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JANE CORRIE



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"Why did you ask me to marry you?"

Thea raised her eyes in expectation, but all Marcus said was, "I told you."

"That doesn't answer my question," she replied quietly. "I'm green and inexperienced—that's really what you meant, wasn't it? You felt you couldn't take advantage of me, right?"

"I guess that's what it boils down to," he replied dryly.

Thea shook her head. "But why marriage?" she asked.

"Would you have settled for less?" he asked her bluntly.

"Not if you mean what I think you mean," she snapped indignantly.

The shrug of his shoulder was eloquent. "Are you ~~honey~~ inexperienced?" Thea exclaimed impatiently, "that you were prepared to tie yourself down for life on a whim—just because, b-because...." She couldn't head.

Marcus's eyes opened wide. "Who said it was for life?"

head

JANE CORRIE

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Pirates' Lair

by

JANE CORRIE



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CHAPTER ONE

THEA JOHN gazed out of her bedroom window on to the sun-drenched beach directly below her. She could have been gazing at an arctic landscape, for there was no warmth in her heart, only a block of ice where her heart should have been.

She then glanced back at the small clock on her bedside table which told her that Marcus would be picking her up in precisely fifteen minutes' time.

Her breath was drawn in sharply at the thought of what she would have to tell him. It was no use putting it off, or pretending that what happened last night simply hadn't happened, or that Sapphire had acted on a jealous impulse and made up that awful story she had told her when Marcus had dropped her back at her hotel after their engagement party.

Her eye caught her reflection in the wall mirror and she nodded grimly at her image. 'You didn't really believe a man like that could fall for you, did you?' she said bitterly to her reflection.

She moved hastily away from the window as if by this one single movement she could blot out the memory of Sapphire's triumphant black eyes as she had sent Thea's world crashing around her, and sat down slowly on the bed. It would be a long time before she would be able to get that scene out of her mind, if ever.

It was two months now since she had come to St

Thomas, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Two months since she had learnt of the death of her brother whom she had travelled from England to join.

Thea's soft lips twisted at the thought and her heart felt as heavy as lead, but she made herself go over it all again, as if by driving the knife into her wound, she could come to terms with this second blow fate had dealt her.

She remembered stepping off the plane on to a sun-splashed runway and looking eagerly around for any sign of Michael, who knew what time she would be arriving and would be certain to be there to greet her.

Her glance strayed to the magnificent emerald ring she wore on her third finger; the green fire of the stone flashed back an answering echo and she swallowed hastily. So like Marcus's eyes, she thought painfully. He had green eyes, and she had seen them flash just like that when aroused to fury by a thoughtless comment made by a jealous contender for his attention, and who only succeeded in getting herself barred from the intimate circle of his close friends.

She stirred restlessly; her thoughts were wandering and she must collect them. There had been no Michael to meet her, but a tall exceedingly good-looking man with chestnut hair bleached blond by the sun, who had introduced himself as Michael's boss and suggested that he take her somewhere where he could talk to her.

When she followed his tall well-groomed figure out to a sleek car waiting in the airport car park after claiming her luggage, she had no idea of the stark news that awaited her of her brother's death

the previous evening in a car smash.

Thea's soft lips clamped together. Whatever she accused Marcus of now, she could not deny that he had helped her through that black period of her life. Even though it had turned out that he had a particular reason for his concern, but she could forgive him that; what she couldn't forgive was what had happened afterwards.

Sapphire's cold voice reached through to her again as it had done before, like a recording now imprinted on her brain. 'Enjoy yourself while you may,' she had said, almost spitting the words out. 'You're in for a shock if you think he's in love with you.'

Thea had not been too concerned about this vitriolic attack from Sapphire Durley. She was in love with Marcus, and from what Thea had been able to gather about the past she had been around some time. Thea had reasoned that it couldn't have been serious on Marcus's part or he would have married her, and a determined woman will always place more emphasis on small inconsequential happenings to further her cause. She had replied in a light manner, showing Sapphire that she had failed if she had wanted to upset her. 'Do you think he'll leave me standing at the altar, then?' she had asked.

Sapphire's eyes had glinted even fiercer at this. 'Better for you if he did!' she had retorted bitterly. 'But don't worry, he'll go through with it all right. The way he sees it, he's got to!'

Thea stared back at Sapphire as a cold feeling played down her spine. 'Oh, now what makes you say that?' she asked as casually as she was able. 'He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who would do

anything he didn't want to do.'

'That's as much as you know!' Sapphire had snapped back at her. 'And you know nothing! Anyone with a grain of sense would have seen why he's marrying you. You can take it from me that Marcus isn't the marrying type—and I ought to know!' she tacked on bitterly. 'But none of this would have occurred to you, would it? You're living in a fairy story, pet, and they went out of fashion years ago. What do you know about your brother's death?' she suddenly shot out at Thea. 'Or were you so caught up with Marcus's wooing that you didn't give yourself time to think about it?' she sneered.

Thea's shocked grey eyes gave Sapphire the satisfaction she had been seeking. 'What exactly do you mean?' she whispered. 'What has Michael's death to do with me and Marcus?'

'Everything!' replied Sapphire gratingly, yet with a certain amount of triumph in her voice. 'If Marcus hadn't sent for him at that time of night, he wouldn't have died. It's as simple as that.'

Thea's bewildered senses grappled with this cold fact, then she rallied enough to say, 'But it wasn't Marcus's fault he crashed. He just took a bend too fast,' she ended lamely.

Sapphire nodded grimly. 'Which he wouldn't have done if he hadn't been half-cut,' she added significantly, and at Thea's still bewildered look, she said impatiently, 'Look, the way Marcus sees it, he should have known that Michael would be at that party. He did know, of course, but he wanted to see those plans. He works all hours himself and is inclined to think that everybody else does, and when Marcus commands he expects quick results.'

Thea shook her head as if trying to clear it, not yet able to grasp the significance behind Sapphire's words. 'I still don't see——' she began.

'Don't, or don't want to see,' Sapphire cut in savagely. 'For heaven's sake grow up! Marcus has a chip on his shoulder about Michael's death, and here's his little sister who's just lost her only relative.' She gave an offhand shrug. 'He could have made sure that you got adequate compensation, but oh no, not Marcus. That wasn't enough for him and his king-sized conscience! He had to do the grand thing and marry you. That way he'd pay for his thoughtlessness—and I mean pay,' she tacked on, working herself up to a frenzy. 'You're not Marcus's type, honey, and never will be. Sure, he's given you a ring, the biggest and best he could find, and believe me, nothing's going to be too good for you. You'll have a beautiful house, lovely clothes, in fact everything a girl could want, except his love, and you'll never have that. Take a good look in the mirror at yourself, honey. I know his taste, and believe me, the country cousin type leaves him cold, but he's experienced enough never to let you know his true feelings, and that underneath it all he feels sorry for you!'

Thea had taken a good look at herself in the mirror after Sapphire had stormed out of her apartment. Through tear-dimmed eyes she could well see what Sapphire had meant. Her clear grey eyes had gone critically over her small elfin features, noting the generous mouth that was now clamped in a line to prevent it trembling, and her small upturned nose that made her look younger than her twenty-two years. Her red hair was nothing to set the world on

fire about, either, for it was a dark red that only showed its best points when the glints of the sun caught it.

She turned slightly sidewise. As for her figure—well, she hadn't one! Her five feet two height and slim nature had nothing in the way of feminine curves, and recalling Sapphire's voluptuous curves and magnificent long legs, plus her dark lovely gypsy-type looks, she closed her eyes and hurried away from the mirror.

Her breath caught on a raw-sounding sob. She was only putting off the inevitable; she didn't want to think about all those other things Sapphire had said. Her hands clenched into small fists. Sapphire had a reason to make trouble for her, she loved Marcus and was making a fight to keep him free from any other entanglement.

Her small white teeth clenched together. She wouldn't believe a word of it! It wasn't true—Marcus wouldn't—she caught her breath. What was the use? It was true, every word of it! It made sense of so much that she hadn't been able to understand. She had not been allowed to dwell in the shadows of grief; Marcus had seen to that. Marcus, she thought, had seen to everything. Even this flatlet belonged to him, for it was part of the huge complex of holiday flats that he owned, and that her brother Michael had designed additional units for, the plans of which he had been bringing to Marcus the night he died.

Thea sat on her bed. She had never felt so vulnerable in her life before, or so foolish. She ought to have known that a man like Marcus Conan would not have looked twice at a slight boyish-looking girl like her, not without a reason, and she now

knew that reason.

'Hi! Are you ready, honey?' Marcus's voice reached through Thea's musings and she gave a start, then got up slowly from the bed and went out into the small lounge of the flatlet.

At the sight of his tall lean figure dressed in casual white polo-necked sweater and navy blue cords, her heart missed a beat, and somehow she managed to avoid meeting those green eyes of his as she announced calmly, 'I'm not going, Marcus.'

Once it would never have occurred to her to wonder at his casual greeting, but now her eyes were open. It was hardly the way a lover greeted his beloved, was it? she thought bitterly.

His reply was typical too. 'Okay, sweetheart, so we give the beach party a miss. What have you in mind? A laze on the beach, maybe?' he asked, sounding amused—as if humouring a child, she thought angrily.

Her anger dispersed as quickly as it had arisen. She had no one but herself to blame for what had happened. 'As a matter of fact, I want to talk to you,' she said quietly, her candid grey eyes meeting his for the first time since his arrival. Then with the same quiet deliberation, she took the ring off her third finger and laid it down on the small occasional table beside her, and felt rather than saw Marcus's hard stare at her action. 'I don't feel it's right to go ahead with——' she faltered slightly, then carried on more firmly. 'I don't want to be a salve to your conscience, Marcus. I just wish you'd been honest with me from the start.' She couldn't go on, there was no need to; he must know what she was getting at, she thought miserably.

His reply of, 'I'd like that put a little more plainly, please,' startled her, and she knew that he was going to see the whole wretched thing through to the bitter end. He might have spared her that, she thought bleakly.

'Do you want it in capitals?' she queried bluntly, her fine eyes meeting his hooded ones. 'I know the reason why you want to marry me. It's because of Michael, isn't it? Because you feel responsible for what happened. Didn't it ever occur to you that I'd find out the truth one day? And how I'd feel about our marriage?' she demanded bleakly.

'By that time it wouldn't have made any difference,' Marcus replied harshly. 'I'd make sure of that.'

One part of Thea acknowledged the bitter truth that he had not attempted to deny her charge, the other part recognised the meaning behind his last words and a slight flush stained her features. 'I'm slow, I'll admit,' she said quietly, 'but not that slow.' She forced herself to remain calm as she met his determined eyes. 'I don't blame you for what happened to Michael and I fail to see why you should blame yourself. He always drove faster than he should have done. I suppose it would have happened one day—the accident, I mean,' she added wearily. 'Can't we leave it at that? I see no point in arguing about it. I just want to say I'm grateful for all you've done for me since——' she swallowed. 'Well, anyway, thanks,' she ended lamely.

'Are you turning me down because of that?' demanded Marcus, his green eyes piercing Thea's grey ones. 'In which case it's pretty obvious that you do blame me.'

Thea gasped. She didn't seem to have got through to him at all. He was determined to use her as a sop to his conscience, and she was just as determined to stop him. 'It's not that,' she said quickly, only just stopping herself from shouting the words at him. 'If only you'd told me how you felt—but you didn't, did you? You could have told me that he was on his way to you with those plans you wanted to see the night of the accident. There could have been only one reason why you didn't.' She took a deep breath. 'As I said, eventually I would have found out about that and—' her voice trembled, 'several other things that it's not necessary to go into now.'

'Care to tell me the name of your informant?' Marcus asked, his eyes now narrowed to a slit.

Thea shook her head decisively. 'No,' she said abruptly.

'I see,' Marcus replied through thin lips. 'So—where do we go from here?'

'We go nowhere,' Thea got out through clenched teeth. 'From now on I'm on my own. I'm quite capable of looking after myself. Michael was often away abroad, and I didn't accompany him, I only came here because he'd decided to settle here.' She swallowed. 'I haven't had time to work anything out yet, but no doubt I'll come up with something,' she added firmly.

'You'll go back to the U.K., will you?' Marcus asked, almost abstractedly.

Again there was a decisive shake of the head from Thea. 'I've nothing to go back for,' she said simply. There was no self-pity in her voice. 'I cut all my ties when I left. I shall try and get a work permit here

and find a job,' she announced quietly.

'There'll be no problem there,' Marcus replied slowly, 'about the job, either. I'll be able to fix you up with something in that line.'

'No, thank you!' retorted Thea, feeling in the middle of some sort of play and just saying her lines, closing her mind to the plain but bald fact that not once had Marcus attempted to make her change her mind about marrying him. 'I said I was on my own, and I meant just that,' she told him, and glanced around the lounge. 'I shall move out as soon as I find some other accommodation, but thank you for offering to help me,' she added, not able to disguise the bitterness in her voice.

Marcus stood looking at her for what seemed an age, and Thea wanted to scream at him to get out of the flat and out of her life. His hard gaze left her and rested on the ring. 'Take it,' she said in a low voice, not able to look at him. 'You'll probably find some use for it.'

She saw his firm lips straighten at this. 'Keep it,' he said abruptly. 'You may find a use for it yourself one day,' and on that terse direction he walked out of the flat.

Thea waited until she heard his car start up, then walked shakily back to the bedroom. At first she knew a bitter-sweet relief that she had been able to extricate herself from what could have been a disastrous situation. She could have found out the truth a day before her wedding, and the consequences of standing Marcus up would have been too awful to contemplate. She would have gone ahead rather than let him suffer such an indignity, particularly as his reason for marrying her had been purely to pro-