are in love they act totally out of character,' she observed.

The girl flinched. So they were not in love. Or at least, thought the lady who had a mother's standard estimate of her son's attractions, Luis was not and the girl knew it. She became even more worried.

'You know, my dear,' she said at last, 'you and Luis really haven't known each other very long at all. And what looks like love can so easily turn out to be infatuation. Do you think that to have the wedding so soon, next week, is really wise?'

There was a pause. Then she looked up to find Olivia studying her very directly.

'Don't you want us to marry, either?' Olivia asked in a *tired voice*.

Señora Escobar was unused to frontal attack and it disconcerted her.

'Not at all—it's your own affair—I shouldn't dream ——' She stopped, struck. 'What do you mean, "either"?''

'Oh, haven't my aunt and uncle told you? They are very opposed to it. Uncle Octavio is insisting on a civil marriage only as a result.'

The news cast Señora Escobar into a turmoil. Of what use could such an alliance be if it only succeeded in alienating Octavio Villa? She turned to Olivia, a rueful look of puzzlement in her eyes.

'Can he do so?'

'Oh, yes,' said Olivia dispiritedly. 'He is my trustee and a sort of guardian, I suppose. Not,' with a flash of fire, 'that his objections are anything to do with him being fond of me. He just doesn't want to lose control of my money. If I hadn't married he would have remained my trustee until I'm thirty, you see.'

'Yes, I see,' responded Senora Escobar faintly.

So Luis was not sidling into the Villa family. He was out for bigger game. He was marrying an heiress. She should have realised sooner that there was bound to be some greater advantage than the uncertain hope of Octavio

Villa's goodwill. She was aware of some compunction for the girl, but it was swamped by a wave of maternal panic. Luis had been his own, very competent, master for too many years to listen to advice, but she was positive that this time he was heading for disaster and she could see no way to avert it.

Except perhaps through the girl. She leant forward confidently.

'Has it occurred to you,' she began, torn between an uneasy feeling of playing the sneak and what she conceived to be a higher loyalty, 'that Luis—well, that he may not be entirely disinterested—when it comes to your money, I mean?

She encountered an unnervingly clear look. For a moment it appeared as if Olivia would not answer. Then fair eyebrows rose.

'That you must discuss with him, *senora*,' said Olivia composedly.

She got to her feet, but Señora Escobar stayed her with a hand on her arm, 'this rushing into marriage. If it's Luis's idea—it's not a good sign, you know,' said his mother. 'Why did you agree? Why don't you?' wheedling, 'put it off—just for a little while to give you both time to think about it?

'I think,' said the gentle voice without any hint of offence, a fact at which Señora Escobar was later to marvel, 'that that is a matter for Luis and myself to decide. It must be nearly dinner time. I will go and see if the others are down yet.'

They were; and Olivia, making the acquaintance of Victor Escobar and talking animatedly to her cousin Diego, contrived to ignore if not to forget the barbed interchange with Luis's mother. It had, after all, no more than confirmed her own suspicions. If she had not been such a stupid little innocent she could have worked it out for herself without having to be enlightened by Anamargarita Cisneros and Eloisa Escobar.

The only thing which remained to be considered, not that she was acquainted with Luis's reason for asking her to marry him, was whether it changed her mind at all. She was

still woefully undecided when she went to bed and in spite of a sleepless night, no more resolved in the morning.

The trouble was that she was coming more and more to depend on Luis. Not, as she might have expected from her previous history, that she wanted him to look after her. Olivia, in direct confrontation with a forceful Uncle Octavio, was finding that, once her mind was made up, she could defend her position very well. It had surprised and rather encouraged her. It had also amused her to see Octavio's baffled expression. Like most bullies he had only one tactic, and to find it baulked by Olivia's gentle determination had seriously ruffled his good opinion of himself. Olivia had observed it and looked forward to sharing the joke with Luis.

And that was it. In the course of a night during which her pillow had converted itself to wood shavings and her coverlet had declined to remain in place for two minutes together, Olivia had discovered that she needed to share jokes with Luis. Also to discuss her doubts with him, survey the landscape with him, play croquet with him and generally share her present life and future plans. It was a state of anticipation of his return which had not been unpleasurable until Anamargarita had planted her barbs. Olivia knew that he was stronger-minded than she. On the other hand she had been fairly certain that he was fond of her: not in love, obviously, but friendly and welcoming. It was a good feeling and one that would do well enough until... .

I'm in love with him, thought Olivia, shocked.

Her first thought, panic-stricken, was whether she had given herself away. She surveyed her conduct during the last month and on the whole decided not. After all, she argued wryly, if she hadn't recognised what was wrong with her, the odds were that nobody else had either. But she would have to be very careful. It would be dreadful to embarrass Luis.

Besides, if he knew she was in love with him he might have some compunction about marrying her, knowing she would never be more than a substitute for the lovely Ana-

margarita. And Olivia had discovered that she wanted to marry him on any conditions whatever. She loved him so much (it rather alarmed her to discover how much) that it was inconceivable that he would not eventually love her too.

However, she did not care to dwell on it. Her love must be disguised from everyone, including Luis who, if he never came to return it, would at least be spared the guilt of hurting her.

She continued to take refuge in Diego's company and in a bright social manner which favourably impressed all but her aunt. Miss Lightfellow, observing a somewhat hectic tinge to Olivia's conversation, shook her head wisely and waited for Luis to come home.

Meanwhile preparations for the wedding and other essentials such as Olivia's wardrobe went ahead apace. The wedding was to be held on the lawn of the Villa Mansion and Aunt Isabel, in spite of the undercurrents, was in her element discussing menus, ordering decorations and overseeing the gradual construction of a number of tables at which to sit the five hundred guests which were all, she told Olivia pityingly, that could be expected to come at such short notice. Elena's wedding, a fashionable affair, had necessarily taken place in Mexico City, which had deprived her mother of many of the enjoyable preliminaries. Aunt Isabel was determined that Olivia's should not suffer from either the brevity of notice or Olivia's own comparative lack of acquaintance in Mexico.

'Of course it will only be a little country affair,' she told Senora Escobar lightly, well pleased by that lady's fascinated awe at the work involved. 'Tut Olivia is our niece. We must do our best for her.'

Thus it was that when Luis eventually arrived in Cuernavaca he found his bride showing signs of strain. Paler and thinner than he remembered, she was nevertheless glittering with a vivacity that was new. At first he thought she had relaxed and was enjoying herself, and was relieved. Then he perceived a degree of tension which disturbed him. He ascribed it to continuing pressure from Octavio Villa's

opposition and thought vengefully of making him regret it. He tried to reassure Olivia and found her evasive.

Not knowing her own mind, Olivia took every opportunity to avoid a *tete-a-tete*. She rose early and went riding, she had consultations with dressmakers, she had to help her aunt with arrangements, and she had to write thank-you letters. Luis became more and more uneasy, but he was unable to neglect any part of his job, knowing that Octavio was watching his performance with hawklike intensity. Any cause for complaint would be gratefully seized upon by Olivia's uncle. He was not a good loser.

So there were only two days before the wedding when Luis finally cornered her.

It was evening and Olivia had taken the opportunity afforded by the time-consuming ritual of dressing for dinner to slip out into the orchard, while everyone else was occupied. She had declined to wear any of the new dresses until after her wedding and was clothed in one of her own simple pastel things. It was cream voile and it was that, a glimmer of pale movement among the shadows, that told Luis where she was.

She gave a great start when he came up behind her. She had not heard him approach, though her mind had been fully occupied with him.

'Oh, you startled me,' she said breathlessly.

'Enjoying the night air?' he asked. 'It's nice, isn't it? That smell of fruit. It reminds me of England in a way. I've always liked English summer twilight. We're too close to the tropics here for much twilight, of course. The sun just goes down, plonk!'

Olivia laughed and he went on approvingly, 'That's better. I haven't heard you laugh properly ever since I've been back. What is wrong, little one? Have they been bullying you?'

'Oh no,' she said, and then pondered. 'Well, not much, I think I haven't really noticed. I'm so used to being told what to do, it all rather goes over my head now. And Aunt Betty has been a tower of strength. In fact, now I come to

think of it, Uncle Octavio has probably been bullying her.'

'Excellent,' said Luis, amused. 'Then he's met someone up to his own weight at last. But that doesn't tell me why you're looking so peaky. Is it the wedding and all Isabel's flapping?'

Olivia gave an instinctive, undisguisable shiver. 'I—I wasn't quite prepared for the fuss,' she agreed in a low voice. 'It's been a bit of a shock.'

'And I wasn't here,' he said remorsefully. 'Poor little one! Never mind, it will soon be over and then we'll be all right.'

She gave another shiver, which she tried to conceal, drawing her crocheted shawl about her and saying, 'It's getting colder, hadn't we better go in?'

Luis ignored the remark. 'I see,' he said. 'You've changed your mind.'

He sounded so bleak and far away that she rounded on him, crying out, 'No no. I promised.'

'Yes, you did, didn't you?' he agreed, still in that unemotional voice. 'But you can break a promise. You wouldn't be the first woman to do so. And better now than later when we're married.'

Olivia, who had been fighting with the conviction that he was as calculating as he was heartless, was suddenly reminded of Anamargarita. She must have hurt him badly, very badly, if he was in love with her. Olivia was coming to know something of the hurts that love inflicts.

She said now, 'I won't break my promise, Luis. I won't cry off at this stage. I just wish that you'd told me, at the beginning, that it was my money you wanted. I wouldn't have minded and it would have been kinder than—than to pretend.'

'Pretend?' He sounded stupefied.

'That I was—that I could be useful. I mean *me*,' said Olivia passionately, 'not my inheritance. That you wanted a wife and not just the bags of gold.'

She was overwrought and melodramatic as a result, but Luis was very far from reproaching her for over-reacting this time.

'You really believe that?' he demanded.

Olivia turned away. 'Isn't it true?' she asked in a muffled voice.

He made a quick impatient movement, abruptly curbed. 'Yes,' he said eventually. 'Yes, it was, in the beginning. At least... part of it was that.' He passed a hand over his face. Now—I don't know. I'm not sure. Can't you understand?'

With her back rigid she was fighting for control. Her make-up had been carefully applied these last few nights to disguise the ravages of too many hours of tears and she did not want to ruin her handiwork.

'Yes, I can understand,' she told him at last, with the gentleness that his mother had noticed on a previous occasion. 'Barbarita told me some of it and I've seen a good deal for myself. My uncle is not a generous man, is he? And you're under an obligation to him through no fault of your own—'

Luis flung up a hand, silencing her.

'It is nobody's fault,' he said heavily. 'And any obligation is not to Octavio but to my brother. It was Victor who made it possible for me to go through university, not Octavio. Oh, he finished the process, right enough, but only because he thought a trained engineer would be more use to him than an unqualified one. But Victor—Did Barbarita tell you about his accident?'

Olivia moved closer to him in compassion. 'Yes.'

Luis hardly noticed. 'To be really good as a climber you have to do it all the time. Victor was good, he was a natural, they used to say, but he didn't have the time to spend on it. My father was totally irresponsible and even before he died Victor was spending all his days in a stuffy office to put me through college. He was going to leave when I graduated. We both knew that. It was our secret from Mama. She still doesn't know. When I was able to stand on my own feet... He broke off. 'Only he still climbed in vacations and at weekends. It wasn't enough, of course, and he knew it, but he said it kept his muscles in trim. But the Andes climb was more than he could take. He just wasn't fit enough or fast enough when his rope slipped. If he'd done it all the

time as he wanted then he would have been. That's what I owe him.'

Olivia was appalled at the depth of his bitterness.

'Don't think about it like that. It might have happened anyway—even experienced climbers fall sometimes. And at least Victor is alive. You mustn't blame yourself. I'm sure Victor doesn't'

He gave an angry laugh. No, he doesn't. He's as peaceful as if he never wanted to do anything but write music and spend his days in a chair. But I blame myself. That's why I've played Octavio along all these years. That's why I sank my pride to borrow money from him last year to set up my own company to patent my ideas. And that's why I'll do anything, his voiced hardened, 'to keep him from foreclosing. That little company means independence for Victor.'

Olivia swallowed. 'I understand,' she said again in a small voice.

'How can, you?' he demanded, still angry. 'You've never lacked money in your life.'

'I have lacked independence, however,' retorted Olivia. In the darkness the tears were now coursing freely down her cheeks, but she retained a commendable command over her voice. 'And I told you, I will keep my promise.'

Luis expelled his breath in a long sigh. 'Oh, Olivia,' he said. 'Little one, I never meant to tell you all about it like this. It's not your problem and I said I'd look after you, didn't I? And now you're having to hear all my family troubles'

'That's all right.' Her voice sounded clipped and almost uncaring, so fierce was the effort to staunch her tears. 'Part of a wife's duties, I'm told.'

'Then you'll be a perfect wife,' he said caressingly, putting an arm about her stiff shoulders.

'Don't!' She almost screamed it, flinging away from him as if she had been burnt.

Luis stood quite still.

'Don't touch me,' she said in a panting voice. 'I've told you I'll keep my promise and I will. I'll marry you and you

can do what you like with the money. It's a fair bargain, after all. That's what I contracted for—freedom from my family. And that's what I want: freedom, privacy. Do you understand that? I don't want to be petted for being a good girl and not making a fuss,' cried Olivia with unmistakable sincerity. 'I want to be left alone!'

CHAPTER NINE

THE wedding took place on a splendidly sunny Tuesday. Bride and groom were a photographer's delight and it was not just the expensive professional specially imported from Mexico City for the occasion who was pleased with the results. Subsequent prints showed what looked to be the perfect wedding day.

The house, filled with exquisite flower arrangements by Elena and her mother, had flung open all its doors and windows to the garden. Tables in the sun, tables in the shade, tables in the cool interior, all were loaded with a wealth of local delicacies. And uniformed waiters hired for the occasion helped the household to serve the guests with as much food and wine as they could digest.

The bride, attended by her cousin and Anamargarita Cisneros, looked charmingly frail, her fair beauty thrown into relief by the darkness of the ladies about her. She was very pale, but brides are allowed to be nervous after all and the blaze of her hair was a good strong focal point in all the sentimental photographs taken of her. One or two showed the white hands clenched so tightly that the knuckles strained. Those with the more subtle colour film in their cameras could pick up a hint of shadow under her eyes. But, with the good food and company, no one observed it until their photographs were returned to them.

Luis noticed, however. He had not seen Olivia before the short ceremony performed in the drawing room and her pallor when, assisted by Elena, she put back her veil, caused him to frown. Afterwards, while they were standing between his mother and the Villas, he bent to her.

'Are you not well?' he asked in an undervoice. 'Do you want to sit down? I can stop this charade now, if you like.'

'Charade?' Olivia, thinking he referred to the wedding, flinched, though it was not so far from what she had been calling it to herself that morning. Sitting in front of her dressing table for a last despairing adjustment to her headdress she had felt quite sick. At the hypocrisy of it all, as she told herself.

'This receiving of the guests, one by one,' he amplified. 'It's quite unnecessary. It's all curiosity on their part and vainglory on your Aunt Isabel's. You don't have to go through with it.'

'It's all right,' she said, grateful for his consideration, hurt by his personal indifference. 'If it pleases my Aunt Isabel. I wouldn't want to be difficult.'

Luis snorted but said no more and the second and lengthier ceremony began. Before it was half over Olivia was wilting, even though her lace dress was as light and cool as could be contrived. The familiar tightening in her chest which presaged pain made itself felt. Automatically she put her hand to her side and he saw it.

'You *are* tired!' He had no time to say any more because the next family of guests were having their names sonorously rolled about the veranda. Olivia summoned up a smile and thanked them for the gifts they had sent. She became aware of a supporting arm about her. It was unexpected and she was startled as well as moved. It remained throughout the rest of the half hour during which she came to lean more and more heavily on Luis's shoulder. That too made a touching photograph, as the city expert was quick to perceive.

In fact the best souvenirs of the afternoon were not the formal, posed pictures, good as those were. It was the unguarded moment that best revealed character and the bride, in the photographer's estimation, was sufficiently sweet-natured not to have to fear such revelation. True, there were some nasty pictures of Señorita Cisneros, frowning blackly, her mouth so thin it had nearly disappeared. And Octavio Villa too did not look at his best: when he was not smiling and playing the genial host it was to be seen that his eyes were too close together and there was a calculating look in them. The bridegroom, properly

impassive in the posed pictures, looked altogether more human when seen laughing with his brother, or unhooking his wife's veil from a splintery balcony rail with a mischievous flourish.

The best photograph of all, however, was not one of the elaborately attired guests, nor of the bride in all her finery. When Olivia had slipped away to change her clothes towards the end of the afternoon, he had been at first surprised and had then decided that she and Luis were following the English custom of leaving their own party for the wedding journey. There should therefore be the opportunity to discover further good material for his camera and he followed her. By this time the party had spread far and wide down almost as far as the paddock but the back and side of the house was deserted. When Olivia came downstairs again he was waiting in the shadows with his camera poised,

She came slowly, almost reluctantly, down the sweeping staircase. Her hair, which had been put up to facilitate the attachment of the veil, was now loose about her shoulders. Her face, he realised, framed by glowing hair and set against darkness, was a perfect shape. As she paused, dreaming no very pleasant dreams by the look of her, he slipped from his hiding place and took his photograph.'

Because it was indoors he had to attach a flash to the camera, and it almost blinded Olivia, who had not heard him. She gave a jump and an instinctive scream worthy of a more threatening terror.

Instantly Luis was in the hall.

'What is it? What has happened? Are you hurt?' he demanded anxiously.

But Olivia was collecting herself, blushing. She explained confusedly, apologising to the photographer, to her husband, to the people who had followed Luis in from the garden. The photographer was thoughtful.

'Well, never mind,' said Luis, drawing her possessively to his side. 'It's been a nerve-racking day. It's not surprising you're on edge.'

'It was so foolish of me. I should have expected it,' said

Olivia. 'I mean, he's been hovering all day. Even this morning when they were doing the flowers.' She gave a weak giggle. 'Aunt Isabel was terrified he would gatecrash my room and catch me with cold cream on or my curlers in or something.'

Luis laughed. 'And did he?'

Olivia was affronted. 'I don't use curlers.'

He touched a gentle finger to a tendril that curled into her neck. 'You amaze me! What about cold cream?'

She gave a little shiver at the contact but said with praiseworthy aplomb, 'Never!' She looked at him sideways under her lashes and added demurely, 'Mind you, there was a mud pack facial mask that Aunt Isabel gave me. . . and went off into gales of laughter at his look of horror.'

'And he's got a photograph of you with green mud all over your face? How ghastly!'

'No, he hasn't,' she comforted him. 'I didn't use **it**, though I didn't think it would be quite kind to tell Aunt Isabel that. So I just sort of lost it.'

'You're a kind little thing, aren't you?' he observed, a warmth in his eyes. 'And resourceful, if you managed to just sort of lose a hundredweight of green mud.'

'It wasn't quite a hundredweight,' demurred Olivia. 'And it wasn't green. It was really quite indistinguishable from the real thing and there are lots of houseplants in my room.'

'You mean you spread heaven knows how many dollars' worth of herbal mud around the aspidistras?' demanded Luis, impressed.

'Oh dear, I didn't think it might have been expensive,' gasped Olivia. 'Do you think it was very foolish and extravagant of me?'

'I think it was very sensible of you, darling,' Luis assured her, only the slightest tremor in his voice. 'Most practical.' His voice quivered and he gave an irrepressible chuckle. 'It is to be hoped it doesn't kill the lot of them.'

Olivia agreed and they went out together into the sunlight, her arm linked through his, both smiling. It made another perfect picture for the album.

So perfect, indeed, that Miss Lightfellow began to wonder

whether her forebodings were unfounded and bade them both an equally affectionate farewell. She was returning to England within the week. Octavio had made it plain that she was an upsetting influence in his house. The last thing he wanted was a strong-minded woman making his nice comfortable wife rebel. Aunt Betty told him so roundly, and booked her return flight.

Señora Escobar, less sanguine by temperament, was nevertheless impressed by this appearance of amity. She had long decided that Olivia did not know what she was doing while Luis knew very well, but at this juncture began to revise her opinion. And so she told Luis when he came over to say goodbye to her.

His goodhumoured smile faded. 'What have you been saying to Olivia?'

'I?' queried his mother, trying, and failing, to look innocent.

'You most certainly. Since I presume Olivia did not accost you to discuss me and I'm fairly certain, from my knowledge of you, Mama, that you are more than capable of accosting her.'

'Well, we did have a little talk,' she admitted.

Luis groaned. 'Heaven preserve me from your "little talks"! What on earth about? You don't know Olivia.'

'Then it was time I did,' returned his mother triumphantly. 'We talked about you.'

'Don't tell me,' said her son. 'You told her that I was selfish, arrogant and totally unreliable.'

'Of course I didn't.' His mother stared at him. 'Why should I?'

'It's what you've told me often enough,' he pointed out. Then remorselessly, 'What did you say to her, Mama? If you don't tell me I shall ask Olivia.'

Thus threatened his mother said as casually as she could manage, 'Oh, nothing very much. I just asked her—as she seemed such a lonely little thing and you were rushing it all along at a great rate—if she was quite sure.'

'Oh, is that all,' said Luis with irony. 'Did you offer to break it off for her, too?'

'Oh, not break it *off*, darling. Just postpone it.'

There was a pregnant silence while Luis regarded his mother with an unflattering expression. She became restless under it.

'What did she say?' he demanded at last, all signs of tolerance banished.

'Oh, she was very sweet,' Señora Escobar assured him. 'Much nicer than I deserved really. She more or less told me to go away and mind my own business, but in the nicest way.'

The hooded eyes lifted, took it in, and slid away to contemplate the horizon.

'Did she indeed?' said her son, a faint smile playing about his mouth, 'That's very interesting.'

'I thought it was a hopeful sign,' agreed his mother, anxious to make amends.

'You could be right at that,' said Luis, into the middle distance. 'I wonder. . .

But the object of his musings came round the corner of the house at that moment and he broke off. There was no further time for private conversation with anyone. Anamargarita achieved a prolonged embrace on her own initiative. Putting her away from him firmly, but politely, Luis looked round for his bride and found that she was deep in farewells with her cousins and had apparently not noticed. Anamargarita drew the same conclusions and was annoyed. She bade Luis an affectionate goodbye and remarked in a stage undertone to Elena that only an English girl would go off on honeymoon in a pair of trousers: So unfeminine, and exactly what Mexican men did not like.

Olivia did hear that, as she was meant to, and her eyes flew to Luis. His face was duly solemn as he kissed Aunt Betty but, over her shoulder and with great deliberation, he winked at Olivia. She gave a little choke of laughter, feeling warm and reassured, and brushed cheeks with Señorita Cisneros in truly saintly fashion.

'What a cat that girl is,' remarked Luis, settling himself into the driving seat and waving a lordly hand at the assembled guests. He let in the clutch and they were **off**

down the drive in the merest sputter of gravel. 'I'm sorry for the unfortunate man who marries *her*.'

'Yes,' said a subdued Odivia. By this time she had remembered that Anamargarita was his lost lady and he might well be feeling some pain.

She remained uncommunicative throughout the drive and Luis, who was concentrating on the unmetalled road, did not observe it. By the time they had swung on to the highway, Olivia was slumbering deeply.

Weeks of troubled dreams had taken their toll and now, though she was by no means at peace, her most pressing problem had been resolved. There was no longer the possibility of running out on Luis and a fatalistic calm took hold of her. Her head drooped down to his shoulder where, despite ruts and innumerable bumps, it eventually remained.

They drove all the way to Mexico City in this posture. They arrived late, and Olivia stirred in a dazed fashion. For a moment, confused by sleep, she thought she was back arriving from her English flight. The car, although she had not noticed it, was the same one in which had met her that night at the airport. They were making their way through the palm-centred avenue again.

'Where are we going?' she murmured, her voice blurred with sleep. 'Uncle Octavio's house?'

A shade of annoyance crossed Luis's face. 'No, my love. I too have a house, you know—or rather an apartment. It's yours now. You haven't asked, but I thought you might like to see it.'

She thought that there was a hint of hurt in his voice and, as always when she had offended, was filled with compunction.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't think. Of course I want to see it. It's just that everything has been overshadowed by the wedding. . .

'Yes, I know,' Luis told her gently. 'But you can forget that now. It's all over, behind you, you don't have to dread it any more.'

'How did you know I was dreading it?' gasped Olivia.

He swung an enigmatic look at her before going back to the windscreen.

'You're not the most efficient girl in the world at disguising your feelings,' was all he said.

Olivia, now thoroughly awake, was thrown into panic. Did that mean that he knew of her fugitive love for him? Had he discovered it from his own observations or had his mother enlightened him? She was very: nearly sure that Lucia Escobar knew she was in love with her son. And what did he feel about it, if he did know? Was he embarrassed? Sorry for her? Amused?

She took a quick glance at his unreadable profile. She did not know which of his imagined reactions she dreaded most. Sitting bolt upright, her hands clenching and unclenching in her lap, she concentrated on the wholly irrelevant debate the rest of the way to his apartment.

When they arrived Olivia followed him indoors silently. Luis was instructing her in a matter-of-fact voice on the domestic details—the underground garage, the modern but erratic elevator, the key to the block, two keys to the apartment, the hours the servants arrived. . . . It all flowed over her and she said 'yes' and 'no' at suitable intervals without even pretending to pay attention. Luis observed the fact but maintained an even tone.

At last he said with amusement, 'Well, I've done my duty and told you everything; it will be entirely your own fault that you can't remember a word of it. Shall we not have the conversation you started in your head about ten minutes ago?

Olivia acknowledged the sally with a smile. It was an effort. He saw that too.'

'What's wrong?' he said in a more serious voice. 'Did the wedding really upset you so much?'

She shook her head.

He was sitting opposite her. He leant forward and took her hand comfortingly between his own. Olivia allowed it to rest there, neither withdrawing it nor returning the pressure of his fingers. Luis began to frown.

'Olivia, what *is* it?' He gave her hand a little impatient

shake. 'I told you : the big production number is behind you. We'll be all right now. No more uncle and aunts getting in the way.' His voice lightened. 'Or have you got cold feet now you're abandoned to my tender mercies?'

Her head snaked up and she flinched. His voice died away and with it the laughter. He regarded her blankly.

'Good God,' said Luis at last very softly, 'you're afraid of me.'

Olivia dragged her hand away and sprang up.

'No, I'm not,' she contradicted, in a high breathless voice. 'I'm not afraid of anyone. It's silly being afraid of people, I've learnt that. People—p-people can't hurt you,' she concluded. It was a wail.

Luis stood up too and put his arms round her. She turned her head away, the fall of hair disguising her expression, but he brought her chin round to face him.

'Can't they?' he asked gravely. 'But somebody's hurt you, haven't they? Is it me? What have I done?'

But Olivia bent her head in a defensive movement and refused to look at him. All she was aware of was humiliation. Luis obviously suspected that she had been so stupid as to fall in love with him and, because he was a kind man, would probably do his best to disguise from her that he could not reciprocate.

She wrenched herself out of his arms and turned her back to him, fighting for control. There seemed to be a chasm opening in front of her. Either she abandoned all dignity and grovelled for his love, or she pulled herself together and behaved like an adult. If she could hide her weakness now, he might eventually come to respect her. If not—she swallowed. All the kindness and the precarious friendliness could explode under the assault of her unwanted and unasked-for passion.

Olivia blinked and said with care, 'Of course you haven't done anything to hurt me. You've been very considerate, and I'm grateful.'

'Then why are you trembling?' he demanded reasonably. Undeterred, he drew her back into his arms. 'Don't shake so, little one. Only tell me what's wrong.'

It would be heaven to fling her arms round his neck and beg him to love her. And irretrievably foolish. She broke contact.

'I—oh, I just feel strange,' she said, telling him half the truth and not the important half. 'When I was getting dressed this morning I kept asking myself what I was doing in your life—and what you were doing in mine. I don't know you **at all**.'

Luis did not attempt to touch her again. He sat down on the arm of a sofa and surveyed her.

'But you knew that,' he pointed out.

'I didn't think of it. All I knew was that I had to get away from the family and be my own creature. My *own*,' said Olivia with intensity. 'Not yours.'

If she had been watching him, instead of her own toes, she would have seen that he lost colour. He would never be pale, but the blood drained out of his cheeks, leaving grey shadows round the eyes and mouth. Suddenly he put a hand up to his eyes to shade them, as if the low lighting gave him a headache.

'It's not your fault,' said Olivia, warming to her theme. 'You were quite honest—about the money and everything—but I feel like a factory that's been taken over. As if I still don't have any say in what goes on in my life.'

'*Damn* the money,' said Luis ferociously. 'Look, Olivia, I should never have said what I did. The money was there, at the start I admit. But now—oh, it's nothing, it doesn't matter, it's a fringe affair—can't you see that?'

'Would it be equally unimportant if there weren't any money?' she demanded.

Luis stared at her. 'Of course it would. Now that we're married what is important is to make the marriage work. Isn't it? For heaven's sake, Olivia, what do you think you're doing? Issuing equity in yourself? You're my wife, not my property. What do you think I am?'

There was a critical moment when Olivia contemplated throwing herself on the alpaca rug at his feet and telling him. Then shyness overwhelmed her in a paralysing fog.

She heard herself saying, 'Dangerous.'

'What?'

Olivia was twisting her hands together. like—like those Spaniards you told me about the first night I arrived, do you remember? How the Aztecs thought they were gods who would protect them. That's what I feel about you—sort of hesitant, and suspicious. I can't help it.'

She was so evidently distressed that he flung up a hand to halt her.

'It's all right,' he said bleakly. 'I understand. I should have realised. You're vulnerable and you want someone to hide behind while you put some defences together.' Luis raised his eyes and looked at her very straightly. 'I want you to be happy, little one. You must do whatever you want.'

Contrary as ever, she flinched, reading into his forbearance nothing more than a kindly indifference. 'You don't know what I want,' she retorted.

'Oh yes, I do. You told me.' Luis stood up. 'I thought—that is I hoped, I suppose—that you didn't mean it. You want your privacy. You want to be left alone. Freedom, I think you called it. I hope it's not another name for loneliness.'

She gasped and he looked at her unsmilingly before turning on his heel.

'I know you rather well by now, Olivia,' was all he said. She had the feeling that it was true.

During the ensuing weeks she came to be increasingly convinced of it. Not that she had any cause to complain of his behaviour—far from it. He treated her with meticulous courtesy, never once went out without telling her when he would return, introduced her to his friends, discussed newspaper items and generally conducted himself like a model husband. But there were occasions, when she looked up from a magazine, or came upon him unexpectedly in the large apartment, when she surprised on his face a considering look. It made her feel as if she were some interesting specimen that he had picked up and was trying to tame. It infuriated her to be, as she phrased it to herself, dealt with, but as there was no specific omission on his part that

she could point to, she was deprived of even the right to complain. Except to herself, of course which she did endlessly, usually in a bathtime interior monologue.

He had brought her home that night, installed her in a room obviously newly decorated and exactly to her taste (a fact which further served to enrage her, quite incomprehensibly), shown her the bathroom which joined her room with his own and left her. Since then he had never intruded on her privacy. Even when they were dressing to go out, he would not come and talk to her while she dressed her hair or chose her jewels. This formality at first struck Olivia as oppressive, then as downright intolerable. She tried a little, at the beginning, to break it down, but she was shy and made no headway. Then it occurred to her that he was doing it as much to protect himself from her invasion of his privacy as from consideration for herself, and she withdrew into her shell.

In spite of her dissatisfaction, Olivia showed a contented face to the world. She was used to hiding her feelings, and pride, as much as fear of being further hurt, now came to her aid. She and Luis were invited out more and more to dinners, barbecues, races, and their hosts would have been very surprised to know that the Escobars were less than ideally happy.

It was not as trying as it might have been. After four days' leave, during which he had conscientiously escorted her to the Museum of Anthropology, the water gardens at Xochimilco and the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, Luis had returned to work. Many evenings he was not home till ten or later. On these occasions Olivia, who had English notions of the hours that servants should be expected to work, cooked supper for him.

These were the evenings she enjoyed most when they seemed to rediscover something of their earlier ease with each other. Perhaps because she was busy and felt herself to be useful; perhaps because he was too tired to maintain his remote politeness, they fell into a bantering way of talking to each other which, on more formal occasions, was quite lacking.

The rest of the time she occupied herself with improving her Spanish, shopping and getting to know the three servants. The cook was a large woman whose husband was porter in an apartment building in the centre of town. She cleaned five units before she arrived at work at nine o'clock and, when Olivia discharged her at five, went home to spend the rest of the evening sitting in the porter's lodge answering the telephone and taking messages. During Luis's sole tenancy of the apartment she had often stayed late to cook a meal for him and she was grateful to be relieved of this necessity by his new and eccentric wife. Nevertheless she despised Olivia for turning her hand to such menial work. Olivia and Luis both knew this. At first it had worried Olivia that Luis might be losing face with people other than his domestic staff because of her oddities, but Luis had laughed so heartily at the thought and professed himself so grateful for her attentions that she had banished concern.

The other two servants included Luis's own valet and chauffeur, who had been with his father and was more like an indulgent uncle than a paid hireling, and a newly acquired maid of fifteen or so. Pepe spoke perfect English already and was well disposed towards the new mistress. Olivia soon became much attached to him and relied a good deal on his advice, particularly when marketing. Seeing this, Luis suggested that Pepe teach her to drive. She would need her own car, living so far out of the centre. She could not travel by bus and taxis could be hard to find. Of course, when he was out of town Pepe could drive her, but when Luis needed him, she was effectively tied to the house. She must learn to drive.

Remembering that *he* had said much the same thing on the first occasion that they met, but that then he had been promising to teach her to drive himself, Olivia shed tears in private. In public she was quite snappy when the subject was raised. Driven to the wall by logical argument, she ended by announcing defiantly that if she needed a chauffeur when Pepe was otherwise engaged she would solicit Diego's help.

This was not well received and she rejoiced. She did not often get a hit in under her husband's guard.

To tell the truth Olivia was seeing rather a lot of Diego. Much of the time Luis was away at sites, sometimes for days at a stretch, and although his friends were kind enough to Olivia when he introduced her to them, she was still shy of calling on them without his social support. She was therefore necessarily thrown back upon her own family for company during these bleak periods. Diego in particular, growing daily more enchanted with his cousin (and seeing in her charming company no threat to his own much prized freedom), was particularly willing to show her Mexico and help her enjoy it.

They ate out together, danced together, even went on picnics together, with some of Diego's cronies. They were a lighthearted crowd, easy to get on with and uncritical, and Olivia found them a relief after the strains of running a new home in a new language. What she did not realise was that she was attracting attention by her behaviour.

The first she learned of it was during a duty visit to her mother-in-law. Olivia was extremely fond of Victor and visited the house in San Angel with less reluctance than she might otherwise have felt, because of it. He reminded her of Luis, though a gentler, less impenetrable Luis. And he talked, by the hour if she desired, of their younger life. She felt that she was coming closer to her husband than Luis would allow through direct contact. It half-shamed her to be creeping upon this underhand way and so she was, if anything, more reserved than usual with him after her visits to his family. He ascribed it to difficulties in the relationship with his mother.

Señora Escobar was treading carefully with her shy daughter-in-law. Having started off on the wrong foot, though for the best of reasons, she was now doing her best to retrieve the relationship. For that reason, if for no other, she would have preferred not to be the one to tell Olivia that her activities with her cousin were creating gossip. For some time she hoped that Olivia's own good sense would point it out. But she reckoned without the effects of a sheltered up-

bringing and a modest character that could not understand why anyone else should be interested in her affairs. At last Señora Escobar was reluctantly compelled to remonstrate.

Olivia, of course, did not notice the reluctance, nor would she have believed in it if she had. She merely thought that her mother-in-law was once again interfering, with malicious intent, in her private life. She was cold and polite and put the matter out of her head. But her visits to San Angel became less frequent and she was seen more often with Diego.

'There'll be an explosion,' said Señora Escobar direfully to her elder son. 'You mark my words. I don't care why Luis married her. And it's my belief he's fonder of her than he first thought. But in any case he won't let anyone else encroach on his property.'

Victor laughed at her, but he too, in his heart, was concerned for Olivia. He knew that all was not well with the marriage and he was also well aware, from Olivia's artless interest in all things concerning his brother, that she was deeply in love with Luis. He feared that if his brother did treat her to a display of his formidable temper, she would be so shocked and hurt that she might never recover. He had tried to suggest that, if she needed a friend, the house in San Angel was always at her disposal, but he knew well enough that she did not trust his mother sufficiently to avail herself of the invitation, should the need arise. And, in a crisis, Victor had only the lowest opinion of Olivia's own family.

The crisis arose sooner than anyone could have expected. A film premiere to which Luis and Olivia had been invited occurred one Friday night. Luis was called away on Wednesday, back to the waterlogged jungle site on the Guatemalan border. Olivia, having learned not to demur, put aside all thought of going to the film and decided to pay a call on Elena Cisneros instead. But Elena was going out of town for the weekend. Diego, however, was with her and suggested that he take Olivia to the premiere instead. She hesitated, remembering her mother-in-law's strictures. Then, deciding that there could be no harm in going to a

public place of entertainment with her cousin, Olivia accepted.

She dressed for the evening in a somewhat defiant mood. If Luis had spoken kindly to her before he left, or shown one sign of regret at leaving her behind, things might have been different. But Luis was showing very clearly that he had lived without her intrusive presence in his home before they were married and that he could live without her very easily now. So at least thought Olivia.

She wore, therefore, a challenge to the censorious and a boost to her own spirits, an emerald green dress that made her skin look startlingly white. It had a low neckline, lower back, and a skirt that was designed rather for sweeping regal curtsies than pushing past the knees of other film fans. Diego was amazed and, when he had recovered his breath, suitably complimentary.

The loss of breath was not entirely a stage trick. Diego too had been taken to task for making his cousin a spectacle. Even his father had said he was going too far, and he had hoped to pass the evening off rather more quietly than Olivia's dress would permit. In the vain hope that, if they did not dine together, some of the comment would be stilled, he brought her back to the apartment.

'You must let me make you supper,' said Olivia hospitably.

'I—that's very kind of you, but I think I should be going,' replied Diego, acutely uncomfortable.

'Oh, surely not,' she teased. 'You must be so hungry. And I'm really a perfectly respectable cook.'

'I'm sure you are. It's not that.'

'Then what?' demanded Olivia.

Without asking his preference because now she knew it very well, she had poured him a whisky and soda and brought it over to him.

'Well, Livvy, I mean you're only just married,' he mumbled. 'And people talk.'

She shrugged. 'I don't care what people say. You sound like my mother-in-law. Just because I choose to brew up a stew for my cousin, who's to criticise?'

'I'm not just your cousin,' he pointed out.

'I don't follow you,' said Olivia, genuinely puzzled.

He sighed. 'Look, Livvy—you're young, so am I, and we're the opposite sex. People are bound to talk. Especially if they knew we were supposed to get married if Luis hadn't got there first.'

Olivia laughed, a high, angry laugh. Diego, seeing her brilliant eyes, did not recognise anger.

'I can't be bothered what a parcel of tittle-tattlers say,' said Olivia vaingloriously.

Such courage, such disregard for the conventions fired him with admiration. And this was the timid cousin that his father had called boring! She was still standing close to him, green dress and green eyes shimmering. He did not observe the slightly set look about the mouth, nor the fact that the eyes were fixed on some distant horizon beyond his shoulder. He was entranced.

'You're wonderful!' he breathed, gathering her into his arms.

The glass fell to the floor and was crushed underfoot. Olivia, who had not expected the move, was caught off balance and held helpless for a moment before she struggled indignantly against his chest.

'Wonderful,' said Diego, carried away and slightly foolish as a result. 'Gorgeous. I never thought there could be anyone like you.'

He kissed her. Olivia gave an infuriated squeak, tried to protest and found that this idle cousin of hers was considerably stronger than he appeared. When he raised his head to draw breath she moaned.

'Oh, Diego,' she began, and got no further.

'Very affecting,' said an icicle behind them.

They both gaped, and for pure fright, held on to each other, not the most diplomatic of moves in the circumstances.

'Don't let me disturb you,' said the icicle with poisonous amiability. 'I merely emerged for some coffee. I'm going back to my study immediately.'

'Luis!' said Olivia, somewhat superfluously, thought her

cousin. 'What are you doing here? I thought you were in the south.'

He shrugged. 'I was. But I had to come back to see a man tomorrow on business, so I thought I might just as well make it this evening and take you to that film. By the time I arrived you had already left, however.'

'I went with Diego.'

'So I infer,' said the injured husband pleasantly. He gave Diego a look which made that young gentleman's blood run cold to the marrow of his bones. 'I hope you enjoyed yourselves. By the way, it's not really very civil to hug my wife in front of my eyes, if you know what I mean. A bit obvious.'

Diego's arms fell to his sides like a clockwork soldier. Olivia, unexpectedly released, staggered and sat down on a low sofa. She put a hand to her head. Her hair, disarranged in the tussle with Diego, fell over her fingers. Luis watched the gesture, a muscle working in his throat. He gave no other sign of disturbance, but Diego was aware of a strong inclination to withdraw.

'Well, now that Luis is home you won't want me,' he told Olivia with an attempt at a smile that flickered nervously.

It was not an entirely felicitous statement and earned him a look of burning reproach from Olivia. Her husband, however, had to turn away to hide a twitching lip. In the silence Diego backed to the door.

'I'll be getting along, then,' he muttered, and made good his escape.

'*Not* very chivalrous,' remarked Luis, as the echo of the slammed door died away.

Olivia did not look at him. She felt as guilty as if she had been caught out in serious wrongdoing, instead of being forcibly kissed by a silly boy who was her cousin to boot.

'Next time I should choose someone a bit more gallant,' advised her husband, preparing to return to his study.

She looked up then.

'It wasn't—what you thought,' she managed.

Luis was amused. 'How do you know what I thought?'

Olivia stared at him. 'That—well, that Diego and I

He made a weary gesture. 'My dear Livvy, you must do

as you please. Only remember that Mexico is a relatively small society. You have made this thing with Diego a bit public. I assure you,' with a charming smile which did not reach his eyes, 'you'll be a lot more comfortable if you're a little more discreet.'

Her eyes widened as if at a blow. She sat on his couch, hunched over her arms as if she had been kicked, with the green eyes blurring as she stared, mortally hurt. The final humiliation was his use of her family's name for her. He had always called her Olivia before.

She called pride to her defence. 'Of course, you're right, I'm sure. You must have had so much experience.' The words bit. She inclined her head. 'I'll try to remember your suggestion.'

Standing up she looked him straight in the eye. He was taller than she, but her heels brought her nearer his level and she lifted her chin. He should not see how he had hurt her. She had never been angrier in her life.

There was almost an unwilling admiration in his gaze.

'It would make things easier for all of us,' he murmured.

'I'll bear it in mind.' She turned away, needing to go to her room to weep or, as she felt was rather more likely, to rip the curtains from end to end. She was shivering with shock and temper.

'Where are you going?'

'Bed!' she snapped.

'There's something I would like to discuss first,' he said firmly.

'Yes?' she asked with her back to him.

His mouth twitched again, but he controlled it.

'About tomorrow,' he said mildly. 'I told you I'd got to meet someone. He's quite important. He's going to finance the new drill.'

Olivia turned very slowly. 'New drill?' she said in disbelief. Her whole life crashed into ruins and he stood and talked about a new drill.

'The one I designed. The one Escobar Incorporated is marketing. This fellow is a banker I've managed to interest.'

'What,' she asked with immense disdain, 'has that to do with me?'

His eyes glittered dangerously. He might find her indiscretions not without their amusing side, but he did not tolerate slighting reference to his invention.

'We shall talk business during the day,' he explained. 'Tut the man's here till Sunday lunchtime. I want to take him out tomorrow night. And I want you to help me entertain him.'

There was a long, fraught moment when she wondered whether she could hit him or whether he would knock her down first. Then she toyed with the idea of bursting into tears. Finally she said, sweetly, 'Naturally I shall be available. It was in the marriage contract, wasn't it, and I told you I keep my promises. Do you want me to bring my cheque book?'

CHAPTER TEN

IT was morning. Young Señora Escobar was still in bed. This was unusual, because she had the English habit of rising early. When the cook expressed surprise, Pepe pointed out that she had been late at the cinema the night before and no doubt sat up even later talking to the Señor, who had returned unexpectedly. The Señor was very busy with his work. He had been in his study all night. The ash-tray was full of cigarette ends and a pall of smoke hung in the air. The floor was littered with discarded drawings. He wanted coffee, but nothing to eat and no one was to disturb him.

The cook sniffed. 'Including the Señora?'

It was beneath Pepe's dignity to notice such a remark, much less answer it. He merely seated himself at the kitchen table and waited for the desired coffee. Despairing of further gossip, the cook shrugged and prepared it.

But it was very interesting. The Señora's door was locked and she had not allowed the maid in to draw her curtains and collect her washing. And she did not seem to want any breakfast either.

Pepe could have enlightened her if he had chosen to do so. As the only servant who lived in the apartment he had access to the couple's private disagreements. Indeed it was he who had halted the quarrel last night, walking in to return the keys to Luis after he had put the car away in the underground garage.

He had found the master blazing with fury while the Señora looked shocked enough to faint. To tell the truth, he had been sorry for her. He supposed it was about her gadding about with her cousin in that foolish way, and he was torn. Half of him sympathised with Luis who was being

made to look a fool. Half of him wanted to protect the mistress. She was, thought Pepe, who had looked forward to the transformation of the bachelor establishment with some foreboding, such a gentle little thing. And a foreigner as well. The master had hardly been the devoted husband, leaving her alone so much, and it was no great wonder if she turned to others for company.

Olivia, who had not been to bed any more than Luis had, did not know that she had any share in Pepe's sympathy. Last night he had halted on the threshold looking embarrassed and disapproving, and she had run away before the final humiliation of being shouted at by her husband in front of a witness.

She had feared that Luis would follow her last night after her craven retreat and had locked the door more against a recurrence of his temper than the servants. Now, however, she no longer feared that. He had made no attempt to continue the quarrel or to approach her. Her clinging to her own room was the result of shame and a natural desire to conceal the ravages of the last twelve hours. Olivia was despising herself deeply.

It was well past midday when she did eventually emerge. She had thought that she had heard the front door close and hoped that it was Luis leaving. As it chanced he was the first person she met outside her door.

Olivia stopped dead, flushing. 'Oh!

'You're up,' he said, his face unreadable. 'I was coming to see if you wanted anything.' He considered her dispassionately. 'You don't look well.'

She looked as if she were in high fever and she knew it. Her hair was unruly after a night of being clutched in desperation, her eyes were dull and shadowed and her skin, when the blush subsided, had an unhealthy blue tint about the mouth. The pain that distress always brought to her lungs was back.

She said, 'I'm all right. I didn't sleep well. I—I ought to apologise,' she added, rushing her fences. 'I know you don't like me to, but this time I think it's due. I shouldn't have said that, last night. About my money, I mean.'

'Oh, I don't know.' He was cool. 'If it's what you thought you were within your rights to say it.'

'It wasn't kind,' she reproached herself.

'The truth often isn't.'

Olivia recoiled. So she was not forgiven. 'I'm sorry,' she said lamely.

'I'm sure you are.'

She began to feel sick, clenching her hands to stop them shaking.

'Are you—are you going out?'

'I told you, I have to see a banker this afternoon. And then I want you to join us for dinner.'

Olivia closed her eyes. Such cruelty did not seem possible.

'But——'

'In your role as my wife,' he explained suavely. 'Not my financial security.'

Olivia walked past him and into the kitchen. The cook had gone home as Saturday was her half day. Everything was neatly polished and put away. Luis followed her. Without looking at him she collected coffee pot, beans, grinder and the percolator.

When she could command her voice she said, 'Did I really deserve that?'

'I think so.'

'Then,' with a flash of independence, 'I hope you'll count yourself sufficiently revenged without making me sit through a business dinner this evening.'

But he was implacable. He tempered it to some extent by agreeing to invite his mother and Victor as well. Olivia, a little hysterically, refused downright to cook and was greeted by a stare of blank astonishment. Luis had not expected her to cook for his guest; they would of course go out to a restaurant. Olivia was left with the impression that her cooking was good enough to rustle up an unimportant snack for the two of them when they were alone, but not to be exposed to the adult world. Perversely hurt, she announced her intention of spending the afternoon at the hairdressers and flounced out of the apartment.

Before coming to Mexico she would never have dreamed

of passing as much time in beauty salons as she now did. It was perfectly normal among the set in which her cousins moved to spend an entire afternoon getting ready for a party. Not just one's hair, one's face, one's hands, even one's feet had to be tended. Olivia, who had washed her own hair and applied her own make-up, had felt very provincial. However, accepting that she had to adopt the habits of the country, she had allowed herself to be persuaded and was in general well pleased with the results. What Luis thought of his newly sophisticated wife he did not say.

As a result of the salon's attentions by the time Pepe arrived with the car to take her to the restaurant where Luis and his guest would wait, she presented an altogether more composed appearance. Her hair, washed and burnished to flame, had been put up and she wore long gold earrings that had belonged to her mother. Her dress, bought on Elena's advice, was gold too, high-necked, full-skirted brocade with sorcerer's sleeves.

The whole image was striking. Her entrance at the restaurant caused a certain hum of admiration, though Olivia, feeling as if the sorry tale of last night's quarrel was branded on her brow, was sure the other diners were speculating about her and Diego.

Too proud to show her discomfort, however, she joined the Escobar table and was perfectly charming to her companions. Luis was cordial, her mother-in-law unsuspecting and the visiting banker enchanted. Only Victor, looking in a troubled fashion from his brother to Olivia, seemed to sense that all was not well.

The only point at which her control slipped was when Luis asked her to dance. For a moment he thought she would refuse, her eyes flaring in panic, then she controlled herself and stood up. Señora Escobar was already dancing with an old friend, which left Victor and the stranger talking.

'What I don't understand,' said the banker, who was a middle-aged American of hitherto impenetrable joviality, 'is why a beautiful woman like that is so unhappy. You'd think she could have anything she wanted.'

Victor sighed. 'Which one of us can have that? Olivia's

had money all her life, but I don't think she's had very much of what she wanted from it.'

'Money?' The other's eyebrows lifted. Now that's very interesting,' he drawled. 'Luis never told me his wife was a wealthy woman.'

Which amazed Victor into silence. The rest of the evening he studied his brother covertly. Could it be that clever, level-headed Luis had actually found that his practical reasons for marriage were not enough? And did he now—when it was very probably too late—want his wife's affection in preference to her fortune?

Whatever doubts Victor had, Olivia had none. She knew that Luis was regretting his bargain as much as she was herself. It was borne in on her during the course of the evening that she had no choice but to leave him. Otherwise she would end up, as she so nearly had when he held her close on the dance-floor, weeping and begging to be loved. And that would embarrass him and humiliate her. She would begin packing tomorrow.

But tomorrow Luis himself had gone. Before she was awake he had been called back to the south. A whole system of tunnels which he had set up to drain water away from the building site had collapsed and three men were injured. He was needed at once. He did not know, said his polite (and unsealed) note, when he would return. It depended on how bad conditions turned out to be. She had better not include him in any of her social arrangements for the coming week.

Olivia dutifully cancelled his appointments. She busied herself by organising her packing. It seemed ungenerous to leave Luis while he was away from the city. The least she could do was tell him to his face what she had decided. Olivia was carefully disguising from herself her hope that he would dissuade her. She wrote a letter to Barbarita wishing her goodbye and explaining, as best she could, why she had to go home. It was not a letter that satisfied her, but she felt that some explanation was owed to the old lady who was so fond of Luis.

She did not feel equal to making a similar announcement

to either his family or hers, however. Diego had evaporated speedily from her circle and did not make his habitual daily telephone call while Luis was away. So that at least was one person with whom she was spared having to dissemble. She avoided Uncle Octavio, though she could not escape having lunch with Aunt Isabel who was fully occupied with accounts of a ball she was helping to organise and did not notice that her niece was distraite. Olivia did not visit the Escobars at all

This in itself was not unusual as their encounters, though cordial, were far from regular. She was therefore surprised to come in from an expedition to the Anthropology Museum, whither she frequently fled, for peace, to discover the apartment littered with messages from Victor. He had been calling at ten-minute intervals as far as she could see. She was reluctant to call back. Victor was too keen an intelligence to be hoodwinked as easily as Aunt Isabel. He would see that something was wrong very quickly.

While she was in the middle of debate with herself the telephone rang again. Bowing to the inevitable, she answered it.

'Olivia? Thank God at last!' Victor sounded quite unlike his normal unruffled self. 'There's been an accident.'

'Your mother! What's happened?' demanded Olivia, all thoughts of her own problems banished. 'I'll come over at once.'

'No, it's not Mama, it's Luis. The company—When they couldn't get you they rang us. He's hurt.'

Olivia sat down abruptly.

'Olivia? Are you there? Olivia, Olivia, answer me!'

'Yes, I'm here,' she said. 'Yes, carry on, Victor. I'm sorry, I was being stupid. Shock, I suppose. Luis—how badly is he hurt?'

There was a pause. Then Victor said carefully, 'We don't exactly know.'

'Don't treat me like a child,' cried Olivia. 'How bad is he? I'm his wife—I have a right to know. What happened?'

'There was an explosion,' said Victor reluctantly. 'As far as we can gather Luis had decided to blow a hole in some

damming up of mud that was spoiling his drainage system. The explosion didn't go off when it was supposed to so, after some minutes he went to check it.'

'Oh, my God,' said Olivia, cradling the telephone against her breast and rocking backwards and forwards with it.

'It's not as bad as it might have been,' Victor assured her. 'It went up, but he was protected by sandbags which collapsed on him. He's bruised, of course, but there are no bones broken. It's only

▼▼
'Well?' demanded Olivia.

'His eyes.' At the other end of the line Victor seemed to be having a battle with himself. 'They don't know if it was the dazzle or whether he took some shrapnel in them or what. But he can't see.'

'How can I get there?' asked Olivia urgently. 'I want to go to him How?'

'But it's in the middle of the jungle,' protested Victor.

'I don't care. How?'

'Well, the office has offered to fly me in there,' her brother-in-law offered. 'We could go together, I suppose.'

'You suppose!' snorted Olivia. 'You're not going without me, Victor Escobar. I'm coming over at once.'

'With a case,' he told her. 'Toothpaste and something to sleep in. The company car will be here in an hour. Do you think you can make it?'

'I'll be there,' said Olivia. And she was.

It was not a helicopter this time but a twin-engined Fokker. She and Victor were the only passengers. To her anxious demand as to why he had not brought a doctor, Victor replied soothingly that the best possible was already being done for Luis on the site. There was an American doctor permanently at base. Olivia bit her lip and tried to console herself with that information.

By the time they arrived she was exhausted, nerves stretched unbearably. A jeep met them. The task of transferring Victor's chair from the plane to the jeep was complicated and it was obvious that the driver was not prepared for it. In the end Victor, claiming to possess no more endurance, decided to stay in the little township.

'But take Señora Escobar out to the site,' he instructed the driver. 'She is very anxious to see her husband.'

'*Si, señor!*'

The man gave Olivia a curious look but was apparently too professional to question her. He gave orders for Victor to be wheeled to a hotel which, he assured his impatient passenger, was clean and as comfortable as could be expected in such a godforsaken hole. He then swung himself up into the jeep and they set off at a great rate, bumping over huge ruts as if they were on a bucking bronco. Various packages that had been collected from the plane, including a sack of mail, lurched from side to side, occasionally striking Olivia between the shoulderblades. She hardly noticed.

The ride to the camp must have taken about an hour, although in distance it was not very far from the little airfield. By the time they arrived it was pitch black and the night was filled with jungle noises—whirring cicadas and the sudden shriek of parrots. Her guide indicated a pre-fabricated hut.

'If you will wait there, *señora*, I will find out about Luis.'

Olivia did as she was told, picking her way across mud criss-crossed with treacherous roots and invisible fungus. It was densely hot. The hut was lit by a single kerosene lamp and a primitive fan was chugging away on top of a desk. The desk itself might have come from any city office: it was piled high with papers and on top of everything was a large, much creased sheet of architect's paper bearing, she supposed, Luis's drainage scheme. She bent over it, interested.

The door opened.

'Olivia!'

She whirled, gasping. 'Luis ! You're all right

'Yes, of course I am.' He had gone a little pale. It was evident he had not expected to see her. Probably he had thought she would not even care whether he was hurt or not. His next words confirmed it. 'What are you doing here?'

'They told me about the accident,' she managed.

If anything he looked more puzzled. 'Oh yes? Did you go into the office?'

No. Victor brought me,' she explained. 'Victor was the one who told me.'

'Really? How extraordinary. . . he began, and then did a double take. 'Victor *brought* you! Do you mean he's here?'

'No, he stayed back at the airfield. They said there was some sort of hotel there.'

'Hotel,' snorted Luis. Fleabitten dosshouse. He can't stay there. What on earth were you doing to let him do a journey like this? Didn't you *know* what the conditions down here were like? Haven't I told you often enough? Or were you just too stupid to think about anything but what you want for yourself?

Olivia blinked. It was true, and she was now prepared to admit it, that in her anxiety over Luis's supposed injuries she had ignored the discomfort the effort must inevitably have cost Victor. She had been inconsiderate, she acknowledged, but she thought Luis was less than understanding. So she was torn between shame and indignation and said nothing.

For a moment he stood looking at her in a baffled fashion. He had run his hands through his hair and it was now tousled, falling over his eyes in a manner which made him look much younger than the awe-inspiringly grown-up Luis she was used to. His face was dirty and drawn with tiredness and she suspected that he had not shaved for some days. His hands were filthy with earth and tar. She observed that he was wearing bandages on two fingers and a wrist which were as dirty as the rest of him.

'Oh, I shall never understand you,' he exclaimed. 'Sometimes you are so self-effacing you're hardly there at all and then, like now, you go berserk! What was it that you wanted, Olivia? Couldn't it have waited till I came back? Did you really have to pursue our disagreements down into the jungle and drag my brother along with you to do it?'

She flinched. 'That's not fair!'

'According to you half the world's not fair,' said Luis, sighing. 'Why can't you grow up and stop expecting it to be fair? You've been protected for so long I don't think you have any idea how to survive without making use of other

people. First it was your aunt, then it was me. Now it's Victor !'

Olivia backed away from him. She was shaking. 'You're despicable,' she told him in a low voice. 'I've met some people I disliked in my time, but no one has come anywhere near matching you. You're cruel and calculating—and you're complacent about it as well. You think you're invincible, don't you? Always capable, always right! And you don't ever make a mistake like the rest of us, do you? Oh no, you're infallible. I,' she finished, clenching her hands with the effort of controlling her voice, '*hate* you!'

Luis did not answer for a moment. His eyes went blank as if he had received a blow.

'Then he said wryly, 'Maybe you do, but I would have thought that was just the sort of thing that could have waited to be said until I got back.'

'Oh!' fumed Olivia. She could have danced with rage. 'Oh, how dare you?'

It was a futile thing to say, as she realised the moment she said it, and that added the crowning touch to her humiliation. She sank down on to his battered chair and wept.

'Don't cry.' He passed a hand over his eyes and he sounded exhausted. 'Please don't cry. I can't—Look, if you want a divorce we can talk about it. Barbarita wrote to me. I know that's what you want. Only please not *now*.'

The urgency of the last plea penetrated her preoccupation. 'Aren't you well?' she sprang up. 'They told me you were hurt. You *are* hurt. What can I do? Is there a doctor?'

Luis stared at her. 'Yes, there is, but he's dealing with the men who were hurt in the explosion. I thought you knew about it. You said you knew about it.'

Olivia sniffed. 'I thought it was you,' she said not very lucidly.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I thought you were hurt in the explosion, you stupid pig!' she cried, driven into wholly uncharacteristic rudeness.

Luis did not appear to take offence. Indeed, his eyes lightened almost with a return of his habitual laughter.

'Did you indeed?' he murmured. 'Well, I'm not. But I

wonder why you thought that.'

'Victor told me so,' stated Olivia. She hunted feverishly and fruitlessly for a handkerchief and looked appealingly at Luis.

Unable to supply the deficiency, he grimaced and indicated his dirty state. Olivia compromised and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. Her own person had achieved a certain local grubbiness since she arrived and this proceeding left a trail of smut across one cheek without removing the tear stains. Seeing this, Luis began to smile.

'I don't know what you're standing there grinning for,' Olivia told him crossly. 'Victor must have been mistaken. But he certainly thought you'd been badly hurt. He said—' she hiccupped and controlled it, 'he said your eyes were damaged.'

'Ah,' Luis was thoughtful. 'Well, they were in a way. The blast went off early and I hadn't had time to put on my goggles. I walked around in something of a daze for a couple of hours afterwards.'

Olivia surveyed him with suspicion. 'If that's the truth, why did Victor terrify me out of my mind?'

'Were you terrified?'

'Well, of course I was. I thought you might be going blind. I couldn't think. . .

'What,' asked Luis gently, sitting on the corner of his own desk and regarding her bent head with great tenderness, 'couldn't you think?'

'How—how we were going to manage,' she blurted out. 'I mean, your work and everything. I would have done anything I could to help, but I'm so stupid and I'm not an engineer and even if I'd read things out to you, I'd probably have made nonsense of them. And then I couldn't have helped you doing your designs or anything. And then you'd wish you hadn't married me even more than you do now.'

A silence ensued, while she studied the scratched surface of his desk in minute detail.

'I have never,' said Luis evenly, at last, 'said that I wished I hadn't married you.'

Olivia's hand rose at that. 'Yes, you have. That night

when you came back and Diego was there. You didn't even *listen* to me. And it was obvious before then. And just now, when I walked in: did I want a divorce, you said. Why not be honest and say that you want a divorce?'

Her eyes brimmed over. She did not knuckle the drops away this time, or bury her head in her hands. She merely sat there with the tears coursing down her cheeks unchecked, silent.

'Because,' said Luis very solemn but with the laughter still lurking in his voice, 'I don't.'

Olivia hunched a shoulder. 'Yes, you do. Or you ought to.'

He laughed aloud at that. 'Do you expect me to apologise for not wanting a divorce?' He took her face between his hands and searched it. 'You,' he informed her lovingly, 'are a very silly, tortuous, melodramatic girl.'

'There you are,' sniffed Olivia, not daring to believe what she thought she heard in his tone, 'you don't even like me.'

'My dearest idiot, I adore you,' he exploded.

Olivia stopped sniffing and prepared to listen. But Luis seemed to have had his say. He stood up and began to pace the room. Perhaps he needed encouragement.

'I don't believe you,' she said helpfully.

'No, I know you don't. I've been trying to get through to you for weeks—months! And you're always very polite and very kind—it's lethal, that kindness of yours, you know. One never knows whether it comes from affection or compassion. And nobody likes to be pitied.'

Olivia stared at him. 'I don't pity you,' she said. 'Why should I?'

He shrugged. 'Because I'm in love with you. Because I have been for weeks. And because you never felt anything comparable for me. I was just an escape route to you, wasn't I? We had a bargain and you kept your side of it meticulously. Only I went and fell in love.'

'When?' demanded Olivia.

'What does that matter?' he said impatiently. 'Weeks ago, as I said. Before that damned wedding. Before I even got you to Cuernavaca, I think. Barbarita saw it. That's why she

wrote to warn me that you were so unhappy you were going to leave me.'

His face twisted and he turned away from her. Olivia jumped to her feet.

'Because you didn't care for me,' she cried, stamping her foot in exasperation. 'Can't you *see* that? I thought you didn't love me and weren't ever going to love me. You never said you did, ever, and you never touched me.'

Luis did not turn round. 'If you remember,' he said heavily, 'you said you didn't want to be touched. I believed you.'

'When?' she challenged. When did I say anything so stupid?'

'In Cuernavaca,' he reminded her.

She remembered. 'But I was wretched, overwrought. I meant it, but only for then—not as a sort of principle, a life style.'

'I see.' He turned back to her. 'Why did you mean it then?'

She took an impatient step towards him. 'I was frightened. I'd been warned against you by everyone who cared about me—and you, for that matter. And you didn't come back and didn't come back. And your mother told me you were marrying me for the money—and I thought I knew that and didn't mind—and then,' their eyes tangled and Olivia was becoming less and less coherent, 'then I did mind and I wanted to be more than that and I didn't see how I could be, and I lost hope and——'

Luis took her firmly in his arms and silenced her burlings with a long and comprehensive kiss. He raised his head after some minutes, regarded his handiwork with undisguised satisfaction and said, 'You've stopped crying.'

'You haven't kissed me for ages,' said Olivia happily. She rubbed her head against him like a cat and became aware of the odour of machine oil. 'This shirt is very dirty,' she observed. She was reminded of one of her major causes for distress. 'Anamargarita wouldn't have liked cuddling you in this state, you know,' she told him provocatively.

'Anamargarita wouldn't have been offered the op-

portunity,' he said, refusing to rise to her bait. 'I'm not going to quarrel with you over that silly girl. I did my duty by her, my God I did. I took her to dances and picnics, the whole works, because she was an indissoluble part of the Villa ménage, but she was so boring.'

'She's so beautiful and so well—so used to the social niceties here.'

Luis snorted. 'She is also a self-willed hussy, very badly-behaved and extremely vain. Oh, you silly Olivia, how can you possibly have thought I would like a girl like that, even if you didn't realise that I had sense enough to fall in love with you?'

Deeply pleased, Olivia controlled an inclination to purr and said mischievously, 'I think you're an opportunist. I don't think you're in love with anybody. I think you just need your shirt washed and think I might be cajoled into doing it.'

For answer Luis drew out from his pocket a grubby packet. Carefully and with considerable dramatic effect he unfolded it and drew out a crumpled piece of paper.

'What is it?' squeaked Olivia, craning.

'Guess.' He held it above her head and she jumped, laughing.

'Show me.'

'You won't recognize it,' he told her, but let her have it.

It was a photograph, Much folded and brown in the creases, it was nevertheless a fairly recent one. Olivia remembered it being taken. Up to now she had never seen the result, but presumably he had ordered it to be sent to him privately. It was the one the photographer had taken of her on the staircase that last moment before they left Cuernavaca. She was staring into the middle distance, dreaming, her face soft and, even to her own critical eyes, beautiful. Behind her there was only the darkness of the house so that she looked like a surreal image.

'That seemed to be you,' Luis told her. 'So beautiful and so—remote. There and not there. I loved you so much and I'd done everything wrong that I possibly could. I didn't think that I had any chance with you. And then you were

seeing more and more of Diego. Of course he's nearer your age. . . . I wanted you to gain more confidence, more independence; but then I could see that when you were eventually sure you could stand on your own feet without my support, you'd go away from me. Can you wonder I was unpleasant last week? I was jealous and angry—and hopeless.'

'Well, I'm quite independent now,' Olivia assured him.

'Yes, I thought you were.'

'And I want to stand on my own feet.'

Luis flinched.

'So will you please,' said Olivia, exercising her new found confidence to mutually satisfactory effect, 'stop waffling, come back over here and kiss me.'