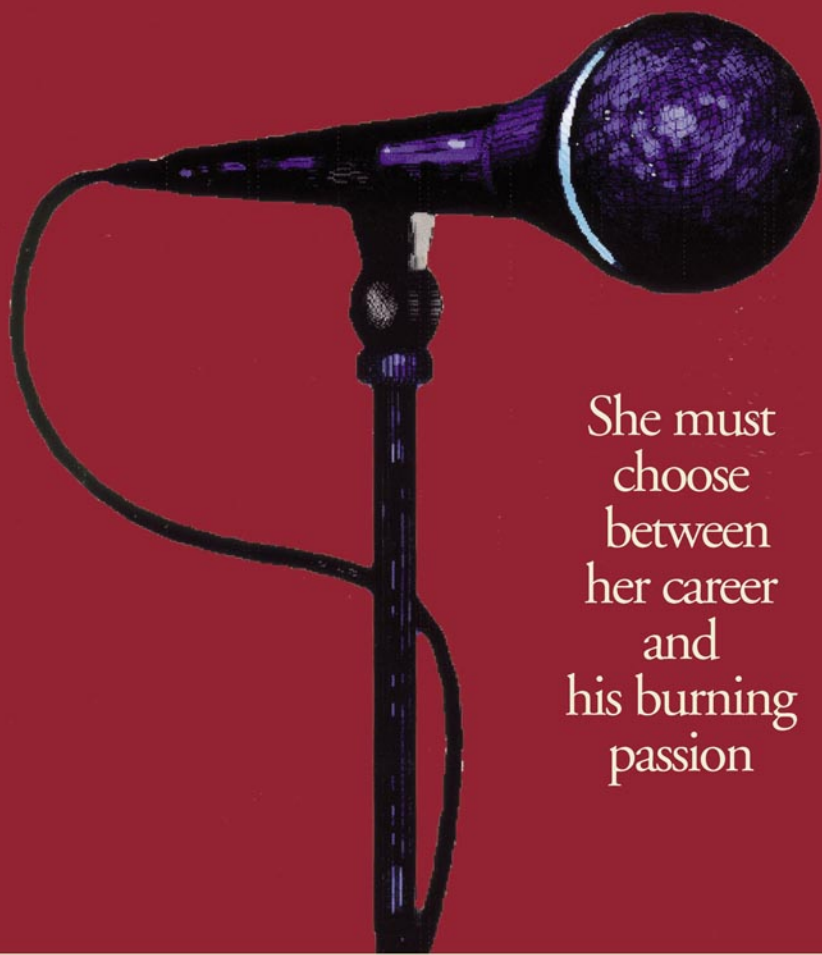


Song for a Lifetime



She must
choose
between
her career
and
his burning
passion

Mary Haskell Curtis

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Mary Curtis

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Novels

Love Lyrics

To Fred, the hero of my romance

Song for a Lifetime

1

The meeting was growing tense. Marcy shifted her weight slightly on the hard straight-back chair and hunched up her shoulder muscles in an attempt to relieve the tightness that was working its way up the back of her neck. A tiny frown creased her brow as she strained to ignore the war going on inside her head and concentrate fully on what Mr. Gately was saying to her agent, Greg.

There were four of them seated at one end of the long conference table: Marcy, Greg, Mr. Gately, and Mr. Grimes, the last a small, balding man whose only apparent function was to fish information out of a briefcase as it was needed. Greg had set up the meeting here at the agency at her insistence. Usually he handled all of the business connected with her bookings, and he would have dismissed this inquiry out of hand had she not intervened. He didn't understand her interest in pursuing the matter, and Marcy couldn't blame him. She didn't understand it either. There were endless reasons to refuse this offer, and not one sensible reason to consider it. There was just that small, persistent voice from some remote corner of her mind insisting, "I want to, I want to," while every logical brain cell in her head tried to tell it to shut up.

"May I see the photos, please?" Marcy smiled at Mr. Grimes, trying to ease the tension.

"Oh, of course." He hastily pushed a stack of pictures across the table to her.

She started to glance through them, wondering why she was allowing her interest to grow and aware that the small voice was getting louder. "Oh!" She looked up, suddenly realizing that they were all waiting for a signal from her before continuing. "Please go on. I can look while you talk." She had never grown used to the deference that had come with her fame.

"You can see the setup, Miss Hanson." Mr. Gately leaned over to arrange the photos in the right sequence. The moment the two men had entered the room, Marcy had known he would be the one to give the sales pitch, reconfirming that keen instinct for people that had been such an asset to her career. She gave her full attention to Mr. Gately. She liked him. No pushy, flirty nonsense, just that heightened level of intensity so necessary in a good salesman.

"The old inn was a honey to begin with, so we preserved every bit of charm we could while modernizing for safety and comfort. The concept of having a first-class inn and restaurant in conjunction with a top-quality summer theatre seems to be growing in appeal in many parts of the country." He placed the next picture in front of her. "And this is the barn before we started the alterations." Marcy looked at the handsome red structure with white trim as Mr. Gately continued, "Here again, we've gone to great pains to preserve the original exterior. Now," — he motioned to Mr. Grimes, who handed him a roll of blueprints — "the interior was still under construction when the pictures were taken, so I'll show you the prints for the theatre."

"Oh, my." Marcy felt the familiar excitement as she studied the plans. The attention to detail was impressive. The stage was large, with plenty of wing space and storage room for scenery. There was also good capacity for flying sets, usually nonexistent in a local theatre.

Mr. Gately went on, "The orchestra pit, as you can see, is very spacious."

"Do you have a good lighting engineer?" she asked.

"We have a good lighting engineer, a good director and musical director, good musicians, a good stage manager, and good local talent. What we need is a very good star."

"Sounds good," she chuckled. The moment of banter was quickly replaced by the air of tension as they waited. She glanced across the table at her agent Greg. He gave her a wry smile, then continued to fill the paper before him with intricate doodles. Marcy knew he knew how intelligent she was about her career. She also knew he was sure that her good sense would prevail and she would put aside this short excursion into nostalgia. She looked through the pictures once more and put them down. "All right," she said, "I'll do it."

Greg dropped his pencil as his head jerked up, his face a mask of consternation. "My God, Marcy, they're offering less than half your usual fee. And we're not talking a three-day gig; this is a musical comedy — you'd be tied up for weeks."

Marcy felt a swift twinge of misgiving. She knew he was right. She was out of her mind to say yes. "Greg, I want to do it."

Greg's surprise turned to obvious agitation. His pencil tapped rapidly while he ran his fingers through his hair. "But think of your career! 'Guys and Dolls' was an old chestnut the first time you did it; by now it's a museum piece. Marcy, listen . . ."

Her eyes pleaded with him to understand. Greg was an excellent agent and a good friend who always worked for her best interests. She had never before made a decision totally against his advice. How could she tell him why she was doing it when she didn't know herself. Her voice was soft but firm. "Greg, I really want to."

He studied her thoughtfully, a worried frown on his face, then gave a brief nod. "Okay, babe, you got it. Come along, gentlemen." He stood and started toward the door. "Let's get the contract worked out."

"Miss Hanson, how can we thank you?" Mr. Grimes shook her hand enthusiastically as Mr. Gately echoed his appreciation.

Marcy smiled, trying to steady the shaky uncertainty she felt inside. "I'll love it, I know I will. Now I'm afraid I must excuse myself; I have rehearsing to do." After a few more grateful remarks, the two men followed Greg into the hall.

Andy Wallace unwound his long frame from the deeply cushioned chair in which he had been silently sitting, watching the morning's proceedings. He walked slowly over to her, studying her face. "Okay, Marcy my sweet, why?"

She basked for a moment in the wave of affection and strength that Andy always offered her. Dear Andy. Her accompanist, arranger, and, most of all, friend, who had seen her through the worst and best of times. Their unique friendship and working relationship had survived many difficulties, including an occasional temptation to allow sexual attraction born of lonely moments to alter it. Suddenly feeling very tired, Marcy leaned against the edge of the table. "Andy, this seems so right for me just now." She knew she sounded plaintive, but that was how she felt. "You know how strung out I've been lately . . . the thought of returning to a small theatre sounds like such fun."

Andy winced. "Yeah, barrels of fun," he groaned. "Dealing with amateurs is a laugh a minute."

"But Andy, just the chance to spend some time in Napa Valley makes it worthwhile." Was she trying to convince him, or herself? "You love good wine. Just think, we'll be right there in California where they make some of the best."

"Whoopee." Andy was definitely less than convinced.

She reached out to touch his arm. "Andy, please come with me. You'd be such an incredible help to them, and I work so much better with you."

Andy shook his head in surrender. "I've always been a soft touch for you, ever since the first time we met."

Marcy smiled at him in gratitude, remembering those early days. She had been a recent graduate of Northwestern University — a recent graduate and a very recent divorcee — when she met Andy. "We've been together a long time, haven't we?"

Andy nodded. "Close to eleven years. Remember where we met? That was some ugly little theatre, wasn't it? My first steady job playing the piano." He grinned at her. "I'll never forget the day you walked in to audition for that review. God, you were beautiful, and God, you were awful."

"Now don't be unkind." Marcy tried to look stern, then grinned in return. "You're right. I was lousy. I was so scared. And I'd just received my final divorce papers." She smiled at him affectionately. "You were so nice to me. You went over and over and over that song with me until I sang it right. I still hate that song."

"You got the job," he pointed out.

"Yes, I certainly did, thanks to you. I was so excited, remember? We spent the whole evening at that crummy little bar, talking. I'd never told anyone so much about myself."

Andy sat down beside her on the table. "You were really hurting. Divorce isn't exactly easy."

Marcy stood and walked to the window. She drew the curtain to one side, staring blindly at the busy street below. "That sweet young boy I married. How could I have gone through three years of college with him without knowing what he was really like? I thought we were so right together, the future Lunt and Fontanne of the musical world."

Andy took a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his jacket. "Yeah, too bad it wasn't just you he wanted. Well, at least it didn't last long." He stopped to light his cigarette, extending the pause before speaking again. "Unlike the episode with Dirk Baxter."

Marcy's startled eyes met Andy's level gaze. Could he see the shock of pain at the mention of the name? She gulped hard, trying to reply in a light tone. "Oh, yes, Dirk. Every girl's dream man: tall, handsome, dynamic, and rich." She turned away. Wow, how could it still hurt like this after three whole years? She felt the sting of tears in her eyes, and she dabbed at them angrily.

Andy rapidly strode to her and put his arms around her. "I could kill that bastard for what he did to you."

Marcy looked up at him, brushing the lustrous black hair from her face.

"That's almost funny. The last thing Dirk said to me was, 'I could kill you for what you've done to me.' All in the viewpoint, I guess." She put her arms around Andy's waist and rested her cheek on his chest. "Oh, Andy, I felt like such a failure at love. Two flops in a row."

Andy stepped back, giving her a pat on the shoulder. "Well, just be glad you're not in the romance business. That's the only place you've been a flop. You're sure at the top of the heap professionally."

Marcy sat on one of the chairs at the table, cupping her chin in her hand. "You know, I've thought a lot about my life lately. It's been a pretty full one. I've traveled over much of the world; dated men most women just dream about; been invited to perform for a queen and two presidents — even a shah. Not too bad." She shrugged defensively. "Maybe I'm destined to be a career girl . . . period."

Andy walked across the room and put his cigarette out in the ashtray on the corner table. He was obviously trying to work up to saying something. Marcy decided to help him. "Andy, what do you want to say that you're not saying?"

He smiled. "Sounds like the first line of a song. Okay, here goes. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that it was during that other run of 'Guys and Dolls' that you met Dirk. Are you sure this isn't going to kick up some awful memories? God, Marcy, when that ended you fell apart for months. This whole thing really bothers me. I mentioned Dirk's name deliberately to see your reaction. I saw it, and I didn't like it."

Marcy stared at her hands, mentally fighting back a flood of memories. "Don't worry about me; that was a long time ago. I'm older, wiser, and a lot more sure of myself." She straightened her spine, finding and holding on to her strong inner core, and changed to a light, teasing tone. "After all, I'm practically middle-aged."

Andy's eyes rolled upward. "Oh, no, spare me," he pleaded, "middle-aged, indeed. You're thirty-two going on twenty. I'll tell you what: the day you walk into a room and people can catch their breath in less than a full minute, we'll talk about middle age." He stood very still for a moment, looking at her intently. "You're not just beautiful and talented, Marcy; it's much more than that. You have an aura, a kind of glow that surrounds you, on and off stage. People want to be enveloped in that glow. It's a responsibility, you know, being special; don't forget it." He blew her a kiss and left the room.

Marcy sank into an easy chair, leaning her head back against the soft upholstery. Dirk, Dirk, she thought, I loved you so. She pushed herself out of the comfortable seat, willing the memories to disappear. Instead, a mental picture, sharper than any she had experienced for years, leapt into her mind. A Greek god, her friend Angie had called him. Tall, sinewy, with a devastating combination of ash-blond hair and eyes so deeply brown you could never see

the pupils, no matter how close you were. Three years ago — it seemed like a former life.

She shook her head rapidly for a moment, as if hoping the movement would physically dislodge the thoughts from her mind. "Come on, Marcy," she admonished herself, "you still have three engagements to fulfill right here in New York, and you do indeed have rehearsing to do." She went to the corner music closet, selected some of the pieces that needed work, and headed for the practice room where she knew Andy would be waiting for her.

Marcy put down the note from Mr. Gately. It seemed impossible that it had been two months since their interview. She sat at the dressing table and leaned close to the mirror, studying her reflection closely.

"Hey, see anything you like?"

She jumped, startled by the nearness of Angle's voice. She smiled up at Angle's mirror image. "Not much tonight. You were very bright, you know, to quit acting and become my secretary instead. Now you don't have to panic at every new line."

Marcy returned Angle's ironic grin, knowing what was going through the girl's mind. Angie had so often commented on the uniqueness of Marcy's beauty: the contrast of the sparkling emerald-green eyes with the fair skin and black hair, the finely chiseled nose, and the high, almost Indian-looking cheekbones. And Marcy had openly acknowledged her gratitude for the feature so important to someone in her profession: the wide mouth with full lips and perfect white teeth. A singer's mouth, to be sure.

"Oh, yes," Angie retorted, "I feel terribly sorry for you, you poor wrinkled thing, you." She waved the packet of papers she held in her hand. "And you're right. I *was* bright. I realized early on the vast limitations of my own talent, and I attached myself firmly to someone headed straight for the top, thereby guaranteeing my tie with show biz — which is obviously the only interesting biz in the world."

"Oh, Angie." Marcy brushed a little more blusher on her cheeks. "I'm twice blessed to have an excellent secretary and good friend all rolled into one dynamic little package." She added a last touch of lipstick, picked up her brush, and swiveled around on the stool to face her secretary. "Now tell me, how are my travel arrangements coming?"

Angie studied the notes in her hand. "The airline reservation is confirmed for one week from today. The tickets will be delivered by tomorrow afternoon. I spoke to Mr. Gately on the phone. They have your accommodations ready at the inn, and a car for you to use while you're there. He'll have someone pick you up at the San Francisco Airport and drive you to St. Helena. Sounds like they're really planning to roll out the red carpet. They're sure counting on you for a successful launch of that new theatre!"

Marcy was brushing her hair. She gave it a final stroke, then shook it vigorously to make it look fuller and swing more freely as she moved. "Well," she murmured as she went to her closet, "I certainly hope I don't let them down." She studied the row of elaborate gowns hanging before her. It was the closing night of her extremely successful run at the King Cole Room in the St. Regis Hotel, and she wanted to look very special. She selected one of her favorites, a kelly-green gown completely covered with sequins. She removed her terry cloth robe and tossed it over the folding screen that stood near the wardrobe closet. Angie moved quickly to help her pull on the skintight dress. Marcy knew that Angie enjoyed helping her dress for a performance: it brought her closer to her beloved theatre's rites. Marcy held up her hair so Angie could close the back zipper. She then stepped into the matching high-heeled sandals and put on the emerald and diamond drop earrings she had taken from her hand case. After making some final adjustments, she faced Angie and asked, "Well, what do you think?"

Angie watched carefully as Marcy slowly pirouetted. This was an important ritual: making sure there were no sagging hemlines or unclosed snaps. Very shortly there would be many eyes focused on that figure. A series of three sharp raps on the door signaled show time. Marcy finished the turn and looked at her friend. "Okay?" she asked. The answer came back, "Perfect. Knock 'em dead!"

Marcy took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked into the hall to meet Andy. He was lounging against the wall, savoring the last few puffs of a cigarette. At her appearance he stopped, letting his gaze travel over her. He slowly extinguished the cigarette, gave her an exaggerated wolf whistle and a broad wink, then started down the hall. They walked in silence, both of them concentrating inward to create the right mood. Andy walked straight ahead into the King Cole Room. The pattern was well formulated. He would walk across the room to scattered applause, sit at the piano, light a cigarette, take a few drags while the babble subsided, put the cigarette in the commodious ashtray where it would burn itself out, and start to play.

Marcy stood outside the door, listening to the rippling chords, sensing the familiar onset of tension, her own personal AAs — anticipation and anxiety — that always started at precisely this time. She heard the low, haunting strain of her theme song, written for her by Andy, that was always used to signal her entrance. Now it was all a sense of timing. She waited to hear the hush of the audience, knowing that all eyes were on the doorway, waiting. Still she lingered, letting the anticipation build to just the right pitch, just to the border of the second A, anxiety. Now. She breathed deeply, lifted her head, and entered.

The wave of applause was instantaneous. A number of men were on their feet. This was going to be a good audience. She added a touch of sensuous-

ness to her long stride and tossed back her hair as she reached the piano. The effect was immediate; she had them in her hand before singing a note. As she passed behind Andy she brushed the back of his hair with her fingers. She knew that people loved being included in a moment of intimacy, loved speculating about the relationship between these two performers. She reached the front of the piano, stood quietly for a moment, looking down, then started to sing. "I'm a lonely lady, please spend some time with me . . ."

The songs followed each other in planned sequence: love song, jump tune, whimsy, blues. She played the audience like a fine instrument, provoking a ripple of laughter, a few sighs, and some sniffles as eyes were wiped. How she loved it. The sense of rapport, the applause, the sheer power of control. It was all there tonight, a perfect closing performance.

Now it was time for an "Andy original," one of her own favorites. "I can't forget the way you smile . . ." Thank you, Mr. Wallace, Marcy thought as she reveled in the delight of being able to create such a velvet sound. "And ev'ry step is a lonely mile . . ." She gazed pensively at the first tables, then let soulful eyes scan the room as she finished the phrase in a husky voice, "Without your hand holding mine."

Suddenly the room seemed to stand on end. It couldn't be! The tall, powerful figure alone at the rear of the room, his face shadowed in the dim light, stood absolutely still. She became aware of the insistent beat of the piano, she had missed her next line and Andy had filled in, but he was trying to bring her back on course. Somehow she got through the rest of the song, like a well-programmed robot.

She looked frantically at Andy and saw that his eyes were searching the audience, trying to locate the source of her distraction. As he focused on the solitary figure, his eyes widened and shifted quickly to Marcy, clearly startled. Dear God, she thought, it really is him. What do I do now? It's far too soon to end the set. As if reading her mind, Andy launched into a jump tune that had a long introduction designed, usually, to give the program a change of pace. Obviously at this moment he'd chosen it to allow Marcy to pull herself together. She walked behind Andy, placing her hands on his shoulders, another familiar gimmick turned oh-so-useful.

"Marcy." Andy's hushed voice cut through the music. "Come on, sweetie, show the bastard you're just fine without him."

She gripped the shoulders of her good friend, letting his strength surge up through her fingers, then straightened her back, smiled down at him, and said aloud, "Okay, Andy, let 'er rip."

He grinned at her and increased the tempo. It was a favorite showstopper: a raucous, funny song tossed back and forth between the two of them, the only melody Andy ever joined vocally. The crowd roared their approval. Marcy

braced herself against the ferocity of the stare she could feel clear across the room, throwing herself headlong into the performance as Andy took her from one high-powered tune into another. No low-key back-off numbers in this show. The audience was enthralled as Marcy went from full-volumed, stinging heartache to whispering melancholy to fanciful flirtatiousness.

All the while, Marcy felt the adrenaline flow. "Look at me, Dirk," she was shouting inside, "look at how good I am, look at how well I've survived. You said I couldn't live without you; well, look at me, look at me."

The pace quickened, the intensity mounted. Half of the people in the room were on their feet. The waiters had stopped to watch, the bartenders had quit mixing drinks, the place was electric as Marcy belted out the end of the closing number, a reprise of her theme song. "How can I tell you how much I need you, I'm just a lonely lady, in need of love." Her arms fell with the final crescendo of the piano, and everyone in the audience leapt to their feet. Marcy was in a daze, dimly aware that her hand was firmly clasped by Andy's, as wave after wave of roaring applause washed over her. She had never been better. She had never had a better audience. She should give them an encore, but she couldn't. She simply could not. With a deep bow and a big smile, she garnered enough strength to stride, not crawl, to the exit.

The moment she passed through the outer door, her step faltered. She was immediately buoyed by Andy's firm grip. "Oh, Andy," she gasped.

"I know, honey." He started to propel her forward to her room. "It was a shocker, but you were wonderful."

At that instant, Angie appeared at her side. "Marcy, are you all right?" The anxious face peered up at her.

"Angie, did you see him?"

The troubled blue eyes narrowed in a frown. "Yes, I sure did. I heard the applause clear down the hall, and I thought, Wow! Marcy's really on tonight. I'd better catch this. So I slipped into the back of the room and almost tripped over him." Somehow they reached the dressing room and closed the door safely behind them.

"Did you speak to him?" Andy asked the question Marcy seemed incapable of uttering.

Angie shook her head. "No. His attention was glued to Marcy, and he didn't even see me, so I waited for the show to end, thinking I'd say something to him as we left. But, Marcy, you were so incredible tonight that I got totally caught up in the last number, and, when I looked up, he was gone."

Marcy fell onto the sofa in the corner of the room. "Oh, why did he have to come back into my life? And why, in heaven's name, do I still react this way?" Suddenly all the control and belligerence fell away, and she began to tremble.

Andy sat beside her and took her into his arms. "Hey, sweetie," he consoled, "it's only natural. You haven't seen him in all these years, and we were just talking about the whole business so recently. Of course you'd overreact."

Marcy sat bolt upright, still slightly hysterical. "Angie," she said, "help me get my stuff together. I have to get home. And call the airline tonight. Book me on the first plane you can get to the West Coast. If they have nothing to San Francisco tomorrow, I'll go to L.A., or anywhere in that direction, for that matter. Just get me at least three thousand miles from here."

Angie immediately pulled two suitcases out of the closet and started to pack. "Would you like me to spend the night with you?" she asked solicitously.

Marcy was in a total daze. "No," she answered, "you go home to your family. Andy can drop me on his way. I'll be fine. To hell with Dirk Baxter."

Andy was watching her anxiously as he unlocked the door to her apartment. "I'll come in and look around."

Marcy held up her hands to stop him. "Oh, Andy, thank you for your concern, but we're blowing this all out of proportion. Dirk was probably in town, saw that I was appearing at the St. Regis, and gave in to plain old curiosity. And here we are, acting like he's some mass murderer, when he's simply a very normal man I had an unhappy love affair with."

Andy nodded his head as he put the two suitcases inside the foyer. "Yeah, you're right," he conceded, smiling ruefully. "That's the trouble with us creative types — we're awfully dramatic." He put his hands on her shoulders and looked at her tenderly: "Listen to me, my girl. Go to bed, get a good night's sleep, then, by all means, do fly the coop tomorrow. Go to the sun country and lie on the beach, or go look at redwoods. Go to Las Vegas and gamble away some of your hard-earned money, even, but for God's sake, relax for a week."

Marcy smiled. "It's a deal," she agreed.

Andy stopped at the door and raised an admonishing finger. "Now promise me, you do nothing even remotely useful until I meet you in St. Helena on the twenty-second."

"I promise, I promise, I promise!" Marcy laughed as she pushed him out the door. "I'll become such an indolent slob that I may not show up at all."

Andy stopped and grimaced in mock consternation. "Hey, now let's not get carried away."

Marcy watched him enter the elevator. She gave a final wave, closed the door, turned the key, and slid the bolt. She carried the suitcases into her bedroom, vowing to unpack first thing in the morning. "Here I go again," she muttered, "unpacking in time to pack." It was good to feel her sense of humor returning. She headed for the bathroom, kicking her shoes toward the closet as she went. She turned on the shower and peeled off her clothes. She stepped in under the hot stream, reveling in the deliciousness of heat, water,

and sweet fragrance as she shampooed her hair and sponged Badedas over her body. What did people do before the shower was invented, she wondered as the muscles in her back and neck began to relax. Feeling greatly refreshed, she turned off the faucets and stepped out of the stall onto the thick, mauve-colored carpet. After drying herself briskly, she began to blow-dry her hair. Her thoughts reran the events of the evening. The fact that Dirk could still cause such a violent reaction after all these years filled her with a helpless fury. "Damn him," she said aloud as she pushed the gentle natural curl into her damp hair.

Just then the doorbell rang. Marcy put down the dryer, momentarily puzzled. Of course. She'd left her script in Andy's car. Undoubtedly he'd decided to bring it up in case she wanted to review it during the coming week. She quickly ran a brush through her hair and reached for the buff-colored robe that hung on the hook on the bathroom door. "Be right there!" she called as she tied the sash.

She padded down the hall to the door. As she slid the bolt open she said, "Just a minute, Andy, I have to undo all these locks." She mischievously stuck her hand out and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, "Okay, pal, hand it over." Her hand was caught in a strong, warm grip. She knew immediately it was not Andy's. "Dirk!" she gasped.

Her balance faltered as the tall, muscular man stepped through the opening.

"Hello, Marcy." How could such a simple, straightforward greeting cause this mental conflagration? Just "Hello, Marcy," and she was rendered speechless. Dirk seemed to have forgotten that he was holding her hand, and she was incapable of removing it as his dark stare burned into her flesh, causing tingling currents to vibrate beneath her skin. Could this really be happening, or was it just another of those middle-of-the-night fantasies? She didn't know what to do. Never had she felt so completely unprepared and inept. The intense shock and mounting anxiety of the evening bubbled up once more, threatening to choke her.

"Why did you come here? Why couldn't you just stay away?" Her acute discomfort and confusion made her voice sound harsh and bitter.

The black eyes clouded for an instant. "I wanted to talk to you. I wanted . . ." He stopped.

Marcy was mesmerized. Despite his polished sophistication, Dirk exuded an animal magnetism that had always overwhelmed her. Now, the combination of his closeness, the strength of the hand holding hers, those incredible eyes burning their way into her soul, was disintegrating three years of painfully built defenses against a memory bank filled with vivid love scenes. All the old, well-remembered responses were beginning: the hot flush creeping over her skin, the burning hunger building inside, the desire to reach out

to him — to touch, to hold, to fold herself into his hard masculinity . . . all instantly set in motion by the simple fact of his presence.

Marcy panicked. She had to escape this now, stop it now. If it started again her destruction could be complete. Pure unreasoning fury engulfed her. "Dammit!" she lashed out at him, "why did you come back? Why did you have to start it all again?" Jerking her hand free, she slapped her palms against his chest and tried to shove him backwards. "Get out of here," she stormed. "Get out right now!"

He caught her by the wrists, immobilizing her with steely strength. His eyes were two chips of black ice, angry and confused. "Marcy, what the hell are you doing?" he snapped. "Stop this!"

She couldn't stop. She wanted to run. A sensation of claustrophobia escalated the panic. She felt the old, familiar love-prison closing around her. She started to struggle, shoving, twisting, pulling. All the while Dirk just silently held her in his iron grip, like a fisherman waiting for a fish to play out its energy.

Then, as abruptly as the rage had started, it ended. Marcy stopped, her strength spent, and forced herself to look into the oh-so-familiar, oh-so-exciting face. He's still the same, her tumbling mind acknowledged, the sturdy oak waiting patiently for the storm to pass.

"Are you quite through?" he asked, his tone one of tight control.

"Yes," she said simply.

He let go of her wrists. He seemed glued to the spot, uncertain, uncomfortable. Their eyes met and held in tingling awareness of each other.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, Dirk . . ."

"Marcy, I just wanted to talk to you. Please don't be frightened." He pulled her into his arms, putting a comforting hand on her still-damp hair. "Lord, you smell good." His lips brushed her temple as he breathed in deeply, apparently inhaling her sweet clean scent. "You took a Badedas shower." His eyes held hers, and she felt the memory of the Badedas showers they had shared ripple between them. "Marcy, Marcy." The deep voice had dropped to a growl. "Why must you still be so indecently beautiful?"

The black-ice eyes had turned to brown mink, and she was falling into it, cushioned by it, engulfed in it. That wonderful face was coming closer. Marcy heard the prison doors clang shut in her mind as the tantalizing lips opened slightly just before they closed over hers.

Like a lonely exile who is finally home, her body leaned into the familiar haven of Dirk's body. Her lips parted eagerly as the speculative kiss quickly deepened into a passionate exchange. Two desert-dry wanderers tasting the first drop of water.

Dirk's hands moved over her back and down to her waist. "You don't have a hell of a lot on, do you." The husky voice brushed her ear.

Marcy felt all of her willpower retreating, and she made a last-ditch attempt to recoup it. With great effort she pulled back and looked up at him. "You wanted to talk?" Her voice held no conviction.

"Marcy." The mink gaze caressed her. "I've completely forgotten what I came here to say." She gasped as he lifted her into his arms and moved smoothly through the doorway into her softly lighted bedroom. With two giant strides he reached the king-sized bed and lowered her to her feet beside it. With one fluid movement he untied the sash and pushed the robe off her shoulders to the floor. She stood absolutely still, breathless, unable to stop him or reverse the direction of events. "God, Marcy, I'd almost forgotten how incredible you are."

The panic started to bubble again as the vise of desire tightened. "Dirk, no, we can't do this." The *no* did not echo the open invitation in her heart.

With a groan Dirk lifted her again and lowered her onto the middle of the downy quilt that covered the bed.

Instinctively she reached up to push him away, only to feel her hands pinned to the bed by his, and the weight of his body on hers. Leaning on his elbows, he riveted her with his dark gaze. "I can't stop it, can you?" Never taking his eyes from hers, he brought his face closer.

His tongue traced the outline of her lower lip, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. Then he covered her mouth with his commanding lips, kissing her with that intensity that no one else had ever matched. Her own lips responded, opening slightly to allow his tongue to commune with hers. As his hands expertly found the secret places of her pleasure, Marcy felt herself sinking in an ocean of erotic memories. Reason retreated as passion grew, and her body began to move under the unforgotten touch of this lover-stranger.

Some time later, from deep inside a cloud of desire, she became aware that his hands had stopped moving over her body, and his lips were gone. As she felt his weight lifting from the bed, her eyes flew open. "Don't move," he whispered, his voice husky.

She seemed to be immersed in the soft quilt as she lay there, watching the tall man by her bed remove his clothes, tossing one garment after another over the small chair at her bedside.

Was there a persistent little voice somewhere in her head? What was it saying — stop, run, flee? She couldn't remember why that made sense, so she simply waited. Dear heaven, he was as glorious as before. The tight-muscled body with its perpetual tan, the long well-shaped legs, the flat stomach — he was still the handsomest man she had ever seen.

Now as naked as she, he sat beside her and leaned over her. She closed her eyes, savoring the touch of the fingers and lips that were doing such devilish

things to her senses. At exactly the perfect moment, he joined his body to hers, transporting her entirely into that world of rapture she had never expected to revisit. Totally spent, holding the only man she had ever truly loved, Marcy drifted in a voluptuary sea. "Oh, Dirk, Dirk," she sighed.

With a sudden, abrupt movement. Dirk pulled himself from her and stood up. Through startled eyes, she watched him pull on his clothes with angry, jerking movements.

"Dirk?" As she whispered the name, his troubled eyes moved to her. "Dirk, what are you doing? Where are you going? I thought . . ." She stopped as the gaze flickered. The ice eyes were back, and the frost glazed the voice that froze her into silence.

"I'm afraid we both stopped thinking the moment I walked through the door."

Could this remote man be the lover of just a few moments ago? Dirk was sitting on the chair, tying his shoes. He stood and put on his jacket before speaking again in a voice that now sounded flat and rusty. "Dammit, Marcy, I was so sure you couldn't possibly still have such an effect on me. I thought I'd gone beyond . . ." He stood rooted, as though fighting an inner battle, then wheeled sharply and, without another word or another glance, strode out of the room. She heard his footsteps crossing the front hall, heard the door open and close.

She lay in the big bed, totally drained. There was nothing left inside; it had all been used up. Why? Why had this happened? Then the memory of his words swept over her. Why, he hadn't been able to get over her either! All those endless months of yearning, when she had felt so alone in her need of him, he had been suffering too! Maybe there was still time, maybe there was still a chance for them.

Then the bubble popped. Nothing had really changed. All the reasons for their split were still as real as ever. The only mystery was why he had returned at all. Marcy sat up, clutching the pillow to her breast. "Dear God, dear God," she moaned. It was a cry for help. "Please, I can't go through this again." She had almost forgotten the incredible pain of loss, had almost forgotten how physical the hurt could be. She was panicked. She must stop it now — put aside this incident, pretend it had indeed been a dream — before Dirk Baxter once again invaded every inch of her brain, every vessel of her heart, every molecule of her body, and she had to sweat him out of her system like an alcoholic sweating out his need for liquor. Completely exhausted by her emotions, she buried her head in the pillow and let the sobbing begin.

2

The pilots voice came over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you look out of the left side of the plane, you will see the Grand Canyon. It's such a clear day you can get a perfect view."

Marcy was on the right side, by the window, but as others stood and craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the awesome spectacle below, she stayed seated. Somehow the simplest movement seemed difficult to her today. Besides, she'd already seen the Grand Canyon.

The whole flight thus far had been spent alternately dwelling on memories and fighting them. The incredible episode of the night before had all but destroyed three years' worth of walls carefully constructed around her bruised emotions. Isn't it amazing, she thought as she sat with her head back and her eyes closed, how absolutely every part of your body can ache. I wonder if there's any physical ailment that causes this much pain. The tips of my fingers, my toes, the backs of my knees — everything just hurts. I wonder if it can possibly last as long this time?

She opened her eyes and stared blindly out of the window. She was thinking of that night five-and-a-half years ago, when she'd stood on the circular stage at the South Shore Music Circus, dressed in the Salvation Army uniform

of Sarah Brown, girl missionary. How she'd loved that role! She had been doing extremely well on the night club circuit when the offer for the female lead in "Guys and Dolls" had come. A summer stock tour, a chance for a change of pace. She had always loved acting, loved building a character, and it was a good part.

They had played Philadelphia, Connecticut, and New York State. The two-week run at the Music Circus in Massachusetts was the last of the tour. The night of her recollections was in the middle of the second week. The place had been packed every night. The play was still a good draw, and the cast was excellent. Marcy had been given a glowing review by the top critic in Boston. She had been surprised and pleased that he had come to the suburbs to see the performance.

The pace that particular night was a little sluggish. They were all slightly off; not enough for the audience to be aware of, but enough to bother the actors. She had deliberately quickened the action in a scene with the man playing Sky Masterson, and as he made his exit she silently said, "That was good; now we're cooking."

She turned and walked to the opposite side of the stage: frequent changing of direction was important for theatre in the round. She started her reprise, "I'll know, when my love comes along, I won't take a chance." She moved forward, making eye contact with the people in the first rows, when she suddenly found herself looking into the dark eyes of the most devastating man she had ever seen. Funny, she'd missed a line of the song that time too. Looking back, it occurred to her that she had fallen in love right then, at that instant. Funny again. She had never believed in love at first sight.

She shifted in her seat and pushed the button, letting the seat back. Closing her eyes, she returned to her reverie. Obviously something had also happened to Dirk at the same time. He was there, in the same seat, every remaining night of the show. She remembered the anxiety mounting each night, until she made her entrance and saw that he was there; remembered the growing desire, the lying awake at night trying to come up with a plan to meet him.

When she returned to her dressing room at intermission on closing night, there was an enormous bouquet of long-stemmed red roses with one exquisite bird-of-paradise blossom in the middle. The card read, "To the star of stars, from one who wishes to bask in her light." It was unsigned. She had finished the show in a daze, taking the extra last-night bows at the end, smiling, smiling, smiling through her haze, and finally escaping to her dressing room. There he'd sat, waiting for her.

What a meeting that had been! What was that song lyric? "And the world took a spin." Oh, yes, indeed it did — and it spun and spun. She had always

considered herself to be a very moral person, but from that first meeting, there was no meaning to that term. Nothing had existed but the two of them — and the indescribable chemistry that sent sparks flying. There had been a brief introduction, a few words exchanged as he had waited for her to change, then they had simply gone to the apartment he had rented and made love. It had been the most fantastic experience of her life. The next two years were a kaleidoscope of scenes: happy, passionate, gleeful, sweet. Two people growing closer and closer. So close, in fact, that they literally felt as one. Then the fissure had started. The one insoluble problem that led from small disagreements to monumental battles, and, at last, to that final dreadful breakup. The tearing apart that left two tattered halves.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Marcy was snapped back to the present by the voice of the stewardess. "The pilot is starting his descent to Los Angeles International Airport. Please extinguish all cigarettes, make sure your seat is in its upright position, and that your seat belt is securely fastened."

I must've fallen asleep, Marcy thought as she watched the plane approach what appeared to be a giant bowl of clam chowder, but was, she knew, a combination of low clouds and smog cupped by the mountains surrounding Los Angeles.

"Okay, kiddo," she silently admonished herself, "you are about to land in California with one whole week to do anything you want. So stash the memories. It's time to fasten your seat belt in more ways than one. You are going to have a good time if it kills you."

"Dammit!" Marcy shouted at the flashy little red Corvette that had just cut her off at the tunnel entrance. She'd forgotten how unbelievable Los Angeles traffic could be. "Highway 10, indeed," she fumed. "If this highway is a 10, I'd hate to see a 3." She inched the car through the tunnel, finally exiting into the bright sunshine. At that moment she caught her first glimpse of the ocean. "Oh, boy, oh, boy!" she yelled, and she grinned at the startled motorist in the next car. He tossed her a brief wave and a smile, then was lost from view as his lane accelerated. Marcy leaned back in her seat to allow the hot sun to bathe her face.

Her mood had lightened the moment she'd reached the rental car booth, where she'd been greeted by the cheeriest smile she'd seen in weeks. She reviewed the dialogue in her mind as she edged into the left lane.

"And what kind of a car do you want. Miss Hanson?" asked she of the cheery smile.

"Anything with a sunroof," said I.

"Well, I do have this darling little Mercedes sports coupe," said she, "but of course it's more expensive."

"Roll it right on out," said I. "Nothing but the best for this august occasion."

"Oh, really?" said she. "And what is the august occasion?"

"My dear," said I in my grandest manner, "so far I have survived." Thus leaving my audience intrigued and perplexed, I made an impressive exit. Bravo, bravo, bravo!

Marcy cut off her mental script-writing to concentrate fully on the familiar scenery. In this fastest changing of all states, this stretch had remained much the same as it had been the first time she had seen it as a child. The Pacific Palisade Hills rose to her right, and to the left along the beach ran a string of unpretentious little wood and stucco houses, forever jammed together in an unlikely alliance of permanence. And there, Muscle Beach. Did the strong-arm boys still display their wares on that golden range?

It had been such a long time since she'd experienced this peculiar kind of freedom. For her, there had always been a near sensual delight to the feel of being behind the wheel of a car heading off at your own pace, at your own whim. How she loved it!

An angry honk jolted her back to attention. The line of cars in which she'd been stalled had started to move. Now she was really on her way. As she drove along the beach and through the coastal towns, she willed her mind to settle into the track of enjoyment that beckoned so enticingly. Why, she mused, does no one teach us that one of the hardest things to do in life is to let go of anger and grief and hurt and allow yourself to simply enjoy the moment. And enjoy she did as she sped her car up the highway past verdant agricultural fields busily growing their crops, slowed to savor the rich aroma of the tall eucalyptus trees guarding their allotted section of roadway, crawled through an area crammed with fast-food outlets, and at last drove into an open panorama of foothills, curving thoroughfares, and dancing, sparkling waves leaping across obdurately tenacious rocks. "California," she breathed, the standard-bearer for the mixing of the ridiculous and the sublime.

Her heart skipped a beat when she looked ahead and saw the San Rafael mountains majestically towering above Santa Barbara. As she pulled up in front of the Santa Barbara Biltmore, a young bellhop moved swiftly to open the door. When she stepped out, his eyes widened. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "I mean, well, wow!" His face was beet-red. "I'm sorry. Miss Hanson, I don't mean to act like a jerk, I just didn't expect, oh, hell, I mean, excuse me. Are your bags in the rear?"

Marcy laughed. "Listen, don't apologize. Two 'wows' in a row is very nice." She handed him the keys, smiled, and made her way to the desk. The registration was smoothly handled, and Marcy soon found herself in a lovely room overlooking the ocean. The same room, she was dismayed to see, that she had once shared with Dirk.

She remembered the admiring bellhop who had brought up their luggage, gazing pensively at Marcy as he accepted Dirk's tip. "She's sure pretty, Mr. Baxter," the bellhop had stammered. "You're a very lucky man."

Oh, the love in those dark eyes when Dirk had looked at her. "The luckiest in the world," he had agreed.

Marcy grabbed her suitcase and angrily started unpacking. No more of that. She would go jogging on the beach. A little sweat and salt air should go a long way toward clearing her head. She put the last of her clothes away and changed into shorts, T-shirt, and jogging shoes. She made her way downstairs and out the side door, noticing a few startled expressions on her way. The Biltmore hosted many celebrities, so usually there wasn't much fuss made by the other guests.

Marcy was soon on the sand, walking at a brisk pace to warm up her muscles. The sun was hot for an April afternoon, and it felt absolutely delicious through her thin shirt. She broke into a full run, staying close to the water's edge where the sand was firm. She didn't always enjoy exercising, but under these conditions it was a real pleasure; and in her profession, it was always a necessity. She alternately jogged and ran for about half an hour, then headed back toward her room.

As she entered the lobby, the desk clerk spotted her and called her name. Marcy reluctantly stopped, self-conscious about her grubby state. The clerk walked over to her and handed her a slip of paper. "A man called for you," he said. "He left his name and said he'd meet you here at six for cocktails and dinner. Shall I reserve a table for two?" He watched anxiously as Marcy read the name and message. It was the hotel's responsibility to insure its guests' privacy, and it was clear he hoped he hadn't made a mistake.

"Peter Jackson! Oh my goodness!" Marcy smiled with delight. "Oh, yes, by all means, please do. Thank you, this is a wonderful surprise!"

The man looked immensely relieved, "Oh, I'm so glad," he sighed. "The gentleman asked if you were here, and he assured me he was an old friend, but I wasn't sure I should've told him you were here without your permission."

"Believe me," Marcy said, "you couldn't have given me a more welcome surprise." She headed toward the stairs, her heart lightened by anticipation of the evening.

At precisely one minute past six Marcy stepped into the lobby. She was oblivious to the buzz of interest around her as she looked for her friend. She saw him the moment he entered. "Peter!" she called. An instant later she was engulfed in a massive bear hug. "Hey," she gasped as she struggled loose, "let me out for air!"

Peter held her at arm's length, a huge grin lighting his grizzled face. Peter Jackson, "Peter-bear" to his friends, was a giant of a man — six-foot-five

inches and 225 pounds of rock-hard muscle. "Now that's what I call a reception!" he boomed. "You must have spotted me the second I walked in."

"Walked in!" Marcy laughed. "You never walked into a room in your life. You explode in. Oh, Peter, I'm so glad to see you!"

Peter stood back and surveyed her. "You look fantastic!" he enthused. "Marcy Hanson, the skinny little kid down the block. Who would have thought it!"

Marcy laughed again. Laughter always came so easily with Peter. "Good grief," she teased, "you make it sound like this is our first reunion since junior high days. I'm sure I don't look that much different than I did when you saw me a year ago."

"Better," he stated unequivocally. "You grow better with age. By the time you're eighty you'll be a real knockout. Hey, beauty, this beast needs a stiff drink and a substantial meal. Let's go in where we can talk and gorge at the same time." Grabbing her hand, he headed for the dining room, where a beaming maître d' showed them to a table.

The moment they were seated, Peter signaled the waiter and placed his order for a very dry Beefeater martini and J&B and water.

"Oh, Peter." Marcy felt like one big grin. "I can't tell you how good it is to have you right here with me. But how in heaven's name did you know I was here?"

Peter looked at her very seriously. "Well, I'll tell you. I sat down in the sun-room this morning, with my first cup of coffee, gazed out across the back forty, and was suddenly struck by something. Egad, thought I, the sun is brighter, the sky is bluer, the flowers are flowerier, the birds are singing their little old hearts out. Something's up. I know, there's only one thing that could cause Mother Nature to spruce up her world to such a fare-thee-well: Marcy Hanson must be in town! Then I called Angie, just to make sure."

Marcy laughed aloud. "You're such a clown. I take it you called for a reason and found out that I just happened to be in California."

"Well, yes, something like that. But all the rest is true, anyway. You must have noticed what a picture-perfect day it was."

"That's true," she agreed. "But wait a minute. It sounds like you were right here yourself." She glanced around. "You're obviously not staying here, or I'd surely have heard the hotel vibrate. Are you visiting friends?"

"No, no," he protested, "I bought a stunningly beautiful retreat. Actually, it's just a house, but it's the 'in' thing these days to own a retreat. In any case, it's located in the hills of Montecito, and you must come and see it. Not tonight, since at least half of its charm lies out of doors, planted, as it were, in the earth."

"Oh, Peter, I love you," Marcy giggled. "You talk in longer sentences than anyone else I know. And I can't wait to see your new house. How I envy you!"

What a heavenly place to have a home. And, you bum, it sounds like you even have a garden."

"A garden! A garden!" he objected. "Likening what I have to a garden is like comparing the Taj Mahal to Aunt Jennie's tool shed. Now, how are you?"

Marcy stared at him in bewilderment. She'd forgotten that Peter could also change the subject faster than anyone else she knew.

"You're incredible," she admonished. "Weren't we just talking about *House and Garden*?"

"Yes, we were," he agreed sternly, "and we finished that subject. Come on, my dear, do not stall for time. Spit it out — what's up? You don't usually wrap up a major engagement one night and split for the other side of the country the next morning with no itinerary whatsoever. It sounds like you scarcely had time to remove your makeup."

"Well," she replied, "you must know that I'm going to do 'Guys and Dolls' in St. Helena, so I have a perfectly logical reason for 'splitting for the other side of the country' as you so eloquently put it."

"I do know all about your engagement in the vine-lands. I also know that you are not due there for six days. I also know, from a spluttering, near-incoherent Angie that your flight plans were made last night. Now come on, Marcy, I've known you since you were the singing sensation of the sixth-grade playground. You usually plan your life with the deliberation of a computer programmer. I may not be your oldest friend, but I am the one you've known the longest. What's up?"

Marcy was humiliated to feel tears welling up and spilling down her cheeks. She put her head down quickly, fighting for control and trying to abolish the treacherous tears with her napkin.

Peter sagged in his chair. "Oh, no," he groaned, "please assure me that I am not witnessing a recurrence of the Dirk Baxter malady."

Marcy's head shot up in alarm. "How did you know? Did Angie tell you?"

He shook his head sympathetically as he handed her an enormous, spotlessly clean white handkerchief. "Marcy, have you no concept of the anxiety, the helplessness, the general gnashing of teeth that went on amongst your friends during that dreadful period after you and Baxter broke up? That was all I could think of just now. It isn't just the tears, it's the expression. I've only seen it on two occasions: the death of your mother and the dissolution of your romance with Dirk Baxter. What happened? You didn't even know where he was the last time I saw you."

Marcy had promised herself that she wouldn't burden Peter with this problem. They were going to have a fun-filled evening, with no heavy subjects allowed. But that promise, as promises will, dissolved. She should have known better. They had not only grown up together on the same block in a small

town in New Jersey, he had also preceded her to Northwestern University, where he, too, had studied theatre. The difference was that he had majored in theatre production, while she had studied acting and singing.

She found herself telling him, minus a few of the graphic details, everything that had happened the night before. He sat quietly, giving her his full attention, encouraging her by sympathetic nods or consoling words when she faltered. "And so I got off the plane, rented a car, and drove up here. And that's the whole story." She looked at him uncertainly. "Are you going to start saying 'that bastard' like Andy did?"

His gaze was steady. "No — not that it isn't called for — but I must admit to being thoroughly stumped. Dirk was no lout, Marcy — you wouldn't have loved him so much if he was. This incident seems so totally out of character. He must still be hurting like hell to pull something like that."

Marcy's temper flared. "Well, thanks a lot! How come you're taking his side?"

"Marcy, knock it off. You know I'm always on your side, even when you're dead wrong. In this case, you seem to be the injured party. It would stand up in any court of law. I'm just not sure it would be that clear-cut in a court of love."

"Peter, how can you be so objective about this? You were just recalling the hell I went through when Dirk walked out on me. Now he shows up again, reopens all the wounds, then walks out again, and you're talking about how unhappy he must be."

"Look, I'm not denying it was a rotten thing to do, and I'm aware of how devastating it must have been for you. But, Marcy, to keep the record straight. Dirk did not walk out on you the first time. You walked out on each other. Dumbest thing I ever saw two people do." He looked at her across the table and softened his tone. "Honey, as you know, I have produced dozens of very successful plays and movies. Dirk Baxter was the kind of guy I'd have liked to have play the romantic lead in all of them. I mean, let's face it, he was a little unreal. Not only the handsomest dude around, but bright, funny, charming," — he paused — "and also damned nice."

"Peter, what in heaven's name is all this leading up to?"

"Marcy, you can't make your living in the theatre without being awfully interested in characters and motives. Now this man has just come back into your life; there has to be a reason."

Marcy gulped down the last of her drink and nodded her assent to Peter's gestured question about a refill. She rarely had a second, but tonight was an exception. "Well, I don't give one damn about his reason. I just want him to get himself back out of my life and stay out!" Saying that made her feel better, if somewhat untruthful.

"You're a terrible liar," he observed. "I fear that what you really wish is that he'd come back into your life and stayed."

"Oh, Peter, what does it matter? He obviously just wanted to prove to himself that I was out of his system, which does surprise me. I thought he'd forgotten all about me years ago." The waiter put their fresh drinks in front of them, discreetly trying not to interrupt their conversation.

"Marcy, don't try to diminish what you had. It was extraordinary while it lasted. Dirk not only had every physical attribute going for him, he came complete with an impeccable pedigree. He inherited more money than anyone could count, then tripled it in his first six years as president of that — whatever they call it when a business gets that big. He could quite literally have had just about any woman he wanted. And he chose you. I mean he really did. No horsing around, no games. He not only loved you, he liked you — everything about you."

"Not everything," she demurred.

"Damn near. So, lest you begin to think there is no point to all of this, we come to the big question. If Dirk does want to come back into your life, what are you going to do about it?"

Marcy put her elbows on the table and dropped her chin into her hands. She was feeling a little tipsy, and she was glad. "I simply don't know, Peter. But I think what you're suggesting is so farfetched that it doesn't bear my cogi — uh — cogitation. Dirk's motive was painfully clear. Revenge. He always got what he wanted. He expected to get what he wanted. After all, he was born to the purple, as the old saying goes, and on top of that he was born with all those goodies you mentioned. The fact that a mere woman, one not even of his class, by the by, could live without him has probably bugged him all these years." She looked at Peter sheepishly, aware that she was slurring her words slightly. He smiled at her; he understood. Marcy was silent for a few seconds, then she turned utterly serious. "You're right about most of it. Dirk was all those things, including nice. Maybe that was part of the problem; I could never fully believe that someone like him could really love me that much. But, that's over. I don't know why he did what he did, and I would guess that at this point he doesn't either. I honestly believe," — she looked straight at Peter — "that if I ever see Dirk again, it will be purely accidental."

Peter signaled the waiter for the menu. "Okay, we'll see. Let's order some dinner, then I will tell you the original purpose behind my trying to contact you."

They took quite a while to study the extensive menu, then they both ordered steaks. Marcy was surprised to discover that she was very hungry. Of course she had neglected to eat either breakfast or lunch. They were silent during the time it took the waiter to fill the water glasses and bring them a basket of hot rolls and a tub of butter, which Peter immediately attacked. As soon as the salad had been delivered and Peter had taken a few bites of it, as

though to insure no one would reclaim it, he reopened the subject of his call. "Marcy, baby," he began, putting down his fork and adopting a chairman-of-the-board expression, "do I have a role for you!" He leaned back in smug satisfaction, as though any other facts he might add would be superfluous.

"A role!" Marcy felt a thrill of excitement. "Stage, screen, or Parker House?"

"Jest not, my girl; this is a rare plum I am about to offer you. And it's only because you are the dear and true friend of my youth that you get a crack at it. Also because everyone connected with the project couldn't imagine anyone but you in the part."

Marcy couldn't contain her impatience. "Come on, Pete, don't tease, tell me what it is!"

"Pete, is it? Why is it that you never call me Pete until we're about to start bargaining over something?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! Who cares? Please Peter, tell me."

"All right, all right. It is a 'made-for-television' movie, a musical, based on the life of Helen Morgan. I've heard the score, which is excellent — just your kind of music. It will require some very dramatic and intense acting, which of course you can deliver, some incredible vocalizing, which of course you can also deliver, and stunning good looks, which of course are part of your basic equipment."

Marcy was enthralled. "It sounds wonderful. Did you talk to Greg? When do you start shooting?"

"Hey! One question at a time, lady. I did talk to Greg. He likes the idea, also the librettist and composer. I'm sending him the script and the score. For you, I happen to have a copy of each on hand. We would start shooting November fifteenth. You have two dates that Greg is sure can be rescheduled. And, we have Bruce Larson for the male lead. I waited until all the pieces fell into place before I called you, because I know how you hate to get all geared up for something and then have it fall through the crack."

"Oh, boy!" Marcy's mood was definitely improved. "It sounds so exciting. When can I see the script and the music? When, when?"

"Dear Lord, Marcy, isn't it time you stopped saying 'oh, boy'? How do you expect people to take you seriously if you run around saying 'oh, boy'?" At her pained expression, he reached into the briefcase he'd carried in with him and placed beside his chair. He removed a large, thick manila envelope and passed it to her. "Now do show some manners and wait until our dinner is over and you have retired to your room to dig into that." With a show of dismay, Marcy dutifully put the envelope under her chair and dug instead into her steak.

Marcy put the script on the bedside table, rubbed her eyes, and stretched. She glanced warily at the clock on the dresser. Oh, dear, just as she had

feared, it was 4:15 A.M. Peter had given her a good-night hug at the end of their meal, and had made her promise to quit reading by midnight and get a good night's sleep. Marcy had to admit that her track record on promises was not great lately.

She lay back against the soft down pillows stacked behind her head and reviewed the script. It was truly excellent. It was full of meaty scenes that would be a fascinating challenge to perform. She reached over to the other side of the bed to retrieve the musical score. Flipping past the overture and the first two numbers, which would not involve her, she quickly scanned her potential solo parts. She had carefully sung through them mentally before starting to read the script. There were at least three full-blown showstoppers in there. She experienced a short twinge of regret that it was not to be a Broadway musical. This was certainly an interesting enough role to bear repetition. Oh, well, she had plenty of work lined up for future engagements, and she could finish with this project in a matter of months rather than years. And it would be seen by more people. They'd have to fill a theatre for a very long time to equal the audience for one prime-time television showing and a couple of carefully spaced reruns.

Marcy looked at the clock again, alarmed to see that fifteen minutes had elapsed since her last check. If she was to get any sleep at all before going to have lunch with Peter at his new house, she'd better turn off her mind and try to relax. She carefully replaced the script and the score in the manila envelope, straightened out the pillows, stretched out, and pulled the covers up under her chin. It had been a draining night, between the emotion-fraught conversation and the excitement of a new starring role in the offing. Unfortunately, her last mental vision as she drifted off to sleep was not of a stage or a camera, but of a tall, blond man with dark, dark eyes.

The twisting road before her wove its way higher and higher into the hills. Marcy was struck, as always, by the remarkable beauty of the Montecito area. Lucky Peter to be able to buy one of these palatial residences. She spotted a wide space of shoulder directly ahead, and she pulled off to the side of the road. She was a little early, and it would feel good to step out of the car and enjoy the surroundings.

She got out, closed the door behind her, walked forward, and leaned against the fender, letting the warm sun penetrate her body and enjoying the smell of salt in the breeze. She was suddenly hit by a rather startling realization. She could buy one of these houses if she wanted to. She went to the edge of the road and gazed down the ravine as the full impact of that thought engulfed her. She really could. She was actually quite wealthy. She'd been working so hard and running so fast for the last few years that she hadn't given much thought to how much money she was earning. She had a

trustworthy and highly efficient manager, who took care of her bills and expenses and supervised her investments. Marcy's life-style was surprisingly simple. The apartment in New York was the only residence she kept. Most of the time her expenses were business oriented. When she did travel, she often stayed with friends.

She'd been forced to sit through a lengthy review of her financial affairs last month for tax purposes, and although she'd been somewhat astonished at her worth, she had been far too anxious to get back to rehearsing some new songs to truly focus on the facts. But here in these lush surroundings, which she had first seen on one of the rare vacation trips her parents had been able to take her on, the enormity of the change in her circumstances took hold.

With a happy grin she flung her arms wide and announced to the stoic palm tree to her right, "I'm rich. Isn't that wonderful? Skinny little Marcy Hanson from New Jersey is rich. What do you think of that?" Receiving no answer from the disinterested tree, who no doubt hobnobbed with rich people every day, she headed back to her car. As she slid behind the wheel, another thought struck her. "So," she said aloud, "nuts to you, Dirk Baxter. I'm rich too." She turned the key in the ignition and pulled the car back onto the roadway, humming happily.

She soon spotted the correct number on a mailbox and turned into a long curving driveway. She slowed to a crawl in order to enjoy the spectacle of an impressive row of multiple-trunked palo verde trees surrounded by masses of red and yellow gazanias in full bloom. As she rounded the curve, her eye was caught by a sea of double-blossom poppies. Peter had obviously not exaggerated the splendor of his garden. As she pulled up in front of the spectacular home, her host bounded out of the door and down the steps. Flinging open the car door, he boomed, "Marcy, my pet, come along quickly, quickly. I want to show you around and have you gush over everything." She found that to be an easy assignment. The whole place was magnificent — a perfect setting for Peter's massive stature and expansive exuberance.

After the house and grounds had been thoroughly inspected and exclaimed over, they settled into comfortable cushioned white wrought-iron dining chairs on the back terrace, where an elegant lunch was served by a crisply uniformed maid. "Wow," Marcy exclaimed, "I don't believe all this. You've come a long way from New Jersey, my friend."

Peter smiled in deep contentment. "You'd better believe it. Sometimes I think I've died and gone to heaven." He looked around him. "It couldn't be any prettier than this! And Felicia loves it."

"Felicia!" Marcy was amazed. "What does she have to do with it? I thought your divorce was final."

"Oh, it is," he concurred, "and it has certainly improved our relationship. She goes her way and I go mine. Occasionally she comes for a week or so, or we take a trip together. It's great."

Marcy shook her head in bewilderment. "You really are crazy, Peter."

"I know," he replied happily. Shifting in his chair, he became instantly serious. "You read the script?"

"Of course."

"Probably read the whole thing last night before you went to sleep?"

"Of course."

"Do you want to do it?"

"Of course!" they shouted together, leaning across the table to hug each other enthusiastically. He straightened up, clearly pleased. "I'll get in touch with Greg for the final details." He smiled at the beaming woman in front of him and raised his wine glass. "Here's to an Emmy award for the best musical special!" They clinked glasses and drank.

3

Marcy stood on the edge of the steep cliff. The warm wind tossed her hair about as she drank in the magnificent panorama before her. She watched the waves roll in, leap across the sharply jutting rocks hundreds of feet below, slam against a natural stone wall, and shoot straight up in the air in a gala display of shimmering foam. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans and breathed deeply of the sharp sea air.

Big Sur. In the hierarchy of the exalted kingdom, Marcy speculated, Santa Barbara would be the suburb of the angels and Big Sur the front yard of God. As she turned to continue her walk, she glanced up at the sharply ascending bluff on the other side of the road. "And there is one of God's creatures now," she murmured, "in his natural state." She smiled to herself as she shamelessly admired the physically fit young man busily tending his field on top of the bluff, clad in nothing but his own skin and heavy work boots. His complete lack of concern for the proprieties of life was somehow refreshing.

Marcy resumed her trek along the side of the road. She had passed up a jog that day in favor of a long hike down one of the winding paths to the ocean and along the beach as far as she could go before being halted by the

meeting place of water and cliff. Marcy had traveled to many of the glamor spots in the world, yet she still considered this to be one of the most glorious anywhere.

She felt like an entirely different person from the harried young woman who had rushed frantically to the airport in New York, desperate to quit the area immediately. Her two-day visit with Peter had all but transformed her from an anxiety ridden runaway back to her usual optimistic self. The "night of Dirk Baxter," as Peter had labeled it, was still a fresh and painful memory, but somehow her friend had brought a perspective to it that Marcy never would have found alone. For the first time in three years, she could accept the probability that all the anguish of the split had been two-way. She chided herself for being all too human. Misery does love company, she reflected. Now she must accept the fact that the recent event was just one day out of time, to be firmly put aside along with scores of other memories. The conviction that she would never see Dirk again was deep-seated. They didn't travel in the same circles, and she was certain that the impulse that had prompted him to seek her out was one he doubtless already regretted.

But one thing was for sure, she mused as she headed back toward the Ventana Inn. She was greatly blessed by friendships. How she would ever have survived without the love and support other friends she couldn't imagine.

She turned her thoughts to planning the rest of the afternoon. She decided to take a shower, put on a skirt and blouse, and go to the Coast Gallery before dinner-time. She was working hard to recall the name of the sculptor who had made Aunt Maude. She grinned at the mental image of the funny old lady who sat enthroned in green propriety on the edge of her mantle in New York. Come to think of it, she wasn't at all sure what Maude was made out of. It felt like cement. Loet, that was the name. She hoped that he was still exhibiting his whimsical works at the gallery. Maude had talked to herself long enough. She, too, should have a friend. Filled with the new vigor of purpose, Marcy quickened her pace.

The late afternoon sun was still hot when Marcy checked the clock on the dashboard as she parked the car outside the gallery. She was reassured to see that her quick shower and change had left her an hour before the place would close. She admired the impressive exterior of the building. It looked like a giant wine cask nestled into the side of the mountain. As she mounted the rustic steps, she marveled at the luxuriant vegetation that bordered the entrance. Nothing grew like that in the East.

She paused a moment after entering to allow her eyes to adjust from the brilliant glare of the sun to the softer interior lighting. She wandered through, keeping a sharp eye out for her objective even as she took time to examine and admire the many fascinating works of art.

She stepped back to get the right perspective on a pair of watercolors, and she caught sight of a display of familiar-looking statues across the room. Feeling a leap of excitement, she hastened to the table. It was indeed a collection of Loet sculptures. Carefully examining each one, she walked around the table. There it was! Standing in the middle of her half-dozen companions was a portly lady with a great floppy hat, holding a sheet of music, obviously giving a vocal recital. Marcy picked her up, handling the sculpture carefully.

She turned the statue slowly in her hands, examining it with delight. The gawky arms were spread wide, as was the oversized mouth. It was hilarious. What a companion for Aunt Maude! She looked underneath for the price, not that it mattered. She must have this at any cost.

The voice came from behind her. "It's absolutely perfect, isn't it?"

As Marcy whirled around, the statue started to slip from her grasp. Two strong hands reached forward to save it.

"Hey, don't drop the merchandise — it's expensive!" It really was Dirk, smiling, friendly, standing there with that ridiculous singer in one hand. "Marcy, don't look so frightened." He put the figure down on the display table and held up his hands in mock surrender. "I just want to talk to you." The smile disappeared as he gazed solemnly into her eyes. "I need to apologize to you."

Marcy was dumbstruck. She wished she were the fainting type; she needed to faint right at this moment. This was simply too much to cope with. Looking into the eyes of the quiet man before her, she shook her head in wonder. "Dirk, am I hallucinating? Is it really you?"

"Yes. More me than the jerk you saw the other night."

Marcy couldn't seem to move or think. She stood there helplessly, looking about as if for escape.

Dirk touched her arm tenderly. "Marcy, please don't run away." Holding up the statue, he said, "Stay right here while I go pay for this. It can be my peace offering. Then maybe we can go to the Nepenthe and talk?" It was a question, not an order.

Marcy nodded numbly. She watched Dirk walk to the counter where the pretty young clerk was wrapping another purchase. The girl glanced up as he approached and almost dropped the box in her hand. Marcy couldn't help smiling. All women reacted to Dirk like that. She was glad for the opportunity to just stand quietly in the corner and watch the transaction. It gave her a chance to steady herself, to regain a sense of reality, if this could be reality. She watched Dirk's elegant figure turn and start back toward her. Why must her heart still do this wild dance at the sight of the man?

Somehow she made it through the gallery and outside, still unsure whether she was imagining this whole scene. Dirk opened the door of the coupe and placed the precious package gently on the back seat. He held the

door while Marcy slid behind the wheel. "Are you sure you're all right? I'll be close behind you."

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "And not too closely, if you please." Her remark brought a smile to his concerned face. It was an old bone of contention between them. Whenever he'd followed her in his car, she'd admonished him for tailgating. His answer had always been that he couldn't stand to be too far from her.

The drive to the Nepenthe was short, which was fortunate. Marcy didn't feel fully in control of her reactions, and she gave a sigh of relief when she sighted the restaurant. She pulled the little Mercedes into the closest space and waited for Dirk. Everything seemed to be happening to her and around her. She had no sense of being in control of anything, not even the movement of her own body. The door opened and Dirk helped her out. She felt like a very old lady or a sleepwalker, being moved with all due care from one point to the next. A sudden thought stopped her. "But Dirk, how did you know — "

"That you were here?" He was even finishing her sentences. "Elementary, my dear Watson. I went back to your apartment the next day, and was told by the doorman that you were gone. I then contacted Angie. When she stopped screaming at me long enough to hear my sad tale of remorse and repentance, she told me that since it was public knowledge that you would be in Napa Valley next week, she could tell me that you were in California. Beyond that she didn't know where you were going this week and wouldn't tell me if she knew."

"Dear Angie." Marcy sighed.

"Dear Angie, indeed. What she didn't realize is that she'd told me all I needed to know. You were in California with a week to yourself. Of course you'd come here. I checked into the Ventana and waited, after looking at the reservation list, of course."

Marcy looked at him in wonder. "Have you ever considered moonlighting as a detective?"

"Wouldn't work with anyone but you." He stopped and faced her. "Have you forgotten, Marcy, how it was almost scary at times — the degree to which we could read each other's minds?"

A sudden surge of anger raced through her. "Dirk, what is this all about? Why are you reviving all those old emotions? You're stirring up things that I just don't think I can deal with again."

Her flash of anger was mirrored in Dirk's eyes. "Do you think you're the only one who went through hell? If you imagine that I want the whole bucket of worms again . . ." He took a few angry strides away from her, then turned back, shoving his hands into his pockets in that old gesture of frustration. "Dammit all! It was easier when I could tell myself I hated you. Hate can be such a nice, safe emotion."

They looked helplessly at each other for a moment, then Dirk put his hand out to her. "Could this wait until we get inside? Let's take a fight break and enjoy the scenery."

Marcy allowed herself to be led down the steps and around the side of the building. She was struck anew by Dirk's uncanny ability to "table" almost anything until the right time to deal with it. A necessary trait, he had told her, for the president of a large conglomerate. He was the one who had tried to teach her to stop and enjoy every event, to "smell the roses." Each moment only happens once, he had counseled, don't let it escape.

And now here they were, each caught in this moment of *déjà vu*. "There's no place like it, is there?" He put his arm lightly around her shoulders as they stood locked in memories, gazing out over the sharply ascending green mountains to their left and down the dramatic eight-hundred-foot drop to the crashing waves below. The warmth from his arm stole down her back and through her body.

"It's happening again," she said.

Dirk looked down at her. "What is?"

"Everything always seemed so much more beautiful when we looked at it together."

"Yep," he replied. "And you're right, it still does. I bet Orson wishes he still owned this." Marcy remembered Dirk's telling her that this had originally been the site of a hiking camp. Then Orson Welles had bought it for his new wife, Rita Hayworth. Rita had loved working on it and visiting it during the day, but she was too spooked by the isolation to spend a night there. It had eventually gone the way of the marriage, and was now a well-known eating place. Dirk dropped his arm and turned back toward the door. "Ready?"

"Yes." Marcy reluctantly followed, casting a last glance at the ocean below.

"Marcy, look." Dirk was staring up at the iron sculpture on the roof. "He's still here — the Dark Angel. I remember the first time we were here. You said you couldn't imagine why anyone would want a dark angel to hover over his door. You wanted all your angels to be pink and cheerful."

"I guess it doesn't work that way, does it?" Marcy looked sadly at the towering form, then followed Dirk inside. A young woman dressed in a long cotton skirt and a halter top approached. She smiled her pleasure. "Marcy Hanson! Welcome. This is an honor." She moved to pick up menus and lead the way to a booth, then she sighted Dirk and bumped into a stand holding a tray of dishes, narrowly escaping knocking them over.

"You're a hazard to the safety of women, you know," Marcy teased after they were seated.

"I know," he immodestly replied. "I go through life constantly replacing broken crockery." They laughed. How easily the old banter returned. "But

look who's talking," he countered. "Those two guys over there are about to fall off their chairs trying to get a good look at you."

Marcy sneaked a glimpse at the booth across the floor. He was right; they were.

"Marcy . . ." Her attention immediately reverted to Dirk. "Before we go into any of the rest of it — all the things we must discuss — I want to tell you something that may not get said if I wait." He smiled at her expression. "Don't be apprehensive; this is the good news part." She was kept in suspense while the waitress, who had returned to the table, took Dirk's order for two J&B's with water. "You know," he continued when the girl had left, "I was in no way prepared for the impact you had on me the other night at the St. Regis."

Marcy blanched. Unbelievable. She had almost forgotten the other night. She focused on what Dirk was saying.

"You really are a fantastic performer. You're not just good, you're spell-binding. I think I understood, just a little, what you'd tried to explain to me about what it means to you to sing."

The magnitude of the admission was not lost on Marcy. All those hours of argument over her career. He never could believe that singing was not just a way for her to make a living, but that it was akin to a biological need. Then the total memory of that night leapt back at her. "Then how could you — how could you do what you did? It was so unlike you. We'd had a lot of fights, a lot of disagreements at the end, but you were never cruel!"

He paused while the drinks were placed in front of them. "Marcy, I came to your apartment to try to talk things over. You're the one who flew into a rage. After that, things just got out of control."

Marcy nodded sheepishly, aware that what he said was true. "I know, I was so unstrung from seeing you at the club, I did go a little crazy." She stopped, her thoughts shifting. "Dirk, why did you come?"

He looked at her intently. "I have never been able to control the memories of you. All this time you popped up in the middle of board meetings, you interrupted speeches, you were the cause of countless sleepless nights. I simply had to put an end to it."

Marcy lashed out at him, "So you thought you could do that by coming to my apartment, making love, and leaving? What kind of cockamamie idea was that?"

Dirk took a sip of his drink, obviously measuring his reply, and Marcy thought in astonishment, Here we sit, the two of us, politely discussing that earth-shattering experience.

"I honestly thought it was over. I planned to come to the club to see you, to convince myself that you weren't really as wonderful as I remembered." He

stopped, then went on. "But you were even more so. I knew I had to end the obsession I had about you. I drove around the block for an hour before I came upstairs. I thought there might be a chance that we could discuss the past . . . to say good-bye in a civilized way." He paused. "I felt that if we could do that, then maybe I could put it all behind me at long last. I had no intention of winding up in bed with you."

How very, very reasonable it sounded. In fact, the reasonableness irritated Marcy. "So why didn't you stick to your carefully construed plan?"

His reply was sharp. "Come on, Marcy, are you forgetting what it felt like to be together again? And why did you have to look so beautiful and smell so good? There was no way I could have stopped." He looked at her, a tiny twinkle appearing in his eyes. "And by the way, you'd have a hard time convincing me that what happened was all my fault."

The blush that washed over Marcy's face conceded the point. "Then why didn't you just stay? It would have been so different, so wonderful, if you had just stayed there in my arms." Tears were invading her eyes, and she angrily blinked them back.

Dirk's tone was full of self-derision. "My manly pride, of course. I was so sure that I would be in complete control of myself, or of course I wouldn't have come. But there I was, once again caught in your web. So I pulled together what little was left of my dwindling willpower and left."

"Did it make you feel better?"

"It made me feel rotten."

"Good, join the group."

"Marcy." His tone was firm. "I promise you this. If it ever happens again, it will be with your full cooperation, when and where and for however long you want me."

Oh, that's not fair, her mind raged, I want you right now, anywhere. Under the table, in the back seat of the car, on the sunny warm tile terrace. She forced her face to remain impassive, and she kept her words measured and low. "Dirk, we did not break up because we didn't want each other. We broke up because you wanted, no, demanded, that I quit my career and become your dutiful little helpmate; your wife, your hostess, the mother of your future heirs, or, to put it another way, your shadow."

His eyes hardened. "I don't need a shadow, Marcy. I cast a pretty substantial one of my own."

Her retort flashed back at him. "And so do I! I'm a star, Dirk. That may sound conceited, but I'm proud of it. I worked my fanny off to get where I am."

"I didn't notice it was missing."

"Dirk!" Now she was really mad. He was not going to put her off with his quips. "I got to the top by hard work. Hours and hours of practice. Polishing

technique, improving timing, lessons, exercise, auditions. And I never compromised anything. And that's not an easy thing to say in my business."

"Marcy," he snapped, "I never, in any way, intimated that your success was not something to be immensely proud of. But it took all of your time. Just how was I to be fitted into that glimmering world of yours?"

"You fit in quite nicely for two and a half years!"

"Sure. We were courting. It was fun and games. But it was time for us to build a home, think about a family."

"Other entertainers have homes and families."

"Marcy, I was the head of five very large corporations. We have four family homes that are essentially mine. There was just too much to juggle."

"Then why did you let it go as far as it did? You fell in love with me as a performer, you seemed to enjoy the 'glimmer,' as you call it. Did you think it would just disappear?"

Dirk looked at her almost coldly. "I assumed you wanted what I wanted — for us to be together."

"On your terms."

"They were always there, Marcy. How did you manage to miss them all that time? I'm a pretty bright guy, and there were certainly some signals that I thought I was reading correctly!" They both stopped at once, aware of their rising voices, of the familiarity of the argument . . . and of an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. "Oh, hell," he said, "I didn't come here to yell at you."

"Why did you come, Dirk? Why couldn't you just leave bad enough alone and let it all fall back into the past where it belongs?"

"Are you still so sure it belongs in the past?" he asked.

Marcy put her face in her hands, fighting to squelch the surge of longing that was welling up inside. He was so close. She could reach out and touch him. Why not? Why couldn't she simply say to heck with everything and grab this man and hold on for dear life. Right at the moment she could think of nothing else in the world that seemed as important. All she had to do was look at him and all the old stirrings of desire began their treacherous invasion. She raised her head, meeting his eyes. "Dammit," she stammered, "why don't you have pupils like other people do?"

Dirk's eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "Why don't I have what?"

"Oh, never mind." Marcy leaned forward, allowing her gaze to travel over those precious features. "Dirk, do you suppose we could possibly block out everything for the evening? Could we sit here and have our drinks and a nice dinner, and catch up with what's happened in our lives like two old friends with nothing more important to decide than whether we should order the Ambrosia Burger?"

Dirk threw back his head and laughed. "You sound like a little girl asking for an ice-cream cone," he marveled.

"I am."

"Okay, agreed. After all, we may never wake up. This dream may just go on forever." Straightening himself in his chair, he picked up his glass and held it high. "Here's to a quiet reunion evening at the Nepenthe with Dirk and Marcy, such good friends."

Marcy raised her glass, then hesitated. "Wait a minute," she objected. "I think I should demand top billing."

"Done," he agreed. "Erase the above," he instructed an imaginary cohort, "and give the lady top billing. Now, I have been able to follow your impressive career by reading every item I could find about you." His tone was hesitant. "Is there anyone serious in your life right now that the tabloids have missed?"

"Are you, by chance, referring to someone of the male gender?"

"I should certainly hope so," he said with an exaggerated show of concern.

Marcy hesitated. Should she invent a flaming love affair to spice up her work-dominated life? She shrugged. "I probably ought to say yes, but as you know full well, that's the first thing the media would pick up. No, my life has been singularly devoid of passion." She flushed. "Well, almost devoid."

Their eyes locked in mutual recollection of that exception. "What a waste," he said.

"I know that's not the case with you." Marcy hastily brought the conversation back to a safer level. "I've seen two or three blips in the paper about you and — what's her name?" Marcy looked at him with wide-eyed innocent interest. Actually, she had all but memorized the three articles. Jennifer Elaine Stanton, of the Newport, Rhode Island Stantons. Cultured, exquisite, brilliant. A graduate of Smith College with her master's from Radcliffe. Now working on a doctorate at Stanford. "At only 25 years of age, how can such a gorgeous creature be so smart?" the article had effused. Marcy hated her.

Dirk was watching her quizzically. "Hey, where are you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I started to give you an answer, but you were miles away. Writing scripts again?"

She shook her head, trying not to allow the misery to show in her face. She was far too sophisticated, she scolded herself, to be feeling this intense jealousy.

"Jennifer Stanton." When he spoke the name, a sick ripple of pain moved through her. "Yes, I have been seeing a great deal of her lately. She's quite an exceptional girl. In fact, that's the main reason I had to deal with my memories of you. I had considered proposing to her." Seeming to catch a few of the

vibrations of her reaction, he slated almost angrily, "Come on, Marcy, I'm thirty-nine years old. I can't go through the rest of my life living on memories. I can't picture myself as the perennial bachelor. Somehow, being footloose and fancy free has never held that much fascination for me. I need something permanent in my life. I'd like to have a family."

"And I suppose that good old Jennifer is just dying to put all those degrees in the lower right hand file drawer and devote herself to satisfying your needs."

"Yes, she is."

It couldn't be any clearer than that. How could she sit there, caught in her own programmed evening of polite conversation, with this awful, sick anguish consuming her? "How nice. And how is your family?" Had she really said that? She had.

His expression was stern, impassive. "Excellent. Mother is her usual ebullient self, busily assisting her two sons and her grandchildren in the living of their lives."

"Grandchildren?"

"Yes, Garth and Lucy have a set of two-year-old twins."

"That's amazing. All kinds of things can happen in three years." Darn it, she was back on slippery ground. "It would be such fun to see them again. Dear Garth. And your mother — how I miss her!"

"She was devastated when we broke up," Dirk said. "All the wedding plans were made. She'd been working on them secretly for a year, just waiting for us to set the date."

"Your mother has to be the world's most complete romantic. Look at your names, Garth and Dirk, in a lineage full of Samuels, Edwards, and George Michael the thirds. It's a good thing there wasn't another son. She would probably have called him Heathcliff. She was always so nice to me. She kind of replaced . . ." She swallowed in an effort to dislodge the lump in her throat.

Dirk reached over to take her hand. "She loved you, Marcy. Still does. She hasn't quite forgiven either of us."

"Does she love Jennifer, too?" she snapped.

"No, but she likes her very much."

Marcy, stop this, she ordered herself. You're the one who wanted a nice, friendly evening. "Is Garth still your right-hand man in the company?"

"As a matter of fact, Garth is now president of the company."

Marcy stared at him in amazement. "But that's your job."

"Not any more. I've moved myself to chairman of the board, which is another way of saying that I have eased out of the active running of the company and am just there for consultation."

"But, Dirk," Marcy stammered in confusion, "that business has always been so important to you. Why did you do that?"

Dirk sat back in his chair, fiddling with the fork on the table. "It's a case of self-indulgence," he admitted. "I accomplished a great deal with the business. It used to be exciting and completely engrossing. But in the last few years, a lot of it seemed terribly repetitious. Since I had Garth there, perfectly competent to run the business, I decided to devote my energies to something I'd wanted to do for years."

Marcy was flabbergasted. "I can't believe you stepped out of that position. It seemed so much a part of you. That enormous office, all those people at your beck and call; it all appeared to be so important to you, almost vital."

"Like singing?"

"Yes." A faint smile touched her lips. "Like singing." She searched his face for signs of derision. Finding none, she continued, "Now, of course, I'm dying of curiosity about what you're doing. I can't remember any deep, smoldering desire on your part for some other line of work."

"That's because my deep smoldering desires had a much more logical objective when we were together."

Marcy couldn't move her eyes from his as that simple phrase repeated itself silently. "You know," she said softly, "I wrote a song after, well, just after. The first line was 'When we were together the world was fine.' It's a very sad song. Andy arranged it for me, but he said we couldn't use it in the act until I could sing it all the way through without crying."

"Have you ever used it?"

"No."

Dirk reached across the table, brushing her cheek with his fingertips in a gesture so gentle and loving that Marcy felt all her defensiveness sliding away. She closed her own hand around his, turning her head slightly to kiss his long, slender fingers. "Oh, Dirk," she whispered.

Startled by the sudden appearance of the waitress beside the table, she dropped her hand as he withdrew his. "Are you ready to order?" the girl asked, her full attention on the handsome man seated there.

"Marcy, do you know what you want?" She stifled the impulse to tell him. "I'll have the Ambrosia Burger," she said calmly.

He cocked his head at her in dismay. "Such a slave to habit," he chided. Handing the unread menus back to the waitress, he smiled. "Make that two. And a pitcher of draft beer."

As the waitress moved away, Marcy tried to push aside the anger she felt toward the girl for interrupting the rapport of the moment before. She picked up her glass and took a long swallow, letting the warmth of the liquid slide all the way down before speaking. "Where were we? Oh, yes, I remember. You were about to tell me what you're working on."

"No . . ." Dirk was still watching her thoughtfully. "I wasn't about to do any such thing. I don't want to tell you right now. I'm hopeful that just the perfect time will come to tell you."

"It sounds very mysterious."

"Not mysterious, just exciting. I have a growing hope that it may prove exciting to both of us."

Marcy studied him impatiently. She started to open her mouth, then firmly clamped it shut. She knew better than to try to extract any information from Dirk that he wasn't ready to divulge. She would just have to live with this rampant curiosity until whatever time he chose to satisfy it. "Well," she grumbled, "you certainly know how to bring a perfectly good conversation to a dead end."

He grinned at her. "Let's start a new one. Want to go back to the lodge and make love?"

She sat open-mouthed as the waitress put two glasses and a pitcher of beer in front of them. "Dirk," she protested, "you are absolutely outrageous!"

"Marcy, my love, you always said it was one of my most endearing qualities." His eyes never left hers as he filled the two glasses, putting one in front other. "Drink deep," he intoned. "Maybe just enough liquor will further my cause."

"What is your cause?" She knew better than to ask, but the game was too intriguing to abandon now.

"My cause is to get you slightly inebriated, take you back to the Ventana, and seduce you properly, which is to say, with your ardent cooperation." Those incredible eyes were burning a hole through her protective wall, deep into the recesses of her memory where lay the forbidden mind-pictures of countless lovemaking scenes. She could feel the flush of red-hot desire creeping up her legs, spreading across her flesh like an invasive force, making it difficult to breathe, impossible to speak. She grabbed for the glass, gulping the contents in a mindless effort to drown the rampant passion that threatened to consume her.

"That's my girl," he purred, his voice husky with sensuality, "remember it all. All the times we held each other, sure that we would never let go. Remember the indescribable pleasure we were always able to give one another. It's all still there, my love, waiting for us." He leaned over, tracing the contours of her face with one finger, sending shock waves through the recesses of her body.

She moistened her dry lips with her tongue, devouring him with her hungry gaze. "I'm not very hungry, for food that is." The words had come from her. She was beyond logic, beyond control, back to the reckless state of ardor in which they'd lived so closely for over two years.

He stood quickly, reached over to pull her from her chair, and, with her hand held tightly in his, started for the door. He pressed a large bill into the pocket of the startled waitress who was en route to their table with two exotic hamburgers and propelled Marcy out of the restaurant to the side of her car. "Let me have your keys," he commanded, opening the door on the passenger side and easing her into the seat.

"But, your car — "

Her protest was cut short by two of his fingers pressed gently across her lips. "To hell with my car; give me your keys."

She dug in her purse ineffectively. Dirk impatiently took it from her, removed the keys, dropped the purse into her lap, and strode around to the other side of the car. Marcy was dimly aware of the roar of the engine, the movement of the automobile. The cool night air made no impression on her heated flesh. Dirk placed his hand on her knee, lightly caressing the tiny space below her skirt. She marveled at the discovery that the kneecap could be an erogenous zone. They had arrived at the inn. Dirk expertly slid the car into the empty parking space in front of her room and handed the keys back to her. She sat there dumbly, holding them, unable to take her eyes from the sensuous man beside her. "Put your keys away, Marcy, and let's go in." He reached across, opening the door on her side, brushing her mouth with his as he did so.

She stumbled out of the vehicle, managing to drop the keys into the small handbag. He was there when she stood up. He gathered her into his arms, pressing her eager body against his as his mouth captured hers. His lips moved hungrily, and his tongue crept into her mouth. She moaned, lost in her overwhelming need for this man. He pulled back slightly, never taking his eyes from hers. With his arm held tightly around her waist, they started toward the building. He took the purse from her grasp, smiling at her. "Maybe I'd better find the key." He efficiently located it and fitted it into the lock of the door. It swung open, and Marcy started to enter, only to be captured once again in his fervid embrace. She ran her fingers through his thick, wavy hair, savoring the clean, soft feel of it. Still locked together, they moved just enough to close the door behind them. "Marcy, Marcy," he groaned, "I want you so." He stepped back, running into the side table.

Laughing softly, she reached over and pulled open the drapes, flooding the room with moonlight. "Now," she purred, "maybe we can see what we're doing."

"Perfect." His smoky gaze traveled over her. "I don't want to miss a thing."

He slowly unbuttoned her blouse. She could feel tiny bum marks imprinted on her flesh at each point his fingers touched. Hurry, hurry, her senses urged. She wanted to be flesh to flesh with him, to feel the hard core of him. He leaned over to kiss each shoulder as he slipped her blouse off, then

stooped to touch his lips to the top of her breasts as he ran his finger tantalizingly inside her brassiere, barely grazing her nipples. Shock flares of craving careened through her veins. Marcy kicked off her shoes and unfastened her skirt, letting it fall to the floor. Then, with trembling fingers, she tried to undo Dirk's tie. His impatient fingers leapt to her aid. The compulsion to be rid of all barriers between them was driving them both to near-desperate haste. They kicked the discarded clothes aside, reaching for each other with intensifying greed.

Marcy wound her fingers in the dense blond hair. She loved the way it curled around them, each strand a soft, petting stroke. "I want you, want you, want you," she whispered against his lips.

"Marcy." Her name was a resonant chime, reverberating through his thrusting tongue, strumming its way to her pounding heart. She opened her mouth wider and wider as their tongues circled, probed, wound. She relished the taste of him, wanted to be consumed, devoured by him.

His hands slid over her petal-smooth body, traversing each curve with the attentiveness of a rapacious tourist, leaving twanging skin cells in their wake. Marcy's palms tingled their pleasure as they roamed across the tightly curled hair on his bronzed chest around to his back, finding and exploring each familiar, never-forgotten ridge and ripple, testing the smooth-stretched skin over rock-hard muscle.

Their lips ground together in the near-savagery of aroused passion, their bodies pushing together, crushing, rubbing, undulating in a synchronized fever of turmoil. With a grating sigh, Dirk swung her up in his arms, his crackling-coal eyes sending pinwheel sparks that singed her teeming brain.

All of Marcy's life juices clamored, clanged, roared in a pandemonium of desire. Even the chenille ribs of the bedspread that met her back delivered sensual messages. A muffled cry escaped her throat as she felt the soft-solid pressure of his lips on her nipple, his tongue sliding and circling, sending wrenching spasms through her thighs. He rolled his tongue across the taut tip, back and forth, back and forth, as his expert fingers trailed across her skin with maddening slowness, stroking, electric tendrils inching across her quivering stomach and down her legs, teasing the hot flesh of her thighs with gentle pinches, moving with soul-shaking steadiness closer and closer to her throbbing core. She reeled under the volcanic burst of her senses when his fingers reached their goal. Her body twisted and writhed as the relentless fingertips pressed, rubbed, probed the drumming nub of her need.

Marcy was a whirlpool of desire, a twirling, spinning, reeling passion ballet. Dirk trailed a path of kisses across her smoldering flesh, vastly accelerating the rotating eddy as constrictions of craving nipped their way from her breasts down her stomach to the moistening center of her desire.

Dirk slid his body up hers, white-hot steel against molten lava, his conquering lips taking hers willing prisoners, sliding his tongue deep into her welcoming mouth. Her searching hands found and explored the surging shaft of his longing, causing a deep growl to accompany the spasm of his body.

"Dirk," she begged, "now, now, please."

"Marcy." The name was an almost inaudible moan as he entered her, giving her back the missing part of herself. Back home, back home, he's come back home, echoed through her mind as she gyrated with the hot-pulsed rhythm of her drum-beating heart. Dirk joined her wild love dance with reckless abandon. They were rising, rising on the Big Sur tide, cresting and curling, faster and faster, together exhaling a cry of release as they arched and bucked in the final crashing roll of fulfillment.

4

She awoke curled inside the curve of Dirk's body, cuddled in the indescribable sweetness of his embrace. She opened her eyes slowly, careful not to move, afraid that he might loosen his hold. The morning sun streamed through the window. Marcy watched the trail of tiny dust particles that were illuminated by the light. Never had she felt such complete happiness. Dirk breathed evenly, still asleep she was sure. But then his hands began to inch toward her most vulnerable areas, and before they had even reached their goal, her motor had started again.

It was 10:00 AM when they awoke the second time. Marcy was on her stomach, nestled close to him, her head on his chest.

"Hey," he whispered, "you awake?"

"Yes."

"I'm starved."

"Me too."

She raised up on her elbows and kissed him lightly. "Want to share a Badedas shower?"

"Did you bring your sponge?"

"That's a distinctly personal question."

"It's going to be a distinctly personal shower." With a sudden whoop, Dirk threw back the covers and rolled over, pulling himself and Marcy up and out of bed. "Come on, lovely wench, to the bath!"

They both stood under the steaming water, taking turns washing each other with great care. Dirk was right; it was a distinctly personal shower.

After they had dried off, Marcy rummaged through the drawers for her jeans while Dirk pulled on his clothes. "I'll go to my room and change and shave," he said, "then come back for you. Shall we eat here or go down to the River Inn?"

"Let's go out. I think the breakfast hour here is over."

"Okay." As he turned to pick up his shoes he caught sight of the two spiral-bound booklets that lay on the side table. Picking up the thinner one, he noticed the title on the front. "'The Helen Morgan Story.' What's this?"

"A script. For a television musical."

He held it in one hand and picked up the musical score in the other. "I take it this is something you're going to do?" He looked at her intently, one script in each hand like weights on a scale.

"Why, yes," she answered. "It's a wonderful role. Peter got it for me."

"I see." He frowned. "When is this set to start?"

"November."

"Will it take long?"

"About four to five months, I'd guess. The schedule isn't set." Marcy tried to suppress a growing apprehension. "Dirk, what's the matter?"

Dirk stared at the scripts for a moment, then dropped them back onto the table. "Nothing." She could almost see him erasing the frown. "I'll be back shortly." He picked up his jacket and tie, gave her a quick kiss, and left.

The apprehension stayed. Marcy busied herself by straightening up the room and putting her things away. It seemed a very long time before Dirk returned. They drove in relative silence to the restaurant.

The River Inn was a quaint spot. They sat by a window overlooking the creek, enjoying the stacked stone sculptures in the river bed. "That's some piece of work," Dirk observed. "I'd like to try one myself. It's all done by balancing the rocks, you know. There's no bonding involved."

Marcy watched his eyes light up. Dirk was endlessly fascinated by things, all kinds of things. It was one of many traits that made him such good company. They had both consumed enormous breakfasts, and now Dirk signaled the young waiter for more coffee. As his cup was filled he asked, "Is the man who does the rock sculpture around?"

"No, I'm sorry, he isn't."

"How do you know it's a man?" Marcy asked indignantly.

He looked at her with a superior male-chauvinistic smirk. "Now, what woman would have the ability to place rocks with such precision, let alone lift them?" He laughed and crossed his arms in front of his face when Marcy lifted an empty plate threateningly.

"Don't throw it," he chuckled. "I asked, that's how I know."

She put the plate back on the table and the waiter hastily removed it. When he had carried all the dishes away, she grinned at Dirk and said, "I think he really believed I'd throw it."

"So did I. Why do you think I lied about asking?"

"Dirk!"

He laughed again and stood up. "I'm going to pay the bill and ask if we can try building our own stone man."

"Are you crazy? That creek must be freezing!"

"Now, Marcy, how do you expect to have hardy feet if you don't expose them to less than ideal conditions?"

"Living in shoes is less than ideal conditions."

"You've got me there. Be right back."

In a very short time, Marcy found herself with her jeans rolled up, yelping and complaining, wading into the creek. The art of stone-balancing proved to be very difficult.

"Ouch!" Marcy yelled.

"What's the matter?"

"I bumped my toe on a rock. Dirk, my feet are freezing. I concede that you are much better at balancing than I. I am clearly better suited to bonding."

Dirk stopped and looked at her, suddenly serious. "Balancing and bonding. I think we should try them both."

Marcy's heart flipped. "I think you're right."

Dirk unstacked the few rocks he'd used and replaced them in the creek. "We'd better leave this to the experts. Let's go walk on the beach."

The twisting road to the Pfeiffer State Beach absorbed all of Dirk's attention, and Marcy sat close beside him, her heart pounding in her ears. It wasn't the road that frightened her, it was the conversation she knew was coming. Dirk parked the car, and they walked the short path to the beautiful, fine-grained beach. The great white-topped waves rolled in over smooth sand and through holes that had been worn in the immense rock that bisected the curving stretch. They kicked off their shoes and sat close together on a small dune, digging their toes into the warm sand.

The silence was hanging very heavily over them by the time Dirk broke it. "Marcy, what would you like to be doing in five years?"

Marcy stared at him in astonishment. "That was one question I certainly hadn't anticipated." She watched the waves form their great swells, push up to a ridge and spill over in white foam as she rolled the question around in her mind, searching for an answer she couldn't find. "Gosh, I don't know. I've been running so fast I haven't given much thought to the future. At least not beyond next year's bookings."

Dirk scooped up a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers. "I figured that's how you'd done it — by running faster."

"Done what?"

"Coped. After we broke up." Marcy's eyes darted back to him. She studied his profile as he continued. "It's funny, you were always the one who examined feelings and explored emotions, and I was the one who just worked harder." His eyes moved sideways to meet hers. "I wonder if we've changed roles?"

Marcy felt very confused. He was right; she had been pushing more and more into her schedule. Andy and Greg had both flatly refused to do a number of gigs that she'd wanted to do, insisting that enough was enough. "It's true that I've spent most of my time the last couple of years working. It's also true that I've done very little emotion probing lately. I couldn't stand it; it was too painful." Their eyes held. Pain was a shared memory. "But Dirk, when we were together my schedule was tough, but yours was insane. The traveling and the meetings and the hours of planning. I can't believe you've simply walked away from it."

"I haven't. I'm still involved in the planning and consulting. After all, I'm vitally interested; it is the family business. It is also, for the present at least, what puts steak on the table and money in the bank. But the day-to-day insanity I have magnanimously turned over to my brother, who, by the way, loves it."

Marcy dug her toes deeper into the sand, trying to will some of its warmth up through her body. "What did you mean about our changing roles?"

Dirk reached over and ran his hand over her hair. Marcy tilted her head toward him, savoring the joy of his touch, trying to convince herself, even as nagging doubts were growing within her, that somehow, some way, he would always be there beside her. Dirk wound his fingers in the thick black mass as though he had to hang on for dear life. "Well," he replied, "first I had to go through the anger after the split. I suppose you did too?"

"With me it was depression."

He nodded. "Same thing. Anyway, I kind of worked my way into me first really introspective period of my life. I spent more damn time staring out of my office window. When I wasn't thinking about you, I was thinking about where the hell it was that I was running to. Was I really going to find some wonderful thing by moving so fast, or was I going to race right by what I wanted and not even have time to notice?"

"So you just decided to quit?"

He smiled. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But, yes, I just decided to quit. Garth had wanted to be president for years. He never said so because he figured it was my rightful position as the older brother. And, of course, I had always been sure no one could run it as well as I." He wrapped his fingers around her bare ankle. "What nonsense. He's not as capable as I was in some areas, but he's more so in others. All in all, we just about even out."

She put her head on his shoulder. "Are you going to tell me what you're doing now?"

He kissed the top of her head. "No. We have more important things to discuss." He paused. "Marcy, if I asked you to marry me right after your St. Helena run and take a year off so we could be together, what would you say?"

Marcy's mind raced wildly about, looking for the right answer. "But," she sputtered, "I'd have to do the TV special. I've promised. But maybe after that . . ."

"After that would be the next engagement." His voice sounded leaden.

She looked at him with a growing sense of dread. "That's not fair, Dirk. What if I asked you to take a year off?"

He met her eyes. "I'd say yes."

Something was going terribly awry. "But that's because you're in a position to do so, and I'm not! Can you imagine what would happen to a career like mine if I just walked away for a whole year?"

Dirk nodded. He looked very sad. "Yes, I can. I can also see that you're still climbing to the peak of the mountain, and I can't blame you for that. You have to do what's right for you." Suddenly Marcy was taking a precipitously fast downward slide from the morning high. A huge lump began to form in the bottom of her throat. Dirk's voice seemed to sound farther away when he spoke again. "I can't just step off of my treadmill and onto yours, Marcy."

Marcy jumped up, terribly agitated. She needed to run, to scream, to swim across the ocean. How could she endure this again? "Dammit, Dirk," she snapped, "we're right back where we were. If you knew you didn't want me as I am, why did you come after me? Are you determined to drive me crazy?" The rat-a-tat of her heart felt like her own personal firing squad.

Dirk lifted his eyes to hers. They held a look so aloof, so defeated, that an icy shiver of grief shook her. "I loved you more than I had ever loved anyone. I honestly thought I was over it, but after I saw you again I realized that I still love you more than I could possibly love anyone else. I told myself I was coming here to apologize. I suppose what I was really doing was indulging in wishful thinking that bordered on stupidity. I'm sorry, Marcy, for both of us." He rose to his feet.

Marcy felt sick. The glorious, immense rock suddenly looked ominous. The warmth of the sun had turned hot and sticky, and the sand felt gritty.

She couldn't stand it, not again. She lashed out. "Why does it all have to be your way?"

Why did his eyes look blacker when he grew angry? "It doesn't. I'm willing to compromise. But so far you don't seem willing to give up one damn thing. I'm a jealous man, Marcy; I want you to love me more than you love the sound of applause!"

His words whipped her, making her feel angry and hurt. She turned and tromped through the sand, stooping to pick up her shoes on the way. The drive back to the inn was completed in stony silence.

Marcy lay stretched across the bed. She'd spent the afternoon pacing and thinking and crying, and she had finally fallen into a deep sleep. She sat up and moved her gaze slowly around the room. Remarkable. One would think the room would display some sign of destruction, some hint of the devastation that had befallen her. The phone rang. She picked it up with an unsteady hand. "Hello?" It came out as a trembling croak.

"Marcy, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." She tried to strengthen the tone.

"What have you been doing all afternoon?"

"Sleeping. What have you been doing?"

"Walking." Dirk's voice sounded cool and distant, as if he were calling from another planet. "Marcy, I made a reservation for dinner. Can you be ready in forty-five minutes?"

Her nap hadn't refreshed her. She felt ground down so finely that she could easily join the rest of the grains of sand on the beach. "Dirk, I don't want to eat. Can't you just leave me alone?"

"Marcy, we stamped away from each other once. Let's not do it again. We're adults; we should try to handle this with some degree of calmness."

"I don't feel adult, and I certainly don't feel calm. In fact, I feel awful."

"I know. So do I. Marcy, please."

She put her fingers to her throbbing head. She might as well go; she knew how persistent Dirk could be. "Okay."

She showered, shampooed, and applied her makeup with great care, trying to disguise her swollen eyes. She took a long while selecting a dress, something that would be particularly flattering. She chose a soft pink; it would be kind to her tired features.

Dirk looked almost as tense as she was, but he had his face arranged in stern, impassive lines. They walked to the restaurant silently, ignoring the magnificent scenery. As they approached the inn, the soft strains of a violin

concerto could be heard. A funeral dirge would be more appropriate, Marcy thought as they walked up the brick steps.

The food at the Ventana was superb, the service excellent, and the décor tasteful, but Marcy scarcely noticed it as she poked at her entrée, trying to remember what she had ordered. It took all of her energy to smile at the waitress and present a pleasant face to the openly admiring couples at the adjoining tables.

Finally the plates were removed and coffee was served. It slowly dawned on Marcy that Dirk was talking to her. She tried to focus on what he was saying.

He put down his cup and looked at her. "It's a crummy situation, isn't it." His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he were making a report on the current status of the stock market.

"But we must accept things as they are and live our lives accordingly. I do apologize most sincerely for my actions in New York, and also for my actions here. It probably would've been less painful to leave the whole thing alone. I had actually begun to hope . . ." His eyes flickered for an instant. "But it's no use going into any of that. At least we have the opportunity to part in a more civilized way, so there is a positive side of it."

The coolness in his voice crept across the table, spilling over her, enveloping her in an icy cocoon. Was this reality? The cold, logical analysis of a vanished dream?

He was still talking. "If we just look at the situation objectively, I'm sure we can manage to hold on to the good memories while we finally put this relationship firmly behind us."

Marcy sat encased in ice, watching the warm fire send its heat to everyone else around her. Dirk seemed to be retreating, drawing farther and farther away as he talked. The chairman of the board making his report. Maybe he could look at everything objectively as he strode off into the sunset, but getting over this "situation" just might kill her.

"I might as well tell you . . ." — would he never stop talking? She just wanted to go someplace to hide — ". . . since there will clearly never be that perfect moment I referred to, what my new line of work will be."

Probably running down cripples, old people, and small children with his Ferrari, she mused.

"I've purchased a vineyard in Napa Valley."

Her head shot up as she stared at him in disbelief. "A vineyard!"

"Yes. Now you can understand why I'd wanted to wait for the right time to tell you. I had begun to hope that I would be able to present it, in just the perfect package, as a gift to both of us. But, once again, I'd underestimated your

needs. So you must sing, and I must crush grapes." He stood and picked up the bill the waitress had dropped on the table. "Shall we go?"

Marcy knew that she had to get up. If she really concentrated, she could probably make her legs work. She simply had to get back to the privacy of her own room before she disintegrated.

"Marcy?" There was a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Oh, yes, of course." She eased herself to the edge of the chair, and, summoning all of her strength, managed to stand. Somehow she made it across the wide lawn to her room.

Dirk put his hands on her shoulders and leaned forward to give her a cool kiss. "Good-bye, Marcy. I'm sure to run into you in St. Helena, but I promise to make an attempt to keep my distance. Take care, and good luck. I mean it." He dropped his hands, looked at her for a long moment, then walked purposefully toward his own room.

Marcy let herself into her room. She knew she was still alive, she was still moving. She dropped to the edge of the bed, her head sinking into her hands. A vineyard in Napa Valley. The picture that came to mind now was in full color and sharply outlined. She and Dirk walking through the grapevines of the Clos du Val winery, fascinated with the whole cycle of grape growing and the making of fine wine. They had agreed, after that particular wine tour, that it would be incredibly exciting to run a winery. They had fantasized endlessly about the right kind of grapes to plant, the preferred topography for a vineyard — every conceivable aspect from the growing of the grapes to the proper method of bottling. Dirk was a true wine connoisseur, knowledgeable in many facets of the wine aristocracy. Marcy had been anxious to learn. It had been a true dream, the kind that was right next door to being a plan. There was nothing else that Dirk could have disclosed as his new vocation that could have caused this degree of remorse. Marcy felt like someone had pulled the plug and let all her vital juices drain away.

A vineyard in Napa Valley. It had seemed the epitome of the impossible dream to her, even though Dirk had assured her that they would really have it one day. At his insistence, she had read countless books on the subject. Her show business friends had teased her mercilessly about it. "Don't bother Marcy," they would caution backstage workers, "she's into the grapes."

What a damned fool I am. The thought finally made its way to the forefront of her consciousness, where she could no longer ignore it. "What a raving, ranting, idiotic lunatic I am. He was ready to lay it at my feet as a nice little gift. And, all wrapped in shiny paper and plush velvet bows, he was offering the greatest gift of all — himself. The only man I've ever really loved or ever really wanted. All I had to do in return was give him one year of my time. One year of undivided attention. I've just looked through the open door

to heaven and turned my back on it and walked away. "Dear God!" she wailed aloud. "What a damned fool I am!"

She slowly, hypnotically, removed her clothes, put on her nightgown, washed her face, brushed her teeth. She reached for the phone a half dozen times, pulling her hand back at the last minute each time. The conversation on the beach haunted her. She really didn't know what, if anything, she was willing to concede. It would do no good to call him and say, "I need you, I want you, we belong together." They both knew that. The problem was, they couldn't seem to work out how to accomplish it.

Marcy stumbled into bed, pulling the covers up tight under her chin. As she fell into a troubled sleep, a tiny voice in the back of her head kept saying, "You're a damned fool, Marcy Hanson, you're a damned fool, Marcy Hanson, you're a damned . . ."

5

As Marcy passed a sign announcing the Christian Brothers Wine Cellars she knew she was close to her destination. She stopped the car by the side of the road to check the directions Angie had meticulously written out. The inn was on Main Street; it must be just a bit farther.

At last she saw the wooden sign, "St. Helena Inn," with another sign, "St. Helena Theatre," directly below. With a sigh of relief, she turned into the drive. Despite her tiredness, she had to admire the lovely old white inn. Obviously, great pains had been taken to restore it. The outside, with its fresh paint and graveled driveway and parking area, was beautiful. There were flowers blooming profusely in front, and in the field to the far side she could see, in the dim light of dusk, the silhouettes of grape vines. She stopped her car near the front entrance and climbed out, stretching her arms above her head as she did. No one had seen her yet, so she wandered around the side of the building. There it was. Behind and to the right of the inn rose a large red barn. It had a covered walkway visible on one side, and additional gravel-topped parking areas surrounding it. The sign in front was prominent, but rustic in design. No neon here. It was, however, well-lighted, and Marcy could read it clearly: *St. Helena Theatre, Grand Opening, May 1. Marcy Hanson in "Guys and Dolls."*

Her name was in the largest letters. A thrill of excitement ran through her. At least that magic was still intact.

Reversing her direction, she walked up the front steps and into the charming reception area of the inn. The early American décor had been meticulously preserved and doubtless improved upon. The room was paneled in wide, darkly aged pine boards. The furniture was antique, with the rich look of at least a century of careful polishing. There was a large, dark red Oriental rug on the floor, worn just enough to add a touch of class. Marcy approached the man at the reception desk. He looked up at her and smiled.

"May I help you?" he inquired.

"Yes, please." Marcy put down the small hand case she'd brought in. "I think I'm expected."

The pleasant man took out his reservation book. "Good. And what is the name, please?" He put a form in front of him and raised his pen.

"Marcy Hanson."

The man dropped the pen and stared at her in astonishment. Then the smile broke out again, brighter than before. "My goodness!" He came around the desk and held out his hand. "What a pleasure. Welcome, Miss Hanson. Everyone will certainly be glad to see you. I'm Bill Sampson. I handle reservations and general traffic control of the housekeeping staff."

Marcy shook the hand, smiling. It was nice to be greeted so enthusiastically after her long ride. "How do you do? I hope I haven't kept anyone waiting?"

"Not at all. It's just that nobody seemed to know when to expect you, or the red carpet would surely have been laid out."

"In that case, I'm glad I sneaked in. I don't feel quite up to royal receptions right now. I drove from Big Sur."

He nodded sympathetically. "Then I'm sure you're tired. Let me take you up to your rooms and send someone out for your luggage. Then I'll let Alan Gately know you've arrived. He'll want to say hello, but I'm sure he'll understand if you want dinner in your room and a quiet evening to yourself." He winked at her. "You just do what's comfortable, Miss Hanson. Believe me, your health and well-being get top priority around here." With that he selected a key from a cubbyhole against the rear wall, picked up her case, and motioned her toward the small elevator opposite the entrance.

Marcy soon found herself in a homey, well-appointed suite of rooms on the second floor, to the rear of the inn. There was a freshly painted and papered sitting room with two love seats flanking a brick fireplace, which already boasted a crackling fire. Bill Sampson led her into the adjoining bedroom, a cheerful room decorated in blues and greens. It was a corner room with four huge windows. Marcy peered out through the deepening darkness

and saw the evenly spaced grape vines on one side and a wide lawn with what appeared to be flower gardens on the other.

"The bathroom is in here," Bill indicated, opening the door of a commodious bath and turning on the light. "Now, I'll send someone up with your bags. May I have your car keys? We'll park it and lock it for you."

"Thank you." She handed him the keys, glancing hungrily through the opened door at the oversized European-designed fixtures. "That tub sure looks inviting."

Bill laughed. "Yep. And there's plenty of hot water. If you want to turn it on, we'll rush your luggage up to you and then leave you alone for a while. Alan will call before he comes up. The phone is over there." He gestured toward the bedside table, then gave her a parting smile as he left.

As soon as the outer door closed, Marcy put the stopper down in the tub and turned the hot water on full force. She then strolled through the rooms, noting in greater detail the handsome antique spool bed, the Oriental carpets, and the comfortably upholstered seats in the living room. She opened a folding door in the corner and found a well-stocked bar and a tiny refrigerator with soft drinks, orange juice, and ice. There was even an automatic coffee maker, already filled and ready to plug in. Oh, boy, was she glad to be here.

There was a knock on the door. That was fast. She went to the door and opened it, and was greeted with, "Surprise!"

"Andy!" She threw her arms around the tall man and hugged him ferociously. All but jumping up and down with joy, she stepped back to look at him. "Oh, Andy!" She hugged him again until he began to struggle out of her tight grip.

"My God, woman, I'd hoped you'd be glad to see me, but don't kill me with exuberance! Remember, I'm important to your act." His dear face creased in a wide grin as she pulled him into the room. The joyous reunion was briefly interrupted by the arrival of her bags. Andy took the two bags from the boy and tipped him, then closed the door and faced Marcy happily. The big smile slowly faded as he scrutinized her face. Lifting a finger to trace the circles under her eyes, he said, "I hope that's debauchery."

Marcy blurted, "Oh, my gosh, wait a minute!" She dashed into the other room, turned off the water, and returned to her friend. "For you," she declared, "I am even willing to postpone my bath."

"It's gratifying to deserve such an honor." Andy surveyed the room appreciatively. "Nice digs. Do you have one of those nice little bars, too, and if so, where?"

Marcy led him to the bar and watched as he mixed their drinks.

"Just soda water for me, please, my stomach is upset."

Andy raised an eyebrow at her but complied with her request. "Is that what accounts for those hollow eyes," he asked, "a week's binge?"

"Andy," Marcy cautioned, "wait until we're comfortably seated and you have your drink in hand. Then I'll tell you all about my week of fun and games."

One hour and twenty minutes later, Andy finished the last swallow of his third drink and Marcy finished recounting the events of the week. Mr. Gately had called, bid her welcome, and agreed to put off their meeting until the next morning. Their dinner had been ordered, and was expected momentarily. Andy regarded her with compassion. "You poor thing. It wasn't exactly a week of sunbathing, was it?"

"Not exactly." A knock on the door cut her answer short. Andy got up to answer the summons. Two waiters carried in a small round table, complete with white linen, shining silver, and a single rosebud in an elegant cut-glass vase. The waiters placed the table carefully near the fire, and then rolled in a hot tray with the food. After putting the appetizer, cold smoked trout with creamed horseradish, in place, one waiter asked if they would prefer to serve the rest of the meal themselves.

"Yes, thank you," Marcy responded graciously.

The second waiter reentered with a wine bucket. "A bottle of Shramsberg Champagne," he said. "Compliments of Mr. Gately. Shall I open it for you?"

"No, no," Andy interjected hurriedly, "I'll take care of it." As soon as the men had left, Andy picked up the bottle, surveyed it approvingly, and put it into the refrigerator. "Shramsberg makes mighty fine champagne," he said, "far too nice to waste on us tonight."

"I thought you could always handle good wine," Marcy teased.

"Unfortunately, I was moved to a level of over-indulgence by the cheerful recounting of your trip through the looking glass. How did you manage to bypass the mad hatter?"

"I'm not sure I did," Marcy said as she sat before the tempting trout. "I think she may have been the one serving mysterious entrées at the Ventana."

"Very possible." Andy lifted his glass of ice water in a toast. "Well, here's to the TV special, at any rate. Drink deeply of this stuff, Marcy, my sweet. I do believe you need some of it in your veins." They looked across the table at each other, shook their heads in shared bewilderment at the turn of events, and then tackled their meals with gusto.

The next morning Marcy awoke feeling greatly improved. Despite her inclination to keep talking, Andy had insisted that she go to bed early. It had been an excellent idea. She got out of bed eagerly and crossed to the window. What a glorious sight! The bright sun bounced off the carefully spaced vines that grew close to the building. She crossed to the other view and sighed with pleasure at the show of brilliant blossoms in the numerous beds at the rear of the inn. By craning her neck slightly she could just make out the corner of the barn-theatre.

She hurried to get dressed. She was to meet Alan Gately downstairs at nine, and then they would take a tour of the facilities and meet some of the people involved. Andy had already seen everything and was going off on a picnic with a girl he'd already managed to meet in the two days he'd been there. "One more on his list," Marcy marveled to herself. "That man is amazing." She opened one of the windows wide to check the temperature. One never knew in this part of the state. It could be fairly chilly to quite warm, but rarely to the extreme of either. It was warm today, so she put on a cotton dress, sandals, and a light sweater. It was nice to look forward to the day once more.

Mr. Gately was waiting for her in the lobby. He hurried forward the moment he spotted her. "Good morning, Miss Hanson." He took her offered hand. "I hope you slept well."

"Just beautifully, thank you. The rooms are lovely, and the bed is very comfortable."

"That's good. I'm delighted that you're satisfied."

"I am indeed. And, by the way, please call me Marcy."

"We're going to be working together for quite a while, and formality makes me nervous."

For the first time, his face really relaxed into a smile. "I'd like that. And of course, I'm Alan. Well, are we ready for the grand tour?" She followed him out into the sun-drenched morning. The apple tree right outside the door was laden with blossoms and full of singing birds. The wide lawn that Marcy had spotted from her window stretched like a green carpet along the back of the inn. There were four large flowerbeds bursting with early blooms. The vineyards ran for acres off to the side, and the pungent odor of growing things filled the air. A touch of buoyancy crept into Marcy's step as they followed the stone pathway to the barn.

It was a very special place, this valley. From the first time Marcy had seen it, she had longed to live here. Zoning restrictions protected the land from being chopped up in the usual small California house lots. The wine makers had joined together in an effort to protect this unique irreplaceable terrain with its near-perfect climate from the acquisitive developers. Even the French envied them the steady temperature so vital to the crops.

They had reached the front of the new theatre. The original barn, an unusually large one, had been preserved. A small box office had been added to the left side, and a sizable covered patio adjoined it. There were patio chairs and benches, lots of greenery, and, to the rear of the area, a neat, unobtrusive bar.

"This is lovely," Marcy observed. As they walked through the patio, she could see that a huge new wing had been added so ingeniously to the back of the building that it was virtually invisible from the front. "That houses the

dressing rooms, the scenery workshop and storage area, and a prop and costume room," Alan pointed out. "You'll see it all when we go in." They headed for the wide doorway on the side of the barn under the patio roof.

She followed Alan inside. "Wow!" Marcy stopped, her eyes wide with astonishment. "This is fantastic. Someone has put a lot of money right up front for this."

"That's true," Alan concurred. "Our backers wanted everything done correctly right from the start. They felt it would be cheaper in the long run."

"Very nice." Marcy's eyes traveled around the interior. "Most theatres never reach this kind of a long run. I'm impressed."

The interior was done in earth tones, from the sand shade of the carpet to the soft brick color of the luxuriant upholstered seats. The floor was graded to insure clear viewing. There was one balcony that curved around to the edges of the stage. Above it, in back, was the lighting booth. The whole place exuded an elegance practically never found in any theatre, let alone a community theatre.

Marcy was given a comprehensive tour of the entire facility. She asked numerous questions, all of which were answered patiently and definitively by her guide. The seating capacity was seven hundred and fifty. The lighting board was unbelievable. "You could light up New York," Marcy marveled. There were innumerable tools in the huge scenery-building room, and space to store complete sets for seven shows. At the end of the tour, Marcy sank into one of the comfortable seats in the front row. "I'm astonished," she said. "This is far more elaborate than I ever would have dreamed."

Alan beamed with pride. "We have high hopes for this place," he said. "We envision someday having one of the finest resident companies in the country, with year-round workshops and productions. We have, as you've noted, extensive financial backing. Now you see why we were so anxious that the opening attraction be a success. There's a lot riding on it."

Marcy looked around her in wonder. "I should say there is," she agreed.

"My goodness." Alan checked his watch. "It's noon already." He stood. "I have a lunch meeting with three of our backers. I'm sure they'd love to meet you, if you'd care to join us."

"What's the plan for the rest of the day?" Marcy asked.

"Actually, you can do whatever you like. There'll be a cocktail party in the sunroom at seven. All the cast members are invited, as well as production crew, backers, and some of our local luminaries. We talked to your secretary about it on the phone, and she seemed to feel you wouldn't mind attending."

"It sounds fine." Marcy hesitated. "In that case, do you mind if I skip the lunch? I have a feeling we'll be inside a good deal for the next few weeks, and I'd like to get some fresh air."

"Not at all. Perfectly understandable." They walked out into the warm air side by side. "I don't think the luncheon will be all that much fun, and there's no reason for you to be stuck at it. That sort of thing is the producer's chore, not the star's."

"Thanks for the fascinating tour," Marcy enthused. "I'll try to do my share tonight by being star-like." That earned a chuckle from Alan as he strode toward the inn.

When Marcy returned to her room, she saw that the bed had been made, everything straightened, and the windows opened for fresh air. She closed the door behind her, aware of a creeping sensation of loneliness that began to assail her. "Damn," she muttered, "I hope this isn't going to happen every time I have to be by myself for five minutes." She was suddenly sorry that she'd adamantly refused Andy's offer to break his date and stay with her. Her eyes darted around restlessly. What should she do for the afternoon? Unless she kept busy, she knew exactly where her mind would go. She knew she should study the script, but she didn't feel ready to concentrate.

A rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the door. Surprised, she went to open it. There stood a roguish-looking young man with dark brown hair and a wide grin. Behind him stood two girls and an older man. "Miss Hanson?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Sure an' it's a mighty fine honor we're feelin' in welcomin' you." The suddenly acquired Irish brogue made him appear for all the world like an oversized imp as, with a great flourish, he presented her with an enormous bouquet of brightly colored flowers. "And it's happy we are to present these to you from us, your fellow thespians."

With as impressive a stage bow as she could muster on such short notice, Marcy accepted the gift. "Why thank you," she said stepping to one side. "Please come in." She was enormously relieved to be so unexpectedly intruded upon. The jaunty troupe filed in, blatantly inspecting their surroundings as they did. "If I may be so bold," Marcy inquired, "which of my fellow thespians are you?"

The imp again stepped forward. "Since I have already thrust myself stage center, I feel I should try to maintain that position as long as possible, competition being what it is. In other words, allow me to make the introductions." Disregarding the moans from behind him, he proceeded. "I am Jeb Blake, hereafter to be known as Nathan Detroit. This here goil," he said with a bow to the slightly stocky blond girl with green eyes that were crinkling in laughter, "is my lady love, Adelaide. Or, in case you desire the real-life moniker, this is Becky Sterns."

Becky smiled her hello. "Delighted to meet you, Marcy. Bear with Jeb: he wanted to be a clown, but the circus went broke."

"No editorializing, please." Jeb was once more in control. "Right here," — he took the hand of the other girl, whose delicate grace had already betrayed her profession — "is the greatest little dancer in the land, Jill Craytor." Marcy smiled as Jill made a deep ballet bow. "And, last but not least," Jeb continued, "your father."

The dignified gray-haired man took her hand, bent in grand manner, and kissed it. "A great honor. Miss Hanson."

"So you're Ben Winter," Marcy said. "I'm truly delighted to meet all of you. You've brightened up what was beginning to look like a rather dreary afternoon. Thank you for the flowers and the welcome."

"Aha!" Jeb exclaimed. "Strange that you should mention dreary afternoons. The truth of the matter is that we have had four of those in a row. All of us, closeted away in a dark room with our director, running lines. Since we've been offered a few hours of respite, we're going on a real, honest-to-God wine tour. We would like to invite you to accompany us."

"Why thank you. I'd love to."

"That's great!" Becky enthused. Then, turning to Jeb, she taunted, "And you said we'd have to talk her into it! Your famous powers of persuasion weren't even necessary."

Marcy laughed. "If you'd like me to act reluctant for a while, I'd be glad to," she offered.

"No, no," Ben interceded, "the time will be much better spent sampling the nectar of the gods. We'll let Jeb here practice his verbal skills during rehearsals. I'm sure we can offer him plenty of opportunities for arbitration, if not persuasion." They all agreed. Tempers often flared on a set, and a light hearted "court jester" could be an asset. After making arrangements to meet in the lobby in half an hour, the visiting delegation departed.

The lonely hours that had loomed before her became an afternoon filled with laughter, wine-tasting, and a growing camaraderie with her fellow actors. Marcy had great fun sharing her knowledge about wine. At the end of the tour at the lovely hilltop Sterling Vineyards, they were comfortably seated on the warm terrace with generous portions of several fine wines to taste. Jeb raised his wine glass to Marcy.

"To you, dear lady, an open invitation to go on all our outings. You are a delightful companion." They all joined the toast in a spirit of affection and good fellowship. Marcy felt immense relief and pleasure to know that the next few weeks would be spent with good people who didn't seem to view her stardom with envy or anger.

They fell quite naturally into discussions of the rehearsals that would begin the next day. As the afternoon shadows fell across the valley, Marcy's mind began to wander. "Where are you, Dirk?" she silently mused. "So near and yet so far."

"Hey gang!" Jeb was calling for attention. "If we're going to get back in time to get that snooze we were all aiming for before the cocktail party, we'd better get a move on." With reluctance, they left the warm haven and started back to the inn.

There was a knock on the door. "Be right there," Marcy called from the bathroom. She gave herself one last look, then hurried to open the door.

Andy walked in, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and said, "You look sensational."

Marcy smiled. "Thank you, kind sir. I attempted to dress like a star attraction." She had carefully tried to capture both the casual style of the California valley, plus some semblance of glitter that would be, if not expected, at least appreciated by her hosts.

She wore Italian designed evening pants and a matching top of soft silk in shades of delicately muted pinks and lavenders. She knew the set emphasized her trim figure and accented the beauty of her hair and skin.

"Most successful, m'dear," Andy confirmed, looking at her with obvious admiration. "Are you ready to descend and join the festive gathering?"

"Is it a festive gathering?" Marcy asked. "I thought no one would be here yet."

"Unhappily, that is not the case. We seem to be dealing with compulsive on-timers. I went downstairs to have what I thought would be a solitary drink at the bar, to give you a little extra time, but I retreated swiftly when I sighted a small crowd in the sunroom. We are definitely not in New York City, more's the pity."

"Hey, that rhymes!" Marcy gave Andy an affectionate pat on the shoulder as they entered the hall. "Now come on, Andy, all this fresh air and sunshine is going to be good for you. And you already have a girl pursuing you! Who knows, maybe this one will turn out to be your true love."

"Not a chance," he protested. "My true love is very large and has eighty-eight black and white ivory teeth. I have, as you well know, been burned a few times in the romance department myself. The difference between us is that I learn from my mistakes."

Marcy winced. "Ouch. A direct hit, that was."

"As for the rest of your California exhortations, I personally believe too much fresh air and sunshine to be injurious to one's health."

"You're hopeless," Marcy scolded. They had reached the entrance to the sunroom. "You're right, it is festive," she observed. "Also lovely. Look at all those beautiful bouquets."

"Yeah," Andy grumbled, "cutting all those poor, innocent flowers off in their prime. Should be a law."

Alan caught sight of them and hurried across to join them. "Good evening, Marcy, Andy." Looking approvingly at Marcy, he remarked, "You are absolutely dazzling this evening. I'm sure you could hold center stage any-

where without even opening your mouth. Come meet some of our friends." Leading them to a small group standing near the bar, he explained, "These are some of the people who've helped us get started. Our main backer hasn't arrived yet, but we expect him shortly. Folks, it gives me great pleasure to introduce Marcy Hanson and Andy Wallace. Marcy and Andy, this is Ken and Jean Black, George and Irene Johnson, and Jeff Nichols."

As enthusiastic greetings were exchanged, a waiter approached. "May I take your order?" he asked. Marcy glanced around, observed that everyone seemed to be drinking white wine, and ordered white wine. Andy glanced around, and, making the same observation, ordered an extra dry martini.

It was soon explained that Jeff was the legal counsel, George the financial advisor, and Ken and Jean were investors. "As I told Alan this morning," Marcy remarked, "I was flabbergasted by the theatre. It's truly sumptuous. You're all to be congratulated on your efforts."

Jean Black looked pleased. "I'm so glad you're impressed; we really are proud of it. All of us wanted it to be very special. And luckily we had someone who was willing to put up as much money as we needed to do it all just right. Of course Ken and I invested what we could, but I'm afraid it would've been necessary to set definite limits if it all had to be up to people like us."

"It sounds like you have what is known in the trade as a golden angel," Marcy observed. "When do we meet this magnificent mogul?" At that point the waiter reappeared with their order. Marcy accepted her wine, raised it in tribute to her companions, and took a small sip. Andy, whose silence had luckily not been noticed, took his martini and swallowed about half of it. Marcy gave him a sympathetic wink. Andy hated this kind of occasion more than almost anything, and Marcy knew he would watch for the first possible chance to inconspicuously slip away.

"Very soon, I hope," Alan said in answer to Marcy's question.

"Ah," declared George, tapping Alan on the shoulder, "speaking of our mogul, here he is now." They all turned toward the entrance.

"Jesus," Andy muttered. He downed the second half of his drink and signaled to the waiter for another. Marcy stood glued to the spot, the color draining from her face.

Dirk Baxter stood just inside the French doors, speaking to a man and woman who had gone to meet him. He was obviously introducing the girl who stood at his side.

Andy, who was placing his order, leaned to whisper in Marcy's ear, "How about a martini?"

Marcy nodded. "Please." Andy turned from the waiter and put a protective arm around Marcy. Everyone's attention was riveted on the couple by the door. Marcy's eyes shifted from Dirk to the girl beside him. She was tall and

very slender. Willowy, Marcy thought. That's what they mean by willowy. "Oh, Andy," she moaned, "why does she have to be so beautiful?"

"She doesn't hold a candle to you, babe." Totally consumed by jealousy, Marcy ignored his observation.

"Excuse me for a minute, Marcy." Alan was addressing her. "I'll go and let Dirk know you're here. Dirk Baxter is the 'angel' we were discussing. I'm sure you'll enjoy meeting him." Alan started across the room, followed by the Johnsons, the Blacks, and Jeff Nichols. Dirk was obviously a man to be courted by all.

"You'll enjoy meeting him!" Andy fumed. "Doesn't that guy read the papers?"

"Probably not the eastern ones," Marcy said. "Besides, Dirk and I were an item a long time ago." She accepted the martini from the waiter, took a gulp, and leaned against Andy's arm.

Jennifer Stanton was blond and impeccably elegant. "She looks like Philadelphia Main Line, British aristocracy, and the Boston Brahmin all rolled into one," Marcy sighed. She suddenly felt gauche and ugly. "I feel like I just grew warts all over my body," she muttered.

"Marcy, let's cut out of here and go back to New York. We'll cable that you broke out in hives from exposure to grape vines. Who needs this? Look at you, you're quivering. Hell, here he comes." Andy dropped his arm and faced the approaching Dirk and his entourage.

"Andy," Marcy pleaded, "please be civil."

Andy grunted as Alan effusively addressed them. "I find that you're all old friends. Isn't that nice!"

"Marcy, how nice to see you again." Dirk took her by the hands and kissed her on the cheek, for all the world as though they were fond acquaintances who hadn't been in touch for ages. "Andy, how are you?" Andy reluctantly shook Dirk's extended hand, and edged closer to Marcy, clearly trying to give her quiet support. "Jennifer," — Dirk drew the girl forward — "meet Marcy Hanson and Andy Wallace. Andy and Marcy, this is Jennifer Stanton."

Jennifer graciously offered a slim hand in a firm handshake. "I'm perfectly charmed to meet both of you. I've heard so much about you." She beamed at them, sliding her arm through Dirk's. "I think it's so cute of Dirk to surprise me like this. I had no idea that the two of you had once dated each other. Of course, I must have been just starting college at the time. I must admit I've had very little exposure to show business." She blinked her hazel eyes adoringly at Dirk.

"It's very nice to meet you," Marcy replied, forcing herself to smile at Jennifer. "And Dirk, what a surprise to see you here. I had no idea you were connected with this project." The accusation was in her eyes as she glared at him. How could you have sprung this on me, it wordlessly demanded.

Dirk fixed her with a stony stare. "I didn't anticipate when we started the theatre that you'd be the first major attraction."

"Wasn't that a coincidence!" Jennifer snuggled closer to Dirk. "I'm sure they couldn't have made a better choice." The tone was gratuitous. "Marcy really is exactly what one would expect a glamorous star to be, isn't she, darling?"

Marcy felt the warts increasing in girth. How could anyone look so far down such a short nose?

"Yes, isn't she," Dirk agreed. He put his arm around Jennifer, causing such an acute pain to pass through Marcy's heart that she winced.

Andy gripped her elbow. "Marcy, I think our cohorts are trying to get our attention. Maybe we should excuse ourselves." He gave Jennifer a broad, phony grin. "I'd invite you to meet them," he said, "but they only speak the-atreese."

It was clear that Jennifer did not know how to take Andy. Her meticulous upbringing kept the smile pasted on her lips. Dirk's arm tightened about her in a protective gesture. "Of course," he said, "I'm sure Marcy is anxious to return to her own kind."

Suddenly a number of things clicked into place in Marcy's mind. Of course. It all began to make sense. The reason for the last-minute call for dinner at the Ventana. He hadn't been interested in whether or not she ate. He'd wanted her to know what she had passed up. He'd had to be sure she knew about the winery — just as he had to flaunt this aristocratic girl before her. Behind that reasonable, calm exterior was a very angry man — a man who did not suffer two rejections lightly. He wanted to hurt her. He was undoubtedly enjoying every sign of discomfort she betrayed. A wave of pure fury engulfed her.

She straightened perceptibly and gave Jennifer one of her brightest stage smiles. "Well, to tell the truth, we show business types are a bit clannish. I'm afraid we're guilty of a peculiar type of snobbery. We often feel we live in a special world that outsiders just don't understand."

She turned all of her wattage on Dirk. "It really was cute of you to surprise us like this. Dirk, my dear." She could see that her use of Jennifer's language was not lost on him. She rushed ahead, "After all, the party is for me, isn't it? Alan did want me to be charming to all these nice people."

Taking Andy's arm, she gave Dirk a deliberately provocative look. "Dirk, I can't tell you how impressed Andy and I are with this whole setup. The theatre is marvelous. I'm sure you'll be able to lure some very capable performers for brief appearances. After all, it's fun to see the country. And you have all those darling grapes everywhere. Oh, look, Andy, some of the other actors just came in."

She stepped forward and gave Dirk a quick kiss on the cheek. "Lovely to see you. Dirk. I do hope this won't be the only time. And Jennifer," — she

gave the startled girl a hearty handshake — “it’s been such fun talking with you. It’s always interesting to meet one’s understudy.”

She feigned embarrassment. “Oh, of course I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. It’s kind of a theatre joke.” With that she sailed off across the room, flashing her five-hundred-watt smile at everyone she passed en route, leaving a smoldering Dirk and a somewhat deflated Jennifer behind.

When they were safely out of range, Andy sidled in close and rasped in her ear, “Just what the hell was that all about?”

“I got mad,” Marcy snapped.

Andy chuckled. “I guess you did. It was quite a performance. I’d applaud, but it might be conspicuous. Anyway, three cheers for you, Sarah Bernhardt!”

They had reached their destination and were immediately engulfed in the high-spirited group of actors. They were all raucous and silly and full of good cheer. Marcy joined in the banter with gusto, managing for all the world to look like she was having a wonderful time. She was introduced to at least two dozen admiring people. She said all the right things, obviously captivating everyone she talked to. She could not, at any moment during the entire party, have recalled one name or one matter discussed or one face other than the one that mentally obscured all the others. She could, however, have recalled the exact moment when Dirk and Jennifer left the party. She had put down the unfinished martini and refused any more drinks, knowing she would need all her faculties to make it through the evening.

Andy, who detested crowds, detested striving to impress anyone, detested small talk — in short, detested cocktail parties — stuck by her to the end, staunch friend that he was. Finally, as the crowd thinned out and all the local dignitaries, contributors, and participants had been met and charmed, Marcy, clutching Andy’s arm firmly, said her good-byes to Alas and the others, refusing, with infinite grace, all the dinner invitations that were offered.

As soon as they were outside of the room, Andy asked, “Got the keys to your car?”

Marcy shook her head. “I don’t have my purse.”

Andy, with a look of sudden enlightenment, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the keys. “Of course she doesn’t have the keys, you jerk,” he sputtered at himself, “you have them.” He’d borrowed her car that afternoon for his picnic.

“Where are we going?” Marcy asked.

“To get something to eat. With a little luck we can find a place that’s run by some guy who doesn’t serve wine, who hates show business, and who won’t know you from a hole in the wall.”

"That may be possible. I feel a little like a hole in the wall right now."

They drove out of town with a conspiratorial feeling of escape, both anxious to put the bad scene behind them. When they reached Sonoma, Marcy remembered a couple of restaurants she had eaten in years before. "Feel like Mexican or French?"

"French."

"Then turn right up ahead."

They were soon settled in a corner of Au Relais, sipping champagne. "Andy, how did I get into this?" Marcy groaned.

"You did it all by your little self," he reminded her. "You did it against the wishes of your agent, your accompanist, your secretary, and the entire population of New York City."

"You're a big help," Marcy protested.

Andy leaned back. "Well, don't ask a question if you don't want the answer. Besides, how you got into it is yesterday's news. How we are going to get you out of it is the topic of tonight's meeting."

"Andy, I can't get out of it. I have a contract."

"Contracts have been broken before."

"But all those people are counting on me. I've never deliberately walked out of a commitment in my life."

"I don't know if you'll live through this one, babe. Besides, Dirk is the big investor. I should think you might enjoy seeing him take a bath."

"Now be realistic, Andy. Dirk would hardly feel it. It's the other, smaller investors who would be hurt — plus the people whose jobs depend on the theatre right now. There are a lot of high hopes riding on that project."

"They could find a replacement."

"Not a good one. Not at the last minute like this."

"Then what's the answer?"

Marcy shook her head and shrugged. They both knew there wasn't one. She had made the commitment and she was stuck with it. Andy signaled the waiter and they placed their order. He then picked up his glass and took a sip of the delicious Shramsberg Blanc de Blanc.

"Andy," Marcy said thoughtfully, "why don't you marry me?"

There was an explosion of coughing as Andy choked on his drink. With a great deal of spluttering and throat clearing, he finally regained his composure. He glared at Marcy in reproof. "For God's sake, woman, don't hit me with something like that in the middle of a swallow. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Does marrying me sound that awful?"

"Marcy, it's not that I'm not overwhelmed by your proposal. It's just that it is, to make the world's greatest understatement, unexpected."

"Why not?" she teased. "We're best friends, we work together, talk over everything, enjoy the same things. Why, come to think of it, we're the perfect couple."

Andy assumed a contemplative expression. "Since I seem to be on the receiving end of this offbeat proposal, I feel entitled to ask the traditional question. Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you."

"Not brotherly love, not best-friend love. When I walk into a room are you aquiver and agog? Do you get hot loins?"

"Andy!" Marcy actually blushed. "What a question!"

"Under the circumstances, it seems like a perfectly legitimate question to me. No hot loins, no marriage."

"Now Andy." Marcy was beginning to enjoy the banter. "Don't toss this off too lightly. We really should consider the advantages. Just think, when the next girl in your life tried to corner you into marriage, you could just look very solemn and say, 'Sorry my dear, but I must confess that I'm already married, and my wife won't set me free.' Just think of the safety factor!"

Andy looked decidedly skeptical. "And I suppose you would automatically lose all response to that certain man just because you were wearing a wedding ring?"

"Of course! What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

Andy sat quietly studying her face, and when he spoke, his tone was serious. "The problem is, my sweet, that if you had been able to say yes to that embarrassing question I asked, I'd marry you tomorrow. But my feelings, I fear, have a certain intensity that is decidedly lacking in yours. I learned to tamp it down long ago, and at this point I enjoy my life as it is. I enjoy our relationship and the closeness we share. I enjoy being around to pick you up and dust you off when you need it. But a marriage of convenience wouldn't work. I'd want the rest of the package. And all those wonderful things we are to each other would begin to dissolve in squabbles and accusations, and we'd lose something incredible."

He reached across the table to take her hand. "And the first time Dirk Baxter walked into a room and I saw the way you react, I'd go out and tie on a week-long binge. And that would make my fingers swell and spoil my piano playing."

Marcy tightened her hold on his hand. She felt contrite and remorseful for bringing up the subject. She really hadn't known that he had those feelings for her. "Damn!" she blurted, "damn, damn, damn! Why is life so unfair? You're the nicest man I know. Why can't I react to you that way? Every other woman you go out with does. Maybe with just a little concentration . . ."

Andy laughed aloud. "As a matter of fact, this is the third proposal I've had in the last six months. It is a bit exhausting fighting off the advances. Why

don't we eat this sumptuous meal they're about to serve, get pleasantly squashed on champagne, and forget the whole thing?"

Marcy looked at him with concern. "Andy, I hope I haven't hurt you."

He returned her solemn gaze. "You have never hurt me, Marcy, not once. And what I told you is true. I do thoroughly enjoy my life. I am essentially a loner, and I like my privacy. All I ask is that this conversation not put any constrictions on our friendship. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

They toasted each other ceremoniously and turned their attention to the gourmet treat that had been placed before them.

A couple of hours later, as Andy bid Marcy goodnight at her door, he stood uncertainly, looking at his feet.

"What's the matter?" Marcy asked.

"Against my better judgment, I'm going to say something to you." He was perceptibly trying to formulate his statement. "Marcy, maybe you should go to Dirk, tell him you love him and want to marry him, and seriously give him the chance you offered me tonight in jest. He's the one you love, and you'd never convince me that he actually wants to settle down with that starched pinnacle from Rhode Island." He looked at her sternly. "Give the guy a chance, Marcy. Give both of you a chance before it's too late."

Marcy wasn't sure what she was feeling. Was it hope, or fear, or simply exhaustion? "Andy, I'm afraid it's already too late. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I could stand another round."

"It's got to be your decision." He kissed her lightly and turned to go. Looking back over his shoulder, he said, "Oh, by the way, sorry to refuse your kind offer of marriage. If you ever want to just shack up, I'd be glad to reconsider."

She laughed. "Get out of here, you keyboard Romeo. No wonder theatrical people have a bad name."

"Get some sleep, babe," Andy called back to her as he headed down the stairs. "The pace will be grueling starting tomorrow."

"As opposed to the rest and relaxation I've had for the last couple of weeks, you mean?" Her last remark was acknowledged by a smile and wave as Andy disappeared down the steps.

Marcy went through the sitting room into the bedroom and reached in to turn on the bathroom light. Maybe she'd take a hot bath before retiring. It usually helped her to sleep.

When she was luxuriously soaking in a tubful of hot bubbles, she thought about what Andy had suggested. What would happen if she did call Dirk? What if Andy was right? The thought that she might be losing out on a chance to spend the rest of her life in Dirk's arms was terrifying. There had to be a way to work out their problems.

She climbed out of the tub, dried herself off, and put on a warm bathrobe. Padding barefoot to the phone, she dialed information and asked if they had a number for Dirk Baxter.

There was a brief silence as the girl checked. "Are you sure it's in St. Helena?" she asked.

"No, I just know he's somewhere in this area." Silence again. Marcy's heart began to skip beats.

"Oh, here's a Dirk Baxter in Calistoga. It's a fairly new number. Could that be it?"

"Yes, I'm sure it must be."

The operator gave her the number.

"Thank you very much." Marcy depressed the button and sat with the receiver in her hand, the dial tone buzzing angrily. Finally, with a shaking finger, she punched the buttons. The thudding of her heart was so loud she wasn't sure she'd hear an answer if one came.

"Hello?"

Marcy jammed the receiver back into the cradle. She sat stunned. Why hadn't she thought of that? The voice had been unmistakable. Jennifer was staying with Dirk.

How stupid can you be, she fumed at herself. Why hadn't she considered it? This wasn't exactly the dark ages. Any girl in her right mind would want to stay with Dirk. Any girl in her right mind. Guess what that makes you, you boob, she raged inwardly.

She pulled the robe off angrily, threw it on the floor, grabbed her nightgown off the bed and jerked it on over her head. This has got to end, she thought. I don't have time for this. I must get on with my life. To hell with Dirk Baxter! Somehow, she thought as she turned off the last light and climbed into bed, that has a familiar ring.

6

The following week flew by. The schedule really was grueling. The blocking started immediately the first morning of rehearsals. Most lines and songs had been learned before the on-stage work began, and once the scenes were fully blocked, books were disallowed and the pace accelerated daily. The other cast members were excellent, and fun to work with. Bruce Engels, the director, was not so pleasant. The twinge of doubt Marcy had felt when she first met him was justified. Bruce tended to be snide and critical in his directing technique. He regularly had several of the girls in tears, and Marcy found that unforgivable. She tried to avoid an open clash with him, because she knew how destructive a war between star and director could be, but her patience was stretched thinner by the day. She found herself working during her free time to help coach some of the cast members and bolster their frayed egos. She finally decided that someone had to speak to Alan about the director's scathing personal attacks on the actors, and that she was the only one to do it. At the end of one tension-packed day she knew she'd reached her limit. She wanted badly to go straight to her room. She was fatigued, grubby, and hungry, but she knew she should try to

catch Alan if he was around. She was afraid she couldn't hold her temper in check much longer.

She went toward the inn to Alan's office to see if he was still there. She was glad to see a light in his window.

She knocked on his door, and, hearing him call "come in," she entered. She was immediately overcome by an urge to flee. Alan sat at his desk, which was covered by papers, and in a chair to the right of the desk sat Dirk. The two men stood to greet her. She stifled the impulse to turn and run.

"Marcy, good evening. What a pleasant surprise." Alan circled the desk to clasp her hand.

The laser beams that Dirk wore as eyes were penetrating her cheek. "Hello, Marcy," he said simply.

She turned to face him, her heart lodged firmly in her throat. "Hello, Dirk," she replied before turning to Alan. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but there's a matter concerning the cast that I need to discuss with you. Could you call me when you're free?"

"Well, Marcy, Dirk and I are going to be at this for quite a while. I'm sure there's nothing that can't be aired in front of him. After all, he's just as involved in all of this as I am. Have a seat."

Marcy hesitated, then sat down and reluctantly recounted the events of the past days. There was a long silence, during which Marcy nervously waited, feeling like an errant schoolgirl about to have her punishment meted out. It was intolerable to be in this position before Dirk, but there had been no alternative. After what seemed an eternity, Alan, to Marcy's complete astonishment, broke into a grin, jumped to his feet, and stuck out his hand to Dirk. "Hot damn, what a relief! That solves the problem!" Dirk returned the smile as they shook hands. "It certainly does," he agreed.

"I don't get it," Marcy said a trifle peevishly. "I thought this was a serious matter."

"And so it is," Alan assured her, settling back into his chair. "It's just that right before you came in we were discussing Bruce Engels. Both Dirk and I, along with a number of the other backers and production people, think that Bruce has turned out to be a real pain in the prat. The one factor in his favor, or so we thought, was that the cast seemed to be happy with him."

Marcy was open-mouthed. "You're kidding!" she exclaimed.

"Not at all." Alan handed her a paper containing a list of names. "These are possible replacements for him in the future. We thought it was too late to rock the boat now, but all of us are in this at least partially for pleasure, and we see no reason to work with, to put it bluntly, a surly sorehead."

Marcy sagged in relief. "And I was so scared I might get everyone into a mess by offending him."

"All directors have a different approach, but Bruce is just plain mean, and that works against the show, not for it."

Marcy smiled at Alan. "Most people just need a little T.L.C.," she said, becoming aware of Dirk's eyes on her the moment the words came out of her mouth. "Luckily," she continued with a trace of belligerence, "some of us can survive on our own."

"Oh, I don't know," Dirk interjected. "I don't know anyone who really can."

Marcy couldn't meet his gaze. She just wanted to leave as quickly as possible, but as she opened her mouth to excuse herself and say good night, Alan spoke. "You must be exhausted, Marcy," he sympathized. "I had no idea how hard you were working. You should get out of here for a day for a change of pace." His face lit up as an idea obviously presented itself. "You know Dirk has made incredible progress on his vineyards. He's going to have quite a spread when he's through. Have you seen his setup, Marcy?"

"No, I haven't." She could almost smell what was coming next, and her mind zigzagged crazily to find an escape as Alan ploughed on. "Dirk, you should take Marcy for a tour. I'm sure she'd be fascinated, and by this time I bet she'd enjoy a breath of fresh air."

Marcy's eyes wavered to Dirk's, expecting to find the same signs of entrapment she was experiencing. Instead he looked downright pleased.

"Wonderful idea," he agreed. "It would give me great pleasure to show Marcy around my place."

Of course it would, Marcy fumed inside. It would give you the chance to turn the knife. She forced a smile. "That's sweet of you to offer," she gushed, "but of course the rehearsal schedule doesn't allow for any play time."

"Nonsense," Alan boomed, holding the schedule in front of him. "You aren't on call at all tomorrow." He glanced up, obviously pleased that he could offer her this time off. "Dirk, could you spare some time?"

Please, Marcy prayed, let him have twenty-two appointments.

Dirk's smile was dazzling. "As a matter of fact, tomorrow would be perfect. Why don't I pick you up at ten in the morning, Marcy. It'll give us a nice full day together."

Marcy glared at him. She hoped he could read her mind: the names she was calling him would curl his toes. "I don't know," she sputtered, "I sort of wanted to be here tomorrow, in case the cast needs some moral support."

"Don't worry about that," Alan reassured. He stood, crossed to her side, and patted her shoulder. "I'll be here."

She felt the vise tighten. She couldn't seem to come up with any other excuses. "All right," she choked, "that's very nice of you." She stood and, with a weak smile, said good night.

Dirk stepped forward to open the door. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow," he murmured, touching her arm as he spoke.

She wondered if Alan could smell the flesh sizzling. "Yes, me too," she gasped as she made her escape into the hall. She rushed to the end of the corridor, then slumped against the wall to regain her breath. Just when she was getting her feet back under her. Could she really manage to get through the next three weeks and leave this valley in one piece? "Not if I keep running into Dirk," she mumbled as she pushed her tired body toward the stairs.

The waiting was sheer torture. Marcy paced back and forth in and out of the two rooms, glancing nervously at the bedside clock as she passed. It was only 9:47, still thirteen endless minutes of waiting time. How could she make it through the day? This could well be the most excruciating day of her life. She was to be paraded past all of her dreams, given a guided tour of paradise, then dropped back to earth with a full-sized picture in living color of the woman who would replace her in Utopia imprinted forever in her mind. Why was she doing this? Why didn't she simply say, "No way, José," and refuse? Face it, Marcy, she taunted herself, because you can't pass up the chance to spend a day with Dirk.

A sudden knock on the door made her jump. Oh, no, he was here. She was infuriated to see how badly her hand shook as she picked up her shoulder bag. This must be how Marie Antoinette felt, she thought, when they came to take her to the guillotine. She paused, made a gargantuan and largely unsuccessful effort to steady herself, then opened the door. Dirk looked wonderful.

"Hello, Marcy. Ready to go?" he asked.

Anywhere, her mind replied. "Yes, I'm all set," she said aloud. They walked quietly side by side down the stairs and out into the brilliant sunshine. What a beautiful day for an execution, Marcy speculated. I wonder when the drums will start to roll.

"My car is right over here." Dirk took her elbow to guide her to the side driveway. The vehicle he led her to was an open battered Jeep covered with clay colored dust.

"How the mighty have fallen," Marcy quipped.

Dirk laughed. "It's the only sure way to get to some of the back acres. I've grown very fond of it."

"Does it have a name?" Marcy asked as she climbed in.

"No. I don't name things anymore."

She shot a sidelong glance at him but could read no expression on his face. Dirk had had a name for everything when she'd known him before. It had delighted him to find just the right title for things. When they'd started seeing each other, all of the names he thought up had something to do with her, or them, or an event they'd shared together. The day was starting off just dandy.

Dirk drove the Jeep with sure expertise. They soon left the main road and headed off on narrow dirt tracks that zigzagged a crazy pattern across an unplanted field. "Is this your land already?" Marcy inquired.

"No, not yet, but it does belong to a good friend, and it's closer and more fun than the main roads." He suddenly swung the Jeep under an enormous eucalyptus tree, stopped, and turned to her. "Marcy, I really do want to show you my vineyards and my house. I've wanted to ever since I bought them. This isn't easy for me, and I have a feeling it isn't easy for you, either. But you asked me that night at the Nepenthe if we could try to put everything aside and pretend that we were two good friends sharing a few hours. It would mean a lot to me if we could do that today."

When he looked at her like that she would gladly give him every hair on her head.

"We'll try to have our defenses in place in advance to guard against any repeat fall-backs. Is it a deal?" he queried.

She nodded assent, in direct opposition to every instinct she had, all of which were screaming at her to run, flee, scream for help.

"Great!" he exclaimed.

The Jeep sped them on their way to the far side of the flat field, then to the base of a hill and onto another dirt road that wound around and around, higher and higher.

"Where are we?" Marcy's hair was whipping around her face, and she was fighting a losing battle to keep it out of her eyes.

"We're just entering Calistoga; couldn't you tell?"

"How could I tell? The only view I'm getting is of my hair."

Dirk looked over at her, stopped the Jeep, and reached into the open glove compartment to retrieve a red bandanna. Handing it to her, he ordered, "Put this on; this is no time to try to look beautiful. You'll be a mess before I get through with you."

"You mean there's more?" Their eyes locked. He clearly knew exactly what she meant, and he gave her a warning look. Taking the scarf, she tried to control a shudder as she speculated on the fact that it probably belonged to Jennifer.

As she tied it around her head, Dirk said, "No, it doesn't."

"Doesn't what?"

"Doesn't belong to Jennifer. I sometimes wear it myself when the wind is blowing the dirt around."

"Will you please stop reading my mind — it's very disconcerting." She didn't look at him. She knew he'd be smiling at her knowingly, and that did terrible things to her equilibrium. He revved up the motor, and soon they were again bouncing across the uneven terrain.

"Okay, that's it!" Dirk shouted, "This is mine! We have just passed the line onto one of the growing fields for the Cragg Hill Winery." He drove a short distance and stopped. Turning the motor off, he stood up and gazed out over the fields with such evident pride and happiness that Marcy ached to reach out her hand and touch him, to share in his pleasure. As she watched him survey the lovely section of the earth with an expression of sheer elation, she reflected upon the fact that Dirk was a man of deep commitment and loyalty. He would throw all of his considerable personal resources into this project with a dedication so total that most people would never understand it, let alone duplicate it. No wonder she'd never been able to get over him; he was one of a kind — a man whose spectacular outer shell held a spectacular inner self. Indeed, Dirk had always disliked references to his physical splendor. And his true friends were those who had learned to appreciate the solid, steady man within.

He glanced at her, a smile of pure pleasure lighting his face. "Isn't it something?" he asked.

"It's simply beautiful," she answered truthfully.

He sat down, and they took off again on their bumpy journey across the crest of a precariously steep hillside. "This area will be planted in Cabernet and Merlot grapes," he said. "It's a sandy loam, high in gravel content. The drainage is excellent up here. Perfect conditions for those varietals. See right ahead of you?"

Marcy squinted her eyes against the sun, and, cupping her hand over them, lifted herself slightly to peer over the windshield. The adjoining hillside was covered with neatly trellised vines. "Yes."

"That's part of the old parcel I bought from Ansel Cragg. He and his brother started this vineyard about ten years ago, so those vines are producing some Cabernet of a quality that looks highly promising. I just closed the deal on this adjoining piece. Cost more than I wanted to pay, but it'll be worth it. It was important to me to get the vines started, since this is some of the finest soil around for Cabernet." Marcy remembered that it took at least seven years for a new vine to yield grapes of good quality. Dirk swung the Jeep onto a steeply descending trail with a suddenness that took Marcy's breath away.

"Hey!" she yelled.

"Hold on." He laughed. "Isn't this fun?" It was. The Jeep leapt and twisted its way down the hill, bumping to a stop at the edge of the Napa River, which was rushing along, full of early spring water. Dirk jumped out, ran to the back of the Jeep, and grabbed something — Marcy couldn't quite see what. He's like a kid with a new toy, she thought. He appeared at her side and handed her a pair of L.L. Bean boots. "Put these on," he commanded. "You'll need them."

"How do you know they'll fit?" She kicked her shoes off to try the boots.

"I know what size you wear."

She glanced at him in surprise. He hadn't forgotten anything, it seemed. As she pulled the boots on, which did fit perfectly, she noted that they were brand new. The man continued to amaze her. When she had finished lacing them, she hopped down to the ground beside Dirk. "Okay, all set." They strode along the river side by side as Dirk explained his plans for the section.

"This will eventually be planted in Zinfandel and Pinot Noir. We aren't growing any of that right now, and we probably won't start the vines until next year. We have all we can handle at this time."

"Who is we?" Marcy asked.

"Ansel stayed with me as my wine maker. He's a real master, absolutely invaluable. His brother, Jeff, is also one of my right-hand men. They're both knowledgeable and completely trustworthy. Also damned fine men to work with. They just couldn't make it, financially, long enough to reap the fruits of their harvest, so to speak. But I intend to see that they do, eventually."

Marcy studied his determined face. "I'm sure you will." She wondered if the two men fully appreciated how lucky they were to be bought out by a man like Dirk, who would gladly share the rewards of the future with the men who had started it. Dirk stopped to scoop up a handful of dirt, which he placed in her hand.

"Look at this soil, Marcy," he enthused, "rich alluvial loam. We're in the process of improving the drainage before planting. Right across the river" — he gestured toward the rows of trellised vines on the other side — "are mature Pinot Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc vines. They were well spaced and have been carefully pruned right from the start. Last harvest they yielded an average of fifteen pounds of grapes per vine, and it has all the appearances of being an exceptional crop."

"How much land do you have, Dirk?"

"Well, in farm land we have three sites at present. Sixty acres of sandy, hill-side soil, like the area we just drove over, that's all planted, or will be, in Cabernet and Merlot and some Pinot Noir; thirty acres of riverside alluvial soil, all in Pinot Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and, in the future, the Zinfandel. Then we have another prime section of forty-plus acres devoted solely to the Cabernet." He turned toward her. "We are emphasizing quality, Marcy. All three of us want to produce some of the finest wine in California." He grinned sheepishly. "The old perfectionism again. Can't teach an old dog new tricks, I guess."

"You are not exactly the run-of-the-mill old dog," she observed.

"Oh, really? What kind of an old dog am I?" He faced her squarely, the devilish glint back in his eye.

"Come on with the tour," she insisted. "Remember all those well-prepared defenses."

With a slight hesitation, he led her back to the Jeep. "All right, all aboard. We'll go to the processing rooms next."

"When do I get to see your house?" she asked.

"Last."

Why did she want to see the house, she mused. Might as well do the whole number on herself — no use suffering over trifles. They were soon driving on a gravel road up a gently rising slope. As they rounded a curve, she sighted a small cluster of buildings ahead. They pulled up in front of the largest and were met by an enthusiastically barking springer spaniel. Marcy jumped to the ground and petted the happily wagging hound. "He's darling. Is he yours?"

"Not officially. He belongs to Ansel, but he's sort of adopted me too." He leaned down to pat the dog, who wiggled gleefully and then dashed off in pursuit of some small creature that darted before him. Dirk opened a door into the building and ushered Marcy in. It was darkish and rather chilly inside. Marcy looked around at the large vats and all the paraphernalia of wine-making. A slightly built man of indeterminate years, wearing old jeans, a patched jacket, and high boots, emerged from a dark recess of the room. A smile split his thickly bearded face.

"Dirk! I've been watching for you." He walked over to them, wiping his hands on his pants as he came. "And you must be Marcy Hanson." He stuck out a stained hand, which Marcy shook vigorously.

Dirk clapped the man's shoulder fondly. "Marcy, I'd like to introduce my good friend — and one of the finest wine experts in the valley. Meet Ansel Cragg."

"It's a pleasure," she said sincerely.

"My, my, if you aren't pretty as a picture." Ansel beamed at her.

She liked him immediately. She hadn't known people still talked like that. "Dirk has been singing your praises while he jolted me over every bump in this part of the country," she responded.

Ansel slapped Dirk on the arm. The affection between the two was apparent. "I'm sure," Ansel agreed. "If there's a pothole in the area. Dirk will find it. Does great things to the buggy."

Ansel turned to the back of the building and yelled, "Hey, Jeff! Come up front!" Seconds later, a beardless replica of Ansel appeared. He was introduced to Marcy, and he favored her with the same wide grin that his brother had bestowed upon her. The obvious difference was that Ansel talked almost non-stop, while Jeff's conversation consisted of little more than a few grunts, nods, and hums. The men took Marcy on a painstaking tour of the processing plant. They showed her where the gondola dropped its load of grapes into the hop-

per, which then fed them into the crusher. Marcy listened attentively and innocently while the brothers described each step.

Dirk winked at her in appreciation of the fact that she was not disclosing the extent of her knowledge. They were having such fun telling her about the processes that she didn't want to spoil it. "The crusher pushes the flesh and skin through the perforations and shucks off the stems and leaves," Ansel explained. "Then the must is pumped into the fermenting tanks — right over here," — he led her to the upright stainless steel tanks — "where it's held under carefully controlled temperatures for ten to fourteen days for white wine and about a week for red. Of course, the red is fermented at a higher temperature." He explained how the yeast was added and the carbon dioxide released. Then, with great pride, he showed her the cooperage rooms. "We use only European oak for our casks," he stated proudly. "Nevers or Limousin, depending on the varietal — that's the variety of grape." The aging room was another obvious source of pride. Marcy shivered as they entered. "Kinda cool, ain't it!" Ansel chorled. "Natural temperature control. You're in a cave that's hacked right out of the side of the mountain. They did it years ago with inexpensive Chinese labor. Could never afford to build one like this these days." Marcy perused the neatly lined up wine casks and the bottles stored on their sides, row upon row, in this nature-controlled room. She was just beginning to feel slightly claustrophobic when she was guided out of there to the preparation room, where the wines were cleared and tested before going to the bottling operation.

By the time the tour was completed, she was beginning to feel the gnawing of hunger pangs. "I hate to be a pest," she said, "but how about a sample of one of the finished products, with maybe a little cheese?"

Ansel chuckled. "I think the lady's hungry," he suggested to Dirk. "Do you think we have a crumb or two around anywhere?"

"I think what we have is a hearty lunch waiting for us at the house," Dirk answered. "Can you two join us?"

"Sorry," Ansel, as usual, answered for both of them, "we have a chore to finish and wives to go home to. Marcy," — the hand was thrust forward again — "it's been a nice thing, meeting you."

"Oh, and for me too." Marcy clasped the hand in both others and impulsively kissed the happily surprised man on the cheek. "Thank you so much." As she turned to Jeff, she was delighted to see him eagerly offer his cheek.

"Me too?" he suggested shyly.

She smiled warmly and kissed him. The two men were aglow as Dirk and Marcy left.

"Two new fans," Dirk observed as they stepped into the Jeep.

"I do hope so. I liked them both so much." They headed farther up the same gravel road that had led them this far, and, as they rounded a bend, Marcy saw a sprawling house sitting on top of the hill. "Is that it?"

"Indeed it is."

As they approached, Marcy's heart did a complete flip-flop. A Spanish hacienda — just what she'd always dreamed of living in. The final turn of the knife. Dirk stopped the Jeep by the front door and leapt out. Marcy slowly descended on wobbly legs, her eyes traveling over the lovely adobe brick entrance with its enormous, intricately carved mahogany door. Come on, English blood, she inwardly commanded, flow! I'm going to need some of that stiff upper lip to get through this. Dirk opened the massive door and stood aside to let her in. She stepped into a large, cool foyer with a ceramic tile floor beautifully patterned in gold shades mixed with soft, dusty blue. There were masses of plants of every description, both in the oblong indoor garden that grew under a skylight and in the numerous pots and halved wine casks that were placed here and there with that perfect casual touch of an expert decorator. As she followed Dirk on a tour of the house, she strove to pay attention to his enthusiastic comments while her mind reeled under the awesome experience of walking through her fantasy home come true, knowing all the while that it would never be hers.

The house was laid out in two sections: the living quarters, which included the kitchen, the dining room and informal eating room, the massive living room and a library; and the section comprising the sleeping quarters. Both areas were rectangles formed around open courtyards, with sliding glass panels that could be moved into place when the weather grew cool. The courtyards were beautifully constructed of mosaics of pebbles and free-form planted areas. In each there was a small pool with sculptured fountains, providing me divine sound of steadily flowing water.

Marcy ran her fingers over the smooth top of one of the exquisite antique side tables. The furniture, like everything else about the house, was perfection.

They completed the tour in the kitchen, where Mrs. Sanchez, the housekeeper, was assembling salads of avocado stuffed with shrimp on crisp lettuce leaves. The ceramic tile floor in the kitchen matched the one in the entry, and the dusty blue was repeated in the counter tiles. There was a large cooking island in the middle of the room, which was flooded with sunlight filtering down through skylights. Mrs. Sanchez, a bustling plump woman of evident good humor, pulled a tray of hot sour-dough bread from the oven. "Your lunch is ready, Mr. Baxter," she announced. "Do you want to open a bottle of wine while I put it on the table?"

Dirk grinned at her. "Is that a polite way of telling me to get my butt in gear, Mrs. Sanchez?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

Putting on his Rodney Dangerfield face, Dirk grumped, "A man don't get no respect around here," as he went to the refrigerator and selected a bottle of Caymus Chardonnay. They sat in the smaller dinette off the kitchen that was so open and sunlit that it felt like sitting outdoors.

"Your house is indescribably lovely," Marcy said. "You've captured the feel of the hacienda with its inside courtyards while successfully opening the outer view. Quite an architectural feat." Indeed, the panorama of rolling hills and sweeping valleys was visible on all sides. He had missed nothing.

Dirk looked relaxed and pleased as they ate the delicious lunch. "You really do like it?"

"I love it." What could she say? I love it, I want it, I want to move right in today, into your house, your life, and your bed. And where the hell did you stash Jennifer? Aloud she said, "Since, as you know, I'm not too good at suppressing my curiosity, where is Jennifer today?"

"Who?" He looked genuinely puzzled for a second. "Oh, Jennifer flew back to Philadelphia for a family birthday event." He studied her face for a moment, then continued, "She wasn't staying here, anyway, you know."

Liar, Marcy thought. "Oh?" She tried to look unknowing. "She wasn't at the inn, was she?"

"No, as a matter of fact she stayed at an apartment I have in Calistoga. I lived there until the house was ready, then kept it for my secretary and her husband to use while they look for a house. Works out well, since this is an unlisted number and my secretary can take all my messages. They were away for a few days, so Jennifer used the place."

Marcy swallowed hard as the memory of hours of fruitless anguish flashed through her mind. Why do we all play such silly games, she wondered. Why don't I just tell him that I tried to call? Because it would bruise my fragile pride, that's why.

Dirk looked across at her. "Are you all through?" he asked.

"I sure am. Oh! You mean with lunch. Yes."

He opened his mouth as though to make a comment, then, visibly changing his mind, stood and offered her his hand. "Then it's time for you to see the pool and patio."

Enough, enough already, she wanted to shout. "I'd love to," she said. She dutifully followed him outside onto a patio that seemed to go on forever. The sparkling blue pool that bisected it appeared to be of Olympic dimensions, and it was surrounded by a lovely pattern of tiles. From the outside, the entire house, pool, and patio seemed to meld into the terrain in an amazingly natural way. They stood silently at the edge of the terrace, caressed by the warm wind. With an expression of joy, Dirk smiled at her.

Marcy suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth as she looked down in alarm. "Oh, Dirk!" she blurted, "how awful!"

He stared at her apprehensively. "What's wrong?"

"We tramped all over your beautiful house in our mucky boots!"

Dirk threw back his head and laughed. "My God, I was afraid you'd seen something you didn't like."

She gazed at him solemnly. "Oh, no," she said. "I saw nothing at all that I don't like." There were a few moments of silence, broken only by the rustle of the trees in the wind.

Dirk reached over and brushed a wisp of hair out of her face, and his ebony eyes looked into hers with infinite tenderness. At that moment, Marcy loved him with an intensity that shook her. They stood close, totally absorbed by each other, until he spoke. "I love you, Marcy."

"I love you too, Dirk." They were suspended in time, visually devouring each other. Dirk took her face in his hands, tilted it, and lowered his lips to hers. Marcy's mouth moved under his, and her hands slid up around his neck as she succumbed completely to the bliss that cocooned her. When the kiss ended, Dirk drew back slightly and, with a sigh of deep contentment, rubbed his cheek against hers.

"Oh, my darling," he whispered, "how can I possibly live without you? You are a part of me, a part of everything I do. I've pictured you walking through the vineyards; I've met you when I turned a corner in my house; I've reached for you in my bed. Marcy, Marcy, we belong together, you and I."

"I know," she murmured. "I've been so foolish. I want you more than anything in the world." She snuggled closer, the warmth of the sun outdone by the warmth of her happiness. He held her tightly, as though fearful of letting go.

"We can work it out, my love, we have to. I need you so." His face was buried in her tangled hair as they clung to one another. Finally, when he pulled reluctantly away, the joy that had shone on his face a few minutes before was magnified a thousand-fold.

7

Taking her hand almost shyly, his eyes never leaving hers, Dirk led Marcy to an oversized softly cushioned redwood chaise longue by the side of the pool. He gently eased her to a reclining position on the chaise, bending to kiss her as he did.

"Is this going to be an attack?" Marcy murmured.

"Don't sound so hopeful," Dirk chided. "Everything in its time. Right now," — he stood, smiling down at her — "I would appreciate it if you would sit there for a minute and cool your jets. I'll be right back."

"I'll sit, but I won't cool," she warned him.

"Is that a promise?" He sat beside her as he asked, leaning forward to softly kiss her neck as his fingers slid tantalizingly up and down her arm.

She shivered. "It's a promise." The fingers were working their magic. "And do hurry with whatever is taking you from me."

He chuckled, touched his lips to hers, and whispered in her ear, "Before this scene from 'Camille' goes one step further, I must tear myself from you for a few brief seconds." He pulled back slightly, running his fingers across her cheeks and tangling them in her thick hair. "Oh, Marcy, you are here, aren't you? This is real, isn't it?"

"I do hope so. I'm so afraid I'll wake up and find out it isn't. That's why I want you to hurry."

"I know what you mean," he said, "but I don't want to rush anything. I want to savor the realization that this is going to last forever. You and I are going to be together for the rest of our lives."

Hearing the determination in his voice, Marcy allowed herself to believe that it could actually be true. The feeling it brought was indescribable. This must truly be ecstasy, she thought.

Dirk stood up and pointed a stem finger at her. "Don't you dare disappear," he warned.

Marcy sank into the soft cushions that, heated by the sun, deliciously warmed her back. She tried not to think. She wanted to relish the feeling of wonder, of incredible gratitude for her monumental joy. It did seem only seconds before Dirk was once again seated beside her. He had a bottle of white wine, which he held up for her inspection.

"This is that special crop of Chardonnay I mentioned, from my first crush as owner. Of course we're drinking it too soon, but this occasion called for . . ." — he stopped and looked at her with an expression of infinite love — ". . . no, demanded, a toast with wine from our very own vineyard."

"Our?" she asked.

"Our," he repeated emphatically. "Now, what would be an appropriate toast?"

Marcy couldn't suppress a sly smile. "How about to love among the grapes? That seems appropriate."

Dirk handed her a filled glass of wine, shaking his head at her as one did at a naughty child. "Incorrigible. You have always been incorrigible. That's one of the many . . ." — he kissed her earlobe — ". . . many . . ." he kissed her eyelids — ". . . many things I love about you." Pulling away with visible effort, he raised his glass. "To us, forever indivisible, the future Marcy and Dirk Hanson-Baxter."

Marcy drank the toast with eyes filled with grateful, joyous tears. He was obviously remembering the argument they'd had when she told him she would have to retain her own name for professional reasons, and, through this simple toast, was telling her that none of that mattered anymore. They drank the toast and, with no further need for verbal communication, put down the glasses and reached for each other. With an ardor born of insatiable hunger, Marcy savored the exquisite sensation of having her lips possessed by his. Dirk stretched his body alongside hers and they pressed close, willing the world to stand still and never again threaten them with outside interference. Just then Marcy heard the insistent buzz of a bell. "Dirk . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Dirk, I think someone's at your door."

"Mrs. Sanchez will answer it."

Marcy pushed away from him, startled. "Oh, my gosh, I'd completely forgotten Mrs. Sanchez!"

Dirk slowly extricated himself from the embrace and, grumbling, sat up. "As a matter of fact, so had I. I'll go and give her the rest of the day off."

Marcy grinned at him. "I'll bet she'll never guess why."

With something close to a self-satisfied smirk, Dirk winked at her. "She'll have to get used to it, if she's going to stay with us."

Just as he stood to go inside, a worried-looking Ansel appeared at the patio door. "Dirk! I hate to interrupt you — " He looked from Dirk to Marcy and back again, a delighted grin creasing his face. "I mean I *really* hate to interrupt you, but . . ."

"That's okay, Ansel." Dirk's entire countenance was aglow with happiness. "You may have two minutes to talk business, five minutes to join us in a toast to our future together, and then, my kind, muchly cared for friend, you may get the hell out of here and take my lovely housekeeper with you. Marcy and I require a substantial degree of privacy."

The grin broadened. "Before one more word is said, I'd sure be mighty honored to drink that toast."

Dirk quickly crossed to a cupboard at the edge of the patio, took out a glass, returned, and filled it, then handed it to Ansel. As he and Marcy picked up their glasses and made ready for the toast, Ansel paused and assumed a serious pose. "You know, Marcy, the first time I met this man, I knew right off he was a real rare kind of guy. I was suffering the torments of the damned because my winery was going under. We just plain couldn't hold on long enough to start making money, even though we were beginning to make some pretty fair wine. Our only hope of avoiding bankruptcy was to sell out, and when Dirk offered to buy, at a real fair price, I was mighty grateful for that. It would be an awesome thing for men like Jeff and me to admit we couldn't pay our bills." He paused and studied his feet for a minute.

Marcy dropped her gaze to her glass, trying to give him a chance to clear his throat without her scrutiny.

He continued. "Then this crazy *hombre* made us an offer we couldn't believe, let alone refuse. He wanted us to stay on, not as hired hands, but as partners. What was that fancy thing you said?" He grinned at Dirk, clearly struggling to lighten the tone and keep his emotions under control. "I remember. You said that a man should have the chance to reap the rewards of his labor." He looked directly at Marcy, the wonder of it still shining in his eyes — the condemned man given a full pardon. "So, I guess you could say . . ." He swallowed hard. ". . . that my brother and I kinda like this guy. Now" — he

shuffled his feet, evidently aware that he was 'running on' — "the one thing I've noticed, and spent some time speculating about, is that there seemed to be something missing in Dirk's life; something that made him seem, oh, I don't know, just a little sad all the time, even when he was happy, you know?" Marcy stole a glance at Dirk, whose eyes were fastened on his wine glass. "I never knew what it was — that was missing, I mean — until I saw him with you today. I kept thinking that something was different, and I couldn't put my finger on it, until the time, you remember, you and Dirk were over by the bottling machine, and Jeff said, 'Boy, Dirk sure looks like one happy man!' Well, I really looked at him then and, by Christopher, he did. All the shadows were gone. Then I watched the two of you together for a while, the pieces just fell into place, and the mystery was solved. So" — with an embarrassed laugh — "here's to the finest man I know, and the lovely lady who makes his eyes shine. Long life and happiness."

All three of them had trouble getting the liquid past the lumps in their throats.

"Now," Ansel resumed in a steadier tone, "after that long-winded speech, I'm afraid I have some news that's not going to make you happy. There's a spot of trouble concerning the land purchase, Dirk. One of the owners, a guy back East, is having second thoughts. Our lawyer thinks we should finish up the paper signing and money changing before he can scotch the deal." He looked sheepishly from one to the other. "Sorry about that."

Dirk looked downright stricken. "To hell with that!" he snapped. "They can wait one day!"

Marcy stood up and slid her arm through his. "Come on, honey," she reasoned, "this is far too important to be put off. And it'll give me a chance to check back and see how everything went with Alan and Bruce. Besides," she stood on tip-toe to kiss Dirk's cheek, "you told me we had the rest of our lives."

Dirk put his arm around her possessively and hugged her to him. "Okay, you're right. I'll drop you at the inn while we take care of this matter, and I'll pick you up about six-thirty for dinner."

Hand in hand, they followed Ansel outside. Marcy stopped for a minute before getting into the Jeep. She turned around and drank in the beauty of the house and its surroundings, feeling for the first time the full impact of the fact that this would be her home — hers and Dirk's. It was almost too much to take in this quickly. Tightening her grip on Dirk's hand, she allowed herself to be led to the far side of the Jeep and helped in. But, as they drove away, she turned around and watched until they rounded a corner and the place was lost from view. Then she turned her full concentration on the man who would turn it from a nice place to live into paradise on earth.

When Marcy reached her room at the inn, she went inside, freshened up quickly, and headed for the theatre, her heart beating a steady rat-a-tat of apprehension as she went.

As she started across the cobblestone walk that led to the inn, she spotted Andy standing under the peach tree, puffing on a cigarette and talking to Alan. She went to join them.

"Marcy!" Alan greeted her affectionately as Andy kissed her on the cheek. "I'm surprised to see you back this early. I hope you had a good day with Dirk."

"It was fine, thank you," she answered. Andy's eyes widened in surprise. So, thought Marcy, he wasn't told where I was today. In that case, she was really going to surprise him.

Before Andy could ask any questions, Alan said, "I hate to dash off, but I have a meeting to get to." He turned to Marcy. "Everything worked out well today. I think Mr. Engels will be less of a problem. I'll talk with you tomorrow." With that he took off at a fast clip toward his office.

Marcy met Andy's inquiring gaze. She was embarrassed by the awareness that tears were spilling out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "Oh, Andy," she sniffled as she threw her arms around his neck, "I'm so happy!"

Andy began to chortle, which brought a smile to Marcy's face. She had read that word time and again all her life and had never heard anything that sounded like it until she met Andy. He really did it. He chortled.

"Being around you is pretty damned hard on the nerves, you know," he scolded. "How about a rendition of that old song, 'What a Difference a Day Makes'?"

Arm in arm, they took a stroll in the warm afternoon sunshine while she recounted the glorious events of the day. When she finished, he was silent, which caused her a twinge of apprehension. She remembered his admission concerning his feelings for her and wondered if this was painful for him. But then he stopped, turned her to him, and hugged her warmly. "Marcy," he said, "I'm so glad." She hugged him back, her happiness complete. He held her by the shoulders, scrutinizing her gleaming face. "It's about time the two of you realized what perfect idiots you were, and got together," he said. "Now for God's sake, hang on to him and don't let him get away this time!"

"Yessir," she promised.

Andy dropped his hands. "Well, since it now appears that I cannot count on the fun of having you pursue me with proposals this evening, I think I'll go call Nancy."

Marcy gave him a sidelong look. "Nancy, eh? So that's her name."

"You just tend to your own affairs of the heart and don't muck about in mine," he warned.

"Yessir," she repeated. With a parting kiss, he went on his way, and Marcy headed for her room for a bath and a nap. All of a sudden she was deliciously, happily sleepy.

Dirk was fifteen minutes early for their date, which was fine, since Marcy had been ready and waiting for half an hour before he arrived. She heard his footsteps in the hall and flung open the door before he could knock. He asked no questions, simply took her into his arms and kissed her hungrily. He looked at her with frank appreciation. "You look gorgeous," he murmured.

She had changed clothes four times, just like a teenager on her first date, but the admiration in his eyes made it well worth the effort. She wore a pale gold silk dress, with a deeply cut V-neck and long, loose sleeves. It was hugged in at the waist by a thin gold belt. High-heeled sandals and a plain gold chain necklace completed the outfit. She took a bulky cashmere sweater out of the closet, picked up her small evening bag, and asked, "Where to, Prince Charming?"

Dirk smiled. "I must say, you look like you stepped right out of the golden coach tonight. I made reservations at the Miramonte. That should be fitting to your elegance."

"Good," she answered, "I'm hungry."

With their arms around each other, they walked downstairs, absently answering hello to several acquaintances in the lobby. They were so completely absorbed in one another that they almost ran into Andy.

He waved a hand back and forth in front of their eyes. "Is anyone there?" he asked.

They both laughed. Marcy kissed him and told him to have a good time with Nancy, and Dirk offered his hand, which Andy shook firmly. "I'll take good care of her." Dirk spoke the words solemnly, as though making an important pledge.

"I know you will, Dirk," Andy assured him. "You two have a good evening. I have to go pick up my date."

Dirk's eyes followed him as he left. "I was always a little afraid you'd realize what a fine guy he is and marry him."

"No way," Marcy said. "I tried that, but he turned me down." She told him the rest of the story on the way to the restaurant.

As they sat in a cozy booth a little later, sipping their aperitifs, Dirk's eyes roamed greedily over her features.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"What a terrible, awful, lonely three years it's been."

She reached out to touch his hand. "Oh, Dirk, if I'd known that you felt that way too, I'd have run to you on at least a hundred different occasions."

"All I can say to that," he answered, "is me too. What a damned foolish waste."

"Dirk, I want you to know that there hasn't been anyone else for me in all that time. That king-sized bed has never been occupied by another man."

Dirk stared at her, shaking his head in wonder. "Is that really true, Marcy? I mean, I'd certainly understand if there had been others — it's been a long time."

"No, no one. I just couldn't bring myself to make love with anyone else. It seemed so wrong." She gave him a wry smile. "I was growing concerned about what was beginning to look like a terribly celibate future."

Dirk twisted his glass around with his fingers. "I wish I could say the same, Marcy, but I can't. In fact, I went kind of crazy for almost a year — became a real raving Lothario. I took so many damned women to bed I lost count."

Marcy's stomach took a significant lurch. "Did you enjoy it?"

"I hated it. Each time I thought 'maybe this will help,' and each time I felt kind of sick. It's funny. I've only heard women talk about feeling cheap from too much bed-hopping, but there's no other word for the way it made me feel — cheap." His forehead wrinkled. "I hope there's nothing wrong with me."

Marcy smiled through the mist of her happiness. "Nothing that the right woman won't cure." Their eyes locked.

"Amen," he murmured. He stared quietly at his hand holding hers for several long minutes, then broke the silence in a sober tone. "I'm almost embarrassed to admit how much it means to me — that you've made love with no one else. It seems incredible, especially since you're in the theatre."

A slight frown crossed her face. "Dirk, we're really no different from anyone else. You've always had a way of referring to 'theatre people' as though we came from a different planet."

He shook his head as though to clear it, and the cloud passed. With the warmth once more in his gaze, he said, "I don't know why your profession was so threatening, Marcy. It always seemed to be in direct competition for your devotion, and I wanted all of that for myself, selfish thing that I am. I felt I either had to hang on tight all the time or let go completely. I think that's one of the reasons I put money in the new theatre. I've always been determined to overcome my hang-ups." He smiled sheepishly. "Also, there was just the off chance of luring you out here."

"So it *was* you."

"Of course."

"I'm so glad." Marcy hesitated. "The one thing I couldn't understand at all was how wary you seemed, not only about my career, but about all the people connected with it."

"I felt threatened by all of it. It's hard to explain. It may have something to do with fear. I guess I've always been a little on guard with people. You're the

one who first called it to my attention, remember? I denied it then, but you were right. Being born into a rich, socially prominent family does automatically bring you lots of attention."

"Especially when you're handsome."

"Okay, okay. Especially when you're handsome." He ran his fingers over the back of her hand. "I never realized, until you mentioned it, that I measured and weighed everything people said and did so carefully. People outside of my tight little circle — as you used to call it — I always wondered if they really liked me or if they simply wanted something from me."

"If they were female," Marcy interjected, "it was undoubtedly both. You must realize that you're housed in a very handsome structure."

Dirk laughed. "It has been called to my attention. It really should have been given to someone else. I'm actually a very simplistic man. I only want one woman. I guess that's why, after I found that woman, I was so afraid of losing her."

Marcy could feel her heart swelling with love and pride. What Dirk said was true. She had never had the slightest question about his fidelity and devotion when they were lovers. She knew she could be just as certain about him in the future, if only his doubts about her career could be completely laid to rest.

The evening passed in a hazy glow of enchantment. As they left, Dirk asked, "Marcy, will you come home with me?"

She looked at him with surprise. "Of course. You've whipped up all those feelings again, my love; you are now going to have to deal with them."

"It will be my pleasure."

"Only partly, I'm sure." Taking the hazy glow right with them, they climbed into his Ferrari and headed for the hacienda at the top of the hill.

The next morning, Dirk drove Marcy to rehearsal before going to work. She snuggled close to him on the ride, laughingly scolding him for paying more attention to her than to the road. The night before had been idyllic. A warm flush spread over her when she remembered the fervency of their ardor, as they strove, again and again, to satisfy the red-hot delirium of their mutual craving; and at long last, the indescribable sweetness of falling into an exhausted slumber in one another's arms.

When he stopped the Jeep, he pulled her to him and held her close. "I flatly refuse to let you go," he proclaimed.

She kissed him on the nose, the mouth, the chin, the cheek. "Unhand me, you mad fool. I must go toil in the footlights, while you go toil in the vineyards."

He let go, then reached out a hand to stop her as she started to step down. "Marcy, I'll pick you up at six. Shall we just have dinner at the house?"

She flashed a smile over her shoulder. "I'd love it," she assured him.

"Oh, and by the way . . ." he still clasped her arm.

"Dirk, I love you madly, but I'm late."

"Okay, hon, I just wanted to ask if you'd mind attending a barbecue with some of the winery owners and their wives tomorrow night. I want to show you off."

Marcy stopped and turned to him, an expression of concern on her face. "Dirk, honey . . . you're forgetting. Tomorrow is the beginning of the last week of rehearsals. We'll be working every night putting the show together."

His eyes clouded. "Hell, I did forget. Couldn't the stand-in do it just the one night?"

Marcy swallowed hard, an uneasy feeling gripping her stomach. "Honey, you know I can't do that; it wouldn't be fair to the others."

He started to retort, then closed his mouth. Visibly gathering himself together, he gave her a somewhat strained smile. "You're right. We'll just make the most of tonight." He leaned across the seat to kiss her. "See you at six."

Marcy tried to shake the uneasiness she felt as she raced to her room to change before heading for the theatre. It would just take a little time, she told herself.

That night, when Dirk called for her, his mood was ebullient — no shadows anywhere. He had called his mother in Philadelphia. "Mother is ecstatic. Mother is, as the saying goes, beside herself with glee, which is fortuitous, since one of her would be insufficient to contain so much exuberance."

Marcy hugged him happily. "I'm so glad she's glad!"

Dirk threw up his hands. "Dear God, between the two of you, I could compile a book of smarm."

"Smarm?"

"It means oozing, gushing sentimentality."

"Sounds like that's just what it should mean. Did you tell your mother we're getting married?"

He looked worried. "That's where the wicket gets sticky. She wants us to wait until she can get out here, assemble the family, and put on a proper wedding — poolside. She had most of the plans made before we hung up!"

"How long do we have to wait?" Marcy wailed.

"We don't," he replied. "Not a day, not an hour. I think we should hire a plane and go straight to Las Vegas. We could do it tomorrow and still have you back for rehearsal. Then we could send Mom a cable inviting her to come out and give us a proper reception."

Marcy hesitated. She longed to do just that, but she also wanted to guard the affection that she had always received from Mrs. Baxter. Both of Dirk's parents had been wonderful to her. "Dirk, this girl is a rippling stream of fresh

spring water running through a stagnant pool," Mr. Baxter had asserted. Mr. Baxter tended to talk in metaphors. Marcy had loved him at once. He had a jovial antipathy toward some of his stuffy cohorts, and he was delighted to see his eldest son madly in love with such an attractive "outsider." "Just what this bloodline needs, a fresh transfusion," he'd told one and all. There was no need to convince his wife; that romantic lady was enthralled by Marcy, who epitomized everything she wanted for her handsome and brilliant son. Between them, they had vanquished all of Marcy's initial fears of being an "outsider." Both of the Baxters had been openly dismayed when Marcy and Dirk split up. Marcy had kept in touch for a short while, but even that had soon become too painful.

"I don't know, Dirk, maybe we should wait and let her give the wedding. It would mean so much to her. After all," she murmured, smiling wickedly at him, "it isn't as though we have to remain in separate quarters 'til then. Besides, it'll give my father time to get here from Switzerland."

"I thought he'd come back."

"No, the company wanted him to stay for two more years."

Dirk looked skeptical. "I just want to get safely married, once and for all. I don't want to give fate another crack at us."

"Nothing but nothing can come between us now," Marcy insisted. "How long do you think your mother will need to put this extravaganza together?"

"She assures me she could have everything ready by May twentieth."

Her eyes widened. "May twentieth! But Dirk, I won't be here on May twentieth."

"What do you mean, you won't be here? Where will you be?"

"I have to leave for New York the day after the play closes to rehearse for my booking at the Waldorf. You remember, I told you."

His eyes narrowed. "No, you didn't, Marcy. I knew nothing about it."

The cold realization that he was absolutely right crept over her.

She had completely forgotten to tell him. "Oh, Dirk." She looked at him, stricken. "Since that day in Big Sur, we haven't talked about the future, except about spending it together."

"It sounds like we'll spend it together now and then when you're not gone." His face was flushed with suppressed anger.

"Dirk, I've had that booking for a year. That's one of the reasons my agent, Greg, had a fit about my doing 'Guys and Dolls.' He said I was crowding it too much. They signed the contract at a substantial fee, so I'd guarantee the performance, since it's only for one week. It isn't something I can get out of."

"How long will it take?"

"Just two weeks. That's why I have to leave so quickly. I only have five days to polish up my repertoire, then the seven-day engagement."

They had reached the hacienda. Dirk stopped near the front door and sat, staring out of the windshield. "How many more 'engagements' follow that one?"

The tightness of his tone made Marcy's heart roll over. She tried to keep her voice even. "Luckily, Angie persuaded me to leave a six-week gap between that booking and the next. She thought I needed a rest."

"Good old Angie."

"Dirk, we'll have to go over the schedule. I'm sure I could cancel some of it, so we could have most of the summer. The one thing I couldn't bear to cancel is the TV special."

She watched his lean, brown hands tighten on the wheel, then slacken. He turned to her. "Okay, this is what I promised not to do. We'll look over the schedule and see if there's anything you can get out of without regretting it, and I will adjust to the rest."

Her heart left her mouth and dropped into its usual station, pumping at a phenomenal beat as she sighed with relief. She put her arms around him and laid her head on his chest. "Oh, Dirk, I will slow down, I promise."

He kissed her forehead and said, "Let's get out and go for a walk down the hill before we go in." He helped her down and, hand in hand, they followed the gravel path around the side of the house and strolled across the crest of the hill, admiring the sprawling vineyards and regaining the tenderness that had briefly been lost. As they swung along side by side, captured by the beauty and peace of their surroundings, the mood shifted through several degrees to lighthearted playfulness.

Marcy snuggled close to Dirk. "After the television special is filmed, I can take a long vacation and reevaluate things." She gazed up at him lovingly. "You know Alan has invited me to be the star-in-residence here, and to do some directing."

"Does that interest you?" Dirk asked.

"Yes, it does, very much. After the TV film. That really is important to me — I hope that doesn't bother you too much." She had a swift, uncomfortable recollection of Dirk sitting on the sand at Big Sur.

He hesitated momentarily. "Not too much," he offered. "I guess I can learn to play Prince consort — for a price."

"What price?"

They were sitting on the grassy slope that ran down the hill at the back of the house. Dirk gently pushed her down to a prone position. "Just lie back and I'll tell you," he said, his eyebrows bobbing up and down in a Groucho Marx gesture.

"Dirk!" Marcy gasped, trying to struggle free. "Now behave yourself. Someone might see us!"

"Who?" He moved a hand around, "A few grapes maybe? A few trees maybe? A springer spaniel, maybe!" He yelped as the playful dog bounded around the hill and jumped on them, happily licking their faces.

Giggling and squealing, Marcy fought off the attentions of the amorous man and the playful dog, and they all ended up in a tangle, rolling down the hill amid hoots of laughter and joyful barking.

The matter of the wedding was settled later, when Garth and Lucy called to offer their congratulations and stress how important it was to Mrs. Baxter to give the wedding.

"I guess we'll just have to wait." Dirk and Marcy once again sat on the knoll of the hill.

Marcy laid her head on his shoulder. "Oh, honey, it will be okay. It could be a June wedding — that's the best kind. Your Mom really wants to plan it, and it will be so good for her, and of course I want my father here."

"Naturally, and so do I. And it would please Mom. She's been so damned lonely since Dad died."

The mention of that made Marcy's eyes fill with tears. "Oh, Dirk, I wish . . ."

"I know." He kissed her on the nose and held her tight. "Remember the letter you sent me when you read about my father's death?"

"Yes."

"Up until then, I'd handled the whole thing with superb control, taking over as head of the family, being the steady, silent pinnacle of strength. When I got your letter, where you mentioned all those funny little quirks of Dad's that you enjoyed so much — for the first time, I sat down in my room and cried like a baby."

Marcy reached up and touched his cheek. "I'm so glad," she said.

He took her hand and kissed the palm. "My little emotion-loosener. Pretty soon you'll have me expressing my feelings so freely that I'll stride onto the stage and play a heart-rending Hamlet!"

"From Pince Charming to Prince Hamlet. I think maybe you should stay as you are; I prefer the original."

He laughed and stood up, pulling her to her feet. "We'd better go see what Mrs. Sanchez left us for dinner, my sweet, and then get you to bed early. The next few weeks will be frantic. You need a lot of rest."

"Well," she purred as she ran her hands through his thick hair and covered his face with kisses, "if we go to bed early, how on earth am I going to get any rest?"

He reached around and gave her a spank. "What am I to do with you?" he asked.

"I have a few suggestions."

"Oh, you do! Going to give me directions, I suppose. Are you trying to get the upper hand?"

"Well, if you're going to discuss positions . . ."

"Marcy Hanson! I do believe you're becoming a bad girl!"

She rubbed her body against him seductively. "I'm trying."

Dirk grabbed a thick handful of her hair and pulled her head back while he slid an arm around to lock her firmly to him. Fixing her with a menacing stare, he warned, "You are flirting with danger, girl."

"I am flirting with the sexiest, handsomest, most desirable man in the whole world."

He stopped, his eyes narrowing in thought. Then he gave a curt nod and said, "Yes, that's true."

Marcy giggled, struggling to free herself. "What a colossal ego! Unhand me, you cur!"

"Never. You are about to pay the price for your impudence."

She assumed a look of terror. "Oh, no! And what, pray, is the price?"

He whispered in her ear, and Marcy felt a warm flush of longing at his suggestion. She looked at the exciting face so close to her own and murmured, "That sounds like a down payment. I think you should demand a much higher price than that."

The glaze of lust glimmered in his eyes. "We'll work out a time payment plan. You may have to grab a nap backstage tomorrow." He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her roughly. Still holding her with one hand, he began to undress her with the other.

Marcy resumed her struggle, shaking her head free. "Dirk, stop this! We're right out in the open!"

"The birds know all about it. Umm, keep moving like that, it feels wonderful."

Their clothes were soon piled in a combined heap, and they sank to the crisp, green grass, laughing and teasing and fanning the ever-present sparks into roaring combustion.

Marcy groaned with pleasure at the delicious sensation of completeness as Dirk entered her. The newly emerged stars above blazed brighter and brighter, then popped like firecrackers across the sky.

Dinner was forgotten that night.

8

Heaven must wait, Marcy thought as she gathered her reserves for one more run-through of act one. Dirk had just entered and sat down in the theatre, and she longed to go to him. It was the first full rehearsal, and tempers were thinning out. The local cast, with stand-ins for the professional leads, had been rehearsing three nights a week for seven weeks. Marcy and the other professionals had worked their scenes through during the daytime sessions for the past week, and it was now time to meld the whole. The usual number of snafus had occurred: chorus members late, one bit player out of town on business, the sulking of the girl who had been doing Marcy's part in the local run-throughs — all the things that made Andy mumble again about working with amateurs. Marcy took a deep breath and made her first entrance. The first few scenes went a little more smoothly, and when Marcy's first big scene with Tom, who played Sky Masterson, started, she determined to make it come alive — to show the rest of the cast that the whole play would work once the snarls were unwoven.

The two of them lit up the stage, making sparks fly as their long argument ended in a kiss. Marcy was aware that Tom's kisses were becoming more and more ardent, but she decided not to worry about it. The run was too short for

it to become a real problem, and she was sure, from past experience, that his feelings would soon cool down after they disbanded.

The rest of the first act moved along at a fast pace, with everyone catching some of the fire that Marcy and Tom were generating. As they were finally reaching the end of the act, Marcy and Tom sang the love song between Sarah and Sky, and Tom took her in his arms for the kiss that was to be interrupted by the entrance of Ben, as Arvide. The kiss went on and on, until finally Marcy broke loose and called out, "Where's Ben?"

"Sorry," Ben answered, racing onto the stage. "Nature called." Everyone burst into laughter.

"Okay," Bruce yelled, "let's get on with it. Tom and Marcy, take it from the end of the duet and into the kiss again."

Tom grinned widely. "My pleasure," he intoned. "Take your time, Ben." This time someone in the mission band dropped the drum and the scene had to be done once more. Please, Marcy pleaded inwardly, make it right, I want to go. She was itching to be with Dirk. That time they managed to do it right, and the welcome call, "Okay, that's it for tonight!" was heard from Bruce. Marcy, her muscles aching from fatigue, walked down the front steps of the stage to find Dirk. She could just see him in the dim light, sitting about halfway back on the aisle. The question of why he didn't come to meet her crossed her mind, but she reached his side quickly and held out her hand. "All right, wake up," she teased. "It wasn't as bad as all that."

Dirk slowly rose to his feet and gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. "Let's get out of here," he said, starting for the back exit.

Marcy followed, deeply puzzled. She hoped the performance wasn't that bad. After all, it was the first run-through he'd seen; he hadn't had time to grow bored with it. They stepped out into a clear, starry night, with a full golden moon smiling down on them. "Oh, Dirk, isn't it lovely!"

"I guess." He walked silently, a few steps ahead of her, to his car. He opened the door of the low-slung Ferrari and stood aside to let her in. So far, aside from the brief kiss, he hadn't touched her. As she watched him start the car and back out of the parking place, her head spun with uncertainty.

"Dirk?"

"Hmm?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No."

Now what? When the ensuing silence became too stifling, she hazarded a simple question. "Where are we going?"

"Downhill."

Her mouth felt dry. "Dirk, what is this? What's happened?"

"Marcy, leave it alone until we get home." The short ride seemed endless. Finally, they reached the hacienda and Marcy slid out of the car, unaided by her frosty companion. He strode into the house, with Marcy following behind, and went straight to the bar at the end of the living room. He took out a bottle of scotch and poured a large shot into a glass.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What?"

"An answer."

He splashed a small amount of water over the scotch, took two ice cubes out of the refrigerator under the counter, and added them to the glass before speaking. "I don't know what to say."

"Dirk, please don't do this. You know it drives me crazy when you clam up. It's obvious you're angry about something; why can't you just tell me what it is?"

Dirk walked across the room and stood staring through the window wall. When he spoke, it was in an angry rush. "Why does that damned Tom character have to paw you so much?"

Marcy was amazed. "What do you mean by 'paw'? He's playing a role, just as I am."

He faced her, visibly bristling. "You're trying to tell me he isn't relishing every minute of it? It all looks so . . . so . . ."

"Cheap?" Marcy felt a cold anger rising as Dirk failed to reply. "May I remind you that you fell in love with me while I was doing this same part? How did the whole thing become so shoddy all of a sudden?"

"I didn't use that word, you did."

"I can read body language." Dirk, she was screaming inside, please, please come to me, take me in your arms and tell me it's all right, I can't stand this.

Dirk went to the bar and refilled his drink. He stood there, his back to her, for what seemed an eternity. "Marcy . . ." He set the glass down so hard that some of the contents splashed over the top. He then turned and crossed the room in three giant strides. He grabbed her almost roughly and crushed her to him, burying his face in her hair. "Marcy!" He pressed his lips to hers with a savage insistence. They clung to each other, frightened by the gulf that had opened between them. Marcy could almost feel the ripping when they tore themselves apart. Still holding on to each other with a near desperation, they crossed to the deep, cushioned sofa by the fireplace and sank into it.

Dirk's voice was muffled as he kissed her neck and cheek. "I don't know how to explain what happened. You seemed so convincing, you acted like you really were Sarah Brown, in love with that guy. I sat there telling myself I was acting like a spoiled kid, but my insides kept turning over and over." He

looked shaken. "I actually had to restrain myself from running up there and flattening the bastard."

Marcy's arms tightened around him. "Dirk, it's all make-believe, you know that."

"I know that, I just don't feel it." Standing abruptly, he took a few steps, then turned. "Marcy, why do you need it, all that make-believe? Isn't reality enough?"

Marcy slumped into the soft cushions. How did one answer a question like that? "Dirk, you still don't understand. The make-believe belongs to the audience. It is reality to me, the work of creating the illusion, that is. That's my job. Sometimes it's very exciting and lots of fun, and sometimes it's very draining and extremely difficult. The fact that occasionally one of the actors gets too caught up in it and takes the illusion seriously is really not so different from the crush a secretary can get on her boss, or the doctor can get on his nurse. It happens." She stood and went to him. "The fact that I seem like the character I'm playing is because I'm good at my job, and I'm proud of that. If Tom or anyone else becomes infatuated with me, that's not my fault and I shouldn't be blamed for it. The only actions I'm willing to account for are my own."

She felt scared to death by her proclamation, but it had to be made. She would not and could not take responsibility for the follies of others. The silence was deafening. Marcy could feel her life teetering on an ethereal fence. Will I slip this way, back onto my fleecy pink cloud, or will I fall that way, down . . . down . . . down. She didn't have to wait long for the answer. Dirk drew her close and held her so tightly that she could feel the thudding of two heartbeats.

"My dear love," he whispered, "you shouldn't be asked to 'account' at all." He looked at her soberly. "I really have no question about your integrity, and naturally other men want you — they'd be crazy not to." He ran his hand over her hair and kissed her gently on the lips. "This . . . strange reaction I have to your occupation is my problem, and I'll simply have to deal with it."

Marcy snuggled closer. Why was that small tremor of anxiety still moving within her? "Dirk . . ."

"What, darling?"

"Do you honestly think you can?"

"Can what?"

"Deal with it."

He straightened slightly, his eyes staring, for just a few heartbeats, past her at some secret mind-picture, then he focused again on her. "I have been a businessman most of my life, Marcy, and business is built on compromise. Of course I can do it, and I must, because the one impossibility for me is to live

without you." His lips closed over hers, and his arms tightened around her. Even as she followed him into the lovely land of rapture, she remained aware of the persistence of that small tremor.

Dirk didn't attend any more rehearsals. He explained it by saying that he didn't want to see it in bits and pieces, that he preferred to wait for opening night and see the whole thing put together. Marcy wished she could believe it. During one of the infrequent rehearsal breaks, she and Andy went outside to catch a few breaths of the cool, fresh air. Marcy found herself telling Andy about the argument. He took a puff of his cigarette and stared at his feet. "That's a problem," he said.

"Very profound, Andy. I know it's a problem. The career always has been a problem. But jealousy? From Dirk?"

Andy gave her a stern look. "Is Dirk supposed to be Superman?"

She shifted her feet impatiently. "Of course not, but a mature, knowledgeable man like him should certainly be able to discern the difference between a stage love scene and a real love scene."

"What about the guy playing the scene?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play games, Marcy, you know what I mean. Dirk was dead right about Tom. He *has* lost the ability to tell the difference."

"But —"

"Marcy," Andy cut in, "this becomes so routine to us that we tend to discount it. But it's very hard for a man or woman outside the theatre world to sit and watch the person they love involved in a passionate love scene with someone else."

"Oh, Andy, of course you're right," she wailed. "Is it hopeless?"

He put a comforting arm around her. "No, it's not hopeless. But you have to do your share."

She turned to face him, surprised. "I thought I *was* doing my share."

He paused before replying. "People tend to look at a man like Dirk and assume that because he has everything in the world going for him he doesn't have any problems and can deal with anything. A piano player has a lot of time to observe people. I have never observed anyone who didn't have his own package of hang-ups to cope with. Give him time, sweetie, he'll grind it all through that super-brain and put it into perspective."

"Oh, Andy, you don't know how much I pray that you're right."

He smiled at her. "He's a very bright guy, my dear. I'm sure he understands that the prize is worth the price." She looked at him in quiet gratitude. "Now," he observed, "we had better return before Bruce comes bellowing after us."

The rest of the week flew by in a rush of frantic activity. The private periods for Dirk and Marcy became so brief and so rare that they guarded and

nurtured them, consciously avoiding controversial issues. The rehearsals ran later and later. When she did get through, Marcy was so wound up that sleep was impossible for at least another hour, so she slept until nine-thirty or ten every morning to restore the enormous requirement of energy for the night's work. It was a familiar pattern to Marcy, but it left her little time to be with Dirk, who had to continue his routine of daytime commitments. He picked her up after the second run-through, but then they both accepted the fact that it made more sense for her to drive her own car to his house after rehearsals, since they could never be certain what time she would finish. The temptation to simply crawl into her bed at the inn became stronger and stronger as the week progressed and the tiredness grew, but Marcy could not forego the warm safety of Dirk's arms for even a few hours of restless slumber.

Opening night was a gala event in the valley. The news had spread far and wide that this theatre was destined to be something special, and that "Guys and Dolls" was a first-class show. The tickets were sold out for the opening and the three weekends, and there were very few seats left for the week-night seats. There were countless cocktail and dinner parties being given before the opening, but as for the actors, they were totally immersed in their own busy world. The wine-growing community was alive with excitement. Dirk seemed to be amazed at the level of interest the new theatre was generating and also at how anxious all of his friends were to meet the glamorous star. "Couldn't you just come to Ken and Jean's for a quick drink if I get you back in time for your makeup?" he asked.

"Ken and Jean? Oh, yes, I met them at the cocktail party." A swift, unelcome picture of a tall, elegant, blond girl flashed through her mind. It stopped her dead. They hadn't once mentioned Jennifer. What had Dirk told her?

"Marcy?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey, my mind wandered for a second." She looked at him uneasily. "Dirk, I just can't. I can't afford to talk too much before a performance, especially an opening, and I certainly can't drink anything."

"Well, you can have plain soda and just smile a lot."

Her eyes pleaded with him. "Dirk, please understand. My nerves will be strung tight by this evening, and no, I can't just smile a lot. Everyone would be full of questions and advice. An opening night performance is all I can handle. Can't we meet some of your friends after the show, instead?"

"There's an opening night party at the inn after the show."

There was a weight descending on her shoulders that she couldn't afford to carry today. With a slight edge to her voice she replied, "Why don't you invite the friends who are important to you who wouldn't automatically be included to the party at the inn. They'd love it. They can mix with all the weird show-biz types." They stared at each other in a momentary deadlock.

Dirk broke the tension by giving her a warm hug and a conciliatory smile. "That's a good idea; I should have thought of it myself. I think I'd better stay out of your hair for the rest of the day. I'll go stomp some grapes."

She laughed in relief. "You'll have to buy them at the supermarket. Yours haven't grown yet."

"By God, the lady's right." He held her by the shoulders, his dark eyes probing hers. "Good luck, my love. I'll be cheering for you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Marcy searched the tan, vibrant face for a trace of the shadows Ansel had mentioned. I don't think I see any, she thought. I do hope I'm right. She put her arms around his neck, allowing herself time to savor the pleasure of studying his beloved countenance. "Dirk, I love you so," she said.

There were definitely no shadows when he replied. "I'm so very thankful for that, because it's the most important thing in the world to me." He kissed her deeply, his lips lingering on hers gently before pulling away. "Do well," he whispered, then reluctantly left the room.

By 7:45 that night, the cast was sequestered backstage, the audience was pouring into the theatre, and the members of the crew were racing about solving last-minute problems. Marcy was pacing in her dressing room when she heard a knock. "Come in," she called. The door opened and a delivery boy brought in an enormous bouquet of red roses with one perfect bird-of-paradise in the center. Marcy thanked the boy, who refused her tip and wished her luck as he left. With trembling fingers she reached for the card. It read, "To the star of stars, from one who wishes to bask in her light." There was a postscript. "Love is better the second time around." She thought she would burst with joy. "Come on, come on," she scolded herself, "don't you dare cry, you'll spoil your makeup."

The time finally came for her first entrance, which was greeted by a tremendous roar of welcome, and from there on, the time flew. The show was a smash hit. The audience loved it. After a standing ovation and five curtain calls, the ecstatic cast pushed backstage, singing, laughing, and congratulating each other. Marcy made her way through lines of well-wishers to her dressing room. She had dropped gratefully into the chair in front of the mirror when the door flew open. Dirk strode in, whirled her around, and pulled her up into his arms. He hugged her enthusiastically and said, "You were fabulous — everyone is raving about you."

Was there a hint of set determination in his jaw? Stop it, Marcy, she mentally admonished, remember what Andy said: give him time. "Thank you for the flowers," she said, and this time she didn't try to keep the tears from forming.

He brushed one of the drops from her cheek as he said, "I am so in love with you." He kissed her lightly and smiled. "I'll get out of your way so you can clean up. Shall I come back for you?"

"No, honey, go on over to the inn. I'll get there as fast as I can."

As soon as Dirk left, Marcy began the messy job of removing her makeup. Just when she was at her slimy best, there was a knock on the door. "Come in," she called. She saw Andy's reflection in the mirror as she tissueed the muck off her face. "Hey, Mr. Andy, what do you think? Did you look up from your keyboard long enough to see how the play was going?"

"It was good," he said as he pulled up a stool beside her. "The whole thing was good. And as for you, you were a sensation. Marcy my sweet. You've set a standard they'll have a hell of a time keeping up with."

"Thank you, Andy."

"Marcy." His tone of voice caught her complete attention.

"Yes, Andy, what is it?"

"Well, I had a call this afternoon, from Gary Drake. He wants an answer about the collaboration."

Marcy's heart skipped. Gary Drake was one of the most successful lyricists of the Broadway musical world, and he had approached Andy about working with him on a new musical. It was a tremendous compliment — and a tremendous opportunity for Andy. A Gary Drake musical was usually completely funded before it was even put together. "Oh, Andy, what a self-centered jerk I've been. I've been so wrapped up in my own affairs that I haven't even talked to you about that." The offer had come to Andy the day before Marcy had fled from New York, and she had frankly forgotten all about it.

"You've been, one might say, occupied." Andy sat massaging his fingers, one by one, a habitual exercise he did without thinking when he was tense.

"You want to do it, don't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "I've jotted down ideas for five songs already. They just run through my head."

"Of course." Andy was a prolific and excellent composer, whose songs were widely performed and greatly sought after. He could have gone into full-time composition at any point in the last six or seven years, but Marcy knew he'd stayed because he liked the work they did together. At least that's what he'd told her. She willed the tears that were welling behind her eyes to stop right where they were; they were not to be used on Andy. "You must do it, Andy. Of course you must."

He nodded again. "It was a hard decision to make, before. I really do like performing, and I kind of like you." He gave her a lopsided smile. "But now

that you and Dirk are going to be out here, swinging from grape vine to grape vine together, it seems there isn't much standing in the way."

They sat looking at each other sadly. There is a price to be paid for everything, Marcy thought, even heaven. Reaching out, she put both her hands in his. "I can't even begin to tell you how much I'll miss seeing you every day," she said.

"I know." He squeezed her hands. "Me too. But we have the rest of this run, and the show in New York. I'll have to duck out of the TV special, but you won't really need me for that. You'll be knee-deep in musicians. Beyond that, I doubt that you know exactly what you'll be doing anyway." She nodded in agreement. She didn't. He rose and pushed the stool back to its corner. "You and Dirk were made for each other, Marcy. Hang on to what you have, work your career around it if necessary; it's well worth making a few concessions for."

Marcy stood and put her arms around Andy. They held each other closely for a few moments, then Marcy had to reach for a tissue to dry her eyes.

Andy shuffled his feet, embarrassed. "Look at you, you're getting all mushy."

"It's called smarmy," she sniffled.

"Also messy," he grumped as he wiped some of her cold cream from his face. "Listen, you have to get changed. I'll see you next door." He kissed her lightly and left.

Marcy's shaky hands did not help her efforts to hurry. It took her over half an hour to dress by the time she removed the makeup, took a shower, and did what she considered the most basic glamorizing job she could get away with for the occasion. With all of her thoughts aimed at being with Dirk, she raced through the patio and across the lawn and through the door of the large reception room in the inn. There was an instantaneous burst of applause accompanied by robust cheers.

Alan, who was standing right next to the entrance, caught her by the arm to stop her. Holding his hand up for silence, he waited until the noise subsided. With his wine glass high, he announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is with deep gratitude and enormous pride that I introduce to you the brightest star in the Napa Valley, Miss Marcy Hanson!"

The response was deafening. She was completely surrounded by admirers, all intent upon talking to the famous young actress. Marcy smiled and shook hands, graciously accepting the ecstatic praises. She warded off the usual number of subtle and not-so-subtle passes, all the while searching furtively for Dirk. She finally sighted him at the far edge of the crowd. With many thank-you's and oh-how-nice-of-you's, she worked her way to him. She reached out for his hand and squeezed herself snugly to his side in the press of people. "Hi, darling," she whispered.

"Hello there." He leaned over to give her a quick kiss, which was caught by the flash of a camera bulb.

Inching his way to her, the man with the camera presented his card. "How do you do, Miss Hanson, I'm Steve Howards. I'm with *Time* Magazine. We're doing a story on your appearance in this new local theatre. We have most of what we need, but one of our journalists would like to talk to you briefly tomorrow, if you can spare about thirty minutes."

"Why, of course," she stammered. Coverage in *Time* was not to be sneezed at.

"Now," the young man said, "if I could get a few pictures." He gently pushed her here and there, snapping rapidly all the while, finishing his job swiftly and expertly. When he was through, he took out a pad and pen to jot down the names of the few people included in the shots. Finally he approached Dirk. "And your name, please?"

"Dirk Baxter."

He looked up, an expression of awareness on his face. "Oh, sure," he said, "I've heard of you . . ." Dirk did not seem surprised; he was used to being recognized by the media. "I was told to keep an eye out for you," the photographer continued. "You're Miss Hanson's new beau, isn't that right?"

Dirk looked ashen. "Yes," he croaked. "Excuse me, I think I'll go get a drink."

Marcy's worried gaze followed him as she quickly made arrangements to meet the interviewer the next afternoon. The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, and when they broke away to go home, Dirk was sweet and attentive, but seemed, for the first time since Marcy had known him, overwhelmed.

Luckily, his basic sense of humor began to reappear by the time they reached the house. "Miss Hanson's new beau," he mimicked as they walked inside. "Now I know how Prince Philip must feel when he follows the queen around."

Marcy laughed. "It's good for you. It'll teach you some humility."

"Thanks anyway," he grouched. "I prefer arrogance." He went to the phone table to check for messages left by Mrs. Sanchez. He looked at the note pad and quickly replaced it, face down.

"Who called?" Marcy asked.

"No one important. How would you like a cup of hot chocolate? I thought I'd go in and make some."

"Sounds delicious," she answered. She tarried behind as he headed for the kitchen, and she peeked at the note pad. The message was written in the housekeeper's neat script. "Jennifer Stanton called. Please get in touch with her." Marcy felt clammy as she dropped the pad back into place. She walked slowly to the kitchen and stood leaning against the entryway frame as she

studied the preoccupied man by the stove. Even in this domestic role, he moved with efficient grace. She perused his aristocratic profile with its finely chiseled features, and noted for the umpteenth time how straight and strong he was — lean, healthy, and perfectly assembled. He's like a champion thoroughbred stallion, she thought, the product of generations of fine breeding. "Dirk . . ."

"What?" he asked as he brought her a mug of steaming cocoa.

She gazed down at the cup, the steam rising and clouding her vision. "Do you have any regrets about Jennifer?"

"What a silly idea. What made you ask that?"

"I don't know. I was just watching you and thinking that with all the blue blood between you and her, you might have started a line of descendants that would bleed royal purple."

Usually that line would have won a hoot of laughter from him, but tonight he just looked at her with an unreadable expression and said, "It's too late for jokes, Marcy. Let's drink our hot chocolate and get some sleep."

She hoped he meant too late at night, and she wished she had kept her mouth shut.

Marcy had to admit a certain amount of relief when, early the next morning, Ansel called Dirk and told him they had to go to France. She took the call while Dirk was in the shower, and after listening to Ansel's rhapsodic comments about her performance of the evening before and thanking him profusely, she called Dirk to the phone.

When he hung up, he turned to her with excitement. "Ansel and I have been trying to get an appointment with this man for months," he told her. "He's one of the top wine makers in France, and we're determined to get a hold of some of his cuttings to graft onto our rootstock. He's almost impossible to corner, and very temperamental. He called Ansel yesterday and told him we should be at his vineyard on Tuesday." He tried to look apologetic. "We have to go." His enthusiasm was clearly overriding any reluctance.

"How long will you be gone?"

He looked down at his hands. "It could be a week to ten days if we really get to dickering about the vine cuttings we want."

In a worried voice she asked, "Do you think you can get back before . . ."

"Before you leave? Yes. I'll be sure to come back, at the very latest, in time for the closing night."

She lay propped up on the pillows watching him finish dressing, trying to fight off the fear that was creeping up from her toes to her belly and sinuously winding its way around her heart. "I wish I could go with you," she blurted.

He stopped and faced her, his eyes clouded. "So do I, Marcy. I wish you could share the whole thing with me. I had hoped . . ." He broke off abruptly

and changed to a briskly businesslike tone. "I'll have to throw some stuff into a suitcase and pick up Ansel as fast as possible. We're flying a private plane to New York and taking the Concorde to France. It's quite a drive to his vineyard, so we have to make tracks." He continued to chat about wine and the French vines and the personalities involved as he packed his clothes and put files of papers into a briefcase.

Marcy was fighting a tremendous battle to keep calm. She felt altogether shut off and disconnected from him. Finally he was ready and sat beside her on the bed. She suddenly wished that she was up and dressed too, looking like a bright, alert morning person, instead of lying like a frump in bed. He bent to kiss her, an impeccable businessman-of-the-world saying good-bye to the tousled, sleepy-eyed hausfrau. Shut up, she ordered her brain.

"I'm sorry, honey, I wish I could put it off for a couple of weeks." Until you're in New York, she mentally finished for him.

She managed a weak smile. "That's okay, it'll get you out from under my feet. I won't have the green-eyed monster following me around." Oh, God, she'd meant it as a joke, and it had come out sounding serious.

He stood, a puzzled look on his face. "Yes, I'm sure you don't need that." He picked up his suitcase and briefcase and, with a quick mimed kiss in her direction, left the room.

She listened to his footsteps cross the tile floor, his friendly good morning to Mrs. Sanchez — another dedicated morning person — the door closing, and the engine of his car starting. When the wheels ground their way across the gravel driveway, Marcy started to tremble. She wasn't quite sure why.

9

Marcy slept later and later, trying to close the gap between the busy nights and the lonely days. She couldn't shake the lingering depression that had been with her since Dirk's departure. And with his departure had come another problem: Tom's attentions had become more and more insistent. She went from being diplomatic to being downright rude, but nothing seemed to deter him. She didn't want to complain to Alan and put a smudge on Tom's record simply for the offense of becoming infatuated with her, but her nerves were drawn so taut that the added aggravation was almost the proverbial straw.

Andy sympathized but could offer no constructive advice. "Tom is really smitten," he observed. "I think the only cure is going to be a lot of space, and that just won't happen until the run ends."

So she tried not to take it seriously, but it became an increasing strain.

The theatre was obviously off and running. The house was packed every night, and the *Time* interview was followed by coverage by several San Francisco papers and radio shows. The opening of the St. Helena Theatre with Marcy as the guest star coincided with a countrywide surge of interest in local theatre companies. Marcy accepted all legitimate interviews, more for

the sake of the new theatre than for herself. Although publicity was always helpful, she was experiencing a strangely overwhelming desire for privacy.

Dirk called almost every day, his voice full of enthusiasm for the project he was on and the results they were getting. Then one morning, during a call accented by the static of a bad connection, he mentioned, in a carefully casual tone, that Jennifer had flown all the way to France to see him.

"How did she know where you were?" Marcy asked.

"I'd received a message to call her before I left," — Yes I know, she thought — "and thought it only polite to do so. I had no idea she'd journey so far to try to reason with me."

"Reason with you!" Marcy snapped.

"That was her expression."

"Reason meaning to keep you out of the clutches of the infamous Marcy?" She couldn't make herself stop.

His reply was curt. "I am not responsible for anyone's actions but my own."

Ouch. Her own words sent zinging across an ocean and two continents to zap her. There was an intercontinental silence. "How long did Jennifer stay?"

"Two days. She wanted to see the vineyard while she was here."

Surely he knew how much this was hurting.

"Marcy," his voice traveled through the crackling line, "she came to talk to me, was told it was no use, looked at some of the scenery, and left, I presume, for school."

She should feel completely reassured. She didn't. "Dirk, I love you."

"I love you too, hon. Whoops, here's Ansel. Got to go. I'll be in touch."

The beloved theatre routine seemed strangely hollow. She was doing very well, which was acknowledged by the tumultuous applause after every performance. The future, from anyone's viewpoint, should look bright and shiny. She could not account for the sense of impending doom that hovered over her. It will all be fine when Dirk gets back, she kept telling herself.

The second week moved with alarming speed. Marcy wondered, with increasing concern, whether Dirk would make it back by the final weekend. By Friday evening, she had developed dark circles under her eyes. She could no longer sleep late — in fact, was sleeping very little at all — so she rose early and spent all of Thursday and Friday working compulsively in the garden. Dirk had not called in two days, and the strain of waiting was unbearable.

At 7:30 that night, while Marcy was putting on her Salvation Army uniform, a girl peeked around the door and said, "Someone's yelling for you in the manager's office, Marcy. You're wanted on the phone." With her heart in her mouth, she hurried to take the call. It was Dirk, calling from Paris. "Hi, darling." He sounded rushed. "Sorry not to call you the last couple of days, but we were really out in the country with no access to a phone."

She could hardly breathe. "Are you coming home?"

"Yes, we're on our way. But I'll probably just about make it for the show. We may even be a little late, so don't worry . . ."

"Dirk . . ."

"What? Oh, damn, here we go again. They're yelling at me to come. I'll see you tomorrow, love. Good-bye."

She sat staring at the receiver, fighting that invasive feeling of despair that continued to dog her. At least he was coming, but not until tomorrow night. They would barely have time to say hello and good-bye. She had brought all of her things back to the inn that afternoon in order to get packed. She and Andy had to leave very early Sunday morning to catch their plane. Suddenly the vast distance between her and the man she loved seemed far more than geographic.

The closing performance of Saturday night was half an hour away. Marcy paced her dressing room, rechecking her makeup and costume every few minutes. Her nervous energy had driven her to an early arrival and preparation, and now the extra time on her hands was driving her crazy.

There was the briefest of knocks on her door before it swung open, revealing a very large, dearly familiar frame.

Marcy's eyes widened in delight as she rushed into the open arms of Peter Jackson. "Peter, oh, Peter!"

His teasing eyes laughed down at her. "You've memorized my name."

"Oh, you wonderful man!" She stood on tiptoe to plant a very bright stage-lipstick kiss on his cheek. "I'm so glad to see you! What are you doing here?"

"That sounds like a welcome and an accusation in the same sentence. I couldn't miss your closing night. After all, it should be one hell of a cast party!"

"You idiot!" She clung to him, substituting for a moment his friendly warmth for that other warmth she needed so badly. "Oh, Peter, I'm so worried. Dirk isn't back yet." Peter had, in a series of phone conversations with Marcy and Andy, been kept current with all the news.

His kind face creased into a consoling smile. "Honey, relax. If there is any way on earth to get here, he will. If there isn't, he'll invent one."

Marcy tried to let the reassurance register. It didn't quite.

"Now," Peter intoned, giving her a big squeeze, "I'm going to claim my seat and watch my favorite actress-songbird. Tweet pretty, my pretty." With that he charged back through the doorway and was gone.

The first act was over, and Dirk had still not arrived. Marcy was close to hysteria. She was giving a superb closing performance. The adrenaline was flowing in waves, but each time she made an exit she asked the curtain man or the prop girl or whatever member of the cast had been standing on the entrance side of the stage, "Have you seen Dirk yet?" They were all working to reassure her with "He'll be here; you know what traveling is like," but her anxiety was spreading through the company.

Tom was belligerent. "Why the hell don't you tell that bastard to go pound sand?" he demanded of Marcy.

"Tom, will you stop it! I don't need that tonight." Marcy rushed to the sanctuary of her dressing room. She had just heard the call "Places, second act," when the door opened and Dirk walked through it. With a cry of joy, Marcy flung herself into his arms. He kissed her hungrily, over and over. She clung to him, stammering, "Dirk, oh, Dirk, I was so afraid you wouldn't make it."

"I almost didn't. We ran into a weather problem."

She really looked at him then. "Oh, honey," she crooned, "you look so tired!"

"I am. We haven't had a chance to sleep since I talked to you yesterday."

"Marcy, onstage!" The call came through the door. "Damn," she mumbled, "I don't want to leave you."

He stood and walked out with her. "I'll go out and watch the rest of the show," he said.

"Why don't you go over to my room and rest, instead," she asked. "You look like you might pitch over at any minute."

He smiled warily. "No, if I close my eyes it'll be all over until tomorrow." He kissed her once more. "Go ahead, honey, they're waiting for you. I'll see you as soon as you're through."

The second act sailed by. Marcy, her spirits immensely buoyed, played the entire act two feet off the ground, and the rest of the cast caught new vigor from her. Only Tom seemed angry and disappointed that Dirk had actually made it back. Isn't it amazing how we all clutch at straws, Marcy thought as she watched him slump in a corner backstage waiting for his cue. He actually thought it would make a difference if Dirk hadn't made it.

The applause was thunderous when the curtain opened for the curtain calls. The audience called the cast back again and again for bows, and Marcy received a standing ovation and a wave of bravos. This closing night audience was largely made up of local residents, and they were grateful to her for helping to give their new theatre such a rousing start.

Dirk met her backstage and found himself embroiled in the mob of people who had poured back to congratulate the actors. A happily smiling Alan grabbed Dirk and, in the semi-sign language necessary in a crowd, convinced him to wait for Marcy at the inn, where the cast party was to be held.

Marcy fought her way through the high-spirited group, anxious to get dressed and join Dirk. She managed the clean-up quickly. This party would be far more riotous but far less formal than the one on opening night. As she crossed to the inn, she tried to push aside the gnawing awareness that she must leave this lovely valley and her beloved Dirk in just a few short hours. The price to be paid for her career had never seemed so high. Her entrance to

this party made the one on the first night seem tame indeed. Tom and a man from the chorus were waiting behind the door for her, and the second she entered they closed in on her and, with a whoop of laughter, picked her up and lifted her to their shoulders. It was clearly a prearranged signal. Everyone turned to her and, at a sign from Alan, called "Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!"

She was deeply touched as the cheers sounded around the large room. So many of these people had become her friends, interested in her not only as a star, but as the person she was herself. She was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that she would be coming back here to live her life in this beautiful place with these very nice people. As she was slowly lowered into the crush of bodies, she firmly disentangled herself from Tom's clinging grasp.

Despite her tiredness, Marcy was on the same high that all the other actors were on. It was inevitable. The feeling of exhilaration, of pride in a job well done, plus all the leftover adrenaline contributed to the euphoria. She kept trying to include Dirk in the frivolity, but it was a losing battle. At a cast party, the division between the "ins" and the "outs" was always clearly marked. There was no way for a non-participant to share, or even understand, that special near-hysteria that all the performers and stage crew members were experiencing. It was akin to walking into a drunken brawl cold sober.

Peter, who was biologically imbued with high spirits and keenly susceptible to theatre vibrations, soon reached the semi-manic level of the cast. His greeting to Dirk was effusively friendly. He threw his great arm across Dirk's shoulder, administering one of the famous Peter-bear hugs. "Dirk, what a pleasure to see you! I'm so glad you made it. Marcy looked like crumbled shredded wheat before act one, and now look at her — a glowing peach!" He gave Dirk a resounding smack on the back.

Marcy watched uneasily, wishing that her usually sensitive friend would notice how the tired lines on Dirk's face were deepening. But the acquired show-glow was making even the nearly abstemious Peter seem tipsy. Peter's jovial voice thundered on. "Has Marcy told you that her gorgeous face is going to be beamed into almost every house in the country? Hey!" His other arm closed around Tom, who had edged into the little circle. "Here's the leading man himself. What a terrific job you did. Maybe we can work you into the TV show." He turned his happy smile back to Dirk. "Didn't Marcy and Tom make a dynamite team?"

Oh, no. Marcy's heart thudded rapidly as she tried to telegraph warning signals to Peter, who was uncharacteristically missing all of them, including the acquisitive looks that Tom was sending her way. Dirk had always liked Peter very much, but this situation was definitely not conducive to a happy reunion. Lucidly, at that moment, Jeb bounced up and split the tension with an elaborate rendition of a newly learned joke.

The noise level became steadily more cacophonous. All the restrictions against drinking were off, and even the moderate imbibers were getting high. Tom became quite drunk and persisted in trailing Marcy like a lovesick puppy. She was so happy she just playfully warded off his advances. After all, that 'space' that Andy had referred to was just around the corner.

It was close to 2:00 AM when Marcy really focused on the fact that Dirk was literally gray from fatigue. She put her arm around him. "Honey, why don't you go up to my room and climb into bed? I'll make the rounds and say good night and come up."

"I'd rather go home, Marcy. You have to get your stuff anyway."

"No, I've already done that. I'm all packed. So we can just stay here for the night."

The gray color darkened. "I see. So after your triumph, we can stay in your room and you can hurriedly kiss me good-bye in time to leave for your plane."

"Dammit Dirk, you're being unfair! You're the one who's been gone for almost two weeks. It's not my fault we haven't seen each other!"

"Marcy," he began in a tightly controlled tone, "I would rather we went to the house. I can bring you back here in the morning in time to leave." They stared at each other in anger. The mutual exhaustion and overstretched nerves were taking their toll.

Just then Tom, who had been standing right behind them, blatantly listening to the argument, stepped in. He slapped Dirk on the shoulder. "Tell you what, Dirk old pal, why don't you go on home and I'll go up to Marcy's bed and wait for her?" It happened so fast that it was only observed by a few bystanders. Dirk swung at Tom, connecting solidly with his chin, and sent him crashing to the floor. Tom started up toward Dirk, but was restrained by Alan and Peter, who were right behind him.

"Dirk!" Marcy cried. "What are you doing? He's just a silly drunk kid!"

Dirk stood frozen, staring at his clenched fist. He straightened his fingers, still watching them as though the hand belonged to someone else. When he finally raised his head, he looked sick and stricken. "I haven't been involved in a fight since I was in prep school," he said almost to himself. He looked squarely at Marcy. "This is impossible. It just isn't going to work, Marcy. I'm sorry, but it just isn't going to work." With that he turned swiftly and made his way out of the room.

The rest of it was a hazy nightmare. Most of the partiers were oblivious to the event, so Marcy, with a smile carved on her face, made a hasty round to say her good-byes, and, refusing Peter and Andy's offers of help, ran to her room. She tried periodically through the remainder of the night to reach Dirk, but he wasn't answering the phone. And so, sick, bone-weary, and defeated, she left for New York with Andy.

The drive to the airport, the flight, the cab ride to her apartment, and the following days were moved through in a fog of unreality. Marcy was numb.

She had lost all ability to feel or react to anything. Andy, Angie, and Greg all tried to help, but finally fell to tiptoeing around her. Everyone's attending a wake, she thought. I think it's mine. She rehearsed for hours, driving herself and everyone around her toward perfection and distraction. Andy's "Mercy, mercy" brought no response; she hardly heard it. She couldn't bear to think about Dirk, and so she worked harder and harder and faster and faster to fill her time and her mind with other things. She tried once to call Dirk after Andy suggested that the fight had been a natural outcome of the state of exhaustion Dirk was in. Mrs. Sanchez assured her she would give him the message, but he never returned the call.

Marcy was due to open her week's engagement on Saturday night. By Thursday morning she was a walking container of jangling nerve ends. She hadn't slept more than a few hours since she returned. She spent the nights pacing, watching late-night movies, trying to read, and reviewing songs that she could already have sung backwards. As she stood by the Steinway grand in the practice room looking over Andy's shoulder at a stanza of music she was still not satisfied with, he took his hands from the keyboard and spoke sharply.

"Marcy, for God's sake, when are you going to calm down? You're about to drop in your tracks, and frankly, so am I."

"I'm sorry, Andy. Why don't you knock off and go get some rest. I can work this section out on my own."

"Not on your life. You shouldn't be doing anything alone right now. I think you should either go stay at Angie's place for the next week and a half, or ask her to bunk with you. I know she'd be glad to; she's as worried about you as I am."

Marcy moved around to the other side of the piano. "Andy, I'm as strong as a horse — you know that. I'll be fine. As soon as we're through with this gig, I'll go away someplace. Maybe visit the Cranes in London."

"If you last that long," he mumbled. "Okay, where do you want to start?"

They worked through the old-timer that she had just returned to her repertoire, singing through lightly until they reached the troublesome part. "I'm a one-man woman looking for the man that got away . . ." She was aware, just for a moment, that Andy was going out of focus before the blackness closed in.

"Marcy, Marcy . . ." Someone, way off, was calling her name. There were strange, colorful circles whirling around and around. She slowly became aware that she was on the floor looking up into the terrified faces of Andy and Angie. "What happened?" she whispered.

Andy pushed her hair out of her eyes. "You went out, babe, like a light." He gently probed the back and sides of her head. "I don't think you hit anything. Does this hurt?"

"No."

They carefully helped her to a chair. "Here," Angie said, "put your head between your knees. It's supposed to help. I don't remember why, but it is."

Slowly her head cleared and the feeling of nausea passed. She resisted Angie and Andy's admonitions to see a doctor. She had yet to hear of a doctor who could suture together a broken heart. She moved foggily through the next twenty-four hours, focusing what reserve she had left on the Saturday night opening. With mighty determination, she blocked the encroaching vision of an immense empty void that looked alarmingly like the rest of her life. The hollow feeling in her stomach and the steady ache that emanated from her heart to every outer point of her body became constant, unwelcome companions. Perhaps, she feared, life-long companions.

Friday evening found her once again at the piano in the rehearsal room, reviewing already perfectly memorized lyrics when Greg entered. He looked worried and harassed. He studied her quietly for a moment, then said, "Marcy, I think we should cancel you out of this engagement."

She was shocked. "Don't be silly, I'm fine."

"You're not fine; you're a walking zombie. It just isn't worth taking a chance on your health."

She looked at him askance. "What kind of an agent are you?" She teased. "You're supposed to get your performers to their bookings on a stretcher if necessary."

Greg grinned at her. "Yeah, that's the problem with liking your client too much." He stood up and paced around for a minute, then sat beside her again. "Marcy, I think we ought to at least open discussions on your future."

"Are you concerned about it?"

"Certainly not in terms of your professional pull — quite the contrary. You've wanted to keep busy for years, so I've kept you on the nightclub circuit, as well as booking you into anything special that seemed right for you, but . . ."

"But?"

"Yes, but. The circuit is grueling. I'm surprised it hasn't also become tiresome to you by now. And the truth of the matter is that you don't need to do it anymore. You're a big enough draw for me to be very selective about what we say yes to. You could easily do a stint in Vegas every year or two. We have more and more requests for TV appearances and two movie inquiries. The point is, you can stay at the top without working yourself to a frazzle. It's up to you, whatever you want. But think about it, and let's sit down after the Waldorf gig and do some long-range planning."

"As they say in the trade?" She smiled at him, her mind reeling with unanswered questions.

"As they say in the trade," he repeated as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. "So you want to do the Waldorf?"

"Of course; they're counting on me."

"Okay, you've got it. See you tomorrow."

She stood outside the stage entrance on Saturday night, listening to the small orchestra and waiting for her cue, thinking of the countless times she had done this, and thinking that she was in fact more than ready to move on to a more relaxed life-style. If only . . . but no more of that.

She heard Andy's solo piano swinging into her theme song. There was a round of applause as members of the audience recognized the cue. She walked in, smiling at the receptive, welcoming people who offered their warmth and approval in return for the shared beauty of her voice. Life is all a trade-off, she thought. Well, Marcy old girl, she told herself, you'd better enjoy this and make the most of it, because it looks like this is what the sum total of your life is going to be. She opened her mouth and sang. She sang of pleasure and pain and gaiety and sorrow. She allowed the warm flow of the audience reaction to touch her chilled heart, hoping that someday it would all seem worthwhile again.

Suddenly the room seemed to stand on end. It can't be, she thought. I'm hallucinating. It's because the conditions are so much the same as that other night, and because I want so much for it to be real. She glanced anxiously at Andy. He grinned broadly and gestured with his head toward the back of the room. Then, all on his own, he began to play the introduction to a very reminiscent song. Marcy could hardly see through the tears in her eyes or sing through the lump in her throat.

"I can't forget the way you smile, and ev'ry step is a lonely mile, without your hand holding mine." Even from deep in the shadows where he stood, his smile lit up the whole room.

As soon as the set was over, Marcy threw a kiss to her audience, dropped a kiss on top of Andy's head, and ran through the exit and straight into Dirk's arms. "Marcy." His powerful arms held her so tight she could scarcely breathe. He kissed her mouth and her hair and her cheeks and her eyes, whispering her name over and over as if to convince himself that she was really there. She looked up at him through her freely flowing tears, amazed to see that his eyes were wet, too. "Look at what you're doing to me," he scolded. "First you get me involved in a drunken brawl, and now you've got me crying like a baby. What are you going to do next?"

"Love you," she sniffled. "Every day for the rest of my life, I am going to love you."

10

Later, snuggled close and still filled with wonder at the joy of sitting together on a sofa, Marcy asked him, "When did you decide to come?" He kissed her nose and held her close. "When the full realization of what I was losing penetrated my thick skull."

She pulled back a little, a tiny frown between her eyes. "Dirk, I'm so sorry about that awful party, and about not being more understanding about how tired you were."

"Shh," he murmured, "that was a bad night, but maybe, in the long run, the best thing that could have happened."

She was amazed. "What do you mean?"

"Marcy, my one and only love, I have done a lot of thinking since then. I've spent a lot of time alone, walking through the vineyards, walking through my empty house, walking, totally ineffectively, by the way, through the tomb-like silence of the winery."

"Where are Ansel and Jeff?"

"Oh, they're right there, with their silent disapproval hanging in the air so thick there was no way to talk through it. They thought I was absolutely out of my mind to let you go, and they made no secret whatsoever about their feelings."

"Oh," she sighed, "I knew I loved those two."

He grinned at her and kissed her again. "Anyway, day before yesterday I was sitting on that slope in the back, with the good old faithful springer beside me, just soaking in the beauty of the valley and thinking about how much I loved it and how perfect it had been when you were there to share it with, when something hit me square between the eyes."

Marcy was completely caught up in his narrative. "What?"

"I suddenly thought, what if Marcy had tried to make me choose between the winery and her." He looked at her intently. "What if you had asked me to give up the vineyards and the winery in exchange for your love. The thought was mind-boggling."

She returned his concentrated look, almost holding her breath in order not to interrupt his line of thought.

"And that was just what I was trying to force you to do. Choose between one love and the other." He took a deep breath and shook his head. "No one should have to make a choice like that."

"Dirk, I love you more than anything. I must admit that when I saw you standing in the back of the room tonight, I was ready to chuck it all if that was what you wanted."

"It's not what I want. What I want is you, just as you are, or just as you want to be at any time in the future." He took her face in his hands and gazed deeply into her eyes, the enormous gift of love he was presenting to her shining brightly in his. When he touched his lips to hers she seemed to dissolve inside into sheer ecstasy.

She slid her arms around his neck, clinging possessively, wishing that they could stay right there, just like that, forever. "Do you have to leave right away, or can you stay for a few days?"

"No, and yes."

Her eyes darted to his. "No what and yes what?"

He laughed happily. "No, I don't have to leave right away, and yes, I can stay for a few days. In fact I intend to stay right here with you until you're ready to come home with me."

Her arms tightened around his neck. "Oh, honey, please hold me close. I am so filled with joy I'm afraid I'll pop! I hope that sometime or other I did something to deserve all this happiness so it will stay this time." Remembering her talk with Greg, she rushed on, "I have so much to discuss with you."

"Could it wait just a while?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stood and pulled her up into his arms. He kissed her deeply, pressing his body to hers with eager need. Marcy was suffused with the rush of fiery

desire. She longed to meld her body with his, and each ensuing kiss kindled the flame until it reached feverish proportions. Dirk scooped her up into his arms and headed for the bedroom. "I can't leave a bad impression with this bed," he said, his hot lips seeking hers. "We'll do right by it this time." And they did.

The week in New York flew by. Dirk attended every single performance, insisting, as he looked her straight in the eye, that he enjoyed each one. At Marcy's urging, he sat with her through two long planning sessions with Greg. The ease with which things started to fall into place astounded both of them. "I've already arranged to be with Marcy most of the time she films the TV special," Dirk stated during one of the meetings.

Marcy's eyes widened in disbelief. "You're kidding!"

"No. Ansel and Jeff can handle the winery. The harvest will be done. I can devote myself to my other business affairs. I'm sure there'll be an airport somewhere around, no matter where you shoot, so I can do whatever traveling is necessary." He cocked his head at both of them. "At least from what I remember about Helen Morgan, this is probably not going to be filmed in the middle of some wilderness."

Greg laughed. "Hardly."

Dirk looked at Marcy tenderly. "The one time of each year that it is most important to me that you be at home is during the harvest and the crush, roughly from late August through October. Maybe you could work with the theatre company during that period?"

She slid her arm through his and squeezed it. "I'm sure I can, although what I'll really want to do is work right with you. Ansel and Jeff will probably have to toss me out bodily."

Greg grinned at them, his face a shining mirror of the joy before him. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "I don't anticipate any problems. As I told Marcy a few days ago, she's reached the point in her career where we can work her engagements around her life-style, rather than the other way around. Just let me know on a regular basis, and as far ahead as possible, what blocks of time you want to leave unscheduled, and I'll do the rest."

There was a moment of silence as they each let the comfort of the newly discussed arrangements sink in. "Well," Dirk declared, "it seems that we made numerous mountains out of what was, admittedly, a fair-sized molehill."

Greg stood and grasped his hand in a firm shake. "Look at it this way," he counseled. "Life can get pretty dull if you live it all on a flat plain. Just don't let those mountains get too high to scale again."

"Don't worry," Dirk assured him, "Marcy and I are going to turn the knack of compromise into a fine art."

"You'd better believe it." Marcy beamed.

They stood at the top of the hill behind the hacienda, the cool evening breeze sifting through their hair, the black and white spaniel lying across both pairs of feet as though to help cement the union by the addition of his body weight. It was the night before the wedding, and Mrs. Baxter's voice could be heard from the house, cheerfully issuing orders to the hordes of helpers and caterers she had assembled.

Marcy giggled. "I'm so glad we let your mother give the wedding; she's having such a good time."

Dirk cast a rueful glance over his shoulder. "She is indeed. I used to think this was a big house, but I'll be damned if I know where she'll put all the people she's invited: all your friends, all my friends, all her friends, and almost everyone in Napa Valley." He shook his head in wonder. "She didn't want anyone's feelings to be hurt."

Marcy smiled up at him. "She'll manage."

"True. She'll manage. As for me, I can hardly wait until we have our privacy restored. Are you sure you don't want to go someplace on a honeymoon?"

Marcy stared at him in astonishment. "Are you kidding? Where could we go that would even come close to being this perfect?"

"You're right," he agreed. With their arms around each other, they gazed up at the full moon that was just gearing up its light for a spectacular night show.

Marcy started to hum.

"Okay, my little songbird, what are you humming about now?"

Marcy leaned her head back against his shoulder. "It just popped into my head." She sang the words to him softly. "A love like ours grows with time, forever yours, forever mine . . ."

Dirk's eyes washed her with love. "Very appropriate. I couldn't agree with it more."

"Good," she murmured, "because I intend to sing it just for you for the rest of our lives."

About the Author

MARY CURTIS, also known to romance fans as Mary Haskell, is a Californian-turned-Massachusetts-resident who divides her artistic energy between writing projects and work in community theater. Author of several romance novels this mother of three daughters also finds time to play heroine in musicals such as "Guys and Dolls," "Kiss Me," "Kate," and "The King and I." When not performing, directing, or writing, Mary is likely to be found traveling with her husband, gathering new story and setting ideas along the way.