

Harlequin Presents...

FLORA
KIDD

stay through the night



STAY THROUGH THE NIGHT

Flora Kidd

"I warned you from the start,"

Burt Sharaton said. "You had no right to come between Nancy and me."

But putting an end to her sister Nancy's affair with him was a responsibility Charlotte had just had to take on. She'd told him her sister refused to cruise with him on his yacht, the White Cockatoo.

Unfortunately, her plan hadn't worked and Charlotte was caught in a trap of her own making. For Burt was determined that if he couldn't have Nancy, he would take Charlotte instead!

CHAPTER ONE

JADE green sea edged by snow-white surf, coral cream sand shadowed by feathery casuarinas and stiff-leaved palms, slid away beneath the sun-dazzled wings of the jet-liner as it made its approach to a runway. A lake, deeply blue gleaming jewel-like among a setting of dusty sage scrub tilted skywards. The plane righted itself. Wheels hit tarmac and in a few minutes the terminal building at Nassau airport came into view.

Her dark brown eyes sparkling with excitement and good humour, her short almost black curls bobbing springily as she walked and talked with the middle-aged couple who had been her companions on the flight, Charlotte Mason made her way with a hundred or so people, most of them tourists, some of them businessmen who had come to spend a week or a few days on an island in the sun during the month of February.

In spite of the numbers of people arriving it didn't take long to clear Immigration, collect luggage and clear Customs. As she walked into the entrance hall of the building Charlotte looked around expectantly.

Bahamian porters trundling luggage, their white teeth flashing in their dark faces, shouted to each other and to passengers in lilting tuneful voices. Tourist officials smartly dressed in brightly coloured clothes, like birds of paradise, in yellow, sugar pink and even purple, collected together the tourists they had come to meet and herded them towards the exits where taxis were waiting to whisk them off to the huge many- roomed hotels where they would stay.

'Is your sister here?' asked Mrs Dodd, the woman with whom Charlotte had travelled on the plane.

'Not yet, but I expect she will be soon,' replied Charlotte.

'We're off to the hotel now, on Paradise Island,' said Mr Dodd, wiping his sweating face with a large white handkerchief. 'Whew! I don't know about you, but I'm feeling the heat already. Can't wait to change into shorts and sandals.'

'And I can hardly wait to get into a swimming pool,' said Mrs Dodd with a chuckle. Being short she had to stand on her toes to reach up and kiss Charlotte's cheek. 'We did enjoy your company on the plane, love,' she added, her eyes twinkling with affection. 'Don't forget now, when you're back in England look us up in Oxford. Jim gave you our address, didn't he?'

'Yes, thank you. I hope you have a super holiday here.'

'You too, dear, and I hope you find everything is all right with your dad and your sister.'

'Come on, Marge,' urged Mr Dodd. 'They're wanting us to get on the minibus. We might see you in Nassau,' he added, nodding at Charlotte. 'Cheerio, for now.'--^

Her bulging shabby suitcase at her feet, Charlotte watched the couple go through swinging glass doors. Now that she was back with both feet firmly on the ground the excited anticipation which had kept her going on the flight across the Atlantic was quickly evaporating and she was beginning to feel limp with tiredness. The beige woollen trouser suit she was wearing had seemed perfectly suitable to wear for travelling on a plane, but it felt thick and heavy and she wished she was dressed in a sun-dress like the one the tall slim woman who was coming through one of the swing doors was wearing.

The dress was made from thin lavender-coloured cotton and the hem of its calf-length skirt was edged by a deep frill and its low-cut bodice was held in place by narrow straps which curved over the smooth suntanned shoulders of the woman.

Charlotte blinked and looked again at the gracefully curving neck and shining auburn hair of the woman who was just removing sun-glasses from her eyes.

'Nancy!' Charlotte called, and waved an arm vigorously. 'Hey Nan, I'm over here!'

Since Nancy didn't seem to notice her Charlotte picked up her case, struggled with it through a queue of tourists, who were waiting to be conveyed to their hotels, and staggered towards her sister.

'Nan!'

'Charlie, at last! How are you?'

Nancy presented a thin sun-tanned cheek to Charlotte's enthusiastic kiss of greeting and stepped back to eye her critically.

'Charlie, that suit—it's awful, so unfeminine,' she remarked in sisterly disapproval. 'And your hair—whatever has happened to your hair?'

'I've had it cut.' Charlotte grinned a wide gamin grin which showed her perfect teeth and lit up the dark depths of her eyes. She shook her head so that the curls bounced. 'Wash and wear, I call it. No trouble to keep it like this,' she added, looking beyond Nancy to the man standing behind her.

He was tall, about six foot one, she guessed, and his thick straight hair was golden, bleached here and there to the colour of straw. His skin where it showed on brawny forearms and legs as revealed by the short-sleeved blue shirt and brief white shorts he was wearing, had been tanned to an even bronze colour. About thirty-two, he looked in perfect physical condition, but his handsome face was marred by an expression of boredom as he looked about him.

'Who is the white god standing behind you?' Charlotte whispered to Nancy.

'White god?' exclaimed Nancy, her beautiful amber eyes widening in puzzlement. 'What are you talking about?'

'That's how he must look to the dark people in this island, aloof and lord of all he surveys yet wishing he wasn't here right now, bored out of his mind with the doings of mere ordinary mortals like us.'

Nancy turned quickly, almost guiltily, to glance at the man. Then she went up to him and to Charlotte's surprise smiled at him and slid a hand in the crook of his right arm, the dark red of her painted fingernails glowing like rubies against the golden sheen of his skin.

'Burt, I'd like you to meet my not so little sister, Charlotte,' she said. 'We've always called her Charlie because she's such a tomboy. Charlie, this is Burton Sharaton. He drove me here to meet you.'

Jade green, the same colour as the shallow sea she had seen swirling about the shores of the island, was the colour of his eyes. They were large and heavy-lidded, set between thick fringes of gold-tipped lashes and under slanting fair eyebrows. Charlotte offered him her right hand and his big one closed round it firmly. Against her palm his felt rough.

'Hi, Charlie,' he drawled, and his smile was a brief cool flash of white—too cool for Charlotte, who felt dismissed and beneath his notice. With her chin at a different angle she looked right into the sea-green eyes, feeling irritated because she had to look up because he was so much taller than she was.

'You've been sailing,' she said. 'Recently too.'

Surprise glinted in his eyes and his eyebrows lifted slightly.

'How do you know?' he demanded.

'Your hand is calloused from pulling on ropes.'

'You're very observant,' he replied, releasing her hand with a suddenness which betrayed his dislike of her remarks.

'Yes, I am—very. It's necessary for me to be in my work,' she retorted, her glance going deliberately to her sister's fingers which were resting so possessively within the crook of his arm.

'What sort of work?' he asked, sharply, and she looked up again. A shiver of alarm tingled down her spine because his eyes were no longer the warm green of jade but the cold green of ice and his eyebrows had a wicked frowning slant to them.

'I'm a newspaper reporter,' she said.

'Ha!' His short laugh brought the blood storming up into her cheeks. 'I thought you had a nosy look about you,' he jeered.

For a strangely dangerous moment their glances held, hers furious and defiant, his scathing and derisive, then he turned to look down at Nancy. With a slow deliberate gesture he covered the fingers resting on his arm with his own and squeezed them gently and intimately.

'You should have warned me, sweetheart, that your sister is a newshound,' he drawled. 'I can see you and I will have to be careful how we behave while she's here.'

Sweetheart. The casual endearment applied to her sister by this handsome arrogant stranger made Charlotte's blood boil. And what was worse than the way he was looking down at Nancy was the way Nancy was looking at him as if he were indeed some god whom she adored.

'Can we go now?' she said abruptly. Somehow she had to stop them from making love to each other with looks and hand-holds in such a public place.

Nancy turned her head and came back to reality.

'Is that all your luggage?' she asked, pointing to the filled-to-bursting case.

Charlotte nodded. Burt Sharaton moved away, snapped an authoritative finger and thumb and a Bahamian porter, wearing a brightly patterned shirt and a jaunty wide-brimmed straw hat, appeared, to heave the heavy case on to his two-wheeled truck.

Outside the building the sun was very hot and bright and the air was warm and moist. Charlotte poked about in her large satchel bag, found her sunglasses and slid them on. She followed Nancy, whose arm was still linked with Burt Sharaton's, across to a car park and by the time she reached the elegant tomato red and cream two-door American convertible she was oozing sweat and had been forced to remove her suit jacket.

Her case was stowed in the capacious boot of the car and Burt Sharaton tipped the porter lavishly, judging by the man's delighted grin.

'Like to get in?' he asked Charlotte when he had unlocked the car door. He had let down the folding roof of the car and was holding part of the long front seat forward. He gestured towards the back seat.

'Can't I sit in the front?' Charlotte asked. There was room for three on the long seat and if she could sit there it would be a way of keeping him and Nancy apart. Again she met the spine-chilling glance of his green eyes. 'I haven't been here before and I'd like to see everything as we go along,' she added.

'You'll see plenty from the back seat since the roof is down,' he replied in cool clipped tones. 'Get in.'

She didn't like the way he spoke to her as if she were a child or a servant he could order about and she turned to her sister.

'Will you sit in the back with me, Nan?' she said.

'No, I'll sit with Burt. Go on, Charlie, get in. We've hung about here long enough. Your plane was late landing and Burt and I have been waiting nearly three- quarters of an hour for you.'

'I'm sorry,' replied Charlotte, a little huffily. 'You shouldn't have bothered to come,' she went on, looking directly at Burt. 'I could have got a taxi.'

'Oh, get in, love, do,' Nancy urged with a touch of impatience. She gave Charlotte a push. 'I told you I'd meet you and I have.'

Reluctantly Charlotte gave in and settled herself on the wide cream seat. The other two took their places in the front. The car started up and swept smoothly out of the car park on to a narrow roadway edged by dusty- looking palms and sage scrub. Warm air rushed past her face and ruffled her dark curls.

Staring at the square set of Burt Sharaton's broad shoulders against the back of the front seat, she wondered what it was about him which had rubbed her the wrong way. He looked and moved as if he owned the earth. Perhaps he did, she thought with a wry grin, glancing around the sumptuous interior of the car. Perhaps he was one of those American millionaires she had read about.

And he was behaving as if he owned Nancy too, her thoughts rushed on as she saw him raise a bronze arm furred with golden-glinting hairs and slide it behind Nancy's shoulders to draw her sister close to him.

All her own training in how to drive a car dictated that it was dangerous for him to drive with only one hand on the steering wheel, and she was just about to lean forward and tell him so when she realised with something of a shock that although the car had a left-hand drive he was driving on the left-hand side of the road, which seemed to her to be even more dangerous. Several cars passed going the other way and in all of them the driver was sitting on the left side of the car. It was very puzzling and disturbing, most illogical. She felt that one of them might have an accident at any minute.

'Why does everyone drive on the left-hand side of the road?' she asked.

'Because the Bahamas were once a British colony and that's the law,' replied Nancy.

'But they aren't a colony now. They're independent,' said Charlotte. 'If they have to keep to the left why don't they import cars with right-hand drives?'

'Some of them do, but most of the cars imported here are made for the North American market and in both the States and Canada traffic travels on the right-hand side of the road,' replied Burt curdy, and his tone of voice indicated he was very bored by the subject. 'You'll get used to it after you've been here for a while. Relax and sit back, there's no danger.'

In other words, shut up, thought Charlotte, making a face at his unsuspecting back, and instead of sitting back she leaned forward, placing her arms along the back of the front seat so that she could speak to Nancy.

'Luke has a new car,' she said, determined to drive a wedge psychologically speaking anyway between Burt and her sister by mentioning Nancy's husband. 'It's a Rover, dark green with pale green

interior. He's just been promoted to project manager for the construction of a new power station his company is building.'

Nancy made no comment, nor did she turn her head. Instead, much to Charlotte's amazement, she nestled her head against Burt's shoulder and placed one of her hands on his bare right thigh.

The narrow road joined another wider road which wound beside a long stretch of cream-coloured sand shaded by some trees which looked very much like pines. Beyond the sand the water was clear green, shading as it became deeper to sun-dappled turquoise, and about a mile out from the shore surf tumbled in cascades of white foam over a coral reef.

'It's hard to believe it was snowing when I left England this morning,' Charlotte went on. 'We've had an awful winter, Nan, very cold and heaps of snow. Luke was telling me there were very bad drifts in the cul-de- sac where your house is and twice he's had to dig out before he could go to work.'

'It isn't my house, it's his,' said Nancy coldly, stung at last into a reply.

'Well, it's the house where you live with him when you're in England,' countered Charlotte serenely. 'That's why I call it yours.'

This time Nancy didn't retort, but her shoulders stiffened. The car slowed down to take a sharp bend as the road curved away from the beach. Instead of trees and sand a high limestone wall edged the right hand side of the road. The purple bells of bougainvilleas and the trumpet-like flowers of scarlet hibiscus flaunted themselves in a splash of vivid colour against the stark wall. Through gateways Charlotte caught glimpses of pastel-shaded walls of expensive-looking villas and well-tended gardens where whirling sprinklers kept lawns green. Red pantile roofs glowed fierily in the

sunlight against a blue sky which was faintly streaked with feathery white clouds.

'This is Long Cay,' Nancy announced, and Burt Sharaton withdrew his arm from behind her shoulders. He swung the car across the road and between two gateposts. It swooped round the bend of a well-made private road and came to a stop beside a two-storeyed cottage with lime green walls and white shutters.

'Will you come in for a drink, Burt?' Nancy asked. 'It's almost sundowner time.'

'Not this evening,' he said as he turned off the engine and opened the door. 'You'll be wanting to hear all the family gossip Charlie has to tell you.' He spoke ironically as if he found the idea of having to listen to Charlotte relate family news extremely tedious and stepping out of the car moved away to open the boot. Over her shoulder Nancy gave Charlotte a dark malicious glare.

'Why did you have to go on about Luke in front of Burt?' she asked.

'I thought you'd want to know about him. After all, you are married to him.' Charlotte's eyes widened to gold glinting brown pools of innocence.

'Oh, don't give me that look!' flared Nancy, her own amber eyes flashing angrily. 'You did it deliberately.' Her full lips thinned and she spoke between her teeth. 'You might as well know before you drop any more bricks—my marriage ended when I left England and came out here to live with Dad.'

'Does Luke know that?'

'If he hasn't taken the hint yet he soon will,' Nancy snapped, and wrenching open the car door she got out and went to speak to Burt.

By the time Charlotte had struggled out of the back seat of the car. Nancy had gone into the house and Burt Sharaton was placing Charlotte's case down by the trellis porch overhung with bougainvillea which shaded the front door. As he turned to go back to the car he almost walked into her and for a moment or two they faced each other in challenging silence.

'Thank you for bringing Nancy to meet me and for driving us back here from the airport,' she said at last, stiff and prickly with pride because she didn't like being beholden to someone she didn't like.

'But you wished I hadn't bothered. Right?' he retorted, his eyes as hard as green ice and his well-shaped mouth curling unpleasantly. 'You let it show too much, baby,' he drawled provocatively.

'Let what show?' she asked.

'Your disapproval of me.'

'I can't help that. I suppose you consider yourself to be above the usual rules of morality which govern the behaviour of most people,' she countered daringly.

'What the hell are you getting at?' His eyebrows slanted fiercely.

'Nancy happens to be married.'

'So?' He shrugged with an indifference which made her itch to slap him.

'So why don't you leave her alone?'

His eyes narrowed and he stepped towards her to tower over her threateningly, his lips curving back over his strong white teeth in a snarl.

'Listen, newshound, Nancy and I are adults and what we do together is none of your damned business,' he said softly and menacingly. 'And I've had enough of your sort, gossip-writers and news reporters, making capital out of how I choose to conduct my life, so keep your nose out of my affairs, or by God I'll make you suffer!'

'It's not you I'm concerned about,' she retorted spiritedly, refusing to back down. 'It's Nancy. She's my sister and I love her dearly.'

'That doesn't mean you have to be her keeper,' he said coldly, turning away to the car and swinging open a door.

'Yes, it does. She has to be protected from her own beauty and weaknesses and I'll do anything to prevent her or anyone like you from ruining her marriage to Luke,' she said, following him, determined to let him know he wasn't going to have his own way with Nancy now that she had come to stay at Long Cay.

'Anything?' He had slid behind the steering wheel of the car and his eyes glinted with a devilish green light as he slanted a glance up at her. 'Such loyalty amazes me but doesn't impress me, and it's probably misplaced,' he jeered. 'And before you start interfering I think you should ask Nancy to leave me alone.'

'I will, you can be sure of that,' she snapped.

'You're going to find her answer surprising,' he warned softly, his mouth curving in a curiously saturnine smile which narrowed his eyes so that they became coldly gleaming slits of light. He started the engine of the car and she had to step back as he began to reverse it. Nibbling anxiously at her lower lip, she watched the big vehicle turn and move off along the curving private road with a lazy insolent grace, a characteristic it had borrowed from its driver. Within seconds it was hidden from view round a bend screened by the spiky green leaves of oleander bushes.

'Charlie, aren't you coming in?' Nancy spoke from the porch. She was frowning and looked a little pale.

'Yes, of course.' Charlotte walked back to the porch and picked up her case. 'Is Dad in?'

'No, not yet He'd have been out here like a shot to welcome you if he were. Rosie says he phoned earlier from the hotel to say he was delayed and wouldn't be here until six.'

Charlotte staggered into the house with her case and let it drop with a thud. Raising a hand, she wiped sweat from her brow and looked around the room into which she had stepped. It was wide and long. Its floor was covered with fluffy sage green carpet and its walls were painted the same silvery colour. Several deep cushioned armchairs were set about it and, like the long chesterfield which took up part of one wall, they were covered with rose-patterned ivory cretonne. At one end of the room under a window looking out over the front garden was a dining table around which four chairs were set and at the other end a wide glass door opened on to a patio where bougainvillea and other flowering vines tumbled over trellises.

'Whew, it's hot!' gasped Charlotte. 'Where can I shower and change into something cooler?'

'Upstairs. This way,' replied Nancy.

She started up the staircase which led right up from the living room to a small landing on to which four doors opened, and pointed to one of the doors.

'That's the bathroom,' she said. 'The only one, I'm afraid. This house is quite small, only three bedrooms, and Rosie has one of those, so you'll be sharing with me, in here.'

They entered a bedroom which had sloping ceilings and two windows, one at the front of the house and one facing the sea. There were twin beds side by side covered with patchwork quilts and a couple of chests of drawers. A long mirror glinted on the front of the door of a walk-in closet.

'Who is Rosie?' Charlotte asked as she unlocked her case.

'The housekeeper,' replied Nancy, sitting down on one of the beds. She kicked off her high-heeled sandals, curled her legs under her on the bed and lit a cigarette from a package lying on the bedside table.

'But I thought you kept house,' said Charlotte. 'I thought that was why you had stayed on here, to keep house for Dad until he'd found another housekeeper.'

'Oh, I keep an eye on it for him,' said Nancy with a shrug, 'but Rosie does all the cooking and cleaning.'

'Then what do you do all day?' Charlotte asked, taking a dress out of her case. It was made from crease-resisting polyester, turquoise in colour and scattered all over with a tiny flower pattern in white. Its skirt was gathered into the waistline and its scooped-out neckline had a draw-string. The sleeves were full and gathered in at the elbow. It looked cool and she hoped that it was.

'I have fun,' Nancy said airily. 'I swim and sunbathe and sometimes go sailing with Burt.'

'But you don't like sailing,' exclaimed Charlotte. 'You would never come sailing with me.'

'Sailing in a luxury yacht like Burt's is very different from messing about in a twelve-foot dinghy,' retorted Nancy patronisingly. 'And a small reservoir in England just doesn't compare with the sea around here.'

'I suppose not,' muttered Charlotte. 'Does he live on his yacht?'

'Only when he's sailing about the islands. You should see the Sharaton house, it's fabulous. There's a bathroom for every bedroom and there are six bedrooms.'

His mother used to invite friends and relatives to stay with her during the winter months. That's how she came to start the Long Cay Beach Club. She bought the whole of the Cay and had the hotel and housekeeping cottages built. Burt owns them now. She left them to him in her will when she died last October.'

'Is this house one of those cottages and does Dad rent it from Mr Sharaton?'

'No. This house goes with Dad's job as manager of the Club.' Nancy blew out smoke and gave Charlotte an underbrowed glance. 'Listen, Charlie, Dad is very lucky to have this job and you'll have to try and be careful about what you say to Burt while you're staying here. It wouldn't do for you to offend him.'

'Why?'

'Because since his mother died he's been Dad's employer. Mrs Sharaton was a very kind and understanding person who appreciated the difficulties Dad had in finding another job after he'd been fired by the big syndicate which took over the Aquarius Hotel which he used to manage.' Nancy inhaled again and blew out more smoke. 'You wouldn't like him to be fired again just because you'd been taddy to his boss, would you?'

In the act of unzipping her pants Charlotte paused to stare at her sister. How lovely Nancy was, she thought, with her finely chiselled features, curling auburn hair, smooth long arms and graceful legs; as lovely as their mother Lilian had been; lovely and a victim of her own wayward desires.

'Is it because Burt Sharaton is Dad's employer that you're more than polite to him and more than friendly with him?' she asked sharply. 'Is that why you paw him every chance you get?'

'I do not paw him!' Nancy's eyes flashed indignantly and she sat up straight.

'Then what were you doing at the airport sliding your hand up and down his arm and in the car when you stroked his thigh? Oh, yes, I noticed,' Charlotte jeered as Nancy's face flushed a dull red. 'Short of kissing him you were doing your best to turn him on this afternoon.'

'How can you be so disgusting as to suggest that's what I was doing?' Nancy was on her feet now.

'Well, how could you be so disgusting as to touch a man like that when you're married to Luke and have vowed to be faithful to him?' retorted Charlotte, stepping out of her pants and tossing them across the other bed. She began to slide off her nylon tights, which had been so necessary in London at this time of the year, glad to remove them from her hot sticky legs.

'I might divorce Luke, that's why,' flared Nancy.

'Oh, no!' Charlotte sat down suddenly on the edge of the other bed. 'You can't do that, Nan!'

'Why can't I? I want to be free so I can marry Burt.'

'Has he asked you to?'

'Not yet.' Nancy's small but passionately curved mouth tilted in a secretive smile. 'But he wants me,' she added softly.

'I daresay he does if you're always making up to him the way you were this afternoon. And he has the look of a pirate who wouldn't

hesitate to steal another man's wife if he took a fancy to her,' muttered Charlotte.

Nancy laughed and her auburn curls danced provocatively on her bare shoulders as she swaggered across the room to survey her reflection in the long mirror.

'He won't have to steal me. I want him as much as he wants me. For me it's just a question of changing marriage partners, and that goes on all the time these days,' she replied, leaning forward to examine her complexion in the mirror.

'I know. It's going on so much it's becoming commonplace and boring,' sighed Charlotte. 'But do you honestly believe a man like Burt Sharaton will offer to marry you to get what he wants?' She had a sudden vision of ice-green eyes set in a sun-gilded tough-jawed face and she shivered a little in spite of the room. 'You'd best leave him alone, Nan,' she said urgently. 'He's dangerous.'

'And that's what makes him so fascinating,' said Nancy. 'But don't worry, Charlie, I can take care of myself. Give me credit for some experience in knowing how to lead a man on and knowing when to stop. He'll find out I'm not as easy as I seem, and by then he'll be wanting me so much he'll be willing to give me anything I ask, including marriage, if I want it.'

'I think I'm more inclined to give him credit for knowing how to seduce a woman and then ditch her after, he's taken what he wants from her,' said Charlotte dryly. 'Nan, leave him alone.'

'Nice of you to be so concerned, duckie,' drawled Nancy, smiling at herself. 'But I'm in so far now I don't want to turn back or to stop.'

'But you can't possibly like him more than Luke,' protested Charlotte. 'Nan, when I go back to England at the end of my holiday, come with

me, break the spell this place has put on you. Once you're back in England and with Luke again you'll forget all about Burt Sharaton.

'Never,' said Nancy fiercely, swinging round. 'I like being spellbound. And I like this place, the comfort and the luxury. I like the sun and the sea and the long dark nights. And I'm not going to leave Burt alone. He's the best thing that's happened to me in the whole of my life. He ... he's ... well, he's a man of gold. He's wealthy and is likely to be wealthier when his father dies. He's handsome and he can give me all I've ever wanted, elegant clothes, jewels to wear, luxurious houses to live in and servants to wait on me. Right now he wants me, and he can have me on my terms.'

'But he doesn't love you like Luke does,' argued Charlotte stubbornly. She was secretly appalled by Nancy's attitude. Never in all the years they had lived together had she known her sister-to be grasping and mercenary.

'Luke loves me?' Nancy gave a short mirthless laugh. 'You've got to be joking! I imagined he did once and I imagined I loved him. I married him for love, fool that I was, and look what happened. I found myself alone all day, cooped up in a suburban house having to clean and cook, tied to a man who loves his work more than he loves me.'

'Luke doesn't love his work more than he loves you. He loves you very much. He's been miserable without you the past few months while you've been out here with Dad.'

'Then why hasn't he come here to see me?' challenged Nancy, her eyes hard.

'You must know why. He's written to tell you why and to ask you to return to him. He's been very busy at work and...'

'You see?' jeered Nancy. 'Work, work—he's always put his work before me.'

'Only because you wanted him to be promoted so he could earn more money to buy a new car and so you could move into a bigger house in a more elegant part of Reading. He could hardly expect promotion unless he showed his bosses he's willing to work and take responsibility, could he? Anyway, do you really believe Burt Sharaton will be any different? Do you honestly believe he would spend all his time with you—if he married you?'

'Burt doesn't have to work like Luke does,' argued Nancy.

'I don't suppose he does, if he's already wealthy,' said Charlotte scornfully. 'How dull to be him and have everything money can buy already. No wonder he looks so bored and no wonder he's looking for distractions. Can't you see, Nan, that's all you are for him—a distraction, a pretty new plaything he'll cast aside as soon as he tires of you?'

Nancy went pale and her eyes flickered with uncertainty. Walking across the room, she found her sandals and slid her feet into them.

'I don't care,' she muttered defiantly. 'As long as he gives me what I want I'm willing to play with him for a while.' The sound of tyres crunching over gravel followed by the toot of a car's horn came through the half- open window. 'There's Dad,' she added, going towards the bedroom door. 'When you've changed come out to the patio. He likes to have a drink and watch the sun set before having dinner.'

By the time Charlotte joined her father and sister on the patio the sun was hovering, a round ball of crimson fire, above the dark blue line of the horizon. Suddenly it slipped below the line. The sky flushed with rose and orange light. Purple shadows gathered about the patio and

amongst the fragrant exotic shrubs the cicadas began their repetitive night chant.

'It's good to have you here, Charlie,' Grant Mason said gruffly as he hugged his younger daughter. Tall and dark-haired like herself, she thought he looked thin and a little haggard in the flickering yellow light of the two candles which glowed in globes of glass on the small glass-topped wrought iron table at which he and Nancy were sitting. 'What will you have to drink?' he asked.

'What are you drinking?' She sat down on the vacant chair.

'Rum punch concocted by Rosie from fruit juices and coconut milk.'

'That will do for me, as long as there isn't too much rum in it.'

'I'll fetch it for you while you have a chat with Dad,' said Nancy generously. 'Would you like another, Dad?'

'Please.' He handed her a tall glass and she went away towards the house.

'How long are you going to be here, Charlie?' Grant asked.

'Three weeks, all my holiday for this year.'

'Good. Nancy tells me Luke drove you to Heathrow this morning. Is there any chance of him coming out for a holiday?'

'I don't know. He didn't say.' Charlotte studied him from under her lashes and decided to plunge. 'Dad, about this Burt Sharaton,' she whispered, leaning towards him.

'You've met Burt?' he sounded surprised.

'Yes. He drove Nancy to the airport this afternoon to meet me.'

'Did he? Well, that was kind of him.'

'I wouldn't call him kind,' remarked Charlotte caustically.

'Hmm. Sounds to me as if he rubbed you the wrong way,' said Grant, giving her a sharp glance.

'He certainly did, and I rubbed him the wrong way too.' Charlotte bit her hp. 'Will it matter, Dad?' she continued anxiously. 'Nancy says it's important that I don't offend him because he's now your employer. Would he fire you if I spoke out of turn?

'I'm not sure,' he said, frowning. 'I have to admit I wouldn't like to cross him in any way. I've a feeling he's come here to check up on the management of the hotel and that he's watching me in particular.' He drew his breath in a short sigh and rubbed his eyes wearily. 'You see, love, I got this job because I knew his mother years ago in Witherton. She helped me out of the mess I was in after that business at the Aquarius Hotel and as a result I think Burt Sharaton is suspicious of me.' He paused, then added dryly, 'He's not his father's son for nothing.'

'Who is his father?'

'Lionel Sharaton, President of Polygon Corporation. Ever heard of it?'

'Yes, I have.' Charlotte frowned as she searched her memory. 'Isn't that the corporation which controls the Marling Hosiery Company at Witherton?'

'That's right. It's an Anglo-American conglomerate with financial interests in many different sorts of businesses, and Lionel Sharaton was the driving force behind its original formation. He inherited a business empire from his father—a chain of department stores in the States—and from there he expanded through a series of take-overs so that now he owns the controlling interest in various manufacturing

companies all over the world which supply his stores with goods. Marling Hosiery is just one of them, and Burt Sharaton's mother was Linda Marling, the only child of Daniel the last of the Marling family.'

'I suppose when Lionel Sharaton took over the Marling business he took her over too,' remarked Charlotte dryly.

'You could put it like that. It was a business marriage, although quite a successful one, for all that.' Grant's eyes twinkled with warm affection. 'I can just imagine you and Burt striking sparks off one another. You're both very forthright and I don't suppose he's used to having a young woman stand up to him. Usually the girls are all fawning over him, hoping to be asked to be the next Mrs Burton Sharaton. As you've probably guessed, he's already wealthy and when his father dies he could inherit millions.'

'The next Mrs Burton Sharaton?' Charlotte exclaimed. 'Is he divorced?'

'No, believe it or not. He married young—another business marriage. It lasted only four years, his mother told me, and ended when his wife died in some sort of accident. Apparently they had had a child, but it had also died. Linda used to get very upset when she talked about it and I always had the impression there was some sort of mystery about both deaths. She told me his experience had made Burt very cynical and reluctant to consider marriage again, he had such a difficult time with his wife.'

'Hah!' Charlotte laughed scornfully. 'I feel sorry for the woman, having to put up with *him* for a husband.'

'Now go easy, Charlie,' Grant rebuked her. 'I realise Burt is a tough character. If you don't like him my advice to you is stay out of his way

while you're here. It shouldn't be too difficult. He keeps pretty much to himself, sailing that big ketch of his about the islands.'

'He hasn't kept so much to himself,' she replied. 'Nancy has found him accessible. Dad, she's just told me that she's thinking of divorcing Luke.'

'Good God!' he gasped. 'Why?'

'So that she can be free to marry Burt—when and if he asks her.'

'She can't be serious!'

'She is, very, so serious I'm worried about her. Have you seen how she behaves when she's with Burt?'

'No. I'd no idea she'd seen all that much of him. I've been very busy lately. Running the hotel and the beach club isn't easy with the labour situation as it is. Twice this season we've had strikes and tonight after dinner I have to go to a meeting with union negotiators.' He sighed again wearily. 'All right, tell me. How does Nancy behave when she's with Sharaton?'

'Like those young women you were talking about. She fawns on him. It's quite sickening.' Charlotte made a grimace of disgust.

'I see.' He looked suddenly very sad. 'So he's the reason she decided to stay longer.'

'What do you mean?'

'She was all ready to go back to England three weeks ago after I'd found and hired Rosie. Then Sharaton arrived. He came to see me here and naturally I introduced him to Nancy. That one meeting seems to have been enough to make her change her mind.' He rumbled his hair worriedly, then gave her a quizzical glance. 'You

know, Charlie, it's possible they've fallen in love with each other, in which case there isn't anything you or I or Luke can do about it'

'But marriage, Dad,' Charlotte argued. 'Can you honestly believe he has marriage in mind? Supposing she divorces Luke and then finds Burt Sharaton won't marry her, can't you guess what will happen to her? He's as hard as a rock and she'll smash herself to pieces against him.'

'But what can anyone do?' sighed Grant. 'She's an adult, Charlie, and I can't very well start telling her how she should run her life at this stage.'

'I wish there was some way to get Luke to come out,' she muttered. 'His company wouldn't let him have time off for a holiday at this time of the year. Can you think of a good reason why he should have time off work?'

'They might release him on compassionate grounds,' replied Grant thoughtfully.

'Such as?'

'If he received a letter from me or from you saying his wife needs him.'

'I'll write tomorrow,' said Charlotte determinedly. 'I'll tell him what the situation is and surely he'll take action—' She broke off as she heard the tinkle of ice against glass. Nancy was returning. 'We'd best talk about something else,' she murmured.

'About you,' said her father. 'How is the ace reporter of *The Daily Globe and Record*? Have you had an article on the front page yet?'

'No, but I love newspaper work and Frank Lane, the assistant editor, says he might give me a regular column in the Saturday edition if I come up with a good article on this holiday of mine.'

'Then we'll have to make sure you see as much of the islands as possible,' said Grant.

'Sorry I've been so long. I had to answer the phone,' said Nancy, arriving with two tall glasses containing a pinkish liquid.

'Was the call for me?' asked Grant.

'No, for me. Betty Holmes has invited Charlie and me to go over to her bungalow after dinner to meet her two sons who've just arrived on holiday from Toronto. And Rosie says dinner is ready, so drink up.'

The meal cooked by the dark-faced smiling Rosie consisted of Bahamian dishes. There was peppery conch chowder, a thick soup made from the flesh of the big shellfish, grilled groper, a succulent sweet-tasting fish which was served with rice and black beans. Tiny sugar bananas, each one not much bigger than Charlotte's middle finger, segments of sweet pineapple and slices of papaya made up the dessert.

After the meal, when Grant had gone to Nassau to the meeting with the union negotiators and Nancy had changed from her sun-dress into a simple calf-length evening dress which left her tanned shoulders as bare as the sun-dress had, the two sisters walked along the curving private road to the bungalow which the Holmes family rented for the winter from the beginning of November to the end of April.

'That's the Sharaton house I was talking about,' said Nancy, pointing to a low house set back from the road among clustering palms and casuarinas. From the many wide windows golden light shafted out into the purple tropical darkness. 'Burt's sister and her husband and

two boys are staying there for the next two weeks. They're having a party tonight.'

Nancy sounded wistful as if she would have liked to have been invited to that party instead of to the Holmes's bungalow, but once inside the Holmes's pleasant living room and being introduced to the two young men she came alive, talking and laughing in her usual vivacious way, and it didn't take her long to persuade them to go with her and Charlotte to the nightclub in the hotel.

The next few hours passed happily and quickly as they danced to the music provided by the drums and electric guitars of a Bahamian group. There were many other young people in the club, the atmosphere was relaxed and everybody danced with everybody else, and it wasn't until the drummer and leader of the musicians announced that it was one o'clock in the morning and dancing was over for the night that Charlotte realised that Nancy wasn't with her any more.

'Didn't you notice?' said Dennis Holmes, the younger of the two brothers, as she walked with him through the softly lit spacious foyer of the hotel. 'A tall blond guy turned up and she went off with him. She said she'd see you later, back at her father's house.'

Tall and blond. Burt Sharaton? Who else could entice Nancy away from something she loved to do— dancing? thought Charlotte as she let herself into the house quietly after saying goodnight to Dennis, who had walked all the way with her to the front door.

'What happened to you?' she asked cheerfully as she entered the bedroom and found Nancy still awake, sitting up in bed and reading.

'Burt came to find me, didn't you see him?' Nancy answered coolly. 'He's flying back to the States tomorrow to attend to some business

and will be away until a week next Thursday. When he comes back I might go cruising with him in the yacht.'

Charlotte made no comment. Someone had unpacked her suitcase and had arranged her clothing in one of the chests of drawers and the unused space in the hanging closet. She guessed Rosie had done it. Slipping off her dress, she found a nightgown, pulled it on and went along to the bathroom. If only she could find a way to get Luke out here before the Thursday after next when Burt Sharaton was due to return, before Nancy could go cruising with him, she thought as she brushed her teeth. Perhaps a cable could be sent instead of a letter. She would ask her father about it in the morning.

She returned to the bedroom. Nancy had put down her book and all that could be seen of her was her shining curling hair spread over the pillow. It was obvious to Charlotte that her sister didn't want to talk any more.

Although she was tired Charlotte didn't go to sleep for a while. In the other bed Nancy slept, dreaming perhaps of Burt, but Charlotte lay awake, seeing him in her mind's eye, tormented by his image, she couldn't think why.

A lean tanned face in which a liveliness had been overlaid by an expression of cynical indifference. Cold green eyes which had looked through her dismissing her as a nuisance and possibly, since she worked for a newspaper, a troublemaker.

'So how did you want him to look at you?' she asked herself. 'The way he looked at Nancy as if ... as if ... he coveted her and wanted to possess her?'

A strange pulsating heat flushed through her body at the thought of him looking at her in that way, and rolling on to her side she closed her eyes trying to blot out his image.

'Why should he look at you when Nancy is his for the taking?' she muttered. 'Go to sleep, Charlotte Mason. That green-eyed devil means nothing to you nor you to him.'

CHAPTER TWO

LIKE a butterfly with red and yellow striped wings the windsurfer skimmed over the blue waves. Dressed in a sleek white maillot swimsuit, held over her shoulders by narrow straps, Charlotte balanced on the narrow twelve-foot surfboard, her knees bent, her body slanting backwards over the rippling water. Hand gripping one of the wishbone wooden booms between which the triangular sail was slotted, she steered her tiny craft towards the crescent of shimmering sand which curved in front of the Long Cay Beach Club cottages.

Soaked from head to foot by the spray which had splashed her and exhilarated by the fast movement and excitement which came from taking part in such a precarious sport, she steered the surfboard into the shallow water, then let go of the sail so that it tipped over with its mast into the water. Stepping off the board, she pulled the mast out of its slot in the board and dragged it with the soaked sail on to the sand.

Another windsurfer, blue and purple sail fluttering, sailed into the beach, its sail also collapsing into the water.

'Congrats, Charlie, on winning,' said Dennis Holmes as he dragged his sail up on to the sand. 'You're a natural. Anyone would think you'd been sailing one for years instead of only ten days. You didn't fall off once today, while I spent half my time in the sea and having to get going again.'

'It's great fun,' said Charlotte as she shrugged into a terry towelling beach robe. 'And I have to thank you and Brian for letting me use your windsurfers.'

'You're welcome,' replied Dennis. 'How about coming up to the house for a beer?'

Charlotte hesitated. Although she had enjoyed his company she had a feeling Dennis was becoming too interested in her. He had a way of looking at her sideways from under his eyelids which caused her antennae to quiver. If she wasn't careful he would be taking it for granted he could make love to her just because she was friendly.

'No, thanks,' she said coolly, picking up her sandals. 'It's Rosie's afternoon off and I promised I'd help Nancy get the evening meal ready.'

'That's too bad,' Dennis complained as he walked beside her up the slanting beach to the private road. 'I won't see much more of you. My uncle, my mother's brother, arrived last night on his yawl. He sailed it over from Miami and he's asked Brian and me to go cruising with him. We're setting off in an hour's time. I know—I'll ask him if you can come with us. There's plenty of room on the yacht. It sleeps six quite comfortably. Would you like to come?'

'It's nice of you, Dennis, but I couldn't come. You see, Nancy's husband is arriving tomorrow and I'd like to be here when he comes. Thanks for asking, though. How long do you expect to be away?'

'About five or six days. Will you still be here when we come back?'

'Yes, I expect so. See you!'

Turning on her heel, Charlotte set off along the road in the direction of Windward Cottage. She hoped Dennis had taken the hint and wouldn't follow her to persist with his invitation. In a way she was sorry she had had to refuse to go cruising. She was sure she would have enjoyed seeing some of the other islands, especially from the deck of a big yawl. But to have accepted Dennis's invitation would have been to give him ideas.

Bending down, she slid her sandals on and fastened them. Her ten days at Long Cay had been good from the point of view of weather

and entertainment. She had managed to acquire a smooth tan which rivalled Nancy's and with her sister she had visited most of the places of interest in the old colonial capital city Nassau, visiting the straw market and the shopping arcades as well as the white-towered Christ Church Cathedral. In the evenings she had crossed the bridge to Paradise Island to lose money at the Casino and to dance to the beat of Bahamian drums at various night spots. Yes, so far her holiday had been a hundred per cent successful and even if she went back to England tomorrow she would have plenty to write about which would interest the readers of the *Witherton Daily Globe and Record*.

Two blond-haired boys with skinny bronze-coloured bodies, bare except for brief swimming shorts, raced across the road in front of her and on to the beach. Trailing kites behind them, they had come from the Sharaton mansion, as Nancy called it, and she supposed they were the sons of Burt Sharaton's sister who was still on holiday in the low pink-walled house which nestled behind its gaudily flowering shrubs.

There was a small dark boy- dressed in a bright Bahamian print shirt and blue jeans lingering by the gate in the white fence around Windward Cottage. From under the wide brim of the straw hat he wore aslant on his head his big brown eyes studied her solemnly.

'Are you de lady who live here?' he asked. 'You sure look like her.'

'Yes, I live here.'

'Boss Sharaton sent this,' he said, and handed her a square of folded white paper.

'You're sure it's for me?' she asked.

'Uhuh, Ah is sure. Give it to the lady who lives at Windward Cottage, he says.'

Charlotte took the paper from his hand and turned it over, looking for a name which might be written on it. There was none. Puzzled, she looked up. The boy had gone. Shrugging, she opened the gate and went into the garden. The note must be for Nancy. It couldn't be for her, not from 'Boss' Sharaton as the boy had called Burt Sharaton.

About to open the back door, she pulled up short. If Burt Sharaton had sent Nancy a note he must be back at Long Cay, a day too soon, before Luke had arrived from England. She stared at the paper. What message did it contain? Dared she open it and read it?

After the brilliance of the sunshine the house seemed dim. It was quiet too without Rosie who was always singing and there was no sign of Nancy downstairs. Obviously she hadn't returned from Nassau yet.

She went into the cool living room and flopped down in an armchair and stared at the folded paper she held in her hand. How strange that Burt Sharaton hadn't bothered to write a name on it. Or had he forgotten there were now two women staying at Windward Cottage? Her mouth curled up at the corners in a little self-mocking smile. That was probably the way of it. He had forgotten about her, Nancy's sister.

Slowly she opened the paper out. It was crisp and expensive and crackled. It wasn't done to open someone else's note, she chided herself guiltily, but after all it had been given to her and there was no name on it.

The writing was bold and sloping and Burt Sharaton hadn't wasted time or effort.

Sweetheart, he began, Remember what we talked about the Sunday before last? Be at the dock where the yacht is tied up tonight at eight. Bring only a few clothes. Burt.

Charlotte folded the paper quickly. The note wasn't for her, it was for Nancy. She turned it in her hand, opened it and read it again. The words seemed to leap at her from the paper. How curt and cool they were! God, he must be sure of Nancy to write to her like that. Apart from the endearment there was no word of love, no entreaty or cajolery. Did he know then that Nancy would go with him, would sail away with him at high tide, into the darkness of the night?

Outside gravel crunched under wheels and she started up from the chair. Crumpling the note in her hand, she bounded up the stairs, went into the bathroom and closing the door locked it. Nancy was back from her shopping expedition. Leaning against the wash basin, Charlotte smoothed out the note again. What should she do with it? The written words blurred before her eyes as an idea grew slowly in her mind. She could flush the note down the lavatory and her sister would be none the wiser and so wouldn't go to meet Burt Sharaton tonight.

But if her sister didn't go wouldn't he come looking for her? Charlotte chewed at her hp, hearing Nancy's voice calling to her. She couldn't let Nancy go off with him, not now when Luke was expected to arrive tomorrow in answer to her father's cable.

'Charlie? Where are you?' Nancy called.

'In the loo. Won't be long!' she shouted back, and began to tear the note into small pieces. She tossed them into the lavatory, feeling her heart leap and thud with excitement at her own temerity.

She would go to the marina dock to meet Burt Sharaton instead of Nancy and she would tell him her sister had decided not to go sailing with him because she was expecting her husband to arrive tomorrow. Yes, that was it. And if she was any judge of character at all Burt wouldn't hang about waiting for Nancy. He would go off on his cruise

by himself as he had so many times and by the time he came back Nancy would be gone, back to England, and so would she.

She flushed the lavatory and watched the pieces of paper whirl away. When she left the bathroom she went into the bedroom and changed out of her swimsuit into a long evening skirt made from flowered silky cotton and a brief white cotton bodice held in place round her neck by thin string-like ribbons. By the time she went downstairs to face Nancy she was in control of herself and was able to pretend that she had nothing on her mind except the fun she had experienced that afternoon windsurfing.

During dinner she chattered about her experiences aware all the time that both her father and Nancy were only politely interested. He looked very worried about something and Nancy was sunk in gloom. When the meal was over Charlotte had a quick whispered conversation on the patio with her father about whether they should tell Nancy her husband was arriving the next day. They decided against it and Grant went off to the hotel where he said another labour problem had reared its ugly head.

'I've got an awful headache, Charlie,' Nancy complained. 'Would you mind if I went to bed?'

Thinking of the note she had flushed down the lavatory, Charlotte couldn't help having a twinge of conscience. Had Nancy been expecting it? Was that why she was so gloomy? Well, there was nothing she could do about it now, she thought as she slipped out of the house and began to walk in the direction of the hotel and marina, and it was for the best Nancy was safer off in bed than going to meet Burt Sharaton.

Golden light shafted out of the Sharaton house and ahead of her the hotel was a column of brightly twinkling windows. She knew exactly where to go because during the week Nancy had taken her to see

Burt's yacht where it was tied up in one of the deep water berths at the end of the concrete docks which formed the marina, thrusting out into the blue water of the bay in front of the hotel.

As she walked along the lamplit dock, her sandal heels clicking, Charlotte glanced sideways-at the boats she passed. Some were huge motor yachts, luxurious in the extreme, like floating mansions complete with lush green house plants, thick carpeting, and some were no-nonsense ocean sailing yachts with high soaring masts, furled sails and glittering stainless steel fittings.

All was quiet at the end of the dock. In the lamplight the gold lettering on the stern of Burt Sharaton's big ketch gleamed softly. *White Cockatoo*. The yacht was well-named, for it lay like a bird at rest, its wings folded as it bobbed lightly on the water, pulling a little tentatively at the thick rope warps which held it to the staging as if it longed to be free.

Charlotte peered at her watch. Five past eight, yet there was no one on deck waiting and watching, although the light shafting out into the darkness from the open hatchway indicated that there was someone below decks.,

Suddenly nervous of meeting Burt Sharaton, afraid of those ice-green all-observant eyes and that cold cutting tongue of his, she paced to the end of the wooden staging. Wind, warm and smelling of the sea, teased the dark curls which clustered about her brow and moulded the thin stuff of her skirt against her long limbs. From the hotel came the rhythmic beat of the music to which she had danced so often that week, exotic and alien, singing of sunny days and warm tropical nights, stirring the senses—

'I thought you'd changed your mind and had decided not to come,' said a voice behind her, and before she could turn two hard arms slid about her. Hands cupped her breasts possessively and she was pulled

against a hard masculine body. Bold lips caressed the nape of her neck provocatively, sending sweet shivers of sensuousness shooting through her so that she stiffened in alarm. The arms tightened about her and she felt the roughness of his chin against her cheek and the shake of his body when he laughed softly. 'Afraid, honey?' he scoffed. 'No need to be. I'll take care of you.'

Placing her hands on his wrists, Charlotte gripped both of them with all her strength and pulled his marauding hands away. Twisting, she faced him.

'I'm not Nancy!' she hissed, and stepped back uneasily when she saw a wicked murderous glint flash in his eyes as he recognised her. He swore softly and succinctly.

'I'd forgotten about you,' he added jeeringly. 'Didn't Nancy get my note?' he demanded, stepping towards her and she stepped back again.

'She isn't coming,' she replied, her head up, giving him glare for glare. 'She ... she said I was to tell you her husband is arriving from England tomorrow and so she doesn't want to go sailing with you--' She broke off and shuffled backwards again because he was advancing towards her, the expression on his shadowed face menacing.

'I asked you a question,' he rapped. 'Did she get my note?'

'She—' Charlotte began, and stepped backwards on to—*nothing*.

For a second she teetered on the edge of the staging, disbelief flashing through her mind as she tried to maintain her balance, but it was too late. She had stepped back too vigorously. Backwards she went and downwards to the glinting water, hitting it with a noisy splash. Warm still from a day's sunlight, it closed over her head, rushing into her open mouth so that she sank. The noise of it roared frighteningly into her ears. Spluttering and flailing with her arms, hampered by the

length of her evening skirt which clung to her legs, making moving them difficult, she fought to the surface.

'Charlie?' Burt's voice was sharp and carried clearly. 'I'm going to throw you a lifebelt. Watch out!'

'Okay,' she was foolish enough to answer. Her mouth filled with water and she sank again.

When she came to the surface again she was further from the dock than she expected. Something hit the water near to her, sending up a splash. It gleamed yellow in the moonlight and she recognised it as one of the horseshoe-shaped plastic-covered lifebuoys she had seen attached to the stainless steel railings at the stern of the yacht. She grabbed it and fitted it about her waist, knowing it would support her no matter how much clothing she had on.

'Charlie?' Burt called again. She could just see him a vague shadowy figure, floodlit by the dock lights. 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes. I've got the lifebuoy.'

'Good. There's a line attached to it, so I'm going to haul you in. Ready?'

She shouted back that she was and at once she began to glide through the water, pushing forward with her hands in a slow breast-stroke and kicking her legs out as much as she could, secure in the knowledge that she would soon reach the staging.

When she did Burt kneeled down, grasped her shoulders and hauled her out. One heave and he had her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and was stepping towards the yacht.

'You can put me down,' she said coldly. The position in which she found herself made her feel strangely helpless and at his mercy. 'I'm quite capable of walking.'

He ignored her request and balancing deftly stepped off the staging and down into the centre cockpit of his yacht. Down the companionway he carried her into the spacious saloon. Only then did he allow her to slide to her feet.

'In there is a small bathroom,' he said curtly, pointing to a narrow door set in the teak panelling on the starboard side of the cabin. 'You'll find towels.'

'Thank you, but--'

'I'll fetch you something dry to put on,' he added, ignoring her protest again, his face hard and impassive. Turning away, he went round the companionway into a passage which appeared to lead to the after-cabin of the boat.

Water dripping from her hair and clothing was forming wet patches on the beige brown-flecked carpet which covered the floor of the saloon. It would be best to take his advice and dry herself. She could hardly return to Windward Cottage looking half-drowned. She opened the narrow door. The bathroom was small but big enough to hold a wash basin, a shower stall and a lavatory. Thick brown towels hung on a rack. Catching sight of herself in the mirror above the wash-basin, Charlotte made a face at the wet tails of hair straggling about her wide-eyed triangular-shaped face and was about to step into the bathroom when Burt came back carrying a pair of blue jeans and a navy blue T-shirt.

'You'll probably find them a few sizes too wide, but they'll be better than what you're wearing right now,' he said coolly, his cold hard glance flickering over her, making her very much aware of the brief

cotton bodice she was wearing which had slipped out of place when she was in the water so that most of her full rounded sun-tanned breasts were revealed. 'Although you behave like a tomboy, you're all woman, aren't you?' he mocked insinuatingly, and her arms crossed instinctively and defensively across her chest. 'Take your time and dry yourself properly,' he urged, offering the clothes to her again.

She took them, gave him what she hoped was a scathing glance, went into the bathroom, closed the door and made sure it was locked. She stripped off every article of clothing and rubbed herself dry. The navy blue T-shirt was too wide and drooped off her shoulders. The jeans were too wide and too long, but there was a rope belt threaded through the slots at the waistband and when she had stuffed the folds of the T-shirt into the top of the jeans and had tied the rope tightly, they stayed up. All she had to do was turn up the bottoms of the legs.

How typical the whole episode was of her, she thought, as she towelled her hair dry. In doing '*anything*' to prevent Nancy from landing in trouble by going off with a man who wasn't her husband she had only succeeded in making a fool of herself in front of that same man.

She wrung excess water from her wet clothing, rolled it in a bundle and picked up her sandals. Her best evening shoes and made from leather, they looked very much as if they were ruined by their immersion in salt water.

Opening the bathroom door, Charlotte stepped into the saloon. She had never been on such a large yacht and had never realised how comfortable one could be. Smooth teakwood panelling, gold and brown tweedy upholstered settee berths, softly gleaming ceiling lights, the cabin was a home from home. It had everything money could buy, everything that would impress Nancy and perhaps even convert her to sailing. Everything, including a powerful engine which was throbbing away somewhere behind the companionway.

The engine was going! Charlotte went quickly towards the steps, realising with a flicker of alarm that the boat was moving. Up the narrow stairway she scrambled into the cockpit. By the light from the compass housing in front of the wheel Burt Sharaton's face and eyes gleamed as he slowly turned the wheel. Above the noise of the engine came the swish of water under the bow along the sides of the hull.

Looking about her, seeing the lights of the marina slipping away behind the stern of the boat, Charlotte gasped in disbelief.

'What are you doing?' she demanded, turning to Burt.,

'Putting out to sea,' was the imperturbable reply. 'Not much time left to get over the coral reef and out of the lagoon—the water won't be high for much longer.'

Dismay chilling her almost as much as the night wind, Charlotte could only stare at him. His glance steady on the compass and only occasionally lifting to look ahead at the moonlit water, he ignored her.

'But I don't want to go to sea with you,' she flared suddenly. 'You had no right to set off with me aboard. You should have waited until I'd gone ashore. Take me back to the marina at once!'

He took a moment off from watching the compass to give her a lightning-bright glance, but said nothing and did nothing to obey her command, shifting his glance to a panel of instrument dials set into the bulkhead which supported the roof of the cabin. A red needle hovered between illuminated black lines, some of which were marked with numbers.

The boat surged inexorably through the water towards two distant lights, one red and one white, which marked the entrance to the lagoon from the sea. Realising that nothing she said was going to make him change course and return to the marina, Charlotte dropped

her bundle of clothing and sandals and seized hold of the wheel in an attempt to turn it.

With one thrust of a powerful forearm he shoved her away and losing her balance on the heaving deck she fell against a cockpit seat, banging her elbow bruisingly against the coaming.

'You crazy hellion!' he rasped. 'Can't you see we're in a narrow channel? One swerve in the wrong direction and we could go aground on coral rocks which would rip the hull of the boat to shreds.'

'You hurt me!' she seethed, rubbing her arm ostentatiously. 'You assaulted me!'

He gave her another quick glance and by the glow of the compass light she saw his teeth flash in his shadowed face as he grinned.

'I warned you, didn't I, when we first met, that I'd make you suffer if you didn't keep your nose out of my affairs?' he said softly. 'Well, consider the suffering has started. If you don't want to be hurt again stay out of my way until I've cleared the lagoon. Go down below, read a book, have a sleep—please yourself what you do, but remember this golden rule: Don't interfere with the helmsman when he's steering a tight course in confined waters.'

Biting her lip, she sank back on the vinyl-covered cushion which covered the long seat and looked away from him towards the land. The lights of the hotel and those of the bungalows strung out behind Valentine Beach were no bigger than the stars now. The distance was too great for her to swim even if she did try to escape by flinging herself overboard, and she didn't really relish being in the water in the dark.

But if she did jump overboard it was possible he would slow down, turn the boat and pick her up, her thoughts went on. It would delay him. He would miss high water and be forced to return to the marina.

She sat up in readiness to step from the cockpit on to the side deck. She would have to climb over the stainless steel wire of the lifelines before she could jump and—

A flashing red light appeared on the other side of the boat and was gone. Immediately the engine picked up speed as the boat surged out of the lagoon into the sea, rolling a Utile from side to side as it crunched over waves which had been stirred up by the night wind.

Charlotte slumped back against the cockpit coaming. Now it was impossible for her to make out distinctly the lights of the hotel and the marina in front of it. Her chance to swim for it had gone. The wheel spun under Burt's hands as he altered course and with masts swaying, white spray flying over her bow, *White Cockatoo* surged forward.

'Where are you ... we ... going?' Charlotte asked, her voice unsteady, much to her annoyance.

'Maybe to the Exumas,' he drawled non-committally.

'Where are they?'

'To the east and south of New Providence,' he replied. 'As soon as we've cleared the entrance to Nassau Harbour we can put up the sails and reach round Paradise Island in this wind, then run south-east.'

'I'm not going to put up any sails,' she retorted.

'You don't have to. I can manage them myself. The foresail unfurls with a flick of a rope from the cockpit and the mainsail is a new one. It furls away into the mast and can be hauled out from here too. The mizzen behind us is also easy to set,' he said coolly.

'Everything money can buy,' she jibed nastily. 'How long will it take us to get to the Exumas?'

'All night.'

'And what then?' she asked uneasily. The rolling and pitching of the yacht was having a disturbing effect on her stomach.

'We'll take it easy—sailing and swimming. diving for conch, sunbathing,' he replied.

Charlotte licked dry lips and stared away over the heaving moon-dappled water. Now she could see the flashing light of a lighthouse and beyond it the blaze of lights which were the hotels on Paradise Island. 'For how long?' she asked.

'A week, maybe longer. It depends on how well you and I get on together,' he drawled suggestively, his hard glance flicking her.

'But you can't make me stay with you for so long,' she protested. 'My father will be worried. He has no idea where I am. No one will know where I am.'

'Nancy will, won't she? You said she'd sent you to tell me why she couldn't come,' he replied smoothly, but again his glance was wickedly derisive as if he guessed Nancy knew nothing about his note, and Charlotte had to look away quickly. 'She'll realise, I expect, that I've taken you as a substitute for her and will tell your father,' he went on coolly. 'I hope you can cook as well as she can.'

'Is that why you asked her to come with you, to cook for you?' she asked hopefully, turning to him again.

'You know it isn't,' he jeered softly. 'I asked her to come because she offered to be my companion on this cruise. You could say she threw herself at me.' His tone was biting and Charlotte flinched on behalf of her sister. 'But you know about Nancy and her weaknesses,' he continued. 'That's why you've interfered, isn't it? *I'll do anything to prevent Nancy from ruining her marriage.* Isn't that what you said?

Or something like it? ,Well, you've done your *anything* and now you're going to take the consequences.' His hard glittering glance seemed to rake her. 'You're not as beautiful as Nancy, but you have your own attractions. I suspect that Unlike her you're a virgin, so possibly your company will prove to be more stimulating than hers.'

'You can't mean ... you wouldn't be so brutish as to ... as to...'
Charlotte broke off as sudden sickness rose up in her throat and she had to clap her hand over her mouth.

'To what? To seduce you? Is that what you were going to say? But of course I am,' he said tauntingly. 'Unless of course you're like your sister and are more than willing to meet me half way, then seduction won't be necessary.'

'Oh, Nancy led you on finely, didn't she?' Charlotte countered mockingly, if a little shakily.

'What do you mean, she led me on?' he demanded sharply.

'Nancy never could resist rousing a man's passions and then turning him down at the last minute.' She forced herself to laugh scornfully. 'How we laughed, she and I, when your note came inviting her to come to you tonight! She guessed you wanted her only as a pillow friend. She knew that even if she wasn't married to Luke you're not the type to offer marriage.'

'So you laughed, did you?' he said, and his voice was softly threatening as he gave her a slitted gleaming look. 'I don't believe Nancy ever saw my note,' he went on. 'I believe you intercepted it, you damned busybody.'

'Oh,' said Charlotte weakly. The awful dizzying nausea was taking all her strength and she wished she could die, right there and then on the spot. 'What makes you think that?' she gasped.

'If Nancy had received it and had decided not to come she would have sent a note back to me with the boy. She wouldn't have seen you, because you see she didn't want you to know anything about...What's the matter?' he interrupted himself sharply. 'Feeling sick?'

'Yes,' she wailed miserably.

'Well, be sick.' He sounded most unsympathetic. 'Only in the sea, not in the cockpit.'

Hanging over the side of the yacht, Charlotte was painfully and wretchedly sick. If only the boat would stop rolling and pitching. If only she had taken her father's advice and stayed out of Burt Sharaton's way. If only she hadn't intercepted his note to Nancy. Oh God, she had only herself to blame for her present distressing predicament, and that was small comfort.

She stopped vomiting and sank back limply on the seat. It seemed to her that the engine was idling now and that the boat was rolling more than ever. The wind was strong too, whistling in the rigging and the lifelines, chilling her to the marrow through the thin T- shirt. Hearing a crackling sound, she raised her head and looked around heavily. The foresail had been unfurled and was flapping noisily, its white terylene shimmering ghost-like in the darkness, and behind her Burt was pulling on some ropes and another sail, the mizzen, was going up the after-mast which was stepped close to the hatchway to the stern cabin. *

When that sail was up Burt went to one of the winches on the cockpit coaming and pulled on another rope. The foresail stopped crackling, filled with wind. The boat heeled over as the other sail filled with wind too. He turned off the engine so that the whine of wind in the rigging and the sigh of waves against the hull were the only sounds.

'Feeling better?' Back in his position behind the wheel he spoke crisply.

'No.'

'Never been sailing before?'

'Yes, but only in a dinghy, never in a yacht like this on the sea,' she mumbled, and turning away she was ignominiously sick again, hating him for being there at this time of utmost degradation and humiliation.

'Go down below and get into one of the bunks,' he ordered, 'Remember to pull up the leeboard at the side of the bunk and lock it so you won't roll out. The wind is strengthening and we're in for a rough, rolling ride. If I'd known you were coming and hadn't been to sea before I'd have advised you to take a travel pill, but it's too late now.'

Subdued by her close encounter with the wind and the sea and unable to argue any more, Charlotte shuffled across the cockpit and crept down the companionway. In the galley she could hear the clanging of pans and the clink of dishes in cupboards. Holding on to handles especially designed for grasping when the yacht was sailing, she lurched in the direction of the wide settee berth in the saloon and collapsed on it. She found the leeboard, pulled it up and locked it. Groaning, she closed her eyes and lay down.

Up and down, up and down the berth heaved, side to side it rolled. Rearing up on one elbow, Charlotte groped for the locks on the leeboard. She had to find something to be sick into.

'This what you want?' Burt asked, and looking up she found he was there, holding a red bucket. He put it down on the floor beside the bunk.

'Thank you,' she gasped faintly, and was promptly sick again. When she had finished she lay back exhausted, aware that he was still there but dressed now in yellow waterproof trousers and hooded jacket. Along the side of the hull close by she could hear the rushing of water as the boat surged inwards and above her the creaking of masts and the roaring of the wind.

'Is it blowing a gale?' she whispered.

'No, just a steady thirty knots,' he replied calmly, and opening a locker above the bunk he reached in and pulled out a pillow and blanket. As he handed her the pillow he grinned down at her in wicked amusement. The boredom which so often marred his face had gone from it as if wiped away by a sponge. 'You look green,' he taunted, obviously delighted because she was suffering. 'Sorry I can't share the pillow with you tonight, but there'll be other nights,' he added.

'Not if I can help it,' she seethed, taking the pillow and putting it under her head, and as nausea churned in her stomach again she turned her face away from him. 'Oh, go away,' she moaned. 'Leave me alone. I hate you! I think you're the meanest, most cruel man I've ever met!'

He didn't reply but dropped the blanket over her and to her surprise tucked it in about her. He moved away and she heard the creaking noise of his waterproofs as he went up the companionway. Closing her eyes she tried to ignore the alarming noises she could hear and slowly but inevitably, rocked by the movement of the boat, she fell asleep.

It was the absence of movement and noise which actually brought her out of the sodden sleep into which she had fallen. Opening her eyes, she stared across the cabin. Sunlight was slanting into it from the open hatchway. Everything was still. Nothing rose and fell and what was most wonderful of all, she didn't feel ill any more. In fact she felt

wonderful, completely rested and ready to eat a large breakfast, preferably waffles, she thought hazily. Hot melt-in-the-mouth waffles with fresh butter and maple syrup.

She sat up, unlocked the leeboard, pushed aside the blanket and stood up. The bucket into which she had been sick had gone, removed no doubt by Burt. But where was he? Asleep in his cabin in the stern? She went through the galley to that cabin. The door was open and there was no one sleeping on the wide double berth.

She went up the narrow companionway which led out of the stern cabin to the cockpit. Bright morning sunlight; struck sparks off stainless steel fittings and warmed the teakwood floor. On one of the long seats Burt lay stretched out, still wearing his yellow waterproofs and apparently fast asleep.

Going across to the other seat, Charlotte stepped on to the side deck and looked about her. The yacht was at anchor in a small bay, its bow pointing towards a curving beach of shimmering sand. Beyond the beach a row of coconut palms were silhouetted against the pale blue sky. They were on an island, the only island in the immediate area, so it seemed, for all around it the sea stretched for miles, calm, blue and empty.

Charlotte looked at the island again. There seemed to be some sort of house built amongst the trees. Her glance went back to Burt and stepping back into the cockpit she moved curiously towards him. How sound asleep was he? Sound enough not to waken if she climbed over the lifelines and dived into the water to swim ashore and ask whoever lived in the house to help her return to New Providence Island?

She bent over him. He slept quietly, without snoring and without any tremor of the thick bronze fringes of lashes. His lean cheeks and his chin were darkened with beard stubble and tails of his golden hair

straggled across his broad lined forehead. He looked happy, she decided, absolutely at peace with himself and the rest of the world.

Pursing her lips, she blew on his nearest cheek, a trick she had used in the past on Nancy to find out if her sister was really asleep or only pretending. Nothing happened, so she blew again, harder. A fine line appeared between his shapely eyebrows and his eyelashes quivered. She moved away and watched warily as he raised a hand and brushed at his cheek. He turned over on to his side and with a sigh settled into sleep again.

Walking stealthily in her bare feet, Charlotte went down into the cabin and into the small bathroom. She noticed that her wet panties had been hung up to dry in there. Taking off the heavy, jeans she was wearing, she pulled on the nylon panties, which were almost dry. They would be easier to swim in than the jeans. As she went back into the cockpit she noticed the sturdy rowing dinghy which was carried in davits at the stern of the boat. Perhaps she should launch that and row ashore?

No. She shook her head and stepped up on the side deck again. She wasn't sure how to work the davits and the noise they might make would wake Burt. She looked down at the water. It was so clear that sunlight striking through the rippled surface was reflected in a criss-cross pattern of shimmering yellow lines on the hard packed coral sand which formed the bottom. Long graceful weeds growing between the cracks in the sand waved gently and a shoal of tiny silvery fishes darted about.

She looked across at the beach. How far? About half a kilometre? In this weather and while the water was calm she could swim the distance easily.

Behind her she heard the rustle of waterproof clothing. Quickly she swung a leg over the lifeline, balanced her foot on the rail of the boat

and swung her other leg over, lifted her arms above her head and dived, cutting cleanly through the water and coming to the surface some distance away from the boat. She didn't look back, but using an over-arm crawl stroke, made for the shore.

The water was cool and buoyant, refreshingly so, and a feeling of joyous delight surged through her as she savoured the pleasure of being where she was at that moment in time, in clean salty water under a blue sunlit sky, swimming towards a pretty tropical island.

Finding the distance greater than she had anticipated she turned on her back to rest and float, gasping and almost sinking when she saw the white-painted dinghy which belonged to the yacht coming towards her, its pointed bow seeming to tower above the surface of the water from her point of view. His hair gleaming brassily under the sun, Burt had his back to her and she could see he was without a shirt, the muscles of his sun-tanned back rippling under the skin as he rowed with long lazy strokes.

Charlotte turned and began to swim as fast as she could, but inevitably the dinghy overtook her and being now short of breath she was glad to tread water when it cut across in front of her.

'Where do you think you're going?' Burt drawled, backwatering with his oars to keep the dinghy stationary.

'To the island.'

'Okay, I'll see you there,' he replied easily, and began to row towards the shore.

Now what should she do? If she went ashore he wouldn't give her a chance to speak to anyone there to ask them for help. Should she swim back to the boat? She looked back at it. Masts glinting gold in the sunlight, it nodded at its reflection in the clear water, like a bird preening itself, and somehow it seemed a long way off, further than

she wanted to swim right then, when she was feeling slightly weak from hunger. She might as well accept the fact that for the time being Burt Sharaton had defeated her intention of getting help and swim ashore.

The dinghy had been pulled well up the beach and there was no sign of Burt when at last she walked through the shallows and on to the warm sand. For a moment an imp of mischief held her beside the small boat as she was tempted to push it back into the water and row back to the yacht without him. Then she noticed there were no oarlocks and no oars. Wise sailor that he was, he had either taken them with him or hidden them somewhere.

The coarse grains of coral sand scratched her bare feet as she wandered along in the direction of the house. There was no sound on the island except the sighing whisper of the sea as it washed against rocks. As she drew nearer to the house she realised with a feeling of disappointment that it was only a shack built of roughly hewn palm tree trunks and thatched with palm leaves.

Through the shrubs of sage and sea-grapes she pushed until she was close to the open doorway and looked into a room which was open to the sky where part of the roof had been torn away. Debris of dead leaves and old coconut shells lay about in heaps on the earthen floor. There was no one there to help her. The island was deserted.

'What did you expect on an island far away from civilisation?' Burt spoke behind her and she turned to find him standing in the doorway watching her. Dressed only in cut-off jean shorts which had frayed at the edges with his sun-bronzed skin and sun-bleached blond hair he looked like a shipwrecked mariner. 'All mod cons?' he added mockingly.

'I thought there might be someone living here who would help me,' she replied honestly.

'You need help?' His eyebrows lifted in surprise.

'Yes—to get away from you. And I'm worried about my father. He'll be frantic not knowing where I am.'

'He knows where you are,' he said coolly. 'Last night I contacted the marine radio operator at Nassau on the V.H.F. and asked him to pass on a message to Grant to say that you're with me and won't be returning to Long Cay for a few days.'

'V.H.F.?' she queried in puzzlement.

'Very High Frequency radio. I have one on board.'

'Then couldn't I contact Dad on it and speak to him?'

'Not from here. The radio only has a range of about twenty-five miles and we're further away from Nassau than that.' He came into the house. 'So you can put out of your mind any idea you might have of radioing for help,' he went on in soft silky tones. 'You're going to stay with me and substitute for Nancy.'

'And if I refuse?' she countered, her chin up, although inwardly she was uneasy and she stepped back from him cautiously, glancing behind her and remembering what had happened to her the last time she had backed away from him.

His eyes narrowed fractionally and their glance roved over her insolently, lingering on the shapeliness of her long legs fully revealed by her brief panties before shifting to her face.

'If you don't your father will probably be out of a job,' he said coldly.

'You ... you'd sack him?' she exclaimed.

'Not only sack him but also take him to court,' he drawled.

'But... but why? What has he done?' she gasped.

'His management of the hotel has been extremely inefficient,' he said, watching her closely.

'Inefficiency isn't a crime,' she argued.

'It is when it shows up in the accounts,' he countered dryly.

'I don't understand,' she muttered.

'Someone has been embezzling money,' he went on. 'And you know surely that your father's record isn't good in that respect. He left his last job under a cloud of suspicion.'

'But it was only suspicion,' she said defensively. 'It wasn't proved he'd embezzled from the company which took over the Aquarius.'

'Not proved, no,' he conceded. 'But the investigation which was carried out showed he was the only person employed who had a motive for embezzling. He'd run up some pretty frightening debts.'

'I know.' She sighed and nodded. 'It was because of Mum. She became very ill while she was living out here, and Dad took her to a clinic in the States where he hoped she might be cured. She was there a long time and the bills were huge. Dad tried to raise the money by gambling at the Casino, but he only got into more debt, and then the group that owned the Casino began to put the squeeze on him and—'

'I know all that,' he interrupted her harshly. 'He soft-soaped my mother into offering him his present job by spinning that yarn and by reminding her that he and she came from the same town in England.'

'It wasn't a yarn—it was the truth,' she flared, her eyes flashing indignantly. 'But I don't expect anyone like you to understand,' she went on scathingly, giving him a scornful look. 'You've always had

plenty of money. You don't know what it's like to have someone you love be very ill and not be able to afford the treatment they need. You don't know what it's like either to be threatened by powerful people because you're powerful yourself and you aren't above handing out threats. You're threatening me now.'

'You're damned right I am,' he jeered, stepping towards her. 'I warned you you'd suffer if you interfered with me. Either you substitute for Nancy, become my pillow friend as you called it last night, or your father goes to jail.'

'You really mean it?' she gasped^ backing off from him again and colliding with one of the broken chairs which were the only items of furniture left in the deserted shack. 'If I agree to ... to be your mistress you'll let Dad stay as manager of the hotel at Long Cay?'

'I really mean it,' he replied, stepping towards her again.

'No, oh no, I couldn't do anything like that. I couldn't. I... I ... don't like you enough,' she cried, and grasping the broken chair tossed it in his way and was off, running through the doorway as if running from the devil.

The scrubby bushes of sage grazed her legs as she rushed through them and ran down to the beach. She couldn't make much speed because her feet kept sinking into the soft dry sand. Looking over her shoulder, she saw Burt was following her, but he wasn't running. Hands in the pockets of his shorts, he was sauntering along with lazy strides as if he had all the time in the world.

Charlotte slowed down. What was the use in running when there was nowhere to run to? There was no place where she could hide from him on the whole of the island. And there was nowhere on the wide wide sea either. She was trapped with him in a situation created by

her own impulsive efforts to protect Nancy, but also by her father's inability to pay his debts.

It would kill her father if he was taken to court and accused of embezzling. He would take his own life rather than do time in jail. Had Nancy known? Was that why she had been making up to Burt? Had she hoped to divert him from his intention to sack their father?

By the time she reached the dinghy Burt had caught up with her. He brought the oars from behind a palm tree where he had put them and laid them in the small boat.

'Why did you run off like that?' he asked. 'What did you think I was going to do?'

'You know,' she retorted, flinging round to face him, and to her inner mortification he laughed at her.

'But the place and the time were both wrong,' he said, laughter lingering in his eyes and making them sparkle. 'Seduction should be pleasurable not only for the seducer but also for the seduced. It shouldn't be hurried or skimped in any way.' He reached out suddenly and grasped a handful of the loose wet T-shirt she was wearing and no matter how she tried to hang back she was drawn inexorably towards him. 'You see, I don't know you very well,' he continued softly, putting his face so close to hers she could feel his breath warm on her cheek and see tiny white lines etched by humour fanning out from the corners of his eyes. 'And so I have to find out first how much you know or don't know about making love. My guess is that you know very little.'

'Making love?' she jeered scornfully, looking right into his eyes, although being so close to him was making her legs shake in the most peculiar way. 'There's nothing loving about what you intend to do to me or about what you intended to do to Nancy. You don't love her and

you don't love me. In fact I would be surprised if you have it in you to love anyone but yourself. Self-gratification is all you're interested in. Now let go of me!

She kicked at him, but only succeeded in stubbing her big toe on his hard shin. So she brought her knee up and at the same time clawed at his face. Gasping with pain, he let go of her and she took off again. But she didn't get very far. Big hands caught at her waist and she was thrown to the ground, all the breath being shaken out of her. He was on top of her at once, grasping her wrists and spreading her arms out on either side. Both breathing heavily, they glared at each other.

'Brute!' she seethed.

'Hellcat!' he rasped between taut lips.

'Get off!' Charlotte tried to twist from under the weight of his body.

'Not until I've made you pay for what you just did. I don't like being kneed in the groin or having my face scratched,' he retorted, and the glitter in his eyes frightened her.

'And I don't like being tossed about like a rag doll. I'm not a possession of yours!' she hissed.

'Not yet, but you're going to be, that is if you really care about your father's peace of mind,' he drawled threateningly.

Too late she tried to twist her head sideways. His lips claimed hers and the weight of him flattened her against the hot coarse sand. Escape was impossible.

Warm and surprisingly gentle were his lips moving against hers in subtle invitation and the stubble of his beard tickled her chin and her cheek. He let go of one of her wrists and she felt his fingertips at her throat, his thumb moving tantalisingly over the tender hollow behind

her ear. From between their thick gold- tipped lashes his eyes watched her narrowly as his tongue flickered provocatively along the tight line of her lips.

'Nice,' he murmured, lifting his head. He traced the shape of her lips with a forefinger. 'Sweet, cool and innocent. Teaching them to respond with passion is going to be interesting and stimulating,' he added tauntingly.

'I'll never respond to you,' she retorted gaspingly.

'No?' The lift of his eyebrows mocked her. 'We'll see about that.'

Strong and brown, his muscular hands curved about her face, making it impossible for her to move her head. They pressed hard against her cheeks, making her lips pout and part involuntarily. Like emeralds set in a golden mask his eyes glittered with green fire and his lips were slightly parted to show the shining whiteness of his teeth and the tip of his tongue.

The wanton expression on his face aroused strange primitive sensations within her which seemed to coil in a knot at the pit of her stomach. Her breasts swelled and tautened, aching to be touched. Alarmed by these reactions over which she seemed to have no control, Charlotte closed her eyes tightly so that she couldn't see him any more. At once the heat of his mouth pressed against hers again.

She tried to resist by stiffening all over. Then she remembered her father. For his sake she would have to make some show of responding. Slowly, tentatively she pursed her lips, letting them quiver against the ones which were tempting them. At once all kinds of new feelings invaded her body and under the heat of his it seemed to become like molten wax taking the imprint of his masculinity through the thin scanty clothing she was wearing. She was lost, at his mercy, and there wasn't anything she could do about it.

At last Burt moved and rolled away from her. Through her lashes she watched him rise lazily to his feet.

'Time for breakfast,' he announced coolly, and went towards the dinghy.

Charlotte lay still, one arm across her eyes. Ostensibly she was shielding them from the brilliant sunshine which was pouring down on her, but in fact she was hiding the tears which had brimmed suddenly. Burt had only kissed her, but the way he had done it, arrogantly and against her will, made her feel as if she had been violated in every part of her being. He had done something she had always vowed she would never let a man do. He had taken something from her she hadn't wanted to give. Hate for him surged up, white-hot, within her. Never would she forgive him for what he had just done. Never.

CHAPTER THREE

ACROSS clear, sun-glittered water the white dinghy bobbed slowly and rhythmically. Oars creaked in the rowlocks. Water popped under the bow. Seated in the stern Charlotte watched globules of water sparkle as they dripped from oar-blades every time they were lifted out of the water, aware all the time that facing her as he was, sitting on the centre thwart, Burt was watching her as he rowed.

Beyond the shape of *White Cockatoo* the sea was wide, flat and empty. They were alone, far away from anywhere, so far away she could imagine that the rest of the world didn't exist; that he was the only man and she was the only woman who were alive. Adam and Eve trapped together in a tropical paradise. Remembering what had happened to them, Charlotte shifted uneasily on the thwart rocking the boat.

'Sit still!' Burt's voice crackled like a whip and she flinched. 'And in the middle of the thwart,' he went on. 'You'll upset the trim of the dinghy if you don't.'

Offended by his bullying tone, she flicked a glance at him. Sunlight gilded his shoulders and slanted across the hard planes and angles of his face. His eyes held a cold calculating expression as he considered her, at odds with the faint smile which turned up the corners of his mouth.

How many days would he keep her with him? As long as it pleased him to stay at sea, she supposed. Or as long as he found her company stimulating.

Her cheeks flamed suddenly. She wasn't so innocent nor naive not to understand what he had implied. To a man like him, whose appetite had possibly become jaded by the attentions of knowledgeable

experienced women, trying to arouse response in an awkward, inexperienced virgin like herself might prove to be stimulating.

Her hands clenched on her bare knees and she ground her teeth in vexation. How was she going to avoid him in the close confines of the yacht? She would have to find some way to escape from the ultimate humiliation of being kissed and caressed by him until her own desires were so roused she would be able to do nothing but give in to his demands.

The dinghy nudged quietly against the hull of *White Cockatoo*. Within the shadow of the yacht the water was a deep dark green in which the reflection of the boat shimmered white and gold. Burt shipped the oars and held on to a small ladder which hung over the side.

'Up you get,' he ordered.

Charlotte climbed the ladder, stepped through an opening in the lifelines and into the cockpit. Without looking behind her she made for the main cabin. Going into the bathroom, she closed the door and locked it. There at least she was safe and could be by herself.

Removing the damp T-shirt, she towelled her almost dry body completely dry, watching herself in the mirror. Her skin was coloured mostly a warm nut brown except where she had worn a swimsuit when windsurfing. There it gleamed like ivory. The contrast seemed to accentuate the slenderness of her waist and the fullness of her pink-tipped uptilted breasts.

Why was she studying herself so closely? she wondered, meeting the surprised gaze of her slightly up-slanted dark brown eyes in the mirror. What was she expecting to find? The imprint of Burt's body on hers? She leaned forward, fingers going to her throat where he had touched it and then to her mouth. Her lips trembled. Only on the

fullness of her lower hp had he left a mark, a small purplish bruise, and the sight of it made her shake with fury.

Although her nylon panties in which she had swum were almost dry the T-shirt was too wet to put on. So what should she wear? Where were her bodice and skirt? Last time she had seen them they had been rolling about on the floor of the cockpit where she had dropped them last night.

She would have to find them, but she couldn't very well go about the boat like she was. Taking a towel, she tied it around herself under the armpits, then opened the bathroom door and stepped cautiously into the cabin. From the galley came the sizzling sound of bacon frying. The smell of it was mouth-watering and she licked her lips hungrily.

She looked round the cabin. Her clothes weren't there. Slowly she advanced to the galley and looked in. Burt was standing in front of the cooker turning the bacon over in the pan.

'Do you know what happened to the clothes I was wearing last night?' Charlotte asked.

He turned to look at her, his glance sliding over her bare shoulders.

'I hung them to dry on the lifelines this morning,' he replied curtly.

'Thank you.' She was frigidly polite, and that was how she intended to be, she thought to herself, as she went up on deck and unpegged the white bodice and long cotton skirt from the lifelines where Burt had put them. She would be polite but definitely cool, speaking only when he spoke to her, if then, and he would find just how un-stimulating and dull she could be and he wouldn't want her to stay with him any more. He'd be glad to take her back to New Providence.

Back in the bathroom she dressed in the almost dry, slightly-sticky-with-salt clothes. The long skirt wasn't suitable wear

for a yacht, but it was better than wearing Burt's jeans again. She didn't want to wear anything of his again. She didn't want to be near him or have him near her. She hated him!

When she had dressed she opened the small toilet cupboard in search of a comb. The cupboard shelves were full of various toilet necessities, mostly male—after-shave lotion with a musky sense-stirring tang to it, shaving cream, talcum powder, antiseptic cream, sun-tan lotion. There were some female necessities too: deodorant cream, a small phial of heady perfume, evidence that she wasn't the only woman who had sailed aboard the *White Cockatoo*.

Tugging at her tangled salt-caked curls with the comb she had found, taking as long as she could, putting off having to return to the cabin, Charlotte thought up more ways in which to keep Burt at a distance.

Wearing the skirt would help. While she was dressed like this he wouldn't ask her to help him sail the yacht. Anyway, anything he asked her to do she would refuse, whether it was cooking, washing up, helping to put up sails or sheeting them in, because to do what he asked would be to admit he was in command and that she was willing to obey his orders. And once she had admitted that he would have no hesitation in taking advantage of her.

She put the comb back in the cupboard and took out the lipstick she found there. The colour was familiar, a light cinnamon which Nancy was fond of using. She smoothed it on her lips. It covered the bruise adequately. As she was returning the lipstick to the cupboard, knuckles rapped sharply on the door, startling her, so that her hand shook, knocking against the bottle of deodorant which fell against another bottle and everything fell out of the cupboard into the wash basin with a clatter.

'Breakfast is ready and on the table,' Burt called through the door.

Charlotte pushed everything back into the cupboard, closed it and turned to the bathroom door. For a moment she hesitated, as a new idea flashed into her mind. Maybe she should refuse to eat, conduct a hunger strike. That was how prisoners who didn't like their conditions managed to blackmail the prison authorities, wasn't it? She could stay in here, locked in, and tell Burt she refused to come out or to eat until he took her back to her father.

But she didn't think she could start a hunger strike right now. She was too weak with hunger already. Later, if all her other ruses failed, she would try it, although she had a feeling he would break his way into the bathroom if she refused to leave it and would feed her forcibly if she refused to eat.

He was already sitting at the teakwood table in the saloon and eating. Charlotte slid into the settee berth where she had slept the previous night behind the place he had set for her. As well as the bacon there were three pancakes, golden brown and fluffy—the next best thing to waffles, she thought as she helped herself to butter and syrup. Light as air, they melted in the mouth.

He didn't need either Nancy or herself to cook for him if this meal was a sample of what he could do, her thoughts raced on. She sent a surreptitious glance in his direction. In fact she doubted if he needed a woman for company at all except for one obvious reason.

He looked up suddenly and their eyes met across the table briefly and warily. His glance drifted down to her clothing. Without saying anything he stood up and went forward past the bathroom to the small cabin in the bow of the boat. When he came back he was carrying strips of black material in his hand. He tossed them down on the settee berth beside her.

'You might find that useful,' he said, and began to pick up his empty plate and coffee mug.

'Whose is it?' she asked, glancing with distaste at the black bikini.

'I'm not sure. It could belong to my cousin Bernice. She left several things on board after she and her husband used the boat for their honeymoon. On the other hand it could belong to Nancy. She came sailing with us a couple of times the week before last.'

'Us?' Charlotte queried.

'Stacey, Clarke and me. Stacey is my sister and Clarke is her husband, in case you're interested,' he replied dryly. 'But you'll find a bikini more comfortable to wear during the heat of the day than what you're wearing right now. Useful if you want to go swimming or snorkelling too.'

'I'm not going to wear it,' she retorted, giving him a defiant glare.

'So, please yourself,' he replied with an indifferent shrug. 'I'm going to swab down the decks now,' he added, and going through to the galley he put his dishes in the sink before going up on deck.

She supposed he expected her to clear her dishes off the table and to wash up—but she wasn't going to, thought Charlotte rebelliously. She was going to do nothing, absolutely nothing. Well, she might read a book.

There was a good selection of paperbacks in the bookcase at the end of the berth as well as some hardback books about yachting. She selected two of the thickest paperbacks and hitching up her skirt with one hand went up to the cockpit.

The vinyl cover of the long cushion on the cockpit seat was so hot it burned through the thin stuff of her skirt. Stretching her legs along the seat, she rested her back against the bulkhead which supported the cabin roof. Sunshine hot as molten gold poured down on to her unprotected head and shoulders.

She opened one of the books and began to read.

After turning several pages she decided the story wasn't very interesting, so she tossed it aside and turned to glance at the foredeck to see what Burt was doing. Wearing a broad-brimmed Bahamian straw hat and a thin long-sleeved white shirt as protection, he was scrubbing the decks of the boat with a long-handled brush.

For a while she watched him, admiring, although she didn't realise it, the way in which he worked. She hadn't thought he would condescend to do such mundane jobs as washing decks or cooking meals. Since he was so wealthy he could afford to employ someone to do that. She knew in fact that he did employ a Bahamian boy to look after the yacht while it was at the Long Cay marina and had seen the boy swilling the decks and polishing the bright work. She supposed he wasn't on board because Burt hadn't wanted a third party present to observe his seduction of Nancy.

Turning her back to the sun again, Charlotte frowned as she picked up the other book. She turned several pages but couldn't concentrate, too aware of Burt as he cleaned the cockpit deck and bothered by the knowledge that he wouldn't have had to seduce her sister. Nancy had been willing to meet him more than half way."

He must believe then that she was like Nancy, willing and ready to submit to any attentions he might decide to show her. Well, he was going to find out just how different she was, she vowed. He was going to find out that Charlotte Mason didn't submit to any man, no matter how attractive he was. Her glance went sideways to him and flinched away again as she admitted wryly to herself that physically he was everything she had ever admired in the opposite sex.

He went below and she tried to read again. Everything was baking under the heat of the sun's rays, including herself, and she would soon

have to move— either go down below or find another place somewhere on deck where there was shade.

'If you're going to sit out wear this,' Burt spoke beside her, and she looked up to find him holding a wide- brimmed hat made from lacy straw. Without waiting for her to take it he crammed it down on her head. 'Now turn round so I can see your back,' he ordered.

'Why?'

'So I can put some protective lotion on your shoulders,' he replied. 'If they're not burning already they soon will be. And you should wear sun-glasses.'

'I'll put the lotion on,' she said, reaching for the bottle of sun-tan oil in his hand.

'You can't put it on your back. Turn round.'

'No!'

'Okay, I'll do it the way you are.' Kneeling down, he tipped some of the brown oil on the palm of his hand and slapped it on her nearest shoulder. She winced and sat up straight. At once his hand slid round to her back above the low line of her bodice.

With long slow strokes of his hard fingers and palm he smoothed the oil into her skin. The strokes became slower and more caressing. Fingertips lingered tantalisingly at the nape of her neck, sending tingles down her spine. She turned her head to glare at him and found his face on a level with hers, very close, the clean lines of mouth and chin blurred by golden beard stubble, the green eyes half-shut, their expression suggestive.

'And now your front,' he murmured, leaning back on his heels and tipping more oil on the palm of his hand.

'I'll do that myself,' she snapped, and tried to snatch the bottle from him, but he put his hand behind his back and before she could move he placed the palm he had covered with lotion against her chest.

She sat stiffly while he smoothed the lotion on, her face averted. This time his fingertips lingered in the tender hollow behind her collarbone, sending more swift shivers racing along her nerves. Gritting her teeth, Charlotte tried not to show that his touch was affecting her.

His hand moved away and she was just going to relax, thinking he had finished, when she felt his fingers smoothing more oil over the swell of her breasts above the edge of the low-cut bodice. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes tightly, willing herself not to react. Reaction, response of any sort was what he wanted from her, she warned herself. It would give him an opportunity to go into action as he had done on the beach. At all costs she must keep still and silent, pretending she was indifferent.

Suddenly she felt the softness of hair lapping her throat and chin and the pricking of beard bristles against her chest. Burt's lips seared the hollow at the base of her throat in a taunting kiss and pangs of pleasure needled through her. Charlotte jerked back away from him and raised a hand to swipe at his cheek, but he was already on his feet, dancing away from her.

Wide and white, his grin mocked her before he turned away and went down into the stern cabin.

Her hands shaking, red outrage storming through her, she picked up the bottle of sun lotion and gathering up the long cushion on which she had been lying went on to the foredeck. There perhaps she would be out of his way! But hardly had she settled down to lie on her stomach with her head pillowed on her arms than she heard the pad of his feet coming along the deck.

'Would you like to go snorkelling?' he asked.

'No, thank you.' She spoke coldly. *Refuse—refuse anything he suggests*, she reminded herself, *even though you would love to go and would like nothing better than to float and drift through the warm silky water and visit the gardens of the sea.*

'You'd like it,' he said. 'The underwater shapes of the coral and the colours are fascinating and there are all sorts of fish to watch. We might be able to spear some groper for supper or collect conch to make a salad.'

Charlotte knew he had sat down on the deck beside her because his bare leg brushed against hers. She shifted stealthily on the mattress away from him and the next instant was clenching her hands in an effort not to cry out as his fingertips trailed delicately yet intimately down the hollow of her spine.

'I don't want to go with you,' she said clearly and coldly.

'Because you would have to wear a bikini belonging to another woman?' he asked jeeringly.

'No.'

'Sulking?'

'Why should I sulk?'

'Most children do when they don't get enough attention or can't do what they want to do.'

'I'm not a child!'

'Then stop behaving like one. Relax and enjoy yourself. We could have fun snorkelling together.'

'No.'

'Frightened?'

'Of snorkelling?'

'No—of me.'

Irritated by the taunting accusation, Charlotte raised her head to look at him and immediately wished she hadn't, because he was lying very close to her, completely naked except for the swimming briefs he was wearing. Stark white, they sat low on his lean hips and clung closely, disguising nothing of what they concealed. His legs were stretched wide apart and his hands were under his head supporting it. From beneath lazily drooping lids his shimmering eyes glinted at her and his mouth was curved into a suggestive smile.

Away from his face her glance strayed again, taking in the raw sensuality of his firmly muscled torso and limbs, sheathed as they were in glowing hair-crisped sun-bronzed skin. Nerves tingled in the pit of her stomach and the palms of her hands itched, not to slap him but to caress him. A longing to stroke his thighs and then the smooth skin over his flat stomach shuddered through her from head to foot. God, she had never felt like this about any man before.

Rolling away from him, she sat up suddenly, hunching her knees up and wrapping her arms about them, burying her face on them, not wanting to see him, afraid of seeing him, afraid of being close to him.

'Well, are you?' he prompted softly.

'No, I'm not!' she raised her head to snap at him.

'Then why don't you do what you want to do?' he suggested.

'Want to do?' she repeated, giving him a quick glance over her shoulder. He was still lying back watching her in that lazy knowledgeable way. 'What do I want to do?' she demanded, looking away, becoming very interested suddenly in the view beyond the bow of the boat of the smooth blue windless water and the stunted palm trees of the island.

'You want to touch me,' Burt suggested softly.

'I do not!' she denied hotly, but her cheeks flamed red as she realised he had noticed how she had looked at him. 'How conceited you are to believe that,' she accused scornfully.

He jack-knifed suddenly into a sitting position so that he was close to her again. Her heart racing, she kept her eyes averted when he slid his fingers about one of her wrists to lift her hand from her knee.

'There's nothing to be ashamed of,' he said persuasively. 'Lovemaking is an affair for two, after all, an exchange of caresses between two people who are attracted to each other, a natural way of expressing that attraction. Let me show you how.'

'No!' Charlotte snatched her hand from his grasp. 'I'm not attracted to you. I hate you!'

Leaping to her feet, she ran along the deck, but she didn't get very far because he was right behind her and putting his hand on her shoulders he spun her round to face him.

'What's the matter with you?' he demanded, scowling down his long straight nose at her. 'Has some guy scared you at some time? Is that why you freeze up?'

'Oh, you'd like that to be the reason why I don't like you to touch me, wouldn't you?' she retorted, twitching her shoulders free of his grasp. 'If I admitted that it would make you feel better. You're not used to

being refused by a woman, are you? So you have to find a fault in that woman. No man has scared me. I'm just not like Nancy or those other women who fawn on you, that's all. You've assumed that because she and they like to paw you I'm the same. But I'm not. I don't want to touch you and I don't want to be touched by you ever, do you hear? Even if you are rich and my father's future is in your hands.' She lifted her eyes to look at him and the expression of indulgent amusement on his face irritated her further. 'I'm not going to be blackmailed into making love with you!' she seethed.

Dodging past him, she padded along the side-deck, her feet flinching from contact with the burning hot surface, sweat breaking out on her skin as she hurried in the heat of mid-afternoon. It would be best to get out of the sun, she thought. Staying out in it only weakened the resistance. Yes, that was what was wrong with her. The hours spent in the hot tropical sunshine were melting away her inhibitions so that she was becoming more and more aware of things that appealed to the senses, a dangerous state to be in when cooped up on this yacht with a man like Burt Sharaton.

He was close behind her when she reached the cockpit. Looking round, she noticed two long winch handles hanging in the rack specially made for them. On impulse she pulled one of them out and when she felt Burt's hands at her waist she swung round, backed off and brandished the shining stainless steel handle at him.

'If you try to touch me again, if you come any nearer, I'll hit you with this!' she threatened wildly.

He stood still. Hands on his hips, he glanced at the handle. Then he looked right into her eyes and his eyes sparkled with green light as he laughed at her.

'I can see you're very unlike Nancy,' he drawled mockingly. 'She would never think of resisting any attentions.' He held out a hand.

'Give it to me,' he ordered- 'A winch in the wrong hands can cause a lot of damage.'

'No. I mean what I say, and if you come any nearer or try to take it from me I'll hit you,' she said breathlessly.

'I don't think you will,' he retorted. 'But we'll soon find out if you will because I'm coming nearer, much nearer. You see, honey, I have a great desire to kiss you again.'

A hand reached out for the handle to take it from her and he stepped forward. She avoided his hand by swinging her arm up, holding the handle high behind her head. Watching him as he approached she had no idea where she was going and collided with the stainless steel pedestal on which the compass and wheel were mounted. Jolted, she staggered. The smooth steel slipped in her sweat-wet fingers and the winch handle flew out of her hand striking Burt on the side of the head before it fell to the deck. He staggered back with a hand to his head. Between his fingers dark red blood began to seep.

For a horrified second Charlotte stood rooted to the spot. Then seeing him sway she rushed forward and flung her arms about him and held him up.

'Oh, please don't pass out,' she urged. 'I'm sorry. It... the handle flew out of my hand.' Burt's face was ashen, his eyes were closed and blood was trickling slowly down his cheek from an ugly gash above his left temple. 'Burt, what shall I do?' she whispered holding him closer. 'Tell me, please!'

'Just hold on to me for a bit longer, while I gather my wits together,' he muttered. 'Is the wound deep? Can you see it?'

'I think it needs stitching,' she said, nerving herself to peer closely at the bloody hole. 'We should get help. Perhaps if you told me how to

use the V.H.F. I could get in touch with an air-sea rescue team somewhere and they could bring a doctor out.'

'We're not radioing for help,' he said, pushing her away. 'I'll have a look at it in the bathroom mirror.'

She followed him down the companionway into the main cabin and leaned in the doorway of the bathroom to watch him examine the reflection of the wound in the mirror.

'I'll survive without stitches and without a doctor,' he said coolly. 'I'll wash it and you can cover it with an antiseptic dressing. You'll find the first aid box in the middle locker over the port side bunk in the cabin.'

It was pleasantly cool in the cabin owing to the draught of air wafting between the hatches and the big ventilators. By the time she had found the first aid kit Burt had come into the cabin and had sat down on one of the settee bunks. Following his curt instructions Charlotte made a thick pad from cotton wool, smeared it with antibiotic cream and put it over the cleaned wound. He held the pad in place while she opened a packet of sterile gauze squares. She put one of the squares over the cotton wool pad and fixed it in position with strips of sticking plaster.

'Is any blood showing through?' he asked.

'No. Does it hurt?'

'Throbs a bit and my head is beginning to ache.'

'Then you should lie down and rest. Perhaps you should take some of these.' She held up a phial of aspirins. He agreed to take some and she fetched him a glass of water. She sat down on the other settee berth opposite to him and watched him anxiously as he swallowed three of the pills.

'There'll be a bad scar when it heals if it isn't stitched,' she said.

'Then it'll be something for "me to remember you by in the years to come,' Burt retorted as he swung his legs up on the bunk and propped his shoulders against the bookcase. 'A memento of the exciting time I went sailing with a hellcat for company,' he drawled provocatively.

'I feel so awful about it,' she whispered. 'But it was your fault,' she added defiantly. 'If you hadn't wanted your own way so much. If you hadn't come nearer and tried to take the handle from me it wouldn't have happened.'

'I realise that,' he said dryly. 'And if you really want to play Truth and Consequence you could go back further than that. If you hadn't interfered in my affairs I wouldn't have been so mad at you last night. I wouldn't have kidnapped you and brought you away with me.' He gave her a glinting malevolent glance. 'I guessed the moment I met you what you're like,' he went on acidly. 'You're a self-willed, self-righteous do-gooder. An interfering busybody. An aggressive know- it-all. And as you've just shown, you're extremely violent.'

'I'm not, I'm not! I've never hurt anyone in my life. I hate violence of any sort,' she protested, and seeing scepticism gleam in his eyes she groaned and clasped her head in her hands. 'Oh, I don't know what came over me. I didn't intend to hit you, just stop you from coming nearer. I didn't think you would persist.'

'You know what came over you all right,' said Burt, his mouth curling in a bitter grimace. 'You were defending your virtue—and quite rightly so, too. But next time you want to hit me do it with your fist. It's just as effective but less damaging.'

He slid open the door of one of the lockers built into the curving wall of the yacht's hull beside him. The opening revealed a row of liquor bottles held in a wooden rack to prevent them from falling about

when the yacht was sailing. He took one of the bottles down, found a glass in the next locker and placed them both on the table. He twisted the top off the bottle of tawny liquor and poured a generous measure into the glass and drank half of it.

'But there won't be a next time,' said Charlotte, watching uneasily as he set the open bottle down again and drank off what was left in the glass.

'What makes you think that?' he asked, filling the glass again. 'I'm not a person who gives up easily.'

'But ... but ... surely you don't want me to stay with you after what's just happened,' she argued.

Burt drank again and gave her a narrowed glittering look.

'I admit you've slowed me down for the time being, but don't think for one moment anything has changed,' he replied coolly. 'You're still substituting for Nancy and if you don't oblige I'll ruin your father. Would you like a drink?'

'What is it?'

'Bourbon whisky.'

'No, thank you. And you shouldn't be drinking, either. Not after being hurt and not after taking aspirins. ...'

'Afraid I'll get drunk?' he jeered, and finishing what was in his glass poured more liquor into it. As he set the bottle down on the table Charlotte reached across and took hold of it intending to take it to the galley and pour the contents down the sink outlet. At once his fingers curled about the neck of the bottle and he jerked it from her hand.

'If I want to get drunk I'll damned well get drunk!' he rasped at her, and she sprang instantly to her feet. 'Now where the hell are you going?' he barked.

'Up on deck,' she replied. 'I don't have to sit here watching you get stoned out of your mind if I don't want to.'

'Sit down,' ordered Burt, half rising to his feet.

Across the table they glared at each other in a battle of wills.

'No!' Charlotte juttred her chin at him defiantly. 'Only if you stop drinking that stuff. Oh, I guessed too what you're like as soon as I met you,' she went on scornfully. 'You want your own way all the time. You're wilful, domineering—and you must have been spoilt by your parents from the time you were born!'

'If you knew my father you wouldn't say that,' he said tautly. 'He brought me up to fight for anything I wanted.' He stepped round the table towards her and added silkily, 'Are you going to sit down, Charlie? Or am I going to make you?'

'I might sit down if you ask me differently,' she countered, backing away. 'I don't like being bullied.'

His eyes gleamed dangerously and his mouth tightened. Then to her surprise and relief he turned away and sat down again.

'Okay,' he drawled, and a swift smile changed his face, lighting it up and softening it. 'Dear Charlotte, please will you condescend to take a seat?' he murmured, mockingly polite. 'It's time we talked about this situation into which you've landed yourself by interfering in my concerns.'

Glancing warily at him, nibbling at her lower lip, she slid on to the opposite berth again. Half-empty glass in his hand, Burt swung his

legs up on to the settee and once more propped his shoulders against the bookcase,

'I could sue you, you know,' he remarked.

'For what?' she challenged.

'For assault and damages.'

'But I didn't hit you. It was an accident. I've told you already, the handle slipped out of my hand.'

'That's your story. Mine would be different,' he drawled. 'I could say you threatened me and carried out your threat.'

'And I could say I did it in self-defence because you were intending to rape me,' she retorted spiritedly.

'I was not,' he countered sharply, glaring at her. 'Seduce you perhaps, but not rape you. There is a difference.'

'I could say you kidnapped me and were going to force your attentions on me against my will, and I'm sure you wouldn't like that to be splashed all across the newspapers,' Charlotte replied acidly. 'It wouldn't do your reputation any good at all, so I don't believe you'll be suing me for anything.'

Burt tilted the glass to his mouth and drained it. As he set it down on the table he looked across at her and grinned.

'You don't scare easily, I give you that,' he observed. 'And you're quite right—I won't be suing you. There were no witnesses to the incident, so I doubt if any lawyer would take the case. I mentioned it merely as another warning to you before your foolish impetuous behaviour gets you into more trouble.' His eyes narrowed and their glinting glance roved over her face, then over her bare shoulders. 'I

find it hard to believe you and Nancy are sisters,' he continued softly. 'You have nothing in common.' He picked up the bottle and splashed more whisky in the glass. 'She's far from virtuous,' he sneered.

'That isn't true,' Charlotte protested hotly. He took a swallow of whisky and gave her a pitying glance from under frowning eyebrows.

'You may think you've protected her from me and prevented her from ruining her marriage, but she'll find another lover soon enough,' he said jeeringly. 'Your Nancy is promiscuous and not worth the risk you took on her behalf.'

'No, she isn't, she isn't,' she argued.

'And I tell you she is.'

'You're just saying that to excuse your own lecherous behaviour,' she flared. 'No nice man would have agreed to take what she offered you knowing she was already married.'

'I can't honestly say I've ever aimed to be a "nice" man,' he said with some amusement. 'And I don't happen to have ice water in my veins. From the first time I met her when I arrived in Long Cay a few weeks ago Nancy has flaunted her not inconsiderable charms at me and has made sure I knew she'd be available if I wanted her.'

'Oh no!' whispered Charlotte, shaking her head distressfully.

'Oh yes,' he mocked softly.

'It would be because she was frightened,' she explained defensively. 'You must have frightened her when you told her you were suspicious of Dad. She'd be afraid to offend you by refusing to do as you asked. You see, she'd know what a scandal of that sort would do to him.'

With a frown between his eyebrows he studied her with slitted eyes.

'But I didn't tell Nancy anything about my suspicions concerning Grant,' he said quietly. 'She offered to become my mistress unconditionally, the Sunday night before I left for the States. I said I'd think about it and let her know. The note I sent to her on my return to Long Cay was my answer. I'd decided to take her away with me for a week to find out if I wanted her in such a semi-permanent arrangement.' His mouth twisted. 'Unless—and it's possible, I suppose—unless your father put her up to it and she was going to try and blackmail me into agreeing to turn a blind eye to his inefficiency by withholding her favours.'

'My father would never do anything like that. Never!' she protested stormily. 'If he'd asked Nancy to blackmail you into giving him another chance he wouldn't have agreed to cable Luke, Nancy's husband, asking him to fly out here immediately to stop her from making a fool of herself over you, would he?' she challenged.

'He did that?' Surprise lilted in his voice.

'Yes, when I told him how worried I was about the way she was behaving with you at the airport and in the car the day you met me.'

'Busybody,' he jeered.

'I did it for the best, and Luke has a right to know.'

'Oh, sure,' he mocked. The expression of cynicism deepened in his face. 'What's her husband like? Long-suffering, I'll bet.' He poured more whisky into his glass.

'He's much nicer than you are,' she taunted.

'Granted.'

'He's kind and considerate, hard-working—and he loves Nancy very much.'

'He'd need to love her very much to forgive her occasional lapses from fidelity,' he sneered.

'I don't see how she could possibly prefer you to him,' Charlotte jibed.

'It sounds as if you'd really like him to be your husband instead of hers,' he suggested dryly. 'You should have let her come away with me and then he could have divorced her for infidelity and married you.'

'Oh, really, how did you get to be so cynical?'

'Experience of people. It's something you don't have much of,' he drawled. 'So you don't want Nancy's husband?'

'Of course I don't. I like Luke, but I don't love him, and I couldn't marry or live with a man I don't love.'

'Ha!' Burt's crack of laughter was sardonic. 'You seem to be hung up on that word love.' He drained the glass again. 'What makes you think love has anything to do with marriage?'

'Everything. And you should know. You've been married.'

'Who told you that?' His voice and glance were sharp.

'My father. Your mother told him you'd been married and your wife and your child had died in some sort of accident.'

He was silent, staring broodingly at the empty glass in his hand, his face a hard pale mask beneath the strands of blond hair which had fallen forward over his forehead. When he looked up the expression in his eyes chilled her to the marrow.

'My marriage to Beverly Chilton was a business arrangement and had nothing to do with either of us being in love with each other,' he said

in frost-bitten tones. He paused, then added in a low bitter voice, 'It was hell from start to finish.' He broke off, shook his head from side to side, winced and touched the plaster on his head. 'God, I feel rotten!' he muttered, and added with a grunt of laughter, 'Like someone had given me a crack on the head with a blunt instrument.'

'I told you you shouldn't drink so much whisky,' Charlotte chided him, although she was suddenly very concerned about him. Supposing the winch handle had done more damage to him than either of them had realised? 'Burt, don't you think we should radio for help?' she whispered, reaching across the table and touching his arm.

He opened his eyes and looked at her from beneath the shadow of his hand.

'No,' he said forcibly.

'But you might be hurt more than we realise,' she argued.

Burt studied her face narrowly for a few seconds, then pushing against the table he lunged to his feet.

'I'll be fine once I've had a sleep,' he murmured. 'I'm going to be down in the after-cabin. It sounds as if a breeze is blowing up, so you might check the anchors occasionally. There are two out because coral sand makes a poor holding ground. If the winds gets very strong and one of the anchors drags—comes out of the sand—wake me up, will you, please.'

He went through the galley and she heard the door of the stern cabin click shut. Picking up the cap off the whisky bottle, she screwed it on. She put the bottle away in its slot in the cupboard and took the empty glass to the galley. The dishes from breakfast which Burt had cleared from the table were still in the sink unwashed. With a sigh Charlotte pumped water into the sink and began to wash them.

When the dishes had been washed, dried and put away she climbed up into the cockpit to look at the weather. While she and Burt had been down below a bank of grey clouds had rolled over the sky, obliterating the sun. Wind was whining in the rigging and the sea which had been so blue and flat was grey and choppy. *White Cockatoo* sidled uneasily on the small waves which rippled across the bay and tugged at her anchor warps.

Charlotte's thin skirt flattened against her legs as she leaned into the breeze and she went to the bow of the boat and looked down. Although disturbed the water was still clear and she could see the stock of an anchor where it was lying on the bottom. The flukes of it seemed to be firmly bedded in the coral sand of the bottom. For a while she stood watching it until she was quite sure the bobbing movements of the yacht were not going to pull it out.

The halliards slapped with a tinkling sound against the metal mainmast as the wind blew a little harder and a flurry of raindrops pattered across the deck. Turning, Charlotte hurried back along to the cockpit. She pulled the cover over the hatchway of the stern cabin and going down the main companionway backwards she pulled the cover over that hatchway.

As she stood hesitantly at the bottom of the companionway wondering what else she should do to make sure the yacht would remain dry below while the rain poured down she caught sight of the chart table on the other side of the companionway to the galley. Going round to it, she looked down at the chart which lay open on it.

It took a while for her to adjust to looking at the map of the sea and islands, but gradually she began to understand it. She found New Providence and then the Exumas. Which one of that chain of many small islands was *White Cockatoo* anchored opposite? She realised she had no idea because Burt hadn't told her its name and although she could see pencil lines drawn on the map with numbers written

beside them indicating where he had plotted a course to follow last night not one of the islands had been marked.

When she looked up from the chart she noticed the V.H.F. radio on a shelf above the chart table. An oblong-shaped box with several dials and knobs, it also had a receiver something like a telephone receiver. She wished she knew how to use it. But then what would be the use? Even if she was able to contact someone and ask for medical help for Burt she wouldn't be able to tell anyone the exact location of the yacht because she didn't know it.

With a sigh she wandered into the main cabin. It was almost quarter to six. Soon the sun would be setting, but already the cabin was growing dim because of the rain squall. She found a switch and was relieved when lighting concealed in the ceiling came on.

She supposed she should prepare a meal. But how could she cook anything? In the galley she looked helplessly at the kerosene cooker, realising she hadn't the slightest idea how to light it and was afraid to try; in case she did something wrong and set the yacht on fire.

But she couldn't let herself be so easily defeated over the matter of finding food. She searched the lockers and cupboards in the galley and felt quite triumphant when she had found canned goods, bread, butter and a selection of soft drinks. Selecting a can of ham, she opened it and made some sandwiches. She took them through to the cabin and ate some of them while she read a book, finishing her meal with a glass of lemonade.

The quietness of the cabin was accentuated by the occasional popple of water along the side of the hull, the ticking of the brass-bound clock and the occasional creak of the anchor warp. Charlotte found herself listening rather than reading, growing more and more tense by the minute as she realised how alone she was. *Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea.* The line of poetry from *The Ancient*

Mariner which she remembered learning at school echoed through her mind and she shivered a little.

Tossing aside the book, she collected up the plate and glass she had used and carried them into the galley. After she had washed them and put them away she went into the cockpit to look around. Everything was shrouded in darkness and it took a few seconds for her to become accustomed to the dark after being in the light below. At last she could make out the loom of the island, a darker shape against the blue-black sky. With the rain over, the clouds were slowly drifting away and the stars were beginning to twinkle.

Holding on to the lifeline, Charlotte made her way to the foredeck and checked the anchor warp again. All seemed well, so she returned to the cockpit. As she stepped down into it something turned under her foot, and she bent down and saw the glint of steel in the light shafting up from the cabin. It was the winch handle. She picked it up. The sight of it brought the horror of what had happened earlier rushing back into her mind and as she put it back into the rack she admitted to herself that she was anxious—no, more than that, she was terribly worried about Burt and needed desperately to assure herself that he was all right.

Quickly she made her way to the stern cabin. The door opened noiselessly and she went into the cabin. She found a light switch and clicked it on. Soft pearly light slanted across the double berth. Dressed only in his swimming briefs and without any covering, Burt lay on his side.

Charlotte leaned over him. Under the tousled sun-bleached hair which had fallen across his forehead his face had a strange pallor. A thin trickle of blood had oozed from under the plaster down his cheek. Looking round, she noticed a sleeping bag tucked away in the bottom corner of the berth. She unrolled it, unzipped it and spread it over him.

Seeing him lying there so pale, so vulnerable to being hurt, was making her feel very different about him. No longer was he the hard, unfeeling, inhuman person she had assumed him to be. He was flesh and blood as she was and could suffer pain and unhappiness as much as the next person. The brief glimpse he had given her of his marriage had shown that.

Seemingly of its own volition her hand went out to push the hair back from his brow. His skin felt cold and clammy to her touch and panic streaked through her. Levering herself on to the bunk, she bent over him and peered at the bold roughly-hewn features. Was he asleep or unconscious? Or was he worse? Was he dead?

Frantically she laid her palm against his cheek, rubbing it as if to warm it. Her hand slid down his throat to his chest to press against his rib cage. Cool to her hand, his skin was a supple silken sheath over hard bones and taut muscles and her fingers, liking what they could feel, pleated it gently.

But surely she should be able to feel the leap of his heart? Her hand moved upwards, fingers curling to the feel of the crisp hairs which criss-crossed the centre of his chest. Lowering her head, she laid her ear against his ribs.

Was that thud she could hear his heartbeat or the swift frantic beat of her own heart? She couldn't tell. She raised her head and looked at his face. His eyes were half open, gleaming darkly beneath the gold-tipped lashes. He was looking at her. Her cheeks were suddenly as hot as fire as she began to lift her hand from his chest. He curved fingers about her wrist and pressed her hand closely against him.

'I guessed you'd get round to it sooner or later,' he murmured, his words sounding a little slurred. 'Welcome to my bed, Charlotte.'

'No, no ... that isn't why I'm here,' she protested breathlessly, and tried to pull her hand free.

His hand slid up her arm to her shoulder and at the same time his other arm went about her and he drew her down on top of him until her breasts were crushed against his chest and his mouth was only an inch away from hers.

'You stroked my forehead, my cheek and my chest very gently and lovingly,' he said in a taunting whisper, his breath mingling with hers. 'Do it again,' he urged suggestively.

'I ... I was worried about you, that's all,' she said. Now she was worried about herself and about the wanton feelings which were sizzling through her body in reaction to being pressed so closely against him. Nerves until now untouched were coming alive low down in her body and aching to be inflamed further by even closer intimacy with him. 'You were so still and cold and I couldn't be sure if you were unconscious or dead.' Her voice trembled on the last word.

'A likely story,' he scoffed. 'You wanted to be with me,' he added, one hand at the small of her back pressing her closer against his muscular masculinity. His lips brushed briefly against the hollow of her throat. 'And now you're here you're going to stay, sweetheart, and sleep with me.'

'No!' she protested, and again tried to roll away from him. Hands at her waist, he seemed to be helping her to move, but she found herself on her back suddenly. With one arm about her he laid his head on her chest just below her shoulder, nestling it there as if against a pillow, and the tangy male smell of his tousled hair filled her nostrils like an inhaled drug, setting her mind spinning.

'Let me lie like this against you,' he whispered. 'You'll keep me warm and maybe the pain in my head will go away if you stroke it. It's the least you can do for me since it's thanks to you it hurts.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she cried, her arms going about him instinctively. 'I didn't mean to hurt you. I could get you some more aspirin.'

'I don't want any more aspirins. I want you to share my pillow,' Burt whispered, and turning his face against the swell of her breast brushed the smooth curve with his lips.

The intimate weight of his head, the savage tenderness of his lips plundering her skin and above all his appeal for her help in easing the pain in his head were awakening emotions within her she hadn't known she possessed. Gone was all her initial hostility towards him. As a sharp, destructive rock is covered and hidden by a swirl of soft silken water it was being swamped by a warm tide of tender feeling which was flooding through her; a purely feminine urge to offer and give comfort where it was needed.

Amazed by the change in herself, Charlotte stroked his head again, lifting her fingers through the silky thickness of his hair. Becoming adventurous, her fingers explored the smooth contours of his heavy shoulders, kneading and probing hard muscles until he sighed in pleasure. Her fingers took to their new tasks naturally and joyously, as if to soothe and stroke him was the reason for which they had been designed.

'You're warm and strong, soft and rounded,' he murmured. Again his speech was a little slurred and she wondered if he were light-headed. 'I've been looking for someone like you for a long time, a long, long time...' He broke off and stiffened. 'Who was that talking?' he demanded suddenly, very clearly and coldly.

'You.'

'What did I say?'

'Nothing very much. It... it... didn't make sense. I think I'd better go back to the other cabin and let you go to sleep,' she said, and tried to move away, but his arm tightened about her waist.

'Don't go. Stay through the night,' urged Burt. 'Sleep with me.'

She could only get away, she realised, with a struggle, and she didn't want to fight with him, not while he was hurt. Oh, why not admit the truth, face up to the reality of the situation? She didn't want to leave him by himself when he was obviously not well.

'Please stay, Charlotte,' he muttered, and again his lips burned against the sensitive skin of her throat.. 'You'll be lonely if you don't. Stay and sleep here with me—just sleep, nothing else, just sleep--'

His head drifted against her breast. In the water- poppling, boat-creaking silence Charlotte lay quietly, her fingers moving rhythmically as they stroked his head until he slept. Only then did she move to pull the sleeping bag over both of them. Snuggling down against his head she slept too.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHARLOTTE awoke suddenly wondering for a few wild moments of disorientation where she was. The sound of water rippling nearby, a sideways rocking motion which was playing havoc with her stomach and the slapping sounds of ropes against metal reminded her she was on board *White Cockatoo*.

There were other unfamiliar sensations. The roughness of tweed upholstery rubbing against her bare shoulders; pins and needles tingling in her right arm where it was trapped under something heavy; the smell of hair in her nostrils, the feel of it feathering her chin and throat.

She opened her eyes. Sunrise was filling the stern cabin with flamingo pink light and a draught of wind was coming through the open doors of the hatchway. It seemed the morning was very windy.

Charlotte looked down. Tousled blond hair tickled her chin again. Burt's head was still heavy on her chest, his arm was still across her waist and his hard pulsating body was still pressed against her.

The yacht rocked more violently and her stomach lurched warningly. She would have to get up or she would be sick again. Slowly she eased her cramped arm from beneath Burt and sliding from under the lax curve of his arm she slipped off the bunk.

As she went up the companionway she lifted the hatch cover. The wind was cool and it whipped her hair into a froth of curls and flattened her creased skirt against her legs when she stepped into the cockpit. Fine wispy clouds streaked the sky and the sea was a deep violet blue crested by white waves.

But where Was the island? Realising suddenly that beyond the rise and fall of the yacht's pointed bow there was no line of coral sand topped by green sage bushes and stunted palms, she spun round and

found it behind the stem. In fact the stern of the yacht seemed to be swinging very close to a heap of grey limestone rocks which formed one of the headlands protecting the bay. The wind had changed direction and so had the boat.

She jumped up on to the side deck and ran to the bow. One of the anchor ropes was slack and it was swinging idly from side to side. A grating noise muffled by the slap of water against the boat came from the depths, like metal scraping over a hard surface. One of the anchors had slipped and it was now dragging over the bottom.

Remembering what Burt had asked her to do if the wind changed or one of the anchors slipped, she hurried back into the stern cabin. She shook his shoulder and he opened his eyes to stare at her sleepily.

'What's the matter?' he murmured.

'You told me to wake you if the wind changed. And I think one of the anchors is dragging.'

He frowned and propped himself up on one elbow, rubbing his head with his other hand as he looked round the cabin and then looked back at her.

'What time is it?' he asked.

'About seven o'clock ... in the morning.'

'Morning?' he exclaimed. 'What happened to last night?' His probing fingers found the plaster on his head. 'I remember feeling under the weather and coming to be down...' He broke off and gave her another puzzled frowning glance and shrugged. 'I must have gone out like a light—I can't remember a thing.' He pushed aside the sleeping bag and swung his legs over the side of the bunk. 'Since the wind has changed we'd better get out of here and sail to somewhere else,' he added.

Stepping past her, he went up into the cockpit and as Charlotte followed him she heard the engine cough into life.

'Take the wheel and keep the bow pointed in the direction the wind is coming from while I winch up the anchors,' he ordered brusquely. 'As soon as I tell you they're up put the engine into forward gear by pushing this lever and head out of the bay to the sea. There are no dangers if you go that way. The only danger is behind us.'

Without waiting to see whether she was capable of doing what he asked he went up to the bow. With her hands clenched nervously on the wheel Charlotte turned it only a little to keep the boat pointing into the . wind. Not once did she look behind at the white water which was smashing against the rocks.

Burt yelled something and waved his arm at her, then pointed towards the sea. She pushed the lever on the Wheel pedestal forward and immediately the yacht began to move forward rolling from side to side over the incoming waves. Keeping her gaze on the deep blue white-crested water ahead of her, feeling the wind singing in her ears and cooling the skin of her bare shoulders, Charlotte steered the yacht out of the bay.

When the anchors were stowed away Burt came back to the cockpit, his deeply tanned shoulders and chest glinting with diamond-bright drops of water where he had been splashed by spray coming over the bow. Standing beside her, he took over the wheel and turned it until the boat changed direction, still going away from the island but no longer pointing to the east where the sun was still climbing fast.

'We'll go north-west,' he said, and pointed to the* compass on the pedestal. 'That's the course I'd like to keep—three hundred and thirty degrees. Could you manage to steer for a few minutes while I shave, change the plaster on my head and find some clothes?'

'I think so,' she said.

He let her take the wheel again and stood beside her watching while she steered. It took her a while to learn how much she should steer the wheel to correct the course of the yacht. At first she turned it too much, then she turned it too little, but eventually she was able to keep the compass needle hovering more or less at the number three hundred and thirty.

'Good,' said Burt laconically, and she felt a surprising surge of joyful pride because she had earned his praise. She looked up quickly. Cool and clear as sea pools on a calm day, his eyes narrowed slightly as their glance met hers. A swift cloud darkened their clearness as a cloud might darken a pool for a second. Then again he shrugged and turning away went down below.

By the time he returned to the cockpit the island was far behind, a smudge of green on the leaping sunlit water. Other islands were appearing slowly in the distance, glowing like emeralds set in gold against the azure sky.

'This is all you're getting for breakfast this morning,' said Burt, coming up into the cockpit. He was carrying a bowl of cereal and milk in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. 'Take 'em,' he ordered. 'I'll steer now.'

Charlotte took the bowl and mug and sat down on one of the cockpit seats. The yacht was lurching uncomfortably and spray flung by the wind into the cockpit stung her bare shoulders, but in spite of her discomfort she ate the cornflakes ravenously and drank the hot coffee at a gulp.

'How is the gash on your head?' she asked, glancing up at Burt. Above the fluttering turned-up collar of the thin navy blue nylon windcheater he was wearing with a pair of heavy blue jeans his face

was its normal colour, a good healthy tan. Across his forehead the new plaster gleamed whitely under the thick strand of blond hair blown forward by the wind.

'It's stopped bleeding and has begun to heal,' he replied curtly. 'I'm going to put up the sails, so I'll be turning the boat head to wind again.' His glance, cool..and remote as ever, flicked over her. 'I suggest you put on those jeans you wore before and another T-shirt. I've left them on one of the bunks in the cabin. And take that bowl and mug down before they get thrown about.'

Charlotte went below obediently to put the bowl and mug in the sink. In the cabin the lurching motion of the yacht was more noticeable as usual and she didn't like it. But she needed to wash and to comb her hair, so picking up the jeans and shirt from the bunk she staggered into the bathroom and closed the door.

How different was this morning from yesterday morning! Yesterday she had felt sulky and defiant and had refused to wear Burt's clothes. Today she was glad to put them on and discard her crumpled salt-caked skirt and white bodice. Yesterday she had been determined to refuse to do anything he had asked her to do. Today she had already obeyed the few orders he had given without question.'

Yesterday she had hated him for what he had done to her on the island. Today ,..? She met the direct slightly mocking stare of her dark brown, black-lashed eyes in the mirror above the wash basin. It seemed to her that her wide full-lipped mouth had a derisive slant to it also; as if Charlie the tomboy was having a laugh at the secretly romantic, tender-hearted woman Charlotte.

'So, Charlotte, how do you feel about him?' taunted Charlie.

'Differently, very differently,' Charlotte replied.

'Why?'

'I don't know,' evaded Charlotte, avoiding her own bright accusing stare.

'Could it be because you liked it when he kissed you after all? Or because he insisted you slept with him last night? Or because he told you he'd been looking for someone like you for a long, long time? Better be careful, Charlotte. He didn't know what he was saying and he remembers nothing about last night. It would be best if you don't remember too. Put it out of your mind. Keep aloof from him. There's danger in getting to know him, the danger of learning to like him too much.'

'Oh, be quiet, you!' Charlotte spoke out loud and made a face at herself, then she pushed open the bathroom door and struggled out into the tilting cabin.

The engine was off and the boat was rolling from side to side, water gurgling and hissing as the hull pushed through the waves. Noticing some yellow waterproof jackets swinging on hangers in a hanging locker opposite the bathroom, Charlotte took one, slipped it on and made her way up the swaying companionway, lurched across to one of the cockpit seats and sat down on it.

Shimmering sunlit sails outspread before the wind, *White Cockatoo* had taken wing and was surfing over the glinting turquoise water. Spray flew in flurries of sparkling drops. White-crested waves tumbled over each other as if in a race to catch up with the stern of the yacht. Water swished and gurgled. Warm air, bright sunlight, clear sky and dancing water. Exhilaration surged through Charlotte. She was glad to be there, glad to be alive and sailing on such a beautiful morning.

It was a feeling to be shared and she turned impetuously to express her pleasure to Burt, forgetful that she must keep aloof from him. Hands on the wheel, his legs braced wide apart to steady himself

against the sway of the yacht, his head tipped slightly back as he watched the luff of the mainsail, he was completely absorbed in what he was doing and was not in the least interested in her.

Immediately Charlotte was conscious of another, sharper feeling. She was piqued because he was ignoring her and she found herself wondering irritably how she could get his attention. In the next instant she was scolding herself for wanting it. What was the matter with her this morning? Was she falling in love with him?

Oh God, no! She sprang to her feet, forgetting about the rolling movement of the boat. She lost her balance and seemed to tumble across the cockpit to fall against Burt.

'What the hell are you doing?' he rasped angrily, bracing himself to support her while he struggled to pull the wheel round.

'Trying to get away from you!' she retorted, pushing away from him, only to find herself falling across the cockpit to crash against the seat again, aware of a great creaking and banging sounds. 'What's happening?' she cried, looking round from the crouching position into which she had fallen on the floor.

'We're gybing,' he yelled back at her, and seemed to leap across the cockpit to release the rope which held the foresail. Immediately there was a cracking of stiff terylene sailcloth as the sail emptied of wind. Back at the wheel Burt hauled it round, the main boom crashed over again, the mainsail bellied and the boat surged forward.

'Get up and pull the foresail sheet round the winch,' Burt ordered coldly. 'The other side,' he added acidly as she lurched to her feet and groped for a rope on the side of the cockpit to which she had been flung. Getting to the other side of the cockpit was like walking up and down hill and in the end she was hurried on her way by a particularly violent heave of the yacht and once again she crashed, painfully

against the hard teak cockpit coaming, bruising knees, ribs and one arm. Biting her lip to keep back the cry of pain, she found the foresail rope which was wriggling and writhing like a snake on the side deck as the flogging empty sail pulled at it. She wound it round the winch and pulled.

'That's enough,' said Burt. 'When the boat is running before a wind like this it isn't stable,' he went on as she sagged on the seat, keeping her head averted because unaccustomed tears had sprung to her eyes as a result of the bruising she had taken. 'So if you have to move about make sure you hold on to something, then you won't fall. An uncontrolled gybe like the one we had just now could have been dangerous.'

Charlotte didn't reply but continued to sit crouched on the seat while the tears dripped down her nose and salted her lips. The small islands towards which the boat was rushing looked like paintings done by a small child and then smudged into a continuous blur of green and yellow. Nothing was distinct, she discovered, when seen through tears.

Nancy would have turned and made play with long wet eyelashes or would have sighed and perhaps pretended to swoon. But Charlotte could only keep looking out to sea and sniff, hoping that he wouldn't notice she was crying because she wasn't going to admit to him that she was badly bruised and shaken.

'What's the matter?' Burt spoke sharply.

'Nothing.'

'Do you usually cry over nothing?' he jeered.

'I'm not crying,' she retorted, sitting up and presenting a stiff back to him.

'Perhaps you're regretting having to share my pillow last night,' he taunted, and she whirled to look at him, forgetful of the tears which still sparkled on her lashes and cheeks. Like green lightning his glance flashed down from the sails to her face and lingered there curiously.

'Not crying, eh?' he mocked softly. 'What's that on your face? Spray?'

'I thought you couldn't remember a thing about last night,' she challenged, ignoring his taunt and wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

'I couldn't when I woke up, but I've remembered since.' His mouth slanted upwards at one corner and his eyes narrowed to gleaming gold-fringed slits of jade. 'I've the impression you were with me all night. Am I right?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Does that mean you've decided to substitute for your sister?'

He was watching the sails again and while he wasn't looking at her she studied him with a strange new interest. Behind the wheel his square shoulders were a strong alert shape against the background of the sun- bright sky. On the wheel his broad tanned hands curved casually yet ready to tense and react quickly in an emergency. There was a tough resilient vigour about him, a hard physical power to all his body. Hardness too in the straight lines and broad planes of his face. Self-discipline lay in the compressed curves of his lips, but in his eyes glinted a rash and reckless will, struggling against the discipline. He had taught his head to rule his heart, she guessed, yet sometimes that latent storminess which she sensed in him and which was very like her own inner impetuosity, coming straight from the heart, betrayed him as it had the other night when he had shanghaied her.

'Well, does it?' Burt prompted. Not receiving an answer to his question, he was looking at her again.

'No, of course not,' she replied. 'I didn't sleep with you willingly.'

'Then why did you stay all night?' he countered.

'I ... er ...' she looked away from his bright intent gaze. 'You wouldn't let me go and I didn't like to struggle when you were obviously not very well,' she said. 'But don't think for one moment that because I shared your bunk with you last night I'm going to share it with you again tonight.'

'Then I'll just have to share yours with you, won't I?' he replied equably, and again she turned quickly to glare at him. The slant of his mouth and the narrowed gleam of his eyes mocked her.

'Sadist!' she flung at him tardy, and the mockery went from his face. Hard as glass, his eyes returned her glare for a second before lifting to the sails again. The wheel turned lazily under his hands.

'Why do you call me that?' he asked sharply.

'Because you're like that horrid French Marquis de Sade who liked to torment any woman he had in his power? He took a cruel and perverted pleasure in taunting them, and you're enjoying taunting me--'

'All I did was state an alternative to our sleeping arrangement of last night,' he interrupted her, and the mockery was back, curving his lips as his glance drifted lazily again in her direction. 'Nothing cruel or perverted about that,' he argued reasonably. 'There was nothing cruel or perverted about our sleeping together last night, either, was there?' His voice sharpened again as did his glance, and she realised she had offended him when she had accused him of sadism.

'No, there wasn't,' she admitted reluctantly.

'Then why are you so uptight about the idea of us sleeping together again tonight?'

Charlotte looked away over the leaping foam-flecked water. The boat was approaching one of the islands and she could see clearly the droop of palm fronds shadowing a long narrow line of yellow sand and the shapes of small houses.

Slowly and defensively she tried to put her confused thoughts into words.

'If we sleep in the same bunk tonight,' she began, and stopped abruptly as her voice quivered. Hands clenching on her lap, she bit her lower lip hard. She daren't sleep with him again. She couldn't trust herself.

'Go on,' he urged. 'You can't start a sentence like that and leave it unfinished.'

'I expect you ... you'll want to make love to me,' she finished in a mortified mutter, her face flaming.

Burt didn't answer at once. The boat surged on towards the island and Charlotte saw the entrance to a bay opening up between the protective reefs of coral over which surf tumbled in sparkling cascades.

'I didn't make love to you last night,' Burt said coolly.

'Only because you were light-headed after being hurt and drinking ah that whisky,' she retorted tardy, turning on him again. 'Anyway, I wouldn't have stayed with you if you'd tried to do it.'

'Wouldn't you? But I thought you said you couldn't leave because I wouldn't let you go,' he taunted, slanting a derisive glance at her.

Then his face sobered. 'I liked sleeping with you, Charlotte,' he added softly. 'And I want to sleep with you again, but there is one question I'd like you to answer first. Why are you so scared of making love with me? Is it because you're saving yourself for some guy back in England who's asked you to marry him?'

For a wild moment she thought of lying to him and telling him that there was someone back in England who had asked her to marry him and for whom she was keeping herself chaste. She turned again and met the cool clear glance of the green eyes. She would never be able to lie to him and get away with it, she realised. He was too observant and too knowledgeable about people.

'Supposing I said yes, there is a man back in England whom I've promised to marry?' she countered with a lift of her chin. 'Would it make any difference to you and your intentions towards me?'

He watched the sails while he considered her question and she watched expressions chase across his face. First he frowned fiercely and his mouth set in a stubborn wilful line. Then the frown faded, and his mouth compressed and his eyes narrowed calculatingly. He slanted her a swift assessing look which made her nerves leap in reaction. He looked up at the sails again and glanced towards the island, and the corners of his mouth tilted upwards in an oddly menacing smile.

'No, it wouldn't make any difference to my intentions towards you,' he drawled. 'But there isn't anyone back in England, is there?'

'No,' she admitted sullenly.

'So my question remains unanswered.' His glance flicked her again.

'I tried to tell you yesterday,' she retorted.

'What did you tell me?'

'That... I... can't make love with someone I don't love,' she muttered, avoiding his eyes.

'Ah, yes, the love bit,' Burt jeered softly, adding slowly, 'Yet I've a feeling that argument of yours isn't going to hold water much longer.'

'What do you mean?' she demanded.

'You're not so immune to the emotion you call love as you think you are,' he drawled provocatively, then with a complete change of tone he ordered, 'Free that foresail sheet from round the winch. I'm going to luff up and take in the sails. We'll go into harbour under engine because the entrance channel is very narrow.'

'We're going to anchor at this place?' asked Charlotte, glancing at the few houses glowing pink, yellow and white amongst drooping palms which were scattered across the land sloping up from a curving beach and feeling hope flicker within her. Perhaps when she was ashore she would be able to find someone who would help her to return to Long Cay. 'What is it called?' 'Macklin's Cay, because it's owned by Ted Macklin who allows a few well-chosen friends to have holiday houses here and keep their yachts here. He's President of a big Canadian corporation. That's his yacht over there, the dark blue schooner.'

The sails began to flap and he reached forward to turn on the engine. Soon both foresail and mainsail were furled in and the yacht was forging quickly through the sheltered water of the almost landlocked harbour.

As soon as both anchors were down Burt lowered the dinghy into the water. Now that they were out of the wind the heat of the sun was intense and Charlotte felt overdressed. Taking off the yellow waterproof jacket, she ducked down the companionway into the cabin and looked around for the bikini which Burt had offered her the

day before. It was lying on a shelf above one of the bunks. She grabbed it and went into the bathroom.

The bikini was a good fit, but as she gathered up Burt's T-shirt and jeans she noticed her own skirt and bodice and her mind raced ahead, considering all sorts of possibilities. Supposing she was able to get away from Burt she would need her own clothing, because she couldn't wander about in a bikini all the time. But .-how could she take the skirt and bodice ashore with her without him noticing them? She would have to wear them over the bikini and risk him making any comment.

In the end after various changes of clothing she wore the skirt with his T-shirt over the bikini and went up into the cockpit. Burt wasn't there, although his windbreaker was lying on one of the seats. Charlotte went to the side and looked over. The dinghy had gone. Shading her eyes against the dazzle of sunlight on the water, she could see the dark shape of the dinghy. Oars lifting and dipping rhythmically, Burt was rowing ashore without her.

The devious, cynical devil! He must have guessed that she would try to escape from him if he took her ashore. Cupping her hands round her mouth, she yelled loudly.

'Hey, come back! I want to go ashore too!'

As far as she could see he didn't take any notice of her yell but went on rowing steadily, and soon he had disappeared behind the high hull of a big schooner which was lying between *White Cockatoo* and the wharf.

Damn him! Charlotte stamped her foot on the cockpit floor. Now she would have to swim for it because she doubted very much if he would take her ashore when he came back. But if she swam ashore she would have no clothes to wear.

Swinging round, she looked at the other yachts that were anchored in the harbour. Perhaps she could get a lift ashore in a dinghy from one of them. The idea pleased her and she sat down on the cockpit seat to keep a watch on them, alert for any movement on board any of them, ready to wave and shout to attract attention.

With the white wings of its sails furled *White Cockatoo* nodded gently at its reflection in the jade green water. High above the mast the sun at noon was white hot. The smooth water shimmered with silvery light. All was quiet and still, baking under the heat.

Feeling thirsty suddenly, Charlotte went down below and helped herself to a soft drink. She found the straw hat she had worn yesterday and going up on deck sat in the shade of the mainmast to sip the drink and keep her watch on the other yachts.

She was seriously thinking again of diving in and swimming ashore when she heard the click of oars in rowlocks. The sound was coming from the direction Burt had rowed and she wondered if he was on his way back. Shading her eyes again, she looked. Yes, there was a dinghy coming, but it wasn't white, it was black and there were two people in it.

'Hi there!' sang out a woman's voice with a nasal twang. 'Isn't this Burt Sharaton's yacht?'

Rising to her feet, Charlotte stepped down on to the side deck and looked down into the dinghy which had come alongside. The woman who had spoken was very thin, her skin was tanned to the colour of teak and she was wearing crisp white slacks and pale blue sleeveless open-necked shirt. On her head was a Bahamian straw hat, her eyes were covered with large-lensed sun-glasses and she was smoking a long cigarette.

The young man who was rowing the dinghy was Dennis Holmes.

'Charlie!' he exclaimed.

'Dennis!' she exclaimed at the same time.

'Sounds as if you two know each other,' drawled the woman with a laugh.

'We do,' said Dennis. 'Charlie, this is Oonagh Torrance from New York.'

'I'm staying with the Macklins,' explained the woman, 'and I've just been visiting Dennis's uncle, Martin Scrivener, on his yacht. I saw this boat come in and I thought it looked familiar, so I asked Dennis to row me over. It is Burt Sharaton's, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Is he on board?'

'He's gone ashore.'

'You might see him there,' suggested Dennis to Oonagh, then looked up at Charlotte again. 'I must say I'm surprised to see you here, Charlie. When I was with you the other afternoon you said you couldn't go sailing with us because you had to be on hand when Nancy's husband arrived. What happened to make you change your mind?'

'Burt is what happened,' remarked Oonagh with another laugh. 'Take my word for it, she isn't the first young chick to find an invitation to go anywhere with the heir to the Sharaton fortune irresistible.'

Charlotte's mouth felt suddenly dry. What should she tell Dennis? How could she explain anything to him about why she was on Burt's yacht with this woman listening to everything she said and making sly suggestive comments?

'I'd like to go ashore, too,' she said, looking at Dennis intently and hoping she was conveying some sort of signal for help to him. 'Could you take me there?'

'Sure thing. I have to take Oonagh back anyway,' he replied. 'Sit in the bow.'

'Have you known Burt long?' asked Oonagh casually once Charlotte was seated in the bow thwart and the dinghy was skimming across the translucent aquamarine water. But the woman's attitude wasn't casual. Sitting with her elbows on her knees, she was leaning slightly forward and staring at Charlotte over Dennis' shoulder.

'No, not very long.' Charlotte spoke coolly, keeping her glance averted.

'Charlie's father is Grant Mason, manager of the Long Cay Beach Club hotel,' put in Dennis chattily.

'How very interesting,' drawled Oonagh. 'He used to be at the Aquarius, didn't he? Left in suspicious circumstances. Rumour was that Linda Marling Sharaton bailed him out. She'd pay his debts while he ran her hotel for her. Seems they had a very cosy arrangement.' Oonagh's wide thin-lipped mouth curved in a sardonic smile. 'Looks like Burt's made an arrangement for himself with his usual ability to seize an opportunity. He'll pay Mason's debts and in return the daughter of his mother's lover will share his bed. Another very cosy arrangement.'

Charlotte blazed.

'My father was not Linda Sharaton's lover!' she flared.

'I admit that is debatable,' drawled Oonagh, leaning back and trailing a hand over the side of the dinghy in the warm dimpling water. 'But the other is obvious. The islands of the Exumas must be an ideal place

for conducting an amorous affair, and I must remember to congratulate Bint when I see him on his choice of location. The two of you alone together on his yacht anchored off a desert island with only a few pelicans to disturb you—Paradise for two, I would call it.'

Now Charlotte's anger showed in the flaming colour of her cheeks and in the sparkle of her eyes.

'I am not having an amorous affair with Mr Sharaton,' she said clearly and defiantly. 'And he did not invite me to go sailing with him. He invited my sister Nancy, and when I went to tell him she couldn't go because her husband was arriving from England he kidnapped me and made me come with him in her place.'

'Kidnapped you?' Oonagh appeared to be delighted because she clapped her hands together. 'Oh, this is wonderful! Millionaire's son forces young English woman to go cruising with him—wonderful copy for the society gossip writer! But you can protest all you like, sweetie. No one is going to believe you're not Burt's latest *amour* once it's known you've been sailing alone with him. His reputation for dalliance is too well known.'

'You know him so well?' snapped Charlotte, miserably aware that she had made a mistake in blurting out the truth to this woman.

'Burt and I go back a long, long way,' said Oonagh, and now there was a certain viciousness in the expression on her narrow, long-nosed foxy-looking face. 'Years and years, before his marriage to Beverly Chilton. Bev was my dearest friend.' She sighed sadly and shook her head from side to side. 'Poor Bev. She committed suicide, you know. Slashed her wrists. Not surprising, when I think how badly Burt treated her.'

Shock rippled through Charlotte and she was glad they had arrived at the wharf. Dennis shipped the oars and held on to one of the iron

rungs which formed a ladder going up the stone wall while she took the painter and climbed up. Once on the wharf she tied the rope to a convenient iron bollard. When she looked round Oonagh had come up the ladder and, hearing her name called by some people who were about to go aboard a big white motor cruiser which was tied up at the wharf, went off to speak to them.

Charlotte watched her go, thinking of the remarks Oonagh had made about Burt and his late wife. The woman had been spiteful, vindictively so, as if she wanted to be revenged on him for some reason. Why? Because she held him responsible for the death of her dearest friend?

Dennis came up the ladder and she turned urgently to him.

'Dennis, listen. I need help,' she began.

'Really?' His eyebrows went up in disdainful surprise. 'That was some story you told Oonagh,' he went— on, bending down to check that she had tied the dinghy up properly.

'It was true. Burt did shanghai me.' He gave her a scornfully sceptical glance as he straightened up and she added, 'Oh, surely you don't believe what that woman said, that I... I'm having an affair with him?'

'It isn't hard to believe,' he said with a sneer. 'I expect you and your sister had it planned between you. If one couldn't go then the other would, to keep it in the family, so to speak. You could hardly refuse an invitation from your father's boss. It wouldn't be tactful, would it? Especially when the boss holds the purse strings and is as powerful and wealthy as Sharaton is.'

'You ... you're not going to help me, then?' Charlotte's voice quivered incredulously.

'I don't see why I should or how I can,' Dennis replied with a shrug. 'As far as I can see you've got it made ... if you play your cards right, and the daughter of Grant Mason ought to be able to do that.'

Dismay stabbed through her as she realised that nothing she could say would convince him that she needed help. Appearances were all against her. Frustration at finding herself in such a position surged through her like a sickness.

'A fine friend you turned out to be!' she snapped at him, and turning on her heel she began to walk across the sun-baked stones of the wharf to the narrow road which wound uphill between the twisted trunks of casuarinas whose feathery tassels of needle-like leaves cast cool protective shadows.

The surface of the road was rough and tiny stones pricked the soles of her bare feet, reminding her that she had left her sandals on the yacht. Her mouth twisted in a rueful grin. What a mess she must look in her crumpled cotton skirt and Burt's T-shirt with her hair a wild unkempt mop of ringlets and her feet bare. Like a waif from the sea, abandoned, lost.

Now that Dennis had failed her where could she find help? Would anyone on the island believe she needed help any more than he had? She was beginning to doubt it. People would just believe she was Burt Sharaton's latest playgirl and shrug their shoulders. She was completely in his power.

There was a movement on the road ahead of her. Sunlight shimmered on blond hair. Burt was coming towards her, his tall figure trim in hip-hugging jeans and short-sleeved navy blue shirt unbuttoned to the waist for coolness. Into the shade of the casuarinas he stepped and in a few strides was in front of her.

'How did you get here? Did you swim?' he asked, his glance raking her.

'No.' Heavens, why was she suddenly so breathless, and why couldn't she stop staring up at his sun-bronzed face as if he were some sacred idol she worshipped? 'I got a lift in a dinghy with some people.'

'Which people? Who were they?' he demanded sharply, frowning down at her.

'Dennis Holmes—his family rent a bungalow at Long Cay. He's crewing on one of the yachts anchored in the harbour. He was very surprised to see me here and to learn I was with you.' Her voice shook a little as she remembered Dennis's remarks, and Burt's eyes narrowed. 'The ... woman too was very nasty,' she whispered. 'Her name is Oonagh Torrance and she said she's known you a long time.'

'She's the sister of Ted Macklin's wife.' The warmth had gone from his eyes. They glinted down at her frostily. 'You little fool,' he grated. 'Why did you have to attract her attention?'

'I didn't,' she protested. 'Not deliberately. I was on deck when Dennis rowed her over. She'd been visiting the owners of the yacht he's crewing on and she recognised your boat and wanted to know if you were on board.'

'And also wanted to know whom I had with me for company, no doubt, damned snooping bitch that she is,' he snapped with a sort of stinging savagery. The sound of voices and footsteps drew their attention and they both looked down the road. Oonagh and another woman were coming up the hill, slowly, deep in conversation.

Burt took hold of Charlotte's arm and pushed her before him into the trees.

'Let's go down to the beach,' he said. 'I'm not ready yet to come face to face with Oonagh.'

Tiny brown casuarina cones scattered on the ground beneath the trees prickled the soles of her feet. Then the crispness of dried seaweed was crackling beneath them. Afterwards the coarse sand seemed soft as it sifted over her skin.

'What did Oonagh say to you?' asked Burt. His hand lingered at her elbow, warm and somehow comforting as they walked along still beneath the shade of the trees yet close to the smooth shining water.

'She suggested that I'm your latest affair,' she muttered.

'Which you hotly denied, of course,' he said dryly.

'Of course. I don't like it when complete strangers make false assumptions about me,' she retorted, and sighed in exasperation. 'She didn't believe me and said no one would once it was known I'd been alone with you on your yacht for a few days.'

'And she was right,' he said with a touch of bitterness. 'And she'll make sure everyone does know. I expect she's telling her sister now all about you. I should have warned you and told you to stay out of sight, I suppose, but I didn't know she was on holiday here. Too late now—fat's in the fire. But thank God she doesn't know the whole of our escapade together. She doesn't know I kidnapped you.'

Charlotte pulled up short and he stopped too, turning to look at her.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'She ... she does know,' she admitted reluctantly. 'I told her.'

'My God, have you no sense?' he hissed angrily. 'Why did you tell her?'

'I thought if she knew the truth she would realise we aren't having an affair. Oh, what harm can her knowing the truth do?' she cried, remembering suddenly how pleased Oonagh had seemed with the information.

'None to you, perhaps, But do you really think I'm going to enjoy having my reputation smirched more than it has been already by her?' he retorted, bitter again. 'I admit to having a number of vices, and you may not believe this, but I don't normally go about kidnapping young women like yourself.' He thrust long fingers through his hair, rumpling it, and groaned. 'Oonagh's going to have a whale of a time with this story!'

'In what way?'

'Like you, she's a newshound,' he said, giving her a bitter scornful glance. 'And she writes a weekly column which appears in newspapers right across the States. You know the sort of thing, I expect. She provides a scandal hungry, sex-starved reading public with a glimpse into the private lives of film celebrities, or well-known politicians and people who've gained notoriety because of their wealth.'

'A gossip column?' she exclaimed, dismay stabbing her like a knife.

'That's right.' Cynicism drew hard lines about his mouth. 'For various reasons she dislikes me.'

'She told me that your ... your late wife was her closest friend and that you treated her so badly she slashed her wrists,' she muttered.

'And you believed her, I suppose, like everyone else.' His voice shook with suppressed violence and the glance that raked her glittered with hostility.

'I ... I ... don't pass judgement on people until I know all the facts. There are always two sides to a question,' she retorted quietly.

Burt's expression softened and this time the glance he gave her was warm, almost tender.

'I .should have guessed you'd keep an open mind,' he admitted. 'But the truth of the matter is that no matter why Bev committed suicide Oonagh blames me for her death and has taken her revenge on me, using her ability with words to ruin my reputation. Every time I date a woman or I'm seen with one she gives it a big build-up in her column.' He broke off and drew a sharp hissing breath, paced away from her and then came back to lean towards her, an urgent sincerity in his whole attitude. 'I'd give anything for her not to have found out you've been with me for the past two nights and I'd give even more for her not to have found out I forced you to come with me. I'm sorry, Charlotte,' his uncharacteristic humility touched her, 'it's all my fault.* I shouldn't have lost my temper the other night.' His mouth lifted at one corner in an endearing self-mocking smile. 'See what you've doneto me,' he added softly, lifting both hands in a wide open gesture, almost as if he was offering himself to her. 'I'm actually admitting to being in the wrong.'

'It wasn't just your fault,' Charlotte said earnestly. 'It was mine too for being too much of a busybody. Oh, I wish I hadn't said anything to Oonagh.' She touched her mouth with her fingers. 'I talk too much. But I didn't know, I didn't realise... Isn't there anything we can do to stop her? Couldn't you go to her and tell her we're having an affair?'

'She wouldn't believe me,' he replied with another self-disparaging quirk of his mouth. 'You see, there's a certain element of truth in what she says. Over the past few years there've been a couple of women, in my life who've been more than just friends.' His eyes focussed on her face and he smiled that faintly suggestive intimate smile which sent alarm signals tingling along her nerves. 'Besides, I'm not at all sure

we're not having an affair,' he drawled softly, and raising a hand he stroked her cheek with his knuckles in a gentle, breath-stopping caress. 'And there's only one way I can think of right now to give the he to anything she might write about us in her next column.'

'And that is?' Charlotte spoke breathlessly, mesmerised by the soft sensuous expression in his eyes.

'I could marry you,' he said.

The sun-bright coral sand, the dropping feathery branches of the trees, the glittering water seemed to waver before her eyes like a mirage. She actually swayed and had to grab hold of his forearm. Hard muscles sheathed in warm hair-crisped skin tensed under her gripping fingers. Then his hand covered them, trapping them against his arm.

'You seem surprised,' he mocked, and bent his head so close to hers his breath wafted the tendrils of her hair which clustered about her brow.

'I am. You can't possibly want to marry me,' she exclaimed.

'But I do. I've been thinking of it all morning. We can go back to Nassau today and make all the arrangements. It shouldn't be too difficult since your father lives there and I hold property there. We might be able to get a licence to be married by the end of next week. Charlotte, will you marry me?'

Pulling her hand free from his, she stepped back, searching his face for signs of deceit, knowing now that he could be ruthless and go to any lengths when he wanted his own way.

'Why? To protect my reputation or yours?' she challenged coolly.

'Both.' Hard and clear, his eyes met the challenge of hers and it was difficult for her to tell what lay behind his laconic answer, yet she had this feeling that he had some other reason for making his sudden proposal than the mere protection of their reputations.

'But you scarcely know me,' she countered.

'I know enough. I learned a lot about you yesterday and last night. I know you're loyal, honest and fiercely independent, but I also know you're warm and compassionate, soft and rounded, good to sleep with,' he said softly, stepping close to her again.

'But rich men don't marry poor women and rich women don't marry poor men,' Charlotte argued shakily. Her legs felt very strange again and she had a great longing to lean against him for support to put her arms about his neck, pull his head down close to hers and kiss him on the lips in surrender to his demands.

'I married a rich woman once, was blackmailed into it,' Burt said bitterly.

'By whom?' She looked up and found there were only centimetres between his lips and hers.

'My father and hers. It was all part of one of my father's take-over bids. It happened ten years ago and I was too young to realise what I was letting myself in for. Not until too late did I discover I'd married a woman who was, unhappily, mentally ill, not until I returned to our home one day and discovered she'd smothered our baby.'

'Oh, God!' Charlotte's hands reached out and clutched at him. Her arms about him, she rested her head against his shoulder and felt his arms go about her. 'What happened afterwards?' she whispered. 'What happened to your wife?'

'She spent the next few years in and out of mental hospitals until she took her own life.' She felt his fingers tangling in her curls. 'The marriage was a disaster,' he muttered. 'But I might have more luck with you, with a woman I've chosen for myself.'

Very close to surrender, Charlotte remembered the differences between them and forced her head to rule her heart for once. Pushing free of his hold, she stepped back from him.

'No,' she said, shaking her head from side to side.

'Why not?'

'Because I'm afraid of disasters,' she whispered.

Burt's mouth took on a stubborn wilful line and a wild storminess flared in his eyes. Again he stepped close to her.

'Do I have to threaten you again, sweetheart, like I did yesterday?' he drawled silkily. 'Refuse to marry me and I'll have no hesitation in sacking your father and suing him for the money he's embezzled.' His fingers fondled her throat tantalisingly, then shd up into the froth of her curls. His brilliant gaze centred on her mouth. 'Marry me and I'll forget all my suspicions concerning his fraudulent activities and all his debts will be paid.'

'Oh, how well you've learned the art of blackmail from your father!' she cried, jerking free and stumbling backwards in the heavy sand which, hot and coarse, slithered over her bare feet. 'And to think—' She pressed her knuckles against her mouth, realising she had been about to betray her real feelings for him.

'To think what?' he prompted, closing in on her again.

'To think I was beginning to like you,' she moaned, and covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the temptations offered by his

handsome face and vigorous body. 'Oh, I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do,' she whispered desperately, repeating the words over and over again like a prayer.

'Say you'll marry me,' he murmured persuasively, taking hold of her wrists and pulling her hands away from her eyes. Still holding them, he placed them palms downwards against the warmth of his half-bared chest and at once, of their own volition, they began to explore and grope intimately.

With a strangely savage exclamation he dragged her against him. With a fist under her chin he tilted her face up to his. Charlotte had a glimpse of passion glittering in his eyes like raw flames, then his mouth covered hers in an erotic kiss which sent her senses spinning.

His hands slid down to her hips and he ground her body against his with a rough intimacy and desire went shooting along her nerves like sparks from a newly kindled fire. Seemingly suddenly boneless, her body flowed against his. Her hands slid up from his chest to the nape of his neck, fingers probing and instinctively finding potent nerve endings. Under the T-shirt she felt the roughness of his fingers against the smoothness of her waist. They slipped down within the waistband of her skirt and under the elasticised nylon of the bikini briefs to press against sensitive hollows in the small of her back until she groaned in pleasure and her trembling legs parted to the thrust of his knee between them.

Clinging to each other, they swayed with the intensity of the passion which was swirling through both of them like a floodtide, breaking down all barriers before its surging rush, and their united shadows, slanting in a dark shape on the sun-bright sand, swayed too.

'Your hair is like an angel's in one of those paintings by Botticelli,' Burt whispered thickly into her curls as he pressed her face against the pulsing warmth of his throat. 'Could be that's what you are really,

an angel come to drag me back from the path to hell.' His words were soft spells weaving magic about her, drawing her to him, binding her closely. 'An angel in disguise, warm and womanly, with your feet all bare and dusty like a beggarmaid's. For the third time of asking, will you marry me and we'll live happy ever after?'

Tiny waves sighed softly on the edge of the shore and the tassels of the casuarinas whispered together as they swung in a sudden breeze. Voices of people on boats sounded across the water, clearly reminding Charlotte that she and Burt were not alone on the island, and were possibly being watched.

It took all her strength to push away from him and stand on her own two feet, and every nerve in her body twanged in protest at being separated from him so abruptly.

'I've never read anywhere that the beggarmaid was happy once she was married to rich King Cophetua,' she said coolly, although a slight quiver in her voice betrayed how difficult she was finding it to refuse yet again. 'The answer is still no. I don't want to be either your lover or your wife.'

Rash temper blazed wickedly in his eyes and she stepped back hastily. A muscle twitched in his cheek and sweat broke on his brow as he struggled to control the violent impulse so clearly expressed in his eyes.

'Do you really expect me to believe that after the way you kissed me just now?' he grated. 'You want me as much as I want you, and I want you for better or worse—and what I want I usually get.'

'Well, you're not getting me, and you can't force me to marry you,' she retorted.

'You think not?' he jeered. 'I can have a damned good try, and we're going to fly to Nassau now to arrange it.'

'Fly?' She was astonished. 'How?'

'In Ted Macklin's plane. I'm leaving the yacht here in his care. We'll come back when we're married and continue our cruise together.'

He gave her no chance to disagree with him. Taking one of her hands in his, he set off through the trees back to the road, pulling her after him, and although she tried hard to wrench her hand free he held it so tightly she had no alternative but to go with him.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE little red and cream four-seater plane belonging to Ted Macklin and piloted by him soared and dipped like a fledgling learning to fly above the Yellow Banks, those vast mounds of coral sand which he just beneath the surface of the sea separating the Exuma Islands from New Providence.

Sitting alone behind Ted, Charlotte stared down at the sea through a window. It was like flying above an artist's wide canvas which had been daubed with aquamarine and daffodil yellow paint, for the sea looked as idle as if it were painted. No sparkling crests of waves, no arrowing wakes of boats disturbed its surface. It looked completely still as if trapped by the treacherous sands and in the brilliant afternoon sunshine it looked beautiful as dangerous things often are.

Charlotte sighed and leaning against the back of the seat closed her eyes. She felt exhausted. Setting her will against Burt's, refusing to be stampeded by his lovemaking, had sapped her strength and she was glad he had chosen to ignore her and sit beside Ted because she needed the respite offered by the forty-five minute flight to gather together her mental and physical resources.

It would have been so easy to have given in to him on the quiet sunlit beach at Macklin's Cay, to fall for that strange half-mocking suggestion of his that she was an angel sent in disguise to drag him back from the path to hell. How well he had got to know her in the short time they had been together; so well that he had guessed such a suggestion would appeal to her foolish, tender heart so that now every part of her was clamouring to put her arms about him and save him from hell.

Why? Because she was in love with him? Slowly she opened her eyes and glanced diagonally across to the seat where he was sitting. He was half turned in it and leaning across to catch what Ted Macklin

was saying to him. A shaft of sunlight gilded his face so that the hard bold features looked as if they had been cast in gold. His hair too had the dull sheen of gold. A man of gold; Charlotte's lips twisted wryly. The description was apt considering how rich he was. And he had asked her to marry him. Not only that, he had told Ted, his wife Joan and her sister Oonagh Torrance that he was going to marry her and she hadn't been able to deny it. The thought of her father had stopped her.

Sighing, she looked out of the window again. The plane was over land now. Toy-like cars sped along a roadway beside a narrow stretch of glittering blue water, crowded with the masts of yachts. A humpbacked bridge leaped over the water joining Paradise Island to the mainland of New Providence. The stretch of water widened out into a harbour where glittering cruise ships were tied up. The plane turned, and in the distance the high-shouldered, window-glinting towers of hotels tilted against a background of blue-green surf-edged sea.

Soon they would be landing. Soon Charlotte would be at Long Cay seeing her father and Nancy. She stiffened in her seat. She had forgotten about Nancy. She had been too busy coping with new and disturbing emotions and with the searing sensual desires close contact with Burt had so rudely aroused that she had forgotten it was Nancy whom he had wanted to go cruising with him in the first place, whom he would have taken if she hadn't interfered.

A strange feeling twisted through her, a sudden spiteful dislike of her sister which shocked her. She was jealous of Nancy because once Burt had looked at her and had coveted her. She shook her head in an attempt to clear it of such thoughts, but they wouldn't go.

So that was the truth, was it? She was in love with him and had been since she had first laid eyes on him. But it wasn't the bored cynical womaniser with whom she had fallen in love; it was with the reckless,

unmanageable, unhappy man whom she had discovered behind the rake, and she longed passionately to make him happy.

Then why had she refused his proposal? Because she was afraid he wanted to marry her for the wrong reasons? Because she guessed he might be attracted to her only temporarily, wanting her only because she was hard to get and once she was his he would lose interest in her, begin to neglect her and would eventually discard her? Charlotte's hand clenched on her knees, her eyes narrowed and her lips tightened. She wasn't going to let him do that to her. She wouldn't let any man do it to her.

The plane landed with a bump and taxied to the terminal building. Burt jumped out and turned to help her down. They said goodbye to Ted Macklin and walked round the building to the front entrance where taxis were lined up taking on or discharging passengers. Soon they were in the back seat of a taxi and were being driven swiftly along the airport road.

'I guess you'd like to go straight to the hotel to see your father,' Burt drawled.

'Yes, I would,' she replied stiffly, sitting as far away from him as possible and staring out of the window, although she hardly noticed the scenery. 'But you don't have to come with me.'

'I think I do. It's the custom, so I'm led to believe, for a guy to inform the father of the woman he wishes to marry of his intentions,' he drawled mockingly, sliding along the seat until he was close beside her. 'And I have a feeling your father is going to be glad my intentions towards you are honourable and could be of benefit to him.'

'It doesn't make any difference to the way I feel about marrying you if he is glad. I'm of age, I'm responsible for myself and I make my own decisions...'

'But your reputation, sweetheart,' he drawled insinuatingly, and she felt his shoulder heavy against hers as he leaned towards her and his hand slid enticingly up her arm. 'After spending two nights alone with me it's going to be in shreds,' he scoffed.

'My reputation is my own concern and not my father's nor yours. Besides, once I've left Nassau and returned to England no one is going to be interested in my brief association with you,' Charlotte retorted, then feeling his lips trail tantalisingly along the line of her chin, she gasped in outrage, 'Oh get away from me! You can't kiss me here in front of the taxi driver in broad daylight.'

'Behind the taxi driver, you mean,' mocked Burt, and sliding an arm about her shoulders pulled her against him. Once more his fingers at her chin forced her face up. For a moment they measured glances, then his lips touched hers, lightly at first, their pressure increasing slowly and provocatively as she managed to maintain a sort of passive resistance until his fingers fanned gently over one of her breasts and she sighed at the exquisite torture his touch aroused. At once his lips were quick to plunder her parted ones so that her resistance melted, giving way to active participation in the act of kissing.

'I love you,' he whispered, his tongue tickling the tender lobe of her ear.

'You're crazy,' she muttered weakly, but did not push him away.

'A man in love often is.'

'You can't be in love with me. It isn't possible,' she protested, and this time she did move away. 'And I'm not in love with you. You only want me because I've refused you. I'm sure that if I'd given in yesterday and let you seduce me you wouldn't have asked me to marry you today.'

'You could be right,' he replied equably. 'You present a challenge I have to overcome somehow.' He stroked her throat from the shoulder upwards. His hand moved about her jaw, the tips of his fingers tickling the sensitive hollow behind her ear. 'When you're angry your eyes blaze with little golden flames,' he whispered, his lips approaching her again. 'You're like a tigress, snarling and snapping, and I want to stroke you, soothe you, kiss you until you...'

'Until I submit to you,' she interrupted him in a fierce hissing whisper, jerking her head back and banging it against the window of the car. 'That's what this is all about, isn't it? Domination and submission. You dominate and I submit. Well, I refuse to play that game. I'm not going to marry you. When I marry—if I marry—it won't be someone powerful and domineering like you. I'll marry someone with whom I'm equal.'

'But we are equals,' Burt argued. 'Haven't you noticed? You're almost as tall as I am and you're strong-armed as well as strong-willed.' His mouth curved ruefully and he touched the plaster on his forehead. 'You've proved in no uncertain way that you refuse to be dominated,' he went on dryly. 'Added to that you're reckless, don't give a damn for convention and you like to have your own way as much as I like to have mine. Oh, yes, we're equals all right, Charlotte, two halves of a whole.'

'No, no! How can you say that when you're rich and I have nothing, only the salary I earn as a cub reporter,' she retorted, and looked away out of the window quickly because the nearness of him was having a weakening effect on her again. She wanted so badly to frame his face with her hands and kiss away the bitter lines she could see setting about his mouth. 'If... if ... I marry you,' she went on in a shaken whisper, 'everyone will say I've married you for your money and I couldn't bear that. Besides, I like my job and I want to go back to England and do it, prove that I can be just as successful a newspaper

reporter as my grandfather was. If ... if ... I marry you I'd have to give up so much, and I don't think I could do that.'

She heard the slithering sound of clothing rubbing against the vinyl-covered seat and knew with a sense of relief in which regret mingled that he had moved away from her.

'Then you don't care about what will happen to your father if you continue to refuse to marry me,' he drawled softly.

'Yes, I care,' she murmured, keeping her head averted. The car was passing Windward Cottage. Pale green walls glimmered among the dark foliage of flowering shrubs and the frond of palms. 'But I don't believe he's done anything wrong. And ... and I care more about what would happen to... to... us, you and me, if we married for wrong reasons.' Her voice shook again and she had to stop and take a deep breath to steady it. 'Burt, please try to understand. It would be another disaster, not only for you but for me too.'

'I don't believe it would,' he retorted coolly. 'Okay, so it's deadlock again. But don't think I've given up. In a few minutes we'll find out whether you're right about your father and once we do that the pressure will be on again, sweetheart. I'm going to marry you before the end of next week.'

As soon as the taxi stopped outside the porticoed entrance to the hotel Charlotte opened the door and jumped out. Knowing that Burt would have to stop and pay the driver she took advantage of having a head start on him, running up the steps to burst breathlessly from the revolving doors into the elegance of the round foyer with its domed ceiling, thickly carpeted floor and discreet alcoves. Right to the reception desk she went where two smartly dressed, dark-faced Bahamian women were dealing in their pleasant smiling way with two tourists. To reach her father's office she knew she would have to

get past them and as soon as one of the tourists moved away she stepped up to the desk.

'Is Mr Mason in?' she said.

'Sure he is.' The woman's black eyes flicked over Charlotte's appearance.

'I'd like to go in and see him. I... I'm his daughter Charlotte.'

The woman's eyebrows lifted disdainfully. Behind her Charlotte heard the revolving doors swish. The woman looked past her and almost at once her expression changed from disdain to one of fawning respect.

'Good afternoon, Mr Sharaton, sir,' she said. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'I was here first,' protested Charlotte indignantly.

'I'd like to go through and see Mason,' Burt drawled.

'Yes, sir. Come right this way.' The woman lifted part of the counter and opened the half-door to let him through.

'After you, Charlotte,' he murmured, gesturing to the opening, and the woman gave him a surprised look.

Her head held high, Charlotte swept through and on towards the door marked Manager, trying to pretend that the receptionists were not eyeing her creased skirt and bare feet with sly smirking expressions on their faces. At the door to her father's office she turned to Burt.

'I'd like to see him alone,' she whispered.

'I guess you would, but you're not going to.' He raised a hand and knocked on the door.

'I don't want you to come in!'

'You can't stop me,' he replied, smiling right into her eyes, and there was a warm tenderness in that smile which caused her to catch her breath. 'You haven't got a winch handle,' he added mockingly.

At that moment her father's voice called 'Come in,' and, with an exasperated glare at Burt which he returned with another smile, Charlotte pushed open the door and went into the wide sunlit room which overlooked the hotel swimming pool.

Grant was without his jacket and had rolled up his shirt sleeves and loosened his tie in deference to the heat of the day. He was sitting behind a handsome teak desk looking through some papers. When he heard the door click closed he looked up over the tops of his reading glasses.

'Charlie!' he exclaimed, whipping his glasses off and standing up. 'This is a surprise. I didn't think you'd be back so soon.' His dark glance went over her as he came round the desk. 'You look a bit bedraggled,' he added, and only then did he seem to notice Burt. His eyes widened and their expression grew wary. 'Is something wrong?' he asked nervously.

'Dad....' Charlotte began, but Burt's deeper voice overrode hers.

'You could say I've come up against a stone wall— Charlotte's obstinacy. I guess you didn't spank her enough when she was young,' he drawled as he leaned lazily against the door. 'Did you get the message that I'd taken her cruising with me?'

Grant's face expressed bewilderment.

'The message was from you?' he exclaimed.

'That's right,' said Burt.

'Good God,' whispered Grant and, rumpling his hair, went back slowly to his swivel chair and sank down into it. He looked across at Charlotte. 'I've been thinking all this time that you'd gone with the Holmes family on Martin Scrivener's yacht. You see, I didn't take the message personally—one of the night staff here took it and passed it on to me. I suppose he didn't listen too well. All he said was that you'd gone sailing with friends and wouldn't be back for a few days, so I assumed you'd decided to accept the Holmeses' invitation which you talked about at dinner on Thursday night.'

'Did Nancy assume that too?' Charlotte asked quickly, moving across to the desk to perch on the corner of it.

'Well, I suppose she did.' Grant gave her a puzzled look. 'I mean, she didn't question me when I told her where you'd gone.' His eyes lit briefly with a smile. 'You'll be glad to know Luke arrived yesterday afternoon,' he added softly.

'Was she pleased to see him?' asked Charlotte.

'It seemed that way. She was down in the dumps yesterday for some reason or other and perked up no end when he arrived. They've gone off to Eleuthera today to stay in a secluded cottage there. I thought they would be better off by themselves away from the distractions of this place, more able to talk things out.' He glanced at Burt uneasily and then looked at Charlotte again. 'I think I'm entitled to an explanation, Charlie,' he said quietly. 'I've told everyone you've gone away on the Scrivener yacht and now you're back here again and it seems you haven't been with the Holmes family at all. Where have you been?'

'She's been with me,' said Burt, pushing away from the door and strolling towards the desk. Placing both fists on it, he leaned towards Grant. 'I invited Nancy to come with me, but I took Charlotte instead. She's been with me two nights, alone on my yacht. I think you can guess what people are going to think and say about her....'

'Daddy, don't listen to him,' Charlotte interrupted hotly. 'He forced me to go with him and now ... now he's trying to blackmail me...'

'Charlie, watch what you're saying. That isn't an accusation you can make lightly,' Grant reproved her. He rumpled his hair again in bewilderment. 'I still don't understand all this...'

'On Wednesday night I went to tell Burt Nancy couldn't go with him. He had sent her a note and I intercepted it. I didn't give it to her. I couldn't let her go with him knowing that Luke was coming. You do see that, don't you?' Charlotte leaned earnestly towards her father.

'Yes, yes, of course I do, but--' Grant broke off and glanced uncertainly at Burt. 'Did you force her to go with you?'

'She fell in the water and I took her aboard to dry out,' replied Burt, a faint smile curving his mouth. 'I have to admit to being pretty mad with her for interfering in my plans. I wanted to catch the high tide, so while she was getting out of her wet clothes, I put out to sea. Now I want to marry her and she refuses. What are you going to do about it?'

'Dad, it isn't like that at all,' Charlotte protested urgently when she saw reproach in her father's eyes. 'We... we didn't sleep together...'

'Yes, we did, last night,' Burt put in quickly. 'Surely you haven't forgotten so soon, sweetheart?' he added suggestively.

'But we didn't ... I mean....' Charlotte broke off as her cheeks flamed suddenly. 'Oh, you devil!' she shouted, turning on him furiously, and sliding off the desk marched away to the window to stare out at the

view of yachts, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides as she tried to control the indignation which was boiling and bubbling within her. Behind her she heard Grant speak to her gently.

'Charlie, calm down. I'm sure Burt is only thinking of your reputation.'

'No, he isn't—he's thinking of his own. Anyway, I've told him my reputation is my own concern, not his. And... and I don't care a damn about his,' she blurted, whirling round to look at them both. Then moving to her father's side she leaned against the desk again. 'But the truth of the matter is it's your reputation which is really at stake,' she told him.

'Mine?' he exclaimed. 'In what way?' 'Burt says that if ... if ... I won't marry him he'll fire you from your job here as manager and expose you as the person who's been embezzling money from the hotel. Tell him it isn't true, that you haven't been embezzling--' She broke off as Grant's shoulders slumped and his face went the colour of putty. 'It isn't true, is it?' she whispered weakly, dismay stabbing through her.

He didn't answer her but looked across the desk at Burt, who had straightened up and was standing with his brawny sun-tanned forearms crossed on his chest. With his sun-gilded face calmly impassive under the droop of blond hair he resembled an avenging mythical god come down to pass judgment on poor weak mortals, Charlotte thought rather wildly, and she found herself wondering quite irrelevantly and jealously how many other women had been attracted and trapped by his golden male beauty only to find out that they had been caught in the devil's coils.

'I guessed you were suspicious of me,' Grant's voice was hoarse. 'How long have you known about the discrepancies which showed in the accounts?'

'About a couple of months,' said Burt curtly. 'That's why I came to stay at Long Cay. It had been suggested to me that you might be responsible for them'

'Dad, tell him you aren't responsible,' urged Charlotte.

'I can't,' he groaned, giving her a tortured look. 'Because I am.'

'But why? Why?' gasped Charlotte.

'Ever since I came to work here I've been blackmailed by someone who knew about the trouble I was in at the Aquarius. I managed to keep him quiet by paying him so much a month. Then last December he raised his price.' Grant looked at Burt. 'I couldn't meet it,' he added with a sigh of defeat.

'So you helped yourself to the petty cash, hoping it wouldn't show,' jeered Burt, his mouth twisting unpleasantly.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Oh, Dad, how could you?' groaned Charlotte.

'Charlie, please try to understand,' he said, turning to her. 'The blackmailer threatened that he would go to Burt and tell him I'd been fired from the Aquarius for fraud, and I had no way of proving him wrong. I didn't want to risk losing my job here and being turned out without any references again, so I paid him to keep quiet. It just became too much for me to cope with.' He turned to Burt again. 'I fully intended to replace the money as soon as I could.'

'Oh, sure.' Burt's , voice was dry. 'But you were a fool to let the guy frighten you in that way. You should have let him tell me about the Aquarius business. It wouldn't have been news to me. My mother had told me and why she'd decided to give you a job.' He gave Grant a rather scornful glance. 'Now you're in an even worse mess. You're

caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, between me and him. But there is a way out for you.'

'How?' asked Grant hopefully.

'Once Charlotte becomes my wife you'll have nothing to worry about,' replied Burt coolly. He glanced at Charlotte and his eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at her. 'Just say you will, darling,' he suggested softly.

'And if I won't?' she retorted spiritedly.

'Then your father goes to jail,' he replied, his face hardening, his eyes ice-cold. 'I'd like your answer now,' he went on smoothly, 'then I'll know what I have to do. If your answer is still no I'll go out through that door and tell the hotel staff your father is suspended from his job as manager and why.'

She stared at him challengingly and he stared right back, his expression not altering. Then she looked down at Grant's bowed rumpled head. This was her father, her kind warm-hearted father who had loved her mother so much he had beggared himself and had run into debt to obtain the best medical treatment money could buy. How could she let him down? She knew she couldn't and live with herself afterwards. Even the cost of her own future happiness was nothing to the price he would have to pay if she again refused to marry Burt.

She looked at Burt again. His head was tipped forward slightly and he was watching her from under slightly frowning eyebrows.

'All right, I will marry you,' she said steadily, and felt a strange feeling compounded of fear and excitement twist through her when she saw triumph glitter briefly in his eyes before they were hidden by his lashes.

'Charlie, you don't have to,' Grant began anxiously.

'Please, don't say anything,' she whispered, squatting down beside his chair and putting her arms round him. 'Except... except, perhaps, to wish me happy.'

'But are you sure?' he murmured.

'I'm sure.'

'I guess you won't hear anything more from your blackmailer once it's known that Charlotte and I are going to be married,' said Burt, coming round the desk. 'He'll realise I know everything about you and that there isn't much point in approaching you any more. If he does bother you just let me know and I'll deal with him. The only other people who might require explanations are Broadfoot, the auditor who noticed the discrepancies, and--' His mouth curved in rueful humour. 'And of course, my father,' he added.

'He's here, in Long Cay,' said Grant. 'He came to see me yesterday afternoon.'

'Why?' Burt's voice was sharp.

'He thought I might be able to tell him of your whereabouts. It seems your sister mentioned that you were very friendly with one of my daughters.' Grant drew in his breath in a rather noisy sigh and gave Burt a bitter glance. 'To tell the truth, he believed Nancy had become your mistress and that I knew. I don't mind telling you he was damned offensive about it.'

'I can imagine,' drawled Burt.

'And it gave me great pleasure to tell him he was wrong,' Grant continued. 'I told him Nancy was at Windward Cottage waiting for her husband *to* arrive.' His lips thinned in exasperation. 'Of course I had no idea Charlie was with you. Now he's going to think I lied to him.'

'Did you know your father was coming to Long Cay?' Charlotte demanded, turning to Burt.

'I didn't know he was coming, but I knew he'd arrived,' he replied. 'That's really the reason why I asked Ted to fly us back here this afternoon.'

'But how did you know?'

'The marvels of modern science,' he retorted with a grin. 'V.H.F. radio. This morning while I was pre-paring the breakfast I listened to the scanner and picked up a message for me which was being relayed by another yachtsman in the vicinity. He had picked it up from the Nassau marine station the evening before. It was from my sister asking me to get in touch with her as soon as possible, so I put into Macklin's Cay knowing I could contact her from here. She told me he'd arrived, breathing fire and brimstone and demanding to see me.' He gave Charlotte an intent serious look. 'I'd like you to come with me now to meet him.'

'But I can't go looking like this,' she protested, suddenly wary of meeting his family. To be introduced to them as the woman he intended to marry would be the final closing of the trap in which she was caught, and she realised she was still hoping, still searching for a way to escape from it before it was too late.

'What's wrong with the way you look?' he asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

'My hair....' she began, raising a hand to it.

'Is like an angel's, I've told you,' he replied, and flicked the front curls with a finger.

'And I'm sticky and dirty and I feel and look a mess.'

'You look lovely to me any way you are,' he murmured, his eyes darkening sensuously as their glance roved slowly over her. Tilting her chin up with one finger, he kissed her lightly on the lips with complete disregard for her father.

'Please ... I must go back to the cottage and have a bath and change my clothes,' she whispered shakily. As his wife she would have to become accustomed to him looking at her in that possessive, predatory way, to him kissing her when he felt like it, to him...

'I'm very reluctant to let you out of my sight right now,' he said bluntly, his voice cutting across her wild thoughts.

'Why?' she challenged.

'You might take it into your head to give me the slip and fly back to where you came from, angel, before I can marry you.'

'You don't trust me?' Her chin went up defiantly.

'Shall we say I don't trust my own luck,' Burt replied enigmatically. His eyes narrowed and he smiled, that strangely saturnine and menacing smile which she had come, to realise meant he was planning some mischief. 'I'll come with you to the cottage and wait while you shower and change, then we'll walk over to see my father together.'

Charlotte bit her lip and flicked an appealing glance at her father. To her surprise he rose to his feet and tightened the knot of his tie.

'A good idea,' he said. 'I'll drive you both to the cottage.'

Half an hour later, submerged in rose-scented foam in the bath at Windward Cottage, Charlotte relaxed for the first time in days, or so it seemed. Being with Burt constantly for over forty-four hours had been a tormenting, nerve-stretching experience and even now he was

still with her, not in the same room it was true, but in the same house downstairs in the living room, waiting for her, not trusting her.

Since she had last been in this bathroom on Wednesday she felt she had lived a lifetime, so much had happened to her. On Wednesday she had been worried about Nancy and had been determined to prevent her sister from going off with Burt. Now she was wondering what Nancy would say when she found out that her younger sister was going to marry the man whose mistress she had hoped to become.

'I had to say I'd marry him for Dad's sake,' Charlotte muttered as if answering a question put to her by her absent sister. 'I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't threatened to send Dad to jail. Someone has to pay the devil his due and it looks as if it will have to be me. Only I wish ... I can't help wishing—' Her lips trembled.

What was the matter with her? She had never been given to indulgence in romantic daydreams, so why start now? Still, she couldn't help wishing she hadn't been blackmailed into accepting Burt's proposal. She wanted to marry for love and to be married for love, but she was sure he didn't love her and marriage had been far from his thoughts yesterday, just as it had been far from his thoughts when he had invited Nancy to go away with him. There was something cold and calculating in his sudden proposal. Something had caused him to change his mind.

If he loved her he wouldn't be in such a hurry, she argued. If he loved her he would be willing to wait, to become engaged in a civilised fashion and let her go back to England to work a little longer at her job, prove herself in it and have the experience of being successful in it. And if she loved him she wouldn't be so suspicious of his motives. No marriage could succeed if there was such a lack of trust between the partners and there must be some way she could get out of the final commitment, some way in which she could prevent her father from

being disgraced without her becoming the second Mrs Burton Sharaton.

Sliding down in the bath, she let her head dip backwards into the water until her hair was completely soaked. Sitting up again, she reached for a bottle of shampoo, poured some on her head and began to lather it. When that was done she turned on the taps, pulled the shower curtain across, flicked the shower lever and stood up. Lukewarm water streamed over her head, rinsing out the lather. It slipped caressingly over her skin, soothing away the last of the salt and sweat which had made her feel so sticky.

When she felt really clean and glowing she twitched back the shower curtain and groped for the big towel she had put on a stool near the bath. Holding it to her face, she dabbed water from her eyes and gasped with astonishment which changed swiftly to a feeling of outrage when she saw that Burt was in the bathroom. Naked to the waist, he was stepping calmly out of his jeans.

'Just what do you think you're doing in here?' she demanded, mentally kicking herself for not having remembered to lock the door. She draped the towel sarong-wise about her and clutching it to her stepped out of the bath.

'I heard the shower running and realised how sticky I felt too, so I thought I'd join you under it,' he replied easily. Tossing his jeans aside, he turned to face her. He was still wearing the bikini swimming briefs he had worn the previous day and the steam which clouded the bathroom laid a sheen on his sun-tanned torso so that his skin gleamed like gold.

'Well, you're too late,' she retorted, trying to pretend a sophistication she didn't feel, trying not to show how much his suggestion had shocked her. 'You'll have to shower by yourself after all.'

She tried to slide past him, intending to make for the bedroom and lock herself in that room, but he sidestepped, blocking the way and with a casual kick behind him closed the door.

'Prude,' he scoffed softly, stepping towards her, and there was nowhere she could go in that small but elegant room except backwards into the bath, so she stood her ground, facing up to him and feeling excitement dance along her nerves when his fingers slid lazily along the slope of her bare shoulder. At the glinting rapacious expression in his eyes as he bent his head towards hers and curved his hand behind the nape of her neck that excitement gathered in a taut knot somewhere in the lower part of her body.

'Pagan,' she retorted breathlessly, her lips parting of their own volition, her face tilted up to his in invitation, her breasts feeling as if they would burst with longing to be touched.

'You'll have to get used to sharing with me. We'll often shower and bath together when we're married, so think of this as a trial run,' he whispered. 'Drop the towel, sweetheart.'

'No--' Whatever else she might have said was lost because his lips accepted the invitation hers offered.

The towel was twitched away from her and she was swept against him. The hardness of his chest inflamed the tender points of her breasts and against the hard thrust of his masculinity her body arched involuntarily. Delirious with delight, she rubbed herself against him, loving the feel of his skin slightly sticky with sweat clinging to the dampness of hers, her mind dizzy and no longer in control, drugged by the male smell of him.

Slowly he withdrew his lips from hers to whisper thickly against her cheek while his hand explored the smooth swell of her breasts.

'Which bedroom is yours?'

'The one opposite the bathroom,' she murmured, clinging to him as desire made her unsteady on her feet. Then the implication behind his words penetrated her half-drugged mind, clearing it. 'But we can't,' she muttered.

'Can't what?' His lips burned against her throat and his hair feathered her chin.

'Anticipate our ... our wedding night,' she whispered, hiding her face against the smooth tensile bulk of his shoulder.

In the moment of silence she heard Rosie's voice raised in song down in the kitchen and the swift excited beat of Burt's heart Beneath her head his shoulder shook as he laughed softly.

'I hadn't realised you're such a romantic at heart, sweetheart,' he mocked gently, putting his hands on her shoulders to push her away from him. His glance scanned her briefly but with a raw hunger which set her nerves twanging again, then he bent and picked up the towel to drape it about her shoulders like a shawl, crossing it over her breasts in an almost reverent gesture. 'God knows I want you and could take you right now,' he murmured, passion smouldering like green fire in his eyes. 'But if it would please you to wait, sweet prude, we'll wait until our wedding night.' He kissed her tenderly on the temple, then turned away abruptly to the bath and turned on the taps.

Charlotte ran across the landing into the bedroom, banging the door shut behind her. Her heart was thundering, her blood was beating wildly along her veins and her hands were shaking as she skimped drying herself. Opening drawers, she pulled out clean clothing at random until she had found what she wanted to wear. She dressed quickly, her ears cocked for the stopping of the shower, afraid that Burt would invade her privacy again and finding her still naked would let his desire run riot.

But he took his time and by the time he did emerge from the bathroom she was downstairs wearing a silky white and green patterned, figure-clinging dress which flattered the long line of her thighs and dipped down in front to reveal the shadowy cleft between her breasts, her hair a feathery dark aureole, her face delicately made up.

They didn't talk as they walked together along the winding, road to the Sharaton residence. Already shadows were slanting long before the rays of the westering sun and as they went up the steps which curved upwards between bushes of yellow allamanda, fiery hibiscus* and spike-leaved oleanders the murmur of voices and the clink of glasses came to them.

Burt's hand on her arm brought Charlotte to a stop.

'It sounds as if Stacey is having one of her eternal cocktail parties,' he said quietly. 'Too bad, I had hoped we could see my father alone. Since no one here knows about our escapade together we'll not mention it,' he went on, his mouth quirked wryly. 'My father is a puritanical old devil and doesn't approve of today's permissive ways. Particularly he doesn't approve of me. He'll try to throw you off balance, so don't take too much notice of what he says.'

Soft lights were already slanting out from the wide open patio doors on to the flagged courtyard behind the house where groups of people lounged or stood and talked. Soft music beat out into the swiftly gathering tropical dusk. A tall woman dressed in silky black narrow trousers and a glittering, shawl-draped top which was cinched into her waist by a jewelled belt, glided in front of them. Her smooth blonde hair shimmered like gold and her wide green-grey eyes were frankly curious as they flicked over Charlotte.

'So you're back,' she drawled to Burt. 'Boy, are you in trouble!' She glanced at Charlotte again. 'I'm Stacey Holden, Burt's sister. Do I know you?' 'Charlotte Mason,' said Burt crisply. 'Really?' Stacey's

finely plucked eyebrows rose in mocking surprise. 'What happened to the other one ... what was her name? Nancy?'

'Where's the Lion?' asked Burt, ignoring the question.

'Inside somewhere, probably talking stocks and shares to someone.'

'Listen, Stacey... look after Charlotte while I go and have a word with him.'

'Sure. But a word of warning, brother mine.' Stacey spoke in a confidential whisper. 'Watch your step. He's been prowling about all day, threatening to cut you out of his will for the way you behaved at the Courtenays' place last Wednesday morning.'

'Let him. I couldn't care less.' Burt shrugged his shoulders. 'I'll be back in a few minutes, sweetheart,' he murmured to Charlotte, dropped a swift kiss on her cheek and stepped into the house through one of the wide windows.

'Mmm—affectionate,' Stacey drawled mockingly. 'I had no idea Nancy had a sister. You're not a bit alike, are you? I mean, everyone can tell Burt and I are brother and sister. In fact some people think we're twins, although there's actually eighteen months between us. Nancy is much older than you are.'

'Seven years,' said Charlotte. 'I'm twenty-two.'

'You're not the type Burt usually associates with either. You look ... well, too fresh and—what's the word?' Stacey snapped her fingers together. 'I know,' she added with a sudden swift smile which showed she was Burt's sister. 'Wholesome—that's right. Too good for him, not a bit shop-soiled. Oh, lord!' She put a long-fingered blood-red-tipped hand to her mouth and her eyes expressed rueful humour. 'I hope I haven't offended you. I tend to run on when I'm nervous, and I'm terribly nervous right now. God knows what the

Lion is saying to Burt. But come inside and have a drink and meet my husband Clarke. I think you and he might get on well together. He's good and clean, and wholesome too, and I'm awfully lucky to be married to him.'

Clarke Holden was a slim fair-haired man with a moustache curving over his upper lip. His hazel eyes had a merry twinkle and Charlotte soon felt at her ease as he provided her with a soft drink and talked to her about windsurfing, having apparently watched her many times during the past few weeks when she had been out with the Holmes brothers.

But eventually someone took his attention from her and she found herself standing alone, a little on the edge of things. Feeling suddenly lonely, she looked around for Burt and found herself being watched from one of the archways of the beautiful exotically furnished room by a tall, straight-backed elderly man who was neatly and rather severely dressed in a well-cut lightweight suit of grey alpaca, a crisp white shirt and discreet dark tie.

A little disconcerted by his penetrating stare of his pale eyes which were deeply set under down slanting eyebrows, she moved towards one of the open windows. The sun was setting in its usual blaze of glory, shafts of golden and crimson light fanning up from it through streaks of dark purple clouds. The sea had turned a pale violet colour, trimmed with lacy white foam, and the sand was a shadowed shimmering rose pink. Then the sun dipped suddenly below the horizon, and stars glinted in the purple-streaked sky. The sea lurked like beaten silver, the sands dark pewter as twilight lingered.

'Miss Charlotte Mason?' the voice at her shoulder rasped dryly, and she turned. It was the elderly man; he was much older than she had first realised, possibly seventy, maybe older, his tanned cheeks hollow, his brow wrinkled. Blue veins showed at his temples hinting

at a certain frailty but the set of his jaw was familiar and there was pride in the way he carried his silver-haired leonine head.

'I'm Lionel Sharaton,' he said, his grey eyes, so pale as to be almost without colour, boring down into hers. 'My son has been telling me about you.'

Charlotte looked past him, searching the crowded room for Burt. He wasn't there.

'Burt was called to the phone,' Lionel Sharaton explained, 'so I thought I'd take the opportunity to speak to you alone. Shall we take a turn about the garden?'

With a polite hand under her elbow he guided her through the window and out into the flower-scented, cicada-noisy dusk, away from the house and along a path which twisted through the shrubbery.

'You come from Witherton, I believe,' said Lionel Sharaton. 'It's some time since I was there. Linda and I were married in Holy Trinity Church at Lanbridge some thirty-three years ago. Do you know the church?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I was told it dated back to the eleventh century— beautiful old building. I'm always telling Burt he should go there, visit it and see the names of his Marling ancestors carved into memorial stones on the walls and in the graveyard. He tells me he's going to marry you.' He paused in his slow pacing and his hand dropped from her elbow to his side. Charlotte broke stride to turn and look at him. 'I'd like to know just how you've managed to persuade him to make such a commitment to you,' he said quietly. 'What did you do? Plead pregnancy and threaten him with a paternity suit?'

Offended beyond caution, Charlotte tossed back her head and glared at him.

'No, I did not! In fact the boot was on the other foot,' she retorted angrily. 'He threatened me. He's blackmailed me into agreeing to marry him--' She broke off, realising what she had done when she saw his light eyes glint.

'Really? How interesting,' he drawled. 'Let's walk a little further where we won't be overheard and you can tell me more.'

'I... er--'

'You can't back off now, my dear,' he said with a chuckle of laughter. 'You've let the cat out of the bag. And you must forgive me if I seem to pry, but Burt is my heir, my only son, so I'm very interested in whom he marries.' He shook his head as they moved along. 'It won't do, you know,' he went on. 'If he marries you I'm afraid I'll have to change my will and leave his portion perhaps divided up among his cousins and my daughter.'

'But I don't want to marry him,' Charlotte said urgently. 'And I wouldn't have agreed if he hadn't threatened to disgrace my father.'

'In what way could he do that?' He swung around to her again.

'He... he ... well, Burt has found out that my father has embezzled some money ... not a lot... from the hotel accounts, and he's threatened to expose him and send him to jail for fraud if I don't marry him. I've kept hoping he wouldn't carry out his threat because I thought my father was innocent. But this afternoon I found out he isn't, and Burt said if I didn't agree thereaiid then to marry him he'd sack Dad on the spot and tell everyone on the hotel staff why. I... I... had to agree. I couldn't think of any way to get out of it.'

'I see. Thank you for telling me. I appreciate your confidence, my dear.' He let out a rather weary sigh. 'Well, it shouldn't be difficult to extricate you from the predicament in which my son has placed you. How long have you known him?'

'We met two weeks ago... but I haven't really seen much of him until the last two days,' Charlotte whispered.

'Then weren't you a little surprised when he proposed marriage?'

'Yes, I was, and I couldn't help feeling he'd done so for some ulterior motive.'

'Oh, he has, my dear, he has.' Lionel Sharaton's voice grated with irony. He was silent for a moment. From the house the music and the sound of laughing voices floated out into the soft velvety dusk. 'He's done it deliberately to thwart me,' he added slowly, watching her. 'And for no other reason. I hope you haven't been misled by him into believing he's in love with you. He's quite capable of subverting an innocent young woman like yourself by saying he is in order to get you to do what he wants.'

'No, no, I haven't been misled,' whispered Charlotte miserably.

'I have to admit, then, Miss Mason, to being mistaken about you,' he went on gently. 'I had believed you to be the sort of shallow fortune-hunting young woman who occasionally attaches herself to my son. Now I'm convinced you aren't, and I apologise for what I said to you at the beginning of our conversation. Would you mind telling me why you don't want to marry Burt? Don't you like him?'

'Yes, I do like him,' she confessed. 'But too much to marry him. It's very hard to explain, but I feel strongly that if I marry him because he's forced me to our marriage might turn out to be a repeat of his previous marriage... a disaster.'

Again there was silence between them Cicadas chanted in the shadows and stray moths flitted by, attracted towards the house by the glimmer of lights.

'If that's how you feel then I have no doubt you're right,' said Lionel Sharaton at last with another weary sigh. 'Do you have a return ticket to England?'

'Yes, but I'm not going back until next Saturday.'

'Mm, you must leave before then,' he murmured. 'I would like you to leave tomorrow if it can be arranged. You see, I know from experience that my son moves fast once he's made up his mind to do something. You must leave before he's able to get a licence to marry you.'

'But what about my father? If I... I... break my word to Burt he'll fire my father and tell everyone he's an embezzler,' she protested.

'Don't worry about that—I shall arrange everything. Your father can leave with you. He'll have to give up his job here, but I can assure you that if you do what I ask he'll leave with an unblemished reputation and excellent references so that he'll have no difficulty in getting employment elsewhere. I'll go and see him later this evening. Meanwhile I suggest you leave this party and go back to where you live and start packing your cases.

'I'll instruct my secretary, who always travels with me, to make reservations if possible on a direct flight from here to England tomorrow. If that can't be done there's another way in which your certain departure can be arranged.'

'But shouldn't I tell Burt?' she asked hesitantly.

'No, I shall take care of all that for you. Now go, my dear. You'll hear from me later tonight about the travel arrangements. Goodnight.'

CHAPTER SIX

PALE October sunshine filtered through the morning mist which curled like grey feathers above the swift sparkling waters of the River Withers as it rushed through the green valley it had carved for itself over the years between the brown moors and fells of the Lancashire Pennines. Slowly rising, the mist wreathed itself about the tall dark chimneys of textile mills built on the river. It hung cloud-like in the branches of old elm trees and drifted across the shining slate roofs of rows of brick houses. Then quite suddenly it vanished and the whole town of Witherton seemed to glow, brick red and leaf gold, under the warm mellow rays of the autumnal sun.

At the corner where the High Street ran into the small square in front of the Town Hall the traffic lights changed from red to green and a little blue car which was leading the line of stopped cars jerked forward with a change of gear, whisked right and darted down a narrow alleyway between two solid brick buildings.

Charlotte parked the battered Mini which she had managed to buy for a song in a narrow lane and gathering up her handbag and briefcase left the car, dashing through the double doorway at the back of one of the buildings behind which she had parked.

Tall and slender in a straight-skirted suit of green-flecked tweed, her dark curls shining and bobbing, she hurried along a bare echoing passage, up some stairs and into a big sunny room furnished with several desks.

'Morning, Charlie. Frank wants to see you straight away.' The speaker was a small plump woman with a very short haircut and a sharp shrewd face. She was the *Daily Globe and Record's* business and finance commentator and was already busy at her typewriter writing up her comments on the latest slump in textiles.

'Thanks, Grace.' Charlotte dropped her briefcase on the desk which was reserved for the use of herself and Bob Baines, one of the junior sports reporters, and went across the half-open door at the end of the room. She put her head round the edge.

'Come in, Charlie.' Frank Lane, assistant editor of the paper, was middle-aged, had sparse brown hair and a long-jawed humorous face. 'How much do you know about the Marling family?'

'I know that Josiah Marling put Witherton on the map at the beginning of the nineteenth century when he built a mill and started making cotton stockings,' she replied, sliding on to a chair. 'And I also know that members of the family have contributed much to the development of the town. Two of them were elected as mayor at different times.'

'Good, good. Do you know that the last of the Marlings—Daniel—died only last year at the age of eighty- seven leaving his few remaining shares in the hosiery company and the old family house out at Lanbridge to his daughter Linda Marling Sharaton, but she outlived him by only three months, so his property was passed on to his only grandson Burton Sharaton?'

Charlotte became suddenly very interested in her long-fingered hands which were clasped loosely on her lap.

'No, I didn't know that,' she admitted.

'Well, you know it now, and that the Burton Sharaton I mentioned is here in Witherton this week.'

'Why?' The question was out before she could stop it and she looked up sharply, feeling her heart change gear and beat rapidly, almost suffocatingly.

'He's come to talk to the management at the hosiery mill. There's a rumour going about that the Polygon Corporation which took over the Marling Company more than thirty years ago has decided to pull out and sell its interests to another corporation. There's also a rumour that he's here to dispose of the old house at Lanbridge. Now I have Grace covering the business part, but I'd like you to cover the more personal side. I thought a profile on the Marling family—you can look up the past history in the old copies of the *Globe and Record*—something about the house at Lanbridge, topping it jdl off with an interview with this chap Burton Sharaton. You know the sort of thing—Grandson of the last of the Marlings seeks his roots at Lanbridge.

'It's a popular angle these days and will appeal to the readers of your Saturday column.'

Charlotte's mind whirled. Burt, whom she hadn't seen or heard from since she had left his sister's cocktail party seven months ago, was here in Witherton, and irony of ironies, she was being asked to interview him, knowing that he loathed newspaper reporters.

'Couldn't someone else do it?' she protested.

'Someone else?' Frank was incredulous. 'Who, for instance? Who else writes about this sort of local interest thing better than you do? It's just up your street, Charlie.'

'Yes, I know, but. but... Burt... Mr Sharaton might not want to be interviewed. Couldn't I just write about the Marling family and leave him out of it?' she asked.

'No, you could not Do I have to remind you of the responsibilities of a newspaper reporter? It's your job to inform the public of what's going on in this town, about the people who visit it Burton Sharaton isn't a native son, but his mother was a native daughter and the take-over of

the hosiery company by Polygon was an important event in the life of the community. It saved the jobs of hundreds of workers, so I think our readers will be interested in being introduced to the son of the man who saved the Marling company from financial ruin.'

'But supposing he refuses to be interviewed?' Charlotte argued. 'What shall I do then?'

'Ah, come on, love. Use your head and your feminine wiles,' he jeered. 'Now get going. You haven't much time. I'm told he's leaving Witherton tonight'

'All right,' Charlotte sighed. 'Have you any idea where I'll find him?'

'He's been staying at the Golden Fleece overnight. This morning he's at the mill and at midday he's lunching with the Board of Trade. Now this afternoon he might be going to look at the old house. Hawker and Ramsbotham, the estate agents and auctioneers, have been looking after the property since Daniel Marling died, so I suggest you get in touch with Audrey Ramsbotham. She might be able to tell you if he's going out to Lanbridge.'

The telephone rang and he picked up the receiver, dismissing her with a jerk of his head towards the door. Charlotte went back to her desk and sat for a while staring down at the typewriter, not seeing it because her thoughts were flashing back to her holiday in the Bahamas and its sudden ending.

Everything had gone according to Lionel Sharaton's plan. Somehow he had been able to prevent Burt from following her to the cottage when she had left Stacey's party and somehow he had managed to persuade her father to give up his job at Long Cay and fly back to England with her.

'I can't help feeling relieved, Charlie,' Grant Mason had confided in her that evening after Lionel Sharaton had talked to him. 'I didn't like

the idea of you being forced to agree to marry Burt just to get me out of the mess I'm in. It's a good thing you talked to old Sharaton about it. I get the impression he felt Burt had acted too impetuously.' He had given her a curious under-browed glance. 'How did you feel about it, love?'

'Relieved,' she had replied, deliberately ignoring the regret which had begun to gnaw at her. 'Did Mr Sharaton say anything about making arrangements for us to leave tomorrow?'

'Yes, it's all fixed. We're to fly to New York in his private jet. It brought him here and he has to return to the States tomorrow, so we'll go with him. From New York we'll fly directly to London. It was impossible to get reservations on the B. A. flight from here tomorrow.'

'What about Nancy and Luke? Is there any way we can let them know we won't be here when they return from Eleuthera?'

'I'm doing something about that now,' Grant had replied. 'Rosie is going to stay on in this house until the end of next week to pack up all my belongings and arrange for them to be sent to England. I'll leave a note with her for Nancy and Luke.' He had frowned a little anxiously. 'I think it would be best not to tell Nancy about everything, about the embezzling, the blackmailing and your escapade with Burt. She'll only be upset, and I don't want to disturb her and Luke too much while they are feeling their way to a reconciliation.'

'How will you explain your sudden decision to leave your job?'

'Oh, I'll tell her I felt homesick for England and that I'd like to live nearer to you and to her.'

Packing her case while her father wrote to Nancy and Luke, Charlotte was tempted to write a note to leave for Burt. Several times she tried, but tore each attempt up, eventually deciding that an abrupt cutting

off of their relationship was the best way to end it, without explanation. After all, their brief association had been only a holiday escapade, as her father had suggested, and it should have been easy to forget once she had returned to Witherton, far away from the sunlit magic of coral strands and aquamarine seas, far away from the islands of paradise, back in the reality of the dark mills and barren hills of her native county.

Yet that hadn't happened because ah through spring and summer she had been bothered by her conscience, feeling that by leaving Long Cay so abruptly she had broken a promise for the first time in her life. She had given her word to Burt that she would marry him and even the knowledge that he had pressured her into making such a promise could not ease her conscience. She felt she had let him down.

It had not taken her father long to find a job when he had returned to England and now he was happily settled as the manager of a country club in the Midlands. Nancy and Luke had duly returned to their home outside London and soon the news came from them that Nancy was expecting a baby. On the few occasions Charlotte had seen her sister no mention had been made by either of them of Burt Sharaton and she had found Nancy a changed woman, no longer restless and bitter but calm and smiling, more beautiful than ever as she projected the image of expectant motherhood.

The jangle of a telephone bell on the next desk, the bursting open of the swing doors of the room as a reporter entered hurriedly jolted Charlotte out of her thought[^]. Somehow during the next few hours she had to find a way of avoiding interviewing Burt. Somehow she had to find out what he thought about Witherton and Lanbridge without actually meeting him.

Why didn't she want to meet him? Because she was nervous about meeting him, afraid that he might take some reprisal on her for letting him down.

She flicked through the telephone directory and found the number of Hawker and Ramsbotham, who managed the family firm, and was asking about the Marling property.

'As a matter of fact Arthur Hawker and I are going out there this afternoon to open up the place for Mr Sharaton,' said Audrey. 'Arthur is going to survey the property to get an idea of its value.'

'Would you mind if I came over to look at the house?' asked Charlotte. 'I'm doing some research for an article I have to write for the *Globe and Record*.'

'Then I'll be delighted to show you around. Do you know where the house is?'

Charlotte admitted that she didn't.

'Well, when you get to Lanbridge drive over the bridge to the church, turn left and you can't miss the house. It has a high wall around it. See you there, then, about two o'clock.'

At half past one Charlotte left the offices of the *Daily Globe and Record* and drove out past the mills and through the new housing estate along the road to Lanbridge which was almost but not a suburb of Witherton. Once a small village, which had sprung up around the only bridge to cross the river at one time, it was dominated by its square-towered eleventh century church, the one in which Lionel Sharaton had told her he had been married to Linda Marling.

Charlotte parked the car outside the church wall just as the church clock chimed two. When she had visited the house she would come back to the church, she decided, and look inside. No doubt she would learn something more about the Marling family from the memorial stones on its walls.

Yellow elm leaves floated down lazily in the warm afternoon air as she walked along the narrow road which led past the church and followed the burbling, glittering river. Some small children obviously not old enough to go to school were playing on the slides and swings in a small park beside the church. Ahead another stone wall, overgrown with ivy, appeared. Above it she could see the slant of a slate roof.

High iron gates hung between tall stone gateposts were open and she went through them and up a short wide driveway edged with dark-leaved rhododendron bushes to the square stone house which was built in early Victorian style with plain sash windows and a plain panelled front door set beneath a cobweb fanlight. There was a small car parked in front of the house and she guessed Audrey Ramsbotham had arrived, so she raised the brass door knocker and knocked twice.

A tall dark woman dressed in a blue tweed suit opened the door.

'I'm Charlotte Mason. We talked this morning on the phone and you said I could look round the house while you're here this afternoon.'

The woman's thin face creased into a friendly smile.

'I'm Audrey Ramsbotham,' she said. 'Do come in. We're expecting Mr Sharaton to arrive soon. He said that as soon as he'd finished at the Board of Trade he'd get someone to drive him out here.'

'Oh. Then I won't bother to come in,' said Charlotte, backing away.

'Not to worry. He won't be here for at least half an hour. Plenty of time for you to look around,' said Audrey Ramsbotham. 'And perhaps I can give you some information about the family. I used to know Linda Marling when I was a girl. We went to the same riding school, and I must say I'm looking forward to meeting her son.'

Unusually hesitant, Charlotte stepped cautiously through the door into the hallway. It was dim and had a high ceiling decorated round the edges with plaster mouldings. A wide stairway led straight up to a landing where sunlight shafted through a stained glass window.

'It isn't long since Daniel Marling died and the house is just as it was when he lived here,' said Audrey Ramsbotham, pushing open a heavy oak door and leading the way into a big sitting room with an enormous cast iron fireplace surrounded by white marble. 'I managed to get a couple of women to come in and clean yesterday so that it wouldn't be too dusty when Mr Sharaton arrived. They seemed to have done a good job. Those old mahogany pieces certainly respond to polish. As you can see, there's some priceless stuff here, if you have a taste for Victoriana.'

They wandered from room to room and up the stairs to the second floor. Charlotte made notes on a pad of writing paper she had brought and asked a few questions about Linda Marling.

'If I remember rightly there's a portrait of her in one of the bedrooms,' replied Audrey Ramsbotham. 'Yes, here it is.' They had stepped into a bedroom at the back of the house overlooking the sweep of moors rising up to the grey crags of Cawthorpe ridge. 'Not bad looking, was she, with all that golden hair?' Audrey went on as they surveyed the portrait of a young woman dressed in riding clothes, pale fawn breeches, black habit, high white stock and black peaked riding hat perched on shimmering blonde hair. 'She was only eighteen when she married Lionel Sharaton. He was twenty years older than her and was already a name in financial circles. Of course the marriage was an arranged one, all part of the deal Daniel Marling made to extricate himself from his financial difficulties. But I can't help wondering if she was happy--'

A voice called from somewhere in the lower part of the house.

'That's Arthur,' explained Audrey. 'You go upstairs and have a look at the attics while I go and find out what he wants. If you see anything about which you'd like to ask questions come and find me. I'll be glad to give you some more details about the family.'

She left the room and went downstairs. Charlotte gave one last look at the pretty enigmatical face of the blonde hazel-eyed Linda, thinking how much Stacey Holden had resembled her mother, and then went up the next flight of stairs.

The attic was divided into three small rooms which had obviously been maids' rooms at one time. In the corner of one of them was a door. Charlotte opened it and found a narrow flight of wooden steps built into the wide cavity of the stone wall. She guessed the stairway went right down to the kitchen and had been used by the maidservants instead of the main staircase.

Closing the door, she left the room and went downstairs to the second floor. There wasn't really much more she wanted to see. The house was gloomy and old-fashioned, its atmosphere somewhat depressing, and she decided she had better leave it before Burt arrived.

As she reached the top of the stairs going down to the ground floor she heard voices and looking over the banisters down into the hallway gasped with consternation when she saw the glimmer of light on golden hair. Burt was standing in the middle of the hall talking with Audrey; a different Burt, elegantly dressed in a business suit of finely checked green and fawn worsted wool, a cream shirt and dark tie, quite different from the man she had gone sailing with; a stranger whom she was afraid to meet.

Audrey moved towards the stairs, still talking, and he followed. As he raised a foot to the bottom step and put a hand on the wide gleaming banister he lifted his head as if to look up. Charlotte stepped back quickly and, glad the second landing was carpeted so that her

footsteps were muffled, she moved quickly towards the room where the portrait of Linda Marling hung on the wall, thinking that since it was at the back of the house there might be access to the servants' staircase from it and she could escape from the house through the kitchen.

Yes, there was a door in the corner on the outside wall situated directly under the door in the room in the attic. It opened easily and as she heard Audrey's voice coming nearer she stepped through it quickly and closed it after her. Thick darkness enveloped her. Reaching out, her fingers came into contact with a wall and she shuffled a foot forward cautiously seeking for the edge of a step. There was none.

Hands outstretched in front of her, she moved forward. Her hands touched something soft and feathery and she nearly yelped with fright. For a moment she stood frozen, hearing above the thunder of her own rapid heartbeats the sound of voices, first Audrey's and then Burt's. Then slowly and carefully she felt in front of her again. There were shelves in front of her and on the shelves were several hats, judging by the feel and shape of them. One of them was a small round cap made of feathers. She was in a closet and the doorway to the stairs must be in the other corner of the room, on the same wall, placed where the stairs slanted down to the second floor level. Why hadn't she the brains to think of that?

Now all she could do was remain in the cupboard until Audrey and Burt had moved on to another room. Suddenly the ridiculousness of the situation struck her and she had to cover her mouth with her hand as laughter rocked her. She laughed until the tears came and her solar plexus ached with the effort of trying to be quiet.

What a fool she was, taking fright just because Burt was in the house! Why couldn't she have kept her cool and met him face to face? She had a perfectly good reason for being in the house that afternoon and

she was supposed to interview him. Really she could leave the cupboard now, go and find Audrey tell her she had seen all she wanted to see and let the estate agent introduce her to Burt. After all, she held the advantage over him. She knew he was here; he didn't know she was. He was the one who would be surprised.

She groped for the door of the cupboard and searched for a knob to turn. There wasn't one. She pushed against the panels of the door. It didn't budge, and with a sinking feeling she realised it was one of those old-fashioned cupboards, often found in Victorian houses, which could only be opened from the outside. She was shut in the dark narrow confines and the only way to get out was to shout for help.

For a few tense moments she suffered the near- suffocation of claustrophobia and almost screamed. Taking a deep breath, she counted to ten and when she felt calmer she began to bang on the door and shout for help.

After a while she stopped, short of breath, and felt another flicker of fear. She would have to be careful that she didn't suffocate, and that could happen if she used up all the oxygen in the air. Pressing her ear to the door, she listened. No sound of voices or footsteps came through it. They had moved on to another room and were perhaps upstairs.

Supposing they didn't hear her? If Audrey Ramsbotham believed she had left the house and had gone back to Witherton she would be here all night, might be here for days. Panic clutched at her. She could die in this cupboard slowly suffocating to death. Frantically she began to kick at the door, wishing fervently that the Victorians who had built the house had not been so keen on making everything so massive and long- lasting. If only they had made their doors of thinner wood! Breathless and sweating, she rested, leaning against the door and

listening again. Was that a footstep? She thumped with her clenched fists on the door.

'Let me out!' she croaked. 'Oh, please open the door and let me out!'

The door opened suddenly and she fell out. Recovering her balance quickly, she swung round to see who had opened the door. Burt stood with his hand still on the knob, looking down at her with wary ice green eyes.

'Miss Ramsbotham told me that a Miss Mason from the Witherton newspaper was in the house somewhere and was hoping to interview me,' he drawled coolly. 'I guessed it was you. What the hell were you doing in the cupboard?'

Although dressed differently he wasn't any different after all, speaking to her as if they had parted only yesterday instead of over seven months ago, and a feeling of sheer unadulterated joy at seeing him again swept through her. She almost flung her arms about him to show how glad she was he was there. Only the coolness of his glance and the hard set of his mouth stopped her.

'I was hiding from you,' she admitted honestly. 'I heard you coming towards this room and I thought I could get out by going down the servants' staircase to the kitchen, but I chose the wrong door and got locked in the cupboard.' She shuddered suddenly in reaction. 'I thought I was locked in there for the rest of my life,' she whispered.

'It's a good thing I heard you as I was passing the door on my way downstairs, then,' Burt replied as he closed the cupboard door. Suddenly his cool deserted him and he turned on her savagely. 'God, you're no different. You're still doing damn fool things. So you didn't want to meet me, hmm? Well, that figures, considering how you left me in the lurch when we were practically at the altar.'

'I didn't leave you in the lurch,' she protested indignantly.

'No?' he jeered. 'I think you did. You'd promised to marry me--'

'Under pressure,' she interrupted him furiously.

'It was still a promise, and you broke it, ran out on me without explanation.'

'But you must know why I left. Your father said he would explain to you.'

'Ah, yes, my father.' His glance was bitter. 'When last seen you were with him and when I asked him where you'd gone he said you'd complained of a headache and had gone back to Windward Cottage leaving a message with him for me saying you'd see me the next day. I was reluctant to believe him, but I thought I could trust you—but when I called on you the next day to tell you I'd managed to get a licence so we could be married the next week I found you and your father had skipped the country.' He gave her a scornful glance. 'How much did my father pay you to go back on your word?' he sneered.

'Nothing. Oh, how like you to believe I had to be bought off! When he found out how I felt about being blackmailed into marrying you--'

'You told him that? Why?' he exclaimed.

'I ... I ... couldn't help it. He suggested I was marrying you for your money and that made me angry, so I told him I didn't want to marry you and that you'd forced me to say I would by threatening to ruin my father. It was then he offered to help Dad and me.' Charlotte paused, drew a shaky breath and added in a low voice, 'Besides, he said you'd only offered to marry me to thwart him.'

'I warned you he'd try to knock you off balance, didn't I?' snapped Burt exasperatedly. 'And he succeeded. You believed him.'

'Well, it wasn't hard,' she argued. 'You were in such a hurry to marry me I couldn't help thinking you had an ulterior motive—although I admit I couldn't understand, and still can't, how your marriage to me could thwart any plans of his.'

Burt stared at her with thoughtful narrowed eyes for a few seconds.

'He wanted me to marry another rich girl,' he drawled eventually. 'It was all part of one of his more dubious business deals. I refused. He was mad and followed me to Long Cay to threaten me. As you know, Stacey warned me he'd come and it was then that the idea occurred to me that if I could persuade you to agree to marry me there was no way he could expect me to fall in with his plans and marry Francine Courtenay just so he could finalise a deal with her father. My problem was shortage of time, and I had to use the information I had about your father's difficulties to trap you into agreeing before I took you to meet the Lion.'

'How glad I am that I accepted your father's help,' Charlotte muttered in a shaken voice. 'Any woman would have suited your purpose, even Nancy.'

'That isn't true. I wouldn't have offered to marry Nancy under any circumstances. You're the only woman I've ever met that I've *wanted* to marry.' Burt shrugged his shoulders and turned away to the bedroom door. 'But it didn't come off. I guess I made a mistake about you and you weren't an angel sent to drag me back from the hell of another marriage arranged by my father to further his business interests,' he added bitterly.

'Then did you ... you ... marry Francine?' she croaked, disappointment welling up in her and making her throat dry.

He swung round to look at her and again there were a few seconds of silence as they studied each other, both trying to penetrate to the thoughts and feelings which lay behind facial expressions.

'No, I didn't marry her and I'm not going to marry her.' Burt's mouth quirked sardonically. 'Would you believe Oonagh wrote about you and me in her column as I expected she would?'

'Oh. What did she write?'

'Something which was nearly libellous, but not quite. She intimated that though there was a possibility of us getting married we'd already set up house together. It was enough for Francine's mother, who decided that I would make a most unsuitable husband for her sweet, darling daughter. The whole deal with Courtenay fell through, and as a result my father resigned from his position as President of Polygon. Since then the corporation has suffered financially and the Sharaton fortune has declined somewhat. That's why I've come to Witherton to sell his and my shares in the Marhng Hosiery Company, and also to find out if I can realise something on the sale of this house.'

'Are you definitely going to sell it?' Charlotte asked, taking out her notebook and pencil.

'Are you interviewing me?' he challenged with a satiric lift of one eyebrow.

'Yes, I am,' she said shortly.

'I have no reason for keeping the house as I have no intention of living in England,' he replied coolly. 'I hope to settle the business of putting it up for auction this afternoon because I'm leaving Witherton this evening.'

'Will all the furniture be auctioned too, or will you keep some special pieces?' she asked, scribbling fast.

'All the furniture will be auctioned too.'

'Including the portrait of your mother?'

'That will be crated and shipped to my father. I think he intends that my sister should have it'

'So all your ties with Witherton and Lanbridge will be cut?'

'Seems like it,' he drawled dryly.

'Do you feel any regret at all about that? I mean, isn't it a painful process, like the pulling up of roots?'

He didn't answer, so she looked up. He was staring at her with a faintly mocking smile glinting in his eyes.

'I thought I might run into you while I was in Witherton,' he commented, 'but I have to admit I didn't think our meeting would be like this.' His glance drifted over her slowly, no longer cool or bitter but warmly and intimately interested. 'You're thinner. Your cheeks have lost their youthful bloom and you have lines under your eyes. What's the matter, sweetheart?' he whispered softly, stepping closer. 'Been pining?'

'Of course not,' she replied untruthfully. 'Why should I pine?'

'Because you missed out on something,' he drawled suggestively. 'Because that wedding night we promised each other didn't happen.'

As the memory of the last time they had stood as close to each other flickered alight in her mind awareness of his physical attraction tingled insidiously along her nerves. She felt a longing to reach up and touch his face, to lift her lips to his and feel the warmth and strength of his arms around her.

'Mr Sharaton?' Audrey Ramsbotham's voice sounded quite near, as if she were on her way upstairs. Stepping away from Burt, Charlotte crammed her notebook into her handbag and hurried towards the bedroom door and out on to the landing.

'I was wondering where you were,' Audrey said as she reached the top of the stairs. 'Have you seen Mr Sharaton yet?'

'Yes, I have. He's in the bedroom there,' replied Charlotte, starting off down the stairs. 'I have to fly— I've another appointment this afternoon. Thanks so much for letting me look round the house.'

'I'll look forward to reading your column now that I've met you,' Audrey called after her. 'Goodbye!'

Down the stairs through the front doorway and out into the mellow sunshine Charlotte hurried. She was running away from Burt again, she recognised that. But she dared not stay with him any longer without betraying to him how she felt about him. All the months of trying to forget him had been so much wasted time, She hadn't forgotten him at all. Being apart from him had only caused her heart to grow fonder and not the opposite.

The church clock was chiming four when she reached her car and she glanced with regret at the sun- gilded walls of the ancient building. She should really have gone inside to see the memorials of the Marling family, but there was no time now. She would come back tomorrow when Burt had left the district never to return again because he was cutting all ties with it.

In a peculiarly numbed state of mind she drove back to Witherton to the offices of the *Daily Globe and Record* where she spent the next hour looking up back numbers of the newspaper for articles which had appeared over thirty years before when Lionel Sharaton had rescued Daniel Marling from financial ruin. When she had finished

she drove out to the suburb where she lived in a block of flats overlooking the park near the river.

Once shut in her small but comfortable flat she felt safe. She put on one of her favourite records, turned up the volume and ran water for a bath. By the time she had washed and had dressed in bronze-coloured velvet lounging pyjamas the light had gone from the sky showing through the wide window of the living room and mist was rising from the river valley.

After eating a snack meal she settled down on the chesterfield in front of the electric fire to sort through the information she had gathered during the day about the Marling family and to plot out the form her article would take.

She wrote quickly in longhand, getting her ideas down, intending to type the article later, and was so engrossed in what she was doing that she jumped when someone knocked on the front door of the flat. Guessing that it would be her nearest neighbour, Barbara Nutter, a teacher at the local primary school who often came to borrow something or just to chat, she put her papers to one side and went over to the door to open it.

Instead of Barbara, Burt stood there, hands on the pockets of the white trenchcoat he was wearing.

'Oh!' Charlotte was surprised and showed it. 'How did you find out I live here?'

'Easy—I went to the newspaper offices. Your boss was very willing to tell me where you lived when I said you hadn't been able to finish interviewing me,' he replied coolly.

'I thought you said you're leaving Witherton tonight.'

'I changed my mind. Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'To... to what purpose?'

'To finish the interview, of course.' Taking a stride forward, he stepped past her into the living room and began to take off his trenchcoat.

'Burt, please go,' she whispered.

'Why?' He turned to frown at her. 'Are you expecting someone else? Your lover, perhaps?'

'No, I'm not—and I don't have a lover,' she retorted, and was immediately irritated with herself for being honest when she saw his eyes gleam with triumph. 'Oh, please go away,' she urged. 'I don't want to interview you any more. I have enough information. We have nothing more to say to each other.'

He moved quickly, wrenched the door out of her hand and closed it.

'I can't agree with you. I have a lot to say to you,' he rasped.

'Oh, all right,' she said defiantly, stalking over to the chesterfield to pick up her notebook. 'But please be quick about it and go. I have work to do.'

He strode across the room and snatched the notebook from her hand to toss it carelessly towards the low coffee table. It missed the table and fell fluttering to the floor. His hand fell on her shoulder and he spun her round roughly to face him. At the sight of the glitter in his eyes, fear and excitement sizzled through her like an electric shock.

'I'll take all night to say what I have to say, if I want to,' he grated between his teeth. 'But first things first.'

His hands were hard and bruising as he hauled her against him and his lips forced hers ruthlessly apart. At once she was swamped by a flood

of sensuousness. With a half sigh, half groan she wound her arms about his neck and pressed herself against him. Under the loose-fitting top of her lounging pyjamas his hands shd familiarly to stroke her bare back. Moulded together by the hot passion which was blazing in them, it seemed as if they would never separate, but at last Burt lifted his mouth from hers and rocked her in his arms while he rubbed his cheek against her hair.

'After that you can hardly deny you're glad to see me,' he taunted huskily.

'I am glad to see you--' she began.

'Then why the hell couldn't you say so when you opened the door?' he demanded, pushing her away from him so he could glare down at her. 'Why tell me to go away? And why did you run away this afternoon?'

'I ... I thought ... I wasn't sure--Oh, I don't know,' she muttered, jerking free of his grasp and sitting down on the chesterfield. 'Anyway, what about you?' she accused. 'You didn't seem particularly glad to see me when I fell out of the cupboard this afternoon?'

He gave her an exasperated glance, raked a hand through his hair, took a few paces away from her, turned back and sat down suddenly beside her.

'When you fell out of the cupboard all I could think of, all I wanted to say was--'He broke off, shaking his head, gave a short mirthless laugh and leaned back, stretching his long legs before him. 'I didn't say it because I thought you wouldn't believe me,' he said in a low bitter voice, 'and I didn't want to be told I'm crazy.'

She turned to him then. He had closed his eyes and so she was able to study him closely. No longer tanned by the Bahamian sun, his face looked pale under the frond of hair which had fallen forward over his forehead. He was thinner too and the lines around his mouth were

more marked as if he had been disciplining his reckless will severely during the past few months. On the right side of his forehead there was a wide shallow hollow, still faintly red. It was the place where the winch handle had hit him and at the sight of it her own control broke as the strong warm tide of love surged out from her heart, breaking down all barriers. Leaning over him, she traced the mark with her forefinger.

'I knew you should have had it stitched,' she whispered. 'It's left an awful scar.'

To remind me of you,' he murmured, opening his eyes and taking hold of her hand. 'Not that I've needed reminding of you,' he went on, his mouth curving sardonically. 'My mind has been full of you all summer long as I've tried to figure out why I was so angry when I found out you'd left Long Cay before we could be married.' He gave her a narrowed, glittering look. 'I've hated you, Charlotte, these past months for what you've done to me,' he said in a savage stinging undertone. 'Hated you because I love you and want you. Now tell me I'm crazy.'

'I... I... can't,' she whispered. 'Because I've felt the same way about you. I love you too. I think I've been in love with you since I first saw you at Nassau, but I tried hard to fight the feeling ... because I didn't think anything could come of it. And when you asked me to marry you I wanted to desperately, but I was so afraid of commitment in case ... in case it went wrong.' She drew a shaking breath. 'I thought I could forget you once I came back here,' she went on, 'but it's been impossible. You will invade my dreams. You've haunted me, making me wish I'd never listened to your father and never let my head rule my heart. Making me wish I'd stayed at Long Cay and married you. Even making me wish--' She paused, warm colour blooming in her cheeks.

'Even making you wish what?' Burt prompted softly, raising a hand and sliding it round her neck to the nape, impelling her towards the sensual invitation of his slightly parted lips.

'That we'd done more than just sleep in the same bunk,' Charlotte confessed softly, her hand suddenly busy with the knot of his tie, loosening it.

'Fool, dear sweet fool,' he murmured, and against her yielding mouth his was firm and demanding. 'You're not going to get the chance to try and forget me again,' he continued huskily, his fingers gentle, drifting down in a delicate skin-pricking caress to the cleft between her breasts which just showed where the deep V of the pyjama top plunged deeply. 'Because I'm not going to let you out of my sight this time. I'm going to stay here through the night and every other night until we're married.'

'And after we're married? What then?' she asked lightly, her body quickening with delight at the thought of having him about the flat day and night, tormenting her and loving her. His tie was now undone and slowly and suggestively she began to undo the buttons of his shirt.

'When we're married will you come away with me, sweet prude? Or will you want to stay here and continue to write for the newspaper?' asked Burt.

'Where will you be going?' At last his shirt was unbuttoned and she was able to slide her fingers under the edge of the opening to feel again the warm, throbbing contours of his chest.

'To the islands where we met,' he whispered. His lips blazed a trail along the angle of her jaw and he bit the lobe of her ear so that exciting tingles danced along her nerves. 'To finish that cruise we

started. *White Cockatoo* is still waiting for us to return to Macklin's Cay.'

"Yes, I'll come with you anywhere at any time,' she replied simply and willingly. 'And you can always stay through the night with me always and for ever.'

She pressed her lips against his, parting them invitingly, and after that there were no more arguments for a while, only love-talk, as they set out together on a sweet sensual voyage of discovery, learning through tender touch and reckless response what gave pleasure most to the other.