

MARGARET BLAKE

*His
Other
Wife*

HIS OTHER WIFE

by

Margaret Blake

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-60313-353-1

Credits

Cover Artist: Jinger Heaston
Editor: E J Gilmer

Printed in the United States of America

**Other Books by Author Available at
Whiskey Creek Press:**

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Fortune's Folly

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Beloved Deceiver

"I have something to ask you, will you marry me?" His first thought was "You've got to be joking," and he thought she was. Only Flora was serious. She was practically being forced by her father to marry a man she detested!

Dedication

~~For Kathy O Connor, a friend and colleague, and with grateful thanks to EJ Gilmer, my editor.~~

Acknowledgement

~~My thanks to Senior Editor Marsha Briscoe for all her hard work.~~

Chapter 1

“I just don’t understand it,” Carla Hetherington said for about the fourth time. This time she glared at her eldest son who was lounging by the fireplace, his elbow resting on the marble mantle as if he had not a care in the world. But that was just like Saul.

“What’s to understand?” Saul murmured. “My brother left a small legacy to a woman.” He shrugged. “So what? And knowing Fabio, it shouldn’t be at all surprising.”

“How dare you.”

Saul raised an eyebrow at her. She looked flushed and agitated. Had he actually forgotten that Fabio—or *fabulous* Fabio as she always called him—had been her favourite child? He was the one, like his name, who seemed more Italian than English. Like his mother, he had been slim and dark and impossibly good looking.

“Sorry,” Saul conceded, and he was. Now was not the time to speak the truth about Fabio, to remind his mother that Fabio had been fond of women and *la dolce vita!* “But it isn’t as if he has left Roxie Rawson all his money, just a small legacy.”

“Roxie Rawson...even the name makes me shudder. She sounds like one of those tap dancers at a men’s club.”

“I think you mean lap dancer...”

“Well, you would know,” she snapped.

Saul did not respond. Maybe she *was* a lap dancer. Knowing Fabio, that would not be a surprise, but his mother was right to be worried. It was upsetting for Louisa, his brother’s widow. She was confused. They had been married only eighteen months and suddenly Fabio was dead. He had wrapped his car around a tree in Tuscany. Louisa had not even known her husband was in Tuscany and she had certainly not known he had known a Roxie Rawson so well he had bequeathed her ten thousand pounds. It was not a drop in the ocean either. Fabio was not wealthy...comfortable would be more like it. He was really just starting to make his way in the world.

“What are you going to do about it?” Carla demanded.

He supposed he would have to do something. Louisa could not be expected to look for this Roxie Rawson. She was devastated. His mother would claim fragility, although he knew she was about as fragile as a piece of Tuscan marble.

“You have the contacts and know how to do it,” Carla insisted, managing to make it sound like an insult. “You find her...I suppose you’ll have to pay her?”

“Yes, the will is valid. The lawyer suggests advertising, but I think I’ll do it my way.”

“Do it quickly. I want it over with. And I need not tell you to keep this...this Roxie person out of our lives. You can insist on that.”

“I think this Roxie person is out of our lives, period. I don’t think she is a recent manifestation,” Saul murmured.

* * * *

Carla glared at her eldest son as if there were a further insult to Fabio’s memory in the statement. He was like his father. Tall, well built, his tobacco-colored hair often unruly in

that English kind of way, his eyes so dark a blue as to be almost navy. He possessed the Roman nose of her side of the family, but that was all. He looked English with that strong jaw...his fine chiselled lips, which were stained by a touch of cynicism. He had always been too tough for her. He'd excelled at rugby at school...was always captain of this and prefect of that. He had set the mould at school. Fabio had always been made to pay because he was not like Saul in any way, but it was she and not Fabio who had resented that. Fabio went on in his own sweet way and never seemed to bother about anyone, or how they felt about him.

Carla had been glad when Saul had left home and joined the army. He had succeeded there, too...going into the SAS. Now he had his own security consultation firm, offering personal security to the rich and famous. He was doing well. She hated his success. It was in a field of work that she thought was good for bruisers and mobsters and not a Hetherington.

* * * *

Saul drove away before dinner. He was glad to be away from the house. It was a nice house, a small manor house built in the Stuart period. It was the only thing the family had managed to hold onto. The land had long gone. There was half an acre of garden, most of it beautifully kept in Italian style by a retired gardener. His mother managed to retain the services of a cook-housekeeper, but there was no other staff. Bad investments had all but ruined his father, and death duties had eroded the rest.

Saul did not care; he had made his own way. He had ceased to have an attachment to the house when his mother had told him it would go to Fabio. There would be a small legacy for him, but the house was to be for her best-loved

child. Saul had known that the moment Fabio got his hands on it, the house would be sold. It was no good moaning about it. It was the way of things. He was a realist and had long since learned to accept that his mother would never have deep maternal feelings for him. He was too confident in his own abilities to let it weaken him in any way.

The drive from the West Country to his London apartment gave him time for thought. When he arrived at the pre-war apartment block, he had a plan of action in his head. After tossing down his overnight bag, he went and turned on his computer. He tapped away for a good hour. The next morning there were replies to his queries, and Roxanne Rawson was traced. Although born in England, she had resided in New Zealand for the past nine years. That figured. His brother had spent two years in New Zealand on one of his “discovering what I want to do” safaris.

The next day Saul had an address for Roxie Rawson. It didn't sound like the kind of town that would have a lap dancing club...but he conceded you never knew. Later, in the office, he re-arranged his diary with much effort. He was in the process of selling his business. He had not told his mother yet and did not intend to until it was all finalized, however he would take time out to see this woman. It would be easier doing it face to face. Besides, it would give him an opportunity to size her up and find out if she could be trouble. He did not want to merely write to the woman. He needed to know why she had ended up in his brother's will, especially since Fabio had not been the kindest of men where his ex-lovers were concerned. Maybe she wasn't a lover...perhaps she was just someone who had been kind to him. The trouble was it was so out of character for his brother to do anything, for an-

yone. He disliked being unkind to the dead, but he was a realist, and Fabio would not care anyway. Fabio did not care what anyone thought about him...with the possible exception of Louisa.

Louisa came into Saul's mind. She was a pleasant enough girl, fair and pretty, and he liked the way she laughed. She had a laugh like champagne. It warmed him. He picked up the telephone and dialled her number. She sounded sad, but cheered a little when he told her what he had found out. She wanted to see him, talk to him about it, but he could not go back to the West Country where she was living. He hadn't the time, although he hated to refuse her.

After he had spoken to Louisa, there were a few more calls to make. His life was about to change. He was ready to embark on doing what he wanted to do. This seeking for this girl of his brother's was an irritant he could well do without.

* * * *

Saul parked outside the house. It was a single story home, detached, with a small driveway. Neither small nor big but fairly average. The street had about ten houses of a similar size and structure, but in the way of houses in New Zealand, they were all slightly different.

The short driveway needed some attention. There was a mail box at the entrance. It was slightly askew, but the name had long since become obscured. He went up the drive, then realized there were two houses on the same plot, one behind the other. There was no number on either, but the front lot had a small porch and a large Maori man was sitting in a rocker staring at Saul with more curiosity than suspicion.

In the still quiet air he heard a hammer being taken to something, the resounding clang followed by a mild curse.

He decided to follow that sound rather than make enquiries the man on the porch.

A battered looking car was on the drive. A pair of feet in the grubbiest trainers he had ever seen were sticking out from underneath the vehicle. A voice—female he thought—said, “Got you!” He turned around before he realized it had come from under the vehicle and was obviously being addressed to something mechanical rather than physical.

“Hello,” Saul said.

There was a moment’s silence and then amid groans and scuffles, the dirty trainers pushed against the gravel, and legs began to be revealed, along with a torso clad in grubby men’s blue overalls. The head, when it emerged, was topped by a baseball cap, the peak pulled low over the face so the features were hard to make out.

“Yes?” It *was* a female voice. She quickly scrambled to her feet, her oil-stained hand clutching a monkey wrench.

“I’m looking for Roxanne Rawson.”

There was no reply right away and then, “Oh, yes? And who can I say wants her?”

“Well, I think I’d rather tell her that,” Saul answered smoothly.

“Sorry, no can do. Roxie never sees anyone without she knows who exactly is visiting.” The accent was English.

Security was his business; he was very good on accent and nuance. “I’m not a debt collector.”

“Well, we don’t have debt,” the girl said. She appeared to be a girl rather than a woman. “So there wouldn’t be anything to collect. Do I know you?” she asked. “You seem familiar.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever met, but, of course, I can’t be sure, seeing as I don’t know who I’m speaking to.”

Her mouth opened, almost as if she would say something, but then as she pulled back, she smiled, a knowing smile.

“Nice one,” she said. She lifted her hand; there was a thin-strapped watch on her wrist. “Look, I have to go somewhere—”

“I really need to see Miss Rawson. I have some important news. It might even be good news...well, some of it.” His eyes travelled to the house. There was a distinct lack of paint and repair. Ten thousand pounds would come in handy. The exchange rate would mean a comfortable sum of money for her.

“Well, unless I know who you are, I can’t tell you anything. I hate to be a stickler, mate, but that’s the way we do things around here.”

“It doesn’t seem to be a place full of desperadoes...quite peaceful in fact.”

“Appearances can be very deceptive. Look, I really have to go, so...”

“Okay. You can tell her that Saul Hetherington wants to see her.”

There was a flicker—it was at her mouth, a vague quiver that showed the name was not one entirely strange to her.

“Okay, wait around.”

She went into the house. He wondered for a moment if she meant for him to wait, or if it was some strange New Zealand saying that meant he could buzz off. He decided on the former. She came back in about ten minutes, at least he thought it was her. The overall was gone, replaced by clean jeans and a white, thin-strapped t-shirt. Her hair was dark chestnut, thick and with a natural curl, and she’d bunched it up and secured it unceremoniously in an elastic band. Then

she looked at him directly, and he saw her eyes were large and green and framed by very long, luxurious lashes. In spite of all these positives she somehow missed being beautiful. She was more—and the word came to him suddenly—arresting.

“I’m Roxie,” she said. “I have to be somewhere, so I can give you five minutes, or we can talk in the car if you’ll give me a ride to where I’m going.”

“You’re very trusting all of a sudden.”

“Eh, it’s New Zealand!” She grinned, contradicting her earlier caution.

Saul noticed that, in spite of a tomboyish, no-nonsense kind of attitude, her mouth was pure sensuality. It reminded him of sweet red cherries, even though she was not wearing any makeup. He could well see her attraction for his brother. She was fresh. She was different.

“Anyway, you look okay and your name suits me. Need I be worried?”

“I don’t think so. I want to talk to you about my brother Fabio.”

Her face looked like the sun had suddenly hidden behind a cloud. All the brightness went from her. She froze, her mouth hardening, her eyes turning into twin emeralds.

“My brother—”

She raised a well-shaped eyebrow as she interrupted him by saying, “I know who you are, but I don’t really want to—”

“He was killed. Six weeks ago, a motoring accident in Italy.”

She paled and seemed to sway a little, then her hand went out and caught the bonnet of the car. She shook her head as if her thoughts needed shaking up.

“Are you all right?”

“Just a little winded...” She checked her watch. “Look, I hate to be a drag, but I do have to get to school.”

“School?”

“Yes, I have to pick up Josh. Obviously my car is knackered, so could you give me a lift?”

“Of course.”

As they went down the drive he wanted to take her arm. She was not a slim, waif-like creature. Quite the opposite, her jeans and sweater showed her to be curvaceous and very feminine, but she had seemed back there, as if she were going to pass out.

She waved to the man on the porch and he called something to her. “No worries,” she called back to him.

Once inside the car she concentrated on giving him directions. The town was very small, just one main street with shops on either side, but they drove out of town and soon were on a road lined with magnificent trees.

“It’s a special kind of school, only small. We used to live out here,” she explained. “I moved into town two years ago. The house was going cheap and it was near my work. Josh didn’t want to change schools. It can be a pain. Fortunately, there’s another kid who goes to the same school and his Mum and me take turns taking the kids, but he’s out with the chicken pox. Okay...turn left and it’s just on the left. Look, obviously we have to talk. You’re Fabio’s brother. I know that. I saw a photo of you once. He was really proud of you, but we can’t talk in front of Josh. After tea he has football practice. Stay for tea, then we’ll talk.”

“That’s fine by me. Is Josh your brother?” he asked.

The school came into view. It was a very small school set in beautiful manicured grounds. Gangs of little kids were

coming out, most of them barefoot by choice, and all of them wearing cute sun hats. He realized how stupid the question had been...these were primary and junior aged children.

Josh spotted her the moment she was out of the car and hurtled towards her. He was a kid of about seven with masses of dark hair and huge brown, gold-rimmed eyes. Saul was no rocket scientist, but he could tell an Italian Hetherington at first glance.

Chapter 2

He had not been in a house like Roxie's before. It was shabby but comfortable. There were books on shelves, crammed together, with some on top of upright ones. The furniture was old, but as he sank into the two-seater settee, there was a great deal more comfort than he had ever found in his mother's over-stuffed furniture. He asked to help with tea, but she said she could manage.

Josh settled himself in an armchair across from him. He was watching Saul surreptitiously. Saul was all right with children because he knew when to push it and when not to. He asked Josh a few questions about football. The boy answered, mostly with words of one syllable. He had been quiet in the car, too. He was probably, Saul suspected, used to having the whole of his mother's attention at the end of the school day. It was clear he resented the intrusion.

"Come and get it," Roxie called.

Tea was dinner—there were meat and vegetables, the gravy thick and tasty. Josh took some juice with his, and Saul took his lead from Roxie and had a glass of water. The plain food was good and the fresh fruit salad to follow was delicious.

After he had eaten, Josh was packed off to do some

homework before footie practice. Saul insisted on helping with the dishes, and she gave in to him. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, had a shabby air to it. Everything looked like it needed replacing. The money would come in useful, but he did not mention it. They chatted generally. Mainly she asked questions about him—was he still in the army, was he married? The personal questions tripped off her tongue and seemed to trap him. He was frank with her, more than he would have been with any other stranger.

“What do you do?” he asked, deciding it was his turn to be interrogator.

“I’m a nurse at the local hospital. That’s another problem, but we can talk about that later. Do you like New Zealand?”

“Yes I do, very much.”

“Have you been to South Island?”

He said he had. However, it was many years ago.

“I was there when I first came over,” Roxie said, “I worked at a vineyard outside Blenheim picking grapes. I’d had a year in Oz just travelling, so I needed to earn quickly and then look for a job. It was there I met your brother. He was working at wine proper.” She grinned. “He was learning all about it.”

“Yes.” He remembered that had been something Fabio had wanted to try. He had sold his mother on the scheme. He would learn about wine, and they would go and live in Tuscany and have their own vineyard. Carla owned a small property south of Florence, toward the coast, and Fabio had grand ideas about what they could do. As usual Carla went along with it.

“He did not stick with it,” Saul said. He remembered pleas for money.

“Maybe that was my fault. I landed a job in Auckland. He wanted to be with me.”

There had been no mention of a girl. There had been only the usual reams of excuses that Saul was used to getting from his mother about Fabio’s reasons for leaving yet another situation.

Josh trailed back into the kitchen. He had a pair of what looked like very old football boots around his neck. He wore a shirt bearing the name of very famous northern English football team and white shorts.

“I’m ready, Mum,” he said, in an almost accusing tone of voice.

“It’s not time. I don’t want you running around until you’ve digested your tea.”

“I won’t run around,” he said. “You can drop me at Pete’s and his mum can take us to the field.”

Roxie seemed to mull this over, made a decision and went to the wall phone and stabbed in some numbers. Pete’s mum seemed to confirm it would not be a problem if Josh came over early.

“Can I take advantage of your good nature again, Saul?”

“No problem.” He smiled.

After less than half an hour they were back in the house, and he knew he could not prevaricate any more. He had to get it over with. He thought of what his mother had thought of Roxie Rawson and how wrong she had been. Roxie might have been a lot of things, but a lap dancer, or indeed any kind of exotic dancer, she was not. He looked at her slyly as she threw herself into the chair her son had used. He amended his opinion of her easily, and it was not because she didn’t have the figure for it because she certainly had. There was an ear-

thinness about her, too, that, combined with her somewhat tomboyish way of speaking, was intriguing, but there was something wholesome as well. He could easily see what his brother would see in her...he could not quite see what she would see in Fabio. She did not seem to be the kind of woman to be bowled over merely by exceptional good looks. But what did he know anyway?

"It seems, Roxie, that Fabio thought about you."

"He did?" she asked, but in a studied kind of way. "What makes you think that?"

"Simple, he left you some money. That's why I'm here. Look, I'll be frank—"

"You be that..." she said, but again in a rather uptight kind of way. Something was coming between them. There were curtains more than a solid screen, but it was hiding her from him.

"I think Josh is..."

"Fabio's son? No secret...why wouldn't he be?"

"No reason for him not to be, of course. He looks very much like Fabio."

"Yes, he does. Unfortunate, don't you think?"

"Fabio was very handsome."

"You're right there. But looks aren't everything. I want Josh to be more than just a pretty face." Her voice was cold, as if she suspected he would not agree with her.

"Meaning Fabio was just that?" Saul could not resist asking.

"You're his brother, so you tell me."

"I don't know what happened between you two."

"Between us? You mean Fabio and me, I take it. Nothing happened and *everything* happened. One fine day, as they say,

Fabio packed his bag and he left. That was that.”

“He knew about Josh?” Saul felt the beginnings of anger stirring in his belly. He was not sure, though, who he was angry at.

“Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t. He went. He didn’t leave any word, and for weeks I was half out of my skull. I couldn’t understand what had happened. I knew he was in trouble, but I suppose I had not realised just how much trouble...”

“What kind of trouble?”

“It’s over now. I’m not going to trash the dead.” She stared into his eyes, offering a wild kind of challenge.

“It seems to me that’s what you’re doing.”

“Oh, really?” Roxie unwound herself from the chair. She pushed her hands into the pockets of her jeans. He could see her fists clenched through the fabric. “You think that if you like. Look, your brother left me eight years ago. I had a telegram. It said ‘Bye, don’t bother to get in touch.’ I didn’t need telling twice!” Her eyes glared into Saul’s own, and there were a shimmer there, as if a sliver of a tear had come unbidden. She must have felt it for she turned away from him, pushing back her shoulders.

“He must have had good reason.”

“Oh sure, I was screwing around.” She whirled around once more. “That’s what you’d like to believe, wouldn’t you? Well, let me tell you, Saul, he was running from something bigger than me—his own mistakes, the wrong crowd. I’m not going down that road. I need to forget it because I was frightened, too, and with good reason.”

Saul stood. It was growing dark, and she hadn’t lighted the lamps. There were long shadows between them. Far away

on the breeze he could hear the sound of Maori songs, they had the gentle hushing sound of waves on a beach. Roxie went across the room and switched on a light. The shadows of the dark were gone, but there were more spiritual shadows between them now.

"That's why I'm here—in the far north, away from Auckland. I didn't want to stay around. I was always looking behind me. I don't want his money, *Mr. Hetherington*. Me and Josh have got by pretty well these eight years without his help or support. We can get on by for another eight."

"He wanted you to have it. It's a nice sum, especially for here. Ten thousand pounds."

She guffawed. "Wow," she added. "And how did Fabio ever get such a princely sum."

"He'd straightened himself out. He was doing very well in the import-export business."

She laughed softly. "Import-export—it figures, but I don't want it, so give it to charity."

"You need it," he said.

She gasped a little; it was a piercing blow to her pride. "We get by. I told you, we don't live in the lap of luxury, but we do all right. We will do even better when I..." but she stopped herself from saying more.

"Do you have parents?"

"No," she said. "I was Little Orphan Annie. See, I'm used to fending for myself."

"Roxie, I'm going to put that money in a bank account and then you can take it whenever you need it."

"Don't hold your breath. I suppose your brother told you about me?"

"No, he didn't. The first time I heard was when the will

was read. His wife is very confused.”

“*His wife?* He has a *wife?*” The words exploded out of her.

She had to be feeling really hurt. It angered him what his brother had done to this woman. Whatever she had done, she had not deserved to be left alone. And his child...how could he have deserted his child? But perhaps he had not known about Josh. She had not said he knew. But then why would he leave Roxie money if he had not known about Josh?

“Yes...Louisa. They were married eighteen months ago.”

“And this wife...what is she like?”

He thought it an unnecessary impudence for her to ask that question. His answer was clipped. “She’s extremely charming.”

“Is she rich?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Humour me. I am trying to work out why Fabio married.”

“Presumably he fell in love. Isn’t that why people marry?”

“Some do.” She smiled a bitter little smile. “There are other considerations. In my opinion, status and money count for a lot. I’ll bet you wouldn’t marry anyone poor and humble.”

“I don’t hanker for marriage, but if I did, well, then I suppose my head would rule my heart to a certain degree.”

“An honest answer, Saul. Well done. So, Fabio left money to whom in his will?”

“That’s none of your business. All that concerns you is the fact he left you ten thousand pounds, and it looks like you need it.” He was getting fed up with this woman. There was something aggressive now about her, as if she wanted to push him, and he did not like being pushed by anyone.

"I don't mean I want to know who is in the will. Maybe I put it badly. I'm in the will, and what did it say exactly? About me, about who I am?"

"Just that money was to be left to Roxie Rawson, ten thousand pounds. There was nothing else whatsoever. No explanation as to why, just the statement."

She smiled the terrible bitter little smile he was quickly coming to loath. "Oh, my," she said. "The fatal error. That is just like Fabio. He always made a blunder. He did the same with the guys on K Road in Auckland. He was involved with the wrong crowd and thought he could handle it. He needed money. I suppose for the import-export; maybe he even needed some sort of cover. Whatever, he decided to take a risk. Quite a man for the risks, your brother. Odd that...I'll bet you take risks, too, but I suppose yours are very measured and calculated. Fabio thought he was crafty, but he wasn't. He was fun, but he was a fool, too."

"Look, I don't know what all this is about. And frankly I care even less. I've told you what I'll do. I really am sorry about how my brother behaved. I'm in no doubt that Josh is Fabio's son. I'll be pleased to help in that department."

"What a bloody cheek. Do you think I want help from you or your family? Do you think we want the Hetheringtons in our lives? You have to be joking, mate. I don't want anything to do with you or your family, your brother's money or your charity." The words rattled out of her. Her eyes raked him.

"It wasn't meant like that."

"It sure as hell sounded like it."

She was standing very tall and erect, her hands now completely relaxed at her sides. She stared at him, but he held her gaze.

"Where are you staying?"

“What?”

“Where are you staying?”

“At a small hotel in Paihia. Then tomorrow I travel to Auckland.”

“It’s a long drive at night. You’d better get going. Where will you be staying in Auckland?”

He told her, and she took up a pen and a piece of paper and wrote it down. “Will you stay over in Auckland?”

“I’m staying for a couple of days. Why do you need to know?”

“I might need to telephone you.”

“You can do that anytime. I’ve told you I’ll help you. You know, it shouldn’t hurt your pride to be helped financially by anyone.”

“You really think that money solves everything, don’t you? Just like Fabio.”

“It can’t solve everything, but it can make a whole lot of difference,” he insisted.

“Don’t you think that Josh and I are happy?” she asked softly.

“I don’t doubt it for a moment.”

“I never knew about family life. I went from Children’s Home to foster home to Children’s Home and then back again, a glorious merry-go-round...I’m not whining about it. Some of it was really good. I don’t think you know much about family life either.”

“I don’t?”

“No. Didn’t you have to go to school at seven, sent away from home? Your mother kept Fabio with her, until your dad insisted he go to your school, but he was eleven then. You were sent away at seven, a year younger than Josh. I think you

were pretty vulnerable.”

“It didn’t do me any harm.”

“It certainly didn’t, not in terms of success anyway, but you strike me as being a pretty cool if not cold person, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“I couldn’t really be bothered what you think about me Roxie,” he said and he meant it, too.

“See...cold,” she said, but softly and almost to herself.

“Why are you striking out at me?”

“Why am I striking out at you?” Roxie demanded. “You can’t even see it. You come here with your patronising hat on, thinking Josh and I are going to be ever so grateful because your brother put us in his will. If he hadn’t driven into a tree, we two could’ve been dead before we got anything. I’m curious as to why we got put in there. What was on his mind? He obviously didn’t tell...what is her name, the woman he married?”

“Her name is Louisa.”

“Louisa. Is she Italian?”

“No.”

“I thought she might’ve been hand-picked by your mother. He didn’t know how to say no to your mother.”

“My mother knows the family, but it isn’t relevant.”

“Oh, but it is. You know why I think Fabio put us in his will? Well, you know Fabio—sense of humour, sense of wickedness, he wanted to cause trouble. He was good at causing trouble for your brother.”

Saul could not deny that. There was always a little of the mischievous about Fabio. He loved to create situations. He was good at it, setting one person up against the other. He had caused endless rows between their parents, just for the fun of

it. He had been, in many ways, the lord of disharmony.

“There may be an element of that,” Saul admitted.

“You’d better believe it. Josh will be back soon. Expect my call.”

“I don’t see why you need to call me at all. The money will be there if you want it. If you don’t and you don’t want my help then...”

“Oh, Mr. Hetherington, there is such a lot you don’t know.”

* * * *

Long after Saul Hetherington had driven away and well past the time Josh had gone to bed, Roxie went and sat on her porch. It was a lovely evening. The midnight blue sky was filled with stars and there was such peace and quiet. It was so still outside; she could have sworn she could hear the waves curling on the beach.

It was so beautiful here. She had thought she would never leave. Only circumstances had conspired to make it necessary for her to move away. The cottage hospital where she was employed was closing down. She would find work in the big cities, but she did not want to live in the city. Truth to tell she was still, after all this time, afraid something Fabio had done would visit some kind of revenge on her and Josh. She wanted to stay here. Work, though, was scarce on the ground.

After weighing all her options, she had decided to go back to the United Kingdom. A doctor friend had gone into private practice near Plymouth. There was an opening for her as practice nurse if she wanted it. It would be a good move, too. Her friend had promised she would be able to do things her way because there would be opportunity for innovation. The other partners really wanted her. She was a degree nurse and one

with all-round experience. There were other considerations, too. The sale of the house had almost gone through. She had paid off the mortgage. The money would enable them to set up in England. If she stayed in England until Josh had finished his education, they could perhaps come back. There would be less pressure and she could maybe find a job doing something else.

Josh wasn't happy about it. He had a good life, but she knew he was the kind of child who would soon get used to life in England. He was outgoing and friendly. He would make friends and his obsession with sport wouldn't come amiss because she knew there were plenty of footie teams who would be glad to have him. He was a brilliant little winger. Everyone said so.

She sighed into the night. Still feeling raw from Saul Hetherington's visit, she went to the fridge, took out the milk, poured some into a glass and went to sit outside again. He had brought so many spectres to haunt her, not least Josh's dad.

Oh, Fabio. She sighed; a tear escaped her eye. She'd thought she would never cry for Fabio again and yet, when she thought about his life ended, it made her sad. He was not all bad. He was just selfish and thoughtless, but he was fun, too. He had made her laugh more than cry. She sighed into the silence. A trickle of tears scorched her cheeks. Angrily she rubbed her fists over her eyes. She would not cry. She did *not* do crying.

Sleep was impossible. It seemed as if her whole world was turned upside down. She went into her bedroom, closed the door and then bent down and searched under the bed. Her hand curled around the tin box and she dragged it out, then, sitting on the bed, she put the box on her knee and opened the

lid. Her passport was on top of various documents. She came up with a thin piece of paper, opened it, then carefully folded it and put it back. Beneath this was a thicker bundle of papers. Compressing her lips, she studied them for a long time. Then she made her decision and it seemed as if everything became very clear. She undressed after putting the box back, then climbed into bed. Sleep came after half an hour, and the next morning the decision she had made in the early hours was still there foremost in her mind.

The car just about got Josh to school and her back home. There would be a little more tinkering before it was fixed.

She waited until next morning before calling. She had finally gotten the car running all right and after she had dropped Josh off, she went home, made a cup of coffee and dialled the number.

Saul Hetherington sounded drowsy, with a husky quality to his voice that was not unpleasant. She tried to see him in her mind's eye, but he would not come. He was just a voice.

"Roxie," he said and he seemed not entirely displeased at her calling him.

She knew he liked to win. Fabio had told her that about his brother. He probably had assumed she was calling to say she would take the money. If things had not been so serious she might have smiled about that.

"Look, I wonder if you could mail me a copy of the death certificate," she asked briskly.

"Why do you want that?"

"I just do," she said.

"It's an unusual request," he said, suspicious.

"I don't see why. Look we took a mortgage out on the house. There was an insurance policy and I kept up the pay-

ment.”

“You did?” Again that suspicion...he was no one’s fool, Roxie knew that, but she was not exactly lying, just tidying up the edges of the truth.

“Look, I dare say I can get a copy myself,” she said when he did not respond.

“No need,” he said. “I’ll see to it as soon as I get home. I’ll send you details of the bank account.”

“Okay,” she said, not wanting to argue about that, although her pride took a dive because she wasn’t being honest with him about her intention never to spend any of that money.

“Look, Roxie, if there’s anything, anything at all, that I can do for you and Josh, I’d be pleased to help. I’d like to see Josh, or at least hear how he is going on.”

“Listen, I don’t want to be mean, but I don’t want anything to do with the Hetheringtons. Josh and I can get by on our own.”

“I’m sure you can, Roxie. You seem very resilient. But if ever you need help, I’m here. I can’t say more than that.”

“Fine. Have a good flight home.”

“Thank you.”

* * * *

Saul had been sleeping late. He pulled the sheets from around him and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran a hand across his chin, feeling the roughness of his beard. Last night he had had a very late night. The evidence of the amount he had drunk stared back at him from the bottle on the bedside table.

He had gone for a long walk around Auckland. Somehow he found himself in a rough part of town. Eventually he had found a cab and headed back to his hotel. When he told them on reception what had happened, they laughed and said he

must have wandered his way onto K Road. He remembered Roxie saying something about K Road—that Fabio had gone down there and that’s where his trouble had stemmed from.

Something did not fit. A piece was missing from the jigsaw and, through the haze of a hangover; he could not sort it out. Last night he had stayed up too late worrying about what Fabio had been up to. He had never been mixed up in anything shady. Saul was certain of that, yet Roxie Rawson hinted that Fabio had been in trouble. K Road harboured a red light district of sorts. Instinctively he knew Fabio would not be mixed up with that business, but where there was prostitution were there not also drugs? It was these thoughts that had kept him pouring the whiskey. On the one hand, there was loyalty to his brother, whom he had loved in spite of his wayward spirit, and then there was this strange woman he had been involved with, the woman he had left pregnant with his child.

Saul was not getting a pretty picture of Fabio’s previous life, and now Roxie wanted a copy of the death certificate. Not for one moment did he believe her story that she had kept up payments on an insurance policy because they had bought a house together. There would be no point if Fabio had no longer had an interest in her house. Besides, she had told him she had lived in the country before moving to the town. Something was wrong with her story.

Saul knew he should let it go, that if he pursued it he might find out other things about his brother, thing that would tarnish the very memory of Fabio, and yet it was in his nature to pursue things to the bitter end. He could not just let it go.

Chapter 3

Life, Roxie decided, was the best. They had enjoyed a New Zealand summer and here they were in England in late May, another summer before them. Everything had gone so smoothly for their relocation. Josh still complained, but his complaints were becoming less and less now. Of course there were traffic jams at certain times...little ones compared to London in the rush hour, she told him. You could not walk barefoot, however; he told her the beaches were fairly cool and school was sort of okay.

He had made her smile, too, quite often with some of the things he had said. The first time he saw rows of terraced housing, he surmised that people in England were very rich.

"How come?" Roxie had asked, driving past similar housing.

"Because they live in such huge houses..."

"They are lots of different houses, Luke," she explained with a laugh, "not one big house."

"Cool," he said.

Doctor Gordon had lined up several houses for them to look at. The one that was not only in her price bracket, but also close to the surgery and to a decent school, was the one

Roxie chose, with a little help from Josh. It was in a terrace of six, with a small front garden but a larger garden at the back. The garden was beautiful, a little too formal and park-like for Roxie, but it could soon be turned into something more interesting. There was a small patio that caught the evening sun, and she soon had a barbecue and a table and chair set out there.

There were three bedrooms and a lounge and huge dining kitchen. The bathroom was wonderful, as big as a room, Josh said, and the bath was old and huge. Most of the house had been renovated, but there were several jobs still to be done, hence the price but with the money from the insurance policy and the sale of her house in New Zealand halved the mortgage. Work was good, too. Jenny Gordon was as good as her word—the other partners were easy to get along with and very amenable to new ideas. Roxie was already getting ready to begin a mother-and-baby clinic, as well as prenatal sessions.

Josh complained at going to a childminders after school, but Roxie did not let it worry her. Josh would soon settle down. He was an easygoing boy and not shy or particularly vulnerable, he made friends easily and he would be all right once he had been to the childminders a couple of times.

“Listen, kid, we have to do things the hard way in this family. There’s just the two of us, so it can be tough. I’d like nothing better than to work part-time and always be there for you, but, unfortunately, if we want a reasonably good life and to have holidays and treats, I have to work full-time. That’s the way it is and no amount whining is going to change it, so let’s get on with it, eh, and stop sulking.”

“I didn’t want to come here anyway,” he muttered, but after half an hour he was down in the kitchen helping her sort it out.

On Saturday, by way of a treat, she took Josh to a professional football match and on the way home, diverted to the Barbican, an area Jenny Gordon said they should not miss.

It was Josh's first time of seeing an *olde* English area. He was enthralled by the narrow streets and old buildings and managed to coax her into an *olde worlde* teashop for ice cream. He ate and chatted with relish, and it made Roxie feel warm inside when she saw him so happy.

"That man..." Josh said, pointing to the window to which Roxie had her back. She turned. There was no one there. "He's gone, but I thought I knew him," Josh went on.

"Maybe he's one of your teachers."

"No," he said doubtfully. "Perhaps he was some kid's dad."

"Okay, now what do you want to do? Shall we go to Sutton Steps, then pick up the car and go home? Would you like that?"

"What is Sutton Steps? I forgot."

"It's where the Pilgrim fathers left for America. I think they went to the Netherlands first, but, gosh, my history is rusty."

"I'd rather go to the Hoe. Francis Drake is more interesting. He chased pirates."

"Did he?" Roxie questioned. "Wasn't it the Spanish? Anyway, we can find out when we get there."

Outside it was still sunny and pleasantly warm. Josh took hold of her hand. He had not yet reached the age when that would be considered not cool. They had only gone a few paces when a man blocked the pavement.

"Hey," Josh cried, "I do know you."

Looking up, Roxie saw to her horror that, indeed, they

did know the man. It was Saul Hetherington. She felt an implosion of feeling deep inside her. It was not pleasant.

"Roxie and Josh," he exclaimed. "I glanced at you in the café, but I couldn't believe it. What are you doing here?"

There was an interrogative tone in his voice that made Roxie shorter tempered. She resented him. The very height of him, and that, with the natural touch of arrogance in his bearing, represented all the things she had resented in her life, but mostly authority and privilege.

"We live here now," Josh said in a pleasant tone.

Funny, Roxie thought, when Josh met him in New Zealand, he had been sulky and unresponsive. Suddenly it seemed as if they were best mates.

"Josh, that's enough," Roxie admonished, her voice soft.

Josh looked up at her questioningly. Of course she knew what it was—Josh needed very much to make friends, to be made to feel welcome in his new country. Saul Hetherington was a link of sorts to the culture he was trying to adopt. It was rather endearing, but maddening to Roxie at the same time.

"Living here? That's interesting," Hetherington said, raising an eyebrow at Roxie. What he should have said was intriguing because that was what he meant.

"I don't think it is of any interest to you," Roxie replied, but with gracefulness she was far from feeling.

"You'd be surprised. Look, we have to talk. Can I take you someplace?"

"We're going to the Hoe," Josh said.

"My car's around the corner. I'll drive you there."

"Great," Josh said.

"We were going to walk," Roxie said.

In the end, she let Saul steer her towards the small car

park, resenting every step she took.

Hetherington's car was a Jaguar with cream upholstery. Josh was more than impressed and said so. Once he was ensconced in the back of the car, he caressed the upholstery and felt the interior woodwork. It was not a new car and had all the elegance and luxury of an older model. The engine purred smoothly, too. Josh had never been in such a car and was honest enough to admit it.

"I'll have to take you out sometime," Hetherington said.

Roxie glared at him, but if he was aware, he did not turn his head to look at her but kept his eyes to the front.

Once at the Hoe, Saul Hetherington joined them on their walk. His knowledge of history was perfect. *Of course it would be*, Roxie thought with an inward sneer. *His expensive education would have taken care of that.* Fabio had often told her how clever his brother was. How he was top of this and champion of that. Oddly, Fabio had not been jealous. He was not interested for himself, but he'd had some sort of warped pride in his brother's achievements and often would boast about him.

Filled with energy, Josh charged ahead of them eventually, skipping and running, and it was then Saul asked why they were in England.

"I think that's my business." Roxie snapped.

"You could have let me know."

"Why should I?" She turned on him. His eyes were full of something, either annoyance or something more deadly, she was not sure, so she looked away from him.

"Because I have a relationship with Josh."

"You think."

"Are you saying he isn't my late brother's child?"

"Of course he is! Look, somewhere along the line I have a

father and a mother, but I don't have a relationship with them."

"You sound bitter," he said gently.

"Maybe I am, but fortunately I'm not your business, and neither is Josh. That Fabio was his father was one of those things. He never saw him. He never claimed a relationship, so I don't see why you should."

"It may sound harsh, and I can't help that. The truth you see, Roxie, is I have a greater sense of responsibility than my brother ever had."

Roxie compressed her lips; the argument against that was spurious she knew. Anyone could claim to have a better sense of responsibility than Fabio, and it would not be a lie. "I just want us to be left alone."

"Don't you think that's rather selfish?"

"Selfish? It would be selfish to give you a good run for your money."

"What do you mean?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I mean *pretend* to be friends. Persuade you out of money, that kind of thing."

Saul Hetherington laughed softly; he had a pleasant laugh—a deep rumble that was sincere.

"What's money?" he said at last.

"You can say that—if you've got it, it doesn't mean anything."

"You're hardly on the bread line, Roxie. You have a profession. I'll bet you even have a good job here."

"Oh, really? What makes you think that?"

"The way Josh is dressed and, if you don't mind my saying, the way you're dressed."

"I might be a good bargain hunter and know all the right

charity shops.”

“You might, but I doubt it. You’re intelligent and you’re very independent. Tell me you don’t have a job.”

She sighed, tired of crossing swords. It was too wonderful a day and, if she carried on like this, she would be letting this man ruin it for her, although much later she was honest enough to admit it was her who was being antagonistic and spoiling the day.

“I do have a good job. I’m a practice nurse. A doctor I used to work with has gone into practice. She offered me the job, so I came back to England. I didn’t expect to meet you, though!” she had to add, not wanting to concede too much too soon.

“I don’t know why you shouldn’t. You must have known the family is from Devon.”

“Devon is a big county. Anyway, I thought you lived in London.”

“I did, but I sold my business and I’m doing what I always wanted to do now.”

She asked in spite of herself. “And what’s that?”

He hesitated, as if doubtful whether to tell her or not. She seemed to pick up his reluctance. “I’m not really interested,” she said shortly.

“Yes, you are. You would not have asked if you weren’t. We aren’t exactly engaged in polite chitchat. Actually, I’m writing...military biography...although I’ve also written an historical thriller. While doing some research, I came across some interesting facts, so I thought it a pity to waste the information.”

She was impressed, but looked away not to show it. Just then Josh came bounding back. “I feel great!” he said. “Don’t you just love this place?”

“I do.” Saul Hetherington beamed down at his nephew, seeming to forge a link between them.

Roxie heard herself sigh again. Saul was right. She was being selfish. Josh needed male companionship now and again. Would it really do any harm to let them meet occasionally? But what if, the nagging persisted, what if Saul discovered the truth of her relationship with Fabio? If he did, it could have terrible repercussions for all concerned. She did not want to be involved with these Hetheringtons and most certainly did not wish to cause trouble, and she could do so. Oh boy, how she could.

Saul drove them back to the car park. “Look, I’ve got a lovely little place on the River Dart. You would love it. You can take out a boat, there’s good fishing, a little beach...let me take you both there one weekend.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Roxie shrugged. She could feel Josh’s eyes burning through her, feel him willing her to say yes.

“It would be pleasant, I’m sure, but perhaps in a little while. It’s a little soon for weekends.”

She looked up. Saul’s firm mouth was twisted in a little smile, his brow raised, and there was just enough innuendo in the look to make her blush.

“I wasn’t looking at it in that way,” he said at last. “But if you want...”

A smile trembled on her mouth. She stopped it by folding her upper lip inside her lower.

“I mean,” she said at last, “a weekend can be a long time if you don’t get along, so could we come for a day?”

“Of course you can. How would next Saturday suit you?”

“Great,” Josh interrupted, searching for his mother’s

hand, as if to give it a reassuring squeeze.

“I’ll collect you at ten o’clock.”

* * * *

When he arrived home, Saul poured a drink. The sun, blood red in a pale yellow sky, was just starting to set. He walked down to the dock and looked at the still, calm waters of the river. Red splashes of light mingled with the silver ripples, and there was a deathly hush, then a blackbird started to sing a lonely lament from a nearby tree. He sang because he wanted a partner. It was a wonderful sound. Saul wondered why he didn’t have hundreds of female birds wanting to join him.

He went back inside the house and left the French doors open. The scents of an early summer wafted in, honeysuckle and the first roses. He loved the house. It was a converted boathouse. There were long windows in every room so the house was always flooded with light. It was not too big—three bedrooms, one ensuite, there was a small kitchen, more like a galley, then a living room with a curved corner that doubled as an office. It was comfortable more than opulent. His mother hated it, which was probably why he loved it. She could not understand why he had not bought a bigger place. When she said that aloud to him, he explained it was quite simple really—he wanted solitude, the river frontage, and the fact he had to park his car away from the house and take a narrow path down was a boon rather than an inconvenience. It meant he did not get anyone driving past or anywhere near. He had silence and solitude, and he enjoyed both. His mother could not understand that and had not shirked from telling him so.

After a long debate with himself, he decided not to call

Louisa. She had been distressed when he had told her what he had found out about Roxie Rawson. She had seemed terrified even, as if Josh would threaten her position.

His mother had refused to believe it! The Rawson woman might have a son, but he was no son of Fabio's. Her Fabio would not desert a pregnant woman and he would never become involved, anyway, with a girl like that. Just how his mother knew Roxie was a girl "like that" annoyed Saul. However, he was not inclined to let them know Roxie and Josh were in England until he had discovered for how long and what they intended to do, and perhaps he would not even let them know when he found out. Both his mother and Louisa had nothing to offer Josh, and whatever kind of person Roxie was, Josh was a really nice kid.

He did not distrust Roxie, although Louisa had thought she would be bound to want something one day, and he knew Louisa was right in certain respects. Some people invariably did want something, but Roxie Rawson was an odd woman, an individual. She was certainly bitter about her own life, but he did not think she was bitter about Fabio. She may well have been at one time, but she seemed over it. She cared deeply for her son, he could see that, but did she care enough to overcome her principles? He would have to wait and see.

* * * *

As the week wore on Roxie was kept busy, but in the dead of night she would still awake-with a start and begin to worry about Saturday. Several times she thought to cancel the day. Even went as far as looking Saul Hetherington up in the phone book. He wasn't listed; she had not really expected him to be.

The trouble was she knew she really could not cancel.

Josh was looking forward to it, too much for her peace of mind. Saul Hetherington promised all the things he missed since coming to England: boating, fishing, all kinds of sports, the boy's things that he used to do at the weekend with friends. He had not established himself sufficiently to be in the swing of things with the boys at school. It would take time. Cliques and factions were well established, and Roxie knew it would take a while before Josh could truly prove himself. She was being selfish in not wanting to go.

Surreptitiously she watched her son as he did his homework. He was so like Fabio it made her ache. Anyone who had known Fabio would see it. But he did not take after his father. There was a clever independence about Josh that had not been in his father, along with a certain toughness and hard strength. Those characteristics came from her, but perhaps also from his uncle.

Fabio had never been able to compete with his brother. He had been wise enough to see that, and so he had become different. And how different! She was forever monitoring Josh to see if he had his father's inherent laziness, but her son was hardworking and enjoyed being active. There was not Fabio's restlessness about him, or the expectations you could get things without working and striving for them.

Josh was a good kid. She knew that and she was proud of him, but now Saul Hetherington had come on the scene, unbidden and unwanted, could she deprive the lad of this masculine man's company? Just because she did not like Josh's uncle, there was no reason why Josh should be prevented from getting to know him. But what did Hetherington bring with him—the mother! The sainted Carla. Roxie knew she did not want to be dragged into that family circle. There was Louisa,

too. It was just too dangerous and complicated. But what could she do?

When Saturday arrived, Roxie had decided Josh should go and she would stay at home, but when the car pulled up outside her house, she knew she could not let Josh go alone. Josh would not be happy, and she would be worried. What did she know about Hetherington anyway? Fabio had been a born liar, so he could have lied about his brother's perfection. How did she know Fabio had been telling the truth about *anything*?

It turned out to be a perfect June day. The sky was a startling blue and the countryside was at its greenest. She was fascinated by the tall flower-festooned hedgerows, as was Josh. Josh chatted all the time about the things he viewed from the window, pointing out things for them to see. He was excited and happier than she could recall in a long while. It was comforting to know she had made the right decision.

Saul Hetherington looked different, too, in worn jeans and a white t-shirt that showed his muscular arms. He looked more human than the man in the silk suit. His arms were quite brown, the fairly dark hair on his arms tipped with gold. He looked like he worked out, but when she asked him if he did, he shook his head. He said he chopped wood for the wood-burning stove and did his own gardening, that kind of thing, as well as playing squash and swimming when he had the opportunity.

"I used to go swimming quite a bit, but I don't seem to get the time these days."

"Well, it will be a bit cold, but you could swim in the creek. I try to swim every day from spring to autumn."

"I haven't a swimming suit," she said. "You didn't say."

He cast a glance at her, his eyes running briefly over her body making her bristle. "I'm sure I've something at the house that will fit you," he said.

"Like a Boy Scout, aren't you?" She was unsuccessful in keeping the sneer out of her voice.

"Of course. Army training...always be prepared." He chuckled in his distinctive way, and then added, "I find it pays off—some of the time."

She knew he was teasing her now, but she did not want to be teased by this man. It made her feel...uncomfortable. Her toes curled against the soft leather of her sandals. As if aware of her desire to keep her distance from him, he said. "Lighten up, Roxie, for goodness' sake."

"I don't want to lighten up," she said and hated the churlish sound in her voice. This was not her. She used to be a fun person and now she was becoming rude and unpleasant and really without just cause.

"Look, I meant to say, I don't want us to be dragged deeper into the life of the Hetheringtons. Just you and no one else."

"There *is* only me," he said.

"What about Carla?"

"Ah, Carla? I doubt Carla would want to meet you. She has a picture of you in her head and I'd hate to disappoint her."

"A picture of me in her head. What kind of picture?"

* * * *

He pondered on whether he should tell her, but only for a moment. She was such an aggravating woman he decided he did not wish to prevaricate. "It's your name. She thought Roxie Rawson sounded like a tap dancer, but she meant lap."

He waited for the explosion, but when it came it was of laughter, a girlish little giggle. "I like that," she said. "I've frequently had a desire to be seen as naughty and nice."

"Well, then, you can see the difficulty I'm in. I should so hate to prove her wrong."

"Me, too. It is a stupid name anyway. Roxanne Rawson. I once thought of changing it to Jean Brown or something nice and simple."

"Was your mother a romantic?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I was thinking of Roxanne in *Cyrano de Bergerac*."

"I'm sorry?"

"A play. It's wonderful. You must see it. There's a film with Gerard Depardieu."

"Oh? Well, I haven't heard of it. Anyway, I have no idea whether my mother was a romantic or not. And she didn't name me, the policeman did...the one who found me. They asked him—I think usually the nurses at the hospital do it—but this time they asked the bobby."

"Sorry? I'm not with you?"

"When he found me, I'd been left in a telephone box."

"You were found in a telephone box?"

"Yes, one of those old-fashioned red ones with all the windows, newly born and abandoned."

Saul said nothing for a long moment. Josh spoke up. He was pointing to some cows looking over a gate like four old country yokels. "They're often there," Saul said. "I'm never certain whether it is the same four, but something in the lane interests them."

Then he turned to look at Roxie. She was sitting staring in front of her, her hands folded in her lap. "That must have

been tough,” he said, but she merely shrugged, and he decided to say nothing else.

They were coming up to the track that wound its way down to the creek.

She spoke then. “It happens, so I guess it was the policeman who was the romantic. Perhaps he knew about Roxanne and Cyrano what’s-his-name.”

“De Bergerac. He loved Roxanne, but never told her until it was too late,” he said.

“Sounds like the story of my life,” she said, but lightly and without bitterness. “Heck, do you live down here?”

The lane was filled with overhanging bushes and trees. He parked on the square of concrete and told them they would have to walk the rest of the way.

“Fantastic,” Josh said

The ground underfoot was fairly squelchy, but there were parts that were laid with stones. Saul explained he was having the path made but the men who were doing it had gone off on a more important job.

“We could do it ourselves,” Roxie said, unconsciously.

Saul let the “we” go. “Yes, I suppose we could. Can you manage or do you want a hand?”

“No, I’m fine, eh. I’m a backpacker from way back when. Josh is pretty tough, too, aren’t you, kid?”

“Yes, I am,” Josh said, then pushed his way to the front, moving as fast as he could down the slope. He was the first to see the boathouse and the river and the small dinghy at its mooring. He exploded with delight. He turned and gazed up at Saul, admiration burning out of him. “Wow!” he called.

When she saw it, Roxie wanted to say the same thing, but she held herself back. She had never seen a place so idyllic.

The river, golden in the pure light; the garden; the luscious pink roses; the way the clematis draped itself over one wall in a profusion of blue...

At the door to the boathouse, she and Josh kicked off their shoes, a habit from their time in New Zealand where you left your outer shoes outside. The floors were sun warmed, honey-coloured boards, with bright coloured rugs scattered here and there. She thought, with a tug of beautiful sadness, that if she lived here she would never want to leave. It was perfect; it was the kind of place of which her dreams were made. The atmosphere was warm and welcoming, too. Some places, as well as people even now, intimidated her, but this wrapped itself around her making her feel—and the word made her smile—comfortable because comfortable was the opposite of how its owner made her feel.

Saul had a light lunch prepared of salad and cold meats, with a delicious fruit pie for afters made, he told them, by his housekeeper, a formidable cook. They took coffee on the terrace. He said he would take them out in the dinghy, but Josh said, revealing her secrets, “You won’t get Mum in that! She hates being on water!”

“What? And you lived in New Zealand, the sailing capital of the world?”

“Why do you think I lived away from the coast!” she said. “And I suffer from sea sickness,” she admitted.

“Not in a dinghy on a river,” Saul protested.

“Maybe not, but I’d rather...” She shrugged.

“Aw, Mum.” Josh moaned.

“I don’t believe I said you two can’t go, if Mr. Hetherington trusts me being alone here.”

“It’s Saul,” Saul said rather sharply. “And of course I trust

you.”

She watched them prepare and was pleased to see Saul coaxed Josh into a lifejacket. He set Josh in the dinghy, and then, his feet in water, he loosened the dinghy from its mooring and jumped in as the little boat moved off. She watched them until they turned a bend in the river, then she went back into the house.

Their used dishes were on the worktop by the sink. There was a dishwasher, but she used the sink to wash them, leaving them to drain when she had finished.

She sat out on the terrace feeling a little uncomfortable. She would have liked to look for a book or a magazine to read, but she was not happy with going in the house to look. She thought it might look like prying. It was the same when the telephone rang. She did not go in to answer it. *Perhaps*, she thought, *it might be a girl friend of Saul Hetherington's*. Her answering the phone could cause all kinds of trouble.

What am I doing here? she asked herself. *Bringing my son into this man's arena. Who knows what ideas he had about Josh and what he could do for him.* It had always been just the two of them and it was how she wanted it to stay. There was possessiveness in that attitude, she acknowledged that honestly. After all, she had never had anyone to love before, never had anyone who was wholly hers. Fabio was certainly not that, and she had never thought of him really in that way. In spite of her once imagining herself in love with the father of her child, she was quite able to be dispassionate about him. There never had been any wild jealousy. She had not ever entirely found any deep feeling of raw emotion, that wild possessiveness she had read about, the need to have the person entirely for you.

Those feelings had only come with the birth of Josh. Josh was the only family she had ever had, and it was hardly surprising she did not want to share him. Yet she *should* share him, she acknowledged, because her son needed masculine company. It was the most natural thing in the world, and Saul Hetherington so far did not appear to be like his brother. She was not entirely sure what he was like, but that he was different from Fabio she did know.

However, she did not want the whole paraphernalia of family. She could not cope with a tribe of Hetheringtons. Just one was enough, and she knew she had to make that perfectly clear.

She wandered down to the dock and saw them heading back, the bright red sail puffed out like the chest of an old soldier. She waved, and it was Saul who saw her first and attracted the attention of Josh. Her son waved. Then Roxie went back into the house and put on the kettle; there were cups and saucers on a dresser, so it was not like she had to look around and open cupboards. There was a tray, too, and by the time they came up the steps to the house, she had tea already made.

“It was fabulous,” exploded Josh when they came in.

“Better than cool, eh?” Roxie teased him. Since everything was cool, she guessed the sailing surpassed anything he had ever done before. He gave her a sly grin, but then nodded his head in assent.

“He’s a born sailor,” Saul Hetherington said. “A master mariner in the making.”

“What’s that?” Josh asked.

Saul had a way of talking to Josh. As she listened to him explain, he was not patronising, but somehow managed to hit

the correct level to have an affinity with Josh, which was surprising in a man who had not had any children.

If I'm not careful, he'll steal my place, she thought and knew that the fear stemmed from her insecurity about herself. A part of her wanted to grasp the idea it was irrational yet she could not stem the fear that wrapped itself around her heart.

"I think we'd better be going," she said abruptly.

"No. Not yet," Josh cried. "I want to stay longer."

Aware Saul was looking at her, weighing her, probably finding her wanting, she went on, unable to stop herself from spoiling her son's day. "I'm sure Mr. Hetherington has things he has to do. There was a phone call. Sorry I didn't answer it..." She shrugged, realising how feeble she sounded.

"I don't have anything to hide, so you could have done," he said, but lightly and she could see he was not really bothered.

"Please say we don't have to go," Josh pleaded to him. "Go on, Uncle Saul."

Roxie felt her head spin at the appendage uncle. She threw a damning look at Saul and felt anger at his nonchalant shrug. What could she say, how could she forbid Josh to call him that? After all Saul was his uncle, although she had never told Josh that.

"Look, if your mum needs to go, then you have to as well. You can come again and soon."

"We don't have anything special to do, do we?" Josh persisted, his mouth setting in a stubborn line, determined not to give in on this.

"If you aren't busy, do stay," Saul said smoothly. "I had Mrs. Harrison make us dinner. We only need the microwave..."

"See!" Josh went on. "He wants us to stay."

Roxie felt the walls closing in on her. She looked helplessly at her son, his face full of pleading. Almost every feature was squeezed up into one huge word, *please*. Her very selfishness disgusted her, so she shrugged and murmured okay, but she left the room quickly. She headed for the bathroom, firmly shutting the bolt on the door and then turning to press her face against the cool cream tiles. Her heart was hammering away at her chest. The emotion was pounding away inside her. She had to control it, had to learn to give, to let go a little, but it was *so* hard!

* * * *

Roxie was not sure how it happened. Had the two males conspired against her? She was there now, wearing a pyjama jacket that belonged to Saul Hetherington, lying in bed in the spare room, her son in another bed beside her.

There had been wine with the meal, and perhaps it had mellowed her, or maybe it was the view of the splendid molten gold sunset, the sight of diving birds, the mellow song of blackbirds and later, the throbbing, sensual sound of a thrush on the still air. She found herself really wound down, unself-conscious, her defences lowered. They'd played cards on the terrace outside, until it went too chilly even for them. It wasn't that cold inside, but still Saul had lit the logs in the stove.

Josh was happier and more relaxed than he had been in ages, so relaxed in fact that he just fell fast asleep. One moment he was sitting laughing and talking, and the next he had fallen into a deep sleep, his head lolling on the velvet covered cushion.

"Oh, laws," she had muttered. His knees were a little grubby and he was sock-less. He looked so vulnerable her

heart swelled.

"Don't worry. I can carry him up to the car," Saul said quietly. "Unless you'd like to stay."

"We don't have any pyjamas," she said, and then remembering what he had said about the swimsuit, muttered, "I suppose you have those on hand, too."

"No, but you can borrow a pair of mine."

She bristled at the idea but said. "And no toothbrush."

"I carry spare packets of those."

"I'll bet you just do," she said, turning the simple statement on its head.

He looked puzzled at her vehemence and then saw her smile and caught the joke.

"Well, yes, those as well, if you like."

"In your dreams!" she said, but lightly.

Saul leaned back, his head against the back of the leather sofa. "How about it?"

"What?" She could not resist teasing. It was the wine, it was the weather, and it wasn't him—was it?

"Staying the night, in the spare room, of course."

She looked over at Josh. He looked so peaceful, it would be cruel to drag him up the lane to the car, even if Saul carried him, then drive all the way back to Plymouth. Saul would have to carry him into the house, too, and up to his bedroom.

"As attractive as you are," Saul went on, "I would not proposition you with Josh here."

"How thoughtful of you and thanks for the compliment. But we will stay, if you're sure you don't mind."

"I don't and it does mean..." He reached over for the half full bottle of Chianti. "I can have another glass. Want one?"

"Please, it's good. I never tasted Chianti before. It's very

palatable.”

“Yes, the wine of Tuscany. I don’t suppose you have been to Tuscany?”

“I haven’t even been to Italy. I went to France once on a school exchange, which was good. My travels have been only in the Antipodes.”

“Only? That’s quite adventurous, even by today’s standards. Going to a country alone and making your way.”

She said modestly, “Well, the language isn’t a barrier to start with, there are some advantages and the culture isn’t strange. I really liked it out there. I felt at home somehow. I mean I didn’t have to explain anything about my background. I was travelling alone. I didn’t have to explain why I lived alone. It was a kind of freedom.”

“Tell me about you,” he said.

“Oh, it’s pretty boring—orphange, foster home...”

“You were never adopted?”

“No, odd that, too, most babies are. I went out to a foster family. They were used to babies, and maybe they thought my mother would show up. I don’t know why, but it was probably for the best. I don’t have to carry any baggage with me.”

He wanted to say, *But you carry a lot*; however, he stopped himself. He did not want to antagonise her. He recognized her mellow mood and would enjoy keeping it that way. It seemed it would be the only way he could get to know her. She was opening up a little, however, he knew she was spiky enough to close up just as quickly “I think we had better put Josh to bed,” she said.

“Fine. I’ll bring him up. It’s the bedroom at the top of the stairs.”

The short flight of stairs was carpeted and there was a

landing with three doors, one of which was the bathroom. Roxie opened the door and saw, in the twilight, that there was a lamp on a table. She went and turned that on rather than the overhead light. It was a large bedroom with twin beds. The beds were already made up.

Going to the first bed, she rolled back the cover. Saul slid Josh onto the sheet. Slowly and carefully, Roxie removed his shorts. His t-shirt would be okay with his underpants since it wasn't cold. Josh muttered a little, but did not waken. She folded the sheet and covers around him, gave him a long and loving look and then turned.

Saul was studying her and the intensity of his gaze obviously made her feel uncomfortable because she turned away before tiptoeing over to the window and, as quietly as possible, pulling the curtains closed. Lastly Roxie extinguished the lamp, but left the bedroom door partly open.

"He had a great day," Saul said, handing her the glass of Chianti when they got back to the living room.

"So did you," she said.

"I won't deny it. It's great to have a kid around...it means I get to be a kid as well."

"Yes, it does have its advantages, like it means you get to go theme parks." She settled down into the armchair and stretched her legs in front of her. She had not done very much, yet she felt tired, too. It had to be the fresh air.

"Tell me about Tuscany," she said

"Didn't Fabio tell you about it?"

"No, not much. He never talked about places a lot. He talked about you a good deal, though. I bet I know *everything* about you!"

"Need I be worried?"

She laughed. "Yes and no. No, really, he was very proud of you. I know all about your time at school, then when you went into the army, your being in the SAS. He once said you were everything he never could be. I thought that rather sad but I don't think he meant it that way." She looked down into her glass and then took a long sip. "This is lovely, so Tuscany. What's it like?"

He talked for a long time, his voice was comforting, and there was a husky timbre to it now that was dark and deep and yet reassuring. He painted pictures with words; she was not surprised that he had turned to writing. She saw the Tuscan landscape through his eyes, even the smell of it—the warm olive groves at Midsummer Eve; then she walked around Florence and gazed with awe at the Domo and wondered at the brilliant creativity of man. He took her to Pisa, and she thought how wonderful it would be to go into the cool dark cathedral and see the marbles and the paintings. She practically heard the song of the attendant as she stood, locked in the baptistery, his voice ringing around the building, echoing down towards her. She sighed when his words died away.

"One day we'll go... Josh and I..."

"I'd like to be with you," he said.

His words caused her to look up. His eyes, those very dark blue and heavily lashed eyes, were warm and held a speculative gleam. The breath caught in her throat as a frisson of feeling swelled through her like warm liquid. Her reserve melted as she held his gaze, not daring to look away, her lips parted in an unspoken question, then realism struck her and she stood in one swift movement that, for a moment, caused her head to swim.

"I think I'd better go to bed, too," she said, feeling her

cheeks redden as she realised that simple statement could be a touchstone as well. “Er, Josh might waken. You said something about pyjamas and a toothbrush.” She heard herself gabbling like a neurotic turkey, but could not stop herself.

“No problem.” He stood, too. “I think I’m pretty tired as well. I’ve had a wonderful day...thank you for coming.” He led the way, and she was glad of that, not trusting herself to walk in front of him without giving a hint of her deepest feeling. She had a horror of sashaying in a certain way that would give out the broadest of hints.

Now lying awake in bed, tormented by secret yearnings, she wondered what had happened to her. She did not like the man. He was Fabio’s brother, and look where meeting Fabio had landed her! Yet the scent of him permeated her nostrils, with a frankly masculine fragrance that made her very toes curl. Angry with herself, she tore herself out of his pyjama top and threw it on the floor.

It was nothing more than sex. He was male, *all* male as it happened, and it had been a long time since she had been around a man who had stirred up emotions she had thought dead. It was years, too, since she had made love; not since before her son was born and she was still young. These teasing feelings were natural a little voice argued within her. If they were just natural, how come she had not suffered them before now?

Eventually she slept—must have done—for she awoke to find the sun streaming in through the window. The bed opposite her own was empty, the cover thrown back. *Josh*— She panicked, thinking of the river and knowing him to be an adventurous boy. She leapt from the bed, pulled on the pyjama top and went out, calling as she went. The empty house gave

no sound in reply. She sped down the stairs running into the kitchen. Breakfast dishes were on the sink. Her eye spied the clock—ten-thirty. There were two lots of dishes and cups. As she whirled around, her eye caught the kettle, where a note was propped up.

*Dear Roxie,
Gone fishing.
Love, Josh and Saul*

It was obviously in Saul's strong, firm handwriting. It was okay—they were together, panic over. The doors onto the terrace were flung back. Going outside, she went and leaned against the rail. She saw the dinghy was gone.

There was coffee made. She flicked the switch to re-heat it and when it was ready, went out onto the terrace and sat in one of the chairs, enjoying the warm heat of the sun on her limbs. Her legs were slightly tanned from the summer in New Zealand. *Not a bad pair of pins*, she mused, enjoying a rare flush of vanity. She smiled. *A lap dancer's legs?* she wondered.

She heard the voice before the figure came into view. "How come you aren't answering your phone these days?" And then she was there, staring up at the terrace, a very tall, slender girl with naturally blond hair, a girl who looked almost too immaculate from the tip of her head, along the fine linen narrowly fitted pale blue dress, and matching sling back shoes.

"Oh," she said, seeing Roxie.

Roxie, all at once conscious of her attire, sprang to her feet, thankful Saul was so much taller than she and the pyjama top reached beyond her knees.

Roxie said, not wanting to cause trouble "It's not what

you think.” The girl had let herself in, so she couldn’t be exactly a stranger to Saul.

“And how do you know what I think?” the girl said, but smoothly and not as if her feathers were ruffled.

“Well, I don’t, of course.” Roxie felt her newfound confidence spiralling away from her. This girl seemed able, by her cool and immaculate appearance, to erode all the hard-won confidence Roxie had scrabbled for.

“Isn’t Saul here?”

“Not at the moment. He’s gone sailing in the dinghy.”

“I see,” the girl said, but Roxie was not certain she did.

She wondered how much she should say.

The girl eyed the coffee. “I’ll have some coffee while you get dressed. He might be back by then.” Then as if it was an after thought, she asked, “Don’t you like sailing in the dinghy?”

“No.”

“Me neither!” She smiled, the haughty quality of her features melting somewhat. “Now an Onassis-size yacht maybe, but that little thing? No way.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Roxie said.

“Certainly, take your time.”

Roxie found herself trembling as she took a shower. It was inexplicable because it was not rage nor was it fear. Or maybe she *was* afraid, afraid of having caused Saul trouble. The woman might be his girlfriend. She obviously did not know Saul had been entertaining. And, while Roxie knew it wasn’t her fault, she did not wish to be the catalyst that brought trouble to Saul’s door.

“I shouldn’t care,” she muttered, towelling herself vigorously. “He was the one who imposed himself into our lives,”

but the words had a hollow sound to them, and, unfortunately she did care. He had been kind to Josh.

When she went downstairs, they still had not come back. The woman was sitting on the terrace, legs crossed, one foot swinging as if she were impatient. "I was hoping we could have lunch together. I do hate Sunday's alone, don't you?"

"Well, I'm not alone on a Sunday that much."

"Oh?" she said, raising a well-shaped eyebrow.

On closer inspection and over her shock, Roxie saw the girl was quite beautiful in a cool, aristocratic kind of way. There was no feature that was out of line, no snub nose or over large mouth, which was how Roxie viewed her own impish, or as she called them, mismatched features.

"We might not be staying for lunch. I'm not sure..."

"It doesn't matter. The more the merrier," the girl said flippantly. "I suppose we had better introduce ourselves. I'd hate Saul to think we had been rude to one another. I'm Louisa Hetherington. I was married to Fabio, Saul's brother."

Roxie felt waves of heat rising as a hot flush crawled up her neck. No wonder she had felt so apprehensive, so afraid and concerned. She could not seem to speak and, for a moment, in a blind panic, she wondered if she should give a false name, then realised immediately the futility of that. Once Saul came back with Josh, Louisa would see the stamp of Fabio Hetherington all over Josh's features.

"I'm sorry," Roxie said, stiffening her spine. It wasn't her fault. She had not wanted to come here, but nonetheless the net was tightening around her, and she felt she could not breathe.

"Sorry?" Louisa picked up the word.

"That we had to meet like this, without warning. My

name is... I am, Roxie Rawson." She held out her hand.

Louisa seemed as if she would back away. Roxie saw her silently mouth the name, then gaining control, Louisa stepped forward, holding out her hand.

"I could have done with some warning, but what the hell. Hello." The clasp was cool but firm and she did not quickly pull away as if her hand would be burned by contact with the mother of her husband's child. When she eventually released Roxie's hand she said, "Perhaps I should leave. Maybe it's not appropriate. I should have rung."

"Please don't let me drive you away. We hadn't intended to stay the night. It's just that Josh fell asleep and it seemed easier."

"Josh," Louisa said gently. "And he is out...with Saul... He likes sailing in small craft?"

"He likes anything that smells of adventure," Roxie said.

"Like Saul...not like...his father," Louisa said coolly.

Roxie would have liked to say Fabio liked danger more than adventure, but the less they shared gossip about him, the firmer ground Roxie knew she would be on, and so she merely nodded. "Please stay. I'm sure Saul would like to see you."

Louisa pursed her lips, pondering on her decision. "We could pretend I hadn't been here," she said, "but then again that wouldn't be fair on you. All right, I'll stay...I wouldn't like to make you a liar."

Roxie, ever alert, looked for sarcasm in the remark, but there was none there. "I don't mind if you'd rather go."

"No, I can stand it if you can. Poor Saul will be so embarrassed." Her laugh was a gay tinkle, a delightful sound.

"He might be, but he seems pretty cool about everything."

Louisa smiled. "You think so?" she said with emphasis, as if she knew better.

"Well, I don't know him that well."

"He's all right," the girl said, as she resumed her chair.

Gingerly Roxie joined her, sitting opposite Louisa. They heard the sound of voices from the river, and when they looked they saw the red sail of the dinghy heading for the dock.

"It looks like we'll find out what he thinks any minute," Louisa said.

Roxie saw the girl's hands clasp the sides of the chair, saw the knuckles go white. She was not as relaxed about things as she pretended. *But who could blame her*, Roxie thought. It was a terrible situation to be in, and had Louisa known the whole truth, it was even worse than terrible!

Josh came first, running up the path and bouncing onto the patio, all smiles and excitement. At first he didn't see Louisa, having eyes only for his mother. Louisa jumped from her seat in such an abrupt manner, she sent the chair crashing behind her. She muttered. "I don't believe it." Then, as if she thought everyone should hear, she repeated the statement louder.

Saul arrived just then, his brows lowering over his nose as he viewed the scene. It was as if the women and the child were frozen in time, each stood so still—Josh, his thumb pushed between his teeth as if he thought he were going to be blamed for something, Roxie her hands at her sides looking helplessly at Louisa, who had gone so pale it was as if all the blood had been sucked out of her.

"Louisa." Then Saul was at her side, his arm going around the slender woman, crushing her alongside him, his other arm

going right around her at her waist, as if afraid a wind would come and whisk her away.

"It's all right...just a shock...my heart's going like a sled-gehammer..." Then she added, as if he would not understand, "Heavy and hard...I didn't expect...I didn't believe..." She broke free from Saul and went to Josh, placing her hands on his bony shoulders and holding him there fast. "Hello, Josh. I'm your Aunt Louisa."

Roxie despised the "oh, no" that immediately came into her mind. *Not another one staking a claim over my child*, but she brushed it away. Her compassion for Louisa overcame her reluctance. She had just lost her husband; a husband she so obviously loved. She had not known Fabio, not really, or at least Louisa had not known the man Roxie had learned about the hard way.

Josh was shy with Louisa but gave her a reluctant smile. He looked for confirmation from Roxie, who gave him an encouraging look. By the time Saul had brought them drinks and lemonade for Josh, Josh was chatting to Louisa in reply to her intelligent questions.

Louisa was all for them having lunch together at a local pub, but Roxie managed to get out of it. She had work to do at home and she was sure Josh had homework still left. This time Josh did not protest, as if he imagined that perhaps Louisa was Saul's girlfriend and he needed time alone with her. Unselfish by nature, Josh would want to be generous as he had had such a great time.

"You could take us to the nearest train station," Roxie said. "I'm sure we can get a train to Plymouth."

"On a Sunday?" Saul said tersely. "And even if there were trains, I wouldn't hear of it. Louisa can come along, too, if she

likes, and we can eat out on the way back, okay?"

Louisa agreed. Roxie had hoped she would have refused. Somehow she did not really want Louisa to know where she lived, but there was nothing, she realised, she could do about it.

The drive back was somewhat tense, conversation was awkward and a little stilted. It was only Saul who managed to sound quite normal. Even Josh seemed to have lost his enthusiasm and stared out the window, now and again searching for his mother's hand and squeezing it.

"Lovely to have met you at last," Louisa said when they arrived. She left the car, giving the terraced house a cursory glance and then ruffling Josh's hair.

Roxie shook her hand and formally thanked Saul for giving them a nice time. She felt strange, as if she wasn't really part of it, as if she were walking in a dream. Here they were, Fabio's brother and Louisa, Fabio's bride, and then Fabio's son, all connected by a tenuous link to the past.

She watched them drive away before entering the house. Josh said, as soon as he was inside, "She seems nice, but how is she my aunt?"

"She isn't really. She was married to Saul's brother."

"Well, how come Saul's my uncle? Is he like those people who send you a Christmas card...those that you lived with...the fosterers?"

"The Bridges, you mean? No, they were my foster parents when I was thirteen and they were good to me," Roxie said. "It was a bad time for me, and it's thanks to them I finished my education." She talked about the Bridges because she was trying to gain the courage to tell the truth to Josh. She could not put it off any longer, not with Saul in the picture.

She knew they would see him again. He had not said so, but he was forging bonds with his nephew and he would not walk away from doing that, no matter what she wanted. It was sadly too late for her to protest. It would be cruel to both of them if she stopped it. She wanted to—for her own peace of mind—to still the terrible possessive insecurities she felt, but she couldn't. She didn't have it in her to hurt them both in that way. There would be no nipping it in the bud now.

"I suppose we have to talk," she said with a sigh.

"I don't like the sound of that. I haven't done anything wrong, have I?" Josh asked, his face puckered up.

"No. It's me in trouble this time."

"That's okay then."

They went and sat in the lounge. It was warm and she opened the patio doors. Josh said he wasn't hungry. She could tell he wanted to get it over with.

She wondered where to start and how she could tell the story. Then she realised Josh did not want a story. He would accept the simple truth. Children did not need to know everything in the way adults did. They wanted just the facts and not the reasons.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. Saul is...was...your dad's brother."

"He was?"

"It was hard for me to talk to you about your dad."

"You said he went away before I was born."

"That's right. Well, he died...was killed in a motor accident."

"Oh."

She looked for emotion in the single word, but there was none. He had never cared to talk about his father, had not

been curious. They had lots of friends in New Zealand—other kids' dads—so it had not really been an issue.

"That's why Saul came to New Zealand? To tell you?"

"Yes."

"You could've told me then," he said.

"I could have, maybe I should have, but there was so much going on. I didn't think Saul would want to see us again anyway."

"Well, that was wrong. He likes me, and I like him. I'm glad he's a real uncle. I can see him whenever I want."

"More or less. He's a busy man, but I think he'd always be glad to hear from you."

"Great. So is Louisa Dad's sister? I thought she was Saul's girl friend."

"No, she isn't. He doesn't have any other siblings. There were just the two brothers."

"What are siblings, Mum?"

She explained. "I think it's only Saul who is interested in knowing you, but he and his family... Well, they move in a different sphere from us. They have money and position and..."

"So what's that?" he said, the egalitarianism of New Zealand still much a part of his psyche.

"Well, in England, there's a lot of class business."

"So who is Louisa?" he persisted.

Roxie was grateful he wasn't interested in pursuing the question of class.

"Louisa married your dad...not long ago actually."

"But...but you're married to Dad," he said, his eyes narrowing, then she watched the sense coming to him. "But you were divorced, right?"

"I think seeing you upset Louisa quite a bit. You look a lot like your dad," she said, hoping that would bring about a change to the subject.

"Ugly man, was he?" Josh said, then laughing at his own joke.

"How would you like to go to MacDonald's?"

"Oh, yes!"

It was over. She had given him sufficient information to satisfy his curiosity. He may never need to be told the whole story. If he asked, she would not be able to lie, but for the time being, she was getting a reprieve. They all were.

* * * *

Saul came often, at least once a week. He always wanted to include Roxie, but more often than not she declared she was busy, letting Josh and he go out alone. They did lots of interesting things together. They went to cricket matches and to the cinema. They went walking or swimming and when it was the school holidays in a couple of weeks, it was planned that Josh would go to Saul's to stay over a few days. She had had to agree to going for a long weekend. Saul was adamant about it. It would, he'd said, help Josh settle in if she went with them for a short time. She had managed to buy a second-hand car and promised to drive over and stay. It was agreed she would stay from Friday until Monday morning and Josh would stay on the rest of the week.

It wasn't that she didn't enjoy Saul's company. It was more to do with her liking it just a little too much for her own peace of mind. He was amusing and kind, he could make her laugh, and she often turned the tables and made him laugh. She knew she was on dangerous ground because laughter was something of an aphrodisiac and anything of that kind she did

not need. Saul was enough of an attraction without any extra stimulus.

When he came close to her she could not quite catch her breath. There was a luscious raging deep inside her that was torment, but it was pleasurable torment. The sensuous parts of her body opened to him. His scent intoxicated her, and even the sly glances she took at the brown flesh of his arm were sufficient to set off sparks inside her. She would melt, feeling liquid gently oozing out of her. At these times she would turn her most caustic, be abrupt and sometimes downright rude. She would, she knew, be mortified if he even suspected how she felt about him!

It's just a silly crush, she would say to herself in the dark of night. But she was a woman and not a girl and women did not get crushes, or did they? How would she know...she had never had a crush. She had tumbled into what she believed was love with Fabio, which had not been anything like she felt now.

"And Louisa?" she asked one day when he had brought back Josh from a visit to the cinema. Josh had rushed to the toilet so she felt safe to pose the question.

"Fine. There isn't a problem. She likes Josh. It was just a little difficult at first because I hadn't told her you and Josh were in Devon. I should have done, I know, but it was awkward and I was waiting for the right moment."

She nodded her agreement. She could appreciate that he was not being deceitful, just trying to do the right thing. Then she asked, curiosity mastering her mind so she could not think straight. "Do you see her a lot?"

"Fairly often rather than a lot."

"I don't know the difference," she said, forcing a laugh.

“Why do you want to know?” he asked his voice husky at the edge.

She dared herself to look at him. He looked devastatingly attractive in pale chinos and a dark blue shirt, the short sleeves revealing his muscular arms. His hands were in his pockets, his elbows out; she saw the gold watchband, brilliant against the dusting of dark, gold-tipped hair at his wrist. She swallowed, uncomfortable with the knowledge he was aware of her perusal of him.

“I’m just nosy,” she said at last. “She’s quite lovely,” she added and felt the sudden rush of jealousy burning away the pleasure she had experienced by just looking at him.

“Yes,” he said, “she is. Would you like to have dinner with me one evening?”

“What?” She gulped.

“Dinner, you and I together?”

“Why?” she asked, feeling gauche the moment after she had said it.

“Why do you think?”

She ran her tongue over her upper lip nervously. “Are you asking me on a date?”

“If you like.” He shrugged. “Look, I don’t usually get the third degree. It’s either yes or no.” The husky warmth was going from his voice.

“Then no,” she said.

“Fine.”

She turned away from him and listened for Josh coming down the stairs. She picked up a tea towel and started drying dishes that had dried themselves on the sink top. Her eyes were burning. *This is ridiculous*, she thought. *Why am I in such a state...why did I just say no when all the time I longed to say yes?*

“I didn’t know you fancied yourself so much,” she said, trying to be sparkling instead of emotionally traumatised.

He came behind her, before she was aware of it, put his arm in front of her, pulled the tea towel out of her hands and turned her roughly around. She opened her mouth to protest, but before she could speak, his mouth found hers. His mouth was hard and angry, but only for a second. As she melted against him, his kiss softened and as her lips parted beneath his insistence, he deepened the kiss, moving his tongue deep inside her mouth until it found and played with hers. Her ears were ringing, her head spinning, her arms betraying her longing by going around him, her body melding itself to his, her legs parting as she felt his hardness against her, feeling, and it was so humiliating, moisture creaming against her thighs.

Suddenly he let her go. Roxie found herself shaking from head to foot and had to grasp the sink. She looked at him, her eyes wide and appealing, her mouth damp from his kiss, then Josh burst into the room and she realised why he had let her go so abruptly. She had not even been aware of Josh coming down the stairs, having been caught up in the thunderous applause of her body.

Saul left quickly barely nodding in her direction by way of goodbye. Josh went to see him off. She was still standing weakly against the kitchen sink when Josh returned.

“You look weird, Mum. Are you okay?” Josh asked with genuine concern.

She stood quickly, straightening her shoulders. “I’m fine, just a little tired. Really I’m okay, so don’t worry. Did you have a good time?”

Josh chatted away about the film they had seen, the things Uncle Saul had said, what they had eaten. She was listening

with half an ear, trying to stem the tempestuous emotions rampaging through her. *What had brought that on?* She had meant to repulse him, but she had not expected he would barge up to her and actually kiss her. Somehow she was giving out all the wrong signals. Then she had given even more away by her response.

“Damn,” she muttered to herself, “how could I have been so weak as to let him...let him do that to me?” But she knew he hadn’t done anything she hadn’t wanted, and what was worse, somehow he saw right through her. She would have to be so much more careful in the future and stop the temptation to gaze at him like a lovesick sheep

But the trouble was, she didn’t know how to play the game. She had never learned.

* * * *

When the telephone shrilled out in her surgery the following afternoon, she had seen the last patient out and was taking a brief break before the practice weekly meeting. It irritated her that they always had to hold it on a Friday, but when she had suggested changing it, she had earned the enmity of the practice manager. Power, she realised, and who held it really mattered to some people, and Daphne Polgrave was one such person.

“Roxie, it’s Jean Law...”

Roxie sat more stiffly in her chair. Jean Law was the childminder and she never called Roxie at work. “Is something the matter with Josh?”

“I hope not,” the woman said. She was a very sensible, no-nonsense type, not a woman to panic over nothing. “I was worried and I thought you must have forgotten, but it was niggling me so I wanted to check with you. When I went to

school to pick up the children, Josh wasn't there. I found his teacher, and she said his grandmother had collected him. You didn't say anything to me about her picking him up, Roxie.

"His grandmother?" Roxie burst out. "He hasn't got a grandmother."

"I thought it odd. I wouldn't have let him go myself, not without your say so, but Miss Harrison already had."

"How dare she?" Roxie said. It came to her in a flash who had taken Josh. *Saul's mother*... She excused herself abruptly and phoned Saul. She could barely find the buttons on the phone, her hands were trembling so much. She was praying that it was so because if it wasn't Mrs. Hetherington who'd taken Josh, it was even more worrying.

Saul, when he answered, sounded sleepy.

Without thinking, Roxie burst out with the announcement that she intended to call the police.

"Whoa...I'm not getting something here," Saul said.

"Your mother has taken Josh...from school...at least I think it's her."

"What?"

She moved the phone from her ear, as the word seemed to burst out of him loudly and furiously. Then he said, in a more reasonable tone of voice, "Look, I'm not going to tell you not to call the police because that is your business, but if you like, you can leave it to me. Give me fifteen...no, thirty minutes. If I'm not back to you by then, call the police. I would be a lot quicker than the police."

Roxie agreed. She didn't want to cause trouble. Who knew what involving the police would create, besides which she trusted Saul and knew, too, that the kind of business he had been in enabled him to have all sorts of contacts. She put

down the receiver with a trembling, sweat-soaked hand. Remembering to lock the medicine cabinet in her room, she went out. Daphne Polgrave was at reception. "Sorry, there's a problem with my son."

"We have our meeting," the practice manager said, as if it were of no import that Roxie had a problem with her child.

"Tough," Roxie said. She had not brought her car, usually preferring the ten-minute walk to work. Right now, her emotions were all over the place, with fear, panic and fury all vying for attention. She was furious at the school and would let them know; furious with the Hetheringtons because they believed they could do anything they liked when they liked. It was so-the kind of thing Fabio would do without considering anyone's feelings but his own. Then she was furious with herself because this showed her she had not properly instilled in Josh the understanding you never went with people you didn't know, no matter how nice they seemed.

She had been home ten minutes when the sound of the door opening and closing caused her to jump. Galloping into the hall she saw Josh standing there looking guilty.

"Where did you go?" she demanded.

He opened his mouth to speak, his lower lip trembled and suddenly she hated the way she was being and rushed to him, gathering him in her arms, overwhelmed by the relief she felt at just seeing him again.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry," he said over and over again. "I said it to her...even before we got to MacDonald's...I said I have to go home. She said all right and she brought me right back. I didn't think, Mummy. I was just so glad I had a grandmother like other kids."

"Oh, Josh, I'm sorry. Believe me, I didn't want any of

this to happen.”

“What?” he asked, confused.

“I never wanted you to feel deprived, but they weren’t part of our life, darling. Your dad went, and it was just the two of us.”

“It’s okay,” Josh said. “It was great, just the two of us.” His arms went around her neck as if he felt she needed a hug. “Then her phone went in the car and it was Uncle Saul. He was so mad at her, Mum. I felt sorry for the old lady.”

I wish I did, Roxie thought. “She should’ve done it properly, not sneaking up like that,” she admitted. “I’m sorry I shouted at you, Josh, but I was so worried.”

Josh looked at her sheepishly. “I guessed you would be. That’s why I told her to take me home. I won’t ever do it again.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I should’ve warned you about that kind of thing.”

The phone rang out, they went into the lounge and Roxie answered it. It was Saul. He sounded concerned, asking if Josh was all right and had his mother brought him home?

“Look, I want to cool all this for a while,” Roxie said. “It’s getting out of hand... I told you I didn’t want the Hetherington tribe pushing into our life.”

“I can appreciate that, but you’re not going to punish Josh because of it, are you?”

“I want things to go back to how they were before.”

“Before what?”

“Before you came on the scene,” she admitted.

“You can’t do that,” he said sensibly. “You can never go back.”

“I don’t want any of you in my life! I’ve had it with He-

theringtons. Can't you see that?"

"I'll talk to you when your brain is in gear. You're obviously too emotional right now," he said coolly.

"Now look here..." But he had put down the phone and she was left listening to a dial tone. Josh was looking at her. Saul Hetherington had been right—she was being emotional—and she would never have spoken like that in front of Josh if she had been thinking straight.

"You can't blame Uncle Saul."

But wasn't the truth that she wanted an excuse to blame him? Needed to have some reason to drive him from their lives, and that was not entirely to do with her possessive feelings for her son?

"I don't suppose I can really, but I do. How do you imagine his mother knew where you went to school? He must've told her."

"It was Louisa," Josh said. "Grandmother said..."

"I wish you wouldn't call her that."

"Isn't she my dad's mother?"

"Yes, but..." *But what?* What else could she say except grandmothers were people who were part of the family? They were there for you when you needed them. Where had Carla Hetherington been when she had *needed* her? Invisible...unavailable...what had Carla said to her when Roxie had called once, looking for Fabio? "Go away. You're nothing to us. We don't want to hear from you ever again."

Well, someone from her background hadn't needed telling twice. She never telephoned the Hetherington home again. Maybe Carla had given the message to Fabio and maybe she hadn't. Whatever, she had not wanted to know Roxie.

“There’s a way of doing things, and Mrs. Hetherington chose the wrong way. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“I will see Uncle Saul when I like,” Josh said, but almost to himself.

“When you’re sixteen, you can do as you like. Until then, kid, we live by my rules.”

Long after a quiet and reflective Josh had gone to bed, the jut of his lip showing just how unforgiving he was towards her, Roxie sat at the computer and wrote a letter of complaint to the head teacher at Josh’s school, asking her to ensure no one but Mrs. Law or herself took Josh at the end of the day.

Probably a case of shouting after the horse had bolted. Roxie doubted after having had a confrontation with her son that Carla Hetherington would try to take Josh again without permission.

The gall of the woman did not surprise her. After all, it was just the kind of thing Fabio would have done. Take what you want and hang the consequences.

It took most of Saturday morning to break Josh’s obdurate mood, but a trip to the swimming pool on the Hoe soon lightened his mood. It was a lovely, warm, sunny day, so later they walked to the Barbican and found a place to have tea. Josh was in such a good mood once more, laughing and joking. Besides she wondered how she could possibly ban Saul from his nephew’s presence. Once her own bad temper had passed on, she saw quite clearly that it would be the most hurtful thing she could do to Josh at this time, and it would, she realised, drive a wedge between mother and son. She knew she was not prepared to take the chance on that happening.

Chapter 4

Saul looked at his mother. She seemed calm and very controlled, her very pale hands folded in her lap, her dark hair stylishly cut, her clothes plain but expensive, and a single strand of pearls at her throat.

He stood in front of the fireplace, legs astride, arms folded. He had retained his own calm, although he was boiling inside. His words though were stern and his expression forbidding.

“Surely I can see my own grandson.”

“I thought you had some doubt as to the boy’s parentage.”
He could not resist the sarcasm.

“That was before I saw him. He is *so* like Fabio. I thought Louisa was exaggerating.”

“I told you all that. The least you could have done was to contact Josh’s mother.”

“I don’t wish to associate myself with her,” Carla said, as if Roxie were someone of no consequence.

“Then stay away from Josh. They come as a package. She’s done a wonderful job of bringing him up alone. She’s had a hard life.”

“These people always have a sob story,” she said.

“What do you mean by ‘these people’?”

“Surely I don’t have to explain to someone like you?”

“Like me? What do you mean, Mother?”

“Well, you must have mixed with some...low life people. Isn’t that what they’re called in your profession? Of course, I don’t mean in a personal capacity. Even you have some standards.”

Saul wanted to say that if anyone knew about low life people, it would be Fabio, but he let it go. It didn’t matter what his mother thought, just as long as she stayed away from Roxie and her child.

“Well, if you take it into your head to see the boy again, you go to his mother and you ask her if it’s all right.”

“I would never ask *her* anything,” she said coldly.

“Then you don’t ever have the chance to see Josh.”

His mother gave him a damning look, as her lips twisted into a bitter line. “Sometimes I find it hard to believe you’re my son.”

They heard a gasp and, as they turned to the door, they spotted Louisa standing there. From the corner of his eye, Saul saw Carla blush slightly. She would be unhappy Louisa had seen that side of her. Louisa was a person she admired, although Saul suspected it was not so much for *how* she was, but *what* she was.

“Louisa, *cara*, do come in. You must forgive us our little quarrels.”

Louisa stepped into the room. She did not comment...she was too polite to do so. She made some inane remark and then, at Carla’s invitation, sat on the sofa next to her. Carla sent Saul to find the housekeeper and order tea, and when he returned, the two women were talking

about mundane matters.

Later when he made to leave, Louisa said she would come with him. She had walked over, and he could give her a lift.

Home for Louisa was the beautiful, honey-coloured detached cottage her father had bought for her and Fabio on their marriage. It was an idyllic home, the garden full of English roses and honeysuckle. Louisa worked from home at the moment. She had been the company secretary at her father's business, but somehow had not been able to face going into the plant after Fabio's death. She told Saul that in September, like a child returning to school, she would give it a try. By then the sympathetic glances that met her everywhere she went would be over with. She would get back to normal...somehow.

"You'll find it better going to work. It must be painful being in the cottage on your own, all day and all night."

"I'm going out more now. Saul, I am sorry I enthused to your mother about Josh. I couldn't help it, and when she asked me about his schooling, well, I remembered you saying where he went. I didn't think she would just go and drag him out. Roxie must've been devastated."

"Well, I think angry more than anything, and, of course, I'm bearing the brunt of it."

Louisa slipped a comforting arm into his, telling him that she understood how much he had come to care for the boy. "He's a good boy, too," she murmured.

He could smell her hair—it was as if it were scented with wild thyme. The sun had bleached it more blond than gold. She was a most perfect English rose.

"Must you go straight home?" she asked.

He felt sorry for her loneliness and her pain, and it was this that took him into the cottage. The country cottage feel was carried on inside. The sun came through the lattice windows, making diamond patterns over the pale wooden floors, and there were rainbows of light from the couple of stained glass windows in the lounge. He never felt entirely comfortable in the cottage—it was too fussy for his taste, too ultra feminine with frills and chintz and copper. He knew it had irritated Fabio, too, but he had been cautious about upsetting Louisa and had let her and her father get along with their interior design.

His cell phone intruded into the old world decor causing a jarring note. Louisa went into the kitchen to make coffee. When she came back, carrying the tray, he had finished speaking. He reached up and took the tray from her. He had not wanted coffee, having only just had tea with his mother. He figured it was probably a ruse on the part of Louisa to make him stay a little longer, and who could blame her wanting to keep the loneliness at bay for a few more minutes? There was a touching vulnerability about her that made him feel just a little protective. After all he felt a responsibility to her, as she was his brother's widow.

He said, "It seems I'm forgiven. That was Roxie and she asked me when I'd be going to see Josh."

"I'll bet Josh has been pestering her and she had no option, if she wanted to have any peace. I can well imagine it."

There was a little glee in her tone of voice that mildly disturbed Saul. However, when he answered he showed none of this. "Perhaps, although I can't see her giving in so easily. She is a pretty tough lady."

"Do you think so?" Louisa asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Maybe that's just a veneer, or again maybe not. You know, I can't see *her* with Fabio..." She sat in the armchair opposite his own. "Somehow it doesn't fit. She doesn't seem his type at all. She's very self-sufficient, don't you think?"

"I imagine she has to be, being a single parent and having to work at a full-time, stressful job. As to her attraction for Fabio, it was a long time ago. Fabio was different eight years ago. Very different. He was wild and restless. Roxie was travelling, too, and what is it that they say about travelling making strange bedfellows?"

Louisa smiled. "I wasn't being critical of Roxie, as such, It's just strange."

"I could be very critical of that little madam," he said. He laughed and shook his head. "She can be so irritating."

Louisa put out a hand and patted his, then lingered, rubbing her fingers slowly across and around his wrist. "As you say, she's had a difficult life. She's different from us, very different," she added silkily.

But he made no comment on that. He believed people were people. To him, it was what they did that was important and not who they were.

"So," Louisa murmured, "when will you see Josh?"

"On Saturday."

"You know you're like one of those absent fathers who have visiting rights," she teased.

"Laws, aren't I just!"

"How about I come with you?" she asked.

His answer was quick and honest, without hesitation. "Louisa, forgive me, but just at this moment I don't want to do anything that might antagonise Roxie. I think she feels under pressure from all the attention of the Hetheringtons.

No hard feelings?”

It was late when he left. He had allowed Louisa to persuade him to stay to dinner. Dark was falling by the time he reached his parking place. The builders had been and had finished the path, so it was easier to get to the boathouse now.

He wasn't sleepy, so went to the wine rack and took up a bottle of Chianti. He opened it, poured a glass, then went and switched on his computer. The work he had done yesterday still required editing. He slid onto the chair and brought up the file.

When he was done, he poured a second glass of wine, shoved the cork in the bottle and sat in the sumptuous armchair that had a view over the patio and down to the river. The sky was littered with stars. He leaned back in the chair, and a picture came into his mind of a girl with tousled, rich chestnut hair and large eyes the colour of jade. She had the kind of figure that would never be seen in a fashion show, but there were plenty of photographers who would not be averse to snapping her picture. He smiled. She was a girl with the kind of figure that had featured in his boyish dreams.

What the hell... He pulled himself upright. She was a haridan, a virago, and you would never know where you were with her! One moment she was all big-eyed and seemed to be coming onto you, and the next she was being down right insulting. He definitely did not want to be serious about a woman like that and a woman who carried so much baggage with her as well.

He left the chair and went into the bedroom. The picture was following him, tormenting him and he could almost taste her on the tip of his tongue. Angrily he slammed into the shower. He ran it barely warm, and that would surely do the

trick and kill his obvious ardour.

* * * *

Roxie said she didn't mind if they went sailing for the afternoon. Josh had pestered from the moment they had arrived and the river was running full and fast. There was a slight breeze, and Saul knew it would be exciting for the boy, yet seeing as they just arrived, he did not like to just dump Roxie.

"No problem," she said. "I have to change the spark plugs anyway."

"Spark plugs?" Saul questioned.

"In the car, you know..."

"I know what spark plugs are," he snapped. "Can't you get someone to do it for you?"

"And pay money for a job that I can do myself? No way."

"You're very unusual. Some women don't even know how to put petrol in a car."

"What a chauvinistic thing to say! Of course they do—maybe not the women you mix with—but I assure you plenty of women can fix cars. If you go to maintenance classes, you'll find over half of the students are women." Unconsciously Roxie tossed her head. The heavy weight of chestnut hair rippled in the breeze, cascading like a silky mink about her lightly tanned shoulders.

"I thought they just went to pick up men," he said, after diverting his eye from the glorious movement of her thick, glossy hair.

"You..." Then she laughed, as she saw by the twinkle in his eye that he was teasing her.

She waved them off and set about her job. It didn't take very long and soon the afternoon yawned before her. It was very warm. Perspiration ran down between her breasts, and

her hair felt heavy, so she lifted it off her neck and secured it with an elastic band. She went down to the river, where the water lay flat and golden and tempting. This time she had brought a swimsuit, not a bikini but a rather respectable black one-piece with thin straps. She went back into the house and changed, found a towel to tuck around her middle and went down to the dock. First she sat on the dock and trailed her feet in the water. It was warm and inviting.

Gingerly she slid into the water. It was deeper than she had thought, but she struck out with a firm breaststroke to the middle of the river, then she turned onto her back and floated, enjoying the feel of the river against her neck and shoulders. It was peaceful and perfect. There was the flutter of birds, but nothing else, apart from the swish of the water as she moved her hands and feet. After a while she swam some more, then headed back to the dock, pulling herself up on the wooden slats easily. She spread out the towel and lay beneath the sun, letting that dry her.

At some time or other she turned over onto her back, looking beyond the cluster of trees down towards the bend in the creek. She must have fallen asleep for the next thing she was aware of was the thud of the dinghy as it bumped against the dock. The noise had startled her awake and she sat up quickly, scrambling to her feet just as Saul jumped from the boat to secure her. She was aware of his eyes on her, taking in her slender legs and round curves.

Her first instinct to seize hold of the towel and tuck it around her was quickly cast aside in the wake of the desire to just stare him out. It would not be a good thing, she decided, to let him see that he could faze her by just one look. The swimming suit was perfectly respectable, the cut of the leg

was modest, and even should she turn and walk away, every part of her curvaceous behind was primly covered.

"Hey, Mum," Josh called, scrambling from the boat, giving her a huge grin. "You look good."

"I was about to say that," Saul said.

"Were you?" she retorted.

"Did you swim?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "It's quite safe," he went on, "but you must know it's always better to swim when there are people around. You'd know that being a nurse."

She merely nodded, again wishing to give him no satisfaction. He was right about that, but she was a strong swimmer and not a fool. He went ahead saying he would make them some tea. Josh took her hand and led her up to the patio. She paused to tuck the towel around her middle, then ruffled his hair. "Have a good time?"

"The best," he said. "It was like being at home."

There was a faint wistful sound in his voice. It was natural; he still missed New Zealand. He had enjoyed a special kind of freedom there that it was not possible to have here. There was a network of friends to share outings with back in New Zealand, but they had not established themselves in Plymouth yet, if they ever would. Although she believed it was for the best, it was hard for her believe it one hundred percent. Guilt was a miserable companion, and she felt its bitter stab at Josh's words.

"Tomorrow I think I'll take you both to a beach, a special beach," Saul announced as they reached the terrace.

Josh was delighted, but, feeling like a real misery, Roxie said they should go alone. They didn't need her, and she al-

ways had things to do.

“Like changing tyres,” Saul said sarcastically.

“Something like that.”

“You’re coming, so don’t make excuses,” he murmured out of Josh’s hearing.

“I just love it when you play the master,” she murmured back.

“Good, because it’s my intention to master you thoroughly one of these days.”

She felt the heat of the blush as it ran from her neck up to her cheeks. She knew he saw it, and she could tell by his secretive smile he was aware the innuendo was not lost on her.

“Want a bet?” She realised, too, the statement, contrary to what she wanted, actually made her toes curl and a tiny thrill of delight to cascade through her. There was something about him that invaded all those erogenous zones neglected for so long. However, she could not let him get away with it. She would be mortified, she knew if he ever became totally aware of how she felt. “You’ll never do that,” she said, feeling she had to say something.

“Want to make a bet?”

“I never gamble,” she retorted.

“Coward,” he teased. Stealthily and before she could prevent him, he whipped the towel from her waist. “It’s damp,” he said. “Would you care to pour the tea?”

Stamping on her first instinct to snatch back the towel, she took a seat at the table and poured the tea, smiling to cover her feelings. Her hand trembled ever so slightly and some tea splashed onto the saucer. If he noticed, he let it go. *Perhaps he hadn’t noticed at all*, she thought, but then dismissed the notion. He was a very clever man, well aware of everything. She

was not dealing with a fool. He was a man trained to be highly observant.

Later he drove them to an inn he knew. A table had been booked in a quiet alcove overlooking the luscious Devon countryside. It was the kind of place where she felt comfortable and where there was a selection of food appealing to a boy of Josh's age. The choice of place showed Saul's astuteness but also that he was considerate as well.

On the excuse of going to the ladies room, Roxie went to the bar, scanned the wine menu and ordered a bottle of New Zealand dry white from the Marlborough region. She paid for the wine.

Saul raised his eyebrow when the waitress brought the wine in a silver bucket. "You shouldn't have done that," he said in the mildest tone of voice.

"I know, but I like to be independent."

"You certainly are," he said with a smile that told her everything and yet nothing.

She amused him, but she didn't know what he really thought. She wondered if he thought, like his mother, that she was a lady with a reputation. He would probably be surprised and even disbelieving if she told him Fabio was the only man she had ever known intimately. The dread of ending up in the same kind of position as her birth mother had always been the best contraceptive.

Suddenly, without warning, Josh asked, "Why aren't you married, Uncle Saul?"

Roxie shot a warning glance at her son, but he wasn't looking at her. He was looking at his uncle, who seemed to be taking an awfully long time to answer. "Never met the right girl," he said at last.

"Never?" Josh persisted.

"I came close but it never felt entirely right. I believe marriage is forever, so she has to be absolutely right for me."

"And you for her presumably, or doesn't that count?" Roxie couldn't help butting in.

"Of course, it goes both ways."

"And you haven't met a girl you wanted who didn't want you?" Josh asked the question not realising it had been on the tip of his mother's tongue.

"No, I've never been in that unhappy situation."

"You can never be sure it'll be forever," Josh said moodily, playing with his fork.

"I think we should change the subject," Roxie said, putting a hand over his to stop him.

"Well, it's true," Josh persisted. "Lots of my mates have parents who split up, and look at you—Dad left you."

Not now, Roxie prayed. *Just drop it now*. She was very aware of Saul's questioning gaze.

"That was different," she murmured, "and anyway, I think your Uncle Saul meant he hoped it would be forever. He knows no one can guarantee it will be."

"No, I didn't. I meant what I said," Saul said.

* * * *

Her eyes met his; there was a kind of desperate pleading there and something else too, something that to him looked like fear. Saul could not analyse it or pursue the matter because the Waitress came and they had not even looked at their menus. The waitress came back after giving them time to study what they would have and Josh's attention now was on another subject. The beach they would visit, what it was like, how far it was, marriage and fidelity and love and permanence forgotten.

The day at the beach proved enjoyable in spite of her feelings. Last evening she had avoided being left alone with Saul by going to bed when Josh did. She had said she was really tired, which was partially true. As it was, she'd stayed awake an hour or so reading and comfortable in knowing Saul would not see the sliver of light under her door when he went to bed because his room was on the other side of the house.

Swimming in the sea was a delight. It was warm and buoyant. There was hardly anyone else at the cove because it was a difficult beach to get to. A relatively easy walk from a small car park, it was a difficult descent down the cliff face keeping all but the fittest away. There was just the sand and the sea and nowhere to buy the ice creams or drinks many people liked to get. Saul had brought them a picnic—sandwiches and pop and water for her, as well as two flasks of coffee.

Now and again, as he came and sat beside her and as Josh played in the shallows with some other kids, she shot a glance at his body. In fitted denim shorts, his chest was revealed to her perusing eyes. His shoulders were broad and his arms showed taut muscles; his stomach was hard and flat and well toned; there was just a dusting of hair on his chest that was darker than his tobacco-coloured head hair. His nipples were darkly pink and taut, and idiotically she wondered how they would taste to the tip of her tongue. The brief erotic thought brought a rushing feeling that resulted in a warm wetness invading her thighs. Quickly she folded her legs up, balancing her chin on her knees and staring in front of her. She admonished herself for having such foolish fancies, but still the sensual warmth persisted.

“Do you want to go for another swim?” His voice had a caressing quality to it, almost as if he’d read her thoughts and felt she needed to cool down. It was a ridiculous suspicion. He was clever, but he wasn’t *that* clever! She unwound herself and stilled herself from running ahead of him. Instead, she walked by his side, waved to Josh and then plunged into the foamy warmth. A good few strokes and she had thrashed the sensuality out of herself. When she had had enough, she went and joined Josh, but, thrilled with his new friends, he obviously did not want her around.

She walked the length of the cove, her feet wading in the curls of foam at the water’s edge. Eventually she came to the end and could go no farther because the cliff jutted out blocking the way. Turning, she made her way back. As she came near their spot, she saw Saul had returned and was sitting, eating an apple, looking in her direction. The only thing she could do was to walk in the other direction, or go once more into the sea. Whatever she did she’d have to return, so she turned towards him and, without looking at him, flopped down on her towel. Her hair was tied in a ponytail. She pulled the thong and let the wet tendrils fall about her neck, fluffing them out with a careless hand. Her hair felt sticky with salt water, but it was not a feeling she disliked.

Saul had said nothing. She turned suddenly and found to her dismay that his eyes were on her, watching every movement she made. An acid comment that flew into her head was quickly dismissed. It was a perfect day—Josh was happy and she didn’t want to spoil it for him by creating an atmosphere.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, lightly and with a slight, husky laugh.

He said, sending her reeling, “Beauty.”

Her heart started to hammer. It was the way he said it, as if he meant it, that it wasn't some kind of stale old line he would trot out to any woman who took his fancy. He had not said, "You," or "You're beautiful," but just that one word. In a strange way it was far more powerful.

"Hi, beast!" she said, dredging up a role to play so she wouldn't reveal her true feelings.

"Hi," he said, not offended.

Then, because he continued to look at her, she had to give in partly. "I wish you'd stop it."

"Why?"

"Because it makes me uncomfortable."

"So, you're allowed to eat me up with your eyes, but I'm not allowed to do the same. That's hardly fair."

"I haven't been doing any such thing," she lied, feeling her cheeks heat with a flush. Her heart started to race.

"If you say so."

"I do. I admit I glanced at your physique. You keep in good shape, so you must be prepared that people will take note."

"And the same could be said..." He quirked an eyebrow up at her.

"I don't keep it in shape...it's just there, and I can't do anything about it."

"And how it is just there," he murmured darkly. "You can have no idea how 'just there' makes me feel."

"Well, I'm sorry about that." She managed to sound care-free, even while her limbs were turning to water. She pushed her legs out straight in front of her, leaning and reaching to touch her toes, anything to drive away the awful yet pleasurable feeling creeping over her. It was fortunate Josh was with

them. The temptation to lean close to Saul, to touch him and taste him was overwhelming. Had her son not been with them, had they not been on a beach with families, who knew what she would have done. She doubted her ability to control herself if the circumstances were different.

Her saviour came to her then. The other family was packing up to go home, and Josh stood, his spade in the sand, and looked at them both. "You two look guilty," he said with the wisdom of an eight-year-old going on seventeen. "I hope you haven't been quarrelling again."

"We never quarrel," Saul said. "We beg to differ, which is different."

"How is that?" Josh asked.

Leaving the explanation to Saul, Roxie began to pack up their things. The sun was slowly losing its power and there were a couple of clouds coming over.

After dinner and when Josh had been tucked in bed, she went and found Saul. He was in the lounge, the patio doors closed on the night. Light rain had come whispering against the glass.

"It's been a lovely long weekend. I'd like to thank you," she said formally.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Here..." He handed her a glass of wine. "Or are you about to run away to bed again?"

"I didn't run away to bed," she lied, aware her burning cheeks gave her away and hating it. "I'm a hard working girl and I get tired."

"I'm sure you do," he agreed.

They stood for a long while in silence, facing one another. She took a sip of her wine, then he stepped closer to her and, taking the glass from her, he placed it alongside his own

on the small mahogany table.

Slowly she took a step towards him. Her head came up to his chest and she put up her hand to that chest. At its centre, her hand moved against the sensuous feel of silk and, as she pressed her palm flat against his chest, the steady thud of his heartbeat throbbed against the tips of her fingers. He slid both his arms to her waist and around to her back. They stood like that for a long, torturous moment, and she did not dare to breath, was not even sure she could breathe.

He moved his head and found her lips with his own, caressing them very gently, without urgency, until she capitulated, sliding her hands around him and at the same time parting her lips. His tongue played with hers, lunging and then withdrawing, only to lunge again.

Every fiber of her body throbbed with delicious, sensual shocks. She became elastic, wrapping herself around him, parting her thighs, moving her breasts against his chest. Saul just held her, letting her enjoy the masculine hard lines, until her very elasticity made it impossible for him to resist and he crushed her to him even tighter. Moving his hands down her body, he cupped her hips, drawing her into a deep embrace leaving her in no doubt as to how he was feeling at that moment.

He released her mouth. Her lips felt bruised and pleased, and she moaned as he slid his mouth down her neck, his hand pushing up the thin cotton sweater. He groaned with delight as he found her bra-less. His mouth encircled her nipple, his tongue teasing the already erect bud.

Greedily she sought his flesh, pulling his shirt apart, her senses overwhelmed by the incessant throbbing at the tender centre of her. She sighed, moaning, not protesting as he undid

her light cotton skirt. She felt it whisper down her legs and moved a bit so as not to impede its progress. His mouth, sweetly moist, found hers once more, only now she was ready to plunder his, too, answering his deep kiss with unrestrained passion.

All at once he swung her off her feet. She felt herself moving like a sprite through the air, weightless, unhampered by heaviness and then down she went into the voluptuous folds of the sofa, and all the while his mouth claimed hers again and again. His hands moved slowly over her bare thighs, sliding the flimsy material of her panties down, cupping the heated liquid centre of her, his thumb teasing the erect bud, causing her to move sinuously in pleasure.

His mouth moved from her, and he muttered a crude word that made her tense slightly. "I don't have anything," he muttered. "Damn, Roxie, I'm sorry."

He wrenched himself away from her, leaving her limp with longing, sprawled practically naked on the sofa. She curled herself into a confused and humiliated ball, bringing her knees up to her chest, the drumming inside her fading and coldness invading her, yet she could not move. *What was it? Anything? What did he mean?*

Then she knew and she shivered at how careless ~~had~~ she'd been. It had never even entered her head, yet he had thought of their protection at the moment she had been ready to accept his body. *It was good he had sense*, a voice of reason piped up, overriding the accusation that he was cold and calculating and had meant to humiliate her. He must have known he didn't have anything.

She heard a door slam; time ticked away—moments, hours, she had no idea. She had not the strength or the will to

move, though she knew she must. Then a door opened, and she squeezed her eyes closed, burrowing deeper into the sumptuous cushions. A blanket was gently put over her. It was wool and felt rough. She half remembered a line of poetry...something about the rough male kiss of blankets. That was just how it felt.

“Roxie, I am sorry,” he murmured.

She could not give him the satisfaction of saying it was all right. He had humiliated her. She could never forgive that, no matter if it was all for the right reasons, which she doubted. Her insecurity had the upper hand—he probably had wanted to test her, to see how far she would go, and now he would view her as easy. It was something that would satisfy him, prove to him she had been his brother’s willing bed mate, when the truth was much different. Well, he would never know it...not from her.

“Roxie, say something, please,” he whispered, but her answer was to burrow her head beneath the blanket.

The following morning she heard them up and about. She crept from the bed where she had gone in the early hours of the morning, her tears of frustration and anger and hurt over with. She had fallen asleep very late, so consequently her clock showed her it was after ten. Parting the curtains she saw it was pouring rain. The English summer was over. Her summer of flowering, too. What a fool she had been to think he actually desired her. It was all some sadistic trick. He perhaps would share the news of her easiness with Louisa and that would delight her, too. They would laugh about it. *Poor Fabio*, they would think, *becoming involved with someone like that*.

Roxie showered, noticing a faint bruise at her throat. Fortunately she had a neckerchief she could tie around her

throat. She remembered her hands on his back, her pulling at the hard flesh; spitefully she hoped she had left him a present or two as well, just as a reminder! Tears threatened to well in her eyes. She was feeling sorry for herself. What was the matter with her? She could handle it. She could handle anything that life threw at her. Hadn't she proved that already?

For the sake of her son she had to pretend normality, but it was difficult. Saul's eyes were on her, seeming to burn right through her flesh. He frowned at her, but his words were light and friendly. They had breakfast. She asked just for coffee.

"We have to go," she said, "very soon. We have things to get ready for school, that kind of thing..."

"Of course," Saul said. "I understand."

But you don't, she wanted to cry. You don't understand anything, you don't understand how vulnerable I have been feeling, you can't even imagine how much you hurt me and that I have feelings. I might be the kid from the orphanage, a person nowhere even near your league, but I'm a person. But she kept her head down and her eyes averted, and when he spoke to her, managed to answer while not even looking at him.

She refused his offer of help and trudged up to the car herself to put in their bags. She tested the engine and the car started easily enough. The rain was consistent and quite heavy. She was very wet when she got back, her hair dripping onto her shoulders, her t-shirt wet and clinging so she had to go and dry herself in the bathroom. Saul came and knocked on the door, calling her name. She half opened the door; he thrust a white t-shirt through the opening. "Borrow this, don't get cold."

"I don't need..."

"Take it," he snapped, "and stop being so bloody stubborn, woman. What use will you be to your son if you go down with pneumonia?"

"I won't. I'm tough...we are, you know."

"What?" he rasped out the word.

"Working class girls...we're tough, with no inbreeding."

"You talk such drivel at times!" he snapped. "You don't know what you are. You were a dumped baby, so your mother could be the bloody Queen of Sheba for all you know."

"But not the Queen of England," she replied, dripping sarcasm at him, but then she grabbed the t-shirt and slammed the door. It was good to peel the wet t-shirt off and she had to take off the neckerchief, too. She wrung them out in the sink, surprised to see how sodden they were. After thoroughly drying herself, she slipped into his t-shirt. It went down to her knees. To her horror, it smelt of him and her senses reeled. She leant against the sink weakly. The terrible realisation it was not merely lust, not just sex that had her in its grip, not even infatuation. It was far more dangerous.

Loathing her weakness she lifted the edge of the t-shirt and burrowed her face in his scent. How could she do it? How could she allow herself to fall in love with a man so different from her? A man from a sphere so far from hers he might as well have come from Mars.

Miserably she left the bathroom. In the kitchen she found a paper bag and shoved her wet things inside. She had rubbed her hair dry, but now just pushed it back from her shoulders. Saul must have heard her for he came into the kitchen.

"I could've loaned you a rain coat. I'll take you both up there with a brolly, or do you want to wait until it stops a

bit?”

“No. I want to go home,” she said.

He came and stood over her. She moved a step backwards, but found herself pressed up against the sink. He was looking at her, but she looked to the side of him.

“It seems I branded you,” he murmured, putting out a finger to her neck. She jerked from him. “Look, Roxie, I don’t know what I’ve done wrong. I thought I was being sensible.”

“I’m sure that’s what you intend me to think.”

“Well, if not sensible, then what?” he asked shortly. “What do you imagine I was doing—playing? You have to be mad if you think I didn’t really want to... Hell, woman, what do you think I am?”

“I think I’ve established that.”

“Oh, really? Then perhaps you’d enlighten me.”

“I think you’re a cold, calculating bastard, that’s what I think.”

He gasped, moving back from her, his face going very pale. Daring to meet his eyes, she saw they were dark and deep, but there was a spark there, a white-hot spark revealing his fury. Yet, when he spoke, his voice was chilling and very steady. “Well, if that’s what you think, then that’s what you think. I’ll call Josh and, if you will, allow me to escort you to your car.”

During the drive home, Josh said, “Uncle Saul seemed quiet. Do you think he’s fed up with me?”

Her heart gave a hurtful wrench. The one thing she did not want was for Josh to be hurt by her stupidity and Saul’s attitude to her. It was nothing to do with his feelings for his brother’s child.

“No, I don’t think he’s fed up with you. Quite the contrary. He probably has a lot on his mind about his writing. After all, he hasn’t been near his computer all weekend, and maybe he has a lot to do.”

“Mm, maybe...” Josh sighed. “I really hope I haven’t upset him.”

“You haven’t. I promise that. Really, believe me, kiddo.”

“Okay,” he said.

Roughly she unpacked her bag, dumping things on her bed and then transferring their used clothes into the laundry basket. Something hard knocked against her hand and, lifting up one of Josh’s t-shirts, she saw a video. She picked it up. There was a note attached to it.

Hope you enjoy this.

It was *Cyrano de Bergerac*. She sat on the bed aware of her eyes filling up. She repeated her mantra. “We don’t cry!”

Chapter 5

It was Josh who gave her the news of Saul's departure. They had spoken on the telephone and Saul had told him that he was going to New York. "It's about his book," Josh said, "so I suppose you were right about that. He must've had a lot of work to do."

"I told you so," Roxie said. "He'd never fall out with you."

She and Saul had not spoken on the phone. He had called one day and, fortunately, Josh had answered. They had talked quite a while, and Saul had not asked to speak to her. She was glad he had gone away. It gave her time to gather herself together. By the time he came back, maybe she would have learned how to handle things, but she knew the best way for her was never to be persuaded to go out with them again. As far as Josh was concerned, she trusted Saul now. He was good with Josh, and Josh liked him. Difficult as it might be, she wouldn't stop Josh from seeing his uncle, but there would be no more cosy *family* weekends.

The practice manager was her usual uptight self when she came and told Roxie someone wanted to see her. She didn't miss the opportunity to remind Roxie that she was there to

see patients and not friends.

Louisa looked her usual cool and lovely self. “What a bitch,” she said, and it actually made Roxie laugh because something like that coming out of Louisa’s mouth was quite funny.

It took the edge off her somehow. Roxie could not make up her mind whether she liked Louisa or not—or more importantly trusted her in full —yet the woman’s opening observation somehow made her feel more warmly towards her.

“That belt does wonders for your waist. You’re very shapely, you know. I didn’t notice when I first saw you,” she said, perching on the trolley. “I bet all the boys relive their fantasies about naughty nurses when they see you in uniform.”

“Goodness, I hope not!” Roxie said, feeling herself blush a bit. No one had ever made such an observation about her uniform before. Roxie thought she might have to look into changing it. “I don’t want to be rude, but I have patients in five minutes, and the dragoness will go berserk if they’re lining up in reception.”

“Of course...sorry, I should’ve thought. Look, can we meet after work, for a coffee? There’s something I need to ask you. I have to go into town, but what time do you finish?”

Roxie checked her watch. “In two hours, but I have to pick up Josh.”

“Oh, good, he can come, too.”

“I doubt he’ll want to, He has to have his tea—boys and food, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Louisa said, but lightly. “Then why not invite me to yours for coffee.”

“That’s not a problem,” Roxie said.

The real reason for Louisa’s visit became clear very

quickly. Louisa had come at the behest of Carla Hetherington. Carla wanted Louisa to negotiate a meeting between her and her grandson.

So, Roxie thought, *it has come to this*. Mrs. Hetherington had come to the mountain. The brief moment of fury she felt dissipated quickly. It was too late for anger and recrimination. She had never been cruel or spiteful, and maybe that had been the trouble—she had been too forgiving, too lax, and had not fought hard enough for her place in the world. Whatever she said and whatever she thought, however much she wished it otherwise, the truth was Carla Hetherington was Josh's grandmother. Josh was made of the flesh of her son.

No one could possibly doubt it any more.

"I wouldn't stop her seeing Josh," Roxie said, "but she has to come here."

"Oh, but..." Louisa started to protest and then changed her mind, possibly reading the determined set of Roxie's chin.

"She isn't frail or anything?" Roxie asked. After all Mrs. Hetherington had had two sons, and the elder was now over thirty.

"Not frail," Louisa was honest enough to admit. "But she doesn't travel very far these days. I think she finds driving a trial, especially into Plymouth."

"But she did come into Plymouth and took my son without my permission," Roxie said tightly, feeling herself sliding into unforgiving mode.

"There was that and it was wrong, and she knows it was wrong. Still I could bring her," Louisa said.

There's a little cruelty, too, in the chosen emissary, Roxie thought Louisa was the last love of Fabio, a woman who had grieved for him, who, Roxie had no doubt, would love to

have given birth to his child and a woman who knew that could never happen.

Still Louisa was a strong young woman. If she hadn't wanted to bring Mrs. Hetherington's offer of peace she would have been quite capable of refusing to do it, Roxie was certain. Louisa was no one's puppet.

When Louisa asked her if she had seen anything of Saul, Roxie had to turn away. She could feel the hot blush invading her cheeks. The question made her feel guilty and yet she could not say why she should. There was nothing between Louisa and her late husband's brother...*or was there?*

Glad of being able to get cups and saucers from the cupboard and then pushing the plunger down on the French press coffee pot, she was able to speak to Louisa without making eye contact. It was easier to sound relaxed about things, she knew, when you were not directly facing the questioner.

"He likes Josh a lot," Louisa said. "Saul would make a very good father."

"Maybe he'll find the girl of his dreams one day," Roxie replied, trying to keep the panic that thought awoke in her at bay.

"Oh, I think he already has," Louisa murmured, briefly looking at her.

Roxie saw a secretive smile play about the woman's rather thin lips. "Really?"

"Really." Louisa moved closer to Roxie, smoothing a hand across the cool worktop. "Only I don't think he knows it quite yet."

"Well, I hope they'll be very happy."

"I'm sure Saul could make a woman really happy," Louisa said, her voice soft and low, and full of innuendo.

Roxie let it go. Providing, she wanted to say, she was the right kind of girl, with the right kind of background.

"Coffee," she said briskly, then lifted the tray and marched into the sitting room. Her legs felt as wobbly those of a young foal but she attempted not to show it.

When Louisa left, Roxie told Josh his grandmother would be visiting on Sunday. He took the information silently, mulled over it for about half an hour and then decided to comment. "Why is *she* coming?"

"She wants to see you."

"She never bothered with me when I was in New Zealand, or didn't she know about me?"

Roxie hesitated, weighing up morality and lies...lies won. "I wouldn't have thought so," she said, deciding it was neutral enough. She realised, too, that she had the power to end his involvement with his grandmother there and then. If she told Josh the truth, he would never want to see Carla Hetherington again. Looking at her son, his tousled hair, those wonderful eyes inherited from his father, the golden colour of his skin that made him look Mediterranean more than English, she realised the truth would really hurt him, might even destroy his sunny personality. Who knew what devil would pursue him in later life were he to carry the burden of not being wanted by his father's mother around with him. She could not do it, could not spoil his sunny disposition, his belief in himself. The truth could do no good and so she would not use it. Let Carla see her grandson if she wanted. She would never steal her son's love from Roxie. Saul might be able to do that, but Josh's grandmother, never. She had never met Carla Hetherington face to

face, but instinctively she knew.

Carla had to be a cold and calculating woman. Of that she was certain.

* * * *

Carla Heatherington was everything Roxie imagined. She was tall, slender and very chic. There was an understated elegance about her, her clothes expensive, but worn with a real sense of style. Roxie knew she could never imitate that kind of elegance, no matter how much money she had to spend on clothing. Everything about Carla was perfect. Her complexion and her features made her a stunningly attractive woman who, even at sixty, would turn heads wherever she went.

“Roxanne,” she said, deliberately not using the diminutive.

Roxie didn’t care what Josh’s grandmother called her. The older woman had no power to hurt her. She would have once, but those days were long gone.

“And Josh,” she said, her tone of voice a little warmer, but only marginally. She was not going to be the kind of grandmother who played with her grandchild, got dirty from being on the floor, who had real fun and frolics. Roxie knew from Fabio his mother had never done the fun thing with him either. Although she had adored him, he had been expected to go along with what she wished to do and had to behave in a certain way in order to please her. She knew Saul would never do that. Saul had always walked his own way.

“I’ll leave you two to get to know one another. I have lunch to make.”

“Lovely,” Carla said. “Josh, do come and sit here. I want to know all those things you like and about your school...”

"I'll come with you, Roxie," Louisa said, "but you shouldn't have gone to so much trouble. We could've all eaten out."

"Sunday lunch at home is our thing," Josh piped up. "Mum likes it so much."

She smiled at him. "Then we must do it," Louisa said sweetly.

It was not long before Josh wandered into the kitchen. Louisa's idea of helping was to sit at the kitchen table and talk, while Roxie prepared vegetables. It wasn't that Roxie minded, but she liked to have her kitchen to herself and would have preferred it if Louisa had helped Carla get to know Josh.

Josh came to his mother, sliding an arm around her and resting his head at her waist. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

He glanced over at Louisa, then shook his head. "No...just wondered if you wanted some help."

"Why don't you and Louisa go back in and talk with Grandmother," Roxie said, throwing a pleading look in Louisa's direction.

The other girl was not an idiot; she got the message and eased Josh out of the kitchen. The sound of laughter soon wafted through for Louisa, it seemed, had a way with Josh that his grandmother did not.

Lunch went reasonably well. Louisa was lively and Josh, over his shyness or reluctance, was prepared to chat away to both women, enjoying being the centre of attention.

"Very nice lunch," Carla Hetherington murmured, although it did seem as if the words had had to be dragged out of her.

When Roxie went into the kitchen with their used dishes,

Carla followed, carrying her own plate.

"I really need to talk to you, my dear," she said, depositing the plate on the worktop and then running her hands beneath the tap as if the deed had somehow contaminated her. She glanced critically around the kitchen. It did look untidy, Roxie conceded. She was a rather messy cook, although she knew, too, that she was a more than better cook.

She came close to Roxie conspiratorially. "You didn't say anything to my older son, did you?"

"No," Roxie said tightly.

"I really should thank you."

"Yes, you should," Roxie could not resist saying.

"My elder son is very different from his brother," she went on.

Roxie wanted to say she knew that already, but she bit her tongue this time.

"He has...I could not say standards, but more a way of looking at the world that is a little...ah, now I cannot think of the word, I want to say puritanical, but doubt that's right."

"Puritanical he isn't," Roxie said.

"You think you know him *that* well?" Carla Hetherington's said, her tone haughty.

Roxie, on her guard with this woman, replied that, of course, she did not know him really well at all, but what she had observed of him, he did not seem puritanical.

"Perhaps judgemental..." Carla went on.

"I really wouldn't know." Yes, yes, she wanted to say. He has judged me and found me wanting. That cruel rejection of her still hurt. She had offered herself to him and the fact he could be practical, at even such a crazy moment, was something she could neither appreciate nor forgive, even

though she knew, at the very bottom of her heart, he had been right to draw back.

“He has very high standards, which comes from being in the army, I suppose.”

“I don’t think so. I think, at least according to Fabio, he was always like that.”

“Oh, he always had to win,” Carla said. “Anyway, what does it matter? He might mellow in time.” She smiled. “If he and Louisa decide to...”

Roxie looked at the woman. She wanted to scream out, “What about Saul and Louisa,” but held her tongue.

“Become...well, you know. It cannot have missed your attention that he is very fond of Louisa and she, him. It’s too soon for her to seriously think about it, but I really believe Louisa would not be averse given time, and I’m even more certain Saul wouldn’t find the idea objectionable. I mean, she’s so right for him, don’t you think?” Carla asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Roxie said tightly. But she thought, *Yes, absolutely*. She knew Louisa was the right kind of woman for Saul Hetherington—cool, sophisticated, wealthy, well bred, all those things Roxie was not. How easily Louisa would slide into his world.

“Anyway, perhaps you’d let Josh spend some time with me? Now you’ve met me, you can surely see I’m not a threat.”

“I never thought you were a threat, Carla, to my son, at least,” Roxie managed to retort.

The woman’s eyebrows rose at Roxie addressing her by her first name.

Perhaps I should call her madam, she thought giddily. “But if, in the future, Josh wishes to visit you, he’ll express that de-

sire. If he does, then I'll think about it. Otherwise, you can make arrangements to come here."

The older woman's lips narrowed. "I'm sure Josh would wish to please you. I always believed it imperative to make decisions for my children."

"Well, things have moved on." Roxie could not resist the implication. "He might express a wish to come and stay with you, but I'd never expect him to do anything he didn't want to."

"If Saul were around, he'd want to, you know. It would be so lovely for Saul and me and Louisa to spend time with Josh."

Over my dead body, Roxie thought irrationally. *That is never going to happen. No one is going to take my son from me.* She saw through the older woman. She would endeavour to wean Josh away from her. Roxie would never ever trust Carla Hetherington. She suspected she had motives and reasons for even being in her house at this moment, and those motives and reasons would not be of an altruistic nature. They would never be for the benefit of Roxie Rawson. However, she was learning how to handle difficult situations and merely replied mildly, "We'll see. Would you care for some fruit salad?"

"How nice," Carla Hetherington said.

* * * *

The weather turned suddenly autumnal, adding a crisp chill in the air. Josh had been chosen for the football team and was excited-at being partway accepted. He was back where he liked to be, in the swing of things. Although Saul didn't call, a couple of postcards had arrived from New York. These were addressed to Josh and didn't even mention her. Josh talked all the while about his uncle, and the

cards only served to make his conversation more excitable about what they'd do when Uncle Saul eventually came home. Uncle Saul would go to the football. There would be all kinds of winter things they could do together.

It made her resentful. She fought against it, but it was there in the very pit of her. Saul had overwhelmed her child in a way no one had done before. His nephew had imbibed something emanating from Saul and the boy was intoxicated by it. *Perhaps it was some gene thing*, Roxie thought and even in passing mentioned it to Doctor Gordon, who had laughed and said it was a man thing. Josh wanted male society of a special kind, and his uncle answered that desire.

"You're not jealous?" Doctor Gordon said teasingly.

Roxie could not answer; she knew that she was in part jealous. "A little, perhaps."

Insecure as well?" Doctor Gordon put her arm around Roxie and gave her a hug. "You've done so well. Roxie. You've brought him up beautifully. He'll never stop loving you, so let him have some fun."

"Oh, I will. Don't think I wouldn't, but I guess I'm still that insecure, frightened kid I always was."

"You've nothing to be insecure about, Roxie. You've achieved a lot in your life and it can't have been easy. Be proud of that."

That was easier said than done. All the insecurities were there as they had always been and she never was able to feel totally confident. Somehow in New Zealand she had seemed able to shrug off the past to a certain degree, but now back in England, the old fears and despair had re-emerged. Of course she knew the catalyst. It was the blasted Hetheringtons. Mother and son destroying her again, just like they had be-

fore. Only this time it was a different son.

She had had some sense of foreboding all day, and on arriving home she saw why. Saul Hetherington was sitting in his car. She thought of backing around the corner and just driving away, but Josh, who was at football practice, would be telephoning when he was ready to be collected. She had to be home since he'd taken her mobile in order to call her.

Gritting her teeth, she swung the car onto the small parking place she had made at the front of the house. She had only just slipped on the hand brake when she saw him looming up behind her car. Grabbing the keys, she leapt out of the car before he reached it, slamming shut the door and clicking it locked with hands barely steady. He looked stern, hardly like a man who had been having a good time in one of the world's most exciting cities.

He was tanned; the navy cashmere polo shirt emphasising the bronze cast to his skin. His hair was bleached naturally, too, but just at the front. He was wearing navy lightweight trousers. The dark clothing made him look slimmer, yet, her skipping heart forced her to concede, none the less attractive.

"Josh is at footie practice," she said by way of greeting.

"Good," he said sternly. "It's you I have to see."

"Oh and why is that?" she dared to say, tossing her hair over her shoulder in a vain attempt to appear blasé.

"I'm not going to tell you out here," he said. There was no smile, no teasing quality in his voice. He was very serious and rather severe.

"My, I wonder what I could've done?" she said daringly. She waited a moment for an answer that didn't come and, because she could not face up to the damning look he gave her, turned on her heel and went to open the front door. She led

him into the small lounge, pulling off her coat and tossing it over the banisters on her way. Red gold light from the huge setting sun coated everything in a warm glow. She was glad it might soften the frigid atmosphere.

“Coffee?” she asked perkily.

“Later maybe,” he said, still cold and distant and in no mood to be prodded into good humour.

“You think there might be a later?” she demanded.

“Shut up, Roxie. I’m not in the mood for your banter.”

“Charming man and so polite. But then you’re never in the mood for my banter, are you?”

“If you say so. Why have you been lying to me?” he suddenly demanded.

The words caught her off balance and fear crept up her spine—yet why should that be since she wasn’t the guilty one? Her face flushed crimson. She was glad she had pulled the band from her hair while driving home. Letting her hair fall loose enabled her to move her head so it covered in part her burning cheeks.

“I...was not aware I’ve been lying?”

“Roxie, you know damn well you have. Or is it being economical with the truth? Is that what you call it? Does that make you feel better?”

She dared to look at him; he was standing perfectly still, but he seemed on the brink of movement, as if he would stride over and seize hold of her. She closed her eyes briefly against the image. The way his hands opened and closed, she knew it would not be to take her in his arms, to crush her up against him and devour her mouth. More likely he looked like a man intent on shaking the very truth out of her.

“You have to elaborate, Saul,” she said, “because I don’t

understand what you mean.”

“When you were in New Zealand, you asked me to send you a copy of my brother’s death certificate.”

“Well?” she murmured, playing for time. Perhaps any moment this would be over, and Josh would come to her rescue by demanding a ride home. She would be safe, at least for a little time. It would give her space to organise her thoughts.

“Why did you want it?” he asked.

“I told you why—it was about the mortgage.”

“Rubbish. There was only your name on the deed.”

“How do you know that?” She gasped.

“Because it was my profession to find things out.”

“Some profession, acting like a spy.”

“You made it necessary,” he snapped, “by always avoiding the truth. Do you think I couldn’t take the truth? That I’m as gutless as my brother apparently was?”

She moaned softly to herself, feeling the pain tear through her. It was true about Fabio, but she would never have admitted it to anyone, and she could not admit it to Saul now.

“I don’t have to listen to this,” she snapped back because it was only by being defensive that she could stop herself from crumbling.

He looked—and the word floated unwanted into her mind—devastatingly attractive. The physical attraction she had for him started to rage away deep inside her, draining her mind of rational thought. She needed to be focused, but looking at him drove everything from her mind, everything but how she wanted him, desperately!

It was so unfair, this attraction he held for her. It was cruel, and the fates had to be really mad at her to make her feel this way.

“What’s the matter with you? Don’t you know how this alters everything?”

She spread out her hands, shrugging her shoulders as if questioning once more what he meant. She could not muster words. The feelings stampeding deep inside her robbed her of the will to speak, to answer, and to argue.

Now he did come for her. She stepped back, but the settee was in the way of her fleeing. She felt it pressing into her calves and made to move to the left, but he was too quick for her. He seized hold of her upper arms, the grip firm, making escape impossible, yet he did it, miraculously without really hurting her.

“Roxie, why have you been such a fool?”

“How dare you? Do you think you can just come here and abuse me? Do I count for nothing in your eyes.”

“I am not abusing you. I want you to tell me the truth.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What you are accusing me of?”

“They’re not accusations, Roxie. I just want you to tell me everything, and if I have to drag every bloody word out of you, I will!”

“Why can’t you leave us alone?” she implored, feeling weak and malleable. Her limbs were melting, her lower stomach turning somersaults, and there was a pain at each of her breasts, the centres throbbing and turning hard against the filmy fabric of her brassier.

She could smell him, the maleness of him. If she moved ever so slightly, then her aching breasts could find some release by being pressed against the soft material of his sweater, yet she could not, would not allow herself to melt against him, to be overpowered by the weakness of her desire. *You*

want him, her crazy mind screamed at her. She needed him, desired to be close, so close they could not be prised apart. She had her eyes closed, fearful he would see the raw passion pounding away inside her.

“Roxie!” His voice had grown husky, the metallic timbre had gone, and he jerked her against him, releasing her arms and sliding his arms around her waist, down her spine, propelling her against him. She yielded, too spent to summon up coldness, too lost in desire to pretend she didn’t want him.

She surrendered her mouth to him, parted her eager lips, answered his seeking tongue. She could do nothing to stop him and his hands cupping the soft contours of her hips, slyly sliding up her skirt until she felt his hard, caressing fingers against her burning flesh. She wore no tights or stockings and her flimsy silky bikini pants were no barrier to his search for the essence of her being. She gasped as his questing hand found her centre, and as his fingers very gently moved against the tender, swollen, silky centre, she could feel herself spilling out over his teasing fingers.

“Roxie,” he gasped against the heavy weight of her hair, his mouth around her ear.

She pulled at the studs on the front of her uniform, revealing the thrusting peaks of her breasts. With one hand he pulled a breast free from its restraint, caressing the centre and eagerly teasing at the pouting nipple.

“I want you,” he murmured. “Oh, Roxie, how I want you.”

Gently, easily, he pushed her onto the settee, leaving her for the briefest of moments before taking her in his arms once more. She felt his cool, hard flesh beneath her fingertips, the skin rough here and there with curling hair. Her hands travelled his body, as his travelled hers, and she found him, hard

and heavy, and gasped a little with pleasure and something so primitive it made her smile.

His lips sought hers, probing every corner of her mouth with his tongue, as if he would drink her dry. His hand parted her trembling thighs, and she raised her hips, moving in excited apprehension. He moved her hand from him, sliding his lips along her throat, down between her breasts, nuzzling the softness of her belly.

She murmured shyly, "Oh, no," slowly covering herself with a nervous hand. He took the hand kissed it, holding the hand gently, while his mouth covered the petals of her femininity, and a roaring sensation spread deep inside her. She heard herself cry out in an agony of ecstasy as wave upon wave of pleasure exploded deep inside her. She knew she had never felt like that before, knew she would have remembered the dizzy height he brought her to.

Then she lay spent, aware that somewhere a bell was ringing and wondered if it were in her imagination. She heard the rumble of Saul's voice and turning saw him on the phone, his back to her as the long strong lines of his back and the curve of his thighs delighted her satiated vision. He was so unconscious and probably had no idea how wonderful, how beautiful his body was.

As he put down the phone, reality hit her. Through the mists of her satisfaction, the words he had been saying came to her. It was Josh, of course. He needed collecting. Shyly she struggled back into her uniform, seizing hold of her panties and bra as if she should run into the bedroom to put them on.

"I'll go for him," he said. "Take it easy."

Her face flushed as her eyes met his. She remembered what he had done to her; how he had brought her to such a

peak of pleasure she had thought she was drowning, yet there had been nothing for him. That much she knew.

He came to her, pulling her out of the comfort of the settee, kissing her softly. "Don't look so worried," he said. "It was great..."

"But you..." She touched his flesh.

"Not a problem. I can wait. For what is it, if it isn't worth waiting for?"

* * * *

Roxie could not believe what had happened and how she had allowed herself to be carried away by her passion. It was amazing how she forgot everything when Saul was around. She had determined not to give in to her desire for him, but the moment he touched her, he lit a fire inside her. Control flew out of the window.

Hurriedly she showered and then pulled on a pair of jeans and a large sweater. She tied her hair up in a ponytail, determined to present a no-nonsense façade when Saul returned with Josh.

The reason for his visit had momentarily drifted out of her mind, but when it came into sharp focus, she felt the life's blood draining out of her. She sank onto her bed, bending forward until her head rested on her knees. Had he discovered the whole truth, and if he had not, then what had it been that had so angered him? There was no other reason for him to be angry with her.

They came in noisily, and wearily she left the bed and went downstairs. Josh was carrying beautiful, wrapped packages into the front room, his face creased in a huge grin.

"Good Lord, do tell me it isn't Christmas already!" she exclaimed, for Josh's sake.

“No, but look at these. Uncle Saul has brought them all the way from New York.”

She trailed him into the living room. The front door was still open. She glanced out into the night to see Saul taking something from his car. She hoped he would drive away, but no, he slammed the car door, locked it and turned to head towards the house. Coward-like, she ran into the front room.

There was wrapping paper all over the floor, revealing a huge Lego set—a castle from the picture on the box. Josh must have told his uncle about his fascination with castles and the Middle Ages; it was the latest fad. There were books, too, with brightly coloured covers for tales of daring do, and a couple of CDs. There was a Game Boy as well.

She felt Saul behind her, turned and said, “You shouldn’t spoil him,” but in a mild kind of way because she was never rude to people who had been generous, whether that generosity was right or not. Saul Hetherington, she had to admit, meant well and he had to have known that times had been tough for them both.

“Whom else can I spoil, if not my nephew?” he said, with equal mildness. “And his mother, of course.” He handed her two packages. Again, both were beautifully and professionally wrapped.

“Gosh.” She blushed, then crossed to the sofa and started to open them. Perfume...expensive French perfume of the kind she could only dream about; in the other package was a simple white designer t-shirt. “Wow!” She held it up, enjoying the luxurious feel of the material and aware the size was just right. *He didn’t miss much*, she thought, but then he had seen more of her than anyone else, including his brother!

“Thank you. They’re both so...wonderful.” She slipped

the cap from the perfume and sprayed just a tiny amount on her wrist, then held it up to her nose. It was delicious on her skin.

Josh leapt up, scrambling through the litter and making his way to Saul. He hugged him as best he could. "Thank you! Thank you! I love you!"

Her heart missed a beat. She looked at Saul and saw that he had paled; he bit his lower lip, but she saw a faint mistiness about his eyes. It moved her, taking away her initial resentment at Josh's declaration. *I know how you feel Josh*, she thought miserably, *but I dare not say it*.

Knowing she had to be alone, she said she would make dinner. Saul suggested he go out and bring in some food, but she had prepared a hot meal and told him not to bother. If she peeled some extra vegetables, there'd be more than enough to go around.

The chicken chunks had been cooked in the slow cooker. She tasted them—just right, tender and tasty. Then she set about peeling carrots. Aware of someone coming into the kitchen, she turned and saw, to her dismay, that it was Saul.

She had put out some potatoes. Silently he took them and went over to the other side of the worktop and set about peeling them with a knife he found in the drawer. Roxie made no protest, feeling it would only come out churlish if she did. They worked in silence, but the atmosphere was redolent with unfinished business. Slyly she glanced at him to see he had rolled up his sleeves and was handling the potatoes deftly. She looked at his fingers. A potent image of what he had done with those hands and those fingers jolted into her mind. She stared at his beautifully shaped mouth. Her thoughts caused a disturbance deep inside her. Her heated loins were melting

and she leant into the worktop.

"Do you want me to slice these or what?" His voice, strong and dark, broke into the silence.

"I think I'll make chips since we don't have them often. Would that be okay?"

"Why? Am I staying for dinner?"

"Of course," she said, trying to force a laugh into her voice and failing miserably. "I must feed you...you've been so good to us."

He walked behind her, and she could smell the scent of him teasing away at her nostrils. He put the potatoes down on the worktop.

"I've eaten," he said, and he bent his head, very lightly nibbling her ear. "And it was delicious."

Her toes curled against the softness of her shoes; everything was draining out of her, and she was turning into liquid. She swallowed, then felt a slender band of perspiration breaking out above her lip.

"But anything else will be fine," he murmured. He left the kitchen, leaving her to lean weakly once more against the worktop. *He knows what he is doing*, her mind screamed, *and you're letting him do it to you*. Where was her ability to be waspish? Angry with herself, she muttered. "Roxie Rawson, you have to fight this or else you will be lost forever." But it was easier said than done. He'd awakened something very powerful inside her, a sensuality she had never known she had, and that sensuality overcame somehow her common sense.

Josh, in spite of Saul being there, was ready to go once it came time for bed. He was tired. He'd had a lot of excitement with the football and then seeing Saul again and the presents he had.

She took him upstairs and, although he was capable of getting himself ready, he liked her there. There was something still a little scary for him in going to bed upstairs. Once he was in bed, he took one of the books Saul had brought and asked her to read the beginning. It sounded really good, but even so, he was soon fast asleep.

She sat with him even as he slept because she was afraid to go downstairs. There were questions still waiting to be answered. She knew Saul had not forgotten his early interrogation. She might have temporarily and unknowingly bewitched him in some way or other, but he was not a fool. Once he had hold of something he would want to see it through. Saul was no pushover, that much she knew.

It was useless to believe she could escape and she knew she had to screw up her courage, but it took some doing.

He had, she saw, washed their used dishes and was just folding the dishcloth over the taps when she got downstairs.

"You're a handy man to have around," she forced herself to joke.

"I'm glad you think so," he murmured, raising an eyebrow at her.

It was there in an instant, that tugging at the very essence of her, the need to be in his arms; she wanted him so much in that moment; wanted to feel him deep inside her, but she knew it would not happen, not then...perhaps never.

"We have to talk," he said, suddenly serious. "But not here, not with Josh around. It wouldn't be fair. Can you get a babysitter one night? We could have dinner?"

She would have liked nothing better than an intimate dinner for two...candlelight, moonlight, the thrill of the thought of it was almost as intoxicating as the reality. Yet there would

be questions requiring answers; it would not be as she wished it to be. It could never be that. Things would never be the same again.

"I don't know anyone," she partly lied. She thought she could ask someone at the surgery who might do it.

"If you would trust me, I think I know someone who'd be perfect."

"Not your mother," she said.

"I said someone perfect. I don't think either of us would consider Carla to be perfect."

"Louisa?" As she said the name, she felt a sharp nip of pain. Carla had said there were aspirations where Louisa was concerned, and Roxie had not forgotten at all, although she had allowed herself to do so earlier.

"No. Actually it's Pauline Kennedy. She used to be my nanny. She lives near here."

"But won't she be ancient?" Roxie asked, curious in spite of herself then knowing she should just have said no to the suggestion. If she agreed, she would be setting herself up for... *For a what? A date?* She did not think that was what was on his mind.

"If you think sixty is ancient, then she's ancient. But I assure you she would not—and I definitely would not—consider her ancient. She ran her own nursery up until a year ago. She's really good with kids."

"She must have been to have looked after you." She could not help the words tumbling out, or the laugh that followed them, just to show she had not meant it in a mean kind of way.

"Exactly." He came towards her, and she backed away a little. "We're not going to do anything with Josh in bed," he

said, "so don't run away, Roxie."

"I seem to think we almost did a while ago."

"Ah, yes, that was us being thoughtless. You wouldn't want Josh to find us in bed together, would you?"

"Of course not," she said, blushing.

"Well, if I did go to bed with you, that's where I'd be in the morning."

"Oh," she murmured, "you would, would you?"

He smiled. "I'm not a hit and run driver," he teased.

"I see, though I wish you'd put it better."

"So, Friday night I'll bring Pauline early so you can see how she gets on with Josh...okay?"

"I'm not sure."

He came to stand over her, reached out a hand and tilted her chin and gazed down at her.

"We have to do this," he said, "before we ever do anything else."

"Oh really?" she said because she could not find any other words. "I'd rather not go there...the past is dead."

"No, it isn't. Friday, okay?"

Weakly she nodded. He bent his head and captured her lips between his own, very gently and sensuously kissing her lips until they parted, and when they did, as if this was all he wanted, he pulled away from her.

"You're a little minx, you know that?"

She didn't. No one had ever called her that before. She wondered if he imagined she was just a girl who liked to have fun. The desire to tell him otherwise almost overwhelmed her, but she managed to keep the words inside.

He stepped away from her and said he would be going.

“Until Friday, don’t come to the door,” he ordered.

She stayed where she was and remained there some while, even as she heard him close the front door and the sound of his car starting up.

“I know what I’ll do,” she spoke out loud. “I’ll phone and I’ll cancel, that’s what I’m going to do.”

Chapter 6

Roxie had not cancelled her meeting with Saul, which was why she was standing in a department store trying on dresses. In the end she went for a little black number. It had shoestring straps and was exceedingly plain, but it fit her perfectly. She had a fake pearl choker and matching earrings and a woollen red jacket, which would look good. She also had a pair of black strapped suede high heels, so all in all the dress, though it was rather more expensive than she usually paid, would be economical, since it did not need anything to be purchased to go with it.

As Friday was the Practice meeting there was no time to get her hair done, but she had managed to get a manicure and a pedicure the day before. *Just why am I doing this?* she constantly questioned, then found consolation in the fact she did not often go out and so why not treat herself. She knew the words didn't ring true, but she was able to push the real reason right to the back of her mind and accept the lie.

She really was anxious and not in the mood for the practice manager droning on as she usually did. When they came to the end of the meeting and there was a request for any suggestions, she piped up, "It really is awkward to have these

meetings after work on a Friday. Why can't we have them on Monday? I'm sure everyone has things to do on a Friday evening."

"We have them on a Friday because we can discuss what has happened during the week," Daphne Polgrave said snappily, looking at the others around the table as if certain of their support.

"We could do that just as well on a Monday," Roxie said.

"Roxie—" she began.

The senior partner suddenly awoke from his stupor to say abruptly, "I agree with Roxie... I think Mondays would suit us all so much better. What do you all say?"

Roxie was well aware that, although she'd struck a blow for Friday freedom, she had made even more of an enemy of Daphne Polgrave but she did not care. It really was a stupid idea to use Friday for an end of week meeting, especially as it made everyone late home.

Doctor Gordon murmured as they were leaving, "You really are wonderful, Roxie, you know that? I just let the Friday meetings ride, but I did resent it. Good for you... we're all so grateful."

There was no time to glow in success. After she'd collected Josh, there was only time to get him home, put out his dinner and then to shower.

"I don't know why I have to stay home with this old biddy while you go out. Why can't I come?" he complained and not for the first time.

"Because Uncle Saul and I will be late and we have things to discuss that would go right over your head."

"Wouldn't," he muttered sulkily into his pizza.

Roxie said no more, rushed up to the shower, washed her

hair and was just drying it when she heard the doorbell. She barged out onto the landing to see Josh letting his uncle into the house. Pauline seemed to be a small woman with red hair. The whoops of delight from Josh told her Josh was all right and Saul had brought him something he would enjoy.

It was good they had arrived for it gave Roxie time to dress and put on some make-up. Josh needed time with Pauline anyway to ensure he felt comfortable with her. Saul's idea of coming early had been a good one in more ways than one.

Once dressed, she gave herself a long, critical look in the mirror before spraying on a little perfume. The dress was a good fit; however the push-up bra she was wearing showed a little more cleavage than it had done in the shop. She slipped into the red jacket and was glad this concealed the still slightly tanned, swell of her breasts.

Satisfied she could do no better to make herself presentable, she went downstairs.

Josh glanced up from a game he was playing with Pauline.

"You look cool," he said, which was a huge compliment.

Pauline stood, extending a hand. She did not look sixty. She was tiny and sparkling and the red hair, styled into a shaped bob, made her appear at least fifteen years younger. Her handshake was firm, her smile genuine. Although Roxie had not doubted he would choose someone really suitable, she was glad to feel she had confidence in Pauline, too. It would enable her to relax.

As they drove onto the main road, Saul murmured, "I think you look more than cool. I think you look beautiful. I like your hair like that."

She felt herself blushing like a lovelorn teenager. Glad, too, she had just left her hair loose. She had planned to have it

done in a French plait, but she was pleased now that she had not made it to the hairdresser's.

"Thank you," she murmured, and then remembering, added, "I forgot to thank you for that Cyrano video. You know, I just loved it. It was so sad, though."

"So you see, Roxanne is a very romantic name. God Bless the romantic copper."

She laughed, feeling herself relax just a little. They did not say anything for a while, until Roxie asked, "Where are we going?"

"A little place I have."

"A place you have? You mean we aren't going to a restaurant?"

"Well, we can if you like, but I thought we could talk better in private."

"Oh, yes," she said, with meaning. Her mind told her to tell him a restaurant would be preferable. She wanted lots of people around them, but somehow the words would not come out. She leant back into the comfort of the leather seat, stretching her legs in front of her. She could smell her perfume mingling with some cologne he was wearing. It was a pleasant and teasing combination.

He pulled onto the forecourt of an elegant block of apartments overlooking the river. He came around and opened her door, then took her arm to guide her inside.

They were transported to the top floor in a silent lift. There seemed no one else about. At the end of the carpeted corridor was a pine door. He slid the key in, opened the door and ushered her in front of him. There was no light on, but there were lights sparkling in from outside. She crossed the polished wooden floor to the huge windows that led out onto

a balcony. Below them, the river sparkled. The view was tremendous, all the way up river to Cornwall.

“Beautiful,” she murmured.

“I like it. Sometimes I like to stay in the city so I thought it would be a good investment.”

He switched on lamps; the room was bathed in amber light. She looked around and saw a table set for two; there were candles and gleaming crystal glasses.

“Wine?” he asked. “White or red, or would you prefer something else?”

“Dry white would be lovely,”

He lifted a bottle of wine from a silver bucket and deftly removed the cork. She crossed to where he was after he had poured the wine and took the glass from his fingers, managing not to touch him.

“I had the meal catered,” he said. “It’s ready whenever we are.”

She went to sit on an armchair, tucking her skirt carefully around her knees.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“No, it’s lovely and warm in here,” she answered without thinking.

“Then why don’t you take off your jacket? As my nanny would say, you’ll feel the benefit when you leave.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered. She could feel trickles of perspiration, warm against the valley between her breasts.

“As you will.” He poured a whisky and soda for himself, then came to sit opposite her. He looked devastatingly attractive in a grey suit made of expensive looking material. The pure white of his silk shirt and the red-and-blue of his tie made a nice contrast. As he stretched his hand to put down his

whisky glass next to hers on the coffee table, she noticed the broad cuffs of his shirt, tightly held together with mother of pearl and gold cuff links. Old-fashioned but elegant. *Probably, she mused, inherited from his grandfather.*

“Roxie...” Her name was a murmur at his mouth. She looked up at him and met those dark blue eyes. “I don’t want there to be this tension between us.”

“You don’t?” The tension was sexual as far as she was concerned, but she didn’t think he meant that at all. *More’s the pity, she thought. He’s going to get so serious about matters that don’t matter anymore.*

“I want it all out in the open. Let’s not have any deceit between us.”

“I wish we could just leave it,” she implored.

“My brother left you in a real mess, Roxie. I know you had to leave Auckland; he owed money to some very shady characters. There was some nasty business he somehow got mixed up in. God...” he spat, suddenly leaping to his feet, “if he wasn’t dead, I think I could kill him. You must’ve been so frightened.”

He didn’t know the whole of it; her relief at that was overwhelming. He had found out things about his brother’s past misdeeds, but he didn’t know *everything*. She felt as if a great weight was being lifted from her. She could relax.

“I got over it,” she said.

“But you had to give up everything—your home, your job in Auckland and you had to go and stay in the backwoods.”

“I liked it out there.”

“And you were expecting a child.” He slammed a fist into his palm. “If only you’d come to us, we’d never have let you struggle like that.”

She almost let the words out; they were on the tip of her tongue. *But I did and I was told to go away, in no uncertain terms. Roxie Rawson does not need twice telling. The one place she knows is her place in the scheme of things.* However, she realised there was no point in bringing this up to Saul because it would only cause trouble. If she admitted his mother had told her to go away, it wouldn't make those days any better. Nothing would ever make those times better. They had been and gone, and she and Josh had survived. She had got the best deal anyway. She had her lovely son, who was a precious balm to her hurt. He had made life worth living, and it was because of him she had got on with her life, in spite of everything.

"How did you find out?" she asked instead of telling him about Carla. "I mean about Fabio."

"It's what I used to do. It's easy for me. I have a lot of contacts."

"In Auckland? Did they speak to the people he owed money to?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes. It's all fixed now, so they won't ever bother you."

"Did...did they say anything about me?"

"No, not really. Apparently they knew he had a partner—that's what they said—and they'd thought they'd get the money out of her, but she'd gone away and, in the end, they let it go. Reasonable of them, wasn't it?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Well, it's over now."

"Look, Roxie." He leaned forward, putting a firm hand over hers.

She jumped a little, not with shock because she saw him moving, but because of the tingle that ran the whole length of her arm.

He appeared not to notice. "If you want to go back to New Zealand, it'll be perfectly safe. Do you want to do that? I can help you if you like."

"Oh, now you're in Josh's life you want rid of us," she said, a little more tartly than she wanted it to come out.

"There you go again, taking my words and wrongly interpreting them. You know I don't want you to go away. But I'm not selfish enough to expect you to stay if you don't want to. Besides, I can have a long distance relationship with Josh."

Fury vied with pain—he did not care about her at all. She pulled her hand from his and stood, crossed the floor to stand by the window. She was taking deep breaths, trying to gain some semblance of control. He thought her easy—a girl he could play with. She had not expected everlasting love from him, but something more than a fling. She was a fool. His brother had led her up a garden path and now Saul was doing the same. He was no different from Fabio.

Stupidly, her eyes were stinging. She blinked, felt the wetness. Turning from him she wiped away the dampness. The silence was oppressive. It was filled with something that boded only ill for her.

She turned, surprised to see he was standing, too, and just staring hard at her.

"We don't need your charity. We can get to New Zealand or anywhere else under on our own steam. We always have and we always will."

"I don't understand you," he said, showing genuine amazement.

"You'll never understand Josh or me," she snapped. "We're not like you or your family. We have to strive for everything we have, but at least we achieve what we achieve

on our own.”

“What are you talking about? Where does all this anger come from? And do you imagine I have never had to strive for what I’ve achieved?”

“Humph—the right schools, perfect connections? No, I don’t think you know the meaning of strive!”

“You are such a bitter woman, Roxie.”

She felt his words like a slap in the face. She wasn’t bitter, or was she? She used to be such a happy-go-lucky person, people liked her, and she was friendly and outgoing. She knew it was what had attracted Fabio to her. She had never felt the resentment she now felt for Saul. But was it truly resentment? Did she envy him? Not really; her outburst was deeper rooted than that—he had hurt her. He had not meant to hurt her, she knew, but the pain was smarting through her. It was not how she wanted to be toward him. If only he hadn’t said she could go away to the other end of their world, so casually, letting her know he cared so little for her.

“Well, maybe I have reason. Thank you for sorting things out, but there was no need. I intend to stay here until Josh is older, but don’t worry. We won’t impose ourselves into your life. We never wanted that anyway.”

“That’s a ridiculous thing to say. I know that very well. Do you have any idea how much it cost me to offer to help you leave? To give you the chance to go so far away I may never see Josh again? Do you think I found it easy?”

What was he saying? Dizzily she stared at him, aware through her pain that she had to have been mishearing what he was saying.

“I just wanted to make up for what had happened to you,” he said, “and not selfishly hold you here.”

She dared to meet his eyes. Aware of the sincerity in his voice, now she felt a flush of shame run through her. She had jumped to the wrong conclusion, letting the kernel of insecurity still there deep inside her take hold of her mind.

She swallowed, raised her chin and tossed back her hair. "I apologise. I misunderstood."

"How could you misunderstand?" he asked, and then he turned away, going toward the kitchen. "Let's eat," he said tersely, driving the appetite right out of her. However, she went and sat at the table and when he brought a feta salad, picked away at it, giving the semblance of eating.

"This is nice," she said.

"Yes, it's from a small restaurant nearby. I go there now and again. The owner and I were at the same privileged education establishment," he said.

"I did apologise," she murmured.

"Yes, you did. Is that all you are going to eat?"

"It's warm," she said.

"The cheese?" he asked, aghast.

"No, in here, in the apartment."

"Then take off that jacket," he muttered, standing and going behind her chair to take it from her. Realising she could no longer keep herself covered, she slipped out of the jacket and handed it to him. He did not look at her, but took the jacket away, then came back and collected their plates.

Their main course came in a casserole dish and it looked and smelled delicious. She took a small portion, then lifting her glass, drained what remained of her wine. He re-filled her glass and poured some for himself before returning to his seat.

"That's a very sexy dress," he said. "Is that why you were clinging to your jacket? Did you get cold feet or something?"

She blushed. "Something like that."

"No need to worry. I haven't brought you here to seduce you. I just thought we could talk in private."

It was not entirely true she knew just as he knew it, but any thoughts of seduction had been well and truly dealt a blow by her bitter outburst.

She managed to eat what was on her plate, now and again adding something to what he had to say. It was all small talk, although he asked intelligent questions about her work.

"You're very well-qualified," he said. "Don't you fancy going further, working in a hospital, that kind of thing?"

"It would be difficult with Josh. This job enables me to be with him. When he's older, who knows? I'm doing a course on palliative care at the moment and I try to keep on top of new innovations. As you know, medicine, thank God, does not stand still. It's a good job that I have now, but there isn't anywhere else to go. I could be a practice nurse until I retired."

"I don't suppose you'd consider boarding school for Josh..."

She flashed him a look, and he shook his head. "I suppose not."

"I don't want my son away from me. I want to be with him. I'm surprised you would think I could do that, given your experience," she said, keeping her voice level in spite of the emotion churning up inside her.

"My experience?" he questioned.

"Fabio said you went away at seven."

"I didn't mind. Did he tell you otherwise?"

"Sort of." She shrugged, not wanting to go into all the details.

“Well, he was mistaken,” he said sternly. “I was very happy at school. But it wouldn’t suit everyone. I think I’ve always been self-sufficient...rather had to be,” he murmured the last words.

Fabio had told her a good deal about his brother. His mother had never really liked him. She had had a very hard time bearing him. Fabio had thought that had something to do with it. In the end she had had a caesarean, but they had waited a very long time. She knew from dealing with mothers in maternity how terrible experiences like that could do some damage to a relationship between mother and child, and mothers needed help before it became corrosive.

“You’re deep in thought,” he said.

She looked up at him and her heart tumbled around once more. She wanted desperately to hug him to her, to make up for that terrible rejection, yet she knew she dared not. It would just not be right to let him know just how much Fabio had said about his brother. Saul would not appreciate his late brother gossiping about him. That much she did know.

“Sorry, just something about work,” she lied.

“Would you like pudding? It’s very fattening I’m afraid, but I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.”

“I don’t think I would,” he said darkly.

“Would you mind if I passed? I’m not really that hungry. I am sorry because this food is marvellous. Perhaps some coffee?”

“Don’t worry about it, Roxie.”

“Are you staying in Plymouth?”

“Just for a day or so. There’s a football match on Sunday. I thought I might take Josh. Unless you’ve something else planned, that is?”

"No, I haven't anything planned. That'll be fun," she said, urging herself to sound bright.

"Do you want to come?"

"Oh, no...Sunday is wash day and preparation for the week ahead. You know what it's like."

"No, Roxie, I don't know what it's like at all." He said it in so kindly a way that it moved her. She looked away from his gaze.

While Saul made coffee, Roxie stepped out onto the balcony. The sky was littered with stars; they were reflected on the water below, in spite of the road lights. She was glad she lived by the coast. She had been brought up inland, but once in New Zealand, she had discovered a love of the sea, loving to be in it, but not on it. She felt suddenly fortunate to have been able to come back to England and knew she should be really grateful for all the good things that had happened to her. *A little more gratitude*, she thought, and a little less being down on life had to be the way she should go. Everything, or almost everything, had worked out just fine for her and Josh. It wasn't perfect, but who had perfect?

She went back into the lounge, closing the door softly behind her. Saul had returned with the coffee and was sitting on the settee. She went and sat opposite him.

"You like it black?" he asked.

"Please."

The coffee was delicious...a special blend he said. Their used dishes were still on the table, and she said she would help him clear up after coffee.

"No need, a lady comes in tomorrow. She moans there's never much to do, so it will make a change."

"Oh, I hate that," she said. "I have to have everything

spick and span otherwise I could never sleep.”

“Well, I can understand how that would be,” he said. “We can put everything in the kitchen if it would make you feel better.”

“Yes, it would.” She wanted to talk to him about when she had been in her last foster home, where everything had been chaotic and such fun, but of course she didn’t say anything. She had a feeling he may get the idea she was being bitter again and she did not want that.

A thick curtain of silence fell. She dare not even look at him because even a glance caused such an ache to move through her she thought she would not be able to bear it, that she would have to cry out or do something silly.

She helped him take the dishes into the kitchen instead. Eyeing the dishwasher, she rinsed the plates, opened the machine and slid them in.

“You are so determined.” He laughed.

“Sorry...” She closed the door on the dishwasher. “I guess I’ll have to go now. Did Pauline have a time?”

“Not really,” he said. “I’ll get your coat.”

She followed behind him into the lounge, and when he stopped and turned suddenly, she almost collided with him. She looked up at him.

“God, Roxie, don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” she gasped, hardly daring to pull her eyes away from his.

“You *have* to know.” The words seemed to be choked out of him.

“But I don’t,” she whispered, shrugging her shoulders in a gesture of helplessness.

“You make me want to...”

“What?”

“To... This...” He drew her into an embrace. His mouth claimed her parted, moist lips, plunging, with a shocking passion that practically knocked her off her feet, his tongue into her mouth, her own tongue eagerly responding, teasing and tantalising him, her body up against his, feeling him go rigid through the thin material of her dress.

Her hands went up his chest, over his shoulder, one hand stroking the curling hair at the back of his neck, the other pulling at the silky material that covered his back. For a moment he lifted her off the floor, holding her hard against him, his hands around her so tightly she felt she may break in two.

Then he swept her across him and, still kissing her, crossed the floor and carried her into another room. Her eyes opened as he released her mouth, her lips feeling bruised and swollen. She slid her mouth to his ear, capturing the lobe between her teeth very gently. It was dark in the room, one light shone. He slid her down him, placing her on the floor. Slow, ever so slow, he pulled down the zipper on her dress, then manipulated the straps, so the dress slid from her body to whisper softly at her feet. Her breasts, hard and sore, sprang from their covering as he undid her bra and tossed it to one side. His head bent, his mouth capturing first one and then the other rosy crest, circling each centre with his tongue, sending a feeling of ecstasy roaring through her.

Somehow he shrugged out of his jacket and when that fell onto the floor, she eagerly tugged at the buttons on his shirt, some popping off the shirt and landing noisily on the wooden floor. His chest felt rough and strong to her eager hands. Baring the skin she pressed her lips at the centre, nuzzling the flesh, stroking it with her tongue.

He moaned against her breasts, his hands at her hips, sliding over the silk of her panties, pushing against the elastic until they slid down. Against her legs she felt the softness of the bed sliding back against it, falling into its voluptuous folds and pulling him with her.

His hands were everywhere crushing, caressing, sliding over each tender part of her, while his mouth followed until she thrashed towards the tide of scalding pleasure that threatened to drown her.

"Roxie..." he murmured against her ear, his mouth teasing the sensitive contours. "I want..." The words were choked off.

"Take me," she cried. "Oh, Saul.... Saul..."

His hand slid down her body, searching for the wet centre of her, moving his fingers gently over her and into her. Quickly he moved, freeing himself from the last remnants of clothing, searching briefly for something in the cabinet drawer before returning to her and covering her, capturing her mouth once more until he slid into the warm, moist body that rose up to meet him. She cried out, aware of the sudden explosion of feeling that erupted the moment he moved against her...going with it...aware of it passing and then mounting once more, sending her beyond the now...again and again...until she felt him shudder against her, murmuring words to her, words that filled her with a dangerous kind of delight.

* * * *

They lay still in semi-darkness. Their bodies clung close, warm and slightly damp, almost sticking together. He propped his head up with his hand, elbow bent, gazing down at her. Her hair was tumbled about her, and even in the dark-

ness he could see how swollen her lips were, how her eyes really sparkled and how she was imbued with a kind of radiance.

He was surprised how this made him feel. He felt it on his body. Yet, he wondered, how could this be when he had just spent himself so deliciously? The faint tip of her tongue came and ran over her upper lip.

The clock on the bedside table caught his eye. It was getting late. They should leave and leave now before... Slowly, sensuously, Roxie pulled herself away from him; there was a faint hissing as their damp flesh was prised apart. She sat up, careful to keep the sheet about her. He thought she would say they should go, that she was making ready to leave. With a teasing smile, she pushed him onto his back, leaning against him, her lips capturing his, her kisses hot and demanding. He felt her breasts crushed against his chest, then the smoothness of her thighs as she lay on top of him.

"Roxie, I really think..." he murmured.

"Yes, of course soon," she murmured, "soon, darling...hmm?"

She leaned up, her long, lustrous hair brushing his chest. With a sinuous movement, she slid over him. Cast in shadows with the faint amber light illuminating her here and there, her body glowed, its perfection and the delicious little movements she made making departure impossible. He groaned as gently she took him to herself, clasping her back, cupping her ripened flesh as he allowed himself to be driven beyond the now, beyond thoughts of going anywhere, beyond even reason.

* * * *

It was a dull, dark late afternoon when Saul arrived home. A thick mist was floating off the river. It somehow echoed his mood on this cold, chilling, dark late autumn af-

ternoon. He collected his mail from the box by the car parking area then raced down the path. He had called the lady who cleaned for him and she had been earlier to switch on the central heating. The boathouse felt warm, yet oddly dull.

Dumping the mail on the table, he went and found matches and lighted the curls of paper and wood in the stove. The wood caught; he was an excellent fire setter, even if he thought that himself. Soon the cosy smell of apple wood imbued the atmosphere, driving out the dullness he had felt.

He had taken Josh home after the promised trip to the football match. When Roxie had come to the door wearing a grey tracksuit, her hair in a pony tail, her face washed clean of make-up, it seemed to him she was in defiant mood. As if she was saying, See I haven't done anything to make you want me. I haven't made an ounce of effort. Yet little did she know how attractive she looked, or how strangely innocent. It seemed to him that he had dreamt the temptress of Friday night. Perhaps it was a clear message as well to keep off. He couldn't tell how she felt, in spite of the fact her welcome to him had been warm, friendly and typically Roxie, yet there was something else there. There had been an offer of tea or coffee, but he had refused to even go into the house. He had to get back to the boathouse, he'd said. Something important to do. No argument was put up by Roxie, and neither did she wait until he got in his car before she closed the front door.

What a mess, he thought. He should never have allowed it to happen. She was probably regretting it as much as he, and then there was Josh, and who knew how that reckless, yet wonderful, moment would affect his relationship with his nephew. *Roxie*, he thought, *what did you do to me that drove all sense from my normally rational mind?*

Angry with himself, he went and poured a whisky and soda and set himself to go through the onerous task of sifting through his mail. A lot of it was junk he deposited into the waste paper basket without reading. There were a couple of things needing his attention that he put to one side for morning. The computer told him he had e-mails, too. He went through these. One was from his New Zealand contact saying he had tried to phone him. He had come across something and wanted to fax a copy of a document to him, but wanted to be sure he was there. Saul knew it was too late to telephone New Zealand, so he sent an e-mail in reply. He was now home and would be home for the next week. That would be definite he knew because he had proofs to finish reading.

Someone ringing the doorbell caused him to start. He rarely had visitors on the spur of the moment. The very isolation of the boathouse made unexpected callers a rarity.

For an irrational and stupid moment, his heart gave a little jolt. He hurried across the room and flung back the door, only stepping back and feeling the dark mood come on him again when he saw who it was.

"Hello." He managed to keep the disappointment out of his voice. "This is a surprise."

Louisa stepped into the cottage. She looked stunning in a pure white trench coat, her long blond hair falling loose over her shoulders. When she undid the coat, he saw she was wearing a fitted pink cashmere dress. She was willowy and it suited her. She shrugged out of the coat, draped it over a chair and then smoothed her hands down the soft cashmere, as if it were somehow wrinkled. He recognised her perfume—Air du Temps. She always wore just a little too much.

"How are you?"

“Fine, busy, but you know...” He shrugged, burrowing his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“I guessed as much. I’ve phoned a few times. I wondered if you’d like to go out to eat.”

“Oh...no, I’ve eaten. I took Josh to a football match and we ate on the way back.”

“That’s nice. Did Roxie go, too? I suppose she likes football. You know I hate it.”

“Er, no. Roxie had things to do. I don’t know whether she likes football or not, but probably she does. She seems the type who would.”

“As opposed to the type who wouldn’t,” Louisa teased gently. “Well, do I get a cup of tea?”

“Of course, sorry...I think there’s some cake, too.”

“It’s okay,” she said, as he made to go to the kitchen. “I’ll make it and you carry on with what you were doing.”

“Okay, I just have a couple of e-mails to reply to.”

He started his e-mail replies and then suddenly stopped. He heard Louisa in the kitchen. She had opened the cupboard and then crossed the kitchen to where he kept a biscuit tin. He heard the fridge open, too. He sat back in his chair. She was not searching around the kitchen. She knew where he kept his stuff. That was strange because she’d never been in the kitchen as far as he knew. She certainly had never made tea or coffee. He was very fastidious about where he kept things. Everything was very ordered and it had taken Roxie some time to crack his system when she had stayed with him, yet Louisa had had no trouble. *How was that?*

When she came into the room, she carried a small teapot and a cups and saucers on a tray, along with a couple of biscuits on a plate. Odd she would go to the right cupboard for

the things without even having to ask him.

The fax pinged. He went to it and saw it was from his friend. He smiled in spite of his mood. The friend, who had been a junior officer, had obviously not overcome his night clubbing habits; it had to be the early hours in New Zealand. He lifted the document, glanced it, realised it was important and he could not study it with Louisa there, so, after crossing to his desk, slid it into a file.

"You *are* busy," Louisa said, as if she had doubted him. "But do come and have some tea. Sit here." She patted the settee beside her.

He picked up his glass of whiskey and soda and raised it. "Already on the hard stuff." He went and crossed to the seating area, but to sit on the chair opposite her.

"Darling," Louisa said silkily, touching his knee with her slender pale hand, "what are you going to do about Roxie and your mother? I mean, surely you can influence her to let your mother have Josh to stay over now and again."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Louisa. Roxie has the right to make the rules. Mother can see Josh whenever she likes, but on Roxie's terms."

"But it's so unfair to make your mother travel to Plymouth."

"It's no hardship when she wants to shop," he said coolly.

"Touché," Louisa said. "But don't you think it's important for Josh to know where he really comes from. I mean all Orphan Annie has to show him is..." She stopped, lifting her hand from his knee as if he had slapped it away. His eyes, so dark blue, glared into her own, and they were hot with sparks. "Well," she said, uncomfortable, "just a joke."

"And one in appalling taste, Louisa. I'm a little surprised

you could imagine I would find that funny.”

“I thought you might,” she said, pouting a little. “Please don’t glare at me, Saul. I didn’t mean it in a bad way.”

She reached down for her handbag and pulled out a lace-trimmed handkerchief. She held it to her nose and sniffed a little. Unmoved, Saul leant back into the chair, crossing his legs before taking a long, slow drink of his whisky.

“Well, I do think she’s being terribly unfair to Carla.”

Saul remembered something his brother had once said about Louisa. She always has to have the last word. Saul had not paid any attention at the time, but now he saw what Fabio meant.

“Drink your tea, Louisa, before it gets cold.”

She did as she was told, then took up a biscuit and slowly nibbled at it.

“More tea?” he asked.

“Please.”

He poured some into the cup for her, added one sugar and a little milk, just how she liked it. He knew that because he had made her tea often.

“Louisa, I gave Fabio a key to this place when he was going to bring you for a weekend. If you still have that key, I’d like it back.” He made his voice pleasant and the request casual.

“I don’t know about that. I’ll have a look,” she said innocently enough.

“Louisa, how did you know Roxie was an orphan?”

“You told me,” she said quickly.

“No, I didn’t. I haven’t told anyone.”

“Then perhaps your mother...” She shrugged. “It’s one of those things I knew. Oh yes, I remember, Roxie told me.”

“I see.”

He had to give her the benefit of the doubt. It would be like Roxie to be open and honest with Fabio's widow. He knew Roxie had a touch of the inverted snob about her. Besides, with Roxie, you always got what you saw.

He found it hard to give credence to the idea Louisa had been letting herself into the boathouse and going through his papers. There would no reason for her to do that. What had she hoped to find out? Yet she *had* been in the boathouse. That was something he knew, and not only instinctively. Was that how she knew about Roxie, or was he being unreasonable?

It took a while for Louisa to leave. When she did decide to go, he walked her up to her car. It was very dark and he said he would wait until she drove up the lane.

"It is rather spooky. I could stay the night," she said, touching his arm.

"Well, I'd rather you didn't. I need to be alone."

"Greta Garbo are you?" she teased and then, standing on tiptoe, she planted a kiss on his cheek. "It could be fun, having company," she murmured, her voice redolent with hidden promises.

"Fun is what I should not be having. I have a lot of work to get ready for tomorrow." Saul was cool.

"How dull..." she complained, then, after opening the door of her car, slid in. He was relieved when he saw the tail lights disappear along the lane. Quickly he ran back to the house. slammed the door and turned the bolt. He did not know why he felt a sudden rage, but it was there, churning away inside him. He was such a private person, the idea someone had been through his things seemed like a violation. He knew in that moment how someone felt after they had been robbed. He had been robbed of his privacy. Tomorrow

the locks would be changed. He would not wait for her to pretend she could not find the key.

He crossed to the desk and took the faxed document out of the folder. He had merely glanced at it and thought it was a birth certificate, assuming it was one for Josh. He lifted the paper closer to the light. He read it once—and then again. He dropped the document on the desk and went to grab hold of the telephone, then he put the receiver back onto the base. It was shocking. A telephone call would never be sufficient. He had to see her face when he confronted her.

* * * *

Monday was the most distressing day she had had in a long time, Roxie decided. It had been a hellish day, no other way to describe it. She had felt down anyway and things had just become worse as the day progressed. First Daphne had organised a flu clinic in the morning, when she knew that there was mother and baby clinic in the afternoon, as well as a couple of patients coming in for changes of dressings. Then, of course, there was the Practice meeting at the end of the day.

Roxie had to stay even later to catch up on her paper-work. She knew it was Daphne's revenge, but decided not to complain. She gritted her teeth and got down to work. She was just leaving when the cleaner came in.

"You look tired out," the woman said.

"Yes, I suppose I do," Roxie answered wearily, "but I've finished now."

"I wanted a word," the cleaner said.

"Oh, yes?"

"It's personal really. You see Jack, my eldest, has left home, gone to a university up north. We have time on our hands and I thought it might be nice to foster a child. What do

you think?"

"Well, I really don't know... it could be ideal. You need to discuss it with an expert."

"That's what I thought, so I've come to get it from the horse's mouth so to speak."

"I'm sorry?"

"You being an orphan and everything."

Roxie felt the blood drain from her. She lowered herself onto her chair. No one knew about her childhood, only Doctor Gordon, and Roxie knew she would never have discussed it with anyone. The only other person who knew was Saul. Had he been gossiping about her? It seemed incredible that he would, and yet how on earth did the cleaning lady know?

"Who told you that?" she asked, recovering a little.

"Well, I can't say I recall, but it isn't a secret...everyone knows." The woman flicked a duster, more in a nervous gesture than a wish to get on with her work. "I didn't mean to upset you, nurse. I mean I think it great that you've done so well for yourself. I thought maybe I could put someone on the right road."

"I don't think I was ever on the wrong road," Roxie said stiffly. "But never mind. As I said, you should speak to an expert. I'm not an expert."

Somehow she reached the car park. She opened her car door and leant against it for a moment or two to try and gain some composure.

"Roxie?"

She turned. It was Doctor Gordon. She'd had late surgery. "Are you okay?"

"Not really," Roxie admitted and told her what had happened between herself and the cleaner.

"I've never said anything," Doctor Gordon said, mortified. "I know how you don't like to talk about your past, Roxie, and it's no one's business anyway."

"I didn't think it was you. But I think I know who it is, only I can't understand why."

"I'm going to have a word with the staff. I think it's a bloody cheek to approach you like that."

"Oh no, I can see why Mrs. Trevelyan would do so. Please don't be angry with her. But I would appreciate it if the gossip, if that's what it is, could be stopped. I don't want everyone thinking I'm the expert on foster care!"

"Don't worry, they won't. And I'm glad to see that little smile's there."

"Don't let the beggars grind you down, that's my motto."

But Roxie's good humour was really a front. She actually felt cold and barren and, at that moment, and in spite of Josh, very lonely and more vulnerable than she wished to be.

A nagging, dull ache at her stomach gave a reason in part for her feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem. The pain hit her as she drove Josh home and was so severe she did not notice Josh was quiet as well.

She made dinner as Josh played with the Game Boy Saul had brought from the States. It was a mild enough game so she did not object.

They ate their dinner at the table close to the fire. It was a cold night, but it felt cosy in the little house with the curtains drawn and low lighting giving all a pleasant glow.

"Are you okay, kiddo?" she asked, finally noticing Josh was not his chatty self.

"Yes, but I think I'm a bit tired," he confessed, spooning up the peas that went with the fish fingers. It was always what

they had for supper on Monday. Usually he loved it and declared it was his favourite, but tonight it seemed an effort for him to eat.

After Josh had bathed and was in bed she took his temperature, but it was normal. She made him a glass of hot chocolate, which he sipped as she read him a story.

"Mummy, I'm going now..." he said, putting his half-finished mug of chocolate on the night table. He snuggled down, and she tucked the duvet around him. She felt his forehead and it was cool.

"Just tired," she said to him, but he was already asleep.

After washing the dishes, she took up the dishtowel, then threw it to one side, for once eschewing drying and putting everything away. Once upstairs she ran a bath and sprinkled in some scented bath essence. The pain was there and all the other miserable symptoms of her female cycle. At least her encounter with Saul had had no results and although he had used a condom, she was never absolutely trustful of the method.

With her head back she tried to relax in the warm water, but her mind was spinning out of control. Images of her and Saul kept intruding. It had seemed so good at the time, but obviously it was nothing to him. No, she amended, *she* was nothing to him. Why had she expected any more than love-making? She was not the woman for him. He was well out of her league. Besides, there had been a hint from Carla that there was something going on with him and Louisa.

He would never treat Louisa in such a cavalier fashion. She should have resisted his advances, but how do you resist what you really want? She could not blame him entirely. She was a grown woman and had succumbed because she wanted to.

There was no doubt she had wanted him just as much as he had wanted her. However, her desire went deeper than surface desire, unfortunately. Miserably she left the tub, towelled herself dry and shrugged into what she called comfort pyjamas. They were big and fleeced cotton, the essence of passion killers, but she loved them when she was feeling off colour.

In her heart of hearts she couldn't blame Saul. She could have said no. He made no promises. Murmured words while in the throes of passion did not count, and she knew that. But—and the word persisted—she was disappointed in him. She thought there had been more substance to him, that he would not just carry on as if nothing special had happened. He had made it all too obvious he wanted to forget it. He would not even come into the house for a cup of coffee. It was odd for he had to know nothing would have happened between them, not with Josh so close to hand. The incident at the boathouse had been a crazy, irresponsible thing to do, and not something she would have countenanced had she been in her right mind. He knew that. She had talked about it to him. He had understood and agreed with her wishes not to have a man in her bed while Josh was around.

Nothing matters, she thought as she slid into bed. *Everything could be gotten over given the right amount of time*. She snuggled deep into the bed, but the pain persisted. Her heart ached and she knew that it would take a long time for her to get over it. This was one thing she was not going to be able to shrug off easily.

The phone shrilled. She had not been asleep, merely lightly dozing, and the clock said it was only nine-thirty, not too late for a call. She had a bedside extension and picked up the phone trying not to sound drowsy.

“Roxie...”

The authoritative voice made her momentarily dizzy. She struggled to a sitting position, clutching the duvet around her as if he could see her. “Yes?”

“I have to talk to you. Can you meet me, tomorrow or soon after?”

Misery turned to fury. She felt it stoking itself up deep inside her. The nerve of the man thinking she was just so available. His desire for some fun was always coached in terms of having to talk, when talk was probably the last thing on his mind.

“Oh, yes,” she said, hearing the quaver in her voice. “And this talk will take place at your flat, I suppose.”

“If you like, but if not, anywhere. I could come to the surgery if you like, or your house, a pub, whatever, wherever.”

“You’ve got a nerve!”

“I’m sorry?”

“You barely spoke to me yesterday, and now you want to...well, euphemistically speaking, *talk* to me. Do you think I’m stupid enough to fall for that again?” She heard her voice go slightly higher. It was humiliating she could not control the rush of anger choking her.

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. She thought for a moment he had hung up, but there was no buzz or any sound. Just as she was about to replace the receiver, he said, “Roxie, this is very serious. If I wanted you to go to bed with me I’d ask just that. I wouldn’t wrap it up in any other way.”

“Oh, would you not? Not like last time then!”

“You know that was not the reason we met. We had

things to talk about.”

“So you said. And while we’re at it, thank you for telling everyone about me. I really appreciate that. I suppose you’ll be giving them intimate details next.”

“Look, Roxie, cut this out!” He sounded really angry. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve said nothing about you to anyone. What do you think I am?”

“Jury’s out on that,” she managed.

“Very well. I don’t know what’s upset you—”

“What’s upset me? I’m not upset, I’m just sick of Hetheringtons worming their way into my life. It’s brought me nothing but trouble.”

“Roxie, you bring half the trouble on yourself. I’ll come to the house and see you.”

“Don’t bother. If you want to see Josh, you can phone and we can make arrangements.”

“I’m surprised you’d let such a disreputable person as myself see your son,” he said smoothly.

“Well I... He wants to... Goodnight!” And without giving him time to respond, she put down the receiver, then unplugged the phone. Back in bed, she curled into a small, tight ball. She felt the sting of tears on her cheeks. She had not wanted to be that way with him. She knew how unreasonable she had to have sounded, and yet he could not seem to realise how he’d hurt her. Maybe he never realised how vulnerable and sensitive she was. Maybe he didn’t even care. Whatever he had to say could no longer be of interest to her. She would never see him alone again. She *dare* not.

The alarm sounded at seven-thirty. She turned it off and then felt something at her back. Turning over, she saw Josh had come into her bed. He was curled in a fetal position, his

thumb in his mouth. Gently she touched his head. He groaned.

His head felt hot. She was out of bed quick, going direct to the bathroom to get the thermometer. His temperature was up from last night.

“Josh...” she murmured.

“Don’t feel well,” he said in what they both called his baby voice.

That tone told her all she needed to know. She, careful not to disturb him, checked him over for serious illness signs and although there were none she called Doctor Gordon.

“I know there’s a virus making the rounds, but he hasn’t been sick, just a high temperature. No sore throat, but he sounds a little congested.”

“There’s a couple of different strains. I’ll call in on my way to the surgery, and don’t think of coming in. I’ll get an agency nurse to cover.”

Roxie was still in her comfort pyjamas at eleven. The chemist at the surgery said he would send the medication the doctor prescribed with the deliveryman. Otherwise Roxie was well stocked with home cures. It was a virus but had infected Josh’s chest so he would need medication. Meanwhile, Roxie managed to get Josh to take some fluids, letting him stay in her bed because he cried when she went to move him.

“Want to stay here...”

“Okay, sweetheart, you can stay in Mummy’s bed for as long as you like.”

Trouble does come in threes, she thought, rummaging in her wardrobe for something to wear and coming up with a navy blue tracksuit: emotional, feminine and, lastly and much more serious than either of them, Josh’s virus. She glanced herself

in the mirror. Her eyes were puffy from weeping, her hair had lost its lustre and her skin looked like a dozen facials would not improve it.

The doorbell echoed through the house. Josh was asleep and it did not waken him. She dashed down the stairs expecting the driver with the medication, flung open the door and then stopped when she saw it wasn't the delivery man. It was Saul Hetherington. He looked severe, the dark blue cashmere overcoat and immaculate white shirt and school tie showing he had to be going somewhere important. He had to have seen her car parked, otherwise why on earth would he turn up on her doorstep?

"Can I come in?" he asked coldly.

"It isn't convenient."

"I know it's not convenient. I telephoned the surgery and that bloody woman who tells me you can't have personal calls each time I call you said Josh was ill, you wouldn't be in today, adding, if ever. What that means I have no idea."

"It means she hopes I get the sack."

"Mummy..." Josh's voice drifted down. "Mummy..."

"Damn, I suppose you'd better come in, but only for a minute."

"That should do it," he muttered.

Josh needed to go to the bathroom. She carried him in and supported him since he refused a potty, even in his weakened state exerting his ability to use the toilet like a grown-up.

She heard the doorbell again as she was getting Josh back into bed and the mumbled voices drifting upstairs let her know Saul had handled it.

"Who's that?" Josh mumbled.

“Uncle Saul...”

“I’m poorly, Mummy. Tell him I’m so poorly...” His eyelids fluttered and he drifted into sleep.

She sat with him worried for some time. From downstairs she smelt the aroma of coffee and toast and was suddenly grateful there was someone around who could do a simple thing like that.

When she went downstairs, he handed her the medication and gave her coffee and toast. She sat at the table, not saying anything. He had taken off his coat and, judging by the navy blue suit, really had somewhere important to go.

“If you want to shower and get out of those...whatever they’re supposed to be”—he raised an eyebrow—“I can keep an eye on Josh.”

“He’s sleeping. I need to give him the medication, but I’ll wait until he wakes up. Besides you obviously have somewhere very important to go.”

“I’ve cancelled,” he said. “This is more important.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she murmured, not knowing how to show gratitude, or indeed whether she should or not. Did she really want him here, helping her? It would be wonderful to have someone on hand, but then again, the very scent of him intoxicated her and those churning feelings, in spite of everything, were happening all over again. Those highs and lows and the crazy, mindless feelings of someone who was...but dare she admit what the feelings were? She would hang the hat of infatuation on them and let that be all it was.

It was so much easier with an extra pair of hands. Even feeling as she did about his presence, she could not deny it. It was easy for her to take a shower without fear of Josh needing

something. There was something for her to eat at lunch. He went out and said he would get some things she was short of. When he came back in jeans, a shirt and sweater, it was clear he had called at his apartment to change.

Josh, feeling a little better, insisted on having her company. He even managed to eat a little mashed egg with toast soldiers. When he fell asleep after lunch, she went downstairs and there was soup and a sandwich for her lunch.

"You shouldn't be doing all this," she murmured.

"Life is hard enough for you as it is."

"And how do *you* know that?" she said without any animosity.

"Because I have eyes in my head. You keep life ticking over great, but when Josh is sick, it really is hard on you."

"We've always managed before," she retaliated.

"I'm sure you have." His reply was cool, as were his eyes as they swept over her.

She thought it was the meanest thing she had ever said to him. Guilt washed over her and it was an uncomfortable feeling. "But I'm grateful to you," she managed and realised being gracious was not hard if you stamped on your pig-headed pride!

She heard Josh call again and was half out of her chair when Saul said, in that authoritative way he had, "Let me go..." He saw her about to refuse. "Come on, Roxie. You know he trusts me, so you eat your lunch."

She let him go—a first for her. It didn't feel too bad to let someone else take the strain. Although she waited for Josh's complaint and cry for her to go upstairs, it didn't come, so he did not object to Saul being there, which again was something of a first.

I have to let go a little, she realised with rare clarity, for Josh's sake. No one will ever take my place and I have no need to be so possessive.

Admitting she was possessive was a great leap forward. Her loneliness and never having anything of her own had not helped. She had wrapped all her dreams and hopes in Josh and he had become her life. He still could be her life, but she knew she could safely share him with one other person.

When Saul returned, Roxie had already washed and put away the dishes. He announced that Josh was fine, he had read him a story and then Josh had fallen asleep again.

"I think he's feeling a little better," she said. "You know kids—they get floored by these bugs, but quite often they soon perk up again."

"Roxie," he said, and she turned to look at him.

Her heart gave a skip and a jump and she chewed her lower lip in an attempt to obliterate the feelings stampeding around inside her. He was so...the word came...*attractive*. The blue sweater emphasised the firm shape of his upper body, the lighter blue shirt the faint tan of his skin. *It didn't matter what he wore. He looked good in anything!* She glanced down at her tracksuit and wished she had chosen something a little more fetching, that her hair was not screwed up in a ponytail and she had at least found some lipstick to brush across her lips. He must see her as a drab old thing.

She realised he had been saying something and she had not been listening. "Sorry," she murmured. "I didn't catch what you said."

"I said, what did you mean about my gossiping about you? To whom have I been gossiping? I didn't think we knew the same people."

“Well, we don’t. It’s just the fact of my being an orphan is all over the surgery. Only Jenny Gordon knew and she hasn’t said anything to anyone.”

He stiffened, pushing back his shoulders a little. He was standing very erect, and she could imagine him in uniform. “I can assure you I have told no one, and I mean no one, about your past or even your present,” he added with a strange smile.

“Well, they all know, so...” She shrugged uncomfortably.

“Perhaps you told someone and didn’t mean to,” he suggested.

“I don’t remember telling anyone, only you...” she insisted. “Perhaps I did mention it, but that is *so* not me!”

He remembered something. “Well, you told Louisa, surely?”

“Louisa? I certainly didn’t. I wouldn’t talk to her about my life, most especially not her.”

It had come out badly. She wanted to bite back, not the words, but the way she had said them. Of course he was fond of Louisa, and more than fond if Carla Hetherington was to be believed. He would not like her disparaging Louisa.

“That’s odd.” He seemed puzzled, frowned and then sat down on the settee, his legs parted at the knees, and his arms, bent at the elbow, resting on his thighs. “Then how the devil did she know?” he murmured.

“Oh, your...” She stopped, swallowing the words. She had been going to say, *Your mother must have told her*, then realised she could not reveal that Carla knew anything about her.

“Yes?” he said.

“You’re making yourself comfortable.” She smiled. “In

for the long haul, are you?"

He looked at her oddly. She didn't think she had fooled him one bit, but he let it go and echoed her smile. "I certainly am. I'm going to make you dinner."

"You are?" She was happy she had escaped his questioning. It would be too difficult for her to reveal his mother was not quite a stranger to her and her background, as the woman feigned to be. Roxie knew who would have told Louisa. Carla Hetherington would have revelled in revealing that to her daughter-in-law. Yet, although Saul's mother would have enjoyed it, she could not see what advantage there would be for either of them in letting people know at the surgery.

"And what about what you wanted to talk to me about?" she asked hands on hips, staring down at him.

"I'd rather wait, if you don't mind."

"Oh, yes?"

"Look, I know what's going on in your twisted little mind, Roxie Rawson, but you're so very wrong. I just want us to be alone so don't look at me like that. I mean with Josh not being upstairs in bed poorly. There's a time for everything and now isn't the time."

"You are so right."

"You're twisting things. You know you have a grubby little mind," he teased amiably enough.

"I try," she countered.

In the end she made up Josh's bed for Saul. He was so helpful and kind, helping her care for her son that she did not want to turn him out into the night. When she asked him to stay, he eagerly agreed. "I can share night watch with you, if need be..." he said.

"You're really kind," she said, touched.

“Not at all. Josh is my nephew, and I do care about him very much.”

“I know that, Saul.” *And if only you cared for me by as much as one fraction, I would be the happiest woman in the world.*

However, there was no need for night duty. Josh slept through and was awake only moments before she woke up. He seemed brighter and his temperature had gone down. “But I don’t feel well enough for school,” he said.

“No, I don’t think you do, sweetheart. I know you don’t want to stay off school without just cause.”

“Too right,” he said, slipping into an Antipodean’s expression.

“If you like, you can sit on the settee. It’s warm down there and you can have the television on or play with your Game Boy. Would you like that?”

“Mm,” he said, with a weak smile. “That’ll be fun. Mummy, could Uncle Saul carry me down the stairs? Would he do that, do you think?”

“I’m sure he’d be delighted.”

The day slipped by happily Josh was brighter; Saul’s company was a boon. Roxie was able to take a long, leisurely bath and then to find a colourful sweater and a sleeker pair of trousers to wear. She combed out her hair and left it loose and even slicked a lipstick across her lips.

Saul prepared an evening meal, but said he could not stay because he had to go and attend to his business. Then early next day he had to go to London. Josh showed his disappointment at the news, but Roxie accepted it as if she were not disappointed at all.

“Look, why don’t you both come down to the boathouse for the weekend? I can come and collect you. I’m sure it will

do you good, both of you.”

* * * *

Roxie drove them down to the boathouse. She'd agreed to meet Saul there. She felt happy to be going and more excited than she wanted to be. In the end, Josh had gone back to school on Wednesday and was well over his virus by the time Friday arrived.

Things had been resolved at work. Jenny Gordon had spoken to all the staff about Roxie's background and, in spite of asking, no one was able or willing to reveal where they had heard the information. Daphne had, by her attitude, obviously had a fright over Doctor Gordon's enquiry as to who had first raised the question of Roxie's background. Roxie did suspect it had emanated from her, since she did not believe she had any other enemies. However, the woman was vaguely pleasant and even asked how Josh was. Fighting the temptation to ask Daphne if she had any idea who had brought the gossip to the practice, Roxie merely responded in kind. It was important to be on good terms with all the staff. Roxie knew and had always managed to achieve that wherever she had worked before. *Perhaps*, she thought, unusually optimistic that she had turned the corner and things would get better, *at least at work*.

Friday had been a lovely day, unseasonably mild and very sunny. Driving down to Saul's home turned out to be a pleasure rather than a pain. They stopped off at a small village and she managed to buy some flowers. Flowers for a man seemed a bit odd, but she thought he'd like them. They were for the boathouse after all...who didn't like flowers? There was a rich cream cake in the boot, as well as a couple of bottles of wine and some favourite soft drinks for Josh.

“He's got loads of money, so I don't know why you want

to bring him stuff,” Josh said.

“Well, hark at Scrooge. Don’t rich people deserve treats?”

“Who’s Scrooge?”

“Well, thereby hangs a tale...now listen to me and I will tell you.”

He said indignantly, after she had finished the story, “I’m not like that.”

“You aren’t?”

“No. I’m going to buy Uncle Saul something for Christmas. I’ve been saving up, but I just don’t know what, and it’s nice you bought him flowers, but he should buy them for you!”

“You know, honey, you’re going to make some girl very happy one day.”

“Ugh!”

It was good to be back at the boathouse once more. There was something about the house by the river that really warmed her heart. It was one of those places where she had felt immediately at home. *My kind of place*, she thought. *The home of my dreams*... but had to concede, too, that it was the homemaker who made it so. The whole house was imbued with Saul’s personality. The décor was masculine, yet very comfortable.

“Gorgeous,” he said, when she handed him the flowers. “I always mean to get flowers when I have company and I always forget.”

“I hope you have a vase!”

“Er,” he said. “A glass jug. It’s huge, though.”

“You find that for me, and I’ll get the rest of our stuff.”

“The other way around. You’ll find the vase in the third kitchen cupboard down, and I’ll bring the things.”

“I’ll come with you,” Josh said.

The evening sped by. She had forgotten how happy she really was in Saul’s company. He made her laugh and he enjoyed her humour, too. He drew Josh into everything. He was so different from his brother that quite often she forgot he *was* Fabio’s brother. The one thing she knew, and it warmed her heart, was that Josh was more like him than he would ever be like his natural father. He was like her, of course, but those things in him that frequently surprised her had to come from his uncle’s side of the family.

After Josh had gone to bed and she’d rejoined Saul in the lounge, sitting looking out at the black sky littered with stars, she took the proffered glass of wine. She enjoyed it when he said he loved her choice of wine and that he had not really paid much attention to New Zealand wine and had not realised just how delicious it was.

She glanced him, swirling the crimson wine in his glass. He looked so thoughtful, the planes of his face smooth and unlined, as if he had no worries. He was very relaxed, she saw. Her heart accelerated, her limbs melting at the mere thought of him, of his scent and how his body felt against hers, how smooth and hard and rough, all those things, and so powerful. The pleasure his body doled out to her; how he worshipped her body with his own. He did not use her, and she knew she had been wrong to think that. He had enjoyed her and she had enjoyed him. Warm liquid pooled against her thighs. “Down girl,” she whispered to herself. “Stop doing this to yourself.” With him—just opposite her, it was so difficult to stop doing it. She wanted to tell herself it was wrong, she should never be that way with him again. She could not go through the way he had been after last time, seeming to be so cold and distant. It would be wonderful just being close to him once more, yet it

would not be worth all the pain she had been through being visited on her again, or would it?

“Roxie,” he whispered her name very softly.

She dared not look at him. If she met those dark blue eyes with her own, he would know just what she was thinking and what she so desperately needed.

“Roxie,” he said again. “I know...*everything*.”

Damn, she thought, *he has seen through me, maybe I give off some scent that tells him how I am feeling*. She glanced down at her light-coloured full skirt, as if the dampness had seeped through, but there was nothing. He could not know, and if he did, she would deny it.

“Are you not going to say anything?” he asked, his voice husky around the edges

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” she admitted. “If you know everything, there’s no need for words.”

“I want to know why you never told me, why you never told anyone.”

At last she looked up, meeting his gaze, feeling the beginnings of confusion. “Who should I tell? And what good would it do?”

“You must know that it alters everything, Roxie. That Josh is, to all intents and purposes, Fabio’s heir.”

Chapter 7

Roxie went out on the deck and leaned against the rail, but even taking deep breaths failed to stop her heart from thudding away. Below her she could see the shine of water covered in moonlight. It was cold out there, but she could not go back in. She had fled from his statement. She wanted to crawl into a corner and hide from him and from the whole world.

He came out, said nothing, but slipped a jacket over her shoulders. The jacket was redolent of his smell, and, in spite of being in a kind of trauma, still she snuggled deep inside it.

“I...” She tried to get the words out, but her teeth started to chatter. All she could utter was “I, I, I...”

“Come inside, Roxie, please. Don’t catch cold because nothing is worth making yourself ill.”

He put his arm around her, and she let him urge her inside. He closed the patio doors with a slam she feared would waken Josh, but he was at the far end of the house.

Weakly she sank into the comfort of the settee, still clutching his jacket about her. She had never dreamed anyone would find out; she had never wanted to cause trouble. When she had met Louisa, she had been devastated. The woman had

seemed pleasant and kind, so how could she expose her to the truth that Fabio was not her husband, could never be her husband because he was still married to her...to Roxie Rawson.

"At first I thought he'd divorced me without my signature or something. Although I knew he couldn't do that," she half-whispered the words.

Saul came and sat beside her, very close, sliding his arm around her shoulder. "Roxie, you've done nothing to be ashamed of. It's me who should be ashamed."

She shook her head, her hair tumbling around her. "You pole axed me," she said.

"I did?" he asked mystified, bending his head as if to see through the folds of hair.

"When you said he had a wife. You know I'm sure my heart stopped, just for a moment, and then I thought, *Okay maybe he did divorce me and forged my signature.*"

"That would not have been beyond the realms of possibility."

She looked up, pushing the hair back. "Maybe he did?" she asked eagerly. "And if so, we need not say anything. We can keep it quiet, can't we?"

"Don't you think I checked that?"

"You're good at checking. I'm not sure that's a good thing." She did not want to sound resentful, but she couldn't help it. The can of worms was open and those worms were spilling out and devouring the peaceful life she had set up for her and Josh. "I don't suppose you'd keep quiet."

"No."

"But it's nothing to do with you." She looked up, moving away from him, leaning back and brushing her hair away as if it were now an irritant.

"It has everything to do with me. I'm my brother's executor. Didn't you realise that?"

"No. It should've have been obvious, but I'm just not that bright."

"You are more than bright. Listen to me, Roxie. Think about it very carefully. Why did Fabio leave you that money? He knew I'd poke about into his affairs. He knew me too well not to be aware I'd somehow ferret out the truth. I believe he wanted me to find you and to find out the truth."

"I can't imagine why. He didn't expect to die suddenly, and you could've been dead."

"But you had to have been on his conscience."

"So much so he didn't bother to divorce me, or to ever see his son."

"Whatever the reason, and I am sure my brother had his reasons, I've found you now, and you have a right to so much more than ten thousand pounds."

She turned on him. "I don't give a damn about money."

"Maybe you don't for yourself, but think about Josh. Besides, you have a hard life and it needn't be that way."

"My life is easy compared to many," she protested. "And anyway, I couldn't do that to Louisa. What is she going to think? Poor Louisa...she loved him and thought he was her husband."

"I don't give a damn about Louisa."

"Saul." She gasped, pressing a hand that trembled against her throat.

He shrugged. "Well, in a way I do, I suppose, but she's rich in her own right, and I want Josh to have what is rightly his."

"Don't do this, Saul, please. I beg of you. You might...it might all be bad for you...things might turn and you'll be un-

happy. It's no good looking under these stones."

"I looked under them, Roxie, and I'm going to see it through."

"Why must you do this?" she demanded.

"Because I know it's what Fabio would have wanted. I never honoured him when he was alive, but as sure as hell I'm going to honour him now he's dead."

He went to her, folding her to him. She lay in his arms, letting him support her, even as he stretched back against the settee. When he manipulated her onto his chest, she didn't protest. Through his silk shirt she could hear the steady rhythm of his heart and almost feel the blood coursing through him. She slid her arm around his waist, enjoying the hard flesh of his back against her hand.

The warm, masculine scent of him teased her nose. She moved her head slightly, bringing her hand up to slide one pearl button on his shirt open. She manoeuvred her tongue inside and discovered he tasted sweet *and* salty. She lapped at his skin like a hungry kitten, then not content with the small area, determinedly slid open other buttons. He was irresistible! It was impossible not to want to do these teasing things, even though, somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew it would bring her no good at all. She knew she should stop and control herself, but she did not want to be in control of anything. She wanted to be close to him, whatever the consequences were.

His hand in her hair tightened and she heard him moan very soft, even before her tongue found and her mouth captured his taut nipple. His breath came fast and deep and when he said her name it was a protest that, as her hand slid down his stomach, turned into a groan. Still caressing his nipple

with her mouth, she opened the button on his jeans, sliding her hand down onto the hard, warm tightness of his belly.

“Don’t,” he said, the world gruff and whispered.

“I won’t,” she murmured, sliding her mouth slow up his chest, along his neck and then hovering, parted, moist lips over his mouth.

He gasped out a savage imprecation and then captured her head, forcing her down until his mouth could blend with hers. His movements were sudden and determined, changing places, gently but with purpose, sliding her down into the folds of the settee, his hands inside the voluptuous folds of her skirt, moving along the roundness of her thighs, sliding inside the soft satin of her French knickers, kneading the smooth, round flesh of her hip. The soft curls of her womanhood were moist, drawing him to move his fingers deeper into the pouting crevice. When he did, she exploded hot against his fingers, crying out against his mouth. He moved swiftly, standing, pulling her with him, not stopping in spite of the whimper of protest she gave. He pulled at her clothes with deft hands, handling zips and fastenings in a fury of action. She followed his lead, pausing to kiss his lips, to touch each part of his flesh that was revealed. He held her to him and lowered her onto the floor...into the soft warm caress of fur rugs.

“Darling,” he murmured, capturing the sheen of her skin, emphasised by the firelight, seeking her pouting breasts with his mouth, teasing first one and then the other, feeling the eager thrust of her body against his, her hands at his shoulders, down his back, pulling at his skin, urging him with every movement to enter her and then when he did, slowly...rising up on him, gasping at the sensations of pleasure that were bursting from her. She slipped over the edge, beyond now,

aware of neither time nor place, but just of him, the delicious thrust of him hard against her yielding softness...sliding her down into complete ecstasy...

* * * *

Spent, they lay tumbled together on the fur rugs. He had leaned up and thrown a log on the fire. It sparkled and hissed and then crackled. She wrapped her legs around him, holding him fast in case he would escape.

"Roxie," he murmured her name, nuzzling against her ear. "You are..." But he did not finish. He slid his hand down and cupped her round breast very tenderly, yet with a touching kind of possessiveness.

"Amazing comes to mind," she said.

"Oh, really...I think I was going to say something a little less...praiseworthy."

She giggled and then sighed her contentment.

"My room's over the other side," he said.

"So?" Then she leaned up, propping her head on her hand, elbow bent. "Better not."

"Better not what?"

"Share a bed. With Josh here, the morning could be awkward."

"I was half hoping you'd take a chance, but you're right. However, if Josh does a nocturnal, he'll see things he ought not to, so perhaps, as lovely as you are..."

"You're so right. Oh, but I just want to stay here like this." She shrugged herself up and reached for her top.

"Do you want to shower?" he asked. "In my own private bathroom?"

Roxie looked down at him, opened her mouth and made a perfect O. She knew what she wanted to say, that no she did

not want a shower, for that would mean washing him from her body. She liked her body imbued with his scent, yet she knew that she wanted to spend longer with him than this, that she wanted to lay with him and to talk and explore and tease, but it would not be possible and the shower was so tempting...

* * * *

It was a mellow morning, with a weak sun filtered through feathery clouds. They walked in the woods along the side of the river. Josh ran on ahead, enjoying the freedom of not having to watch for traffic. Saul reached for her hand, holding onto it firmly. Now and again she looked up at him. He was always looking at her when she did that, almost as if he knew she was going to look at him. She felt a shiver of pleasure and gave herself over to it.

Perhaps it would all go away, the other thing. If she did nothing, then maybe nothing would be done about her and Fabio's marriage. Louisa would live in ignorance, never to know she had married a bigamist. *What an old-fashioned word*, Roxie mused, *and there was no need for Fabio to have done that to Louisa. Not in this day and age when divorce was so easy. Why had he been such a fool as to do such a thing?*

"Roxie," he murmured, "I can almost hear the cogs of your mind clicking over. I am really determined to do this thing and I want you to know why."

"If I must," she said wearily.

He told her about Fabio—all the things he had kept from her, including the fact he had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. That was the real reason for his going to Italy alone and without telling Louisa. In fact the only person he'd shared the secret with was Saul. He'd made Saul swear to

tell no one, at least not for the moment. "I didn't know he was going to Tuscany, but I could understand why he did. Fabio adored Tuscany and was proud of his Tuscan roots."

She felt suddenly cold and shivered, not because of how she felt about him, but for a more frightening reason. He saw the shiver and slipped his arm around her, hugging her tightly.

"He didn't..." She closed her eyes against the terrible picture that came into her mind.

"Who knows for sure? He made the car crash look very good, but that was like him. He wouldn't want to exist with that terrible thing in his head, to die slowly and painfully. He'd have hated to see the pity in anyone's eyes. Maybe it was an accident," he said. "I haven't told anyone else."

"Then why tell me?"

"That's easy...because I don't ever want there to be lies between us."

"Oh, Fabio," she said sadly, feeling her eyes fill with hot tears, so wrapped up in regret and pain for a lost life that she failed to fully take in what Saul had said.

"So you see, he *knew* what he wanted to do. He wanted me to find out everything and deal with it. He didn't want the others to know about his tumour and if he'd left a more detailed will and a confession, well, who knows what conjecture people would put on it."

"But it is so foul for Louisa," she murmured. "To learn she isn't a widow and that she was never a wife."

"Sorry, but that can't be helped. And Louisa will survive, so don't worry about her."

"But I can't help it."

"Anyway, suppose you wish to marry. What would you declare? You could hardly lie about your marriage because it

might put your new marriage in jeopardy. You have to declare you're a widow. You don't want to start a life with lies."

"Married? I'm never going to get married again. One mistake was one too many."

"When you meet someone you want to spend the rest of your life with, you'll change your mind," he said softly.

She thought for a moment she had misheard. She turned and looked at him. How could he be so insensitive? Did he not realise, had he not been aware, that he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? Their moments together in the early hours of the morning flashed into her mind—the passion, the tenderness, those inconsequential words shared in the dark of night.

In spite of all she had said, she had stayed in his bed, leaving him at five in the morning. She had been so happy and had thought that she sensed in him something more than previously. Only now she realised how mistaken she had been.

Slowly she untangled her hand from his. "I'm going to catch up with Josh," she said, then fled down the path calling her son's name. He waited for her to reach him, then said she should chase him. They ran down the path, through the trees, crisp, bronze coloured leaves crushing under their feet. The running was good, it accelerating her heartbeat, sending the blood pounding through her. It was a feeble attempt, she knew, but she had to try to drive the misery out of herself.

The path, although she had not realised it, was a circular route and as the woods cleared, she saw they were at the rear of the house. "Wait," she cried to Josh, catching his arm. "I'm not sure how we go down."

"I know how. I remember from when I had those couple of days here with Uncle Saul. Come on, Mum, we have to beat him."

We can never do that, she thought wearily, but she followed Josh down and the path lead to where her car and Saul's was parked. However, there was another car parked there as well. It was a shiny red sports car that, with a sinking feeling, she recognised as Louisa's.

"Now we'd better wait," she cautioned. There was a rustling and Saul appeared on the path. Josh waved and called out, "Someone's here."

"There?" Saul saw the car, and his expression changed. Before he had been relaxed and now he seemed a little tense.

Hardly surprising, Roxie thought. Knowing what he did about her and her relationship with his brother, it had to be disquieting for him to face Louisa. He had it all planned. He had told her that morning he would go and see Louisa and tell her the truth. That it would be better coming from him than by a letter sent by a lawyer. He was adamant that there would be no more lies, even though Roxie had asked him to just leave it. "What shall we do?" Roxie asked him. She felt a coward putting the decision on his shoulders, yet what else could she do? Her idea was to not say anything, but he had insisted that the truth be told. Even should she walk away, he would still do it. He was stubborn and nothing would shift him from his purpose.

He glanced at Josh, then at her. "Play it by ear, given the circumstances with..." He nodded in Josh's direction. "We don't want any scenes," he murmured.

"Perhaps we should leave."

"Why should you?" Saul demanded. "You're my guests."

She looked up at him and, unable to meet his hard stare, looked away again. "I don't want to upset Louisa, or..." And she did think before saying it, but could not stop

herself. "Or spoil things for you."

"How could you do that?" he asked.

"With you and Louisa, of course. It seems like I'm always around," she muttered.

"Oh, that," he said, then he crossed to her and put his hand on her elbow. "Don't worry about it."

Angrily she shrugged from his clasp. He was honest, she supposed, yet how that honesty hurt. Perhaps it was true that there was something between Saul and Louisa.

How convenient, she thought bitterly, the bearer of bad news could also be the great comforter. Maybe that was why he was so insistent on telling her himself. Deceiver. The word flashed through her mind and, although she wanted to say it, Josh had now moved closer to them, seeking his uncle's hand and tugging him toward the downward path.

* * * *

Louisa had let herself into the boathouse. He hadn't yet arranged for a locksmith to change the locks and he was sure he'd locked the door before setting off on their walk. She was sitting by the fire, and when they all burst in through the door, she stood.

She looked pale and beautiful. Her slender frame was clad in a black suit, her long legs covered by pale silk stockings that had a glossy quality to them, and she was wearing very high heels that made her seem taller but also rather fragile.

She said by way of greeting, "Ah," as if this was meant to convey all kinds of things.

"You brought back the key," Saul said sternly.

"What key?" she asked. His gaze must have been really hard because she added, "Yes. I really think *they* should leave," she said coldly, nodding in the direction of Josh and Roxie.

"My father is on his way." She checked her watch. "He should be here in about half an hour."

"Why is he coming?" Saul slid his hands into the pockets of his tan suede jacket,

"I asked him to come."

"Why?" Saul persisted.

"I think you know why." Once more Louisa nodded in the direction of Roxie and Josh. "And before he comes, they should do as I say."

"You've a bloody cheek!" Saul said harshly. "Inviting people to my home and then telling me to send *my* guests home."

Josh was speechless. Seeing him just standing looking at Saul and Louisa, Roxie made up her own mind. "We have to go. Come on, Josh, and let's get your things together."

"No, you don't have to leave. I've a table booked for dinner. You stay here, and Louisa and I will go outside and wait for her father."

"What?" Louisa demanded. "How dare you?"

Roxie said nothing, but, taking Josh by the hand, led him out of the room, closing the door behind them. Saul had fixed up a TV in there for Josh and she turned it on. Thankfully, there was a children's serial he had been watching on previous weeks.

"Oh, boy, this is good." He went and curled up on his bed. "What's the matter with Louisa?"

"I don't know."

"She seems mad at something," he said.

An understatement, Roxie thought. But what was she angry about and why was her father coming? Had she guessed at the relationship between Saul and her? Was that what had caused

her fury. *Relationship?* Was that what it was anyway? It was all so confusing. Surely Louisa could not have guessed what had happened between her and Saul. And what had that to do with her father anyway? It was not as if Louisa and Saul were together.

There was a buzz of raised voices. Roxie heard the sound of a door slamming and turned up the television. Then she sat and pondered whether she should just pack their bags and leave. Yet how could she and Josh walk through the living room? They couldn't leave without doing that, and all kinds of things could be happening. They could be making up.

The intense pain was like having needles stuck into her, and she bent from the weight of it. He would never be with Louisa like he was with her. *And how do you know that*, a small voice asked her. Because—and perhaps it was a woman thing that told her—but she knew Louisa was not like her. There was just a little coldness about Louisa, as if she were not at all emotional.

She had glimpsed it previously, now and again, when the other girl seemed to let her guard down, but Roxie had ignored it. She had liked Louisa and thought it just stemmed from her being unhappy. After all, she had just lost her husband. But this behaviour today really had shocked her. She could be horrible to her, to Roxie, but why be so rude to Josh, who had done her no harm? She had always been friendly to him when they'd met before. Had that friendliness been because she had an agenda Roxie had not been able to guess? Louisa knew Saul was fond of the boy—no, fond was not a strong enough word; he had really deep feelings for his nephew—and it would be expedient for Louisa to show some feelings, too. That was if Louisa wanted Saul. Roxie, being in

love with Saul, could not blame her for that either.

A tap on the door caused her to start. She looked over at Josh, but he was engrossed in the television program. She opened the door. Saul stood there. He looked pale and a little pinched, but in perfect control. "Would you come out for a moment, Roxie, please?"

Her eyes pleaded to be allowed to refuse, but he had turned away, so she stepped out into the room. There was a man with Louisa of about middle fifties, grey-haired and distinguished looking. She could see from where Louisa got her cool, attractive looks. This handsome man had to be her father, Louisa was very like him about the eyes and mouth, and he was a very good looking man.

"There's no need for this, Hetherington," the man said coldly.

"Oh, I think there is. If you doubt the veracity of the document, then go to the source."

"You don't expect me to believe *her*, do you?" Louisa spat.

Roxie turned to look at the woman, and she would never have believed that Louisa could give such a venomous look. Her eyes raked Roxie from head to foot, then tossing her hair, she looked across at her father. "If you imagine you're going to get any money by your claims, you're mistaken."

Money—as always, it came down to that, and it was the one thing Roxie had never wanted from any of them. She could hold her tongue no more. "Money? Is that all you think about? I don't want, or even need, your money. I didn't want any of this. It's not my responsibility what Fabio did, but he did it, and you have to face the facts."

"How dare you accuse Fabio," Louisa said. "I know very

well what you did. You tricked him into marrying you, but when he divorced you, you decided to ignore it.”

“Think what you like,” Roxie said. “None of it really matters anyway.”

“Not to someone like you,” Louisa’s father said, “but my daughter is entirely different.”

“Really? In what way is Louisa different? We were both fooled by the same man.”

“We all know who’s done the fooling, and it isn’t Fabio.” Louisa’s father cast her a hard-eyed stare.

She could almost hear the wheels of his mind clicking over.

“How much do you want?” he asked.

“For what?” Roxie asked.

“Not for what...to just go away.”

Roxie smiled a sad smile. “I never wanted to be here. Excuse me, but I have to get my son. We’re leaving.”

“Roxie, you don’t have to go. I think it’s time Mr. Fanshaw and his daughter left.”

She turned to look at Saul. He was standing, arms folded, and looking so serious. Her heart still gave that skip and a jump it always did whenever she looked at him, but she felt oddly in control. In the arena of animosity she could hold her own. She had been schooled to do so from a very early age.

“No, Saul, we have to go. There’s nothing here for either of us.” She turned and looked at the other two. “We don’t *need* anything from you; we certainly don’t *want* anything from you. We know who we are.”

Saul followed her, and when she reached the bedroom, she turned and looked up at him. “Saul,” she whispered, “just

let us go. I need to go, and right now.”

He stepped back, away from her, looking neither angry nor hurt, but also in control. He was in control of his feelings and he was in control of his features. He would never reveal how he felt, she saw that clearly. She had been such a fool!

Chapter 8

More often than she would like, Saul drifted into her dreams. He was a potent force whom she might push out of her mind while she was awake, but who overtook her while she was sleeping and vulnerable. She would awake from these dreams covered in a thin film of perspiration. Sleep would elude her for hours and consequently, she was frequently tired and listless the following day.

Why had he cast such a spell on her? How had she let him invade her unconscious self, while she had the ability to chase him away from her consciousness? It was a mystery she could not solve. She did not know how to solve it, and she'd had no experience of such a powerful force ever in her life before.

Of course, it didn't help that Josh talked about him. The latest gift from his uncle, which had been sent in the mail, was a mobile phone with text facility. She did not ask Josh how often he heard from his uncle, but she surmised it was quite regularly. Josh had told her Saul was in London, and she had caught him on a radio programme discussing his book. Immediately she had switched the radio off. She did not want him coming out of the radio as well as invading her sleep.

As the days grew shorter and the wind more chilly, her

work load increased. This was matched, too, by Josh's schedule, packed with Christmas party events. There was the football team party, as well as various other things for him to attend, then there was the Christmas school concert in which he had somehow inveigled himself a role. Organizing their schedules was so demanding Roxie had designed a timetable just so she knew where he had to be at any given time. He was popular now that his fellow pupils had gotten to know him. He possessed a high likeable factor, but she guessed it was a gene thing inherited from his father. She had never been out of things, but she hadn't been Miss Popularity.

She remembered last Christmas. Then she had been so carefree, in spite of the worry about the hospital closing. They had gone with friends to a beach on Christmas Day and had barbecued food. The sun had been hot and high, and there had been cricket and other games and lots of fun.

She pulled her coat tighter around her. She had forgotten how chilly the winds that invaded England could be, or how cold the rain.

Last year, she had had little idea how much her life was going to change. How she would so easily fall in love with a man who really should have repulsed her. The man who was the brother of her late husband. She was sure in some countries that it would be against the law to have any kind of relationship with him. She was even pretty certain that at one time it had been forbidden in England.

She sighed, sat in her car for a moment until it heated up, then put the car into gear and drove into the swirl of traffic whose drivers were all heading home. Her mobile set off, its gay little melody suddenly an irritant. She pulled onto the forecourt of a row of shops before answering it.

It was Josh, and he sounded chirpy and excited. Rehearsals had just finished and Mrs. Brownlow was dropping him off. She knew Jack Brownlow was his best friend, so that was all right. "But Mrs. Brownlow wants to know if I can go to their house tomorrow for a sleep over."

"Let me speak to Mrs. Brownlow," she said.

She heard him say, "Mum wants to speak to you," in a frightened whisper, as if afraid she was going to refuse or complain about the invitation.

"It's fine," Roxie confirmed, "and sounds like fun, if you're sure you don't mind?"

"Josh is ever so good. Of course I don't mind. It'll be great, and the next day we're going into town to see Father Christmas arrive, so I thought Josh could come, too?"

"That'd be smashing. I was going to take him, but I could certainly use the time to clean up the house and get ready for the big event."

She had just arrived home when Josh was dropped off by Trudy Brownlow. Trudy waved from her car and then drove off.

"It's cool," she said, when Josh asked if she were sure it was all right.

"I don't like to leave you all alone," he said sweetly.

"It's fine. One of these days you're going to leave me alone for a lot longer than a night. Wait till you go to college, or even before, when you go to senior school and they have school trips. Bet you won't want to miss out on any of that to stay with your old mother."

"I haven't got an old mother. I've got a young mother," he said charmingly, putting his arm round her waist.

"You know how to say all the right things. Come on and

let's eat." She hugged him back. It would be his first sleep over with a friend since they had come to England. It was a big step for them both.

* * * *

When she arrived home the next evening without Josh, the house seemed empty and lonely. His things were all about her, but there was not that excited chatter or the sound of his playing. She put on the radio and, not feeling hungry, set about cleaning up the house for Christmas.

By the time ten o'clock came, she was exhausted and fell into bed, dropping into a deep sleep. She had set the alarm and it wakened her at seven-thirty. Downstairs the house looked neat and clean, and she idly wondered how long that would last. Since she had done all the cleaning last night, the day stretched emptily before her. She thought she might go Christmas shopping. It looked a fine day, and she would get twice as much done with Josh not being around.

She slipped into a pair of black cords and a white woollen sweater, leaving her hair loose. She knew exactly where to get what she wanted and buzzed in and out of the shops at top speed. Since she had hit the shops early, the city was only just filling up as she departed it. There would be lots of time to wrap Josh's gifts and put them in the attic before he returned. A phone call from Trudy Brownlow had told her that they planned to eat out after seeing Father Christmas, so Josh would not be home until seven or seven-thirty.

Before making a cup of tea, she set out the wrapping paper and tags and tape on the table in readiness for the wrapping marathon, then she thankfully plugged in the kettle and when the water boiled made the tea. She had just sunk into the comfortable arm-chair in the front room when the doorbell jangled.

Expecting the postman, who had been a frequent caller since lots of parcels had been arriving from New Zealand, she flung back the outer door, but the smile died on her lips as she saw it was not the postman. It was Saul Hetherington. She tried not to gasp, but it came out in spite of herself. *He looks so...so Saul*, she thought, in a dark overcoat, clean-shaven, immaculate shirt and grey worsted suit.

He said, as if it had not been almost two months since she had seen him, "Hello, Roxie," his voice smooth and comfortable.

"Hello," she said in response, still looking up at him. "I'm afraid Josh isn't here."

"I know. I called him. Didn't he give you my message?"

"No, he didn't," she murmured, wondering why Josh had failed to let her know. Of course the boy was not stupid, far from it. He might have suspected if he told her Saul was going to call around, she would have made some excuse not to be in. *That's one smart kid*, she thought, because, had she known, she would have gone anywhere not to be at home when Saul Hetherington called.

"Are you going to ask me in?"

"Why didn't you call me," she demanded, "instead of going behind my back?"

He sighed. "Why do you think, Roxie?"

"I've no idea why." The lie slipped off her tongue, and she did not like the taste of it.

"I think you do," he said smoothly.

"Well, I suppose you'd better come in. I was just having a cup of tea. Would you like one?"

"I'm fine."

She turned when they reached the living room, standing

before him as if she would interrogate him.

“Do get your tea,” he said, slipping out of his overcoat and going back to the lobby to hang it over the newel post.

Cheek, she thought to herself, *making himself at home*. But she went and picked up her tea and sank back into the chair, crossing her legs as if to show him she had not a care in the world.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been before,” he said. “I had to stay in London.”

“Yes, I know, and you don’t have to apologise to me, Saul. You don’t owe me anything.”

“Don’t I?” He raised a speculative eyebrow at her. “I was going to write to you, but I wasn’t sure you’d read anything I had to say.”

“I don’t know why you’d have thought that,” she said with feeling.

“I mean after that terrible scene at the boathouse.”

“It wasn’t that bad...only to be expected really. Insults like Mr. Fanshaw’s don’t bother me that much. But I didn’t want to cause a rift between you and Louisa, and I’m sorry if I did. Anyway it wasn’t really my fault. It was no one’s fault but Fabio’s, and how he’d have loved being such a lord of misrule.”

“Well, there’s quite a lot in that statement...everything out all at once.” He smiled a little. “I thought I’d let things quieten down a bit. It was all such a shock to Louisa, but I think she’s coming around at last. It really was her own fault. If she hadn’t been so inquisitive it might have been easier for her.”

“I’m sorry?” she said, genuinely puzzled.

“For some reason, Louisa had been letting herself into the boathouse and looking around. She found the copy of your

marriage certificate on my desk.”

Roxie’s first instinct was to jump in and say, *You don’t want to be involved with a woman like that, a woman who snoops on you, even though you’re not even engaged. Not with a woman so insecure she has to resort to doing something so despicable.* She thought she was the one who was supposed to be insecure, but it seemed as if Louisa had problems, too, and without any justification. *Just why would she snoop like that?* Roxie wondered. But she said nothing, feeling it would not be fair for her to attack the woman he would probably end up spending the rest of his life with.

He said something she had not caught being so deep in thought. “Sorry?”

“I merely said, I don’t know why,” he said.

“Don’t know why what?”

“Why Louisa would want to spy on me.”

“You don’t?”

“No, do you?”

She shrugged. “Not really. Perhaps she was spying on me. Well, what I mean is on what you knew about me.”

“That had occurred to me, Roxie. Anyway, given time she’ll perhaps see Fabio for the rogue he was.”

“Nice word that. I could’ve come up with a lot worse years ago, but rogue is okay now.”

“Don’t imagine I’ve not come up with a lot worse, Roxie. Louisa is, I understand, going to release Fabio’s trust fund. You should be hearing from a solicitor soon.”

“I don’t want it!” She jumped up so quickly she knocked her tea cup over, but fortunately it was empty.

“Roxie come down off your high horse and come into the real world.”

“Real world? Mister, I’ve always been in the real world. It’s you who never has.”

“What?” He actually had the gall to laugh. “And me having been in the army.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. She felt a slight smile tugging at her lips, in spite of being angry at his suggestion that she take Fabio’s trust fund from Louisa.

“Well,” she muttered, “you know what I mean.”

“You mean that I’ve always had money, which has nothing to do with being in the real world. And what money I do have, I’ve earned. My father lost much of his money in a sour business deal. He managed to hold on by selling land. Besides, Louisa is very wealthy, far wealthier than Fabio or me. And it isn’t your decision—the money should be for Josh, for his future. Think ahead, think university, and even sooner, all the things he’ll want to do when he’s at senior school.”

“I’m not actually on the bread line,” she said.

“You could’ve fooled me, the way you go on about *not* wanting money. I thought you were living on gruel and water.”

“Idiot!” She smiled. “I’ll bet you have your pride.” He nodded to confirm that he did. “Well, so do I. I’ve always made my own way. It’s difficult to get things thrust into my lap.”

“They are things that belong to you by law and by right. We talked about it before. You seemed to understand when I explained everything to you that it was more than likely what Fabio wanted.”

“Yes, I know, and I do...” But just because Fabio wanted it doesn’t mean that it was right. Louisa has probably been more of a wife to Fabio than I ever was.”

"You think so? Well, sometimes..." He sighed. "Sometimes I wonder just how much he wanted to marry her. Louisa was very persuasive, and with her and my mother whispering in his ear, I think he was just led along."

"That doesn't sound like Fabio to me. But I will concede it was a stupid thing for him to do. I mean he could so easily have divorced me. I wouldn't have objected."

"Maybe he didn't want to. Who knows? He knew about Josh, so perhaps that was making him reluctant."

She looked away from him, her cheeks flooded red. She wondered if she should tell him everything. Yet how could she, how dare she? He came to her, standing behind her now, so close she could smell the faint scent of his cologne. His intoxicating scent always teased her senses, making her lose control because it was combined with his essential male smell, which was sensual and warm.

"Roxie," he murmured, daring to slide an arm around her small waist.

She told herself to pull away, but the essence of her was not listening, so she leaned back, her head crushing the fine material of his jacket.

"Your hair smells of crushed herbs," he whispered.

She could feel his warm breath against her ear, and as if it were not part of the sane side of her that told her not to do anything to make the situation explode, her arm slid up, wrapping itself around his neck, the movement pulling her sweater tight so that the aureoles of her breasts were clearly visible. He moved his hand up her, clasping the mound of one breast in a tender embrace. He found the lobe of her ear with his mouth, teasing the contours with his tongue

"Turn around," he commanded. "I want to kiss you..."

She obeyed, but slow, teasing ensuring that as she did so, her body, wedged up against him, melded to him, each contour, as she turned, massaging the force at the centre of him.

“Roxie,” he groaned. Seeing her as she faced him, her jade-coloured eyes half-shaded by her long, curling lashes, her ripened lips damp, he could not stop himself. Saul pulled her roughly to him, covering her lips with his own, drowning in their moist warmth. Her arms were around him, pushing inside his jacket, feeling the slippery material of his silken shirt, sliding down his to waistband until the shirt was free and her hands could touch the firm flesh of his back.

She broke free, gasping slightly, for each breath. “Let’s not get into this,” she pleaded. “It’s going nowhere and we shouldn’t keep doing this to ourselves. It’s not fair.”

“Not fair? It would be unfair not to do this...to deprive ourselves of the pleasure of each other. Roxie, angel...” He bent his head, capturing her lips, caressing them. Her response was immediate, her own parted lips demanding deeper kisses, her body wrapping itself around him.

He held her fast against him, his mouth plundering hers and then he let his grip slacken, slid his mouth from hers and, while still holding her waist, stepped back from her, looking down. His eyes were darker than ever, the pupil indistinguishable from the iris.

“Look, Roxie, I didn’t come here just to... I know you’ll think I did.”

“How do you know what I think?” she whispered. “You can’t see into my mind. This is just what we do when we get together and we’re alone.”

“What?”

“Explode!” She smiled. “We’re just so combustible when

we're together. I don't know why..."

"Don't you?" he asked, his voice deep and dark and secret.

"Not really..." she lied. From her point of view she knew why she was combustible around him. She loved him, but she could never say it because it would probably drive him away.

He wanted her. They fit perfectly together, but it was a physical thing and he wouldn't want anything deeper or more meaningful. She knew, too, with rare insight that he wouldn't want to hurt her. He would not like realising she had fallen in love with him.

"Roxie," he whispered, "how you haunt me. You're a little Jezebel and you know it."

"I don't," she said, tossing her hair, eyes wide.

He drew her to him, folding her against him, his arms strong and firm. She nuzzled her head into his chest, enjoying the feel of his hands running through her dark mane of hair, the way he combed his fingers through it and then, gently so as not to hurt, tugged back her head, so he could capture her lips once more.

She ran her hands inside his shirt, up his chest, parting the pearl buttons as she did so. His skin felt deliciously smooth and hard, his nipples taut and dry. She rubbed her thumb against their centres, feeling the whole of his body go rigid with pleasure, hearing him gasp against her mouth. She loosened his tie, freeing the knot so she could pull it from him and toss it across the room. Somehow he had struggled from his jacket, and she forced back his shirt from his shoulders, baring the muscular strength of him, cupping his flesh with her lips, her tongue teasing the smooth, dry skin.

Her trousers loosened. He eased them down over her

hips, lifting her out of them and kicking them to one side, sliding her body down his very slowly. Pulling her free of her sweater...devouring her bare breasts with hot, fiery kisses, his tongue teasing the centre until it was hard and red and full of delicious sensations that shocked through the length of her body. His hand moved down her body, moving over the tiny white silk panties, manipulating them away from the core of her.

Without warning he lifted her off her feet, holding her in his arms, his mouth stealing hot, quick kisses as he crossed the floor and climbed the staircase. When he reached her room, he deposited her on the bed, paused to tear away the clothes he wore and then laid beside her, gathering her up in his arms, finding her eager lips, letting his hands tease every inch of her warm flesh. Easing his mouth from hers, his lips followed the journey of his hands, stroking her breasts with his tongue, sliding down to the mound of her stomach, tenderly cupping the soft flesh in his mouth until she groaned with a combination of pleasure and agony.

As his lips circled the pink bud at her centre, she cried out and could feel herself sliding over into sensual pleasure that robbed her of all thought.

"Please..." she whispered, her head tossing on the pillow, beads of perspiration breaking out on her upper lip.

He moved, covering her body with his own, caressing her thighs apart and sliding into the warm dampness of her being.

"Oh, Roxie," he groaned. "Roxie..." He kept moving rhythmically in unison with her. "I love you so much."

She felt the implosion...tried to stop it tumbling her beyond the now, but she could not control it, she was spiralling out of control, crying out her love over and over again,

letting the waves drag her down, only to push her up once more. She was drowning, sinking down into ecstasy over and over again...

She was wrapped in his arms, too filled with wonderment to even speak. Her body was satiated but glowing with an inner radiance. He had murmured that he loved her, not once but many times...and at the end, as he spilled out his hot shimmering passion, as he lay satiated, he had murmured the words to her again, and again. She felt his heart thudding against her breast just before he moved, ever so slightly, to take the weight from her, his hands and arms, though, still holding onto her as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him.

"Roxie," he murmured, a finger curling around a tangled, damp lock of hair.

She said, a little teasingly, "Saul."

A laugh rumbled out of him. "What do you do to me?"

"Well, if you need to ask that, I think you have problems," she whispered, smoothing a hand down his back.

"I don't mean *that*. I mean how you make me feel."

"Well, good, I think," she said.

"That goes without saying, but I meant in a more meaningful way."

"There's a line of a song, 'You make my heart sing...that's what you do to me.'" She said the words, then closed her eyes for moment against the fear it had to be too much.

"I really think that's the most beautiful thing you've ever said to me," he said, then, "You know I'm in love with you, don't you?"

She took a deep breath and dared herself to meet his eyes.

She caressed one side of his face. "When you said it, it made me... I don't know...but then I was frightened you meant you loved me because of the moment and not in a long term kind of way. You'd better say it if it's an in-the-moment kind of way because I don't think I could take much more of this...this...suspense."

"Roxie, listen to me, girl." He pushed her back against the pillows, leaning over her. "If I say I love you, I mean I love you. I don't play games and I don't say things I don't mean all the way."

She eased herself up, hugging him to her, running slim fingers across his head, down his neck, along his shoulders. "Oh, Saul...I've loved you for so long and I was so scared. You seemed to be able to turn off and—"

"God, Roxie, I'm so sorry!"

"You are? I mean for what? Saul, I don't go in for this kind of thing...I mean I haven't ever... Oh, why do words keep failing me?"

He tangled his hands in her hair. "I was so scared! I don't like not being in control. I didn't like how you made me feel. I didn't want to be *in* love with you!"

"Because I'm not the kind of girl you had in mind, eh?" she asked without rancour.

"Well, in some ways, yes. You were so... The word acidic comes to mind."

"I know I was. But I was so attracted to you, and you weren't what I had in mind either. I mean Fabio's brother, a Hetherington!"

"We're a pair of bloody fools."

"I think so, too."

"But no more..." He drew a little away from her. "You

know what I said about *always*, Roxie? It has to be for always because I'm a long haul kind of man."

"And I'm not a flight of fancy girl. But you are sure? I mean I understood you had ideas about Louisa."

"Louisa? Where did you get that idea from? Oh no, never Louisa..."

She smiled. "Well, I think I should've asked that question a long time ago because that came out quite definitely."

* * * *

Saul drove to the parking place, turned off the engine and mused for a moment on the afternoon. His mother had returned from Christmas in Italy a little earlier than expected. Roxie and Josh were at the boathouse, but he'd said he would drive over and see Carla. She'd sounded agitated, which was hardly unusual.

He had been into Plymouth that morning and had things planned. In his pocket was the ring he had chosen for Roxie. He was going to give it to her tonight, after Josh went to bed. He thought it would be fun to propose formally.

Of course, the visit with his mother was what he had expected. Louisa had been around to see his mother and had obviously stirred Carla up with tales about his and Roxie's doings.

"You can't believe a word that woman says," Carla had begun.

"Well, actually I can," Saul said.

"Are you certain she was married to Fabio?" she demanded.

"Of course I am."

"Then why did she never tell me?"

Saul looked at her long and hard. He slipped his hands in-

to his trouser pockets. He waited until the realisation of what she had said dawned on Carla, and when it did, she shrugged haughtily. "If I paid attention to all the women who telephoned for Fabio, I'd have been old before my time."

"Why did she phone?" he asked.

"Oh, don't tell me she hasn't told you."

"No, Mother, she's told me nothing."

He had parted amicably from his mother. He had to do so. He was not going into marriage with a feud on his hands. His mother would have to accept Roxie or lose the grandson she had, as well as any prospective ones she might have. She would, she'd promised, endeavour to accept things as they would be. However, he admitted, it would be very difficult, at least initially.

He left his car, locking the door and then standing for a moment, breathing in the still night air.

He saw Roxie, young and frightened, a long way from the father of her child. She had pleaded with Carla to ask Fabio to call her. It was so urgent.

"How urgent?" Carla had asked.

"I'm pregnant. Is that urgent enough, Mrs. Hetherington?"

But Carla had declared to Saul she had not believed the girl and so she had not told Fabio. So Fabio had not known about his son, even when he had left the money to Roxie. Strange, for Saul had always believed that had been the motivation behind Fabio leaving money in his will to his wife.

He shrugged and then ran down the path. The soft lights of the Christmas tree spilled out onto the patio. He looked in and saw Roxie and Josh sitting at the table, playing a game of sorts and, by the looks on their faces, having a good time.

“Hi,” he said, and they both ran to greet him, happy and spontaneous, their affection warm and genuine. He looked at the woman he loved and kissed her ever so softly.

Josh hugged his waist as if giving his approval.

Later, as they shared a bottle of Chianti, he told her what he had learned from his mother.

“We just have to let it go,” she said. “It’s all in the past, and we can’t carry bitterness with us into the future.”

“How I agree. Roxie, about our future?”

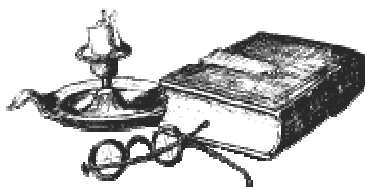
“Yes?” She stared at him and he saw a slight shiver of uncertainty there. It touched his heart—that small kernel of insecurity that she would always carry with her—unless he could drive it away with his love.

“Long haul, my darling,” he said. “So...do you think you could find it in your heart to marry me?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Blake was born in Manchester, England. She is the author of twenty novels. You are invited to visit her website at: <http://www.margaretblake.co.uk/> .

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