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385

# Inherit the Sun

REBECCA STRATTON



## **Inherit the Sun by Rebecca Stratton**

*Beth stared at Louis, her eyes wide and dazed. She couldn't believe her ears. You mean I have to convince you of my ability to handle the money before I can inherit my share?" she asked. That I can't have it until you say I can?" The acquisition of the fortune she had come such a distance to claim depended upon Louis Marizzi's goodwill. To think that she had been put in such a situation!*

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## CHAPTER ONE

BETH turned quickly when someone touched her arm, and gazed at the man who had approached her with a vague and rather confused look in her eyes. Everything seemed a little confusing to her at the moment, for the journey from London to Honolulu was close on nine thousand miles, and doing the whole trip in one day had left her feeling rather dazed.

She had vaguely noticed the man a few moments before, she thought, watching the new arrivals as if he was looking for someone, and when she turned he smiled anxiously, rather as if he feared he might have made a mistake and accosted the wrong person. The hand on her arm was hastily withdrawn.

'Pardon me—are you Miss Fraser; Miss Elizabeth Fraser?'

Beth's prime reaction was one of relief at not having to find her own way through the busy complex, and she admitted her identity with a nod and a somewhat shaky smile.

'Yes, I'm Beth Fraser,' she said.

He was looking at her as if she was not quite what he had expected, and she half smiled. Men often looked at her with interest, and she was accustomed to a certain number of them making almost any excuse to scrape an acquaintance, but this man she thought was not one of those—besides which, he knew her name.

For all that he was obviously appreciative of a small oval face that had wide green eyes and a rather generous mouth that trembled a little uncertainly at the

moment, but normally smiled quite readily. Hair that was not quite auburn, but a warm rich brown that could look as if it was red in certain lights, framed her face and was fluttered about her shoulders by a light wind.

All this she saw register with the man facing her, and she felt a niggles of impatience that he took so long to identify himself once he had got her attention. It was possible he could be Louis Marizzi, she supposed, but somehow even in her present slightly confused state, she could not quite believe he was, for he was nothing like she had envisaged her unknown cousin, and that was who she had expected here to meet her. He should surely be a little older than this man, and certainly more Italian-looking, although she was probably judging by preconceived and incorrect ideas of how Italians should look. Dark and black-haired, she had thought, with dark eyes—nothing like this man at all, and for a moment she experienced a sense of disappointment, although her common sense told her it was quite idiotic to feel so.

She was still confused after all those hours of flying, she told herself, or she would not be so slow to respond. Whoever he was, the man was offering her his hand, and she took it after a moment of hesitation, at the same time taking stock of him from the concealment of her lashes.

He was probably about thirty-two years old, she guessed, and looked healthily handsome in a typically American way; he was also unmistakably an outdoor man, judging by his tan, and he had a friendly smile which was very welcome at the moment, while she felt so unsure of herself.

'I'm Ray Brauman, Miss Fraser—Mr Marizzi's overseer. Aloha—welcome to the islands!'

'Thank you.'

She had to admit to being a little disappointed that Louis Marizzi had not come himself to meet her, but there was probably a very good reason for his delegating the task to his overseer instead and Ray Brauman was a pleasant enough deputy.

Her luggage was collected and she passed through the necessary check points all in something of a daze —nothing yet seemed quite real. All around were such a bewildering variety of races and faces that she felt she could have been at an international conference, and almost everyone wore at least one of the traditional leis. The scent of the flowers used in the garlands was spicy and sweet and it filled the air, mingling exotically with the chattering confusion of voices. It was all new and interesting and incredibly exciting.

Noticing her interest in the traditional symbol of welcome, Ray Brauman grimaced apologetically as he carried her luggage across to a parked car. 'I guess I should have remembered to get you a lei, Miss Fraser, it's the done thing for a new arrival.' He smiled ruefully as he put her suitcases into the boot of a vast and shiny American car. 'I'm sorry I didn't think about it, but I was kind of anxious not to miss you.'

'Oh, please don't worry about it V Beth still felt a little lightheaded and barely in full command of her faculties. 'I'm only grateful you were here to meet me, Mr Brauman—that that flight was unbelievable, I thought it would never end!'

'You came direct, is that right?' She nodded, and he whistled silently in admiration of her stamina. 'All the way from London, England, since this morning—no wonder you feel a little dizzy! I guess you'll be glad to stretch your legs—sorry I have to whisk you into a car as soon as you arrive.'

Beth glanced out of the car window as they drove away from the airport complex, via neatly laid out roads and seemingly endless flower gardens. 'Is it very far to—' She laughingly admitted defeat yet again in her effort to pronounce the name of the estate her grandfather had owned. 'I've no idea how it's pronounced!'

Ray Brauman seemed to find nothing untoward in her difficulty, but he shook his head as he smiled. 'Hawaiian words aren't too much bother if you just stick to a few basic rules,' he explained. 'Once you get the hang of it, you'll find there's nothing to it. Like, A-u-w-a-i, is pronounced "ow-eye", get it? It means a stream and there's one running clear through the property, so I guess old Enrico knew what he was doing when he chose the name as well as the place!'

'Enrico Marizzi?'

'Right!' The glance he gave her over his shoulder was probably curious, but she did not wonder at that. 'He was quite a guy.'

Beth smiled a little vaguely. It was still very hard to believe that because an old man of ninety-six had been troubled by his conscience in the last days of his long life, she was now a wealthy heiress. It was even harder to accept that the old man, born in Sicily but long settled in the Hawaiian islands, had been her grandfather.

She glanced at the man beside her and laughed a little unsteadily, her heart thudding anxiously again, now that she had been reminded just what an important moment this was in her life. 'I still can't quite believe that all this is happening, you know,' she told him, and he nodded without turning his head.

It was obvious he must be curious, but he appeared no more than politely interested at the moment. 'I

guess it is kind of hard for you to grasp,' he observed.

It was indeed hard to grasp, and Beth still found it all rather unbelievable. It seemed a pity not to give more of her attention to the passing scene, but she had so much else

on her mind that it was almost impossible to think of anything but her own present position, and the events that had led up to her being here in Hawaii.

Great-aunt Grace had been worried about her coming so far alone when she had seldom been out of England during her twenty years, but Beth herself was both excited and apprehensive at the idea of meeting relatives she had not known existed until a few weeks ago. For the whole of her life she had understood that her great-aunt was the only person she had in the world, then suddenly she learned she had had a grandfather living in Hawaii, and a second cousin, Louis Marizzi. That was all she knew so far, but it was an exciting beginning to a venture she had high hopes of. Grace Fraser had never married because she had devoted her life first to Beth's mother, and then to Beth herself. When she could perhaps have been having a family of her own, she was busy caring for the orphaned daughter of her only brother, only to see the girl she had come to look upon as her own child die when she was only eighteen years old, giving birth to a child of her own.

For most of her life Beth had known nothing at all about her father, and her natural curiosity had been turned aside, sometimes brusquely, by her great-aunt, so that on occasion her imagination had run riot, but nothing she had imagined had compared with the truth. It was only when Enrico Marizzi died and left her a fourth share in his not inconsiderable fortune

that she had learned who she really was.

It was through his second marriage at the age of fifty-four, to an English schoolteacher, that Beth was connected. Their son, Richard, was visiting England when he met Ruth Fraser and the affair had been brief but passionate. The young couple married after only a few weeks, despite the fiancée that Richard already had at home in Hawaii, but in the circumstances he had thought it more politic to return home alone and break the news to his family before introducing his young bride. It was while he was on his way home that he had been killed.

Shocked and grief-stricken, Ruth had turned to her elderly aunt once more for comfort. It was Grace Fraser who wrote, some months later, to inform Enrico Marizzi that his son Richard's widow was expecting his child, but the letter was ignored. Old Enrico had hardened his heart and refused to acknowledge either the bereaved wife or her child. Nothing was heard of him until a letter had arrived a few weeks ago stating that the child of Richard and Ruth Marizzi, formerly Fraser, was a beneficiary under her grandfather's will. Old Enrico's conscience had caught up with him at last.

Grace Fraser had never forgiven him for denying her niece the recognition she was entitled to, for Ruth had been her whole life, and she had taken care, when she took on the upbringing of Ruth's daughter, that Beth never knew her real name—her birth had been registered in the name of Fraser, and that of Marizzi buried with the bitterness of the memories it invoked.

'You never knew the old man?' Ray Brauman's inquiring voice brought her swiftly back to reality. 'Mr Enrico Marizzi, I mean,' he added, seeing her slightly dazed look, and Beth shook her head.

'Oh no, I didn't even know of his existence until a few weeks ago!'

'It must be kind of strange,' he observed, 'not even knowing your own grandpa.'

Beth was not at all sure just what his position was —what terms he was on with the family he worked for, or how much he knew of her own curious story, but she hesitated to enlighten him at this stage, if he was simply being inquisitive.

'It's, a long story,' she said, and he nodded, apparently content not to pry further.

'You'll like the islands,' he told her. 'It's like nowhere else on earth.'

Beth smiled, wondering if she herself would ever become as enchanted with the reputedly mystical spell of the Hawaiian islands. The sea was not very far away, for only minutes ago it had been immediately on their right, shimmering like dark silk in the evening sun, but now they were travelling through a seemingly endless expanse of tall, green canes that she recognised as sugar, with its silvery tassels fluttering in the light breeze, and she turned to Ray Brauman once more, a flicker of nervousness showing in her voice.

'Is this—are we near the Marizzi plantation?' she asked, and he nodded.

'Right here,' he told her, and turned the car along a rough dirt road between rows of the tall cane, the red dust rising like a cloud before them and almost hazing out the dying glow of the sun. 'As far as you can see is Marizzi property!' He grinned over his shoulder at her, briefly and reassuringly. 'Not far now!'

'Do you belong here, Mr Brauman?' She wanted something to take her mind off the imminent meeting

with her brand new relatives, and she lit on the first subject that came to mind. 'I mean, do you belong to the islands?'

Ray Brauman laughed. 'Heck no,' he told her, shaking his head. 'I'm from Oregon originally, but I did a spell in Guyana when I left college, learning all about sugar, then moved on to the West Indies for a while, working for a British firm.'

'And now you work in Hawaii !'

'For the past couple of years,' he agreed. 'I was lucky, I guess, it isn't every day you get a chance like this come your way !'

'No. No, I imagine not.' He must have noticed her absent manner, but she thought he would understand—she felt so nervous now that she was actually here and it must have showed in her manner. 'Mr Louis Marizzi is your—is the boss now, of course.' He glanced at her briefly, and nodded. 'Since the old man died at the year's start,' he told her.

'And you like working for him, too?'

'Sure.' Something in his voice did not sound quite right, and Beth turned her head and glanced at him, but he was smiling, and showed no sign of uncertainty. 'There's been changes, of course, bound to be with a new hand on the rein, but we get along O.K.'

It seemed incredible that an old man of ninety-six could have taken an active part in running such a huge concern, but Ray Brauman's answer seemed to suggest it. 'Was Mr Marizzi still holding the reins when he died?' she asked. 'At ninety-six years old?'

He laughed and shook his head. 'You didn't know Enrico Marizzi, Miss Fraser,' he reminded her, 'or you wouldn't be so surprised! He was quite a guy !'

And a stubborn and unrelenting one too, Beth added silently, although he had eventually, after

twenty years, recognised his grand-daughter. She could only hope that Louis Marizzi would prove a less daunting prospect. He was bound to be some years older than she was herself, of course, for his father was the old man's son from his first marriage, but she could not even be absolutely certain about that. She caught a glimpse of a house, its lights already beaming out between the rows of cane, and felt apprehension again when she realised she knew nothing about the man whose guest she was to be.

The house itself was impressive, especially coming upon it suddenly from a forest of cane as they did. Huge and white and ablaze with lights it was half hidden by a lush

growth of trees and shrubs all around it. It looked, Beth thought a little dazedly, as if someone had transported it just as it was, from somewhere in southern Europe. 'Auwai,' Ray Brauman said, and turned the car in a wide sweep in front of the house before putting on the brakes and cutting the engine. 'It looks like Louis still isn't back.' The house seemed even larger close to, and the gardens were the most beautiful she had ever seen. Tall trees shaded it, palms and many more she did not recognise, heavy with exotic blossom and scenting the air with their perfumes. The variety was breathtaking and even in the strangely deceptive mixture of daylight and artificial light the colours were almost unreal.

A fountain splashed into a wide stone basin at the centre of which was a naked stone nymph in creamy marble, and red roses grew in a low border around it, climbing over the edge to the water. It was beautiful, and Ray Brauman gave her a moment or two to enjoy

it before he moved round to take her luggage from the car.

It was so quiet too, and she remembered he had said that Louis Marizzi was out somewhere, and only the soft shushing sound of the water in the fountain broke the stillness, until her suitcases were stood down with a light crunch on the gravelled forecourt, and the boot lid snicked down quietly.

'You like it?'

He came and stood beside her for a moment, looking at the wide front of the house with green shutters and arched windows blazing with light. A long verandah ran the length of its front, the tiled floor spilling over with flowers in stone vases and urns—geraniums and many more exotic and unfamiliar ones.

'It's—it's beautiful!' She turned and smiled, a little uncertainly. 'It really is lovely.'

Ray Brauman grinned as he bent to pick up her suitcases. 'Yeah, and exactly like you see in Italy!' he said. 'Do you know Italy, Miss Fraser?'

She shook her head, following him into the house itself, and only vaguely aware of what he was saying for the thudding beat of her own heart. 'No—no, I've never been to Italy.'

This was a moment she had both anticipated and dreaded since she left England. She was here at last, in the house of the grandfather she had never seen, about to meet the cousin she never knew she had until a few weeks ago, and she felt quite sick with nervousness. It was exciting, but nerve-racking too, and she wished she did not feel so anxious.

The house itself was a revelation too, for that too might have come straight from Italy. Old Enrico Marizzi, it seemed, had done everything he could to remind himself of his original homeland.

The floor of the entrance hall was tiled in mosaic and scattered with rugs, and potted palms stood in corners, half concealing white alabaster statues. There was a uniform whiteness about everything that was dazzling, especially after the soft light outside. The only dark colours were in the several paintings that hung on the virgin-white walls, and they had such a similarity of feature in each of the sitters that Beth could otily assume they were Marizzis—her own family ancestors.

She was brought swiftly back to earth by Ray Brauman's cheerful greeting. 'Ah, Peg, there you are!' Swinging round swiftly, she could feel her heart beating hard at her ribs, and for a moment she felt almost lightheaded. Everything was happening so fast that she had difficulty in adjusting for a few moments. 'Peg, this is Miss Fraser,' Ray Brauman was telling a woman who came across the hall towards them. 'She's flown all

the way from England—today, will you believe? Miss Fraser, this is Peg Hashada, housekeeper, etc., etc.!

The woman was perhaps in her fifties, and what Beth would have called a typical islander, from her colouring. Her eyes suggested she was at least part oriental, but her round brown face could have come from any one of the many races that went to make up the colourful and delightful citizen of modern Hawaii. She had dark eyes that crinkled in friendly welcome, and she looked at Beth a little anxiously for a second. 'You must be clear wore out, Miss Fraser honey,' she told her, in a curious lilting version of an American accent. 'You come on, and I'll show you your room, then when you freshened up a little, you'll maybe think about something to eat. You hungry?' The thought of a bath and a change of clothes was

irresistible, even though she was hungry, and Beth heaved a sigh. 'Yes, I am rather,' she said, 'but I'd love to bath and change first, if I may.'

'Sure you can!' The woman picked up one of the suitcases and looked at her inquiringly. 'This the case you want? Jiro'll bring the other up later.'

'Hey, Peg, isn't Louis back yet?' Ray Brauman asked, as they turned to climb the wide shallow staircase that led off from the centre of the hall, and Peg Hashada frowned briefly as she turned to answer him.

'Mr Louis still out with Miss Tish,' she told him, and made it plain that she meant to correct his informal use of their employer's name. 'He be back soon now.' She turned back to Beth. 'O.K., Miss Fraser? We go and find you a shower and a change of clothes, huh?'

'I'll see you later,' Ray Brauman called after her, and Beth turned to answer him, but before she could say anything Peg Hashada spoke to him, a bright gleam in her eye. 'Not till you seen Bate Kanua about that job in section four,' she told him with an amiable grin. 'Bate come here to see Mr Louis 'bout it and he near blew his top when he saw him!'

'Oh, my God!' Ray Brauman struck his forehead dramatically. 'I clean forgot—O.K., thanks, Peg!' Again he gave Beth a friendly smile. 'I will see you later, Miss Fraser, unless I get fired in the meantime!'

Peg Hashada seemed to think it unlikely, for she chuckled fatly as she accompanied Beth up the wide, marble stairs. 'No chance!' she declared, and Beth made a note that Ray Brauman was apparently on very good terms with his employer.

Beth's room was every bit as luxurious as she expected from the general character of the house, and she

delighted in soft carpets and the sheer exquisiteness of a lace-draped bed that reminded her irresistibly of a fairytale. The open windows looked out over the exotic gardens she had already seen, and beyond that over the vast expanse of sugar, stretching out like an ocean of shadows, almost as far as she could see. The sea was not too far away, for the sky had that curiously luminous look beyond the cane fields, as if it reflected the shining surface of the water, even this late in the day.

It was all so unbelievably good so far, that it somehow made her a little wary. Shaking off any suggestion of pessimism, she turned away at last, and went along to the bathroom that Peg Hashada had said was for her use. It was right next door to her bedroom and every bit as luxurious as the bedroom itself, in turquoise blue, black and silver, with a huge marble bath as well as a shower.

Beth spent some time under the shower, revelling in the pleasure of freshness after the long flight, then she smoothed her favourite talc all over, and put on the new and rather



exotic robe she had bought especially for the trip. It was much more expensive than any one she would have dreamed of buying before, but she felt that being an heiress entitled her to some extravagance, and the fine Thai silk felt incredibly luxurious against her skin.

Her hair was still pinned on top of her head, but little strands of it had escaped while she bathed, and tickled her neck, so that she brushed it back with one arm as she turned to close the bathroom door behind her. It was as she turned from the door that she came into sudden and violent collision with the unyielding hardness of a masculine body, and strong hands held

her for a moment in their grip, as if to prevent her falling.

'I'm sorry!'

She gasped out an apology automatically, although he made no similar response. Instead he stood looking down at her flushed face and the wide green eyes that looked momentarily startled, and with the same instinctive certainty that she had known the man at the airport was not Louis Marizzi, just as certainly, she knew this man was. Apart from the fact that his features suggested he might be either of Spanish or Italian blood, he had a certain air of arrogance about him that she could well imagine would be part and parcel of old Enrico Marizzi's grandson. The only completely unexpected thing about him was his eyes, and instead of the dark, Latin eyes she had expected him to have, they were a light, almost icy grey and, at the moment seemed to suggest he was amused.

The big hands still held her and she wondered dazedly if she could break their hold without appearing too ungracious. In fact she felt curiously shy suddenly, for the silk robe was more revealing than concealing, and she was becoming more conscious of its thinness every second. A dark brow arched suddenly into the fall of almost black hair over his forehead and he smiled.

'You're Elizabeth Fraser, I guess,' he said, and she nodded.

He was what she expected, and yet in some way quite different. She had expected someone more ordinary, more easily acceptable as a cousin; instead this man had a personality that was almost awesome in its strength, and his manner showed that he was quite accustomed to the taste of wealth and power, which

was something that still overawed Beth to some extent.

'I'm Beth,' she told him, in a small and rather un-steady voice as she proffered her hand. 'I'm known as Beth.'

'Beth.' He repeated her name softly, and she realised that he was still smiling and slightly amused by the encounter. He took the hand she held out and enclosed it in his own strong fingers, while the grey eyes were lowered briefly to inspect the rest of her, a gesture that brought another rush of colour to her face. 'You're welcome to Auwai, cousin Beth, but don't look quite so much as if you expect me to eat you, you'll ruin my reputation—I'm Louis Marizzi!' He pronounced his name the French way, she noted absently, and not as 'Lewis' the way Ray Brauman had.

Beth had never felt quite so staggeringly overawed in her life, but she did her best to conceal the fact, difficult as it was in the present circumstances. 'I—I'm afraid I'm not exactly dressed for formal introductions,' she said, with a breathless little laugh. 'I needed to freshen up before I put in an appearance down-stairs. You rather caught me—'

'On the hop?' he suggested. 'I guess you don't know whether you're on your head or your heels yet, do you?'

'I feel a bit light-headed,' Beth confessed. 'It was rather a long flight and I'm not a very experienced traveller, I'm afraid.'

The grey eyes were unwavering and quite disturbing, so that she looked down at her feet rather than try to meet them. 'You believe in jumping in at the deep end, don't you?' he asked. 'Taking a trip this length when you're new to travelling—I admire your nerve!'

'It—it was quite interesting.' She was becoming increasingly aware of the robe's limitations as a covering and she wished there was some way she could bring

this rather unnerving meeting to a close without being ungracious about it. 'I really ought to get dressed,' she ventured, and he smiled once more.

She noticed that when he did his grey eyes crinkled at their corners, and strong white teeth showed in startling contrast to his almost swarthy dark face. 'Sorry I wasn't there to meet you,' he said, ignoring her attempt to go, 'but I had to take Tish to the dentist—I can't trust Peg, she's too soft-hearted and lets her skip the appointment. Then the little wretch gave me the slip and I had to go searching for her. I finally tracked her down in the Liliuokalani Gardens and by then it was—' He shrugged his broad shoulders and laughed, as if the chase had amused him rather than angered him, and she looked at him curiously. 'I guess I should have left Tish to find her own way home and come and met you myself ! '

'Tish?'

Beth looked at him curiously, and realised yet again just how little she really knew about the family she had so recently become a part of. She had no idea who else there was for her to meet or if they would all be as friendly as Louis Marizzi. He was shaking his head and smiling.

'You'll meet Tish when you come down,' he told her. 'She's taking a bath in honour of the occasion ! She's a nice kid, you'll get along just fine.'

'I—I didn't know there were children.'

He flicked a dark brow and smiled. 'Not children, honey, just Tish.' He glanced once more down at her slim shape in the silk robe, a glance that missed nothing of the soft curves it revealed, and the small sandalled feet below its hem. 'I'll leave you to dress—anything you need, just give Peg Hashada a shout.'

'Oh, thank you, I'm fine—I have everything I need for the moment.'

'O.K.' He bent his head suddenly and kissed her cheek. 'Aloha, cousin, welcome to Auwail!' With a brief, casual wave of his hand he strode past her and along the carpeted landing, leaving Beth standing for a moment in blank surprise.

When she was dressed once more, Beth felt a little more confident, although she would have been happier to know just how many more Marizzis there were, cast in the same disturbing mould as the man she had already met. At least, she consoled herself, Louis Marizzi had shown no sign of resentment, and that was what she had dreaded most about meeting her unknown family—the possibility of being resented. The reaction of a family suddenly faced with accepting a stranger into their midst, and with sharing their inheritance with her. -

The simple green dress she had on gave her a rather youthful look, but it flattered her colouring, and gave a translucent look to her green eyes. The fact that she did not look any different now that she was a wealthy heiress she found briefly curious, but then

she shook her head over such fantasies and closed the door behind her before heading for the stairs.

She turned suddenly when she became aware of other, softly light footsteps coming along behind her and faced a girl, apparently coming from one of the other rooms, walking slowly, almost reluctantly, as if she was trying not to catch up with her. She was a dark child, about twelve years old, Beth guessed, and with a distinctly oriental look about her doll-like face and almond-shaped eyes.

As she came close the intriguing eyes regarded Beth

with more curiosity than friendliness, a steady almost insolent stare that did nothing to encourage the rather hesitant smile Beth had ready. It was not surprising to see a child, in view of Louis Marizzi's remarks about taking someone to a dentist, but this girl's distinctly oriental appearance was rather unexpected, and she wondered who she might be.

'Are you Louis's English cousin?' The voice was flat and uncompromisingly hostile, but Beth did her best to ignore the tone and be friendly.

'I'm Beth Fraser,' she said. 'Hello.' The girl offered no clue to her own name, but Beth remembered the name of the reluctant visitor to the dentist, and smiled. 'Are you—Tish?'

'Tisho,' the girl told her, and Beth thought she caught a flash of the same hauteur that had characterised Louis Marizzi's manner.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I only heard you referred to as Tish.'

She would have offered to shake hands, but she had the uneasy feeling that the gesture would be ignored and she had no desire to be openly snubbed. Tisho, whoever she was, seemed to have been endowed with none of the traditional Oriental courtesy, and Beth was trying to imagine why it should be this girl who showed the resentment she had expected from Louis Marizzi.

In a simple cotton dress the girl looked a normally pretty teenager except for the straight line of her mouth and the cool gaze of those almond eyes. She stood leaning against the wall, frankly eyeing Beth and noting everything about her, then she looked along to-wards the stairs. 'You going down?' she asked.

Still hoping to be friendly, Beth summoned a smile. 'I'm just trying to raise enough courage—I feel rather as if I'm plunging in at the deep end!'

The girl was walking along beside her, her head bowed as she watched her own steps rather than look at Beth, so that her long black hair hid most of her face. 'I can't imagine what you're scared of,' she said with impatient frankness. 'You've already met Louis!'

Beth glanced at her, swiftly suspicious of her knowledge and uneasy when she remembered her very informal introduction to her host. 'How do you know that?' she asked, and a small, feline smile showed for a second on Tisho's face when she turned her head.

'I saw you,' she said, and laughed in a way that Beth found incredibly discomforting.

'He's quite a guy, isn't he?' she asked, and laughed again.

It was done with the deliberate intention of embarrassing her, Beth realised, and felt a sudden stab of dislike for the idea of a child being so blatantly malicious. There was no point in making an issue of it, however, so she simply ignored it as a childish attempt to discourage her.

'I'm not sure how many more cousins and such I have to meet yet,' she said. 'That's why I'm a bit apprehensive.'

'There's no one else,' Tisho informed her. 'Not here at any rate—not since Great-grandpapa's gone.'

Her claim to kinship with Enrico Marizzi surprised Beth for a moment. The girl looked so very Oriental, so foreign to Beth's untutored eye, that she wondered if the relationship was real or assumed. 'Mr Enrico Marizzi?' she asked, to be quite sure, and Tisho nodded, swinging the curtain of silky black hair even further across her face.

'Sure, who else?'

Beth laughed, a short nervous laugh, as they started down the marble staircase together. 'I don't know who

else there is for me to—to know about,' she said. 'That's the trouble!'

Once more, briefly, the girl's intriguing eyes looked at her directly. 'There's nobody else but Louis and me —Grandfather and Grandmother went to live on the mainland when I was a baby.' Seeing Beth's puzzled look, she explained, rather impatiently, 'That's my mother's parents!'

'Oh, I see.' In fact, Beth thought, she did not see any more clearly than before just where this almond-eyed and slightly aggressive twelve-year-old fitted into the family picture, but she hesitated to say so. It occurred to her after a second or two that, this being Hawaii, the girl could, for all her oriental appearance, quite easily be Louis Marizzi's daughter, and she attempted to confirm it without actually naming him. 'Are you—I mean, are you my cousin's daughter?' she asked, and Tisho turned and looked at her once more.

There was a deep, incomprehensible look in the velvety almond eyes, and once more that tiny feline smile hovered about her mouth. She opened a door politely, allowing Beth to precede her, and answering in a soft, quiet voice as Beth walked past her.

'Yes, I am,' she said.

Beth had barely time to absorb the information before she realised she was in the company of her host again. The room was big and would undoubtedly have been called a salon in its more natural European setting, but it was palatial by any standards. The high ceiling was embossed with curlicues and cherubs, richly gilded against white, and the mantel that surrounded a fireplace, which could hardly have been used in such a climate, was a beautiful cream marble, and even more ornately decorated than the ceiling.

Louis Marizzi rose with almost indolent ease from a

deep leather armchair and in a second Tisho had left Beth's side and gone to him. An arm around her shoulders, he smiled down at her, hugging her to his side for a moment. 'Hi, kitten! How's the mouth?'

The girl laughed, tossing back her black hair and looking across at Beth with a look in her eyes that was curiously like a challenge. 'Oh, it's O.K. now,' she told him. 'It doesn't hurt a bit ! '

'Good!' He too looked across at Beth and smiled. 'Have you two introduced yourselves?' he asked.

'In a way,' Beth acknowledged. 'I was feeling a bit—' She shrugged uneasily, aware of Tisho's dark eyes watching her. 'I was afraid I might have a whole lot of people still to meet,' she confessed, 'and it's rather a relief to know that you and your daughter are the only ones. I'm, really not very good at meeting people. I—we never mixed much at home, I'm afraid.'

She was conscious of a slight narrowing of Louis Marizzi's eyes, and a strange glittery look in them that might or might not be laughter—whatever it was she found it infinitely

discomfiting, and glanced swiftly from one to the other, realising instinctively that something was wrong without being sure what it was. He indicated a chair next to his own and Beth sat down, thankful to have its solid support, for her legs felt curiously unsteady.

The girl perched herself on the arm of his chair, one hand resting on his shoulder. 'I guess I'd better put you right before we go any further,' he told Beth. 'Tisho is my niece, not my daughter, Beth.' The grey eyes searched her face, noting the slightly stunned look and the softness of parted lips. 'You're way off course somewhere, honey.'

'I'm—I'm sorry.' It was difficult to look directly at him when she had just made such a mistake. 'I thought

—Tisho said.' She licked her lips anxiously, seeing the glistening look of satisfaction in the girl's dark eyes. 'I asked if she was my cousin's daughter,' she told him, recalling the exact words, 'and she said she was. I—'

'You didn't know I had a sister?' She shook her head. 'Tisho is the child of my sister, Cara, and her husband,' he explained. 'They were killed in a -car crash almost eleven years ago; since then I've looked after her.' He was smiling, glancing up at the placid doll-like face of his niece. 'Her name's Tisho Kimuraz, her father was part Japanese—I guess you misunderstood what she said.'

A slight nod allowed the assumption, but Beth's heart was beating anxiously hard in her breast. A look at Tisho Kimuraz's dark almond eyes was enough to tell her that the misunderstanding, like that taunting laughter when she revealed a knowledge of their meeting on the landing, had been deliberately fostered for the purpose of embarrassing her, and she knew she had been right to expect resentment from Enrico Marizzi's family. His great-granddaughter at least, had no intention of welcoming her, or of encouraging her uncle to do so.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT was amazing what a night's sleep had done for Beth's morale, and she came down to breakfast the following morning feeling much more optimistic. The cheerful voice of Peg Hashada greeted her when she reached the bottom of the stairs and stood for a moment in the hall, unsure which way to turn. Her brown face beaming an encouraging smile, she bustled across from somewhere in the rear part of the house, and Beth turned to her in relief.

'Morning, Miss Fraser! You sleep pretty good?'

'Very well, thank you, Mrs Hashada.' She smiled in return, feeling better already for her welcome. 'The bed's so comfortable, and I was really tired.'

'Sure you were after all that fiyin'.' Peg chuckled fatly as she led the way across the hall. 'An' you better call me Peg,' she suggested. 'Nobody else calls me Mrs Hashada since I married old Jiro twenty years ago! You call me Peg, honey, like everybody else!'

The sheer exuberant good humour of the woman was infectious, and Beth was only too willing to be influenced. 'All right—Peg.'

She followed the stout figure clad in a colourful and voluminous shift-like garment, hoping to be led to her breakfast, for she had an appetite this morning, something she

seldom had in the mornings at home. 'You hungry?' A broad smile anticipated her reply without actually giving her time to make one. 'I bet you are—I fix you a good breakfast!' 'I usually have a slice of toast and a cup of tea,' Beth

ventured, and Peg Hashada's crinkly dark eyes cast her a brief unbelieving look over one shoulder.

They went into a big airy room that opened on to the gardens at the back of the house, and set in one window was a long wooden table, gleamingly polished and set with dazzlingly white napery and cutlery that looked solidly silver and quite beautiful. Huge salmon pink and yellow blooms, growing on vines that had already invaded the edges of the window frames, framed a vista of blue sky and exotic gar-den, their perfume mingling with the aroma of coffee to produce a particularly heady combination. The fountain, with its riotous surround of roses, whispered softly, shattering rainbows into its stone basin, while the cool and beautiful marble nymph in the centre looked on serenely. Every aspect of the scene, Beth decided a little dazedly, was so beautiful as to seem un-real.

She was not the first for breakfast, she had hardly expected she would be, and both Louis Marizzi and the almond-eyed Tisho looked up when she came in with Peg Hashada. Before anyone had time to say a word, Peg appealed to her employer, her hands spread and a definite hint of scorn in her deep friendly voice.

'You think one bit slice of toast is a breakfast to start the day?' she demanded, and snorted derisively. 'Toast —huh ! '

Louis Marizzi was on his feet, his dark face smiling, crinkling his grey eyes at their corners. 'Miss Beth's from England, Peg,' he told the housekeeper. 'Our breakfast customs might seem a bit strange to her.' He directed another smile at Beth herself, and raised one brow queringly. 'Good morning, Beth—maybe you'd rather have your toast? Or maybe bacon and egg, then toast and marmalade and tea.' He laughed and shook

his head. 'I do know an English breakfast when I see one,' he told her, 'and Peg can produce one, no matter what she suggests to the contrary.'

'Miss Beth said toast,' Peg insisted, as if she still found it hard to believe. 'Jus' one "slice of toast, she said, what kin' breakfast is that?'

Taking a seat on the other side of Louis from Tisho, Beth felt the girl's dark eyes on her although she had so far said nothing. 'I'd rather have whatever constitutes a Hawaiian breakfast,' she ventured, addressing herself primarily to Louis. 'Whatever it is, I'd like to try it.'

'We don't eat missionaries, if that's what you're expecting!' Tisho's light voice interrupted before he could reply, and Beth saw his quick frown at her, and the brief shake of his head.

'Hawaiian breakfast is just about anything you care to eat at this hour of the day, like most other places,' he told Beth, and his niece fell into a noticeably sulky silence. 'Tish has had banana pancakes and a glass of milk—I had a couple of eggs and some ham, and coffee, so you just take your pick, Beth. Whatever suits you, tell Peg and she'll fix it for you.'

'You try some pancakes,' Peg urged. 'You like them an' I make 'em pretty good, don't I, Tisho honey?'

'I like them,' Tisho agreed, and Peg beamed.

'There—now you try some, huh?' She looked so disappointed when Beth looked like refusing that she hastily nodded, though she felt a bit dubious about eating anything so seemingly indigestible so early in the day.

'Just a few pancakes, Peg,' she warned, 'and some coffee, please.'

Peg nodded her satisfaction, her broad brown face beaming as she padded off in her flat soft slippers, and

Beth looked across at Louis a little uncertainly. She felt much more self-conscious now that the expansive personality of the housekeeper had left the room quiet once more, and she was uneasily aware of Tisho's far from encouraging gaze.

Louis looked more casually dressed than he had been last night, and also, being less tired, she was more observant she supposed—wide awake enough to take better stock of him. Last night, for instance, she had not noticed that there was a suggestion of grey in the thick black hair above his ears, nor how broad and powerful his shoulders seemed under a white shirt. The neck of the shirt was open and showed a strong brown throat and neck, tanned and muscular like the bare arms that rested on the table, and the hands that held a cup of coffee while he looked across at her.

He was an autocratic man, she recognised; strong in other ways than the merely physical sense, and yet the steely grey eyes that were watching her so steadily had a warm friendly look in them and they were shadowed by quite incredibly long black lashes that, in another face, would have seemed almost effeminate. He would be a difficult man to overlook, and a hard man to oppose, she guessed, just as Enrico Marizzi must have been.

Tisho Kimuraz's soft light voice broke into Beth's daydream, reminding her that one person at least did not extend a welcome to her, and she wished it need not be so. Whatever happened the girl was not going to change her attitude very easily, and for the life of her Beth could not imagine why she was so antagonistic.

Tisho was glancing at her wristwatch and looking anxiously up at her uncle. 'Louis, look at the time, I have to go or I'll be late for class!'

He checked the time automatically, then nodded looking at the girl with a curiously meaningful look that Beth failed to understand. 'O.K., honey, then you'd better skip—I'll see you later.'

Tisho was on her feet, but she made no move to go, instead she stood looking at him and her fine brows were drawn into a frown above those intriguing eyes. 'I—I wish you'd take me like always, Louis.'

She sounded plaintive, even reproachful, and there was still a suggestion of sulkiness about her childish mouth as she looked at him. It seemed as if by standing there she hoped to persuade him to change his mind, and Beth wondered why he wasn't taking her to school, if that was what he normally did. He was not so easily persuaded, however, and it was no real surprise to Beth, for she could imagine him adamant once his mind was made up, for all his apparently easygoing manner and his seeming gentleness.

He pulled the girl into the crook of his arm and looked up into her reproachful, doll-like face, his mouth just touched by a hint of smile, as if he was familiar with her moods and felt quite capable of dealing with them. 'I've arranged for Ray to take you in this morning, Tish,' he told her. 'I have other things to do right here—I explained last night.' The dark eyes switched to Beth for a second, angry and hostile, then back to her uncle, still seeking to persuade him. She was fully aware that other things meant other people—specifically the stranger in their midst. 'Sure—more important than me, I

guess!' she said breathlessly, bitter and disappointed and, Beth realised with a start, furiously jealous.

'You know that's not true, sweetheart.' The calm voice sympathised without yielding an inch. 'Now just simmer down and get going before you're late.'

'Why can't Ray show her around? Why can't. No, Tish!'

The grey eyes were hardening, Beth noticed, and wondered that the girl seemed not to care. 'You've always taken me,' Tisho said, her soft voice desperate to convince him.

'Always, Louis, ever since I first went to school—until now!'

'Then you can't complain, can you?' her uncle asked brusquely. 'You can't have my undivided attention for ever, Tish—now, do like I say and go find Ray. He'll take you to school.'

Tisho's lower lip thrust out, tremblingly unsteady, and she glanced at Beth once more before turning again to her uncle. 'O.K.,' she said in a small voice, and Louis hugged her close for a moment, kissing her cheek when she bent down to him.

'So long, kitten, see you tonight, huh?'

Tisho said nothing, but hurried off without a back-ward glance, and Beth felt curiously in sympathy with her. She was completely antagonistic, openly hostile, and yet there was a pathos about her that was irresistible for all that. It was obvious that she was afraid of losing her uncle's affection, and it was easy to imagine how much he meant to her. He had cared for her since she was a year old, according to Louis, and he must be her whole world.

Beth ventured a glance at his dark, expressive face and cleared her throat, inexplicably nervous of saying what she had to say. 'You could have taken Tisho to school,' she said, and hurried on when he looked up at her suddenly. 'I mean, if you usually do take her and you didn't do so this morning just because—'

'You figure I was too tough on her, is that it?' The deep voice had an edge of steel that she had not noticed before, and it was matched by a certain steely

greyness in his eyes as they watched her steadily.

'I didn't say that,' Beth denied, uncertain of her argument and quite aware that it showed. 'I just thought—it seems a bit hard if you ' She shrugged, then almost sighed her relief aloud when Peg Hashada's comforting bulk came across the room towards them, carrying a loaded tray. 'Oh, thank heaven, my breakfast!' She beamed at Peg and carefully avoided the gaze from across the table. 'I'm so hungry, it must be the air here! Thank you, Peg!'

A dish was put in front of her containing a staggeringly high mound of small, delicious pancakes and beside it a jug of syrup, cream, sugar and a pot of fresh coffee. The smell was mouth watering, but the size of the feast staggered her.

'You want more pancakes, I'll fix 'em,' Peg told her, beaming, and Beth laughed.

'Good heavens, I shan't eat half these!'

'Sure you will,' Peg assured her confidently. 'You eat them, honey, they do you a power of good!' Chuckling good-naturedly, she looked at her employer, and Beth noticed the quick but barely perceptible narrowing of her eyes, as if she sensed something wrong. 'You want more coffee, Mr Louis?'

'No, thanks, Peg!' He picked up his cup and drank what was in it, then he waited until Peg had disappeared back to the kitchen before he spoke again. 'Saved by the bell!' he remarked quietly, and Beth glanced up, not bothering to pretend she did not know what he referred to.



He took exception to her even suggesting criticism of his handling of Tisho, that was obvious, though she had not meant it as criticism exactly. 'I wasn't exactly criticising,' she insisted, and he laughed shortly, help-

ing himself from her coffee pot, but adding neither cream nor sugar, she noticed 'Tish is a doll,' he said, resting his elbows on the table, 'but she gets—kind of possessive!' The explanatory hand he used to convey his meaning was very Italian, Beth felt, and she wondered if the gesture was copied from his grandfather. 'I guess she gets a little unsure of herself sometimes.'

Beth poured herself coffee, not looking at him while she spoke. 'Do you always take her to school?'

'No.' He sipped the strong black brew slowly, his eyes narrowed as they looked at her over the rim of the cup, but slightly less steely, she thought with a sense of relief she could not quite understand. 'Mostly I do, but I can't always make it, and she goes off quite happily with Ray or one of the hands as a rule. That little drama was for your benefit, I guess. She's jealous.'

The bland statement rather stunned Beth for a moment, but she tried not to let it show. Instead she put cream and sugar in her coffee and faced the prospect of that pile of pancakes that Peg had provided. 'I can't imagine why,' she said. 'Unless she thinks you're going to give time to showing me around that you would normally spend with her. But that won't be necessary, will it?'

He sipped his coffee again before he answered. 'You figure on finding your own way around?' he asked. 'Or has Ray Brauman made some kind of rash promise to act as a guide?'

'No.'

She made the admission somewhat reluctantly, thinking that if only Ray Brauman had made such a promise it might have made Tisho Kimuraz a little less hostile, and things would have been easier. Louis Marizzi was nodding his head, however, as if the

answer was perfectly satisfying as far as he was concerned.

'I'm glad to hear it,' he said. 'There's plenty for him to do without escorting you around.' He put down his coffee cup and got to his feet while Beth was still trying to decide whether or not he was being insufferably rude, or simply making a plain statement of fact. 'You forgive me if I leave you to have your breakfast alone, won't you?' he asked. 'I have to see one of the hands before I come with you.'

'Oh, but you don't have to bother about showing me around, I

'It's no bother, everything's fixed and I'll be back before you want to go anywhere—I have it all planned.' He stood beside his chair, toweringly tall beside her, and she felt suddenly as if no amount of suggestion, however logical, would convince him that his own plans were not best. 'Do you ride?' he asked, so unexpectedly that she stared at him blankly for a second. 'Horses!' he explained with a hint of sarcasm, and Beth flushed.

'No, I don't,' she said, and met his eyes steadily as she looked up at him. 'I'm sorry if that spoils your plans, but I just never learned.'

It was unforgivable of her to have spoken to him like that, and she hastily looked away, regretting it before the words were out of her mouth. He said nothing for a second, but stood looking down at her, and there was a suggestion of anger in the tall, straight leanness of his body, and the big hands that curved suddenly at his sides. Then he laughed, a short harsh sound that shattered the stillness in the big bright room.

'I guess you really are a Marizzi,' he said, and his voice was pitched low and almost sensually soft, flick-

ing little thrills of sensation all over her skin. 'And you spit, don't you?' A hand slid beneath her chin, causing her an involuntary gasp of surprise when her head was jerked up and back, bringing her face to face with him. The grey eyes had a steely look again for all the glitter of laughter in them, and a small tight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. 'Well, don't spit and claw in my direction, honey, I've had plenty of experience handling kittens that scratch!'

Beth was too startled to say anything at first, strangely disturbed by something she did not understand. He seemed to be treating her not as a young cousin, but the way he might treat a cat. She closed her eyes hastily, refusing to allow that train of thought to develop, then looked up at him again with his strong fingers still curved about her jaw. 'I neither spit nor scratch, Louis,' she insisted in a small and breathless voice. 'I'm not a cat!'

'No?' It was obvious he did not believe it, but he released her before she had time to reply, shaking his head. 'It looks like I might have my hands full with you and Tisho,' he told her, and once more Beth looked up to protest.

'We're hardly in the same category,' she objected. 'Tisho's a schoolgirl still, and you're responsible for her.'

Louis laughed, a softer sound this time, but mock-ing her grounds for protest. 'And you're a reasonable adult woman, huh?' He was still laughing, taking no account of the flush that warmed her cheeks or the warning glint in her green eyes. 'Beth, honey, there can't be more than eight years between you and me and I guess you both figure you know how to handle your own lives. But don't forget it's me you have to

convince before either of you can touch a nickel of Grandpapa's dough!'

Beth stared at him open-mouthed, her green eyes wide and dazed. She could not believe it—she refused to believe that she had been put in a situation where the acquisition of the fortune she had come so far to claim depended upon Louis Marizzi's good will. Her mouth was suddenly dry and she slid the tip of her tongue across her lips before she spoke.

'You mean—I have to convince you of my ability to handle the money before—before I can inherit my share?' she whispered huskily. 'That I can't have it until you say I can?' Louis's grey eyes scanned her face for a second, bright and curious and slightly narrowed, as if her surprise was unexpected. 'I mean more than that, Beth! You don't just inherit any of it in one lump sum, like you obviously expect. The money's in a trust fund and I'm the trustee.'

'But

He was shaking his head slowly. 'It isn't so surprising to anyone who knew him,' he said. 'Grandpapa was one of the old school, and he was as much a Sicilian on the day he died as when he first came from the old country, seventy odd years ago. He would never dream of leaving money direct to a woman, no matter who she was.' He smiled, a slightly ironic smile that tugged one corner of his mouth. 'He knew my father didn't see eye to eye with him on it and that's why he left me holding the purse-strings!'

Beth felt a sudden irrational anger against the old man, who all her life, it seemed, had tried to deprive her of what was rightfully hers, and even now, when he was dead, he

could still reach out and make things go wrong for her. Her hands clenched tightly at her

sides and her eyes had a sparkle as bright as jewels in her flushed face.

'Because you're just like him?' she suggested, in a small tight voice, and he shook his head, his eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

'Because he knew I'd respect his wishes and do it the way he wanted it done,' he argued quietly. 'After all, it was his money, and if he figured I could handle it for him, then fair enough—I'll do what I can to make it work.'

'And make me beg for every penny I need!'

She was not sure just what it was that made his eyes glitter the way they did, but there was a firmness about his mouth that she did not like and his voice suggested that he held himself in control only with some effort. 'Not quite that, honey,' he said coolly. 'But if you want to dip into your nice fat inheritance, you have to ask —nicely!'

Maybe it had been wrong of her to come out alone when she knew quite well that Louis had arranged to show her around his property, but Beth had been so angry when he left her that she needed to be alone for a while to let her head clear and get this latest staggering outcome into perspective. She could walk for a while, at least until he had finished with the workman who had prior call on his time. If he still wanted to show her around personally, he could no doubt find her easily enough when he was ready. She found it rather a curious sensation walking through the canefields. It was rather as if she had suddenly diminished in size and the tall green cane around her was no more than ordinary grass that had grown gigantically out of proportion. It was hotter than she expected too, and she greeted the sight of a

lush green pasture at the end of the field of cane with a sigh of relief.

There was a high, solid wooden fence to negotiate, but she managed it eventually, and revelled in the sense of freedom it gave her after being hemmed in by the towering green acres of cane. Now she could feel the light wind that was blowing in off the sea, and she half closed her eyes as she strolled across the grass, while the breeze lifted her hair and blew coolly across her brow and her flushed cheeks. It was almost like being at home apart from the heat, and even England had hot summers sometimes. Every time she thought about Enrico Marizzi's will she felt angry all over again. It was like an added insult, she felt, after all the years he had refused to recognise her existence, to tie her hands like that. To make her dependent on the autocratic opinion of his grandson for every penny she had. For two pence she would tell her new-found cousin that he and the other beneficiaries could have her share between them—after all, she would be no worse off than she had been before she ever heard of the Marizzis.

'Beth!'

She blinked herself back to earth hastily when a voice reached her, coming from some distance, it sounded, and she looked around her curiously, unsure from which direction it came. There was nothing ahead but a few cows grazing, but coming from her left she saw a man on horseback racing towards her and making frantic signals with one hand as he came.

She had no difficulty in recognising Louis and she spared an absent second to admire the way he rode—fast and furious, but perfectly in control. It was only his insistent use of that frantically waving hand that

puzzled her, and made her turn at last to look across to her right.

Her heart almost stopped and the breath caught in her throat, rooted to the spot for a moment and unable to move. Standing no more than fifty yards away and pawing the ground with one restless hoof was the solid mass of a Hereford bull, its white-blazed face turned in her direction, its great shaggy head lowered as he fixed his small mean eyes on her.

She had never felt so terrified in her life, and her legs felt ready to collapse under her, definitely they would never carry her as far as the fence she had climbed over to get there. For a second she believed the thudding sound she heard above the pounding of her own heart was the animal actually charging, and she closed her eyes tightly, a cry frozen in her throat.

The cry broke from her suddenly when she was snatched up by something that felt as hard and strong as a bar of steel, that swept her into the air, then put her down again in one swift, ungentle movement that knocked the breath out of her. With her eyes still closed she put out her hands, clutching instinctively at the solid support of a human body. A muscular, male body that was warm and comforting and smelled of some tangy masculine scent as well as the unmistakable smell of horses, and she realised at last where she was.

The curious jerkily rocking motion she was experiencing confirmed her suspicion, as well as the snorting, anxious breathing of an animal under pressure. She opened her eyes at last and realised that her face was pressed against Louis Marizzi's broad chest, to the spot where his shirt opened and showed the smooth golden tanned skin, and the shiver that ran through her was quite involuntary.

The grey stallion he rode halted suddenly with a snort and shake of his head, and somehow they were through on the far side of the fence and a big wooden gate closed firmly behind them. The short legs of a Hereford, especially carrying such an enormous weight, could never have outpaced the horse, but it had been too close for Beth and she was shaking like a leaf when Louis first dismounted, then lifted her down.

He had said nothing so far, and she prayed he would not yet, for she felt not only shaky but incredibly Weepy as well. If Louis had not seen her and acted so promptly she would have been badly gored at least, and possibly even killed, and she recognised the fact with another involuntary shiver.

Strong hands gripped her arms suddenly, so hard that she cried out in surprise, and she was shaken roughly until her teeth chattered. 'For God's sake, you little idiot, why didn't you wait for me? Or at least ask somebody before you went strolling about over strange ground as if you were taking a quiet walk at home? You might have been killed if that brute had been a second or two quicker, do you realise that? Do you?'

Another shake made her head spin, and Beth was no longer able to do anything about the persistent weepiness. She had been badly frightened, and now scolded, and she felt so weak with reaction that she would not have been surprised if her legs collapsed under her. It was only reaction, of course, for she was not normally a girl to give way to tears so easily, but she felt bruised in both body and ego and being shaken like a rag doll was the last straw.

'Don't, Louis—don't do that!' Her voice had the edge of hysteria on it, and she closed her eyes on the

tears that rolled down her face. 'I didn't know about the bull—I didn't know!'

She sensed his surprise, probably at the sight of her tears, then she was gathered close to him again suddenly, drawn into his arms while one hand smoothed comfortingly over her hair and his voice sounded soft against her ear. 'Now come on,

honey, don't cry—I didn't hurt you and neither did he! You're O.K., there's nothing to cry about. Come on now! ' His other hand was spread across her back, stroking and comforting, and she began to wonder rather dazedly why she was letting it go on for so long. 'I'm sorry I bawled you out,' the soothing voice went on, 'but you could have been badly hurt, Beth, or worse.'

'I know.'

She murmured the admission, but her voice was muffled against his shirt and she was strangely reluctant to move. After a second or two the decision was made for her, and he eased her away from him, standing for a moment with his arms still supporting her, looking down at her flushed face and the dampness of tears that spiked her lashes.

'Why didn't you wait for me, Beth?' he asked, and one finger removed a tear from her cheek with surprising gentleness. 'Why, honey? You knew I was all set to show you around—were you just so mad to discover I had the last word on your spending all your lovely money that you couldn't even face being civil to me? Was that it, Beth?'

She looked up at him, her eyes reproachful, and she found it hard to believe she had known him for less than twenty-four hours. She seemed to feel some strange sense of rapport with him, something she had never known before, even with Aunt Grace, and she could only suppose it was brought about by the mutual

legacy of old Enrico Marizzi's blood in their veins.

'Is that what you think?' she challenged, and after a moment Louis smiled, shaking his head.

'I'm trying not to think,' he said, 'of all the years I'm going to have to cope every time you want to dip into your money and I have to decide whether or not to let you have what you want.'

It came home to her, then, just what it involved, and she stared at him for a moment, wondering why she did not do as she had thought of doing while she was walking across the pasture earlier, and simply tell him that she would rather let him and his family have it all than have to ask for every penny she wanted. Instead she was seeking ways of complying with the conditions.

If the fund was to be administered from Hawaii it might not even be possible to have it transferred, it would certainly complicate an already complicated situation. The most obvious thing that came to mind was for Aunt Grace to join her out here and they could live where the money was.

Not that her great-aunt would like the idea, but she could not simply abandon her, and the more she thought about it the less she felt inclined to abandon her claim to her grandfather's money. It was the only gesture old Enrico Marizzi had ever made towards acknowledging her, and she felt she owed it to the parents she had never known to take it whatever the conditions attached.

'I suppose I shall have to think about moving here to live,' she suggested, and Louis looked at her steadily for a moment, then he laughed suddenly, his head thrown back and the grey eyes as bright as steel in his tanned face.

'You won't let me out of your sight, now you know

I have the purse strings, will you, Beth? You're a real Marizzi—you'll hang on to what you've got! '

'I'm a Fraser,' she retorted swiftly, her face flushed because she hated the idea of him finding her amusing, 'and we know how to hang on to what's -ours as well! I've no cause to love the Marizzis—it took them twenty years to recognise my existence, but now they have they'll find me harder to overlook a second time! '

For a moment Beth thought he would be angry, it threatened in the way his brows drew together, and in the steely glint of his eyes, but then he shook his head, his eyes scanning her face slowly as if he was seeing her for the first time ever. It gave her a curious sensation to be so meticulously scrutinised, and she lowered her eyes, her cheeks flushed as she moved away from him to go and stand by the wooden fence. The bull was still looking across, his shaggy head lowered, but she did not even bother about him now, only gazed across the deceptively peaceful-looking pasture, her mind filled with other things. 'You're a lot like Richard was,' Louis said after several moments, and she spun round swiftly, her eyes wide.

Her father was still such a vague, formless figure that she sometimes had the strange feeling that Richard Marizzi had never existed at all, impossible as that was. Aunt Grace would never mention him; even after Beth had discovered who she really was, just those few weeks ago, she had never really said what he was like, and it was becoming important for her to know at least something about him—what he looked like at least.

'You—you knew my father?' she asked, and Louis smiled wryly.

'But of course I did—he was my uncle, but he was only seven years older than me, and we were more like

brothers than he and my father were. They were only half-brothers, of course, and never really close—too far apart in age, I guess, apart from a natural antagonism.'

'They didn't like each other?'

He shrugged, coming to lean on the fence beside her, his elbows resting on the top bar and his eyes fixed on the horizon, as if he was seeing not the vista of field and sky, but people and events that were past but not easily forgotten.

'They didn't dislike each other,' he said. 'But I guess they hadn't much in common—my father was a man of thirty-three when the old man married again, and he was thirty-four when Rich was born. A man and a child, you couldn't expect the normal kind of relationship between them, especially as my grandmother had been dead for less than a year when the old man married Liz Clewes.'

'My grandmother?' He nodded. 'She wasn't Italian, then?'

Louis smiled. 'Bless you, no, child, she was an English schoolmarm and thirty years old, prim as a stiff shirt, and nobody figured she'd have any family. I guess Rich was a kind of bonus for the old man—he grieved like hell when he was killed.'

Beth hesitated, then looked over her shoulder as he stood beside her. 'Tell me about him, Louis,' she begged in a small and slightly breathless voice. 'I never even knew who he was until a few weeks ago, Aunt Grace never spoke of him, not once—not even what he looked like.' She swept her lashes down to hide her eyes briefly. 'I only know that you say he looked like I do.'

He studied her for a second or two and when she looked up he was straight-faced and serious. 'You've been taught to hate us, haven't you, Beth?'

A little disturbed by the use of the word hate to describe Aunt Grace's twenty-year silence on the subject of her father, she hesitated, but she supposed it had been a kind of hate. 'I don't think she meant to hate,' she denied. 'Aunt Grace had no one but Ruth, my mother, and when old Enrico refused to acknowledge her as Richard's wife it made her—bitter. More so because my mother died, I suppose; she loved her so much, and she was only eighteen.' She looked at him, her eyes serious. 'She was very pretty, you know, my mother.'

Louis smiled and his eyes swept once more over her face. He nodded. 'Yes, of course she was,' he said. 'Richard always had very good taste, and for him to have married her, she must have been something very special.'

'I've seen pictures of her,' Beth told him, 'but I never knew what my father was like.'

The appeal in her green eyes was irresistible. 'Tell me about him, Louis.'

He thought for a moment, then smiled. 'I'll do better than that,' he told her, 'there's a photograph of him in Grandpapa's room—I'll give it to you when we get back.'

Beth felt a swift flutter of excitement in her heart, and she looked up at him eagerly.

'You'll let me have it?' she asked. 'You don't want to keep it?'

He turned and looked at her for a moment and his eyes were not in the least steely cold now, but warm and friendly. 'There are others—but this one was the best he ever had taken and it always stood in the old man's room. You have it, honey,' he added softly. 'I don't need it—I guess you do.'

### CHAPTER THREE

BETH paused in brushing her hair and looked yet again at the framed photograph that stood beside her bed. She was not yet used to seeing it there, even after several days, and she still paused every time she was near it, to look once again at the young man it portrayed. Louis had promised to give it to her, and he had been as good as his word; it had been taken, he told her when he handed it over, only a few months before her father was killed.

To Beth that made it all the more precious because it showed him exactly as he must have been when her mother knew him, as he must have looked when she married him so quietly and secretly that his family had refused to recognise the marriage at all. Old Enrico Marizzi must have treasured the photograph as the last sight of his beloved younger son, the son born to him in his later years, and for once Beth felt a trace of sympathy for the old man.

Louis had told her that she was like her father, but somehow a likeness to herself had so far eluded her, perhaps because she was not seeing herself with Louis's eyes, nor the man in the picture either. She had never known her father animated with life and to her there was nothing about him that was familiar. She could see and judge the features, but it defeated her when-ever she attempted to fit a character to them, or to en-dow them with a personality.

His hair, judging by the photograph, had been more fair than Louis's, though still much darker than her

own, and it was thick and curly above a broad brow and dark-fringed brown eyes that showed a hint of mockery in their depths. There was a bright, confident look about him, the look that she privately called the Marizzi arrogance, and she could well imagine that the softly pretty girl in the photographs that Aunt Grace still treasured had easily fallen in love with him.

The hardest part for Beth was to see him as her own father, for the young man in the picture was no more than twenty-one years old, only a year more than her own age, and she found it hard to place him in another generation.

She put down the hairbrush and lightly touched the face in the photograph with a finger-tip as she turned away. She was grateful to Louis for letting her have it, and for

understanding her need to know what her father had looked like. Some time, when she had known him a little longer, she would ask Louis about the man behind the face—ask him to give life and character to the handsome image.

As she turned to go she remembered the letter she had to post, and picked up the envelope from the bedside table. Last night she had spent a considerable time composing a letter to Aunt Grace, explaining how things were; that if she was to enjoy her inheritance to the full she felt she must stay and live in the islands.

She had explained it all as best she could, and asked her great-aunt to come and join her, adding that if she preferred not to make the journey alone, Beth would come over and fetch her. Louis would surely understand that such a trip was a legitimate claim on her share of the trust, and allow her her fare home and back.

During week-ends presumably it was permissible for Ray Brauman to ask her out, for he had made it plain

when he issued an invitation to go to the beach with him, that he did so purely for his own pleasure, and in no way because he was acting as delegated guide to his employer's cousin. Beth accepted without hesitation, anxious not only to see more of the island, but also to further her acquaintance with Louis's good-looking overseer. They had met several times since that first day, but always when either Louis or someone else was present, and he was working, and it had been no real surprise when he had asked her to go out with him.

Carrying the letter to Aunt Grace in her hand, she went downstairs and was about to go out through the front door when she was called from across the hall. 'You're not going in search of a mail box, are you, Beth?'

Turning, she smiled at Louis, and shook her head. 'I thought I'd post it while I was out,' she told him, and thought his eyes narrowed slightly, but she could not be sure.

'With Ray?'

'Yes.' It should not concern him, she thought, but perhaps a little concern was natural in the circumstances, so she let it pass. 'We're driving to a beach—I believe Ray said something about Kona Beach.'

Louis nodded, and again looked at the letter in her hand. 'If you're going to Kona Beach you won't be passing a mailbox, you'd better let me take that—I'm going into Honolulu.' He took it from her, noting the addressee and smiling. 'Keeping Aunt Grace up to date with the news?' he asked, and Beth nodded.

She stood with one hand on the edge of the door, her eyes just evading the probing gaze that watched her so steadily. 'I'm—it's to ask Aunt Grace to come out here and join me,' she told him. 'If she doesn't like

the idea of flying out alone I—I might have to ask for some of the money sooner than I expected, Louis. I'd have to fly home and fetch her.'

'Sure you would ! ' She looked up at him swiftly. A suggestion of a smile matched the ironic gleam in his eyes, and it was obvious that her reaction amused him. 'Did you expect me to refuse, Beth?' he asked, soft-voiced, and she felt the warm flush of colour in her cheeks.

'No—no, not really.'

A short hard laugh suggested he did not believe her, although he did not actually say so. 'And suppose your aunt won't come? She's an old lady, it's possible, isn't it?'

Once more she looked directly at him, trying to decide what his feelings were in the matter. It gave her a curious fluttering sensation in her stomach when she faced the prospect of her great-aunt refusing to come and live in this exotic but completely alien



land. Aunt Grace had always had an aversion to strangers, and particularly to anyone who was not of her own race—it was possible that she would refuse to come whether Beth fetched her or not.

She lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug, for she had no solution to offer at the moment. 'I haven't thought about it,' she confessed. 'I don't know what I'd do. I—I suppose there would be no alternative but for me to go home and give up the idea of living here. I couldn't desert her, I owe her too much to ever do that.'

'And you love her too much.' He said it with such understanding that for a moment she felt a curious lump in her throat.

'Yes,' she agreed. 'Yes, I do. She's all the family I have, or all I had until lately.'

He moved closer, just a few steps until he stood the

other side of the half-open door, looking at her with that disturbingly intent look she was beginning to know. He was not so casually dressed this morning as he usually was, but smart and formal in a beige suit and a cream silk shirt, both so expertly tailored that they fitted his lean frame to perfection. If he was going into Honolulu, as he said, it was obviously for some-thing important.

One hand rested on the door frame, the palm flat and the strong brown fingers curved slightly, while he leaned a little towards her. 'But you don't really want to go, do you?' A trace of smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. 'You're already a little pupule about the islands, aren't you, honey? Crazy,' he added with a smile when she looked puzzled, and she nodded. She was quite ready to agree that she was crazy about her new surroundings, and she would regret it deeply if she had to change her plans.

'I'd rather stay on here,' she admitted, 'but if Aunt Grace ' Once more she shrugged in that vague, helpless way, and Louis reached out to touch her cheek lightly with his finger-tips.

'Try and persuade her, Beth,' he said, and smiled.

She glanced up briefly, wondering if she could be misunderstanding him. 'You mean—you'd rather I stayed?' she asked, and his mouth twisted sardonically into a half smile, as if he made the admission grudgingly.

'I'm beginning to get used to having you around.'

She searched the strong dark features with no real purpose in mind, except that she found the face intriguing, and the character of the man behind it fascinating. She was startled into almost gasping aloud when a car horn blasted the quiet outside suddenly,

and through the gap in the half open door she saw Ray Brauman getting out of his car. Louis looked across at her and smiled, his grey eyes warm and friendly, the way she liked them to be. 'You'd better go,' he said. Without a word, she slipped past him and round the edge of the door, but as she did so he caught her arm lightly in his strong fingers and held her for a second, his face close to hers, his breath fanning her cheek warmly when he spoke. 'Take care,' he said, then turned and strode back across the hall before she could even begin to question his meaning.

Kona Beach was even more than Beth expected, for it had everything that goes to make the perfect South Seas island. Bright white sand that sloped gently down to foaming breakers rolling in off the surf, and palm trees that grew to the very edge of the beach and gave shade from the sun. There was no one else about, but out on the ocean, where distance could lend enchantment, there were several small boats, and Beth sighed with pleasure as they walked down on to the sand.

'Oh, but this is perfect!' she said. 'It really is perfect, Ray.'

He was beside her, taking her hand as they walked along under the palms, and he was smiling at her enthusiasm as if it was exactly what he expected. 'I figured you'd like this place,' he told her, giving her hand a light squeeze. 'It's like something out- of a Presley movie, isn't it?'

Beth nodded, though she wondered, from that smile, whether he perhaps found her enthusiasm a little naïve. Whether he did or not, she could not hide her enchantment with everything she saw. In the few days she had been on the island she had found everything

just slightly unreal, and her enjoyment of each new experience showed in her response.

Where else, for instance, could she sit having breakfast and look out at blossoms ranging in colour from palest yellow, through shades of orange and peach to deep pink—and all on the one tree? Peg Hashada had called it a rainbow shower tree, and chuckled fatly at her speechless surprise, but to Beth it had seemed like something out of a dream and she was not blasée enough to simply accept it. Everything, even the people, seemed larger than life, and so far she had found it all enchanting. There must be serpents in this Eden, she supposed, but so far she had not yet been disenchanted. She dropped down on to the sand, tucking her legs up under her, and smiled at Ray with a little grimace. 'I find it all so—so incredible,' she confessed, 'that I sometimes feel I must be dreaming.'

Even her present companion, she thought as she looked at him, was almost too good to be true. Tanned and cleanly handsome in his coloured shirt and white slacks, he sat beside her, the fringed shade of the palm leaves casting strong shadows across his face, and she wondered if he had caught Louis's whispered admonition to take care. 'I guess it all seems kind of strange to you still, doesn't it, Beth?' he asked, and she nodded.

'Strange but exciting and beautiful. This island, the plantation, even the people—I can't quite believe any of it yet!'

Ray was gazing out at the ocean with his eyes narrowed against the sun rather than replace the dark glasses he held in his hand. 'Are you going to stay? I mean for good—become native, like your folks?'

Your folks! She could not yet think of Louis or

Tisho Kimuraz in that cosy, intimate way, but she supposed they were. 'I hope to,' she said. She did not say, either, that Aunt Grace could put an end to her hopes, but kept that between herself and Louis at the moment.

'How are you getting on with the family?' he asked. 'You settling down to being a Marizzi?'

'Oh, yes—on the whole.'

Thinking of Tisho's ill-concealed hostility she had hesitated fractionally when she answered, but brief as it had been, the hesitation had not gone unnoticed, and Ray was looking at her curiously, as if speculating on the reason for it.

'I know Louis can be a hard man to get used to,' he remarked. 'I've had a couple of set-tos myself with him since he took over, but I have to admit he usually knows what he's doing.'

The admiration was grudging, she thought, but it was there, and she once again wondered what that intangible something was that coloured any statement of Ray's concerning her cousin. 'It's just as well he does,' she said, pulling a rueful face. 'Did

you hear about the near-miss I had with that wretched bull, the first day I was here? If Louis hadn't known what he was doing then, I probably wouldn't be here now !'

'Peg told me,' Ray said. 'She was full of admiration, naturally—Louis's top man as far as Peg's concerned, she dotes on him. It was her told Louis you'd gone off alone and which direction you'd taken. I guess he figured that sooner or later you might come across his pride and joy and come to grief.'

'His pride and joy?' She looked at him curiously, and he nodded.

'The old man never would have cattle on the place when he was alive,' he told her, 'but Louis always had

this ambition to build up a herd of pedigree Here-fords. He and his grandpa used to have long arguments about it, but the old man never would give in.'

'They argued?' The idea was new, and somehow disturbing. though heaven knew why. 'But I thought Louis and his grandfather were very close.'

'So they were,' Ray agreed, 'but they were both too bull-headed to give in easily.

Louis, naturally, had to be the one to yield eventually, but he never let the old man forget the idea, and he kept bringing it up, hoping to get his way !' He laughed, shaking his head slowly. 'He never did, but sure enough, the first thing Louis got when he inherited was that great brute that nearly tossed you! I guess it was a gesture the old man would have appreciated '

Something in his voice suggested that he had been more in sympathy with his late employer's views than with the present one in the matter of cattle, and Beth wondered if that could be the basis of that barely definable antipathy she thought she detected. She had noticed it first when Ray drove her from the airport, she remembered.

'You don't agree?' she asked. 'About the cattle, I mean.'

Ray shrugged, a smile dismissing any idea of dissension. 'I'm a sugar man,' he told her. 'I don't know any-thing about cattle and quite frankly, I don't want to, but if Louis wants them he'll go ahead and have them. He's enough like the old man to go his own way regard-less of anybody else! '

'You liked my—my grandfather?' It was still difficult for her to get used to the relationship, and she never felt quite at ease when she claimed it.

Ray nodded. 'I respected him,' he said, and avoided a more personal commitment, she noticed. 'He was

very old, but he was no slouch when it came to business and he was as straight as they come.'

'But hard and autocratic?' Beth suggested, calling upon her own experience of Enrico Marizzi's intolerance.

Ray regarded her steadily for a moment before admitting it. 'That too, I guess,' he said. In the silence that followed he sat and looked at the ocean again, then he turned suddenly and smiled at her. 'Now, how about that swim?' he said.

After the cool quietness of Kona Beach, the centre of Honolulu seemed unbelievably hot and noisy, but Beth found it exciting too. She had said she would like to see some shops and, rather reluctantly she suspected, Ray had agreed to drive her down into the town, and it was like entering another world.

There were so many shops, and in such a variety that the difficulty was to know where to start. Selling almost everything she could think of, from all over the world, the shops and stores were owned and staffed by the many nationalities that went to make up Hawaii's multi-racial citizenship. It was like nothing else she had seen before, and Beth meant to enjoy every minute of it.

In the huge International Market Place in the very centre of Waikiki, she went from one display to another tirelessly, with Ray holding on to her hand, smiling tolerantly at her enthusiasm. The market place was, in fact, a huge garden shaded with palms and with waterfalls and ornamental bridges concealing little lanes of shops that were for the most part grass-roofed huts, or stalls made from bamboo, and offering every imaginable aspect of the island crafts.

Walking around the shops and stores and seeing the

extravagant selection of merchandise, Beth realised with a start that she could quite quickly and easily dispose of a considerable inheritance in no time at all in a place like Honolulu. As it was, she succumbed to the temptation of a moderated version of the muumuu, the voluminous and colourful garment that half the women in Hawaii seemed to wear in one form or another.

The one she bought bore very little resemblance to Peg Hashada's comfortable but shapeless garments, though its basic form was the same. In pure silk, it was flattering and exquisite, and it made her feel quite exotic when she tried it on. It would, she thought, do for some very special occasion.

'How about some lunch?' Ray's voice close to her ear brought her swiftly back to earth and drew her attention from the lure of an exquisite jade and pearl pin. 'Are you hungry?'

'I believe I am ! ' She looked up at him and laughed, her eyes bright and softly sea-green in the flushed oval of her face. 'I've enjoyed myself so much, Ray, I almost forgot about being hungry. It's all so—so pretty!'

Pretty was not a strong enough term, but it was all that came to mind at the moment, and Ray was smiling at her, shaking his head slowly. 'You're the prettiest thing here,' he told her, and his fingers squeezed gently into her soft skin for a moment as he drew her along with him. 'I think the Hawaiian word is nani, if I remember.'

'Do you know a lot of Hawaiian words?'

He laughed, bending his head to look into her face' as they walked through into the street. 'Only the odd word,' he admitted. 'But I do know enough to pay a pretty girl a compliment. Now—how about that lunch? Any special nationality you prefer?'

'Oh, I leave that to you! '

She felt slightly lightheaded, and she did not entirely blame it on the heat or the fact that it was lunch time and she was hungry. Ray Brauman was somehow part and parcel of the glamour of Hawaii and he was a very attractive man. It would be foolish to pretend she had not noticed his interest in her during the past four days, and just as foolish to deny her own attraction towards him.

It was certain that if Aunt Grace had been with her already, she would have thought twice about accepting his invitation to go to the beach with him, for her great-aunt mistrusted strangers of any sort, a characteristic she had done her best to pass on to Beth. But on her own, Beth was less suspicious, more ready to accept people. and she liked Ray Brauman.

He still held her hand and she had no inclination to do anything to change the situation. Squeezing her fingers, he smiled down at her. 'I know just the place,' he said. 'It serves mostly Hawaiian food, but there are other things if you want them—I think you'll like it!' 'I'm sure I will ! '

The restaurant was beautiful, just as he promised, and Beth was delighted with it. Willow trees shaded the garden where tables were set out beside a fish pool, and the atmosphere was one of peace and tranquillity. The menu was varied, and the various

names intrigued her, but eventually she chose something called laulau, which Ray told her was a favourite Hawaiian dish.

When it arrived it proved to be little pieces of pork with fish of some kind and taro shoots all wrapped in leaves and cooked together. She had difficulty in identifying any of it except the morsels of pork, but she found it delicious. The coconut cream pie that followed proved almost too much for her, but it was

much too good to throw to the fish in the pool, as several other people were doing with scraps from their plates.

The Cona coffee that ended the meal was stronger than she liked, but it would have been unthinkable to criticise anything after such a wonderful meal and she sipped the strong dark brew as slowly as possible while Ray sat opposite her, watching her whenever he thought she was not aware of it, so that she wondered if he had something on his mind.

'What's wrong, Ray?'

She smiled across at him, and he put down his cup, staring down into it for a second or two before he answered. 'You didn't think I had an ulterior motive for asking you out, did you, Beth?' he asked, and almost automatically she recalled Louis's last whispered admonition.

Shaking her head hastily, she looked across at him. 'No,' she said. 'Why on earth should I?'

He shrugged, but there was a small and rather wry smile about his mouth that puzzled her. 'I wondered if Louis had said anything—made any suggestion about why I asked you to come, or tried to put you off, that's all.'

'Put me off?' She echoed him curiously, still not understanding. 'I don't understand, Ray. Why should Louis say anything to try and—put me off?'

His fingers toyed with the empty coffee cup for a second or two, then he shook his head. 'Well, for one thing because you're a very wealthy girl, and I saw Louis say—something to you just before we left. I thought he might have been warning you.' He laughed, but it was a slightly unsteady sound and not at all humorous. 'After all, Beth, I guess I wouldn't be the

first guy to combine business with pleasure, and Louis would know that maybe better than you!'

'You mean—' He nodded, and she gazed at him for a second, wide-eyed. It startled her to realise that what he was saying was probably true. Now that she was to be rich, Enrico Marizzi's granddaughter, she would probably need to be on her guard against men who would be seeking more than the pleasure of her company. 'I—I hadn't thought,' she confessed.

'Then I guess you should, honey!'

Perhaps she had spent too much time with Aunt Grace and not enough with people of her own age. She was not so well equipped as some of her contemporaries to tell whom to trust and who not. Maybe Aunt Grace had made her too suspicious of strangers, and her new environment without her aunt's influence, had disarmed her. For the first time it occurred to her that being an heiress might not be the carefree state she had anticipated.

She looked through her lashes at the good-looking face of her companion and tried to judge. Surely if Ray Brauman was a fortune-hunter, he would not have forewarned her, and if Louis had thought so he would have been quite forthright about it, she felt

certain. He would have been firm in his discouragement, not merely whispered a brief warning to take care.

She looked at Ray and smiled a little uncertainly. 'Are you?' she asked. 'Are you combining business with pleasure, Ray? I wouldn't know, you see, if you were!'

He reached across and touched her hand and his blue eyes had an earnest look she could not doubt. 'Will you believe me when I say I'm not, Beth?'

She did not hesitate, but trusted her first impression of him. Most of all, she thought, she trusted Louis's judgment, and she knew in her heart that he would

have said so to her if he had the slightest suspicion Concerning his overseer's motives. 'I believe you,' she said, and Ray smiled.

'Then I'm going to come clean about everything,' he told her, and squeezed her fingers reassuringly when she looked startled. 'Maybe you didn't know,' he said, 'but I was married once.' He looked at her directly and his eyes were steady. 'I figure you're the kind of girl it matters to,' he went on, 'and I don't want you getting any—second hand opinions. I'm free and clear now—no complications.'

'I see.'

'I'm telling you because I want things straight between us from the beginning, Beth.'

'Yes, of course.'

It was, she supposed, rather touching that he wanted to have everything straight between them, but at the same time a little warning bell was ringing somewhere. A warning that perhaps Ray Brauman was becoming too serious too soon, and she felt a little out of her depth at the moment.

'You don't mind me being honest with you?'

'No, of course not, I appreciate it, Ray, but—' She looked down into the cool water of the pool where the carp darted like shafts of gold after the scraps of food thrown to them. 'It doesn't really concern me, does it, Ray? Your private life is your own affair.'

'Oh, sure, only—' He looked as if he was about to say something more, but then he shook his head and after a moment or two called over the waitress with their bill. 'Sure it is,' he said.

The place was full and there were people waiting to take their place, so that as they made their way to the exit it was necessary to pass through a group standing near the door. Ray had her hand in his, leading the

way so that when she stopped suddenly at the unexpected sound of a familiar voice, he looked back at her curiously.

It was not easy to miss Louis, even in a crowd, and the owner of the restaurant was talking to him herself before handing him over to a waitress. Apart from his height, Louis Marizzi stood out for the sheer masculine arrogance of his bearing, and Beth felt a curious little shiver pass through her as she turned and watched him make his way between the tables, almost without realising she was doing it. It was a second or two before she realised that he was not alone, and in that moment Ray realised the object of her interest and laughed.

'Louis,' he said, picking out his employer's tall and unmistakable figure. 'He likes this place—it was him put me on to it in the first place.'

Beth was frankly interested in the woman who walked in front of her cousin through the crowded restaurant with all the confidence of a royal progress. She was sleek and cool-looking; tall for a woman and about thirty years old, Beth guessed. Not a girl, but a smooth and sophisticated woman with almost as much arrogance as her escort, and Beth looked around once more at Ray as they made their way to the street.

'Is that his girl-friend?' she asked, and he pulled a face.

'You could say so! At least she has the edge on the rest of them, and I guess she's as well suited to be Mrs Marizzi as anybody!'

'Mrs Marizzi?'

She could not imagine why it should surprise her to learn that Louis was contemplating marriage; it was bound to happen sooner or later and he was well into his thirties. Now that he was in control of most of his grandfather's fortune and the plantation was his alone,

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he was surely in a position to marry and have a family of his own. Tisho would soon cease to be his responsibility too; in a few years now she would be grown-up and less dependent upon him.

Just the same she found it hard to see Louis with that cool and icy-looking blonde for his wife. He was arrogant, it was true, but she knew that he could also be a warm and caring man, and he would want the same qualities in his wife, she thought. Of course looks could be deceptive, but

Ray's hand on her arm brought her swiftly back to earth, and she summoned a smile. 'I didn't realise Louis was thinking of getting married,' she said, and he laughed shortly. 'I don't know about Louis,' he said, 'but Grete is definitely thinking about it, and she is one determined lady!'

'She looks it,' Beth observed thoughtfully, and wondered if Louis was really capable of being led into a situation that was not entirely of his own choosing, no matter how determined the woman in question was. Then she recalled that tall, blonde figure sweeping like a queen between the restaurant tables ahead of Louis, and thought it might just be possible. 'A Viking queen!' she remarked a little acidly, and Ray turned and looked at her.

'In name and looks, and maybe character,' he agreed, 'but in every other respect Grete Haas is one hundred per cent American, and a woman to be reckoned with—you better believe it!'

Something in his voice gave her a clue, made her certain before she spoke, and she turned and looked at him curiously. 'Do you know her, Ray?' she asked, and he laughed, a curiously short and bitter sound that startled her.

'You're so right I do! ' he said. 'But Grete has her eyes fixed firmly on the Marizzi dollars—with what Louis already has going for him, and old Enrico's dough, it's strictly no contest as far as the rest of man-kind is concerned! '

Beth was prepared to believe that Louis's being his grandfather's principal heir had something to do with Grete Haas finding him attractive, but she was equally convinced that Louis would have attracted the kind of woman she seemed to be whether he had the added incentive of the money or not. Saying so to Ray, however, was probably not the most tactful thing to do, so she merely shrugged.

'Oh, I see.'

Ray saw her into the car and closed the door on her, and once more that short laugh jarred on her ears as he walked round the car and got in beside her. 'I don't think you do, honey,' he told her. 'You see, my marriage broke up because of Grete, but when I introduced her to my boss's grandson she just walked out on me—can you beat that?'

## CHAPTER FOUR

IT was such a very important decision to make and such a difficult one that Beth knew she would not be able to make it alone. It was the first time in her life that she had not been able to turn to Aunt Grace for guidance, and she felt alarmingly helpless and rather frighteningly alone.

She had sat for some time now, alone in her room with Aunt 'Grace's letter in her hand, reading it over and over again, and trying to make up her mind what to do, but she was no nearer to a solution now than when she started. Louis could surely help, she thought; he was older and he was certainly more confident and decisive, more used to making decisions. He could and would, she felt sure, help her.

She looked at the letter yet again, and felt the same bitter sense of disappointment that the first reading had brought. She could not possibly live abroad, the old lady said, but neither would she dream of Beth giving up something that was long overdue to her, and reject a way of life that obviously appealed to her.

It was still possible to find a lady companion, she believed, and she would soon find someone suitable to share her home with her, someone she could get along with. Beth was not to worry about her on any account, and she must certainly not contemplate coming back to live in England, and giving up so much simply because of an old woman's stubbornness.

Although she sought to make light of the matter of a companion, Beth knew that it would never be easy

for Aunt Grace to do as she said. She had given her whole lifetime to bringing up, first Beth's mother, and then Beth herself, and she would be lonely, no matter who she found to be her companion.

Aunt Grace was a close and private person, and for most of her life she had kept strangers at a distance. To have a stranger living in her home would be a much bigger step for her than for most people, but Beth knew that, having made up her mind, she would not change it.

She glanced at her watch, making up her mind suddenly when she realised that it was already lunch time. The midday meal was the one time, when Tisho was at school, when she could have Louis's private and undivided attention. If she mentioned it to him while they had lunch, she felt sure he would come up with some kind of a solution.

As she came downstairs Peg was on her way through the hall, and she looked up and beamed a smile when she saw her. 'You hungry for your lunch, honey?'

'Not really.' Beth answered absently and looked past Peg's ample figure to the room beyond. The table was laid for their meal, but so far there was no sign of Louis, and she frowned. 'Isn't Louis in yet, Peg?'

'He was,' Peg told her cheerfully, 'but he was in early; said as he was around an' the food was there he figured he might as well have it then. He said to tell you he was sorry to desert you!' She chuckled. 'I told him it wouldn't make no difference to your appetite!'

'He's been and gone?'

'That's right, honey—'bout half an hour since.'

'Oh no!' Beth bit her lip in vexation. Louis would have to be early on a day she particularly wanted to speak to him alone, but maybe she could find him, if he was not too far away.



Peg's dark friendly eyes were quizzing her anxiously. Was you wanting him special, honey?' she asked. 'I could send one of the boys for him, if you did.'

'Oh no, better not do that, thanks, Peg.' Louis, she thought, was not likely to take kindly to being brought in from plantation business to settle her private problems. She looked at the letter still in her hand and frowned indecisively. 'Do you happen to know where he was going, Peg?'

'Sure, he gone down to see that nui pipikane—that big bull who nearly tossed you,' Peg explained, seeing her frown. Coming closer, she peered into Beth's face, her own usually sunny countenance unnaturally sober. 'You got trouble, Miss Beth?' she asked, and glanced at the letter in Beth's hand. 'Your old aunt took sick, maybe?'

'Oh, no, she isn't sick, Peg, it isn't that, it just—' Beth shook her head and made up her mind at last. 'Did you say he'd been gone only about half an hour?' -If he had not been gone too long, she thought, he might not have become too involved in anything yet and would not mind being disturbed.

Called upon to be more accurate, Peg was less sure, and she shrugged apologetically. 'Maybe a little more,' -she told her, 'I ain't sure, honey, but can't be much more.'

'I'll go and find him—thanks, Peg!'

'You ain't had your lunch, girl!' Peg called after her, [but Beth was already at the door.

'Later, Peg!' She opened the door and called over her shoulder before she darted off. 'I must find Louis ,first! '

'You do yourself no good, goin' without food!' she heard Peg complain as she went out into the garden, and smiled to herself absently. Maybe Peg was the one

to turn to for advice, she was a comfortable motherly woman, and probably wise into the bargain.

From the gardens she passed on into the canefields and in the direction of the pasture where Louis kept his precious cattle. She would not venture on to that dangerously peaceful-looking grassland again, but if Louis was about she would find him sooner or later, and she felt sure he would spare her a few minutes when he knew how worried she was by Aunt Grace's letter.

Walking down the paths between the cane she experienced once more that curious sensation of having shrunk in size. It was a sensation that she had not out-grown since the first time, although she was less over-awed by it now. The wind made odd crackling sounds among the cane too, and the feather-duster tops way above her head fluttered and whispered together, catching a breeze that was denied to her because she was so low between them.

As it always was, coming upon the open grassland was curiously unexpected, although it was visible along the straight rows of cane for some time before she actually got there. She made no attempt, in this in-stance, to climb over the protective fence, although there was no sign of the cattle, and none of Louis either.

Then she caught sight of him suddenly when he appeared on the horizon where the land presumably dipped down over a small hill. He was, as far as she could tell, riding the same grey stallion he had when he came to her rescue, and she once more felt a curious response from her senses at the sight of him.

He veered suddenly, turning the horse swiftly, and she caught a brief glimpse of the great solid bulk of the red and white Hereford bull on the skyline before

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he was turned by the man on the horse and disappeared once more. Almost breathlessly she watched for them to reappear, like puppets in silhouette, but when

they did the horseman was alone, apparently having successfully completed the manoeuvre.

Louis was riding across the open ground now, getting nearer but riding at an angle from her, and for a moment Beth watched him. There was something almost exciting about the sight of him, a tall lean figure on the galloping horse, seemingly at ease and yet in full control of his lively mount, and she found it unexpectedly disturbing to watch. Dark trousers fitted his muscular legs closely and were tucked into the tops of short boots, and a light shirt opened at the neck and fitted across the broad chest and shoulders so closely that it did not even billow in the breeze he was creating. Hastily recalling her reason for being there, and fearing he might not see her from the direction he was taking, she waved a hand to attract his attention.

Immediately, he turned his mount and rode across towards her with one hand raised to acknowledge her. Emboldened by his being close, Beth climbed on to the fence and sat sideways on the top rail, waiting for him to join her and feeling quite inexplicably nervous as she watched him come. Wondering if, after all, he would dislike her interrupting his work to bring him her personal worries.

It was too late to worry now, and he reined in his horse, smiling down at her curiously. Taking off the dark glasses he wore as if to see her better, he swept his light, half-smiling gaze over her face and raised a brow.

'Beth?' The horse turned sideways on and he pulled at the rein, using his heels to bring him back where

he wanted him. 'Are you looking for me, or just revisiting old haunts?'

The jibe was meant to tease her, she knew, but she barely raised a smile. 'I—I wanted to talk to you, Louis.' She realised as she said it that she still had the folded letter from Aunt Grace tucked into the pocket of her dress and clearly visible, and she saw him take note of it. Saw him recognise the reason for her solemnity.

'You've heard from your aunt?'

Beth nodded. She was once again overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness and looking up at him her eyes were wide and appealing, and her face had a touchingly childish look that was further heightened by the soft, tremulous droop of her mouth.

'Louis—she won't come!'

'Oh, Beth—honey I '

In a moment he swung himself down from the saddle and reached up to put a hand to her slim waist, his strong fingers warm and firm through her thin dress. The touch of him was so reassuring that She felt the problem already less oppressive—she had been right to come to him after all.

'I'm sorry to bother you with it,' she told him in a small and slightly husky voice, 'but I don't quite know what to do. I thought if you—I thought you might help, Louis.'

'Yes, of course I will!' He ran a hand through his hair and glanced briefly over his shoulder. 'I just wish you'd found me alone, Beth, then we could have talked this out right here and now, and figured out just what's best for you to do.'

Beth blinked, startled for a second. She had not anticipated him not being alone, except perhaps for one of the hands or possibly Ray Brauman, but when a

jeep came into sight suddenly over the brow of the hill she realised what he meant.

The woman behind the wheel of the jeep was tall and slim and, even though she was wearing dark glasses and with a straw stetson on her blonde hair, Beth was able to recognise her as his sleek and elegant companion in the restaurant. A Viking queen, she had called her, and Ray had seen little wrong with the description.

Beth felt horribly embarrassed suddenly when she realised what she might have interrupted. Obviously Louis had lunched early and come out here to be with Grete Haas, the woman Ray had intimated might become Mrs Marizzi, and now Beth had appeared more or less demanding that he give his attention to quite another matter. She thought she could imagine how he was feeling, although he had concealed it well, but she wanted to leave before the woman joined them. Grete Haas was likely to be much less understanding, and would show her resentment at the intrusion more obviously than Louis had done.

She climbed hastily down from the fence, pushing his hand from her waist. 'I'm sorry,' she said in a small tight voice, and Louis looked at her curiously.

'What for?' he asked. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter,' she denied. 'I just don't want to interrupt anything, that's all.' She looked across at the blonde woman as she braked the jeep to a sharp halt only a foot or two from where Louis stood. 'I'll see you later, Louis!'

'You'll see me now!' he insisted firmly. 'You don't have to go scuttling off like a rabbit just because Grete's here!'

Beth would rather have gone. She would rather have left him to his meeting with Grete Haas and awaited

some more opportune moment to talk to him about Aunt Grace's letter, but he reached across the breast-high fence and his strong fingers fastened themselves round her arm, pulling her back against the hard wooden bars, and holding her there firmly.

For God's sake, child, will you stop behaving as if you've walked in on a private orgy! ' She made a small tentative movement to free her arm and he shook his head. 'Stop it, damn you!'

The gleam in his eyes was as much exasperation as amusement, but there was nothing else Beth could do about breaking his hold on her arm without making a scene, and that was the last thing she wanted in the present circumstances. The wooden rails were uncomfortably hard, but she stood pulled up against them while Grete Haas swung elegantly trousered legs over the side of the jeep and came across to join them.

'You cheated!' she accused Louis, without preamble.

couldn't start the engine or I would have headed that brute off before you did, Louis, and you know it! If it hadn't been for that—you didn't sabotage my jeep by any chance, just to prove your point, did you?' She took off her dark glasses and a pair of light, sharp blue eyes swept over Beth from head to toe, then noted his hold on her arm.

'You look like you might be hurting that arm, hon—what's going on? Did you catch a little hippy wench on your property?'

Louis merely smiled, but Beth, stung by the reference to her as a hippy, prised at his fingers. 'Let me go!' she told him through clenched teeth. 'And please tell Miss Haas that I'm not a hippy!'

He ignored her effort to free herself, but was looking at her narrow-eyed, while Grete Haas put her hands on her lean hips and regarded her suspiciously. She was probably older than she had first imagined, Beth

thought—perhaps closer to thirty-four or five, and steel-hard as well as arrogant.

'I don't recall having had the pleasure,' she remarked sarcastically. 'How come you know my name?'

In some curious way Beth felt sure she knew who she was, but preferred to feign otherwise for the moment, and she flicked a glance from Louis's mildly curious face to

the woman's less friendly one, shrugging lightly. 'I saw you in a restaurant in Honolulu one day last week with Louis,' she told her. 'Ray told me who you were.'

'Ray Brauman?' Grete Haas did not wait for confirmation, but laughed shortly. 'Yeah, I'll bet he did!'

It was obvious from Louis's expression that he too could imagine what Ray's opinion had been, but he made no comment on it. Instead he called on that remarkable self-control of his, and performed an introduction as formally and politely as if they were at a social gathering.

'Beth's my cousin, Grete—she's Richard's daughter.' He still kept his old on Beth's arm, as if he thought she might still try to leave if he gave her the opportunity. 'Beth, this is Grete Haas—Mrs Haas, a friend of mine.'

Beth was aware of how closely the light blue eyes were watching her—with a certain hostile curiosity. Maybe she had known about Louis having a cousin stay in his home, but she had probably not anticipated having her come out looking for him, and she obviously resented the intrusion.

'Are you here for very long, Miss Marizzi?' she asked, and Beth caught her breath. She had never thought of herself as Miss Marizzi, not even since she knew who her father was, and it gave her a curious feeling to be suddenly called by it.

Had it not been for Aunt Grace's bitter determination to cut her off from all knowledge of her father, she would have been Elizabeth Marizzi, she supposed, but as it was she found the name strangely alien, and hastened to correct it.

'My name is Fraser, Mrs Haas,' she told her. 'I'm Elizabeth Fraser.'

Fine fair brows arched swiftly and Grete Haas smiled in a way there was no mistaking, but before she could utter a word, Louis stepped in and put matters straight. 'Beth's aunt registered her in her mother's name,' he explained, 'she was born after Richard was killed and —well, I guess we treated her shabbily. We knew Rich was married in England,' he added with obvious meaning, 'but we didn't know about the name change—it made things difficult.'

For all his explanation there was a sly, provocative smile on the brightly coloured mouth that suggested doubt, and Beth felt the hot colour in her cheeks when she realised its meaning. 'Well, you can't blame me for getting ideas, can you, honey?' she asked. 'I was some years younger than he was, but even I knew Rich Marizzi's reputation!'

'Damn you, Grete!'

Louis's eyes blazed, hard as chilled steel in his dark face—a face hard with anger and a mouth drawn tightly, cruel in its tightness. Where the light shirt opened at the neck a pulse throbbed violently at the base of his throat, and Beth could feel the force of his anger as he gripped her tightly.

She looked up at him, her eyes bright and defensive, but still uncertain, and she wondered why it should come as such a shock to hear her father spoken of in that way. After all, he had probably been no worse than Louis, his nephew, but somehow it was not so

easy to accept. Richard Marizzi had been her father, but she knew nothing about him—she could only rely on Louis to prove or disprove that malicious innuendo.

'Louis?' She looked up at him still, anxious but determined.

'Forget it, baby, please—forget it!' He wound the reins around the top rail of the fence with impatient haste, then vaulted over to her side. Taking one of her hands in his, he

slid the other beneath her chin and raised her face so that she had no option but to look at him. 'Beth?'

His gentleness, coming on top of that suppressed violence only seconds before, was oddly affecting, and it was not only concern about her father that made her voice so unsteady, she realised. 'You never did tell me what he was really like,' she reminded him. 'Not what he was like as a man, Louis, did you?'

'He wasn't much more than a boy,' he told her, and sounded as if he was anxious to convince her. There was a softness in his voice and the hand under her chin had a caressing touch as he looked down at her small, flushed face. 'He wasn't much older than you are now, when he died, Beth.'

'But was he—' She shrugged her shoulders uncertainly. 'Maybe it's all in the past and it doesn't really matter anymore; not to anyone else.' She glanced past him, at the tall blonde figure of Grete Haas, and noted how her smooth fair face was flushed with anger because Louis had cursed her. She was angry, but she would not let it make any difference to her determination, Beth guessed. Glancing up at Louis again, she sought his understanding. 'It's just that I have to know about him, Louis.'

'And I'll tell you, honey—one day.' He did not even glance behind him, but looked down at Beth and

smiled. 'Look, I figure you're not going to be able to settle until you get this thing about Aunt Grace sorted out, are you? Suppose I come and talk it out with you now—will that suit you? Make you feel happier?'

Beth could scarcely believe he was willing to leave Grete Haas and come back with her to the house, and yet he seemed quite serious about it. She could imagine how the other woman would react and that made her more uneasy, for Grete Haas would not be a willing loser, no matter how temporarily.

'I'd be happier,' Beth agreed, 'but---' She glanced behind him at that tall, icy figure in the red trouser suit. 'I don't think Mrs Haas would like it much.'

His mouth twitched briefly into a smile and he barely shrugged his broad shoulders. 'I'll see Grete safely on her way,' he told her, 'then come and settle your business with Aunt Grace. O.K.?' The big hand that had cupped her chin curved instead around her cheek, the palm smoothly warm against her soft skin, and he smiled more fully for a moment. 'Then maybe you won't look quite so much like Little Orphan Annie, huh?'

'Do I look like Orphan Annie?' she asked, not at all sure that she liked the allusion, and Louis nodded.

His face was serious but his eyes were warm and teasing as he looked down at her.

'You look all eyes,' he told her. 'And rather as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, which I suspect is not the right impression at all!'

Beth was well aware of those sharp blue eyes regarding her with angry resentment, and it was quite clear that Grete Haas disliked her as much as, or perhaps more than Tisho did. Everyone, it seemed, resented Louis paying her any attention at all, although Grete Haas was a much more serious proposition than Tisho,

for she would make a bad enemy. She would almost rather cope with her own problem, Beth thought, than incur any further animosity.

Turning her face slightly, she was able to dislodge his hand from her cheek, and she shook her head slowly. 'I'd really rather not break up a—I mean—'

'I know exactly what you mean!' Louis assured her with a tight-lipped smile. 'But if you imagine I can give my mind to anything at all while your unhappy little face keeps

coming back to haunt me, you don't know me very well, honey! So you go back to the house and I'll see you in about half an hour. O.K.?'

Beth nodded. She might as well agree, for further argument seemed pointless when he had made up his mind what he was going to do, and she only hoped Grete Haas was going to be as easy to see safely on her way as Louis seemed to think. 'O.K.,' she said, but as she turned away he once more lifted her chin with a long finger, and eyed her quizzically.

'Have you eaten since breakfast?' he asked, and the question took her so much by surprise that she did no more than shake her head. 'Then first off when you get back to the house you tell Peg I said to feed you!' he instructed firmly.

Beth flushed. She objected to being treated as if she was no more than Tisho's age, especially with Grete Haas standing just the other side of the fence and missing nothing of what passed between them. 'I told Peg I didn't want lunch,' she said, but Louis had a tight insistent look about his mouth that she knew meant he would not be interested in her answers.

'You eat lunch first, then we'll talk about Aunt Grace,' he said adamantly, 'or next thing I know you'll be fainting all over the place because you haven't eaten!'

He turned her around so that she was facing along the path that ran between the rows of sugar cane, and a light slap on her bottom was presumably meant to send her on her way. It was something she had seen him do to Tisho more than once when she was being argumentative about something, but she resisted the hand in the small of her back, turning round again to face him.

Her face was flushed and her eyes bright and defensive, for she only now fully realised that he had been treating her for the past few minutes exactly as he would have treated Tisho, and she resented it with an intensity that surprised her.

'Louis, please don't talk to me like that!'

The brief, meaningful glance she gave in the direction of Grete Haas explained the reason behind her reaction, and she saw the swift elevation of his brows when he looked at her. He was standing beside the fence still, with one hand on the top rail, as if he had been about to get back to the other side, and she felt very small suddenly, as if her objection was unreasonable.

'How's that, honey?' He spoke softly, and she would have felt better if he had been annoyed, it would have made her response easier to excuse.

'I—I wish you wouldn't—I just wish you wouldn't treat me as if I was no more than Tisho's age,' she explained a little breathlessly, and felt herself flushing warmly when she realised he was smiling.

'What's wrong, Beth?' he asked in a voice that was pitched low enough to exclude the onlooker. 'Did you object to having your bottom slapped?' He laughed shortly. 'I'm sorry; Miss Fraser!'

'Oh, please—don't be sarcastic, Louis!' Her eyes looked as green as jade in her small flushed face, and

something, somehow was different suddenly, although she could not say how.

He held her gaze even though she would much rather have looked away, then he laughed suddenly, and there was something about the sound of it that stirred unfamiliar responses in her—fluttering little sensations she was unprepared for. With the blue sky behind him there was an almost primitive arrogance about him that was strangely disturbing, and she felt herself shiver involuntarily.

'If you want my help, honey,' he told her, soft-voiced, 'you'd better sheathe your claws!'

'Lou is—'

He ignored her half-formed protest and vaulted back over the fence, taking up the reins again, and while she still watched, he turned to speak to Grete Haas. The other woman smiled, and it occurred to Beth that for a man like Louis Marizzi women would always smile.

Thinking of what Ray had said, that Grete Haas stood a better chance of becoming Mrs Marizzi than most, she experienced a curiously intense feeling of dislike suddenly, and turning swiftly she started back along the path between the rows of cane, her feet kicking up the red dust before her.

She needed Louis's good will at the moment, but as soon as she had everything sorted out Shaking her head impatiently, she struck out at the towering mass of canes alongside the path in a gesture of angry frustration. She was going to need Louis's good will for as long as he held the key to her grandfather's fortune, and he was unlikely to relinquish that.

Beth almost refused her lunch from sheer contrariness, but common sense and Peg Hashada prevailed eventu-

ally, and she ate her belated meal alone except for Peg's cheerful attendance.

'You find Mr Louis O.K.?' she asked, and Beth nodded.

'Yes, thank you, Peg, he was where you said he'd be.'

'Dat animal ain't safe to have around,' Peg decreed, 'but Mr Louis dotes on him, and he ain't going to listen to nobody!'

For a moment Beth had the tall arrogant figure of a horseman in her mind's eye, veering around the great bulk of the bull with a skill and nerve that could still bring a curious prickling to her skin, and she nodded. 'Mrs Haas was with him,' she said, taking more salad. 'I didn't know he wouldn't be alone.'

'Nor me,' Peg admitted frankly. 'But she don't come here very often, he sees her in town.'

'She doesn't?'

It was almost two weeks since her own arrival at Auwai, and she had never yet seen Grete Haas there, though she could not imagine why. It was even more puzzling in view of Ray Brauman's view of the way things were. Peg was shaking her head and pouring papaya juice into a glass as she spoke, but it was not hard to guess that her opinion of Grete Haas was much like Beth's.

'Ain't none of Mr Louis's lady friends comes here, 'cept for dinner parties and luaus. Old Mr Marizzi, he was a real old-fashioned gentleman for doing things right, an' he wouldn't have liked nobody coming here less they was a serious fiancée or something—not just lady friends on their own, you get me?'

'I think so.' Beth looked at her, finding it hard to believe that Enrico Marizzi had enforced such stern customs in the free and easy climate of Hawaii. She traced a finger down the length of the tall glass where

the chilled papaya juice had formed a cold mist on the glass. The question popped into her mind unbidden, and she could not resist asking it as she raised the glass and pressed its chill surface to her forehead. 'You've been here a long time, Peg? Here, at Auwai, I mean?'

'Pretty long,' Peg agreed, and there was a slight hint of reluctance in her voice, Beth thought, almost as if she guessed what she was going to ask.

'Were—were you here when my father was alive?' She asked anyway, but Peg hesitated, and it was so unlike her to do so that Beth looked up sharply. 'Were you, Peg? Did you know him?'

'No, she wasn't here!'

Louis's voice was unmistakable, and Peg leaned hastily down to pick up the empty plate from in front of Beth, her dark eyes warm and kindly as she did so. 'No, I wasn't here, honey,' she told her in a quiet, reassuring voice. 'I can't tell you anything 'bout Mr Rich.'

She took the empty plate and the rest of the salad and carried them away, and Louis said nothing more until her ample shape in its colourful muumuu had disappeared from sight across the hall. Then he took the chair opposite to Beth across the table and rested his elbows on the table, his chin supported on his folded hands while he regarded her steadily with those light steely grey eyes for a moment.

'I promised to tell you about your father, Beth,' he said, and the edge of harshness on his voice sent a small shiver of apprehension along her spine.

'I just wondered if Peg knew him, that's all,' she said. She knew she sounded defensive, though she did not quite see why she should.

'Well, Peg wasn't here then, as she told you, and I'd

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sooner you didn't ask her about things like that, Beth. If you want to know anything about my family, ask me, not Peg!'

He sounded angry, as if Mrs Has had not been so easy to brush aside after all, and Beth looked across at him reproachfully. Maybe she should not have questioned Peg about family matters, but the questions about her father had been impulsive and there was certainly no harm done—how could there be? Whatever had put him in his present less agreeable mood, he had no cause to lecture her.

'I was asking about my family,' she reminded him, her voice not quite steady. 'I'm entitled to ask about my father, Louis.'

'Then ask me!'

She did not remember for- the moment that he had come home especially to see her about Aunt Grace's letter, and she could not ask him about her father while he was so obviously out of sympathy with her. Getting to her feet was purely an instinctive gesture, and its purpose was to try and make herself feel less small and uncertain. The object was rather defeated by the fact that he too got up from the table, and he was so much taller than she was that he seemed to loom over her even from the other side of the table. He had a taut, edgy air about him that was communicated to her, and she turned suddenly and began to walk away without quite knowing where she was going.

The sound of his booted feet thudding across the room after her reminded her suddenly of why he was there, but before she could turn he took her by one arm and swung her round to face him, his fingers hard and strong. She found herself incredibly aware suddenly of the taut, lean frame that emanated warmth

and a kind of urgency to her own body, and once more her nostrils were assailed by that strangely titillating scent of horses and after-shave.

'I came back especially to see you,' he reminded her in a voice that was much deeper than its normal timbre and edged with steel. 'You can't just walk out, Beth!'

'I wasn't, I forgot—I mean, I thought you didn't seem as if

The light grey eyes fixed themselves on her with unwavering steadiness. 'Sit down,' he said, 'and give me that letter from your aunt!'



Without demur she handed over the letter and he strode back to sit down at the table once more, leaving her to follow. While he read the letter she sat with her elbows resting on the table and her hands to her mouth, and when he had finished she looked across at him, half anxious, half defiant.

He studied it thoughtfully, and for so long that she licked her lips anxiously with the tip of her tongue. 'What—what shall I do?' she asked, and he looked up at last.

His eyes held hers for several seconds, and she could feel a steady, thudding beat in her breast as she waited for him to answer. 'Do you still want to stay?' he asked, and she nodded.

She could not deny it; she did not want to leave, even though Aunt Grace would not come out and join her, but she could not see how she could do so without appearing quite selfish and hard-hearted. 'I want to stay, but I don't see how I can,' she said, and there was a quiver of unsteadiness in her voice. 'What can I do, Louis?'

'You want me to make the decision for you, is that it, Beth?'

She supposed that was it, but when she thought

about it, it was not altogether fair to leave the final decision to him. It was not really a surprise to her to notice that the steely look was gone from his eyes, and they were warm and understanding as he looked at her and smiled wryly.

'What can I say honey? It's your life, not mine, and I guess you only want to hear me say one thing, don't you?'

Beth nodded. 'I suppose I do,' she admitted. 'I just thought—if you, if you could think of some way—Could I stay, as Aunt Grace says? Would I be very selfish, Louis?'

He looked at the letter again, then got to his feet suddenly and stood for a moment gazing out through the open window into the garden, and Beth felt her-self growing anxious all over again. Then he came back and sat on the edge of the table, looking down at her and searching her face with an intensity she found hard to bear.

'Stay, Beth,' he said, and she blinked at him for a moment, not quite believing it.

'Stay?'

He nodded. 'I think your aunt knows what she's saying--she's been your whole world until now, and you've been hers, but you're young and she's too old to change now. I think in her own way she wants you to stay, Beth. She wants you to have the chances that she never had herself, that she feels you should have had sooner but for Grandpapa's pigheadedness.'

She took the folded letter from him and opened it. The words did not really register, but she knew them by heart almost, and she thought he was right. 'You really think she wants that?'

He reached out and covered her hands with one big one, the hard strong fingers closing over hers reassur-

ingly. 'Just look at it in a logical way, honey,' he said, his voice quiet and persuasive.

'Sooner or later most young girls leave home and parents, don't they? I figure this isn't so very different from a girl marrying someone from another country and going out to live in his home.' His fingers squeezed gently. 'Ruth would have come here to Rich, wouldn't she?'

It was something Beth had not considered before, and she saw the whole thing in a different light suddenly. But for Richard Marizzi being killed on his way home, and old Enrico Marizzi's stubborn intolerance for twenty years, she might well have been born in the islands.

'I hadn't thought of that,' she said, and Louis smiled.

'Then think about it, Beth ! I think your aunt would be much more unhappy if you went back and spent the rest of your life regretting it. She'll be glad to know you're staying where you'll be happiest.'

Beth looked up at him, her eyes wide and enquiring. 'Will I, Louis?'

He leaned across the table and brushed the hair back from her forehead and the smile in his eyes made them warm and friendly. 'I guess that's up to you, honey,' he said softly.

## CHAPTER FIVE

IT had not been at all easy finding just the right words to use when she wrote the letter to Aunt Grace, and Beth had put off writing for a couple of days, and yet now that it was actually done at last she felt a sense of relief. She had discussed with Louis the possibility of making her great-aunt an allowance from her share of the trust, and he had agreed unhesitatingly. Arranging that had made her feel a little better about not returning to England.

There was no question of ties being broken, of course, she and Aunt Grace were much too close for that to be done easily or lightly, and in her heart she still hoped one day to be able to persuade the old lady to come to the islands and join her. It was a vain hope, she knew, but she nurtured it optimistically.

Ray had promised to post the letter for her when he fetched Tisho from school, and by now it should be on its way. Since she left Ray she had taken her time walking back from his bungalow, for she had a great deal on her mind, and the tall, whispering screens of cane gave a privacy that was conducive to deep thought. She was barely aware of her surroundings until she heard someone coming up behind her.

Whoever it was was on horseback, for she could hear the soft thud of hooves on the ground as well as the faint jingling sound of harness, and she guessed it would be Louis. Although a couple of the hands who helped with the cattle also rode, they seldom had call to visit this part of the estate, and it was on the

assumption that it was Louis that she stepped back into the edge of the cane as the rider came closer, and turned to smile when he swung himself down from the saddle and draped the rein over one arm.

His dark hair was slightly dishevelled and he ran a hand through it as he came to join her. He was hot and dusty and she thought he looked a little out of temper, until a brief smile eased the suggestion of tension. He glanced back over his shoulder as they walked along in the shadow of the tall green cane and raised a brow.

'Been visiting?' he asked.

Beth shook her head. She wondered if he kept such close tabs on his other employees as he seemed to on Ray Brauman. 'Not exactly visiting,' she said. 'I've written that letter to Aunt Grace at last, and I knew Ray was fetching Tisho from school, so I got him to post it for me.' She looked at him from the corner of her eyes, and half smiled. 'You don't suspect me of keeping secret assignments with your overseer, do you, Louis?'

It was something of a surprise that he did not immediately deny it, but instead /met her provocative glance with raised brows and a glint of laughter in his eyes. 'I wouldn't put it past Ray, if he thought he could get away with it!'

'Louis!'

She had no way of telling just how serious he was, but he was laughing, and he reached down to clasp her hand in his own strong fingers. Their arms were entwined and the touch of his smooth tanned skin on her soft inner arm was unexpectedly affecting, almost sensual, and when he pressed close the hard muscular warmth of him touched her like fire through the thin-

ness of her dress, bringing a sense- of excitement suddenly that startled her.

'Oh, he'd realise you're not the type that usually falls for his fast smooth operation,' he told her with startling frankness, 'but I'm surprised he hasn't tried something! He must be slowing down!'

Beth was not at all sure how to take this unfamiliar earthiness, and she glanced up warily. 'I've only known Ray two weeks, Louis.'

His brown face split into a wide smile that crinkled his grey eyes at their corners in the intriguing way they always did, and he cocked a questioning brow at her. 'I never knew him need more than a couple of days before,' he observed. 'Maybe the fact that you're the boss's cousin has something to do with it, hmm?'

He had never talked to her that way before, and she felt both irritated and intrigued. Instead of looking up at him when she spoke, she looked down at the ground, where their feet kicked up red dust like sand on a beach as they walked.

'Would he think it mattered?' she asked. 'I mean, would he imagine that you'd bother about him seeing me?'

The hand that held hers squeezed hers tightly for a second, and he laughed. 'He'd know damned well I would,' he told her, and Beth took a second or two to understand the significance of it.

'Do you mean—you'd actually say something to him?' she asked.

The idea 'of his intervening was something she viewed with mixed feelings. It gave her a certain sense of satisfaction to think he was so concerned, but at the same time it might suggest that he saw himself in much the same guardian role in her case as in Tisho's, and that was less appreciated.

'I'd certainly say something to him if I thought he was getting out of line,' he confirmed, 'and I guess he knows that.'

'Oh, but you couldn't!' She saw the way he looked, as if her objection was completely unexpected, but she could not let it stay at that. 'I appreciate your—your concern, Louis, but it isn't necessary, really. If Ray—steps out of line, as you call it, I'm capable of taking care of myself.' That was probably not entirely true, but she could not see Ray Brauman as a serious threat at the moment. 'I like him, Louis, and I'll go on seeing him as long as he wants me to.'

'Oh, you will?'

It was difficult to tell just how he took it, but something in his voice suggested he was finding her insistence vaguely amusing, and that irritated her. She glanced up at him with a glint of defiance in her eyes and in the angle of her chin.

'I know you have the right to say how I spend my inheritance, Louis, but you can't expect to choose my friends as well.'

For a moment the grey eyes regarded her steadily. 'It wasn't exactly friendship I had in mind, honey,' he said, soft-voiced. 'Ray Brauman's thirty-one years old and he's no high-school boy where women are concerned. Maybe he's taking his time because you happen to be my cousin, or maybe he's playing it cool because you're only twenty, I

wouldn't know. I hope it's because you're so young, because then I'd feel better about trusting him!

Beth said nothing for several 'seconds, but she was more than ever aware of the muscular warmth of his arm that entwined with hers, and the strong fingers that curled about her hand. Louis Marizzi was a man who did and said unexpected things, and most of the

surprises he had produced so far had been pleasant, but she could imagine how ruthless he would be if Ray should step out of line—she had had more than one glimpse of his anger too.

Glancing up at him from the shadow of her lashes, she smiled, a slightly tremulous smile that hovered uncertainly about her mouth for a second before she spoke. 'You really don't have to worry,' she told him. 'I'm not easily swept off my feet, even if I am only twenty.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear it!' He smiled, then quite unexpectedly bent his head and kissed her lightly beside her left ear, his voice stirring the wisps of hair on her neck and shivering along her spine. 'I'd just hate you to get hurt, honey!'

It was doubtful if either of them had been really conscious of anything coming along the track behind them, but the stallion's sudden nervous side-stepping warned them of an unexpected burst of speed from a vehicle coming along the track, and he whinnyed protestingly when the car cut in close, bringing a soft curse from Louis as they choked on the red dust thrown up by the wheels.

Louis let go her arm and gave his attention to soothing the startled animal. His eyes were narrowed as he watched the car disappear in the direction of the house and Beth recognised not only the car and the driver, but also the small almond-eyed figure beside him. It was unlike Ray to drive so dangerously, in her experience at least, and she stared after him in disbelief as she brushed the clinging red dust from her clothes, wondering what on earth had possessed him.

'That was Ray, wasn't it?' she asked, and Louis nodded.

There was a small tight smile on his mouth, - she noticed, but his eyes looked thoughtful as well as angry as they followed the car's progress along the dusty track. 'Well,' he remarked in a flat, cool voice, 'maybe he isn't playing it as cool as I figured! I'd better let him know that I'm allowed to kiss my pretty little cousin without risking life and limb when I do!'

Beth stared at him, taking a moment to accept his meaning. 'Oh, Louis, you surely can't think—'

'You'd better believe it, honey!' He took her arm again and his fingers were harder and firmer, like the sardonic twist to his mouth when he looked down at her. 'That was a keep off the grass sign!'

'But that's—that's silly!'

'My kissing you, or Ray trying to run me down for doing it?' Louis asked, and she knew from his voice that Ray was not going to be allowed to get away with that seemingly pointless gesture. 'I don't see it as merely silly when my overseer panics my horse and scares the living daylights out of me,' he stated firmly. 'It's not only dangerous, it's a damned nerve, and I shall tell him so when I get my hands on him!'

Still not convinced that anything as mildly innocent as that light kiss on her neck could have made Ray behave so rashly, Beth looked up at Louis anxiously. For all his quietness it was evident he was angry, for it was in the taut hardness of his body and

the pressure of his arm on hers, and she felt slightly dazed, not only by what had happened but by Louis's reason for it happening.

'You won't—you wouldn't sack him?'

The question was impulsive, because she saw it as a possible outcome, and she not only disliked the idea of Ray being sacked but the idea of Louis being vindictive enough to do it. She was not quite sure what

she expected him to say, but he looked at her narrowly for a moment before he answered.

'You wouldn't like that, would you, Beth?' He gave her no time to answer, but shook his head impatiently. 'Well, don't worry; he won't get fired—partly because his contract still has six months to run!'

'But—would you have sacked him?'

Louis eyed her for a moment, possibly puzzled by her anxiety. Beth did not want him to admit that only a contract prevented him from getting rid of Ray, and something of the way she felt showed in her eyes. Then he shook his head and laughed shortly.

'It isn't the first time we haven't seen eye to eye about a woman,' he told her, 'but you don't fire a guy for that!'

Beth was tempted to mention Grete Haas, but somehow she resisted it. Instead she said nothing and they walked along the dusty red track with the grey stallion pacing along behind and only now and again snorting impatiently at the pace they set. Louis's hand held hers tightly, almost possessively, she might have imagined, except that such an idea was oddly disturbing; and they were within sight of the house before either of them spoke again.

The tension had eased, she felt, and he seemed to have cooled off. Turning his head suddenly, he looked down at her and smiled. 'Has anyone mentioned the luau we're having for Tisho's birthday in a couple of weeks' time?' he asked, and she shook her head.

'I didn't even know it was Tisho's birthday,' she said, and wondered if he realised just how unlikely it was that his niece would have said anything to her about her birthday celebrations, or about anything else for that matter. Tisho was less aggressively hostile

lately, but no more friendly, and Beth had almost given up hope of a change.

'She'll be thirteen!' He laughed ruefully and pulled a face. 'I can hardly believe it, but it's true! Less than three weeks to go!'

'Almost grown up!' Beth glanced at him from the corner of her eye, judging his reaction.

'You won't have to be a bachelor father for very much longer, will you?'

For a second or two Louis held her gaze and she felt a curious trickling sensation along her spine, then he laughed suddenly and shook his head, a bright amused gleam in his eyes. 'Were you ever quite convinced that I'm not a bachelor father, Beth? Sometimes I wonder whether your opinion of me doesn't persuade you that I'm really Tish's father and not just her guardian!'

'Louis, no!' She looked up, anxious to convince him, although she wondered for a second if he was not at least partly right. 'I—I never thought that.'

'Never?' He gave her no opportunity to answer, but squeezed her arm against him and laughed. 'Then maybe you don't think so badly of me as I figured,' he told her.

She looked at him reproachfully while he walked around to the other side of the stallion and prepared to remount. The stables were at the back of the house and some distance from it and they had come to the parting of the ways at the field gate.

'I don't know why you should think I have such a bad opinion of you,' she told him.

His hands on the saddle, he looked at her across the animal's broad back, one brow arched teasingly. 'I don't know why I should either, honey,' he said, 'but I'm glad you don't! Maybe you'll save me a dance at the luau, hmm? If Ray can spare you!'

She ignored the dig about Ray and frowned at him curiously. 'I don't even know what a luau is,' she told him, and he grinned.

'It's a wing-dinger of a feast, Hawaiian style, baby, and you'll love it!'

'A party?'

'A feast, a party, a dance—you name it!' He swung himself up on to the stallion's back and sat looking down at her for a moment with a glowing warmth in his eyes that did strange things to her senses. 'You wear something special, honey, and I'll guarantee you'll be the belle of the ball!'

A sharp dig with his heels sent the stallion surging forward and Beth stood watching him for as long as he was still in sight, experiencing once more that curious and inexplicable tingle of excitement thrilling through her. Whether she would be the belle of the ball or not, it was for just such an occasion that she had been saving the lovely silk muumuu that she bought in Honolulu when she was with Ray, and it crossed her mind to wonder, as she walked through the gardens to the house, whether or not Grete Haas would be invited to the luau—it would never be easy to outshine Grete Haas. It was the following morning, some time after breakfast, that Beth saw Ray coming from the house, and one look at his face was enough to tell her that Louis had been as good as his word when he threatened to see him about that dangerous manoeuvre with the car yesterday. His rather boyish features were flushed as he came striding through the gardens, and his eyes were stormily dark, much more grey than blue. Had she not put out a hand and spoken, she doubted if he

would even have noticed her, he was so wrapped around with his anger.

'Hello, Ray!'

He stopped in his tracks and, instinctively she thought, glanced back over his shoulder at the house before he spoke. 'Hi, Beth!' His mouth had a slightly bitter twist to it rather than a smile and he was shaking his head. 'I'm not sure I should be talking to you,' he told her. 'Not after the rocket I just got from the boss!'

It would be pointless to pretend she did not know what he referred to, and she too looked at the house. It was discomfiting to think that Louis could probably see them from one of the windows, but she was not going to let it deter her.

'I suppose he saw you about—about yesterday?' she guessed, and he laughed harshly, running a hand over his hair.

'Saw me?' he retorted. 'He cut right through me That guy's got more sheer neck than anybody I know —he's even got the old man beat when it comes to cutting somebody down to size!'

'Oh, Ray, I'm sorry!'

She was genuinely sorry, for she could imagine just how Louis could and would crush anyone who crossed him, even though he did it only when he had good cause. Ray had been wrong to behave so dangerously, but having sampled a very mild taste of her cousin's anger herself, she could feel for Ray having just had the full force of it. He was smiling ruefully. 'Well, I guess maybe I asked for some of it at least, but—whew!' His blue eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. 'I gather he thinks I might step out of

line with you,' he said. 'What gives him that idea, Beth?'

Beth felt the flush of warmth in her cheeks and she held her hands together tightly when she thought of Louis trying to intervene after all. 'certainly didn't,' she assured him. 'I've told him he has no need to worry about me, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself. He had no right to try and stop you seeing me!'

'He didn't exactly,' Ray confessed, and glanced again at the house. 'He just told me that if I'd got far enough with you to figure I had the right to run him down for kissing you, then I was way out of line, and I'd better back up!'

The idea of being discussed as if she was an inanimate object being tussled over between them made Beth curl up inside, and she shook her head angrily. 'He had no right!' she said huskily. 'I don't care what his reasons are, he has no right to tell me what I can and can't do! He has no right to treat me like a baby! I could—ooh, if I could just—'

She stopped suddenly and stared when she realised he was smiling. It was a shock to realise it and she felt almost as angry with him suddenly as she did with Louis, her green eyes bright and sparkling in her flushed face. 'I'm sorry, honey!' He was immediately contrite and he put his hands on her arms as he shook his head. 'But you look almost like him when you're mad I guess it's that Marizzi blood coming out!' Then suddenly he was serious again and curiously still, his hands sliding lightly up and down her bare arms while he looked into her face with a new intensity. 'Only you look much more lovely than he does,' he said in a soft voice. 'Would I be stepping out of line if I kissed you, Beth?'

Instinctively she glanced once more across at Auwai,

wondering if Louis really could see them and if he was likely to do anything at all if Ray kissed her. She felt curiously shy of Louis witnessing anything so intimate, and she half smiled at Ray in a way that must have told him her reasons.

'I'm not sure it would be a good idea right here and now,' she ventured, though annoyed by her own reticence, and he pulled a face.

'I guess it would be a bit like flying in the face of providence in the circs,' he admitted.

'Look, Beth, I'm on my way down to section eight, do you feel like a drive?'

She was almost ashamed of the hasty speculation she made, that there would be at least one of the hands waiting there to see him, but she nodded after a second or two. 'Why not?' she said.

Ray smiled, then turned and took her arm while they walked out to where his jeep was parked by the field gate, and she could not help wondering if he saw her going with him as some kind of a victory, after the dressing-down he had received at the hands of his employer. He saw her into the jeep, then slapped a straw hat at a jaunty angle on the back of his head before starting up the engine.

The red dust swirled up around them as they drove down the track between the cane, and Beth was reminded of the reason for his recent interview with Louis. She could not find it in her heart to blame Louis for objecting forcefully about being endangered by Ray's driving, but Ray's reason for doing it was a little more disturbing than she cared to admit at the moment.

He turned and smiled at her as they went along the row and swung the vehicle round the bend at the bottom of the track and headed for section eight which

was almost the limit of Marizzi property. Several heads turned as they passed, and she guessed there would be speculation before long, more so than when she had gone out with Ray in his off-duty time, for now she was encroaching into working hours, and she

realised it only now. Maybe Louis would have something more to complain about if he ever learned about it, and there was not much that escaped him.

Her sigh of resignation made. Ray turn his head again, and he raised a questioning brow. 'Something wrong?' he asked.

Beth shook her head. 'No, I'm just thinking.' She laughed a little uncertainly, wondering if she was not being too sensitive to other opinions. 'I'm not sure Louis is going to take -kindly to me coming around with you during working hours, though, are you?'

'Is that what you're thinking?' She nodded. 'You figure he might see it as a kind of gesture, after the way he warned me off back there?'

She shrugged, not quite sure what to think. Somehow the idea of incurring Louis's disapproval seemed to matter a great deal more than she would have believed. 'Oh, I suppose it doesn't matter,' she said. 'Why should he mind, as long as I don't hinder you in your work?'

Ray said nothing for a moment, but drove along the perimeter of the canefield, where the public highway was only yards away on their right, then he drew over into a small break, concealed by the towering cane and shaded from the sun as well as inquisitive eyes, and stopped the jeep's engine. Turning in his seat, he sat looking at her for a second or two in silence, a scrutiny she bore uneasily.

'You're kind of scared of him, aren't you, Beth?' The question was unexpected and she was appalled to think she had given him such an impression. Shak-

ing her head firmly, she hastened to deny it. 'Oh no, how can you think that, Ray?

What possible reason do I have for being afraid of Louis?'

Shrugging, he leaned across and lifted the hair from her neck, and the finger he used touched lightly on her skin, a touch that was almost a caress. 'I don't know,' he confessed. 'I guess it's just the impression I get.' The light, caressing touch lingered and Beth wondered what was in his mind that seemed to preoccupy him. 'You said once that he hadn't—warned you against me. Is that still right, Beth?'

Once more she was caught unawares, and it was a question she was reluctant to answer, so she hesitated before doing so. Impulsively she swung her legs out of the jeep and stood on the dusty track, and in a moment Ray was climbing out of his own side to come and stand at her elbow, his arm just brushing hers when she put a hand on the side of the vehicle.

'He has, hasn't he, Beth?'

His voice was quiet but persistent, and she looked round at him lifting her shoulders lightly, unwilling to admit it. 'He didn't exactly warn me,' she demurred. 'But he—he's a little over-anxious, Ray, that's all.' She looked up at him and laughed rather unsteadily. 'He's taken me under his wing in the same way he has Tisho,' she said. 'And no amount of insistence on my part will convince him that I don't need a full-time guardian as well!'

Briefly, she thought, he eyed her narrowly, speculatively—she could sense it even without looking at him. 'And do you see him as your guardian, Beth? Is that how you think of him?'

'Oh no, of course not!' She realised when she looked at him and saw the expression in his eyes just what he visualised as the alternative, and she shook her head

hastily. 'I simply see him as my cousin,' she insisted. 'I know there's quite a big difference in our ages, but we are the same generation—his father and mine were brothers.'



She looked up in time to see the wry half-smile that gave his good-looking face a kind of bitterness she had noticed before. 'Yeah, but from what I hear Louis has more in common with—'

He broke off abruptly as if he had been about to say something he felt he would later regret, but Beth was looking at him with a bright uncertain look in her eyes. What he had been about to say, she felt, would have been an opinion very much like the one Grete Haas had expressed when she spoke of Richard Marizzi.

'Did you know my father?' she asked, making no pretence that she could not guess the rest, and Ray looked uneasy.

'No, Beth, I didn't.' He gripped the fingers of one hand around her arm and turned her to face him. 'That's why I cut off when I did,' he admitted. 'I don't have the right to pass opinions on somebody I never knew.'

'Unfortunately I never knew him either!' Beth retorted, swiftly defensive. 'So I can't argue with you, Ray—I only wish I could!'

'Oh, Beth, honey!' He held her arms lightly, but there was a sense of urgency about him for all that, and she felt her heart begin to hammer uneasily at her ribs. His eyes had a bright, glittering blue look that she found hard to meet. 'I haven't made you mad at me, have I?'

It was that trace of boyishness in his make-up, despite his sophistication, that was her undoing, and she shook her head and smiled almost involuntarily. 'I'm

not angry,' she said, a breath of sigh escaping her, 'I just wish I could find out what my father really was like.'

Ray leaned back against the side of the jeep, his hands on her arms, and pulled a wry face. 'The best person to ask is Louis,' he told her. 'From what I gather he knew him probably better than anyone else did.'

'He promised he'd tell me about him—one day,' she said, adding the qualification just as Louis had. 'So far he hasn't told me a thing, except that I look a little like him.'

Ray smiled. 'Then he must have been a lovely-looking guy!' he said. He drew her towards him, his hands firmer on her arms, and his gaze was fixed on her mouth as he spoke. 'You promised me a kiss,' he reminded her. 'Didn't you, Beth?'  
don't think—'

She jumped back as if she had been physically propelled, and her eyes were wide, startled by the man who stepped from the shadow of the cane behind. Ray, leading a horse by the rein and treading with that soft-footed step she had noticed most of the hands had. She recognised the round brown face as belonging to Bate Kanua, one of the hands who sometimes gave Louis help with the cattle when it was needed. The man's bright, dark eyes, she thought, held a glimmer of laughter when Ray spun round sharply and frowned.

'What's wrong?' Ray asked shortly, and the man smiled.

'Ain't nothin' wrong, far's I know,' he said in the peculiar sing-song American that characterised the Hawaiian accent. 'I got a message from Mr Louis, that's all. He said to tell you there ain't no need to bother

about section eight this morning. Better you get the men on two moved to the other end.'

'Well, damn it, you could have done that while you were riding down here after me!'

'Boss said to tell you,' Bate Kanua said unconcernedly. 'I told you.'

One hand on the side of the jeep and the other back-turned on his hip, Ray eyed him narrowly. 'He sent you all the way down here to tell me that?' he asked, and the man shrugged.

The dark eyes flicked briefly in Beth's direction, then he grinned. 'I only brought the message, Ray,' he told him, 'I dunno what the boss has on his mind!'

'Like hell!' Ray swore softly, then shrugged his shoulders as if resigned to the inevitable. 'O.K., you've delivered your message,' he told the man, 'now get out of here!'

Once more that brief, flicking glance in Beth's direction gave a clue to what was going on in the man's mind, and she felt a flush of colour in her cheeks as she hastily looked away. It was scarcely credible, and if Ray had not openly recognised the fact, she would never have believed it.

Louis must, after all, have seen her go off with Ray and had sent Bate Kanua after him with that needless message. The idea of his doing such a thing left her with a curious mixture of reactions, some of which she preferred not to acknowledge, but there was no doubt that Ray was angry about it, and made no secret of it.

He turned back to her almost before Bate Kanua was out of earshot, and his blue eyes had a dark resentful look. 'I guess you need to make the message a little clearer,' he told her in a tight clipped voice. 'Louis's still playing guardian!'

Beth sought excuses, without quite knowing why

she did it. 'That about moving the men on section two,' she ventured. 'Isn't it true, Ray?'

'Sure it's true,' Ray said, 'but he knows I'd have done that anyway! Sending Bate down here was just his way of reminding me not to step out of line!'

It was difficult to know just what she ought to say. Defying a direct order from Louis regarding the plantation was not something to be undertaken lightly, and she would not suggest it, but she wondered if that was what Ray had in mind. 'You—you won't go?' she asked, and he laughed shortly.

'Oh, sure I'll go, but—' He shrugged and pulled a face as he reached out to take her arms again, knowing that they could not recall the moment before Bate Kanua arrived. His eyes searched her face slowly, then he shook his head. 'It's no use, is it, Beth?' She did not know quite what to say, so she shrugged lightly and did not look at him. 'If you have work to do on section two, we'd—I mean, you'd better go back, hadn't you?' she said. 'I'd hate to give Louis any reason to accuse me of hindering your work.'

'Damn Louis!'

Ray reached out for her suddenly and pulled her into his arms. His mouth was pressed firmly over hers in a kind of desperate bid to rekindle the mood of a few moments ago, it seemed, but in vain. She had felt oddly uneasy before, but now that Bate Kanua had seen them, it was impossible for her to feel at ease, and she did not respond at all to Ray's kiss, only allowed herself to be kissed while she stood in his arms, un-resisting. When he released her after only a second or two, he looked down at her for a moment in silence, then let his hands fall at his sides in a gesture of resignation. 'I guess I may as well drive you back,' he said ruefully. 'I

guess Louis's got more pull than I realised!'

He saw her into the jeep once more and climbed in beside her, driving at a speed that suggested he was still angry, and sending up clouds of red dust before 'them. After a few moments Beth turned and looked at him through her lashes, wondering if he blamed her at least in part for what had happened.

`Ray—' She hesitated. `I don't know if—'

`Don't worry, Beth.' He reached over with one hand-and pressed it over hers on her lap. 'There'll be other chances—he can't keep you under wraps all the time!' He turned his head and winked an eye at her. `Hang on to your hat, sweetheart, I'm putting my foot down!'

## CHAPTER SIX

PREPARATIONS for the traditional luau began hours before the actual event was due to begin, and Beth watched the procedure with fascinated amazement. At one side of the house there was a huge lawn surrounded by trees and shrubs, and it was there that two fairly deep pits had been dug out by a party of men from the plantation. They worked with much chattering and laughing, for it seemed that everyone without exception looked forward to the feast.

When the pits were dug fires were lit in them and brought to a glowing heat into which they put big, smooth stones that would in time become red hot. Preparing the ritual roast pig was done to the accompaniment of the rather eerie sound of conch shell horns and the old chants to the gods. A lot of it was done for the benefit of the few onlookers, Beth realised, but it was none the less exciting, and the Hawaiians put their hearts into it as they did into everything else they did.

Two whole pigs were to be roasted, and these were skinned and scrubbed, then rubbed all over with rock salt and with some kind of sauce, then placed on pieces of wire netting. The red-hot stones were then raked from the pits and put inside the carcasses, and the wire netting carefully wrapped around them to form a kind of parcel.

After the embers had been raked over in the pits, they were lined with' leaves and the pigs lowered into the ovens, along with sweet potatoes and plantains as well as some of the little parcels of pork and fish that

Beth had enjoyed so much in the restaurant in Honolulu. The whole lot was next covered with more leaves and wet sacking put on top, and finally a layer of earth to keep in the steam.

To Beth the whole episode had a pagan atmosphere that she found exciting if vaguely repellent, but she awaited the opening of the imus, the underground ovens, with no less anticipation than did Peg and the rest. She knew without doubt that Aunt Grace would have found it horribly uncivilised and not at all to her taste, but she could not help her own more excited anticipation, and she spent the hours between the preparation and the feast with an almost childish sense of exhilaration.

She had bought a very attractive slim gold bracelet for Tisho, thinking to please her, for Peg had said she wanted one, but the gift had been left unopened beside her plate at breakfast until the very last moment. Until, in fact, Louis had pointed it out to her. Without a word Tisho had opened it, then, without even taking the bracelet from its box, murmured polite thanks, replaced the lid and returned to admire afresh the yellow silk dress that was Louis's gift to her.

It was the first time, Beth thought, that it had really been brought home to him just how deep Tisho's resentment went, and she had seen the way he frowned, and the thoughtful look in his eyes when he recognised it. His suggestion that Tisho wear both

the yellow dress he had bought her and Beth's bracelet to the party had been received with no more than a vague shrug, and once more Beth had noticed him frown, although he said nothing. He had not realised before, she thought, just how difficult it was for her.

The episode at breakfast came to mind once again while Beth was finishing dressing that evening, and as

she fastened a small silver bracelet round her own wrist she fell to wishing there was something she could do to overcome Tisho's suspicious resentment of her. She was not normally an unfriendly child, Beth felt sure, but she was so firmly convinced that Beth's being there was in some way going to alienate Louis's affection that she was doing her best to make it so uncomfortable for her she would be glad to leave.

Someone else she felt for sure would gladly see her leave as soon as possible was Grete Haas. Only once had she seen the blonde woman again, since that meeting by the range, and the second meeting had been no more amicable than the first. Grete Haas left her in no doubt that she'd disliked her in such close proximity to Louis, cousin or not, and it had been a relief to know that at least Grete Haas was not going to be at this evening's occasion.

There were to be adults there, as many as there were youngsters, for it was customary to invite large numbers to a luau, but Beth had already discovered why the blonde woman was excluded from the number. A briefly indiscreet Peg Hashada had revealed that Tisho and her uncle's woman friend had met only once, but Tisho's reaction to her had been much like Beth's, and for once Beth felt she was in complete sympathy with the girl.

If only she could establish other points of contact with Tisho, reassure her that there was no danger of Louis transferring his affection, they might get along quite well—the way Louis had anticipated they would. She had felt sure the gold bracelet was going to help, having chosen it especially to please her, but Louis had seen how that too had failed.

It was a little over a month now since Beth had arrived from England, and recently she had men-

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tioned to Louis that perhaps she should be thinking of finding herself a separate and permanent home on the island—not too far away but far enough for her to be independent.

He had not shown much enthusiasm for the idea, and she suspected it was because he preferred to have her where he could still keep an eye on her. A benevolent eye, she had to admit, and she was not really so anxious to leave Auwai as she would have had him believe when she put forward the suggestion—a fact he probably recognised. She sighed as she left her bedroom, briefly disturbed by uncertainties, then shrugged off the threatened gloom impatiently as she turned to close the door behind her. It was a party and she had anticipated it with such excitement all day that she refused to let even Tisho's jealousy spoil it for her. The only thing that she could not easily dismiss was her inbred dislike of meeting any number of strangers at once, and that moment was yet to come.

She was no more than half way to the top of the stairs when Louis appeared and came striding along the landing towards her. His grey eyes crinkled into a smile that was infinitely reassuring when he saw her, and she responded automatically. It was the first time she had seen him in evening dress and she thought she had never seen him look more impressive.

The black trousers and white dinner jacket emphasised his lean vigorous frame and in some curious way made him look slightly older, although it was in no way detrimental. His skin looked more darkly tanned and his hair more black than its usual dark brown, except for those intriguing streaks of grey above his ears. He was, she recognised a little dazedly,

a very attractive man—dangerously so in her present receptive mood.

His gaze scanned swiftly over her slim shape, over the soft curves that were flattered and enhanced by the deep blue silk dress with its scooped-out neck and brief sleeves, and he smiled approval. She had managed to find shoes that matched almost exactly, and had high heels to flatter her slim legs and ankles, and she felt in-credibly lightheaded as she went to meet him, and also curiously shy suddenly.

'Will I do?' she asked, and a small uncertain laugh trembled on her lips as she spun round for his inspection.

'You look beautiful!' He took one of her hands in his strong fingers and held her at arm's length while he studied her for a moment, then he pulled her close suddenly and kissed her forehead, a light gentle kiss. 'Didn't I tell you you'd be the belle of the ball?' It wasn't until they were more than half way down-stairs that she realised he must have come especially to find her, for he had gone nowhere else, but turned about and come with her, and she looked up at him curiously from the corner of her eye. 'Did you come to fetch me?' she asked. 'Am I late?'

'You're not late.' His smile was slow, but it warmed his eyes in the way she always found so encouraging, and formed intriguing little crinkles at their corners. 'There's quite a few folks here, but they're mostly Tish's school pals—you know what kids are!' He glanced at her once more. 'No—I just thought I'd come and see how you were doing, that's all.'

It occurred to her then why he had come to find her, and the thought of his being so concerned gave her a warm glow suddenly. She had told him, quite early on, how she became nervous when she had to meet any

number of strangers for the first time, and he had obviously remembered.

He had thought of that, and possibly of Tisho's rebuff that morning too, and he had come to find her with the idea of lending moral support. She was overwhelmed suddenly by a wonderful sense of being cared for, and when they got to the foot of the stairs, she turned to him and tiptoed impulsively to kiss him beside his mouth.

'Thank you, Louis!'

He looked almost startled for a second, then he shook his head. 'I can't imagine what I'm being thanked for,' he told her with a smile that gave lie to the words, 'but I must do it again some time!'

He still held her hand while they walked through the hall and out in to the gardens, and she was glad of his physical as well as his moral support. 'Are there many here yet?' she asked, and he cocked a brow at her and smiled.

'There'll be more by now,' he assured her. 'I waited for a while at the top of the stairs for you to appear. But don't you worry, honey, you'll knock their eyes out in that little number!'

The gardens at the front of the house looked much as they always did and were untouched by the party except for a couple of cars that had been parked in the forecourt. The fountain made a soft sound like whispering voices and the naked water-nymph stood as she always did, on her plinth in the centre of the -stone basin with roses at her feet.

But round at the end of the house where the feast had been prepared it was a different scene altogether. Lights had been strung between trees and shrubs, and long low tables set out ready for the big moment when the food would be taken from the imus. Brown

faces hovered expectantly at the edge of the trees, smiles beaming like beacons in the soft light of the fairy lights. No one was excluded and everyone loved a luau.

Louis had said that not everyone was here yet, but to Beth there seemed an incredible number scattered about on the normally huge lawn, and the unaccustomed volume of human voices seemed in some curious way to detract from the scents and colours of the flowers. It was as if the senses that normally appreciated them were dulled by the volume of sound and less appreciative.

Over by the gate that led in from the plantation Tisho, resplendent in her yellow silk dress, was playing hostess to her guests, being kissed and hugged and accepting parcels from all and sundry. It was when she raised her arm to greet someone that Beth noticed the thin gold bracelet on her right arm, and felt a brief moment of satisfaction, until it crossed her mind to wonder whether Louis had been insistent about her wearing it.

She looked bright and happy, and prettier than Beth had ever seen her look, but Beth noticed the quick small frown between her brows when she looked across at Louis and noticed who he was with. She recovered quickly, but it was enough to tell Beth that it had almost certainly been Louis who was responsible for that bracelet being on her arm, and she regretted it more than she could say.

'Is—is it the custom for everyone to go and see Tisho when they arrive?' she asked, and Louis looked down at her steadily for a moment before he answered her.

He knew exactly how she felt, it was plain, and he half-smiled, one brow cocked questioningly. 'You'd rather' not?' he asked.

III

'Oh, it isn't that I don't want to,' Beth hastened to assure him, and glanced once more at Tisho's surprisingly grown-up image in the yellow silk dress. 'I just wondered if perhaps—if Tisho would rather—'

Louis's fingers squeezed hard on her arm and he smiled at her encouragingly. 'If Tish does anything like showing her claws in front of all these people I shall personally make sure that she can't sit down for a week afterwards!' he promised grimly. 'Shall we go, honey?'

The distance to the field gate seemed interminable to Beth, and she had seen Tisho's swift flush of colour when she saw them coming and guessed that she was going to have to greet Beth after all, as she did the rest of her guests. Louis made no ostentatious show of force, but he held his niece's eyes steadily for a long moment before he spoke, and his grey eyes had a warning darkness in their depths that she would understand only too well.

'How's it going, kitten?' he asked, and she hesitated.

'Happy birthday, Tisho!' Beth took the initiative and leaned towards her impulsively and kissed her cheek lightly. 'I hope you have a lovely party!'

For a moment the soft almond eyes looked startled and a flush warmed her cheeks again, then she glanced at her uncle and blinked uncertainly. She glanced down at the bracelet on her wrist and her chin tilted just slightly as if in defiance of something she was not quite sure existed.

'I'm wearing your bracelet,' she told her, and once more flicked a brief uncertain glance up at her uncle's faintly smiling face. 'I wanted to show Carole Siddons from my class,' she explained, as if her gesture needed explanation. 'She betted I wouldn't get one!' Louis was laughing, though not too obviously, and

he shook his head as he put a hand under Beth's arm again. 'Woman's vanity! ' he remarked. 'There's no getting round it! ' -

'I'm glad you like it, Tisho.' Beth had seldom felt better about anything in her life, and she smiled at the girl delightedly.

'It's great—thanks! ' Tisho must have caught a brief glimpse of her uncle's raised brow, for she hastily re-worded her thanks. 'It's lovely—thanks, Beth.'

'Have a lovely time! ' -

There were other people arriving all the time, waiting to greet the birthday girl, and Louis bent his head as they moved off, to kiss his niece's flushed face. 'You're beautiful, kitten,' he whispered, and Tisho smiled.

A band consisting mostly of guitars and drums was playing at one end of the lawn and people were already dancing. It was a much more romantic setting than any indoor ballroom would have been, though possibly less easy on the feet, and Beth could imagine nothing more sentimental than dancing by the light of the huge silver moon that was set in a deep blue sky and looked to have been hung there with the rest of the lights.

The house and gardens were completely surrounded on all sides by acres of waving cane, that whispered and swayed in the light evening breeze and it gave the impression that they were isolated on an island. A fancy that brought a smile to her face that was still in place when she turned suddenly and found Ray at her elbow.

'Hi, Beth! ' His eyes took in the deep blue silk dress and approved, then he glanced at Louis with what seemed very like a hint of challenge in his expression. 'Do I have to join a queue to dance with you?' he asked Beth. 'Or will you have this one with me?' It was pure instinct that made Beth glance up at Louis before she answered. Since the day, more than

two weeks ago, when he had sent Bate Kanua to look for them; she had taken care not to intrude into Ray's working hours, and nothing more had been said between her and Louis about her friendship with him.

He knew she still went out with Ray sometimes, but he had never made any more moves to check on Ray's behaviour towards her—not at least to Beth's knowledge. At the moment his grey eyes had a darker look than usual in the subdued light, but they had a glow that seemed to suggest laughter as he held her gaze for a second.

'Sorry,' he told Ray, 'but I booked this one a couple of weeks ago. Right, honey?'

The claim had taken Beth by surprise, but she could do nothing about the hand that slid around her waist and drew her out into the space in the centre of the lawn that was being used for dancing. His arm encircled her slimness and held her close, almost as if he suspected she might change her mind and walk off, when in fact nothing was further from her mind.

Being in his arms was not a completely new experience, but she had never danced with him before, and the sensation was more exciting than she could have anticipated. He danced well, guiding her less certain steps confidently over the slightly dragging surface of the lawn, but it was the vigorous leanness of him holding her close that made her feel the way she did, and she found herself wishing the soft sound of the

music would go on forever. It was a startling and quite unexpected reaction to simply dancing with her cousin, and she tried to keep her emotions more firmly under control. It was several moments before he eased her away from him slightly and looked down into her face, a small and barely perceptible smile hovering about his

mouth. 'Did you mind?' he asked, and Beth shook her head.

She knew well 'enough what he referred to, and her eyes sought out Ray at the edge of the lawn with a drink in his hand and his good-looking face shadowed, looking morose and rather sulky. 'I don't think Ray really believed you, though,' she said. For a moment the broad hand that held her just above her slim waist pressed more tightly, and his eyes crinkled into a smile. 'You think I pulled rank on him?' he asked, then laughingly admitted it before she could reply. 'I guess I did, honey, though I can't imagine why! I'm not usually that nasty—am I?'

A quizzical brow dared her to deny it, and Beth found herself wanting to laugh suddenly without really being sure just why. It gave her a curiously lightheaded feeling being with him, a feeling she could neither understand nor explain, but it was exhilarating and exciting, and she was quite prepared to agree with him that he was not normally malicious.

'Not usually,' she told him, and laughed as she looked up at him.

Louis said nothing for a second, only regarded her steadily, his eyes curiously unfathomable in the soft lighting, then he pulled her close again and tightened his arm around her. 'Hmm!' he said. 'I'm not sure I should have asked!'

Sitting at the low tables provided for the feast was not as awkward as Beth expected, even though she was squashed against her neighbour on either side with barely enough room to use her arms. She found herself sitting part way along the side of one table and next to Ray, a manoeuvre he had managed without it dawn-

ing on her that Louis would almost certainly have expected her to join him and Tisho. The traditional way to eat kalua pig was with the fingers, and she soon got into the way of pulling the tender meat into small pieces and popping it into her mouth along with some poi, a sticky brown paste that helped to stick the meat to her fingers. It was messy but fun, and she enjoyed every mouthful of it.

The various side dishes that were served with the pork were, for the most part, unfamiliar to her, but she did not let it deter her. Mixtures of salmon and tomato, chicken and coconut and a dark, rather unappetising-looking mollusc referred to as opihi, all added to the infinite variety and all, somehow, tasted good.

Once she caught Louis watching her from the other end of the table while she was popping in another mouthful of pork and poi, and he raised a brow, as if in surprise. Unable to do much else in the circumstances, she wrinkled her nose at him briefly while she licked the sticky poi from her lips with the tip of her tongue, and he laughed and shook his head.

Even the band joined in, for no one was excluded from a luau, and it was the purely Hawaiian element in the party that started the singing which everyone else took up. Slow dreamy tunes with few words but infinitely touching melodies, especially affecting in such a setting. Then people started dancing again, and Ray, was lured away by his dusky neighbour on the other side, leaving her alone for a moment.

She turned suddenly, her breath caught in her throat when she found Louis stooped down beside her. His face within inches of hers and his steely light eyes curiously fathomless in his dark face as he smiled at



her, he touched her arm lightly with one finger when she started, as if to reassure her. 'Would you like five minutes' quiet walk after all that?' he asked.

He spoke close to her ear and his breath whispered warmly against her neck, stirring strange sensations in her that she could not control or explain. The thought of the gardens at the front of the house, with the cool of the fountain and the scent of the blossoms, undisturbed by any other people, was irresistible suddenly, and she nodded without hesitation.

'I'd love it,' she said.

He straightened up swiftly, reaching down for her hands and pulling her to her feet in one easy movement, holding on to her hand still when he turned off under the trees. The shrubs parted before them and the scented blooms brushed her face coolly, reminding her of how hot and flushed she was, and it was surprising how soon the sounds dimmed behind them and became no more than a formless hum through which the lighter tones of the guitars fluttered spasmodically.

Beth could feel her heart begin to beat more quickly and she was suddenly much more conscious of the hand that held hers, the strong fingers that enclosed hers and drew her along beside him. It was cooler too, as she had known it would be, the trees and bushes whispered in the same light wind off the sea, that forever rustled through the canefields.

There was a huge jacaranda beside the path to the house and facing the fountain and Louis leaned back against it while he let go her hand and took out his cigarette case. He said nothing while he took a cigarette and lit it, his face momentarily blazed with light when he bent over the flame of the lighter, and some-thing about the dark strength of his features affected

her as never before when she looked at him.

Exhaling a plume of smoke from pursed lips, he turned at last and smiled at her. For a girl who doesn't like crowds and parties,' he said with a hint of mockery in his voice, 'you've had yourself quite a time, honey.'

'I've enjoyed myself much more than I expected to,' she admitted readily, and hastily transferred her attention to the fountain's sparkling play because she found his steady gaze too disturbing. 'I—I think everyone's had a good time, don't you?'

He shrugged lightly and drew on the cigarette again. 'Oh, sure, these things are usually a riot.'

He sounded very matter-of-fact, but she wondered if indeed he was. Her instinct told her that he was preoccupied, and yet she could not quite explain what made her so sure. 'Do you often have these luaus?' she asked, and he nodded, smiling.

'Birthdays, like now, highdays and holidays, usually for a new arrival.' He caught her eye when she turned suddenly and shook his head. 'You let it be known you didn't like strangers much, Beth, or we'd have had one for you.' His eyes swept over her bright flushed face slowly and he smiled again. 'I guess we could have gone ahead, seeing the way you took to the idea!'

'Oh, I still find crowds a bit—over aweing,' she told him, 'but somehow—I don't know, somehow it's been fun tonight and I've enjoyed it more than I've ever enjoyed anything before.'

Louis studied the tip of his cigarette with apparent interest while he spoke, the first time he had avoided her gaze. 'Could it be that Ray Brauman being there had anything to do with it?' he asked, and she once more felt her heart thudding hard as she sought to keep her voice steady.

'I don't know,' she said, slightly husky. 'It could be I suppose.'

He said nothing for the moment and she felt her legs curiously unsteady suddenly, so that she too leaned back against the jacaranda. Reaching up, she pulled one of the bell-shaped purple blossoms from its stem and held it to her nose for a second, then stared down at it without really seeing it at all. Glancing up at Louis's dark face from the corner of her eye, she noticed how the contours of it were softened by the rising smoke from his cigarette, giving him a curiously unreal look, and she hastily shifted her gaze when he turned and looked at her.

'I liked the party,' she said in a softly breathless voice, 'but I love it out here in the garden.'

His smile suggested he had known it all along, and he nodded his head in the direction of the nymph who stood so serenely naked in the centre of the pool. 'You prefer the company of Klara to that of our guests, is that it?'

'Klara?' She looked up at him, laughing at his choice of a name for the shapely marble maiden. 'Why do you call her Klara? I always think of her as Venus, it's much more appropriate ! '

Louis was shaking his head, obviously enjoying her mystification. 'I didn't christen her, honey, that was her name. My grandmother modelled for that figure when she was twenty years old, and when he was through my grandfather—our grandfather—married her.'

Beth stared; first at him and then across at the smooth marble nakedness of the nymph, trying to believe that what he was telling her was the truth. The idea of old Enrico Marizzi being capable of producing such a beautiful work of art was a revelation that stunned her for a moment.

You mean— you mean that Enrico Marizzi made that?'

Louis nodded. 'He was a gifted sculptor,' he told her, not without pride, she realised, 'but there was little money in it, even for a man of his talent, and he turned his hand to something more practical and more profitable when he married. Klara Leitzen was his last model and she was always very proud of that statue, I believe.'

'I should think so,' Beth agreed breathlessly. 'It's beautiful, and so was she.' She glanced up at him again, trying to see some trace of those chiselled classical features in his own dark looks. 'Was she German?' she asked. 'Judging by her name, I thought—'

'She was Austrian,' Louis said. 'She came from the bright lights of Vienna to the life of the islands, which was much more of a difference then than now. Not that they were impoverished—her father was some kind of an aristocratic black sheep, I believe. In fact it was mostly his money that helped found the Marizzi fortunes.'

'Oh, I see!'

It must have been something in her voice that betrayed her reaction, her inevitable conclusion, and Louis looked at her sharply and shook his head. 'No, I don't think you do, Beth,' he told her. 'I don't believe he would have married her for the money she brought with her, he was too proud a man for that, and he wasn't such a—a hard-hearted old guy as you like to - think, honey, he really wasn't!'

'You see him differently, of course.' She would make no allowances for Enrico Marizzi, and Louis recognised it.

'The point is I did see him, Beth, I knew him, and

believe me, he wasn't the cold-blooded brute you've been taught he was.'

Beth tried hard to accept his version of their grand-father, as readily as she had accepted Aunt Grace's, but the two had such opposing views and she found it almost impossible to entirely disbelieve either of them. As Louis said, he had known the old man, which Aunt Grace had not, but their so different opinions left her in a curious kind of limbo where the old man was concerned, and there was no chance of her ever forming her own judgment—she almost wished there was.

Rather than stay with a matter as controversial as Enrico Marizzi, Beth tried to return the subject to his first wife, Klara Leitzen, and she studied her statue once more through the softening spray of the fountain, trying to find some similarities between her and her grandson, with his dark Sicilian face and his grand-father's fierce pride.

'You don't look like her,' she ventured, and Louis laughed softly, almost as if he guessed her reason for changing the subject.

'And you look nothing at all like your rather straight-laced English schoolmarm grandmother,' he told her.

Still intrigued by the subject, Beth studied him anew, finding the dark strong face even more fascinating than before. 'Is it from your Austrian grandmother that you got those grey eyes?' she asked, and he laughed.

'No, I get them from my mother,' he told her. 'She's French!'

'You're quite a mixture!' The pert remark was impulsive and not really meant to be provocative, but Louis was looking at her with narrowed eyes, his face

once more hazily softened by the nebula of smoke from his cigarette.

'Do you figure you have room to be snide about that, honey?' he asked, soft-voiced.

'Your mother was Scotch and English, wasn't she? And your father was half Sicilian, I'd guess that puts us about level pegging when it comes to mixtures!'

'Oh, Louis, I wasn't being snide!' She denied it hastily, her eyes wide and anxious. The very last thing she wanted to do was to disturb this delightfully quiet and informative moment with him, and she would have done almost anything to avoid it. 'French, Austrian and Sicilian is a very nice mixture,' she ventured appealingly, and Louis was shaking his head, laughing as he looked down at her.

The cigarette went sailing across in the direction of the fountain suddenly and he eased himself away from the jacaranda's ghostly grey trunk so that he stood tall beside her, and his steely grey eyes gleamed in the semidarkness. 'And your dash of Sicilian makes for a very beautiful mixture,' he said softly. One big hand reached out and slid beneath her hair, the palm hard and warm against her neck. 'A really beautiful mixture,' he whispered.

The hand on her neck drew her towards him at the same time as his other hand encircled her waist, pulling her close until she was pressed with breathtaking force against the hard, disturbing vigour of his body. She was trembling like a leaf, but her senses responded to him, her slender shape bowing softly in the hard curve of his arms while a wild incredible excitement ran through her like fire as she closed her eyes.

The thick lashes on her cheeks fluttered briefly when his lips touched hers, and she sighed without realising she had made any sound at all, then suddenly the

fierce hardness of his mouth seemed to snatch the breath from her, and whirled her away from reality with a wild crescendo of sound in her ears that she did not yet recognise as the sound of her own heartbeat.

The warm pressure of his mouth over hers, the arms that held her and the steely masculine vigour of him were something she had neither the desire nor the strength to

resist, and she yielded instead to a whole gamut of new sensations that she made no pretence of understanding. She only knew that she did not want this moment to end—ever.

When it did, it was slowly and with an almost dreamlike sense of unreality, and she looked up at Louis with eyes that shone like sea-green jewels between shadowy lashes. Something, some alien sound in the quietness of the garden, had snatched her back from the soaring heights that his kiss had sent her to, and she turned her head after a second or two, made vaguely uneasy without quite knowing why.

'Beth? What is it, honey?'

His voice was still that low and persuasive tone she had found so hard to resist, and her breath caught briefly on the excitement it caused, then she shook her head.

Brought so swiftly back to earth, she took a moment to begin to think clearly, but the impression lingered that, she had heard some alien sound.

'I—I thought I heard something.'

His laughter was something she did not expect, although she should have known that he would be far less concerned about being seen during the last few minutes than she was herself. 'Maybe somebody who got the message and disappeared again,' he suggested, and Beth turned swiftly and looked at him, her heart thudding hard, trying to match his coolness and failing dismally.

'I suppose it could have been,' she allowed in a small husky voice, and Louis slid a hand under her chin and raised her face, looking down at her for a moment in silence, then he bent his head and put his lips to hers lightly, barely touching her.

'I'm sorry, baby,' he said softly. 'I guess I stepped out of line, didn't I?'

Beth felt the flush that, warmed her cheeks and hastily jerked her head away, turning sharply so that he should not see how much he had touched her with that single kiss.

'Not at all,' she told him. 'I'm not exactly unfamiliar with the facts of life, Louis, you certainly have no cause to apologise for one kiss!'

'Beth—'

'I think it's time we went back to the party, don't you?' she said, her voice bright and determinedly off-hand.

She walked around the path that hemmed the fountain's basin and found her legs incredibly unsteady, though she would not have admitted it for anything. Instead of cutting through the shrubbery as they had before, she took the path round the house to the lawn, telling herself she did not care whether he was following her or not, and she almost walked past some-thing glittering on the stone path without seeing it.

Bending suddenly to retrieve it, she found Louis right alongside her, and she showed him what was in her hand, with a dark anxious look in her eyes. 'It must have been Tisho,' she whispered, wishing it could have been almost anyone else. She closed her hand over the slim gold bracelet that must have been impulsively and defiantly discarded before she turned about, and sighed. 'Oh, why did it have to be her?'

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tisho had avoided her for the rest of the evening, Beth knew, it had been obvious from the way she pointedly moved off whenever Beth came near her, and after the promising start they had made to the evening, it was all the more regrettable, Beth

thought. The fact that Tisho seemed much more unhappy than angry she found more discomfiting than sheer resentful temper would have been.

In the same way, though perhaps not quite so pointedly, Beth had herself kept out of Louis's way by spending the rest of the evening dancing with Ray. In the circumstances she did not want to do anything more to incur Tisho's reproach until she had had time to try and talk to the girl.

By the time she got home, with Ray insisting on seeing her right to the door, Tisho was already in bed, and Louis was simply waiting to see her safely in before he locked up for the night. He had said little, not even to comment on the fact that she had come in so much later than anyone else, but had merely planted a brief and very cousinly kiss on her forehead, then left her to go upstairs in her own good time. It was, she felt, rather an anti-climax to what had been a very exciting evening one way and another. Her sleep had been deep and undisturbed, but she woke next morning with a curious feeling of anticipation in her stomach, a sensation she impatiently shrugged off as she bathed and dressed. It was a lovely bright day, as every day seemed to be since she came to the

islands, and she promised herself she would take a swim this morning some time, and then perhaps sunbathe for a while on the quietness of Kona Beach. She had no firm arrangement with Ray, but he had mentioned he would be there and that if she felt sufficiently energetic after-last night, she could possibly join him.

After the over-indulgences of the night before, she faced the prospect of one of Peg's pancake breakfasts with far less enthusiasm than usual, although she came downstairs at much the same time she always did, calling to Peg in the kitchen as she went through the hall.

It crossed her mind to ask for no more than a cup of coffee this morning, but it scarcely seemed worth the effort of facing Peg's inevitable disapproval. Skipping a meal, in Peg's opinion, was downright foolish and not to be encouraged, and even Louis, for the most part, bowed to her opinion in that.

The bright, sun-warmed blossoms of yellow allamanda and salmon pink bougainvillea, and the pale perfumed clusters of mock-orange that came peeping in at the windows each morning were something that never failed to enchant Beth, and she breathed deeply on the heady scent of the mock-orange as she walked across the big sunny room.

The table in the window was laid for breakfast as it always was—a white cloth and the gleaming richness of silver reflecting the sun, gave a lift to the beginning of the day. The early morning scene was becoming increasingly familiar, without for a moment beginning to pall, and she wondered for a moment if she would ever become blasée about it.

The violent skip her heart gave when she caught sight of Louis sitting there was startlingly unexpected, however, and took her by surprise. His strong, arrogant

features were a familiar enough sight by now, silhouetted in profile against the background of azure sky framed in the window, but somehow this morning she was much more aware of the man rather than the mere physical presence of him.

The smile he turned on her crinkled the grey eyes, as always when he smiled, but she thought it held a certain speculation, and when he spoke there seemed to be a slightly different timbre in his voice, a kind of softness that drew a response from her senses that she did not expect.

The impressions, she realised, could have been no more than her imagination playing tricks, but she seemed so much more sensitive to him this morning. She could recall the hard pressure of his mouth on hers and the strong persuasion of his arms with startling clarity, even this morning. Perhaps she was being incredibly naïve, but she could never feel quite the same way about Louis again, and she wished that he might share at least some of the same reaction, no matter how coolly he had behaved last night.

Glancing across at the chair that Tisho usually occupied, she noticed for the first time that the girl was missing—probably after such a late night she was sleeping on. Louis stood the coffee pot down in front of her as she sat down! and the grey eyes swept briefly over her face as he murmured a greeting.

'How are you feeling this morning?'

'I'm fine, thank you, Louis.' She managed to sound very casual. 'Are you?'

All the time she was pouring herself coffee she was conscious of him watching her; leaning with his elbows on the table and a cup of coffee cradled between his big hands while he regarded her steadily over its rim. 'Me?' He laughed shortly and raised a brow as if the

question surprised him. 'Oh, it takes more than a late night luau to lay me low, honey! I'm O.K.' He glanced in the direction of the door. 'Does Peg know you're down?'

'Yes, I called her as I came through.'

She was right, Beth thought, he was different this morning. It was a barely perceptible difference, and probably if she had not been so tinglingly aware of him she would not have noticed anything, but there was something in his manner that was slightly different from usual, and she felt her hands trembling as she raised the coffee cup to her lips.

The grey eyes quizzed her and she hastily avoided them. 'Did you enjoy your first luau, Beth?'

Heaven knew what he expected her to answer, but she nodded without hesitation. 'Oh, very much, though I suspect I ate far too much even though it was a feast!' She glanced across at the empty chair opposite. 'Tisho's not down yet,' she observed, and Louis smiled wryly.

'It was kind of late for her last night, and she was mad at me when she came in—I guess she's sleeping it off!'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

She needed no reminding of the reason for Tisho's being out of temper with him, Beth thought, but she hated to think of the two of them on bad terms because of something that involved her. It was unlikely there was anything she could say to Tisho that would put things right, but she would have liked to try.

'Are you mad at me too, Beth?'

The question stirred unexpected responses in her as she shook her head, her eyes downcast. 'I'm sorry about Tisho.'

'Oh, she'll get over it!' He put down his coffee cup

with studied care, and he wasn't even looking at her, Beth noticed. 'Beth ' Her heartbeat quickened suddenly, stirred by something in his voice. 'I guess I ought to apologise or something about last night.' He shrugged his broad shoulders in a suggestion of helplessness that was curiously affecting somehow, but hurried on before she had time to say anything.

'You're my cousin, and I guess that'd be bad enough for some, but you're also very young, and I should have remembered both counts before I kissed you the way I did last night.'

'Don't cousins kiss?'

She asked the question hastily before he could go further, and she realised only after she had spoken that it sounded rather too defensive. That breathtaking assault on her senses had been no cousinly peck, and perhaps Louis was more troubled by their quite close relationship than by her comparative youth, she had no way of knowing at the moment.

He glanced up swiftly when she questioned him, and she felt the colour that flooded into her cheeks when he quizzed her with narrowed eyes. 'I'm more or less on trust to care for you the same way I do Tisho,' he told her, 'and last night I let myself forget that. I can't say I didn't enjoy it—I did, but the fact remains that I should never have let myself forget how young you are or who you are—I'm sorry.'

She vaguely remembered that he had made some kind of apology last night, and she had dismissed it then with an airiness she had been far from feeling. Then, however, it had been dark except for the moon and the lights from the house, and she had been walk-ing away from him—he had been unable to see her face.

Now it was broad daylight and she sat facing him

across the intimacy of the breakfast table, and it was much more difficult to appear offhand. She held her coffee cup tightly in both hands and took a drink from it before she answered, praying for the ability to handle the situation as coolly as she wanted to. Other women had been kissed by him in that same exciting way, she had little doubt, and it was certain he had never apologised to one of them. He seemed bent on making an issue of it in her case, and she wished he Wouldn't.

'You've already apologised, Louis—last night, don't you remember?' Her voice was less steady than she could have wished, but at least it gave the impression that she took the whole thing far less seriously than he obviously did. 'You really don't have to be so concerned about one kiss, you know! As I told you last night, I'm not so easily shocked, even though by some standards my education might fall a little short in that direction!'

'Beth—'

'I'm really not on a par with Tisho, you know, though you never will believe it, will you?'

She chanced a brief glance at him from the shadow of her thick lashes. There was a steely look in his eyes, she thought, that disapproved of her apparent flippancy. 'Beth, I'm trying to put you straight so that you don't get any wrong ideas—so you'll know you don't have to worry it'll happen again!' The stern, almost paternal tone of his voice matched that steely-eyed glint, and her heart beat anxiously hard at the thought of quarrelling with him. 'I don't doubt you've been kissed before, you're a very 'I haven't!' He was looking at her narrow-eyed; almost as if he did not believe her, she thought, and she felt her colour rise as she hastily looked away. The

shiver of unsteady laughter that fluttered from her was involuntary, and she shook her head. 'At least, not like that—nothing like that. You see, Aunt Grace was always very strict about—everything.'

She looked across at him, willing herself to hold his gaze, a hint of defiance in the angle of her chin, and while she looked at him she saw the way that steely look vanished slowly and gave way to the reassuringly familiar warmth. He was shaking his head to and fro, beginning to understand how she felt.

'Oh, Beth honey ! '

The softness of his voice slid along her spine like an icy finger and she once more looked down at the cup she held rather than at him. 'Oh, I'm not a complete idiot,' she assured him with another nervous attempt at lightness. 'But Aunt Grace isn't—she never was married, you see, and she took a slightly biased view of the whole man and woman relationship, especially after

She glanced up swiftly and bit her lip, and Louis reached out to touch her hand.

'Richard,' he said quietly. 'Yes, that's understandable, I suppose.'

There was that almost paternal air about his manner again, and it stirred Beth into reacting against it. 'But I'm not a baby for all that, Louis, and I have been kissed a couple of times before! '

Something seemed to occur to him then, and he narrowed his eyes briefly in question.

'Has Ray—'

'Once!' She answered hastily, without giving him time to complete the question. 'After you sent Bate Kanua down to section eight to find us.'

'That's the only time?'

It was that suggestion of paternal concern that once again aroused her to defensiveness, and she looked across at him with a lift to her chin. 'You really don't

have any reason to worry about me, Louis, I've told you I'm quite capable of taking care of myself.'

The smile that only briefly touched one corner of his mouth had an almost bitter twist to it. 'Beth, honey, I know just how capable you are of taking care of your-self in situations like that—remember?'

The prompting was gentle, but she felt very small suddenly and she almost disliked him for making her feel so vulnerable. 'That—that wasn't the same at all,' she denied, in a small breathless sounding voice, and he reached out once more and touched her arm, curling his strong fingers into her soft flesh in a grip that was at the same time, in some curious way, a caress.

'I know, baby, that's what bothers me.' The grey eyes moved slowly over her face in a steady, searching scrutiny that sent small shivers of sensation all through her. 'I had you nicely slotted into the role of little cousin, not much older than Tisho and in the same need of care and concern.'

'But I told you—I'm not! '

don't know.' He kept his hand on her arm and his thumb moved caressingly over her soft skin until she felt herself responding to his touch in a way that startled her. 'Maybe it might be better if you--' He withdrew his hand suddenly and swore under his breath.

'Oh damn it, Beth, you need somebody to look out for you! How can I—' He turned sharply and glared at Peg fiercely as she came across the room. 'What is it, Peg?'

Peg's customary smile was missing and something in her manner as she padded soft-footed towards them made Beth catch her breath. 'It's Tisho, Mr Louis—she gone missing! '

For several seconds Louis simply stared at her, trying to adjust to a different kind of situation, then he

frowned. 'You mean she isn't in her bed?' His voice had a curiously uncertain edge to it that was quite alien to him, and once more Beth caught her breath. 'Maybe she got up early to take her new pup for a walk —is he around?'

Peg said nothing, instead she handed him a folded piece of paper, and he hesitated a second before taking it from her. Glancing across at Beth, his eyes were strangely



blank, then he unfolded the paper and read the few scrawled lines that were written on it.

'Oh no!' He read it through again, then handed it across the table to Beth. 'That fool kid!'

The writing was large and the hand unsteady, obviously a child's writing, and Beth could imagine Tisho's growing conviction in the early hours of the morning that her beloved uncle no longer held her in the same affectionate regard he always had until now. That he preferred his new-found cousin, and that nothing would be the same again. Tisho was at an age when turbulent emotions overcame plain common sense, and the way she felt was in every word of that painstakingly written note to her uncle. 'Dear Louis,' she wrote 'I guess by the time you get this I'll be gone. I plan to take the 7.15 out of Honolulu for Los Angeles and find Grandpa and Grandmother—I have their address. I have to leave Sam and I hope you won't mind taking care of him for me. Thanks for all you did for me when I was a kid and I want you to know that I don't blame you for anything. I still love you, though I guess that doesn't matter so much now. Always, Tisho.'

Louis was already on his way out of the room before Beth finished reading, and she stared after him with an uneasy certainty in her heart that now she would have to take more definite steps to find an independent

place of her own. That was what Louis had been trying say when Peg appeared with the note from Tisho, she felt sure of it.

Peg hovered. Looking after Louis, but seeming unwilling to leave Beth, and Beth looked up at her anxiously. 'Should I go with him, Peg?'

The warmth and understanding in Peg's dark eyes was almost too much for her self-control, but she was shaking her head slowly. 'I don't think that would be the best idea, honey,' she told her. 'If dat keikiwahine already gone, ain't nothing nobody can do 'cept tell Mr Louis's folks to look out for her. If she ain't then I figure she won't want to see nobody but him come lookin' for her.'

It was the truth, Beth recognised, but the full realisation was only just beginning to dawn. The enormity of the step Tisho had taken and the fact that her being there was the reason for it. She clenched her hands tightly and sat for a moment trying to fight down the feeling of frustration it gave her to realise how close she had been to bridging the gulf between her and Tisho last night, and how soon it had been lost because Louis had kissed her, on an impulse that he obviously now regretted.

She was vaguely aware that somewhere the door slammed behind Louis as he left the house, and a few moments later the sound of his car broke the quiet of the morning when he drove past on his way to the airport. She felt the need for urgency, for some quick decision so that she could present a fait accompli when Louis returned, but she was too unsure to take the first step.

'Oh, Peg, what am I going to do?'

She appealed to Peg, in the same way she would normally have turned to Aunt Grace, and for the first time

she realised how much she had always depended on that strong-willed but gentle woman, and how much she missed her. Peg, as if she sensed her need, clucked softly in sympathy and patted her hand as she sat herself on the chair that Louis had just vacated.

'Ah now, Beth honey, don't you go blamin' yourself for nothing—you ain't got no call to ! Tisho, she da kine who gets all upset for nothing at all, an' sometimes she don't see straight, but Mr Louis'll put her right! '

'You think so?'

She wanted so much to believe it, and Peg was nodding confidently. 'You better believe it! Mr Louis, he's a lovin' man but he don't stand for no nonsense!'

'But if she's really gone, Peg?'

'Then her grandpa'll put her right back on that plane, honey, you'll see!'

'It's—it's because of my being here, you know.'

Beth half wished Peg would deny it, but Peg was too wise to deny anything that she knew as well as anyone else was perfectly true. Instead she patted her hand consolingly. 'Guess it's that friend of hers in class started her thinking,' she said. 'Her daddy remarried an' his new wife didn't want the girl, so she got sent away. It upset Tish, that did, an' she maybe figured it was goin' to happen to her when you got here, honey.'

Beth stared at her, seeing the matter as possibly more complicated than she had first thought. 'But that doesn't apply in this case, Peg, she surely must realise that there's—there's nothing like that—' She broke off suddenly, remembering the scene that Tisho had witnessed last night beside the pool. Maybe she did believe there was a possibility of the same thing happening and she had run off with the idea of forestalling Louis's rejection of her, in the same way and for the

same reasons her friend's father had sent her away.

'Maybe not,' Peg smiled, and one of her chuckles rocked her ample figure. 'Or maybe she reckons Mr Louis don't treat you like she figures he should treat a cousin ! ' She got up from the table and beamed encouragingly. 'You'll feel a whole lot better when you've eaten, honey—I'll go fix breakfast for pou '

'Oh no, Peg, I—I don't think I could eat anything.'

'Sure you can,' Peg assured her confidently. 'An' if I don't feed you Mr Louis's goin' to have my hide too ! ' She chuckled as if the idea worried her not at all, one of her fat reassuring chuckles, and she was shaking her head as she walked soft-footed across the room. 'Da poor man sure got some job with two keikes on his hands!'

Two children on his hands. That was how Peg saw it, and Beth had little doubt that was how Louis saw it too, despite those few moments last night. Maybe she could find a little place not too far away, but far enough away to establish her independence and also set Tisho's fears at rest. She reached absently and touched the soft cool beauty of a yellow allamanda blossom that had strayed in through the window. Louis had not been at all enthusiastic when she broached the subject first, but he might be a little more amenable now. Maybe she would start looking today—as soon as she knew Tisho was safely back.

It seemed something of an anti-climax when Louis returned after no more than half an hour, with a subdued but vaguely defiant Tisho with him in the car, but Beth let out an enormous sigh of relief when she saw them come in through the front door together. She had been resigned to a long wait, maybe while flights were checked and inquiries made on the main-

land, and to take her mind off all the innumerable unpleasant possibilities she had allotted herself the task of keeping the new puppy out of the kitchen and out of Peg's way.

Crises of any kind were a new experience for her, and one that involved her own impact on the life of a sensitive young girl was shattering when she realised it first. She needed time to think, but found that thinking about it did little to reassure her of what she ought to do about Tisho, and she was in the same dismaying state of uncertainty when she heard Louis's car on the drive.

She hurried out, carrying the puppy in her arms just as Louis came in the door, ushering his niece before him, as if he meant to foil any attempt on her part to slip away again. Sam, the puppy, had been given to Tisho by one of her school friends, as a birthday gift, and Beth could imagine how she had hated leaving him behind when she made that impulsive decision to leave home. So, without waiting for anything to be said, she hurried across with Sam and impulsively thrust the small wriggling bundle into Tisho's arms.

'I've been looking after him,' she explained a little breathlessly, 'keeping him from under Peg's feet in the kitchen!' She glanced briefly at Louis's dark, implacable face, then smiled at the girl. 'It's easy to see who he prefers—he nearly jumped out of my arms when he heard you coming.'

The puppy was licking Tisho's face enthusiastically, and she leaned over him while she held him in her arms so that it was impossible to judge her reaction. A thick silky curtain of black hair swung forward to hide her face, and lowered lashes concealed the expression in her almond eyes as she pressed her cheek to the puppy's soft fur.

'Thank you.'

Her voice had a husky unsteady sound, and Beth guessed she had cried a lot. Why she had not flown out at the time she had said in her note was open to speculation, but Beth was only too thankful that she had been there when Louis arrived. It was possible that she had anticipated Louis doing exactly as he had done, of course, but whatever the complexities of the situation, Tisho looked as if she was close to tears still and for some reason beyond her understanding at the moment, Beth felt moved to put her arms round her and comfort her, only fear of being snubbed held her back.

She was dry-eyed at the moment when she raised her head, but her uncle's hand on her shoulder could have been a warning or consolation, it was difficult to tell which. Just as it was impossible to tell how he was feeling from the one brief glance Beth gave him.

Peg came bustling out from the kitchen and her face relaxed into a smile of relief when she saw Tisho, but she made no other concession, and her eyes went instead to her employer, as if his wellbeing was her prime consideration.

'That keike had any breakfast?' she asked, and Louis shook his head.

'Neither ain't Miss Beth,' she told him. 'Seems nobody wants to eat this mornin'. Now you here maybe you can tell her she ought to eat the pancakes I cooked for her, instead of making do with nothing but a cup of coffee!'

'Beth?' The grey eyes seemed somehow to be curiously aloof as they sought hers, and yet there was something there that caused a swift and violent reaction from her senses. 'Didn't you have breakfast either?'

'No, I told Peg I wasn't hungry. I—I was worried.'

He looked at her steadily for a second or two, then

'turned to Peg, his frown swift and impatient. 'Peg, cook enough for two, and make more coffee, will you?' 'But Louis, I'd much rather—'

Beth broke off hastily when he grabbed her arm suddenly in a grip that made her gasp. He took Tisho's arm in his other hand and marched them determinedly across the hall in the direction of the breakfast room, giving them no option but to go along with him. 'I'm not interested in any more arguments,' he declared firmly. 'You'll both sit down and eat!'

There was little use trying to pull back, for his grip was like steel, and Beth could feel the tension in him like a coiled spring. Even so she was not entirely deterred and she struggled against being hauled along so unceremoniously.

'Louis, you're hurting!'

Peg's opinion, that he had two children on his hands, rankled anew in her mind as she fought to free her arm, but she could as well have tried to break from a vice, and he took her and Tisho with him into the bright, sunny room where breakfast was still laid. She had never seen him so violently emotional, and it had a curious effect on her that was disturbing without her quite knowing why.

'I've had enough of feminine temperament to last me a lifetime!' he declared in a hard flat voice. 'Now sit down, both of you! You'll eat whatever Peg brings you, and you won't cause any more trouble, or by God I'll really lose my temper! Maybe when you've eaten we can bring a little common sense into this situation!'

Beth found it hard to see that he had any cause to be angry in her own case, but she suspected it was more than likely she was being made to take some of the backlash from Tisho's escapade. Relief could take on some curious and unexpected forms sometimes, and

Louis must have been ineffably relieved to find Tisho still at the airport.

Without hesitation, Tisho sat down at the table in her usual place, setting the puppy down on the floor beside her, but Beth momentarily resisted the hand that tried to seat her. She was not quite sure what she could say that would give him some hope of a solution to Tisho's problem, but she spoke impulsively.

'Louis, I've decided to

'So have I—sit down, Beth!'

The hand on her arm was firmer than ever and she knew Tisho was watching with those intriguing almond eyes that were at the moment red and puffy in the smooth doll-like face. Heaven knew how patient Louis had been while he reassured her, persuaded her that Auwai was still her home. He could simply have hauled her back, of course, he had the right to do so as her guardian as well as her uncle, but that wasn't Louis's way. He would have talked to her, tried to make her see the position with a less prejudiced eye. Heaven knew how he had explained that scene she had witnessed last night beside the pool, but maybe he had found it unbearably embarrassing, trying to explain his own impulsive action to a jealous child, and it was that which was, in part, responsible for his present mood.

Her own resistance could be the last straw, she realised, for she could feel tension in the angry tautness of his body as he urged her on to the chair beside her, and she yielded suddenly to the strong pressure of his hand, rather than cause him any further stress.

She sat facing Tisho and briefly met her eyes. Dark, unfathomable eyes that were seldom as expressive as her uncle's steely grey ones, but which at the moment suggested a glimpse of curiosity, Beth thought. She made

a brief grimace as she sat down, trying to imply a fellow feeling between them, but Tisho hastily shifted her gaze, and bent to fondle the puppy by her feet.

Feeling snubbed, although the reaction was not unexpected, Beth looked up at Louis. 'If only you'd listen, Louis, I was trying to tell you that I've decided it would be better if I found myself a place right away.' She spoke in a rather subdued voice, wondering if he really cared one way or the other at the moment. 'I—I thought I'd start looking for somewhere today.'

She was not quite sure what kind of an answer she expected, but certainly not the brief, terse one she got. 'Good!' he said, and went striding out of the room.

For several moments Beth felt too dazed to do anything other than stare after him. He had intimated before he went to fetch Tisho that perhaps it might be better if she had her own place after all, although he had seemed very reluctant about it still. His abrupt, almost harsh approval of the plan left her in no doubt that he was now more than ready for her to go and she felt oddly small and vulnerable suddenly.

Her heart was thudding hard when she turned back and looked across at Tisho instinctively, with wide and vaguely unbelieving eyes that plainly showed the hurt she felt. Tisho's small, doll-like face betrayed nothing, but for the first time since she had known her, Beth saw understanding, even sympathy, in those intriguing almond eyes. Then she bent her head to the puppy once more and silky black hair again concealed her face.

'I'm sorry,' Tisho said.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

DURING the next few weeks the feeling between her and Tisho became a little better, and Beth sometimes wondered just what it was that Louis had said to her that made her seemingly less resentful than before. She was not overly friendly even now, but at least it was possible to speak to her without incurring a definite snub, and she did not fall into a resentful silence if Louis involved Beth in one of their conversations.

Ray had become a willing helper in her search for somewhere of her own to live, seeing the agents and driving her to see possible purchases, although so far without success. It was not that they had not found anywhere she liked or could afford, but each time when she told Louis about it he had gone to see for himself, declaring he would not sign any cheques until he was satisfied that the property was worth the price asked for it.

Without fail each one had been pronounced unsuitable for some reason or other, until Beth began to wonder if that brief harsh declaration in favour of her moving out had since been reconsidered. The thought of that being so left her in a curious state of uncertainty—she would happily have stayed on at Auwai, but it would surely take them back to the initial problem as far as Tisho was concerned.

Ray was openly in favour of the idea, and made little secret of the fact that it was because he saw it as a chance to see her more easily and more often, once she was free of Louis's watchful eye.

Their latest find was a little house further inland but still within fairly easy reach of Auwai, with a glorious view of the not too distant Koolau Mountains and the magnificent towering cliff of the Nuuanu-Pali soaring in the background.

It was a quiet situation, a community of uncrowded and fairly new houses set in the colourful surroundings of tropical gardens, and Beth found it very attractive, so that she

made up her mind that this time she was not going to let Louis turn her from it, no matter what reason he found. She mentioned it at lunch time, when she and Louis were alone, then watched him rather anxiously through her lashes while she waited for his reaction.

'Where is it?' He poured himself more coffee, and he did not look at her, so that it was difficult to know exactly what was going on behind that dark, implacable face.

'It's out near Nuuanu Avenue—there's- a road turns off just before you come to the highway.'

'It's part of an estate?'

She sensed the beginnings of yet another objection and steeled herself to oppose it.

'Yes, it's part of an estate, but it's nothing like you make it sound, Louis—it's a very nice area! '

'Each house with its little yard, I suppose?'

Beth flushed, flexing her hands into tight little fists either side of her coffee cup as she faced him across the table, a glint of defiance in her eyes. 'I'm used to living on an estate with nice little gardens,' she insisted. 'It's what I was brought up to, Louis V

'And what you chose not to go back to,' Louis reminded her.

Beth drew a deep steady breath as she faced him, her eyes bright and luminously sea-green and a flush

colouring her lightly tanned cheeks. She was prepared to outface him in this instance no matter what arguments he put forward against her choice of a house. If he really did not want her to move out of Auwai, then he could come right out and tell her so, not find fault with every place she found, she was determined on it.

'I want this house, Louis, and I'm going to have it!' She was adamant even though her voice was breathlessly unsteady. 'It's well within the price range I can afford, and I won't let you talk me out of it this time!'

'Have I tried to talk you out of it?'

It was unexpected, and the grey eyes held hers steadily in a long cool inquiry that she hastily avoided. Taking a cigarette from his case, he lit it without haste and blew the smoke out through pursed lips while Beth watched him, her mind racing in confusion. Looking at him again uneasily, she shrugged. 'Not exactly,' she admitted. 'But you sounded as if you didn't think much of the idea—of the place we've found.'

'We?' An arched brow questioned the possibilities her statement suggested. 'just how close an interest does Ray Brauman have in the choice of your house, Beth?'

'None at all, except to help me as a friend!'

She had no doubt at all that Ray's interest in her would become much more personal once she was away from Auwai and Louis, but it was something that she preferred not to think about too deeply at the moment.

'Beth!'

She looked across at him in a kind of helpless anger. The half smile on his mouth showed just how well he understood Ray's interest in helping her to buy her own house, and she wished she could have denied it more convincingly. It was all part of the confusing di-

lemma she found herself in—Ray was willing to help her for his own reasons, but if she did not have his help she would have found it impossible to do on her own, and Louis had never once offered to assist—she only wished she knew why.

'Who else could I ask?' She appealed to him without realising she was doing so. 'I can't handle a house purchase on my own, Louis, and you've never done the slightest thing to help ! All you ever do is find fault with the houses we—I find ! '

She was aware of a dark brow elevated behind that concealing drift of smoke, and the grey eyes studied her narrowly. 'Are you suggesting that I found fault where there wasn't any? Now why would I do that?'

She lifted her hands helplessly and shook her head. 'I don't know,' she confessed, 'but you've never liked anything I've found so far. One you said had a leaky roof, one needed the plumbing overhauling, another was too big for one person, or so you said! You've consistently found fault with every house I've liked, Louis, and I refuse to let you talk me out of this one ! '

'Then maybe we'd better drive out and see it,' he suggested, and Beth's heart gave a great, breathtaking leap and seemed almost to have stopped for a moment as she stared at him.

'You—you mean you want to come out there with me and see it?'

She did not like being so wary of him, but she wished she knew just what was behind his unexpected move, and the unfathomable look in the grey eyes behind a screen of smoke gave her no clue at all. She had been convinced in her own mind that the house was exactly what she wanted, and Ray had declared it the best one yet, but even before Louis had seen it, she was convinced that if he found fault with it as he had with the

others, she would give in to his judgment as she had before.

'Don't you want me to come and see it?'

'Well—yes, yes, of course I do!'

He got up from the table, stubbing out the cigarette and looking across at her with a faint smile that never reached his eyes. 'Then what's keeping you?'

'Louis—'

He turned and looked back at her over his shoulder. 'Changed your mind?'

Beth shook her head vaguely. Her eyes were anxious and uncertain and she wished she knew what made her feel the way she did. 'Louis, you—you will like this one, won't you?'

He did not reply at once but looked at her in silence for a second or two, then he held out a hand to her, drawing her close up beside him when she put her own into it. His strong fingers grasped hers encouragingly. 'Let's go and find out, shall we?' he asked. To Beth the house looked every bit as attractive when she saw it again as it had the first time, and she saw no reason at the moment to change her mind about buying it. With Louis's earlier criticisms in mind Ray had thoroughly checked out the plumbing and the state of the roof, and pronounced it in good condition.

It was pretty and not too big, and the garden seemed to be growing without any help from anyone at the moment. There were palm trees bordering the street that gave a certain privacy, and a couple of pink shower trees which, while not quite as exotic as the rainbow shower at Auwai, were nevertheless very pretty. A well grown jacaranda shaded the front of the house and many of the flowers in the garden were ones Beth was now familiar with.

It was strange, but the difference in size between this house and Auwai had not struck her quite so forcibly in the first instance and now that it did she was left wondering if perhaps Louis had already put a doubt in her mind with those earlier questions. It sometimes surprised her to realise how soon she had adapted to life on a grand scale,

but now that she was used to it, she could only hope that she could adapt to a new environment just as readily.

One matter that she had thought about as much as anything else concerning her move was the idea of suddenly being completely on her own in strange surroundings. It would be the first time in her life that she would have no one immediately to turn to and it sometimes troubled her when she stopped to think about it.

Until she came to Hawaii there had always been Aunt Grace's comforting presence in the background then, for the past two months while she had been living at Auwai, there had been Peg and Louis always there. Coping on her own would be a new experience and she hoped she could cope when the time came, without too many crises.

There were a great many things she would miss at first that she more or less took for granted at Auwai. Like the vast acres of space to roam in much as she pleased, and the luxury of her surroundings. What she was equally convinced of and much more uneasy about was the certainty that she would miss Louis, and she glanced at him from the corner of her eye as they walked together up the short shaded drive to the house.

He teased her, sometimes scolded her as if she was no older than Tisho, and he made her angry more often than she cared to remember, yet she faced the prospect of not having him around any longer with a curious

sense of loss. She was probably anticipating too much, but somehow she felt so sure that this time he meant to authorise the purchase of the house and, inexplicably, she found herself almost praying that he wouldn't.

He unlocked the door and she followed him into the house, once more trying to understand her own feelings. The house was unfurnished, but she could afford to furnish it to suit her own tastes, and it was bright and airy, or would be once the windows were open to the cool wind and the scents of the garden. It was the kind of house that only a few months ago she would have regarded as the height of luxury—instead she found herself comparing it with the Italian style splendour of Auwai.

The marble palace that her grandfather had built, not only as a home for his young bride, but to appease his homesickness, had become home to her during the last two months, and she had come to regard it with a certain affection. It had been her father's home too, and that gave it a special appeal, even had there been nothing else in its favour.

She would have a housekeeper, of course, a woman as much like the indispensable Peg as she could find, that was just one of the many things to be considered once she knew that her move from Auwai was a settled fact. Showing Louis from room to room, she wished he would make some comment other than that expressive but unenlightening 'hmm' that he was so fond of using, that he would give her some indication of his opinion instead of merely nodding his head.

He was taking stock of the small but neat kitchen when he looked round at her suddenly and raised a brow. 'Can you cook, honey?'

He took her by surprise, but her answer was swift and vaguely indignant. 'Yes, of course I can cook!'

Heaven knew why the question should have brought a flush of colour to her cheeks as it did, but she saw him note the fact, and hastily avoided looking at him once she had given him an answer. He laughed shortly, leaning against the kitchen sink and regarding her for a moment in silence, then he shook his head.



'It's not a safe assumption to make in this day and age,' he told her in the soft quiet voice that could do such strange and disturbing things to her senses. 'But I guess Aunt Grace took care to instil all the old-fashioned virtues, didn't she, honey?'

Unsure just what his mood was, she looked at him uncertainly from the concealment of her lashes. Aunt Grace would have been very welcome right there at the moment, and she had no intention of letting him suggest there was something faintly amusing about her old-fashioned upbringing.

'I suppose her ways might seem old-fashioned to some people,' she said in a small and much too un-steady voice. 'But I—I don't like you—I don't like anyone being clever at her expense, Louis.'

'Beth, honey,' he reached out and touched her cheek lightly with a finger-tip that traced a shiver-inducing line down her cheek and on to her neck where it pressed for a second on the small pulse throbbing away there, 'I wasn't laughing at anyone, least of all your aunt.' The grey eyes scanned swiftly over her flushed face and the bright sea-green eyes and he half smiled. 'I rather like the old-fashioned virtues, and I was really only concerned with whether you could cook or not—I promise.'

It occurred to her suddenly why he had asked, and she looked up at him again. 'I'll be quite capable of looking after myself, Louis, don't worry about that:

`Uh-huh ! '

He studied her for a second longer, then turned suddenly and walked over to a row of wall cupboards and began opening them systematically, one after the other, his back to her. He wore no jacket and through the thin texture of his shirt the shadowy darkness of his body drew her eyes irresistibly. His broad shoulders, the arrogant angle of his head, and the brown hands and arms—there was a touching familiarity about him that stirred unexpected longings in her and made her shiver suddenly at the violence of her own reactions.

'You're firmly set on moving out, aren't you, Beth?'

She did not answer immediately but watched his restless and, she suspected, aimless inspection of the wall cupboards with almost wary eyes. This was the moment, she thought, her heart pounding anxiously. If she told him that this was the house she had set her heart on having, he would agree to release the money from the trust, she knew it, and she hesitated to take that irrevocable step too soon.

Then he came back to her suddenly and stood facing her, close enough for that exciting aura of maleness to reach out and disturb her senses. He took her hands, his fingers strong and encouraging, confusing her even more.

'Or are you?' he asked, soft-voiced. 'Is your mind set on it?'

It was such a temptation to tell him that she would much rather stay on at Auwai with him, but she resisted it because she knew that the whole problem with Tisho could start again if she did. Taking a firm grip on her weakening resolution she shook her head, but carefully avoided his eyes when she answered, looking instead at the strong brown throat where it emerged from the open neck of his shirt. It was so difficult to

keep her mind on practical matters when she was so vibrantly aware of him, but she hastily brought herself once more back to realities.

'I—I think we've both agreed that it's the best thing if I move,' she said. 'And I like this house better than any I've seen so far, Louis.'

`You want me to say you can have it?'

She swallowed swiftly on the lump that rose in her throat and nodded. 'Yes, please.'

Somehow it was becoming more difficult to evade the steady look in those grey eyes, and after a second or two she looked up. 'You don't figure on living here alone, do you, Beth?'

She caught her breath. 'Of course I shall be on my own!' She realised too late that her hasty answer had been too defensive and on the wrong lines.

Louis's dark brows arched swiftly and there was a sardonic twist to his mouth that was not really a smile. 'I wasn't referring to Ray Brauman,' he told her quietly and with embarrassing frankness. 'Aren't you going to hire some help? It seems kind of pointless suddenly becoming an heiress if you're going to do your own chores ! '

It seemed he had decided; he had made up his mind about the house without telling her in so many words, or why else would he suddenly be asking about hiring help? The realisation stunned her for a few seconds—it had happened and she had scarcely been aware of it. In her heart she had been praying, ever since they set out, that he would reject this house as he had the others, but he hadn't, and she needed several seconds to get used to the idea before she could answer him.

'Oh, .I'll—I'll have to think about getting someone in, of course!' She laughed, very unsteadily, and

avoided looking at him. 'I only hope I can find someone like Peg!'

'You can have Peg!' His hands held hers lightly and his strong fingers were gentle over hers as he looked down at her for a moment. 'Only until you get somebody—then she can come back to Auwai.'

Beth's head was spinning with confusion, and she stared up at him, trying to understand his motive. 'But what will you and Tish do? How will you manage?'

'Bate Kanua's wife will come in for a while, like she does when Peg's on vacation, that's no problem.'

'But—' She still watched his face; relieved to know that Peg would be with her initially, but once more wary of his motive in sending her. 'Surely it would make more sense if Mrs Kanua came to me and Peg stayed on at Auwai, wouldn't it?'

'Not to me it wouldn't!' He smiled and this time it was the kind of smile she was more familiar with—one that crinkled his grey eyes at their corners and fluttered her heartbeat with the warmth it brought to them. 'I'd sooner Peg was here to keep an eye on you, honey.'

She was being over-sensitive, she thought, and yet the feeling that he was insisting on Peg coming to her for some reason other than the obvious one refused to be banished. Then it occurred to her suddenly and she looked up at him for a second in silence, her eyes searching that strong, dark face questioningly.

'Or is it that you want to keep your eye on me still?' she suggested as soon as the idea came into her head, and without stopping to think.

The fingers holding hers tightened suddenly into such a grip that she gasped, her heart jumping anxiously in her breast. 'I guess you just can't accept that I

don't like turning you out to be on your own, can you, Beth? You just won't believe that the reason I want Peg here is because you're such a—damn it, you're such an innocent abroad, and I'm not the only one who realises it!' He shook his head impatiently when she would have spoken, for it was plain enough that he had Ray in mind. 'And I don't care how many times you tell me you're able to take care of yourself, you—'

'But I can, Louis ! I'm quite capable of taking care of myself, and by living here I can prove it.'

'And you're going to have to prove it, honey, once Ray knows I've O.K.ed the price of the house!'

'I'm not worried about Ray

The grey eyes blazed at her until she felt herself shivering, responding to little sensations that were neither quite fear nor pleasure, but a curious kind of excitement.

'Well, I damned well am!' he said between clenched teeth.

He pulled her close suddenly, tight against him with the steely hardness of his arms binding her closer still until she was conscious of nothing but the warm disturbing strength of him, and the sudden fierce pressure of his mouth on hers.

Her hands slid over his broad back, open palms pressing close to the smoothness of golden tanned skin under the thin shirt, her whole being responding to sensations she had never known existed until now. He released her mouth slowly and with evident reluctance, then buried his face for a moment in the softness of red-brown hair, his lips close to her ear.

'I swore I wouldn't let it happen again!'

His voice was low and curiously anxious, barely above a whisper, and Beth stirred in his arms at last,

though she made no attempt to free herself. Instead she had her eyes closed still and the fierce disturbing masculinity of him shut out every other sensation. He had apologised the last time he kissed her like that, and she did not want him to do so again this time.

As if to forestall him she raised her head and put her hands to either side of his face, touching his mouth with her own lightly, thick lashes lowered to conceal her eyes. She was trembling like a leaf and her legs felt far too weak to hold her if he should suddenly let her go.

Instead of letting her go, he stood for a moment looking down at her, and even imagining the deep dark glow in his eyes sent a shiver of sensation through her. Then he eased her from him, but kept his hands on her upper arms, his voice softer than she had ever heard it before.

'I can't change my mind about you,' he said. 'What I can do is make sure nobody else takes the same liberties!' He laughed shortly and shook his head, running one hand through his hair as he turned away at last. 'And I guess you could say that was the pot calling the kettle black!'

Still too dazedly unsure to think clearly, Beth looked at him through her lashes, her green eyes wide and questioning. 'By-by anybody else, you mean Ray?' she guessed, husky-voiced, and Louis narrowed his eyes as he looked down at her steadily.

Heaven knew what was going on behind those implacable features, but it was evident that his mistrust of Ray was far greater than her own. 'Do you imagine he'd have stopped there, Beth?' When she did not answer at once, he took her arms again and shook her, not hard but enough to impress her with what he was

saying. 'For God's sake, do you, Beth?' He gave her no time to answer, but frowned impatiently and shook his head. 'You're darn right I wanted Peg here to keep an eye on you! As much for my peace of mind as your comfort!'

Even in her present slightly dazed state Beth noticed the way he had worded that last sentence, and she looked up swiftly, searching his face for confirmation before she put her suspicion into words. 'You said —wanted, Louis.' Her voice still had the same husky uncertainty. 'Have you changed your mind about letting Peg come with me?'

Louis eyed her steadily for a second or two. 'I've changed my mind about a whole lot of things,' he told her. 'I'm not signing any cheque that's going to make it easy for Ray Brauman ! That's just the chance he's been waiting for!'

Beth felt the thudding response of her heartbeat, and very briefly she closed her eyes in an expression of relief she was completely unaware of. 'Does that mean —does it mean I can't have the house after all?'

The grey eyes searched over her face slowly and explicitly, bringing a soft flush of colour to her cheeks, and he raised one brow when he once more settled his gaze on her mouth. 'I mean I prefer to keep you where I can keep on eye on you, honey!' He bent over her and pressed his mouth over hers in a light, tender kiss that barely touched her lips. 'You're too much of a temptation!'

'To you?'

She was not sure whether she had meant the question to be provocative or not. Her mouth still tingled from the bruising hardness of his, and she could close her eyes for a second and quite easily imagine the

pressure of those unyielding arms around her, but she did not consciously set out to taunt him with his own impulsive action. Her lips were parted slightly and he placed a light finger on her lower lip and pulled it down.

'Me too,' he admitted. 'But I have more concern for your welfare, honey—I'm family.' He studied her for a moment longer in silence, then quizzed her curiously. 'Do you really want to leave Auwai, Beth?'

When she shook her head it was more instinctive than conscious, but she could not forget the main reason for her deciding to move out in the first place, though he seemed to have. 'There's Tisho,' she ventured, and Louis shook his head.

'You get along better now, don't you?'

She nodded, but wished she could share his confidence, for she was almost unbelievably anxious that nothing should stop her being welcome at Auwai. Things had certainly been easier between her and Tisho lately, but they were not exactly close, however many hopes Beth had of the situation improving. Looking up at him, the irrepressible optimism she felt, as well as the doubt, showed in her eyes.

'We're better friends than we were, but if she knows

He silenced her with a firm finger over her lips, and a smile creased his eyes in the way she was finding increasingly endearing. 'Then stop worrying,' he said, 'and let's go home—I have work to do ! '

All the time they were driving back to Auwai Beth was feeling quite remarkably lighthearted. Maybe she was being too optimistic, but somehow trusting Louis was instinctive and if he said things would be all right with

Tisho, then she believed him. It was enough to know that she would not be leaving Auwai after all.

She felt rather less optimistic when she learned that she and Tisho would be having dinner alone. Louis was out for the evening and her own reaction to the discovery that he was taking Grete Haas to dinner quite startled her. She hated the very thought of him being with that tall icy blonde for the whole evening, and she had no hesitation in admitting it, at least to herself.

There seemed nothing she could do about the frequency with which Louis's face came into her mind while she was changing for dinner, nor how often she found herself remembering the strange and exciting mixture of fierceness and gentleness with which he kissed her and the excitement of being in his arms.

Louis, she was forced to admit, had become a very important factor in her life, but she would be foolish to let him become too important. Louis might allow himself the occasional weakness of kissing her, but he was unlikely to see her in a more serious light, and certainly not as a wife. The latter crept unexpectedly into her mind and she shook her head hastily and stared at her reflection for a second or two in disbelief. Whatever happened, she must not let him become that important.

She found Tisho already in the dining room when she came downstairs, and from her attitude as she stood leaning on the window sill looking out into the garden, Beth guessed she was not feeling very pleased about something. The thought that Louis might have broken the news to her about staying on, she hastily dismissed as unlikely. Louis would never have done that and then left her to spend the evening with Tisho

alone, but just the same she felt curiously uneasy as she walked across the room. Tisho turned from the window as she approached and her mouth showed a hint of smile as she came and sat down at the table with her. Something was on her mind, it was plain, and Beth felt so anxious to know whether it concerned her own position that she eventually found the courage from somewhere to ask.

'Is something bothering you, Tisho?'

Tisho's almond eyes flicked quickly upwards and Beth detected surprise as well as curiosity in them before she spoke. 'Not really,' she said, but it was more evident than ever that something was on her mind, no matter if she denied it.

Still certain, Beth smiled encouragingly across the table at her. 'You're sure there's nothing you want to talk about, Tish?' she laughed with the idea of encouraging her, but it was a small unsteady sound and Tisho must have recognised it. 'I'm a good listener, so I've been told!'

Tisho glanced hastily at the door watching Peg bring them slices of melon, sweet and succulent and needing nothing to enhance its wonderful flavour. When she paddled back to the kitchen once more Tisho looked up, her spoon poised.

'Did you know that Louis's having dinner with Mrs Haas?'

The question took Beth by surprise and she sat with her own fruit untouched as she stared at her for a moment uncertainly. 'I—I did know,' she allowed at last, wondering what on earth the girl had in mind, and Tisho's intriguing eyes watching her from across the table were curiously inscrutable.

'Don't you mind?'

Beth hastily took a spoonful of melon, but once in her mouth she felt in danger of choking on it. Tisho's mood was new to her and she could not imagine where on earth this conversation was leading them. She did not look at her while she answered, but her heart was thudding loud and hard at her ribs and she knew she minded very much that Louis was dining with Grete Haas, she had already admitted as much to herself. It was less easy admitting it to Tisho, however, and she found the girl's intuition startling, so that it took her a moment or two to think how to cope with it.

She took another spoonful of melon but did not put it into her mouth, instead she sat looking down at it rather than at the small brown doll-like face opposite. 'I don't think I have the right to—object, Tisho,' she said in as steady a voice as she could manage, 'whoever Louis takes out to dinner.'

'Aren't you in love with him?'

Once more Beth stared, too stunned to answer at once, although Tisho was calmly eating her melon as if the subject of someone's deepest emotions was an everyday, matter-of-fact thing. Beth could not and would not delve into her own feelings at this

moment and in such a situation. She did not want to snub Tisho and tell her that it was no concern of hers, but she could not have given her a truthful answer, even had she wanted to.

'A lot of women are,' Tisho went on, coolly matter-of-fact, when she did not answer, and Beth felt her heart skip urgently when she faced the truth of what she said. 'I'm a bit disappointed you're not.'

'Disappointed?' Beth shook her head slowly, for Tisho in this mood was completely beyond her and she could not imagine what was in her mind. 'Tish—' She licked her dry lips anxiously, almost afraid of say-

ing the wrong thing. She felt curiously close to the girl suddenly and it was something she had hoped for so long that she dared not take a chance on destroying the rapport. 'I don't quite understand what you're get-ting at.' She looked across at the smooth and pretty face and shook her head helplessly. 'Why, Tish?'

For several moments Tisho ignored the question, while Beth was on tenterhooks of suspense and gave up any pretence of eating her own meal. When Tisho did answer, her voice, she noticed, had a slightly unsteady sound and she did not look up but kept her face half hidden by that curtain of silky black hair.

'I think he might decide to marry Mrs Haas,' she said, 'and I don't want him to, Beth! ' She looked up at last and Beth saw the shiny threat of tears in the vel-vety darkness of the almond eyes. 'She wouldn't let me stay here if Louis marries her, I know she wouldn't, she doesn't like me and she told Ann Kruper's mother that Louis should send me to boarding school—maybe in Europe! '

'Oh, Tish! '

'I don't want to go away, Beth! ' The voice was even more unsteady and the eyes brighter and more appealing. 'If he married you, you wouldn't make him send me to boarding school, would you?'

'No, no of course not.' Beth's brain was racing and she wished there was someone else there, someone with Louis's strength and understanding who would help her know what to do. 'But, Tisho—I really don't think you have anything to worry about. Louis—I'm sure Louis wouldn't send you away, no matter who said he should; he came and fetched you back, didn't he? If he'd wanted you to go he'd have let you fly out to your grandparents on the mainland, wouldn't he?'

Tisho took a moment or two to consider, then she

looked across again with a slightly less woebegone expression. 'I—I guess so,' she admitted.

'Of course he would!'

She sat for a moment or two with her hands in her lap and her head bowed, that silky hair hiding her face, and Beth almost held her breath. Then she looked up suddenly and there was a glimmer of speculation in her eyes, a suggestion of a curve in the drooping mouth.

'If you were to stay on,' she said, 'I guess Mrs Haas wouldn't be able to get us both out, would she?'

Beth had almost forgotten her own situation, that she was staying on at Auwai after all and that Tisho did not yet know it. This was surely a heaven-sent opportunity to break the news to her, now that she was suggesting it herself.

Cautiously she approached the subject, praying it was the right thing to do, instead of leaving it to Louis to tell her. She had never had a sister or even a confidante of her

own age, and she felt curiously out of her depth as she looked across at Tisho and half smiled.

'I—I've changed my mind about buying a house, Tisho. I—we went to look at one this afternoon, but

'Louis didn't approve?' Tisho guessed, and the sudden look of laughter in her eyes made Beth smile instinctively.

'He never does,' she told her, 'so I've given up trying.'

'You're—you'll be staying at Auwai?'

It was difficult to be absolutely sure if Tisho liked the idea, but she thought she did, and in any case she probably found any alternative to Grete Haas a welcome prospect. It crossed Beth's mind to wonder what would happen to her as well as Tisho if Louis ever should de-

cide to marry his Viking blonde, but she dismissed it almost before it occurred to her.

'For the time being, I'll be staying,' she said, and Tisho nodded.

'Then I guess it's O.K.,' she said, and went back to eating her melon.

## CHAPTER NINE

THE relief of knowing that Tisho was at last on her side, no matter what her reasons for the change of heart, was immeasurable, and Beth could not wait to tell Louis the news, although as it happened telling him was not necessary.

He had returned quite late from his dinner date with Grete Haas and found the two of them still involved in a game of checkers. It was a game that Beth knew nothing about and, when there proved to be little of interest on television, Tisho had offered to teach her. Still overwhelmed by the idea of being on friendly terms with the girl, Beth had found the further proof of good faith too much to resist, although board games were usually out of her scope.

Peg had passed no remark on the new situation, but once when she came in with coffee during the evening and found them at their game she raised a brow at Beth and beamed her approval. She had come in again later to suggest that it was time for Tisho to go to bed, but as it was Saturday the next day both Tisho and Beth had begged for more time and the housekeeper had merely shrugged her ample shoulders and returned to her quarters.

So it was that Louis found them some time later, laughing at some particularly silly move of Beth's, and showing no sign of tension at all. Beth, after an initial wary glance to see if he was angry about her keeping Tisho up so late, decided it was time she went to bed herself—if he was going to send Tisho up, as he

was bound to do, she did not want to be left alone with him, not when she knew he had been with Grete Haas all evening.

'I think it's time you went to bed, kitten,' he told his niece after a quick survey of the scene. 'What turned you into a checkers addict?'

Tisho's almond eyes glowed warmly and she looked at him with a pert confidence, swinging back her long black hair as she looked up at him. 'I figured it was nice and easy for Beth to learn,' she told him, and his hasty glance at Beth showed that he had not yet fully grasped the full significance of the situation.

'Don't be sassy, Tish ' He put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her close for a second, his grey eyes flicking from her to Beth, narrowed and curious. 'What have you two been up to while I've been out?' he demanded, and Tisho shrugged.

She felt a little embarrassed at the idea of having to explain, Beth thought, and hastily came to her rescue. 'We've had a very interesting evening,' she told him, packing up the pieces so that she need not look at him. 'I think we understand one another a little better now, don't we, Tish?'

The girl nodded, anxious to be away suddenly. She tiptoed and kissed her uncle's cheek, her silky hair swinging out as she skipped out of the curve of his arm and hurried across the room. 'I'm going to bed before I fall asleep,' she declared in that curiously half-defiant way she had. 'Goodnight, Louis!'

Both Beth and Louis watched her go, and neither of them said a word about her omitting Beth from her goodnight until she was on the point of going through the door, then her uncle called after her. 'Tish! ' His eyes turned to Beth briefly, then back to her, and she shook her head hastily, as if the oversight had been

accidental rather than deliberate and she was apologising for it.

'Goodnight, Beth.' She hesitated for a second longer, looking across at her with those intriguing eyes. 'I'm glad you're staying,' she said, and hurried out and closed the door after her.

When she had gone Beth too got to her feet and smoothed down her dress, trembling suddenly as if she was nervous, but tinglingly aware of Louis as he stood by the small coffee table in the window reaching for a cigarette. He put it into his mouth and lit it with a curious air of detachment, and Beth felt her heart thudding hard at her ribs as she watched the dark features that seemed suddenly so alarmingly dear to her shimmer hazily behind a haze of rising smoke.

'I think it's time I went too,' she said in a voice that was so, shaky she hated to think what reason he thought she had for being so nervous. 'Goodnight, Louis!'

He looked across at her, his eyes narrowed through the smoke but steady as a rock and infinitely disturbing. 'What happened, Beth?'

His voice was quiet, firm but with a suggestion of gentleness that could be her undoing, and she shook her head urgently. 'Nothing—happened,' she said huskily.

A black brow rose in disbelief and he jettisoned smoke through pursed lips as he shook his head. 'You and Tish playing checkers and laughing like a couple of kids, and you tell me nothing happened? What do you take me for, Beth—an idiot?'

'Oh no, of course not!' she hesitated, wondering what on earth she could tell him.

Certainly not that a mutual dislike of Grete Haas made them allies. 'We—we found we had common interests,' she said, and he frowned curiously.

'Well, I'm too glad to see you friends to care too much what they are, but I can't say I'm not puzzled. Did Peg act as peacemaker?'

Beth shook her head, wishing she had gone when Tisho did instead of staying to answer all these questions, questions which could only get more difficult to answer the deeper he probed. 'No one acted as peace-maker, Louis, we just—we just decided that we both liked and disliked the same things and—and things just went on from there.'

He came across the room to her, and it was what Beth had been fearing—the nearer became the more conscious of him she became, and she could not forget that he had been with Grete Haas, it was a fact that re-fused to be banished from her mind.



He had one hand in the pocket of his dress trousers and the other held the cigarette, its spiral of smoke still drifting up before the dark strong features and softening them into something that was not quite real—like a face in a dream. 'I'm curious, honey,' he told her in the voice that could play such havoc with her senses, 'and I'd like to know how you two got together at last, just for the hell of it. What's with the mystery? Why can't you just come out and say how it happened?'

'Because I don't want to!'

Briefly that black brow swept up again and he narrowed his eyes. 'In other words you think it's none of my damned business, right?'

She was tired and anxious not to be driven into a corner, and she looked for a way of escape. Curling her hands tightly into her palms, she looked up at him with bright, defiant eyes. 'If you like—yes!'

She turned and almost ran to the door, leaving it open behind her, and it wasn't until she was half way

across the hall that she realised she had heard him laugh.

She would have to tell Ray about her changed plans, Beth knew, and she knew he would be disappointed at least, probably even angry. He had been a willing helper in the search for her own home, although, as Louis said, he had his own reasons for helping.

Ray collected her from the house the following afternoon and they drove to the isolated beauty of Kona Beach for a swim. It was not until they had had their swim and were walking back up the beach that Beth told him her news.

'He turned it down?' Of course he was bound to see it as a decision made by Louis alone, and there was a hardness in his eyes that she did not like the look of. He cursed softly under his breath while he rubbed a towel vigorously over his body. 'Why in hell can't he let go, Beth? Damn it, he had no right to—to dictate to you that way! It's your money, the old man left it to you and you should be able to spend it any way you see fit, not have to crawl to Louis Marizzi every time you want to spend a dollar!'

Beth used her towel with rather less energy than he did, and she preferred not to look at him while she answered. She had expected him to be disappointed, perhaps even a little angry, but his almost vindictive attitude startled her a little and made her more uneasy than she expected.

'The thing is that I can't do as I like with the money, Ray, but the fault isn't Louis's, it's old Enrico Marizzi's. He made sure I had to ask for every penny I have by making Louis his trustee.'

'But I'm damned sure he didn't intend him to act as if he was in charge of you as well as the dollars!' His

anger had a petulance that was a different proposition altogether from Louis's stern and passionate fury, and she could not help feeling that he was being sulky in much the same way that Tisho sometimes was when she could not have something she wanted. 'Next thing you know he'll figure he has the right to choose your friends for you—and you know where that leaves me, don't you? He's already made his feelings pretty clear on that point!'

'Oh, Ray, that's silly!'

It wasn't silly, she knew, for she had accused Louis of much the same thing herself at one time. Somehow, though, letting Ray make the same accusation and get away with it seemed to go against the grain, and she hastened to deny it. It was a kind of family

loyalty that made her react that way, she told herself, although some other and more disturbing reason came into mind too, and was hastily dismissed.

'Not on your life!' He towelled his hair energetically, then ran his fingers through it as he looked at her with bright angry eyes. 'Does he know how much you want your own place?'

Still without looking at him, Beth sat down on the shifting coolness of the white sand, and rubbed the towel over her slim legs. 'The truth is, Ray—he knows that I don't really want to move to a place of my own.'

He stood there with the towel in one hand for a second or two, staring down at her, then he flung it impatiently aside and dropped down beside her, close enough for the warm dampness of his body to brush against her arm each time she moved. One knee was raised and he rested an arm on it, his thumbnail lodged between his teeth while he regarded her steadily.

'Let me get this straight,' he said after a moment or

two. 'You're now telling me that you want to stay on at Auwai?' Beth did not answer, but went on using her towel with more than usual energy. She could feel the tension in him, guess at the look of disbelief in his eyes as he watched her. Then he put out a hand suddenly and gripped her arm in a hold that made her gasp, turning her so that he could see her face better. 'Are you telling me that all that—that chasing around after real estate was just one big joke? That you're not moving after all?'

Beth shook her head and tried to do something about easing the grip he had on her arm. She could understand him being annoyed about it, but she had not expected him to make quite such a violent protest, and she pulled away from him, trying to make him release her.

'Don't grip like that, Ray, you're hurting me' He said nothing but let go her arm and sat looking at her instead with narrowed eyes, his mouth tight and petulant. 'I—I'm sorry about wasting your time, but—'

'He talked you out of it'

Beth shrugged uneasily, wishing it did not appear quite so much as if Louis had browbeaten her into giving up the idea of her own house. Her own mind had been made up before she even drove out there with him, and his eventual refusal to sign the cheque had been a relief, not a frustration, but she could not tell Ray that—she could certainly not mention that kiss which, had she not been already in a state of chaotic indecision, would certainly have made her so.

'I suggested having a house of my own in the first Place because of the way it was with Tish and me,' she confessed, 'that's all.'

'The kid doesn't like you being there, does she?' He did not wait for confirmation, but nodded with cer-

tainly. 'It figures—she's been queen bee there ever since her folks died and Louis took her on, both him and -the old man made a little idol of her. Sure she isn't going to like having you around, taking his mind off his nursemaid duties!'

His malice was unexpected and she felt he was doing both Louis and Tisho an injustice. Tisho was to some extent spoiled, but she was not pampered by any means and was quite capable of taking independent action, as she had shown when she took off for that flight to her grandparents on the mainland.

'We—Tish and I get along now,' she told him. 'It's all settled, so the problem no longer exists.'

'Yeah?' He laughed, but there was little humour in the sound he made, and for the first time Beth realised just how much he disliked his present employer. He had quite liked old Enrico Marizzi, but not so his grandson—he might even be jealous of him; she thought it was possible. 'I can't see that kid changing her mind for very long,' he told her with a suggestion of a curl in his lip, 'she isn't going to like it as a per-manent way of things, Beth, and you know it. Be-sides ' he winked an eye in a meaning there was no mistaking, 'you want to be free to come and go as you please, honey, not under his eye for the rest of your natural!'

'It wouldn't have been as easy as you think, Ray.'

It would have been difficult to explain that she had never been alone in her life. Never held down a job as most girls of her age did. Aunt Grace was not a wealthy woman, but she had seen to it that neither her beloved Ruth nor Ruth's daughter had needed to go out and earn their living. It had possibly been a misguided form of protection, but Beth had not yet had cause to

regret it, except that it enabled Louis to see her as an innocent abroad.

'It couldn't be easier!' Ray leaned towards her until his good-looking face was only inches from hers, and his blue eyes were earnest as they sought to persuade her. 'The house is still there, sweetheart, waiting for you to move in, and he'll sign the cheque if you insist it's what you want, you know he will. There'd be no restrictions, nobody to watch every move you make—just think of it, Beth honey, I could come and see you any time!' He reached across and kissed her cheek lightly, coaxingly. 'Wouldn't that be something, hon?'

'It's all settled, Ray.'

Her heart was thudding as he leaned back slightly to look at her long and hard, with his clear blue eyes narrowed and suspicious. 'You mean he's settled it for you ! ' He made a short and impatient sound with his mouth and shook his head. 'Oh, damn it, Beth, he doesn't own you, does he? Why can't you break out, tell him you're going away whether he lets you have the dough for the house or not—that'd make up his mind for him!'

Beth was shaking her head, her voice a little breathless as she insisted, knowing she was not going to change her mind, but wishing he would stop trying to change it. 'No, Ray! I—I don't want to go, I really don't!'

He had his hands on her arms again, though not with the same cruel grip as before, and he studied her for several seconds before he spoke. 'Beth.' He raised her chin with one hand and made her look at him. 'Don't you get any thoughts about your sexy cousin, honey child,' he said in a flat quiet voice, 'he's already hooked, and on a much stronger hook than any you could use.' Beth had no doubt at all that he was refer-

ring to Grete Haas and she felt a cold sensation in the pit of her stomach suddenly.

What she felt must have shown in her eyes, for Ray laughed, a sound even more harsh than his voice. 'He is the reason, isn't he?'

Beth could feel her heart racing like a wild thing and her hands trembled as she reached up and pulled his fingers from her chin. If Louis was her main reason for staying at Auwai, and she was not yet ready to admit that he was, she certainly had no intention of admitting it to Ray, and her cheeks were flushed as she pulled away from him and scrambled to her feet.

'I—I'd like to go home,' she said, her voice breathlessly unsteady, and Ray sat for a moment looking up at her.

When he got to his feet it was with deliberate slowness, and he pulled on his clothes with the same careful deliberation, saying nothing and not even glancing in her direction until they were both fully dressed again and standing facing one another on the white sandy beach. Then he looked at her for a long moment, his eyes scanning her face as if he sought something that he thought should be there and wasn't.

'Beth! ' He came closer, standing only a matter of inches away and reaching out to take her arms, pulling her close until he could put his arms around her. His head bent, he pressed his mouth to the soft skin of her neck, his voice quiet but gruffly unsteady against her ear. 'Don't let's fight, honey, huh? I hate fighting with you and you know I'm right about—well, skip it, I'd sooner not talk about anybody but us.'

Beth had made no move to respond to him the way she had to Louis when he took her in his arms, and she noted the fact with a curious sense of detachment. Her green eyes stayed levelled on his throat where his shirt parted at the neck, and she felt no such heart-skipping

reaction as when she looked at Louis.

'You're talking about Grete Haas,' she said, not quite sure why she wanted to raise the controversial subject of Louis's blonde woman friend at this moment. 'Are you trying to say that—things are really—serious between them?'

Ray did not like the subject being pursued either, she knew that, but there was something in her mind that she had to get straight. 'You'd better believe it, honey I Haven't I told you? You've seen him with her, couldn't you form your own conclusions?'

Beth kept her head down, her hands on his chest, keeping him from holding her too close. 'I've seen them together twice, that's all,' she told him, keeping her voice as steady as possible. 'The second time he introduced us, since then I haven't seen her again.' She raised her eyes at last and looked at him as steadily as her thudding heart allowed her to. 'Ray—if Louis is thinking of marrying Grete Haas why would he persuade me to stay home at Auwai instead of taking a place of my own? Surely he'd want me out of the way if he was bringing a new wife there.'

The look in Ray's eyes did nothing to reassure her and there was a slight suggestion of a sneer in the line of his mouth when he smiled. 'Maybe he isn't going to marry her or anybody else, baby, I wouldn't know. Could be he's got—the alternative in mind, in which case he figures he can have his cake and eat it too I He's a Marizzi, honey, that's the way they operate!'

Beth knew without anyone telling her that he was referring to her father as Much as to Louis and she looked up at him with bright angry eyes. 'How can you know?' she demanded, husky-voiced. 'You came here only two years ago, you told me so! How can you know so much about the Marizzis?'

His blue eyes narrowed, resenting her doubts and her sudden and unexpected pride in her family name, and when he spoke his voice had that hard, flat sound she had noticed earlier. 'Oh, I might be a newcomer, honey, but there are plenty who aren't, and there are plenty who talk about Richard Marizzi as well as his nephew, believe me!'

'My father!' She licked her dry lips and felt a curious sense of belonging suddenly, that she had never experienced before, no matter how often she tried to relate herself to that good-looking young man in the photograph beside her bed. She looked at Ray and the angle of her chin was less deliberate than instinctive. 'You seem to know a great deal more about my father than I do, Ray, though you never do any more than—hint, do you?'

'Oh, Beth, please, I didn't want to start any of this!' He was regretting his ill temper again, and Beth could not find it in her heart to blame him entirely, though she felt far too confused and uncertain to want to discuss anything at the moment, even her father. 'I'm sorry, I was snide about him, will you believe me?'

'I'd like you to take me home,' Beth said in a voice that sounded far more steady and confident than she was feeling. 'Louis has promised to tell me about him more than once, and I think it's time I found out just what kind of a man he really was.'

Beth had gone back to the house with her mind firmly made up, but it was obvious that Louis was not happy about being pinned down on the subject of Richard Marizzi. Not that Beth let it deter her, for she was determined this time not to be put off with evasive promises, no matter how painful the subject might prove to be.

She had checked carefully when she returned to the house, and discovered that there was no one else about but Jiro Hashada, Peg's handyman husband. Tisho, she knew, was out for the afternoon visiting the Sea Life Park in Honolulu with one of her school-friends, and Peg was shopping, so there was unlikely to be any interruptions for quite a while. Long enough for her to ask Louis all about her father.

After making sure they would not be disturbed she went along to the sitting-room and found him relaxed and comfortable and scanning a newspaper. He looked up when she came into the room and seated herself on the other end of the settee he occupied, turning to face him with her determination plain on her face. She sat with her legs tucked under her and a bright resolute look in her eyes, though her hands were clasped tightly together in her lap and showed, more than anything, her real nervousness.

There had been so many insinuations during the past two months, so many veiled hints about the character of Richard Marizzi that she was uncertain how bad she expected the truth to be. Louis's evasive promises to tell her about him, one day, had in a way been as much responsible for her present state of confusion as all those implications, although she knew that in his case it had been done with the idea of shielding her from possible hurt.

For a moment when she first came in, her resolution had wavered, for there were more enjoyable ways of passing the time with Louis than by raising the controversy of Richard Marizzi. It was when she remembered those remarks of Ray's and her own inability to argue her father's case that she steeled herself to be insistent.

Louis heard her initial demand in silence and

watched her while she sat on the other end of the settee, then he put down his newspaper with obvious reluctance. It was some consolation to realise that almost certainly it was the subject she insisted on discussing rather than her company that was unwelcome.

He looked at her for a moment while she settled herself beside him, holding her gaze steadily though perhaps a little warily, and his mouth twitched briefly into a ghost of a smile as he shook his head at her.

'So you're digging your heels in, huh?'

His fleeting smile played havoc with her senses and she realised with dismay, just how sensitive she was to his every mood and gesture. The realisation disturbed her, made her feel vulnerable, and she must try and do something about it, only right now a raised black brow was quizzing the reason for her sudden determination.

'I have the right to know, haven't I, Louis?' 'Sure you do.'

'He was my father.'

No question, honey, only what makes you so set on it suddenly? Did somebody get under your skin?'

He knew well enough who had got under her skin, she thought, for he had seen her go off with Ray, but she swiftly lowered her long lashes to hide the look in her eyes .that admitted it. `Not exactly, no.'

'Ray Brauman?' He frowned swiftly without waiting for an answer. 'If he's been getting at you with snide remarks about Rich, I'll take him apart!'

His flash of anger she found both startling and unexpected, and she was at a loss to explain the sudden tingle of excitement she felt at his swift concern for her. 'He—he mentioned him,' she admitted, 'but I've been asking you to tell me about my father ever since

I arrived here, Louis, you know that. Only you'll never do any more than promise you'll tell me one day I '

The grey eyes were warm and friendly, scanning her face briefly, and he smiled. 'And you figure this is the day, eh, sweetheart?'

The unexpected endearment set her heart racing with breathtaking speed and she nodded, swallowing hard before she answered. 'I—I think so.'

He must have noticed the breathless sound in her voice, but there was nothing she could do about it. It was disturbing having him so close, and she wished suddenly that she had sat in one of the armchairs in-stead of sharing the settee with him. Being beside him made her aware of the many things about him that could banish everything else from her mind, and she wanted to concentrate on what he had to say about her father, not be distracted by the remembered strength of those bare brown arms and the fierce pressure of his mouth on hers.

He was looking at her steadily, almost regretfully, she thought, and wondered what there was about the character of Richard Marizzi that he was so reluctant to reveal. The steady gaze of those steely grey eyes aroused a quivering uncertainty in her, and she felt her resolution weakening yet again. Her heart pounded and her hands were trembling as she held them tightly together.

'Beth

'Tell me about him, Louis, please! ' His voice had the same low, soft pitch she had heard at other times and succumbed to because she could not help herself. Now she tried hard to keep her mind on the subject she had steeled herself to ask about. 'I need to be able to—to see him in my mind. to know how much of what I hear is truth and how much—just gossip.' She looked

at him for a moment and felt the lurching thud of her heart in her breast. 'Please, Louis.'

He held her gaze and that same warm gentleness was in his eyes, sending little shivers of response through her. 'What makes you think I'll give you an any less biased view of him than anyone has so far?' he asked.

'But you knew him ! '

She held her hands tightly together, and he eased himself further along the settee towards her, taking her hands in his and enfolding her fingers in his own reassuring strength. Holding her for a moment, as if by doing so he hoped to dissuade her from going on.

'Sure I knew him,' he agreed, 'but that was twenty years ago, before you were born, honey.'

'But opinions don't change.'

'Oh yes, they do, baby!' He met her puzzled and half-accusing look with a wry smile. 'Oh, don't get me wrong, Beth—I remember Rich with just as much affection as I ever did, but I was a fourteen-year-old boy then, now I'm a man of nearly thirty-five; I don't see him the same way I did then. I guess you could say I understand him better now, but I see flaws I didn't notice then.'

She refused to be deterred by the suggestion of warning in his voice and she shook her head slowly, almost unconsciously. 'I—I think you'll give me a true picture of him because you won't be—you weren't envious of him.'

'Envious?' He considered the word for a moment, then nodded as if he agreed with it, and squeezed her fingers lightly. 'I guess maybe envy does have something to do with the way some folks felt—maybe quite a lot to do with it.'

'But not in your case,' Beth insisted, and watched him with wide anxious eyes. 'I think perhaps you're a

lot like him, Louis, and you might not be so—so—'

'Beth!' He leaned forward suddenly and his mouth stopped the rest of her words, sending a shuddering sensation along her spine. 'I guess I'd better tell you about Rich, honey, then you can see how much you think I take after him.'

It seemed the most natural thing in the world, with Beth curled up beside him, for him to put an arm around her shoulders while he talked, and she tried hard to concentrate on what he was saying rather than on Louis himself. The warmth of his body through her thin dress disturbed her as never before, and she only just resisted the temptation to rest her head on his shoulder.

'You've seen his photograph,' he said. 'Rich was good-looking, wealthy and a complete extrovert. Nothing and no one deterred him; he could take on the world and he would have done too, if it had challenged him.'

Briefly Beth looked up into his face, scanning the strong brown features with a curious sense of possessiveness, meeting the warmth in the grey eyes with a wildly beating heart. 'You liked him a lot, didn't you, Louis?'

He nodded without smiling. 'I liked him a lot, honey. I guess I thought he was just about the best guy in the world. I was only fourteen years old and Rich was doing all the wild and impossible things I thought were exciting. I wanted to be like Rich more than anything then.'

Beth was studying her hands in her lap and she did not look up at him when she spoke, but there was a fluttering uncertainty in her voice. 'He—he had a lot of girl-friends?'

Louis put a hand beneath her chin and turned her

face up to him, his eyes scanning her small flushed face for a moment before he said anything. 'I guess that's where you think I've followed in his footsteps, eh, sweetheart?'

Beth hastily looked away. 'I don't know,' she said in a small voice. 'Do you? Have lots of girl-friends, I mean? I only know about Mrs Haas, are there very many more?'

'Hmm.' That small, enigmatic and very familiar sound neither confirmed nor denied it, but he studied her for a moment longer, then hugged her closer until her head was resting on his shoulder. 'Would it matter if there were, Beth?'

'No! No, of course not!'

She had made that short and rather breathless reply too quickly, she thought, and caught her breath when the arm about her tightened suddenly and he held her close, his face resting on the softness of her hair. 'Oh, Beth, how am I going to explain Rich

to someone like you? How am I going to--make you see that he wasn't the way he might have seemed to some?'

Beth raised her head and looked up at him, her eyes in the shadow of her long lashes, both anxious and defensive. 'I'm his daughter, Louis,' she reminded him. 'I don't want him to be—to be bad, but I can try to understand him if you help me. Aunt Grace said 'Your Aunt Grace's upbringing hasn't exactly prepared you for being Richard Marizzi's daughter,' Louis told her with a dismayingly flat and discouraging frankness. 'When I think about it, that poor woman must have—hated Richard from the start, coming near her sweet Ruth. What chance did a baby like Ruth have with someone like Rich? Your aunt might not know a whole lot about men, sweetheart, but I'll bet her heart sank when she first saw Rich—Ruth wouldn't

have stood a snowball in hell's chance with him!'

'But he loved her,' Beth insisted, clinging to the one certain virtue her father had possessed. 'He married her, Louis, and if he was—like you say he was, he must have loved her to marry her!'

The grey eyes scanned her face slowly, warm and gentle as the arm that held her close to his side. 'I'd guess she looked a lot like you,' he said. 'Even Rich would have found that hard to give up.'

Beth fought hard to keep her voice steady and her mind on the matter of her father and Aunt Grace's re-action to him. 'You—you really think Aunt Grace hated him?' she asked.

She had never thought of Aunt Grace feeling so strongly about her father, only about old Enrico for denying her her birthright, but now that Louis had started the train of thought, she could see how it was possible.

'Wouldn't she, baby?' He shook his head without giving her time to find a reply. 'But to judge Rich fairly, you have to understand what the situation was like here, and I'm not sure you'll be able to do that. Rich was born when Grandpapa was nearly fifty-six years old and already as rich as Croesus, when he had thought himself almost an old man. There was nothing too good for Rich.'

He smiled and there was an edge of cynicism on his voice as well as in his eyes. 'I guess my own father was kind of a disappointment to him because he looked nothing like the old man. Poor old Grandpapa, he figured he could marry his lovely little Klara and still have sons who looked one hundred per cent Sicilians. Yeah, without doubt, Pop was a disappointment to him. He's light-haired, you see, like Klara was, and his eyes are blue, whereas Rich, when he came along,

wasn't only a bonus for his old age, but he looked a whole lot like the old man must have done fifty years before.'

'He—he doesn't look as dark as you in his photograph.'

Louis smiled and ran a hand through his thick not quite black hair. 'I'm not that much darker than he was honey, and he had dark eyes, which made him just about perfect in Grandpapa's eyes. Rich could do no wrong!' He laughed shortly, and Beth thought it had a harsh sound to it so that she looked up again. 'Even when he did!'

'Did he do very wrong?' She wished she could be sure whether the sudden more urgent beating of her heart was caused by anxiety about any possible wrongdoing of her father's, or because of her reaction to Louis's hand on her arm as it soothed a finger-tip touch rhythmically up and down her arm while he talked.

He took several seconds to answer and she thought he was finding this part of his narrative more difficult than any other. He had idolised his young uncle, he had never



made any secret of that, and it probably troubled him to talk about his less admirable points—especially to her, she thought.

Moved by something she had no control over, she reached up and placed a hand on his cheek in a gentle soothing gesture that tried to convey something of the understanding she felt for him. 'Louis?'

His free hand covered hers, pressing it to his face for a second, his fingers strong and firm around her wrist, then he bent his head and pressed his lips to the soft skin of her inner arm for a second before he spoke. 'I guess Grandpapa paid-out several thousand dollars one time and another to get him out of trouble. Fines for

driving offences, for fighting, getting drunk. It was never his fault, the old man said, and he bailed him out of trouble every time.'

He smiled down at her, a tight sardonic smile, and for the first time Beth realised how often and how severely the loyalty of Richard Marizzi's family had been tested. 'The old man paid up and Rich went on as before. He had a capacity for life that I never saw before or since—I guess that's what made him so attractive to people, why he got away with so much, and he did get away with a hell of a lot, Beth, especially with women. Women adored him, young as he was, and men found him good company—you couldn't help liking him, he was so intensely—alive.'

The vibrant excitement of his voice brought an answering excitement to her own senses, although she had not recognised her own picture of her father at all. She had in some curious way, hoped that the imagined sins she had visited on him would prove to be worse than the reality, and Louis, she knew, in his affection would have erred on the side of generosity in his character sketch, so that the misdemeanours he attributed to him were probably underplayed.

She did not look at him, but rested her head against him for a few moments longer, partly to give herself time to become used to the kind of man her father had proved to be, and partly because she liked being there, nestled up close to Louis with his arms around her. In fact after a second or two her reaction to Louis was uppermost in her mind and she coped with a whole new gamut of sensations.

His face rested on the softness of red-brown hair and his voice sounded slightly muffled consequently. 'Are you very shocked in that puritan little soul of yours, honey?'

She ought to object to his misconception of her attitude, she felt, but she was reluctant to do anything that would change the present situation, so instead she spoke without even raising her head and made no objection at all to the allusion. 'He wasn't the way I'd pictured him,' she confessed, then closed her eyes when Louis pressed his lips to her brow in gentle consolation.

'I'm sorry, sweetheart, I wish I could have given him a better epitaph, but I swear to you he wouldn't have wanted it any different!'

'Oh, I never supposed he was a saint!'

A vibrance ran through her body and it took her a moment to recognise a short, hard laugh, then once more he kissed her forehead lightly, his voice muffled by her hair.

'None of us are, baby, though I guess some of us don't try as hard as we might.' He eased her away from him, out of the curve of his arm, and she sat upright, not looking at him while the steely grey eyes, warm with some expression she could not easily define, watched her for a moment before he spoke again. 'I think I ought to try a little harder, Beth!'

A long finger pressed firmly over her lips and he shook his head slowly. 'Do me a favour, honey, and don't ask me what I mean—please!'

He got up suddenly and Beth watched him walk across to the window and stand there with his back to her, his hands thrust into his pockets. Her mouth had a softly reproachful look that she was quite unconscious of as she watched him from the shadow of her lashes. Her heart was racing, making her breathless, and she wanted so much to be in his arms again and close to the exciting hardness of his body that she could think of nothing else.

When he did not turn around after several seconds, she found the tense, taut atmosphere too much to bear, and she got up too and walked across to join him by the window, looking up at him from the concealing fringe of her lashes. Standing so close that their arms just barely touched was instinctive rather than deliberate, but the touch of him was like fire and she felt her senses spinning wildly out of control.

He turned slowly at last and sent a swift, searching glance scanning over every inch of her face, until it came to rest on her mouth with an intensity that stunned her. 'Why in God's name couldn't I keep you in the same category as Tish?' he murmured in a voice that was not quite steady, and Beth shook her head.

'Because I never was in the same category as Tish ! ' She tipped back her head and smiled at him, the full softness of her mouth unconsciously provocative, and Louis shook his head slowly, as if he was trying to fight something that was almost too much for him.

'I'm beginning to know how Rich got himself married to pretty little Ruth,' he said, his voice low and soft in the way that Beth found irresistible. 'guess she had your kind of—of innocent witchcraft, my love, didn't she?'

He reached out his arms for her and drew her close against him, so close that she felt herself moulded to the hard strength of him. Then her arms went up round his neck and she buried her fingers in his dark hair where those premature grey streaks lent even more distinction to his arrogant head.

His hands slid around her, drawing her closer still until his mouth was only a warm breath away and his eyes gleamed like grey steel in the darkness of his face. The first gentle pressure of his mouth did not prepare her for the fierce, hard assault on her senses that fol-

lowed, and she felt almost as if she had ceased to breathe for several head-spinning seconds until he released her.

'Beth!' He kissed her eyes and the softness of her neck, then looked down at her with something in his eyes that brought a swift flush of colour to her cheeks and an even more urgent beat to her heart. 'I love you, sweetheart!' He buried his face against her neck, his mouth pressing lightly to the soft skin. 'I want to marry you more than anything in the world, if you'll have me, my baby—will you?' He raised his head, and once more looked down into the wide, bright excitement of her green eyes, like gems in the small flushed face. 'Will you, Beth?'

She let her eyes roam over the familiarity of his features, wondering at how dear they seemed to her now, and she smiled up at him after only a second with her mouth smiling and soft, inviting further kisses. 'I think I must,' she said in a small light voice that trembled with unfamiliar sensations, 'I love you ! '