



Mills & Boon

BIRD OF PARADIS

Margaret Rome



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In a fit of bravado, Lynette rashly and untruthfully declared that she believed in trial marriages -- and only realized how foolish she had been when Luis Estevez, Marques de Paradis, took her at her word.

CHAPTER ONE

THE cocktail bar of Papeete's principal hotel was crowded with a colourful, chattering crowd of young, not so young, and a few gracefully old people. It was *aperitif* time in French-governed Tahiti, the most tolerant and carefree isle in the whole of the Pacific, and Papeete, its capital, was a hub of laughter and gaiety.

The gay decor of the room paled to insignificance as one brilliant dress vied valiantly with another. The scarlet of the hibiscus flower mated restlessly with the yellow of citrus; foliage green fought with brilliant ocean blue; sea aquamarine failed to conquer the sour sharpness of lime. Parakeet colours; and the high-pitched, at times even harsh voices fell as alien upon the ears as that of the bird itself.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when a waiter respectfully ushered a small party of newcomers towards an empty table all eyes should turn as if with relief to rest upon the lavender grey chiffon worn by the regal old lady who, with her elegantly groomed escort, had just entered the room. There was a momentary hush, and into that small silence fell the words Lynette Southern would have given a year's allowance to retract but which, once started, had to reach a conclusion if only for the sake of saving face.

'Of course I believe in trial marriage! If one buys a dress one doesn't like then one can return it as unsatisfactory! Why then should a modern society such as ours tolerate an antiquated system whereby two people are tied together for years because they hadn't the sense to get to know each other well before the manacles were snapped on?'

Her last few words were not quite so decisive - she had sensed the size of her audience - but after a quick glance round at the faces surrounding her - some scandalized, some pitying, others openly amused - she tossed her head and concluded defiantly: *'I shall insist upon a month's trial before I marry!'*

Just before her sophisticated young companions began to chime in with their opinions and the wave of conversation that had been interrupted began once more, she looked up into the fathomless eyes of the man who was escorting the aristocratic old lady. She just had time to note his censorious frown and the disdainful thinning of his autocratic lips before her view was obscured by the shifting mass of people between them. She sensed, however, that in that split second he had taken in every detail of her appearance. Her violently hued pyjama suit had seemed to offend him almost as much, as her remarks, and she did not doubt that her fantastic hair-do of baby blonde Bubbles curls that foamed over her head and dropped down on to her forehead would not recommend itself to him even though it was the pinnacle of fashion. *I'm glad*, she told herself without pausing to wonder why his silent criticism should unnerve her so, that I slashed on frosted purple lipstick and eye make-up. It will give that prig something more to disapprove of!

She turned her back on the laughing, elegant crowd and was swept into the conversation of her own circle. Vince Chambers, her escort, chimed in admiringly.

'You certainly told 'em, Lynette! The dowagers are shocked rigid !' He laughed his approval, but Lynette's answering smile was a little uncertain, *I've done it again!* she was acknowledging to herself as a sick feeling of disgust knotted her inside. Why, oh, why can't I speak my true feelings instead of pandering to the pseudo-sophistication of the people I'm forced to keep company with? She hated herself for her weakness, for her spineless acceptance, and now championship, of the low moral standards of the pleasure-satiated crowd she called - for the want of a better word - her friends.

Two years earlier her father, Edgar Southern, a business tycoon reputed to be one of the richest men in England, had called her into the study of their luxurious home and told her frowningly: 'I've decided that something must be done about you, Lynette!'

'Done about me, Daddy?' she had queried, honestly puzzled. He had frowned deeper and groped with thick, podgy fingers into his cigar box before continuing. She had waited patiently while he had cut the end off his cigar and lighted it, but the query in her grey eyes had seemed to irritate him and instead of searching for words to soften his criticism he had snapped,

'Yes, girl! Don't you *ever* look into a mirror?' At her look of bewilderment, he had hurried on: 'I've spent hundreds of pounds in order to send you to the best schools; schools chosen especially for the emphasis they placed upon the importance of deportment, dress sense and the like, and what have you gained from them? Nothing! Just look at yourself, child. You left the most expensive finishing school in Paris two years ago and for all the good it's done you I might just as well have sent you to . . . *Bradford*. . . *to your mother's people!*'

He had thrown his arms wide as if what he had suggested was the most drastic occurrence that could have befallen her; as in his eyes it was. He had advanced a long way after marrying Lynette's mother. She had been his childhood sweetheart in the days when they had both lived in a row of small dingy terrace houses crouched in the shadow of one of Bradford's decrepit mills. But Edgar had nursed a burning ambition to get ahead. He had worked and schemed to reach the top and his phenomenal achievements had outstripped even his wildest hopes. His wife had been a meek, dreamy person, without ambition of any kind. His success had pleased her at first, but then when money had begun literally to pour into the Southern coffers and Edgar had wanted to jump head first into the social swim, she had retired into her shell and refused absolutely to face the limelight. She had spent her days with her baby daughter, delighting in her to the exclusion of everyone else, until finally Edgar and she had drifted irrevocably apart. She had died when Lynette was twelve years old, eight years earlier, leaving behind her a bewildered daughter and a slightly ashamed husband.

All the irritation he had felt at his wife's lack of confidence had been mirrored in the disparaging look he had swept over his daughter, and she had been mortified. She had looked down at her crumpled jeans and grubby blouse and wished passionately that she could be the fashion-plate he so obviously wanted her to be. But she could not. Cocktail parties, afternoon teas and mannequin parades left her cold. She was happiest grubbing about in the grounds, helping the gardeners or taking long walks with her dogs and feeling the rain on her face or running wild into the wind. School she had hated. She had been a complete outsider there. Her apathy towards the social graces and her indifference to the ceaseless speculation about men and marriage that had absorbed the other girls had made her barely tolerated by the majority and completely ignored by the rest; all but one - a sweet little French girl who had attached herself to Lynette and whose friendship had made her last six weeks there tolerable.

As Edgar had watched, she had started to blink rapidly, another mannerism which annoyed him intensely because he felt it betrayed a lamentable lack of dignity, and in his temper he had begun to bluster: 'I'll have you knocked into shape, my girl, if it's the last thing I do! It's a ridiculous situation when a man who has everything is let down by his family, first by your mother and now by you ...! I need a hostess. Someone to welcome my business associates and to keep a firm hand on the running of the house. In other words, an asset, *not* a liability!'

She had digested this with a sick feeling of inadequacy, recognizing that to him she was no more than an investment that was not paying dividends. But she loved her father. She also admired him for his tenacity, for his success as a business man; more than anything she wanted his approval. So with a plea for understanding in her voice she had lifted her chin high and pleaded,

'I'll do anything you say, Daddy, anything! I'll start to take an interest in clothes and I'll have my hair done regularly . . .!' Then Edgar had dropped his bombshell. Abruptly, he had told her,

'I've arranged for something better than that. Do you remember a girl called Sutton - the Honourable Merle Sutton - I believe you were at school together?' The very name had made Lynette's small frame stiffen with apprehension. Remember her . . . how could she ever forget the girl who had made her last two years at school a nightmare? The spoiled, capricious daughter of one of England's most exclusive families, she had had no real need of the 'finishing off' the school specialized in and had made no secret of her contempt for the daughters of self-made men whose lack of breeding necessitated their presence there; and of Lynette in particular. Her blood had run cold when he went on to say in a self-satisfied way: 'Lord Sutton and I were in a business deal together, but I'm afraid he came out of it rather badly, disastrously in fact, he's almost bankrupt. I've helped him all I can, naturally, and he's now indebted to me for quite a large sum. That's why,' he smiled complacently, 'it didn't take a great deal of persuasion on my part to get his daughter to agree to my plan.'

'What plan?' Lynette had faltered as a horrible suspicion had begun to form in her mind.

'That she should take you in hand, of course!' He had rubbed his hands together with satisfaction and assured her: 'You'll find no better tutor. That little lady knows it all! I've arranged for her to take you under her wing for at least a year in the hope that some of her polish might rub off on you !'

Lynette had blushed a furious red and her long silken eyelashes had begun their agitated fluttering as her nerves had tautened with foreboding.

'But, Daddy, you can't ...! You mustn't ...!'

Before her stammering objections could be marshalled into coherence he had jumped up from his chair and taken a couple of paces towards her. She had worriedly noted the veins knotting at his

temples as he had striven to contain his wrath and, knowing his blood pressure was a source of worry, she had bitten back the words that might have clarified her seemingly ungrateful attitude.

'I *can* and I *will*?' he had spluttered angrily. Vexedly he had lifted his eyes to the ceiling and asked of no one in particular: 'Is there another girl in the world who would object to a year's travelling with a blank cheque with which to buy anything she should fancy?' He had swung around and glared at her. 'I'm offering you the world on a plate, my girl, see that you make the most of it!'

That was why, after six months' aimless wandering in Europe in search of the refinement her father de-sired for her, they were now in Papeete because, Merle had drawlingly informed her, it was a *must* for members of the swinging scene at this time of the year. She looked up and saw Merle watching her speculatively. Her nerves jumped, as they still did whenever she felt Merle's eyes upon her, but by now she had mastered her childish habit of blinking rapidly whenever she was the least bit disturbed and she returned her look calmly. Merle competently stubbed out her cigarette and turned her attention upon Vince who was still smiling his admiration of Lynette's outspoken views. Delicately as a cat, she purred to him,

'Most men would take Lynette's words as an invitation, darling. We all know how you feel about her, so why don't you rent one of the small islands that are dotted about the ocean and carry her off for a month to see how well you get on together? But perhaps,' she added silkily, 'you're afraid *Daddy* wouldn't approve?'

Vince Chambers threw her a look of dislike as her shot found its mark. She knew he wanted Lynette and not just for her money, although it was a major factor, but he dared not risk offending Edgar Southern - none of his crowd dared - Edgar wielded influence and power and, if crossed, would not hesitate to stamp his transgressor and anyone who favoured him into the ground. For the sake of his

family, who financed his junketings around the globe for six months of every year, he had to be discreet. So he decided to ignore Merle's bitchy remark and to concentrate on winning Lynette's affection in a more conventional, if duller, manner.

His eyes glistened with appreciation when he turned them upon her. It seemed incredible she should be the same girl who six months ago had trailed in Merle's wake to a party at his London flat. He squirmed inwardly as he remembered how he had reproached Merle for her companion's lack of *savoir faire*, her painful lack of chic, for which the girls who frequented his parties were renowned.

'I say, Merle, sweetie,' he had whispered indignantly, 'where did you dig *her* up?' Merle had not had the decency to keep her voice down when she had answered mockingly,

'Didn't I tell you, darling? I'm a working girl, now. Merle Incorporated, maker of geese into swans for the newly rich. Behold my first assignment!'

He still felt hot when he remembered the stricken look on Lynette's face as she had faced a barrage of amused eyes, but, plucky kid that she was, she had not turned tail and run, as he had thought she might, but had stuck it out right the way through what must have been for her a miserable evening.

She did not need pity now, he thought as his eyes wandered over her, she could hold her own in any society. Her voice, as she thrust and parried her way through the scintillating conversation, rang with confidence. Her small, beautifully manicured hands waved to and fro as she emphasized a point and even Merle, who in the beginning had seemed to dominate her, was no longer allowed to hold the stage exclusively as was her wont. The transformation was remarkable; in no way more so than in her appearance. She had not been content simply to copy Merle but had cleverly studied the dress and

mannerisms of those around her until it was now a case of the teacher looking to the pupil for guidance. He chuckled quietly to himself as he recalled Merle's discomfiture at her first sight of Lynette dressed for the evening's festivities. Her eyes had narrowed jealously when she had offered her barbed advice: 'I'm not too sure about that outfit, Lynette. It's a bit outrageous, even for Papeete.' And then Lynette's composed answer.

'But, darling, one of the Royals was photographed wearing a similar outfit while on holiday in Greece! But perhaps,' she had twinkled, 'you're becoming the tiniest bit outdated, Merle?' Even Vince had recognized that this was throwing down the gauntlet with a vengeance and he was not surprised when the atmosphere for the rest of the evening simmered with the animosity towards Lynette that Merle had never really tried to hide.

He was brought back abruptly to the present by the voice of Cy Chermak, a feather-brained, rich and pampered American member of the party, asking her husband, Lucas, penetratingly,

'Lucas, doll, who's that brigand of a man who is sitting over there, do you know?' Before Lucas could answer her in the negative, she appealed to the rest of the girls with an exaggerated gesture: 'Don't you think he's the absolute ultimate, darlings? Can't you just picture him with a patch over one eye and a cutlass in his hand defying anyone and everyone to challenge his rights? What must it be like to be married to such an adorable man!'

Totally disregarding her husband's frown of displeasure, she twisted round in her seat to take another look at the man who was attending to the needs of the old lady in grey, mercifully oblivious of the comments Cy was making. Lynette's skin crawled with embarrassment when the occupants of the table next to theirs turned to smile at Cy with amusement. One of them, a strikingly chic,

middle-aged Frenchwoman, leant slightly towards them to inform Cy with a twinkle,

'You are not far wrong in your estimate of Luis Estevez, Marques de Paradis, *cherie*. He is half Spanish and half French. All his life he has made women weep, that one, but still we love him. As for being a brigand . . . Well, let his nickname speak for itself. Amongst his islanders on Paradis he is known as '*Le Pirat*!'

'The pirate!' Cy breathed rapturously. 'The pirate of Paradise Island! Oh, how absolutely spine-rippling!'

The Frenchwoman laughed aloud at Cy's bemused expression, then added, 'Ah, but our dear Luis is civilized, these days - at least on the surface. He was a mere boy when his wild escapades earned him that title. Maturity and, I suspect, his grandmother, the Comtesse de Guitaut, with whom he is sitting, have combined to tame the piratical tendencies he inherited from his ancestors and now he is a scion of our society. The only convention he has so far resisted is marriage, and that is not, I assure you, because of lack of opportunity!'

To Lynette's relief, she gave them a final smile, then turned to give her attention to her own companions. All during the previous conversation Lynette had been afraid Cy's penetrating voice would reach over to the table where Luis Estevez and his grandmother were sitting and, although she gave no sign of it, her nerves were tense at the idea of yet another ice-cool look being directed towards herself and her friends by the man with the calm, composed demeanour of a marquis and the contradictory reputation of a pirate. Which was the real man? Probably the passion of curiosity such an enigma would arouse in most women was responsible for his popularity with her own sex, Lynette thought contemptuously, complacent in the knowledge that curiosity had never been a weakness of hers and that she was therefore immune.

It was obvious, however, that such immunity did not encompass Cy and Merle; they were both captivated by the man whose presence seemed to dominate the room. The angry flush on Lucas's face should have warned Cy to be more discreet, but she was too entranced to care about her husband's feelings when she said in a hushed voice,

'Oh, what I'd give to be able to get him interested!' Lynette's eyes flew to Lucas with quick sympathy, but before she could find words to soothe the hurt Cy had inflicted, Merle broke in with a hard laugh,

'Why, you can't, Cy, dearie. You're already manacled - as Lynette so prettily put it - so you'll just have to sit back and watch us single girls angle for the prize!'

Cy pouted. 'You mean *you* want him? Oh, well,' she shrugged, 'that leaves us all out.' Vince, who had been listening with petulant boredom, suddenly decided to join in.

'Why should it?' he asked Cy sharply. 'Are you implying that Merle is the *femme fatale* of our little group?'

Merle's eyes narrowed with surprise that he should question her superiority in the field and it gave him great satisfaction to prick her vanity by continuing, 'My vote would go to Lynette. I may be prejudiced,' he swivelled round to smile at her fondly, 'but I reckon she's the one who could topple the high and mighty Marques from his tin pedestal, if she wished it.'

Two bright patches of angry colour appeared on Merle's cheeks at this implication that the girl she despised as a country bumpkin - albeit the superficial cloak of sophistication she had so recently donned - could be even considered a danger to her plans and her Voice was sharp with contempt when she replied.

'Lynette hasn't the ghost of an idea how to handle such a man. He would swallow her!' Lynette stiffened. Temper caused her to relax the

armour of indifference she had learned to wear constantly in Merle's presence as a protection against her barbed tongue and cutting wit. Her eyes flashed round each one of them and came to rest finally upon Merle. Hardly, she stressed,

'You, Merle, can be as predatory as you wish in your quest for a mate, but please leave me out of it! And, just for the record, I would like you all to know that from what little I've seen of him, the Marques de Paradis is every bit as theatrical as his title! He's a ridiculously over-estimated man made to look big by the subservience of a bunch of simple islanders whom he probably flogs if they dare to disagree with him. Any woman foolish enough to marry that man deserves the deepest sympathy!'

She heard Cy give a short gasp. Glancing towards her, Lynette saw that her eyes seemed riveted above her own head. She turned in the direction of Cy's horrified stare and found herself looking straight into the startlingly blue eyes of the man she had just been reviling. For a horrible hypnotized second their glances locked, then he gave a slight bow and walked on.

He had heard! She knew he had heard! Why then, in those blue depths that had seemed so ready to blaze, had there been no real anger? She could have stood that, even revelled in it. But the mocking amusement she had glimpsed from under her madly fluttering eyelashes had reduced her high-flown words to the babbling of a retarded adolescent. And her heart to a small quivering traitor ...

Merle's malicious laughter broke into the appalled silence.

'Well! Well!' she exclaimed with evident enjoyment, 'I think we can now rule Lynette out of our little game, don't you, Vince darling? She's completely ruined her chances with the handsome Marques with *that* little speech!'

Vince gave a bored shrug as he put his arm across Lynette's shoulders and replied: 'Oh, let's forget the damned man, for heaven's sake!' Then, to the rest of the party, he appealed, 'What plans for after dinner? I feel-like making whoopee tonight! Are you all on?'

Eagerly, they grabbed at the chance of ending the uneasy silence and began to discuss the evening's itinerary. To Lynette's fervent relief, the ensuing argument as to where they should go that evening lasted all through dinner and acted as a screen for her unnatural silence. She wondered frantically if she could plead a headache in order to find the solitude she craved. She wanted to run away and hide; to sort out her mangled feelings and to try to regain control of her scattered emotions. Never would she have believed that one brief encounter could cause the turbulence she had felt from the first moment her eyes had met the challenge in those of Luis Estevez. She felt an urge to flee from Papeete - from Tahiti - anywhere away from him. She sensed danger and knew she was not equipped to fight it. She put her hand to her head, her lips forming an excuse, but before it could be voiced Vince concluded the heated discussion by pulling her up from her chair and saying: 'Right, then, it's decided! We go on a tour of all the night-spots and then everyone will be satisfied!'

With a chorus of assent they made an exuberant exit. Laughing, and in evident high spirits, they surged outside into the soft tropical night to begin their tour of the riotous Montmartre-type night clubs where native beauties stomped out ancient Polynesian dances to the rhythm of raucous modern jazz bands, and Lynette's feeble protests were lost amongst the sound of their laughter and shrill voices.

After an abortive attempt to get Vince to listen, she shrugged her shoulders and admitted defeat. He was in a gay anticipatory mood and had no intention of allowing her to escape. She might have persisted, had it not been for Merle's too perceptive questioning. Her brilliant eyes bored into Lynette as she provoked,

'Lynette, my dear, you're looking quite pale ! Don't tell me your little encounter with Le Pirat has upset you to such an extent you don't feel able to join in the festivities?' Lynette wondered why anyone as beautiful as Merle should be so full of malice. She forced up her head and lied coolly,

'Certainly not. I'd forgotten about it!'

But Merle was not convinced. As the evening advanced, Lynette was conscious of her probing eyes and speculative glances, so, in an instinct of self-defence, she forced a swift change of mood which she hoped would be sufficient to allay her suspicions. To Vince's delight, she suddenly became the life and soul of the party. She insisted upon dancing every dance, she wildly applauded every performer, she was the first to become restless and to insist upon moving on to fresh places of amusement. And it was she who, at their final rendezvous, began with desperate abandon to balance a champagne bottle on the top of her tumbled curls and to attempt to dance in time to the music within a circle of her by this time slightly tipsy companions.

The nightclub was new to them all. Indeed, they had almost missed it, secluded and tucked away as it was from the garishly illuminated entrances of the more popular haunts. It had been a toss up whether or not they patronized it at all, because its air of selectivity did not seem to welcome them nor the frivolity, fast leading to rowdiness, that possessed them. But its very aura of taboo represented a challenge and so they had trooped into the lush, opulent interior, laughed and clowned their way on to the small dance-floor, and ignored completely the raised eyebrows of the more refined clientele who were making no secret of the displeasure they were feeling at the disturbance their noisy exuberance was causing.

The low, pulsating beat of a steel band reverberated around the room, generating a heady excitement. Lynette, in the midst of her encouraging group of friends, carefully balanced the bottle on her

bright, curly head, practically unaware of the sensation she was causing. Vince was watching avidly, a large grin upon his face, when Merle clipped in his ear,

'I hope you'll remember that *Daddy* is paying me quite a large sum to look after his chick. While I don't pretend to enjoy the job, I shall be most annoyed if something or *someone* should cause me to lose it!'

He looked blank. 'I don't know what you're insinuating.'

'Oh, yes, you do, Vince. I watched you pour vodka into Lynette's lime-juice. You know perfectly well she has no head for hard liquor - never touches it, in fact. What exactly is your game?'

He shrugged carelessly and gave a short laugh. 'Oh, for heaven's sake, where's the harm? It was only a small vodka and you can see how it's helped her to throw off the mood she was developing. She's *realty* enjoying herself now. Stop playing the mother hen, Merle, or you'll be old before your time!'

She turned away angrily and as she did so heard a shriek of dismay followed by a crash as the bottle Lynette had been balancing tipped from her head and shattered on the dance-floor. Quickly, hovering waiters descended to sweep up the debris, followed by a short stout man with a harassed expression who directed the operation. When he was completely satisfied that every particle had been disposed of he turned to face the now slightly subdued party and, speaking directly to Vince, told him firmly: 'I'm sorry, sir, but I must ask you and your friends to leave immediately. You will notice,' he swept out a hand to encompass some of his guests who were evidently making their departure, 'that the disturbance you have created has upset some of my clients. I must therefore ask you, please, to go !'

The crash as the bottle hit the floor had acted as a douche of cold water upon Lynette. She stood at Vince's side, dazed and shocked,

shivering a little as she realized how her behaviour had upset the people around her. Her throat was dry, and when she tried to speak all she could force out was a slight croak. Her head ached abominably. Once more she felt the urge to get away; the trappings of sophistication that sat so uneasily upon her had been suddenly stripped away, leaving her bewildered and vulnerable to the censure she could feel all around her.

Vince began to bluster: 'Look here, my man, do you know who you're speaking to . . .?'

Lucas Chermak butted in with his deliberate, slow drawl that nevertheless held a note of command.

'Let's go, Vince. There's no need to make a scene. We're ready to move on, anyway.' He turned to the manager and smiled apologetically. 'We're sorry to have caused such a disturbance. Please accept our sincere apologies.'

The manager smiled his relief and waved away the note Lucas proffered.

'You are most generous, sir, but thank you, no. I hope I shall see you all here again when you are perhaps in the mood for a quieter celebration.'

Lucas looked cynical when he answered, 'Yes, perhaps you will.'

He began to usher his friends towards the exit, keeping Vince, who was still inclined to be belligerent, to the forefront. Cy and Lynette were the last to leave and they had to run the gauntlet of curious eyes. Cy sauntered unconcernedly on, but Lynette's face was afire with embarrassment. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead as she made her way out, so that when a voice unexpectedly called her name it was all she could do to turn in that direction.

'Lynette ! Lynette Southern! How wonderful to see you again!'

A slim, dark-haired figure detached herself from out of the semi-darkness that had descended suddenly in preparation for the cabaret that was about to begin and stepped straight into her path with a cry of delight. Lynette was startled and could not quite focus in the gloom that surrounded them. Impatient demands for silence from the nearby tables sent them hurrying towards the exit. Once outside, Lynette gave a cry of recognition.

'Vivienne ! Of all people! What are you doing here?'

Vivienne laughed delightedly. 'But I live here, *cherie!* Surely you haven't forgotten? I know we were together for only six short weeks at that dreadful school in Paris, but I have often thought of you and I had hoped that you would think of me . .

'Oh, but I did! I do . . . How could I ever forget you, Vivienne? You made that place bearable for me!' Laughing with sheer pleasure, they linked arms and began to talk excitedly, the words tumbling from their lips in their eagerness.

Lynette was stopped in mid-sentence by Vince's voice calling out to her: 'Come along, Lynette, we're waiting for you!'

'Oh, but you cannot go just yet, *cherie,*' Vivienne protested. 'Now when I have only this minute found you again. I'll tell you what!' she snapped her fingers. 'Why don't you join our party? We will see that you get back safely to your hotel, either my fiance, Jacques, or my brother will escort you.' Lynette hesitated. Vivienne and she had so much to talk over. Although, as she had said, they had known each other for such a short time they had been so compatible that an enduring friendship had sprung up between them and she did not want to lose sight of her now. Besides that, she was tired of making the effort to be at one with Vince, Merle and the rest of their gang.

They lived always in a state of hypertension; not content merely to enjoy themselves they had to be seen and heard to do so. The warm, quiet regard emanating from Vivienne was soothing and very welcome, with her she could be herself without feeling inadequate or insipid.

Impulsively, she turned to Vince, who by that time had reached her side, and asked him wistfully: 'Do you mind if I stay, Vince? Vivienne is a very dear friend whom I haven't seen for ages and we have such a lot to say to each other.' He was so taken aback by the unexpectedness of her request that he could not hide the annoyance that flashed into his eyes, but with both pairs of eyes upon him, pleading for his understanding, it would have been churlish of him to make a fuss, so he answered, but with very little grace: 'Very well, if that's what you want. I'll make your excuses to the gang and I'll see you tomorrow.' He gave a peremptory nod and strode away with resentment in every line. Lynette relaxed with a sigh of relief when he finally disappeared and Vivienne, with a small frown, put her head to one side and asked,

'Why do you go with these people, Lynette, if they make you so tense? Are they responsible for the change in you? If it had not been for the fact that one of them mentioned your name, which made me look closer, I would not have recognized you !'

Lynette blinked back a sudden urge to cry, swallowed hard, and said quietly: 'It's a long story, my dear, and I won't bore you with it.' Vivienne's hand squeezed hers tightly and, although she was the younger of the two, she sounded almost maternal when she assured her,

'But I shall insist upon hearing it, Lynette. Now now-not here - but later when we cannot be interrupted I will want to know why you find the need to sparkle like champagne on the surface and yet have a deep loneliness in your eyes that can be glimpsed only by someone very

close to you, such as myself. That is how I know these friends of yours do not touch your heart. They would not allow such sadness if they did.' She squeezed Lynette's hand again, hard, and followed up briskly, 'But we must join the others or they will begin to think I have deserted them. My brother will be annoyed with me, as it is, because of my sudden departure.'

But when they reached the entrance to the dining- room Lynette suddenly remembered. She tensed, and hung back when Vivienne would have entered.

'Why, whatever is wrong, Lynette?' Vivienne queried with alarm. 'You have gone quite white again. Don't you feel well?'

Lynette licked her dry lips and managed to ask huskily, 'They saw... in there . . .?'

Vivienne smiled and gave her a small shake. 'You were simply in high spirits, *cherie*! No one is going to disapprove of you because you felt happy and gay and were not afraid to show it. I enjoyed your dance enormously. I admit some of the people here are rather stuffy, indeed, my brother and I had quite an argument about coming here because I wanted to go somewhere more exciting, but as usual he had his way. I often wonder why I bother to cross swords with him; I never win! Come, I want you to meet him and my fiance, Jacques, who, I assure you, you will find quite charming.'

Still with misgivings, Lynette allowed her to lead the way towards her party. The cabaret was over but the lighting had not yet returned to normal. Each table was lit by a small lamp that cast a flattering glow over the faces of the women and attempted to soften the features of the men. Outside their radius was deep shadow and as Lynette followed in Vivienne's wake she noticed two men rising to their feet, as if anticipating their arrival, and melting into the dimness while they waited until they reached the table. But when she and Vivienne

finally arrived, it was to the woman who remained seated that Lynette's eyes were immediately drawn.

She was so beautiful Lynette's eyes were riveted. She was dressed in unrelieved black, her matt white shoulders bare, and with a single rope of exquisite pearls twisted around her slender throat. She gave an impression of fragile delicacy. Her face, in the pool of light cast from the table lamp, was a perfect cameo set with eyes of soft, limpid green. Only her mouth marred the perfection a little; it drooped in such a naturally petulant way that one sensed the petulance was permanent. Lynette expelled a breath of admiration and held out an eager hand when Vivienne introduced her.

'Claudia, I would like you to meet my very dear friend, Lynette Southern.' Then to Lynette she intimated, 'Madame Claudia de Courcel, Lynette.'

Feeling gauche and over-ornate in her vivid trouser suit compared with the elegant good taste of Claudia's gown, Lynette stammered a greeting. Claudia's lazy eyes glanced over her and the droop of her mouth lifted with amusement when she negligently nodded an acknowledgement. An annoyed sparkle lit up Vivienne's eyes and she hastily turned Lynette's attention to the first of the two men who stood in the shadows waiting to be introduced. A young, fair-haired man with a frank open face stepped into the circle of light and was introduced by a beaming Vivienne as her fiance, Jacques Viaux. He more than made up to Lynette for the offhand greeting she had received from Claudia. Bowing low over her hand, he said with engaging impishness,

'Ah, the fascinating young lady who entertained us so enchantingly earlier! My fiancée did not stop to tell us why she so abruptly had to jump and run from our company, but now I have met you, she is forgiven.'

Vivienne threw him a laughing kiss which he pretended to catch in his palm and place in his pocket as if for redemption at a later date, and Lynette's eyes glowed at her friend's obvious happiness. Vivienne was still blushing a furious red when she turned to introduce the final member of the party. Lynette could just make out his tall, dark shape as it merged into the background. She saw his hand, encircled by an immaculate white cuff, raise a half-smoked cigarette, then the glow as he inhaled. Vivienne's voice began: 'Lynette, may I introduce my brother . . .' but before she could finish her sentence the lights were switched on full with a theatrical suddenness that could almost have been a cue for the confrontation Lynette would have given the earth to have avoided.

Standing looking mockingly down at her, his hand outstretched, his piercing blue eyes alive with amusement, was the man she had sought all evening to forget. Luis Estevez...! *Le Pirat!*

CHAPTER TWO

LYNETTE froze to immobility as his blue eyes bored into her, sending a message she was too confused to interpret. She was silent with shock; her mind was frantically denying that such a thing *could* happen - *had* happened. Vivienne's name ran protestingly through her mind - *Vivienne Chatrelle*, not Estevez! How then could she be Luis Estevez's sister? If she had had the slightest inkling that Vivienne even knew Luis Estevez she would have run into the night and been resigned never to claim her friendship again, rather than risk a meeting with him.

One point, at least, was clarified when, as if from a great distance, she heard Vivienne continue with the introduction.

'Lynette, this is my stepbrother, Luis - Luis Estevez, Marques de Paradis, to be exact.' Then to him, 'Luis, I would like you to meet my very good friend, Lynette Southern, from England.'

She had no need to look up; her eyes had been locked with his from the moment the lights had blazed. Curiously numb, she found herself thinking he had a cruel mouth. It was well shaped, with a slightly full lower lip that could perhaps denote a passionate nature. But was it capable of lifting with tenderness . . .? She did not think so.

He raised her hand to his lips and the pressure was electrifying. She snatched it away before the trembling that betrayed her could be communicated to him, and he gave a short laugh that hinted of his knowledge of how the small intimacy had affected her. She was caught up in a surge of feeling such as she had never before experienced. She resented him having such an effect upon her senses and tried to resist the magnetism he seemed deliberately to be directing towards her. Even as he spoke a conventional greeting, his eyes caressed her slender body, carelessly assessing. Through his thick black lashes he sent a reckless message that only she received,

and it was then she understood that he meant to experiment with her emotions, like the pirate he was, because he had sensed her vulnerability but at the same time he intended, incredibly, to use his image of a suave, urbane aristocrat welcoming his sister's friend into the protective custody of his authority as a screen for his wicked teasing. She sucked in a dismayed breath as she realized how aware he was that the magnetism he was deliberately exuding affected her deeply. He was supremely confident of his ability to attract, due no doubt, she thought bitterly, to the many opportunities he had had to practise his charms, and he was seizing this opportunity of punishing her for the way in which she had disparaged him earlier that evening. It was to be a contest, it seemed; his provoking devilment against her pitiable barrier of scorn.

She tilted her chin, determined to withstand his assault, and gave him a cool stare. He withstood it smilingly until her long lashes fanned down upon her hot cheeks to curtain the apprehension his alert eyes might discover. Again she heard his soft laughter and indignantly she swept up her lashes, only to find his sun-tanned, handsome face startlingly close to her own as he bent to whisper,

'Don't be alarmed, *mademoiselle*, I never carry out a flogging after sundown, so you are quite safe, at least until morning!' His voice, melodious and with the merest trace of accent, did not even pretend to calm; his words were a laughing taunt that made her heart sink as they confirmed that her disastrous remarks had been overheard. She swiftly averted her eyes from his and sought the calm sanity of Vivienne's, but during this interchange - which had seemed to her to last an age - Vivienne and Jacques had obviously been, and still were, engrossed in each other. Only Claudia had watched as they exchanged what had seemed to her to be the formalities of a first meeting and she was waiting with ill-concealed impatience for the return of Luis' attention.

'Darling,' she pouted, 'come and sit by me !'

Immediately he was the perfect host. He pulled out a chair for Lynette, then, with a slight bow, he left her side to sit next to Claudia. For the rest of the evening he was all Marques. Lynette danced twice with Jacques and, to her relief, only once with him, but although his tantalizing attitude had changed completely to one of formal solicitude, she felt, by the time the dance had ended, as if she had been on a storm-tossed sea in a cockleshell boat with only the flimsiest of protection against an overwhelming force.

She experienced a sense of reprieve when he led her back to Vivienne and Jacques and then excused himself and Claudia in order to welcome some friends of theirs who had just arrived.

'Well, *cherie*,' Vivienne asked her eagerly, 'what do you think of my brother? Is he not exciting?'

Lynette flushed as she sought for words which could answer Vivienne's question without betraying her feelings. Jacques relieved her of her burden with the amused remark,

'There you go again, *ma petite*! Fishing for compliments about your wonderful brother! I truly think that if you had not been related I wouldn't have stood a chance with you !'

'Oh, Jacques,' she pouted at him, 'you know that is not true! I just hoped that perhaps . . .' She peeped at Lynette, then shrugged. 'Oh, but never mind . . .'

'Ah!' Jacques twinkled knowingly at Lynette. 'Watch out, Lynette! This little schemer is matchmaking and she obviously has yourself and Luis in mind!'

Lynette blushed crimson and Vivienne threw a furious look towards Jacques. 'Not at all!' she retorted, annoyed that he should have seen through her wiles so easily and upset in case Lynette should take fright. 'You know perfectly well Madame de Courcel has her hooks

into him! I admit,' she glanced under her lashes at Lynette, 'I would like to see him married to someone I could like really well, but,' she gave a very French shrug, 'we all know how Luis' extended sense of obligation leads him to think he owes a duty to the beautiful widow of the man who was his best friend.'

'And she, in turn,' Jacques murmured, 'makes it very clear that she intends that Luis shall step into his friend's shoes just as quickly as she can manage to persuade him!*' Vivienne's expressive face clouded, and Jacques thought it politic to change the subject. He gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze before asking,

'Now, what about this heart-to-heart you two were planning? There is not enough privacy here to talk, so you will have to make plans for another meeting. The question is, when? You, Vivienne, have to accompany your *grand'mere* to Paradis tomorrow, so as to be in readiness for the guest she is expecting the following day.'

Vivienne frowned, deep in thought for a moment, then snapped her fingers and cried out: 'But of course!' She beamed at Lynette and told her, 'You must come to Paradis to stay with me for a while.' When Lynette would have demurred, she hastened on, 'But you must, Lynette! How else will we be able to meet and talk of all the things we have to talk about? Please, *please* say you will come!'

The temptation was enormous. To stay with Vivienne on her island home, away from the ceaseless round of activity she had been forced to endure for so long, would be heaven. But not if Luis Estevez was to be there! That she could not face. She was searching for an excuse that would not offend her friend's generosity when Claudia, escorted by the Marques, sauntered back to her seat just in time to hear Vivienne make one more impassioned plea. 'Do please say you will come, Lynette..

She gave a small bored smile and asked, 'Where are you planning to go, Vivienne?'

'I am asking - pleading - with Lynette to join me at Paradis for a while. I have to go there tomorrow with Grand'mere and if only she would join us it would be ideal. I shall be bored to death, otherwise, with only two old ladies for company. Luis has to stay here on business for at least another two weeks and Jacques too has to return to his family for a while. And so,' she concluded dolefully, 'if I cannot persuade Lynette to join me I shall be devastatingly lonely.'

'Pauvre petite,' Claudia murmured. 'But you can always stay here with me if solitude does not appeal. From tomorrow I am having half a dozen young people as my guests and I am expecting their stay to be quite a long one. Please do not hesitate to join us, Vivienne. And perhaps,' she slanted an oblique glance at Luis Estevez, 'you might also persuade this brother of yours to make my house his headquarters while he is herein Papeete?'

This did not suit Vivienne at all. She looked anxiously towards her brother and pleaded, 'Oh, but you understand, Luis, that I must stay with Grand'mere. Can't *you* persuade Lynette to come with me to Paradis?'

Lynette felt the Marques's questioning eyes upon her face as he swivelled round to lift an interrogatory eyebrow in her direction. When she made no effort to meet his glance, he answered Vivienne coolly,

'Have you considered that Mademoiselle Southern might have interests here in Papeete which appeal to her more than the prospect of your company, charming though it is, Vivienne? A boy-friend, perhaps ...'

Lynette was confused to find all eyes upon her. Her lashes flickered with agitation as she stammered,

'No ... of course not! It's just that I don't wish to impose upon Vivienne's kindness. I'm with a party of friends, but..

'Ah, yes!' Vivienne pounced knowingly. 'But you would much rather be with me! Is that not so, Lynette?'

She was cornered. Trapped. Vivienne was quite determined to have her way - every bit as determined as she had accused her brother of being, Lynette thought wryly. Impishly pretending to construe her silence as consent, Vivienne concluded triumphantly, 'Therfe, then, it is settled! Tomorrow you come with Grand'mere and me to Paradis!'

'Tomorrow?' Lynette echoed, thankfully aware that this could be the straw she sought. 'But I can't leave so suddenly, and at such short notice. I must have time to explain to my friends...!'

Vivienne was visibly upset. 'But it must be tomorrow, otherwise you will miss the boat; It calls at Paradis only once a month and if you are not on it tomorrow it will mean a long wait before we see each other again.'

Relief washed over Lynette; she prepared to speak a conventional expression of disappointment that the plans could not materialize. But she stopped on a half- drawn breath when the Marques drawled infuriatingly,

'Perhaps I can help. If you, Vivienne, will contain your soul in patience for a week until my more pressing business is dealt with, I will take a day off and fetch Mademoiselle out to Paradis in my launch.'

'Oh, Luis, will you? You are a darling! I will not mind going back to the island with *Grand'mere* tomorrow if I know I shall have to wait only a week for Lynette to join me.'

Vivienne's eyes glowed with pleasure at this solution to the problem and Lynette had to try hard to seem equally pleased. There was no way out now, he had seen to that. There was nothing else for it but to accept the fact that she was committed to spending at least a week in his home. She gained a little consolation from the knowledge that he would not be there, but it was quickly submerged by the thought of the hours she would spend in his company on the journey. She gritted her teeth as she envisaged the enormous enjoyment he would derive from tormenting her while they were alone together, and was in no way soothed when she noticed the small flicker of amusement in his eyes and the upward tilt to his lips that twitched into a derisive smile while he listened as she expressed her gratitude for the arrangements that had been made. She gave an involuntary shiver; it seemed almost as if he had planned this situation and was complacently congratulating himself on the success of his manipulations. But that was nonsense, she averred inwardly, he was too engrossed in the lovely Claudia to give more than a passing thought to herself. This premise left her feeling strangely depressed.

Shortly afterwards, the party broke up to enable the Marques to escort Claudia de Courcel to her home and Jacques and Vivienne to deposit Lynette at her hotel. Before she stepped into Jacques' car, the Marques reminded Lynette, 'I shall be in touch with you in a few days, *mademoiselle*, please be prepared to leave at a moment's notice.' She managed to nod an acknowledgement before he gave her a mocking bow and returned to the imperious Claudia, who was waiting in his car with a frown of impatience upon her lovely face.

When Jacques' car reached the hotel, Lynette stepped out feeling physically and emotionally tired. The strain of the evening showed in the pinched whiteness of her face and she was grateful to Jacques

when he cut short Vivienne's excited string of last-minute instructions and drew away from the kerb with a final adieu and an injunction to go straight to bed.

This she would have loved to do, but first she had to face Merle. Knowing her predilection for sarcasm and the chilling aura she could don when displeased, Lynette had to gather up her courage before going in search of her to tell of her imminent departure to Paradis. But, surprisingly, after tapping on her bedroom door and being bidden to enter, it was Merle who for a second seemed ill at ease and at a loss for words. She did not seem at all put out by Lynette's desertion, indeed she seemed to bubble with a suppressed excitement that gave to her eyes a luminous glow and her face a tinge of pink colour. They spoke simultaneously.

'Merle, I have something to tell you...'

'Lynette, there's something you have to know ...'

They stopped abruptly. Merle jumped eagerly into the breach. 'I'm leaving here tonight,' she finished arrogantly. Then, her voice rising with excitement, she went on, 'We've had a most marvellous evening. After leaving you we bumped into a couple of Cy's American friends. They have a simply fabulous yacht anchored offshore and they invited the whole gang of us aboard. Oh, the luxury! The indescribable luxury of it made me green with envy! Anyway, to cut a long story short, they've invited Vince and myself, along with Cy and Lucas, to finish the cruise with them - and we've accepted!'

'Vince too ...?' Lynette's voice held a hurt cynicism she could not help but feel when she considered the impassioned declarations of love he had so often voiced. She knew, of course, that her father's wealth was her greatest asset in Vince's eyes, but it still hurt a little to think he could leave her without a qualm when some richer prize became available.

Merle did not bother to hide the malicious satisfaction she felt at Lynette's hurt, and she deliberately stressed, 'The couple who own the yacht are brother and sister; both quite personable. I have no doubt whatever that if I play my cards right I'll have the male half of the duo in the palm of my hand by the time the cruise ends and,' she drawled with great enjoyment, 'knowing Vince as I do, I'm certain his plans are laid in the direction of the sister. He fussed and flattered her so much tonight that she was well and truly hooked. All he needs now is the opportunity to land her, and this trip will be ideal for the purpose.'

Lynette was sickened by this mercenary scheming.

The distaste she felt showed in her expressive face, and Merle's colour deepened. She turned on Lynette with vicious suddenness. In a voice thick with resentment, she spat,

'Oh, yes, little Miss Moneybags, I'll do anything for money. Hasn't that been proved by the way I've humiliated myself trailing around the globe with you in my wake? God, how I've hated every minute. Running after a man for his money is no worse than playing nanny to the daughter of a vulgar working- class man who by rights should be labouring in one of the factories he owns! And as for the money my father owes ... if my plans materialize - and they will - it - will give me great satisfaction to throw those few miserable pounds right back in your father's face !'

The sickness Lynette had felt was now physical. Her stomach knotted at this evidence of the hatred Merle felt for her. They had never pretended to be friends, but even while she had suffered the venom of her tongue she had never guessed the extent of the hatred that motivated it.

She drew herself up with a small dignity that shamed Merle to silence and looked steadily at her as she said quietly,

'I'm sorry, Merle, that you've found my company so distasteful. In the circumstances I think it would be as well if we said good-bye now. I'm ... going out with friends tomorrow,' she lied valiantly, 'so I won't see Vince either. Please tell him I hope he has a very pleasant trip. .. and you too, of course.'

Merle looked discomfited. 'What will you do now?' she asked surlily. 'You'll be left quite alone because the rest of the gang are moving on tomorrow and I can't see them wanting you to tag along. You never did fit in...'

Lynette flinched. Merle was right. She never had fitted in. Not with them. Not at school. Not even at home. She wondered sadly if there was any place on earth she could go where she would be able to feel wanted. To find her niche in the world should not be impossible - but it was beginning to seem so. There was relief in the thought that at least it was no longer necessary to tell Merle of her imminent departure for Paradis. In any case, Merle was so wrapped up in her own plans, that she doubted if she would be even interested; Vince neither. So she kept her own counsel and answered with unconscious sarcasm,

'Don't bother about me, I'll find somewhere.'

Merle gave a hard laugh. 'You could always stay on here and try your luck with Le Pirat. After we've gone the competition will be negligible. Why not think about it?' she mocked.

Lynette gave a vague smile and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

MERLE and Vince left before breakfast the next morning. Lynette ate alone and then wandered out of the hotel without any definite objective in mind. Gradually, an exhilarating feeling of release dawned; it strengthened by the minute, giving wings to her feet and bringing a happy look of anticipation to her face. She wandered along the main street passing unpretentious shops, theatres, and business houses that suffered somewhat in comparison with their Western counterparts but which nevertheless had a fascination all their own. She began to enjoy herself immensely. What little she had seen of Papeete up until then had been seen through the windows of cars speeding her on her way to cocktail bars or night clubs. Daytime hours had been spent around the edge of the hotel's magnificent swimming pool and occasionally on the tennis courts. In fact, they could have spent the entire time in a hotel in any part of the world and gained the same experience - the atmosphere of Papeete had been entirely lacking.

She stepped down a shallow kerb and sniffed appreciatively. Instead of walking on, she turned right, followed her nose, and found herself flanked by dozens of Chinese shops and restaurants filled with smiling, chattering people who bowed graciously as she passed, then broke into unintelligible speech when she walked on. For hours she sauntered pleasantly on, savouring the new smells and the potent combination of French, Chinese and Polynesian influences that resulted in an enchantment that held her spellbound.

After a while, she felt hungry - it was well past lunchtime - so she slipped into one of the spotlessly clean Chinese restaurants. It was nearly full, but the proprietor immediately arranged for a small table to be positioned in a corner where she would not feel conspicuous and, when she was seated, he presented the menu with a bow that was neither obsequious nor servile; it simply reflected confidence in his ability to please. His confidence was justified. After a delicious lunch

and a refreshing glass of iced lemon tea, she was escorted to the door by the widely smiling proprietor whose incomprehensible utterances she guessed were an invitation to call again, to which she could only nod a smiling acceptance.

Her elation increased as she walked in the direction of the waterfront. For the first time since leaving home she felt as free as a bird. Merle's oppressive and ever watchful presence had been a greater strain than she had realized. So, too, had the efforts she had had to make to seem to conform with the totally alien outlook of Merle's friends. She felt a different person. She *was* a different person, and nothing and no one, she vowed as she almost skipped along, would ever again persuade her to pretend to be anyone other than herself.

With this decision concrete in her mind, she reached her destination. Coming from out of the narrow side streets, the view was breathtaking. She found a deserted spot on the quay just across the street from the business houses and hotels, and sat down. As she leant back to drink in the sublime beauty of the tropical scene she revelled in the soft fingers of the southeast trade winds that caressed her. Along the waterfront were vessels of all kinds, inter-island schooners; private yachts; fishing boats and even sailing canoes. While anchored offshore, cruise ships gazed down with haughty majesty at the cheeky tramp steamers they were forced to accept for a while as neighbours.

She closed her eyes for a moment to rest them from the brilliance of the sun as it danced upon the bright blue ocean transforming every lazy ripple and wave to iridescent splendour. But even through closed eyes the magic still penetrated her senses. From the dock where the island's products lay waiting for transportation wafted the odour of copra tempered by fragrant vanilla beans; glistening tuna from the ocean gave added pungency, as did the fruits and vegetables piled alongside of it. She relaxed, nestled into a comfortable position, then slept.

When she woke, the sun was far down on the horizon. Guiltily, she jumped to her feet, only to sigh with satisfaction when she remembered she had no one to answer to for her lack of diligence; no need to make a frantic rush back to the hotel to wash and change into one of the off-beat outfits it had seemed so necessary, only yesterday, to wear. The chains had fallen away and she relished the sweet taste of freedom. She frowned as she recollected those outfits. Everything in her wardrobe belonged to the girl she had been yesterday; not one of them appealed. She would get rid of them! There were plenty of shops in Papeete - wonderful shops.

She gathered up her handbag and walked with purposeful steps back to the main thoroughfare where, late though it was, the shops were still doing thriving business. She had a vague notion of having seen a suitable shop in one of the side streets she had wandered through earlier and, after retracing her steps once or twice, she found it. It had a discreet sign saying 'Madeleine's' above a small window that held only one gown and a wispy stole. She went in.

The proprietress, who came to meet her, was an elderly Frenchwoman. She was dressed entirely in black, but her elegantly coiffured silver-white hair drew immediate attention and detracted from the sombreness of her appearance. She smiled questioningly, and waited.

'I'd like some dresses, please,' Lynette stammered, a little in awe.

'Mais certainement, mademoiselle! It will give me much pleasure to serve you. Will you please step this way?'

Lynette followed her to a small fitting room and slipped off her dress while she waited for Madame Madeleine to fetch a selection from her stock. She had not been asked her preference of style or of colour and she wondered nervously how she would refuse if the dressy brought should prove to be unsuitable.

Half an hour later, she was ashamed of the thought. Madame Madeleine was not merely a dressmaker, she was an artist. Whatever her reasons were for plying her trade in a back street in Papeete, it was that small capital's gain and a loss to Paris. With a great discernment and a certain eye for colour she produced a variety of outfits that might have been created with only Lynette in mind. She bought recklessly but - under Madame's direction - wisely. Some of the dresses she chose were cool little shifts, the colours definite but not aggressively so. They flattered her colouring and acted as a foil for her soft grey eyes and short golden hair. Others were romantically seductive; clinging fabrics cut by a cunning hand, they outlined her shapely young figure and lovingly emphasized her delicate curves. A few brief tops and minute shorts were added to the growing pile set aside for delivery to the hotel. Luckily, nothing needed altering, she was stock size and never had difficulty when buying off the peg. When, at last, she felt satisfied she had all she needed, Madame walked into the fitting room with yet another dress over her arm. It was long and white and she handled it lovingly when she draped it across a chair so that Lynette could see it to advantage.

'Oh, Madame,' Lynette breathed, 'it's beautiful! So delicate ..

Madame Madeleine nodded her agreement. 'Indeed it is, *mademoiselle*. It is made of the finest hand-drawn lace which a dear old friend of mine worked exactly to my design. I dreamt up this dress - yes, literally' - she affirmed in answer to Lynette's surprised look. 'I dreamt of it one night and when I woke I immediately put the design on paper and then contacted my friend to work the lace. It is a beautiful partnership, *n'est-ce pas?*'

Lynette's eyes were fastened on the dress and she answered without looking away. 'Beautiful,' she whispered. 'The loveliest evening gown I've ever seen.'

It was so much Lynette's dress that when she tried it on Madame Madeleine looked almost tearfully pleased. She clasped her hands together, stepped back, and said all she felt in two words. '*Oh, mademoiselle ...!*'

Lynette's hands trembled with excited pleasure when she wrote out the surprisingly modest cheque Madame Madeleine requested. She thanked the proprietress sincerely for her help and before she left the shop was assured that the dresses would be delivered to her hotel that evening.

She was smiling pensively when she entered the hotel foyer and walked towards the lift that would take her to her room. She had decided to clear her wardrobe of all the outfits she had bought while under Merle's influence and to give them to the hotel chambermaid - a lovely young Creole girl with a very obvious penchant for striking colours and vivid design - and was so intent upon her plan that she did not hear when first her name was called.

'Mademoiselle Southern!' This time it was repeated louder and her head jerked upwards to find the hotel manager at her elbow. He seemed rather agitated, which was unusual because on other occasions when she had met him he had seemed to be an urbane and extremely self-possessed gentleman.

'*Mademoiselle,*' he went on rapidly when he saw he had caught her attention, 'we have been most anxious about you ! Several times today we have tried to contact you, without success. All your friends have left the hotel, so we could not inquire of them where we could get in touch with you.'

She immediately thought of her father. Suddenly white, she clutched his arm and asked,

'What's wrong? Is it something serious? Please, tell me quickly . . .'

'No, no, *mademoiselle*!' he gave her hand a reassuring pat, 'it is nothing like that. The Marques has been inquiring for you - the Marques de Paradis - and we could not help him!'

She sagged with relief. 'Oh, is that all? I thought something dreadful had happened!'

The manager's face told her that in his opinion something had. His look practically rebuked her for the lack of urgency in her response to the information he had given her.

'Did he say what it was he wanted to see me about?' Lynette asked him.

'He left a message, *mademoiselle*. I am to tell you that his plans have been changed hurriedly and that he would like you to be ready to leave early tomorrow morning instead of next week, as planned. He will not be in Papeete this evening, but he has left a telephone number he wishes you to use only if you cannot meet this arrangement. If you are willing to go with him tomorrow morning, he asks that you be on the quay at eight o'clock and he will meet you there.'

Every nerve in her spine tingled a warning at these words. She had thought she had a few days' grace before having to meet the challenge of the journey with him, but now it was almost upon her and she did not feel competent to deal with his devilish arrogance. But she could not back out. She had promised Vivienne she would visit her and she would have to keep that promise.

The manager noticed her lack of enthusiasm and wondered if she realized the honour the Marques was bestowing upon her. He was not to know that the sun had suddenly been blacked out for her and that the gently swelling blue ocean now represented a menacing void that had to be crossed before she could ever regain the peace of mind she had been so newly revelling in.

The next morning after breakfasting on cups of black coffee, which was all she could manage, she arrived at the quayside far too early. The grey cloud of depression that had dampened her spirits had given way to tense, nervous anxiety as she stood on the all but deserted quay waiting for her first sight of the man who had such power to savage her emotions. Wearing one of the cool, sleeveless dresses that had been delivered from Madame Madeleine's the evening before, and with the minimum of make-up and just the slightest trace of iced-pink lipstick on her mobile mouth, her outward appearance was one of delicious serenity. But when Luis Estevez finally strode up from behind she was caught unawares and could not control the nervous blink that betrayed her inner agitation.

He looked belligerently male; devastatingly so. Under his white silk shirt his muscles rippled like well-oiled components as he bent to pick up her luggage. His long brown legs, under brief white shorts, were bare from the knees, giving him a look of unrestricted freedom he seemed to enjoy. Lithe, laughing, and with the teasing devilment in his blue eyes she had nerved herself to expect, he greeted her.

'Good morning, *mademoiselle* ! I am glad you could make it.' He peered at her, then quipped, 'But you do not seem to be enjoying the prospect of a day's sailing as much as I am, *mademoiselle* Bending a little closer, he flicked her cheek with his finger and embarrassed her by asking, 'Why does your little pink mouth droop so? Is it because you find my company distasteful?' -

She willed the furious colour that flooded her cheeks to fade before he could perhaps use it, too, as ammunition. Mounting anger gave a sharp edge to her voice as she jerked out, 'I am quite prepared to put up with your company for the short time required to reach your home, *m'sieur*. But after that, I hope we shall see very little of each other!'

He did not question the antagonism she projected, but put back his head and gave a delighted shout of laughter. She wanted to run at him

and to pummel his broad chest with her fists in an effort to ease her frustrated anger, but instinct told her she would be playing into his hands and that his method of retribution might easily be as astringent as his appearance. So she subdued her urge to retaliate and forced herself to adopt a meek quality as a defence against his deliberate aggravation.

Annoyingly, he seemed capable of assessing her every mood and he fell in with her attitude of calm aloofness by adopting an expression of gravity - belied by a twinkle in his deep blue eyes and by an occasional twitch at the corner of his mouth - as he led the way to the launch. It was moored against the steps of the jetty. A powerful-looking sea rover, pristine in blue and white, with dazzling slivers of light sparking from its shining brasses which the sun's rays caught as the boat bobbed impatiently on the ocean swell. He went aboard first, then, after depositing her luggage, he turned to help her over the side. She was awkwardly positioning herself to jump on to the deck without his assistance when he reached her side in three strides and leant over to place his hands firmly upon her waist.

'Now jump!' he commanded.

She had to obey, although she would have preferred to jump into the sea, and as her feet left the step of the jetty she felt his hands tighten on her waist. She was swung over the side and caught up against his muscular chest where he held her fast in the circle of his arms, seeming in no hurry to let her go. Her heart pounded frantically as his hold tightened, forcing her slim body closer and causing a holocaust of emotion to storm her senses. The whipcord strength of his arms frightened her almost as much as the red-hot surge of alert, responsive feeling irradiating from the crown of her fingers and the ends of her toes. His warm mouth teased her ear as he gently whispered 'Lynette ...?' and the questioning inflection bored though the haze of emotion she was trying to fight and demanded an answer. What did he want of her? Why was he wasting his attention upon

herself when he had Claudia de Courcel willing and eager to do his bidding? The answer pounded her brain. His attitude from the very beginning had been one of premeditated revenge for the way in which she had dared to insult him. Probably if she had been a man he would have found a swifter and more physically satisfying way of reaping retribution, but she, being a woman, was to be punished physically yet with diabolical cleverness. The thought was a dash of acid. With an involuntary movement she brought up her hand and struck her open palm across his bronzed cheek. He jerked his head upright and stared hard into her frightened eyes. For a long moment he searched, the imprint of her fingers showing livid through his tan, and then a reckless flash lit his eyes. He moved his head closer and for a second she was certain he was going to kiss her. But then he laughed into her panic-stricken eyes and agitated her further by mocking, 'You are right, *mademoiselle* ! This is neither the time nor the place. I shall reserve that pleasure for later!'

Quickly, before she had time to protest that she wanted to be put ashore immediately, he stepped over to the controls and set the boat's engines roaring into life. Seconds later they were heading swiftly out to sea.

Under different circumstances, the voyage could have been a delight. The world was fresh and lovely and the breeze that tossed her golden hair into wild disorder was clean and invigorating. She took deep breaths and filled her lungs with the pure sweetness of it; for too long she had been subjected to heated rooms cloudy with cigarette smoke and overpowering perfumes. Her eyes were brilliant with appreciation as she watched Tahiti fade on the horizon until there was nothing left but the blue-green ripple velvet of the ocean merging into cloudless sky.

She gathered, after a while, that Luis Estevez had decided to leave her in peace to enjoy her pleasure, because each time she chanced a peep in his direction his eyes were directed straight ahead and his brown

hands were busy with the controls. So she was able, gradually, to allow herself to relax and to savour the new experience to the full.

They passed many small islands, scattered like pearls upon velvet, some quite large; some seeming big enough for only a dozen palm trees. She was curious to know how far it was to Paradis, but each time she gathered up enough courage to speak the words died in her throat when she contemplated the crossing of swords that might ensue if she should start a conversation.

They had been travelling for some considerable time when she began to feel hungry. Breakfast seemed hours ago and she was regretting her foolishness in refusing all but coffee when she had known of the long journey ahead of her. She felt the launch alter course, and looked ahead to see they were heading for a small, crescent-shaped atoll, its dazzling pink and white beaches edged with slender, languorous palm trees that seemed to dip their heads in welcome. She expelled a breath of relief at the thought of Vivienne waiting to welcome her and wondered if they would arrive between meals or if there would be food and refreshments waiting for them. The hollow feeling in her inside suddenly developed into ravenous hunger as she remembered that her last real meal had been the one she had eaten in the Chinese restaurant the previous day. She derided herself for her foolishness, but fortunately the nearness of their destination obviated the need to beg for a bar of chocolate or even a ship's biscuit from the supercilious Marques.

The launch skirted the edge of the atoll and slipped into a clear, placid lagoon, jade green in the sun and fringed with darker green foliage: She looked eagerly for Vivienne's slight figure to appear on the beach, but it remained deserted. An anxious frown puckered her brow, but it cleared when she remembered Vivienne was not expecting her for another week yet. She suddenly felt so light-hearted that she was able to smile at Luis Estevez when, after switching off

the engine, he crossed to her side and stated: 'Well, here we are, are you ready to go ashore?'

With all antagonism submerged by the thought that he would soon be leaving on the return journey to Tahiti, she nodded her head vigorously and affirmed, 'Oh, yes! I can't wait to see Vivienne's face when we walk in unexpectedly, a week early. I do hope she's at home, it will be such an anticlimax if we arrive at the house, ready to surprise her, only to find that she's out.'

To her surprise, his only reaction was an unfathomable look and a nod in the direction of an inflated rubber dinghy he had thrown over the side of the launch ready for their disembarkation.

'Why do we need that?' her eyebrows lifted with surprise. 'Is there no landing stage on Paradis?' But he was too busy, it seemed, to answer, and so she decided to keep all her questions for Vivienne and remained silent even while he handed her into the dinghy and began to row towards the fairy-tale shore. He rowed with quick, even strokes and Lynette watched avidly as the beach grew nearer and nearer. She felt a faint stirring of unease, unaccountable, unless it was born of the distrust she felt of the slight smile of satisfaction that played upon his straight-cut mouth. She looked around at the utter stillness that surrounded them and began to have doubts. Where were the islanders? Where were their boats, and their children . . .? The island seemed deserted, with not even a footprint marring the pink and white symmetry of its beaches.

The dinghy grounded in shallow water, and she was helped on to the virgin sand by the man who in some indefinable way seemed to have thrown off completely his mantle of civilization and was looking down at her with a light of conquest in his reckless eyes. Sudden premonition assailed her, and she accused him sharply:

'Where are we? This isn't Paradis?'

He took her arm and held her eyes with his own while he answered audaciously, 'No! But it will be a paradise for us, little Lynette, I promise you!'

She looked her bewilderment. He threw back his head and flung his arms wide, encompassing all that was around him. With a frightening glitter lighting his deep blue eyes, he went on to astound her.

'This is my hideout. My release from the bonds of stifling conformity!' With unleashed exhilaration, he continued, 'For months I carry out my duties as Marques de Paradis, hemmed in by irksome convention and by the affairs of my estate, but every now and again I escape and make straight here. No one else knows of this island retreat of mine. I come here to live as my ancestors did - free and untrammelled. The first Estevezes were men of the sea - buccaneers! Although they passed on to me their possessions and their mounting responsibilities they also bequeathed to me the hot blood that runs in my veins and with it the urge to be free - even wild - for a small number of weeks in the year. And now,' he glinted down into her disbelieving face, 'I also have a companion who believes as I do that convention should be thrown overboard if it threatens to choke and subdue a natural longing to be free. You touched a sympathetic chord in my heart, little Lynette, the night you astonished some of the hidebound members of our society by so passionately expounding your views on marriage and the manacles that partner it. I could never be manacled! Of all the women I have known, not one thought as you do, *mon ami*. They all wished to tie me down even more by marriage - some even talked of children! Some day, perhaps, I must comply with those wishes, but not yet; not now! I have all I want in you, my sweet little rebel!'

He pulled her limp body against his rock-hard one and clamped her within the circle of his arms. Sun and sky were blotted out by his dark, piratical face as he swooped upon her trembling mouth and besieged it with all the fire and passion he had inherited from his lusty

forebears. But not even volcanic fire could have instilled warmth to Lynette's icy lips in that first shattering moment of truth. His kisses were a brand of shame she suffered numbly; too shocked and too ashamed to protest her innocence of the charge he had laid against her. It had never once occurred to her that she might appear so cheap in anyone's eyes, because even while she had outwardly accepted the casual endearments and ultra-permissive views of Merle and her crowd she had remained inwardly the same romantic, slightly diffident girl she had been before she had met them. How could she tell him he was mistaken in his opinion of her? How could she defend her behaviour when he had the evidence of his own eyes and ears with which to condemn her? These questions moved sluggishly through her mind even as she battled with the sensuous, crazy urge to submit that his passionate lips were awakening. His kisses became more forceful as he sensed her infinitesimal response. She tried, so hard, to turn her mouth away, but he would not be thwarted and held her prisoner by threading his lean brown, fingers through the pale golden bubble curls that tumbled around her head. She felt his heart hammering against hers; a great dynamo of power that threatened to accelerate beyond control and send them both hurtling past the bounds of reason. She had to do something, and quickly, to leash the violent storm of feeling that pounded inside of him and which threatened to sweep away them both on a mounting tide of ecstasy that would need to reach fulfilment before it would ebb. She knew it would be useless to try to convince him that she was hurt and ashamed and that his behaviour was an insult. She must first be able to reason with him. As the only way she could think of to cool his ardour presented itself, she jerked her mouth away from his and instilled all the coolness she could command into her voice when she demanded: '*Stop!* Please, don't...!'

Surprise loosened his grip, and she swiftly wriggled out of 'his' clutches. He moved forward to imprison her once more, but she took three hurried steps backward out of his reach. Before he could advance farther, she somehow managed to project a light trill of

laughter through her tight throat and at the same time forced into her eyes a flicker of coyness that must have looked unbelievably genuine because his own eyes narrowed to questioning slits of blue as he made a visible effort at control, and waited. Rallying her panic-stricken wits around her for the greatest act she had ever been called upon to perform, she swept her gold-tipped lashes up over smoky grey eyes suddenly full of guile and reproached him.

'Really, Luis!' voicing his Christian name was almost her undoing, but she grabbed at her courage and continued with deliberate sweetness, 'I know you have a reputation to live up to, but you'll have to curb these piratical impulses of yours until we've spent a little time together. After all, I hardly know you, do I, and I don't like being rushed.' It was a play for time; a last-minute gamble she thought was going to come off until his hard white teeth showed in a wide smile and he answered confidently,

'Surely, my little rebel, we know enough when we know each other's hearts? We have the same views, the same beliefs, and you won't try to deny, *mon petit*, that we share a very strong attraction? That I would refuse to believe! Your eyes tell me you agree and your lips, when I kiss them, are complete traitors because they respond immediately to mine. Now,' he challenged softly, 'are you going to admit that I'm right? Or do I have to make your ice-pink mouth admit it for you?' His eyes lingered upon her mouth, still quivering from his siege upon it, the sight of which had the effect of rekindling his ardour and he took a decisive step towards her. In desperation, she pleaded,

'But I hardly know you! You can't expect that I should fall into your arms, even if, as you say, we feel a strong physical attraction. Surely that would defeat the whole object of my argument about,' her voice stumbled over the hated phrase, 'trial marriage, which is supposed to indicate a period of discovery - a time to assess whether or not physical attraction is the only basis upon which a couple can agree?'

'But,' his voice was suddenly wary, 'I have not brought you here as a prospective bride. I thought I had made my feelings quite clear on that point. I want a . . . playmate, if you like. Someone who understands my need for freedom from watching duennas and prospective mothers-in-law. Someone like you, little rebel, who, by your own admission, care as little for shackles as I do myself!'

When her face flooded with colour, he gave an impatient flick of his fingers, then, tired of arguing, he coaxed impatiently, 'I'm asking for only a few days of your company, Lynette! What possible harm can come of that? It will be our closely-kept secret, one the world outside will never learn of. What do you say, will you stay?'

Hope flared in her heart. 'You mean I have a Choice?' she asked, half afraid of his answer. He reached out and took her hand which trembled in his and she waited with bated breath for him to say she could go. But a despairing calm filled her when he jerked up his arrogant head and decreed,

'No! I know you want to stay and I want you to stay! I promise to behave,' he glinted wickedly, 'for as long as my inclinations allow me to, but this is too good a chance to miss just because you have suddenly developed cold feet. In a few days' time, Lynette, you will thank me for sharing with you the happiest experience of your life!'

Completely assured, he dropped her hand and stooped to pick up her luggage. 'You won't need these,' he nodded cheerfully at the bags, 'but now they are here they might as well stay. Come, follow me! I want to show you my house before I take you on a tour of the island.'

Lynette stifled an hysterical scream. She had been kidnapped, insulted, and her wishes completely overruled, yet he obviously expected her to pin on a smile and to get ready to enthuse over his island domain. What prisoner, she wondered wildly, could be expected to exclaim with pleasure at the bars that surrounded him?

Luis Estevez was undoubtedly the most exasperating, the most presumptuous, and by far the most dangerous man she had ever met. She would need to be on her guard every moment. The days ahead loomed menacingly as a test of endurance from which she would be fortunate to escape unscathed. He had promised to behave, but how much consolation could she derive from a promise given while audacious mischief danced in eyes that were already assessing the potential of his booty? Her teeth caught up her bottom lip in an agitated nip as she stumbled after him.

The path he took inclined upwards from the beach, through luxuriant vegetation; dark green and splashed with the sudden colour of exotic blooms. Elongated palm trees thrust their slim trunks high in the air, their graceful branches shimmering in the slight breeze that teased them. He looked back several times to make sure she was following and to send her encouraging smiles which she was too despondent to return. When he reached the summit he put down the bags and held out his hand to help her up the last steep slope. Then he placed his hands upon her shoulders and turned her round until she faced the ocean.

'Look, Lynette, is that not a wonderful sight?' he asked her softly. Far out to the horizon stretched the deep blue ocean, without a ripple seeming to disturb its satiny surface, but its tremendous activity was evident when it met the edge of the coral reef that ringed the island. As great rollers surged against the reef, curtains of glistening foam edged by momentary rainbows were flung high into the air. She drew in a gasp of wonder at the beautiful sight and he smiled when he heard it. Without moving his hands from her shoulders, he inclined his head and murmured in her ear,

'On this island there is no time and no care. Relax your tense little mind and body and be prepared to live for a while as we were meant to live - happily - free from inhibitions. This may be the only opportunity you will ever have of being completely carefree. Why not

take what is offered with both hands and live each glorious moment? I promise you will have no regrets.'

He rendered his message with the sure touch of a maestro, plucking at her heartstrings with insidious temptation until she felt almost ready to succumb to the sheer magic of his charm. Only a wild grab at common sense prevented her from leaning back against his lean body and surrendering to the wild, treacherous clamouring of her own heart. She fought a hard inward battle before moving away from his lightly-placed hands and managing, through sheer matter-of-factness, to bring herself and him abruptly down to earth with the mundane reply, 'Luis, I'm famished! Is there anything to eat on this island of yours?'

For a second he looked blank, then he gave a great shout of laughter. 'My poor little Lynette! How thoughtless, how stupid of me to try to woo you on an empty stomach! Come, *mon petit*,' he held out his hand, still laughing, 'we will see what we can find to satisfy your hunger.'

He was still chuckling softly to himself when he led her to a small thatched house set in a grove of coconut trees which, he told her with pride, he had built entirely from coconut trees; posts and planks from its trunk and thatch from its leaves. Even the cordage used to tie up the structure had been made from bark thongs. She peered into the dim interior and saw that it held only a metal camp bed, devoid of mattress, and a few metal cooking utensils that hung upon the wall. The only other object in sight was a large tin trunk pushed up against the opposite wall. She turned away quickly before the implication born of the sight of the solitary metal bed could begin to send her nerves quivering again, only to find the grove deserted; Luis was nowhere in sight. She was about to take to the path that led through the undergrowth when she was hailed from above. She jerked her head upward in the direction of his voice. Her heart took a frightened plunge when she saw him, stripped to the waist, hacking away with

virile strength at the branches of a towering coconut tree. He waved her aside and she stepped hastily back just as a hail of coconuts thudded into the soft ground a few yards from her feet. He shinned quickly down the trunk and bowed with mocking enjoyment as he told her: 'Mademoiselle will be served dinner in just a few moments.'

She sat down to watch as he drove a sharpened stake into the ground, point uppermost, then deftly used it to chip off the husks of the coconuts neatly without breaking the shells of the nuts inside. He skewered a couple of holes in one of the nuts and held it to her lips; the milk was deliciously cool and satisfying. She drank thirstily and exclaimed with genuine gratitude, 'Mmm, that was wonderful! What's next?'

During the next half hour he teased her so unmercifully about her regard for food that she found herself gradually responding to his remarks with a shy humour which delighted him. So much so that by the time he had prepared their meal and they were ready to eat, the grove rang with his appreciative laughter. He continued to tease her while they ate delicious baked bananas and yams washed down with coconut milk; an unusual but sumptuous meal.

The sun was drifting towards the sea by the time they had finished and small shadows had begun to creep into the small grove where they sat. Luis rose lazily to his feet to throw a few coconut husks on the the dying fire, then he walked into the hut to emerge a second later carrying a small guitar. She watched covertly as he lent against a convenient trunk and began to strum. She closed her eyes against the magic of the night, but could not escape the soul-stirring melody he was softly playing. It reached across the distance that divided them and held her entranced and deeply moved.

She was somnolent, but not asleep, when the music stopped and she heard him move towards the hut. Her pulses raced when she heard the trunk scrape across the floor and the noise of creaking springs as a

mattress was thrown across them. Every nerve was taut when his soft footsteps moved towards her. She kept her eyes closed, feigning sleep, and felt herself lifted and carried towards the hut. He must surely have felt the terrified thumping of her heart as he held her gently in his arms, but he made no effort to speak. He lowered her on to the bed and, to her fervid imagination, seemed to stand looking down at her for an age. Just as the lump of fear in her throat threatened to choke, he moved quietly away, stepped outside, and closed the door of the hut firmly behind him.

She lay awake for hours, frightened and confused, with all the enjoyment she had felt during their hours of happy companionship submerged by her quick realization of the appalling ease with which he had lulled into her a false sense of security. How pliable, how malleable he had found her to be when opposed by his own diabolical cunning. Only now was she aware of the full extent of his power over her wayward emotions and of the purpose behind his changed attitude. She was to be wooed gently, by way of friendly smiles and teasing words, until she fell willingly into his arms. All through the long night she searched her mind for some avenue of escape from the island, knowing only too well that her only defence against heartbreak was to put as much distance as possible between herself and Luis Estevez - but there was no escape. Even if she were to manage, somehow, to reach the launch she had no idea how to navigate it. Finally, when her mind was a mass of jangled nerves and her body ached with nervous tension, she had to admit defeat, and fell into a deep sleep of emotional exhaustion.

CHAPTER FOUR

A THIN spear of sunshine stabbing through a slit in the thatched roof above her bed woke Lynette the next morning. As she dragged up heavy lids over eyes still drugged with sleep, the unreality of her surroundings confounded her for a second until memory flooded back and brought with it all the complex problems of the previous evening; the same problems which were responsible for the tired stupor she was now struggling with. Her heart was so heavy it seemed hardly worth the effort to try to stay awake and she was sorely tempted to slide under the blanket of fatigue that still oppressed her in a cowardly attempt to retreat from the contest which would begin at first contact with Luis Estevez. But she was denied the luxury of a withdrawal by the entry into the hut of the man whom she now looked upon as an opponent, and her timid heart fluttered almost to a standstill as it acknowledged the futility of opposing such zestful high spirits as he was exuding.

He had been swimming. She could see diamond droplets clinging to coffee-silk skin that was stretched tight over his rippling biceps and over the powerful exposed muscles of his back and chest. Her breath caught in involuntary admiration and her tell-tale lashes fluttered nervously when he leant across the bed and lifted her chin with a brown forefinger. She froze - only her gold-tipped lashes continued to show the anxiety she felt as she waited, fearfully, for his opening attack.

One of his straight black eyebrows arched and a smile creased his brown cheek as he queried, 'Are you *cowering* from me, Lynette?'

She blushed crimson and willed her stiff body to relax under the single sheet that covered her. To her mortification, he laughed unkindly and derided: 'You are clutching that sheet as if it was a shield, *ma petite*. Is your assessment of my intentions so lurid? Or,' he

leant closer, 'is it perhaps wishful thinking - even pique - because you consider me to have been neglectful last night?'

Forgetting her fear of him, she jerked upright and denied indignantly, '*Of course not!* How can you even think such a . . .' She stopped short, remembering the reason he thought as he did was because her own words had condemned her. She decided not to pursue the subject in case it should lead her into deeper water, and hastily turned the conversation away from herself.

'Have you been swimming?' she stammered out the unnecessary question. He humoured her by answering, 'I have, and the sea is glorious. That is why I returned to fetch you. Hurry into a swimsuit and we will swim together.' He swung on his heel and as he made towards the door he threw over his shoulder, 'Be as quick as you can. I will be outside getting a fire going to cook our breakfast.'

She jumped out of bed as soon as the door closed behind him and ran to open up the suitcase that held her swimsuits. As she rummaged, she mentally reviewed its contents and wished belatedly that she had thought to include swimsuits amongst her purchases from Madame Madeleine's. Tucked into the corner of the case were three microscopic bikinis, one made of futuristic plastic discs which definitely did not encourage immersion in water and which had been evolved solely for lounging at the edge of a pool, and a second one - equally unsuitable because of its multitudinous frills which were almost certain to turn into a bedraggled mess when wet. She thrust them both back into the case and reluctantly donned the remaining one - a handful of silver lame, highly fashionable, defiantly modern, but completely out of environment amidst the dignity of her natural surroundings. She slipped over it a white towelling robe and belted it round her slim waist, then, before her courage could desert her, she ran outside to join him.

He was leaning over the smouldering embers of a fire, blowing gently on to the coconut husks he had piled upon it so as to kindle a spark that would bring it flickering back to life, when she reached his side. He grunted with satisfaction, but whether his pleasure was caused by her arrival or by the flames that had begun to curl around the dry husks she had no chance of discovering, because his lithe, tanned body straightened in one supple movement and he grabbed hold of her hand and began to run with her towards the shore.

She was laughing and breathless when he finally released her. She sank down on the warm silver sand, gasping with unaccustomed exertion, quite unable to find the strength to plead with him to let her rest when he began to advance towards her once more with devilment dancing in his eyes. He caught the desperate message she signalled, but could not voice, and grinned widely as he threw himself down beside her to wait until she regained her composure. For several minutes he laughed down at her while she fought for breath, his black hair, dense and disordered by his earlier swim, falling over his brow and giving him a devil-may-care, rakish look that was echoed in the frightening glint that lit the dark depths of his eyes. She moved aside to escape his disturbing nearness, and as she did so the loosely tied belt of her robe became undone, exposing to his searching gaze her smooth, lightly tanned limbs and her inadequate wisp of costume. Blushing fierily, she clutched at her robe to try to hide the costume which she had worn many times in the company of Vince and his friends without embarrassment, but which now, under the mockingly piratical assessment of Luis Estevez, made her feel unbearably self-conscious. As she made to pull her robe closer around her waist his hand reached out with a casual possessiveness that made her face burn and deliberately slid it from her bare shoulders. Utterly confused, her hands lifted from her belt in an effort to replace it, but as soon as she released her grasp he gave a swift tug and deftly whipped the robe from around her and threw it across his shoulders where it landed upon the sand a few feet away. He leant over her, forcing her back against the warm sand, his eyes dark with turbulent

feeling, and even though the sun was beating down upon her she gave a chilled shiver when she felt his hands cool upon her waist. Broodingly, his eyes caressed her, taking in every detail of the silver sheath of provocation which vainly attempted to cover her and the smooth beauty of her curves which it exposed. She waited for his kiss - sensing that it was inevitable - and the thought of it sent a surge of nervous excitement through her body which terminated in an agitated flicker of her long, sun-tipped lashes. The nervous habit annoyed and disconcerted her, coming as it did at every moment of crisis, but she was unable to control this visible betrayal of her inward fear and could only hope it would go unnoticed: a hope soon dispelled when he spoke to her in a voice so low and so thick with emotion it was terrifying.

'I find that trick you have with your eyes most fascinating, *cherie*. You are like a little brown English linnet whose heart is fluttering with fear in the face of an attack by a great eagle. Why are you afraid of me, little brown linnet?' His fingers gently smoothed her quivering lashes until they were still crescents upon her flushed cheeks, where she allowed them to stay rather than uncurtain the wild panic she knew would be reflected in her eyes. When she did not answer, his firm hand slid down her cheek and came to rest under her chin. His touch was causing havoc inside of her. She longed to jump and run, but her limbs were stiff and unresponsive when she tried to move; her nerves taut with anxiety. Again his caressing words played upon her senses when he whispered against her ear, 'You are a drug in my veins, *mon coeur*. You make my heart beat faster every time I am near you. Tell me you feel it too, this heat that burns me, this longing I have for your touch - for your kisses. *Do* you feel it, little linnet?' His warm breath fanned her mouth as he urged, 'Do you want me to kiss you ... do you long to feel my touch?'

A bewitching languor chased all resistance from her body as his lips teased her mouth with featherlight kisses and his hands dallied lightly and with deliberate sensuality against the smoothness of her shoulder.

She was lost to all but the music of his words and the inflammatory delight of his touch. This, she thought, is love, *real love*. Tentatively, her hands crept around his neck and she slowly opened her eyes. As her lashes so unexpectedly swept up she felt herself to be looking almost into the depths of his soul, but what she saw there was enough to dispel all her stupid notions of love.

As if the naked flicker of triumph she saw was not enough to sicken and dismay her, he confirmed his trickery even as she watched by changing the small chuckle of satisfaction he had given at her response to a huge grin of satisfaction. Her heart thudded to earth with shattering force as his smile told her that, once again, she had almost succumbed to the deliberate fascination he subjected her to. He did not want her love, she was honest enough to acknowledge that he had made that quite plain - but she could not pretend that being his plaything would be enough for her; not now when she had just realized how much she loved him. She wanted to hate him for playing upon her emotions with such devastating effect she had been ready to submit to his will without thought of the consequences. She tried to find words - blistering, despising words - with which to humiliate him, but her mind was too confused and her heart too sore to search for them. She looked into his triumphant face and her trembling mouth tried hard to form a rejection, but to her dismay she felt a surge of tears behind her eyes and she hastily turned her head aside before he could gauge the true extent of her hurt. She had only one faint straw to grasp at.

Loving him had given her a deep perception which allowed her to hope that, domineering and ruthless though he might appear, Luis Estevez was a man who would not accept that which was not given willingly. Although he had tried, and nearly succeeded, to overcome her resistance, he was too proud to force her to bend to his will. She would have to go to him willingly or not at all. With this notion to bolster her courage, she managed to force back the tears that burned behind her eyes before turning her head to meet his still victorious

gaze. The tears stung, giving her eyes the look of sea-washed grey pearls, as she forced steadiness into her voice and asked him with a valiant effort to appear unmoved,

'What about that swim you mentioned, Luis? If I must spend some time in this godforsaken place the least you can do is to try to make my stay enjoyable!'

His hands fell to his sides as her words registered, and for a moment the pirate in him was subdued by the marques. His nostrils flared and his head went up with an arrogant jerk at the disdain in her voice and at the sight of the bored, petulant droop she was deliberately forcing her mouth to portray. Then, after a tense second, his rigid frame relaxed and his anger gave way to reluctant amusement. With laughter spilling into his words, he said admiringly,

'You certainly are a cool little character, Lynette, and an amusing one. Of all the women I have known you are the only one who can make me burn with desire and then curl up with laughter, all in the space of seconds. You are good for me, *ma petite*! With you I feel complete - you are everything a man could wish for in a woman, but minus the chains that would bind him!'

She realized that it was going to be incredibly difficult to penetrate his enormous self-assurance, but his amusement made her so resentful she did not have to try so hard the second time to project her displeasure. She sat up so suddenly he was taken unawares, and before he had time to speak again, she thrust at him: 'And do you expect me to be flattered because I've been chosen by you as a companion? *You*, the playboy of the south seas, if gossip is to be believed!' Her heart beat fast with fear, but she went on to charge him, 'You may have made many conquests in the past, *monsieur*, but I assure you that I am not one of them! And if you don't mind,' she carefully blended in a touch of sarcasm to give her words credibility, 'I would like either to continue my journey to Paradis or be returned

to my hotel in Papeete. There I will be under the protection of the management, and if I'm to be subjected to any more amorous advances I will be at least able to choose my partner myself instead of being forced to suffer your unwanted attentions !'

In the still silence that enclosed them after her last words, Lynette realized that in her eagerness to convince, she had gone too far. The twinkle fled from his eyes instantly and was replaced by a mask of chilling hauteur. Rigid with displeasure, he stood up, pulled her ungently to her feet, and looked menacingly down at her. Grimly he searched her face as if for confirmation of what he had just heard, and she returned his look with an outward defiance that showed nothing of the quaking fear she was feeling inside. She saw the muscles under his gleaming brown skin tauten as his fists clenched with anger, and her knees began to shake as she contemplated, too late, what the outcome might be if she had been mistaken in her assessment of his character. Terrible thoughts ran swiftly through her mind. What if she were wrong and there was more of the plundering, reckless blood of the piratical Estevezes running in his veins than she had thought? Looking at him, he seemed quite capable in his anger of sweeping her off to her feet and carrying her back into the interior like a piece of booty chosen solely to pander to his whims.

A nervous tremor shook her and she blinked nervously up at him. As if a spring had been suddenly released, he expelled his breath and his muscular frame slackened. Her eyes were fastened on his face and she gave a small sigh of relief when she saw his dark, angry look begin to recede and his compressed lips relax into a cold smile that held no humour and which was only a shade more reassuring than the angry tightness it had replaced. She watched the cold smile as if hypnotized, and shivered while she waited for him to speak. When he did, his voice rained a hail of ice upon her now bent head and although the words he spoke were the ones she had longed to hear, she gained little comfort from them, coming as they did from the lips of a chilling, aloof stranger.

'If you had made your distaste known to me earlier, *mademoiselle*, you would not have been subjected to my *unwanted attentions*. We will resume our journey to Paradis without further delay and I hope we will be able to erase this unfortunate episode from both our minds.' He gave a negligent shrug but his look still speared as he went on, 'I hope you will accept my apology, Mademoiselle Southern, for bringing you here. I thought we were compatible, but,' again he shrugged, 'since you have made your feelings quite plain, I must accept that we are not. Please forgive me my mistake.' He gave an ironic bow and when he straightened his voice suddenly crisped: 'When you are ready we will proceed to Paradis!'

He turned upon his heel and began to walk towards the path that led to the hut. Lynette stood stock still, and watched him walk away from her. She felt, in that first moment, such a sense of loss and deprivation she was almost compelled to call him back in order to plead with him for the return of his teasing, tormenting smile and his carefree manner. Almost, but not quite. The hard core of northern common sense she had inherited from her father directed her away from disaster by taking firm control of her wayward emotions and prevented her from following her heart by pushing to the forefront of her mind the words he had used to try to persuade her to stay: '*I want a playmate . . . someone who understands my need for freedom ...*'

Dejectedly, she picked up her robe and shrugged into it. She could not bear to be simply a plaything for him to discard when he tired of her. Neither was she different from all the other women he had known who had wanted to tie him down with responsibilities and to shackle him further with marriage bonds. She was thankful he would never know how much she longed for that very thing. She grimaced slightly to herself as she pictured his probable reaction if he were ever to find out that, far from being the uninhibited, permissive type he thought her to be, her present idea of heaven would be to have his ring upon her finger as a symbol of his undying devotion, and his love wrapping her like a cloak. Because he would never know, she even dared to

dream of a house filled with happy, laughing children - blue-eyed, black-haired boys and silver-topped little girls - all endowed with the same daredevil temperament as their piratical father.

She looked up and saw him waiting impatiently for her to catch him up, his jaw uncompromisingly rigid and his eyes glacial, and the dream faded abruptly. She blushed crimson, fearing his perception might be acute enough to read her thoughts, and hastily cast aside the sweet daydream before he was able to read the tender yearning in her eyes and the small, soft smile of longing clinging to her lips.

By the time she reached him, she had composed her features into a mask of cool indifference and her grey eyes were as inscrutable as his own. In frigid silence they walked together towards the hut.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN less than half an hour, after a breakfast of freshly-caught fish that Luis had left baking in the fire embers - which should have tasted like ambrosia but which instead had almost choked her - the launch was again speeding across the sparkling sea leaving an angry stream of foam cascading in its wake. Lynette sat in the stern watching the island fade gradually from sight until it was a mere blur on the horizon and feeling terribly conscious of the silent displeasure emanating from the man whose back was turned to her as he busied himself with the controls.

Not a word was spoken during the hour long journey, made to seem even longer by the continuous silence and the nerve-racking atmosphere of tension that set them so far apart in spirit he could have been an unfeeling automaton mechanically carrying out the necessary movements of control and she a piece of luggage dumped aboard to be forgotten about until time for collection.

But she did not really mind the silence because she had so much to think about; so many of his words stored in the back of her mind to resurrect and ponder over. Had he really meant what he had said on the beach earlier? Strung out in the forefront of her mind like beads of fire were the words '*You are a drug in my veins, mon coeur. You make my heart beat faster every time I am near you.*' Had they been spoken as a mere ploy to her susceptibilities or had there been a thread of sincerity running through them? She badly wanted to believe she had been wrong to reject him, but in all honesty she had to admit that Luis Estevez would probably have said those same words to any likely girl he should happen to be alone with on a deserted island. She pondered upon the word she had subconsciously chosen to describe the category in which she was sure he had placed her: 'likely'. How puzzled he must have been to discover how 'unlikely' she actually was and how very much opposed her actions were to the defiant, unthinkingly reckless words she had used when championing the

cause of permissiveness on the night when she had first met him. A shudder of self-revulsion crept her flesh and she absently rubbed her arms in an effort to disperse the chill that suddenly gripped her when she remembered the outraged looks that had been directed towards her by the more conventional members of her audience that evening. She blanched at the thought of how first impressions were the more lasting and forced her mind to skip hurriedly over the question of how she would face the recipients of her unfortunate comments that evening should she ever encounter them again. *Her* first impression of Luis Estevez had been a completely wrong one. Far from being the censorious prig she had labelled him at first sight, he was even more in sympathy with her outspoken views than she was herself. Her own guilt complex had been responsible for the hasty judgment she had made of his reactions; she had expected him to be shocked, but instead he had turned the tables on her completely and had utterly confused her by displaying a disregard for convention which far outstripped even the permissiveness advocated by Merle and her companions. She sighed and stirred a little as she remembered the vow she had made only yesterday as she had skipped towards the waterfront. It seemed she was doomed never to project her own personality but was forever to act out a part; a completely alien part.

Once more she was committed to playing the role of a cool, sophisticated member of the International Set, seldom disconcerted and never allowing emotion to rule her actions. That was how Luis now saw her, and for her own defence she had to nurture that impression because she knew that if he were ever to find out how flimsy were the barriers she had hidden behind in her attempt to resist him he would not hesitate to renew his attack upon her insubstantial armour and would then immediately discover her pitiful deception. Much better that he should think she had resisted his siege through disinterest in himself as a lover than that he should become aware of the overwhelming passion he was capable of arousing and exploiting

it to the full. She had wounded his vanity, but his wound was slight compared to the scars she knew she would carry on her heart for ever.

Through lack-lustre eyes she noticed a smudge on the horizon. Gradually, as she watched, it took the shape of an island, much larger than the atoll where they had spent the previous day, but smaller than the majority of inhabited islands that dotted the ocean. As the launch drew nearer, she saw signs of activity on a small wharf that edged the shore where men were busy piling sacks and boxes as if in readiness to dispatch as cargo when the next ship should call. Luis guided the launch up to a landing stage that jutted out into the sea and she braced herself to meet the chill formality of his tone when, after switching off the engine, he turned to her.

'Welcome to Paradis!' he mocked gravely. 'I hope the fact that it is my home will not detract from the pleasure of your stay here.'

She did not deign to answer his sarcastic challenge but made to step out on to the landing stage. He forestalled her by swiftly vaulting the side of the launch, then he leant across towards her with his arms open to receive her. She hesitated, wary of his touch, but saw she had no option but to jump the small space between the side of the launch and the landing stage where he waited with sardonic humour. She tried to time her jump for the moment when the gap of water between the launch and the landing stage was at its narrowest, but a split second before she jumped the launch bumped against the wooden supports and the impetus sent it gliding momentarily outward. She lost her balance and instead of embarking in dignified silence as she had intended, she was propelled into his arms with a force that sent him rocking on his heels. For a split second they clung together to right their balance, but whereas only hours before Luis would have welcomed the opportunity to tease, it was he who was first to disengage himself and to ask with distant politeness: 'Have you hurt yourself, *mademoiselle*?'

'No,' she stammered, 'but I'm afraid I must have hurt you when I landed with such force.' A slight smile feathered his uncompromising mouth when he answered the anxiety in her troubled grey eyes.

'Not at all, *mademoiselle*, you are as light as .thistledown.' Even before he had finished voicing the polite rejoinder, he had taken hold of her arm and had begun to lead her towards the island.

She felt herself to be the object of much speculation amongst the islanders that lined the wharfside watching their approach, and her long eyelashes gave a quiver of apprehension as the battery of eyes grew nearer. But when they finally reached the little groups of men she was relieved to see that each cinnamon- coloured face reflected a huge friendly grin of welcome that changed to delighted shouts of recognition when they saw her companion. Luis grinned his appreciation of the welcome and was immediately surrounded by the warm-hearted islanders as they all tried to shake his hand at once, almost as if he had been absent from the island for years instead of actual weeks. Lynette, too, was enfolded into the warm circle of friendliness, and her hand was shaken so many times by the men and by their wives who had run up from the beach to join in the small festivity that by the time they were allowed to leave the wharf it felt like boneless pulp.

She could not help but stare at the girls and women who had left their children playing happily on the beach in order to run to join in their husband's welcome committee. Without exception, they were startlingly beautiful women; spice-coloured, deliberately provocative, entirely feminine Creole beauties dressed in brightly coloured prints that clung to their voluptuous figures with caressing grace. Their evident love of life, and of their men, shone unashamedly from sloe-dark eyes, all of which held the twinkle of the born coquette.

Lynette's eyes held an answering twinkle as she settled herself in the front seat of the car Luis indicated when they finally managed to drag

themselves away from the excited islanders. As he revved up the engine and began to move away she twisted round in her seat and waved until the last bright dress and colourful shirt faded to a blur in the distance before she turned to face the road ahead, a smile of pleasure still playing upon her lips. The smile faded abruptly when she heard his hateful drawl.

'Do you still think I flog my islanders, *mademoiselle*?' She blushed furiously at this reminder that he had not forgotten her first disastrous outburst against him, and all her pleasure faded in the face of his cold sarcasm. Swallowing hard, she answered stiffly, 'I'm sorry, *monsieur*, I should have apologized earlier for the remarks I made about you that evening. I had no right to speak as I did.'

'But you do not retract, nevertheless,' he speared. 'You may apologize for what you said, but your opinion of nje is even worse now than it was then - is that not so?'

Indignantly she challenged the censure in his tone.

'How could it be otherwise? Have your actions been conducive to a change of heart on my part? You carried me off to your island without a thought to what I might feel in the matter. How can you expect me to respect you when I know the *real* you! Everyone else may see you as the dignified aristocratic Marques de Paradis, but I have met the barbaric, ruthless pirate that hides behind that facade, remember? And that is how I shall always see you, *monsieur*, no matter how hard you might try to erase the memory. To me you will always be *Le Pirat!*'

She dared a look towards him and was disconcerted to find herself looking straight into his enigmatic eyes; her breath caught in her throat with a small choking sound and she had to look away hurriedly. She clenched her fists as they lay in her lap and willed her limbs to stop the trembling that had begun when their glances clashed, but her

pulses gave a great leap when she felt the car slow down and finally come to a halt.

For a moment he said nothing, then she felt his hand under her chin and was forced to meet his look. Tensely she waited while he searched her face with sombre intentness, and was surprised to detect apology in his voice when he told her quietly, 'I am sorry to hear you say that, *mademoiselle*. Barbaric . . .? Ruthless ..? Is that really how you think of me? What can I do to atone for the distress I have caused you? I apologize humbly for my actions, please say you will forgive me?' His deeply tanned face was grave as he waited for her answer, and her hand went out impulsively to cover his as a tide of compunction swept her. She could not stand to see him subdued and humble. She had said she would always think of him as *Le Pirat*, and she would, but only because that was how she wanted to think of him. It was *Le Pirat* she had fallen in love with . . .

'Oh, please ... Of course, I forgive you!' Her eyes were liquid velvet as she swiftly consoled him.

'You are quite sure?' he asked with alien diffidence. She smiled up at him earnestly and reaffirmed,

'Oh, yes, perfectly sure!'

'The time we spent together will be our secret? You promise you will speak of it to no one?' he urged intently. Lynette nodded her head fervently. She would have promised anything to disperse his abject mood.

'I promise,' she pledged.

He gave a sigh of relief and relaxed against the luxurious upholstery of his seat. She watched him reach into his pocket for a cigarette and when he had lighted it, lean back once more with a smile of satisfaction that seemed to her puzzled eyes to be slightly ominous.

His humility had disappeared so suddenly she became suspicious, and when he turned his eyes upon her and she saw the mocking amusement sparking out of them she charged him indignantly,

'You were making fun of me! You don't care in the least who knows about the hours we spent together!'

Negligently, he contradicted her, 'Oh, but I do, *mademoiselle*, I care most deeply, but now that I have your promise I need worry no longer. You see, as you so rightly said, no one but yourself knows the real me, and I wish it to remain so. I have the honour of my family to consider, as well as a duty to set an example to my islanders, and it would never do if they were to find out our little secret. Now that I know I can rely upon your discretion, I have no fear of my *grand'-mere* or my young sister Vivienne being upset by such gossip as might have arisen had you seen fit to speak to anyone of our . . . assignation.'

She looked at him with dawning contempt. 'You tricked me into giving that promise. But why should you think such trickery necessary?' She drew herself up proudly. 'I can assure you, *monsieur*,' she answered shakily, 'I have as little desire as you have to acquaint the world with the fact that we spent a day and a night together. I just pray,' her voice shook with unshed tears, 'that in time I may be able to forget I even knew you!'

He shrugged with seeming indifference and reached forward to switch on the ignition before saying coolly,

'I had to be sure of your reactions before I could even contemplate introducing you to my *grand'-mere*. She is not of our generation and therefore does not understand our outlook on such matters. But while I insist upon complete freedom to live my life as I wish, I also recognize the necessity to be discreet in my actions in order to save her distress. In her mind, you see, she still lingers in the days of her

youth when women were cosseted from the cradle to the grave; first by diligent fathers and then later by adoring husbands. She could not even begin to understand young things such as yourself who travel the globe unescorted, snatching at every opportunity of enjoying the power your beauty and wealth gives you over the men you use merely as implements with which to demonstrate your emancipation. So I hope you can understand, *mademoiselle*, that while I understand and sympathize with your code of conduct, my *grand'mere* never could. And again, even though I am willing to enjoy participating in today's modern permissive trend, it is unthinkable that my young sister should be exposed to it.'

He felt her give a start and his lips curved into a rueful smile as he admitted, 'Yes, I know that sounds arbitrary, but Vivienne has an old-world charm which she inherited from her *grand'mere* and which I find completely captivating as, I have no doubt, Jacques also does. He would not wish her to change any more than I do. He knows that when they marry she will love, honour and obey him for the rest of her life. To you that will sound unutterably dreary and old-fashioned, but Jacques will delight in it - as would any man - and to her it will come as naturally as breathing. Provided,' his quick, hard glance lanced her heart, 'she is not spoiled beforehand by any upsetting influence that might instil into her a restless seeking after superficial pleasure which you must acknowledge, as I do myself, is a pastime to be indulged in only by people such as ourselves who know the score and who will not be hurt and bewildered if our chosen playmates should lose interest halfway through the game!'

Into the silence that fell, she thought she heard through the clamouring of her pulses a softly breathed 'as you did', but the blood was pounding in her ears with such force she could not be sure. In any case, it hardly mattered. What did matter was the searing knowledge of how contemptuously he valued her. He had told her, obliquely, but with ruthless intent, that he did not think her a suitable friend for his sister, and through the telling had run an unmistakable warning that

she was not to contaminate Vivienne with her own worldly views. Worldly! For the first time Lynette wished fervently that she really was as uninhibited and uncaring as he thought her, because then she would be incapable of feeling the staggering pain he had so carelessly inflicted. Pride answered the call for help that screamed through her senses; it lifted her chin high and sent fury to whip bright flags of colour into her cheeks and brightness to her eyes. Bringing tremendous will to bear, she forced steadiness into her voice and lashed back at him.

'You're despicable!' In her relief at finding her voice as cool and steady as she had prayed it would be, she rushed on, 'You sacrifice to the form of hypocrisy which necessitates you having to provide an excuse for indulging in your baser instincts. It isn't your grandmother's feelings you think about when you cover up your indiscretions; your insufferable conceit will not allow you to let people see you as you really are! You cannot bear for anyone to realize that the omnipotent Marques de Paradis is as mortal as other men! Far from retracting the remarks I made about you in Papeete, I reiterate them: You are a sham, *monsieur*, I sensed it from the very beginning! Do you wonder now why I rejected you? For me, a man must be above all things true to himself, not an insubstantial shadow!'

The anger that had given her the courage to chastise him fled when she saw his face darken. Tight-lipped, he repeated with angry incredulity,

'A shadow? Mon Dieu, that I will not allow!' His brown-fingered hand reached out to snap off the ignition and then, before she realized his intention, she was very forcibly pulled into his whipcord arms and held a silent prisoner under the cruel pressure of his punishing mouth. His kiss contained all the fury he had subdued on the island and reaped retribution for her scorn and rejection of him. With mute opposition she fought him, every nerve-end screaming for him to stop, but he overwhelmed each attempt she made to break free and

continued to kiss her until finally she lay broken in spirit and passive in his arms. Only when he sensed her defeat did he release her. She fell backwards into her seat, meeting the victory in his eyes with hurt disbelief, and did not even attempt to answer when he challenged, 'You enjoyed being kissed by a shadow, *mademoiselle*?'

She refused to react and turned her face away from him until all he could see was her delicate profile; soft, infant curls that tumbled on to a smooth brow and the fan of her eyelashes as they rested upon her rounded cheek. A momentary quiver disturbed the finely etched bow of Jier mobile mouth, and the sight of it impelled him to grind out harshly,

'How do you manage to have the look of a chastised cherub when . . .!' Instead of finishing his sentence, he threw back his dark head and uttered a savage, humourless laugh. Impatiently, he switched on the engine and drove on.

They drove through idyllic tropical scenery; lush foliage, cane fields and coconut groves through which the sea and the spectacular coastline emerged time and time again, but the sights only half registered upon Lynette's numb mind as she gazed with vacant eyes through the car's wide open window.

Luis depressed the accelerator, perhaps hopeful that the increased speed would evoke some startled rebuke from his silent companion, but she did not stir, did not seem even to notice, that the passing scenery had merged into one vast kaleidoscope of blurred colour from which it was impossible to distinguish any positive object. Neither was she conscious of the frowning glances he cast her way at intervals during their journey, and he had to speak sharply to bring her back to awareness when they reached their destination.

'Well, we have arrived! What do you think of my home?'

With a visible start, she emerged from her deep preoccupation and saw that the car was passing through tall iron gates of impressive workmanship, so finely wrought they seemed to hang as delicately as finely-worked black lace. She half-turned to have a better look, but then her attention was caught by the smooth velvet lawns running alongside the drive, bordered with exotic shrubs bearing brilliant, multicoloured blossoms. Far away in the centre of the grounds she caught a glimpse of a fountain and here and there under shady trees more delicately worked white-painted iron was fashioned into garden seats. As they rounded a sudden curve, she saw the house and gave a gasp of appreciation which seemed to compensate Luis for her silence, because her expression lightened with a quick smile as he leant forward to share with her in her first glimpse of his home.

They were still a considerable distance away from it, but yet near enough to be able to distinguish its beautiful structure of white French stone fashioned in an old colonial style of architecture that re-created an atmosphere of earlier days. Streams of colour stained the pristine walls and as the car drew nearer she saw that these were cascading flowering vines that showered downward from the roof with tropical lushness. He halted the car in front of an elaborately carved door, and as he helped her out she noticed, with a lump of nostalgia in her throat, the totally unexpected contrast made by pastel-shaded sweet peas that clambered over a trellis framing one of the windows. The sight of the very English flower sent a wave of homesickness surging through her, and it was only the sound of Vivienne's trilling voice coming from inside the house that prevented the tears that ached behind her eyes from falling.

Luis, too, heard his sister's voice and he motioned Lynette to precede him into the hall from where the sound had come. She stepped inside eagerly, impatient to greet her friend, but her eyes, which had become accustomed to brilliant sunshine, could distinguish nothing in the

seemingly dark hall. A sudden squeal of delighted recognition sent her swerving in that direction, and a couple of seconds later she was being enfolded in Vivienne's enthusiastic embrace. Her welcome was heart-warming.

'Lynette, *darling*! I was not expecting you for days yet! How absolutely wonderful it is to have you here.' To a smiling Luis, she directed a sparkle of delight and told him, 'You are a darling for bringing her here so soon.'

Half a dozen excited interchanges later, she linked her arm into Lynette's and urged her forward towards one of the doors that lined the hall. 'You must come and meet my *grand'mere*, darling,' she told her. 'She is dying to meet you!'

At these words Lynette's heart sank. Incredibly, she had just then realized that Vivienne's grandmother had been Luis' guest that evening in Papeete and was almost certain to have heard the foolhardy views she had been expounding. She felt she simply could not stand any more emotional stress that day, and her nerves were taut with apprehension as Vivienne led her into a charmingly feminine drawing-room where "the regal old Comtesse sat chatting amiably to the only other occupant - a pleasantly-smiling plump lady who looked as old as the Comtesse herself. Vivienne rushed forward exuberantly and startled them both by almost yelling in her excitement.

'*Grand'mere*! Luis has arrived and he has brought with him my dear friend, Lynette Southern. See, here she is!'

Lynette saw the frown that creased the Comtesse's brow and wanted to flee from the room, certain that she had been recognized. Then her heart filled with relief when the old lady rebuked Vivienne sharply,

'Really, child, how many times must I ask you not to shout when you address me. I might be hard of hearing, but I assure you I am not as completely deaf as you appear to think.' After giving Vivienne's hand a small slap of disapproval, she turned to beam upon Lynette with obvious pleasure and extended her hand towards her.

'I am so pleased you could come to visit us, my dear. Vivienne has been singing your praises for days and I am sure you are just the friend she needs to help to tone down her unladylike exuberance. I quite despair of ever getting her to realize that such behaviour is not, *comme il faut* for a young woman of her position, but I can tell, my dear, that your natural young dignity will be a good influence upon her.'

Lynette's ears burned when, as she answered the Comtesse's greeting, she heard Luis give a strangled cough somewhere behind her. She felt his derisive glance as he moved forward to kiss his grandmother, but she gave her complete attention to Vivienne as she introduced to her the other old lady who, Lynette was delighted to learn, was an Englishwoman named Mrs. Reddish, a friend of the Comtesse's since girlhood. She told Lynette, as they chatted for a moment while Luis and the Comtesse exchanged affectionate greetings, that she had been a widow for many years and her annual holiday was always spent, at the insistence of her old friend, on the island of Paradis.

'You will love it here, child,' Mrs. Reddish assured her, her kind eyes assessing the signs of strain that were beginning to show on Lynette's rather wan face. 'But might I suggest,' she addressed her remark to Vivienne, 'that you show your friend to her room so that she can rest for a while before dinner. We English are not as acclimatized to the sun as you islanders, and we tire more easily.' She turned back to Lynette. 'Isn't that so, my dear?'

Lynette could have hugged her for her understanding. She was longing for a moment's solitude in which to recuperate in some small

measure from the assault Luis Estevez's presence had upon her frayed nerves, but she hesitated to appear lacking in courtesy by trying to avoid the *tete-a-tete* Vivienne was so obviously dying to indulge in. Vivienne looked her disappointment. But even as her look pleaded with Lynette to deny the assertion, Luis suddenly appeared as an unexpected ally by stepping forward and agreeing with the old lady.

'Do as Mrs. Reddish says, Vivienne. We have had a long and tiring journey and Mademoiselle Southern will be all the more receptive to your chatter after she has rested. I myself propose to have a quick shower and then rest for an hour and I am sure your friend will welcome the opportunity to do the same.'

His tone implied that he intended to brook no argument, so Vivienne immediately wiped the faint expression of dissension from her expressive face and gave a sigh of acceptance.

'Very well, Luis, you old tyrant, I will do as you ask. But *no one*,' she laughed threateningly, 'will be allowed to part Lynette and myself after dinner, so be warned!'

Gaily, she took hold of Lynette's hand and led her towards the door, hardly giving her time to stammer out her thanks to the two old ladies, and mercifully giving her no time at all to meet Luis's piercing eyes. She was swept up a fan-shaped, shallow-treaded staircase and along a short passage to the room that had been prepared for her. Vivienne swiftly showed her around, then as she was making towards the door she stopped and said thoughtfully, 'Luis is right, as usual, *ma petite*, you look all in. I will leave you to get some rest, and don't worry about over-sleeping, I will call you in good time to dress for dinner.'

Her kind words and worried expression were almost Lynette's undoing. She had to fight to control tears of weakness before she could say huskily, 'Thank you, darling, for being so understanding. I

promise I'll be better company this evening. I don't want you to regret having asked me here.'

'Pouf!' Vivienne snapped her fingers with amusement and trilled out: 'As if I ever could!' before closing the door behind her and leaving Lynette wrapped in the soothing oasis of solitude she had been craving for. ..

It was amazing how a short nap on top of the bed revived her flagging spirits. She woke feeling comfortably refreshed, and as she lay looking drowsily around her at the sumptuously furnished room she had barely glanced at earlier, a sensation of relaxed well-being spread through her. She could have laughed at the vague fears that had precipitated the headache and the tense muscles that had required her to take this rest. Now that she knew the Comtesse had no recollection of ever having met her before, she could begin to enjoy her holiday; with Vivienne as a companion and an enchanted island to explore it should be an ideal interlude. She stretched with satisfaction and pondered on what to wear for dinner. Only one more evening of Luis's company to endure, she thought with quickening pulses, before his departure tomorrow morning, then she would be free of his saturnine presence altogether. He must leave tomorrow, she consoled herself, because he had implied, when Vivienne had arranged with him to transport her here, that he had unfinished business in Papeete. Claudia de Courcel's madonna-like face flashed across her mind and a twist of primitive jealousy speared her. But she did not intend to allow such feelings to upset her newfound composure and thrust the upsetting vision out of her mind. Luis Estevez was not for her, she told herself grimly, so it hardly mattered whose presence was responsible for drawing him back to Papeete.

She jumped up from the bed before thoughts of him should once more set her nerves on a knife's edge, and began to explore her room. She was drawn towards a huge french window draped with pale yellow silk curtains gently billowing in a soft breeze, and found herself

overlooking smooth, undulating lawns that directed her eyes onward until they reached the shimmering, vivid ocean that filled the horizon. She could have stood there drinking in the heavenly view for ever, but conscience nagged her to begin dressing for dinner and she reluctantly moved away.

Some silent spirit had unpacked for her while she slept and had hung her dresses in a large blonde-wood wardrobe. A matching chest of drawers held her underwear and casuals, and set out on the glass-topped dressing table were her brush and comb set and cosmetic case. She padded, shoeless, over a primrose patterned carpet which, combined with leaf-green walls, gave an illusion of being in a cool, flower-filled glade, while the added sound of the fountain's tinkle that drifted through the open window gave credence to the fantasy.

She undressed slowly, savouring the tranquillity of her surroundings, then sauntered through a connecting door into the bathroom; a deliciously cool grotto lined with green tiles the colour of ocean depths and with a sunken bath of the same translucent colour decorated with silver and crystal fittings.

She had finished her bath and was standing examining the contents of her wardrobe when Vivienne knocked upon her door and called out: 'Time to dress, Lynette!'

'Oh, do come in, Vivienne, I've been awake for ages! Come and help me to choose a dress.'

Vivienne bounced in, more than willing to oblige. Eagerly she scanned the contents of the wardrobe, then hesitated and turned her puzzled face towards Lynette.

'But where are all the gorgeous way-out garments I was expecting to see? That wonderful trouser suit you wore in Papeete, for instance ...?'

Lynette blinked. 'I gave them all away,' she replied. 'I only wore them because my companions dressed in that way and I would have stood out in their company like a sore thumb otherwise. They simply weren't *me*, Vivienne, and although I tried hard not to show it, I felt horribly ill at ease while wearing them.'

'Hmm . . .' Vivienne nodded understanding[^], 'that part of the story I shall insist upon hearing later, when we have time to talk, but now,' she picked out a dress of subdued pink, the colour of drifting May blossom, and handed it to Lynette. 'Wear this tonight, *petite*, and give Luis the opportunity of enjoying the sight of a real English beauty. He must, by now, be satiated with Creole lovelies and he will enjoy feasting his eyes upon you in this!'

With a cheeky grin at Lynette's dismayed face, she moved towards the door once more, saying as she went. 'I must fly! I have to have my bath yet and Luis and *Grand'mere* get so annoyed if I am late for dinner. Do not wait for me, just go down when you are ready. It's the door directly opposite when you reach the bottom of the stairs.' With a cheery wave, she disappeared, leaving Lynette with unspoken objections trembling on her lips.

A worried frown marred her brow as she finished dressing. She would have donned a different dress from the one her friend had so teasingly indicated, but for the embarrassing comments she might have to endure from Vivienne if she did. The evening already promised to be a great ordeal without adding the burden of Vivienne's unthinking remarks. She felt she would be more than satisfied if she were allowed to fade inconspicuously into the background until the time of Luis's departure.

Finally, when she was unable to find any more small demands upon her time with which to delay her departure downstairs, she gave a last nervous flick at a tumbled curl and walked to the door. Vivienne's directions were easily followed, but she dallied in the hall before going through the door she had mentioned, so as to admire the mature elegance of the furniture. She guessed Vivienne had been given a free hand in redecorating some of the bedrooms in a style more suitable to her modern taste, but here below one could have stepped back in time to the days of the earlier Estevezes who had furnished the house with priceless antiques and *objets d'art* from every country of the world. Unbidden came the thought of plunder, but this strangely added to the romance of the atmosphere rather than detracted from it. She was tracing with a loving finger the design of a very old and beautiful inlaid cabinet when a voice from behind startled her.

'I see you are a lover of antiquity, *mademoiselle*. You continually surprise me with your contrariness; I imagined your taste would lean towards more futuristic design.'

She stiffened at the sound of Luis's voice and had to check the involuntary denial that sprang to her lips. Within a second she had control of her emotions and, without turning, answered in the vein he obviously expected of her. 'Oh, some of these old things are quite attractive,' she shrugged, 'but in their place ..

He moved forward and her heart leapt when she saw how vitally attractive he looked. Against his dark tan his pristine shirt and white evening jacket contrasted vividly. The fine material of his black trousers held a razor's edge crease that enhanced their elegance and in his cuff, which showed as he leant his arm negligently against the cabinet, sparkled links inset with tiny diamonds. He raked her face and she withstood his scrutiny bravely, for the first time successfully controlling her wayward lashes. She waited calmly while he continued to study her, but was immediately confused when he said with a lazy quirk of one black eyebrow,

'Not all things are stripped of their beauty when removed from their natural environment, *mademoiselle*. You, for instance, remind me at this moment of a lovely English rose and,' he touched her cheek and watched with interest the wild colour that flooded it, 'your alien surroundings have not detracted one whit from your delicate perfection.'

She had no defence against such concentrated charm and stood looking up with unconscious appeal into his inscrutable face. His eyes dominated and seemed to demand from her a reaction she could not even guess at. He reached out towards her and although she despised herself for her weakness she knew she was not going to resist when he kissed her . . .

A loud reverberating gong startled them apart and broke the intransient spell. With a gasp, she turned to run from him, then, as if in answer to a prayer, she heard Vivienne's laugh and her grandmother's answering voice as they met at the top of the stairs. He gave a mocking laugh and bowed as if conceding defeat before opening the dining-room door for her to precede him inside. With the wild rose colour even more evident in her cheeks, she walked past him.

During dinner, which was served romantically under the glow of flickering candles set in heavily engraved silver candelabra, Lynette determinedly kept her glance from lingering upon Luis, who sat at the head of the table. Now and then, during gaps in her own conversation with Mrs. Reddish, she heard his well- modulated voice answering some query of his grandmother's or parrying some teasing remark of Vivienne's and her heart flipped at the sound. But she took care not to be drawn into conversation with him, nor even to meet his eyes. Always conscious of his probing glances, she evinced so great an interest in Mrs. Reddish's conversation that the old lady was visibly

flattered and with such a seemingly attentive audience urging her on she excelled herself as she spoke eloquently on her favourite subject - the island. Lynette soon found it unnecessary to pretend an interest; the subject became absorbing. Mrs. Reddish, who had explored every part of the island and its industries during the many holidays she had spent there, brought into vivid prominence each aspect of it she portrayed, Lynette was fascinated by her account of the harvesting of sugar cane, the growing of bananas and spices, the spectacle of native spear fishing and, lastly, the interesting procedures followed in the manufacturing and distilling of rum.

Vivienne had long since given up the attempt to steer the conversation into a more general vein, and had to be content to chatter amiably to her stepbrother and the Comtesse until Mrs. Reddish's fund of anecdotes should run out, or Lynette's interest should wane. Luis, she lazily noted, was not pleased at being excluded from Lynette's attention, and her quick mind began to put two and two together and to make five. As she watched covertly the impatient drumming of his long, tapering fingers upon the surface of the table and the dark frowns that chased across his face each time he looked towards Lynette, she arrived at a sudden conclusion ; he was falling in love with her!

Mentally, she hugged herself as she explored the very satisfactory idea, and with a vague notion of helping things forward to a happy conclusion, she broke into the conversation that was absorbing all of Lynette's attention to say very loudly,

'It is all very well hearing about these things, Lynette, and Mrs. Reddish,' she smiled charmingly at the lady, 'tells a fascinating tale, but why not wait until you see everything for yourself? I am sure,' she glinted wickedly at her stepbrother through downcast lashes, 'my stepbrother would be charmed to show you around the island, wouldn't you, Luis?'

Lynette's dismayed eyes flew towards him and then were cowardly averted when she saw his lurking glint of challenge. Smooth as silk, his voice registered the satisfaction he felt when he answered coolly: 'But of course! It would give me very great pleasure to escort Mademoiselle Southern round the island.'

Lynette's face crimsoned. Before she could politely decline his offer, Vivienne rushed in with careless impatience. 'Oh, Luis, don't be stuffy by insisting upon using surnames. I'm certain Lynette won't mind if you call her Lynette, and you,' she addressed her friend smiling, 'must call him Luis.'

To have declined this offer after the intimacy of the hours they had spent together would have amused him greatly, so Lynette was forced to give a quick nod of agreement, which he acknowledged with suitable gravity. She knew he was secretly laughing at her when he said,

'Very well then, *Lynette*,' he lingered as if savouring her name upon his lips for the first time, 'let me hear you say, "I would love to have you take me round the island tomorrow, *Luis*".'

She felt she almost hated him then, but with all eyes upon her, smiling encouragement, she had to obey. With flaming cheeks, she repeated his words, stumbling over his name which she felt she could have voiced as 'Lucifer' in that moment of humiliation.

Vivienne's happy laughter cloaked the tension that lay between them and the Comtesse - who would have died rather than admit that her deafness caused her to miss most of what went on around her - asked with seeming inconsequence,

'Are you enjoying our French dishes, my dear? They are not to everyone's palate, but perhaps you do not mind being adventurous with food? Myself, I like to try as many as I can of the traditional

dishes of any country I visit.' Lynette looked down at the dainty forkful she had been about to lift to her lips and realized, rather foolishly, that she had no idea what she was eating, nor indeed what she had eaten earlier. Vaguely, she remembered a delicious lobster cocktail, followed by an unfamiliar but tasty fish course, but the dish she had just then been served with, although reminiscent of chicken or some such fowl, was totally unfamiliar.

She lifted up her fork. 'This tastes heavenly, Comtesse, but I hope you will forgive my ignorance when I ask what it is?'

The Comtesse smiled. 'It is a product of French imagination and culinary skill, my dear. A delicacy very highly regarded here and in France - broiled dove.'

Lynette thought she had not heard aright. Her fork clattered to her plate and she looked instinctively towards Luis, with cheeks suddenly ashen, for a contradiction of his grandmother's incredible statement. *Broiled dove! How could they . . . !* she was thinking, aghast, as a surge of nausea overwhelmed her. She had a vision of the soft-feathered, gently-cooing creatures as she used to see them at her home where they had been favoured pets, as domesticated as her dogs and her two Siamese kittens. To have to think of such delightful birds being killed for food was, to her, an act so cruel it dismayed and sickened her. With a quick understanding and an instinctive knowledge of the way she felt, Luis rose from his seat and quickly reached her side. Sharply, he instructed the young manservant to take Lynette's plate away and then, under the completely uncomprehending stare of Vivienne and the Comtesse, he put his arm around her and urged,

'Don't upset yourself by dwelling upon it. Come, we will go outside, you will feel much better in the open air.' His strong arms encouraged her to her feet and led her towards the terrace. 'Carry on with dinner,' he commanded Vivienne sharply when she would have belatedly

jumped to his assistance, 'I will attend to Lynette.' With a look of puzzled astonishment, Vivienne obeyed.

Lynette was grateful, while she grappled with and eventually overcame the dreadful nausea that swept her, for his strong arm that held her steady and for the broad shoulder she leant upon until the spasm had passed. He lead her towards the balustrade, then seemed content to remain a silent sympathizer while he waited until she had gulped into her lungs sufficient of the cool night air to dispel the unpleasant after-effects of her unhappy experience. She was aware of his soothing hand stroking her brow and of the slight tightening of his arms when she nestled closer, seeking comfort. Deep silence enfolded them as they stood silently in the dark under an indigo sky displaying a crescent moon, breathing in the powerful perfume of the flower-laden garden secreted in the darkness that surrounded them. She w&s grateful for the sympathy she knew he was feeling; and for his quite passionless touch which was 104 surprising as well as being immensely soothing. She had never before been subjected to gentleness from him - only impatient passion - and with coherent thought came the wish that she could learn more of this facet of his nature.

She stirred, and lifted her head from his shoulder. He brooded down at her, his mouth tender with anxiety, and spoke with a light trace of accent.

'You have recovered?'

Shyly, because of a faint stirring of foolishness, she nodded, and whispered, 'Yes, thank you. I'm sorry to have acted in such a silly way. What must the Comtesse and Vivienne be thinking of me, not to mention Mrs. Reddish? They'll think me completely mad!'

'Don't worry. I am sure they understand.'

'But how can they possibly?' she stammered in her dawning distress. 'How can they understand my reaction to what they, and you, regard as a perfectly normal meal?' she pleaded with him. 'Do *you* understand my feelings, really understand? Or are you just being kind, and pretending?' Her look demanded complete honesty, so he chose his words carefully.

'It is an English characteristic, I believe, to be careless - even slightly callous - towards human emotions and yet to be highly susceptible to the suffering of animals and other helpless creatures. Even there, there is an anomaly, because your race are great followers of blood sports, is that not so?' Without heeding her quickly whispered 'Not *all*. ..' he went on,

'So while I cannot, with honesty, claim to understand you English as a race, I can only speak the truth and say I believe you to be utterly sincere in your feeling of distaste - horror - at the sight of what is to us simply another meal.'

He felt her sudden shudder of revulsion and continued deliberately, 'And yet you eat chicken and pheasant .. .? Is the curly-fleeced lamb, killed in order to provide tender chops, any less pretty than the cooing dove?'

When she refused to answer and kept her head downbent, he firmly forced up her chin and challenged with a hint of tolerant laughter: 'Come now, Lynette, answer me, is it. ..?'

With a choked cry of shame, she had to concede his logic. 'Oh, Luis,' she hid her face against him, 'you *are* laughing at me!'

She felt his frame shake with silent amusement and then, after an indignant pause, she gave a glimmer of an answering smile. At this sign of capitulation, Luis gave rein to his laughter. His merriment was so infectious she was able, because she felt it was not unkind

laughter, to give a rather woeful, trembling laugh of her own which pleased him immensely and a while later, when he was calmer, he affirmed,

'How pleased I am you have your share of another famous English characteristic: a sense of humour. I thought, I had offended you deeply, until you saw the funny side and began to laugh.' He sobered completely and looked down at her keenly.

'You know, little bird, you intrigue me. You are the only woman I have known who has dared to excite, rebuff, puzzle and even insult me, all within the space of a few hours. I have had my heart wrung with compassion and then been transported into a paroxysm of mirth. Who taught you these wiles that you practise with such devastating effect upon my poor sex? Were you born a temptress or do you have to work at it?'

She withdrew from him and stammered, 'But I'm not a complex person at all. I have never tried to beguile you, I wouldn't know how!' When he laughed disbelievingly, she cried out insistently, 'You make me sound as effervescent as champagne, whereas I'm as uncomplicated as a . . . a . . . glass of water!'

His laughter faded and his black eyebrows suddenly drew together in a frown. He replied slowly, as if only realizing a fact,

'But a man can live without champagne. He cannot live without water . . . !'

Vivienne, whose keen ears had picked up the sound of Luis' unrestrained laughter earlier, moved tentatively out on to the terrace. When she saw how closely they stood together and how earnestly absorbed they were, she backed away, loath to intrude. But as she silently retreated, her ankle knocked against a protruding plant pot and she gave an involuntary gasp of pain that immediately attracted

their attention. Lynette was quick to seize upon her as a means of escape.

'Oh, Vivienne, are you looking for me?' She gave a short embarrassed laugh and stepped forward. 'I don't quite know how to explain my behaviour. You and the Comtesse must think me entirely lacking in manners to leave you in the middle of dinner, as I did.'

Vivienne's lively face was alight with amusement when she answered merrily, 'We understand perfectly, *cherie*, so do not worry. Mrs. Reddish has explained everything!'

Wondering how this could be, when she could hardly explain it herself, Lynette entered the dining-room and stood hesitating just inside the french window, waiting for the Comtesse to speak. Both the old ladies were smiling broadly, and the Comtesse held out a hand to encourage her to move forward.

'Come, my child, don't stand there as if you expect me to bite. I must admit that, at first, your obvious repugnance towards your meal puzzled me greatly, until my friend, Helen,' she inclined her head towards Mrs. Reddish, 'reminded me of my own reaction when I asked for the ingredients of a dish I enjoyed enormously when I visited her in the North of England, years ago. *My dear*,' she raised her hands in horror at the memory, 'it was called black pudding and it tasted divine. But when they told me that an essential ingredient was *fresh blood* . . .!'

She broke off as, at the sight of her stricken face, they all collapsed into helpless laughter. The Comtesse smiled benignly upon them and while she waited contentedly for them to recover she pulled Lynette down on the settee beside her and patted her hand as she told her solemnly: 'I promise, *ma petite*, that you will be informed well beforehand of what you are being offered at the table. No more broiled dove for the sensitive English Miss!'

For the rest of the evening Lynette felt wrapped in a warm glow of happy companionship. Her slight *contretemps* and the consequences of it had endeared her to the Comtesse and Mrs. Reddish and they both showed it. Lynette felt completely relaxed and happy for the first time in months; she felt she was amongst real friends.

It was very much later when Vivienne and she had their promised chat. They talked in Lynette's bedroom as she prepared for bed. Vivienne, looking no more than twelve years old in her short white dressing gown, sprawled inelegantly on the bed and watched Lynette remove her make-up in front of the dressing table mirror.

'Alone at last! Now tell me *all*? she demanded eagerly as she settled more comfortably.

Tentatively at first, and then with increasing confidence,, Lynette opened her heart to her friend. She began from when she left school, skipping lightly over her father's blunt ultimatum because it hurt too much even then to dwell upon it, and finishing where she and Vivienne had met up once more in Papeete. But Vivienne's perception was more advanced than her years, and she knew instinctively that Edgar Southern's words had hurt his daughter to a degree just short of actual cruelty. She was wise enough not to denounce him, but the hard anger she felt at his disparagement of her friend was a lump in her throat. She walked over to where Lynette sat motionless, staring into the mirror, her mind numb with newly-remembered hurt, and told her simply,

'I know how you feel, *cherie*, because up until I met Jacques I, too, felt I had no one really close.' To Lynette's surprised murmur,

'But you have Luis and your grandmother,' she replied,

'Luis's mother was my father's first wife and I know he loved her until the day he died. The Comtesse is not my real grandmother - Luis's

mother was her daughter - so you see, we are not related at all. Luis's mother died when he was about nine years old and three years after her death his father married again. A year later I was born. My mother used to talk to me about my father. She thought I was too young to comprehend the heartache of loving a man whose heart was in a grave, and indeed it was only years afterwards when I recalled some of the things she had said that I really understood. She once said to me: "They are wild and utterly devastating, the Estevez men, but when their heart is given it is given for ever!" then she wept bitterly. Shortly after that they were both drowned when their boat was caught in an unexpected storm that swamped them. Luis took his father's death badly. He went wild for a time, always seeming to be looking deliberately for some new act of devilment with which to outrage those around him. It was then that the Comtesse came out here to look after us and I have grown to love her as if she were my own flesh and blood. But I have always had the feeling that - quite naturally, I suppose - Luis comes first with her. That is why, 'her eyes took on a soft luminous glow and her young lips trembled, 'I long for the day when Jacques and I will be married.' She counted rapidly on her fingers with a return of her old impishness. 'Only twelve more weeks until I become Madame Jacques Viaux!'

This happy subject engrossed them for another hour and they were both fighting a losing battle with drowsiness when the Comtesse rapped on the door and commanded Vivienne to allow her friend to sleep. When she had returned to her own room, Lynette pondered dreamily on what Vivienne's mother had said. Her last waking thought was the sentence that had held her attention to the exclusion of all others.

'They are wild and utterly devastating, the Estevez men, but when their heart is given it is given for ever!'

CHAPTER SIX

THE next morning Luis and Vivienne took Lynette on the promised tour of the island. Vivienne had tried tactfully to back out, thinking that being left on their own for a day might help to precipitate the romance she had determined was in the offing, but Lynette would not allow it.

'If you don't come then I'm not going,' she told Vivienne firmly. 'I came here to be with you and if, as you say, you prefer to spend the day in the garden with a book, then that will suit me fine.'

'Oh, I'll come,' Vivienne had answered swiftly, 'I just thought that as Luis will probably be returning to Papeete soon, today would be a good opportunity for you both to get to know each other better. You haven't had time to get acquainted, and I am certain you would find you had a lot in common, given the opportunity.' She had finished on a hopeful, questioning note and had had her hopes dashed when Lynette had given an uncompromisingly firm answer.

'I know your stepbrother as well as I'm ever likely to know him, Vivienne, and I've no intention of spending today alone with him. Either you come with us, or I don't go at all!'

However, Vivienne was cunning enough to make sure she shared the back seat of the car with the enormous picnic hamper that had been prepared for them, leaving Lynette no alternative but to take the seat in front next to Luis. But his behaviour gave her no cause for alarm. At the beginning of their tour, as he drove into the heart of the island, he seemed strangely quiet and preoccupied, leaving all the talking to Vivienne, then later as they walked around the plantations looking at banana, pineapple and sugar cane crops, he was politely informative but very much the Marques showing a visitor around his domain. Lynette was puzzled, but relieved at his change of attitude - one she found much more acceptable than the teasing wickedness that had so

ragged her nerves - and she began to enjoy seeing Paradis unfolded before her.

But Vivienne became more and more depressed as her sharp eyes watched for signs of a budding attachment and disappointingly found none. She decided it was her presence that was preventing Luis from being more forthcoming, so when they left behind them the fields of tall sugar cane being cut and handled by the carefree island labourers into carts for dispatch to the refinery, and Luis proposed a visit to the works to show Lynette how the cane was processed into the fiery island rum, she hastily excused herself from accompanying them.

'Drop me off outside Cecile's daughter's house, please, Luis. A visit from one of us is long overdue and *Grand'mere* will be most annoyed if I omit to visit her when I am so near to the village.' She explained to Lynette, 'Cecile was our cook for many years before she retired and went to live with her daughter. She looks forward to a visit from us now and again and will certainly be upset if I don't call when I'm in the neighbourhood.'

Lynette looked suspicious, and was rewarded with a smile of bland innocence. Luis did as she requested, telling her he would pick her up on their return from the factory, then he headed the car in the direction of a low, rambling group of buildings just visible on the horizon.

Lynette, reflecting on what she' had so far seen, concluded that the Estevez's must be an extremely wealthy family. She knew, from what Vivienne had told her, that the entire island belonged to Luis and that the plantations, refinery and other industries were controlled solely by him - provision having also been made for Vivienne in her father's will which would make her a very rich young woman. It was small wonder, she thought, that Luis Estevez sometimes displayed an arrogant conceit and an arbitrary disposition. Inheriting such wealth was bound to have made him the target of every predatory female

who entered his orbit, added to which, his vital physical attributes provided an attractive bonus few women would be able to resist.

They were met upon their arrival at the factory by the manager, Monsieur Giscard, who greeted Luis like an old^ friend and beamed expansively upon Lynette when it was explained that it was for her benefit the visit had been arranged. For the next hour she was completely absorbed as she was taken on a thorough tour of -the buildings. Monsieur Giscard was delighted to answer the many questions she put to him and he told Luis as he led the way out of the last of the buildings preparatory to showing her the cellars where the bottled liquor was left to mature: 'The little *mademoiselle* has a keen interest and a quick mind, Luis. You would do well to employ her!'

Luis smiled. 'But then I would get less work from you, Valery, and you find distraction enough as it is!' Lynette was relieved when a sudden call of '*Monsieur Giscard!*' distracted their attention from the sudden blush they were both smilingly observing, and caused them both to turn and wait until the young islander who had called out had reached their side.

Panting a little, he told the manager importantly, 'You are needed urgently, *monsieur*, in the refinery. The foreman asks that you come immediately!'

Monsieur Giscard shrugged apologetically and turned a rueful smile upon Lynette.

'Will you excuse me, *mademoiselle*? I am devastated at being deprived of your charming company, but I know Luis will enjoy showing you the cellars - the contents are his pride - and I will join you both as soon as I can.' As Lynette thanked the charming Frenchman for his courtesy, she felt Luis's arm under her elbow and, as usual, his touch brought an instantly-stilled quiver of delight which she hoped was suppressed quickly enough to escape his notice. She

glanced obliquely up at him from under lowered lashes and was not comforted when she saw a slight smile flicker across his firm lips. He kept his hand firmly under her elbow as he led her towards a heavy door set into solid rock. He inserted a large key into the lock and the door swung open to reveal a black chasm of darkness. He detained her with a warning when she would have stepped forward.

'Wait, I will go first. There is a torch behind the door, or should be.' He groped, then gave a grunt of satisfaction. 'Ah, yes, here it is!' He beckoned her forward. 'Follow me closely and I will guide you down the steps.' Obediently, she picked her way down shallow steps cut out of solid rock, her eyes never deviating from the beam of light he shone on each step. When they reached the bottom he handed her the torch. 'Stay there, there is a light switch over on the far wall, I won't be a moment ...' She had to smile when she heard him curse lightly as he stumbled into something in the darkness and the friendly relationship that existed between himself and his manager was emphasized when he spoke ruefully into the darkness. 'I've argued interminably with that stubborn old fool, Giscard, about having this switch moved to the top of the stairs, but he insists it would be left switched on by some careless person and he swears that too much light would harm our maturing process. How, I don't even pretend to know and neither, I suspect, does he. So we are condemned to grovelling in the darkness for a switch that is the most cunningly hidden of any I have ever seen, so that we will turn off the light down here and will not be tempted, as Giscard vows we would be, to simply walk out and leave the bulb alight. A ridiculous notion, don't you think . . . ?' She could not see his face, but his tone of aggrieved injustice brought laughter bubbling to her throat.

The light suddenly blazed. One bare bulb hung straight down from the roof of what she now saw was a large cave lined from floor to ceiling with rack upon rack of dusty, regimentally arranged bottles. In the centre of the floor was a table-topped cabinet from which Luis took a tray and two small crystal glasses. He set them down on top of

the table, then reached out a hand towards her. 'Come,' he indicated the racks with a nod of his head, 'you choose the one we shall sample.' They sauntered along the racks, her hand lightly clasped in his, and he read out the names of each vintage as they passed. 'This one is "*Rhum Clement*", it has the quality of fine cognac. This one,' he pointed, 'is "*Vieil Acojour*" which means "Old Mahogany", named so because it has a dark colour, and next to it is "*Jeune Acojour*"...'

'Light Mahogany!' she interrupted in her desire to air her suddenly awakened knowledge, 'because it is light coloured.'

'Correct, *ma petite*/' he laughed. 'Now tell me what this name indicates.' He pointed to a sign that bore the words '*Coeur Chaud*' and waited with one black eyebrow raised questioningly.

'Um, "Heart ... something",' she hesitated, a puzzled frown creasing her brow as she strove to remember the small amount of French she had managed to assimilate during her stay in Paris. He reached down the bottle and carried it to the table where he uncorked it and poured a small amount into each glass. He gave her one of the glasses and raised his own to the naked bulb so that the light showed through its mellow depth, causing it to glow jewel bright.

' "Warm Heart",' he said tenderly, his look suddenly swivelling towards her with such depth of meaning her knees began to tremble. 'This is my choice for you, Lynette. As light as your kisses; as strong as the attraction you hold for me, and as hot as the temper that fires your veins! To you, "Warm Heart"!' he toasted, before putting the glass to his lips and tossing back the liquor with swashbuckling vigour.

Nervously keeping her eyes averted from his, and her mind from dwelling upon their solitary surroundings, she sipped the fiery liquid, then coughed as molten fire scorched her throat. 'Oh ...!' she gasped, when tears sprung to her eyes with its savage bite. He stepped

forward, full of concern, and she hastily backed away, fearful of the intent behind his words. He stood still and regarded her gravely. She waited for angry teasing or mocking laughter, she even tensed herself for another physical onslaught, but he surprised her utterly by asking softly,

'Would it be possible, do you think, for us to begin again, Lynette?' In answer to her look of wary puzzlement, he clarified, 'Somewhere along the line I suspect I made a mistake in my assessment of you and my subsequent behaviour has not endeared me to you. Can we forget what has happened between us previously and begin afresh as if we had just this moment met? If you were to wipe from your memory the actions of mine that caused you to dislike me, and I were to forget the image of the kind of person I thought you to be, *then* perhaps we could be friends. What do you think? Are you agreeable?'

Her heart was thumping like a wild thing, but with caution born of mistrust of his honeyed words, she reminded him coldly,

'You played this trick on me once before, remember? Do you think me so gullible that a few soft words will disarm me *twice*?' she stressed.

With a sincerity she could only wonder at, he acknowledged, 'I tricked you deliberately into giving me your word that you would not speak of the hours we spent together on the island, but believe me, Lynette, when I say this. I truly want you to look upon me as a friend. I promise you will never regret it if only you will agree to forget my transgressions and allow me to make up to you for the stupid notions I had of your character. Will you meet me half-way .. .?' he coaxed softly, stepping closer, but making no attempt to touch her, '*please!*'

Wild joy filled her at the thought of being treated by him as a person whose feelings had to be considered and whose friendship had to be wooed, instead of having to endure the hurtful attitude of playful

contempt she had hitherto suffered at his hands in his role of plundering pirate.

Marques was asking for her friendship where *Le Pirat* would have stormed her heart and taken at will whatever he desired. Her trustful grey eyes mirrored wonder and then a soft acceptance that communicated without words the answer he waited for. His dark face, devastating even when grave, lighted with pleasure when he saw the message written there. Deliberately,

he lifted her small, cold hand and touched it gallantly to his lips while he murmured,

'How do you do, Mademoiselle Southern. May I present to you, for the first time, my humble self, Luis Estevez, I hope we will be great friends!'

His ridiculous nonsense broke the tension between them and their laughter spilled over until the glasses on the tray beside them vibrated merrily in unison. Then, quietening suddenly, Luis told her lightly, 'This is the thing I treasure most about you, *ma petite*, this ability of yours to make me laugh. It is a gift very rarely shown by a woman and I thank you for allowing me to share in it.'

Shyly, she answered, 'If it is a gift then it's you who have nurtured it. I can't ever remember sharing laughter like this with any other man. Perhaps we are good for each other, Luis.'

'Perhaps,' he agreed softly, as he smiled gently down at her earnest face. As they stood silently regarding each other an emotion, so fragile it could not be tabulated, was born, and it was then she knew she had made a great mistake in her eagerness to fall in with his wishes. It had been possible, with the help of anger and shame, not to dwell too deeply on the love she felt for him, and his behaviour had helped her to erect a barrier behind which she could hide her too

tender heart. But now the barrier had fallen. She had nowhere to hide. All she could do now was hope that if he should discover her secret he would be kind enough to ignore where-once he would have taunted. She gave a visible shiver at the thought of her vulnerability to the whims of a man who could so easily beguile her but who had so often stressed his aversion to marriage and his dislike of women who pursued him to that end.

He noticed her shiver and was immediately full of concern. 'You are cold?' he condemned himself. 'I am a fool for keeping you here in this gloom after being so long in the sun! Come, we will go! Valery is obviously too busy to join us and,' he glanced swiftly at his watch, 'it is time we returned to pick up Vivienne.'

They found Monsieur Giscard still busy with the matter that had required his attention and bade him adieu. He asked for Lynette's promise that she would visit him again before she left the island and with a possessiveness she thrilled to, Luis replied: 'I will personally see to it that she returns, Valery.' He quirked his eyebrow to signal a message as he stressed, 'We will both remember with gratitude the pleasure this visit has brought us, is that not so, Lynette?'

Under the manager's quizzical eyes she coloured delicately and nodded. She could still picture, as they drove away, the look of dawning comprehension that swept his smiling face when Luis placed his arm lightly around her waist to lead her towards the car.

Vivienne was waiting, slightly impatiently, for their return, but when her all-embracing glance swept them and took in Lynette's tremulous smile and pink cheeks and then noted that the grimness that had been so evident around Luis's mouth on their outward journey had been replaced by a curl of humour and a relaxed look of satisfaction, she felt amply rewarded. She greeted them warmly and settled into her seat at the back of the car with an attitude of pleasurable anticipation, expecting to hear that her suspicion of a romance was not unfounded.

But she was disappointed. Although there was a marked change in their attitude towards one another not even Vivienne's optimistic nature could build into their words or their tone sufficient meaning to convey any more than friendly companionship. But, she consoled herself, there was an improvement, a small sign of progress, and she pledged herself to be content with that for the moment.

As they journeyed home Lynette's thoughts were as much a turmoil of speculation as were her friend's. Luis's offer of friendship, welcome though it was, had taken her completely unawares, rendering her incapable of fathoming his action and therefore inclined still to suspect his motives. But a strong feeling of happiness overawed her natural diffidence and coloured her emotions with rose-tinted optimism. All was now set for a completely new beginning, the slate was wiped clean and she dared to dream again. He had admitted several times to feeling a strong attraction towards her. If that were so, could their newly pledged state of friendship pave the way to an even deeper attachment? Suddenly, the ocean was bluer, the sky more cerulean, the island a bower of vivid hibiscus, bougainvillea, poinsettias and wild orchids, their beauty intensified by a poignant awareness that she shared them all with Luis.

It was not until they were almost home that Vivienne sighted the launch in the harbour: 'Are you expecting visitors, Luis?' she frowned. He followed the direction of her eyes and leant forward to get a better view.

'No, I am not expecting anyone,' he said with a hint of surprise, 'no one knows I am here, so far as I am aware.'

While Luis concentrated on driving with increased speed, Vivienne and Lynette watched the strange launch for signs of movement aboard, but saw nothing. Whoever had arrived at Paradis had left the boat and must now be on the island. 'Do you recognize the boat, Luis?' Vivienne persisted.

'No,' he replied, 'but your curiosity will soon be satisfied, we are almost home.'

He drove with a flourish through the iron-lace gates and drew up outside of the silent house. They alighted from the car and Luis moved forward into the cool hall, but as Lynette would have followed him, she saw Vivienne staring with rapt attention at a figure moving swiftly over the lawn towards her. Suddenly she began to run.

'Jacques! Jacques!' she called out with unbelieving delight, then as Lynette watched she was swept into the arms of her merry-eyed fiance. Lynette was still smiling her delight for her friend when a voice behind her caused her to swing round with dismay plainly written upon her expressive face.

'Merle!' was all she could utter in her surprise.

'Lynette!' she mimicked back maliciously, 'aren't you a sly puss!' When no answer was forthcoming, she continued with vicious anger, 'So you managed to hunt the handsome Marques down, as you said you would,

you clever girl! Has he taken the bait yet? I do hope our arrival here won't upset all your well laid plans, I would never forgive myself if my appearance here were to prevent you from becoming the next Marquesa.'

Merle's eyes were mere slits as she spoke, but they widened suddenly with pretended dismay and Lynette's heart plummeted. She sensed the steely, hard mass projecting terrible anger from behind her, and was numbly unsurprised to hear Luis's voice cut across her shoulder to command Merle with deadly impact: 'Will you leave us, *mademoiselle*?' Even Merle was not proof against such visible anger and she did not wait even to portray the triumph she was feeling.

Lynette swivelled round with a quick, pleading denial upon her lips, but it died immediately she saw the steel shutters of withdrawal that clamped his face. His voice grated with leashed anger that sparked blue fire behind his eyes as he spoke.

'Your friend is quite right, you *are* extremely clever, *mademoiselle*. Clever enough to deceive me so far as to ask for your friendship. How that must have amused you!'

She backed away from the force of his fury and he snapped out, sounding unbearably provoked: 'Do not cringe from me!'

She stood, immobile, and he went on in a voice made even more terrible by its implacable softness.

'Do not draw away from me! I feel I never want to touch you again!'

He turned on his heel and strode away, leaving her surrounded by the fragments of a broken dream.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LATER, everyone met in the lounge for pre-dinner cocktails and the circumstances of their arrival in Paradis were clarified. Lynette was not surprised when Vince walked into the room in Merle's wake and at his appearance she surmised that something must have gone drastically wrong with the plans they had had concerning the wealthy American couple they had latched on to. He made a beeline for her with a self-conscious smile of welcome on his face and greeted her a shade too effusively.

'Lynette darling, am I pleased to see you! Merle and I were worried stiff when we returned to Papeete and found you'd left without leaving a forwarding address. You really shouldn't worry your friends in such a way, pet. We were almost at the point of calling in the police when we had the great fortune to meet Madame de Courcel who told us of your plan to visit your friend here in Paradis.'

Claudia, who was complacently accepting a drink from the attentive Marques, looked up at the sound of her name and pouted, 'Yes, Luis, and I would not have known of your sudden departure had not Jacques here informed me that you were no longer in Papeete. I had been waiting for a call from you and could hardly believe when, after meeting Jacques quite accidentally, he told me he had heard from your business colleagues that your affairs had been abruptly concluded so as to enable you to fulfil some other pressing engagement.'

Lynette gave a start and her eyes flew automatically towards Luis, who continued imperturbably to serve his guests. Claudia was obviously expecting some qualification of the pressing engagement that had necessitated his hurried departure; but it was not forthcoming. Jacques bridged the awkward silence that fell by explaining his own unexpected reappearance in Papeete. He gave

Vivienne's hand a warm squeeze and told everyone quite unrepentantly,

'On my way home I felt my fiancée's absence to such a degree that I decided to return to her as quickly as possible. Separation is intolerable, and the only way I can think of to appease my indulgent but understandably irate family is to persuade Vivienne to advance the date of our wedding so that I can take her back with me to France. Otherwise, the Viaux family fortunes will decline, as I can see no chance of my being able to concentrate on business affairs while thousands of miles separate me from my beloved.'

A beautiful colour stained Vivienne's cheeks, and everyone laughed kindly, but Jacques' seriousness was betrayed in the determined out-thrust of his jaw and the way his eyes tenderly caressed Vivienne's rosy face.

Then Merle chimed in with simulated hurt reproof to ask of Lynette, 'Why didn't you tell us you had been invited here, Lynette? Why keep it such a secret? After all, we are supposed to be travelling companions, and if anything had happened to you I daren't think what your father's reaction would have been to the news that you had been roaming the islands on your own. I can only be glad of the happy chance that sent us to inquire about you at the hotel at precisely the same time Madame de Courcel was meeting some friends there. She heard us inquiring for you at the desk and came over to tell us of your intention to visit here. Then she put us in touch with Monsieur Viaux, who had stated his intention of chartering a launch, and he very kindly offered to bring us here.'

How strange, Lynette thought dully, that all the while she had been happily supposing fate had at last decided to smile upon her, some gremlin working in opposition had arranged such a precise meeting in order to shatter her pitiful illusions. She faced Merle with an utterly expressionless face. She could have renounced both her and Vince as

hypocrites who had abandoned her in their pursuit of wealthy partners, but she knew they would ruthlessly range together to present an image of hurt injustice which would make her appear an ungrateful, spiteful creature unworthy of solicitous friends, so she remained silent.

Vince cleared his throat nervously and changed the subject. 'All's well that ends well, and all that,' he grinned fatuously. 'This island seems a wonderful place and I'm very grateful to the Comtesse,' he raised his glass in her direction, 'for inviting us to stay for a while.'

The Comtesse inclined her head gracefully.

'It is our pleasure, *monsieur*. Any friend of Lynette's is welcome here.'

The dinner gong came as a profound relief to more than one member of the party and in the small activity of moving into the next room, some of the inflammable atmosphere surrounding them was dispersed.

It was with hurt relief that Lynette wondered by whose orders Claudia had been seated next to Luis at the dinner table. She had to admit the fairness of herself being placed next to Vince and opposite Merle, for they were, supposedly, her friends, but this did not prevent the spread of hurt she felt when she saw how engrossed Luis seemed in Claudia's conversation and how delighted she was with the softly murmured answer Lynette could only guess at when she asked him archly: 'Are you pleased, Luis, that I decided to seize this opportunity of coming to Paradis?'

Vince must have had misgivings about their intrusion into her visit with Vivienne, because after chatting to her for some time and receiving monosyllabic answers, he whispered under cover of the conversation around them,

'What's wrong, Lynette?' He saw her start with surprise and searched her face for the information she could not vouchsafe. 'God!' he muttered savagely, 'your eyes are tortured! Have we hurt you so much?'

Appalled by her own lack of discretion, Lynette gave all her attention to her food and tried to forget the spoiled enchantment of the earlier part of the day. But Luis's voice, so warm with feeling it made 'Warm Heart' sound like a caress, kept creeping back with heartbreaking nostalgia. Vince tried once more to invade her thoughts.

'Lynette! Won't you speak to me, *please*?' His tone, louder than he had intended, attracted everyone's attention and caused conversation to cease and immediate attention to focus on Lynette. Each one's reaction was plainly written. The Comtesse was slightly perturbed because she sensed all was not well but, because she was unable to hear enough of what went on, was unable to judge; Mrs. Reddish was uncomprehending of the explosive undercurrents; Jacques and Vivienne were concerned but, owing to their absorption, not completely aware; Merle and Vince were aware but determinedly self-interested; Claudia was definitely alien. And Luis - he was coldly forbidding, his eyes glacial as they rested upon her with the distant stare of an aristocrat whose breeding forbids anything less than politeness to a guest, however much unwanted.

Lynette wanted to flee from their questioning eyes, but that would have underlined her misery and defeat, so she stayed. She even managed to sound nonchalant when she answered Vince.

'Oh, I beg your pardon, I must have been woolgathering. What was it you asked me?'

Vivienne chortled, 'You must forgive her, Monsieur Chambers, our island has obviously cast a spell on her and she has not yet come

down to earth. But she must be excused, because she has been here for less than a day and some people take weeks to digest its beauty.'

As delicately as a kitten treading on glass, Claudia corrected Vivienne, 'You are mistaken, surely, Vivienne, when you say Mademoiselle Southern has been less than a day here? It must be two days since her arrival.' Her brittle voice demanded an exact answer and in the small interval that elapsed while Vivienne knit her brows and thought, Lynette's panic-stricken eyes met those of the enigmatic Marques who blandly ignored her signal for help and leant casually back in his chair and waited.

'No, I am right, am I not, Grand'mere?' Vivienne appealed. 'It *was* only yesterday Luis brought Lynette here, although so much has happened since then it seems more like a week ago.' Her hand reached out to Jacques and was caught and held in his tight clasp.

'Then where,' Claudia's ice-green look linked Lynette with the Marques, 'have you been since you left Papeete two days ago?' Fear made Lynette's clenched hands clammy as once more she faced a barrage of surprised, questioning looks and when the attempt she made to speak died a croaking death at the back of her tight throat, she appealed mutely for help to the silent, frowning man at the head of the table.

He waited until the void of silence was as penetrating as a scream before rising to his feet and walking deliberately towards Lynette. She sat petrified when she felt him place his hands upon her shoulders and heard his cool voice reaching across the top of her head,

'Lynette and I had things we needed to discuss in private, so we spent some time alone before coming here.' His explanation embraced them all, but it was to his grandmother he spoke direct. The Comtesse coloured slightly and Lynette felt his grasp on her shoulder tighten a

little at the sight of the small flicker of pain the Comtesse was not quick enough to mask before she reproved him gently.

'Your discussion must have been of great importance, Luis, when it took precedence over discretion and,' she hesitated, then stressed, '... chivalry.'

When Lynette, crimson with humiliation, would have protested, his fingers increased their pressure on the soft flesh of her shoulders until she was forced to relax in order to relieve the pain he was so callously inflicting. Pain that was immediately lost amongst the turmoil of amazed incredulity that engulfed her when she heard his answer.

'It was very important, Grand'mere. I asked Lynette to be my wife, and I know you will be pleased to know that she-has accepted me!'

After a short, stunned silence everyone seemed to want to speak at once. The Comtesse smiled a trembling, happy smile and joy was evident in her voice when she recovered enough to be able to say. 'Oh, Luis, this is the news I have waited so long to hear!'

As she reached across the table to clasp Lynette's hand in her own a tear rolled slowly down her finely wrinkled cheek. 'Lynette, my dear, I am so happy to welcome you into our family, so very happy . . .' Mrs. Reddish nodded her happy approval and Vivienne's excited voice rose above the babble.

'I knew it! I just knew there was something between you two. But I am *shattered*, Lynette,' her voice ascended to a wail, 'that you did not confide in *me*!'

Lynette blinked with nervous confusion, too appalled to answer, and once again Luis's firmly controlled voice took command. 'We naturally wished to approach Lynette's father for his approval before making our engagement public, Vivienne, that is the reason we did not speak of it earlier. After all,' his words seemed to Lynette's ears to

have the rigour of tempered steel, 'he might yet decide against me as a son-in-law.'

Claudia uttered a harsh sound that might have passed as a laugh if it were not for the fact that her face was a mask of chagrin and her eyes glowing green signals of danger. 'I cannot picture you, Luis, begging for any woman's hand in marriage, you have become a past master in the art of avoiding such an institution.' She transfixed Lynette in a beam of malice before continuing, 'One cannot help but wonder what magic formula the little English Miss employed to overcome your immunity!' Her contemptuous glance said plainly that she was not so much admiring as astonished that Lynette could have accomplished such a feat.

But by that time, Vivienne, together with Jacques, the Comtesse and Mrs. Reddish, were vying with each other to offer the first congratulatory kiss, and the impact of her barb was lost amid the surge of family rejoicing. Lynette's bruised shoulders were released from Luis's painful clasp and in her relief to be free she found herself able to smile at the happy faces around her; although her numbed mind still refused to grasp the enormity of the lie she was being forced to accept. Someone called for champagne to toast the happy couple and it was immediately produced by a smiling manservant who must have heard the news while hovering behind the door.

Luis, under the benevolent eyes of his grandmother, acted the part of a newly-engaged man to perfection and Lynette had to suffer his arm around her shoulders and his outwardly tender glances that deceived all but herself, because only she could see lurking in their depths the angry frustration of a freedom-loving pirate being forced by circumstances into accepting the yoke of domesticity he had fought for years to resist. Her heart withered at the thought of the showdown that had to come before very long and the smile she had so desperately pinned to her lips faded to a tremble as she pictured a confrontation with the angry, despising Marques.

The Comtesse urged Luis, 'You must use the radio telephone immediately, Luis, to cable Lynette's father and acquaint him with the news. Tell him we will be honoured to have him as our guest if he should find it possible to visit us.' Luis's eyes narrowed and he seemed about to protest, then he shrugged his shoulders and agreed,

'Yes, perhaps that would be as well.'

He walked across to Claudia to refill her glass, and Vince seized the opportunity to corner Lynette.

'How could you do this to me?' he asked her reproachfully. 'I thought we had an understanding?'

If she had been capable of feeling emotion she would have felt contempt for his duplicity, but the battle she was fighting left no room for trivial skirmishes, so she smiled at him vacantly and hoped her dazed look would pass for bemused wonder.

Merle sauntered up. Her needle-sharp eyes searched Lynette's face and a smile of triumph lightened her expression when she noted her discomfiture.

'Tell me, darling,' she glittered mockingly, 'where *did* you and *Le Pirat* spend that lost day? We never did find out and I'm all agog with curiosity.'

Lynette's blush deepened to a fiery crimson at the question and, miserably aware of her guilty colour, she stammered,

'On . . . another island not far from here.'

Merle's eyebrows elevated.

'An inhabited island, I hope...?'

While both she and Vince waited with intense interest for her reply, Lynette cast a desperate look around for help. She felt like a lamb cornered by two vixen and some of her trapped feeling was visible to Luis, who, looking her way, saw how desperately she needed to escape. He bowed slightly to Claudia and annoyed her by excusing himself and walking purposely over to his fiancée. Merle was still probing pitilessly when he reached Lynette's side. 'Well, Lynette,' she prodded, 'are you going to tell us?'

He took hold of Lynette's arm and interrupted smoothly. 'Will you allow me to steal my fiancée for a few moments?' he smiled down into her eyes and continued, softly, 'We have much to discuss, have we not, *ma petite*?'

Thankfully, Lynette nodded, and as she was led away from her intended tormentors she expelled her breath in a sigh of relief. Further inquisition from Merle was certain - this was just a momentary reprieve - but she would feel better able to face her taunts and questions later when she had shaken off the stupor that still fogged her reactions.

Luis led her through an open French window into the moonlit garden. She realized his intention too late to make a detour towards the Comtesse and Vivienne who, together with Jacques and Mrs. Reddish, were busily engaged making plans for an engagement party, but in any case, any attempt she might have made to escape would have been foiled by the tightness of his grasp on her elbow. He remained silent until they reached a seat by the fountain and then when he calmly produced his cigarette case and proceeded to light his cigarette with a calm nonchalance that riled her tattered nerves, she berated him through clenched teeth,

'How dare you place me in such an invidious position! What do you hope to gain from it? I'll never marry you, never!'

His answer chilled.

'I don't intend that you should, but the proprieties must be observed for the sake of Grand'mere and Vivienne - I thought you understood that.' He continued dispassionately, 'We will continue with this farce for a short time, then later I will allow you the privilege of exercising a woman's prerogative by saying you have changed your mind about me. By that time the memory of our indiscretion will have faded and no one will be hurt.'

No one will be hurt! - her heart throbbed with slow, sickening jerks. No one of any consequence was what he really meant. She mattered so little to him. He alarmed her by suddenly throwing down his cigarette and pulling her into his arms. She began to struggle angrily, and jerked her face aside away from his cruel mouth that was bearing down on hers, ready to swoop. His hands fastened with steely strength upon her still tender shoulders and she flinched when she felt their iron caress.

'Kiss me!' he demandingly whispered, then as she frantically resisted, he qualified, 'Your two friends are watching and no doubt wondering why we are not already making love. I advise you to do as I say or you will be called upon to answer more of their suspicious questions.'

She glanced beyond his shoulder and saw Merle and Vince silhouetted against the light from the window. They were staring intently in her direction; waiting and watching. She turned her head away and found his amused face dangerously close. 'Well,' he tormented, 'now do you believe me?' He drew her unresponsive body closer and demanded again, 'Kiss me, and do it as if you meant it!'

She stared into his daring eyes, her mouth a soft pink flower trembling against the matt whiteness of her face and whispered vehemently: '*I hate you!*' even while her hands crept up to his shoulders and her face lifted to his. He gave a savage laugh before

plundering her mouth with punishing kisses that drew forth a response-She was helpless to contain.

After a prolonged torment of time, he drew away and she opened her eyes in an effort to dim the ecstasy that filled her, he glinted down at her and taunted grimly: 'I love the way you hate!'

No longer caring what Merle or Vince or anyone thought, she tore herself out of his arms and ran blindly in the direction of her room.

When Lynette went down to breakfast the next morning she was listless and heavy-eyed from lack of sleep. She had spent most of the night pacing her bedroom frantically searching her mind for some way out of the dilemma that was fast threatening to become a nightmare, without reaching a satisfactory solution. She dallied deliberately so as to avoid Luis - who breakfasted early - and when she reached the breakfast room its only occupants were Vivienne and Jacques, who were the unknowing bearers of good news.

'Ah, Lynette!' Vivienne greeted her, 'you have slept late this morning. Luis had to leave early to attend to some business on one of the plantations and unfortunately he will be away all day. I wanted to rouse you, but he would not hear of it, he insisted I should leave you undisturbed. Are you terribly disappointed, *cherie*?'

Lynette's tense frame relaxed. She was wearing one of her cool, sleeveless shifts in a shade of leaf-green that added coloured flecks to her smoke-grey eyes and at Vivienne's words a cloud veil of worry seemed to lift, leaving their brilliance clearly displayed. Hastily, she assured Vivienne,

'No, I don't mind. As a matter of fact, after the excitement of last night I feel I just want to sit in the garden today and take things quietly.'

'Oh, but Jacques and I want you to come swimming with us, don't we, Jacques?' Vivienne appealed for his support. 'We are taking a picnic down to the beach and we intend spending the whole day there.'

Manfully. Jacques added his plea to that of his fiancée, but he betrayed a small relieved smile when he realized Lynette was adamant in her determination not to join them. She would have been glad of their happy companionship, but she could not bear to deprive Jacques of his beloved's undivided attention, and when she waved them farewell half an hour later it was with a pang of envy she was only just able to hide.

When they had gone, she wandered disconsolately into the library and chose a book at random from the shelves before slipping outside into the garden to settle in a vacant garden swing whose shady comfort beckoned. It was so peaceful she did not bother to open her book, but sat drinking in the beauty and tranquillity of her surroundings with appreciative pleasure. Multicoloured blossoms ran riot and spilled their fragrance abundantly on the still air. Small, strange birds flitted from branch to branch, oblivious of her presence, and the music of the tinkling fountain had the soporific effect of making her feel deliciously relaxed and lazy. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the luxury of a daydream in which she recaptured the happiness of her first evening in Paradis when everyone around her was a friend and she had for a short time basked in the rare atmosphere of feeling wanted and completely at home. Her short period of introspection was rudely shattered when Merle's voice jarred suddenly on her ears.

'How fortunate I am to find you alone,' was her first greeting as she settled down beside Lynette with an air of making the most of the opportunity that had presented itself. 'Now I can ask you all the questions I've been saving for just such a moment!'

Lynette's heart sank. She looked around swiftly for an avenue of escape, but the garden was deserted and no voices could be heard coming from the direction of the house, so she could not make an urgent wish to speak to the Comtesse her excuse. Merle smiled as if reading Lynette's reaction and hastened to begin her inquisition.

'Now,' she leant back against a cushion as if prepared for a long discussion, 'start at the beginning from where you met up with Vivienne in Papeete.'

Although dismayed, Lynette was better prepared than she had been the evening before and she took the wind out of Merle's sails by countering,

'Why don't *you* answer a question that has been puzzling me since your arrival here? What happened to your rich American friends? I don't flatter myself you left such a prize behind you because you wanted my company and Vivienne was never your bosom friend, even at school. So what happened?'

Merle flushed an unbecoming red and defiantly brazened out,

'They ditched us! Vince had too much to drink the first evening aboard and the fool let his tongue run away with him. He was bragging to Cy Chermak about his fatal attraction for women and of his intention of finishing up as part owner of the yacht by marrying his hostess, when her brother overheard him. Unfortunately, I was dragged into the scene that followed, with the result that we were both put ashore to fend for ourselves.' Her teeth snapped together with angry frustration. 'I could kill him when I think of the humiliation I suffered because of his stupidity!'

Lynette added wryly, 'And so Vince decided to renew his pursuit of me, is that it?'

Merle's deepening flush was answer enough without her surly reply.

'Well, you know neither he nor I are flush with cash, and you wouldn't see us stranded in the Pacific without a bean however much we might have offended you, would you? Besides, you can afford to be generous, having managed to annexe the richest and most sought-after bachelor in the district.' It was Lynette's turn to colour, and Merle's eyes narrowed speculatively. 'Just how *did* you manage that?' she queried nastily. 'I note you've changed your usual outfits for demure, little-girl styles, but that's hardly enough to ensnare a worldly Marques.'

'I haven't ensnared him!' Lynette was goaded into replying.

'Then how,' Merle responded swiftly, 'did you manage to become his fiancée? It seemed to me yesterday, when he-interrupted our first meeting, that he was extremely angry with you, and yet later that evening he announced your engagement.'

Lynette called upon dignity to help put an end to the tasteless questioning. She drew herself up straight and replied with cool hauteur, 'My affairs are no concern of yours, Merle, and you will oblige me if you will kindly mind your own business! If you don't,' she threatened mildly, 'it may become necessary for me to see that both you and Vince are asked to leave.'

Merle jerked upright, her face twisted with anger, and spat out, 'Why, you little nobody, how dare you speak to me like that!'

Lynette's inside turned over at the viciousness of Merle's tone, but although she was quaking inwardly she gave no sign of her trepidation and looked steadily into her furious face, refusing to back down.

Vince's voice cut into the angry silence.

'What's going on between you two?' His look swivelled from one to the other.

'Merle has just been telling me why you followed me here,' Lynette answered contemptuously, 'and it isn't a very pretty story!' Unheeding of Vince's half-voiced protest, she flung away from them, sickened by their shallowness and duplicity, and ran into the house to seek the company of the Comtesse and Mrs. Reddish.

She found them both sitting in the Comtesse's small sitting-room and they looked up with a welcoming smile when she tentatively asked if she might join them in their morning coffee.

'Of course, child, of course!' the Comtesse answered with a welcoming smile. 'We are flattered that you prefer the chatter of two rather vague old ladies to that of your young friends.' She held up her face for Lynette's kiss and after a moment's hesitation she bent down and pressed her lips to the old lady's soft cheek. The Comtesse's eyes misted and she fumbled for a handkerchief to wipe away the suspicion of a tear that trembled on her eyelid. 'I'm a foolish old woman, Lynette, but a very happy one.'

A lump came to Lynette's throat and her voice was husky when she answered with despair in her heart,

'I hope you will always remain so, Comtesse.'

While they smiled at each other, Mrs. Reddish jogged the Comtesse's memory, 'You have something to tell Lynette, remember?'

'So I have!' the Comtesse snapped her fingers, annoyed at her unreliable memory. 'Lynette, my dear, we have to attend a party tonight! The islanders have heard the news of your engagement to Luis and, as is to be expected of people who arrange a party at the drop of a hat, they are staging a carnival tonight to celebrate. It is in your honour, so you must wear your prettiest dress so as to let the islanders see their future Marquesa looking her very best.'

They discussed the forthcoming party during their coffee break and then after a while Lynette wandered thoughtfully up to her bedroom to examine her wardrobe. She opened the doors and her eyes were drawn automatically to the beautiful white lace dress swathed in a plastic cover - Madame Madeleine's dream dress. Excitement fluttered in her throat at the thought of wearing it for Luis that evening. Perhaps when she had gone out of his life her memory would linger a little. Her heart skipped a beat. If that were so, she would like him to remember her in this dress; a dress that became her more than any other she had ever worn. Madame Madeleine's voice echoed in her mind: 'Mademoiselle will look like a bride'. A bride was the very last thing Luis sought, but there was no denying that bridal white lent to most women an aura of untouchable purity men found irresistible, and although her mind was averse to examining that thought too closely, her hands shook as she reached forward and carefully lifted the dress from its hanger.

She lunched with the Comtesse and Mrs. Reddish - Merle and Vince did not appear - then spent the rest of the afternoon preparing for the evening's festivities. Dinner was being waived, the Comtesse had told her, because there would be ample refreshments provided by the islanders who would expect a healthy appetite as a reward for their labours, so she would have no need to venture downstairs until it was almost time for their departure.

She washed and set her hair and while she waited for it to dry, manicured her nails. After a short rest with pads of cotton wool soaked in witch hazel over her eyelids, she ran her bath and then lingered in the soft, perfumed water for almost an hour before towelling dry and dusting herself generously with her favourite talc. Clad in only a thin dressing gown, she leisurely strolled over to her dressing table and began to brush and style her silver-blonde hair into a delicate nimbus of enticing infant tendrils and soft curls.

Its manageable texture was easily coaxed into place, and she was soon satisfied with its almost professionally coiffured look. Light make-up followed, then a touch of lipstick to outline her pensive mouth. She sprayed all over with a wickedly expensive but enticing body perfume before slipping into filmy underwear and then lastly into the dress. The cobweb lace had a fine white underslip that left her smooth arms bare so that the long lace sleeves showed up as vivid, delicate tracery against her cinnamon-coloured tan. The bodice moulded the gentle curve of her breasts but left her shoulders bare, exposing a tiny mole that could have been placed there specially to accentuate the perfection of her smooth, unblemished skin. She stepped over to the full-length mirror and involuntarily put her hands to a waist that had been made to look incredibly slender by the clever cut of the material. An inexplicable surge of excitement caught her as she studied her reflection and wondered, half-fearfully, whether Luis might resurrect *Le Pirat* that evening or whether the Marques had subjugated him for all time. Angry with herself for desiring such a happening, she turned sharply from the mirror and walked on to the balcony of her room where she stood shaking until the blush that had suffused her body subsided. She lingered, drinking in the wonderful view, aware that as she was ready much too early and the others would not yet be dressed, she had no need just yet to venture downstairs.

In answer to a light tap on her door, she called 'Come in!' and a smiling maid entered. 'Monsieur le

Marques requests that you join him in his study, *mademoiselle*, as soon as possible,' she informed her. Lynette stammered out a surprised, 'Thank you,' but it was quite a few minutes after the maid had left the room before she could force her reluctant feet in the direction of his study.

He was standing, his back towards her twirling the knob of a wall safe, when she knocked and then walked in in answer to his command to enter. He did not turn, but spoke curtly to her across his shoulder.

'The Comtesse insists that you wear some of the family jewels this evening, she thinks the islanders will expect to see you glittering with gems. On second thoughts, I suppose it is not such a bad idea, because if anything can be guaranteed to make a woman look happy, it is jewellery, and I have no doubt you will need something to help you to give an impression of radiant happiness.' He delved into the safe and brought out a heavy box which he set down on a nearby table. Lynette fumbled for words of protest; she hated the idea of using the Estevez family's jewellery as a screen to hide the true state of affairs that existed between Luis and herself, and nothing, she decided, would induce her to condone such mockery. But before she could voice her dissent, he turned to face her and his swiftly indrawn breath made her conscious once more of her desire for his approval. She trembled as she withstood his raking inspection, and dropped her eyes nervously when she glimpsed the lambent fire that flickered in his eyes. He seemed bereft of words and a silent interval stretched nerve-rackingly between them before he stepped closer and grated out: 'You look quite breathtakingly beautiful this evening.' He seemed unwillingly fascinated by the beauty spot that nestled on the curve of her shoulder and with his eyes upon it he asked, 'How is it I did not notice this when we were on the island?' He touched it lightly with his finger and an electric current charged between them. Afraid of the pregnant silence that held them, she forced a laugh and shrugged lightly.

'Probably the strap of my swimsuit covered it. Why, is it so important?'

He answered her flippancy with a low, 'No, but I find it quite enchanting.' She looked up quickly and found his expression grave. Their eyes lingered. With a swift change of mood, he smiled faintly and spoke with a touch of whimsy. 'You look an adorable cherub in

that dress and with those childish curls tumbling across your forehead.' He impaled one with a brown finger and laughed softly when it sprang back into place as if possessing energy of its own. 'Yes,' he continued, his voice hardly above a whisper, 'a rather wicked-looking, seductive cherub, but yet one that still manages to convey the innocence of a very small child.'

A wave of shyness made her reluctant to answer. She was afraid to move, afraid to break the mood that held him. Unprotestingly, she allowed him to lead her to the table where the jewel box spilled its treasure over on to the mirror-like surface of the table. He took her hand in "his and slid on to her finger a wine-dark ruby ring set in a heavy antique setting, that might have 14-6 graced the finger of a queen in earlier days before the plundering Estevezes had laid claim to it. Next, he fastened around her neck a fine gold chain which had suspended from it a magnificent matching ruby that lay against her breast like a teardrop of blood. He stood back to judge the effect and seemed more than satisfied. The earrings he had been dallying with were dropped back into the box as he said: 'That is enough. The inferior beauty of the jewels serves as a foil to display the power of your undoubted charms, *mademoiselle*.'

She blushed at the charming compliment and, now ready to forgive him anything, began to move towards the mirror to judge for herself the effect of the blood- red stones against the virgin whiteness of her dress. A pleased smile turned up her lips and she was about to speak her appreciation when the door was pushed open wide, effectively screening her from sight, and Claudia, resplendent in a dress of black sequins, burst into the room and ran straight to Luis. Stricken, Lynette watched her put her arms around his neck and raise her pouting red mouth for his kiss. 'Thank you, darling Luis, for a wonderful day. A truly wonderful day!' she purred. While they exchanged a kiss that seemed to last an age, Lynette realized dully that although Claudia had been missing all day, she had never once suspected that she was with Luis. The Comtesse was a most relaxed hostess who expected

nothing more of her guests than that they should amuse themselves each day as they wished, without feeling obliged to follow a rigid timetable of meals, and so Claudia's absence had not even been commented on.

Luis put Claudia firmly away from him and turned back to Lynette. Claudia followed his glance and gave a small scream of pretended dismay when she saw her standing as still as a small, white statue behind the door.

'Oh, I do hope you will forgive me for kissing your fiance, my dear,' she begged sweetly. 'I keep forgetting he is your property now. Indeed,' she mocked, 'I have spent the whole day with him without being reminded of it.'

Lynette whitened at the barb, but although Luis' lips tightened he said nothing, not even when her eyes silently questioned him. She turned away hurriedly. She knew her look had registered reproachful accusation, but, coming so soon after his attentions, it hardly merited the raised black eyebrows that plainly questioned her right to be even interested in his actions, much less censorious. His look was enough to puncture the small bubble of happiness that had welled up inside of her; it plainly stated his irritation at the irksome restrictions imposed by their mock engagement. He was attracted to Claudia and was making it very obvious that he intended, in private, to continue to conduct his relationship with her on the same lines as before although bound, for his family's sake, to be discreet when in their company.

Lynette wondered dully if he had told Claudia everything about the circumstances of their engagement. She watched her hanging on to his arm, pouting up at him with invitation written plainly in her limpid eyes, and felt certain she either knew, or had guessed, that all was not what it seemed between Luis and herself. She bit her lip, humiliated at the idea of being the object of Claudia's amusement and pity. Utterly defeated by the strain of the see-saw of emotions Luis

subjected her to in their encounters, she moved towards the door with growing conviction that she must avoid any further contact with him. She was sick of being played with, dallied with. Completely stripped of dignity. She would play out her part that evening but after that, she determined, she would seize the first opportunity of escaping from the island that presented itself.

Colour rose high in her cheeks as she walked past them and realized they were so engrossed as to be completely unaware of her. As she stumbled blindly outside into the passageway she felt the tear-shaped ruby that nestled so warmly against her breast could have been wrung in agony from the wound he had so callously inflicted upon her heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LYNETTE was glad of the momentary respite in her room which enabled her to get a grip on her emotions before facing the rest of the guests downstairs. When she finally did join them, her face was composed into a deceiving serenity not even Claudia's triumphant, searching look could pierce. Vivienne, looking duskily captivating in a dress of deep pink, greeted her with warming flattery.

'Oh, how lovely you look, *cherie!*'

Jacques bowed to each of them in turn and complimented,

'Which is the more beautiful, the white rose,' he inclined his head first to Lynette and then to Vivienne, 'or the pink rose?' With a laughing shrug he appealed to Luis and Vince, 'Come, help me to decide, my friends!'

Luis, at Claudia's side, was content merely to smile away Jacques' foolery, but Vince stepped forward to take Lynette's hand and raised it to his lips. 'They are both adorable,' he said, then without moving his eyes from -Lynette he repeated, 'utterly adorable!'

Luis' cold command broke the small hush that descended. 'It is time for us to go. We must not keep our hosts waiting.' He ushered them all outside to the waiting cars, but detained Lynette when she would have joined Vivienne and Jacques. 'You will stay with i en me,' he told her tersely, 'it will be expected that we two arrive together.' Decisively, he manoeuvred so that Claudia went in the Comtesse's car and Vince and Merle went in Jacques'. Then, as they drove off, he motioned Lynette to sit next to him in his own sleek monster which, had he wished it, could practically have accommodated them all. She sensed his annoyance as they drove in silence through the scented dusk. His profile was granite-grim and when she chanced a look in his direction she saw his lip curl in a disdainful line as if some aspect of

his brooding thoughts displeased him. His silence lasted until they reached the large clearing where the carnival was to be held. As the cars appeared, a great cheer went up from the festive islanders and as if in answer to a signal, torches held by- the men were lighted to form a circle of fire around the clearing. Another torch was thrust into the heart of a great bonfire piled up in the centre of the circle and in seconds the dry twigs crackled actively as fire rapidly consumed them. The Comtesse and the others were directed to seats set around a platform piled high with food, where they waited patiently until Luis presented Lynette to each islander in turn as they filed past to shake hands with her. She loved the way the warmly curious, great-hearted islanders took her to their hearts. They voiced their unqualified approval of Luis' choice with uninhibited words; the men straightforwardly complimenting him on his eye for beauty and the women giving delighted exclamations of pleasure at the sight of her golden hair and slender, white-clad figure. The islanders loved colour - the more brilliant the better - but they saw in Lynette, in her virgin-white ensemble, all the regal dignity and cool composure they expected of a prospective Estevez bride, and were abundantly satisfied.

Luis did not remain aloof for long in the happy atmosphere that surrounded them, and his face relaxed into a smile and then into pleased laughter as one outrageous remark after another was addressed to him and his shy, blushing fiancée. But when he glanced down at her with dancing eyes and took her hand in his to give it a squeeze of comfort, she withdrew from him carefully, her guard immediately erected against the charm he turned on so easily but which, as she knew to her cost, could as easily disarm her. When each islander, down to the smelliest infant, had been introduced, Luis led her to their seats at the head of the platform and the feasting began in earnest. They ate exotic dishes, cooked with imagination and attention to detail that made the meal a delight. Luis helped her to choose from lobster, turtle, red fish and the island speciality, stuffed crab with rice, but thoughtfully he steered her away from stewed

octopus and fricassee of raccoon to sample some of the highly spiced Creole dishes. In the background, throughout the meal, there was a pulsating throb of drums that gradually generated a heady excitement which, together with the potent island rum - neat for the men but diluted with soda and fresh limes for the ladies - made mockery of inhibitions and encompassed them all in a mood of relaxed enjoyment.

Vince, who sat on Lynette's left, seemed determined to annexe her and he was delighted to find her responsive to his attentions. She spoke to Luis only when he addressed her, and as the meal progressed her involved conversation with Vince excluded him completely, leaving him no alternative but to devote all of his time to a complacent Claudia. In the darkness, lit only by flickering torches, his face seemed to regain some of its former grimness and when at last everyone was replete, he intercepted a signal from the head islander and directed Lynette,

'Come, we have to take the seat of honour while the islanders dance for us.' Lynette's reluctance to move brought a deep furrow of anger to his brow. He stepped forward and pointedly offered her his arm. She took it unwillingly and was led to a vantage point where a wide seat had been placed for them to sit during the display which was to follow. Seats had been arranged some distance away for the others, and as Lynette took her place beside Luis on the raised dais she felt completely isolated in his austere presence. Nervously aware of his banked-down anger, she concentrated on the firelit circle and waited for the dancing to begin.

It started with a fanfare of trumpets and clarinets that faded into the deep tropic night as one by one the dancers glided into position around the leaping fire. In its illuminating glow the supple, graceful Creole women looked irresistibly fascinating. They circled their men, flashing great, dark eyes full of promise, and began their dance with a slow suggestive movement of the hips timed to coincide exactly with

each rhythmic beat of the chachas. With effortless unison, their virile partners swung into a complicated pattern of movement glistening, razor-sharp machetes whose blades caught and held the leaping flames of the all-consuming fire. As the rhythm became faster, the blades cut through the air with accelerating swiftness and the girls' movements became progressively more voluptuous as their inborn seductiveness bloomed in the torrid atmosphere. The result was sensational - so sensational that Lynette found herself clutching Luis' sleeve in a spasm of awe that carried her far beyond the need to keep him at a distance, and which made her unaware of his arm encircling her waist and pulling her closer to his side. Fuel was thrown on to the fire until flames leapt like searing beacons into the dark night sky. The young islanders shrieked and screamed with ecstasy as music and flame combined and reached a frenzied crescendo. They danced as if possessed, their wild, grotesque shadows gyrating in the flickering flames with hypnotic effect. When they reached a surfeit of emotion, their energy consumed, the flames were allowed to subside until the only light came from steadily burning torches. Tired and content, the couples stretched out languidly and relaxed in the semi-darkness that shielded them.

A woman stepped gracefully into the circle carrying a stringed instrument which, when she began to play, projected a message of such heartbreaking pathos it brought a misty-eyed response from Lynette. She began to sing - a sweet sentimental song, and softly Luis whispered its message against her ear. He told a hauntingly simple story of a Creole beauty's hopeless love for her *Doudou*, her naval officer lover whom orders compelled to sail with the tide and which became so much equated in Lynette's mind with her own deep melancholy that she felt the story could have been her own.

She was still full of emotion when the singer stepped out of the clearing and the musicians began to play music with a modern beat.

The transition was so sudden that her large wonder-filled eyes met Luis' without comprehension when he stood up and held out a hand towards her. 'They are waiting for us to begin this, dance,' he informed her gravely, and indicated the rows of smiling expectant faces watching them. She moved tentatively towards him and enthusiastic clapping broke out when he swept her into the circle of his arms and they began to dance. She steeled herself not to react to the strong, virile closeness of him, nor to the tender way in which his eyes caressed her as they danced the length of the clearing. His tender glances were for the benefit of the islanders, who must never guess that the girl he held in his arms and who wore his ring upon her finger was not the one who held his heart. Keeping this in mind, it was easier to prevent her lips from responding to his when, to conclude their dance, he pulled her closer and pressed a lingering kiss upon her mouth. The islanders went wild with delight and began shouting for more, but when he would have mischievously obliged, she tensed against him and choked out a furious, adamant, 'No!'

His arms loosened their grip with instant withdrawal and his spontaneous merriment faded to a tight smile as he guided her into the shadows and out of sight of the happy crowd. Miserably, she waited for his words of displeasure to fall upon her downcast head, but it was Vince's voice that broke into the pregnant silence.

'I say, old man, I've come to claim Lynette for the next dance. You mustn't be allowed to keep her to yourself all night, you know!'

Lynette gave an audible gasp of relief. She raised her head just in time to surprise a look of fierce anger, quickly suppressed, darken Luis' face. He did not answer - did not even look, in Vince's direction - but turned sharply on his heel and made his way back to Claudia. Gladly, she allowed Vince to guide her back into what was now an energetically chachaing throng and for the rest of the evening she danced almost exclusively with him.

She felt the Comtesse's puzzled eyes upon her more than once as the evening progressed, but she kept determinedly away from Luis' upsetting presence; an action she felt went unnoticed by the islanders as they all seemed by that time too happily engrossed in their own partners to care. Perhaps that was the reason Luis felt able to concentrate upon Claudia; he was paying her very marked attention even under the critical eyes of his grandmother and Vivienne. Whenever Lynette's glance happened to clash with his, his eyes slid over her with a cool indifference that caused her searing pain. A sudden ache to escape his proximity forced her to ask Vince with false brightness: 'Let's walk down to the beach. I have the beginning of a headache and feel the need of sea breezes.'

Vince agreed with alacrity and they slipped quietly away in the direction of the sea which had been just audible during the short intervals when the musicians were silent.

It was blessedly cool and deep-green silent amongst the thick vegetation and they sauntered along slowly savouring the peace after the fevered activity of the carnival. Vince took her hand in his and she did not resist. Greatly encouraged, he set himself out to be the charming companion he was capable of being when called upon. He did not rush into compliments and fulsome flattery; that would have made her wary. Instead, he revealed a side to his nature she had not known existed - one of silent sympathy and soothing, undemanding comradeship. When they reached the shore, they walked for almost an hour along the edge of the ocean, speaking now and again but mostly silent as the beauty of the moon-radiant ocean defied description and demanded as its due their silent, rapt admiration.

Vince shook his moon-struck companion slightly to halt her wandering progress. Tilting her chin with his finger, he told her lazily, 'I don't want to spoil your enjoyment, but we have quite a long way to walk back and I think we had better begin to retrace our steps otherwise the Marques will be sending out a search party.' She made a

small moue of disappointment, but acknowledged the sense of his words by doing as he asked. She looked in the direction from which they had come and saw the seemingly endless track their footprints had made in the firm sand. They stretched as far as the eye could see; every detail of the shore, every palm trunk, every piece of driftwood was clearly outlined in the distinct clarity of the moonlight.

'How I wish I could walk along like this for ever,' she breathed sadly.

Cautiously, he put out a feeler. 'But you will have plenty of opportunities of doing so when you are the Marquesa . . .' There was a slight, questioning inflection in his voice that merited an answer and she was too much off guard to be wary.

'That day will never come! I must leave here as soon as possible without Luis knowing. Can you help me, Vince?' He did not ask questions; the knowledge that he still had a chance with her was enough. With a great show of sincerity, he told her,

'I'd do anything for you, Lynette, don't you know that?'

'Then help me, Vince, *help me!*' The desperation in her voice told its own tale and he had to subdue the surge of triumph that filled him when he realized that, far from being in love with the arrogant Marques, she was afraid of him. He put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a comforting hug.

'Rely on me, my pet, I'll find some way of getting you off this island and the proud Marques de Paradis won't know a thing about it until we're miles away!' She clutched at him despairingly and lifted her face to his to plead anxiously,

'Promise, Vince? Promise you won't let me down!'

Under the brilliant light of the moon their figures were clearly visible. Lynette was unaware of the immobile figure that merged in to the

shadows of the bush behind him, but when Vince bent down to seal his promise with a light kiss upon her forehead an unaccountable shiver of apprehension chilled her and she looked around fearfully as she withdrew from his embrace. 'Let's go, Vince,' her teeth chattered with cold, 'it's getting chilly.'

Immediately he whipped off his jacket and slipped it across her shoulders. She snuggled into it gratefully and quickened her steps to try to instil some warmth through her suddenly trembling body. When they reached the path that led to the clearing, she jerked to a halt when from out of the darkness of the bush she saw a tall shadow detach itself to block their way. With shocked dismay, she recognized Luis and although, she could not see his face the utter coldness of his voice indicated the unmistakable tenor of his mood. Addressing Vince, but without moving his eyes from Lynette, he stabbed out,

'Your companions are waiting for you to join them, *monsieur*. I advise you to hurry as they are already a little impatient and anxious to be on their way.'

Vince hesitated and looked uncertainly at Lynette. When he seemed ready to argue, Luis' voice lashed out, 'You will please do as I say, *monsieur!*' All the authority of decades of commanding aristocrats lay behind the order, so that even Vince was startled into obeying. But before he had taken more than a couple of steps, Luis stopped him. With a disdainful movement he twitched the coat from around 'Lynette's shoulders and handed it to him.

'Take this,' he jarred. 'Mademoiselle will not be needing it!' Helplessly, Vince took the coat and disappeared into the bush, leaving Lynette at the mercy of the man whose anger was so great it allowed him to speak only in vicious, clipped sentences.

For a long frightening moment silence reigned. Lynette felt her nerve beginning to slip and a scream rose hysterically in her throat as she

returned his hard stare with the defiance of a timid rabbit. Wordlessly, he replaced Vince's coat with his own, keeping his hands firmly upon the lapels after he had covered her shoulders so that she was imprisoned within its folds. Inexorably, he pulled her towards him and she stumbled with fright at the leashed violence she felt in his hold. In opposition to what she had expected, his tone was dangerously quiet when he accused,

'How dare you make a fool of me in front of my family and my people? Do you realize the extent of the humiliation you have inflicted upon me? To dally in light-hearted flirtation on the very night I offer you to my islanders as their new Marquesa! What do you imagine my people will think of me - a weak fool, a gullible, easily hoodwinked man, putty in the hands of his woman ...? You have undermined the respect they have for me, and what is more,' he glittered down, incensed, into her terrified face, 'you have flouted my authority!'

She tried to interrupt, to tell him how innocent she was of his charge, but he shook her sharply and effectively silenced her by asking with narrowed eyes, 'Have you any idea how a Creole man would deal with an errant fiancée? How they will expect *me* to deal with *you*?' Dumb with terror, she shook her head. He tightened his grip and pulled her forward until her white face was only inches from his own. 'They will expect me to do as they would, and that is to beat you publicly until you crawl to me for forgiveness! A harsh punishment, you think? Perhaps . . . But on this island no crime transcends that of infidelity. The men worship their women, heap them with favours, but they demand, and get, absolute faithfulness. That is why,' she felt his heart beating furiously in pace with his anger, 'I must think of a suitable punishment for you, not only to save face, but to demonstrate to them my dominance over my wayward woman. Otherwise I will lose the respect of all of them, and that,' he drew himself, up with arrogant dignity, 'is something which has never happened to any of my family and which I don't intend shall happen to me!'

'But I didn't ... I haven't ...!' Appalled, she found she could not go on. Her body was trembling with shock and her eyes spurted humiliating tears that rolled down her ashen cheeks to fall unheeded on to his tightly clenched hands. She was incapable of dealing with the barbaric, primitive storm her unthinking action had aroused, and in her terror she was certain he was more than capable of carrying out the atrocious retribution he had outlined. She had wanted to arouse the slumbering pirate that hid always under his thin veneer of civilization, but never in her wildest thoughts had she imagined his wild blood could create such havoc, could inflict such tempestuous torment.

She gave a low moan and covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight of his savage wildness. She felt herself lifted from her feet and swung up into his arms, but she dared not protest nor even question his action. She lay prone in his arms, hardly daring to breathe, while he carried her' effortlessly onward in grim silence. After a while she was lowered, and dropped her hands from her eyes and saw with dazed relief she had been placed in the car. The drive back to the house was accompanied by the same aura of savage energy he had displayed on the beach, but her fear of him was greater than her fear of any accident that might befall them because of his fanatical urge for speed.

When he drew up in front of the house she stumbled from the car and her heart sank farther when she realized that everyone had gone to bed and she was still alone with him. Too tired to do anything but wait his pleasure, she drooped against the door frame like a broken, slender-stemmed flower until he reached her side. What now, she wondered listlessly, what other fiendish, torturing words would he find with which to flail her? She waited and watched dispassionately as a pulse throbbed, quick as a heartbeat, at the side of his forehead. His angry, flashing eyes assessed her broken beauty and contempt flickered and then waned when she blinked nervously up at him. With

a savage curse, he wheeled away from her and bit out with frustrated rage,

'Mon Dieu, get out of my sight! Go to bed, and be consoled by the thought that I intend to see to it that your friend Monsieur Chambers leaves this island tomorrow !'

Too utterly defeated to reply, she dragged herself towards the stairs and slowly up to her room.

CHAPTER NINE

LYNETTE remained in her room until after lunchtime the following day. Vivienne paid her a visit during the morning and when she saw the dark, bruised circles underlining her unhappy eyes and the peaked whiteness of her face, she was all concern. She hovered over her and fussed sympathetically, '*Pauvre petite*, whatever is wrong! Are you not well?'

Lynette grasped at this straw. 'I have a headache, Vivienne, do you mind if I don't get up just yet?'

'But of course not, *cherie*!' Vivienne assured her as she tucked the bedcover neatly around her. 'You go back to sleep and don't worry about a thing. I will explain to Luis and give orders that you are not to be disturbed. Jacques and I are taking Grand'mere and her friend for a drive, but I will come up and see you when we return. Would you like some breakfast, some coffee and toast, perhaps?'

Lynette was surprised at the weakness of her own voice when she replied: 'No, thank you, I just want to rest.'

'Very well, *cherie*, then I will leave you in peace.' Before she left she hesitated, then asked: 'Shall I send Luis in to you?' She was astonished by the shocked dismay that swept Lynette's pinched face and her eyes narrowed thoughtfully when Lynette stammered,

'No, no! Please, I don't want to see anyone!'

Vivienne's expressive face was still thoughtful when she left the room to go in search of Jacques. He was downstairs waiting for her to join him, and he recognized immediately that something was troubling her. He put his arm around her shoulders and asked,

'What is it, *mon coeur*?'

'I don't quite know, Jacques. Something has gone very wrong between Lynette and Luis, of that I feel certain. I could not bear it if. . .'

Jacques did not allow her to finish. 'Oh, it will be a mere lovers' tiff!' he scoffed. 'All people in love have them now and again. Haven't we. . .?'

But she would not be comforted. 'It is more than that. Something really serious must have happened to distress Lynette so badly. She says she has a headache, but, Jacques, I think her heart is broken!' He hugged her tenderly.

'If that is so, my love, then we can do nothing but hope that Luis will mend it again. We must not interfere. Come, I insist you stop worrying about things you cannot alter.' Determinedly, he changed the subject and would not allow her to return to it, and after a while he was rewarded by seeing the twinkle return to her troubled eyes and the smile he was so accustomed to seeing lighting her face. For the rest of the day he exerted himself to keep her mind occupied, away from the thoughts that disturbed her.

Later, when the house was wrapped in silence, Lynette bestirred herself to bath and dress and then wandered apathetically downstairs and into the garden. She was leaning against a tree trunk, gazing sightlessly out to sea, when Vince's voice startled her.

'Lynette! I've been waiting around for hours to see you. We must talk!'

He too was shocked by her appearance, and anger against Luis gave a hard edge to his voice when he demanded: 'What has that swine done to you?' He placed his hands on her shoulders and swung her round to face him. 'What happened last night, Lynette? If he has harmed you I swear I'll , . .!'

'Please, Vince,' she pleaded. 'I don't want to talk about it, just get me away from here, quickly!'

She bit her lip to still its uncontrollable trembling and Vince cursed vehemently beneath his breath.

'I saw him this morning,' he said hardly, 'or rather, I was ordered into his presence and told to pack my things and be ready to leave this evening. He has arranged for one of the islanders who can navigate the launch to take me back to Papeete, but he can't be spared until after dinner, so the Marques is prepared to put up with me until then. Just so long as,' his lip curled, 'I keep out of his way, and yours, until then.'

Lynette glanced fearfully over her shoulder at his words and he gave a short humourless laugh. 'Don't worry,' he scowled, 'I made sure he was out of the way before I approached you. He drove off half an hour ago with the gorgeous Claudia by his side.'

With sudden eagerness, he went on, 'Come with me tonight, Lynette! This is the chance you've been waiting for. Don't bother to pack all your things, just the bare necessities. We can dump your suitcase somewhere near the jetty, then just before it's time for me to leave, you can slip into the launch and hide until we're under way. What do you say, will you do it?'

It sounded so beautifully simple she could hardly believe it would work. But she was more than willing to try anything that would get her away from the man whose passions were so easily aroused and who could bend her without effort to his inflexible will.

Vince urged, 'Well, Lynette, will you come?'

She nodded quickly. 'Yes, I'll go right now and pack my things,' she agreed with a panic-filled heart.

'Good girl!' Vince smiled his satisfaction. 'I'll go and look for a suitable hiding place and when you've packed your suitcase bring it down to me and I'll plant it until this evening.'

She left him and hurried up to her room to throw a handful of underwear, a nightdress, toilet things, and a warm coat into her smallest suitcase, then she crept with it down the stairs and hid out of sight in the bushes until Vince returned.

He was not long until he was back. 'I've found an ideal spot, Lynette. All you need do now is plead a headache during dinner and ask to be excused to go to your room. Then slip out the back way and keep out of sight as much as possible until you reach the launch. Once you've boarded it you'll find plenty of spots in which to hide. I'll pick up your suitcase and put it on board with my luggage and we'll be away before anyone realizes it. I don't for one moment suppose anyone will be seeing me off. Merle has no intention of joining me, and the Marques,' he sneered, 'certainly won't be interested.'

Lynette's heart thumped like a mad thing while Vince outlined his plan to outwit the Marques. Only she knew the full extent of Luis' wrath when roused and she dared not contemplate the possibility of failure or the dire consequences such failure would bring. But she could not bear the idea of facing Luis alone once more, of being scourged by his cruel tongue or lacerated by his furious looks. Still less could she bear to have to endure the mock affection and bitter-sweetness of his touch when he was portraying to his family the outward signs of his devotion. No! She was prepared to take any chance rather than have to live through that.

When Vivienne returned she immediately sought out her friend. 'You are feeling better, *cherie*?' she asked hopefully.

'Yes, much better, thank you, Vivienne.' Her answer, given in staccato jerks, did not convince Vivienne. She looked closely at Lynette's averted face and compassion filled her.

'You are very brave, Lynette, but I can see you are not well, even yet. Let me get Luis to look at you, he is very good at diagnosing illness and I'm sure he will know of something that would help you!'

'Please don't do that, Vivienne!' her voice was so low and tense when she pleaded Vivienne had no option but to accede to her request. She was still staring worriedly at her friend when a loud whirring noise caused them both to look upwards at the vivid sky.

'Why, it's a helicopter!' Vivienne registered surprise. 'Who on earth can it be?' They watched as it hovered just a few feet from the ground, obviously preparing to land on the smooth green lawn. When it did finally land and while they waited for the great whirling blades to stop revolving, Luis' car turned into the drive and stopped at the front entrance just as a man stepped down from the helicopter and began walking across towards them. Lynette felt herself begin to tremble and then, when she was sure, she began to run towards the short, stocky figure that was strutting across the lawn. They heard her call out: '*Daddy!*' *Daddy?* and were near enough to see the slightly embarrassed, surprised look on Edgar Southern's face when she flung herself into his arms.

Luis walked quickly to meet him and the two men narrowly assessed each other over the top of Lynette's head. Formally, Luis welcomed him. He held out his hand and told him, 'I am pleased you could come, Monsieur Southern. I am Luis Estevez, your daughter's fiance. Welcome to Paradis.'

Edgar eyed him warily, not completely at ease when faced with Luis' look of elegant breeding. 'How d'you do,' he answered abruptly, then his natural belligerence asserting itself, he asked loudly, 'What have

you been doing to my little girl here?' he lifted up her chin to display her haunted face. 'I've never seen her look so peaked! I came here expecting to find her blooming with happiness, but she looks more ready to attend a wake!'

Lynette jerked away from him and mumbled an agonized plea: 'Please, Daddy, don't . . .!'

Smoothly, Luis took command. He escorted Edgar into the house and introduced him to the family and guests before showing him to his room to wash and change before dinner. Edgar's loud voice seemed to flood the house as he told everyone how he had used his money and influence to good effect so as to enable him to get to Paradis in double quick time as soon as he received Luis' wire telling him of his engagement to his daughter. Lynette shrank from his loud vulgar boasting and from the pitying, amused looks Claudia was exchanging with Merle. She had been overwhelmed with homesickness and longing at her first sight of him. Time had dulled the memory of his tactless remarks and of the bulldozing methods he used to have attention focused upon him, but his presence was reminder enough and she shrivelled inwardly with embarrassment as his strident tones echoed through the large rooms with the finesse of a bellowing bull. She blanked her mind against wondering what Luis and the Comtesse would think of his awful vulgarity and clung grimly to the fact that whatever anyone thought, she - knowing his shouting was a covering for a giant-size inferiority complex — still loved him dearly, and always would.

All during dinner, Edgar dominated the conversation. Luis and the Comtesse were charming to him. Vivienne - who knew of and resented the hurt he had inflicted upon Lynette - was rather cool. Mrs. Reddish and Jacques were indifferently polite. Vince was ingratiating. But Merle and Claudia made no secret of their contemptuous amusement and Lynette's face burned as she intercepted their meaning looks and raised eyebrows. As the clock

moved forward to the time of Vince's departure, however, she found herself in a state of anxious indecision. Her father's arrival had upset her plan to abscond with Vince. How, she asked herself, could she possibly run away and leave him when he had travelled hundreds of miles to be with her? Deep in thought, she pondered anxiously on her dilemma, and it was some seconds before the impact of what her father was saying registered.

As if from a distance, she heard him say to Luis: 'Yes, you can thank me and Merle for licking Lynette into shape! A year ago you wouldn't have considered her as a future Marquesa because she wasn't capable of acting the part of hostess even in her own home!' He paused just long enough to sample more of his excellent wine before blundering on. 'D'you know,' he confided to Luis, 'she was so shy and unworldly she used to run out of the house with her dogs and wander for hours over the hills rather than entertain the men I brought home to dinner. Terrified of strange men, she was! Absolutely lacking in guile and completely unsophisticated. Then I persuaded Merle to take over . . .'

'Indeed . . .?'

Luis, his eyes inscrutable, urged him to continue. Lynette was so mortified when Edgar, revelling in Luis' intense interest, carried on triumphantly, 'I talked Merle into acting as a sort of companion-tutor; the idea being that she should introduce Lynette into her circle of jet set friends so as to educate her in their ways while they travelled together around the world. Mind you,' Edgar frowned across at his daughter with doubt clearly mirrored in his eyes, 'I can't say I see a lot of improvement in her,' his eyes criticized her wan appearance, 'but I suppose I can't complain when she has managed to interest a man like you!'

Luis inclined his head coldly and Lynette flinched as if she had been struck. She avoided looking at Luis, but felt that if she had it would be to see the same expression on his face as was reflected on Claudia's—derisive contempt.

Needing no excuse now for pleading a headache, and with her mind firmly made up to escape with Vince, she mumbled incoherently and fled crimson- faced from the table.

When she reached her room, she flung herself down on the bed and allowed the tears that had threatened all day to overwhelm her. Her heartbroken sobbing muffled the sound of the knock at her door, and it was not until she heard the Comtesse's voice calling her name that she held her breath on a choked sob and tried valiantly to be calm. She waited, her body tense, and willed the Comtesse to go away, but her name was repeated with gentle persistence until she was forced to answer.

'Just a moment,' she quavered, as she tried hastily to mop, up the still-welling tears. After a momentary pause while she drew a deep breath, she hesitatingly turned the key and opened the door. When the Comtesse saw her ravaged face, she stepped quickly inside.

'Lynette, my poor child!' she cried out. She opened her arms wide and folded her into a warm embrace.

Lynette's misty eyes filled again with tears and although she battled hard, she was not able to prevent them from cascading down her already wet cheeks. The Comtesse uttered soothing words while she gently led her towards the bed where she sat down, with her arms still encircling Lynette's slender sob-racked body, and encouraged her: 'There, there, my dear, let the tears come and then you will feel better.' She continued to nurse her gently until her storm of weeping was over and when she quietened a little, she asked softly, 'Do you want to tell me about it?'

Lynette yearned to confide in the sympathetic old lady, but she knew she could not unburden her own grief on to the shoulders of the frail Comtesse. So that she might fully understand, she would have to tell her of her, kidnapping by Luis and of the night they had spent

together on the island, and she had given Luis her word that she would never reveal the incident. She could not bear to hurt the woman she had learned to love by blackening the character of her grandson. So she shook her head and mutely begged the Comtesse to understand.

The Comtesse did understand. She smoothed Lynette's tumbled curls and said shrewdly: 'It is Luis who has caused you this pain, is it not, my dear?'

Lynette shook her head once more, incapable of speech, but the tell-tale tears of hurt flooded her eyes and answered for her. 'You are very loyal, Lynette, but I think I am right in placing the blame on my grandson's shoulders.' She continued gently, 'It might help you to forgive him a little if I explain to you the devil that drives him.' Lynette was suddenly still, listening.

'He was angry with you,' the Comtesse stated, did not ask, 'because you went off with your friend Monsieur Chambers last night.'

'But I only wanted to walk . . .'

The Comtesse held up her hand.

'Don't bother to explain, child, I understand perfectly that your motives were quite innocent. I want to try to explain why Luis was so angry . . . You see, his father and mother were devoted to each other, so much so that, quite unintentionally, they sometimes seemed to exclude him from their warm unity. He was too young to understand the demands his father made on his mother - my daughter. He wanted all of her attention, every hour of the day, and although he would never have admitted it even to himself, he jealously demanded that he came first with his wife - even before their son. My daughter tried her best to divide her love so that they were both evenly considered, but Luis's father was a passionate man - a man very much in love - and

inevitably the boy was pushed aside. Consequently, when my daughter died Luis' father was inconsolable. I thought - as I think the boy did - that the tragedy would bring them closer together, but although Luis was his father's shadow for months afterwards, he could never fill the gap his mother had left.'

The Comtesse sighed heavily and her shoulders drooped as if she carried a tiring burden. Anxious not to dwell too long on such a painful subject, she hurried on, 'Vivienne will have told you what happened after that. My son-in-law married again. His second wife gave birth to Vivienne and a few years later they were both drowned. I came here to look after Vivienne and Luis, and while I did my best to treat them both with equal favour, my heart leant slightly towards my grandson - not because he is my own flesh and blood, but because I have always sensed his need, his longing, to be first with the one he loves.' She smiled wryly. 'Perhaps if he could recognize this longing himself he would realize how his father felt - how all Estevez men have felt right down the ages. They were all proud, daredevil, handsome men, loving and generous, but all, without exception, demanded from their wives complete and utter surrender.'

A silence fell, the Comtesse said nothing more until Lynette stirred restlessly, then she asked her pleadingly, 'Now do you understand, Lynette? Luis was jealous of Monsieur Chambers, but his great love for you must be his excuse. Can you excuse - will you forgive him now - knowing the need that drives him?'

Lynette remained silent, seeking words to assure the Comtesse without having to tell her how very much mistaken she was. How the shrewd, wise old lady could be so deceived into thinking her grandson was as much in love with herself as she had intimated was beyond her comprehension. But then Luis was so adept at hiding his feelings, so clever at blinding people into believing what he wanted them to believe. She cleared her throat and whispered huskily,

'I do understand, Comtesse, and I will try very hard to forgive. But please don't ask me to see him now. Perhaps tomorrow . . .' She hated herself for her deceit, but her heart was so sore and her spirit so weary she had no other choice.

Gratified, the Comtesse smiled and stood up to take her leave. Her regal head was a trifle bowed, but her eyes sparkled with relief when she patted Lynette's head and told her simply,

'Of course not, my child, you must rest now. Tomorrow everything will be so much less painful and feelings will not be running so high. But may I say just one more thing before I go?'

'Yes?' faltered Lynette.

The Comtesse's face held a glint of mischief when she continued: 'I am pleased your father's efforts to change your nature were not successful!' When a blush fired Lynette's cheeks, she said quickly, 'Don't be ashamed of him, *petite*. He is a genuine and straightforward man and I like him very much. He is also much to be envied,' at Lynette's surprised, inquiring look she nodded and stressed, 'He has you, my dear. The sweetest, most delightful girl I have ever met, and exactly the girl I would have chosen myself to be the next Marquesa de Paradis!'

She left the room with a light step, leaving Lynette grappling with a wave of dismayed shame.

CHAPTER TEN

THE house was as silent as a tomb when Lynette crept silently from her room an hour later. She tiptoed carefully down the wide, fan-shaped staircase - thickly carpeted but in its mellow antiquity still inclined to creak - then melted into the sombre-shadowed hall until she reached a door at the rear that led out into the grounds. The moon was full. Bushes and trees threw grotesque silhouettes on to the smooth swathe of lawn and on to the path she took that led to the jetty where the launch was tied up ready to effect her escape from the man she could no longer bear to love. A slight breeze ruffled the bushes; a shadow moved, causing her to jerk to a standstill with fear parching her mouth and her heart thudding like hammer blows. She froze, and waited with half-resigned fear for Luis' curt, clipped voice to demand an explanation, only to collapse like a rag doll when the breeze once more caught the bushes and she realized her taut nerves and tense imagination had played her false.

Reaction caused her to reject all thought of caution, and she sped the rest of the distance to the jetty on fear-winged feet, slowing down only when she sighted the launch riding the gentle swell of moon-silvered ocean. She nervously glanced around at the deserted beach, the solitary jetty; the shadow-filled blackness of the thick foliage whose denseness could be hiding watchful eyes, then, when she was certain she was unobserved, she ran lightly along the jetty and jumped aboard the launch, landing with an impetus that knocked all the breath from her body.

For a second she lay there gathering her wits for her next move, then she got to her feet and moved cautiously around in the darkness seeking a place to hide until Vince was aboard and the launch was well away from the island. She found a cupboard holding an assortment of tackle which, when removed, left her just enough room to stand upright. She hurriedly concealed the lengths of rope and other pieces of equipment from the cupboard under a bunk in the tiny

cabin, then stepped inside and resigned herself to waiting until the sound of the engines should tell her they were on their way.

She was stiff with cramp and drooping with weariness when the sound of voices some distance away from the launch brought her to erect attention. She strained her ears to try to catch the words being spoken, but they were inaudible. She recognized Vince's voice; it was as high with anger as the man's who answered was low. Her heart plummeted. Something must have gone wrong with their plan, why else would Vince sound so incensed? Footsteps pounded the deck and even as she prepared to go aloft to face whatever might be in store the engines throbbed and she felt a slow movement as the launch pulled away from the jetty and headed out to sea.

She leant against the wall limp with relief, and wiped away the beads of perspiration that dewed her brow.

Whatever had gone wrong, Vince must have righted, otherwise they would not now be heading for Papeete. She was free! Never again would Luis Estevez be able to sway her emotions with his piratical magnetism, his ruthless, compelling charm. No longer would she be subjected to the pitiless lash of his cruel tongue or to the searing contempt of his caustic looks whenever she happened to displease him. She tried to enthuse, to lift her flagging spirits with these thoughts, but her mouth broke into a spasm of heartbroken trembling and she tasted the salt bitterness of tears that raced unchecked down her ashen cheeks.

For an interminable time the launch sped onwards. She eased her stiff body out of the cupboard and stealthily paced the small cabin to bring back the circulation to her unyielding limbs. She was careful not to make a noise, recognizing the need for caution lest the man whom Luis had directed was to take Vince to Papeete should decide to turn around and head back to the island if he discovered her presence

aboard. She was content to wait until Vince felt it was safe for him to come below and seek her out.

There was no sound from above; no one spoke or moved. Only the steady thrum of the powerful engine filled the tiny cabin as the launch rocked and swayed in the lap of the ocean. Then suddenly the noise stopped. The engine's roar died to nothingness, leaving a deep void of intimidating silence. For about five minutes she sat rigid in the dark, fighting a premonition of doom that had sprung out of nowhere. The uncanny stillness enmeshed her in a web of in-

tangible force she could not fight; it rendered her incapable of movement or speech and left her feeling panic-stricken and alone, just waiting . . .

She was taut as a bowstring when the silence was broken by the sound of footsteps descending the steps into the cabin. A switch clicked and when light flooded the cabin her apprehension was so great it was almost a relief to acknowledge that her worst fears were realized when she looked up to see Luis standing looking grimly down at her. He folded his arms against his hard chest and narrowed his storm-filled eyes to cloak the fury they reflected.

'Well?' he demanded. 'Am I allowed an explanation, or do I let the facts speak for themselves?'

His question did not penetrate her empty, sullen brain. When she continued to stare mutely up at him, he hissed sibilantly, 'So! I am to believe then that Monsieur Chambers' attraction for you is so great you could not wait for a short time to pass until you broke off our engagement but had to run away with him immediately, caring nothing for the fact that you distressed my *grand'mere* and Vivienne greatly, and even less that you have made me the laughing stock of the island! *Mon Dieu*, have you no shame? Did you really think it was possible for you to leave the island without my knowledge? Your

friend Monsieur Chambers has found out to his cost that every movement is reported to me, *especially*,' he stressed grimly, 'when my future wife is absconding with her lover!'

She tried to believe she was in a horrible dream, but even so, she knew that if she were to wake up the dream would still be true. She tried to speak, but the effort was abortive. She stood up to face him and the slight movement brought sweat beads to her brow even though her body felt ice-chilled. He loomed over her threateningly, his waiting silence demanding an answer, but all she could quaver was: 'It wasn't like that at all...'

'Then what was it like, Lynette?' He was hanging on grimly to his control. When she refused to answer, he went on with clinical detachment to probe the secretly embedded thorn of her love for him. 'Was it my anger last night that frightened you? Did you really think me capable of carrying out on you the punishment the islanders dole out to their wayward spouses?' Ridicule rippled under the surface of his words, firing her to retort resentfully,

'Well, aren't you?'

His face darkened. 'What do you think I am, Lynette, a savage . . .?'

'Yes,' she choked, turning swiftly away so that he could not see her tears, 'the worst kind - a civilized one!'

In a stride he reached her side. He raked her face with incredulous disbelief when he questioned,

'You think that of me?'

Tried beyond measure, she blazed at him, 'Why not? Ever since we met you've treated me like a bundle of swag carelessly filched because for some unaccountable reason I took your fancy! You expected me to dutifully do as other Estevez women have doubtless

done in the past - prostrate myself willingly before you, submit to you as if I had no will of my own. In other words, to demonstrate the form of obedience you expect of any woman upon whom you condescendingly choose to bestow the doubtful honour of being your playmate! When I refused to submit to such degradation you precipitated me into a web of deceit which I found abhorrent. That is the reason I tried to escape from you. I can't stand any more deception and still less can I stand any more of you!'

She waited for his wrath to fall upon her head, but he confounded her by carefully dissecting her last remark. Thoughtfully, he questioned,

'It troubled you to deceive my family? Such behaviour worried you? And yet,' he treaded delicately, 'you advocate living your life in the way you see fit whoever might get hurt in the process. You are inclined towards the destruction of outmoded moral standards and despise conformity. Why then did you not speak of these things to my *grand'mere*? She would have been very hurt, but would that have mattered ... to you?'

'I would never ...' her contradictory remark faded on her lips.

'No,' he mocked. '*You would never . . .* because you are a sham, Lynette,' he charged, 'a sham all through! You once threw that accusation at me, but you no more believe in permissiveness than does my *grand'-mere*. You were not so much indignant about being imprisoned on the island with me as shocked. You pretended,' he stressed hardly, 'that you disliked me because you were afraid of what I might do while we were alone there, is that not so?'

'Yes, *all right!*' she blazed, and stamped her foot. 'I'm not ashamed. You, Merle, Vince and the rest can laugh and call me old-fashioned if you want to. Now,' her voice shook with unshed tears, 'go ahead, laugh at me!'

But he was not amused. He frowned down at her shaking hands and caught them in his own. 'Don't shake so!' he ordered. His touch, though the merest contact, was a mistake. In the close confines of the cabin the atmosphere was thick with tension and his touch was the spark that set alight the torch of passion that flared between them.

'Lynette!' he muttered thickly. His hands went to her slim waist and he pulled her into the circle of his arms with a longing he did not try to hide. She was pressed against the hard, lean strength of him and caught up on a tide of intense emotion. He kissed her deeply, again and again, as if too long deprived. Violently and ruthlessly he plundered her mouth until she, lost against her will in the storm of passion that swept him, gave him kiss for kiss with complete abandonment of all the caution and wary distrust with which she had rejected all his previous advances. She melted against him and was moulded perfectly to him as if she were the missing part of a whole. He caressed her, inflamed her, until through his demands ran an hypnotic aura of inevitability that set off a warning bell in her brain. Unable to despise herself enough, she tore herself free and fled up to the deck to seek if not a hiding place, then a moment's respite in which to arm herself against further attack.

Up on deck it was a calm beautiful night. The moon sent a pale pathway of light glimmering upon the water. It bathed the deck in its luminous glow and caught and held the fragile loveliness of her silvery hair. She leant against the rail, faintly sick with churning emotion, and gulped in great breaths of air until sanity crept back to calm her mind and her vibrant senses into a semblance of order. Her lips felt bruised and tortured, every nerve in her body was alight in a way she had never before known. She had resisted defeat, but she was throbbingly aware that never as long as she lived would she ever feel quite so sane, quite so whole as she had before Luis' tempestuous storm of passion.

She tensed as instinct told her he had followed and flinched when his mocking voice derided: '*Now, tell me you hate me!*'

She clenched her fists but did not move from the rail. He came up behind her and stood very close, making her achingly aware of him. She closed her eyes tightly and prayed for him to go away and leave her in peace; a vain hope, because again he spoke. This time he sounded angry. He jerked her round to face him then insisted, as if impelled by a force he could not contain.

'Say it, if you can. Tell me again that you hate me!'

Goaded beyond endurance, she sobbed out: 'How many victories do you want in one day?' then flung away bitterly. There was a silence during which she told herself he was savouring his victory. Humiliation almost choked her, and it was some seconds before she took in the import of his next incredible words. Harshly he was telling her,

'I love you, Lynette.' When she did not stir, he ground out again, 'Do you hear me? I said I love you, Lynette!'

She looked at him then, unable to believe, expecting to see the mockery she had become so used to seeing on his dark, handsome face, but he was grim and unmistakably serious. With great distinctness, he told her, 'I fell in love with you in Papeete on the first night we met. Even then I recognized, deep down, that you were not what you professed to be. I saw a small, defiant little English linnet dressed up in the plumage of a Bird of Paradise, uttering sentiments which I suspected were completely alien. You puzzled, amused and completely intrigued me, and it was then I decided to punish you - to call your bluff.' She started with surprise, but did not attempt to interrupt. Incredulous joy was flooding her heart; she dared not speak in case this was a dream that words would shatter. Luis continued deliberately,

'I took you to the island intending to frighten you into an admission that your permissive attitude was a blind behind which you sheltered, but it was I who became frightened . . . For the first time in my life I fell in love, but whenever I tried to reach you you withdrew from me. I became desperate. It was the first time such a thing had happened to me, and a man in the throes of first love does not think clearly nor act wisely. I obstinately forced myself upon you, refusing to admit that you did not share my feelings, until finally I alienated you completely.' He shrugged and admitted bitterly, 'At times I thought you were softening towards me, but your capriciousness and your tantalizing ways confused me utterly. That is why I now want to know,' his dark eyes were deliberate with intent as he looked down at her, 'why I *insist* upon knowing, if there is a chance that perhaps some day you might return my love. I can no longer stand the strain of wondering and hoping, one day optimistic and the next day having my dreams dashed to the ground. Please, Lynette, for the love of heaven, tell me *now!*'

Lynette wondered if his wild, wonderful words were a figment of her imagination. Luis, *Le Pirat*, was pleading for her love! If happiness could be measured she would have been brimming over with it, but so fragile was her hold upon it she spoke in a whisper in case it was a mirage that would fade in the face of harshly spoken words,

'I *do* love you, Luis. So very, very much, my darling!'

Her voice was a mere thread of sound, but his head jerked up as if she had shouted. Hesitantly, he searched her face for reassurance and when she smiled radiantly up at him he gave a groan of despair for all the wasted moments and pulled her forward into his arms. At first he did not seek her lips, but nestled his warm mouth close against the smooth whiteness of her neck with a gentle reverence that turned her heart over. She nestled closer and folded her arms lovingly around his neck, revelling in her right to do so. With a restrained passion far

removed from his earlier onslaught, his hands caressed her radiant face and he demanded to know: 'Enough to marry me?'

Her breath caught in her throat. 'You want to marry? But you've always said .. '

'I was a fool, then,' he interrupted roughly, 'a stupid, obstinate fool who resented the idea of being caught. Now I know that unless you become my wife my life will be drab with discontent and void of happiness. Let me hear you say you will marry me, Lynette, my darling.' His arms tightened desperately when she dimpled delightfully up at him and whispered,

'Oh, yes, please, Luis darling!'

He laughed exultantly and his lips found hers in a kiss of deep dedication that told her she too had joined the band of fortunate women who had known the exciting, turbulent, entirely devoted love of other Estevez men. Gradually, his kisses became more forceful and she gave herself up to the heavenly experience of savouring her power over him. He whispered soft endearments during the short intervals when he was not taking the lips she offered with such tempting assurance. The moon shone benignly down upon them as they kissed . . . and murmured . . . and were lost in the wonder of their love.

Only the waves were there to listen when later he whispered softly, 'I adore that trick you have of flickering those delightfully long eyelashes of yours, *ma petite*.' She moved contentedly in his arms and smiled when he told her lazily, 'I have noticed that you do it at every moment of crisis. Many times when you made me very angry I was disarmed completely when you fluttered up at me like a timid little bird poised ready for flight.'

She raised her eyebrows with teasing puzzlement. 'When did I ever make you angry, Luis?' He frowned blackly even as he tightened his hold on her and she realized that there were some occasions when she would still have to tread very warily until time dulled hurtful memories.

'The worst times,' he said tersely, 'were when I thought you preferred the company of Monsieur Chambers to mine. If that young man is still on the island when we return I will deal very severely with him. But somehow,' he stated succinctly, 'I do not think he will be!' Even the mention of Vince's name seemed enough to anger him and she hastily soothed him back to even temper by telling him earnestly,

'Vince means nothing to me, and never has. But I, too, was hurt by your obvious affection for Claudia.'

His instant look of surprise was answer enough, but she was comforted to hear him say: 'Claudia? But she is just an old friend!' He dismissed Claudia by bending over and asking urgently: 'Promise me, my little linnet, that you will never fly away from me again?' She recognized the need for reassurance that the Comtesse had spoken of and her answer came from her heart.

'I will stay with you for as long as you want me to, Luis. I can think of nothing I want more than to settle for ever on the island with you. Your love has clipped my wings; I will never want to fly away.'

He brooded down at her, his eyes dark with feeling, and whispered with a passion that thrilled her,

'I will always want you, *mon amour*, my dearest love. My very own Bird of Paradis!'