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GOLDEN FIRES

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What life is there, what delight, without golden Aphrodite?

—M/MNERMUS 650-590 B.C.

Author's Note

In 1952, the great Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier entered the chamber of Pacal, or Shield. The Maya king had been buried for over a thousand undisturbed years in the Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque.

“None can deny that his reign must have been one of the greatest in all the ancient history of the Americas,” Ruz said in *The Mysterious Maya*.

Come with me and see what wonders he found. My heroine shares Ruz's love for the Maya, as did John Lloyd Stephens and Arthur Morelet before them. You will see what Morelet saw in 1846, travel where he went as Lina risks her life in the Yucatan to add to their record. Her methods are advanced for these early days of archaeology, but women as bold and adventurous as my heroine would have to be ahead of their time. I've moved the discovery to the Temple of the Sun because Lina, intrepid as she is, could never steal another man's find.

I've combined two loves in this novel. My degree in archaeology, with an emphasis on the Maya, gives me special regard for this story. In addition, Jeremy Mayhew is the only secondary character I've ever created who demanded his own romance. Those of you who read *The Tender Devil* will remember him as the black-sheep brother of the hero. I hope you'll enjoy his journey to his own happiness as much as I enjoyed giving it to him.

Part One

We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel.

—MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, letter 19 (1796)

Chapter 1

THE FIRST TIME he saw her, she was surrounded by men.

In the future Jeremy Mayhew would remember the moment as a turning point in his life; on that sunny April day of 1879, he merely paused with interest. The frilly architecture of the Hotel de Paris in Monte Carlo made an ostentatious backdrop for the four men who stood, two on each side of the girl. Their exquisite broadcloth coats and embroidered waistcoats proclaimed the status augmented by their

jeweled tiepins and rings.

Jeremy's long, fair eyelashes drooped cynically over moody gray eyes. Once, long ago, he reflected, he'd aspired to this rarefied breed. No longer. Gentlemen lived a life that he neither sought nor envied. Their hypocritical, shallow world was more distasteful to him than the rat-infested ports that were his only claim to a land's end.

That life, at least, was bounded by rules he understood: The strong survived, the weak perished. Treachery abounded, but it came with a club instead of a smile. If you paid your debts, and kept to yourself, you didn't make many enemies. You might not make many friends, either, but Jeremy Mayhew had learned long ago to live without friends.

With a will of their own, his eyes slipped once more to the girl. No, he didn't envy the gentlemen their wealth and the incumbent responsibilities . . . but this? This, he envied. She was so different from his usual woman. She was flirtatious, yes, but breeding and, even more appealing, *joie de vivre* glowed from every inch of her small frame.

Even on a step above the four young men, she was shorter. But her lack of height only accented her appeal. She was a pocket princess who had never known deprivation or despair. She fit here in Monte Carlo, where the sun shone and the climate was as temperate as the morals of the Monegasques themselves.

Her cherry-red gown was a stunning contrast to the lustrous black hair worn atop her head in a series of braids and small curls. The princess-style dress was tight from the high, ruffled neck to her hips, where gores flared to the hem. Each gore was inset with white lace. The same lace cascaded from her shirred sleeves. A small red hat adorned with white lace and swansdown perched on one side of her curls, wobbling as she tilted her head and nibbled a white-gloved fingertip.

Her soft, musical voice drifted to him on the lavender-scented breeze. "Really, gentlemen, you're unkind to present me with such a dilemma. I vow I can't choose between you." She looked up at each man in turn.

Jeremy expected her to bat her lashes, but her gaze was direct. "Shall we all dine together? I have

such news to share of my papa's plans—" She broke off with a gasp as a gust of wind caught her hat and snatched it loose from its moorings. Like a small, flirty cartwheel, it rolled down the steps to where Jeremy stood at the bottom. He bent and saved the delicate lace and swansdown from the paved drive.

He held the wide eyes that, he could see as he drew closer, were deep blue, and climbed the steps to three below her. He proffered the bit of fluff with a slight bow. "Your hat, milady. Though why it would want to part from such charming company is beyond me." He gazed into beautiful, curious eyes that were framed by spectacular curling lashes.

Before she could take the hat, one of the men, a tall, supercilious blond, snatched it out of Jeremy's hand and dusted it off on his sleeve. "You've done your good deed for the day, fellow. Now be off with you." He eyed the hat critically as if checking for Jeremy's dirty prints. With a bow deeper than Jeremy's, he presented it to the girl.

Jeremy stayed put, watching the girl watch him. The gentleman scowled.

Ignoring the blond's disapproval, she took the hat. "It is, I confess, a favorite of mine, though it doesn't seem to share my affection. Should I reprimand it?" She gave it a chiding glance, then smiled up at Jeremy, showing a deep dimple in one cheek.

"You can try, milady, but don't be too harsh. It's such a pretty little thing." He wasn't looking at the hat. Jeremy waited for her blush. To his disappointment, she took the compliment in stride. It was probably poor praise indeed compared to the encomiums usually heaped upon her. Her smile didn't waver as she set the hat back upon her head and stuck a pearl-headed hatpin through the lace.

Her composure made him more determined to rattle it. Leaning close, he blew gently. The swansdown fluttered, as did the long black lashes. When the bit of dried leaf floated down, it lit on the shoulder of her dress. Holding her eyes, Jeremy licked his fingertip and daubed up the leaf, his touch lingering long enough to be noticeable but not long enough to be impudent. Even through the layers of clothes he could feel the soft warmth of her flesh, and he let his eyes show his enjoyment of that fact. He was pleased to see her smile waver as he tilted his head and blew the leaf away, his pucker lingering along with his sidelong glance.

Her gaze lifted from the strong lines of his mouth. She hurried into speech, her voice a bit higher.

“Thank you, sir, for fetching my hat.” She held out her white-gloved hand.

Each of the young gentlemen watched skeptically, as if expecting the oaf to shake it.

A thick lock of pale blond hair flopped over his bronzed forehead as, instead, Jeremy bent and kissed her hand in the Continental manner. “It was an honor, ma’am.” He straightened and smiled the lopsided smile famous among the women of Marseilles. “I’m an excellent back-scratcher as well, should you need further assistance.”

At last she blushed. Angry mutterings came from the young men, but Jeremy didn’t even glance their way. To his delight, she recovered quickly, and smiled back.

“My maid performs that task quite well, sir, but I thank you for your, ah, gallantry.”

Jeremy eyed her beaux, then looked at her and said dryly, “You’ve a surfeit of that, it seems to me.”

She held out a staying arm, shaking her head when her blond suitor and his friend made a move toward Jeremy. “No woman can have too much gallantry.”

Jeremy looked from her, to the men beside her, to the facade behind them. Abruptly he came to his senses. The dalliance had been pleasant, but he was here on business. Besides, the only use he had for any woman was something he’d never get from this girl. They had absolutely nothing in common. And common, he thought wryly to himself, was surely what she thought him. He shrugged mentally.

“In that case, mademoiselle, I bid you good day so you may return to that pastime.” With a curt nod, Jeremy moved aside to ascend the steps.

“You there! The servant’s entrance is to the back,” said the blond. Contemptuously, he appraised Jeremy from his scuffed brown boots to his clean but well-worn beige breeches and plain white shirt, then back again.

Jeremy paused. “I don’t recall asking for directions. Perhaps you’d like to personally show me where I should go?” His tone was soft, but his steely gray eyes glanced off the blond’s face. Though the dandy was taller than Jeremy, he lacked the broad chest and powerful legs of his challenger.

The other young men watched with interest, the girl nibbling at her full lower lip.

The breeze calmed. The sun beat down with merciless clarity on the sweat gathering on the blond's brow, and the lack of it on Jeremy's. His relaxed stance indicated he seldom lost this type of battle—or cared if he did.

When the blond swallowed, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing with the movement, Jeremy's mouth curled down at the corners. Flicking a hand in the air as if he'd just brushed away a bothersome insect, Jeremy ascended the rest of the steps. By the time he paused in the lobby to look about, he'd dismissed the incident. To a man who'd often fought with whatever weapons were handy, be they knives, fists, broken bottles, or even, on occasion, teeth, the confrontation *was* picayune.

The hotel's tasteful but grandiose architectural scheme was repeated in its interior: marble floors and pillars, plush chairs and sofas, sparkling chandeliers and a festooned, arched ceiling centered by a flower-inlaid glass dome. Jeremy's boots left marks in the red carpet as he approached the desk.

The clerk's obsequious smile went crooked. "Yes?"

"You've a room being held for me, I believe, by a Sir Lawrence Collier. The name is Jeremy Mayhew."

The smile stayed pinned on, barely, as the clerk flipped through his reservations. He seemed surprised to find one. He swung the huge registration book around for Jeremy to sign. Jeremy did so, then accepted the key the man offered, and the waiting note.

He'd already turned away when the man asked, "What of your bags, sir? Do you need help?"

"I have none," Jeremy tossed over his shoulder. He smiled to himself at the clerk's muttered, "Hpmph!" He was not insulted. In fact, he felt rather sorry for the fellow. How grim for your livelihood and your self-consequence to hinge upon the wealthy, he thought. Much better to have barely a pot to your name, know that fact and accept it, than to live comfortably under the shadow of others. If the fellow knew how much he'd earned in his peripatetic calling, he'd sing a different tune, but Jeremy didn't care what he, or any man, thought of him. He'd chosen his dangerous way of life out of necessity, but now pursued it by preference—for reasons he'd not justify to anyone.

Even himself.

Jeremy ascended the carpeted steps to the second floor and followed the long hallway to his room. He unlocked the door and went inside, resigned to feeling out of place for the next day or so. No expense had been spared here, either, but the opulence was wasted on Jeremy. The green and gold tapestry bedhangings were set off by a gold velvet sofa and chair. The rococo-style furniture, with its ornate carvings, didn't appeal to him. He threw himself sideways in the dainty chair and plopped his scarred boot heels on the adjacent marquetry table.

Pulling the note from his pocket, he unfolded it. "Please meet me and my daughter in the dining room at seven for dinner, where I will explain my business proposal. Yours, Sir Lawrence Collier."

Jeremy wadded up the note and tossed it onto the table. Damn. He hadn't brought a suit with him because he didn't own one that fit. He'd been slimmer in build when he left New York six years ago. His preference was to go as he was, uncaring of the scandalized glares. But embarrassing his host was no way to begin what Jean had claimed could be a lucrative business association. And Jean had steered him to many such in the past. He'd have to buy new clothes.

Levering his legs back around, Jeremy stood. He frowned at the room, wishing this snooty English lord had agreed to meet him in Marseilles, as he'd requested. Jeremy sighed and turned to the door.

One lesson he'd readily learned: Delaying the unpleasant only made it more so. Jeremy slammed and locked the door, then stomped down the corridor and out of the hotel. This quaint little town was becoming more popular now that the rail was through, so he should find a decent tailor who had a few suits made up.

Back at the Hotel de Paris, Evangeline Collier grimaced at her reflection in the glass. Her tight gray silk gown would have been sheath-plain without the silver bugle beads. The clever snowdrop pattern was sparse at the heart-shaped bodice, growing gradually denser toward the hem until shimmering snowflakes seemed to float around her feet as she walked. White lace peeped at hem and bodice and trimmed her puffed sleeves. Her hair, dressed now in a cascade of curls, was decorated in back with a diamond hair comb that matched the jewels shimmering at neck, wrists, and ears.

By all appearances, she was an affluent young woman. Only she, her father, their barrister, and their lengthening list of creditors knew the image was as false as the paste jewels. The lovely gown had been lately reworked by her own clever fingers from the voluminous skirts left in the attic by a wealthier relative. In fact, unless they concluded their business soon, she'd have to start reweaving the gowns her swains had already seen—a dead giveaway to the true state of their fortunes.

Evangeline thumbed her nose at her reflection. “You might as well have a sign that says For Sale pasted to your forehead,” she said aloud.

Her father, entering in time to hear her remark, stopped in his tracks and scowled. “That’s no way to speak, Lina. I swear I’ve taught you better than that.”

“Indeed you have. Perhaps For Rent would be more appropriate.” Lina turned away to collect her fan and reticule. “It may come to that if you can’t coax enough men to your side using me as bait.”

“Lina! I’ll not have any daughter of mine be so ... so—” “Honest?” Lina snapped her fan open and simpered over it, “La, sir, if you insist, we can perhaps include you in our little venture. A thousand pounds, you say? It’s not much, but it will do—”

“That’s enough! They’ll get twice what they’ve invested, as you well know.”

“I know no such thing. Morelet and Stephens found no gold in their travels. What makes you think we will?”

“Their investigations weren’t funded or mounted as ours will be. We can spend months looking, if we so desire. If we’re systematic, as Schliemann was—”

“Schliemann didn’t have to contend with a tropical rain forest.”

“Nor did Troy leave ruins to mark his path. Where there are temples, there must be burials.”

“And what then? If gold there is, will you melt it down like Cortez did, or preserve it for the future, as every serious archaeologist should?”

Her father turned away to comb his thick dark hair before her mirror. “That, miss, is none of your concern. I, too, would prefer to keep the finds intact, but I needn’t remind you that our future depends upon the success of this expedition. We’ll dispense with the finds in whatever way will net the most for

ourselves and our investors. The British Museum should be willing to pay a pretty sum if they're anything like the gold Schliemann found...He put the comb down and turned to face her.

She put a soft, pleading hand on his arm. "Please, Father, there's another way. You can take the position offered you by the museum and let me be your assistant. We can sell the estate and pay off our debts, then live on our salaries."

He shrugged her hand off. "I'll have no daughter of mine take employment, nor will I give up your heritage without a fight. If you persist in this stubbornness, I may make you stay with your aunt, after all. It's against my instincts to take you along. If it weren't for your drawing skills, I'd not let your blandishments sway me."

Lina drew herself to her full height, and only the paling of her healthy, glowing color betrayed her hurt. "You may try to 'make me' do as you please, but I'd remind you, sir, that I am three and twenty and responsible for myself. Leave me behind if you will, but I'll follow you to Palenque if I have to swim the Atlantic."

Deep blue eyes glared into deep blue eyes.

Finally Sir Lawrence rubbed his brow. "It's my fault for raising you as I have. Your poor mother must be turning in her grave to see her daughter such a hoyden. I should have made you wed years ago instead of letting you accompany me on all my expeditions."

Lina's eyes kindled. "Indeed you should have."

"Now, Lina, let's not get into that again. Young Chambray was totally unsuitable for you, as you've since agreed. You didn't wear your heart upon your sleeve beyond a twelvemonth—"

"What do you know of my heart?" Lina burst out. "Or how I felt when Philippe married Marie?"

"Only your pride was hurt, Lina. Admit it."

"Pride, at least, is something we have in common. And know this, sir: I'll not let you endanger mine again. Stop pushing me toward wealthy suitors and let me make my own choice, or I swear to you that when this expedition is over, we shall go our separate ways. If I didn't want to see Palenque as badly as do you, I'd consider leaving you now."

“Lina!” her father whispered through stiff lips.

Grinding her teeth, she whirled and marched to the window. “Now leave me to compose myself. I must appear at my best if I’m to lure these men—and their money—to our cause. Not to mention this mysterious captain Jean thinks so highly of.” She arched a glance at him over her shoulder.

Sir Lawrence stalked to the door, opened it, and snapped it closed.

Lina stared through blurred eyes at the drive below. These draining fights had become more frequent as she grew up— or, more rightly, aged. Here she stood, a woman in her prime and proud of it. And yet... Somehow she felt that, grown in stature though she was, she’d shrunk in all the ways that mattered. She’d taken life’s lessons to heart, but felt weary at the learning.

What was life without joy, ambition without purpose, or maturity without acceptance? As her horizons had literally broadened on her travels with her father, her perspective of the world had narrowed. She’d been both touted in a way she didn’t want and scolded for what she couldn’t change too many times to avoid the cynicism that now plagued her. When she’d been sheltered on her English estate, it had been easy to laugh, to enjoy life’s great adventure, to savor her femininity. But true adventure had taught her the toughest lesson of all: Being a woman in a man’s world was little to revel in.

Men were now arguing about the meaning of her infant science, archaeology. Of what value was a mere woman’s opinion? She’d best keep to her drawing and leave the important decisions to those with cooler heads and sounder logic. While no one had said the words to her face, all had made them clear by deed and action.

Including her father.

At first, she’d argued. With her father, his workers, and finally with the French scholar she’d loved, Philippe. She’d accomplished nothing but a hardening of her father’s attitude, snickering from the workers, and anger, then rejection, from the man who supposedly loved her to distraction.

However, Philippe’s betrayal three years ago had, with time, changed from a mortal wound to a salutary lesson. She’d eschewed the full trousers and mannish shirts for her more appropriate dresses. The resentment of her gender had faded as she realized Philippe had hurt her pride more than her heart.

Realized, too, that scorning her own womanhood was both counterproductive and foolhardy. She'd been impotent to steer her own destiny, much less her father's, as a woman aping a man. But a woman worthy of the name had powers she'd not begun to measure.

Had she not since used those powers to good effect? She'd coaxed her father into taking her along on his most dangerous expedition. She'd wheedled more investors into their risky venture than they'd dared hope for. Now, if she could only charm this captain, whom Jean said knew the Yucatan better than most, into being their shipper and their guide but charging them little more than operating expenses, her satisfaction would be complete.

So why did she wander to the mirror and look at herself with dislike? Sighing, she drew a silver-spangled, tassled shawl over her shoulders. That was easy to answer. Because she liked this role little better than her old mannish one. Both were deceitful; both required smothering part of herself.

Would she never meet the man who could accept her as she was? Neither a wilting violet nor a thorny cactus, but a hardy wildflower that would thrive and proliferate year after year— if only left alone to grow blossom.

Men seemed reluctant to admit that women could think as clearly and even, when challenged, be as brave, as they were. Until she met a man who could accept both her masculine and feminine side, she'd shrink, cajole, and flirt with the best of them.

Unbidden, a strong face capped with pale hair popped into her head. Silver eyes stared into hers with an expression she'd seen often enough to recognize. Yet those eyes had expressed more than physical desire. The loneliness, the sadness behind the boldness, had touched her deeply.

He'd reminded her of a penniless boy looking into a window at the shiny red wagon he had no hope of buying. Then, his expression had changed as he'd looked from her to that boorish Baxter. Cynicism had weakened that magnetic pull. He'd left before she discovered his name.

As she went to the door, she reflected that was just as well. Now, when she was about to embark on the greatest challenge of her life, was no time to be attracted to a man. Further contact with that compelling stranger would be disastrous.

When she descended the stairs, she forced a gay smile. She paused at the bottom to accept the proffered arm of one of her admirers, then swept into the vast, muraled dining room with a grace that made her seem six inches taller. The gas lighting flickered on her beaded gown and paste jewels. The silver dress threw her glowing complexion and lustrous dark hair into sharp relief. Even among the throng of women glittering with real diamonds, she was like a crisp, pine-scented air in a stuffy room.

When she reached the table where her father and other admirers sat, she accepted the chair Baxter had saved for her. Of all her beaux, he appealed to her the least. Unfortunately he was also the wealthiest, and he was the investor who would accompany them and report to the others. She looked around the table, but spied no new faces. Her odd tension relaxed as she threw herself with vigor into her role.

Before the soup had been served, she had every man at the table grinning at her tale of how she'd cajoled a Greek worker into letting her see the Acropolis. "Father had confined me to my room, you see, and was not going to allow me to visit the Acropolis as punishment for some misdeed."

Her airy wave was interrupted by her father's mild, "Your 'misdeed,' as you put it, almost cost me my position. Playing dress-up with ancient jewelry worth a fortune was not the best way to endear your father to his coworkers."

After the laughter had died, Lina continued. "As I was only thirteen at the time, the punishment seemed overly severe. I'd longed to see the Erechtheion since Father first showed me its picture. I tried many ways to make the man, an aging Greek with several grandchildren, understand, but I couldn't overcome the language barrier. We weren't facing the right direction, so no amount of pointing seemed to help . . ." She paused to take a leisurely sip of wine.

Baxter squirmed at the long pause. "I say, then, how did you manage the thing?"

Lina daintily put her crystal glass down in the correct position beside her porcelain plate. "I acted out my request. Can you guess how?" Her mischievous, glinting glance went from one attentive face to another.

Baxter rubbed a hand along his jaw. "Dashed if I can see it. How does one act out a building?"

The answer came from an unexpected quarter. A deep voice said over Lina's shoulder, "It's quite

simple. She posed as one of the most famous parts of the Erechtheion. I imagine with a sheet draped over herself, even at thirteen she resembled a karyatid, one of those graceful ladies who so magnificently support the south porch. Is that correct, Miss Collier?”-

His words were courteous, Lina told herself as she turned her head to look over her shoulder. So why did she feel them grating over her like gravel? She saw a white-coated waiter receding down the aisle and deduced that the stranger must have been standing there for some time after being escorted to their table. They'd all been too engrossed to notice him. Baxter and her other gallants scowled at the newcomer. Jeremy stepped closer, under the blazing chandelier over their heads.

Gone was the laborer; in his stead was an urbane man of the world. From his cropped blond head to his white dress tie and tight black trousers and tails he was sartorial perfection. Lina had to take a deep breath to find voice to answer him.

“Perfectly correct—Mr. Mayhew.” Her brilliant smile hid her dismay. *Oh, why did I even get out of bed this morning? This was the captain she must charm?*

Her father rose at the name and advanced toward Jeremy, his hand extended. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Mayhew. Won’t you join us?”

Lina watched Jeremy walk around the table. He was tall, sleek, and powerful, but curiously, he called up images of locomotives more than jungle cats. For his strength was controlled, available at his command, rather than wild and predatory. How she understood that she couldn’t say, but as he sat down across the table and met her eyes, she knew he was analyzing her also. And, from the set look about his mouth, he was no happier to know her identity than she was to learn his.

“You seem to know my daughter, though I’m rather at a loss to understand how.” Collier sent a half angry, half inquiring glance at Lina.

“We met earlier on the steps when I retrieved her hat,” Jeremy replied.

“I see. May I introduce you to these fine young men? Each is interested in the venture I wish to discuss with you.” Collier went about the table, starting at his left, naming each Englishman, with Baxter, who was seated on Collier’s right, last.

Baxter's infinitesimal nod was more insult than courtesy, but Mayhew only lifted an eyebrow before looking back at Lina. "I didn't mean to hog your stage, Miss Collier, but since none of your swains seemed to make the proper connection . . ."

Somehow he made the apology insolent. He might as well have likened her to an actress and her suitors to idiots. "To the contrary, Mr. Mayhew. *They* understand all that is proper." She turned to Baxter, who shot a triumphant glance at Jeremy. He lifted Lina's hand to kiss it, but froze with her fingers halfway to his mouth when Jeremy again interrupted, even more smoothly.

"Bravo! Thespis himself would be impressed with your ability. If you played the karyatid with as much sangfroid as you do the dignified lady, no wonder your Greek jailer was swayed."

That was it! Lina snatched her hand out of Baxter's and clenched it and its mate in her lap to avoid reaching across the table and slapping that crooked, oh-so-polite smile off Mayhew's face.

With the hard-won control she'd acquired in the past few years, she said evenly, "Again, you err. Thespis would never have noticed my 'ability' because the Greeks would not have allowed me, a mere woman, to act. Women then were to be seen but not heard." Lina paused and let her eyes drift disparagingly over Jeremy's immaculate person. "An opinion still shared by many in the modern world. Unfortunately." To her fury, the sally that made her admirers smirk didn't elicit a blink from her tormentor.

"I've never been so charmingly likened to a primitive," was the suave reply. "Not that I mind, actually. I've seen more to admire, often, in so-called backward societies than I have in 'civilization.'"

Goaded beyond her patience, Lina snapped open her fan and batted her long eyelashes at Jeremy. Only her father knew her well enough to realize that when she resorted to her fan, an affectation she detested, she was truly furious. He reached out to grab her arm, but she shifted away and leveled a limpid blue gaze on Jeremy.

"Did I imply primitive? How remiss of me. Perhaps simian would be more apropos—if Mr. Darwin is to be believed. While I've been skeptical of his theory in the past, you, Mr. Mayhew, may make me reconsider."

Jeremy threw back his blond head and roared even as Collier moaned, “Lina! What’s the matter with you? Insulting a guest so. What will he think of us?”

Between chuckles, Jeremy gasped out, “That your daughter is that most rare and heady of women: a beauty with wit. Though why she uses that rapier tongue on me *is* rather mystifying.” Jeremy unfolded his napkin and tossed it in his lap as the first course of turtle soup was served. He might as well have patted a yawn to signify his lack of concern at her hostility.

But when their eyes clashed across the table like crossing swords, Lina knew something bothered him. What, she didn’t know. Nor did she understand precisely why she felt as if every hair on her body were standing on end. One thing was certain: This man, whom she’d been so drawn to on their first meeting, deliberately provoked her.

And she was encouraging him.

She took a deep, calming breath and turned a graceful white shoulder on him to engage Baxter in animated conversation.

Only after the elaborate meal had been taken away did Collier clear his throat and broach the subject foremost in all their minds. “These gentlemen shall be privy to our business because they have each invested tidy sums in our expedition. Captain Mayhew, you come highly recommended to us from a trusted source as being intimately familiar with the interior of Mexico. Specifically, we wish to hire your vessel to take us as far as Campeche, then pay you to lead us through the Yucatan to Chiapas—”

“Palenque,” Jeremy inserted quietly.

“Precisely. We can negotiate the form of payment later, but we’ll carry much equipment, so we’ll require many canoes and mules. Have you the contacts in Campeche to get us the supplies we’ll need?”

“Yes.” Mayhew watched the light refracting off the cut-crystal glass rotating in his hand.

Lina couldn’t read his thoughts. Whatever his failings, she thought tartly, lack of confidence was not one of them. Though she didn’t doubt that he could deliver whatever he promised, that surety only made her angrier. She had to bite her inner lip to avoid drilling Mayhew on his qualifications.

“Our party will not be large; it will consist only of myself, my daughter, and Mr. Baxter, who wishes

to report personally to the Royal Geographic Society.”

Mayhew glanced up at that, one brief, piercing look at Lina, then back at his glass.

“We’ll need to hire workers, of course, but I and Mr. Baxter will supervise the project.” Collier’s acute blue eyes searched the American’s face, but Jeremy still studied his glass. “We wish to leave as soon as possible.”

When Jeremy didn’t refuse the offer, Collier leaned back in his chair with a satisfied air, as if awaiting only the captain’s acceptance.

“That’s your decision.” All at the table relaxed, but tensed again when Jeremy set his glass down, pushed his chair back, and stood. “But not with me as guide. I’ve little taste to witness suicide.”

“Suicide? Nonsense. We know the dangers and are fully prepared—”

“No one can be fully prepared for the rain forest. Even one who has experienced it many times, such as myself. No, Mr. Collier. The Yucatan is no place for you. Much less your daughter.”

So, he’d gotten to her at last. She’d known he would eventually. Lina also stood to face Mayhew across the table. “I’ve lived much of my life in tents. I’m used to rough conditions. You’ve no right to judge me ineffectual on so short an acquaintance—”

“Ineffectual, Miss Collier? This time *you* err. I judge you a bit too efficient for your own good. But the Yucatan has a way of showing all of us the weakness of arrogance—”

“Oh yes? Then you’ve learned little in your many journeys there.”

Jeremy propped his fists on the table to lean over it. “I’ve learned that the rain forest is a great, primitive beast that slumbers best when left alone. Toy with it at your peril.”

Her narrow eyes met the quicksilver challenge in his. She ignored the thrill chasing up her spine at the double entendre. “I am well read on the area, Mr. Mayhew. I know the privations Morelet and Stephens endured. Don’t be deceived by my appearance. I’ve survived on less than maize and beans.”

“Have you awakened with a venomous serpent crawling over you? The Indians call it *nahuyaca*. It can exceed six feet in length. Its bite induces paralysis, burning thirst, retching. Then come livid spots about the wound that soon turn to gangrene that spreads throughout the body. Oh yes, we have no cure.

Of the eight people I've seen bitten, cupping and cauterization saved two. The others died." Jeremy smiled slightly when she couldn't hide a shiver, but she swiped the smile away with her retort.

"That is one of the reasons why hammocks are the most practical mode of sleeping. Really, Mr. Mayhew, do you not know that?"

He bowed in her direction in acknowledgment of her hit, but responded equably, "True. However, hammocks, or even nets, can't entirely protect against mosquitoes. And the jungle variety are larger. Then, of course, there's *el tigre*."

"The tiger is indigenous to Asia, not the Americas," Lina scoffed.

Mayhew cast his eyes toward the plaster ceiling. Patiently he said, "That's the Spanish term for the 'jaguar.' It hunts at night. While we sleep. It attacks from trees. Where we sleep." Mayhew glanced from Lina's paling face to Baxter's wooden expression. But dots of sweat popped out on the Englishman's high forehead.

"And then there's the vampire bat. It, too, attacks at night. And of course there are alligators, iguanas, poisonous insects. These are only the animal variety. Some of the Indians are not friendly—"

Collier slammed his hands down on the table and rose. "Your scare tactics won't work, Mayhew. We're going, with *or* without your aid. We should be able to acquire a guide on arrival, if not before."

Jeremy sighed and straightened. He sent a regretful glance toward Lina. "A pity."

"Don't measure me for my coffin yet," she snapped back. "One wonders why you overemphasize the dangers. Could it be you have plans of your own for Palenque?"

Leaping to his feet, Baxter inserted, "By Jove, that's it! Fellow's been there before. Stands to reason he must suspect the buried riches, ripe for the picking."

Jeremy went still. After a pregnant pause, he murmured, "I'll ignore that remark only because of where we are. Since you won't heed my warnings, then to the devil with you." He started to turn, then sliced a look at Collier. "And for the record, Sir Lawrence, I'd never have agreed to guide you for an interest in such a risky venture. I operate on a cash basis only. Up front." Jeremy turned on his heel and stalked off, his tails swaying slightly with his arrogant stride.

He didn't miss a trick, did he? Lina was torn between grudging admiration and fury. They'd not stood a chance of hiring him since his price was doubtless exorbitant. Still, he could have refused them in a less obnoxious way.

"Surely you can find someone just as suitable," one of the other young men said heartily, but Collier shrugged and slumped back in his chair. Lina glanced at her father. Before she could speak, Baxter took her arm.

"Miss Collier, I could use a breath of air after the stench that rogue left behind. May I escort you to the terrace?"

Lina longed to refuse and retire for a hot soak, but a pleading look from her father made her bite the words back. Keep Baxter happy at all costs, yes indeed, she thought bitterly. Since her vaunted charm had failed them so miserably tonight, she owed her father better success with their biggest investor.

"I'd enjoy that, Mr. Baxter," she responded politely, and let herself be led away, out to the terrace, where the Mediterranean uttered its siren call.

The terrace was dimly lit by gas lanterns, but their glow paled beside the full moon beckoning over their heads. Lilacs and lemons scented the air, and the waves lapping at the rocky promontory on which the hotel stood lulled some of her unease away. She strolled at his side as Baxter led her deeper into shadows. It wasn't until they were in a dark corner formed by the terrace wall and the side of the hotel that her senses were alerted. She pulled her hand out of Baxter's tightening grip and casually strolled to the wall, ostensibly to peer down at the sea's dance.

"Amazing to think how effortlessly the Greeks plied these waters and others in their tiny ships."

"Let's not discuss archaeology tonight. May I call you Evangeline?" She nodded, but didn't look at him. "Please call me Hubert. We've many miles to cover together, and formalities will soon be as silly as they are unnecessary."

Lina glanced over her shoulder as she thought she heard a footfall, but the waves muffled the sound, and Baxter turned her chin back in his direction. "Evangeline, you already sense my feelings, I know. I'm so looking forward to our journey. What discoveries we shall make. Together." When she didn't pull

away, his voice grew more insinuating. ‘The wealth of pleasure you give can never be matched by mere gold. Oh, my darling...’

Lina forced herself not to struggle when he lowered his chiseled mouth over hers. She accepted his passionate kiss passively, even when he bent her back over his arm and deepened the pressure. She found his lips as dry and nauseating as burned beef, but then she only had Philippe to compare him to. Would he never be finished? she wondered as she was forced to breathe through her nose. She sniffed again. Surely that was cigar smoke. She was so involved in sensing another’s presence that she didn’t at first notice that Baxter’s hand had slipped to the front of her low-cut gown. But when he began to ease it off her shoulder, she pulled out of his arms.

She slipped her sleeve back up and opened her mouth to berate him, but was interrupted by a suave voice. ‘Please excuse me. I came out to enjoy raw nature—and got rather more than I bargained for.’

A red tip glowed a bare six feet away. Lina whirled and met silver eyes shining in the lantern light. Their blatant contempt hit her like a slap in the face. She blushed, but drew herself up to her full height. While she was still grappling with words, Mayhew’s footsteps receded down the terrace.

Lina whirled on the man who’d caused this humiliating situation. Blast him! Biggest investor or not, he must learn that his money had bought and paid for her smiles and perhaps a kiss or two—but no more.

‘Keep your hands to yourself in future, *Mr. Baxter*, or you may get them bitten off.’ She turned and marched inside the hotel.