

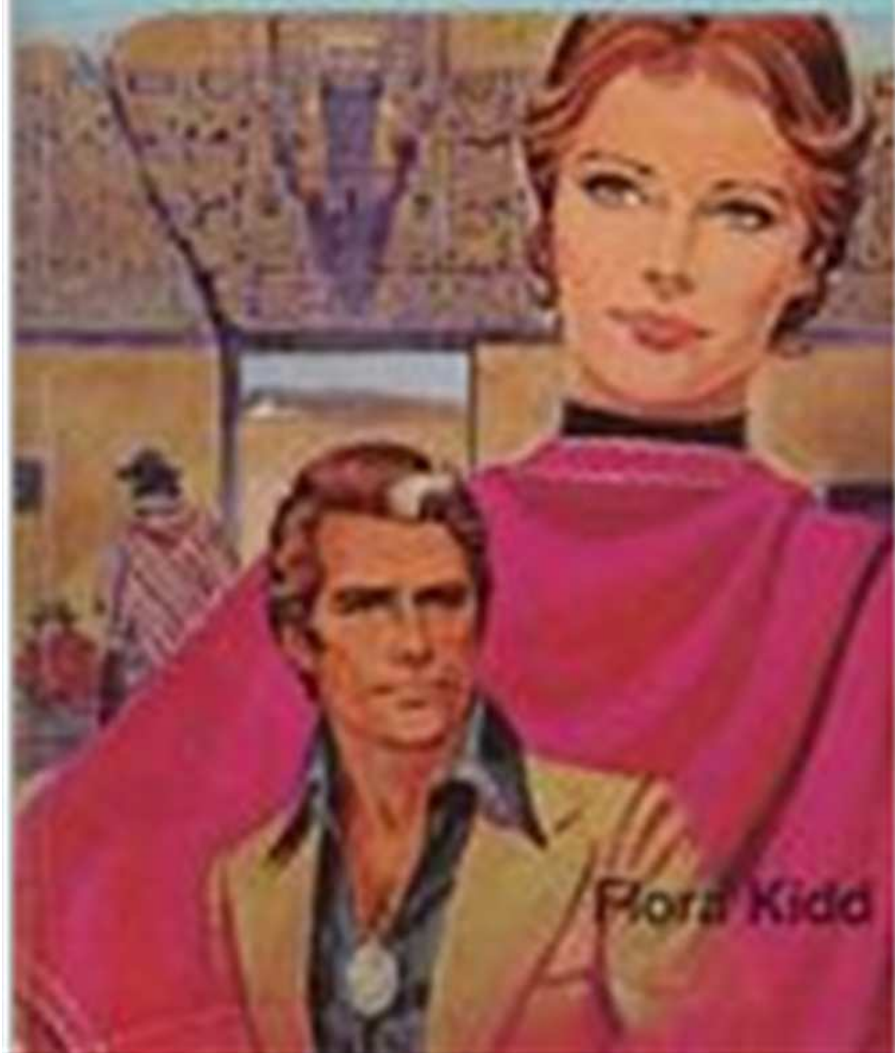


1977

A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

.75

THE DANCE OF COURTSHIP



Flora Kidd

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All Cherry had to do was to fly out to Bolivia with a baby and deliver him to his relatives there.

But one relative, the black sheep of the family, Ric Somervell, brought many complications into the situation -- and into Cherry's life!

CHAPTER ONE

"AND SO when Uncle Vic asked me if I thought you'd be interested in the job I said I'd tell you about it. You've got to admit that it does seem tailor-made to fit you, Cherry," said Bunty Graham to the young woman who had been nanny to her two youngest children for the past four years. "You're experienced in looking after babies; you've some knowledge of Spanish, thanks to the holidays we've taken in Spain; and you're resourceful in a tight corner. You're also very diplomatic and mature in outlook."

"Thanks," said Cheryl Hilton, known as Cherry to all her friends and relatives. The gentle irony in her voice made her employer grin in appreciation.

"I could add also that you're not likely to get your head turned by flattery," Bunty said. "The only objection you might have to the suggestion, as far as I can see, is that Bolivia is a long way from this country, and that it's a wild sort of place where anything could happen."

"Vic told me he would have stayed there if he could," murmured Martin Graham from behind his newspaper. "He was fascinated by the people and the scenery."

"Do you know what else is involved besides taking a baby to its grandmother?" asked Cherry. She was interested. She had great need of change in her life, the more unusual and demanding the better. Anything that would take her away from England, away from Edwin who was going to marry Joanna; away from anguish and frustration.

"No, I don't," replied Bunty. "Uncle Vic knows that your job with us is coming to an end soon because Tina will be ready for school, and he just asked me to sound you out. If you want to know more, I've to phone him, and he'll make arrangements for you to meet Senor Fidel

Diaz of the Bolivian Embassy here in London. Uncle Vic used to be attached to the British Embassy in La Paz - that's the capital of Bolivia. He looked after publicity and he got to know the country quite well. Shall I phone him?"

She watched the play of expression on the oval face of the girl sitting opposite. During the past few days she had noticed a paleness in the usually pink cheeks and blue smudges of shadow beneath the fine, dark-fringed grey eyes; they were signs which told their own tale. Cherry Hilton was in the dumps about something.

"Unless of course you've got something else in mind. Perhaps we're going to hear wedding bells soon?" she added, aware that her husband had lowered his paper and was looking at her with raised eyebrows. She had broken one of their most important rules when dealing with employees. Never be too personal.

"Oh no, not yet." Cherry appeared to be quite cool. "Not for years - I like my independence too much. I'd be glad if you'd tell Mr. Sutton I'm interested in that job."

"Right. No sooner said than done." Bunty sprang up from the settee, relieved that the awkward moment had passed. Trust Cherry to handle it smoothly!

In a few minutes arrangements had been made for Cherry to visit Victor Sutton in his office the next day.

"Take the whole day off," Bunty offered. "I'm not busy tomorrow, so I'll look after the kids. They'll have to get used to being without you sooner or later. Now, off you go to bed and hays ^a good night's rest, you're looking tired. I hope you're not getting a cold."

No, she wasn't getting a cold, thought Cherry, as she went slowly upstairs. She was suffering from something far more difficult to cure. Heartbreak.

There's no such ailment. Her own scornful words, spoken to a fell student nurse at the hospital where she had trained as a nurse, came back to mock her. A cheerful person with a serene outlook on life, she had always been able to take any emotional crisis in her stride and she had never expected more from life than she thought she deserved. But she had thought she deserved Edwin Baker, and she had assumed that when he had qualified as a doctor he would ask her to marry him.

It was because of Edwin that she had left the hospital and had taken this job as a nanny, convinced that it would be wiser for them not to meet every day under the critical eyes of ward Sisters and staff nurses. The position in the Graham household had suited her fine. She had been well treated and had spent holidays with them in places she would never have been able to visit on a nurse's meagre pay, so the time of patient waiting for Edwin to qualify had passed pleasantly and quickly.

Three years of waiting. A lot of good being independent and cautious had done her! Now she was almost twenty-four and ready to marry, but instead of marrying her Edwin was going to marry her younger sister, Joanna. Joanna the bright and the beautiful, who had also chosen to come to London, to train as a doctor at the same college hospital as Edwin; and who couldn't wait and, because she couldn't, was getting what she wanted - Edwin.

Was it possible to hate your sister? Not when you were Cherry Hilton. She couldn't hate Joanna. She was the clever baby of the Hilton family, whose quick brain was allied to the beauty of shining blonde hair and periwinkle blue eyes. Cherry couldn't hate perfection, and she couldn't blame Edwin for preferring her impulsive, warm-hearted sister to herself.

She paused at the top of the stairs. It was too early to go to bed, she thought. She would only lie awake wondering how she could have

behaved differently, her mind whirling until her head ached, her heart growing heavy as she tried to foresee a future without Edwin.

She must find Something to occupy her for the next hour or two. It would be sensible to prepare for the interview to-morrow. She knew very little about Bolivia. All she could remember from her school geography lessons was that it was a country in South America and that its chief export was tin ore.

On impulse she turned and went downstairs to the book- littered "den", and found the right volume of the encyclopaedia. Taking it up to her room, she settled down to read the article about Bolivia. Soon she knew that it had no coastline and that it seemed to have a record number of "highest-in-the-world" places.

It had the highest city, the highest airport, the highest freshwater lake, the highest ruined city, the highest ski slopes and the highest golf course, and all because it was situated amongst the fabled turreted Cordillera de los Andes, the mountains of the Andes.

When eventually Cherry went to bed, her mind was teeming with strange names. Potosi, the remote silver city, Titicaca, the cold blue lake; the *ahiplatio*, a flat eroded plateau which was over twelve thousand feet above sea-level; *the yutigas*, the tropical valleys at the feet of the mountains, some of them as yet unexplored.

Bolivia seemed to be a land of contrasts dominated by the insolent titanic heights of the Andes, a land caught midway between heaven and earth.

Before going to sleep Cherry arrived at a decision. No matter what the job might involve, if it were offered to her she would accept it. She would go to Bolivia if only to say when she returned that she had seen the Illimani, the shining mountain keeping guard over the city of La Paz.

Next day was one of those June days when London looks at its best; the sky was blue and soft yellow sunshine flattered the buildings, gilding old grey stone and impersonal grey concrete, so that they took on a more mellow appearance. In St. James's Park the same golden light filtered through the fresh green leaves of trees and dappled the shimmering water of the small lake where mallards and teals swam and ducked. Across the pathway where Cherry walked, slate-blue pigeons stalked, cooing and fluttering as they pecked for crumbs of bread.

Inside the building where Victor Sutton had his office a strangely secretive silence prevailed, as if great and important decisions were being made behind the closed doors. By the time she reached the right floor Cherry felt suitably awed and subdued by her surroundings.

His secretary was expecting her and showed her into a room panelled in dark wood with windows overlooking the park. It was furnished with heavy mahogany furniture and dark leather- covered armchairs. It smelt of cigar smoke and polish.

"Mr. Sutton will be here in a few minutes. Please make yourself comfortable," the secretary smiled, and went out.

Cherry stood in the middle of the room and looked around. One wall was lined with shelves behind glass doors and the books on the shelves looked dull and heavy; not much entertainment there. She swung round to see another wall, covered with framed photographs. Interest stirred and she walked over to study them.

They were all in colour and showed places abroad. With a little leap of delight she recognized the carved Gate of the Sim at Tihuanacu, the ruined city near Lake Titicaca, its bulky outline soaring up against a white-streaked blue sky. Another photograph taken in Bolivia showed a huge grey statue, almost human in form but not quite, like someone's impression of an ancient god.

The door of the room opened behind her and someone entered. Turning, she saw to her surprise not Victor Sutton, but a younger man of about thirty-four or five years of age, his straight black hair, ochre-coloured skin and slanting opaque brown eyes proclaiming his foreign origin. He was no taller than herself, and his wide shoulders and deep chest were emphasized by the cut of a double-breasted suit jacket made from fine grey wool. His shirt was white and crisp, his tie dark and discreet, and when he smiled his splendid white teeth flashed beneath his heavy curving moustache.

"Are you Miss Hilton?" he asked. The lengthening of the vowel "i" showed that English was not his mother tongue. "I am Fidel Diaz. Victor asked me to tell you he'll be a little late."

He held out a broad hand and she put hers into it. His grasp was firm and warm.

"You were looking at the photo of the Weeping God. Do you find him interesting?" he asked.

"I was wondering what that statue is supposed to be. How did it get its name?"

*"Quien sabe? Who knows? He is one of the archaeological mysteries of my country. He has tears carved on his cheeks. Maybe he is weeping because of the plight of his people whom, the legend says, he turned into stone. Would you like to see the statue in reality?"*⁵

He was studying her. His quick brown glance missed nothing, yet there was no insolence in it. He was just sizing her up.

"Yes, I would. Very much."

"Bueno, let us sit down and be comfortable. It isn't often I have the privilege of entertaining a young woman in the morning, so I intend to make the most of this opportunity."

She could not help but be charmed by his frank manner and his wide white smile. They both sat down, and were engulfed in large leather armchairs.

"You know a little, perhaps, about the mission we would like you to undertake?" he said seriously.

Mission! He made the job sound very important. Cherry thought of missionaries chosen by religious communities to go out to far distant places to convert the heathen; then of the highly-placed diplomats who were chosen to conduct delicate negotiations in secret with the heads of foreign governments. The word both impressed and excited her, as possibly it was meant to do.

"I know only that someone wants a nanny to take a baby to its grandmother in Bolivia," she responded.

"That is correct. The baby is the son of Juan Benitez, who was an important member of our Embassy here in London. Senor Benitez was unfortunately killed recently in a plane crash - you may have read about it in the newspapers. He was an enthusiastic aviator and was flying his own plane."

Headlines flashed across Cherry's memory. *Plane Crashes in Fog. Playboy Diplomat Killed.*

"I remember. There were no survivors."

"Only Felipe."

"Felipe?"

"The baby. He was flung clear and survived the catastrophe in the strange way that babies often have of surviving."

"That's amazing. How old is he?"

"Very young. He is. now almost two months old. At the time of the crash he was only a month old; Senor Benitez was taking his wife and child on a holiday to visit relatives in Paris, and then to his villa in Spain. He was a very wealthy man - he had inherited a great deal of the wealth amassed by his grandfather, Alfonso Matino d'Aubigny - and his wife was English like yourself. It is a very tragic affair. You feel the sadness, Miss Hilton? You feel for the young child left alone, parentless?"

He looked as if he was feeling it, because he took a large white handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose while his eyes glittered with obvious emotion.

"Yes, it is very sad," she murmured.

"Little Felipe is a very valuable child," continued Fidel, slowly and rather pompously, "and it is only right that he should be sent to the home of his paternal grandmother, the much-respected and highly-revered Bianca Matino d'Aubigny Benitez Somervell, so that she can supervise the upbringing of her only grandson, for he will one day inherit the remains of the Matino fortune. You are looking puzzled?" "I am. All those surnames! Are they really necessary?"

"I was using the Spanish custom with family names. In the case of a man, his father's last name always comes first followed by his mother's maiden name. In the case of a woman, when she marries she keeps her father's name plus her mother's name. Since Dona Bianca has been married twice she keeps the name of her first husband, General Pablo Benitez, and then adds the name of her second husband, Arthur Somervell."

"He sounds English."

"*Si*. Senor Somervell was an Englishman who loved Bolivia more than his native country, and he devoted much of his life to teaching

the modern methods of agriculture to my countrymen. Are you less confused now?"

"Yes, thank you."

Cherry found she could not prevent laughter from bubbling up. His pompous manner was too much for her, and she was sure it was not his normal way of behaving. He was just putting it on to make an impression. She laughed out loud and to her surprise he laughed with her, his air of pomposity discarded completely, so that he became a lively and rather cheerful young man.

"Most of the time we just use the christian name and family name as you do, it's less complicated, but there are some people in the country who like to cling to the old Spanish customs. Although I have to admit Dona Bianca is not one of them. Her first husband was a revolutionary leader and she herself has led a sort of cultural revolution in preferring to have her children educated in Bolivia instead of Europe, which was the way of the Matinos and other wealthy families in the past."

"Isn't there anyone from your Embassy who could take the baby to her?" Cherry asked curiously.

"I have been given the task because I'm a relative of Juan's, but I'm unmarried and have no children. I know nothing about babies, how to feed them, how to... What is it you say?"

"How to change the nappy." He spread out his hands in a gesture of bewilderment and helplessness, and Cherry could not help laughing again. He was really very charming.

"I understand," she said. "But couldn't anyone from the mother's family help you?"

He looked rather uncomfortable for a moment. Then he leaned forward and spoke quietly, confidentially.

"You will keep this information to yourself, please. Her family cut her out of their lives some years ago, and they'll have nothing to do with the child. You see, her marriage to Senor Benitez was a secret one; even at the Embassy we did not know. It came as a great shock to me to be told of the baby and I've had some trouble in establishing Felipe's identity, as well as that of his mother. I'm afraid there will be some people in Bolivia who will challenge his identity, but all the papers proving it are in order now, so that all I require is someone who knows about babies yet will also be able to cope with any challenge. When I told Victor of my dilemma he told me about you. Do you think you could take Felipe to Bolivia and deliver him into the arms of his paternal grandmother?"

"Alone?" Cherry enquired with a calmness she did not feel.

"*Si*. Much as I would like to travel with you it is impossible for me to go at the present time. But Victor assures me that you are trustworthy and capable, and now I can see for myself that he is right."

"How would I go there?"

"By air. There are direct flights from here to Lima, stopping on the way at Antigua and Caracas; from Lima you would fly to La Paz. There you would be met by a representative of Dona Bianca and taken to her. It's just possible that she may wish to engage your services as a nanny to Felipe, but that is something which would have to be arranged between you and her. Ah, and here's Victor at last, to add his powers of persuasion to mine."

Victor Sutton crept into his office as if he didn't want anyone to know he was entering. He was a short, portly man with a shiny, pink bald head and bland baby-blue eyes. In comparison with the vigorous

Fidel he looked just like anyone's English uncle, gentle and benign and not at all capable of dealing with fierce and wily diplomats from South American republics.

He hung his furled umbrella on the hat stand behind the door and trotted quietly across to his desk.

"Hello, Cherry," he mumbled, "nice to see you. I notice Fidel has lost no time in making your acquaintance."

"And I would like very much to further my acquaintance with her before too many hours pass," said Fidel, flashing his brilliant smile in her direction.

"You would," said Victor drily. "You have to watch out for these Bolivians, Cherry. They're fast workers. Emphasis on the word fast, if you get me. What do you think of the job?"

"I'd like to do it."

"I thought you might. This is a girl in a million, Fidel. She won't let you down, and you can depend on her. She'll make sure the baby reaches his grandmother, I give you my word."

"Your recommendation is all I need," replied Fidel. "Now that I've met Cheery ... Is that how you say it?" he asked, with that charming mixture of helplessness and mischief.

"Not quite," said Victor. "But it will do because she is a cheery person, always calm - I don't think I've ever seen her upset or in a temper."

"Now that I've met you," continued Fidel, smiling again at Cherry, "I'd like to take you to see Felipe, who is in a home for orphaned children just now. Perhaps we could have lunch together first."

"What did I tell you?" grumbled Victor. "He's a fast worker. Always makes sure there's plenty of pleasure mixed with his business. Any questions before you go, Cherry?"

"Are there any preparations I should make for the journey?" she asked quickly.

"Let me see," said Fidel, "you'll need the usual inoculations against disease. I expect you have been done for smallpox? That leaves yellow fever, cholera, typhus, typhoid and tetanus injections to be taken care of. I assume that you are in good health and have no respiratory problems?"

"I've had a chest X-ray recently and a medical check up - everything was in order."

"*Bueno*. Then I have only to warn you about the altitude when you reach La Paz. Since it is above twelve thousand feet the air is thin and breathing is difficult for those not accustomed to living there. We who are born there and grew up there are adjusted. We have big lungs and big chests." He thumped his own chest with his fist.

"What effect will it have on me?"

"You'll feel a little uncomfortable for a day. A headache and possibly stomach cramps, so you must go slowly, and don't get agitated. Life is lived at a slower pace in Bolivia - there is always *manana*, tomorrow, and even the day after that. Eat lightly at first and you'll avoid the *soroche*, which is what we call mountain sickness. Victor can tell you all about it, he lived there for six years."

"And loved every minute of my time out there," murmured Victor. "Your fare there and back will be paid by Dona Bianca, and I shall make arrangements for David Fuller of the British Embassy in Peru to meet you at Callao airport outside Lima when you arrive. He'll find

you somewhere to stay for that night and then put you on the plane for La Paz. It's a long journey and I daresay you'll get very bored by it."

"When would you like me to leave?" Cherry could hardly believe it all.

"In about two weeks' time. Will that be convenient?"

"I think so. I'd like to visit my parents first, and of course I'll have to arrange with the Grahams."

"No problem there," asserted Victor, "that can be arranged easily. By the way, Fidel, is Arthur Somervell still alive?"

"No, I regret that he isn't. He died a few years ago."

"He was a great fellow, a colonist in the old tradition of colonists, for all that he did his best work in Bolivia. He was lent to the government out there to teach new methods of agriculture to the natives. I visited that estate which belonged to Dona Bianca at Vallera and he'd turned it into a showpiece. Didn't he and Bianca have a son, a half-brother to Juan Benitez?"

"That is so."

"Seemed to me they were having some trouble with him when I was out there ten years ago."

"Ah yes." Fidel gave a lugubrious sigh and rolled his expressive eyes. "He was the dirty sheep of the family, a never-do-it-well. He was so wild that I used to think he had a screw loose."

"The word is black, not dirty," said Victor when he and Cherry had stopped laughing, "and we say ne'er-do-well. Too bad he turned out like that, but it happens sometimes in the best of families."

"Even in the best of Bolivian families," admitted Fidel with a smile. "But now I would very much like to take Cheery to lunch, if you will excuse us, Victor."

"Very well. I'll be in touch with you, Cherry, about passport arrangements and tickets."

A few hours later, after lunch, Cherry stood in the nursery of an orphanage and gazed down at the small crumpled face of Felipe Benitez as he slept in a crib. In her opinion he looked just like a baby with a dark skin, and black hair, but Fidel asserted that he could already see a resemblance to Juan Benitez-.

"Juan was also olive-skinned and black-haired," he said.

"And so are you," said Cherry, laughing at his expression of alarmed surprise. "He could be your son."

"This is terrible!" he exclaimed.

"Not really. I expect many babies with Bolivian parents have this colouring, just as many babies with English parents have fair hair and blue eyes when they are born. In a hospital nursery it's often hard to distinguish one baby from another if they all happen to be of the same racial origin. Only the mother is sure, and I've even known some mothers to make mistakes. Could Felipe have inherited any birthmarks or other distinguishing marks from his father?"

"I am afraid I do not know. There is the Matino mark, but that doesn't show itself until late adolescence."

"What is it?"

"A streak of white hair develops, growing from the peak on the forehead. It can be very becoming."

"Yes, I can imagine it can," said Cherry, imagining a silver streak sweeping through coal-black hair. "Did Senor Benitez inherit it?"

"No.¹ He was very like his father, the General. It doesn't occur in every Matino."

"Well, we can't wait until Felipe is in his teens, can we?"

"You are right. But I have his registration of birth and there is also this, which I regard as proof that he is Juan's child, because only someone who is descended from the main branch of the Matino family would possess it."

While he was speaking he brought his hand out of his jacket pocket, and from between his fingers dangled a silver medallion attached to a silver chain.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It is a Matino heirloom. It was in the baby's Moses basket. Look at it closely and you will see on it a puma or panther. The panther rampant in silver is the Matino family crest."

Cherry took the medallion from him. It was about two inches in diameter and solidly silver. Round the edge of the disc a delicate design of laurel leaves had been carved, and in the middle was the stylised shape of an animal; a panther, rampant like the Scottish lion, standing on its hind legs, its forelegs raised to attack, its head flung back, its tail curling up parallel to its back.

"It's beautiful," said Cherry. "I wonder why it was in the basket? It's really far too good to be a plaything, and anyway Felipe would be too young to appreciate playing with anything like this. Unless someone had been holding it and letting it swing above him? Sometimes young babies are fascinated by anything shiny swinging in front of their eyes."

"You could be right!" said Fidel excitedly. "Maybe the child was restless in the plane, and the mother used this to distract it and dropped it into the Moses basket. Juan would have given it to her."

Cherry nodded. It did seem a feasible explanation. She held the medallion out to him.

"No, keep it," he said. "I want you to take it with you to La Paz and when you hand over Felipe to Dona Bianca you can give it to her. But remember you're to give it to no one else, just as you must not part with Felipe until you see her."

"You sound as if you're expecting someone to kidnap him," said Cherry half-jokingly as they left the nursery.

"Stranger things have happened in Bolivia," he replied, smiling. "And now I shall take you back to the Grahams' house. We shall meet again - soon, I hope. I have every intention of seeing as much of you as I can before you leave for La Paz."

The weekend following her interview with Fidel Diaz and Victor Sutton, Cherry travelled by train to the Lancashire cotton town where she had been born and had grown up, and where her parents still lived. In the cosy furniture-crowded living room of the semi-detached house which clung, with several hundred other semi-detached houses, to the edge of the moors rising above the old mill town's tall brick chimneys, she told them about her forthcoming journey to La Paz.

To say they were surprised was to put it mildly. They were downright astonished, but once their astonishment was over and they had finished making exclamations, she sensed a certain pride in their attitude; a pride which had previously only shown itself in Joanna's achievements at school.

"Sutton must think very highly of you to have recommended you," remarked her father. "Did you mention to him that I'm in the Force?"

He was a policeman, had been one since he had left school and was now an inspector at the local police headquarters.

"No, I didn't," replied Cherry, her eyes glinting with laughter as they encountered her mother's twinkling ones. "Would you have liked me to, Dad?"

"No. I don't suppose it was necessary. I just wondered how he came to the conclusion that you're trustworthy, that's all," he replied.

"He had his niece's recommendation, that would be enough," said Eunice Hilton. "Mrs. Graham knows that Cherry can keep her mouth shut and her wits about her, besides being very good at handling babies. I think it's a marvellous opportunity, love, and you're right to take it. You're only young once, after all. You'll have to watch out, though! The men in Bolivia think they're superior to women in everything, pride, energy, strength, and of course they don't half fancy themselves as lovers. ..."

"Now then, what's all this, Eunice?" interrupted Frank Hilton. "How do you know anything about them? The farthest you've been abroad, to my knowledge, was that trip you went on to Paris."

"Aye, I know. But I've read plenty of travel books," retorted Eunice. "What is it they call that cult of masculinity? Do you know, Cherry?"

"Machismo?"

"That's it. And they might get some funny ideas when they meet an independent Englishwoman and think that because you're free to go about on your own you're a bit free in other ways too."

"What other ways?" asked Frank with mock-innocence.

"You know very well what I mean, Frank Hilton," retorted his wife, her grey eyes flashing. "Anyway, love," she added turning to Cherry, "you'll just have to be more careful than usual. Don't let anyone take advantage of your friendly ways."

"The only Bolivian I've met so far doesn't fit in with your description," answered Cherry thoughtfully. "I've been out several times with Fidel Diaz and he's behaved perfectly - in fact his manners have been better than the manners of some Englishmen I've been out with. He certainly knows how to make anyone feel at ease in his company."

"But don't you see, that's exactly what I'm getting at," her mother insisted. "They know how to lead a woman on, and he wants you to do this job for him, doesn't he? So he's bound to be on his best behaviour with you."

"Oh, give over, love, can't you?" said Frank rather impatiently. "Cherry is a grown woman and she's been managing her own life fairly successfully for a few years now. I bet she can keep any man who makes up to her at a distance when she wants to, can't you, lass?"

"I do my best," replied Cherry with a grin. "Although I can't say I've really suffered much from having passes made at me."

"Well, I'm only advising you as any other mother would. You can't be too careful these days," said Eunice. "It's a pity you have to go so soon, though. Can't you wait until after the wedding? I know Joanna was counting on you being her bridesmaid, and I was thinking I'd be glad of your help with the arrangements for the reception."

"Sorry, I can't," Cherry answered coolly, "I have to return to London on Monday and I fly to Lima in ten days. It's all arranged. I can't let Senor Diaz down now."

"Joanna will be very disappointed," pleaded Eunice, glancing at her husband, who shook his head silently. They were both aware that at one time Cherry and Edwin had been very close friends.

"Sorry, Mum."

Nothing, not even Joanna's disappointment, was going to make her change her mind about leaving, thought Cherry. This time she was going to be true to herself.

And noticing the determined set of the mouth, and the cool steady glance of the grey eyes, which were so like her own, Eunice sighed a little and gave up without further struggle. No point in arguing with Cherry when she looked like that.

Everything went according to the well-laid plans of Fidel Diaz and Victor Sutton; exactly ten days after talking to her parents Cherry boarded a plane bound for Lima in Peru, carrying Felipe Benitez in a brand new carry-cot.

As the plane soared up into the blue sky she watched the patchwork of green, yellow and brown fields slide by beneath, but already her mind was leaping forward to the landing of the plane on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. She could see no reason for dwelling on what she was leaving behind; an opportunity had been offered to her and she was determined to make the most of it.

The flight had its moments of tedium as long flights always do, but Felipe, young as he was, behaved in exemplary fashion, feeding and sleeping as if nothing unusual was happening to him; as if flying by jet across an ocean, then across mountains and great stretches of land, was normal. And considering who his father had been it would come naturally to him, thought Cherry, as the plane at last began to descend in the darkness towards the airport at Callao, outside Lima.

Opening her handbag she glanced through the papers it contained to make sure they were all in order. Her passport, the papers proving Felipe's identity and her tickets for the flight to La Paz, all were there, and as she felt about her fingers touched the small cardboard box in which she had concealed the silver medallion which she was also to hand over to Dona Bianca.

Leaning back, she closed her eyes and braced herself for the part of flying she disliked most, the landing. It came without too much bumping, and the tune of the engines changed as the big aircraft swung round and taxied along the runway to the airport building, whose lights twinkled rather hazily through a fine mist.

In the space of half an hour Cherry was walking along an airy passageway, carrying Felipe herself so as not to let him out of her sight. At the immigration desk a young man with fair curly hair, blue eyes and a tanned cherubic face, who could have been Victor Sutton's son, introduced himself as David Fuller from the British Embassy.

"How was good old London when you left?" he asked as he escorted her out of the building into the humid night air. "Raining there, I expect?"

"No, actually it was lovely weather."

"Better than here, then. We've been suffering from a *garua* for the last few days, cloudy, wet and humid, typical of this time of the year. Let's hope it lifts tomorrow so that you can see Lima in sunlight. It's a city which looks its best in sunlight, all those white walls and glinting Spanish towers...Here, let me hold the child while you get into the car, then I'll pass him to you. He's the same age as my youngest."

"How many children have you?" asked Cherry as she took Felipe from him, having settled into the front seat of his little Austin car. His youthful appearance was deceptive, she thought.

"Two. James was born here."

He slammed the door shut, made sure all her luggage had been loaded into the boot and slammed that shut. Then he joined her in the front of the car and was soon guiding it away from the airport towards the glittering towers of light which were the city of Lima.

"I'm taking you to the home of a very good friend of ours," explained David, as the little car dived in and out of the evening traffic. "Her name is Isabella Murillo Kelly - bit of a mouthful, isn't it? She's married to an American engineer who's working out here. Angie, that's my wife, and I would have liked you to stay with us, but we've just moved house and to tell you the truth we're not quite fixed up for visitors, so Isabella offered to help us out. We thought it would be better for you than staying at a hotel with the baby, and it'll give you a chance to get a good night's rest. I expect you're feeling bushed after that flight."

"Not too bad," murmured Cherry. She glanced out of the window with interest, catching sight of the floodlit facade of a magnificent Spanish-style cathedral with ornate baroque carvings and graceful archways as she peered down long canyons of streets between the high walls of skyscrapers.

"This is the Jiron de la Union, the main shopping street," said David chattily. "As you can see it's where the *limenos*, inhabitants of Lima, like to meet in the evening.,'

"What does Jiron mean?" asked Cherry.

"It's the name given to a block of buildings. There are five blocks on this street and each one has a different name - gets a bit confusing at times."

The street opened into a big *plaza* with streets radiating out from it in all directions. Cherry was impressed by the way in which David found the one he wanted and drove down it.

"Not far now," he said. "Isabella is related to the father of the child you've brought out, in a rather roundabout way. You ought to be warned about the complications of any South American family; there are always dozens of cousins and they all talk about each other. They thrive on drama and quarrels. Are you going to work for Dofia Bianca?"

"I don't know yet. It depends on whether she requires ananny for Felipe."

"From what I've heard she's pretty wealthy and keeps a very comfortable home, or perhaps I should say homes. She has one in La Paz and one in the country. Here we are."

He wrenched the steering wheel round and the little car shot through an archway which was squeezed between two high modern buildings, ablaze with lights.

Cherry felt as if she had been rocketed backwards in time, from the noise and pollution of a twentieth-century city on the shore of the Pacific Ocean to the world of seventeenth-century Spain. She was in a courtyard illuminated by the glow of several lamps held by wrought-iron brackets to the white walls of a house. A grille made from gleaming golden wood screened a window on the lower floor of the house, and a big panelled door made of the same wood was set in a corner under an archway decorated by carvings of fruit and flowers. More wood gleamed above, in the balustrade of a balcony overlooking the yard and set about the paved floor were huge pottery jars in which flowering shrubs flourished in profusion.

"You know what the Americans and the British who live in La Paz say about it?" asked David as he turned off the engine of the car.

"No," said Cherry, coming back from the seventeenth century, was suddenly aware that she hadn't been listening to him.

"They say it's above the kissing line."

"What's that?"

"An imaginary line about ten thousand feet up. You see, the high altitude slows down the biological urges just as much as everything else. Lovemaking becomes an effort. As a result, when they come down here for a holiday by the sea they're very, very chummy," David laughed.

As he helped her from the car the big panelled door swung open and a woman appeared. She was small and slim, and was wearing a simple red dinner gown which enhanced her classical Spanish looks; smooth creamy skin, thick black curly hair and clear grey eyes. She greeted David gaily, and was no more reserved with Cherry as she led them into the house.

Gazing at Felipe, who was now blinking sleepily at the crystal chandelier hanging from an ornate wooden ceiling- rose in the hallway of the house, Isabella exclaimed over him in Spanish. Then she said in prettily-accented English:

"But he is beautiful - the little hands so perfect. Oh, how I wish he was mine!"

"Plenty of time for that," said David, "after all, you and Bob have been married only a few months."

"But he is away so often," complained the pretty Peruvian. "Even now he is up in the high *cordillera* supervising something! I get

lonely without him. Now, Miss Hilton, I shall show you the room I have prepared for you and the little one - you must be tired after the long journey, and you will wish to rest so as to be fresh for another journey tomorrow. If there is anything you want which I have not provided, please tell me. I would like you to be comfortable."

She led Cherry up a wide staircase, and David followed with the two suitcases and the empty carry-cot. The room to which they were taken was pleasantly but simply furnished, and had a long window opening on to the balcony overlooking the courtyard.

"It is a long way from England," remarked Isabella, as she watched Cherry lay Felipe on the bed and begin to undress him. "Do you not feel strange caring for someone else's child in a foreign country?"

"It isn't unusual for me. In my last job I used to look after my employer's children when we went on holiday to Spain."

"Ah, Spain. I have been there too," said Isabella. "My family is one of the old Spanish-Peruvian families. My ancestors came to Peru with the conquistador Pizarro and helped him build this City of Kings. You know, for a long time and until quite recently, the social behaviour was the same here as in Spain. Young girls went everywhere with a chaperone and no one married out of their class. Now it is different; girls are free to leave home to earn their living and marry whom they wish. Look at me! I'm married to a middle-class American from Texas, much to the horror of my grandmother who brought me up. Please tell me, Miss Hilton, who arranged for you to bring Felipe here?"

"Senor Fidel Diaz," Cherry said with a smile.

"Ah, Fidel. He is so charming and gay, is he not? He is also a cousin of Juan's like myself. Did you ever meet Juan?"

"No."

"He was so handsome and dashing - it is very strange to think that Felipe is his son. I did not know he had married in England. Do you know who his wife was?"

"Someone called Elizabeth. I believe her last name was Humphreys." Cherry was surprised to hear Isabella give a little gasp.

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes. I can look at the papers I have brought with me if you like."

"No, no ... do not bother. *Madre de Dios!*" Isabella was quite pale and, as if she realized that David and Cherry were looking at her in concern, she covered her white cheeks with her hands. "It is sad to think of Juan, who was always so full of life and energy, dead, and his little child left without a parent! I feel it very much, and all my sympathy goes to Doha Bianca. Who is meeting you at La Paz, Miss Hilton?"

"Senorita Francisca Sorata," supplied David. "Probably another cousin," he added mischievously, with a wink at Cherry.

"*Si*, that is correct," Isabella said seriously. She seemed to have recovered her colour now, and Cherry supposed that like Fidel she was very emotional, and was accustomed to expressing her emotions fully and without reserve. "Francisca is a cousin on the other side. Her father was half-Matino and related to Dona Bianca. She lives with Dona Bianca and acts as her companion - but we must let you see to the little one and then go to bed, Miss Hilton. Is there anything you require to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you. I ate very well on the plane, and I couldn't face another meal just now."

"That is very wise. You'll need to feed the child, though. Please feel free to use the kitchen as you wish - it is downstairs at the back of the house."

"Thank you," said Cherry.

David told her the time he would call for her the next day to drive her to the airport, and then followed Isabella from the room.

After she had attended to Felipe and had put him to bed in the cot which Isabella had provided, Cherry had a bath and fell thankfully into bed, where she slept soundly until Felipe awoke next morning for his first feed of the day.

When she had fed him and dressed him, she prepared herself for the flight to La Paz, putting on a clean white blouse with her blue woollen trouser suit. Then she went downstairs to have breakfast with Isabella before David arrived. He was on time, and soon they were in the car and Isabella was saying goodbye.

"If you ever come this way again please call on me," she said, "I love having visitors. And remember to give my sympathy to Dona Bianca and ..." She paused and frowned a little, then added, "And to the rest of the family on the occasion of Juan's death. *Adios*"

With a wave of her hand she stood back, and the little Austin shot out through the archway back into twentieth-century Lima, where second-hand American buses and dilapidated taxis which overflowed with people, and which David called *colectivos*, were careering about the streets. The faint mistiness which had hung about the night before had gone, and sunlight glinted on the curves and gold crosses of old churches as well as on the numerous windows of the angular white and cream skyscrapers, so that the whole place seemed to glitter.

The plane which was to take Cherry and Felipe to La Paz was not the most modern in design, but, as David put it, it was better than no

plane at all; which was sometimes the case when a local airline decided to cancel a flight because they did not have enough money to run it.

Lulled into a sense of security because the first part of her journey had passed uneventfully, Cherry relaxed and half listened to the chatter of two cheerful middle-aged ladies from Ohio in the United States. It was their first visit to South America, and they were very excited about this trip to Bolivia where, they told her, "anything might happen."

Cherry did not believe them, and went off into a sort of daydream visualizing her arrival at El Alto airport outside La Paz. Senorita Sorata would be there waiting for her. She would be middle-aged too, and comfortably plump with flashing brown eyes and a gay smile, a female version of Fidel. She would exclaim over Felipe and say how like Juan Benitez he was. Then she would take them out to a car which would be driven by a chauffeur - Cherry was sure Dona Bianca would have a chauffeur - and they would go straight to Dona Bianca's house. There Cherry would hand over Felipe into the arms of his grandmother...

She did not get as far as visualizing Dona Bianca, because the American ladies were telling her to look out of the window. She looked and saw snow-covered fangs of rock pointing upwards out of a sea of granite which was divided by plunging ravines; a mass of tortured and twisted land shadowed by clouds or brilliantly illuminated by sunlight; the summits and slopes of the insolent Andes.

The "plane shuddered and seemed to fall, and the American ladies shrieked. An air pocket! How awful it would be to crash amongst that jungle of rock and to be lost forever.

But the plane was descending, rather bumpily it was true, and making its approach to the airport, and one of the Americans was saying that the runway at El Alto was four miles long.

"Why so long?" asked Cherry.

"I guess it's because it takes such a long time for a plane to take off or land in the thin air. We're all going to have to slow down for a few days. I hope there'll be someone at the airport to help you with the baby," the woman said.

"Oh yes, there will be," replied Cherry confidently, and felt a quiver of excitement. At last she was nearly there.

She and Felipe were the last to leave the plane and they were escorted to the airport building by one of the stewardesses from the plane who carried Cherry's hand luggage for her. Immigration and Customs were a very casual business, and no one seemed interested in the arrival of the son of Juan Benitez.

"Is there someone to meet you?" asked the stewardess in Spanish.

"*Si*," answered Cherry. She looked round the almost empty arrival lounge. As far as she could see there was no plump middle-aged woman waiting for her. In fact there were no women at all. Only a few men, all wearing business suits, all with olive-skinned faces, opaque dark eyes and drooping black moustaches.

"You do not see anyone?" queried the stewardess. "Perhaps you will have to wait. You should sit down and rest, you are short of breath."

Cherry had to admit she was feeling a little peculiar. Even Felipe seemed distressed, and was opening his mouth widely and pushing at his nose with his little fists.

"The luggage," she muttered.

"I shall get it for you if you will tell me what it looks like," offered the stewardess kindly.

Cherry described her cases and within a few minutes they were placed beside the seat on which she was sitting.

"I shall have to leave you now. I hope your friend comes soon. *Adios, senorita,*" said the stewardess, and walked away.

Trying to ignore the wave of unusual panic which swept over her at the thought of being left alone in that strange place, Cherry looked round. No one new had arrived and now there were fewer people in the lounge.

She slumped back against the seat. She must keep remembering Fidel's advice. *Don't get agitated or you'll be ill. Life goes at a slower pace in the high places. There is always manana - tomorrow.*

But somehow she couldn't help hoping that it wouldn't be tomorrow before Senorita Sorata arrived.

She must have been sitting in a somnolent daze for about fifteen minutes when a voice spoke to her, a deep masculine voice with a fascinating undercurrent of mockery stirring in its depths.

"Are you Cheryl Hilton?" Only the indolent slurring of the consonants suggested that English was not the speaker's mother tongue.

She looked up. It took ages for her to raise her head, so heavy did it seem. But then he was tall; a tall man in a sand- coloured suit, wearing a wide-brimmed, fiat-crowned hat of soft black felt which was tipped rakishly forward over his forehead. He stared down at her with dark eyes of an indeterminate colour.

"Yes." Her answer sounded like a sigh.

"I have come to meet you," he said politely.

Under his jacket his shirt was dark blue and was unbuttoned at the-collar to reveal a red and white neckerchief tied in a casual knot which gave him a somewhat brigandish appearance.

"Senorita Sorata?" she queried slowly as suspicion began to niggle in her mind.

"She could not come," he replied smoothly. "I have a car outside. I'll carry the little one for you."

Before she could speak or move he picked up the carry-cot in one hand and one of the suitcases in the other, and strode off towards the exit doors.

Felipe was being kidnapped from under her nose! Cherry struggled to her feet and glanced round again. No one seemed in the least interested in either her or the man who had just carried Felipe away. There was nothing she could do but follow the wide-shouldered figure in the sand-coloured suit and the black hat. Even now he had passed through the exit doors and was striding away outside.

Feeling curiously sluggish, she picked up the other suitcase and her hand luggage and meandered to the exit; it was difficult to avoid staggering about as if she were drunk. Once she was outside she felt even worse, short of breath and sick to her stomach.

The air was thin and dry and the sky was very blue. Puffy white clouds skimmed across the blue and their shadows chased across flat dun-coloured land which stretched away to mountains, cones of glittering blue, clearly etched against the sky.

Exhausted by her short walk from the interior of the building, Cherry could only stand and stare, wondering in which direction the man had gone and whether she would ever see Felipe again.

Eventually a tough-looking vehicle, which resembled an estate car or station wagon but was much bulkier and higher than either, slid to a stop beside her. Its cream and red paint was covered in dust as if it had recently covered many miles, and her slow-moving mind registered that it was called a Cherokee and had a four-wheel drive.

The man got out and came round to her, opened the nearest door and gestured to the inside of the vehicle. On the seat behind the front seat she could see the carrycot; Felipe was still asleep. She got in and sat down on the back seat beside him. The doors at the back of the vehicle opened and she turned to see the man putting the rest of the luggage in the space behind the seat on which she was sitting and as he slammed the rear doors shut she sighed with relief. Her moments of panic now seemed totally unwarranted. They had probably been due to light-headedness caused by the high altitude.

The man, whom she now guessed to be in the employment of Dona Bianca, got in behind the steering wheel and banged the door shut. He gave her a quick searching glance over his shoulder. It was a wide open glance, and she realized with surprise that his eyes were blue, but so dark as to appear almost black.

"Arriving here by air is too sudden," he said in English, "The change from the coast to this high plateau is made too abruptly for someone like you, who isn't used to it. Up here movement and thought take on a different dimension. It would have been better if you could have come more slowly, by train from Cuzco, or even by car."

Now her suspicions were really roused. Surely a mere driver would not be so interested in her reactions to the altitude or speak such excellent English. But as he tinned away to start the engine and put the vehicle into gear so that it moved forward, she cautioned herself to relax.

"There was no time," she replied coolly, leaning against the back of the seat. She felt determined to take an interest in all she could see and make the most of her time up there on top of the world.

But her attempt to relax was short-lived, for within a few seconds she was clinging to the back of the seat in front of her as the vehicle hurtled along a straight tarred road which seemed to plunge downward into a huge bowl gouged out of the mountains. Her heart pounding, she stared in amazement at the distant city, almost a thousand feet below; a muddle of undistinguished buildings which seemed to spill over the bowl.

The vehicle slowed down. Ahead loomed a signpost which bore a warning: *Atencion! Cuidado! La velocidad lo conduira al cementerio.* Translating silently, Cherry gathered that if they didn't take care speed would drive them to the cemetery, and she noted with a shudder the rusty remains of a vehicle hanging over the edge of the precipice, a practical demonstration of what would happen if they didn't slow down. At that moment the driver guided the vehicle to the side of the road and stopped in order to let a heavily laden truck which was chugging slowly up from the city have right of way.

Once the truck had passed they continued downwards and the lower they went the taller rose the mountains, towering above the city in a sun-hot haze. One single peak stood out, its slopes glittering white and runnelled with deep blue lines of shadow.

"Is that the Illimani?" asked Cherry excitedly, delighted that the mountain she had come so far to see should be so easily recognizable.

"Si." The soft Spanish syllable made her aware that he did not always think in English and he continued in Spanish, speaking slowly so that she could understand. "It is the guardian of La Paz. A friend of mine who regards himself as something of a poet calls it a feast of beauty, remote and having magical powers."

Again she glanced at him suspiciously, but she couldn't see much of him from this position. Some brown hair showing from under the brim of his hat; straight flat shoulders set firmly against the back of the seat; the jut of a long clean- angled jaw and the curve of a conquistadorial nose; two capable- looking elegantly-shaped hands, tanned to the colour of golden teak, resting on the steering wheel.

Trying to quell her suspicions about him, she leaned back again. Now they were passing roughly-made huts of mud which seemed to grow out of the hillside. People were trudging about, different-looking people with straight regular features, *cafe-au-lait* skins and narrow tilted eyes.

The women wore wide knee-length skirts with blouses over which shawls were draped. On their heads were round hats, very much like bowler hats, in varying bright colours. From under each hat two braids of black hair hung down almost to the shoulders. Although the men were much more conservative in their dress and wearing trousers, shirts and jackets, here and there one would sport a bright *poncho* instead of a jacket, and they all seemed to wear flat-crowned, wide-brimmed hats similar to the driver's.

As the road descended into the town the houses became bigger and better. Tree-lined avenues opened up, edged by the usual angular modern office buildings, which did not attain skyscraper heights in this city, presumably because of the altitude.

After bumping rather uncomfortably over the ancient cobbles of a narrow side street bordered by high walls, the vehicle was swung through an archway into bright sunlight of a courtyard surrounded by the walls of a Spanish colonial house. The sunlit space seemed to glow with the colours of flowers; starlike yellow jasmine, blue plumbago and golden shower cascaded over trellises, marigolds and zinnias blazed in flower beds. In the centre a graceful bronze fountain

stood, although no water spouted out of the mouths of the panthers' heads which decorated it.

The sight of the panthers on the fountain allayed Cherry's suspicions a little; the house must belong to the Matino family. She got out of the vehicle and turned to take the carrycot, but the driver was too quick for her. From the other side he reached in, picked it up and carried it towards the door of the house. Moving after him, Cherry felt glad he had taken the carrycot, because her head was swimming again and the colours of the flowers ran together before her eyes.

"This way, *senorita, par favor,*" he murmured as he pushed open the big heavy door on which a panther rampant was carved. It swung back silently under his touch.

She went in front of him into a wide hallway with a floor of terracotta tiles. Dark intricately carved furniture gleamed glossily against dead white walls and a wide staircase with a carved wooden banister swept in a curve up to an upper gallery.

The front door closed, and the driver placed the carrycot on a chest made from dark wood. Turning, Cherry felt a leap of surprise as she saw a woman, with an ochre-coloured face framed by black braided hair, standing just inside another door. Her expression was inscrutable, her dark slanting eyes were unrevealing. Her hands were folded together on her dark red skirt which was topped by a crisp white blouse. Pendant gold earrings winked in her ears and a fish-shaped brooch fastened the woven shawl of grey wool which was draped about her shoulders.

The impassivity of the woman's face unnerved Cherry and she turned for reassurance to the man who had driven her from the airport. He was removing his hat and with a flick of his wrist he tossed it carelessly on to the nearest chair, behaving as if he were the master of

the house and not just a servant. The hat landed on the highly glossed surface of the chair with a soft *whuffing* noise.

Drawn by some strange force, Cherry's glance lifted upwards from the hat to his head and her eyes widened.

A streak of white slashed through his hair, about one inch wide, beginning at the peak on his forehead. But his hair was not black as she had imagined it might be when she had first heard about the Matino mark. It was a rich tawny brown, almost chestnut in colour, slipping forward in a curve over his left temple; thick and unruly, the sort of hair one longed to run one's fingers through.

But the silvery streak, so cruel, like a scar left by a wound, disconcerted her as much as the woman standing by the door did. "Where is Senora Somervell?" she heard herself asking querulously.

"I regret to say she was unable to come to La Paz at this time," the man replied politely.

"Then who are you?" she demanded. She wished that her brain was not quite so sluggish; she had a feeling that he was hostile towards Felipe and herself.

A faint smile emphasized the ironic curl of his mouth.

"I was beginning to think you'd never ask," he drawled softly, and the hairs on the back of her neck lifted.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE supposed she should have asked at the airport. But he hadn't given her a chance, carrying Felipe off in that arrogant manner. Anyway, he should have had the manners to inform her of his identity when he had asked who she was.

"I'm asking now," she retorted coolly, lifting her chin. Little blue devils seemed to dance in the eyes surveying her. He bowed slightly from the hips.

"Then I'll tell you. I'm Ricardo Somervell Marino, the only son of the late Arthur Somervell, farmer, who married Bianca Matino Benitez, widow of the late General Pablo Benitez; so I'm half brother of the late-lamented Juan Benitez. I'm also a farmer and I'm usually known simply as Ric Somervell," he replied smoothly.

Cherry felt slightly shattered, but managed to conceal her disturbance and to return his mocking gaze with a clear candid one of her own. She was face to face with the black sheep, the ne'er-do-well who, according to Fidel, had a screw loose. She was wishing now that Fidel had told her more about him, because she still had a strong feeling that this man was hostile to herself and to Felipe.

"May I welcome you to La Paz and to this house? My late half-brother used to live here when he worked at the Foreign Office here," he added.

At that moment Felipe stirred and let out a cry. It was past noon, and he was ready for his next feed. Cherry made a move towards him, but her feet seemed suddenly to be made of lead. Her head whirled and she staggered alarmingly, feeling her pulse racing. She felt as if someone had cast a spell over her.

"Josefa, see to the child," ordered Ricardo curtly in Spanish.

"I'll take the *senorita* into the library. Make some *mate* and bring it for her, *por favor*."

"*Si, senor*," replied the dark, still-faced woman. She glided forward, her bell-like skirt swinging, her ear-rings and the articulated fish brooch glinting as they caught the light from the sun's rays slanting in through a high window.

"Oh, no, you mustn't," objected Cherry. To her alarm she saw Felipe being lifted up, cradled in alien arms and carried away from her. She might never see him again, but she could not follow the woman because her way was barred by Ric Somervell.

"*Esta tranquila, senorita*," he ordered, his voice still dangerously gentle, "don't worry. Josefa will not harm him. She is good with babies. Juan trusted her with his daughter."

Translating to herself, Cherry could not repress her start of surprise, and his firm long-lipped mouth dipped ironically at one corner as he grinned suddenly, revealing strong white teeth.

"I see you weren't aware that Juan already had a child, Miss Hilton," he said in English. "She's ten years of age and lives with my mother,, her grandmother, at Vallera, near Betanzos, a few hundred kilometres from here."

Cherry could hear her blood throbbing in her veins as she absorbed these pieces of information. Juan Benitez must have been married to someone other than Felipe's mother. She wished Fidel had told her - then she would not have appeared to be so ignorant to this man. Such ignorance on her part must surely make him suspicious of her.

"Come into the library. You'll feel better sitting down. Josefa will bring you some refreshment," Ricardo said. "There are a few questions I want to ask you concerning the baby and your presence here in La Paz; they won't take long, and afterwards you may retire to

a room upstairs to rest and recover from your journey. After you have rested ..." He paused and gave her a sharp assessing glance as he opened the door of the library and indicated by a gesture that she should enter the room. Then he shrugged. "*Quien sabe?*" he murmured. "What happens then depends entirely on your answers to my questions."

His cool authoritative manner disturbed her. She could do nothing else but obey him, and go into a high-ceilinged room the walls of which were lined with shelves crowded with books. Heavy carved antique furniture seemed to take up most of the floor space, which was covered with a superb thick-piled carpet patterned in green and gold. Under the window, which was covered outside by a wooden grille, was a dainty love-seat with elegantly-curved legs and arms. It was upholstered in gold-coloured velvet, which was striped by slivers of sunlight shafting in through the grille of the window.

"Please sit down," Ricardo said. His manner was still smoothly polite, but under the smoothness Cherry detected a steeliness of purpose which would be difficult to deflect, so she did as she had been told and went to sit on the love seat.

Going to the big wide desk of dark, intricately-carved wood, he lounged negligently on a corner of it, one foot off the ground so that she noticed his footwear. He was wearing half-boots of supple tan leather. They looked expensive and custom-made. Her glance lingered, travelling slowly upwards over the well-tailored sand-coloured suit, and she noticed that the dark blue shirt which matched his eyes was made from fine cotton and was decorated with colourful hand embroidery round the edge of the collar and down the front facing. Ric Somervell might refer to himself rather mockingly as a farmer, but judging by his clothing, he had access to great wealth.

He seemed in no hurry to ask questions, being more interested in helping himself to a golden-coloured liquid which he poured from a

fine crystal decanter into a cut-glass tumbler. When he replaced the stopper in the decanter he noticed her staring at him.

"This is *pisco*, a local grape brandy," he explained quite pleasantly. "I would offer you some, but since you're not yet used to the altitude it will be wiser for you to keep clear of alcohol. You'll be safer and feel better with the tea which Josefa is bringing. It will have a tranquillizing effect."

A little annoyed by his insinuation that she was not tranquil, Cherry sat up straight on the edge of the love-seat and decided it was time she took the initiative. She would be sitting there all day if she didn't, she thought ruefully. Ric Somervell looked as if *manana* would suit him just as well as today.

"I would like to know why I've been brought here instead of being taken straight to Dona Bianca. I was told by Senor Fidel Diaz in London that I shouldn't let Felipe, the baby, out of my sight until he is in his grandmother's arms. He is a very valuable child," she said firmly.

He did not reply at once, but considered her appraisingly while he sipped his *pisco*. Then he set his glass down and drawled:

"So. You know Fidel. Amusing, is he not? And a great hand at intrigue, which is possibly why he's in the diplomatic service."

Cherry had no chance to retort because the door swung open noiselessly and Josefa entered the room. She was carrying a silver tray with intricately carved curled-up edges, and on it a delicate china cup and saucer; faint vapour rose from the cup, indicating that it held a hot liquid. The tray was placed on a small table near the love-seat and Cherry saw that there was also a plate of little almond cakes, and a dish with mixed shelled nuts on it. As Josefa straightened up she

smiled a little shyly "and, heartened by this ray of sunshine in the still dark face, Cherry smiled back.

"Muchas gracias, Josefa," she murmured, and the woman nodded.

"De'nada, senorita," she replied, and went noiselessly from the room.

Cherry could feel her mouth trembling. Secretly she was a little frightened. Fidel had described Arthur Somervell's son in such a way as to imply that he was a weak character and unintelligent into the bargain, but the man who was lounging against the desk was neither weak nor unintelligent. In fact, she found him formidable and had doubts about her own ability to deal with him.

As the doors closed behind Josefa he left the desk and walked over to the small table, picked up the cup and saucer and offered it to her. Cherry took it and it rattled as her hand shook uncontrollably. The liquid in the cup was a pale insipid green and had particles of dried leaves swimming in it.

"Drink it. It will refresh you," ordered Ricardo softly.

Feeling in great need of refreshment she sipped some of the liquid. The taste was also insipid, nothing like the tea to which she was accustomed to drinking, but it eased the taut dryness in her throat, so she drank some more.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mate de coca."

He had taken a handful of nuts from the dish and now he tossed some of them into his mouth and. crunched them.

"Coca?" she exclaimed, and hurriedly placed the cup and saucer back on the tray.

She had learned during her conversation with Fidel about Bolivia that the coca plant was extensively cultivated in the green valleys of the Yungas, and that from its leaves the narcotic drug cocaine was obtained.

"What is wrong?" asked Ricardo politely.

"I don't want to become an addict," she asserted, looking up at him, her direct glance accusing.

He laughed. Attractive lines creased his cheeks and his teeth glinted white against the deep golden tan of his face.

"But we all drink this. It's no more harmful than the tea you drink in England. How many cups of that do you drink in a day? Yet I'm sure you'd never think of saying you're addicted to it."

"I was told that the Indians here take coca to drug themselves into insensibility."

"To make their lives up here in the high *altiplano* supportable," he finished for her. "That is right, they do. They chew the leaves of the coca together with a hard round sweet of *quinoa*. One reacts on the other and brings on a state of resignation and tranquillity. It also brings relief from hunger and pain, but taken to excess it takes a terrible toll of them physically and mentally. But this," he pointed to the cup, "this is useful, especially when you are suffering from the *soroche*, which you undoubtedly are at this moment. Think of it as taking the place of your usual cup of tea or coffee. It will do you no harm." He paused, then added wickedly, "Nor shall I."

Cherry glanced up then and met his dark blue glance. That twist was back at the corner of his mouth. He had guessed she was frightened of him.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"I've told you - to ask some questions. The letter informing my mother of the existence of yet another child of Juan's upset her greatly; she isn't young and has recently been in poor health. His tragic death shook her up a great deal, so she asked me to come to meet you instead of Francisca. She wants me to make quite sure that she is not going to have an impostor foisted on her as a grandson."

"Impostor! Oh no, Felipe really is the son of your half- brother. I have papers to prove it," Cherry said. Here was the challenge that Fidel had warned her about, and she was not surprised that it came from this man. She opened her handbag to take out the envelope that contained the papers concerning the identity of Felipe's parents and the proof of their marriage.

"I wouldn't really expect you to have come all this way without something," said Ricardo, a note of dry contempt in his voice which alarmed her. "Who provided you with them?"

Fidel? When did you meet him? Before or after you met Juan?"

"I never met your half-brother," she replied.

"No?" His disbelief was evident in the unpleasant narrowing of his eyes and the twist to his mobile mouth. "You must have met him at least *once*. Or didn't you exchange names at the time?"

Cherry gasped. She was conscious of a strange sense of unreality. It was like being in a bad dream where she was surrounded by a hazy white veil through which it was impossible to see clearly. Shocked by the implied insult, she felt suddenly quite sick and was unable to retort.

"Juan was no saint where women were concerned," continued Ricardo in that same contemptuous voice. "You aren't the first who has attempted to capitalize on your brief acquaintanceship with him. How much do you want?"

The question was like a sharp knife slicing through the white veil of unreality. Cherry swallowed her sickness and sat up straight. In spite of the dragging weariness, which was making her long to curl up on the love-seat and go to sleep, she lifted her chin and said coolly,

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, *senor*."

He gave an exaggerated sigh as if he was also weary of the whole conversation.

"I am asking how much you have to be paid to make you turn round and fly back to England with the baby and forget that you ever met Juan Benitez."

"But Felipe is not my child." Her voice rang out clearly in denial, and she felt a curious triumph when she noted he was impressed by its sincerity. "Oh, didn't Senor Diaz make it clear to you? Felipe's mother also died in the crash. She was with your half-brother. I'm just a nanny who was hired to bring him out here." She pulled the envelope containing Felipe's papers out of her handbag together with her passport. "Here, you can see for yourself. They had been married for some time. And that is my passport which shows I'm really me, Cheryl Hilton, spinster, five feet six inches, brown hair, grey eyes."

She couldn't help mocking him a little, although her nerves quivered in reaction to the dangerous glance which he slanted in her direction. Taking the envelope and passport from her, he turned away to the desk. As she watched him remove the papers from the envelope, she wished quite contrarily that she hadn't given them to him. He could easily destroy them.

Her shoulders slumped while he wasn't looking at her. She was making a mess of everything, allowing Felipe to be snatched from her and now letting this man stampede her by his insulting insinuations about her possible illegal relationship with his half-brother into

handing over not only the proofs of Felipe's identity, but also the proof of her own.

"Thank you, Miss Hilton. I owe you an apology. You're not what I suspected you to be."

He was polite again, freezingly so, as if it pained him to have to bend his stiff neck and admit that he had been in the wrong. She looked at him and was surprised to see that he was pale under his tan and that his mouth was set in a tight line. Some deeply-felt emotion was being held in check. Possibly, like Fidel and Isabella, he regretted the death of his half-brother very much.

But he was holding out the blue passport with the gold lettering, so she took it from him and slipped it into her handbag, relieved to have possession of it again.

"I'd really like more proof than these papers provide," he said," and with an awful sinking feeling Cherry watched him slip the envelope into the side pocket of his jacket.

"I have that proof," she offered brightly. Thank goodness Fidel had thought to give her the medallion!

"May I see it?"

He held out a long-fingered, wide-palmed hand. The blue cuff of his shirt just showed below the edge of the sleeve of his sand-coloured jacket and under the shirt cuff she caught a glimpse of a gold watch held to his wrist by a wide band of woven gold. Suddenly she felt oppressed by the wealth and affluence so elegantly and unobtrusively conveyed by his clothing as well as by the house and its furniture. What chance had someone like herself against such power? How could she possibly refuse to show him the medallion?

With fingers which shook a little she extricated the medallion from her bag and held it in the palm of her hand for him to see. To her relief he did not attempt to take it from her, but she heard his breath hiss between his teeth as he took a sharp surprised breath. Glancing up, she noted that he had gone even paler, if that were possible, and that a muscle was ridging along his jaw as he struggled for self-control.

"Do you recognize it?" she asked.

"It is a medallion. Such trinkets can often be bought here in the market," he replied noncommittally, and she had to admire his coolness. "Where did you get it?"

"Senor Diaz gave it to me. This isn't a trinket. It's made from solid silver, and he told me that it's a Matino heirloom."

"Did he tell you where he found it?"

"It was in the Moses basket in which Felipe was lying when he was discovered after the plane crash. It was this more than anything which convinced Senor Diaz that the child is truly your half-brother's son."

"I see. May I look at it more closely, please?"

Reluctantly she let him take it. Going round to the other side of the desk, he opened a drawer and took out a magnifying glass. Through it he peered at the medallion, subjecting it to a close scrutiny.

Silence was warm and sunlit in the room. Outside the window birds twittered in the courtyard, and from the road beyond the walls Cherry could hear the whining sound of a vehicle's engine as it ascended the steep hill.

She gazed at the books on the shelves, and enticing leather bindings and gilt lettering glinted back at her. She looked at the paintings on another wall; most of them were surprisingly modern and she thought

she detected an original Dali amongst them. She looked down at the silver tray. The carving of a panther, in the same pose as the one on the medallion, seemed to leap out at her from the centre.

The magnifying glass clinked against the top of the desk as it was laid down. Ricardo tossed the medallion from one hand to the other, carelessly, as if it were of no significance, and then slipped it into the other side pocket of his jacket.

"I'll keep it and the papers," he said.

"Oh, but ..." Cherry stopped as he raised haughty eyebrows.

"I wish to show them to my mother. Do you have some objection?" he drawled.

She shook her head. To argue with him would be a waste of time. He had every right to keep the papers and the medallion. But how could she know if he was telling the truth and would really show them to Dona Bianca?

Now she had lost everything before she had finished the mission which had been entrusted to her. She had been outwitted, and her failure to finish the job she had begun made her feel resentful towards the man who had beaten her.

"Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell me why someone like yourself is involved in this rather depressing affair," he asked quietly. He had recovered his colour and was sitting half on the corner of the desk again.

"I'm a trained children's nanny and I was recommended to Senor Diaz by the uncle of my last employer as someone who could look after a young baby on the long journey, and deliver him safely to his grandmother's arms. You have so far prevented me from doing that, so naturally I'm worried," she replied. "Oh,-I can understand why

you're suspicious. You don't want to believe that Felipe is your half-brother's child because you stand to lose in the long run, don't you? Felipe will come between you and the Matino inheritance, won't he?"

In two quick loping strides he was in front of her, standing over her threateningly.

"Be careful, *senorita*. You're passing comment on concerns which are not yours." He spoke with deceptive softness, and she felt as if a big cat had reached out a paw and scratched her warningly.

"But how can I do otherwise?" she retorted spiritedly. "As well as kidnapping Felipe and myself you've also insulted me, yet how can I be sine you're Ricardo Somervell? Do *you* have any form of identification to show me?"

A strange expression glimmered briefly in his dark eyes. Then he laughed suddenly and appreciatively and shook his head.

"You've scored a hit. I haven't. There's only Josefa's word that I am the son of my mother and father. You can ask her if you like. Or isn't your Spanish up to doing that?"

"Oh, I suppose I could manage," she said, defeated by his equanimity. "But I realize she would be on your side and not mine, so I won't bother to ask her. I wish you'd tell me what you intend to do with Felipe."

"I'm going to take him to Vallera, to my mother, believe it or not. The immediate problem is what should I do about you? You're free now to leave whenever you wish. Were any arrangements made for your return to England?"

Disappointment was a huge wave, washing over her and then receding, leaving her feeling completely drained of energy. To

explain to him why she wanted to finish the job she had been hired to do seemed an almost insurmountable task.

She was aware of movement. He had sat down beside her. His knee brushed against hers and she moved away from him, suddenly very conscious of taut muscle sheathed in golden- hued skin, concealed beneath fine cotton and smooth alpaca, of warmth and strength held in leash.

"You're disappointed," he murmured. "Why?"

Surprised by this change in his attitude, she responded to his interest, the explanation coming easily after all.

"I wanted to do what I'd been asked to do by Senor Diaz. I wanted to deliver Felipe personally to his grandmother."

His dark gaze assessed her, flicking over her hair and her face as if he was looking at her properly for the first time.

"I see," he drawled. "Then all I can do to make amends for kidnapping you and then insulting you is to invite you to stay in this house for the next day or so. I have to finish some family business in the city and when it's done I'll take Felipe to Vallera. You can come with me to take care of him on the journey and also," he paused and she saw that glint of wicked mockery in his eyes, "and also so that you can make sure I don't harm him."

His mockery made her feel very silly, as if she had made a fuss about nothing.

"Have you changed your mind? Do you believe he's your half-brother's child, after all?" she asked.

"I've less reason to doubt that he is. I realise you find it difficult to understand my distrust; I assure you I've only been trying to protect

my mother. We had no idea that Juan had married again." He frowned and bit his lower lip. "As I've said, there have been similar situations in the past."

"I understand."

"Will you come, then? Vallera is in the high valleys below Potosi. If you come and finish your mission, you'll be able to return to England with a clear conscience."

Cherry regarded him warily. He had just played a trump card,- as if he had guessed that her loyalty to the child in her charge would not let her refuse to go with him. He was much more astute than Fidel's description of him as a ne'er-do-well would lead anyone to suspect. But why the change in his attitude towards her? Dared she trust him? As far as she could see she had no option if she wanted to see her mission through to the end.

"Yes, I'll come," she said coolly, revealing nothing of her indecisive state of mind.

"Bueno." He seemed relieved for some reason. "We'll go in the station wagon. It will take us about two and a half days, barring accidents - driving is good at this time of the year. In the wet season the roads down to the valleys often get washed away."

He paused, and there was an odd little silence as they both looked -at each other assessingly. The sudden change in their relationship had made them both uncertain about what to do next.

"I expect you'd like to see something of La Paz and the surrounding area while you're here," murmured Ricardo, with a surprising show of interest in her welfare.

"Yes, I would, if that's possible."

"I regret I can't take you round myself, but I'll tell my next-door neighbour about you and ask her to call on you. She's English and is married to a Bolivian businessman. Her name is Betty Garcia. She'll probably be delighted to meet someone just out from England so that she can catch up on the latest news." He paused and his mouth curved sardonically. "She might even listen to any complaints you might have to make about me."

He guessed at her uncertainty and distrust of him and so was offering her a chance to check on him with the neighbour, who would probably listen sympathetically, being English herself.

"Thank you. That's very kind of you," she replied, still cool.

Again there was an odd silence while they assessed one another. Cherry was beginning to wish he would move away. His nearness was having a peculiar effect on her. She was aware of him physically in a way she had never been aware of a man in her life, not even of Edwin. She could not even continue to return the steady gaze of his heavy-lidded, opaque blue eyes.

"Am I forgiven, then?" he asked softly, surprising her so that she looked up at him again.

"Forgiven? For what?"

"For thinking and saying what I did about you?"

She was lightheaded again. She must be, because she wanted to lean towards him invitingly, to touch the silver streak in his hair, rim her fingers through the thickness of it. She wanted to feel those strong elegant hands caressing her and the touch of that firm-lipped yet sensual mouth against hers.

Afraid of the crazy behaviour of her senses, Cherry turned her head away sharply, lifting her chin. As she rejected her own feelings, she appeared to reject his approach.

"I can see that I'm not."

The cool dry note in his voice brought her head round again. He had risen to his feet and was walking away from her towards the door.

Realizing what she had just done, she rose to her feet too.

"Oh, I didn't mean - " she began hastily, only to be silenced by a repudiating gesture he made with one hand.

"It doesn't matter," he said coldly, "you have every right to feel offended. I'll tell Josefa that you'll be staying here and she'll prepare rooms for you and the child. You should find her easy to get on with, since you speak some Spanish and so does she. She is a *chola*."

"What does that mean?"

"Here in Bolivia it has a different meaning from what it has in other South American countries. Here it means someone of Indian blood who has kept to Indian ways and customs. I must go now. As soon as I can I'll let you know when we'll be leaving for Vallera. I'll call on Mrs. Garcia on my way to the city. *Adios, senorita.*"

He opened the door and went out, closing it behind him so that Cherry found herself muttering a bewildered *adios* to its wooden panels.

She spent the rest of the day resting, getting to know Josefa, finding her way about the house and attending to Felipe. She went slowly, refusing to get agitated any more, so that her attack of mountain sickness would pass.

Josefa was kind and competent and very eager to look after Felipe. The house was comfortable and well-equipped, although when night came Cherry found it rather cold and was glad of the woollen jumpers and cardigans she had brought. She ate lightly and carefully and thought that her mountain sickness was over, only to find that when she went to bed she was too breathless to sleep.

Lying sleepless, she went over everything that had happened since her arrival at El Alto airport. Her welcome to Bolivia had certainly been very different from the way she had envisaged it! There had been no kindly middle-aged woman to greet her. Instead, she had been swept down to this house by a determined, high-handed, handsome man. There had been no warm words of welcome. Instead, she had been insulted and then surprisingly cajoled into agreeing to go to Vallera.

Should she go with Ric Somervell? Should she trust him? What alternative did she have? She supposed she could turn round and go back to England and leave him to deliver the baby to Dona Bianca's arms. But she didn't want to. She wanted to stay and finish her mission.

The sound of guitar music and someone singing floated up from the ground floor. She knew that Ricardo had returned to the house and that he had guests, rather noisy guests. Her thoughts went round in circles making her frown, bringing on a severe headache, while her imagination ran riot. She saw Ricardo abandoning herself and Felipe in the Bolivian wilderness. *Anything can happen in Bolivia.* The words of her American companions on the flight came back to haunt her and were underlined by the wild music she could hear throbbing and twanging downstairs.

In desperation she got up and took two aspirins; she must make a determined effort to relax and sleep. Tomorrow she would meet Betty Garcia, who might be able to tell her whether she could trust Ric

Somervell. Cherry chuckled suddenly to herself. Tomorrow. *Mariana*. Already she was behaving like a Bolivian!

Morning was fresh and sun-swept, the air so light and pure that it seemed to sparkle. After she had attended to Felipe, had her breakfast, and talked a little with Josefa, Cherry wandered into the courtyard where sparrows were chirruping and humming birds were flitting about, hovering over the blossoms which cascaded down the walls. The tiny birds moved so fast that it was difficult to get any idea of what they looked like; even when they were taking nectar from the flowers their wings were perpetually fluttering.

She was standing trying vainly to make out what colours they were when a woman walked into the courtyard.

"You must be the girl from England," she said in a gruff voice. "I'm Betty Garcia from the next house. His Nibs Somervell asked me to call on you. How do you do!"

She was tall and slim and about thirty-eight years of age. Her grey-sprinkled brown hair was cut in a short boyish crop which accentuated the sharp features of her face. Shrewd grey eyes, bright with curiosity, summed Cherry up as they shook hands.

"I thought you might like to go for a drive to see the Lake," said Betty. "It's a good day for it."

"Yes, I would like to. Would it be possible for us to go and see the ruins at Tihuanaco on the way there?" asked Cherry.

"Of course it would. Better dress warmly, though. Those pants you're wearing will do fine. I always wear pants myself. Bring a sweater and a headscarf, the wind can be biting at times ,,"

Delighted to have the opportunity to go out, Cherry went indoors to tell Josefa where she was going and to make arrangements with the woman for the care of Felipe. Then, putting on a Shetland sweater and her trouser suit jacket, she collected a headscarf and went back to join Betty.

"We'll go in my old bone-shaker of a car," said Betty, "it's not much to look at, but its engine goes like a dream, and that's what matters in this place."

Soon they were driving in a rather battered American car through a moon-landscape of queerly shaped rocks which had been twisted and eroded by the weather. Ahead of them stretched the high plateau, seeming interminable; dun- coloured, lifeless, the edge of the world. In the far distance a skyline of silver and blue mountains taunted and beckoned like a mirage of another world.

Besides small, twinkling, reed-fringed lakes flocks of yellow daisies and wild blue lupins danced in the wind, flaunting their colours as a challenge to the monotonous brown. More colour flared in the bright skirts and *ponchos* of the inhabitants of a village where small adobe huts were dominated by a church with twin towers. Bells hung in the towers, each one separate in a framework of rose-tinted stone, silhouetted against the deep blue of the sky.

The market town of Tihuanaco was a jumble of red-tiled roofs, white-washed walls and Spanish archways. They parked the car down a side street and walked to the ruins of basalt and sandstone, great slabs of rock which had been meticulously dressed, polished and fitted together in pyramidic fashion by human hands in this high faraway place, hundreds of years ago.

A cold wind blowing straight off the *altiplano* sighed mournfully in the crevices between the stones of the ruins, and tweaked at Cherry's headscarf as she stood in awe before the Gateway of the Sun and

stared up at the strange figure carved on it. A sphinx-like stone face, surrounded by the plumes of a headdress and attached to a disproportionately small stone body, looked back at her.

"I first saw this gate in a photograph hanging on a wall in an office in London," she said. "Now I can hardly believe I'm seeing the real thing. It's huge."

"Made from a single block of stone and almost ten feet high," replied Betty in her cryptic way.

"It's so remote up here. I'm beginning to feel as if the rest of the world doesn't exist."

"I know that feeling. I had it too when I first came here ten years ago. Difficult to imagine that there are such things as red double-decker buses and Tube trains, isn't it?"

"Why did you come?" asked Cherry. So far their conversation had been impersonal, although she guessed that Betty was almost bursting with curiosity about her own presence in the house of Juan Benitez.

"I was fed up with teaching Spanish in a girls' school and decided to see something of the world. I applied to the Foreign Office and went to the United Nations Organization, who sent me here to help with the teaching of English. Been here ever since except for a couple of visits home to my parents. Whose was the office you saw the photograph in?"

"Victor Sutton's."

"Really? Well, what a coincidence! Vic was here when I first came. We went round the country together showing two films of the plays of *Hamlet* and *Henry V* to various universities and cultural organizations all over the country. We had great fun. It was on that

tour that I met Pedro, my husband. He was staying with a friend of his, a university professor who invited Vic and me to his home for a social evening."

"And it was love at first sight," teased Cherry.

"Not quite, but almost," Betty laughed. "When I returned to La Paz he invited me to go out with him and after that we met regularly. What were you doing in Vic's office? Are you with the Foreign Service too?"

"Oh, no, nothing quite so grand, although I suppose I could say I'm doing a job of a diplomatic nature," said Cherry drily. "Didn't Senor Somervell tell you why I'm here?"

"Not a word. Just said that there was someone staying in the house from England who would be glad to see a little of the area, and asked if I'd be interested in meeting you. To tell you the truth I was so flummoxed when I opened the door and saw him standing there I forgot to ask him why you were visiting."

"Why were you flummoxed?"

"I've never met him before, only heard of him. He's a little overpowering, isn't he? Takes your breath away with that silvery streak in his panther-coloured hair. Brr! This wind really gets through, doesn't it? Let's go down into the remains of the courtyard."

They walked down some wide stone steps between the remains of two solid stone pillars. The wind hissed through it the stiff grasses which grew about the ruins, swishing the dust about the old paving stones of the courtyard.

"These are supposed to be the relics of an altar," said Betty, pointing to a group of stones in the middle of the floor, "although no one is

really sine whether the place has any religious significance or not. There are many theories about it."

"Who are the bogey men?" Cherry looked round at the strange carved human heads, jutting out from the remains of other pillars, whose mute inscrutability seemed to add to the sense of eerie isolation.

"Those are the people created by Virajocha, the Lord Creator. He turned them to stone when they refused to listen to one of his prophets."

"Oh, the Weeping God," exclaimed Cherry, remembering the other photograph. "Where is his statue?"

"In the city, on the Prado, the main boulevard. I'll show it to you tomorrow if you'd like to come marketing with me. Hard to believe that this is all that's left of a great civilization which existed before that of the Incas, isn't it?"

"Whose civilization?" "Probably their ancestors'," replied Betty, pointing to two little boys dressed in rather ragged pants and shirts and wide-brimmed hats who were gazing at the two strange women. "Aymaran Indians. They live mostly on the *altiplano*, and although great efforts have been made to try and move them down to more equable climates, they still cling stubbornly to this plateau. You were going to tell me why you're staying in the house next door?"

"I'm staying there because I've brought the baby son of Juan Benitez from England."

"Good lord!" Betty looked astounded. "I didn't know he had a son, or a new wife, for that matter."

"You knew he was killed in a plane crash in England?"

"Yes, the La Paz papers were full of it. He was a very popular and notorious native son. But there was no mention of him having married again or of a baby."

"His wife was killed in the crash and only the baby survived. I imagine the marriage was a secret one."

"Must have been a great shock to the family, then."

"Yes," said Cherry, thinking how white Ric Somervell had gone after he had looked at the papers concerning Felipe's identity.

"I suppose Dona Bianca sent Ric Somervell to meet you and take you and the child to Vallera," mused Betty.

"Well... er ... yes," replied Cherry rather uncomfortably. "Betty, between you and me, do you think I can trust him?"

"What with? Yourself?" Betty's sharp eyes narrowed inquisitively. "I believe he has a reputation for dalliance with women, but it's nowhere near as bad as his half-brother's was."

Cherry could not help blushing as she recalled her reaction to Ric's powerful physical charm when he had sat down beside her the previous afternoon.

"No, I'm not worried about myself. I can usually handle that sort of thing, I'm not exactly green. It's the child I'm worried about."

"Good lord!" said Betty again. "Surely you don't think he'd harm a baby in any way?"

"I don't know what to think about him. You see, he was very hostile towards me and the child at first; he wanted us both to go back to England. Then his manner changed so completely that I became even more suspicious of him. Do you think I'm being hypersensitive?"

"Can't really say. Don't know enough about either of you, although at that brief meeting I had with him I did get the impression that for all his suave polite mairer he might be violent if someone crossed him. There's a hint of storminess lying beneath the smooth exterior and a suggestion that he's been wicked in his time. Makes him quite fascinating. You'd never be sure of what he might do next."

"That describes it exactly," exclaimed Cherry. "I'm glad you feel it too. It's very disconcerting."

"I think the best thing for you is to come back and have tea with me after we've been to the lake. I'd like you to meet Pedro. He's a very astute person and I value his opinion about other people, especially his own countrymen - they're always a bit of a mystery and paradox, like this old ruin. His family has been dealing in antique furniture for years now, and he knows all about the old Spanish-Bolivian families. You can tell him how you feel about the silver panther ..."

"Silver panther?" interrupted Cherry. "Why do you call him that?"

"Seems appropriate somehow. Ric Somervell has the Matino streak in his hair, he's unpredictable and the panther is the crest of his mother's family."

"Do you usually go in for giving people descriptive nicknames?"

"If they possess striking characteristics I do, and you have to admit he does," Betty's eyes tinkled roguishly. "I could call you Cherry Ripe."

"Don't you dare! I suffered at school."

"I thought you might have done. Shall we go to the lake now? I think we've exhausted the rather sombre charm of this place. I thought we'd drive round to Huatajata. Pedro and I are members of the yacht club there."

Across more stretches of flat dun-coloured land they drove, passing a bell-skirted, bowler-hatted Aymaran woman who was trying to beat order into her flock of llamas, those long- legged, sheep-faced, shaggy-bodied animals which thrive so well in the high altitude.

The air was thin and diaphanous, and the great lake appeared at first merely as a thin azure line in the distance, then as they approached nearer to it the land changed becoming more green and fertile. Smallholdings of well-farmed land sloped down to the edge of the water, which was a deep glittering blue.

People were working in the fields or sitting outside their huts weaving coarse cloth from the wool of the llamas, while contented cattle browsed, some of them knee-deep in the water. Fishermen poled about in *balsas*, the strange gondola- type boats which were woven from the *totorá* rushes which grew at the edges of the lake. The boats had high prows and single masts, and as they moved they seemed to slice across the reflection of reeds, clouds and mountain peaks in the still water.

"The water is too cold for swimming," said Betty as she parked outside the yacht club building, "but the fish are very good, especially the trout, which grow much bigger here than they do anywhere else in the world. The Uros Indians who live here say the Lake is made from the tears of their women - they must have had a lot to cry about because it's very deep and over a hundred miles long. By the way, how are you coping with the altitude?"

"I felt under the weather yesterday," Cherry admitted. "Funnily enough Felipe seems to have adjusted more quickly than I have."

"Babies usually do if they're healthy. When are you going to Vallera?"

"I'm not sure yet, Senor Somervell said he'd let me know when he's ready to leave. I've not seen him since yesterday noon, although he was there last night. He seemed to be having a party. There was a lot of guitar music and singing."

"And dancing and carousing, I expect," said, Betty with a laugh. "Bolivians love a party and dancing the old folk dances is a popular pastime, especially in the houses of professional people."

After lunch - which was a full course meal and was really the main meal of the day so that there was plenty of time to digest it before going to bed, said Betty - they went for a ride on the lake in a *balsa* poled by a serious-looking Indian and his small boy. Returning to the land, they drove back to La Paz along a different road from the one along which they had come.

At the Garcia house, which was another old Spanish- colonial building set round a courtyard, they found Pedro already at home. He was a tall, thin man with a cadaverous sallow-skinned face. With his dome-shaped head and beaky nose he reminded Cherry a little of a parrot. He greeted her warmly, but when Betty told him over the tea-cups about Felipe his eyebrows shot up in amazement.

"The son of Juan Benitez?" he exclaimed. "*Por dios!* This is a mystery! Are you sure the child is his?"

His incredulity, added to that of Ric Somervell, was too much for Cherry. It all came out. She told him everything, from the interview with Fidel and Victor in London to her "kidnapping" at El Alto airport. Ric's insults and change of attitude, and her own subsequent distrust.

"Well, that beats everything," said Betty, hearing of the "kidnapping" and the insult for the first time. "Arrogance. You can see it in his face

and the way he moves. It's all very well for you to laugh, Pedro, you haven't met the man."

"Yes, I have. I've known him since he was a boy. Also he lived in that house when he was a student at the University here," he retorted. "He was a lively one."

"Oh, he belonged to that mob, did he?" said Betty scornfully. "Rioted every other day, I shouldn't wonder. Looks as if he'd be in the thick of anything like that. But what a way to treat Cherry! He must have a very low opinion of English women."

"Possibly of women in general at the present moment," murmured Pedro thoughtfully. "I seem to recall that there was a rumour that he was considering marriage, but the woman concerned changed her mind."

"I'm not surprised she did, if his behaviour towards Cherry is an example of what he's like," muttered Betty as she poured more tea.

"He used to be very friendly with Fidel Diaz - they were students together. Didn't Fidel tell you anything about him?" Pedro enquired.

"He said he was the black sheep of the family and a ne'er-do-well," replied Cherry.

Pedro laughed again.

"Black sheep," he repeated. "Yes, I suppose Ric was that for a while. He didn't get on well with his father, you see. Arthur Somervell was over forty and set in his ways when he married, so by the time his son reached his late teens he was over sixty and not inclined to be tolerant of a young man's pranks. But it was more than a generation gap, it was the conflict between two strong characters. Arthur was a strict disciplinarian, an English puritan who expected his son to do as he

was told. He forgot to take into account the Bolivian blood. You know what is said about us Bolivians?"

"No," said Cherry.

"We know how to fight, how to command, but we do not know how to obey." He chuckled again. "And it is very true, we're an unruly lot. But I think Arthur must be resting happily now."

"Why?" asked Betty.

"His black sheep, after a riotous career as a student here in La Paz and after kicking up his heels in various resorts in Europe, returned home and settled down on the farm. Now he is just as good and conscientious a farmer as his father was, if not a little better. You know whom he reminds me of, Betty?"

"No, I haven't a due."

"I am reminded of the young English prince who behaved riotously but when his father the king died, and he succeeded to the throne, he became the ideal leader of his people."

"Henry the Fifth," exclaimed Betty. "See how well he knows his English history, Cherry? How many times did you sit through that film, Pedro?"

"I cannot remember. I was too dazzled by the pretty Englishwoman who was the projectionist," he retorted, his eyes twinkling as he teased his wife. "But to return to the subject of Ric Somervell, it's not surprising that he was sceptical about the child's identity. In the past the family has suffered in the way that wealthy families often do from attempts to extort money from them under false pretences, and because of his mode of life Juan was always vulnerable. I expect Ric was as suspicious of you as you are of him."

"Cherry wants to know if she can trust him to take her and the baby to Vallera," said Betty.

"I don't see why she shouldn't. Now that he's assured himself that the child is truly Juan's, I believe he'll look after it. He's going to have the responsibility of it, you know, in the long run. His mother is getting on in years and from all accounts is in poor health."

"So it looks as if he's going to be stuck with being a father to two orphans," murmured Betty. "Not an enviable task."

And he's not married. Whatever happened to Juan's first wife?"

"I believe she died in an accident," replied Pedro. He turned to Cherry and smiled. "Don't let yourself be disturbed by Ric's arrogant behaviour. He's descended not only from a long line of *puleros* - they're Spanish-Bolivian merchant adventurers, accustomed to seizing an opportunity and turning it to profit - but also from another long line of English yeoman farmers, independent and holding on to what was theirs."

"A rather formidable mixture, I must agree," remarked Betty. "No wonder he's unpredictable."

"Go with him," continued Pedro, "and by the time you reach Vallera you may understand one another a little better." He paused and his eyes began to twinkle again with gentle amusement. "I think you'll both have a very interesting journey!"

Her anxiety soothed by Pedro Garcia's calm assessment of the situation, Cherry returned to the other house feeling relatively light-hearted. She found that Felipe and Josefa had had a happy day together, and she took the baby upstairs to prepare him for bed.

She had just finished feeding him and was talking to him in a quiet soothing manner while she held him against her shoulder and patted

his back, when she had a feeling she was being watched. Her glance travelled slowly to the door to the toes of the boots of tan-coloured leather, up over sand- coloured trousers and a dark blue shirt, to the steady dark blue gaze of Ric Somervell, who was leaning against the closed door.

"I didn't hear you come in," she said on a little gasp of surprise.

"I walk quietly. *Cdmo esta usted?*"

"Bien, gracias, y usted, senor?"

"I am well, thank you," he replied politely, advancing into the room. "Watching you with the child it would be easy to believe he is yours. Are you always so attentive to babies who are committed to your care?"

"Of course I am, but not just because it's my job. A baby is a human being and it's also helpless. How could another human being not care for it?"

He looked down at the child who was now lying in the crook of Cherry's arm, almost asleep, his dark eyelashes making two silky fans on his plump olive-tinted cheeks; his tiny fists doubled up on his chest.

"He's very small," commented Ricardo.

"Babies often are," she said lightly. "Here, hold him a minute while I make sure his cot is ready."

She almost laughed aloud as she saw his eyes open wide, twin flashes of blue against the tanned skin of his face, as he took the child awkwardly from her, shifting Felipe about until he had him settled comfortably in imitation of the way she had been holding him.

"Unfortunately babies often grow into men who are interested Only in power and possessions, and who never care about the feelings of others," observed Cherry as she smoothed a clean sheet over the mattress of the cot. "Often when I'm nursing a baby, I wonder how it is that something so innocent could develop one day into a megalomaniac or a murderer or a kidnapper."

"A philosophical nanny," he teased as she turned to take Felipe from him. His glance lingered on the dark fluffiness of her fine hair, met the candid clearness of her eyes, then considered the full pink curves of her generous mouth which tilted upwards at the corners. "You're too pretty to be dabbling in philosophy," he added.

The quick colour ran up into her cheeks, making them glow more rosily than usual. She turned away with the child to lay him down in the cot, irritated with herself for allowing the compliment to disturb her. But no one had ever called her pretty before, except her father.

The only way to deal with it was to ignore it, so she said nothing while she laid Felipe down and placed sheet and blanket over him, glad that the homely everyday action of putting a baby to bed could be apparently absorbing.

"Men, and women too, become what they are as a result of heredity and environment," continued Ricardo, leaning against the cot and watching her movements. "I'm told that the right sort of environment can do wonders for people who have inherited unfortunate tendencies from their forebears: on the other hand heredity has a way of asserting itself in unusual ways. For example, there was nothing about me to suggest that I am partly Matino until I reached adolescence, and this white streak appeared in my hair. Looking at Felipe, I would say that he has inherited nothing from the woman who is purported to be his mother in those papers you handed to me."

Purported. Then he was still doubtful about Felipe's identity.

"Did you know her?" she asked, straightening up and turning to look at him.

He was staring at Felipe again and the curve at the corner of his mouth was more pronounced than usual. Some bitter thought was running through his mind.

"Yes, I did. Very well, but not well enough," he replied in a hard voice, "but I didn't come up here to discuss her. I came to tell you that I've finished the business I had to do quicker than I expected, and I'd like to leave for Vallera in the morning. Is there anything in particular you'll require for the child's comfort?"

"I'll need something for heating his food. I can prepare the bottles before we set out."

"That's easily done. I usually carry water and a Primus cooker when travelling by road. I hope you have plenty of warm clothing to bring with you. Take extra blankets for the child."

"Yes." Cherry lifted up the side of the cot and turned away, to clear up the equipment she had been using and to collect dirty clothing. "Where shall we stay for the night on the way?"

"Nights - there'll be two of them. We'll probably find a hotel. I'm afraid the lodgings will not be up to the standard you're accustomed to; Bolivia is not yet geared to extensive travel by tourists. You may find you'll have to share a room."

"With Felipe? Oh, I won't mind that." She went to the door, her hand on the light switch ready to snap it off when they both moved out into the corridor. He came up behind her, opened the door, and she stepped out; the light went out and the door closed. They stood facing each other.

"It depends on how many people are staying at the lodgings," he said. "Payment in country places is by bed and not by room, and often privacy can only be obtained by paying for all the beds in the room. I'll do my best, of course, to find a place which is convenient and comfortable for you, but if I can't the alternative will be for us to sleep in the back of the station wagon."

She was silent as she thought of the space at the back of the station wagon. Enough room for two people lying side by side and not much more.

"I can see by the expression on your face that you wouldn't like that, Miss Hilton," he murmured, and mockery lilted in the depths of his voice.

"No, I wouldn't, Senor Somervell," she replied coolly. "A hotel would be preferable."

"I get the impression that you don't trust me!"

"No, I don't. It's not really surprising, is it?" she retorted.

Again his eyes opened wide, bright with reflected light as he stared down at her as if trying to fathom why she distrusted him.

"It's a pity you don't," he went on smoothly, "because I hoped to dance the *cueca* with you tonight."

"The *cueca*?" she queried, diverted in spite of herself.

"It's a dance of Spanish origin. We are fond of dancing in this country, but if you don't trust me there's no point in me asking you, is there? Unless..." The pause was deliberately tantalising, creating a trap into which she fell, quite aware of what she was doing and incapable of preventing herself.

"Unless what?" she asked.

"Unless we declare a truce for tonight and the next few days, and forget that our first meeting was not exactly auspicious. Would you be willing to do that?"

He was a master in the art of temptation, having had much experience over the years, she had no doubts of that. Already she wanted to do nothing else but go with him and be shown how to dance the *cueca*.

"Where would we dance?" she asked, pretending to be cautious.

"At the house of some friends of mine, Gabriel and Victoria Lorca. He holds an administrative post at the University and they are quite respectable. I have been invited to take a partner for the dancing, but I have no partner unless you come with me.

She did not believe that last part. She imagined he was never short of partners. It was just an appeal to her soft-heartedness.

"Who will mind Felipe?" she parried, knowing very well that Josefa would oblige.

"Who do you think?" Now his mockery was open, glimmering in his eyes. "Stop fencing, *senorita*, you know damn well you want to dance with me."

In the face of such self-confidence Cherry's half-hearted defence collapsed completely and she capitulated, her mouth quivering as she laughed and held out her hand to him.

"Then let there be a truce between us, *senor*. I would like to go with you to learn how to dance the *cueca*."

He took her hand in his.

"Gracias, senorita. I'll meet you at eight-thirty in the hall. We'll probably have a light meal at the Lorcás' house. Have you a white handkerchief you could bring with you?"

"Yes, I have. But why?"

"You shall see."

CHAPTER THREE

NIGHT transformed the city, hiding the shabbiness of the old adobe buildings and disguising the monotonous regularity of more modern structures; the clear cold air made harsh electric lights and tawdry neon signs glitter like jewels laid out on black velvet. High above in the sky the constellations of the stars burned with a greater brilliance than Cherry had ever seen before.

As the station wagon bumped over the worn cobbles of the Calle Jaen, she had glimpses through doorways in high walls into lamplit courtyards. Half-revealed aged beams and carved stonework created an atmosphere of an earlier century and she almost expected a Spanish grandee in a black cape and wide-brimmed hat to appear and swing down an alleyway bound for some romantic rendezvous.

Caught in a spell of delight by the glitter of lights and the blackness of shadows, she snuggled down in the front seat of the vehicle, feeling the stuff of the stole which she was wearing over her head and round her shoulders smooth and soft against the skin of her face. When she had gone down to the hallway of the house wearing a thin woollen coat over her long-sleeved, long-skirted dinner gown, Ric, in a dark suit and white shirt which had made him seem a remote elegant stranger, had surveyed her narrowly and had said abruptly,

"You won't be warm enough."

He had turned on his heel and had gone bounding up the curving staircase to the upper part of the house. A few minutes later he had returned with the stole made from *vicufia* fleece which, he said, belonged to his mother.

Now, feeling its warmth against her face, she wondered what had prompted him to fetch it. Betty Garcia had been right when she had said he was unpredictable; you could never be sure of what he might

do next, and that unpredictability, combined with his distinctive appearance,- made him rather dangerous.

She could heartily dislike his cool authoritative manner, with its overtones of suave contempt for the feminine sex, only to find herself charmed in the next minute by a show of apparently sincere interest in and care for her welfare. The pendulum swing from disliking and liking and back again to disliking had a disturbing effect, so that when she was with him she found herself perpetually on tenterhooks, in a state of excitement which made clear and sensible behaviour almost impossible. It was as if she had been bewitched, and changed from the cool independent serious young woman into a warm impulsive person ruled by emotion rather than by reason; a person she hardly recognised as herself but who, she suspected, had been hiding behind a facade of independence, waiting to be invited out.

They drove away from the city, through the valley of the Choqueyapa to a suburb which had once been a village. It still had its old Spanish-style *plaza* where the buildings were still guarded by railings. In a side street they stopped in front of a large well-kept house of modern design.

The door was opened by a plump, black-haired, dark- eyed woman whose full-breasted figure was draped in a dress of silky clinging material which emphasized every curve she possessed. On seeing Ricardo she exclaimed excitedly in Spanish and at once engulfed him in an embrace, patting him and kissing him with great gusto, much to Cherry's surprise.

Something of her surprise must have shown on her face, because as Ricardo withdrew from the embrace his eyes glinted with amusement.

"I'd like to present Cheryl Hilton from England, Victoria. She isn't used yet to seeing us indulge in an *abrazo*, and I think she finds such an expression of sentiment a little embarrassing."

"From England! But how exciting. I am pleased to meet you, *senorita*" said Victoria. "Let me explain the *abrazo* to you. It is the usual form of greeting between Bolivians. You take my right hand - so. Now we merge like this; put your right hand over my left shoulder and I put mine over yours. Your left arm goes under my right arm and mine under yours, and we pat each other's back with the left hand. Since we are women we rub cheeks, and if we are very affectionate we kiss, no matter which sex we are." She chuckled and winked at Ricardo. "There, that's all there is to it. You should have shown her yourself, Ric. And now you know what to expect from my guests when you're introduced to them! Go into the lounge, Ric. You will see many friends there looking forward to seeing you again. This way, Miss Hilton, I will show you where to leave your coat."

After she had left her coat and stole in a bedroom Cherry followed Victoria back to a big room which appeared to be furnished at only one end; the other end was empty and the wooden floor was bare. Later she was to discover that the space was left bare for the dancers.

Ricardo introduced her to their host, Gabriel Lorca, a jolly fat little man with crinkly black hair and luxuriant moustache, and to the other people who were present, some of whom were old friends of his and had been students with him at the University. Amongst the other guests were some Americans from the suburb of Caleto who were working as doctors and geologists in the area, and there were also a couple of English engineers, who both worked for the railway, and had been living in Bolivia for many years and were married to Bolivian women.

A drink was thrust into Cherry's hand and she asked Ric what it was.

"*Pisco* sour, the most popular cocktail here; don't drink too many or I'll have an insensible nanny on my hands," he mocked.

From then on it seemed to Cherry that she was borne along on a wave of gaiety. Food was served, buffet style; a *picante* of chicken, beef and hot peppers, *empanadas saltenas*, which were cases of rough pastry filled with spicy meat, raisins and olives; all followed by slices of fresh paw-paws and bananas.

After the food came the dancing to rhythms played on guitars and on *charangos*, the stringed instruments originally fashioned by the Indians from the scooped-out shells of armadillos. The dances came from all over the country; *huayanos* from the *altiplano*; *taquiries* and *camavalitos* from the tropical valleys. But the most popular was the *cueca*, and at last Cherry learned why she needed a white handkerchief. It was *para coquetar* - for flirting, because the *cueca* was a courtship dance. The partners faced each other, one hand on a hip, the other flirting a white handkerchief. The women fluttered the handkerchief under her partner's nose and he shut his eyes in rapture and drummed his heels on the floor. Then they circled and twirled around each other, advancing and retreating, while the accompanists sang one throbbing love song after another.

With her natural sense of rhythm Cherry was soon able to join in the fun with Ricardo, hopping and stamping on the wooden floor, oblivious to everything but the beat of the music and the blaze of blue eyes as they met hers.

Then suddenly it was time to go, and in a daze she searched for her coat and the stole amongst the others flung on the bed. As she draped the stole about her head, observing with surprise her pink cheeks and shining luminous eyes in a mirror, Cherry heard an American voice say to her,

"Gee, you and your fiance did the *cueca* together great."

She turned to deny that Ricardo was her fiance, but the speaker had gone.

In the crowded hallway, noisy with many laughing voices, she said goodbye to Victoria and Gabriel and submitted to their embraces. Then with Ricardo's hand under her elbow she hurried through the fine cold air out to the station wagon.

Back up the valley they drove at the usual reckless speed. Above them La Paz hung like a gigantic chandelier glittering against the sky and soon they were winding up the cobbled street and turning into the courtyard of the old house. Another quick walk through icy air, and they were in the dim hallway where Josefa had left one lamp lit for the returning revellers. Up the stairs they went, not speaking for to speak would destroy the spell which had held them enthralled ever since they had danced together.

Outside the door of the room where she had slept the previous night Cherry stopped, and Ricardo stopped with her. She looked up at the silver-streaked, slightly dishevelled hair, at the dark blue eyes, at the long-lipped curling mouth. He had dominated everything for the past few hours, and she was reluctant to part from him.

"Buenos noches, senorita, y gracias," he said politely, putting out his right hand.

She put her hand in his and at once strong arms swept her into the *abrazo*, but instead of merely looking over her shoulder and patting her back he bent his head and kissed her on the mouth.

As soon as his lips touched hers Cherry felt a shock, like being touched by a live wire. The kiss was a natural culmination of their outing together, and it should have lasted no longer than the flash of light which occurs when an electrical current jumps a gap.

But .it did last longer, and time became of no consequence to either of them as they clung together, trying to find by touch the essence of each other.

Cherry had no knowledge of what disturbed them, the creak of a floorboard or the rattle of the doorknob on the door behind her. It brought Ric down to earth immediately, but she took a little longer to descend from heaven.

In the dim light his eyes were indigo, unreadable.

"It's late," he said, "you must go to bed. We'll leave early in the morning, but Josefa will call you. Sleep well, Cherry."

He walked away soft-footed down the passage, and she turned to blunder into the darkness beyond the door. In darkness she undressed, fumbling for her nightdress, shivering in the cold air. Quickly she huddled under the bedclothes and lay with her eyes tightly closed as she tried to still the mad beating of her heart, clenching and unclenching her hands in an attempt to rid the palms of the feel of thick hair.

La Paz is above the kissing line. So David Fuller had said. Well, if this was an example of what happened when Ric Somervell kissed her above the kissing line, heaven help her if he should kiss her below the same line!

She fell asleep suddenly, and woke to brilliant icy sunlight slanting in through the window and the lusty sound of Felipe crying for his food. After changing him she took him downstairs to feed him in the warm kitchen, then she ate breakfast with a Ricardo who greeted her coolly and politely. When he had finished his meal he went out, to load the station wagon with luggage, spare petrol cans and other equipment which he thought they might require on the long journey to Vallera.

Soon they were saying goodbye to Josefa who with a sudden generous gesture gave Cherry a brightly coloured *poncho* which she had woven herself.

"You will need it," she said, "it is very cold in Potosi."

Since she had already been told by Ricardo to keep the stole of vicuna fleece, Cherry reckoned that she was going to be well wrapped up on the journey.

"I hope we'll reach Qruro tonight," said Ricardo, as he guided the car down the cobbled street and took the direction they had followed the previous night. "It's not the most beautiful place in the world, being the centre of the tin mining industry. From there we'll go on to Potosi and then drop down the valley to Betanzos. It's the quickest way I can take you to Vallera. To go round by way of Cochamba and Sucre would be warmer and perhaps more pleasant, but would take too long. I've been away from the estate long enough."

His manner was the same as the first time she had met him - cool, authoritative. Last night had merely been a distraction, a few hours of pleasure seized and enjoyed to the full while they had been offered, and she guessed that was how he lived all the time; making the most of opportunities. Possibly if she had been more sophisticated and more knowledgeable in the ways of conducting an affair, that one kiss would have led to more lovemaking, but she was relatively innocent - he would have learned that from kissing her - so he had left her.

Which was just as well, thought Cherry irritably. Keep it cool. No use getting het up just because a man kissed her and then behaved as if he'd forgotten all about it.

"Isn't Oruro famous for its carnival?" she asked brightly, determined to show that she too could take dancing and kissing in her stride.

"*Si*. That is when all the hotels are full and every house opens its doors to accommodate the hordes of visitors who come from all over South America."

"Sounds like Blackpool at illumination time," she commented, thinking of similar hordes of visitors from all over Britain and even Europe descending upon the Lancashire seaside town every September and October. They came in cavalcades of cars, motorbikes and motor coaches, to see the spectacular festival of fairy lights strung out along the promenade and outlining every building of note.

"Como?" His sharp question and puzzled sidelong glance made her realize that for all his easy command of the English language and his English father he had never heard of Blackpool. So she told him about the illuminations and how she had -been taken to see them as a child, going with all the other people who lived on the same street as her parents, and crowding into the bedrooms of a small boarding house.

He listened attentively as he drove south along a rough road across more *altiplano*, where the air sparkled like ice-cold wine and, in the distance, mountain peaks shone with the crystalline purity of cut glass against the vivid blue of the sky.

When she had finished he nodded and said,

"I understand, you see a similarity in the gathering of many people to witness a spectacle and to have some fun together. The big show at Oruro is the Devil's Dance performed by the miners."

"How did it originate?" she asked.

"Miners are very superstitious people and here they believe that there is a *tio* or spirit who owns each mine and lives in it. If they are to dig in his mine they must propitiate him, and so you'll find at the entrance to most mines a stone figure with horns on his head who looks something like a devil. Now at the festival time, which is the occasion

for affirming devotion to the Virgin Mary - the Virgin del Socavon in this case, whose altar is also at the mines near Oruro because it is said she once performed" a miracle there - the miners dress as *tios* and wear devil's masks and dance through the streets."

"So the festival is half pagan and half Christian?"

"Like most festivals. It's become very complicated and the preparations take a whole year."

The sun rose higher in the sky as they sped along the empty rough road and gradually the land took on some character which owed more to the subtle blending of colours than to any change of contour. Muted reds, browns and greys merged into sepia in the shadow; grey rock blushed to soft pink in the sunlight and the distance became suffused with a warm apricot tint.

Everywhere a coarse bristly grass grew in clumps.

"It's *paja brava*, which means savage straw," explained Ricardo when Cherry asked about it. "If you brush against it or fall into a clump, you'll know about it. It itches and scratches like hell." Felipe grew restless and began to whimper. At Cherry's request the vehicle slowed down and was stopped at the side of the road and she lifted the child from the carrycot on to her knee and began to change him. When he was changed and lying quietly on her knee, she looked up to see a herd of llamas drifting by across the gaunt land; tall dignified figures seemingly indifferent to the bareness of their habitat.

"They've been called the 'frugal companions of men,' by Gregorio Reynolds, one of our poets. They provide the Indian with everything, food, clothing and friendship," remarked Ric, noting her interest in the animals. He was leaning back against the door on his side of the vehicle, his hat pushed to the back of his head, the picture of a man taking his ease. He had told her it was time he returned to Vallera, but

he seemed to be in no hurry to get there. How pleasant, thought Cherry, not to be in a rush; to live each minute as it came and not to be hurrying on to the next, and so missing half of life.

"The poet's name is a mixture, like yours," she observed.

"Such mixtures are common here in the New World. We're all mixed up, descended from adventurers and immigrants from all over the world and mixed up with the native Indians."

"Have you ever been to England?"

"Yes, I stayed for a short while trying to find out if I belonged there."

"Did you belong?"

"I wouldn't have returned to this country if I'd belonged there," he replied drily. "I stayed in Spain for a while for the same reason, with the same result."

Ricked up his heels in several European resorts before coming back and settling down, Pedro Garcia had said.

"I've been to Spain too, on holiday with the family I used to work" for. We stayed in a different part every summer for the past four years," she said.

"I stayed mostly near Barcelona. The Matinos were Catalans, businessmen. Juan had a villa there, but it's almost seven years since I was in the country, so there was no chance of us meeting there. *You* had to come across half the world for *us* to meet."

His softly spoken remark lay like a challenge between them. Cherry glanced up cautiously. Dark blue eyes were watching her intently.

"Why did you take on this strange errand?" he asked, gesturing towards Felipe, whose dark head was nestling against her breast.

"My other job had come to an end; I needed a change, the more unusual the better," she replied warily.

"Because you were unhappy?"

The probe found its mark and Cherry gasped, completely betraying herself.

"How did you guess?"

"Unhappiness is often the reason for wanting a change of scene. Also I sense a defensiveness about you, as if you're afraid of being hurt - which probably means you have been hurt. Usually, in your country, women of your age are either married or going to be married, yet I see no ring on your finger."

"Perhaps I've no wish to marry," she countered. "There's more in life than marriage for a woman."

"I know that, but not for you. You'd make a good wife and a good mother." His gaze drifted down to Felipe, then lifted again to her face, which she was trying very hard to keep composed. "What happened to make you unhappy? Did some man let you down?" he queried.

"It's really none of your business, Senor Somervell," she retorted coldly, and then was furious because he laughed at her.

"So you'd like to freeze me out," he taunted. "But it's too late. We've gone too far. Last night you called me Ric and I called you Cherry, and we danced the *cueca* together. We danced it very well too, as if we were courting each other, and this conversation and any other we might have is an extension of that dance. Advance and retreat,

withdrawal and pursuit. In the process we find out something about each other and also discuss if we're compatible."

"Compatible for what?"

"Marriage. Courtship is the usual preliminary."

His cool confidence took her breath away, but she had to clarify the situation. He must not be allowed to assume that he could go ahead and court her with a view to marrying her.

"You have no reason to court me," she said.

"I disagree, I have every reason. I'm looking for a wife. You could be eligible."

"Really?" Cherry began to laugh. Now she could believe Fidel. The man did have a screw loose after all!

"You seem amused," he commented.

"I am - very. Considering the way you treated me at our first meeting, I find it very amusing that you now consider - me eligible to be your wife. I suppose I should feel honoured, but I don't. You've no right to consider me as eligible. I've no wish to be anyone's wife at present."

"Your reaction is understandable," he replied equably, completely unshaken by the scorn in her voice. "Perhaps it will make it easier for you if I tell you that you're not the only woman I'm considering."

"Thank you. That makes it much easier," she replied sarcastically.

He slanted a mocking glance in her direction and drawled tauntingly,

"Now you're piqued to think that there might be competition."

"Oh! How conceited of you. I'm not piqued! I don't care how many women you're considering for the position. I'm telling you now that I don't wish to be one of them. Your whole attitude to the matter is too cold-blooded."

"Isn't that how a wife, or a husband for that matter, should be chosen, in cold blood? There's less chance of making a mistake that way," he argued coolly. "I happen to be a practical person, and the time has come for me to make some arrangements regarding the future of Marita, Juan's daughter, and Felipe, who appears to be his son. They are both left in my care, and they both need a mother as well as a father: it would be convenient if the same woman could look after my home and share my bed. To take a wife is the obvious answer."

"I understand the situation perfectly," Cherry retorted, trying to match coolness with coolness. "But I insist that you don't consider me. I couldn't marry a man I don't love."

"Let's not confuse the issue with love," he jeered.

"I have to," she replied with dignity.

"It's an overrated word which women use to cover up a lot of sentimental mush."

"That isn't true! It's a warm sincere feeling."

"I suppose you believe you loved the man who let you down, and that's why you're hurt. But if you hadn't romanticized about him, you wouldn't have been hurt when he decided that you weren't suitable to be his wife after all."

"Oh!" she gasped, and cast about for a weapon to use against him. "What about you? Aren't you really searching for a wife in cold blood because the woman you chose originally changed her mind about you?"

They faced each other like adversaries. Ricardo's eyes narrowed unpleasantly and his long-lipped mouth took on a more sardonic curve, but otherwise he seemed unperturbed to learn that she knew something about him that he had not told her himself.

"*Touche*," he drawled. "Whatever happened to our truce?"

"I didn't break it. You did, with your talk of courtship and marriage," she retorted. "And what a place to choose! The middle of the *altiplano* far away from anywhere." "With a few curious llamas looking down their noses at us as if they heartily disapprove," he added, and laughter stirred in the indolent depths of his voice.

Cherry looked round and saw the blank sheep-like faces of several llamas which had paused to examine the vehicle and its occupants. With their long aristocratic noses and droopy-lidded eyes they did look very disapproving, and she could not help laughing. But as she encountered Ricardo's amused blue gaze she felt that brief shock again, like a flash of recognition, and her laughter died in confusion. Conscious of colour sweeping over her face, she lifted Felipe in her arms and leaned over the back of the seat to lay him in the carrycot. Immediately he let out a howl of protest.

"I hope he isn't going to be troublesome," she muttered.

"He wouldn't complain if you carried him on your back, as that herdsman out there is carrying her child," observed Ricardo, sitting up straight and tilting his hat forward over his eyes as he prepared to drive again.

As she settled back into her seat, Cherry watched the bowler-hatted Aymaran woman who had appeared. Stick in hand, baby in a shawl on her back, she drove the llamas away from the vehicle. Rearing their haughty heads, the animals trotted away, their shaggy coats flouncing like a woman's petticoats.

Ricardo drove on steadily southwards, stopping only once more so that they could take the lunch of *empanadas* and hot coffee which Josefa had provided, and feed Felipe. All afternoon the land unfolded before them like a vast sand-coloured ocean-. Villages loomed up on the horizon like islands, dark shimmering mirages which gradually took on the form of squat adobe houses dominated by the usual adobe towered church. In one place the church was different, having been built in colonial times when the baroque influence in art had been at its height; the white stone facade of the building was decorated with fantastic carvings. Human figures, animals, fruit and flowers glowed rosily in the light of the sun, contrasting rather shockingly with the simplicity of the houses.

Oruro beckoned coquettishly from the midst of a shimmering haze, giving the impression of being a secret magical city, but the impression was destroyed completely when they drove into it and saw the streets of mean houses straggling up a barren hillside. A few scrawny trees shaded the central *plaza* and the hotels looked uninviting with their corrugated iron roofs, peeling plaster and broken-down verandahs. But, surprisingly, they were all full and there was not a bed to be had in the place that night, because there was a miners' conference taking place in the town.

"We'll go on to the next village," said Ricardo calmly. "We should be able to get lodgings there."

Night came suddenly after the sun had set in a blaze of orange and crimson light, but with darkness Cherry felt an odd sense of unreality as if they were the only people up there on the high *altiplano*. She was glad she was with someone like Ricardo; for all his strangely unpredictable behaviour, she was beginning to realize that his assessment of himself was right. He was practical, and he seemed to possess an inner rock-like strength of mind which she guessed had been developed through living for many years in an isolated countryside.

Although the conversation had been mostly impersonal since that argument concerning courtship and marriage had taken place, she found herself wondering several times what being married to him would be like. Each time she snatched her thoughts away from the subject, rejecting it as ridiculous, and each time they crept back to it stealthily; almost guiltily..

Some dark buildings loomed up. A wooden sign bearing the one word *Alojamientos* swung into view. The station wagon crunched to a stop in front of a doorway.

The lodging which was offered turned out to be two beds in a room reached by an outside staircase from the courtyard.

"There are eight other beds in the room, but the landlord won't let me buy them because they're reserved for a group of geologists and drillers who are working in the area," explained Ricardo. "But it's the custom to share a room at an inn, so you've nothing to fear. Why not pretend you're in Blackpool, crowding into one bedroom, in a boarding house while on a visit to see the illuminations?"

His reference to Blackpool made her laugh, and swept away the slight coolness which had been between them for the past few hours.

"I understand, and I don't mind," she said, "as long as Felipe can be fed and kept warm. No one will want to share a room with him if he isn't fed properly because he'll grizzle all night."

The landlord seemed delighted to have them to stay and he chattered away cheerfully to Ricardo about the state of the country. His *chola* wife brought an old-fashioned tin bath of warm water and placed it on the table in the big kitchen, so that Cherry could bath Felipe. When the child had been fed she wrapped him up in the *vicuna* stole and carried him outside and up to the long narrow room above, which was furnished with ten iron bedsteads covered with rough Indian blankets.

Ricardo followed with the carrycot, which he placed on a table in the far corner of the room away from the door.

"Do you think he'll settle?" he asked, watching her tuck the baby into the cot.

"I hope so."

"You'd best sleep in the bed next to him and I'll take the one on the other side of you," he said practically. "I see that you're-feeling the cold; put on the *poncho* Josefa gave you."

She had noticed that he was already wearing one over his suit jacket. As she slipped her own over her head she felt grateful to Josefa for having had the foresight to give it to her, for the closely woven woollen garment had the thickness of good tweed, and was easy to wear.

In the room downstairs they sat on benches at the long table and shared a meal of meat stew, seasoned with a sauce of hot peppers, tomatoes and herbs, perhaps created especially to keep out the cold. *Chunos*, oval-shaped potatoes which had been soaked in water and then alternately scorched by the sun and frozen by the frost for a week until they resembled nuts, bobbed about in the stew and possessed a strange taste which Cherry didn't think she would ever acquire.

After the meal was over the landlord produced a bottle of *pisco* and some local beer which foamed excessively because of the altitude, but which tasted very good. The conversation was as highly-spiced as the meal had been, and sometimes became fiery as tempers flared and disagreements took place, but Cherry could not follow all of it because they spoke too fast. Then one of the geologists, a handsome man with a tanned hawk-like face and soulful black eyes, produced a guitar and began to sing some folk songs; strange piquant melodies in which a forlorn sadness alternated with spirited lusty rhythms. To

Cherry they expressed completely the paradox which she was beginning to realize was Bolivia.

Growing drowsy after the good food, the beer and the music, she became aware that the guitarist was staring at her in a strange way, and decided to go to bed. Telling Ricardo of her decision, she rose to her feet. All the men rose to their feet too and wished her good night, and as she turned away she saw the guitarist lean forward and say something to Ricardo.

"What did he say?" she asked Ricardo as he escorted her across the cobbled yard to the staircase.

"He asked if you are my woman."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you are more - that you are my wife. Now he'll know better than to bother you with his attentions. I noticed him staring at you and thought I'd better give you some form of protection."

"Thank you," she said faintly, a little shaken by his cool arrogance. "I've never been promoted so quickly before!" "What do you mean?" he asked as he followed her up the stairs.

Outside the bedroom door she turned to face him, and told him about the American woman at Victoria's house who had believed she was his fiancée.

"You see, I told you we danced the *cueca* well together, as if we meant it," he murmured with a chuckle. "Fiancée one day, wife the next. Why not give it a try, Cherry? With me."

In spite of the cold she felt her senses stir. He was standing close to her and she could feel his vibrant warmth.

"You have a one-track mind," she retorted, a little shakily, not knowing whether to take his suggestion seriously or not. "I've told you I'm not eligible."

By way of answer he held out his right hand. Cautiously she placed hers into it and was swept into the *abrazo*. His cheek was rough against hers, the tang of *pisco* was on his breath. As the warmth of his lips touched hers she closed her eyes in sudden ecstasy.

The embrace was brief but effective, leaving her trembling with something other than cold.

"Wear all your clothing in bed," he advised her as he released her, "you won't be warm enough if you don't."

He left her then, going quickly down the stairs, back to the fiery conversation, the haunting melodies and exotic rhythms, the warmth of the *pisco*.

Keeping on the poncho, she wrapped her head in a woollen scarf and thrust her feet into the sleeves of a spare sweater. Then she crawled under the blanket which was thick and heavy, and went to sleep almost immediately.

Next morning the geologists and drillers, so gay and talkative the night before, were silent and heavy-eyed, no doubt suffering from the effects of conviviality. Dark smudges lay beneath Ric's eyes, and he was moodily silent when he joined Cherry at the table in the dining room to drink piping hot coffee with their companions of the previous night.

After settling Felipe in his customary place on the back seat, they drove off into the sunlit silence of the *altiplano*. In the villages people were just beginning to come out of their huts, wrapped up against the chilly air, and some Aymaran women trooped by on their way to

market, their bell-skirted bowler-hatted figures etched friezelike against the sandy land and blue sky.

"How far to Potosi?" asked Cherry cheerfully.

"About a hundred and fifty kilometres," growled Ric, and she grinned to herself. The *pisco* of the night before had left its mark on him.

"Isn't it the highest city in the world?" she queried.

"I believe it has that distinction." The answer was given stiffly and was intended to put her off.

"A bear with a sore head," taunted Cherry..

"*Cdmo?*" The vehicle lurched dangerously as he sent her a sidelong glance.

"I was referring to the state of your head this morning," she replied serenely. "There's a hammer banging away in it, isn't there? And your tongue feels all gritty like the bottom of a bird cage? And to think you warned me about the dangers of drinking too much *pisco* at a high altitude. Would you like me to drive?"

"Could you?" he drawled, and this time the sidelong glance was dangerous.

"Of course. Any time. Just say the word and we'll change places."

"And I'll become nanny and have to change his nappy? No, thank you," he retorted. "Are there any more women in your family like you?"

"I have a younger sister, but she isn't like me."

"What is she like, then?"

"Beautiful and brainy."

She thought of Joanna. Today was the wedding day; how strange that she had forgotten about it until now. The heartbreak she had felt and which she had thought would be with her for ever now seemed long ago and faraway, almost as if it had happened to another person. Here in this land of endless vistas of flat land and glittering distant turrets of rock, Edwin no longer mattered. He was a pale uninteresting ghost beside the tough, vital man she was travelling with.

"Am I to assume from that remark that you don't regard yourself as possessing either brains or beauty?" he queried.

"Oh, my intelligence is average and I've a lot of common sense, but I can't compete with Joanna, who is really brilliant. As for beauty - you can see for yourself. *You* wouldn't notice *me* in a crowd," she replied honestly.

"But then I didn't have to look for you in a crowd. You were the only woman waiting at the airport and you had a baby with you," he retorted, then made a grimace of distaste. "I don't care for brains as well as beauty in a woman. It's a diabolical combination."

"I suppose that's because you believe that all men are superior in all things to all women," she retaliated, enjoying the game.

"But of course I do," he drawled softly, and her skin prickled warningly.

"How old-fashioned and narrow-minded of you!" she taunted, ignoring the warning.

"Not at all. Experience has taught me that most women like a man to be strong and masterful - even women like you who regard all men as children to be subdued and dominated by a series of critical and

deflating remarks. Be careful how you go, *senorita*, I'm not a child, nor am I easily subdued."

Time to change the subject, thought Cherry ruefully. His knowledge of her sex was far greater than hers of his.

"*Vale un Potosi*," she said, "I read that somewhere. What does it mean?"

"It's an old Spanish saying meaning that something is very valuable; comparable to Potosi, because the city was once the wealthiest in the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Silver poured out of the Potosi mines and was carried by llamas and mules down the trail to La Paz, then through the mountains to Lima to be shipped to Spain."

"Fidel told me that the first Matino to come to this country came to Potosi to make his fortune. Is that true?"

"Yes, he came with hundreds of other Europeans to exploit the Indians, who saw silver and gold only as luxuries and not as a means to wealth and power. Potosi became a boom town. Huge mansions were built and many churches were endowed, but it had all the vices associated with such places too. Then gradually the richest veins of ore were exhausted and the population dwindled, so that now it's a ghost town, a relic of former glory."

"What did the Matinos do when the silver gave out?" Cherry asked.

"Being opportunists of the first rank, they had already started to open some tin mines in the Betavi region, so when tin took the place of silver they were ready to make a new fortune." His voice was dry.

"Does the family have any interests in mining now?"

"No. My grandfather Alfonso Matino was clever and wily to the end; he saw the writing on the wall and handed over the mines and most of the land he owned to the government. No one noticed that he had secretly invested his wealth elsewhere. Because of his generous gesture he was allowed to keep Vallera, which he left to his only heir, my mother."

"You don't sound very fond of your Matino ancestors."

"Oh, I admire them for their business acumen; after all, I've benefited from the wealth they amassed. But I can't admire them for the way they and others like them took everything and put back nothing. Mining has been the scourge of this country, and strangled the agricultural system so that today only a quarter of it is farmed properly and most food has to be imported." He stopped abruptly, then laughed self-mockingly. "But I'm getting carried away on my hobby-horse, which, incidentally, was also my father's."

"I believe that he transformed the Vallera estate into a show-piece," said Cherry.

"That is so, using the wealth left to my mother. She is a gentle patriot and regards the work done at Vallera as an atonement for the exploitation carried out by the Matinos in the past. You seem to have talked much with Fidel."

"I saw a lot of him before coming out here," Cherry confessed. "He told me about you, too."

"What did he say?"

"That you are the black sheep of your family and have a screw loose."

Once more the vehicle lurched dangerously, its tyres scrabbling on the surface as he lost control of the steering wheel when he glanced at her.

"Oh, Fidel, my little friend," he said in Spanish, "wait until we meet again. Just wait! I'll get you for that build-up!" He laughed suddenly and spontaneously and continued in English, "Fidel and I were always rivals for the same place in the soccer team, for the same honours at school, but principally we were rivals for the same girls. You know why he told tales about me?"

"No, I don't."

"He wants you for himself."

"Oh, no, there was nothing like that in our relationship. He just wanted to tell me about Bolivia and what to expect when I arrived. He wasn't interested in me personally."

"I find that hard to believe. You underestimate your own attractions and do not know Fidel. He would be making the 'beeg eempression' on you with his knowledge of English. A screw loose. A black sheep. *Por dios*, if he were here I would find a way of getting my own back on him for that!"

"He was very polite and courteous and I enjoyed his company very much," she retorted, tilting her chin.

"He didn't insult you, dance the *cueca* with you, kiss you or talk to you about marriage in a cold-blooded way?" he queried mockingly. "But he'll be waiting for you, hoping to pick up where he left off and to go a little further, when you return to London. *If* you return to London."

The challenge in his glance as well as his words confused her, and she stared out at the dusty white glare of the road stretching ahead of them to a jumble of tortured rock towering above the plain. In that jumble was hidden the ghost town of Potosi, once an Imperial City, known as the "mouth of hell" to those slaves who had been forced to work in its mines.

But Cherry wasn't thinking of Potosi. She was thinking about Fidel, wondering why he had painted Ric Somervell blacker than he was. Had he feared she might fall a victim to the enigmatic charm of the friend who had always been his rival for the same girls when they had been students together in La Paz?

Felipe gave a little cry and began to whimper. At once Ricardo took his foot off the accelerator and stopped the vehicle at the side of the road, turning to grin at Cherry.

"You see, I'm beginning to recognize the demands of a baby," he said. "Will he need feeding?"

"Not yet, I hope, although his appetite is growing. He's probably wet."

Ricardo leaned over the back of the seat and lifted the crying child while she searched for yet another disposable napkin, wondering whether the quantity she had brought with her would last until they reached Vallera. As soon as he found himself being held by strong comforting hands Felipe stopped crying, and focused his dark eyes on the face of the man who was holding him. Ricardo looked down at the child, a strange expression on his face, and Cherry felt her cheeks blanching as all her old suspicions of him came rushing back into her mind.

As he handed the child over to her Ricardo noticed her paleness.

"What's the matter? Do you feel ill?" he asked sharply.

"No, I'm all right."

"Don't lie. I can see you aren't all right. Something has upset you."

"It was the way you were looking at Felipe."

Amusement gleamed in his eyes as he leaned back against the door and shoved his hat back, revealing the silvery streak in his hair.

"You seem to be blessed with a remarkably vivid imagination," he remarked. "I wasn't thinking how I could do away with him. I was just contemplating the irony of this situation."

"In what way do you find it ironical?"

"Because I, of all people, find myself responsible for the welfare of the child of Juan and Elizabeth," he replied, and the sardonic line from the nostril to the corner of the mouth was very marked as he jeered at himself.

"You said you knew Felipe's mother. Did you meet her in England?"

"No. Here, in La Paz." His curt answers made it obvious that he was reluctant to discuss the woman again.

"What was she doing here?" Cherry asked.

"She was a volunteer working with the United Nations Organization. We get many of them from all over the world, offering their skills to teach the people here about modern methods in medicine, agriculture and so on."

"I suppose she met your brother at some diplomatic get-together?"

"You suppose wrongly. I introduced them to each other. Shall we go on now?"

He had pulled his hat forward and had turned to face the steering wheel; in profile his face looked hard, as inscrutable as an Indian's, and she felt suddenly shut out from his thoughts. There was something odd in his cool dismissal of Elizabeth. Had he disliked the woman?

"Yes, we can go on," she replied. "I'll keep Felipe on my knee for a while so that he can exercise his legs."

As the vehicle churned onwards the child kicked his little legs vigorously and waved his fists about while he chuckled and muttered, making charming baby noises and blowing bubbles. His silky black hair glinted in the sunlight which gave a golden sheen to his olive-tinted skin.

Cherry was silent. Her attempts to rouse her companion out of his morose morning mood seemed to have failed, because he also remained silent. Several times she glanced at him, intending to speak, only to decide against it. He looked most unapproachable, and she had a feeling that if she did speak he would either growl or spit at her like an angry cat.

She was glad when he decided to stop at Challapata for the midday meal. It gave her a chance to stretch her legs, as well as see something of the way of life in the town. They ate in the dining room of the small hotel which, for all its broken- down appearance from the outside, was clean within. The meal consisted of great bowls of meaty soup and fresh bread, the bread was made on the premises and the smell of it cooking tantalized Cherry's nose. They were served by a dark-faced smiling women in bell-skirted petticoats, and a sparkling white blouse, who wore a tall black hat on her head.

"Why is her hat different?" asked Cherry. Ricardo was still silent, apparently sunk in unpleasant thoughts.

"Como?" he said, looking up from his meal.

"Her hat. It's different. Like a Welsh woman's."

"That's because she's a Quecha, not an Aymaran. Women's hats have regional characteristics. From now on you won't see many bowler hats. In Sucre, if you go there, and in Cochamba, you'll see white ones

like that, decorated with loops of ribbon; the number of loops varies according to whether the woman is single, married, or widowed, and you can often guess at a man's wealth and standing by the number of hats his wife possesses."

"I much prefer the tall ones to the bowlers. But why do the Aymarans wear bowlers?"

"No one knows," he replied, "they have been wearing them since the beginning of this century. Sometimes I wonder if a salesman of hats dumped a whole pile of them in this country when they had gone out of fashion elsewhere. Can we feed the child before we go on?"

He seemed eager now to reach Potosi, and there were no stops after they left Challapata. Gradually they left the *altiplano* and delved into the foothills of the mountains, twisting through gorge after gorge where the road often hung over the edge of steep precipices and the rock was runnelled by the dried up beds of streams.

Slowly the sun slid down the sky and long shadows appeared. Twilight came early at three o'clock in the afternoon in this part of the land, where the mountains were omnipotent.

With twilight and the hiding of the sun behind a tower of rock came the cold; sharp and penetrating, invading the vehicle, creating draughts around the feet and sliding icy fingers around the neck. Over three bridges swinging high above the river they passed, and there was Potosi, dimly lit and secretive, a huddle of steep roofs and narrow high-walled streets.

Ricardo found his way unerringly and soon they were stopping in the yard of an hotel, an old-fashioned inn with a well in the centre of the yard and water troughs around it for horses to drink from. A staircase ran up the outside wall to the gallery onto which the doors of the upstairs rooms opened.

This time Cherry and Felipe were to have a room to themselves while Ric shared a room with two other male travellers. In the dining room they were served by an untidy waiter with a mop of thick hair hanging in a fringe over his forehead. He looked to Cherry like a character right out of one of Grimm's Fairy Tales, but nothing was too much trouble for him, and his cheerful service and assistance made up for the intense cold and the dilapidated appearance of the hotel.

When she decided to go to bed Ric escorted her up the stairs to her room. This time he followed her into it to make sure she had everything she required. Having satisfied himself that there were enough coverings on the bed and that Felipe was covered warmly, he paused in the open doorway as he was about to leave and looked at her. In spite of the sweaters, *poncho* and woollen pants she was wearing, she was still shivering.

"Perhaps I should stay and keep you warm for the night," he murmured, and in the dim light of the single electric globe she saw his eyes glinting wickedly.

"No, thank you," she replied. "I'll have enough to remember about my Bolivian adventure when I return to England without that."

"Your Bolivian adventure," he repeated softly, and the devilry in his face reminded her of Betty Garcia's warning that he had a reputation for dalliance with women and put her on guard. "I could make it more interesting for you," he added suggestively.

"No. And you're not to kiss me again. I've told you, I'm ... I'm not eligible," Cherry replied coolly, although her heart was hammering.

"What difference does your not being eligible make to my kissing you?" he countered, and put out his hand. "It's only the *abrazo*. Don't take it so seriously. It's a polite custom; it means nothing more than

'thank you for your company today and goodnight'. Unless, of course, *you* choose to make it mean more."

Had she chosen to make his previous kisses mean more? Had there been no mutual pleasure in those embraces? Had they meant nothing more to him? She stared up at him, trying to read the expression on his face. As he looked back at her his mouth twitched with humour, and his eyes gleamed mockingly.

"You know, Cherry, if you refuse to accept the *abrazo* I'll begin to think you're falling in love again, this time with me," he scoffed.

"Oh, how you like to torment!" she flared, and put her hand in his, regardless of the consequences.

She did her best not to let it mean anything, but she could not help responding to the pressure of his mouth on hers; and then she was lost as mind and body seemed to fuse together into one dominating desire to stay in his arms, close against the warmth and hardness of his body, feeling the comfort of his strength, the magic of his hands.

She moved away from him reluctantly into the chilly atmosphere of the room, not daring to look at him.

"*Buenos noches*," she whispered, but Ric did not answer and when she looked round she saw that he had gone, and the door was closing quietly behind him.

He hadn't stayed to keep her warm as he had threatened, but he was in her thoughts most of the night as she turned restlessly on the bed, breathless because of the altitude. Sleep had hardly come than she was awakened by the crying of Felipe and the sound of many bells clanging, reminding her that it was Sunday and that Potosi was a city of many churches, which had been endowed in the past by the men who had exploited the silver mines.

Shivering with cold, Cherry lifted Felipe and changed him. He yelled lustily when the cold air touched his warm skin, and did not really quieten down until she had fed him in the dining room where the wild-looking waiter hovered and could not do enough to help her.

Ricardo came in, looking vigorous and cold-eyed, to join her for breakfast, but Cherry found she could not face scrambled eggs.

"Now who is the bear with the sore head?" he mocked her.

"I didn't sleep well," she replied, conscious of sickness and dizziness. "It was all your fault," she burst out, and then, swept by the memory of their goodnight kiss, she blushed.

"Mine?" He raised his eyebrows in that supercilious way she detested. "No, I don't think so. It's the altitude. Potosi is a bad place; plenty of *mate de coca* for you this morning. I want to get to Vallera today, so I don't want you delaying us by succumbing to the *soroche*."

His cool, slightly contemptuous manner alerted her. She felt she was back where she started in the quiet sunlit library of Juan Benitez's house. When the *mate* came she drank it all, obediently, and it brought ease as it always did. Confusion and anxiety faded, and she was even able to eat a little.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you." Meeting his watchful eyes, she smiled, but Ric did not smile back. "You'll have me becoming an addict to *mate* yet," she added lightly, sensing that once again their relationship had changed. He had definitely withdrawn. Was it because he was almost home?

"And why not? Isn't it better to follow the customs of the country while you're living in it, instead of fighting them?" he said coolly.

"Like the *abrazo*, and flirting, and sharing bedrooms?"

Amusement glimmered briefly in his eyes, then was gone, leaving them hard and enigmatic.

"You're beginning to get the message," he drawled. "Now that you're feeling better I want to make a suggestion to you, something for you to think about on the way down to Vallera. Would you consider staying on as Felipe's nanny if the position were offered to you?"

"But you said you were going to find someone to be your wife to look after him and Marita."

"I know what I said, and I teased you a little about it to see how you would react to the suggestion that I might consider you as eligible. Your reaction told me a lot about you, Cherry."

Across the table their eyes met; hers puzzled, his still cool and unrevealing.

"I'm glad. I hope you found it entertaining," she retorted, wondering a little why she should feel so hurt.

"Now you're offended again," he said with a sigh. "It seems I'm often my own worst enemy. Will you think about my suggestion, please? I gather that there's no urgent need for you to return to England and at Vallera there's no one to look after a baby like Felipe. My mother is too infirm and Francisca doesn't like babies and knows nothing about them."

"You could employ someone like Josefa."

"I could, but why should I when you're around and available for employment, even though you have no wish to be considered as eligible for marriage? A truly modern, liberated woman."

She regarded him searchingly for signs of mockery. They were there all right, and her palm itched to slap him.

"I'll think about it," she said coolly.

"Bueno. I can expect nothing more until you have seen Vallera and have met my mother. Now if you and Felipe are ready we'll be on our way. You'll find the climate in the valleys much more to your liking and you won't suffer any more from the *soroche*."

CHAPTER FOUR

THEY drove away from the hotel down a narrow cobbled street, where sunlight slanted across high white walls broken here and there only by a single window covered by a grille, or by a secretive-looking door set under an archway in the deep black shadow. Bells were ringing again, and in a square planted with cypress trees, sedate-looking families dressed in their Sunday best clothes walked to the Cathedral, white and shining in the cold sparkling sunshine.

The last Cherry saw of Potosi was a collection of russet red roofs and shining Spanish towers and turrets clustering under the lifeless red cone of the Cerro Rico, the mountain where silver had once been mined. Then the city, that strange distillation of old Spain marooned high above the rest of the world, had gone and the road was twisting down through a land of tortured rocks. Huge boulders lay scattered about, rolled there by some giant-like forces; hairpin bends hung perilously over cliff edges and most of the time Ric used only the two bottom gears of the vehicle. Cherry was glad that it was strong and had a four-wheel drive, because the road was too rough for an ordinary car. Dust hung in sun-shot shapes and filmed the leaves of the few plants struggling to survive at the roadside.

Eventually the scenery changed, became softer and more undulating. River beds wound between peaceful fields, lorries laden with produce and people loomed up and were overtaken. Many of the people seemed to be strumming *ckarangos*, and were singing as they travelled.

"Sunday is market day in Betanzos," Ric explained, "and the Quechas always make music wherever they are going. They are the song-writers of Bolivia."

Further on they passed groups of Indians on foot, driving flocks of sheep before them. The bright *ponchos* of the men and the gaudy

swinging skirts of the high-hatted women flaunted gay colour against the brown land as they strummed and sang, and Cherry was aware of a gaiety and vitality which had been absent in the dour, impassive Indians of *xhealtiplano*.

Betanzos was full of noise and movement. In the central *plaza*, Quecha women squatted on the ground, their wares spread about them as they called to passers-by to come and buy. At the hotel Ric was greeted heartily by the proprietor, who knew him, but since Cherry was not introduced, she found she was being stared at surreptitiously by the proprietor, his wife and several other people in the dining room. It seemed, as she sat feeding Felipe with his midday bottle, that a great deal of whispering was going on. Presumably they were hazarding guesses about her relationship to Ric, and were getting the most unlikely answers.

Beyond the town the land was a broad sweep of sun-soaked tawny vales and rolling hills. Fields of golden stubble alternated with freshly-ploughed ones. Fronds of acacia trees provided shade along riversides and tall agaves loomed soldierlike over the curve of a hill. Bronze, ochre, sand and sepia were the predominant colours.

"We're almost there," said Ric, with a sound of deep satisfaction in his voice.

Cherry glanced at him. He had removed his hat, and his silver-streaked hair glinted with golden lights in the sunlight which also gilded his tanned face. Suddenly she saw him as being part of the land through which they were passing, big and tawny, with that impression of hidden tensile strength, of muscle flexed in long, indolent-seeming limbs, of a quality which was essentially pantherish.

Her time alone with him was coming to an end, and she felt a sharp, surprising pang of regret because it was almost over. Soon, possibly

within minutes, she would be meeting new people and coping with different impressions and challenges. They would come between her and him. Once again her relationship with him would change. Possibly it would become strained under new pressures and would even disintegrate.

She didn't want that to happen. She wanted, with an unusually fierce desire, to continue to know him, to grow closer to him, not apart from him. Alarmed by the strength of the feeling, Cherry turned away sharply to look out of the window, and pretended to be absorbed in the scenery in case he noticed her tenseness.

The vehicle turned off the main road, which was better surfaced than any other road they had been on throughout the whole journey; now they were on a narrower road, where tall poplars slanted long spears of shadow. Through the spaces between the trunks of the trees she had glimpses of neatly-tilled fields, of cattle browsing, of cypress trees crowding together to form pools of deep green shade against the tawny ground.

A white-walled house with a roof of glowing terracotta tiles appeared. A verandah with stone pillars around which leafy vines twisted was built along the whole front of it over arches in which big doors were set, leading, presumably, to storerooms. Formal gardens with neatly-clipped yew trees and paved pathways sloped away on one side of the house, carefully primed fruit trees stretched in neat rows on the other.

In the big central courtyard, around which the house was built and into which they drove, flowers bloomed in profusion, climbing up trellises attached to the white walls and hanging down from an upper gallery. In the centre a large replica of the bronze fountain with the panthers' heads, which Cherry had admired at the house in La Paz, gleamed with a soft golden sheen under the water which trickled over it.

"What a beautiful place!" The comment burst from her spontaneously as she stepped down from the vehicle. "I would never have dreamed that such a place could exist ..." She broke off, embarrassed by her own enthusiasm, as Ric came round the front of the vehicle.

"In Bolivia, after the places you've passed through on your way here," he finished for her drily, as he leaned a shoulder against the vehicle and grinned down at her. "But there are other mansions like this one and there are other estates along the road between here and Sucre. Not in such good condition, perhaps, their fields not so well tilled and their orchards not so well cared for - but then you see those other places have not had the benefit of the attention given to Vallera by that hardworking perfectionist, Arthur Somervell."

His rather cold, objective remark chilled her slightly because it conveyed dislike of his own father.

"But you must have thought highly of what he did here, or you wouldn't have wanted to continue with the work," she objected.

His glance was sardonic as he thrust his hands in his pockets and leaned idly against the door of the station wagon. They were alone in the sunlit courtyard, where birds twittered and flew about and the warm air was scented with jasmine.

"It wasn't as simple as that," Ric drawled. "I continue with the work he began because I like it and because I want to live here, not because I think highly of his achievements. Yet at one time I wasn't sure what I was, never mind what I wanted to be."

She nodded.

"I understand. You went through a crisis of identity. It's not an unusual occurrence in young people, especially when their parents come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds."

"Then I'm glad to learn that my behaviour wasn't unique. It certainly wasn't appreciated by my father, who thought he'd bred some sort of monster. I behaved badly."

"Like a black sheep, a never-do-it-well, as if you had a screw loose," she mocked softly. Her sudden understanding of him was a new surge of feeling, wanting to reach out and enfold him. As if he felt it, he gave her a puzzled glance.

"That's true, and Fidel was a spectator of my behaviour when we were students together in La Paz. After my disastrous career as a student I eventually graduated, but instead of coming back here I went off to Europe where I indulged in a futile round of pleasure until one day I woke up and had another sort of crisis."

"The puritan in you rebelled," she guessed.

"How well you put it!" he mocked.

"What did you do then?"

"I went to visit my English relatives who still own and farm the farm where my father was born, the youngest of three sons. It was in the old stone farmhouse overlooking a Yorkshire dale that I thought about Vallera, and suddenly I knew what I was and what I would be. A farmer in Bolivia."

"And you came back?"

"But only just in time. My father's health had deteriorated, and my mother is not a farmer. She was glad to have someone to take over, and because he was ill I was able to do things my way. Even so, since he died I've often wished I hadn't wasted so much time when I was younger and had listened to him more." He shrugged his shoulders. "But that is like crying for the moon. We did not get on well with each other. These things happen."

"In the best of families," she murmured consolingly, and again he gave her a surprised glance.

"You are very understanding, Cherry," he said softly.

The closeness of their minds at that moment could only be given one form of expression, but it was not possible because the sound of running footsteps broke the sunlit silence as a little girl came towards them, her long black pigtails flying behind her. She was wearing jeans and a white cotton T-shirt and her skin had the same dark sheen as Felipe's. As Ric moved forward she flung herself into his arms, and was swept up to be kissed affectionately. Then she burst into a torrent of Spanish.

Felipe let out a lusty yell. The girl's questions stopped abruptly. Her big dark eyes opened wide.

"Quien es?" she asked.

While Ric explained, Cherry lifted Felipe from the carrycot into her arms. She guessed that the girl was Marita and that the time had come to introduce her to her tiny half-brother.

"Marita doesn't understand much English, so you'll have to use your Spanish," said Ric as he introduced the girl to Cherry. "I've told her who he is. It isn't too much of a surprise to her because my mother has prepared her." A movement of someone else approaching caught his attention, and his face lit up with the now familiar teasing devilry. *"Hola, Francisca,"* he called out. *"Como esta us ted? Have you missed me, little cousin?"*

Marita was gazing with awe at Felipe, touching his plump cheek with a gentle finger, letting his tiny fingers curl around one of hers. ,

"He is pretty. He is mine. My little brother. I would like to hold him," she said in Spanish.

"Like this," Cherry explained, trying to ignore the embrace which was taking place between Ric and Francisca. Her preconception of Senorita Francisca Sorata as plump and middle-aged had been completely wrong. The woman who had exchanged an *abrazo* with Ric and was now being guided towards herself was not much more than twenty years of age.

She was small and slim, her creamy-coloured skin smooth and thick like the petals of a magnolia flower. Her abundant shining hair, swathed in a smooth chignon, was predominantly black; but in the sunlight it glowed here and there with the sheen of chestnut, a glossy reddish brown. Her eyes were also chestnut in colour, and shaded by very long black lashes. Her beauty was completely natural and in full bloom. She was wearing a short-skirted black dress and long black stockings, obviously in mourning for the death of Felipe's father.

The glance of the chestnut eyes was youthfully contemptuous as it roved over Cherry's travel-rumpled trouser suit, pale face and flyaway brown hair, which had not benefited in any way from the long journey. Then it flicked down to Felipe, who was once more in Cherry's arms.

"Are you sure he is Juan's son?" Francisca's voice was a disappointment, harsh and shrill, not in keeping with the cream and chestnut colouring.

"As sure as I can be without asking Juan himself," retorted Ric curtly. "He looks like Juan."

"Perhaps," conceded Francisca. "And the child's mother? Is this she?" She gestured towards Cherry.

"No." Ric's eyes met Cherry's for a brief moment, amusement glinting in them. Obviously he was recalling, as she was, his own assumption in La Paz that she was Felipe's mother. "This is Miss

Cherry Hilton, from England. She has been acting as Felipe's nanny and has brought him out here. His mother was killed with Juan. She was English too."

"I might have guessed." Francisca's shapely mouth curled with scorn. "Juan was a fool to be caught by her."

"He was my brother and he is dead," cautioned Ric softly, and Cherry's scalp prickled as she recognized the threat in his voice. "Be careful how you speak of him to me."

"But do you not realize," Francisca persisted passionately, "that if this baby had not been born you would have everything that is Matino? Everything!"

"I do not want everything that is Matino," he replied coldly. "Now will you please take Miss Hilton into the house and show her where the nursery is?"

"I did not prepare it." Francisca looked defiant and a little uneasy.

"Why not?" The easy drawl was threatening again.

"I was sure you would not bring the child here."

"Go and prepare it now." The order was rapped out and Francisca flinched. Her eyelids dropped over her eyes.

"*Si, senor,*" she murmured quite humbly, but the slanting sidelong glance she gave Cherry was calculating and vindictive. "How long will Miss Hilton be staying here?"

"Longer, perhaps, than you guess. It's none of your business how long she stays. Go and do as I tell you," said Ric sharply.

With another slow, hostile glance in Cherry's direction Francisca turned on her heel and marched off into the house.

"Marita will take you into the *salon* where you and Felipe can wait until the nursery is prepared for you. It won't take long. It's just a question of removing dust-covers, making the beds and seeing that all is clean and ready for your use," said Ric. Although he spoke in English to her the note of command was still there and left her in no doubt about who was the boss at Vallera. He was, and if his orders were not carried out he had no compunction about showing his displeasure or in making it felt. "I'll go and find my mother now," he continued "to tell her you and Felipe are here. She'll probably want to see him, so be ready to take him to her should she send for you."

Inside the house was dim and cool. The *salon* was a big room with an arched ceiling and full-length windows opening out on to the front verandah, furnished with beautiful antique Spanish and French furniture. Silver ornaments and delicate porcelain gleamed behind the glass doors of cupboards and original paintings hung on the walls; all relics, Cherry guessed, of the period when the Matino family had mined silver and tin and had been amongst the wealthiest in the country.

She was holding a rather stilted conversation with the shy Marita while Felipe snoozed uneasily in her arms, when Francisca appeared at last.

"The rooms for you and the . baby are ready now," she said, "so I will take you to them and you can tell me if there is anything else you require there for looking after the child. I expect you will spend most of your time there."

"I expect so," conceded Cherry, and asked Marita to fetch the holdall in which she kept changes for Felipe from the station wagon. Marita skipped off, only too glad to do something to help her new brother,

and Cherry followed the straight-backed Francisca along a passage to another wing of the big sprawling house.

The nursery was a self-contained suite of rooms. The biggest room was furnished with a table and chairs and a cooker where the child's food could be prepared. It had three big windows which framed a view of tawny fields and groves of poplars stretching away to the curved outline of a hill. In addition there were two bedrooms, one for the baby and one for the nursemaid, and there was also a small bathroom.

"Is this always your work, this looking after babies?" asked Francisca curiously as she watched Cherry lay Felipe on the table and begin to remove his outer clothing.

"Yes." Cherry sensed the hostility again. She was unable to account for it and decided that it would be best if she trod cautiously.

"You are not like the other Englishwoman who came here. Ric brought her too. *She* wanted to marry him," said Francisca, and again that contempt for anything English was noticeable.

"Oh?"

"Aren't you interested?"

"Am I supposed to be interested in Senor Somervell's personal life?" countered Cherry coolly.

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed Francisca in obvious exasperation. "Now *you* sound like Uncle Arthur. 'None of your business, Francisca,' he used to say when I asked him questions. I can hear him now. He was cold and strict. He drove Ric away from Vallera and made Tia Bianca cry. But Ric came back, and sometimes he sounds like his father too. Did you not hear him down there in the courtyard, how he spoke to me?" Francisca shrugged, then smiled. "But me, I do not mind a man who is

master in his own house. That is how we expect them to be here. We have no use for men who grow their hair long, as in your country. We like our men to be masculine in every way and superior to women."

"So I've heard," murmured Cherry drily, thinking that it would take a strong man to deal with Francisca, who was obviously a strong-willed determined young woman.

"You do not approve?" Francisca had noted the dryness and suspected disagreement. "You believe perhaps in equality of the sexes? Bah! I have read about such theories. They are stupid. Men and women are created differently, so how can they be equal?"

"I agree with you up to a point," said Cherry. "But in a world where women can compete with men for jobs, they should be treated equally and judged by their abilities and not by their sex."

"Did you have to compete with a man for this job?" asked Francisca.

"No, not at all," laughed Cherry. "It was because a man did not know how to look after a baby that I got it."

Francisca nodded.

"Because it would not be fitting for a man to care for a child in that way, or natural."

"Not all the time, I agree. But fathers like to care for their children sometimes. I have a brother who gets up in the night to see to his baby son so that his wife can get a good night's rest."

"You mean he changes the napkin?" exclaimed Francisca. "But that is terrible! I cannot imagine any of the men I know doing that. Juan would not have done it for Marita."

"What about Senor Somervell?" asked Cherry. "Don't you think he would want to care for his own children?"

As soon as she had finished speaking she knew she had made a mistake in mentioning Ric, because the beautiful long-lashed eyes narrowed.

"You are interested in him?" queried Francisca. "Like the other Englishwoman was? For all you call him Senor Somervell so stiffly, it is a pretence. I cannot believe you called him that all the time you were together on the way here. I know Ric too well. He likes to flirt with any woman who is around, even with a child's nanny, sometimes even with me. It is a game he plays, and which many men play. The other woman thought he was serious - I hope you will not make the same mistake."

"He has given me no reason to make such a mistake," said Cherry coldly. She was definitely on thin ice now.

"I am glad that is so. I would not like to have to make your stay here uncomfortable. You see, the other woman stayed only as long as I allowed her to stay."

"What do you mean?" asked Cherry, a little startled.

"Just what I have said. She left because I did not want her here. Let me explain and then you will be in no doubt about the situation here; one day I shall marry Ric and shall be mistress here. It is arranged."

Cherry swallowed hard to keep back a retort. She wondered who had done the arranging, and suspected it was Francisca.

"I can assure you, *senorita*, you don't have to worry about me," she replied smoothly. "I haven't come all the way to Bolivia to find a husband, but only to bring a baby to its grandmother. Marriage isn't a career in which I'm interested at the moment - I prefer my

independence. I'm not going to say I didn't enjoy the company of Senor Somervell on the way here because I did, very much, but I'm certainly not interested in him as a possible husband."

Thinking she had done rather well and had laid Francisca's suspicions to rest, Cherry turned to smile at Marita, who had returned with the holdall and began to busy herself with changing Felipe's nappy.

"Thank you, Senorita Hilton, for being so forthright," said Francisca pleasantly, "you have relieved my mind. And now please excuse me, I have much to do for this evening. I shall see you later."

She went briskly from the room, but Marita stayed, apparently fascinated by the baby and all that had to be done for him. She watched over him when Cherry placed him on a rug in a patch of sunlight so that he could kick a little, and later helped to bath him.

It was while Cherry was feeding him from a bottle and Marita was sitting on a nearby stool watching that there was a knock on the door. It opened slowly, and an elderly woman leaning on a walking-stick entered slowly. She was dressed in a long flowing black dress, her thick white hair piled up on her head, its silvery shade contrasting dramatically with her olive-complexioned face. The arrogant curve of her nose was offset by the sweetness and generosity in the full curve of her mouth, and under arching white eyebrows her eyes were a deep indigo blue.

"*Mi abuela!*" cried Marita, springing to her feet and going across to the woman to take her free hand. "Look, Grand- mama! Here is Felipe, my baby brother."

There was a stateliness about the woman which commanded respect, and Cherry gathered Felipe up, instinctively preparing to stand up.

"No, *senorita*, please continue to feed him. It isn't wise to disturb a young child while he's feeding." The woman spoke English fluently.

"I'll sit here with you and Marita and talk to you a little. I am Bianca Somervell."

"I am pleased to meet you," said Cherry shyly. Bianca Somervell might be descended from wealthy mining potentates and even aristocratic Europeans, but she had a simplicity of approach which possessed great charm.

"And I'm pleased to meet you. Cherry Hilton," Dona Bianca said, her eyes twinkling a little as she sat down in the chair which Marita pulled forward for her. "Ric has told me how impressed he has been by the loving care which you have given the little one on the journey here, so I felt I must come to see you and express personally my admiration for your determination to bring the child to me, in spite of certain efforts to prevent you from doing so."

Cherry glanced up sharply. The dark blue eyes, so like Ric's, were dancing with a mockery which was also familiar.

"I hope you have forgiven his behaviour towards you in La Paz," continued Dona Bianca. "He has his own way of doing everything, which would not always be mine. I asked him to go and meet you because I'm afraid my emotions often lead me into acting impulsively. When Fidel wrote to me about the baby I wrote back at once saying send or bring the child to me. It was only afterwards that it was pointed out to me that the child might not be Juan's, and by then it was too late. Fidel had made the arrangements to send the baby, so Ric came to my aid and said he would go and make sure that he was not an impostor. Did he explain this to you?"

"Yes. Eventually," replied Cherry with a touch of dryness, and saw the twinkle come back into the dark blue eyes. "My instructions were to hand Felipe over to you only, so I was rather upset when he was snatched from under my nose and then later his identity was doubted."

"I'm sure you were. But you are here now, and in a few minutes you may hand him over to me."

"Has Senor Somervell given you Felipe's papers?" asked Cherry, determined to make sure that everything had been done properly.

"He has."

"And the medallion also?"

"*Como?* The medallion? Which medallion is that?"

"Senor Diaz found it with Felipe. He said he believed it to be a Matino heirloom. It is solid silver and quite old, I think, and it has a panther engraved on it. Senor Somervell took it from me and promised he would give it to you."

It seemed to Cherry that Dona Bianca looked suddenly very worried.

"This is very strange," she commented. "He hasn't given it to me. Maybe he forgot. Thank you for telling me about it, I'll remind him about it. And now, since Felipe has finished his bottle, I'll just hold him for a while."

Cherry handed the baby over and Dona Bianca took him, cradling him competently in her arms. The expression on her face was sad.

"See, Marita, he has dark hair and an olive skin like you," she said to the little girl. "And also like your father and your grandfather, General Benitez." She turned and looked at Cherry. "We Matinos are not as dark," she explained. "We're inclined to have brown hair, or even chestnut-coloured hair like Francisca and Ric. I myself had red hair when I was young, the dark red which you find amongst Spaniards sometimes. And then of course my mother was French, from Alsace,, and she was brown-haired and blue-eyed. You are interested in family likenesses, Miss Hilton?"

"Isn't everyone?" replied Cherry with a smile. "I thought that perhaps Senor Somervell must be like his father, because he has a fair skin and blue eyes."

"The complexion only. Arthur was fair-skinned, it is true, but small-boned and short in the leg. I was the tall one of the partnership, and Ric is like my father, even to the silver streak in his hair. One day I will show you a portrait of my father. He was a very handsome and powerful man."

"Do you see any likeness to your other son in Felipe, apart from his colouring?"

"Yes..He is like Juan as a baby." She sighed. "I only hope he will have a happier life than my poor Juan. When his first wife, Maria, who was Marita's mother, was killed in an accident he was inconsolable; you see, he loved her very much, and I'm afraid his relationship with women since then has not been exemplary. Which is why we were a little suspicious of the identity of the child. I can't help wondering, too, why he didn't tell me of his second marriage - he must have known how pleased I would be to learn that he had found someone else to love. Did Fidel say nothing about it to you?"

"No. But he did tell me that the marriage had been kept a secret from the Embassy staff too."

"And now we'll never know. Here, you had best take the child and put him to bed. I would be very pleased, Miss Hilton, if you would consider staying on here at Vallera as Felipe's nanny. I believe Ric mentioned it to you on the way here, and you told him you would think about it"

"Yes, I did, but..."

"But you haven't come to a decision. That is understandable. You have only been here a few hours and know nothing about the place. I

would like you to stay with us for a month before deciding. That should give you enough time to find out if you fit in here. I know it is a long way from your home in England, but I am told you are independent and can please yourself in this matter. There is no one waiting for you in England? No young man?"

"No, there is no one waiting for me," Cherry admitted.

"*Bueno*. Then I am sure you'll find living here, even for a month, an interesting and, I hope, a pleasant experience. We are a simple household. I do not care for ostentation and neither does Ric, both of us are much more interested in showing what can be done when land is conserved and farmed properly. It is a lesson which has to be taught to, and learned by, the Indians as well as the Spanish Bolivians. You would find yourself an important member of our family and would be of great help to us; also it would be in the best interests of the baby if he didn't have to change his nanny. In losing both parents he has not had the best of starts in this life, and I'm sure you are aware of the necessity of stability in a young child's life, and will agree with me when I say you are in a position to provide some of that stability."

How difficult this gentle gracious woman was making it for her to refuse to stay! Cherry found herself agreeing without hesitation.

"Yes, I could stay."

"For a month, and then we shall re-assess the situation. *Bueno*, I am glad. Perhaps you'll teach Marita some English and how to look after babies properly, so that when she grows up she will be a good mother," Dona Bianca smiled. "Ric will arrange a salary with you, I am not good at such things. That is why I married Arthur when my own father died and left this estate to me, and also why I let Ric take over the ownership and management of the place when Arthur died. Arthur made big improvements here, and he showed the local people

how to modernize their methods of farming; now we often have groups of agricultural students staying here to work and to observe."

"You must be very pleased with the contribution the estate has made to the life of the country," said Cherry.

"Yes, I am. And pleased also that Ric is continuing the work which his father began."

Dona Bianca rose slowly to her feet.

"Tonight we are having a late dinner - something which we do only when there is an occasion to celebrate or we have guests. Tonight we have both, the arrival of Juan's son and my first grandson and two old and valued friends who have been staying here this weekend," said Dona Bianca. "I would like you to join us."

"Thank you," said Cherry.

"Francisca likes to entertain in the grand manner, so we dress .up to please her and meet for sherry in the big *salon*. I'm sure you'll be interested to meet my guests, Don Diego Mendoza and his son. Don Diego is a professor of English at the University of Sucre and he spent some years at Oxford University and is very fond of talking about his experiences there. So we'll see you later, Miss Hilton. Come, Marita, it's time Felipe went to bed. You can see him again tomorrow before you go to school."

The lateness of the dining hour gave Cherry a chance to unpack and put her clothing away in the drawers and wardrobe provided, then she bathed and shampooed her hair. Because it was so fine her hair dried quickly, fluffing out about her face like a dark halo; then she applied a little make-up, outlining her mouth in cherry pink lipstick. She knew she could not compete with Francisca's warm natural beauty, but she thought she looked cool and composed in her long-sleeved evening gown, which was how she wished to appear.

When she reached the big *salon* at exactly a quarter to nine, she found two people already there, Francisca and a slim dark young man of about thirty years of age. They were speaking rapidly in Spanish, Using many gestures, and seemed to be having a fierce argument. They stopped abruptly when their attention was caught by the sight of Cherry hovering in the doorway.

Francisca raised her eyebrows rather haughtily.

"You want something, Miss Hilton?" she asked in her heavily-accented English. She was wearing a rather old-fashioned black velvet dinner gown which had the effect of making her look older than her years.

"Dona Bianca told me to come down here before dinner."

"She has met you so soon?" Francisca seemed annoyed to find that something had happened in the house without her knowledge.

"She came to see the baby," replied Cherry gently. She had decided that nothing that Francisca said to her must be allowed to irritate her, and that if she was going to stay at Vallera she must be sure never to annoy Francisca in any way.

"But you will not be dining with us. You are only the nanny," said Francisca.

"And you are only the companion to an elderly lady, yet you dine with us," teased the man, and winked one black eye at Cherry.

"But I am a relative," retorted Francisca, obviously determined to be objectionable.

"One without manners too," taunted the man, whose English was much more fluent than Francisca's. He held out a thin brown hand to

Cherry and smiled. "I am Rafael Mendoza. I am pleased to meet you. Do you stay long here?"

"For a month, maybe longer," said Cherry, cautiously putting her hand in his. He did not pull her forward into the *abrazo* but just shook her hand and released it.

"That is good," he said, "you are most welcome. A little competition will do Francisca no harm at all. Will it, *chiquita*?" He smiled down affectionately at Francisca.

"I do not know what you mean when you talk about competition," replied Francisca, who was still looking haughty.

Rafael did not reply, because Dona Bianca was coming into the room with a tall thin gentleman. Although the man held himself straight and there was pride in his aquiline face and in the set of his high flat shoulders, melancholy lingered in the set of his thin-lipped mouth and in the depths of his fine black eyes; the same melancholy Cherry had noticed in the eyes of the Indians she had met. Dona Bianca introduced him as Don Diego Mendoza, and then said sharply to Francisca:

"You have not offered sherry to Miss Hilton. Do so at once."

Colour spread over Francisca's face as she realized she had been caught out in a social solecism by a person she did not wish to offend. Quickly she moved towards a small table on ' which decanters and glasses winked and glittered in the light from the big chandelier.

"Most people from England prefer a sweet sherry. We have a fine *oloroso* and there is an *amontillado*," she said to Cherry.

"I prefer a dry sherry, please, if you have it," said Cherry, suspecting that she was being patronized.

A glass was filled and handed to her, and then Francisca attended to Dona Bianca and Don Diego.

"Ric is late," she said, coming back to sip sherry with Rafael and Cherry.

"Perhaps he is working," said Rafael drily.

"At this time of day?" exclaimed Francisca. "He can-do nothing outside. It is dark."

"There are always accounts and paperwork to catch up on, as he has often told me," replied Rafael. "And then he is partially English, and we all know that Englishmen prefer work to a light-hearted flirtation with a pretty woman. Am I not right, Miss Hilton? Did you not find that so on your journey here with Ric?"

It was a leading question and Cherry was glad that Dona Bianca was too absorbed in conversation with Don Diego to hear it. Once again she warned herself to step carefully while Francisca was watching and listening.

"I don't know Senor Somervell very well," she said coolly, "so I can't really tell you what *he* prefers to do, but I know there are many Englishmen who like to flirt as much as any Bolivian, given the chance."

Rafael's dark eyes gleamed with admiration as he smiled at her, but Francisca looked frustrated, and Cherry wondered whether the woman had asked Rafael to find out, if he could, exactly what her relationship with Ric had been on the journey from La Paz.

At that point Ric himself came into the room, silent-footed as ever. He greeted Don Diego politely, then went to help himself to sherry. As he raised his glass to his lips his eyes met Cherry's and she felt that lovely sense of recognition again.

It was no longer a shock to the system but a glow of warmth and pleasure, a meeting with a close and intimate friend in a room of strangers. It was also dangerous and must be suppressed at all costs, so she looked away quickly, met Rafael's interested glance again and smiled at him.

He smiled back and said, "Do I have to call you Miss Hilton all the time?"

"No, I'm usually called Cherry."

"But that is delightful. There is an English poem, is there not, Father?" he called out to Don Diego, and the older man looked up. "Which poem is it which refers to a woman's mouth being riper than cherries?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked Francisca.

"So that I can serenade her, of course," retorted Rafael, his black eyes dancing with mischief.

"The best known poem is *Cherry Ripe*, by Herrick," said Don Diego, his eyes sharpening and losing their sadness as he searched his memory. "But there is another to which two poets lay claim. It likens a woman's face to a garden where cherries grow that none can buy until ripe themselves do cry."

"That sounds perfect," cried Rafael excitedly. "The name of the poets, please."

"Rafael is a poet himself," said Dona Bianca softly to Cherry. "Maybe later we will get him to say one of his poems to us. You are not too embarrassed by his interest in your name?"

"A little. But it used to happen at home in England all the time."

"Campion," announced Don Diego triumphantly, looking round at everyone as if expecting praise for this feat of memory. "Thomas Campion. He was the first to use that image. And then Alison - Richard Alison."

"It is a very fine image," said Rafael, quite seriously. He had taken out a small notebook and was jotting the names of the poets down on it. "Don't you think so, Ric?"

But Ric was busy talking in a whisper to Francisca, his head bent down close to hers. Her face was tilted upwards as she listened, and there was an intimacy between them which was underlined by their shared laughter when he had finished-whispering. Aware of a sudden sharp prick of envy of that shared laughter, Cherry looked away from them, and heard Dona Bianca say something to Francisca which sent the younger woman hurrying from the room.

"Miss Hilton tells me that Fidel gave her a medallion to give to me," said Dona Bianca suddenly, looking across at Ric, who was pouring more sherry for Rafael. "I should like to see it, please. Do you have it with you, Ric?"

Ric flicked a slightly mocking glance in Cherry's direction, which she returned coolly, then held up the glass of sherry he had poured and looked at it against the light, turning to make a remark about it to Rafael before handing it to him.

"Ricardo," said Dona Bianca sweetly, but authoritatively, "you have not answered my question."

"About what?" he parried suavely.

"The medallion which Miss Hilton gave to you. Do you have it with you now?"

"No, it's in my room. I'll show it to you another time."

"Very well, but don't forget. Please take care of it. I don't like to think of it being left lying around carelessly."

Now there was a surprising bite in Dona Bianca's gentle voice, and Ric gave her a slow, measuring glance before sipping more sherry.

"Which medallion?" asked Francisca, who had returned to the room.

"I don't know, but I'm hoping to find out," replied Dona Bianca, with a touch of irony and another sharp glance at Ric's averted profile. "Shall we go into the dining room, Francisca? Is the meal ready?"

"*Si.*" Francisca was smiling, very much the gracious hostess now. "I would like you all to come. Don Diego, will you go with Tia Bianca? And you come with Miss Hilton, Rafael. I shall go with Ric."

As they went in procession from the *salon* through a curved archway into the candlelit dining room, where ornately carved silver cutlery and dishes gleamed softly on a starched white damask cloth, Rafael pointed to Francisca, who walked ahead of him with her arm through Ric's. Then he touched his temple with his forefinger, tapping the nail against bone as he grinned and winked at Cherry.

"She is a little crazy, that one," he whispered. "She has the delusions. She sees herself as the great *chatelaine* of a big country house, the mistress of Vallera, holding fast to the old customs and traditions of Spain. She forgets that our country must move forward with the twentieth century."

"You sound like a revolutionary," teased Cherry. "Are you?"

"No more than Ric is or has been. No more than Dona Bianca or her late husband Arthur. Like them I believe in the present and the future, and I see that it lies in the mingling of races and traditions. My grandmother was a *chola*, yet my father prefers to ignore that fact. I do not. For all I was baptised a Christian and speak and think in

Spanish, my soul is Indian. I worship the sun, the stars and the mountains..."

"But not just now, Rafael," mocked Ric as they reached the table. "Later when we've eaten and drunk and our mood is a little more mellow, you can declaim your latest poetic creation and we'll all listen. Will you sit here, Cherry, please?"

She slid into the chair he held for her to find herself sitting on his right hand, facing Francisca and next to Rafael who was sitting on Dona Bianca's left. The food, which had been cooked by Francisca herself and which was served by her, consisted of a spicy concoction made from pork with delicious ingredients of bananas, peanuts and tomatoes. Wine was served by Ric, a light Spanish wine which he told her had been brought at one time by a Matino from Spain.

"There are still bottles and bottles of it laid away in the store-rooms under the house," he said. "Francisca, you must take Cherry to see the store-rooms and the rest of the house - she has been to Spain and will be interested to see how like some of the old Spanish houses this one is."

"*Si*, I shall do that. I envy you your visits to Spain, Miss Hilton. I should like very much to go there."

Francisca's remark reminded Cherry of Isabella and the message of sympathy she had sent, so she leaned forward to pass it on to Dona Bianca.

"You did not tell me you had stayed with Isabella," murmured Ric as he leaned forward to pour more wine into Cherry's glass.

"I forgot," she replied coolly.

"We had so many other things to discuss, hadn't we? Such as identities and medallions." He drawled the last word as if to place

emphasis on it, and she guessed at once that he was displeased because she had mentioned it to his mother. But she was also displeased because he had not fulfilled his promise to give the medallion to Dona Bianca with the papers.

"Why didn't you give it to your mother?" she asked under the cover of a noisy argument which had broken out between Don Diego and his son, and which had drawn Francisca's attention away.

"Because I didn't wish to give it to her." His answer had the effect of pushing her away from him.

"But you must have known I would tell her about it! I was instructed to give it to her and to no one else, remember."

"*Sí*, I remember. Fidel's instructions which had to be so faithfully carried out," he remarked sardonically. "He must have guessed that he would embarrass me by insisting that it should be given to my mother."

"I don't see how that could embarrass you," she said.

"And I don't expect you to see, *senorita*," he replied coolly. "I've had reason to warn you before not to comment on concerns which are not yours."

She felt as if he had just slammed a door in her face. Surprised, she stared at him, unable to conceal the pain which his reprimand inflicted upon her. He looked back at her and there was a hint of mockery in his eyes, as if he guessed she was hurt and was amused that she should be. She glanced down at the wine shimmering in her glass, calling on all her hard-won poise to help her through this difficult moment. In spite of the few moments of closeness in the courtyard when they had arrived at Vallera he had lost interest in her; the withdrawal she had sensed in Potosi was now complete. He was no longer the partner she had danced with at a party in La Paz, nor the

companion who had made a long tedious journey interesting. He was the enemy who had questioned her with such cool authority in the house at La Paz on the day of her arrival.

"I see," she replied lightly, not looking at him. "The truce is over."

"There's nothing I can say or do now to make you think otherwise," he said suavely.

His reply alerted her. Looking up, she found that Francisca was no longer listening to the other argument but was watching and listening to her and Ric. Hastily, Cherry sipped some of her wine and turned to speak to Rafael.

The dessert of fresh fruit, paw-paws, bananas and custard apples was followed by coffee and *pisco*. Rafael, his blood fired by the wine and the *pisco*, declaimed his new poem in praise of the high *cordillera*, the lofty mountains which dominated the country. When he finished it he ignored the applause of Dona Bianca and Francisca and turned to Cherry to say, "Did you like it?"

"I'm afraid I didn't understand all of it."

"Then I shall explain it to you, on the verandah. You will excuse us, please, Dona Bianca? Cherry does not understand my latest masterpiece. I must explain it to her in private "

"But of course you must," said Dona Bianca with her sweet smile. "You are both excused."

Outside on the verandah the night air was cool, and Cherry was glad her dress had long sleeves. She gazed up at the stars while Rafael leaned against one of the stone pillars supporting the roof of the verandah and lit a cigar. Soon the fragrance of its smoke mingled with the scent of jasmine which clung to the white walls below them.

"You find the stars brighter and bigger here than in your English sky?" said Rafael as he followed her questing glance.

"Yes. And there are some I haven't seen before."

"*El Crux*, perhaps, the Southern Cross," he murmured, he pointed to four stars, one of which glowed much more brightly than the others. Cherry could see that if two lines were drawn between the stars they would form the shape of a cross. "And those five beyond," said Rafael, "we call them *Musca*, the fly. Here, almost above us, is the great constellation of Centaurus, the half man, half horse, and the brightest star of that group is the nearest neighbour of the sun. Tell me, *senorita*, does it seem strange to you to be upside down and to find that July here is a winter month?"

"Not as strange as being high up on the *altiplano* at Tihuanaco felt. There I felt as if the rest of the world didn't exist at all."

"Perhaps it doesn't any more for you," he said rather strangely. "Perhaps you are going to find that your world is going to be here in the future, just as other visitors from your country have. They have come to work here and been trapped by the strangeness and the beauty."

A little perturbed by his statement, which sounded almost like a prediction, Cherry said, "You were going to explain your poem to me."

"So I was. It expresses a sentiment which I feel very strongly. I feel that the soul of man is expressed by the mountains of the Andes; in those masses of tortured rock I see the torment which men suffer here on earth beneath the merciless rays of the diamond-bright sun." He lowered his voice as he leaned beside her on the low wall which edged the verandah. "I used my poem as an excuse to get you away

from watchful eyes for a while, so that you can relax and enjoy the rest of this evening."

"Whose eyes?"

"Francisca's. She's been watching you and Ric all through the meal. I should warn you that she is very possessive of him."

"Oh, dear," sighed Cherry, "and I told her she had nothing to worry about."

"You mean that?" He sounded doubtful.

"Of course. What could there possibly be between Senor Somervell and myself?"

"You were travelling with him for two whole days and nights. Anything could happen in that time, or so Francisca thinks."

"But I was looking after Felipe! Oh, I do hope she isn't going to be difficult."

"Did she tell you about the other Englishwoman who stayed here once and showed so obviously that she wanted to marry Ric?"

"Yes. Did you ever meet her?"

"Once. She was beautiful in a fair glittering way, like a diamond."

"In La Paz I was told that he was considering marriage, and the woman concerned changed her mind," said Cherry.

"That is a different view of the whole affair. If it was the woman who changed her mind, I would say it was changed for her by Francisca."

"But what about Senor Somervell himself? How did he feel about the woman?"

"Quien sabe? Who knows how Ric feels about any woman? Certainly I do not think Francisca knows. She just reacts instinctively, primitively if you like, to anyone who seems dangerous and likely to come between her and her ambition to marry him herself."

"I see. She told me that it is arranged for her to marry Senor Somervell."

"Ha!" Rafael's short laugh was mirthless. "Arranged in her imagination only. As I have told you, she sees herself as the mistress of a great country house. The other woman saw herself as the wife of a handsome man who is heir to half a fortune banked in Europe. Now, I believe that it was when she realized she would have to live here if she married him that she left, hoping possibly that he would follow her."

"But he didn't follow her?"

"Oh, yes, he did, as far as Lima, but there the affair ended. That was nearly two years ago. Since then Ric has flirted with several women."

"The list of eligibles," murmured Cherry.

"Si, or safety in numbers. I am glad you are not like that other Englishwoman. You are gentler, not as hard as she was. I like soft women." He moved nearer and put an arm around her waist. "Don't stiffen or pull away," he whispered. "Our little friend who is so jealous is watching us from the room behind. I am glad that she is, because if she sees us like this she will think I am flirting with you, and she might not be so suspicious of you. Also she might begin to notice I have a few attractions too."

"Why do you want her to do that?"

"I love her and would like to marry her," he confessed simply. "I find it almost unbearable to see her deluded by grandeur, that vision which she has of herself as the great lady in the old Spanish style, holding court here in Vallera. She doesn't see that Ric doesn't need a wife like that and that the time has gone when this house needs a mistress like that."

"What sort of a wife does he need, then?" asked Cherry. *Let's not confuse the issue with love.* Ric's own mocking comment on the situation came to her mind.

"Someone who won't mind living here and who won't mind being a farmer's wife. He at least has no delusions about what he is."

"I'd have thought Francisca would have been an ideal choice for him. She's lived here a long time and she seems to like it."

"She likes it for the wrong reasons, and she lacks other necessary requirements," argued Rafael stubbornly.

"What are they?"

"A sincere liking for children who are not her own. There are two orphans to be brought up. Now Francisca does not like Marita, and she makes the girl's life a misery because she knows Marita has more right to Vallera than she has herself. Already she resents the baby. She was speaking of him when you came into the *salon*; she wished he had never been born and, strange to say, that is one of the reasons why she resents you. You brought him here and one day he might inherit everything which belonged to the Matino family. Perhaps I should warn you that she would not mind if little Felipe had an accident or contracted some dangerous illness and died."

"Oh, how horrible of her! How cruel!" gasped Cherry.

"I agree. But you must remember we have a heritage of cruelty in this country. We are a cruel and clannish people, yet we can be hopelessly sentimental and will die for a slogan. But we are fools where we worship, and Francisca is no exception. She worships Ric, or rather she worships all she believes he represents. You should see her grovel when he lashes out at her."

"I have."

"Then you know what I mean, and I'm afraid that if she marries him she will be most unhappy."

"Am I to assume you wouldn't lash out at her?" Cherry teased.

"No, I wouldn't, because I understand her. Understanding a person is the biggest part of loving her, don't you think?"

"Or him," Cherry agreed thoughtfully. "Thank you for telling me your secret."

"It's no secret," he said with a touch of self-mockery. "Everyone knows about that clown of a schoolteacher, Rafael, making a fool of himself over Francisca. And she takes me for granted, which is why I think a little competition will do her no harm. Loving her as I do, I would like to save her from hurt as well as from hurting others, as I suspect she has done in the past by her own foolish and jealous behaviour. If there is any way I can help her and draw her attention to myself at the same time, I might be able to help her from being disillusioned."

"If I can help you I will," said Cherry.

"I knew you were kind, *senorita*, as soon as I set eyes on you. Kindness and humour, they will take you far and may even win you your heart's desire."

"You sound like a gypsy predicting the future," laughed Cherry. "I've really no idea what my heart's desire is at present."

"You will find it while you are here. I feel sure of that," he replied. "Thank you for your co-operation."

Far away there was a sound which was unmistakable to Cherry's ear. Felipe had woken and needed feeding. She explained quickly to Rafael.

"To have such infantile competition on a beautiful night like this!" he mourned. "Then I shall say goodnight and hope to see you again soon. Maybe one day you'll come to Sucre, and I shall have the pleasure of showing you the city. It is a pretty place."

"I'd like that. *Buenos noches.*"

He put out his right hand.

"You are familiar with the *abrazo*?" he asked.

"*Si.*"

"Then you will not mind if we indulge for the benefit of our spectator?"

From the corner of her eyes Cherry saw a shadow of someone standing just inside the window, and she submitted to the embrace. After all, it did not mean anything unless she chose to make it mean something.

CHAPTER FIVE

TIME slipped by in a series of sunlit days and starlit nights, and as the dry weather persisted, Cherry established a routine for herself and Felipe, and soon found her place in the household at Vallera. With her usual calm approach she settled in, becoming, as she described the situation half-humorously in a letter to her parents, "part of the landscape."

And that was how she wanted to be while she stayed there - she didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to herself because she realized how important it was for Felipe that she should be able to stay and look after him. Not only was he a valuable child, but it was apparent that he was a vulnerable one too.

As she went about the house she was aware of being watched and assessed; with benevolence by the gracious Dona Bianca; with cool detachment by Ric; but most of all by Francisca, who, Cherry was sure, was waiting for her to show an undue interest in Ric. Once she did show any interest, she guessed that Francisca would act in some way to make her stay at Vallera not only uncomfortable but perhaps impossible.

Fortunately Ric himself made it easy for her to avoid him, for his work on the farm kept him away from the house most of the day and he made no attempts to seek her out privately. When they did meet, usually either Francisca or Dona Bianca was also., present, and gradually she accepted his distant authoritative treatment of her as an employee as something which was necessary while Francisca was always watching.

This time, she warned herself, his withdrawal was not part of the dance of courtship and he did not expect her to pursue; so she did not make any effort to do so. And if there were times when she was alone in her room in the evening, and her thoughts strayed to those other

evenings spent in his company which had ended in an embrace, she could always snatch them back and redirect them into safer channels before she could begin to romanticize about him.

For after all, hadn't Ric himself pointed out the dangers of romanticising and how it might lead a person into making a mistake?

But while she was careful to protect her heart, she allowed herself to be caught up into another romance, with Vallera itself. In Marita she found a lively, well-informed companion, who was only too pleased to help her explore the estate. The beautiful tawny vale was enclosed by long ridges of mountains whose bare rocks twinkled in the sunlight, perpetually changing colour throughout the day until they were hidden from sight by the dark purple of enfolding night.

The house, too, cast its own particular spell and often she found herself standing entranced by some new aspect of white walls, stark and angular beneath slanting terracotta roofs, glinting and glowing against a background of dark green cypress trees and curving golden fields.

To Cherry's relief Francisca, after a period of cautious assessment, began to accept the presence in the house of another young woman, and showed signs of being friendly. One day when she was preparing for the coming of weekend guests she took Cherry down to the great vaulted storeroom beneath the main part of the house, going through a thick door set into the wall of the kitchen and sidling down a stone staircase which clung to the whitewashed wall of the storeroom.

There were no windows in the place and the two outer doorways, set under archways, had been boarded up long . ago, so that the only entrance and exit was through the door from the kitchen. The walls were lined with racks and shelves for the storage of dry goods, such as flour and sugar, as well as for wine. Jars of preserved fruit and

pickled vegetables glinted under the electric light, and from the rafters hung dried herbs.

Furniture which was not in use in the house had been collected in one corner with some huge storage chests, and Francisca took the lid off one of the carved chests to show Cherry some of the famous Matino silverware which was stored in it, handling huge silver salvers and intricately- carved candelabra with loving yet possessive hands.

"At one time all this was shown off in procession at the *fiesta* in Potosi," she explained. "There would be several car-loads of it. All the big silver families used to take part. But Tia Bianca stopped taking part when her father died because she said it was wrong to make such a show of worldly goods when so many people in the world are hungry and poor. Some of the aristocratic families have had to sell their silver to antique collectors in order to make ends meet; we are lucky to have kept so much of the Matino silver."

From that chest she passed on to another in which women's clothing was stored, and taking out a dress of gold brocade which shimmered opulently she held it against herself.

"It must have been wonderful to have lived here in the olden times," she remarked with a sigh. "The Matinos were famous for their parties, and always entertained lavishly. Fifty people would come here for a *fiesta* and stay for a month. Now we never have parties. When I am Ric's wife I'll restore those tapestries over there to their proper place in the long passage, and re-hang those portraits, and we shall have many famous people to stay and once again Vallera will come alive."

Her face was slightly flushed and her chestnut eyes glowed as she was carried away by an image of herself presiding over some great social occasion.

"Supposing Senor Somervell marries someone else, what will you do then?" asked Cherry prosaically, thinking it was time that Francisca was forced to face reality.

Francisca's reaction to the question was violent. Swinging round from the chest, where she had been replacing the dress, she almost snarled as she answered.

"You have heard something? You know who he visits when he goes into Sucre nearly every night?" she demanded.

A little startled by the girl's ferocity, Cherry stepped back a pace. She had noticed that Ric often disappeared in the evenings, but she had never questioned his absence from Vallera. Presumably he had good reasons for doing all that he did.

"No, I haven't heard anything. How could I? I've never been to Sucre."

"I know, but Rafael talks much to you when he comes here," replied Francisca, trying hard to recover her composure, "and it can't always be about his poetry. He must have told you something for you to even think of asking me such a question. I have said before, it is arranged that Ric and I shall marry! When, I do not know - maybe we shall have to wait until after his mother dies. Meanwhile I realize that he may have a mistress in Sucre... but that I do not mind. It is the custom. I worry only when he starts paying attention to a woman who is eligible for marriage, like Teresa del Monte." Here Francisca's eyes flashed dangerously and she showed her small white teeth.

"Do you love him?" asked Cherry.

"I do not understand what you mean," replied Francisca, looking puzzled.

"Do you care about his comfort and happiness, or are you thinking only of yourself when you say you want to marry him?"

Fury made Francisca's eyes glow with reddish lights and for a moment Cherry regretted having asked the question.

"*Par dios,*" Francisca grated between clenched teeth, "do you compare me to that little gold-digger he brought here and who came from your country? She knew that one day he would inherit half the Matino fortune, and that was all she wanted. But I tell you I worship Ric. Ever since I came here I have worshipped him. I did not have a comfortable happy childhood as you probably had, *senorita*. My father was weak and drunken. He deserted my mother, who died. Dona Bianca, who is a saint in disguise, brought me here to live with her, and Ric was here, handsome, lively, full of laughter, different from anyone I had ever known. I worshipped him at once."

"But worship isn't love," persisted Cherry, thinking how cool and flat her voice sounded in contrast to Francisca's passionate speech. "When you worship something you expect it to be perfect."

"*Si.* That is correct." Francisca was passionately earnest now and Cherry suddenly felt a great pity for her. The girl was so fiercely naive. "And for me Ric is the perfect man. He is strong, handsome and clever, he knows how to command men and how to make love to a woman. In the past he would have been a *caudillo*, a hero-leader in our country."

Oh, dear, Cherry thought ruefully, she believes in *machismo*. She'll be expecting him to fight a duel one day, to defend his honour!

Aloud she said: "But we're not living in the past. This is the twentieth century, and we know so much more about ourselves now. We know that we all have weaknesses and failings and that it is better to love

than to worship a man. Better to be his partner than his slave or his servant."

"Ah, bah! You talk like Rafael," retorted Francsica, then added with a sly sidelong glance, "You like him, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. He's a sensitive and talented person."

"I've told Ric that you like Rafael," murmured Francisca as she selected bottles of wine from the racks. "I've also told him that I've seen Rafael put his arm around you when you have walked and talked together."

So the covertly-watching and listening Francisca had noticed Rafael's brief embraces, as he had hoped she would.

"And what did Senor Somervell say?" asked Cherry, who was very curious to know what Ric's reaction had been.

"He shrugged his shoulders as if he were not really interested in what you do, and said it was natural for you and Rafael to have something in common. After all, Rafael is a schoolteacher and you deal with young children. He said he was glad you had found a friend here, because it might influence you when you have to make a decision about staying on as Felipe's nanny." Francisca's glance was slow and assessing and she added curiously, "Do you think it might?"

"It might," replied Cherry non-committally, thinking that Ric had answered Francisca very diplomatically. Almost as if he had guessed at Rafael's game and was playing along with it.

"But he is only a teacher," sighed Francisca, as if talking to herself and answering some unspoken question. "Although it is true that he comes from a very good family, for all his grandmother was a *chola*."

"What is wrong in having a *chola* for a grandmother? The *chola* women I have met so far have struck me as being very dignified and clean-living," said Cherry. "I know also that your grandmother was a *chola*, so why should you be so prejudiced against Rafael's grandmother?"

Fire flashed in Francisca's eyes and once again Cherry wished she had kept quiet.

"I can tell that Rafael has been teaching you well," scoffed Francisca, "but his theories concerning our country are not held by his father, who takes great pride in being a Mendoza as I take pride in being a Matino. Don Diego used to own a big estate like this, only lower down, below Sucre, where it is warmer. Once he was a *padron* in the old Spanish tradition, with many people working for him. He did not soil his hands like an ordinary farmer."

"What happened to his estate?"

"The government took it over and shared out the land to the Indians. He could not get anyone to help him work the land, which was left to him, so he sold it and became a professor of languages instead."

"Maybe he is of more use as a professor than he was as a landowner," mused Cherry, who was determined to put in a good word for Rafael. "There doesn't seem to be much point in owning land if you refuse to soil your hands and work to improve it yourself as Senor Somervell does. He doesn't seem to mind being an ordinary farmer."

Francisca opened her mouth, then closed it again, presumably realizing the futility of arguing that point.

"And anyway I think a teacher is just as important as a farmer is in this country, where so many people still need to be taught to read and write," continued Cherry.

"You think Rafael is important?" asked Francisca.

"Very, as well as being clever. With the right sort of encouragement he could go far in his profession."

Francisca's eyes gleamed with interest.

"What sort of encouragement do you think he needs?" She busied herself taking down some more bottles of wine.

"I think he needs a wife who would look after him and make a good home for him. He's very impractical - he would forget to eat if someone didn't put a meal in front of him, and forget to change his shirt and his socks if clean ones were not laid out ready," returned Cherry.

"I see," Francisca spoke slowly. "But we have talked long enough. Would you help me to carry the bottles, please?"

At the top of the stairs the big door was still open, and with their arms clasping the bottles they went through it into the kitchen. The smell of food cooking in the oven made Cherry's mouth water as she set her bottles on the table, and watched Francisca close the storeroom door and lock it.

"The door opens only from this side," explained Francisca. "Once Elizabeth was imprisoned down there for hours. She was very frightened. She said she suffered from claustrophobia.

Soon afterwards she left Vallera - for good."

There was such a note of venomous satisfaction in her voice that Cherry felt a little chilled.

"Elizabeth?" she queried.

"*Si*, the woman I told you about who wanted to marry Ric. Elizabeth Humphreys." Francisca pronounced the name as Oomfrys. "She caught Juan instead, but he was an amorous fool and easily deceived by the flattery of foreigners."

Cherry's head was reeling. Why hadn't she realized before that Elizabeth and the Englishwoman Ric had brought to Vallera were one and the same person?

She became aware that Francisca was staring at her curiously.

"You have gone pale, *senorita*," she said.

"A slight stomach upset," muttered Cherry.

"You find the food too spicy, perhaps. It is often so for English people. Elizabeth suffered in the same way; I hope you do not have claustrophobia too. *Muchas gracias*, for your help."

"*De nada*," replied Cherry, and made her escape.

Out in the sunlit courtyard she looked down at Felipe, who was lying in the rather grand perambulator which had once been Marita's.

No wonder Ric found it ironical that he was now responsible for the child of Juan and Elizabeth! No wonder he had gone pale when he had looked at the papers which established Felipe's identity and had read the name of Felipe's mother. In the light of what she had just learned, Cherry understood his remarks much better.

Had he loved Elizabeth? Or had he seen her only as a woman who was eligible to be his wife, and so had only been flirting with her as he flirted with other women - including herself. According to Rafael he had followed Elizabeth to Lima when she had left Vallera, so it was possible he had been serious about her.

Cherry had a sudden vision of Isabella Kelly's face expressing shock when she had mentioned the name of Felipe's mother. She must have met Elizabeth in Lima, probably in the company of Ric, and so had been astonished to learn that the woman had been married to Ric's half-brother.

Ric's experience was so like her own that Cherry felt a sudden surge of empathy with him. Now she understood why he had that derisive contempt for women, and why he did not wish to cloud any discussion of marriage with talk of love. Oh, yes, now she knew about Elizabeth she understood him much better and the desire to offer comfort was almost overwhelming. She was glad he was nowhere near her, or she might have gone to him and put her arms around him and told him she knew everything.

The sound of skipping footsteps alerted her and she thrust aside her dangerous thoughts. Marita was home from school and ready to take a walk through the gardens with Felipe.

That evening the week-end guests arrived. As well as Rafael and his father there was Josef del Monte and his wife, their son and their two daughters. The eldest daughter was Teresa, who was plump and vivacious with wiry black hair and ripe red lips, which were often parted in laughter to reveal shining white teeth. Watching from the sidelines, Cherry could see why the possessive Francisca regarded Teresa as a rival.

Next day, when she was walking Felipe in the garden, Rafael joined her and she was able to ask him whether Ric visited Teresa when he went into Sucre.

"And what have you been hearing about his visits to Sucre?" he countered with a grin.

"I didn't even know he went there so often until Francisca mentioned it," she replied.

"It is true he does visit the del Monte house, but that is only natural because Josef is his lawyer, and I expect Teresa is there when he calls. But then he also visits the Costillo home and Magdalena, the daughter there, is very pretty. And Doctor Moreno who is Dona Bianca's physician is also on Ric's visiting list, and Carlotta Moreno is extremely attractive—"

"All right, all right," interrupted Cherry, laughing. "You don't have to say any more. I get the message - safety in numbers again! But Francisca is afraid he might be seeing more of one eligible woman than another. She only fears them, but she doesn't seem to mind if he has a mistress." ' "And you, coming from a different country and culture, find that difficult to understand?"

"Is it the custom here for a man to have a mistress?"

"It used to be, as it was in Spain. You may have noticed in the house a small room beside the front door which has an entrance of its own from the outside."

"Yes, I have. I've often wondered what it was for."

"That was designed especially for the use of the master of the house. There he could entertain his mistress without disturbing the rest of the family. But that was in the days when marriages were arranged by the parents. Now there is much more freedom between the sexes, and less tendency for a man to have both wife and mistress. I suppose it has never occurred to Francisca that Ric goes into Sycre to attend meetings? He is on several committees to do with the local government and agricultural development. Sometimes he comes to visit my father and me, and then he has other men friends. There are

times when he gets a little tired of being the only male in this household, you know."

"Well, he isn't the only male any more. Felipe is here," laughed, Cherry.

"Yes, he has Felipe," agreed Rafael with a smile which faded quickly, leaving him looking rather disconsolate. "If Francisca is still worrying about what he does when he is out of her sight, I can't be making any headway."

"I'm not so sure. She was talking to me about you yesterday, and she said that although you are only a schoolteacher you come from a good family."

"But I don't wish to be liked for my family. I wish to be liked and loved for myself, for what I am as a person," Rafael exclaimed, passionately beating his chest with his fist.

"I know you do," Cherry answered soothingly. "But don't you see, it's a start. She does think about you, and when I pointed out to her that I thought a teacher is just as important as a farmer is, and that if you were married to someone who loved you, you would go far, she looked most interested."

"*Mi angela, mi queridissima mujer,*" shouted Rafael. "Oh, how I love you!" And to Cherry's surprise he flung both arms around her and kissed her heartily.

"Forgive me for intruding at such a tender moment," said a deep familiar voice from behind them, "but I have a message for you, *senorita*, from my mother. She would like you to take Felipe to her."

Rafael's arms fell to his sides and he swung round to face Ric. Cherry turned more slowly, refusing to show that his arrival on the scene had disconcerted her. Looking up, she braved the mockery dancing in his

eyes, but before she could make any reply Rafael said rather nervously,

"Ah, what a pity. Just when our conversation was beginning to be interesting. Perhaps we can meet later. You do not object, Ric, if I make demands upon her time? I find her *muy simpatica*, very understanding, so gentle, kind and pretty."

"I'm sure you do," said Ric with a touch of dryness. "Then, since you seem to be busy with other concerns this afternoon, *senorita*, perhaps I should take Felipe to my mother. She wants to show off her grandson to her friends."

With that cool insolence he had shown at their first meeting he grasped the handle of the pram, turned it round and began to push it before him out of the arbour along the flagged pathway bordered by neatly clipped yew edges.

The irrepressible Rafael exploded into rapid speech.

"*For dios!* What is the world coming to? Never did I expect to see *el padron* of Vallera pushing a baby's pram like any nursemaid!"

But Cherry was not amused. The touch of contempt in Ric's attitude had upset her and she began to hurry after him, determined to explain fully the situation between herself and Rafael.

At that moment Francisca appeared, probably in search of Ric, hurrying along the path. When she saw him pushing the pram her eyes flashed angrily and in a spate of Spanish she began to point out to him the indignity of his present position as she saw it.

Then she tried to take the pram from him, but in a few succinct words, he told her to leave it alone and when she persisted he gave her a gentle push which sent her reeling into the yew hedge. By the time

she had bounced back from the closely cut bushes he had gone, still pushing the pram.

Behind her Cherry heard Rafael spluttering with ill- concealed laughter. She had a great desire to laugh too at the little scene she had just witnessed but it was more important that she should catch up with Ric. So as Francisca, her chestnut eyes blazing, turned on her, almost spitting with fury, Cherry pushed past with a muttered excuse and followed Ric.

She caught up with him at the central part of the garden, from which all the paths radiated out.

"Please wait," she panted, placing her hand on the handle of the pram. He slowed down, but did not stop, circling the bronze sundial supported by crouching panthers, heading for the path which would bring him out nearest the house.

"I can take Felipe to Dona Bianca," said Cherry, "and I can also explain. It wasn't what you're thinking."

"And what am I thinking?" he challenged coolly. "I didn't know that mind-reading was amongst your talents."

"You're thinking that... that..." In the face of his suave mockery, her usual serenity deserted her.

"Let me help you," he offered. "You feel guilty because I found you locked in a passionate embrace with one of my mother's guests."

Beneath his derision she detected a reprimand. As her employer he had every right to be displeased with what he had seen, and to tell her so, but she still had the right to explain.

"It wasn't a passionate embrace," she objected. "You told me yourself once that an embrace means only what I choose to make it."

"So I did," he drawled politely. "And what did you choose to make that one mean?"

"An expression of thanks for something I've been able to do for Rafael. Being a natural spontaneous person, he finds it necessary to express himself in such gestures when he feels deeply about something."

"As I've noticed on several occasions recently," he rejoined drily. "In fact he seems to find it necessary to thank you every time he visits us, which has been more often than usual since you came to Vallera. I hope you're finding he's adding interest to your Bolivian adventure? Perhaps you should keep a list of the number of men who have embraced you in this country, so that you can giggle over it with your girl friends."

"Oh!" she gasped. His remark hint, and it also gave her an indication of how he might be judging her behaviour. Recalling how she had responded to his embraces she felt her face flame with hot colour, which added to her mortification; he must believe that she had responded in the same way to Rafael.

But whether he was her employer or not, she could not let him get away with such injustice.

"I suppose that is what you do," she countered sweetly, "keep a list of women you've embraced in your time. It must run into hundreds."

He stepped walking so suddenly that the pram jerked sharply wakening the baby, who began to cry.

"Oh, now look what you've done!" remonstrated Cherry.

Womanlike, she could not resist a chance to blame him for Felipe's distress.

"No, it's what *you've* done," he countered. "Such remarks do not help to clarify the situation."

"I was only trying to match contempt with contempt," she replied in a low, shaken voice, looking down at the crazy paving of the pathway in case he saw the sudden glitter of tears in her eyes. "Your contempt is unfair and unjust. I don't keep lists or keep count. I'm not like that. It shows how little you know about me."

"So what are you going to do now? Leave Vallera? Give up because I've had to rap your knuckles?" he jibed softly.

Surprised by the change in his attitude, she looked up, blinking rapidly to clear her eyes of the unshed tears.

"No," she muttered.

"Then listen to me." He spoke in that cool authoritative manner which was familiar to her and which set her at a distance. "You'll agree, I think, that because I am paying you to do a job here, no matter for how short a time, I have a certain amount of authority over you as your employer."

"Yes."

"And you'll agree also that if I did not exert that authority from time to time, I would not be a good employer?"

"Yes."

"This afternoon I found you in a situation which would probably have shocked my mother, and also her guests if they had seen it. You see, they have certain strict ideas about the deportment of young women in their employ, especially those who are in charge of young children. Now I know that possibly Rafael was more to blame in this instance

than you were, yet I did not notice any reluctance or resistance on your part."

He paused as if expecting her to reply, but she only tightened her lips as she struggled with a totally new feeling. Abjection. Could this be Cheryl Hilton, free and independent, equal to any man?

"I didn't want to reprimand you in front of Rafael," he continued, "so I took the child knowing you would follow. I tried to soften my rebuke by making fun of you and I think you'll admit it found its mark, yet you say I know very little about you. It would be much easier for both of us if ..." He broke off, hearing the sound of a woman's high-heeled shoes tapping on paving stones. Francisca was coming towards them.

"Take Felipe to the *patio*, please," ordered Ric brusquely. "You'll find my mother there with her friends. Tell her I'll be joining them later. There is something I must attend to on the farm."

He strode off down another pathway and Cherry moved off, pushing the pram towards the house, her feeling of abjection complete.

Later, when she was putting Felipe to bed in his room, Rafael came to see her.

"I am leaving now," he said.

"But I thought you would be staying for the whole weekend!" she exclaimed.

"I am afraid not. My father has a headache and wishes to return to Sucre. And I ..." He shrugged his shoulders fatalistically and grinned crookedly. "I find myself suddenly not very welcome here."

"Who has made you feel like that?"

"Two people. Ric, for obvious reasons. He disapproves of guests who take advantage of his employees. And Francisca. You must have heard her in the garden; she was very angry because you let her hero push a pram."

"Oh, how silly she is. As if there is anything wrong in a man pushing a pram! Men do it all the time at home. My father pushed my pram and was proud to do so," replied Cherry.

"Ah, but this is not England, and the sight of Ric pushing a pram damaged Francisca's image of him as a strong proud hero. It tarnished his honour."

"Oh dear. She'll ruin his life if he's not careful," she sighed.

"I am glad you have noticed," he murmured. "I told her it was my fault, that he was annoyed with you and that was why he took the pram, and I told her you were seen being embraced by me."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing, for a change. It was what she did which made me realise it would be wise if I left. She slapped my face."

"Well, really!" exclaimed Cherry, and started to laugh. "All that fuss about a little thing!"

"Amusing, isn't it? But Bolivian. We are a temperamental people. I get carried away by my emotions and embrace you, Ric is annoyed at finding you in my arms and makes off with Felipe, and Francisca in her anger at seeing her hero do something which is beneath his honour, slaps my face. I think in England you would call it a storm in a teacup. I am sorry, Cherry, I think I have made it difficult for you. I forgot for a few seconds in the garden that you are employed here."

"It's sweet of you to feel like that, but I'll get over it. I expect by tomorrow the storm will have passed and everyone will be in a good mood again."

"That is the way of it," he agreed, cheerful once more. "Refreshed and invigorated, we shall settle down, a new page before us, all our past mistakes written off. Which more or less describes the history of this country."

And it was as he had predicted. Next day Francisca behaved as if nothing unusual had happened the previous afternoon, and not once did she refer to the incident. In good spirits after the guests had left, she even came to the nursery in the evening to tell Cherry about the arrangements which had been made for herself and Ric to go to the del Monte house in Sucre for a *fiesta* which would be held in the city at the end of the week.

"Tia Bianca would like you to go with us," she said gaily. "You might see Rafael there and dance with him."

"What is the *fiesta* for? Some saint's day?"

"No. It is to celebrate the independence of this country which was won from Spain under the leadership of Bolivar in August 1825. The city of Sucre is called after Bolivar's commander-in-chief in the area, you know, and in the procession his portrait as well as that of Bolivar will be carried. You might also see the miracle-working Madonna, the Virgin of Guadeloupe. She has many jewels, whole rooms of them."

"Who gave them to her?" asked Cherry.

"The people of Sucre, as tokens of love and esteem for prayers answered and miracles worked, of course. Do you think you could help me to make a new dress for the *fiesta*?"

Amazed by this request, Cherry agreed readily and they discussed patterns and materials for the rest of the evening.

Next day when Cherry took Felipe for his daily visit to his grandmother, Dona Bianca asked if Francisca had mentioned the *fiesta*.

"Yes, she has," replied Cherry as she took a proffered cup of tea. She always enjoyed this hour of the day in the pleasant sunlit room, which was crowded with favourite items of furniture and scattered with many family photographs, and where Dona Bianca received her many visitors. Having been a leader of Bolivian society and the widow of a famous revolutionary general, as well as a respected agriculturalist, she was often consulted by local government officials and politicians for her advice.

"I would like you to go. It will make a holiday for you; you have earned one, I think. Then when the holiday is over your month's stay will be at an end, and we shall discuss with Ric whether you can stay with us any longer."

"Who will look after Felipe while I go to *the fiesta*?" asked Cherry.

"Always he comes first into your mind! He is a fortunate child to have you as his nanny. I shall not be going to the *fiesta*, neither will Marita. Also Juana, the washerwoman, will stay for the whole day. She knows much about babies, so you need not worry. He shall be well cared for and you can enjoy yourself."

"*Gracias, senora.*"

"De nada, senorita. Your Spanish is improving. Soon you will be speaking like a Bolivian. You are liking it here?"

"Very much."

"I am glad. You fit in well because you have a serenity of temperament which complements our more excitable one; you do not get upset over our little squabbles. Arthur was like that too. Because he was calm many thought he was cold and unfeeling, but I knew differently. He could feel as deeply as I do about something which was important. It was the small unimportant things which left him unexcited."

Cherry looked at the photographs in silver frames which were arranged on a small table nearby. One was of a dark handsome man with a curving moustache and bold black eyes. The collar of a uniform jacket could just be seen, and she knew now that he was General Pablo Benitez. Next to him was the photograph of a younger man whose dark eyes showed his relationship to the General, but whose passionately curved and generous mouth showed that he was related to Dona Bianca. He was Juan Benitez, the handsome dashing father of Felipe.

The third photograph showed the long-jawed face of Arthur Somervell, capped by sparse silvery hair and lit by humorous shrewd eyes, and the fourth was of Ric when he had been younger, when the ironic curve to his mouth had not been so pronounced and the laughter of his glance invited everyone else to laugh too.

"Handsome, aren't they, my men?" said Dona Bianca with a chuckle as she noticed Cherry's absorption. "Particularly the youngest one." She sighed suddenly. "But he is the most difficult to understand."

"Did he ever return the medallion which Senor Diaz asked me to give you?" asked Cherry.

"No, he did not. But then he does not have to give it to me, because it is his to wear until he dies. You see, it was the custom in the Matino family for any of the males who developed the silver streak in their hair when they were adolescents to be presented with a silver medallion bearing the panther. My father possessed one, and I gave it to Ric on his eighteenth birthday. Although he is not a Matino by name, he looks like one, and now he is the last male in the direct line."

Cherry's glance now strayed to the big portrait of a tall, powerfully-built man with a hard hawk-like profile, stern mouth and disdainful heavy-lidded eyes - Alfonso Matino, Ric's grandfather.

"But if the medallion belongs to Senor Somervell, why was it found with Felipe?" she asked.

"I believe that is what is known as a very good question," said Dona Bianca drily. "Why, indeed? I would like to know the answer, and I'm far from finding it, since Ric has always had a dislike of what he calls 'parental inquisition', and will not answer if he does not wish to."

"Excuse me for being curious, *senora*, but were you here when Felipe's mother visited Vallera?"

"No, I regret to say that I was not. I would like to have met her, but I was away staying with friends in Buenos Aires. When I returned she had gone. Why do you ask about her?"

"I just wondered what she was like."

"I have often wondered too. Francisca didn't like her, but then her opinion of another young woman is often suspect. She gets a little jealous of her position here." Dona Bianca smiled indulgently. "And when I asked Ric all he said was, 'She was a woman', as if that explained anything."

"Perhaps it does for him."

"Perhaps so, but I would have liked a little more detail from him. I can only assume from his refusal to discuss her that he did not like her, for all he was the one who invited her here."

Which had been her own assumption when Ric had refused to discuss Elizabeth on the journey to Potosi, thought Cherry. And still there was the mystery of the medallion. As far as she could see she could not solve it without asking Ric himself, and since he had refused to tell his mother why should she assume that he would tell her? Even when there had been a truce between them, his reserve about his personal feelings and matters had been steel-like, totally inflexible, a door which he would open only when he felt like opening it.

So she pushed the matter to the back of her mind again, and the days slid by, sunny and uneventful, the only excitement being the cutting out, sewing and fitting of the new dress for Francisca. She was delighted to find that Cherry could do all those things just as if she had been trained as a dressmaker, and it served to make her even more friendly.

The day of the *fiesta* came, and after leaving Felipe with Dona Bianca and Marita, Cherry went out into the courtyard where Francisca and Ric were both waiting for her.

They were standing by the sturdy station wagon. Francisca was wearing a fitted navy blue coat over her new floral dress and she was talking excitedly, her hands in their prim white gloves waving in graceful gestures. Ric, wearing his sand- coloured suit, blue shirt and black hat, was leaning indolently against the vehicle, his head turned away from his companion and so obviously not listening to her that Cherry could not help having an impish thought. Portrait of a man ignoring a very vocal woman.

As if sensing her thought he turned his head and looked at her over Francisca's head, his glance travelling over the white woollen coat

she was wearing over a long-sleeved blue and white dress, and then coming back to her eyes. There was a brief flash of recognition between them, so sharp and startling that after not experiencing it for a while Cherry felt a little faint with shock.

Realising that someone was behind her, Francisca stopped talking and turned round. Ric straightened up, pulled his hat forward over his eyes and opened the door of the vehicle.

"Sit in the back seat, Cherry," he said, and as she passed him she could not help glancing up at him. Dark blue eyes, in which laughter gleamed tantalizingly, looked down at her. He was in a good humour, and why shouldn't he be? He was taking a day off from the farm and going to the *fiesta*, where there would be music and pretty girls to dance with.

Francisca sat in the front seat next to Ric and she chattered incessantly all the way along the road to Sucre, pointing out the old houses set back from the road amongst trees and overgrown gardens and naming the family which had once owned or still owned each one of them. Through gaps in high moss- grown walls Cherry had glimpses either of neatly clipped hedges and flowering borders or of broken statuary, which was almost obscured by overgrown climbing plants lying about the unkempt grounds of a one-time stately home.

As they approached the city they joined a line of slowly- moving traffic making its way to the *fiesta* along wide tree- lined avenues, past beautiful columned colonial town houses from whose courtyards the leaves of peach and orange trees peeped above white enclosing walls.

It was in front of such a house that Ric stopped the vehicle, and soon they were in a courtyard full of people and being greeted by Josef del Monte and his wife.

"Cherry! At last you have come."

Rafael was there, greeting her with an *abrazo*, and over his shoulder she caught a glimpse of Ric frowning at her before he was engulfed by Teresa's arms as she embraced him.

"This way," urged Rafael, guiding her out of the courtyard and into the street again, "we're going to the *plaza*. Friends of mine are keeping seats for us in front of the municipal buildings so that we'll have a good view of the start of the procession."

"How did you know I would be coming today?" asked Cherry, as they joined a throng of happy laughing people which was surging along the roadway presumably to the main square.

"Teresa told me when I was invited to go to the del Monte house to join in their celebrations. Since I had already made other arrangements for spending the day I arranged for you to come with me - later we shall return to the del Montes' house for dancing. You do not mind coming with me?"

"No, of course not. I only hope Senor Somervell and Francisca will understand; I was invited with them."

"I know, but don't you see, Cherry, this is another chance for me to draw Francisca's attention to myself here on my home ground, without fear of offending Dona Bianca and Ric or abusing their hospitality. In previous years I have hung around the del Montes' house hoping to dance with her, and she has ignored me completely. Today I have an alternative, and possibly, when she realizes I am not there and Ric is busy flirting with Teresa or some other pretty girl, she will miss me."

"I understand. Well, let's hope you're right. Goodness, what a crowd!"

Finding herself jostled by a group of singing, dancing Quechas, Cherry almost lost her balance and Rafael put his arm round her to steady her.

"We had better hold hands," he suggested. "I would not like to lose you now that I have found you."

"And I wouldn't like to be lost because I've no idea how to get back to the del Montes' house," she replied, laughing and letting him take her hand. She put aside all thoughts of Ric, and the niggling feeling that if Francisca did miss Rafael's attentions during the day, she would have no hesitation in making life uncomfortable for one Cherry Hilton, and went with the tide of people.

The square was jammed with crowds of people. On one side of it the splendid cathedral glittered in the bright sunlight, its twin towers soaring heavenwards, each curve and point elegantly etched against the deep blue sky. Above a wide flight of steps were three arched doorways, their stonework decorated in baroque style with leaves, flowers and figures intertwined, and a huge circular window glowed with brilliant colour as its stained glass reflected the light.

The places being kept for them were in front of the plain modern municipal buildings. Quickly Rafael introduced her to his friends, a young married couple.

"Meet Forges and Jenny Salvadori, Cherry," he said gaily.

"Jenny?" queried Cherry as she took the slim brown hand of the shy young woman in hers. "Isn't that an unusual name for a Bolivian?"

"My father came from Scotland to work here as an engineer," explained Jenny. "I am called after my mother. Oh, look, I think the declaration is going to be read."

She pointed to an ornately-carved balcony jutting out from an old building which took up another side of the square.

"That is the legislature building," Rafael whispered in her ear as they watched a group of people step out on to the balcony. "From that place Simon Bolivar himself read the declaration. You know that our country is called after that great man who had a vision of a united states of South America?"

While the declaration was being read Cherry looked around her. The majority of people there were Quechas, all dressed up for the occasion; many of the men wore hats like squashed pudding basins, others had helmet-like affairs made from hard black leather, edged with bright beads and sequins which glittered in the sunlight. Their *ponchos* were woven in stripes of vivid colour and they wore leather belts studded with silver round their waists.

The women were no less colourful, in their wide full skirts which were mostly red in colour, their gay shawls and wide- brimmed tall white hats which were tilted coquettishly on their heads and glittering with sequins and shiny ribbons.

A cheer went up. The procession was beginning, movement and colour under the bright light of the sun, set off by the shining bulk of the cathedral; huge fantastic figures dressed in gleaming satin wearing weird grinning masks painted in vermilion, black and white, dancing and cavorting beside the procession's floats on which scenes from the history of Bolivia were presented. And when the floats had passed the people swarmed after them, dancing and singing, strumming *charan- gos* and playing the reed flutes which always gave the music such a sad poignancy.

From the square Cherry went with Rafael, Forges and Jenny to the home of Forges' parents for the main meal of the day. It was served in the big *salon* of the old Salvadori house, and Don Diego was there,

and so were many Salvadori relatives, including Jenny's parents, Maria and Bob Thompson.

After the meal was over Cherry was able to have a few words with the grey-haired stocky Scot, whose broad accent was still in evidence when he spoke English.

"Once ye've felt the magic of this place ye'll not be wanting to leave, I can tell ye. Or if ye leave ye'll be wanting to come back," he said to her. "I came out here over thirty years ago. Went back to Scotland and was homesick for Bolivia. Missed the sunlight, ye ken, and the gaiety and drama. So I came back and married Maria and settled, and I've never regretted it."

From the Salvadori house Rafael swept her off to the house of some other friends, for that day everyone held open house. Everywhere there was music, dancing and feasting; and as darkness covered the sky the first fireworks were set off, leaping up in streaks of flame to burst into fountains of slow- falling glittering sparks.

When they returned to the del Monte house they found it ablaze with lights and vibrating with the sound of guitars and *charangos* as the numerous guests danced in the main entertaining rooms.

Cherry looked round for Francisca and Ric. Surprisingly he was not among the dancers, but she spotted Francisca sitting in a corner of one of the rooms with some of the older women, who were presumably mothers of the younger people dancing.

"She looks furious," murmured Cherry to Rafael, as she noted Francisca's bolt upright position, compressed lips and her white face in which her eyes glittered. "I'd better go and speak to her."

"*Si, esta furiosa,*" he said excitedly. "Dare I hope it is because I have not been here? Or is it because Ric is not here? He is not even dancing with Teresa, who also looks sad. You go to Francisca, and I shall join

you both in a few minutes. I wish to have a word with Teresa to find out what has been happening here."

Cherry nodded and began to sidle round the dancers towards Francisca, but as she passed an open archway leading into another room where some of the men were drinking and playing cards, a hand grasped her arm and she was forced to stop.

"Where have you been all day?" asked Ric.

She looked up at him. Silver-streaked chestnut hair sliding forward over his temple, heavy eyebrows slanting in a frown above storm-dark eyes, long-lipped mouth curving into a sardonic smile, in his own way he was also furious, and the storminess of his mood transmitted itself through the grip of his fingers on her arm.

"I've been watching the procession with Rafael and visiting the homes of some of his friends. I've had a lovely time, have you?" she replied serenely.

"What do you think?" he drawled, with a touch of sarcasm. "Come and dance with me. It's the *cueca*."

Aware that Francisca had noticed them and was watching every mood, Cherry tried to move away from him, but his fingers tightened bruisingly.

"I haven't a white handkerchief with me," she murmured.

"I always carry a spare one with me for such occasions," he replied coolly, producing one from his jacket pocket. "Here, take it."

"Francisca won't like it if you dance with me," she said, and was startled when he muttered an imprecation in Spanish.

"Stop making excuses, Cherry. Francisca can't dance as well as you can, and you know damn well you're longing to dance. You can hardly keep your feet still," he retorted in English. "Come on. I haven't had any fun all day."

Later she might regret having given in to him, but she found, she could not resist the rather boyish admittance that he hadn't had any fun, and without a word she nodded and let him lead her amongst the dancers.

At the lower altitude of Sucre the *cueca* was danced with more abandon than at La Paz, and they danced it not only once, but several times as the dancing couples kept demanding a repeat of the music. Soon the twanging of the instruments, the slither and stamping of feet on the wooden floor, the passionate vibrating voice of the young singer and the breathless laughter of some of the dancers combined together to create a different dimension, in which all that mattered was the dance of courtship and what it meant. Advance, retreat, pursuit, withdrawal and finally commitment.

It came to an end with a great throbbing chord on the quit-ars. Hot and breathless, her face aflame and her heart beating madly, Cherry leaned for support against Ric, feeling his arms holding her closely. Still held in the spell created by the music and the drama of the dance, they were both careless of the many curious eyes watching them.

"Let's go and walk in the garden to cool off and watch the fireworks," he whispered into her hair, and she did not argue.

Outside the air was soft to her burning cheeks. Moonlight, shredded through the leaves of trees, made a tattered patchwork of light and shade on the stone pathway. Occasionally the whole sky was lit up by showers of coloured sparks, as more multiple fireworks vied with the moon and the stars.

Walking along, Cherry gradually felt the feeling of shared pleasure which had held her spellbound, slipping away as she wondered whether Francisca had noticed her leave the house with Ric. Recalling the fury on the girl's face, she shivered a little.

"Now you feel cold," said Ric. "There is a garden temple near here somewhere. I think it's called the Temple of Venus. Let's go and sit in it. I have much to say to you."

"No," she said, stopping in her tracks and trying to disengage her hand from his. "I think we should go back to the house before Francisca notices that neither of us is there."

"I don't care if she does notice, so why should you?" he replied coldly, stopping too and refusing to release her hand.

"Because I know she believes that one day she will be your wife."

"So?" The icily-drawled monosyllable warned her that he was not pleased with her answer. "What has that to do with anything *I* have to say *to you*?"

The cool rebuff silenced her. When would she learn to respect that inflexible reserve of his?

He turned off the pathway and they walked across a lawn to a clump of bushes which screened the open side of the small circular temple with a domed roof supported by pillars in which there was a statue of the goddess of love. Beneath the statue was a stone bench on which there was just room enough for two to sit side by side. There was no doubt that the temple had been placed there for one reason; it was a trysting place for lovers.

"Come and sit down," said Ric, leading her up the two steps. "I want to settle this business of your staying on at Vallera as Felipe's nanny."

"Not now, not here," Cherry demurred.

"Now and here," he insisted as he sat down, and pulled her down beside him.

"But the month isn't up until tomorrow," she protested. "I don't have to tell you until then."

Now that they were sitting, the confusion which his nearness always caused started up within her. Her pulse raced and she found she was without breath. This time she could not blame the altitude for her condition; she was suffering from physical attraction.

"Surely a few hours makes very little difference," he murmured persuasively. "You must have made up your mind by now whether you like Vallera and can put up with living there with the rest of us. Have you heard from your parents lately?"

His interest was disarming and he probably knew it. He knew how to manage anyone who worked for him.

"Yes, I have."

"I presume you have told them of the position offered and have consulted them?"

"Yes."

"And what do they say?"

"That I must please myself about accepting it. Naturally they don't like the idea of my working so far away from home but they would never think of insisting that I refuse to take a position on their account. They have never been over- possessive."

"Then you are fortunate," he remarked drily. "Are you going to stay, Cherry?"

He had moved closer, and his shoulder brushed hers. His use of her first name, the faint slurring sound he gave the first two consonants almost undermined her slender defences against him. It had been a mistake to let him trap her into sitting here with him in such a romantic setting, the temple of the goddess of love, with the silvery disc of the moon high in the purple black sky, the distant twanging of a guitar and the sharp sad shrill of the reed flute accompanying the tenor voice of the unseen singer, as he mourned his lack of love. "*Nada no tengo yo, ni nada me importa* -I have nothing, for nothing do I care. *El me ne importa de nadie si o nadie me importa* - I matter to nobody if I care for nobody."

She was longing in every nerve for him to kiss her, and the desire was so strong that it was a burning, suffocating feeling which made immediate speech impossible.

"What's the matter?" he queried gently. "Why don't you answer? Are you afraid to tell me you don't like Vallera? Is it too isolated for you? I realize that living here must be very different from living in London. There are no bright lights, no theatres, but we have the occasional *fiesta* like this when there is music and dancing and good company."

He stopped speaking abruptly, but she had heard the slight bitterness and she guessed he was remembering Elizabeth who had changed her mind about marrying him because she had not wished to live at Vallera.

"No, it isn't that," she blurted out, not wanting him to think she was like Elizabeth. "I love Vallera and I don't find it too isolated...."

She got no further because he bent his head and kissed her on the mouth. She drew back quickly, surprised at having her desire fulfilled so soon, and pushed on to the defensive.

"What was that for?" she asked tremulously.

"A spontaneous gesture. You might say I was expressing my thanks because you said you love Vallera," he replied, laughter stirring in his voice. "And now I'm going to do it again."

As he moved she drew back against the smooth stone of the curved wall of the temple.

"Don't you think you're being a little hypocritical?" she countered, knowing that she dared not let him kiss her again, even while her senses were clamouring for him to do so. He would find out too much about her if he kissed her now.

"All right, so I'm a hypocrite," he murmured equably, and as she gasped with irritation at his amused acceptance of her criticism he moved in again, cutting off any escape, jamming her in the corner of the seat. Curving his hand about her throat, so that she could not twist her head and dodge him, he kissed her again, differently. It was no quick spontaneous gesture of thanks, but a deliberate caress designed to rouse her. She tried passive resistance, but it didn't work because she wanted to respond and soon she relaxed under the pressure and gave as much as she was receiving, until they were both so engrossed in each other that neither of them heard the rustle of bushes being pushed aside.

"Ric! I know you're there, in the temple. Teresa said she thought you would be."

Francisca's voice was shrill with petulance. Cherry stiffened in surprise and Ric raised his head at once. They both waited in silence for Francisca to speak again.

"Oh, don't pretend you're not there. I can see you," she said, stepping forward on to a patch of moon-bleached grass in front of the temple.

Ric stood up and stepped down from the temple. Cherry remained seated in the shadow, every nerve quivering and alert.

"What do you want?" asked Ric coldly. "Why must you always be following me about like a pet dog? Or perhaps I should say, like a jealous wife?"

There was a sharp hissing sound as Francisca took a gasping breath when his scorn seared her.

"I want to go home," she said, sounding subdued and almost on the verge of tears. "Have you forgotten that Miss Hilton has to be back to look after Felipe during the night? You cannot expect your mother or Marita to get up to attend to him if he wakes."

"That's true," said Cherry, rising to her feet and moving forward. "It must be almost ten o'clock."

Cherry saw the whites of Francisca's big eyes glint in the moonlight as she swung round and, too late, she realized that until she had stepped out of the shadow of the temple Francisca had not known that anyone was with Ric.

"Ah, so it is you!" shrilled Francisca triumphantly. "I guessed you would not be far away. For all your big talk about wishing to be free and independent you do not fool me. You want a man, like the other Englishwoman did. But she was more honest than you. She did not hide her real intentions behind a pose!" She turned furiously to Ric and her voice was piercing as she stormed at him. "Don't you see what she is like? Don't you see she is trying to trap you by using Rafael? She has come straight from his arms to yours. She is nothing more than a cheap..."

"Be quiet, or I'll make you sorry you ever came to Sucre today." Ric's voice, for all its softness, held such menace in its deep tones that Cherry felt the hairs on her neck prickle. The panther had unsheathed his claws and was ready to maul.

"Ay, ay, ay!" wailed Francisca, bowing her head and covering her face with her hands. "I am sorry already, sorry she came, sorry you ever brought her to Vallera. I have had a miserable time today, all because of her."

Cherry decided it was time she spoke up for herself. She was getting tired of Francisca's insinuations.

"You're mistaken, *senorita*. I'm not trying to trap anyone, least of all Senor Somervell. He is my employer, that is all, and I've no wish to change that relationship for a closer one." She spoke quietly, although her voice shook when she noticed Ric swing round to peer at her, as if trying to see the expression on her face. "As for Rafael - well, all I can say is I can't help it if your little mind is so twisted you can't see straight, and you allow yourself to be deluded."

Turning on her heel, she walked away in the direction of the house, her mind in a turmoil and the familiar pain of anguish squeezing her heart. She had lied. She had denied what her own senses had been telling her only a few minutes before. She had lied because she was afraid to love.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as she entered the big *salon* by the wide patio window, Cherry was almost pounced upon by Rafael, who took her by the arm and led her to a sofa where they could sit together, ostensibly watching the dancers.

"I have been looking for you," he said. He looked angry, his eyes glittering in his ochre-coloured face like pieces of black jet.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously.

"Francisca has given me a wound from which I might never recover," he moaned, clutching the left side of his chest with one hand.

"Oh, come on, be serious. What did she say to you?"

"I am serious," he protested. "She said everything she could to kill' my love for her. It seems that I am the cause of all her unhappiness. Because of me Ric had been moody all afternoon, preferring to drink *chica* with the men to taking her to watch the processions. Because of me he has not asked her to dance with him. Because of me he danced the *cueca* with you, not once but several times, so that everyone noticed and guessed that there is something going between you and him."

"Oh no!" gasped Cherry, hands to her hot cheeks.

"Oh yes. That is the way her mind is working, and I am to blame. Am I not a terrible fellow to have caused so much distress to the one woman I love? I regret to say the logic of her reasoning escapes me."

"Me too," sighed Cherry. "But she is not logical."

"You are right. She is not logical," he agreed with a surprisingly affectionate smile. "For all she is a grown woman her mind is

adolescent. She is still infatuated with the idol of her teenage years, Ricardo. She is waiting for him to stoop down from his pedestal and lift her up beside him. Thinking to make up for his neglect of her, I asked her to dance the *cueca* with me, and what did she do? Stamped her foot, told me not to be stupid and stalked off saying she was going to find Ric and insist that he take her back to Vallera."

"She found him with me, in the garden," Cherry told him.

His glance was inquisitive.

"May I be permitted to know what happened then?" he asked.

"Another storm, this time with floods of tears," sighed Cherry. "I left them together. I'm afraid your attempts to draw her attention to yourself have recoiled on me; she believes I'm using you to force Ric into making some sort of commitment to me, and now I've a feeling she'll do anything to make me leave Vallera."

He had the grace to look both alarmed and concerned.

"*Madre de dios*, I am sorry. I would not have that happen for the world. What shall we do now? Think. Think of something, Cherry, *par favor*." He clutched his head dramatically between his hands, as if he could no longer stand the anxiety.

"I'll try," she said soothingly, "but perhaps it would be best to do nothing and let everything take its natural course. Sometimes it pays to be patient."

"Ha!" His laugh was scornful. "Patience! Mine is fast running out." The expression on his face changed as he looked past her, and fear flickered in his eyes. "*Por dios*," he whispered. "Look over there. Enter the panther, stealthily."

Once again the hairs on the back of Cherry's neck prickled as she turned to look in the direction Rafael was looking. Ric was standing just inside the patio door and looking round the room, and even at a distance she could see anger tautening all the lines of his face and flickering flame-like in his eyes.

She raised a hand, and he noticed, nodded slightly and began to move round the edge of the dancing couples towards her.

"Get your coat and go to the station wagon now," he ordered softly when he reached her side. "I will make our excuses to Senor and Senora del Monte. Go now."

"*Si, senor.*" Now she sounded as humble as Francisca did when he rebuked her. He gave her a narrowed, searching glance and then loped off to find their host.

"*Ay, caramba!*" Rafael's exclamation came out in an awed sigh as if he had been holding his breath while Ric had been with them. "The panther snarls and we all quiver, even you. I do not envy you that drive back to Vallera. Perhaps I should come with you."

"Why? To protect us?" she asked laughingly. "No, we'll be all right. But you can come with me to the station wagon and say goodbye to Francisca."

"And the way I am feeling now I think it might be my last goodbye," he muttered mournfully.

Outside the house he held the door of the vehicle while she got into the front seat. Francisca was sitting bolt upright in the back seat, looking straight before her, and when Rafael wished her goodnight she did not reply.

Then Ric appeared, said a few words to Rafael and climbed in behind the steering wheel.

The strained silence which prevailed between the three occupants of the vehicle as they left the city was broken only by the occasional sniff from Francisca, who was weeping surreptitiously. Cherry would have felt sorry for the younger woman if she had not been in such a confused state of mind herself. For the first time she could see herself as Francisca undoubtedly saw her, as the villainess in some drama of romantic love; the worldly sophisticate come from the outside world to torment an innocent country girl by enticing the two men who so far had meant so much in Francisca's life, away from her.

"If only she knew that I'm just as confused as she is, and that both of us are at the mercy of Ric, who apparently cares for no particular woman but sees all of us as merely objects designed for his entertainment or use," she thought bitterly.

As if to mock her thought Ric began to whistle, the tune of the song she had heard being sung when they had walked to the temple of Venus in the del Monte garden.

"I wish you wouldn't whistle that song," Francisca burst out. "I hate it."

"I don't," he retorted. "It expresses how I feel right now."

"Ay, ay, ay," wailed Francisca miserably. "Never did I think you would be so unkind to me, so brutal!"

"How you enjoy being wronged, don't you?" he jeered. "How you love to play the part of the poor little relation who has nothing and who matters to nobody. Maybe it is you who should be singing the song. But if you have any sense you'll say nothing to my mother. Remember the warning I gave you in the garden back there?"

"*Si, senor*" whispered Francisca at her humblest. "*Lo siento*. I am sorry."

"Espero que si. I hope so," he replied, and put his foot down on the accelerator so that the vehicle sped at high speed along the rough road and the jolting and buffeting they received in consequence made coherent thought and conversation impossible.

Presendy the line of poplars which marked the limit of the Vallera estate loomed up, their spear-like shadows, black against the moonlit earth, marching beside them. The station wagon took the turn into the long driveway with a screech of protesting tyres, and roared on towards the house which gleamed with a ghosdy sheen from amongst its sheltering cypress trees. In the courtyard stark white walls glittered and were fretted with the shadows of leaves, and the radiance of the moou struck sparks of green and gold from the bronze fountain.

The vehicle stopped abruptly and at once Cherry, wishing to escape into the house, opened the door and stepped out with a murmured, *"Gracias, senor. Buenos noches."* Francisca, also keen to escape from Ric's evident disapproval, did not waste any time and rushed past her towards the big door under the arched porch. Thinking that she might be able to offer some comfort to the other woman if she attempted to explain her own feelings to her, Cherry hurried after her.

"Wait!" The order was curt and came from behind her. She knew better than to disobey, so she waited and he came up to her.

Behind him stalked the shadow of a tall, broad-shouldered man in a rakishly-tilted wide-brimmed hat.

"We did not finish our talk," he said softly, and she sensed the steel beneath the softness. She kept her gaze on the elegant yet threatening shadow.

"Tomorrow?" she suggested warily.

"Now."

"Felipe," she murmured hopefully.

"He can "wait for once. He's probably fast asleep."

"I'm tired and have to get up early."

"A woman's excuse," he mocked. "Come in here."

The shadow moved and merged with hers as he placed his hand under her elbow and guided her up the steps into the porch, towards that small secretive door in the corner. He opened it and propelled her into the room beyond.

A lamp with a crimson silk shade glowed on a wide old- fashioned desk which was scattered with papers. On the panelled wall behind the desk hung a painting of the house. In a corner was a steel filing cabinet and in another a smaller desk on which there was a typewriter. Between the two was a single divan covered with a crimson fitted cover. On either side of the door which Ric closed behind him were two stained glass windows depicting scenes of chivalry with knights on horseback slaying dragons, while beautiful maidens swooned in distress. It was the room in which the master of the house had once entertained his mistress, and which the present owner obviously used as an office or study.

Ric removed his hat and tossed it on to the desk.

"Sit down," he ordered, twisting a chair round for her so that it faced the desk. He went round to the other side and sat down in a swivel armchair.

"To add to what I was saying to you," he said in a cold hard voice, "my mother and I are entirely satisfied with your work during the past month and we both feel you would fit into our small community very well. We would be glad if you could accept the position as Felipe's nanny on a more permanent basis. We would like you to stay with

him at least twelve months and at the end of that time we could reconsider the situation. By then Felipe should be sufficiently established in this life and won't require so much attention, and you'll be able to take a holiday, perhaps return to England. Are you willing to stay?"

How different his approach was this time. By putting the desk between them he was making it quite clear he meant business. The embrace in the garden was to be forgotten. For him, it had been, no doubt, part of the fun he expected to have at a *fiesta*, and was not to be taken seriously.

But she was hesitant. The self-analysis in which she had indulged during the drive back from Sucre had given her an insight into her own feelings which had frightened her. Now her impulse was to leave Vallera, to run away before this man could do any more damage to the thin new armour which she had managed to forge, to protect her vulnerable heart.

"I hope you're not going to let what happened at the del Montes' influence you against staying here," he said in the same hard businesslike way, as he became impatient with her hesitancy.

Being a person who took flirting and embracing in his stride and not at all seriously he would not be referring to his own behaviour but to Francisca's, she thought, and at once she grasped at the straw which offered a way of escape for her. He would probably understand and accept that she could not stay on in a house where there was a woman who disliked her and made her uncomfortable.

"I find it difficult not to," she ventured slowly. "As you know, I'm not used to being insulted."

He had been leaning back in his chair, hands in his trouser pockets, completely self-assured and no doubt confident of the outcome of this

interview. He would get his own way. But at her reply he stiffened and sat up, his eyebrows coming together in a puzzled frown; a totally different reaction from the one she had expected. She had expected him to laugh in memory of the time he had insulted her at La Paz.

"I didn't realize ..." he began, stopped, frowned harder, then continued stiffly, "it was not intended as an insult."

Surprised that he should attempt to defend Francisca's behaviour when to all intents and purposes it had annoyed him, Cherry raised her eyebrows in polite incredulity.

"Oh, really?" she queried with a scornful little laugh. "I'm quite sure it was, and if I thought that sort of thing was going to continue I couldn't possibly stay on, not even for Felipe's sake."

He sat as still as if he had been carved out of stone, his eyes hidden by their heavy lids. Minutes ticked away on the beautiful antique clock which shared space on a shelf with books on agriculture.

When eventually he spoke his voice was colourless and he did not look at her.

"If I assure you that there will be no repetition of what happened, will you stay then?"

It was possible that Francisca, warned by the man she worshipped, might behave herself and be careful about what she said; but she would still be capable of *doing* and *looking* in order to create an unpleasant atmosphere.

"Still you hesitate." Exasperation roughened his voice.

Pushing out of the chair, he came round the desk to lean against it near her. "Look," he flung out one hand in a wholly Bolivian gesture as emotion destroyed his usual equanimity, "can't you forget that

insult, as you call it, pretend it didn't happen? Go back to how you felt before it did? Wipe it out and start afresh?"

A new page before us, all past mistakes written off, the drama of life as lived there. At one time she could have taken up the challenge, and even now she felt the old surge of confidence, the refusal to be beaten. Then she remembered how she had responded to his kisses in the temple of love, and fear took over.

"I'm not sure that I can," she muttered, despising herself for behaving in such an irresolute manner.

She wasn't surprised when he muttered an imprecation, followed by a scathing remark about the unreliability of the female sex which she had to let slide by, because at that moment that was how she must seem to be - unreliable. He lunged away from the desk, paced over to the corner of the room and turned to face her. For a moment as he stood there, tall and disdainful, in the shadow cast by the lamp, he looked very like the portrait of his grandfather; pride, with that tremendous inner reserve, hardening every line of his face and emptying his eyes of their usual latent humour.

"Do you think you'll be sure tomorrow?" he asked quietly, with just the slightest of sneers.

"I ... I'll try to be." Cherry stood up, prepared to leave, relieved that he had decided not to push the matter to a conclusion.

"Then go and sleep on it. *Buenas noches, senorita.*"

Opening the door, she went out into the moonlit porch, catching her breath at the clear sparkling beauty of the night, and quietly let herself into the house.

She slept on it, but not very well, waking periodically through the night to struggle with the problem. Never had she felt so indecisive.

Even the fact that a deadline had been set did not help her to make up her mind, for instinct was at war with reason. Instinct said: "Stay", Reason said: "Leave."

Sunrise came at last, its red glow a wound in the straggling remains of the night. Felipe awoke and the usual routine began; a routine which Cherry welcomed because it meant that she did not have to tussle with her problem.

But although the household at Vallera swung to its usual rhythm all morning, apparently undisturbed by the break caused by *the fiesta*, Cherry knew that Francisca's emotions as well as her own were in a state of upheaval, and that this time there was no new page, no wiping out of past mistakes and a fresh beginning for the Bolivian girl. Her face pale, her beautiful eyes swollen with weeping and her mouth a tight, . hurt line, she went about her tasks like an automaton. When Cherry attempted to speak to her as if nothing unusual had happened, she turned away each time without a word of reply.

By early afternoon Cherry was no nearer to making a decision, and her own indecisiveness was making her feel exhausted. If only something would happen to tip the scales one way or the other, she thought as she pushed the perambulator into a warm patch of sunshine in the courtyard.

As if in answer to a prayer the rather battered car which belonged to Rafael chugged round the corner and came to a stop. He got out, waved to her and then opened the door for his father to alight.

"My father felt he must come and describe in detail to Dona Bianca the scenes which he saw yesterday at the *fiesta*," he explained as they all walked towards the house. "It is still a holiday for us, tomorrow also, while the festivities continue. I also came to make sure you and Francisca arrived back safely. I imagine the drive was hair-raising?"

"A little," Cherry replied with a laugh, feeling very pleased to see him. "Oh, Rafael, I am in a terrible muddle!"

Leaving his father to find his own way to Dona Bianca's study, he walked with her along the passage to the nursery where she intended to go through Felipe's clothing to see whether any articles should be discarded because he had grown out of them.

"No more than I am, I can assure you," he shrugged. "I have given up hope, and decided that I must go away and forget her. But it is not easy. I like living in Sucre and my father depends on me to drive him about. What is your muddle, Cherry Ripe?"

"Today I have to decide whether to stay and work here or not and I don't know what to do."

He gave her a sharp glance.

"I thought you liked being here."

"I do, but there is one drawback - Francisca."

He nodded understandingly, his mouth turning down at the corners.

"What a pity. A terrible pity," he murmured.

"After yesterday's little episode at the del Montes' I think it would be better for all concerned if I left as soon as possible."

"I see." They had reached the door of the nursery, but when she opened the door and went in he did not follow her, so that she had to stand and wait for him to continue. "Would you like to leave tomorrow?" he asked, his eyes suddenly bright.

"Is that possible?"

"But of course. I shall drive you to Cochamba and there we shall take the plane which flies up through the *Cordillera* to the *altiplano*."

"We?" she queried.

"*Si*. I am going to La Paz for an interview for a teaching position there. It may be my chance to break away from Francisca. We can travel together."

"That is very kind of you, but I don't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble. Have I helped you to make up your mind?"

"Yes, you have. I'll go with you to La Paz, but I have to tell Dona Bianca and Senor Somervell of my decision yet. Are you staying for dinner this evening?"

"No, we shall be leaving soon. We have another engagement."

"Then how can I let you know whether I'll be coming with you?"

"I shall leave Sucre at noon tomorrow. Get Ric to bring you to my house if you decide to come. *Adios*, for now, Cherry - I must go and tell Francisca I am going away."

Inexorably the afternoon wore on. Don Diego and Rafael left, and Cherry took Felipe to his grandmother's room for his daily visit. She entered the pretty cluttered room with a • feeling of sadness; this would probably be the last time she would sit and talk with the gracious woman who had been so kind to her.

She had half expected to see Ric there, but only Dona Bianca was in the room, sitting behind the beautiful antique desk which had been carved long ago by Indian craftsmen in the baroque style. It had been taught to them by their Spanish conquerors, but they had used it to express their own beliefs and mythology. The carving showed the

tree of life, and on its twining branches clung the animals of the country for which the Indians had so much affection: llamas, condors, anaconda snakes, armadillos and panthers.

When Felipe had been duly inspected and admired Cherry set him down on a blanket she had brought, which she placed in a patch of sunlight on the floor near the window. There he kicked and gurgled vigorously.

"Ric has gone to Potosi for me. He will not be back until tomorrow."

Dona Bianca paused and Cherry waited, guessing that there was more to come. She watched the sallow, wrinkled face of the other woman, thinking that it was as lacking in expression as Ric's had been last night.

Suddenly Dona Bianca looked up, and she felt the full force of the intent stare of dark blue eyes.

"I believe he asked you about staying here yesterday evening," she said.

"Yes, he did try to rush things a little," replied Cherry calmly, and watched the eyes twinkle with amusement.

"He wanted to know before he left this morning. I do not know why. You were right not to be rushed. I have decided, however, that there can be no further delay. I must have your decision now."

In her own gracious way Dona Bianca was just as businesslike as her son could be when he wanted, and she had the advantage of being older and a little frail so that it was difficult to hedge or argue with her. Cherry swallowed hard.

"I have to return to England. I can't stay. Although I'm very honoured that you should want me to."

White curving eyebrows rose in slight surprise, and blue eyes darkened to black.

"I am sorry, *senorita*, to hear you say that. When we talked together the other day I had the impression that you would stay. I am not going to ask you to tell me what has influenced you since then, but perhaps I should tell you that I am aware that something happened yesterday which upset Francisca, and that it involved you. Knowing her as I do, I can guess what happened. Normally she tells me everything, but today she is maintaining a mutinous sullen silence, and I can only come to the conclusion that she has been threatened rather severely by someone she fears more than she respects me."

Again Dona Bianca stopped speaking and let her eyes do the questioning.

"Didn't Senor Somervell tell you what happened?" asked Cherry.

"No, although I asked him. He just shrugged his shoulders and said 'Women!' rather scornfully, and went out"

Cherry searched her mind for something to say. She felt for the first time in her life that she had done something wrong and was about to commit another mistake, as if by deciding to leave Vallera she was letting everyone down, including Francisca. It was not a nice feeling and she resented it; but she could do nothing about it. Nor could she tell Dona Bianca exactly what had happened the previous day. If Francisca could restrain herself from telling tales, then so could she.

"I'm afraid that Senorita Sorata and I don't get on very well," she said at last, "and since this is her home and I am much more of a free agent than she is, I think it is wiser for me to leave. I wouldn't like to cause her any more distress."

Dona Bianca surveyed her quietly, almost knowledgeably, with an expression of extreme sadness in her eyes.

"I do not believe that you are speaking from your heart, Cherry. Nor do I believe you are being wise. I think you are running away, and that surprises me; I would not have thought you could be so easily defeated. But the decision is yours. When do you wish to leave?"

"Senor Mendoza is going to La Paz tomorrow. He has offered to drive me to Cochamba to catch a plane there, if I can get to his house in Sucre by noon tomorrow."

Dona Bianca's eyebrows rose again in surprise.

"You seem to have it all arranged. There might be some problem in getting you to Sucre with Ric not here to drive you, but perhaps we can find someone else to take you."

"Thank you. I hope it is convenient to you for me to leave so soon. Have you someone to look after Felipe?"

"I have someone in mind for Felipe, not as expert or as suitable as yourself, but competent enough," said Dofia Bianca noncommittally, and immediately Cherry felt shut out. She had made her decision. It had been accepted and now she was no longer considered to be part of the community at Vallera, no longer part of the family. The realization brought about a strange turbulence in her mind. She wanted to belong to Vallera, she wanted to be part of the family. She wanted to stay.

"Very well, then, go with Rafael tomorrow," Dona Bianca was saying, "and I hope you will write and tell me when you arrive in England. I worry about people travelling long distances, and like to know when they have reached their destination."

"I will write," said Cherry in a choked voice, and was glad that Felipe began to cry for some reason and had to be scooped up from the floor. Since he did not settle she asked Dona Bianca's permission to leave with him, it was granted and the interview was over.

Up in the nursery Marita joined her to help with the usual bathtime ritual and putting to bed of the baby. Cherry told her that she would be leaving the next day, and was surprised when the little girl burst into tears. She flung her arms round her and pleaded with her not to leave, and it took some time to calm her; and, when that was done, they both went down to the kitchen. Francisca was there, looking better than she had done all day.

"I hear that you are leaving us tomorrow." She spoke politely to Cherry but without looking at her, and Cherry guessed that it was the news of her own imminent departure which had brought about a change in the younger woman's attitude.

"Yes, if I can get to Sucre by noon."

Francisca nodded, as if she knew all about that arrangement, and Cherry wondered who had told her, Rafael or Dona Bianca.

"I shall drive you in," said Francisca confidently. "Tia Bianca will let me use her car. It will give me great pleasure."

"I bet it will," thought Cherry. Aloud she said, "*Muchas grahas, senorita.* You are very kind."

"*De nada,*" replied Francisca, and her eyes glinted with malice.

Her departure had been arranged so coolly and easily that Cherry could not help wondering why she had ever imagined it would be difficult for her to leave Vallera. From that thought sprang another. Would it have been quite so easy if Ric had been there? Would he have brought his powerful persuasiveness to bear on her and cajoled her into staying? She would never know. She would never see him again, because by the time he returned from Potosi she would be flying to La Paz.

Her memory flickering with pictures of that journey with him from La Paz to Potosi, she packed her clothing with her usual efficiency, conscious of a growing sense of desolation. In vain she tried to rid herself of it by thinking ahead to her arrival in England. Unless she sent a cable there would be no one to meet her on her arrival, because no one would know she was returning. In her last letters home and in her letter to Fidel Diaz she had intimated that she would be staying on as Felipe's nanny. So there was nothing to look forward to as there had been when she had flown out to Bolivia.

She remembered her own vow, made when setting out from London, to make the most of the opportunity offered to her. Well, she had tried and had been offered a good position in a beautiful place. Then why was she leaving? She knew the answer only too well. She was leaving because she was afraid of being hurt again, afraid of falling in love with a handsome tantalizing man who did not give a snap of his fingers for love, and who regarded marriage merely as a convenient way of providing a mother for the orphans left in his charge and a housekeeper for his home.

But what about those flashes of recognition she had experienced? What about that shared laughter? What about those embraces which had lasted much longer than any *abrazo*, and could have developed into much more? Had they meant something only to herself? In spite of her efforts to avoid it, had she fallen a victim to romanticizing again?

The night was another torment, and morning brought again the bright sunlight and blue skies which she had known ever since she had been at Vallera. She knew now, because she had been told that the weather wasn't always so perfect, that in the warmer season the rain fell heavily and roads were washed away and landslides were common. She knew also that during wet weather the place could be cut off from the outside world for days on end. She knew that to live there always one required an inner strength and a kind of super faith in oneself and

in what one was doing, as possessed by Dona Bianca, Ric and possibly also by Arthur Somervell and even by Francisca. And she knew that she had the potential within her to develop in that way herself.

Why then was she leaving? She could not say it was because no one had asked her to stay. The decision was entirely her own and she would have to live with it.

When she was ready to go she left Felipe with a tearful Marita and went down to say goodbye to Dona Bianca, whose farewell had a quality of resignation about it which brought tears to Cherry's eyes. The elderly woman looked very frail in the bright morning light, her skin so thin that every vein seemed to show, her eyes lacking their usual twinkle.

"*Adios, senorita,*" she murmured gently, taking Cherry's firm capable hand in her own. "It has been a great pleasure knowing you. I shall think of you often and wish that you had stayed."

Cherry fled then, afraid that she might break down, and went to find Francisca to tell her she was ready to leave. There was no sign of her in the courtyard where the shining black car belonging to Dona Bianca was waiting, so she went to the kitchen. Only the daily washerwoman was there, and when Cherry asked her if she had seen Francisca the woman pointed to the open door of the store-room and said that the *senorita* had gone down to bring up some *chunos* and other vegetables to be prepared for the midday meal.

Glancing at her watch, seeing that she must leave immediately if she wished to get to Sucre by noon, Cherry went through the big thick door to the top of the narrow stairway and called to Francisca. There was no answer, so she went down a few steps and called again.

Francisca did not appear and did not answer. Thinking that the woman had gone into a far part of the storeroom and could not hear her, Cherry went further down the steps and called again.

"Francisca, please hurry up or I'll miss Rafael," she said.

Behind her there was a soft swishing sound followed by a thud. Turning hastily to retrace her steps, she found that the door had swung to and refused to budge when she pushed against it. Clenching her fist, she banged on it and shouted, hoping that the washerwoman would hear her, but the door would not open. Once again she called to Francisca, and again there was no answer. Going down the stairs, she walked all round the storeroom, and slowly it dawned on her that not only was Francisca not there, but also she had never been down there.

Slowly she returned to the steps and sat down on one of them, her feet resting on the one below. She would wait for a while and then bang on the door again. Eventually Francisca was bound to miss her, and would find out from the washerwoman that she had gone down to the storeroom. The main thing was not to panic. After all, she did not suffer from claustrophobia as Elizabeth Humphreys had.

She looked at her watch. Ten-thirty; only by driving at high speed would they reach Sucre in time now. Her departure would have to be delayed until tomorrow. As Rafael would say, the whole episode was typical of the country and tomorrow, *mariana*, would be just as good as today.

At five-minute intervals Cherry banged on the door and shouted, but when her watch showed that she had been sitting there for over an hour, she began to wonder what had happened to Francisca. Surely she must be wondering where she was ? Surely she had gone to tell her beloved Tia Bianca that the stupid Englishwoman had disappeared, and surely Dona Bianca had asked for a search of the house?

By one o'clock Cherry had given up banging and, feeling hungry, managed to open a jar of preserved peaches and ate them and drank the juice. Not that there was any chance of her being short of anything to drink, she thought wryly, glancing at the bottles of wine and *pisco*.

Her short meal over, she wandered around the storeroom. Some old portraits of bygone Matinos caught her eye and she stared at one in particular, of a haughty Spanish lady who was wearing a full-skirted dress made of gold brocade, and a black lace mantilla. The dress was the one which Francisca had once taken from the big clothing chest and had held against her.

On impulse, thinking of the way she and Joanna had passed many a rainy Sunday afternoon by dressing up in some old clothes stored away in the attic of their grandmother's farmhouse in Lancashire, and of the stories they had enacted together, Cherry went to the chest. She would look through the clothing and entertain herself by dressing in some of it to see if she could transform herself into a Spanish lady of the eighteenth century. It would keep her mind occupied and save her from dwelling on the awful realization that she might be imprisoned in the storeroom for hours.

The dress of gold brocade was on the top of the pile of clothing? and she held it against her and surveyed herself in the cloudy mirror propped against the wall. No, the gold colour did nothing for her. She always looked best in blues or greens which brought out the latent blue or green in her grey eyes and flattered the whiteness of her skin. Delving into the chest again, she pulled out dresses, petticoats and lace mantillas, all of them smelling of mothballs and slightly dingy with age. There were also many shoes made from satin and encrusted with sequins.

In the end she chose a dress of peacock blue with a full skirt and a rather indecent low-cut neckline, which she imagined had once been

decorated with a collar of lacy frills. The colour was right, and it looked as if it might fit her.

Slipping out of her woollen suit and blouse, she pulled the dress over her head. Fastening it was difficult because there were many hooks and eyes at the back, but after much fiddling, she managed to fasten them all and looked at herself in the mirror.

A tall slim girl with tangled fly-away hair looked back at her. She was showing a rather large expanse of white bosom, and the tight-fitting waistline and full skirt of the dress gave her a feminine grace which belonged to other times. But she still did not look like a Spanish lady of the eighteenth century - perhaps a mantilla would complete the picture. But how did one arrange a mantilla?

The delicate old lace of the mantilla she chose almost ripped as she struggled to arrange it over the tall Spanish comb with the edging of tarnished silver which she had managed to secure at the back of her head; but at last it was fixed and draped and she gazed critically at her image.

She really looked quite different, mysterious and slightly coquettish, experienced in the ways of flirting. There was just one thing missing - a fan. No Spanish *senorita* ever went without a fan, in the past; it had been as essential to the art of flirting as the white handkerchief was to the *cueca*. And there was one at the bottom of the chest, a beauty, with shimmering mother-of-pearl spokes joined together with stiff silk on which a design of peacocks had been picked out in tiny iridescent blue and green sequins. Obviously it had been chosen to match the peacock blue dress.

Carried away by her make-believe and utterly engrossed in it, Cherry fluttered the fan experimentally and made a deep curtsy to her reflection, pretending she was curtsying to an admirer.

"*Buenas tardes, senorita*," replied a deep masculine voice in which laughter stirred lazily.

Cherry dropped the fan in surprise. She bent to pick it up and as she did so she saw the toes of tan leather boots peeping from beneath sand-coloured trousers. Straightening slowly, she saw a light blue shirt which had a pattern of red embroidery edging its deep shoulder saddle. The shirt was unbuttoned half-way down the front, giving a tantalizing glimpse of a bare chest and a silver medallion glinting against a whorl of brown hairs. Her glance lifted to meet dark blue eyes gazing at her with slightly mocking amazement.

"This is a surprise, *senorita*" he said. "Do you often come here?"

Her heart hammering, Cherry fluttered the fan, aware that his gaze was roving boldly over her, taking in the differences the dress made to her appearance.

"No, this is my first visit - alone," she replied. "How did you get in?"

"Through the door from the kitchen. How else?"

"I didn't hear you."

"No, you were too busy dressing up." Humour glinted in his eyes and pulled at the corners of his mouth. "You look charming. The dress becomes you, but the mantilla is not quite right. I'll fix it for you."

He stepped forward, his hands reaching out to the mantilla, and while he re-draped the lace Cherry held her breath, almost overpowered by his warm vibrant presence. She gazed steadily at the tantalizing glint of the medallion, then, hardly aware of what she was doing, she put out a hand and lifted the disc of solid silver. The panther engraved on it seemed to watch her warily?

"Why didn't you tell me it was yours?" she asked.

Ric stepped back from her, removed the medallion from her hand and slipped it inside his shirt.

"Everything was quite confused enough," he parried.

"But how did it get into Felipe's Moses basket?"

"Elizabeth had it. I gave it to her," he replied coolly, and she realized that he would never tell her any more unless she pushed her advantage now. Taking a chance on the intimacy which this strange encounter had created between them, she ventured to question him.

"Why did you give it to her?"

Ric raised an eyebrow at her, and for a moment she thought he was going to snub her by not replying to the question.

"Why are women always so curious about a man's more irrational behaviour? What is it about the irrational that fascinates them?" he drawled mockingly. "The giving of my medallion to Elizabeth was something I've preferred to forget."

"I see. It was a mistake which you have wiped out so that you could begin again on a fresh page," she taunted lightly.

His mouth quirked sardonically.

"Rafael has taught you much about Bolivians during your short stay here," he drawled, "for that is exactly what I did. I wiped Elizabeth from my mind, and started again. While she was here I romanticized about her, imagining I was in love with her; she was pretty and fun to be with, but she wanted marriage. There I hesitated, knowing that any woman I married would have to like Vallera and want to live here too; so I tried an experiment. I brought her here to stay for a while."

"To take the test of eligibility," she suggested.

"Possibly," he conceded. "At first she liked the place, but gradually she grew restless and uneasy. She said that she would have to return to England to see her family before committing herself. That seemed reasonable, and I went with her to Lima and we stayed with Isabella for a few days." He broke off and his face tautened. "A few days which we spent in a romantic haze," he added slowly, and Cherry felt an un-pleasant painful jab of jealousy as she found herself imagining what those few days of romance might have been like.

"Before she left," he continued, his voice hardening again, "she asked me to give her my medallion as a token of my love for her and in exchange she would give me a locket which contained a miniature of herself. I was so infatuated that I agreed, and we promised that if either of us changed our minds about the other during our separation we would return the tokens." He paused, then added in a low voice, "As you know, the medallion was returned to me in a most unexpected way two years after I had given it to her."

He swung away from her and went over to the racks where the wine was kept and lifted out a bottle. Gazing at his back, Cherry felt herself racked with the anguish he must have felt when he saw the medallion again and knew that Elizabeth had married his half-brother.

"Didn't she give you any other indication that she had changed her mind about marrying you?" she asked.

He turned round, bottle in hand, and leaned against the rack.

"I believe now that she had changed her mind before she left Vallera, because by then she had met Juan and she knew also he was going to be posted to the London Embassy. But either she was afraid to tell me or she wanted to keep two irons in the fire. She kept "up the pretence in Lima. It wasn't until I returned to Vallera that I began to realize she was not suitable to be my wife at all, so I sent back her locket and waited for the return of the medallion. It never came, and then I knew

I had parted with it while the state of my mind was temporarily unbalanced, while I was being taken a ride by my own emotions." He shrugged fatalistically. "It happens all the time."

"Yes, it happens all the time." She sighed, and he gave her a sharp underbrowed glance.

"To you too," he observed. "Remember, I guessed that something similar had happened to you: I recognised a wariness in you which was only too familiar."

"I remember, and I didn't want to tell you because I thought you would laugh at me. I'd hoped that Edwin loved me as I believed I loved him. I'd hoped that one day we would marry, but he married my sister instead."

"The beautiful and brainy one? Then your experience was even more like mine than I'd supposed. I suspect that when Elizabeth returned to England she sought out Juan and conveniently transferred her affections to him, knowing that he could give her more than I could."

"More of what she wanted, you mean?"

"*Si*." His mouth curled bitterly. "Half the Matino fortune plus a way of life I have never envied. I could only offer Vallera. But what of you? Have you managed to wipe out your mistake yet?"

"Yes, I think I have."

"And is there anything written on the new page? Another mistake, perhaps, from which you'd have run away today if Francisca hadn't locked you in here?"

Cherry gasped. "Do you believe she locked me in here deliberately?"

"I do. She did it to Elizabeth because she was jealous of her."

"But she had no reason to frighten me into leaving. I was going of my own accord. Oh, how deluded can she get?" exclaimed Cherry disgustedly.

Amusement glinted in his eyes as he noted her irritation.

"Her locking you in here had nothing to do with any delusions she may have had about her relationship with me," he drawled. "It was done coldly and calculatingly. She could not bear the thought of you travelling to La Paz with Rafael."

"Oh, really! Well!" Cherry found she had no words to express her amazement. "Where is she now?"

"In Sucre. Or possibly on her way to La Paz in your place. She isn't here, nor is my mother's car. Mother told me that you had decided to leave and that Francisca had driven you into Sucre; naturally I was surprised, when I came down here to choose some wine because we have guests for dinner tonight, and found you here, all dressed up."

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Why would Francisca not want me to travel with Rafael?"

"You have to admit you and he have been pretty thick lately, embracing at every opportunity when he's visited us, then spending the whole day together at the *fiesta*," he remarked drily.

"We were only doing it to attract Francisca's attention to him," sighed Cherry. "He thought that if he showed an interest in me she would notice him, and I agreed to help him."

"So. Now I understand," Ric said, replaced the bottle on the rack and came towards her. "And as Francisca missed the attentions of her faithful knight, she became more and more confused. Unwilling to relinquish her infatuation for me, she was beginning to fear she might lose him too. Oh, no wonder she sulked yesterday! No wonder she

blew up in the garden at the del Montes'. No wonder she locked you in here to stop you from running away with Rafael."

Laughter danced in his eyes and rippled in his voice as he stepped right up to her.

"I wasn't running away with him," she objected, fluttering the fan in sudden agitation.

"But you were running away," he accused.

"Oh, really?" she scoffed. "You'll be telling me next why I was running away!"

"I've a good idea," he replied with that cool equanimity which made fencing with him so difficult. Unable to contain her curiosity, she asked,

"Why?" And she fluttered the fan again, thinking that it was not surprising Spanish women had found fans useful in the past to screen any emotion they might be showing.

Hardly had the thought passed through her mind than the fan was snatched rudely from her hand and tossed aside. Hands on his hips, his powerful shoulders slightly hunched, Ric towered over her threateningly.

"Stop acting the part of a simpering *senorita*" he ordered. "I like the dress - and all it reveals - but I don't like the fan or the simpers. Neither of them are you."

"Oh!" she gasped. Then, realizing his criticism of her behaviour had been instead of an answer to her question, she drew herself up to her full height and retorted, "Well, if you don't like the simpers I don't like your evasions. Why do you think I was running away, just because I was leaving Vallera?"

Crossing his arms across his chest, Ric half closed his eyes as he studied her.

"I think you were running away because you're afraid that if you stay you'll fall in love again," he said slowly.

He was right on the mark, and Cherry wished she still had the fan to hide her surprise. She took refuge in sarcasm.

"You're so knowledgeable, aren't you?" she jeered. "I suppose you also think you know the person I might fall in love with?"

His mouth quivered a little at one corner, as if he were having difficulty in restraining his amusement.

"As a matter of fact I do," was his tantalising reply.

She struggled hard not to fall into the trap set for her, but once again curiosity got the better of her.

"Who?" she challenged weakly.

"Myself, of course."

"Of course, of course! Why didn't I think of that?" She discovered she was shaking in every limb. "Ric Somervell, you are the most conceited man I've ever met!"

He raised his eyebrows in surprise, then murmured wickedly, "I find it strange that you dislike evasion of your questions, but when I tell you the truth you object. I don't think I'm conceited; I just know something about women. Flirting is a useful custom. It teaches both sexes about each other. While we travelled together I learned a lot about you, Cherry, as I think I told you. On the night of the *fiesta* I learned a great deal more."

The memory of the kisses they had exchanged in the little garden temple flared in her mind, causing her face to flame. For a moment she hated him quite fiercely.

"Not only are you conceited, you are also quite unscrupulous in your methods," she accused in a low voice.

"Sometimes," he conceded coolly, "when I want something, I happen to want you, and have done since we danced the *cueca* together in La Paz."

Dizziness made everything blur before her eyes. It couldn't be caused by the altitude. Maybe she suffered from claustrophobia after all. She lost her balance, almost falling backwards into the big empty chest behind her. Moving quickly, Ric grabbed her by the shoulders and once he had a firm hold of her being an opportunist of the first rank, he made the most of the opportunity, by slipping his arms round her. For a moment they stared at each other. The wariness was still there, in both of them; this situation was not new to either. They both knew what commitment involved, and how it might result in bitterness or heartbreak. But it might also result in happiness.

Swiftly, as if he had decided to throw caution to the winds, Ric bent his head and kissed her, a hard sweet kiss which left her longing for more.

"Feel insulted?" he whispered.

Surprised by the question, Cherry leaned away from him, although she remained within the circle of his arms.

"I've never felt insulted when you've kissed me, only afraid," she admitted.

"But the other night when I asked you not to let what had happened in the del Montes' garden influence you in your decision about whether to stay on or not, you said that you'd been insulted."

"I thought you were referring to Francisca's tirade against me," she exclaimed as his strange behaviour in the small room with the private entrance became clear to her. "So that's why you behaved in that proud and prickly way!"

"Was I proud and prickly?" he asked with a laugh.

"You often are. You withdraw into yourself and become as remote and insolent as the Andes."

"I note the further influence of Rafael the poet," he mocked. "If I was a bit stiff, it was because you had said to Francisca that you regarded me only as your employer and had no wish to change that relationship. I could hardly believe my own ears after the way you had ..."

"Shush!" she murmured, putting her fingers against his mouth. "Please don't keep reminding me of my weaknesses."

"Is it a weakness?" he queried softly, removing her hand. "Are you still going to run away if this sort of thing continues to happen?"

Expertly he tilted her chin and kissed her again, drawing from her such a fervent response as her feeling were suddenly liberated, that they were both breathless when it ended.

"Is it going to continue?" Cherry asked shakily, leaning against him.

"If you stay here the dance of courtship will continue until you surrender," he said softly.

"And if I leave?" she asked cautiously, thinking of Elizabeth who had left and had lost him.

Ric did not answer at once and she sensed a struggle was going on in his mind, as his emotional needs fought to overcome his pride. Perhaps the question wasn't quite fair, but she had to know the answer to it for her own peace of mind.

"If you leave," he replied at last, "I guess I'll come after you and make you come back?"

"Make?" she challenged, lifting her head to look at him, her independent spirit up in arms at the thought that he might use force to get his own way.

"Yes, make. I have methods of persuasion of which you know nothing yet," he threatened softly, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. He cupped her face in his hands and this time there was no mercy in his kiss.

"Are you going to stay, Cherry?" he asked huskily, several minutes later.

Dishevelled and breathless, her mantilla gone and her cheeks aglow, Cherry surrendered, knowing that having experienced his lovemaking she could not leave. But she still had to make a show of being unaffected, even though the expression in her eyes belied her.

"There isn't much point in my leaving if you're going to follow and make me come back, is there?" she countered sweetly. "Oh, I think I'll risk it. After all, I like dancing the *cueca* with you."

With a delighted laugh he caught her against him, this time not with passion but with warm affection.

"Never at a loss, are you?" he taunted. "That's what I love about you most, your refusal to be stampeded."

"Love?" she queried lightly, although she felt joy bursting within her like a multi-coloured firework, lighting up the darkness which had been in her mind since her disappointment with Edwin.

"Si, amor. Te quiero mucho, querida." The soft Spanish language of love, gave this amazing - confession a beauty of sound which convinced her of his sincerity, although she still had to question it.

"But you once told me you didn't want a certain issue clouded with talk of love."

"I know, and at the time I meant it. Your answer told me much about you. It told me you're a woman who would only marry where you loved and for no other reason. That confirmed my assessment of you as being eligible to be my wife, and is why I wanted you to stay here for a while. I hoped that one day, when you'd stopped being afraid of being hurt, you might learn to love me, marry me and become the wife I chose in cold blood. As you've already noted, I was quite unscrupulous about it, using all my experience of flirting to court your interest. Pursuit and then withdrawal. The day of the *fiesta* I was going to advance again, but unfortunately Rafael, and then Francisca, fouled things up. Time was running out, and I had to go to Potosi without knowing whether you'd decided to stay or not."

He paused, bent and picked up the mantilla from the floor and began to untangle the lace from the comb.

"When I returned today," he continued quietly, "and found you had gone, I felt as if I'd received a crippling blow. When I'd recovered a little, my first impulse was to rush after you. Then I remembered what you'd said about being insulted and I hesitated." His long mouth twisted sardonically at the corner and he gave her an underbrowed

glance. "My damnable Matino pride did the rest. Obviously you preferred Rafael, I thought, and I pretended I didn't care. Then it hit me. For the first time I understood my own peculiar behaviour - why I was furious when I found Rafael kissing you in the rose garden, why I spent the day of the *fiesta* drinking *chica* instead of joining in the fun, why I made love to you in the temple. I didn't only want you as a mother for my children or a housekeeper - I loved you for yourself, every part of you, and I didn't know how I was going to manage without you. I tell you, Cherry, when I came down here I was in a pretty desperate state, and then I saw a *senorita* in a peacock blue dress, preening and bowing in front of an old mirror, and I knew that I had another chance."

Once more Cherry put her fingers against his mouth. He had said enough.

"Shush," she said softly. "It's my turn now. *Te quiero muchisimo*. I love you very much, and you were right when you guessed I was running away. You see, I didn't think you were serious and I couldn't bear to be hurt again."

Passion leapt in his eyes, making their darkness glow with blue fire, but before he could embrace her again there was a sudden commotion from the steps leading up to the kitchen.

"Cherry, Cherry! Are you there? Are you all right?"

Rafael's voice sounded breathless, as if he had been running in a race. It came as a surprise. Moving together, Ric and Cherry went to the bottom of the stairs. Halfway down them and about to take another step was Rafael, looking unusually fierce. Behind him was Francisca, her luxuriant hair tumbled from its usual smooth chignon falling about her face and shoulders in a shining mass, making her look remarkably young and defenceless. One of her hands was caught

firmly in one of Rafael's, but she was trying in vain to pull it free and retreat up the stairs.

"Yes, I'm all right," said Cherry hurriedly. "But what are you doing here?"

"I waited for you," he replied. "Even when it was long past noon. I waited. I was just about to leave when this silly girl arrived - on foot."

"On foot?" exclaimed Ric. "Why? What happened to the car?"

"There was an accident," explained Rafael, his mouth turning down at the corners. "In her haste to get to Sucre she drove into a ditch at the side of the road, this side of the city. She is not hurt and the car is not damaged badly. I asked her where you were, Cherry, and she said you were not coming. I did not believe her, and after a severe inquisition," at this point Rafael looked very severe and conquistadorial, "she confessed that she had locked you in here. I was afraid that you might be in here for hours, alone, without anyone knowing, so I came here instead of going to Cochamba, to release you."

"That was very kind of you, Rafael, and I appreciate your consideration, but as you can see I'm perfectly all right."

Cherry turned to look at Ric with smiling eyes. He smiled back at her, put a possessive arm round her waist, and kissed her.

"You see," stormed Francisca suddenly, twisting about as she tried to free herself from Rafael's grasp, "I told you she would be all right. I am the one who suffers. Let me go, I cannot stay to watch them. Ay, ay, ay. I am so unhappy, and nobody cares about me!"

Ric raised his head and glanced impatiently at Rafael.

"*Por dios*, can't you keep her in order?" he growled softly. "If you don't know how, may I suggest you take her to the rose garden or

some other secluded place and treat her as I've seen you treating Cherry, more than once?"

The glitter in Rafael's eyes died away. His wide white grin appeared as he nodded his appreciation.

"Si, si, senor. It was in my mind to do that; I have been watching you and learning much. Come, *chiquita*, no more fighting. It is time you learned who is your master."

Turning away, he set off up the stairs still holding Francisca's hand. After a slight struggle she gave in and followed him meekly.

"Buena suerte - good luck!" Ric called after them, and the laughter in his face chased away the sardonic lines, making him look like the young man whose photograph was in Dona Bianca's room. "And now to continue," he said, turning to Cherry.

At the top of the stairs the big door closed with a dull thud. They stared at each other, first in consternation and with growing amusement.

"I wonder when they'll realize they've locked us both in here?" said Cherry with a chuckle.

"Not for a long while - I hope," he replied, drawing her into his arms. "You and I have to make up for lost time."