

SERPENTS IN EDEN

BY ROBERT LEADER

THEY WERE SHIP-WRECKED IN PARADISE ---

BUT PARADISE HID A TERRIBLE SECRET

A romantic second honeymoon cruising around the paradise islands of the South pacific had seemed the perfect cure for a failing marriage. But for Nicola and Greg Conway it hadn’t worked and a freak storm and sudden shipwreck with enigmatic skipper Jack Baker was not part of their plan.

 They were washed up on to a tropical island occupied by a small religious community. The Children of New Eden lived a seemingly idyllic existence but were shrouded in mystery.

 Why had the cult fled from California, and why was the small community graveyard filled with a disproportionate number of little girls.

 Soon Nicola begins to wonder if their presence here was entirely by chance, for it seems that Jack Baker has his own agenda.

 As the tensions heighten and the mysteries deepen the malevolent presence of an ancient stone idol watches over them from a forbidden cliff top temple site high above the beach.

PROLOGUE

 The burial was conducted at night, one of those few moonless Pacific nights when clouds blotted out most of the familiar stars. The few pinpricks of silver that showed through the dark banks of rolled cumulus were intermittent, quickly hiding their light again as though this was something they did not want to see.

 A zephyr wind moaned softly through the black serrated palm fronds and the sound of the sea beyond the reef was a muted growl. Somewhere a ripe coconut dropped with a heavy thud on to the soft sand. The noise startled the small group at the graveside and their heads turned and stared into the shadows. They jumped like guilty men. There were no women.

 The low voice of Pastor John paused in the ritual of prayer. He too looked down the beach to where the nut had fallen. Beyond the palms where it had dropped was the base of the cliff that rose in a high promontory, casting its black, brooding shadow over the coral sand. In daylight this was an idyllic scene, a South Seas Paradise. On this night it seemed sombre with menace.

 On top of that cliff, shrouded behind curtains of thick black jungle, stood the ugly stone idol that had squatted on its crumbling brick terrace for a thousand years or more. It was a relic of the Polynesian past, a bloated caricature of a human face and body crudely carved in grey stone. It suggested scenes of ancient, evil worship and dark practices culminating in sordid sacrifice. There were lichen-breeding stains on its pot belly that might have been blood, perhaps chicken blood or animal blood, or possibly human blood.

 “We should have pulled it down.” Elder Jonas spoke the thought that was in all their minds and his voice was only a little louder than a whisper.

 They all nodded but no one answered. The presence of the idol was a blasphemy, the only blemish in their New Eden. Most of them had wanted to see it torn down, but none of them could bring themselves to touch it. Elder Peter had said that it was an ancient cultural artefact and they did not want to be seen as the kind of blind and bigoted sect who would destroy such an object in pure ignorance. Other missionaries before them had eliminated the cultural treasures of Polynesia and burned the sacred books of the Aztecs, the Inca and the Maya, and all of them were now held to be cultural criminals. They did not want the name of New Eden to be added to that reviled list.

 It was an argument for leaving the idol and ignoring its existence, but even Elder Peter had not believed it. They were isolated here, they had no neighbours. There was only their small congregation community. There were no witnesses to anything they did, no witness except God. The real reason that the idol remained was that no one wanted to go near it. None of them wanted to soil their hands by touching it.

 Even so it held an evil fascination. Most of them had looked upon it at least once, now most of the time they pretended to ignore it. It was a thing of Satan, perhaps a reminder they needed in this island paradise. Their thoughts and attitudes were confused. So the pagan symbol remained, forgotten until moments like tonight. Now the memory of its thick-lipped, sardonic leer was suddenly vivid in all their minds.

 “The thing is evil,” Elder Mathew said at last. “Perhaps this island is not blessed. Perhaps it is cursed.”

 “New Eden is not cursed,” Pastor John spoke in a firm voice, recognizing the need to rally his flock. “Death comes to us all but Our Lord has conquered death. Death is nothing to fear. We grieve for we cannot escape grief. Grief is part of our human condition but we can take comfort in the truth of resurrection.”

 Elder Peter looked down into the shallow grave containing its small wooden box at their feet. “She is so small,” he sighed, “So young.”

 “Question not the Will of the Lord,” Pastor John reprimanded him gently.

 Elder Peter pursed his thin lips and crushed his internal doubts.

 Pastor John continued the service. They sang a hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful,* the favourite hymn of the dead child. Their voices sounded rough and ragged without the softening influences of the women. Next they solemnly recited The Lord’s Prayer. They ended with a chorus of muted “Amens.”

 Each man picked up a handful of sand to sprinkle over the small coffin. The sound of the falling grains brushing the bare wood made them shiver. Elder Jonas had brought a spade and began to fill in the grave. When the task was done Elder Peter picked up the small wooden cross and Elder Mathew helped him to push it into the loose earth to stand upright at the head of the grave. It was a single white painted board bound to an upright of bamboo. On it was painted the name *Alice, aged seven.*

 There were two adult graves in the small cemetery and two more child graves. All the graves bore an identical cross and the child graves indicated that two more girl children, *Cecile aged six* and *Debbie, aged seven*, were here laid to rest.

 Pastor John said a final prayer and with bowed heads the solemn group moved away.

CHAPTER ONE

 The storm came up fast with only a flicker of warning. With all the speed and ferocity of a black-maned lion in full charge the dark thunderclouds had leaped over the haze-blurred edge of the sea.

 For the previous six halcyon days the hot, glittering blue expanse of sea and sky that was the Pacific had lived up to its name. The world’s largest ocean had stayed as peaceful and calm as any fair boat sailor could have wished, with only enough skittering breeze to fill the sails as *Blue Sea Dreamer* had cruised the lush green necklace droplets that were the coral islands and atolls of Polynesia.

 Nicola Conway lay basking on the roasted deck planks of the forty foot, ketch-rigged yacht, wearing only a brief bikini swimsuit. She was aware of nothing but the glorious warmth of the sun on her bare limbs and body and the easy rolling motion of the sturdy little ship as she forged slowly through the gentle heave of the waves. There was only the sound of the sea, the soft swish and gurgle of salt foam parting before the sleek oak bow and the faint whispering and creaking of the sails and rigging.

 Nicola’s eyes were closed as she drowsed in the mid morning heat. Faintly she heard a sea bird cry, a sign that they were not too far from land, but she could not be bothered to look. It would take too much effort to raise her shoulders from the deck and lift her sunglasses from her eyes.

 Her thoughts drifted lazily over the past few days, back to Tahiti and the yacht-lined, mast-tinkling waterfront at Papeete. There they had first met Jack Baker and fallen in love with the trim, sea-weathered lines of *Blue Sea Dreamer.* There had been a host of larger and more graceful vessels on display, the inter-island schooners and the flocks of powerful motor yachts, but their charter was much more than she and Greg could afford.

 However, it had not mattered. From the moment they saw her they both knew that *Blue Sea Dreamer* was the boat on which they wanted to sail. There was something rakish in the curves of her hull and the slight backward slant of her masts. Her white paintwork and her brass deck-rails were eye-dazzling in the bright morning sunshine, matched only by the varnished and polished teak of her small wheelhouse. The yacht strained at her moorings, eager to be gone, seeking for new landfalls and far horizons, and Nicola and Greg were instantly longing to go with her.

 Jack Baker lay asleep on the foredeck. A tall, rangy, muscular man in his forties, his body burned brown by the sun. He wore a bleached pair of jeans cut down to frayed shorts and a peaked sailor’s cap shaded his eyes. Greg had shouted down from the wharf to wake him.

 “Ahoy there, skipper, permission to come aboard?”

 Jack had pushed back his cap and stared up at them. His gaze had lingered briefly on Greg but longer on Nicola.

 Nicola knew that men liked to look at her. At twenty-eight years of age her figure was still slim and perfect, for despite her three year marriage to Greg they had no children. Nature had blessed her with a rich cascade of fiery red hair which she still wore long and loose so that she could swirl it about her shoulders with devastating effect. Her eyes were somewhere between lustrous hazel and deep sea green. Greg had told her often that it was her eyes that had first captivated him, sparking over a glass of white wine on their first dinner date. Now they worked their magic on Jack Baker. Jack had smiled his appreciation and invited them to come on board.

 Within ten minutes they had chartered *Blue Sea Dreamer* for a two week cruise. Two weeks was all they had left to spend in Tahiti but already they had seen enough of Papeete which was crowded, noisy, and wreathed like any other modern town in its own fog of petrol and diesel fumes. What they really wanted was clear skies, fresh breezes and balmy days, and nights with spectacular sunsets that filled the island skies with molten colours. In short, Paradise, the Pacific Island Dream. All of it, they knew instinctively, would be best experienced under sail.

 In that respect they had not been disappointed. They had circumnavigated Tahiti, sailing just outside the encircling coral reefs where the breakers boomed and creamed in gentle thunder. In a never ending panorama the lagoons and bays and palm fringed beaches of scorched white sand had paraded before them. Behind the beaches were lines of neat modern villas and bungalows and ever-changing views of the island’s magnificent interior of rugged volcanic peaks, cloaked in lush green tangles of jungle and vegetation.

 Neither Nicola nor Greg had ever sailed before but under Jack’s tuition they quickly became adept at raising and lowering sail, taking their turn at the wheel, tying knots and securing lines. They had cooked in the tiny galley, launched the ship to shore dinghy and performed a hundred and one other general shipboard tasks. This was a working holiday, Jack had made that clear at the outset, and doing their share of sailing the ship was all part of this fabulous experience.

 After Tahiti they had cruised around equally spectacular Moorea, and then on to visit the other lesser known of the broken chain of the Society Islands that made up French Polynesia. Each day was a new adventure, another island and another idyllic lagoon where they could picnic and swim. After they had explored they would up-anchor and sail into the next sunset.

 The locations were paradise and it should have been a second honeymoon, the holiday of a lifetime. They had tried to make it into all of those things but it was not meant to be.

 Nicola’s thoughts darkened and her spirits sank as the joys of sailing failed to suppress the other reality of the moment. She knew she had tried and she knew Greg had tried, but somehow they just could not make their marriage work any more. They had the most romantic setting imaginable, with starlight and moonlight and those glorious sunsets, and yet not once had they succeeded in making love. Their cabin was small but afforded them all the privacy they needed, and Jack had been tactful enough to leave them alone at every opportunity: on a succession of isolated beaches, in bamboo glades where parakeets and doves whistled and cooed above them, and in shaded coconut groves where the white sand was dappled by the serrated bars of the whispering palm fronds. If anything could have saved their jaded marriage then this voyage should have succeeded.

 But the revival of their love affair, the rejuvenation of their marriage, had just not happened. The old arguments had stubbornly continued in the rich new setting. The verbal battles that had once fired and spiced their relationship had become soured and bitter. Where once their quarrels had ended in physical play-fights and glorious sex, they now ended in frustrated stand-offs and stony silences. It was not just because they were stressed and over-worked by the demands of two high powered career jobs. Somehow the chemistry had changed between them and not even paradise could bring it back.

 Nicola was saddened but she had known for a long time that it was over. It had been Greg’s idea to come to Polynesia, to get away from grey, dreary London and the pressures of the agency and its creative deadlines. They were both crushed and drained he had argued. They needed space to unwind and time to relax. They needed an opportunity to find each other again.

 For once she had let him win an argument. They had both taken a three week vacation, despite Bill Gordon’s voluble protests that he could not afford to be without his top accounts director and his top art director at the same time. They were both overdue for a break and had chosen the most exotic holiday destination they could dream of. And it had not worked.

 Last night had been hot and sultry and they had forsaken their small cabin to sleep on the open deck at the stern of the boat. Jack had found a safe anchorage in another quiet lagoon along the scattered chain of islands. The Milky Way was a brilliant cascade of white diamonds flung in huge handfuls across a black velvet sky. They knew that Jack slept on the foredeck with the wheelhouse between them, separating them so that the murmur of their voices would be out of his hearing.

 Even so, leaving the cabin to sleep under the stars was an unspoken admission that they no longer needed to be alone. The second honeymoon was over. In fact it had never even started and the possibility of love-making was no longer on their minds.

 They lay apart on blankets and pillows, not close enough to touch each other, looking up at the stars. Nicola wondered if there was life up there, if there were other life forms and other civilizations scattered through the star streams and spirals of the galaxy. And if so, was life as difficult up there as it was down here. Then she wondered how many millions of human beings had looked up at these same stars to ponder these same thoughts. Perhaps in this infinity of time and space all the thinking and all the wondering was just meaningless, just thought motes going nowhere in the celestial breeze.

 She had almost forgotten Greg when suddenly he spoke.

 “It could have worked, Nikki. We were in love once but somehow we’ve let it go. Perhaps if we had children…”

 He allowed the words to trail away and there was resentment in his voice. She knew that if she looked at him she would see the sulky look on his handsome face. Greg was two years older than Nicola but had a perpetually boyish air that made him look younger. When he was cheerful and smiling he was full of youthful appeal that had once turned her heart but when he sulked she could get furious with him. She refused to look at him now and continued to stare up at the stars.

 “I have a university education,” she reminded him angrily. “I have a first class degree in sociology and economics. And I have a damned good job in one of the top advertising agencies in London. In a few years time Bill Gordon is probably going to retire and I could be in line for Managing Director. I could be running the whole agency instead of just a few prime accounts. Do you really think I’m going to throw all of that away just to be a housewife and mother?”

 “You wouldn’t have to throw it all away. Lots of women combine marriage and motherhood with a career.”

 “You know that’s just a feminist fallacy. No one can have it all. Something would have to suffer. And I’m not lots of other women, Greg, I’m me. I don’t want babies yet, maybe sometime but not now.” She paused to stare at him curiously. “Why bring this up now? You’ve never been this keen before.”

 “I know.” He was defensive. “It’s just that I’ve been lying here trying to figure out where we went wrong, where we could go right, where we might have done different. It might have been different if you hadn’t been such a gung-ho, single-minded career woman.”

 “Aha, so now this is all my fault. But you knew exactly what I was when you married me. We met at the agency for Christ’s sake, the day I started working there. I’ve never made any secret of what I am and what I want out of life. I’m going for the top, Greg, that’s always been my ambition. If you had that drive it would be okay. If I were a man it would be okay. Why is it that me being a woman with ambition has to come between us?”

 “I don’t know. It’s not just that.”

 “What then? This babies thing? I know we’ve talked it over a couple of times but I thought we were in agreement. I didn’t think it was all that important to you either.”

 “I felt it could wait. I didn’t want to stop you chasing your career. Now I’m just beginning to wonder if it was the right thing.”

 She softened toward him, feeling suddenly sorry for him.

 “Greg, it wouldn’t have been the right thing. I love my job. I love all the luncheons, meetings, planning the market strategies, selling the ideas to our clients. I enjoy what I do. I don’t want to do anything else. I’m a damned good accounts director even if I have to say it myself. I get a kick out of the buzz and I don’t want to give up even the smallest part of it.”

 “I know you’re good, too bloody good,” Greg said bitterly.

 “What’s that supposed to mean?”

 “I guess it means you do it too well, Nikki, all the talking and persuading. You’re too good at putting your opinions over, convincing your clients that you know what’s best for their business. You can out-argue anyone I’ve ever met.”

 “Well,” she admitted slowly, “I was Chairperson of the University Debating Society.”

 “And you were the most out-spoken student at every seminar.”

 “Who told you that?”

 “It was your friend Jenny, the one who works at the Midland Bank.”

 “Jenny Pearson,” Nicola smiled at the memory of her old room-mate, and some of the more reckless games they had played during their three years at university. Then she gave Greg another sharp look. “What’s all this leading up to? What are you getting at?”

 Greg stared at the sky again, refusing to meet her eye.

 “I suppose what I’m saying is that all your aggression is fine in a university debate. All your determination to push your own ideas and swing everybody round to your way of thinking is okay in a business meeting where you are trying to sell the agency. But it’s not good for a happy marriage. If you could leave all your push and assertiveness at work that would be fine, but you can’t leave it out of anything, not even our relationship. You always have to be right. You always have to have your way. You always have to have the last word.”

 Nicola laughed, although it was a strained effort to make her mood sound lighter than she felt. “I suppose there is some truth in that,” she agreed wryly. “I do like to win all my arguments. If I were to argue otherwise now it would be tantamount to admitting that you are right anyway. This time you’ve got me in a no-win corner.”

 “There you go again,” Greg seethed with frustration. “Even when you can’t deny what I’m saying you still have to come up with a clever answer that makes you sound smarter than I am.”

 “Tough titty,” Nicola was tart and angry again. “If you wanted a door-mat to inflate your ego and just say “yes-dear” and “no-dear”, then you should have married someone else.”

 “That’s unfair and you know it. One of the things that attracted me to you was that you did have a lively mind and strong opinions. I just didn’t know that you never gave it a rest. I didn’t realize that you had to be pushing it all the time.”

 Greg turned his back to her and rolled away. Nicola let it go. The back-to-back routine was an all too familiar end to the day and it depressed her. Sometimes she wished that she could let her guard down and be less aggressive. Perhaps he was right about the need for give and take, and it would help if she could be sweetly feminine in the way he wanted. However, most of the time she just wished that he could be less of an old-fashioned wimp. They only fought verbally and it was fun scoring points. It was a nuisance that he had to be so petty about losing.

 She said at last, “What do you want to do about it?”

 He was a long time in answering and then said reluctantly, “Finish it, I suppose. I’ve had enough, Nikki, and there’s no point in going on.

 “How do you mean, finish it,” She had to make him spell it out, “Our marriage?”

 “Everything,” he said dully. “When we get back to London I’m moving out. You can stay in the flat if you want to. I’ll find somewhere else. And I’ll find another job. Bill Gordon can find another art director and I’ll find another agency.”

 “So very final, we are talking about divorce?”

 “Divorce or separation, you name it.”

 “Divorce,” she said calmly. She was surprised at her own composure, as though they were discussing just the logical end to another argument and not the end of their marriage and an uncertain future.

 “You can name the grounds.”

 “Don’t be such a bloody gentleman.” Her anger oozed through again. “Just call it a mutual break-up.”

 “Whatever you want,” He sounded weary. “Do you want to cut this cruise short? We can tell Jack to head back to Tahiti in the morning.”

 She thought about it. Despite the way things were between them she was still enjoying the islands and the sailing. It was an experience she might never be able to repeat. She looked again at the glorious display of the stars, felt the creaking motion of the boat as it rolled peacefully at anchor, and decided that she did not want to cut all of this short.

 “No,” she said. “We’re here and we’ve paid a lot of money to get here. We may as well make the most of what there is, the sun and the sea.”

 “That’s my Nikki, practical to the last.”

 He was tired and defeated and said no more, and she didn’t know how long he remained awake after that.

 Nicola did remain awake for a long time. It all seemed suddenly unreal and she began to wonder if they had actually had this sober, matter-of-fact discussion to end their marriage. She had realized that it must be coming and now it was over like some well rehearsed play. It was as though they were actors in roles that were not of their choosing but the curtain was finally drawn and nothing would ever be the same again.

 Something inside her at last wanted to cry but her eyes stayed dry until she slept. The deck was hard and uncomfortable and when she awoke again a few hours later the stars still hung silently above her. They were as brilliant as before, only their positions had changed as the earth rotated slowly beneath them. Her cheeks felt cold and to her surprise she found that they were now wet with tears.