

Harlequin Presents...

LINDSAY
ARMSTRONG

the director's wife



CHAPTER ONE

CATHERINE WEST stared out of her kitchen window, over her kitchen garden and the summer-gold paddocks beyond towards Mount Macedon, with a tinge of longing in her deep blue eyes. She was preparing a luncheon for four—two guests—but the clear skies and heat of this Victorian summer day, the intoxicating scent of grass and bush, a tantalising drift of woodsmoke through the air, were calling to her very soul, and she wondered what Tom would say if she went in to him—breaking all the rules—and told him to cancel the luncheon and take her for a picnic to Hanging Rock.

She closed her eyes and remembered the time, two years ago, when he had done just that. She had been a very new bride, still hardly able to believe that Tom West, acclaimed film director and screen writer with a well-deserved reputation for arrogance, a terrible temper or a kind of crushing indifference, which was worse, and a reputation with women that could be summed up in one word—dangerous, had married her. Not only that, although that had been staggering enough and still staggered her secretly, and nowadays sadly, but he had brought her to this beautiful old stone home with its steep roof and tall chimneys, with its acres of garden, and Mount Macedon, which was reputedly the Hanging Rock of the legend and the

book and film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, in the background.

She'd been fascinated, she remembered, and sure there would be sinister auras at the Rock. But on a day just such as this, it had been peaceful and placid with insects humming, birds singing—and Tom had made love to her in the grass in a secluded little dell, and the Rock had overlooked and given no indication of disapproval.

She opened her eyes, turned away from the window and grimaced at her curious fancies. There was no way Mount Macedon could have expressed its disapproval of their lovemaking by placing a—a what?—on their marriage. A curse? No, that *was* being ridiculous. Besides, it had been so lovely the way Tom had suggested it with a little glint in his eyes, and laughed, but gently, as her eyes had widened and she had blushed just to think of it, then not laughed when, in a bid to show him she wasn't quite the shy, inhibited girl he thought she was, had started to unbutton her blouse. And she remembered, as if it were happening to her again, the feel of his fingers on hers, stilling them, and the way he had taken her into his arms and kissed her first, slowly and thoroughly, her lips, then her neck and throat and lower, until she was dazed with desire and not even sure where she was...

'Cat?'

Cathy blinked and refocused from her mind's eye to the kitchen doorway and the tall figure of her husband, who was staring at her with a faint frown in his eyes.

He said her name again with a lift of an eyebrow and moved towards her, adding, 'You looked as if

you were in a trance—want to tell me where you were?’

She blushed, a habit she'd not lost, and turned hastily to the kitchen table and the salad she'd been making. 'Nowhere. Just... thinking. '

Tom leant his broad shoulders against the wall next to the table and watched her measure oil and vinegar and a pinch of mustard into a cut-glass container, cork it, then tilt it backwards and forwards to blend the contents. 'Your thoughts must have been particularly wistful, then, ' he said at last.

'No, not particularly, ' she lied, and tried to smile brightly.

'Come here, Cat, ' he said softly.

'Tom——' another faint flush of colour stained her cheeks '—I'm running late. They'll be here soon and I haven't changed or——'

'Because you've been daydreaming about something you don't want to share with me?' he queried lazily.

'I'm running late, that's all——'

'Then I'll come to you, ' he murmured, and before she could side-step he straightened and slid his arms about her waist.

'Tom——'

'I'm not proposing to make love to you, ' he said gravely but with a glint of amusement in his eyes, those hazel eyes that could see through to her soul—sometimes, she thought rebelliously, not always! 'I just thought I might—embrace you. You look—looked—as if you needed it, ' he added with a twist of his lips.

Cathy winced, and he felt it and narrowed his eyes as he stared down at her. Then he said in a

different, suddenly harder voice, 'What's wrong, Cat? Tell me.'

'Nothing,' she said briefly, then shut her lips obstinately.

'You're being childish, Cathy,' he warned impatiently, and drew her a little closer.

A phrase she'd heard often ran through Cathy's mind—he always gets his own way, by fair means or foul. And the context she'd heard it in most frequently applied to Tom West, her husband, her tall, loose-limbed husband with his unhandsome face, his ruffled dark-fair hair, his devil-may-care aura—a combination that attracted women in their droves—his thirty-eight years of age and experience as opposed to her twenty-two, his ability to arouse her physically so that there was always, but more particularly when they were as close as this, the desire to simply revel in the fact that he still wanted her, even though that was the only way he wanted her...

The phone rang. There was no extension in the kitchen, but it could be heard clearly down the tiled passageway from his study. Tom lifted his head, then looked down at her and said with soft mockery, 'Saved by the bell—but you're going to have to tell me some time.' He released her and touched her mouth lightly with his fingers. 'Don't run too late, will you? I'm starving!'

Cathy stared at the kitchen door he'd closed behind him, a supremely symbolic gesture, she thought angrily, and gritted her teeth. Then she said, 'All right, I will tell you, Tom West—at least, I'll tell myself. I don't know why you married me. You

shut me out of every part of your life except your bed and your home. You're quite happy for me to spend my whole life here, not that I don't love it, but I might as well be the housekeeper you come home to sleep with. You share none of your dreams or aspirations with me, nothing, except the daily little things that happen here. You make me feel illiterate and immature and good for one thing only—and I'm not even sure if I'm good enough at that to ensure I'm the only one you sleep with. I mean, when you're away so often, do you... do you... ?'

She was still staring at the door with this awful question mark in her mind when she heard a car drive up the sweeping gravelled driveway, and she muttered, '*Damn*. They're here!'

Lunch, despite her rush, was a success, and their guests were content to linger at the table for their coffee in the elegant, panelled dining-room with its bow window overlooking the rose garden.

Cathy had set the table with a cream damask cloth and napkins, silver and cut glass and a low bowl of full, scented roses. Now she cleared most of it away and produced the fine, paper-thin Wedgwood coffee service, while Tom poured port for the men, and the conversation turned in earnest to the reason for this lunch.

Their two guests were both heavily involved in the latest film Tom was to direct. Duncan Haines, head of the production company, was a gentle giant of a man with sleepy eyes and in his middle forties. Yet he both was wise and had an acute financial sense as well as an artistic judgement that Tom re-

spected—they'd been friends for years and always worked closely. In stark contrast, Peter Partridge was younger, dark, thin and intense. He had written the best-seller the film was to be based on, and he and Tom were collaborating on the screenplay—not an easy liaison at times, Cathy had guessed, and looking at the zeal in Peter Partridge's dark eyes she could understand why.

She listened to the conversation with interest as she moved about the room.

'Chloe, ' Peter was saying. 'We still have to find a Chloe. I'm happy with all the other casting—I'm ecstatic about Bronwen Bishop playing the lead female role, I think she has the vitality, the star quality, and she's a very accomplished actress——'

'She can also be one tough lady, Pete, ' Duncan said. 'Don't be fooled by those large dark eyes and willowy figure. '

Pete paused to give this some thought, then shrugged as if it didn't really enter into his priorities and continued intently, 'But I'm beginning to think it will have to be an unknown who does Chloe—no one else I've seen has the... the right blend of mystery and beauty, vulnerability, that fragile, essentially *mysterious* appeal, if you know what I mean. A woman or a girl who holds the eye on just a glimpse and you can't forget her. '

Cathy saw Tom and Duncan exchange glances as Peter spooned sugar into his coffee and stirred it vigorously.

'We'll find you your Chloe, Pete, ' Duncan said soothingly and with the long practice of someone used to dealing with the artistic temperament.

'She's really an important part of the plot, Duncan,' Peter said urgently. 'I know—I know it might not seem so.' He gestured. 'It's not a big part, but it sort of embodies the spirit of it—this girl who keeps cropping up in Robert's life but he can't get his hands on her. This girl who's at different times joyful, vulnerable, sensual, wistful—the effect she has on him is a pivotal part of the plot.'

'We understand that, Pete,' Tom said easily, and added with his eyes on the window, 'You still there, Cathy? Because your best friend is at the window.'

Cathy was standing at the sideboard putting away silverware, and she glanced over her shoulder, then had to smile ruefully. 'I don't know about my best friend, but a most persistent one.'

'Let him in—he's probably hungry.'

'You make him sound like a dog!' Cathy said indignantly as she crossed to the window.

'He follows you around like one sometimes—well, William,' he said to the child Cathy helped climb over the low windowsill. 'Come and be introduced. Gentlemen, this is William Casey, who lives with his grandparents next door—and spends a lot of time eluding them. Do sit down, William. I'm sure there's some lunch left for you. I can't imagine why we didn't invite you in the first place.'

'Thanks, Mr West,' William, who was seven, thin but unabashable, replied, and sat down with alacrity. 'I've had my lunch and I've got clean hands—see?' He held them up palm out.

'Excellent,' observed Tom. 'We're making progress, but if you've had your lunch...?'

'No dessert,' William said succinctly. 'Gran doesn't believe in 'em, so all she gives me is an apple

or something. But Cathy makes the most 'stonishing desserts!'

'Cathy does indeed, ' Duncan agreed gravely. 'In fact Cathy cooks like an angel—thanks for that excellent lunch, my dear, ' he said, laying a hand on Cathy's arm as she placed a bowl of trifle and ice-cream in front of William, 'but come and sit down and talk to us. After all that effort you deserve to relax. Let Tom do the dishes, ' he added with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

'I——'

'Sit down, Cathy, ' said Tom with a wry look. 'Otherwise I'll acquire the reputation of wife-driver as well as everything else. Would you like a glass of port—I didn't think to offer you one?'

'No, thanks. ' She pulled out a chair and sat down next to William and said seriously to him, 'This is a special occasion, William. Your grandmother is right—too many desserts aren't good for you. '

'So we're not corrupting you, William, just—indulging you. '

Duncan and Peter grinned, but Cathy looked at her husband reproachfully. 'I don't suppose he understands half of what you say to him, Tom—which is just as well. '

'Is it?' For some reason Tom West's hazel eyes lingered on her, on her long, fair, curly hair that was gathered into the nape of her neck today, her darker eyebrows and blue, blue eyes—so blue, the whites of them were startling, her wide, generous mouth, the cool, sleeveless blue and white print dress with its revered neckline and belted waist that she'd changed into so hurriedly, the smooth golden sweep of her arms and throat. Then he grimaced

as if at some private thought and said, 'Want to bet? William, at four o'clock this afternoon, in the interests of fitness, I should be prepared to have a short bout of that ancient and barbaric ritual that originated at a no doubt equally barbaric public school, with you. How does that affect you?'

'Oh, boy!' William said joyously. 'I was going to ask you if you'd kick my rugby ball around with me till I realised you had visitors. '

Everyone laughed, including Cathy, although she did say to Tom's I-told-you-so expression, 'That was a safe bet. You do it nearly every afternoon with him. '

'You two need kids of your own, by the sound of it, ' said Duncan, still grinning. 'What's stopping you?'

Cathy stilled and her smile faded as she stared into her husband's eyes, then looked away and heard him say after a little pause that was just becoming awkward, 'Oh, there's plenty of time for that, Duncan. '

It was Peter Partridge who created the diversion. He had been staring at Cathy for a couple of minutes, but now he made a convulsive movement, knocked his coffee-cup over but didn't even notice, stood up with his mouth open, then said in a strangled voice, 'That's it. How blind! Chloe!'

It didn't immediately occur to Cathy that he was talking to her as she hurriedly rose and reached for a napkin to blot up the coffee. It still didn't altogether sink in what was going on as Tom said in a hard, decisive voice, 'No. '

'But... but, ' Peter had trouble getting the words out, so great was his emotion, 'she's perfect! She's

everything I was trying to describe to you. Didn't you see that... vulnerable, wistful——'

'Pete, ' Duncan said warningly, and Cathy stopped mopping coffee at last, and straightened and looked in turn at the three men, then back at Tom.

'Does... he mean me?'

'None other. ' His tone was clipped and curt.

'But——'

'And you do have some acting experience, don't you, Cathy?' Pete continued obliviously, his dark eyes starting to shine. 'Isn't that how you two met? Tom!' He switched his luminous gaze to his host.

'Sit down, Pete, ' drawled Tom, changing moods adroitly—outwardly at least. 'Yes, we did. In the classic director-actress manner for which I have yet to—forgive myself, ' he said barely audibly but causing Cathy to colour. 'That was in a stage play, though. Cathy's never worked before a camera——'

'I have. ' All eyes switched to her, including William's.

'Well, to be precise, you've done a television commercial.'

'That's working in front of a camera, ' she said with a little shrug.

'Selling shampoo is a little different from selling Peter Partridge's mystery woman, ' Tom said drily, then, with a suddenly dangerous glitter in his hazel eyes, 'And before this goes any further—husband and wife on the same set rarely work. '

'It wouldn't worry me, ' Cathy said quietly. 'Besides, I think I need a bit of a challenge. But I'll leave you to discuss it. Come, William. *You* can

help me with the dishes—that's the penalty for illicit desserts!'

A couple of hours later, Cathy watched Duncan and Pete leave from her bedroom window. She guessed they didn't realise she was back from the walk she'd taken William on after they'd done the dishes—either that, or there was some embarrassment about facing her again.

She sighed and fingered the long blue velvet curtains. It was a blue room, the main bedroom, almost a Victorian bedroom with its heavy curtains, beautiful mahogany furniture, blue and ivory wallpaper, velvet-covered, buttoned mahogany chairs in front of the fireplace and its great four-poster bed. It might have been made for *you*, Tom had said on their first night in it. It matches your eyes...

Her eyes, she thought, had been what had intrigued him about her from the beginning—that classic, director-actress encounter which he still found it hard to forgive himself for... What had he meant? The clichéd way it had happened or that he'd allowed it to happen at all? She remembered it so well...

A nineteen-year-old Cathy Kerris in her first year at NIDA, having won a place in the acting school for, oddly, a flair for comedy. Tom West, acclaimed director doing a teaching seminar in a most practical way—directing a play put on by the students, who were, almost without exception, quite bowled over by the experience—and the possibility of being 'noticed' by the great man. A love scene, during which Cathy was to be passionately kissed

by the leading man and was expected to kiss him back with equal passion. One problem—Cathy Kerris, despite her looks, despite her fledgling talent, had apparently been miscast.

'Look——' Tom West had stridden down the stage towards them, '—that was about as effective as two frozen cod kissing each other! Haven't you ever kissed or been kissed?' he demanded, his hazel eyes running over her flushed, embarrassed face, her figure, and returning to her face with an acute degree of scepticism in them.

'Not... actually, ' she mumbled, and cringed inwardly as everyone laughed.

'I find that hard to believe, ' he drawled. 'Your eyes alone are—where have they kept you since you left school?'

She was unable to answer, only able to stare at him like a mesmerised rabbit until he made an impatient gesture and said drily, 'Well, in the interests of your career, perhaps you'd better acquire some experience to call upon. This, ' he added with a satirical twist of his lips, 'is how it's done. '

It was a kiss that would go down in NIDA's history, Cathy suspected. It certainly held the whole cast and everyone else who was there spellbound. What it did to her was also history, she'd thought often, and just as often wondered how in her awful embarrassment and confusion, it could have affected her so. But there was no doubt that it did. Some attraction to this tall, worldly man had obviously sprung up in her as soon as she'd laid eyes on him, she'd reasoned later, but because of so many things, so many poles between them, she had not even admitted it to herself. Yet, when it had

ended, when his mouth had left hers and he had held her away from him, not only had there been stunned shock in her eyes but something else, an awakening and an unlocking, an unspoken admission that the feel of his arms around her, the feel of his hard body against hers, his sampling of her lips, his teasing them apart, his fingers moving up the back of her neck and into her hair—all of it had been a revelation.

Which he had seen in her eyes, with a faint frown growing in his own. To make matters worse, they had all seen it, and people had begun moving awkwardly, looking away... That was when he'd ended it—not only by releasing her but abruptly calling an end to the rehearsal. Cathy came to life and stumbled away, conscious of the fact that she doubted she'd have the courage to face him again, or NIDA.

Mercifully everyone left her alone as she gathered her things and escaped with relief out into a dark, wet winter's afternoon.

But as she almost ran along the pavement, a sleek green foreign car pulled into the kerb and the driver leant over and opened the door. It was Tom West.

'Cathy?' he said. 'Hop in. '

She had to bend down to see him properly, and her tongue tied itself into knots as she sought to speak.

He waited for a moment, then said wryly, 'All I had in mind was buying you a drink—assuming you drink—or a cup of coffee, and apologising. '

The bar he took her to was warm and dim and after disposing of her coat and long scarf Cathy ac-

cepted a brandy and dry, then with some helplessness looked across at him. His hair was damp and ruffled and there were droplets of rain on his tweed jacket; he'd stretched his long legs out sideways to the small round table and he was twisting his glass around absently, staring down at it. And her heart started to beat oddly again—but what was the use? she thought with some despair. They were still poles apart, this was only an act of kindness—there was no way this tall, experienced, clever, sometimes satanic man could be interested in her.

He lifted his eyes and disturbed the fixed way she was looking at him, and raised an eyebrow ruefully. 'I wish I knew what was going on behind those beautiful blue eyes now, young Cathy, and for what it's worth I do apologise for putting you on the spot like that. I hope you don't think I've blighted your career or——' he paused '—made it too difficult for you to go back. It'll all be forgotten by the next rehearsal, you know.'

To her surprise, Cathy heard herself say, 'But I don't think I'm right for the part, so...'

He studied her rather intently for a moment. 'Perhaps not,' he said slowly. 'Not yet, anyway. How come——?' His hazel eyes narrowed. 'I mean, for a budding actress you do seem... not quite the type.'

'I'm much better at deadpan comedy than kissing,' she told him with a grimace, 'although I did think I could broaden my scope, *should* broaden it. Now, I don't know. I certainly couldn't... well...' She stopped in confusion.

'Kiss just anyone passionately?' he queried with a glint of amusement. 'That could be due to a conflict of interest—a conflict with your upbringing, perhaps. Tell me how you did grow up. '

Half an hour later, Cathy stopped self-consciously and realised she'd told Tom West her whole life story. How her parents had died when she was four and her grandmother had brought her up with the help of an exclusive convent boarding school. Told him about her grandmother, who was dead now too and had been an old-fashioned autocratic lady in her sixties when she'd taken on her orphaned granddaughter.

'I'm amazed you ever got as far as NIDA, ' he had commented once. To which she had replied that the Kerrises, her father and grandmother, had both had a stubborn streak and she guessed she'd inherited a little of it.

'But why acting?'

She shrugged. 'Why does anyone——?'

'I know that, ' he said, 'but in some cases it's a form of rebellion. In your case, against your extremely sheltered, even repressed childhood. '

Cathy considered, then she said seriously, 'You don't think I've got any talent?'

Tom sat back with a grimace. 'I didn't say that. It's only your first year, and you must have shown someone something to have got in. As a matter of fact, I have to admire your tenacity, and one certainly needs to be tenacious for this profession. So, ' he put his head on one side and those clever hazel eyes watched her curiously again, 'apart from NIDA, what else do you do with your life?'

'Lots of things, ' Cathy said vaguely.

'Do you live alone?'

'Yes. I inherited quite a bit of money, so I can... afford to, ' she said with a trace of awkwardness.

'Are you ever lonely?'

She looked at him, then away. 'Sometimes. But you get used to it. And I *do* do lots of things. I go to a cordon bleu cooking school, I belong to my church's fund-raising committee and I have friends. You don't have to feel sorry for me, ' she said with sudden dignity.

'No, ' he said, but thoughtfully. And not long afterwards, he drove her home. But on the way, he said to her, 'I hope I'm forgiven, and would you object to changing roles in the play?'

She tensed.

'Cathy, ' he said quietly, 'believe me, I can do it without any loss of face for you—further loss of face, ' he added with an oddly grim twist to his lips. 'That way—well, it will be better for everyone, but especially you. '

'Ah right. '

He was as good as his word. He achieved the recasting with the minimum of fuss, and although it was a smaller role, Cathy was undoubtedly happier playing an old woman rather than a passionate one. And such was Tom's mastery not only of the play but of everyone in it that the subject of *the* kiss was not alluded to, to her, although she doubted it would ever be completely forgotten. But the fact that Tom West didn't single her out for any special attention, and treated her exactly as he had before, helped.

Treated her exactly as before at NIDA, that was; but when they bumped into each other in a rush-hour crowd a couple of weeks later and he all but knocked her down so that she had difficulty getting her breath back and the contents of her handbag rolled all over the pavement, he insisted, with a rueful glint in his eyes, that he should be allowed to compensate. He took her to the same bar and she had the same drink, and he exercised the same knack so that she was able to talk freely to him and even invite some confidences in return. Such as that film directing was his great love and, he felt, his forte, but he liked to keep his hand in with live theatre from time to time.

Then Cathy got a cold and had to miss a rehearsal and at the next one was still a bit pale and pulled-down-looking, and once again Tom caught up with her just after she'd left the building and told her she looked as if she needed a good meal and that was what he proposed to do with her—feed her.

He took her to a subduedly elegant restaurant where the food was superb and the atmosphere calm and restful. And remarked at the end of the meal, with his hazel eyes resting on the faint colour in her cheeks, that he'd been right and had she *no* living relative to look after her?

'Not even two ugly sisters like Cinderella, ' she replied with a grin. 'But you don't have to worry about me. '

'For some reason, I do, ' he said, rather drily, she thought. But then he changed the subject, and presently he drove her home.

To her immense surprise, she actually got up the courage to ask him to come up for coffee and, even more to her surprise, he came. And it was obvious her flat was something of a surprise to him—the really good pieces of furniture she'd saved from her grandmother's home, the paintings, rugs and porcelain—and she sometimes wondered afterwards if those things had led him to believe she was more sophisticated than she actually was—led him to believe he was safe from an adolescent crush.

Whatever, after that night, their meetings were no longer chance ones. Every now and then Tom would ring her up and ask her out to dinner or to a movie and dinner or to a concert, and he kept up the practice after the play had come and gone and his seminar at NIDA was finished. But it was four months after their first kiss that he kissed her again, and then somewhat reluctantly.

It happened one night when she had asked him to dinner, when she knew she had fallen deeply in love with him but was determined not to show it because she was quite sure it would ruin their friendship. But after what he told her was an excellent meal with his usual faintly wry smile, she went to get the coffee and tripped, and he stood up quickly to save her from falling and she ended up in his arms.

For a moment, the world seemed to stand still for her and her breathing altered as she stared up into his eyes, and her lips parted—and all her determination to hide things from him went for nothing.

And Tom stared back, then he closed his eyes briefly and said softly, 'Oh, *hell*. ' And gathered her closer and kissed her.

But when it was over he put her away from him and said abruptly, 'Cathy, we shouldn't do that again. '

'No, ' she whispered. 'I know. '

'What do you know?' he queried with a sardonic little twist to his lips.

Cathy said with an effort as she smoothed her dress agitatedly, 'That... it's not the same for you. '

He raised an ironic eyebrow. 'Kissing you seems to come fairly naturally to me, as a matter of fact. '

'Well, perhaps it's more that you enjoy teaching me rather than doing it *because* it's me. Does that make any sense?' she asked anxiously.

He grimaced. 'Yes—and no. I suppose most men would enjoy teaching you, but I'm not so sure we can separate the inner you from the outer you—does that make any sense?'

Her lips parted and, unbeknown to her, a glimmer of hope lit the deep blue of her eyes.

But he saw it and he said roughly, 'Cathy, I think it's best if you just forget about me. I'm not the type of man for a girl like you; the kind of arrangement I usually have with women... is not for you. '

She turned away. 'No... I always knew that. That's why I didn't want this to happen, you see, and it wouldn't have if I'd watched where I was going. ' She made a small gesture with her hands. 'You can go now—I mean, I understand, I really do. '

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her back and said something under his breath, then, 'I'm *sorry*. '

Cathy lifted suddenly calm eyes to his. 'What for? It wasn't your fault. '

'Oh, yes, it was, ' he said grimly. 'I should never have... ' He broke off and swore, then he said, 'Can you really understand that it's best if I do go?'

She nodded, and he stared down at the pale oval of her face, the deep blue eyes, her long loose cloud of fair hair, and he said with a sigh, 'Goodbye, Cathy Kerris. Look after yourself—promise me you'll do that?'

'Yes. '

But two weeks later he was back. He simply turned up unannounced, causing her to gasp and then go pale as she opened the door and saw who it was, and be struck speechless.

'Cathy?' he said, and added with an oddly self-directed note of mockery, 'Will you marry me, Cathy?'

'I don't understand, ' she said later, but by then Tom was sitting on her settee with her in his arms.

'It's quite simple. ' He smoothed the Peter Pan collar of the blouse she wore with jeans. 'I couldn't get you out of mind. I couldn't——' his lips twisted, '—concentrate. Nothing seemed to have much purpose for me—quite simple, ' he repeated, and above her head grimaced.

'But do you really want to marry me? That's what I don't understand. ' Cathy looked up gravely into his eyes.

'I do really want to marry you—for one thing, I don't want anyone else to be able to teach you anything. I want you, Cathy. ' And for once his hazel gaze showed no amusement or mockery, no compassion or irony. 'And I can't envisage not wanting you. '

'But I *might* be a terrible disappointment to you—I have no experience, you see. ' She bit her lip.

'Cathy, how have you felt these last couple of weeks?' he asked abruptly.

She stared up at him, then shivered suddenly and buried her face in his shoulder, recalling the loneliness and the sense of sorrow that not even the fillip of getting a shampoo commercial had been able to pierce.

'So you see, ' he said, cupping her cheek, 'we're in the same boat. As for experience——' his fingers roamed behind her ear and there was a slightly wry glint in his eyes as he continued '—you seem to be very much at home here, in my arms, so... '

Cathy raised her head with a hectic little flush burning in her cheeks and a stricken look in her blue eyes which caused him to smile faintly down at her. And to say, 'Believe me, that's a good sign. I don't think your inexperience is going to be a problem at all. '

It hadn't.

Not the way Tom had handled it. And handled her body—but only after he'd married her, which he'd done quite quickly—gently and with care, so that it had flowered for him and her love for him had grown, and she'd thought she was even learning

to match him, to develop a sensual style of her own that not only accepted his lovemaking but added to it.

So where did it all go wrong? Cathy West asked herself that beautiful summer's day at Mount Macedon, standing at her bedroom window. Should I have insisted on staying on at NIDA? Or accepted the couple of commercials I was offered after the shampoo one? But I knew he wasn't keen on that, and it wasn't really practical for him to have a wife studying to be an actress—or studying anything away from home, for that matter. Nor did I really think twice about giving it up—it was as if I'd come home at last. Should I have given a lot more thought to *why* he wanted to marry me, though? Was it, talking of being practical—was it a practical decision for him—to take a wife?

The door clicked open and Tom stood in the doorway for a moment. Then he closed it, but didn't cross the room to her. Instead he leant his shoulders back against it and let his hazel gaze rest on her thoughtfully.

And finally, as her nerves began to tighten, he said abruptly, 'Tell me why you want to do this, Cat.'

CHAPTER TWO

TO PROVE to you that I'm a woman, not just a body, not just an orphan you took under your wing and are fond of... The urge to say it was almost uncontrollable, but something held Cathy back—a lack of confidence to open that subject with him, a lack of articulacy to match his, the lack of courage to risk his sometimes cruel remarks... Yet it's all there inside me, she thought with despair.

'Cat?'

Tom's own private name for her that he never used in public—did it mean he wanted to understand?

'I thought you were happy with this life until you started looking all... wistful and mysterious, ' he said with an ironic twist to his lips.

No, he didn't. 'I am happy here—I love it, but I did always want to be an actress. You love it here too, but you combine a career with it. '

'Is this, ' he said after a moment, 'a calculated backlash against the fact that I'm not in any great hurry to start a family?'

Cathy turned away and laid her fingers on the curtain again. 'No. I don't think it's a good idea either—yet. '

'That's a sudden change of heart, ' he said softly. Then, 'If you feel so strongly about it, let's go ahead. '

'No!' The word was torn from her.

'Cathy——'

But she swung round with her eyes blazing. 'What's the use if you don't really want to?'

He'd started across the room, but he stopped mid-stride, his eyes narrowed and his mouth set grimly. 'So, ' he said curtly after a moment, 'I gather the state of our marriage is not pleasing you at present and you're aching to change it, but if you think playing Chloe is going to improve it, I have to disagree and we'll have to settle for the other option so dear to your heart. Unfortunately, because we're due to start shooting in about three weeks, that's all the time we'll have for a while to have a really concentrated go at it. Should we start now?' he queried with a glance to the bed, then a mocking, deliberate glance at her that stripped her naked and brought dull colour to her cheeks.

The silence lengthened as disbelief, fright and anger all warred within her, then anger got the upper hand. 'Well, I'll tell you why the state of our marriage isn't all joy to me at the moment, Tom West, ' Cathy said through her teeth, and was dimly amazed at herself. 'You cut me out of most of your life! Because I love it here, you're content to *leave* me here, and you fob me off with silly excuses about it all being business, but you won't even discuss it with me. I don't even know if it is all business! You certainly have a lot of friends that I only get to meet when they come here, but *they*... I mean, when they do, they talk about this party or this "happening" or that, and *you* certainly don't look blank, although I——'

'In this business, Cathy, ' he broke in roughly, 'people give parties and "happenings" on the flim-

siest of pretexts, and that's how most of the business is conducted. It's all a part of the industry and it's incredibly fake often—and something I thought you'd be happier to live without, to be honest. '

'row don't——'

'It's also part of my livelihood—and, ' his eyes glinted with sudden menace, 'are you accusing me of being unfaithful to you when you say you don't even know if it is all business?'

The only sound to pierce this silence was the irregular thud of a football approaching. All the colour had drained from Cathy's face now as she stared at Tom and her lips parted several times.

'I don't know, ' she said painfully at last. 'You're away so much. It's as if you have two lives. I don't know...'

'So—all women are the same. I thought you were different, Cathy. I thought——'

'I know what you thought, ' she whispered as something inside her felt raw and bleeding. 'You thought that if you married me you could have the best of both worlds—a Cinderella who was grateful enough and young enough and in love enough to take care of this part of your life——' she gestured '—without disturbing the rest of it. So you could go on being your own man who basically despises women on an intellectual level. '

'Is that what you really think?' Tom was paler now too, but his eyes were glittering dangerously and a nerve flickered in his jaw.

'I don't know what else to think, ' she said despairingly. 'Why——' she licked her lips '—why don't you want us to have a baby? Do you think it will tie you to me more than you want to be tied?'

'I'm irrevocably tied to you, Cathy, ' he said harshly. 'Is it so inconceivable for you to stop and think that, since once you have children you have them for the rest of your life, therefore *this* part of our life will be gone for ever?'

A tremor went through Cathy and her shoulders slumped. 'Is it inconceivable for you to admit, Tom, ' she said huskily, 'that you can't keep me a perpetual Cinderella?'

They stared at each other until she said tonelessly, 'Our surrogate son is here. '

He swore and raked her from head to toe with a hard hazel glance, and she trembled visibly, but he said no more—the way he slammed the door as he left said it for him.

He didn't come in again until about eight o'clock, and Cathy guessed he'd walked to the village pub after his exertions with William, which they sometimes did together—never alone. Cathy tried to eat her own dinner, but it was oddly hard to swallow, and she left a light meal of cold meat and salad out for him and wandered out into the garden. It was that lovely last-of-the-daylight time, and the garden Tom's grandmother had planted and his mother had tended was alive with perfume and the slight dampness of approaching night.

When she went in at last, he was eating his meal at the kitchen table.

'Oh, I didn't know you were back, ' she said nervously, and stood just inside the kitchen doorway rubbing her hands down the side of her dress.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Where were you?'

'Just... in the garden. It's been a beautiful day. I wonder how many more we'll get?'

'The longer you live in Victoria, the more you realise it's useless to speculate. Have you eaten?'

'Yes. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Thanks, ' he said briefly, and went on eating.

Cathy made the tea in a nerve-racking silence. But when she put a cup and saucer down in front of him, he said, 'Sit down, Cathy. I'm off tomorrow morning about my "dubious" business, so we have to have this out now. Has a burning desire to do Chloe really awakened in you?'

She stirred her tea, then lifted her blue eyes to his, and they were shadowed but suddenly obstinate. 'Yes. But you don't think I'm capable of it, do you?'

'That's a new twist, ' he said drily. 'I think—' he sat back and surveyed her expressionlessly '—you could certainly look the part, you're eye-catching enough for that, but good-looking girls are a dime a dozen. Whether you can reproduce what Pete has in mind in front of a camera remains to be seen. But the other problem *will* be working with me—not an easy task under the best of circumstances, harder when everyone will be attuned to our slightest vibrations towards each other, and ever harder——' he paused '—if you cherish the doubts about me that you've obviously been nurturing for some time. '

Cathy stared at him. 'You're not going to forgive me for that, are you, Tom?' she said at last.

He lifted his shoulders in what could have been a denial or simply a gesture of indifference.

Cathy swallowed and battled with some angry, frustrated tears.

He watched her, then he said, 'Cathy, what we had was rather unique. It was for me, anyway, and to be honest again, the other side of my life, my art, if that's not too grandiose a term for it, is something I can't share with anyone—it's the way I'm made. But what we did share, the lovely, quiet times——'

'What do you mean?' A spark of panic lit her eyes. 'You're talking as if it's all over!'

Tom grimaced, 'It's about to enter a new era. '

'It doesn't have to be different, ' she said hoarsely. 'We can still have the quiet times—what have I done?' she asked more of herself than him. And she jumped up and knocked her chair over in her agitation.

'Cathy——'

But she ignored him and the fallen chair and ran to their bedroom.

She was standing in the middle of it, looking around wildly, when he came in and closed the door. 'Go away!' she whispered fiercely. 'You won't even *try* to understand. You're treating me as if we lived in the Middle Ages, as if I were a possession and had to be content just to be a wife—or more particularly, someone to sleep with... '

'I sometimes wonder if that wasn't the way it was meant to be, ' Tom said ironically. 'But at least you could console yourself with the fact that you enjoy sleeping with me, however badly I treat you in other respects. ' His eyes mocked her. 'It also seems to me it might be what you need right now. '

'I *don't*——'

'Oh, come on, Cathy, this is getting out of hand, ' he said impatiently, and reached for her. 'Is it something to do with the time of the month?'

'No. Tom——'

But he picked her up and carried her over to the bed, where she only exhausted herself trying to fight him and ended up lying with her hair spread out, her dress rucked up to her thighs, her eyes bitter and her mouth clamped shut, her wrists caught in his hand.

'This is not only getting out of hand, it's ridiculous, ' he said grimly, and released her wrists abruptly. 'You're carrying on as if I'm about to rape you!'

Cathy caught her breath and said huskily, 'But you seem to think making love to me is the sole solution, the cure for all my problems, yet you won't even let it be productive—you know, I don't think you understand women very well at all, Tom. '

He sat back and stared down at her in a way that was angry, then became curiously cold and calculating, and at last he said coldly. 'All right. Teach me, then, Cathy. Make your statement and let's put it to the test—you've got the part. ' He shrugged and with a cynical little glint in his eyes, let his gaze rove the twisted grace of the way she was lying.

Cathy sat up and pulled her dress down defensively. She said slowly as she rubbed her wrists, 'I don't want the part without a screen test. I don't want any patronage or the possibility of people saying I only got it because of you. I want Duncan's approval as well. '

Tom was silent and their gazes caught and clashed.

'What happens if the screen test is no good?' he queried at last.

'I'll... find something else to do. '

'You're sure you wouldn't care to leave me altogether?'

'That depends on you, ' she said barely audibly, but her eyes were bravely stubborn again, although her mouth trembled.

'I see, ' he said. 'That is laying down the gauntlet, Cat, ' he added softly, but his eyes were entirely enigmatic. 'Well, let's begin our new life. ' He stood up and walked towards the door.

'Tom... '

He turned and lifted an eyebrow at her.

'Don't leave me like this. '

He studied her for a long time. The long fair ruffled fall of curls, her pale but composed face, the blue and white dress and the blue canvas shoes she wore with rope wedge heels and narrow criss-cross ties about her slender ankles. Then he said, quite gently, 'Cathy, you object to me making love to you *unproductively*—as you put it—you've rejected my offer to change that and you've chosen the other option. Let's just leave it at that for the time being. ' He walked out and closed the door quietly.

Cathy stared at the door for a full minute. Then she buried her face in the pillow and wept.

The next morning Tom was gone when she got up and there was a brief note for her on the hall table saying that he'd be back the following afternoon. It was a strategically placed note—it was propped on a copy of the screenplay of Peter Partridge's best-seller.

'Well?' Tom looked at Duncan and Peter in turn in the small darkened auditorium, but not at Cathy.

'I *told* you...' Pete started to say, but it was Duncan Tom was really concentrating on.

And it was Duncan who turned to Cathy and said, 'My dear, he *was* right. You have a haunting quality on screen I've rarely seen equalled. And the contrast between your Chloe and Bronwen's much more robust and earthy Portia will be quite stunning.' He paused and turned to Tom. 'But what do you think, Tom?' he asked with his eyes slightly narrowed.

'I agree.' It was said abruptly. 'So, the show is on the road—are we all agreed we're ready to start shooting on schedule? You have no further alterations for the screenplay, Pete? Or last-minute changes of casting in mind, or any other changes you can think of?'

Pete looked hurt. 'I only want to get it right!'

'Of course!' Tom said blandly. 'Would I suggest anything else? Then it's Queensland, here we come!'

'Queensland?' Cathy stared at him.

'Oh, did I forget to tell you?' her husband said casually. 'We've hired the Warner Village Road Show studios at Cades County, which, for your further information, is between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, closer to the Coast. The new *Mission Impossible* series was filmed there... We'll be using the Upper Coomera Valley which is just behind Cades County for the outdoor sequences and Brisbane and Surfers for the city shots, and the Broadwater and Stradbroke Island for the idyllic uninhabited tropical island sequences so dear to Pete's heart. If it worked for Paramount to turn

south-east Queensland into any part of the world they wanted, I don't see why it can't work for us—you look a little stunned, Cathy. '

'Where will we live?' she asked.

'At a place nearby called Sanctuary Cove. We leave next week. Any more questions?' he asked all round.

There weren't. Cathy, for the simple reason that it was impossible for her to communicate with Tom on any but the most superficial level and had been since that disastrous night when she'd made her objections to the state of their marriage plain, and in her hurt and confusion had withdrawn into herself. She had also asked herself a number of times how it was that she could love a man and have lived with him for two years yet still understand so little about him. But Duncan also looked as if he had something on his mind, although he chose not to reveal it, and if it hadn't been for Pete's bubbling enthusiasm which once again made him immune to any undercurrents, the lunch Duncan gave them might have been an awkward affair.

The drive back to Mount Macedon from Melbourne was accomplished almost in silence, although one part of Cathy was crying out to break it, to wring some words of reassurance from Tom even if he wasn't prepared to comment on the screen test—even just some general discussion about the film, anything, but every time she stole a glance at his shuttered expression her courage failed her.

And by the time they reached home, a sense of resentment had replaced the need for reassurance and had stilled the growing feeling that there must be some way to understand him, perhaps some key

from his past to unlock this barred path to his heart. It had occurred to her that she knew very little about his past other than the facts of it.

It was a long drive, and she was stiff and cramped when they pulled up in front of the house.

'Have a bath, ' said Tom as he unlocked the front door. 'I'll fix up some dinner. '

'I'm not terribly hungry. '

'You have to eat, Cathy, ' he said much as he might have spoken to William, and for an instant a flare of anger lit her blue eyes, but she turned away and stilled the impulse to say something cutting in return.

But while a warm scented bath washed away the stiffness of her body, it didn't ease her resentment or that curious, cold little feeling of panic around her heart.

True to its reputation, the Victorian weather had done a complete about-face, and it was a cold, windy night, so she put on a pair of red and white dotted silk pyjamas and her rich red velvet robe.

And Tom had built a fire in the lounge grate and set his dinner out in front of it—a light meal of tinned asparagus soup and toasted chicken sandwiches.

He also made some effort at conversation as they ate in front of the fire. 'Have you ever been to Queensland?'

'No. It should be... interesting. '

He looked wry. 'You've obviously heard it described as the Deep North. '

'Why do you say that?'

'Your expression of guarded reserve, ' he murmured.

'Well, ' Cathy shrugged 'people do talk about Bananaland and Banana Benders, so... '

'It's a different lifestyle. The tropics and subtropics have that effect on people. '

'So they're more relaxed up there?' she asked with a lifted eyebrow.

'Definitely. '

'Don't you approve?'

Tom grimaced. 'Yes, I do. In small doses. '

'I see. '

'You're doing it again, Cathy, ' he said softly.

She raised her blue gaze to his. 'I don't understand. '

'Looking all guarded and reserved. '

She stared at him. Then she said coolly, 'I was wondering if it's a good idea for you to be making a film up there, that's all. '

'In case the relaxed atmosphere drives me round the bend? I wondered the same thing, so at least I'm aware of the problem. ' He put his plate down and sat back in the linen-covered armchair. 'Don't you agree that's half the battle?'

Cathy got rid of her own plate and stood up to pour the coffee. The fire glowed brightly on her hair as she bent down—the rest of the comfortable, chintzy room, with its lovely porcelain lamps and vases and oak tables and bookcases, was in the shadows.

'Cathy?'

She straightened with his cup and saucer in her hands. 'I don't know. I guess time will tell. '

'And what, ' he held her blue gaze with his own, 'do you think time will tell about us?'

'I've told you—but ever since I told you, you've treated me like a stranger, you sleep in the spare room, ' her eyes flashed suddenly, 'which I happen to think is adolescent, ' she finished bitterly.

'So you're missing it, Cat?' he said softly.

She put the cup down, but on the tray. 'I'm missing being treated like an equal, like an intelligent human being. I'm wondering why you're *like* this, and why it took me so long to realise I don't understand you at all. '

'You might not like it if I told you why I'm like this, Cathy, ' he said after a long tense pause. 'You might like it even less, but since you've insisted on being treated like an equal and an intelligent human being, and since you've insisted on doing Chloe, you're probably going to find out anyway. Sit down. '

Her eyes widened and her lips parted at something in his voice, something that lay under the even syllables and chilled her oddly.

'You asked me once why I married you. There were several reasons—the one that I made plain to you and *hasn't* changed; guilt also, which hasn't changed either, ' he said drily. 'And—the fact that you're the exact opposite, or so I thought, to the only other woman I ever asked to marry me. '

Cathy could only stare for an age, then she said, and thought her voice didn't sound like her own at all, 'She didn't want to?'

'She knocked me back—let's not beat about the bush. ' He smiled faintly but derisively.

'Why? Didn't she love you?'

He shrugged. 'What is love? Perhaps we had differing opinions of it. She was content to live with me as if she loved me but make no commitment. '

Cathy frowned confusedly. 'There must have been a reason. '

'A reason, ' Tom said musingly, and stared into the fire. 'Oh, yes, there was a reason. Her career—her all-consuming passion, you might say, that just couldn't be fitted around a marriage. '

'What career?'

He lifted his eyes to hers and she was struck by the cynicism in his hazel glance. 'Acting, my dear Cathy, as you feel yours should be. It's quite a coincidence, isn't it?'

'Who... ' But she stopped as a dread premonition struck her. 'Not... ?'

He stared at her. 'Yes. Bronwen Bishop. '

Cathy closed her eyes, but it didn't shut the images she could see in her mind's eye. She'd never seen Bronwen Bishop in the flesh, but she was an established enough actress to be instantly recognisable to most Australians, and she did have large dark eyes, a willowy figure and, if not conventional beauty, a compelling quality that was both essentially feminine and vitally arresting. She was in her early thirties, Cathy guessed. A tough lady, Duncan had said—and of course, Duncan probably knew about her and Tom, which explained his reservations and slight unease.

'Do you still love her?' she asked.

Tom took a long time to answer. 'If I knew the truth about that, I might be able to tell it to myself, Cathy, ' he said eventually. 'It doesn't seem possible that love could exist along with the other emotions

she generated in me—hate sometimes, despair, scorn, a desire, to be honest, to strangle her sometimes... The important thing is, I made the decision to sever the relationship and put it all behind me. ' He lifted his eyes at last to hers. 'And since I made that decision, and since I married you, that's what I have done. Contrary to what you think, I haven't been unfaithful to you, Cathy, with her or anyone else. '

A thought ran through Cathy's mind—I'm too young to cope with this, too immature to even contemplate those dark emotions without a shiver and a desire to wish I'd never known... Then a tremor ran through her, and she knew they were cowardly thoughts and exactly what he'd believed of her.

'But, ' she said with an effort, 'you're making this film with her?'

Tom smiled rather bleakly. 'Not from choice, but I knew it could happen one day if we both continued to live and work in Australia. ' He lifted his shoulders.

Their gazes caught in the firelight. 'Cathy, ' he said slowly, still staring into her eyes, I wish I could make you understand and believe that there's part of me solely reserved for you and that will never change. Nor will I be betraying you, whatever happens. '

Sudden tears shone in her eyes but didn't fall. She said with difficulty, 'I suppose I should thank you for that and for being honest, but can you understand how I feel now?'

'Yes, ' he said abruptly, 'but tell me anyway. '

But that proved astonishingly hard to do, and she could only stare across at him with succeeding expressions of frustration, sorrow and helplessness.

Tom muttered, 'Oh, hell!' almost beneath his breath, then rose swiftly and pulled her out of her chair and into his arms.

Cathy was too stunned and confused to protest and, in spite of everything, the familiar feeling of his arms around her, his mouth on hers, the feeling of being safe—although how that could be now, she didn't know—claimed her.

He picked her up and carried her through to the bedroom, took her robe off and her white and red dotted pyjamas and put her beneath the covers like a child, then after a brief interval he slid in beside her and gathered her close again. Then he began to make love to her in a way that was impossible for her to resist and that made her think dimly that her taunt about him not really understanding women would probably haunt her for ever. Unless she was an unusually arousable one, it occurred to her, as he stroked the soft skin from her armpit to her waist and other satiny, vulnerable areas like the nape of her neck, the small of her back—as he often did before he laid claim to any of the more intimate parts of her body. And so that she was relaxed, soothed yet revelling in his arousal of her smooth, naked skin and feeling a rhythm of movement, a rhythm of desire welling up in her.

But as the rhythm claimed her and she moved against him, needing the feel of his lean, hard body on hers, an agitation also rose in her. A sudden expression that broke the bounds of what he was doing to her, of resentment that he could still do

it while he loved another woman; an angry, confused urge to assert *her* imprint on him.

'Cat...' He said her name on a breath once, but she moved her head back and her blue eyes blazed briefly in a warning of some kind that silenced him into a narrow, probing look. He said no more, but responded to her sudden fierce urgency by easing his weight on to her, and all her soft, scented flesh became consumed with a need to drive him to the kind of distraction he was driving her to.

All conscious thought fled from her mind as he took possession of her body, and she moved beneath him and raked his back with her fingers, straining her breasts against him, and he buried his face in the curve of her neck and held her unflinchingly as if he understood... And all the time his possession of her deepened and quickened, more than she'd thought possible, and she felt the long muscles of his back ripple as he moved on her and heard his breath come shorter and felt his heart beating heavily as he drove her inexorably towards the only fulfilment that would slake the terrible agitation of her mind and heart and body.

It was a climax when it came that was shattering in its intensity, that left her gasping and shuddering and feeling as if she was falling down an endless cliff. It was a curious mixture of pleasure and pain and like none that had ever happened to her before, and when she was capable of thought again and capable of quietening at last, her first thought was how it had been for Tom. Her lashes fluttered up, and it was only when she saw him through a haze of tears that she realised she'd been crying silently. She blinked and licked her lips. 'Tom... ?'

He stared down at her sombrely and smoothed her hair. 'Don't talk. '

'But——'

'No, Cathy. Relax—I'll help. '

'Will it hurt me to talk?' she whispered.

'You're going to hurt a bit tomorrow. That was... ' He stopped and cautiously rolled away from her, then immediately reclaimed her in his arms. 'Go to sleep, ' he murmured.

'My head is sore—why my head?'

'It'll go, ' he said quietly.

'But I have to say something——'

'You don't have to say anything. I understand how you felt and it's not your fault. I should never have——'

'I know about all the things you shouldn't have done!' she said in a stronger voice, and struggled to sit up. He let her go finally. 'What I don't know is—how we'll be able to go on, and what I really don't know, ' her voice sank and tears beaded her lashes again, 'is whether you liked that or—hated it. '

'I obviously didn't... hate it. '

But she caught the faint hesitation, and she saw how his eyes were narrowed and intent as he watched the twisted, awkward way she was sitting with the sheet clutched to her breasts which rather accurately reflected the state of her mind.

'All the same, ' she said more to herself, 'why do I get the feeling I've done myself some harm in your eyes?' She stared at him, but he had crossed his arms behind his head as she spoke and he looked perfectly normal now, breathing easily, his dark-fair hair wayward, but then it always was, his eyes

unreadable—he looked, even in the aftermath of love, all the things that had troubled her before their marriage—attractive, slightly dangerous, so far out of her real reach... And not as if he were suffering a pounding headache.

'It's not a question of that, Cathy, ' he said gently but nevertheless with an underlying emphasis, like a steel fist in a velvet glove, she thought, and realised why as he continued. 'As to how we go on, we have no option but to go on as before, although with some adjustments, but essentially as what we are—man and wife, and what we'll remain, ' he added.

Cathy's lips parted, then she put her hands up to her face and closed her eyes. Tom pulled one hand from behind his head and closed it round her wrist, fingering the narrowness of it and the soft skin inside it. Then with a little tug, he pulled her back into his arms.

She found she didn't have the strength to do anything but lie quietly in his embrace, and she fell asleep not long afterwards.

CHAPTER THREE

CATHY woke alone to a grey, wet morning and lifted her head cautiously off the pillow, but her headache had gone. The rest of her as she moved her limbs cautiously beneath the covers felt lethargic but warm, and she decided to stay where she was and try to review everything that had happened.

She got no further, though, because the door opened and Tom came in with a tray in his hands. Their eyes caught, and Cathy felt herself colour and looked away awkwardly.

'I don't think, ' he said rather wryly, 'it can be a bad thing for a two-year-old marriage to be capable of surprising itself occasionally—if that's why you're feeling embarrassed, Cathy. ' He put the tray down on her bedside table, but stood looking down at her with a question mark in his eyes.

With an abruptness that took her by surprise, her awkwardness deserted her to be replaced by annoyance. 'I'm sorry if you feel we'd got into a same old "routine" situation, Tom, ' she said tartly, 'but perhaps your heart and soul were never really in it?'

'That wasn't what I was trying to say at all, Cat, ' he replied evenly.

'What, then?' she shot at him.

'Look, sit up and have some breakfast instead of spitting at me like an angry kitten, ' he recommended, and reached for her robe.

She closed her eyes in extreme frustration. 'You don't think I have cause to be upset?'

'I do, ' he agreed briefly, and pulled the blankets back.

Cathy sat up with an angry gasp, because although two years of marriage had seen her lose a lot of the inhibitions that had caused Tom to call her his convent-bred little puritan from time to time, to be naked and on display for him now seemed to her to be an outrage and an insult. '*Don't...*' she whispered fiercely, trying to gather back the covers.

But he did. With an easy strength, he not only kept her wrists in one hand but he also thoroughly inspected her upper body, her satiny breasts and nipples of the palest, furred pink, her slender neck, for signs of their torrid lovemaking. As he touched his fingers lightly to the few marks blemishing her skin she flinched, suddenly realising her breasts were sensitive and sore.

He took his hand away, but she trembled and couldn't tear her gaze away, and to her horror, realised why. Her hapless body, almost with a mind of its own, wanted him to go on gentling it, soothing it as if the defeat she had suffered in the night had been right and proper. And it had been a defeat, she realised. Her confused 'statement' had merely left her broken and crying in his arms and dashed against his strength and unassailability—perhaps further from him mentally than she had ever been. Well, she thought rebelliously, managing to look away at last but with a tinge of pink growing in her cheeks, I'd be stupid to make that mistake again.

But Tom took her chin and tilted her head back. 'What are you thinking?'

She said nothing for a moment, but she couldn't and didn't even try to hide the hostility in her eyes and about her mouth. 'Can I have my robe?' she asked.

Something flickered in his eyes, and he hesitated, then sat back and handed it to her. Cathy pulled it on and bunched the pillows up, and he put one of his on her lap and put the tray on it. There was orange juice, a boiled egg and toast.

Cathy stared at them and discovered she'd never felt less like eating, but Tom picked up her hand, put the glass into it. 'Go on. You have to eat. How's your head?'

'Fine, ' she said coolly, although she was battling desperately for composure because she hated him for reminding her and felt like doing something essentially childish, such as pouring the juice over him... 'As a matter of interest, is there a clinical explanation for it? That you might have encountered in your much greater experience?' She raised the glass to her lips and sipped the juice, but she felt like biting the glass, she discovered.

He smiled drily and she knew she had been childish. 'No. But you're liable to give yourself a headache when you do anything with the intensity you—we employed last night, that's all. '

'It didn't give you one. ' She drained the glass and set it down sharply on the tray.

'I'm obviously a much tougher nut, ' he replied with some irony, and handed her an egg-spoon.

She cracked the egg with a ringing blow, then flung the spoon down and put her hand to her eyes. 'Go away, Tom, ' she whispered shakily, 'and take your breakfast with you, please. Because I'm not

sure if I want to cry or I want to die, but I want to do it on my own——'

'No, Cathy, ' he said harshly, 'you're not going to do either, you're going to eat your breakfast and we're going to talk this out. '

'You can't make me——'

'I could, but I won't—I will point out that you told me yourself last night you were an adult and resented being treated otherwise—well, here's a chance to prove it. I'm going to get the coffee. ' He stood up, stared down at her with a plain warning in his eyes, then turned away.

Cathy watched him go, then turned her attention to her maltreated egg and deliberately ate it all, and the toast, and pushed the tray away, waiting.

He made no comment when he came back with the coffee, but removed the tray and pulled a chair up beside the bed. In deference to the cold wet morning, he wore his beloved old plaid dressing-gown over only his pyjamas bottoms. The vagaries of the weather seldom affected him, Cathy had discovered; in fact he seemed to gather inspiration from the worst elements of it.

And it was with a curious sinking feeling that she eyed him over the rim of her cup. She'd eaten her breakfast in a spirit of defiance and resentment over and above a whole host of emotions, but the reality of getting through to him and making him admit the terrible error of his ways, which was what she burningly wanted, suddenly seemed monumental.

She sighed and slipped dispiritedly down the pillows.

He took her cup. 'Cathy?'

'Go ahead, ' she murmured. 'I'm listening. How *are* we going to sort this out?'

'Have *you* come to any profound conclusions about it?' he countered.

Cathy laughed huskily, a small, desolate sound, and turned her cheek to the pillow. 'No. '

'You're not, for example, ' he said evenly, 'suddenly filled with a burning desire to leave me?'

'You make it sound such a ridiculously childish thing to even contemplate, ' she said bitterly after a moment. 'Why shouldn't it be an option?'

'Where would you go?'

She shrugged. 'Back where I came from. Back to spinsterhood but older and wiser, ' she said very quietly.

'*Had* you thought of it, Cathy?' Tom asked curtly.

'No. ' She moved restlessly as her mind was filled with images of her pre-Tom West life. 'Not yet... Tom?' She sat up abruptly and captured his gaze. 'Why are you treating me as if I'm in the wrong?'

His eyes didn't waver and she could see the little green flecks in them. Then he rubbed a hand along his blue-shadowed jaw and said, 'As a defence against corrupting the innocent, probably. Cat, life is rarely perfect, unfortunately, and I'm one of the imperfect specimens peopling it. But one thing I need to make clear is that it's over between me and Bronwen and I have neither the desire to nor the intention of rekindling it. Wait, ' he said as she opened her mouth. 'I understand that saying it is one thing and living with it another from your point of view, but what you're living with is not the ghost

of another woman—what I felt for Bronwen and what I feel for you are two different things. '

'Do you mean you don't think of her... when you're sleeping with me, Tom?' she asked on a breath.

'No!' He said it harshly and definitely, but there was a sudden glint of compassion in his eyes. 'Do you honestly think I'm capable of that?' he added.

'I don't know, ' she whispered, pleating the sheet. 'Are there different kinds of love for different women?'

A nerve flickered in his jaw as he stared down at her. 'I don't know, ' he said at last. 'I do know, however, that the way I am is probably a mixture of my natural nature and the cynicism and disillusionment Bronwen left me with—but don't imagine the blame lies solely with her. In some respects I'm a loner, and I always will be, I suspect. She certainly accused me of it and told me I expected a total commitment from her when I couldn't give it myself. If that's true then I was far more in error than she was. Unfortunately, again, acknowledging these things doesn't always make them go away. But if you *could* live with the kind of man I am, now that it's all out in the open, what we do share is... something to build on. '

Cathy went on playing with the sheet, then she raised her eyes at last and wiped them with the back of her hand. 'You're being very honest again, ' she said huskily, 'so I'll have to be honest in return. What's to build?'

'We could start with you. One thing I can acknowledge and change is that it would be supremely selfish to expect you to go on as before.

And this—doing Chloe, I mean—will at least be a positive step forward for you. ' He got up and went to the dressing-table to get her a tissue.

'It couldn't be a more ironic way for me to take that step, though, could it?' She blew her nose. 'I only wish I weren't now—is it too late?'

He sat down again. 'To pull out? No. And, ' he shrugged, 'it will be loaded with ironies, I guess, but you said you needed a challenge; perhaps it's what we both need. '

'It'll certainly give you the opportunity to hold us up against each other, Tom, ' she said with an oblique look.

'That wasn't what I had in mind, Cat, ' he said abruptly.

Cathy laid her head back. 'I don't know what to do. I don't even know what to say. '

'Neither do I any more. '

She lifted her head and stared at him intently until he said roughly, 'All the way, right from when I asked you to marry me in a moment of aberration and guilt, I had one harmless motive, Cat—I didn't want to see you hurt. At least, I thought it was harmless, but that's where I was in the wrong, my dear, because it might have hurt you less... but, ' he paused, 'be that as it may. I'm also trying to say that if you can handle it, I'd much rather you stayed with me than left me, because that part of me capable of loving cares more about you than anything else. And is prepared to cut the Cinderella cord, to prove it. But, ' again he paused, 'it's *not* going to be easy to work together, it wouldn't be under the best of circumstances. '

To her surprise, Cathy came to a sudden decision. 'I can do that,' she said quietly. 'It's the rest of our life I don't know about, but I suppose,' she frowned, then went on with an effort and barely audibly, 'it's not your fault I love you more than you love me. It never was——'

'One day you might find that's no longer true,' he said gently. 'You were so young, Cathy. You still are.'

She smiled sadly. 'Do you think I'm still in the grip of an adolescent crush or something like that? After two years?'

Tom's eyes narrowed. 'It happens,' he said sombrely.

'So you're prepared to keep me until I grow out of it?'

'If you think that, you haven't understood what I've been trying to say.'

'No. I have—that you love me in a limited sort of way, you feel guilty about me and you want us to try to build something better out of it. I just—perhaps I need some time to think it all out,' Cathy said helplessly.

'We don't have a lot of time,' he said quietly. 'Not if we're going to do this movie together. And there's no way we can separate and do it. By the way, about last night...'

Cathy put her hands to her face. 'I don't want to talk about it. I don't know what got into me,' she whispered.

Tom lifted an eyebrow. 'You don't think you hated me for the things I'd told you and that was the only way you could express it?'

'No.... ' She stopped. 'Well, a little, but I also wanted to try to erase the memories of her, and that's why I knew you didn't like it. '

'It wasn't that. What I didn't like was dragging you down into the mire of my tortured relations with myself, the way I am, and it was myself I was hating. Cat, will you let me try to make amends?' He put his hand over hers.

She trembled and lifted her tear-streaked face to his. 'Are you saying I should make a decision now?'

'I'm saying... oh, hell, ' he muttered beneath his breath, and went as if to take her in his arms, but she stiffened.

'No! No, Tom—that's what you did last night, but I think I have to come to grips with this and really stop being a Cinderella. If you do want us to go on, then for the time being I'll try, mainly because I can't think of what else to do, but there'll probably be times when I'm going to be offended and resentful and there might be times when I'll wish I hadn't. All the same, I do understand I have to be professional about the film, but I can't... I just can't let you make love to me at the moment. '

'I see. ' He studied her earnest, painful expression for an age, then touched his fingers to her lips in a brief caress. 'And very proper too!'

'If you're laughing at me—I didn't *mean* it to sound juvenile and prissy, ' she said in an agony of frustration.

'It didn't sound like that at all, nor did I have in mind making love to you, but I did want to comfort you—I thought it might help just to be ordinary together for a while. '

'Is that what you love about me, Tom?' she said on a suddenly indrawn breath. 'Being ordinary with me, no heights, no depths... '

This time he brooked no refusal and gathered her on to his lap, and it seemed to her supremely ironic again that, as she wept out her sadness and disillusionment, it was his arms that did comfort her, his hand on her hair, the beating of his heart beneath her cheek, the wiry golden roughness of his chest as she slid her fingers beneath the old plaid that she touched with love.

'I'm all right now, ' she said shakily at last. Which wasn't true, of course, and she could tell from Tom's eyes and the lines beside his mouth that he knew it wasn't true, but there was no more he could do. And for some reason that gave her some strength. 'Should we be practical as well as ordinary?' she said, and tried to smile. 'I don't know any of the details of this trip to Queensland and you probably have a million things to do—I might, as well. ' She sat up with a frown.

But he pulled her back and kissed her lips gently before lifting her back on to the bed. 'You might, ' he agreed. 'We'll be away for eight weeks approximately. We're flying up, but I'm sending the car up by rail and you can send whatever you like that way too—any special things that will make you feel more at home. And the costume designer is coming up to do a rush job on you this morning—but not for a couple of hours, so relax for a while. '

Cathy lay back and watched him shrug off his dressing-gown and head for the shower. But as she heard the water thrumming in the bathroom, her

mind was curiously blank when she was sure it should be otherwise.

It was still blank when Tom walked back into the bedroom, rubbing his hair with a towel which he dropped on the carpet, and strode over to his dresser. She stared at his naked back, at his tall, lean body which she knew so well, his compact hips and wide shoulders, at the little crescent scar at the top of his left thigh which was the relic of a schoolboy rugby game and which she'd often touched gently. Then her gaze sharpened and her eyes widened and she made a husky little sound.

He swung round and saw her dilated stare. 'What is it?'

'Your back, ' she whispered.

'Oh, that, ' he said with a faint grin. 'Don't worry about it. '

'But——'

'All little cats liken to sharpen their claws occasionally, ' he said gravely but with a wicked glint in his eyes. 'Why should mine be any different?'

'Tom——'

'Cathy, ' he overruled her, still gravely but still secretly laughing at her, 'it's nothing. And I've run you a bath—which will help your battle scars!' And he turned away and got dressed with the minimum of fuss.

It crossed her mind then that she really was in an impossible situation, she had to be when he could make her feel weak with love just by teasing her. How unfair was that?

It was something she found herself dwelling on during the busy days before their departure for

Queensland. Busy days that helped promote the image that they were going on in unity and harmony when in fact she was consumed by an unresolvable mental turmoil; she wondered how she was managing to fool Tom, *why* she was trying to, why she'd been so foolish as to give him the undertaking she had. And the core of her turmoil seemed to be that, while he had tried to brush Bronwen Bishop aside as a symptom, and blame himself mostly for the way he was, she found she couldn't believe you could do that to a living, breathing woman you'd lived with, slept with, wanted to marry... In other words, I'm already plain jealous of this woman, she acknowledged to herself, and I haven't even met her. Was I mad to think I could work with her, with them?

To make matters worse, although they slept together, Tom hadn't tried to make love to her since she'd told him she couldn't, and every night she trembled inwardly in terror in case he did, because she didn't know if it would be a sign of weakness and *spineless* acceptance of the situation to let him, and trembled with a desolate little sense of loss when he didn't.

Then, when it all boiled up one day, she discovered that she hadn't fooled him at all, about anything.

She was studying the script at the kitchen table at the same time as she was keeping an eye on their evening meal when Tom walked into the kitchen and raised his eyebrows at her rapt expression.

Cathy coloured faintly but said with dignity, AT know it's not a big part, but I don't see why I

shouldn't prepare myself properly—anyway, I always thought the best directors spent as much time as possible with their actors before they began shooting. '

'It's a flexible thing. I do and I don't, and you're one of the ones I'm just going to let run, Cathy. ' He opened the fridge and took out a can of beer. 'Would you care to share this with me?'

'No, thanks—you might have told me. '

'Well, now you know. Dinner smells good, by the way. '

Cathy compressed her lips. 'What about Bronwen Bishop?'

He was standing with his back to her and he took a long draught from the can before he turned and put it down on the table. 'I haven't been having long coaching sessions with her, if that's what you're suggesting, Cathy. She too will do her own thing, more or less, ' he said drily. 'Besides which, there hasn't been time. '

Cathy looked at him sceptically.

'That expression doesn't quite become you, ' he said softly. 'In fact I haven't laid eyes on Bronwen. She's only due back from overseas tomorrow. '

'But... ?' Surprise overcame Cathy's irritation at being told what did not become her.

'If you recall, Bronwen was not our first choice for Portia. Julia Whitefield was under contract, but she broke her leg, and to Pete's joy—he wanted her right from the beginning—Bronwen was available, and I was outmanoeuvred. But she's been working overseas. ' Tom met her gaze levelly. 'And it's over two years since I've seen her except fleetingly, and never to talk. '

'Oh. ' Cathy flushed, but her eyes were mutinous.

'Anything else you'd like to know?' he asked with a trace of mockery.

'Yes—how you can imagine I can't help wondering about her and... oh!' she exclaimed again, and gritted her teeth.

'I don't imagine it's easy, ' he said abruptly, 'but we're not going to get anywhere unless you can tell yourself it's over, which it is, and put it away from you. '

'Perhaps if I recite it to myself a hundred times or write a hundred lines—do you think that would do the trick?' she taunted.

'Cathy, you told me you wanted to do this movie, and you assured me you could be professional about it——'

She got up and slammed the script shut. 'We're not on your precious film set yet, ' she said tightly, and she strode over to the window and stared angrily at Mount Macedon.

Tom watched the taut, slim lines of her back beneath a simple green sun-dress, then silently crossed the room to her.

'Cat. ' He said it barely audibly, and she flinched.

He waited a moment, then put his hands on her shoulders. Cathy held herself rigidly, then they slumped beneath his hands and he drew her back against him and slid his arms about her waist, and for a long time they stood like that without moving. Until he turned her to face him and smudged the tears on her lashes, but that precipitated more, and he pulled her into his arms and she buried her face in his shoulder. 'I don't know what to do, ' she whispered at last.

'I think I might. ' He picked her up and started to carry her to the bedroom.

'Dinner... ' she said faintly.

'It can wait—this can't. ' He shouldered open the bedroom door and laid her carefully down on the bed, then sat down beside her, stared down at her for a long time and said, 'Cathy, I have memories of you, of us, that I'll have for the rest of my life. Lovely memories. That must mean something to you.'

Her lips parted.

'Memories of this. ' He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek and his long fingers wandered down her throat and twined in her hair lying on her shoulder. 'I'd also give anything not to have hurt you the way I have, but I was hurting you anyway without realising it, so... ' He lifted his shoulders wearily. 'But there's the possibility that I can also heal you. Will you let me start to try?'

'Like... this?' Her eyes were wide and very blue.

'Yes.'

She said after a long time, 'All right. '

She lay passively beneath his hands as he unbuttoned the sun-dress down her body, with her eyes closed and her cheek on her hand against the pillow.

All she wore underneath was a pair of bikini briefs, and Tom laid the dress aside, untying the halter neck without disturbing her position, then lay down beside her.

Cathy didn't move for a long time as his hand wandered over her body, then she sighed softly and opened her eyes and began to unbutton his shirt.

She had long ago learned that the feel of him gave her as much pleasure as the way he touched her gave her. And that to touch, stroke and slide her lips and her arms and her breasts against his body both excited and softened her body and pleased him, and that sometimes she too could deliberately prolong this sensuous pleasure until he gave way with a groan and a glint in his eyes, and claimed her because he could no longer help himself. But this time she did what she loved doing, not with the raw intensity of their last lovemaking, not with a naughty but nice desire to tease, as he'd once called it, but a profound feeling of destiny in her heart because she couldn't change the fact that she loved him and because he was the centre of her life.

Perhaps he guessed what was going through her mind and what was in her heart, because he returned her lost, gentle rapture for a long time until she was arching her body and her hands fell idle and her head fell back, and only then did he part her legs, and this time his first contact with her inner flesh was all that was needed to tip her over the edge of rippling pleasure, and to take him with her. And this time it was pure pleasure, and it held them united for an age, breathing as one, locked together until the last echoes faded slowly.

There were two consequences to this lovemaking.

Cathy's dinner was burnt beyond redemption, so Tom took her out to the pub. And over the last days left to them at Mount Macedon, there seemed to be a closer, unspoken closeness between them.

The day before they left they took William and his grandparents to Hanging Rock for a picnic, which somewhat compensated William for the prospect of the lack of their company over the next weeks. After they had eaten, Cathy lay back on a rug and plucked a feathery stalk of grass to swish away the flies, and stared thoughtfully at the Rock. William and his grandparents were inspecting a stream and Tom was packing up the remains of their lunch.

Her thoughts drifted idly for a time, then centred on what had been eluding her for days—had she made a subconscious decision about her marriage? Had she decided to accept this state of affairs, and was she even going on in the hope that one day she might supplant Bronwen Bishop in Tom's heart? If so, she thought, was there a code of behaviour she should adopt? Her mind told there was, and she stopped to think of all the women through time who had found themselves in this position, all the women who had made this decision or had had no choice but to clamp down on their anger and their jealousy. Although, of course, it wasn't a question of having no choices, for her. Yet the alternative... She sighed and turned over, burying her face in her arms.

'Cathy?' It was Tom's voice above her, and she turned back reluctantly. 'All right?'

He was kneeling next to her, and he took the crushed stalk of grass from her and smiled down at her so the fine lines beside his eyes and mouth crinkled and the sun shone on the long tanned lines of his throat and his hair.

Cathy took a breath and smiled back. 'Fine. '

'The last time we were here, ' he said quietly, 'we——'

'I remember, ' she broke in.

'It's a pity we're not alone. ' His tone was wry, but his eyes held something else.

Cathy stared into them for a moment, then glanced at Hanging Rock. 'Perhaps it's for the best. '

He raised an eyebrow, but she sat up and kissed him briefly and said gravely, 'There'll be other times and places. '

'I'm relieved, ' he remarked. 'You had me worried there!'

'Well——' she thought for a moment '—there's tonight, for example. A farewell to our bed and bedroom might be called for—what do you think?'

'I think, ' he said slowly as he searched her eyes right through to her soul, she felt, 'it might be difficult to wait that long, but also worthwhile. ' He took her chin in his hand and kissed her back, and she knew as he lifted his head that not only had she now consciously made her decision, but in some curious way, had transmitted it to him. She had also managed to keep her equally curious fears and fancies about Hanging Rock to herself.

Twenty-four hours later they were winging their way north to Queensland.

Cathy gazed out of the window at the carpet of woolly white cloud below the wing. They had had their lunch and would be landing at Coolangatta in half an hour—the thought of which was making her nervous.

But right on cue, Tom put his hand over hers and said, 'These might be the last few relaxed moments

we'll have for a while—we're the last to arrive. Everyone else is assembled and, let's hope, rarin' to go. '

Cathy's hand moved under his. 'Tell me about them. ' She turned her head on the backrest to him.

He stretched his long legs out more comfortably. 'On the technical side, I've worked with a lot of them before—the camera crew and the sound engineer were part of the team on *Last Friday*? He'd received an Oscar nomination for *Last Friday*. 'I've gone out on a bit of a limb with the film editor, Jason White. He's a crazy kid, but he has sparks of genius and he has the same kind of imagination as Pete—they make a good pair, ' he said wryly. 'And I suspect Charles Westfield could make it three of a kind. '

'I used to think he was rather a dish when I was about—twelve, ' Cathy said with a grin. Charles Westfield was an American actor who as a boy had starred in a television series and not quite made the major break-through into the big league of movies yet. His signing on for the lead role of Robert in the movie of Peter Partridge's best-seller *Half an Hour Earlier in Adelaide* had reactivated some of the long-running controversy about the habit of importing foreign actors to star in Australian productions, but, as she'd heard not only Duncan but Tom point out, the role might have been written for him—a good-looking, rather zany American in Australia grappling not only with his personal problems in the form of Portia and Chloe but also a case of mistaken identity which had several of the world's leading secret services chasing him.

'Did you?' His hazel eyes laughed at her.

'Mmm. But I haven't seen him for ages. I don't even know how old he is. '

'He's twenty-six and has quite a way with girls, so I'm told. I have this——' he paused '—intuition that he and Portia will clash. '

Cathy said without a tremor, 'On principle? Because he's American? Or... ' She stopped.

He said after a moment, 'I think Bronwen has always had a good understanding of what side her bread's buttered on, but I think this might be a difficult role for her to play. She's supposed to be younger, she's supposed to be madly in love with someone——' he paused again '—whom I'm sure she considers no more than a pretty face acting-wise and probably every other wise. '

'He might surprise her, ' said Cathy. '*You* must have some faith in his acting ability. '

'I do. But I also don't have any inbuilt prejudices about men. ' He grimaced.

Cathy had been studying his hand on hers but she raised her blue eyes to his. 'I wonder why she has these prejudices?'

Tom said rather drily, 'Who knows? But that's not your problem, ' he added with the faintest of smiles and tightening his grip on her hand briefly. 'Nor is it mine in any other but an artistic sense now. ' He stopped and continued a moment later, 'When you look like that, I know you do have the capacity to do Chloe, Cat. '

'Tom——' she looked away, then back '—thank you. Just one last thing—do a lot of people know about you and Bronwen?'

'Unfortunately, yes, Cathy. ' His hazel eyes were suddenly bleak. 'That's why, the way things worked

out, you had to know from me and not some stranger.'

When they landed, as they were walking through the arrival hall, Cathy tripped and Tom put his arm about her shoulders and kept it there. And a flash-light exploded at the same time as Duncan emerged from the crowd to greet them and introduce the Press.

Cathy didn't see the picture in the paper the next morning, or the one alongside it of Charles Westfield who had arrived on an earlier flight, but among the many who did, two of them reacted with more than normal interest.

Charles Westfield, known to his mates as Charlie and his mother as Chuck, stared at his handsome likeness with satisfaction, then glanced casually at the other picture. Whereupon his brown gaze suddenly became riveted on Cathy, and he pursed his lips and emitted a soft whistle of very genuine appreciation. Then he read the caption and his eyes widened and he said incredulously, 'The director's *wife*—why didn't anyone tell me? Damn...' And he frowned ruefully, then shrugged fatalistically, but at the same time discovered that his slight unease about doing this movie in a foreign, albeit English-speaking land, which was a hell of a long way from home, had disappeared.

Bronwen Bishop also stared at his handsome likeness, but briefly, then transferred her dark gaze to the picture of Tom and Cathy, to Tom's arm around his wife's shoulders and the way he was looking down at her, to Cathy herself, and she closed her eyes in pain.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Now I've got you all together at last and we're about to start shooting, ' Tom said easily but with his usual laid-back magnetism, so that every eye rested on him and no one fidgeted, 'I'd like to say a few general words. The true style of a motion picture is in its overall handling and shape, quote unquote, and that's my job—to take Pete's plot and translate his original creativity to the screen via the medium not only of the actors and the inspiration I can give them but the technical aspects of filmmaking—the impact and the tension, good camera-work and sound, framing, editing et cetera, can achieve. This is not a "big" movie or one with a particular message, but that doesn't mean we can't imprint it with the same kind of style and pace, timing and suspense that grabbed Pete's readers in the first place and held them spellbound. I'm always open to suggestions, but perhaps I should warn you that I'm extremely intolerant of tardiness and an uncooperative attitude, not only from my own point of view but because of the inconvenience to others and the waste of time and therefore money. Any questions?'

Despite herself and despite the fact that Bronwen Bishop was sitting a few feet from her, Cathy felt a little thrill run down her spine. She was undoubtedly a part of this professional team, and it was impossible not to feel stimulated and excited.

There were several questions and some general discussion, then Tom said, 'The fact that it's pouring in paradise means we can't do the outdoor sequences we planned for today, so we're going to make a start with Chloe—as you know from the script, Chloe keeps making these mysterious appearances in Robert's life, both fascinating him and frustrating him, and the first of these is at a party—a sort of "some enchanted evening" and "across a crowded room" affair. Now, seemingly by chance but not by chance at all, all the other major characters are at the party and all have a vested interest in immobilising Robert—not to stop him from getting to Chloe but for much more devious reasons which he's quite unaware of—so it's a comical scene with sinister overtones. The set is ready, and what I'd like to do is run through it in rehearsal as you are, with an aim to shooting it this afternoon—let's go!'

It was nine o'clock that evening when Tom finally called, 'Cut—it's a take!' and everyone cheered.

He grinned rather wryly. 'Sorry, folks, but I think we've all started to get the feel of each other, so things will be easier from now on.' And he outlined briefly what he planned to do the next day, and the session broke up.

Cathy was sitting on a settee with her beautiful yellow brocade off-the-shoulder long evening dress hitched up to her knees because of the heat, and she thought for a moment that she might not have the energy to move, but no one else seemed to be quite as exhausted, so she made the effort and trailed through the throng to her own small

dressings-room, stilling the instinct to go to Tom, who was surrounded by people anyway. She closed the door with relief and sank down in front of the make-up table with her elbows on it and her chin in her hands, and she searched her reflection wearily but discovered that what she was really examining was the odd feeling of being two people, one to be treated as a wife, but only in private—well, hopefully then, she thought with a grimace—and one to be treated like everyone else, even to be looked at purely academically and discussed in the same way... She closed her eyes and took herself to task—you knew it had to be like this, *he* told you and it is the only viable way to work, so what's the problem?

She opened her eyes and watched her lips move. 'He's so good at it—how *can* he divorce himself so completely from me and with no evidence of strain at all, whereas I feel like a nervous, not to mention physical, wreck. How can he be *so* seemingly oblivious of the way everyone is watching him with Bronwen, and watching me, oblivious of the unspoken speculation that's humming through the air? For that matter, how can she? Is it super-professionalism, whereas I'm just a rank amateur? Or...'

Someone knocked on the door. It was Bronwen.

'Cathy, are you decent?'

'Yes... Come in, ' Cathy said uncertainly.

Bronwen had changed into jeans and a blouse and taken her make-up off, and she carried two mugs of coffee awkwardly in one hand as she came in. 'I thought you looked as if you needed a reviver—you were great today, ' she said straightly,

her large dark eyes resting on Cathy's parted lips and slightly dazed eyes, 'but it's an exhausting business, and especially for a beginner.' She kicked the door closed with her heel and handed Cathy a mug, then leant against the wall with her own.

Cathy took a sip of coffee. 'Thank you. I do feel exhausted. I thought you were great too—and much less tense.'

'Comes from experience—how are you liking Sanctuary Cove?'

Cathy thought, for a moment, of the luxurious harbour-front villa that had been rented for the exclusive use of the director and his wife for the next eight weeks, of the rather charming shopping village, the marinas, the boats, the golf courses and sports facilities, the Coomera River and more that made up Sanctuary Cove, and said with a little grimace, 'I'm still a bit overwhelmed, but it's only been a few days—and it's been raining.'

'You're not wrong!' Bronwen said with a laugh. 'What amazes me about Queensland—one of the things—is how people just ignore the rain. You see droves of kids riding to school in torrential downpours without even a raincoat.'

'I suppose it's hot enough to dry off quickly,' Cathy responded with a grin, and they laughed together, then sobered together and stared at each other until Cathy looked away awkwardly.

'Cathy,' Bronwen said slowly, 'I'd like to think we could work together with no——' She broke off a little helplessly.

Cathy took a breath. 'I think we can,' she said quietly. 'Tom has told me about you, and it's probably best... I mean, it's silly for us to try to

ignore it. You must have been wondering whether I knew—I can see everyone else is wondering the same thing. *I've* been wondering how you feel about Tom now——' It was her turn to break off and stare into Bronwen's eyes.

The other girl didn't flinch, but it was with an oddly bleak look that she said after a moment, 'It's finished between Tom and me, Cathy. You——' she paused '—you're very lovely, Cathy, and younger than——'

'She is, isn't she?'

They both swung round to see that Tom had opened the door silently. He added abruptly by way of a sardonic greeting, 'Bronwen. '

Bronwen straightened. 'I was just going, Tom. I was telling Cathy I thought she'd been great today. Well, I'll see you two tomorrow. ' She stared at Tom until he stood aside and let her pass. He closed the door and turned to Cathy. 'Is that all she's been telling you?'

'No, Tom, ' Cathy said steadily but with evidence of strain in her eyes. 'I think we both decided that it wasn't going to work, the way we started off. Pretending, in other words, that we were complete strangers, so I told her that I knew about you and her, and she told me, ' she hesitated for the first time with her eyes on his shuttered expression, 'that it was all over between you and her, ' she finished barely audibly.

His lips twisted. 'I hope you believe that, Cathy. '

Do I? Cathy asked herself. I don't know, but there's no point in saying it. 'I believe I can work with Bronwen and that tomorrow I'll be much less

tense. ' She turned away, and this time their eyes met in the mirror.

'In fact you were great today, ' he said after a long pause.

Cathy shrugged slightly, then picked up a jar of cold cream and started to clean the stage make-up off. 'You don't have to pay me compliments you normally wouldn't. '

'I'm not. Nor do I have to treat you professionally behind closed doors. ' He took a step towards her and put his hands on her shoulders close to her neck, massaging the back of it with his thumbs. She wiped the last trace of make-up off, stared at herself for a moment, then closed her eyes and relaxed a little. 'I'm so tired, ' she said huskily.

'I know. But you'll get used to it gradually. In the meantime, let's go home to bed. ' He took his hands away and looked around for her clothes, and when she stood up, he released the zip of the yellow dress and helped her to step out of it. Then he said, with a little glint in his eye as he surveyed her figure clad only in a flesh-coloured, strapless bra and panties, 'Did you enjoy being the belle of the ball today, so to speak?'

'Was I?'

He handed her her cream blouse. 'If I'm any judge, quite a few people thought so. '

'Oh. ' Cathy buttoned the blouse and took her fawn linen skirt from him. 'Well, I was supposed to be, I imagine. I mean, Portia gatecrashed the party in her air hostess uniform. ' She fumbled with the side waistband button and felt his long fingers do it for her. Then he turned her to face him and settled the collar of her blouse and lifted some

strands of hair that had got caught in it away and ran his fingers through the luxuriant silkiness of it. 'I'm glad we decided to leave this just as it always is. Well, as you often say to me, ' his hazel gaze roamed up and down her, 'all prim and proper again and hardly able to keep your eyes open. Let's go. '

But once home, in a home that couldn't be more different from Mount Macedon, with its cool tiled floors, modern furniture and angles and pastel colours, Tom insisted they have something to eat, and poured Cathy a glass of white wine to go with it.

And when she protested feebly, he said wryly, 'I know you, Cathy. Some people eat when they're wound up—you don't. But that's not good for you, and it's not good to go to bed without unwinding, so keep your eyes open just a little longer. '

In fact the meal, and the wine, did just that, helped unwind and even woke her up a bit, and afterwards Tom came to sit beside her on the settee she was curled up on, stretched his long legs out on a low table and put his arm around her shoulders. He also, for the first time ever, talked a bit about his day's work. He even brought it up himself.

'I was right about Charlie and Jason and Pete. They'll have to be kept under some surveillance, otherwise we could have the makings of a "brat pack" on our hands. '

Cathy laughed softly. 'I think you were right about Bronwen and Charlie too. They look, when

the cameras are off, just ever so slightly suspicious of each other—did you notice?"

'I did. I also noticed——' he hesitated, glanced down at her unconscious face and changed tack without her being aware of it '—one good thing about Pete and young Charlie Westfield becoming kindred spirits is the fact that Pete believes in the story so utterly that he might be able to infect Charlie with——' he paused again '—*all* the right enthusiasms.'

But this time Cathy noticed something different in his voice and she lifted her face to his enquiringly.

He grimaced. 'In other words, point out to him that Robert does love Portia despite his infatuation with Chloe.'

'Pete *can* be very persuasive,' Cathy said with a chuckle, and rested her head on his shoulder. 'Do you realise something, Tom? I'm the only one of the actors who's worked with you before. I think I've come a long way,' she added gravely, 'since you told me I looked like a frozen cod.'

He grinned. 'I didn't tell you you looked like one.'

'Was as effective as one, then,' she amended. Then she suddenly looked rueful. 'I'm glad I don't have to prove that.'

'Kiss anyone passionately, you mean?' he queried, looking down at her with a sudden glint in his eye. 'So, incidentally, am I.'

Cathy sat up. 'Would you really mind, Tom?'

He considered her serious expression and answered her question with one of his own. 'Why shouldn't I?'

She opened her mouth, hesitated, then said, 'Husbands and wives of people who have to do those things must be able to understand it's only acting.'

'That doesn't mean they like the thought of it.'

'Even...' She stopped, then blurted out, 'How will you feel about Bronwen and Charlie—sorry, that slipped out.' She grimaced ruefully.

Tom's expression didn't change. 'My big problem, I suspect, is going to be getting some realism from them.'

'But you can switch off, Tom,' Cathy said slowly, and when he raised an eyebrow, she went on, 'You can switch off completely to everything but the movie—I saw you today. I might just as well have been,' she gestured, 'Minnie Mouse. I'm not complaining, I——'

'Are you not?' He reached out and drew his finger down her cheek, and there was something quizzical in his eyes.

'Well, I realise it's got to be that way,' she said more truthfully, 'so if you can, I should be able to.' She frowned. 'But I don't know...'

'Perhaps our reservations have something to do with my being the first and only man who's ever kissed you. Properly,' he suggested. 'Are you burning to have a go?'

'No! I just told you——'

'It seems to me you're also telling me it's something we should consider,' Tom drawled, and added with some irony, 'I guess once again there's no one more qualified to show you all the right techniques, for the camera, the best angles, et cetera. A good way to start is with a really deep glance between

the two of you, like this... ' And he put his hands on her shoulders and stared down into her eyes with all the amusement gone from his and in a way that suddenly caused her to catch her breath and feel hot. But she managed to say, 'You're making fun of me, Tom!'

'Not at all, ' he denied. 'Now you should tilt your face up and I should, again in the classic tradition, ' he paused as she did tilt her head back, 'appear to hesitate—and here endeth the first lesson, ' he said with a strange smile as he let her go and picked up her hand. 'I was teasing you, ' he added, leaning his head back. 'You could either forgive me or—slap my face. ' And he kissed her knuckles instead, then returned her hand to her lap but didn't take his eyes off her face.

'Tom, ' she said thoughtfully, after a moment, 'you don't want to be having this conversation with me, do you? Is it against the rules of play—while we're working together? Or am I trespassing?' She shrugged.

He said quietly, 'It's not a case of trespassing on any hallowed ground to do with Bronwen, in fact it could be quite——' He stopped rather abruptly.

Cathy waited.

'It could be quite simple, ' he said at length. 'I'm too tired to be making much sense, while you appear to have perked up remarkably!' He sat up with a wry look. 'Why don't you take pity on me and take me to bed?'

Cathy stared at him, then she said with a faint smile, 'That's the worst excuse I've ever heard you conjure up, Tom West! All the same, come. ' And she held out her hand.

He took it, but pulled her into his arms. 'There's so much I love about you, Cathy Kerris, can you keep believing that?'

Once again she opened her mouth, but this time she decided to hold her peace and sighed an odd little sigh that somehow extended to a large yawn. 'OK, ' she said through her fingers, and, 'Contrary to what you believe, I don't even know if I've got the energy to get up the stairs, Mr West. '

Tom laughed. 'I'll help you. And contrary to what I told you, I still have some work to do. '

'I knew that, ' she murmured. 'Just take *me* to bed. '

He did, and she fell asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. But it was some time before Tom stopped staring down at her unconscious face. And when he went back downstairs, instead of working, he poured himself a glass of wine and took it out to the terrace, where he stared out over the water, and the lights of Sanctuary Cove reflected in it, for a long time.

The next morning Cathy woke feeling surprisingly refreshed and she let Tom sleep in while she set out to potter around her new, temporary domain, making breakfast, doing the washing. But as she worked, she tried to take stock and see behind their conversation of the night before, only to come to the conclusion several times that the only thing she could be sure of was that there must be *some* hallowed ground between Tom and Bronwen, even if he might be trying to deny it to himself. Then she deliberately reminded herself of her code of be-

haviour and warned herself to apply it to her thought processes.

Tom was still fast asleep when she took his breakfast in, and she paused a moment before waking him. He was lying on his side and he had taken over all the bed since she had left it; he'd got the sheet impossibly twisted round the lower half of his body and he was cradling her pillow in his arms.

A faint smile touched her mouth, because it was only in sleep that he ever looked—not vulnerable, she mused, but younger somehow, and it was only when he was asleep or just waking that she found herself feeling affectionately indulgent and as if she had a slight edge instead of being very definitely the younger, the student half of the relationship. But when he was asleep she could, and often did, remind herself that he had some faults. He was hopelessly untidy and incredibly forgetful about a lot of things, such as paying basic bills like the electricity and phone; he could never remember where he'd put his car keys; he was utterly careless of his clothes, often found himself without a cent on him or a credit card, forgot appointments and, when he didn't forget them altogether, often turned up a day late or expected people a day early—in fact, how he'd survived before he'd married her was something of a mystery to her. He could also be abominably rude to perfectly innocent people and then be surprised to find he'd hurt them to the core.

'Tom?' she said softly.

He opened one eye and squinted at her, then rolled on to his back with a groan. 'What's the time?'

'Nine o'clock. I brought your breakfast——'

'Nine!' He sat up and raked his fingers through his hair.

'We start at ten, don't we? That's plenty of time, ' Cathy said placidly, and put the tray down beside the bed.

'You start at ten—I had planned to be there a lot earlier so I could go over yesterday's rushes. '

'Oh, ' she said, and smiled down at him. 'You should have told me. '

By way of reply, Tom fingered the blue shadows on his jaw, eyed her state of pristine freshness, her gleaming hair, her white shorts and blue T-shirt, then with a sudden movement pulled her into his arms and lay back with her.

'Tom!' she protested.

'Cathy?' he returned politely, but added, 'I have this... caveman urge to undo you and muss you up, quite an irresistible urge, I must tell you. What do you say to that?'

She trailed the shadows on his jaw with her fingers and said demurely to the wicked, hungry glint in his eyes, 'That will make you even later. '

'Not the way I feel right this instant—but I've changed my mind—I don't care if I'm late or the rushes have to wait. I don't give a damn. Dear Cathy, ' he finished gravely.

'You... you're serious!' She managed to evade his arms long enough to sit up, although his hands captured her about the waist almost immediately.

'Never more so. '

'Well——'

'There you go again!' he teased.

'But *I'll* be . . . I mean, I was feeling much calmer this morning, sort of, and unrushed and——'

'I don't plan to change any of that—in fact I could add to it. Sometimes, ' he said seriously, 'the way I make love to you gives you an air of rather lovely serenity. '

Cathy stared at him. 'Tom West, ' she said severely, 'you are incredibly vain about some things, you really are!'

'But wrong?' he queried softly.

'Well... '

But that was the last word she was able to say for a time, and by the time his mouth left hers, she was drowning in the warmth of his embrace and unable to resist the deft removal of her clothes or her 'undoing' as he had put it, which turned out to be a mutually joyful experience despite the fact that he was as good as his word and it didn't take long at all.

In fact they made the giant, rather barnlike studios with two minutes to spare, and Tom put his hand briefly over hers before they got out of the car. 'Am I forgiven?' he asked.

Cathy raised an innocent eyebrow. 'What for?'

'Rushing you. '

She looked up into his eyes and answered him with a little glint in her own. 'The true test of that will be in today's rushes, probably. '

'Ah——' his lips twisted into a wry smile '—so be it. '

It was not until they began shooting that it occurred to Cathy that whereas yesterday she had been expected to project a Chloe unconscious of what

was going on around her, today's script called for more, a serene Chloe who could not be unaware that a very odd sequence of events seemed to be unfolding about her but at the same time refused to be fazed by any of it.

She had no trouble with the part at all, although she did eye her husband once a little narrowly and wondered about two things—how well he must know her and whether he would actually use that knowledge to get a better performance out of her. Then she resolutely closed her mind and gathered her serenity back.

It was amazing how time flew. Hours, then days and weeks. And it was equally amazing how well it all went—which was not to say those first weeks of shooting didn't have a share of drama; they did. Tom had been right about Bronwen having some difficulty with Portia—but nothing that was to approach the last few weeks' high drama, did they all but know it. It was also, Cathy realised more and more, a tribute to Tom's genius, those relatively trouble-free first few weeks—his patience with Bronwen, his knack of inspiring the others and leading them to the correct interpretation of a role, his judgement on when honest criticism would work and when encouragement was needed—and when throwing the script to the floor and swearing coldly, comprehensively and precisely at everyone would galvanise them out of a bout of boredom.

And Duncan, although he commuted to and from Melbourne fairly regularly, contributed too, as a referee occasionally, or as a quiet friendly presence.

It was also a time of pleasant socialising for Cathy, more particularly the sessions they had at home at Sanctuary Cove where she was happy to provide food and drink and listen with deep interest to the debates that flourished on every aspect of film-making. But there were other outings—boat trips and sightseeing trips, receptions, media sessions—no wonder, she thought once, time had flown.

Was it also how busy they all were, she also wondered once, that accounted for the fact that her problems appeared to have virtually disappeared? It was certainly no longer a problem for her to be just one of the cast on the set. Just as it appeared to be no problem for Tom and Bronwen to work with each other, despite her difficulties with the part and the undoubted animosity between her and Charlie. And, Cathy was to realise later, it was easy to put Bronwen's air of abstraction down to the problem of Portia and leave it there... For that matter, to ignore the fact that Bronwen spent very little time at the Sanctuary Cove villa compared to most of the other members of the cast and crew but seemed to prefer to be alone with Duncan, who was obviously an old friend despite his once made comment. And it would have been asking a lot anyway, she *had* reasoned once, to expect Tom and Bronwen to be like lifelong buddies, and it might have made *her* feel awkward when Tom put an affectionate arm about her or the times when they stood in the doorway and waved their guests off, then closed the door on their private life...

That was another aspect of it all that she was to discover had escaped her—it was true she and Tom

had never been demonstrative in front of others, it was also true that even socialising, she often felt as if she was trailing in Tom's wake, a quiet shadow with the snacks. But every now and then he would say something or do something that demonstrated to all concerned that she was his, and manage to do it in a way that warmed her and satisfied her. She never stopped *to* think how little it took to achieve that for her... Just as, she was to come to realise with bitter self-mockery, she was either too stupid or busy and stimulated enough to be lulled into accepting the surface of things, and didn't see the rocks below the surface until she crashed into them.

It didn't even, for example, occur to her that Charlie Westfield was to be one of those rocks.

She did discover during those first weeks that she liked him, that he made her laugh, that she thought he was doing a good job with Robert, and also that his aura of being into fast cars, fast women and moderately loose living was somewhat exaggerated. Although there was certainly an abundant supply of girls who were happy to surround him, girls with dark-painted lips and nails and few inhibitions.

But that Charlie Westfield should consider himself falling deeper and deeper in love with her every day actually only surprised two people—herself and him. In fact, it would have wounded his pride severely had he realised that on top of this strange new feeling that was gripping him so intensely he was not quite hiding it with his usual cool. That his emotions would get the better of him one day surprised no one else either; indeed, it was

a matter of open speculation among some that it was only a matter of time.

The first intimation of it came when they were filming a balloon sequence—another of Pete's cherished cameos of Chloe escaping Robert- this time per medium of her being hijacked in a balloon with Robert chasing in another.

They used three balloons on a clear sunny Sunday morning, setting out from a vast paddock at Carrara—Cathy in one with the villain who was abducting her. The villains in the plot had by now realised that by dangling Chloe in front of Robert they could get him to do almost anything. Her villain was in fact a balloonist in disguise, while Robert was ostensibly operating his own balloon, and Tom and a cameraman were squashed into a third.

Of all Pete's bizarre scenarios, this was the only one that had worried Cathy, but she had said nothing and trusted in her new-found professionalism. But no sooner were they off the ground and rising higher than she discovered she was frozen with fear, that the roar and the smell of the burner were horrible, the swaying was nauseating, but what was worse was looking down, and she crumpled to the bottom of the basket.

The confusion that followed mostly escaped her as she tried desperately to concentrate on the advice her alarmed balloonist was offering her and the image, if she could ever get on her feet again, she was supposed to project this time for the camera, of haunting farewell as she was sailed off into the blue yonder. In fact, she did get to her feet once and look back, but she didn't stay up for long,

although she was dimly aware of Tom's voice booming through a megaphone and Charlie adding his voice and manhandling his balloonist, who was supposed to be unseen, upright and commanding him to do something!

By some miracle, they managed to curtail the flight and all land in another large paddock, although some distance from each other. But it was Charlie who reached Cathy first and helped her down while the balloon was made fast, and it was Charlie who had his arms around her when she discovered her legs had left her, and Tom arrived on the scene.

There followed another couple of confused minutes as Charlie Westfield clutched her and demanded angrily of Tom how he could have put her through such an ordeal.

Tom replied with some cutting advice of an extremely personal nature, and uttered so menacingly that he quite took Charlie by surprise, and took the opportunity to take Cathy from him, swing her into his arms and snap at her, his hazel eyes cold and furious still, 'You bloody idiot! Why didn't you tell me?'

'Why didn't you tell me, Cat?'

The same question, but asked in a different voice, several frustrating hours later after a forced, estranged wait in a strange paddock while the ground support team changed direction and desperately tried to find them.

Cathy had refused to say a word, although due to Tom's machinations and the fact that he'd sat himself down to wait and kept her in his arms,

together with her genuinely feeling sick, she had hidden her extreme chagrin with him from the others.

Now, though, she was home and alone with him, ensconced on a settee with a cup of tea beside her, and had been ordered not to move.

She fiddled with a small ornament on the table beside her, then lifted her blue eyes to his at last. 'I didn't *know*, ' she said hotly.

He lifted an eyebrow. 'Didn't even suspect?'

'I... well, I was a bit nervous, ' she admitted reluctantly at last.

'You should have told me that, Cathy, ' he said quietly.

'I didn't think... I really didn't know it would be so... ' She broke off and shuddered. 'I mean, I don't mind flying in planes or helicopters, but... I also, ' she said with a dignified glance this time, 'wanted to be professional about it, and I thought if you knew I was nervous, well... ' She shrugged.

'You're damned right—I would have done something about it, ' Tom said with a rueful smile. 'The point you seem to have missed is that I wouldn't have expected *anyone* to go through that kind of hell, but least of all you. '

'Is that so?' A little glint of anger lit her eyes. 'I suppose that's why you called me a... an idiot?'

His lips quivered. 'I apologise for that, ' he said gravely, however. 'It was, in fact, an expression of concern—that got a bit twisted. '

She considered, then said candidly, 'You were also terribly rude to Charlie. '

Something flickered briefly in his eyes, a curious mixture of irritation, she thought, and speculation,

but about what she didn't know. He murmured finally, 'I'm sure Charlie will survive. How are you feeling now?'

Cathy laid her head back with a grimace. 'Fine. And foolish. Do... will I have to do it again?' She sat up suddenly. 'Perhaps you could hide in my balloon? I'm sure I'd feel better with you there. '

Tom's eyes resting on her determined expression were oddly gentle. 'No, you won't have to do it again. We'll find some other way. '

But, later that day, he got an excited call from Jason, and he turned to her when he put the phone down.

'You can relax, Cathy. The rushes are marvellous, apparently. You look thoroughly haunted and Charlie suitably demented, and the whole sequence has a tangibly tense air about it—I wonder why?' he added with a grin. 'But anyway, will you let me give you dinner? We could wander round some of those fascinating shops in the village and then have an early meal. '

But not all the consequences to the ballooning sequence were so successful.

Unknown to anyone this time, Charlie Westfield brooded darkly but very secretively this time and, several days later, found himself alone with Cathy in a deserted corner of the set, surrounded by some really weird props such as a stuffed tiger which Cathy got trapped behind, and found he could no longer conceal his feelings.

'Cathy, ' he said slowly, his dark eyes roaming her simple yet exquisitely cut dusky pink dress that

was so different from the complicated mixture of straps and studs, berets and socks, trousers of all description and tiny tube bodices, jangling bracelets and necklaces and bizarre earrings that most of the girls he knew wore.

'Oh, Charlie, there's a real menagerie here. What do you suppose——'

'Cathy, ' he broke in intensely, still studying her smooth, bare, golden arms, her bare throat and her hair, 'I *love you*. I can't think about anything but you, I... ' He stopped as she made a shocked little sound and her blue eyes widened.

They stared at each other across the tiger.

Cathy cleared her throat. 'Charlie, you can't be serious, ' she said with difficulty. 'I—'

'Goddamn it, I am——'

'But I'm married——'

'Leave him!' Charlie Westfield said urgently. 'He only treats you like his lapdog anyway. They all do! And do you know why? They're jealous. '

'*Jealous?*' Cathy echoed incredulously.

'That stuck-up bitch Bronwen Bishop is, anyway. ' He gestured contemptuously. 'For two reasons, because you're going to steal the show—you've got movie magic in you, honey! Everyone here knows it and *she* knows it—next to you she looks like a dried-up old bat, and don't think she's not regretting that on two counts—your precious husband being one of 'em. It's killing her to think you're not only going to steal the show but you stole him. '

'I *didn't!*' She——'

'Whatever, ' Charlie said with another grand gesture. 'And don't think he's not jealous either! He's no fool, whatever else he might be, our high

and mighty Mr Director. He knows how good you are, he knows a love affair between a person and the cameras when he sees it, but has he ever told you?' He waited a moment as Cathy's lips parted, then closed. 'Of course he hasn't. He's not one to share the limelight either, our Tom West. Specially not with his wife, whom he's trained like a little——'

'Stop it!' Cathy gasped. 'How *dare* you?'

'I dare because I'm crazy about you, Cathy. ' A dull flush of colour spread over Charlie Westfield's good-looking features. 'And I don't want you as my faithful shadow. I want to free you. ' His voice deepened and quietened. 'Have you ever been free, Cathy? Have you ever spread your wings and let your hair down and done things just for the hell of it? I could teach you how to do that, but I'd also look after you because, ' this time his voice quickened with exasperation, 'I love you. '

There was no doubting that Charlie earnestly believed what he was saying. Cathy licked her lips and tried to sort through the tangle of thoughts that filled her mind. It was a fatal hesitation, however, because Charlie then vaulted the moth-eaten tiger and took her into his arms and attempted to kiss her passionately.

'I believe this isn't particularly original, ' a dry voice said behind them, 'but would you kindly unhand my wife, sir?'

CHAPTER FIVE

CHARLIE released her and spun round, going as pale as he'd been flushed.

There was a moment's silence as Tom's gaze bored into his dark one, then transferred to Cathy. He was leaning against an iron girder in a way that indicated that he might not have just arrived, and there was something about his negligent, meditative stance, despite that quick, cutting look into Charlie's soul, that contrived to make Cathy feel curiously hot-handed and adolescent. She wondered briefly how Charlie's psyche was standing up. He immediately indicated that it was somewhat bruised.

'She may be your wife, but I love her and you don't deserve her! You treat her as if——'

'That's enough, Westfield!' said Tom, and there was no mistaking the contempt in his hazel eyes now or the menace, again, in his voice. 'You may be prepared to shoot this production down in flames—I'm not. We're waiting for you on the set. You might recall, ' his gaze was now mockingly ironic, 'that you and Bronwen are about to embark on a passionate love scene. '

Charlie opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, and despairing futility was stamped into every line of his body. 'She——'

'Dislikes you as much as you dislike her, ' Tom said evenly. 'That's not the point. You're both

actors, or claim to be. ' He paused to let this sink in. 'What's more, you're both under contract. '

Charlie stared at him and Cathy could see the stiffening of resolve overcome the futility. He said coldly, 'I am an actor, pal, and I will see this production out. That doesn't mean I can't make my own judgements, nor does it alter the fact that you're side-stepping the real issue here. But then where Cathy's concerned, I guess that's second nature to you. ' And with this parting shot, he stepped over the tiger and walked away.

Tom let him go. He didn't even turn his head. He watched, instead, Cathy's parted lips and the way her eyes followed Charlie, then jerked back to his. And the way she licked her lips before she spoke.

'I had no idea!'

He grimaced. 'None?'

'Of course not—you don't think... ?'

'I'm sure you haven't led him on in any way, other than getting yourself trapped behind a tiger. What——' he straightened abruptly '—did you make of the rest of his sentiments?'

Cathy said slowly, 'I don't feel like your lapdog, although I can see why some people might... but that's probably *me*. The way I am, I mean. I don't... ' She stopped.

'Go on, ' he said quietly.

'Tom, I think we should leave this until later. It isn't the right time or place for——'

'I think it will be hard to be spontaneous later, ' he said drily. 'You were saying—you don't... ?'

Cathy made an effort to concentrate. 'I don't believe Bronwen is jealous or that you are—that's

crazy, ' she said firmly. 'I don't believe I'm going to steal the show either. ' She shrugged. 'So—'

'But you do believe he's in love with you?' he said softly but capturing her gaze.

A tinge of colour entered her cheeks. 'He... seems to believe he is, but I don't know why. '

Tom raised an ironic eyebrow. 'You don't?'

'Well, I'm just so different from all the other girls he... ' She stopped, then went on a little helplessly, 'I am, aren't I?'

But he chose not to comment on that. He said, instead, 'What about the "freedom" he offered you?'

Cathy took a breath. 'I... ' But she couldn't go on, nor was she sure why she couldn't just say it was as ridiculous as everything else Charlie had implied, or that it didn't appeal to her at all. Then it occurred to her that Tom was treating her like a witness on a stand, like a defendant, in fact, when she had nothing to be defensive about, and she found that annoyed her. 'Tom, ' she said quietly but with resolve, 'you're blowing this out of all proportion——'

'Am I? You don't think the fact that Charlie Westfield is madly in love with you, that he loathes Bronwen and detests me, is a matter of quite some proportion, Cathy?' His expression was sardonic.

'Of course! I mean, it's going to make things rather difficult. '

'Only rather?' he mocked.

'Very difficult, then, ' she said through her teeth. 'But it's not *my* fault. '

'On the other hand, if you hadn't insisted on doing Chloe, none of this would have happened, ' he said harshly.

Cathy gasped. 'That's—you *agreed*—*how* unfair can you be?'

'It's not a matter of being fair or otherwise—it's a fact of life. '

'But Charlie would have loathed Bronwen anyway, probably, and could just as easily have fallen in love with whoever did Chloe, so——'

'Oh, he could, ' drawled Tom. 'I suspect our Charlie falls in and out of love regularly, but if someone else had done Chloe, she wouldn't have been my wife—do you see, Cathy?'

Cathy stared at him, then she stumbled round the tiger and ran past him towards the refuge of her dressing-room.

There was, fortunately, not the opportunity for any further words on the subject until later that night, by which time some of Cathy's rage had abated to a slightly duller emotion. She also left the set mid-afternoon and occupied herself at home until Tom came in after ten, which helped calm her down a bit.

But it was a set, cold face she turned to him when he closed the front door behind him and came towards where she was sitting in the lounge with a book.

'I gather you're still not talking to me, ' he said briefly when she turned back to her book.

'Now that would also be ridiculous, ' she said coolly. 'But while I may talk to you, it doesn't mean I'll enjoy it. '

A faint, dry smile lit his eyes. 'I'm suitably damned,' he murmured, and cast himself down on the settee opposite her. 'However, I'm sure it would be better for you to get it all off your chest.'

Cathy took a breath. Then she said acidly, 'You're wrong, you know. Talking about it won't change anything, it won't change *you*, particularly, and the only thing, to my mind, that we can do now is get this movie over and done with.'

'In a state of armed neutrality?' he queried.

'Yes,' she replied baldly.

'Unfortunately,' he said thoughtfully and with a smothered yawn, 'I'm uncharacteristically exhausted, and without the energy to prise it out of you or do much more than go to bed, but don't hold that against me too, will you, Cathy? By tomorrow morning I'm sure I'll have come up with a better plan.'

'You——!' Cathy said hotly, and stopped abruptly as she realised his face *was* uncharacteristically lined with tiredness and his eyes heavy-lidded. '... Are you sickening for something?' she asked uncertainly.

He grimaced. 'I hope not.'

'You have been working awful hours, but then you always do and it never seems to affect you...' She stopped with a frown in her eyes. 'All right,' she said with sudden decision, 'you'd better go to bed.'

'Are you coming with me, or is that too much to ask?'

Cathy compressed her lips, then was struck by the memory of once accusing him of being ado-

lescent for sleeping in the spare room. 'Why not?' she said, but added coldly, 'When I'm ready. '

His lips twisted, but he said no more, and it was with an obvious effort that he pulled himself together and took himself off to bed.

'I hope it's conscience, ' Cathy said, but to herself.

It was conscience that had tired Tom out so uncharacteristically, but not about her, she was to discover the next morning after a restless night during which he tossed and turned in his sleep to an extent that really worried her.

Then she fell deeply asleep in the early hours, and when she woke with the sun streaming over the foot of the bed she was alone.

She lay for a while in the rumpled bed, sleepily gathering her thoughts which, surprisingly, had lost a lot of their hard certainty, she discovered. Not that she believed for one minute that she was stealing the show—or that Tom was jealous of her. Nor, on reflection, was she less annoyed with Tom's attitude, but Bronwen... ? Bronwen isn't happy—the thought surfaced in her mind and refused to be banished. Why? Because of the antagonism between her and Charlie? No... it's more a bone-deep unhappiness that she hides rather well, but it's when you see her in the odd times she forgets, when you see the vitality and the energy, the intelligence and the humour—that's when you realise it's mostly smothered.

'Is it because she's discovered she made a terrible mistake about how much Tom means to her?'

It was a whispered question Cathy asked herself, and one that she didn't have to search for an answer

to. Instead she thought with some bitterness that she herself had spent the last weeks with her head buried in the sand, and it had taken Charlie of all people to make her see that Bronwen was deeply hurt and desperately battling to put a brave front on it. And on top of it all, she thought, she has to put up with seeing herself usurped by a lapdog. If... just say I could ever fall in love with someone nearer my own age, someone like Charlie Westfield, her thoughts ranged on, how would I be, I wonder? Free and able to spread my wings? Able to do things just for the hell of them? Tom does sometimes...

She sighed, pushed away the sheet and got up, then she caught sight of the clock, and because it was so quiet, guessed Tom had already left for the set.

But when she walked noiselessly down the stairs in her bare feet and white nightgown, he was sitting at the breakfast bar surrounded by a sea of papers and with his head in his hands. He wore only a pair of jeans, and the Queensland sun had tanned his body a deep smooth gold and lightened his hair.

'Oh, ' Cathy said at the bottom of the stairs.

He looked up slowly and their gazes clashed.

Cathy was the first to look away. 'I thought you'd gone, ' she said coolly, and walked into the kitchen, where she opened the fridge and took out the orange juice and poured herself a glass. 'Don't you feel well after all?'

His hazel eyes followed all her movements, the way her breast tautened under the fine cotton as she reached up for a glass, the disorder of her hair and the faint flush of sleep still on her cheeks, her

slim hands adorned only with his gold wedding ring, the lack of interest in her blue eyes.

'As a matter of fact I feel bloody awful, ' he remarked after an age, 'but not because I'm sick. '

Cathy raised her eyebrows and sipped her orange juice. 'I suppose it would be too much to expect that it might be conscience after all, ' she murmured.

'Conscience, ' he said slowly, and surprised her by grinning unexpectedly. 'I guess you could call it that. The fact is, this blasted movie has "gotten" away from me—as your besotted young swain would no doubt express it. '

'He *isn't*... I hate you sometimes, Tom!' Cathy hissed, then took a deep breath. '*I'm*——'

'As pure as the driven snow, I know, ' he broke in. 'Although I wonder for how long—but be that as it may. ' His lips twisted ironically. 'We did agree to be professional about all this, didn't we? Well—your favourite word this time—now's the time that I need some pure professionalism, my dear, ' he said laconically.

Cathy stared at him through narrowed eyes and felt a cold rage such as she'd never known flood her. 'All right, ' she said abruptly, 'if it's advice you're talking about, I'll give you some. This movie's *gotten* away from you for one simple reason. It's not only the fact that Charlie and Bronwen hate each other that's making it impossible to get the right sparks from them, it's because Bronwen is desperately unhappy and would find it hard to act in a Christmas pantomime at the moment. I've seen her on screen, and she just doesn't have her usual lustre and verve. Now normally, ' she paused, 'I'm sure your directing

skills would be able to overcome this "'block" she's experiencing, but since you're the object of this deep unhappiness of hers, you can't. And for your information, Tom West, the biggest mistake you made was not agreeing to me doing Chloe but agreeing to work with Bronwen—and it wouldn't have mattered if I'd been doing Chloe or not. You say it's over, she says it's over, but it's pretty obvious it's *not*—for her, at least. '

She stopped, gulped down the last of the orange juice and continued quite evenly, which was not a true reflection of her emotions, 'Actually there's something else wrong, while we're on the subject. You're trying to get Bronwen to come over as a beautiful bimbo, but Portia wasn't like that in the book. She wasn't just gaily and illogically, madly in love with Robert, she was also deeply torn by her love for him and the fact that she knows he'll never love her as much as she loves him, although he goes back to her in the end. It was a real love-hate relationship, and it made sense that way. It doesn't this way. '

Tom had studied her through narrowed eyes as she spoke, and he now said with irony, 'Are you trying to tell me how to do my job, Cathy?'

She shrugged. 'You said you needed professionalism. '

'I do, but the whole tone of this movie is——'

'I know, ' she interrupted, 'light fantasy. Personally, I think it could do with a touch of realism. '

'So, ' a muscle flickered in his jaw and there was something frighteningly intent about him now, and angry, 'you're not just a pretty little lapdog after all, dear Cathy. And if Bronwen can't act her way

out of a paper bag at the moment/ he added mockingly, 'how am I going to get her to come up with some reality?'

Cathy stared at him, then she said huskily, Tell her to imagine Robert is you, Tom. That should do the trick' But she didn't leave it there. She picked up the empty glass and hurled it across the breakfast bar at him, then whirled around to run upstairs again.

He caught the glass in a lightning reflex action, and he caught her halfway up the stairs.

'Don't touch me, ' she said through her teeth. This lapdog has had *enough!*'

That's the trouble about being a lapdog, ' Tom countered grimly, standing on the step below her but still towering over her, 'they're not very ferocious.'

'Don't you believe it, Tom, ' she warned. 'I'd have no qualms about biting and scratching and screaming my head off—in fact, I'd enjoy it right now/

'Your convent would be shocked to the core, ' he drawled.

'Do you think so? In fact it was a certain Sister Margaret Mary who once told us exactly where to aim for, '

'I wouldn't recommend it, ' he said gravely with a suddenly different light in his eyes.

'Just... go away, then!' she blazed, and with a twist of her body ran up the remaining stairs and into the bedroom. She was not quite quick enough about slamming and locking the door, however, and as he shouldered his way in, she retreated to the

bed, but her eyes were still a deep, furious blue, her cheeks pink and her hands shaking with rage.

'Don't you dare——'

'Cathy. ' Tom closed the door and leant his shoulders back against it. 'Calm down. I'm not going to touch you. ' He paused, then said rather wryly, 'As a matter of interest, what are you imagining I'm about to do to you?'

'Do?' Her lips quivered. 'Probably try to make love to me. That's your panacea for everything, isn't it? Well, I have to tell you the days of it converting me back into a "pretty little lapdog", ' she said with tremendous scorn, 'are over!'

There was a moment's taut silence. Then he said softly, 'So he did get through to you. '

'Yes, he got through to me, ' she flashed. 'Why shouldn't he? It's obviously the way you saw me yourself. You just *said*——'

'That didn't come out quite the way I meant it, Cathy, ' he said abruptly. 'I was somewhat piqued. '

Cathy sat down and ran her hands through her hair. 'And that's another thing, you're treating *me* with the utmost suspicion as... if, ' she stammered wrathfully, 'I've got something to be ashamed of, and then you've got the nerve to tell me you're piqued when it's all a figment of your imagination!'

'You agreed a moment ago that Charlie——'

'I *meant*—*he* opened my eyes about a lot of things. '

'Cathy, ' he said roughly, then with an effort perhaps to still his hands, folded his arms. 'Cathy, we're at cross-purposes here. When I said what I did downstairs it was in a moment of resentment because you're right. '

She laughed hollowly. 'What about?'

Trying to portray Portia as a mindless bimbo. It's been—for some time now I couldn't put my finger on what I was doing wrong. More amazingly, Pete didn't see it either. You have to admit that even in the book Portia does sort of stray into bimboish country. '

'When she's on the defensive, ' Cathy said wearily. 'Well, perhaps it is a fine line—how come Pete... ?' She lifted her head and looked into his eyes curiously, her rage temporarily forgotten.

'Pete's a novice at the more subtle nuances on a screen. He's also been very busy trying to learn so many tricks of the trade, ' Tom added with a ghost of a smile in his eyes.

Cathy thought of Pete and how he'd been over the past weeks—intense, eager and under everyone's feet. She had to smile shakily herself.

'Am I forgiven?' asked Tom after a long pause, during which he hadn't taken his eyes off her, although she'd been studying her hands distractedly.

She raised a hand and pushed her hair back again, fighting some sudden weak tears. 'No, ' she said desolately. 'Except in public'

'Could I come and sit next to you on the bed?'

'Tom, ' she said on a breath, her eyes flying to his, then skidding away.

'Not to touch or to offer any panacea you find intolerable, ' he murmured.

She lifted her shoulders in a helpless little gesture which he took as assent, and strolled over to sit down beside her.

And he said, not looking at her, 'I've never in our life together, thought of you as a lapdog. If

I've given *you* that impression, I'm sorry, and if I've given other people that impression I'll do what I can to rectify it. But, ' he paused, 'you——'

'I know what you're going to say—it's what I tried to explain yesterday—what Charlie doesn't understand is that I'm not a very outgoing person. I——' she hesitated '—perhaps I've just never had the opportunity to be different. '

He was silent so long that she looked across at him at last. 'You mean, ' he said slowly to his hands, 'you might be capable of letting your hair down and spreading your wings given the right conditions?' And at last his eyes met hers, soberly, even a shade bleakly.

A tremor ran through Cathy. 'I don't know, ' she said painfully. 'To be honest, I've never even given it much thought. '

'But now you have to. ' It was a quiet statement, but she felt as if he was looking right into her soul.

She licked her lips and for a brief, mad moment felt like throwing herself into his arms and begging him to love her, to end this awful confusion, to take her back to the days when the one simple fact of her life had been her love for him, and it had overridden all else. 'Do you think that's silly?'

Tom picked up her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. 'No, ' he said evenly. 'Although I don't know if Charlie Westfield is the one to do it. '

Cathy tensed. 'I didn't mean that!'

'What did you mean, then?'

She looked down at his long, strong fingers around her own. 'I'm not sure, ' she said at last, and freed her hand. 'How are we going to go on now?'

'Cathy——' he took her hand back, then sighed harshly '—do you mean us or the movie?'

'Both, I guess, ' she said tonelessly, and wondered if he would bring up the subject which was really the heart of it all—Bronwen. And she shivered suddenly, thinking of her callous suggestion downstairs that had been torn out of her in the heat of the moment—and came to a sudden decision. 'What I said earlier about Bronwen, ' she clenched his hand suddenly and went on awkwardly, 'was also said out of pique, and I'm sorry for it. And I can go on—we have to go on, don't we?'

'Like real troopers, ' he agreed drily. 'How will you handle Charlie?'

'Very firmly, ' she said in a firm voice, 'but you'll have to help me. It won't do any good to be cutting and unkind to him. We'll just have to pretend it never happened and present a united front. '

'Your wisdom amazes me, ' he said, and stopped rather abruptly.

'I know, ' Cathy conceded with a very faint, wry smile. 'It amazes me a bit too, so it's not surprising you—well, people have this lapdog view of me——'

'Cathy, ' Tom gripped her hand so tightly she winced. 'I'm sure I deserve to suffer for my sins, but could you do one thing for me? Don't ever call yourself that again. I hate the very thought of it, and it's not true—Charlie wasn't accusing you of it, he was accusing me of treating you that way——'

'I know that, ' Cathy interrupted, 'but I suppose... anyway, it doesn't matter. We do have

to forget about all this for the time being. That's what really matters. '

There's still us, ' he said.

She stirred and said with a little sigh, 'I guess we have to go on as before, otherwise... ' She broke off uncertainly.

He tilted her chin and stared into her eyes. 'Just now you didn't want me to touch you. '

Her mouth trembled and her eyes were troubled. 'Can you not——her voice was husky with emotion and it faltered '——understand why, Tom?'

'I understand, ' he said slowly, 'that... ' He stopped, raised his head and stared out of the window at the wide, cloudless blue sky and the sun streaming in. Then he said, 'Why the hell not?' and reached for the phone beside the bed.

It was Duncan he rang and Duncan he said casually to, 'I'm taking a day off, mate. Can you give everyone a holiday? And if you'd also schedule a conference for nine o'clock tomorrow morning, please. You, Pete, Charlie and Bronwen, and re-schedule everything we had planned for today to tomorrow afternoon. '

He listened for a moment, then grinned wickedly. 'That's what producers are for, Duncan! The ultimate authority. As to what I'm doing today—I'm going fishing. ' He put the phone down gently.

'Fishing?' Cathy stared at him, mystified. 'I didn't know you liked fishing. '

'I don't. '

'Then... ?'

'It's a well-known synonym for playing hookey, ' Tom said gravely. 'Have you never played hookey, Cat?'

'Not really, but——•

Then your education *is* sadly lacking, and we'd better start to rectify it. What you'll need is a swimming costume, sand shoes, a hat and towel, shorts and a shirt and a jumper. I'll organise the rest. Be on the jetty in an hour. '

Tom——'

'Cat, ' he said softly, 'this is freedom, letting your hair down, doing things just for the hell of them when you should be doing something else. I know I'm not Charlie Westfield, but that doesn't mean I don't know what it's all about. '

Each villa had its own jetty, and an hour later a sleek cruiser nosed into theirs and Tom appeared on the back deck and threw Cathy a rope. 'Welcome aboard, Mrs West. '

'Tom, ' Cathy scrambled on, 'whose boat is it, and——?'

'It belongs to a very good friend of mine who lives on the coast and keeps it moored here. I've been out on it a few times on previous trips and he told me I could use it any time I liked. '

'But I didn't know you knew anything about boats!'

He said, 'I probably know about lots of things you don't know I know about—I know, for example, that I could teach you to handle this boat. '

'Me?' Cathy stared around. They were in the spacious main cabin by this time with a seat running along one side towards the spoked wooden wheel and cupboards and a compact galley on the other. Down two steps forward, she could see two berths forming a V. And on the galley counter she noticed

several bags of food and one with some long-necked bottles protruding. 'I think I'd better be head cook and bottle-washer, I think I'd be better at that - Torn, you've got an awful lot to eat. How long... ?' She stopped, frowning.

'Overnight.'

Tom!

'Cathy, ' he said firmly but with a little glint in his eyes, 'trust me. And no, you're not going to be head cook and bottle-washer, you're going to have your first lesson at being a mariner right now. ' He put his hands round her waist and lifted her into the chair in front of the wheel. The engine was ticking over slowly and she looked at the dials with panic in her eyes. 'But don't you have to have a licence to drive boats?'

'Only those that go over ten knots. This doesn't. Now listen carefully and I'll be right beside you. '

A couple of hours later, Cathy said wonderingly, 'I had no idea it was so simple. '

'Once you understand the buoys and channel markers and know which side of the channels to keep on, it's easier than driving a car, ' Tom told her. 'Of course, there is a bit more to it, but for the Broadwater, which is very well signposted and on a weekday when there's hardly anyone else out, you'll do. '

'Of course, ' she agreed gravely, then laughed up at him. 'I'm starving! Show me how to anchor this boat now so we can have some lunch. '

They anchored off South Stradbroke Island, opposite a tree-lined beach where the cottonwoods and casuarinas were suddenly familiar to Cathy.

'Isn't this where——?'

'Yes. Where Robert supposedly got himself stranded on an uninhabited island. '

Cathy giggled, remembering some of the hazards of that day's shooting, such as the surprised couple and their particularly persistent dog who had wandered into the shooting area, ruining a sequence that had been going particularly well. Today would have been a better day, ' she murmured, gazing around. There were no other boats at anchor, no sign of life on the beach and the glittering, sun-metalled water stretched about them undisturbed. 'It is lovely, isn't it?'

'Yes, After lunch we could go ashore in the dinghy and walk over the island to the surf, if you like. '

'Yes, please, ' she said simply, and began to help him peel the succulent pink prawns he had bought for their lunch.

But they didn't go for their hike straight after lunch, because Tom opened a bottle of wine of which Cathy had two glasses, and after the excitement of the morning it seemed quite natural to curl up on one of the bunks and go to sleep.

He woke her about four o'clock by tickling her cheek with a lock of her hair.

She yawned and sat up, looking rueful. 'You shouldn't have let me sleep so long, ' she told him.

'Why not?' he said idly, but watching her pull down her blouse and tuck it into her shorts. 'I had

a kip too. If you're going to have a surf, you'll need your togs on. '

'Oh'

'Here. ' He handed her her sapphire blue one-piece costume, then, as she hesitated, turned away, saying, 'I'll put the towels and sand shoes in the dinghy. '

It was only about a twenty-minute tramp through the hot, still bush and across the burning sand to the unprotected side of the island with its high, rolling dunes, wide, long beach and pounding surf, and again, there was not a living soul in sight. And it was hot enough for Cathy to be grateful to throw her shorts and blouse off and plunge into the water. Tom did the same, his lean golden body slicing a wave. They both surfaced with their hair plastered to their heads and water streaming from them.

'Nice?' he asked.

'Wonderful!' she called, and flipped on to her back with her arms outstretched, her face tilted to the sky.

They frolicked in the water, then came out, but Cathy discovered as she dried herself down that she felt full of pent-up energy. 'Let's walk up to the horizon, ' she suggested with a grin, shaking out her hair so that sparkling droplets of water flew in all directions.

'Why not?' Tom returned wryly.

And as they strolled up the beach he told her that North and South Stradbroke had once been one island joined by a narrow neck, but weather and a cargo of sunken dynamite had breached the neck and formed Jumpinpin Bar, which separated the

islands now. Cathy shaded her eyes as they walked north, trying to see the bar, but the sand just went on and on. And eventually Tom said they had better turn back, otherwise they'd be caught trying to find the path over the island in the dark. In fact, the sun was just slipping behind the mainland as they reached the Broadwater side and stepped on to the beach.

She caught her breath and put out a hand to stop Tom, pointing delightedly at a family of wallabies at the water's edge.

They watched them for a few minutes.

'What are they doing?' she whispered.

He shrugged. There must be something nutritious in the seaweed the tide brings in. '

Back on the boat, Tom switched on some lights but left the afterdeck in darkness—for a reason, Cathy discovered.

There's a cold water shower out there, ' he said, not quite smiling. 'It's cold but fresh water, so it'll get all the salt off, and the sand. '

'I see, ' Cathy said gravely. That deck is also very public'

There's not a soul for miles. It's also quite dark, ' he replied innocently but with a little glint she knew well in the greeny depths of his eyes. 'Look, ' he added, stripping off his trunks, 'I'll go first'

Cathy sighed, for several reasons. Because only this morning she had been so angry with him, angrier than she'd ever been with anyone, and determined not to succumb to any physical blackmail, yet now, taking a naked shower on the open deck of a boat seemed only a right and fitting thing to

do. Strange, but then only today I learnt to drive this boat, she mused, which is something I never visualised myself doing, and there's no one about and it is dark, so it's not so very daring, but Tom...

Her thoughts centred on Tom, standing straight and tall on the deck with his back to her, dousing himself with cold, fresh water from the hand-held shower, and she found herself wondering if he might appreciate her more if she did let her hair down and spread her wings, did do things just for the hell of it...

'Is it very cold?'

He turned and blinked as she stood in the spill over of soft light from the cabin, and switched the water off.

'Pretty cold, ' he said after a moment, his gaze roaming her body. 'Shall.., I?'

'Yes, please. ' Cathy braced herself and closed her eyes.

But he didn't begin immediately. Instead he said with an oddly restrained beat in his voice, 'I wonder if you have any idea how beautiful you are, Cathy?'

Her lashes fluttered up and she stared at him for an age until he said, 'Tell me what you're thinking. '

She cleared her throat. 'If you must know, I'm asking myself why I can't stay angry with you, Tom. Why I'm doing this——'

'It's not such a desperate thing to do—for a husband and wife, ' he broke in, but rather gently.

She lifted her slim shoulders and spread her fingers. 'Tonight I'd rather be someone else, a fascinating stranger—I suppose that sounds ridiculous——' she paused and wondered what had made her say it, what had made her wish it '—but

I don't want to be made love to because I'm *here* and because I'm your wife, because you think it might placate me. I'd rather... no, ' she said beneath her breath, and half turned away.

'Tell me. Cat. ' He caught her wrist and swung her back.

'It's very difficult, ' she said with a frown. 'You want me because you think I have a beautiful body, and it's not that I don't want to be wanted, but... ' She stopped and bit her lip.

'You want to be courted again?'

She winced. 'That sounds awfully coy—no, I'd rather you wanted to talk to me and be mentally attuned, ' she whispered as his fingers tightened round her wrist, but her blue eyes were dark and curiously brave.

'This, ' he said after a long time and fingering her inner wrist as he sometimes did, 'is an odd conversation for a naked couple, however married, to be having, but, ' his lips twisted into a faint smile, 'I concede your point. Unfortunately I'm going to have to take another cold shower—just to be on the safe side. ' And he switched on the water and held the nozzle in a strategic position.

Cathy started to blush, then she began to laugh and received a spray of water which made her gasp and then laugh again at the sheer, tingling invigoration of it, the freedom of being alone like this beneath the stars and surrounded by dark water with the sheen of a rising moon silvering it, of being able to be so uninhibited—and something else: the sudden primitive sensual awareness of the wet lines and angles and strength of Tom's body and the paler, softer curves of her own. The white glint of

his teeth as he drenched them both from head to toe and the way the water ran down her breasts and dripped off her nipples which the chill had made full and sensitive.

In fact she was looking down, observing this phenomenon, when a faint hum in the darkness made her look up, and immediately forget it as she realised Tom was staring at her dripping breasts and unfurled nipples, and that a moment before he'd turned the shower off and laid it down.

Tom... ?' It was more a husky little sound.

He lifted his eyes to hers, but said nothing.

'I... ' But she could formulate no words, because not only her breasts but her whole body was suddenly aching with a desire to be touched, aching with the remembered, familiar feel of his hands and lips, aching for him. 'I feel so humiliated' she said in a sudden rush of words.

'Why?' His lips barely moved.

'Do you——' she stared at him with a painful enquiry in her eyes '—did you feel like this just now?'

'Yes.'

'I mean—as if you'd die of desire if I didn't... if I didn't... ' But the words stuck in her throat.

His smile was only a brief chiselled movement of his lips. 'It doesn't last—it's only a small death. '

She closed her eyes briefly. 'What can I say?'

'Nothing—welcome to the ranks, Cat, ' he said softly.

'Ranks?' Her blue eyes were bewildered.

'Of us mere, often muddled adults. '

'I don't understand... '

'You thought you didn't want to be wanted, with reason, but reason doesn't altogether govern these things. You——'

He stopped abruptly, and with a start, Cathy realised the hum she'd heard had become the loud throbbing noise of an outboard motor, and as they both turned their heads, a powerful spotlight was turned on from the approaching boat, and it bathed them unerringly in stark relief.

Tom swore, stepped between her and the light, picked her up by the waist and lifted her into the cabin, slamming the door behind them with his heel.

'Oh, God!' Cathy gasped as he released her and swiftly pulled all the blinds down.

He turned to her and grinned at her expression of utter horror, but it was an oddly taut grin. 'Exciting times we're having, aren't we? I'd say they're fishermen who caught an unexpected thrill, but it's probably just as well they came along. *We* could have caught a chill if we'd stayed out there much longer like this.' He knotted a towel around his waist and handed her one.

CHAPTER SIX

CATHY took it, but with a dazed look on her face.

'Use it, ' Tom said briefly. 'You're getting goose-bumps—here, I'll do it. '

'I can, ' she mumbled as with sudden impatience he put his hands on her wet, satiny buttocks and pulled her towards him.

'You look too stunned to do anything, Mrs West, ' he drawled, and proceeded to rub her dry vigorously until she was pink and glowing all over and starting to protest,

'Tom!'

But all he said was, 'That's better. Get your clothes on now and I'll fix us a drink—I think we've earned one, don't you?'

Cathy grimaced as she pulled on her blue French silk and lace panties. 'Something, anyway. '

A glint of amusement lit his eyes, but he made no comment as she stood and stared stubbornly at him, clad only in that frivolous silken triangle. But when he merely raised an eyebrow at her, she suddenly felt as if she was blushing all over and in a reflex gesture brought her hands up to cover her breasts, then reached for her blouse and shorts and scrambled into them. Tom still didn't comment as he turned away and produced a bottle of Scotch, although when he handed her her glass he did murmur, 'I thought the fright you got might have doused the flames. '

Their fingers touched as she took the glass from him, but a measure of decorum had returned to her, together with a measure of something rather challenging. 'It did, actually. But it's left me feeling——' she paused and studied her glass, then lifted her lashes '—oddly truculent. Is it a part of that "small death"?'

'Definitely,' he said with a twisted smile.

'Do you feel hostile too?'

Tom laughed briefly. He hadn't changed and his hair was still dripping on to his bare shoulders, but *he* didn't look cold, he looked instead rather tough and impervious and curiously detached as he leant back against the galley with his arms folded and his drink unregarded in his hand. 'I think I've had more experience of it,' he answered obliquely.

Cathy sat down and sipped her Scotch, tilting her chin reflectively as it slid down her throat. 'Well, I suppose it's taught me something, if nothing else,' she said ruefully.

He lifted a quizzical eyebrow at her. 'Tell me. '

She thought for a bit, then said slowly, 'Not to be superior about these things. ' She hesitated, stared at her drink, then lifted her eyes to his. 'What's for dinner?'

'Cathy——'

But she got up swiftly and touched her fingers to his lips. 'Don't,' she said quietly. 'I've got the feeling that nothing we can say now is going to resolve anything for either of us, so let's not spoil the rest of our gone-fishing trip. '

Tom got rid of his glass and hers and put his hands on her waist. 'I've offended you again, but in fact my motives are rather pure this time. I don't

want to be party to you compromising your principles. But—it wouldn't be difficult to rekindle the flames—perhaps that's all we need to say to each other. '

Cathy searched his eyes with her lips parted as his words sank in, and a growing feeling of being at a loss, suddenly, as if things had taken a new, bewildering tack, then, as he waited and watched but she couldn't read his expression, she sighed inwardly and resorted to flippancy. 'Perhaps, but seeing that you've walked me and swum me, not to mention frightening the life out of me—I think you have to feed me first, '

'I didn't do all those things to you at all, ' he protested with a grin.

'You brought me here. '

He stared down into her eyes. 'So I did. ' And he pulled her into his arms, which she didn't resist. 'Do you hate me even more now?' he said into her hair.

'No, ' she answered, thinking, no, how can I? But why do I feel I'm battling something I don't understand as well as the things I do?

They ate grilled chops and sausages, chips and a salad and opened another bottle of wine, but they didn't rekindle the flames. Instead they talked desultorily and listened to some music, then, when the fishing boat departed noisily, sat on the after-deck finishing the wine and watching the stars until they were both yawning and Tom suggested they get some sleep.

But they woke at dawn to a lilac-pink sky that laid the same living shimmer on the water, and it

was so beautiful, it made Cathy's throat ache and made her feel inexplicably sad. She turned to Tom as if for reassurance which he must have read in her eyes, because he took her into his arms and held her for a long time.

'Why so sad?' he asked eventually, setting her a little away at last.

'I don't know. ' She leant back against him, not wanting to be parted, and laid her cheek on his bare shoulder while she considered, realising that, while she might not be possessed of any great blinding truth, it was as if the forerunner of it was there, and the premonition that it was going to be a lonely, unhappy truth.

Tom, ' she said on a sudden breath, and went on in a rush, 'if you gave me a baby, whatever happened to us, it would be the most precious thing I had.'

He stared down at her, then said steadily, 'What is going to happen to us, Cathy?'

'I don't *know*, ' she answered anguishedly,

'Then that's the last thing you need. ' He took her face in his hands and his eyes searched hers. 'Have you come to some momentous decision?'

'You keep asking me that. ' She drew a deep breath. 'No. But I am changing, Tom. '

'Do you think I don't know that?' His voice was clipped. 'Although don't *you* think wanting a baby might be your way of trying to halt the process?'

'I would have thought, if you married me to have the kind of wife who was completely committed to you, that could be the best way of showing it, Tom, ' she said huskily.

He lifted his head and stared over her shoulder and she was struck by his suddenly graven expression apart from a nerve beating in his jaw. She felt incredibly cut off from him suddenly and resentful, and she drew a sharp little breath that caused him to look back at her and narrow his eyes.

'What words of wisdom are you about to offer me now, Cat?' he said softly, curiously.

'It doesn't need to be put into words,' she countered, equally softly. And indeed, what she did, didn't.

'Cat, ' he began on a suddenly indrawn breath himself, 'you don't... '

'Hush, ' she said without looking up. There are some things you can dictate to me about, some you can't. This is one of them. '

'I'm afraid, ' he said with an effort, staring down at her disordered hair, 'you're right about that. ' And with a sudden groan he swept her up into his arms and took her back to his bunk.

'I've called this conference, ' Tom said on the dot of nine, 'because I've finally worked out what I'm doing wrong. As a matter of fact, although she asked me not to tell you, it was Cathy who was able to pinpoint it. '

Cathy bit her lip as everyone looked at her with varying degrees of surprise, except Charlie Westfield, who was looking rather sphinx-like.

'Bronwen, ' Tom continued with a direct glance, 'my apologies. According to Cathy, I've been trying to turn your role of Portia into that of a mindless bimbo, which, ' he switched his gaze to Pete who was suddenly intensely alert, 'was never meant and

doesn't work. And is, no doubt, the reason for your difficulties with it, Bronwen. Apart from your difficulties with Charlie, which have to be resolved now,' he added quietly but with an unmistakable air of authority, and sat back.

'Of course!' It was, not unnaturally or unexpectedly, Pete who led the debate that ensued, and quite a heated debate it became, as Charlie forgot the perils and traumas of having the untouchable love of his life sitting a few feet away from him, and Bronwen unfroze—what had she been expecting? Cathy wondered. The other truth?

But finally they all agreed, and it was with a little smile twisting her lips that Bronwen said to her, 'Thank God for you, Cathy. I suppose I *should* be able to play the part of a mindless bimbo, but...' She gestured ruefully and turned to Charlie Westfield. 'Peace, Charles—and my apologies.'

Charlie looked several things. Taken aback, unconvinced, but then under the weight of Tom's regard and Duncan's and Pete's he said, less grudgingly than he felt, 'Accepted and returned, Bron!'

Bronwen winced but barely perceptibly, then grinned and said to Tom, 'I suppose we'll have to reshoot a bit of it—I might need a day or so to rethink it.'

'We'll do it together. In the meantime, Chloe and Robert have one last scene to be shot, so that's what we'll do today. We'll run through it now and hopefully shoot it this afternoon. Ready, Cathy?'

She lifted her eyes to his but couldn't read them, could see no reflection of that urgent lovemaking of a few hours ago, when it had been she who had succoured and comforted with a new kind of

strength. No reflection of the surprising way she'd left him when he'd been sated at last, and without thinking about it had absently checked that no one was about and showered her slim, spent body on the afterdeck in the early morning sunlight—then turned to find him watching her from the doorway. They'd said nothing at first, just stared at each other, then she had handed him the shower.

Thank you—but not only for this. '

Cathy had only smiled. And they hadn't said much on the way home either, as if they'd each been thinking their own thoughts...

'Cathy?'

She came back to the present. 'Yes, I'm ready. '

'Cut—that's fine, ' Tom said in the early evening. 'In fact you were inspired, Charlie, old pal, ' he added in a faintly dry tone. If he noticed the hostile glance Charlie cast him before he could stop himself, he gave no sign of it but went on, 'It's also worked *in* well—now we've cleared the decks of Chloe, so to speak, and no disrespect intended towards you, my dear, ' he nodded at Cathy, 'we can really come to grips with Robert and Portia's tortured relationship. Bronwen, if you'd care to come back to the villa we can begin hammering it all out tonight. You better come too, Pete. Cathy, why don't you take a night off? I'm sure Charlie wouldn't mind shouting you dinner. '

If Cathy's lips parted in astonishment, Charlie Westfield did worse. He was carrying a bag which he dropped on his foot, causing him to swear but still look incredulous, and to say to his everlasting shame, 'But shouldn't I be in on this conference?'

'It's not you we're having the trouble with, ' Tom replied briefly, and turned away.

'Why the hell did I say that?' Charlie muttered, then bounded towards Cathy. 'Where will we go? Surfers? There are some great nightclubs and discos—but it's up to you!'

Cathy removed her gaze from Tom's back and in doing so, discovered Duncan was watching him curiously too, and turned her attention to Charlie. 'No discos, thanks, Charlie, ' she said firmly. 'I'm tired, but, ' as his face fell, 'I'm also hungry. What about Beers at Sanctuary Cove?'

'Done! Er... what do you think's got into your old man?'

Cathy had to smile and say quite truthfully, 'I don't know. '

Tom came to find her in her dressing-room before they left, and although she didn't phrase it quite as Charlie had, she did look at him with a question in her eyes.

He closed the door and leant back against it.

'Do you mind?'

'I don't know. ' She pulled off the robe she wore as she took off her make-up and reached for her dress. 'I do find it hard to understand. '

He didn't help her to dress this time. 'It's all grist to the mill, ' he said thoughtfully. 'If you have to fight him off, mention my name. '

Cathy's fingers stilled on the buckle of her belt. 'You don't believe... ?' Her eyes were wide.

'No. No, I don't. ' He moved his shoulders rather restlessly. 'But there's no reason why you two shouldn't be friends. '

Cathy heard herself laugh. 'So it's a PR job? While you're sorting out Bronwen, I'll be sorting out Charlie. Tom——'

But he didn't let her finish. He said, 'If anyone can let him down nicely, you can. Cat. Under normal circumstances, wouldn't you want to try?' But there seemed to be a question mark in *his* eyes.

She opened her mouth, closed it, then said, 'Well—yes, perhaps. You——' she paused and stared into his eyes '—you're obviously not afraid I'll no longer be as pure as the driven snow after a date with him?'

'No' He said it very quietly.

'Because of this morning?'

'No;

Tom—I don't understand. Something's going on,' she said slowly. 'Tell me. '

He touched her at last, just the point of her chin with one finger. 'Only the inevitable,' he said barely audibly.

'What does that mean?'

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. 'You said this morning you're changing—I think that means, among other things, that you can handle Charlie Westfield on your own and without me having to keep you under double wraps any more, that's all. ' He dropped his hand. And as if on cue, Charlie knocked on the door.

Tom opened it with a flourish. 'Well, pal—she's all yours!'

'You could have knocked me down with a feather, ' Charlie said as they cut into juicy steaks. It wasn't the first time he'd said it.

'Charlie, ' Cathy said firmly, 'don't get this wrong. We can be friends, but that's all. '

'Is that what he told you?'

'No—it's what I believe. ' And that's not a lie either, she told herself firmly.

'I'm surprised he allows you to make those kind of decisions. '

Cathy put her knife and fork down and picked her napkin up off her lap. 'If——'

'Sorry. Sorry!' Charlie said hastily, and replaced her napkin and topped up her wine glass. 'The guy gets to me, that's all. '

Cathy subsided. 'You have to admit he's a good director. '

Charlie waved a hand. 'Sure. He can also be as cold as the proverbial maggot. '

She smiled. 'That's called professionalism—you know, Charlie, I think it would be better if we left Tom out of our conversation. '

'Would that we could leave him out of our lives, ' he murmured with a grimace, 'but I guess you're right. Tell me your life story—just leave out the bits that include Tom West. '

'I've got a better idea—tell me yours. I used to think you were gorgeous when I was about twelve. '

Charlie brightened perceptibly and needed no further invitation—indeed, a couple of hours later he looked ruefully at his watch and swore mildly. 'You should have stopped me!'

'Why?' Cathy asked with a grin. 'I enjoyed it. '

'You know, ' he said seriously, 'you're the most gorgeous thing and you're... different. How come you're into older men?' he asked with genuine

puzzlement. 'I mean, I can understand the old sugar daddy bit, but that doesn't *fit you*. '

Tom's not old, 'Cathy protested.

'Did he sweep you off your feet, then, dazzle you and all the rest of it? How come I don't?'

It should have been laughable, but it wasn't. In fact Cathy found herself staring at him with something close to resigned affection, because it had become increasingly obvious during the evening that he was dazzling just about every other woman and girl in the restaurant. Their waitress was falling over herself to serve them, two girls had come up and asked for his autograph and several more mature, definitely sophisticated ladies had taken a very roundabout detour to the powder-room, via their table. So, how to answer him? she wondered.

'I happen to love Tom, ' she said simply at last.

'So does Bronwen... Does he love both of you?'

'That's none of your business, ' she said evenly. 'And this time I am going. '

'So there's a serpent in Paradise—I'm coming, don't make a scene, Cathy, ' he said softly. 'Sure as hell it'll find its way into some gossip column. '

She'd started to rise, but she sank back and waited while he called for the bill and paid it by credit card. They walked out together, and it was impossible to be unaware of every head turned their way.

He tried to take her hand as soon as they were out of sight, but she withdrew it and they walked along the waterfront in silence until she said with genuine weariness, 'Take me home, Charlie, otherwise I'll walk. '

He had parked the car they had given him close by and he said nothing as he opened the door for her, and nothing as he drove through the village and through the security gates and around the curve of harbourside villas. But as he pulled up outside 'home', he said quietly, 'I'm sorry if I've offended you. My big problem is that I happen to be in love with you myself. And no amount of *friendliness* is going to change that. But I'm not just a big mouth and a big ego—if ever you want someone to talk to about it, you could trust me. '

Cathy laid her head back on the seat. 'How could I trust you?' she said a little desolately. 'You'd never understand. '

'I might—I'm *not just* a pretty face either, you know, ' he said gravely.

An involuntary smile curved her lips and she sat up. 'Actually, I like you a lot, Charlie, but I suspect I'm a lost cause—there is one thing you could do for me, though. You could stop letting Tom get to you. ' Charlie swore, but she patted his hand. 'Try it, I promise you *Half an Hour Earlier in Adelaide* will benefit. '

'Want to bet?' he said bitterly. 'You know I've got the feeling that damn silly catch-phrase is going to haunt me for life! For one thing, we never even get to blasted Adelaide——'

'Adelaide is a very nice city, but that's the crux of the plot, isn't it? The time difference——'

But he broke in broodingly, 'Adelaide and Chloe—both goddamn mirages!'

'Ah, but there's always Portia to come back to, and one thing you are, Charlie, is a good actor. '

He looked at her incredulously. 'You're not trying to flatter me on your husband's behalf, by any chance, are you, Cathy West?'

'Not at all, ' Cathy said seriously.

'Or flatter me into dazzling Bronwen Bishop?'

'I don't know if that's possible, but I'm sure you could dazzle Bronwen's Portia. '

'Hell, I've been trying to do that for weeks, ' Charlie said feelingly, and their glances caught and suddenly they were both laughing. 'OK, ' he said finally. 'All messages received and digested, but I must warn you I don't believe in lost causes—no, ' he held up a hand as her expression changed, 'I'm not going to be causing any furores, and if it's the last thing I do I'll wring some kind of a spark out of Ms Bishop, but that's not going to change the way I feel about you—and don't pat me on the head and fob me off with some platitude, dear Cathy, ' he warned. 'It won't work. '

Cathy stared at him and felt a frisson of something touch her nerve-ends—the knowledge perhaps that Charlie Westfield was indeed not just a pretty face. 'I'm sorry, ' she said quietly. 'I'd better go in. '

He let her go.

Bronwen and Pete were still there and the lounge was littered with papers, plates and coffee-cups. They all looked up, but it was Tom who said with a glance at his watch, 'You're home early, Cinderella.'

'Yes—how's it going?'

'Well, I think, cautiously, that it's no longer going to be like getting blood out of a stone, ' said Bronwen with a yawn. She wore a one-piece sleeve-

less cotton boiler suit in a vivid emerald-green that suited her colouring and suited her tall, lithe figure, and despite the yawn, the vivacity that had been so tempered was back. Was it to do with having Tom more or less to herself? Cathy wondered.

She said, 'I 'm glad.' And looked around with a rueful little smile.

Bronwen jumped up. 'You sit down,' she ordered. 'It was supposed to be your night off—I'll clear up the mess. Pete will give me a hand,' she added.

Pete looked surprised, but got up and began gathering plates. Cathy hesitated, then sat down opposite Tom, who had spread his arms along the back of the couch.

'Well?' he queried a little quizzically.

'Well what?' she returned.

'Did you have to mention my name?'

Cathy shrugged. 'Not in that context, no.'

'Then my confidence in you wasn't misplaced.'

She didn't answer, but couldn't prevent the swift, immediately veiled glance of resentment she sent him.

'Cathy?'

But Bronwen intervened unwittingly. 'I've poured us all a nightcap—I think we deserve it, and you deserve one too, Cathy.' She handed Cathy a glass of wine. 'How did you get on with our Chuck? Did he make a pass at you? I think we've all got the message fairly loud and clear that he's rather smitten.'

Cathy's reaction to this surprised her. For a moment she felt like flinging her wine over Bronwen, but she tightened her fingers on the stem

of the glass. 'No. He was very good company, but I suppose we're more of an age, ' she said lightly.

Bronwen laughed. 'That's true. He sometimes makes me feel a million years old, and so do you... ' She stopped and bit her lip, then turned away and drank some wine.

Cathy stared at her back, then looked at Tom, but he was watching Bronwen with a curious intensity that made her shiver inwardly—and suddenly decide she'd had about as much as she could stand for one day. She put her untasted glass down and stood up. 'I really can't keep my eyes open. Do you realise we've been up since the crack of dawn, Tom?'

He turned his head to her. 'So we have. You go up, I'll supervise the clearing up. '

She called goodnight to Pete and Bronwen, to which Pete, as usual, replied unconcernedly but Bronwen with the definite sound of strain in her voice.

And Cathy closed the bedroom door and leant back against it, feeling inexpressibly drained and claimed by the sense of sadness with which she had started the day. But there was more—for the first time she had a clear picture in her mind of Bronwen and Tom, a clear sense of the conflict between them. It was as if the mists had parted and the real Bronwen had stepped forward—not the shadowy version who had done the unthinkable and refused to marry Tom, and been so hard to equate with the living, breathing one, the one she had even come to like—until tonight when she'd wanted to throw her wine over her...

She straightened and walked over to the window, saying to herself, 'And *not* only because of what she said but because, however much they deny it, there's still a current between them, an electric current...'

The door opened, and at the same time car doors closed downstairs and a motor revved up.

Cathy turned from the window as Tom switched on the light and came to a decision. Tom, I'd like to go home for a while. '

He stopped, his hand still on the light switch, and his eyes narrowed. 'Why?'

She lifted her hands. 'You don't need me. Chloe's part is finished, and if there's anything you need to reshoot I can come back. '

He dropped his hand, walked a few paces towards her, then stopped in the middle of the room. 'That doesn't answer my question. '

Cathy steeled herself despite her weariness, but she noticed that he was tired too, that there were lines of strain beside his mouth and that his big, loose-limbed frame was oddly tense and that he flexed his shoulders as if they were cramped. Once again a longing to get through to him flooded her, and she wanted to go to him and run her fingers through his dark-fair hair and massage those broad shoulders... well, why not? she thought. If that's a way we do communicate, why shouldn't I use it?

'Why don't you get ready for bed?' she asked.

'What kind of an answer is *that*?' he said curtly.

'I have plans for you. In bed. '

'Cathy, ' he said with sudden soft menace, 'have you turned to a life of seduction? Wasn't this morning enough for you?'

A flush burnt her cheeks, but she said coldly and bitterly, 'I did what I did this morning for reasons that had nothing to do with seduction for the sake of it—that's your speciality,' she added slowly, conscious of a desire to retaliate to the awful hurt of his words. And she turned away to hide the tears on her lashes, and the stark knowledge of rejection in her heart.

But he walked over to her and deliberately turned her back and kept his hands on her shoulders. 'Cat——'

'No, Tom, I'm going home and that's it,' she whispered. 'I've tried, I've tried to be professional——'

'You have,' he said harshly, and she thought he looked pale beneath his tan, but she couldn't care. 'You've been the most professional of all of us.'

'Well, I just can't go on!' Her voice rose. 'And I can't help feeling jealous of Bronwen when I see the way you look at her, and desperate.'

'Cathy, that's——'

'No, Tom, you're treating me like a fool,' she insisted, and the tears spilled over. 'Do you know what happened to me tonight? When she made her patronising remarks about Charlie? I wanted to throw my wine over her because not only did she patronise Charlie, she patronised me in the same breath—and so have you tonight. Why? I know she regrets losing you. Are you feeling the same way? Is that why you've done such an about-face and now seem to be almost pushing me at Charlie Westfield—who incidentally is a much nicer person than either of you, stuck up in your lofty towers, give him credit for... *Tom!*' Her voice changed as

his mouth tightened to a white line and his fingers dug mercilessly into her shoulders, came out with a little gasp, yet the stubborn angry defiance in her eyes, despite the tears, didn't change.

But he only stared down at her with a grim, bitter look in his eyes, his fingers still digging into her shoulders. Then he said in a voice she barely recognised, 'If you feel we're patronising Charlie and that he's a viable alternative, why don't you take it?'

And he released her abruptly so that she staggered and strode out of the room without a backward glance.

Cathy stood like a stricken statue, and a few minutes later doors opened and closed again and another motor sprang to life, but one she recognised only too well. And he drove his car away at speed.

He didn't return that night; she didn't wait around for long the next morning. And by the next evening she was stoking a fire in the lounge grate of their Mount Macedon home but wishing, really wishing she'd fled somewhere else.

She couldn't eat any dinner, which was just as well because there was nothing much to eat, but when she got the fire going—it was a wet, miserable night—she poured herself a fair portion of Tom's expensive liqueur brandy into a balloon glass and sat sipping it, letting the fire warm her body but discovering that neither the fire nor the brandy were warming her soul.

As she lay curled up and with her head back in the comfortable wing-backed chair, watching the

firelight on the ceiling, she wondered what had possessed her. Not that anything she'd said hadn't exactly echoed the turbulent confusion of her thoughts, but to let it all spill out like that,... And on top of, only that morning, begging him for a child.

The typical outpourings of a jealous wife, she mused, but then I am, and it's no use trying to pretend otherwise. I want him to love me as I love him, it's that simple, and is it so much to ask? But now he doesn't even want to make love to me.

'Why?' Her lips framed the question—and the phone rang.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS Tom.

'Cathy?' he said down the line before she got the chance to say anything.

'Yes—hello, Tom. '

There was a short silence, then, 'You had me worried. '

'Did I?' she said quietly when she very much wanted to say—Good! 'I told you I wanted to come home. '

'I don't think it's much good for you to be there on your own. '

'I'm quite used to it, Tom. ' There was an edge to her voice, she realised, but she couldn't help it. Nor could she help adding, 'Where were you?'

'At the studio, Cat, ' he said levelly. 'On my own—look, what I said——'

She cut in, Tom, you asked me why I wanted to come home. Well, I want some time on *my* own to sort out how I really feel. I'm not going to do anything rash, and if you really are worried I'll come back—next week, but right now I'm tired and cold and I think it's best if we just say g-good-night. ' Her voice shook a little, but she put the phone down resolutely.

She got three days on her own, then Duncan arrived on the doorstep.

'Hello, Cathy, ' he said, and once again she noticed his warm smile and wise eyes.

'Come in, ' she said ruefully—it was raining again. 'I suppose you're here to check up on me. '

He didn't bother to dissemble.

'It's quite funny really, ' she said with an odd little laugh. 'In the old days Tom never worried. I mean, I'm quite safe so he didn't have to *worry*, but... ' She shrugged.

'He also used to get home as often as he could, Cathy. '

She stared at him, then turned away. 'Come into the kitchen, I've just made some tea. '

She poured two cups and cut him a slice of fruit cake, wondering how to get over the awkwardness of the moment, but Duncan began to chat easily and to fill her in on how things were going, even to make her laugh a little with anecdotes of Charlie and Bronwen's efforts to come to grips with Portia and Robert. But she sobered suddenly and had to turn away to hide the tears that welled up.

'Cathy, ' he said gently.

'I suppose you know I was the last to know?' she heard herself saying fiercely as she dashed at her eyes.

'About Tom and Bronwen?'

'Who else?' Her voice was bitter.

'And you don't believe it's over?'

She turned back at last and said even more bitterly, 'Do you? Do you know why he married me, Duncan? Not because he'd fallen in love with me but because he knew he was never going to get over her, but he couldn't ever *forgive* her, so it didn't much matter who he married, '

'Cathy——'

But she went on as if he hadn't spoken, 'And there was I, in love with him and not able to hide it, and he felt guilty, and then he thought I was young enough and... whatever you have to be to put up with a one-sided marriage. '

Duncan watched her sombrely as she pulled out her handkerchief and blew her nose. 'You know him well, ' she went on huskily. 'So you know I'm right.'

'Tom's not an easy man to know well, Cathy. '

'You're right about that—and of course he's a friend of yours, so I shouldn't... I don't know why I'm telling you this, it must be very embarrassing for you. Sorry, ' she said with a weary sigh. 'Another cup of tea?'

'Cathy, it's neither embarrassing nor is there any reason why you shouldn't have someone to confide in. I don't think you have anyone else, ' he said with a keen glance.

She laughed hollowly. 'No. Except Charlie Westfield. He's dying for me to confide in him, but how could I? That would be worse than confiding in you. '

She reached for the teapot, but he put a hand over hers. 'In fact I'm a better person to confide in than you could imagine, Cathy. You see, I've been in love with Bronwen myself for, ' he gestured wryly, 'a long time. Before she and Tom even met. '

Cathy's mouth fell open and her eyes widened, and a million little things tumbled into place—the way Duncan could put Bronwen at her ease, the way he had so unobtrusively but nevertheless been

like a buffer between Tom and Bronwen, the time they'd spent together...

'Doesn't she know?' she whispered.

'Oh, she knows. Not that I've mentioned it for years, but, ' he smiled faintly, 'I'm a patient man. '

Cathy blinked several times, and it was he who poured her some more tea. 'Thanks, ' she said vaguely. 'This... ' And she stared at him, still dazed, until she said eventually, 'So you know what it's like. '

'Yes. But there are some differences. Tom——'

'Has a place in his heart for me, ' Cathy interrupted. 'So he told me. Bronwen probably feels the same way about you, and you're right, there is a difference—you're not *married* to her, so it *can't* be as difficult. '

'In some ways, no, ' he agreed, 'but I happen to believe it is over between them; they just haven't realised it yet. '

'Duncan, ' Cathy said slowly, 'I can't help believing otherwise, and I'll tell you why. So long as I was—the way I used to be—things were fine between us. Tom could come and go and live his life exactly as he wanted, and I was happy enough with the scraps of it. But since I've grown and matured and come to understand that it's not enough for me any more he——' her voice broke '—is no longer happy, and, leaving Bronwen right out of it, that means to me that he doesn't love me for myself, the real person I am... But of course, we can't leave Bronwen out of it, can we?'

'Cathy... ' Now his eyes were narrowed and suddenly very acute.

'Yes, ' she said huskily, 'perhaps you do understand.'

'No—I mean, there could be a different interpretation for the way he is. There are enough similarities between you and Bronwen to make him rather wary.'

Cathy blinked. 'I can't think of one.'

'Can't you? I can. You're about to have a career on the screen lying at your feet.'

'Oh, that,' she said wearily. 'I'll believe it when I see it.'

Duncan pushed his cup away and stared at it thoughtfully for a time, then he sighed and said with a grimace, 'When are you coming back—you are planning to, aren't you?'

'I told Tom next week. Why?'

'Why don't you come back with me? There's a bit of reshooting to be done and—well, to be honest, everyone's a bit on edge.'

Cathy grimaced. 'If you think I can change anything——'

'But you can,' Duncan said quietly, and smiled at her. 'I don't know how you do it, but you do.'

'Duncan,' she said painfully, 'can't you understand it's a bit like walking back into the lions' den for me? Apart from Bronwen,' not to mention Tom, she thought, 'there's Charlie. If it weren't for me we wouldn't be having any problems.'

'We would,' he said.

'Well——'

'But I think they all feel guilty now, you see.' He stared at her steadily.

For a moment Cathy felt like telling him they could all go to hell, and it must have shown in her

face, for suddenly his eyes began to twinkle ruefully and he said, 'I know how you feel.'

It was her turn to look rueful yet doubtful.

'But I do' he insisted. 'In fact, you and I are a lot alike,' he added. 'The quiet, steady types—which we often cop a lot of flak for. But it's amazing how much they need us, loath as they would be to admit it.'

'And true professionals to the bitter end?' Cathy said drily.

That too.'

Cathy put her bag down and looked around.

Duncan had delivered her to the villa, but although the car was in the garage Tom was nowhere about.

Nothing had changed except that the place had an untidy, rather desolate air even with the last of the late afternoon sunlight glinting on the waters of Sanctuary Cove and reflecting in the windows. It wasn't only an air either, she discovered as she wandered around. There were dirty dishes in the sink despite the latest-in-technology dishwasher, there was a huge four-day pile of every possible newspaper available slipping and sagging off a chair, the bed was unmade upstairs and the bathroom floor was a sea of towels and clothes.

She began to pick them up almost mechanically, but stopped with a shirt in her hands—a shirt she had washed and ironed many a time, but it conjured up a vision of Tom in her mind—and not only there, to all her senses, so that she closed her eyes and could almost believe he was there with her. Could feel the texture of his dark-fair hair and the

rough, smooth texture of his skin, see the little lines beside his mouth and the greeny glint in his eyes, remember exactly where she came up to, his shoulder, and how he always had to bend his head to kiss her, how his hands felt around her waist and how he could lift her with them, how he used to tease her and make love to her in the same mood yet make her feel like dying for him...

Her lashes fluttered up and she brought the shirt up to bury her face in it as a shudder went through her body, but two things happened. There was a sound in the doorway behind her—and she dropped the shirt as if it was burning her fingers before swinging round.

They stared at each other and for a moment it was as if they were drowning in each other's gazes. Cathy, certainly, was reliving in the flesh all she had been visualising in her mind: his tall, loose-limbed body and wayward hair, those clever eyes which were often so hard to read—and as the thought slipped across her mind, they did just that—became unreadable and no longer intent on her hair that was tied back today but still curly and vitally fair, her eyes, her jeans and white silk blouse—even her white Reeboks.

And it was Tom who broke the silence—in an uncharacteristically banal way, for him. 'You're back/

'Yes... You're in a bit of a mess.'

His mouth twisted. 'I was going to have a big clean-up next week. I didn't expect Duncan *to* succeed.'

'Oh.' Cathy looked around awkwardly. 'I'll do it. I thought you might be at the studio.'

'No. I walked down to get the paper.' He had it under his arm, but from the rather surprised look he gave it as he pulled it out it was almost as if he'd forgotten it was there.

'Another one,' Cathy said with a faint smile. 'I don't know how we're going to get rid of them all. Well...' She turned away and began to pick up towels and clothes.

But he said, 'How's home?'

'Fine, although William was away——' she hesitated '—gone fishing with his grandfather.'

'Lucky William! Cat, leave that. You're making me feel guilty.'

'But it has to be done!'

'Later, then,' he said with an amused glint in his hazel eyes. 'I'll give you a hand. Why don't you come for a walk with me?'

She turned to face him. 'You've just been for a walk.'

'There's a band playing in the bandstand, it's a beautiful afternoon and we could have a sundowner'

How does one do it? Cathy asked herself much later, in the darkened bedroom, as Tom rolled off her body but immediately reclaimed her in his arms. How can you partake in lovemaking when you're so much at odds with your partner—yourself, even, and you've made certain resolutions—without hating it or being stiff and tense? How *was* I? Not stiff, not tense, although not terribly involved but acquiescent...yes, that's the word, acquiescent. So how do you explain that? Do you tell yourself he is still your husband, you do have a duty and he

did seem to want you rather urgently? What's more, now you're lying comfortably in his arms, listening to him starting to fall asleep, certainly not aching to tell him any home truths or tell him anything, for that matter. It's as if—all afternoon and evening together it's been the same, no real communication but still *together*. Out of habit? she reflected. Is that how marriages jog along? Out of habit with neither one really knowing what the other is thinking. He hasn't asked me anything——

'Cat?'

Surprise caused her to move. 'Yes?'

'All right?'

'Mmm... I thought you were asleep.'

'No. Do you want to talk?' He stroked her bare arm.

She was silent.

Tell me why you came back and how long you plan to stay, for example,' he said very quietly, and moved his hand down the curve of her hip beneath the sheet.

She slipped her hand beneath her cheek and stared into the darkness, then said with a tremor of desolation, 'I don't think I know anything any more—I thought I did, I thought I had it all worked out. One of the things I'd worked out was that if you still wanted me it would have to be on *my* terms or not at all, but then—well—oh, I don't know,' she sighed.

'What,' he paused, 'are your terms?'

'But that's the thing—they don't seem to make sense now. I mean, we can't change each other, can we? I can't *help* changing and you can't help it if you hate it.'

'I don't *hate* it!'

'Well, don't want me to. And there are the times you don't want me at all,' she said barely audibly.

'I thought I'd explained—about that.'

'You also accused me of turning to a life of seduction when in fact all I wanted to do was rub your back and...' She stopped as she felt his jolt of laughter and bit her lip. 'I know it sounds——'

'If I laughed it was only because that makes me feel rather geriatric,' said Tom before she could go on.

'Well' Cathy struggled to be honest, 'I didn't only want to rub your back, I wanted us to be able to talk to each other, and I thought it might be easier if we were physically close—you yourself said it might be all we needed to say to each other.'

'And you didn't see it quite like that—on one memorable occasion, Cathy.'

She sighed. 'No—and I was more right than I knew,' she added.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, when I seduced you the next morning——'

'Very successfully!'

'Perhaps,' she said drily, 'but I don't think you see that as my role at all, although the few times it's happened it's been because you've moved me to it, so how can it be wrong?'

'The few times it's happened I've moved you to anger or desperation—oh, hell,' he said wearily.

'Whatever,' she said. 'But does it matter when two people love...?' She broke off and flinched.

The silence stretched.

'In fact, you often seduce me without even trying,' Tom said at last.

'I think Cathy Kerris did,' Cathy said forlornly. 'I don't know about Cathy West.'

He started to say something, but didn't finish because the phone beside the bed rang stridently, causing them both to jump.

Tom reached for it and Cathy sat up, pushing back her hair and pulling the sheet up round her breasts, and listened to the one-sided conversation which consisted of Tom saying tersely that no, he couldn't discuss it now, it would have to be the morning, and replacing the receiver ungently.

'Who?' whispered Cathy, feeling her nerves still jangling.

'Bronwen.' His voice was clipped and curt.

'What's wrong? Is she...?' Is she all right? she'd been going to say, but something made her twist round to stare at the bedside clock which showed eleven-thirty—not that late for Tom, but... And change it to, 'Is she in the habit of ringing you up through the night?'

'No, Cathy, she's not,' he said grimly but getting up and reaching for a pair of jeans.

Then why?

'She's nervous about tomorrow. We're shooting the big finale when Robert comes back and first of all she kicks him out and then she relents. I thought I had her all teed up for it—heaven alone knows why I allowed myself to be so optimistic!'

Cathy lay back. 'Where are you going?'

'To make myself a nightcap. Would you like one? I might do some work on the script too; I doubt if I can sleep now.'

'No, thanks,' Cathy said slowly, but she felt a tide of anger rise up in her as he strode out of the bedroom. Yet who to blame? she wondered, as she clenched her teeth. Bronwen, or the fact that once Tom had his mind on work, *everything* else ran a poor second?

She didn't wake when he came back to bed, and she also slept in as late as he did, so they had to rush to get to the studio by nine—she hadn't expected to be needed, but he told her he wanted her there. Which became the subject of an ongoing conversation in the car.

'Are you reshooting today as well?' Cathy asked.

'No.'

'Then why...?'

'You might just calm 'em all down,' Tom said briefly.

Cathy shook her head. 'I don't know why everyone thinks I have this ability——'

'Everyone?' He shot the question at her without turning his head and negotiated a roundabout with a flick of the gear lever.

'Not everyone, but Duncan virtually black-mailed me into coming back, because he said the same. But——'

'It's nothing very mysterious. You're supposed to be the novice, that's all, yet you've often shown them both up, so they might be on their mettle.'

Cathy made a distracted little sound. 'But it was such a small part!'

'Quality can be as hard to achieve in small doses as in large. And Cathy,' he turned his head at last so their eyes met, 'I need to get this movie over and

done with. The longer we drag it out, the less chance we have of getting it how I want it—it'll just sink into a mire of bloody temperament and emotion. And I might sink with it.'

Cathy opened her mouth, but closed it, and her eyes widened as she read the almost unbearable tension in his.

It was plain no one knew she was back, and she wondered why Duncan had chosen not to enlighten anyone.

Bronwen virtually did a double-take as she walked in with Tom, then she looked guilty, but Charlie was quite exuberantly delighted.

'Doggone! as they say back home,' he drawled with a grin almost splitting his face. 'You've just made my day, li'l lady!' He threw his arms around her and picked her up and twirled her through the air, while Tom looked on expressionlessly. 'Ah do apologise, pardner,' he added to Tom as he set Cathy back on her feet with a flourish and said to her less audibly, 'Your old man has his "unhand my wife" expression on, therefore I shall desist.'

But Tom heard, although he said pleasantly enough, 'I would if I were you, Charlie, because we're about to have a brief conference and then we're going to shoot the finale, come hell or high water, and we're going to get it right.'

Bronwen groaned, they all did, but she also said normally, 'It's good to have you back, Cathy. It didn't feel quite right without you.'

'That's what I told her,' murmured Duncan. 'Well, kids,' he added with a twinkle, 'I 'm here in

my usual position of referee if the going gets tough—let's get to it!

But as everyone turned away, Cathy noticed how his eyes lingered on Bronwen and how she half turned back towards him, then squared her shoulders and followed Tom.

But despite the conference and despite a determined start by all concerned, things didn't go well, and it was late afternoon when Tom said abruptly, 'Bronwen, I know you're trying as hard as you know how, but you're still lacking conviction—in fact, you're trying too hard. You're not living the part.'

Bronwen swore. 'Then I can't do it, Tom,' she said tightly, and an unnatural hush fell on the set.

Tom got up from his director's chair and walked slowly towards her. He stopped about two feet from her, staring at her. 'Why can't you do it?' he said softly but with a sort of insolence that caused Cathy's eyes to widen. 'Don't you know what it's like to love and hate a man? To hate and fight the awful dependence of love, the ties you resent so much? But don't *you*, of all people, know now that you can't have one without the other—haven't you... lived through losing out, and not just to a will-o'-the-wisp like Chloe?'

Bronwen returned his gaze, her dark eyes glittering unnaturally and her face pale beneath the paint. 'You bastard!' she whispered.

'Perhaps,' he conceded with an ironic little shrug, 'but why lose out altogether? Acting was supposed to be your *life*, so why not use the experience, why not give us a glimpse of the awful turmoil Portia

is going through even if her reasons are somewhat different from ... your experience; why not *show* us the pain and loneliness she's so afraid of—if you know it? And then the turning point, when she decides that if you can't have everything, you make the best of what you've got, will have some meaning.'

As his words died away you could have heard a pin drop. Cathy didn't realise it, but she too had gone pale at the sheer cruelty of what he was doing, the ultimate revenge he was taking, let alone *her* implicit involvement in it all, and she couldn't see how Bronwen could bear it.

But Bronwen came to life after what seemed like an eternity. She visibly unclenched her jaw and said, although her eyes were incredibly bitter, 'Why not? Are you ready?'

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS midnight when they got home and Cathy was white with tiredness and tension, not sure why she hadn't insisted on leaving earlier—but then no one had been able to tear themselves away—and not sure what name to put to her latest mental turmoil.

Because, among other things, the fact that Bronwen had finally produced a stunning performance appeared to have elated only Pete and Jason. Bronwen herself had retired immediately to her dressing-room with a set, haggard expression when Tom had finally called 'Cut!' and they'd not exchanged a word. Duncan had followed her, Tom had gone straight into a conference with Jason, and even Charlie had looked tired, moody and subdued and had taken himself off with little to say.

The drive home had been silent, and the first words Tom said as he closed the front door behind them were, 'Bed, I think. I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted—thank heavens it's all over bar the shouting.'

'Bar the shouting?' Cathy stared at him, her eyes wide and wary.

He glanced at her. 'The final editing, then the post-shooting publicity and parties. What did you think I meant?'

'I don't know,' she said wearily.

'What's wrong?'

Cathy didn't answer his rather curt question. Instead she shrugged and half turned away.

But with a sudden tiger-like movement he caught her wrist and swung her back. 'It had to be done, Cathy.'

'Why?' she whispered, not pretending to misunderstand, and even though she was suddenly afraid of the hard glitter in his hazel eyes. 'In the cause of your art? Her art? Forgive me if I can't help thinking it was only a very public bid to avenge yourself, Tom.'

His mouth hardened, then he drawled, 'You have a short memory, my dear. You suggested it yourself.' Cathy gasped, but he went on imperturbably, 'And aren't you exhibiting a curious ambivalence towards Bronwen? Only last night you were extremely suspicious of her, yet now you're siding with her—I find that strange.'

Cathy tugged at her wrist, but he tightened his fingers on it. 'Oh no, you don't! I think you need to explain, Cat. You can't have it both ways,' he added mockingly.

She stared at him, her face pale and still, and her lips worked once, but it was a good minute before she could express herself, and then it came in a torrent of words. 'Yes, I can, Tom. I can be suspicious of—both of you, although not because I imagine you've been leaping into bed with each other behind my back but because of the power of whatever it is between you... Because even if you don't know whether you love her or hate her and vice versa, I can't believe you're unmoved by each other. On the other hand, I can't help feeling sorry for her and even understanding how she feels. Be-

cause I'm in the same boat as she is, you see, Tom. You wanted to change her, didn't you? You wanted to make a lapdog out of her just as you want to keep me that way. The only thing I haven't worked out yet is *why* you're like this. Did you have an overbearing mother who henpecked your father? Did——'

But she got no further, because with a lightning movement of his arm he pulled her wrist sharply so that she winced with pain and cannoned into him, into his arms.

His teeth gleamed white but in a frighteningly savage little smile as he said softly, 'My sweet Cathy, what a veritable fount of wisdom you've become lately—but I think it's gone to your head. My mother in fact went to her grave being a doormat for my father. What, as a matter of interest, do you make of that? Other than the obvious?' he queried.

Cathy licked her lips. 'Obvious?' she echoed huskily, her eyes scared but stubborn and very blue.

'That we Wests are male chauvinists of the highest order,' he said sardonically.

'Are you saying it's just the way you're m-made?' she stammered.

'Well, I've bared my soul to you—more or less, and you've guessed the rest. I can't think of any other explanation. Can you?'

Cathy tried to speak but couldn't.

'On the other hand,' Tom continued, watching her mouth and her eyes and every hurt, bewildered expression that chased across them, 'Charlie Westfield believes that's all old hat, doesn't he? He's all in favour of "freeing" you. Perhaps you should try it.'

With a superhuman effort, Cathy tore herself out of his arms. 'Why——' her own eyes glittered now and were no longer hurt or bewildered but furious '—are you pushing me at Charlie Westfield, Tom? I'd really like to know, because there could also be an *obvious* explanation for that too, you see. With me gone there'd be space for Bronwen to come crawling back to you, wouldn't there, for example?'

He stared at her, and suddenly his shoulders sagged and he raked a hand through his hair. He also said barely audibly, 'It occurred to me that you might be better off with him—there's no question of Bronwen being allowed to come crawling back.'

Cathy blinked several times. Then she whispered, 'How can you say that? Unless...' She stopped.

'Cathy——' he paused and looked deadly tired '—let's go to bed, we're not getting anywhere.'

'We never get anywhere,' she said bitterly. 'It's like a circus roundabout, and I'm on it with my hands tied to it like a puppet.'

That's because, despite all your new-found wisdom, there are still some things you don't understand—perhaps you never will,' he said harshly. 'Are you coming?'

Cathy put a hand to her brow, suddenly aware that she had what felt like a hammer pounding inside her head. 'What don't I understand?'

'It doesn't matter—you'll be quite safe from me in bed,' he murmured, and frowned. 'Is something else wrong?'

'... I have a headache,' she said uncertainly.

His eyes suddenly flashed mockingly. 'How original!' he drawled.

She shrugged and winced.

Tom stared at her with his mouth set in a hard line, but then his eyes narrowed and he swore under his breath, then before she could do anything, he picked her up in his arms and carried her upstairs.

She didn't have the will to resist him in the end, she found. And she fell asleep first in the wide double bed despite the pain in her head and the mental gulf between them, and the foot or so of mattress between them.

But very early in the morning she woke with her heart pounding and her mouth dry from a nightmare she could remember nothing about. Tom stirred beside her as she twisted restlessly, then he put his hand out to her and sat up abruptly.

'Cat?'

'W-what?' Curiously, her teeth seemed to be chattering, although she felt hot.

He switched on the bedside lamp and stared down at her, her pink cheeks and the dew of sweat at her hairline, her damp nightgown. 'Cat—you're not well, why didn't you *tell* me?' he ground out.

'I didn't know...'

'I knew I shouldn't have let you go home—you never could take care of yourself,' he said savagely, getting out of bed and pulling on clothes at random. 'You probably ate next to nothing!'

'I made a fruit cake,' she said vaguely and with a shiver. 'What are you doing?'

'Ringing for a doctor.'

'It's too late, you won't find one,' she protested, sitting up herself.

'Oh, yes, I will,' he said coldly.

'I always used to take care of myself while you were away—I could just as easily have picked this up, whatever it is, up here. I wonder what it is—I don't know if I'm hot or cold.' Cathy looked up at him with a bewildered little smile. 'What an awful time to pick to be sick—the last thing you need! I could have waited until after the movie was finished, couldn't I?'

Tom slammed the phone down and sat down beside her, taking her in his arms. 'You can't help it,' he said into her hair. 'Forget about the bloody movie,' he added roughly, then moved her away from with a sigh. 'I'm going to get you into a dry nightgown, and you mustn't get cold even if you're feeling hot. And I'm still going to get a doctor!'

He did, but Cathy was not privy to their conversation after the doctor had examined her—Tom took him downstairs for that.

'Your wife has picked up some kind of virus, Mr West—there are a lot of them about, and if it's the one I suspect she'll have a fever for a couple of days and then be on the mend. I'll prescribe something to make her as comfortable as possible in the meantime, and the length of time it takes her to get over it will depend on her. If you're debilitated or,' he gestured, 'have been under a lot of strain, for example, you don't fight these things off quite as easily or get them quite as badly as she seems to have it. Has she been under a lot of strain?' he asked, and discovered himself pinned beneath a curiously savage hazel gaze.

Then his patient's husband raked a hand through his disordered hair and rubbed his face wearily. He

also said barely audibly, 'God help me—yes. Are you *sure* it's nothing more serious?'

'On the evidence at the moment, yes, but I'll keep an eye on her, rest assured.'

It wasn't anything more serious, but it was three days before the fever left her and nearly two weeks before Cathy felt one hundred per cent herself again.

It was also Tom who put everything else on hold and nursed her himself for those three days with surprising skill and compassion, although he got someone in to clean and cook. And even when she was on the mend, he spent a lot of time with her, much more than he could afford, she was sure...

'Tom,' she was still in bed and they were, of all things, doing a jigsaw puzzle he had bought her—he'd bought her books to read, books of crossword puzzles, games which he seemed quite content to do and play with her, 'shouldn't you be at the studios?'

'I might go in tomorrow for a couple of hours. Tired?' he asked.

She grimaced. 'I shouldn't be—all I do is sleep and eat. When are you going to let me get up? It's been five days now.'

'When the doctor agrees.' He began to collect the jigsaw pieces. 'We're about halfway there,' he added as he carefully removed the tray on which a picture of a sailing vessel was taking shape.

Cathy ran her fingers through her hair and stretched her arms up. 'I didn't know you liked jigsaws. I'd love to wash my hair.'

A little glint lit his eyes as he watched her, today in a fresh pink dotted nightgown. 'Well, that must be a good sign. I don't see why you shouldn't—I'll give you a hand if you like.'

'I can do it in the shower, I can manage!'

'Then I'll dry it for you—up you get.'

So she took a shower and washed her hair, but she found it unexpectedly tiring and was muttering to herself, 'I don't know what's wrong with me,' as she came out of the bathroom into the bedroom swathed in a towel.

'Nothing rest and time won't put right,' Tom said quietly, unwinding her from the towel and deftly slipping her nightgown on as she raised her arms obediently.

Cathy found herself smiling as he picked her up and deposited her on the bed which he had made while she'd been showering. 'What?' he'd enquired,

'There are just *so* many things I didn't know about—jigsaws, what a good, even tyrannical nurse you could be, although I should have suspected the tyrannical bit, how quiet you can be. You must have been very bored.' She looked up at him as he piled pillows behind her and switched on her hair-dryer.

'No,' he said lightly. 'How do you use this thing?' He lifted some damp strands of hair up.

'Just blow it on my hair. Mmm... that's nice,' she murmured as he ran his fingers through her hair, lifting strands and blowing warm air through them. 'But I am worried,' she said after a while. 'I know this is such an important time, the final editing to be done and—'

'Cathy——' he switched off the dryer and sat down on the side of the bed '—the best thing you

can do for both of us is quit worrying. There are times when...one needs to be quiet, and this is one of them.' And he tipped her chin up with his fingers. 'In all conscience this is definitely one of them,' he added barely audibly, but smiled faintly immediately and said wryly, 'You'd do the same for me, I expect.'

'Of course...'

'Well, then——'

But she broke in with sudden urgency, 'We're very married in one sense, aren't we, Tom?'

His fingers stilled on her jaw. 'What do you mean?'

'We don't mind doing these things for each other despite...' Cathy stopped with a suddenly indrawn breath as for the first time full memory flooded back of the disastrous sequence of events that had occurred the night she had fallen sick.

But Tom moved his fingers and put one across her lips. 'Forget about all that—I insist. Otherwise I won't let you up tomorrow.' And he switched on the dryer again.

She didn't forget, it would have been impossible to, but she discovered there was a curious air of unreality about it—about everything beyond the walls of the villa over those next peaceful days, those days, as she regained her strength, of quiet companionship with Tom that reminded her of home. Days when he spent a few hours at the studio but most of the time with her, and unbeknown to her crammed an unbelievable amount of work into the hours he spent away. They were also peaceful because he allowed no one to visit, not even Duncan, although everyone sent flowers. Days

when they sunned themselves on the terrace and swam in the pool, times when they sauntered up to the market together, and the village vintner, and times when he let her cook and concoct marvellous dishes from the stunning array of seafood and fresh produce available, but insisted she leave the dishes for the daily lady who still came. Days when his hands lingered on her body and nights when he slept with her in his arms but didn't attempt to make love to her, times when she looked up from the jigsaw or a crossword or a game of cards and found his hazel eyes resting on her, only to look away... Lovely days for her, and, she couldn't help believe, for him too, because the tension sometimes so visible in his eyes and his tall body was gone. Evenings when they listened to music and talked about nothing very important and watched the stars. Nights when she fell asleep like a child because she still tired easily, soothed and comforted by the solid presence of Tom so close, his hand on her hip or about her waist, and so that she couldn't help but feel that, although he hadn't tried to make love to her, it was not because her slender body was not still his domain but because of concern for her.

And perhaps that was why it came as such a shock that this period could end, did end, and she wondered if she had been sicker than she realised, and really cocooned from reality because of it, allowing herself to be lulled into such a false sense of security, while another part of her wanted to scream at him and ask him how he could have done it—let her build up her hopes only to crash them to the ground.

Because that was what he did, unspectacularly but all the same like someone removing the crutches from a cripple who had to learn to walk alone.

The first intimation came after he had taken her to the doctor for a final check-up, much against her will because she had known she was fine now, that she'd even probably been malingering, but mainly because he had insisted on it; on the way home he told her that *Half an Hour Earlier in Adelaide* was almost ready for its first preview.

Cathy opened her blue eyes wide at him. 'But how?'

'We've all worked our guts out.'

'But you couldn't have—you've spent nearly all your time with me.'

Tom shrugged. 'I put what I didn't spend with you to good use.' He smiled slightly and added, 'I'm not very popular at present.'

Tom——'

'It also had to be done,' he interrupted. 'There's nothing worse than dragging these things out interminably. That gets on everyone's nerves even more, did they but realise it.'

Cathy grimaced and bit her lip. 'I feel guilty.'

'It wasn't your fault—but for the next few days until the preview I'll be flat out.'

'Oh—of course,' she said quickly. 'I'll be fine, I'm fine now.'

He turned his head. 'You certainly look... fine,' he said on an odd note.

'That's because you were such a good nurse. Thank you,' she replied with a grin.

An expression crossed his eyes of something like self-mockery, but then she thought she must have

imagined it as he said casually, 'You might as well stay out of the way, incidentally, until the preview. I imagine there'll be a party afterwards/

'I'll have to get out my glad rags—will it be that kind of party?'

'It usually is—why not?'

Tom, is something wrong?' she asked slowly.

'No. Why?' He drove on with his usual effortless ease.

'I.. .just thought you sounded ... preoccupied, but then I guess you are—don't worry, I do understand,' Cathy added with that flicker of guilt again, and they arrived at the villa.

But it was that night, when he didn't get home until midnight and was moody and uncommunicative, that she asked herself if she did understand, and over the next few days kept asking herself the same question and several more, such as—what did I expect? That that lovely rapport we had would go on—why can't it? Why do I have to be shut out now even if he is tired and under enormous pressure again—he must have been under pressure without me knowing while I was sick. And once—what did I imagine—that Bronwen and Charlie and all those problems had vanished into thin air because I got a virus? When will I ever learn? Why doesn't he even want to make love to me now? I'm fine now, and I thought when I came back, after that night—was that just to keep me happy until he'd finished shooting? Why don't I...? Because I'm afraid to, that's why, afraid of being rejected again.

And inexorably the day of the first preview drew nearer, and finally was there and she was dressing for it, although Tom hadn't come home.

She chose, by way of 'glad rags', a dress she had never worn before, a blue shantung dress that matched her eyes and hugged her figure and was quite short although not a mini, and she couldn't help feeling it was a sophisticated dress and might lend her some sophistication or something that she felt she needed desperately. Then she put her hair up, which she did rarely, and was quite surprised at her reflection—not someone she altogether knew, she decided, and thought it was rather apt with a sad little smile—then she turned at a sound.

Tom was standing in the doorway, his hands on the buttons of his shirt but not undoing them, his hazel eyes riveted on her.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'I didn't hear you come home. Is something wrong?' she added, taking in the fixity of his expression, and when he didn't reply finding herself nervously smoothing her skirt. 'Don't you like it?'

'It's fine,' he said curtly, and his long fingers started on his buttons again. 'Very fitting, and I'm running bloody late. Are *you* ready?'

'Y-yes,' she stammered.

'Well, give 'em a ring, would you, and explain that we'll be about fifteen minutes late.'

'Tom——' she began.

'Not now, Cathy,' he said impatiently, and shouldered open the bathroom door as he unzipped his jeans.

She tried again in the car. 'Did you mean the dress is too tight?' Which wasn't what she wanted to say at all but came out somehow.

'Not at all,' he replied.

Then...?'

Tom turned his head briefly. 'I meant it was very fitting for a... rising star, a... director's wife—whatever you see yourself as, in fact.' He shrugged.

Cathy closed her eyes and prayed she wouldn't cry at the hard indifference in his voice, praying at the same time for some guidance and some understanding of why he would bind her to him as he had when she'd been ill, only to sever it like this, because she had the chill knowledge in her heart that that was exactly what he was doing, and for some reason she'd chosen to wear an outfit that was helping him to do it... and not only that, she had to get through an extremely public experience for the next hours and cope with this knowledge at the same time.

The lights came up and there was a moment's silence, then a spontaneous burst of applause, and to her surprise Cathy realised she had lost herself in the preview, as had all the rest of the cast and crew despite their familiarity with it. She could only marvel how all the scenes they had shot out of sequence, all that had been pruned and moved and woven through, had, thanks to Tom and Jason's and everyone's skill, come together and created a movie that still had the power to hold them spell-bound as well as those who were seeing it for the first time.

Of her own performance she couldn't help but be aware that she seemed to establish a rapport with the audience new and old alike, yet at the same time she was conscious of how little real acting she'd had to do. And as she stirred at last, Tom did too, with something like a deep sigh, then Duncan was up on the stage saying a few words of congratulation and recommending with a grin that they all let their hair down.

So the party began, although for a fair while Tom was surrounded by people shaking his hand, and even Bronwen and Charlie were happily under the same kind of siege together. What surprised Cathy almost as much was her own siege, and for a time the interest and desire to talk to her that so many people exhibited was exciting and made her forget.

What brought it all back was seeing Tom watching her over the crowd, his eyes expressionless and curiously still. And the way he turned away as her eyes met his.

She couldn't remember afterwards how she got through the rest of it, including everyone's concern over her recent illness, Charlie's particularly, and as Tom made no move to come to her she understood how you could feel lonely and incredibly bereft even while you were talking and laughing, having your photo taken, even in a multitude, and she found herself wishing she'd never heard of *Half an Hour Earlier in Adelaide* and that she could be home at Mount Macedon in her old role. Can I go back? she wondered. If I thought I was unhappy then it's nothing compared to now.

To make matters worse, the party relocated to *Sanctuary Cove* and turned into an all-night affair, and as the sun rose Cathy came downstairs at home after trying to snatch some sleep to find some sleepy revellers toasting the dawn with champagne on the terrace. Tom was not one of them. He was stretched sideways across a chair, asleep. And he had, even when they'd got home, hardly said a word to her.

Cathy stared down at him with tears in her heart and knew that, for whatever reason, he had deliberately closed off the last link between them. She stilled an urge to reach out and touch his hair, smooth it off his forehead, and remembered how she had always liked to watch him asleep. But now, even in sleep, he was as remote from her as he had ever been and she knew, with a shaft of pain but sudden resolution, that she couldn't go on.

'Going my way?'

'Ch-Charlie!' Cathy stammered. 'What are you doing?'

Charlie Westfield leant over and opened the passenger door of his car. 'What am I doing? In fact I've been asleep in this *ol'* roadster for hours, having discovered myself not fit to be driving it—somewhat to my surprise,' he confided candidly. 'But the sun shining in my eyes woke me up, and no sooner had I hit the road than who should I see walking down this cobbled *Sanctuary Cove Way* carrying a bag but Cathy West, bright new star of the silver screen but not looking so bright,' he finished with a grimace. 'Have you left him?'

'I...' Cathy blushed and gritted her teeth. 'I just wanted some time on my own——'

'By my reckoning you had that a few weeks ago, Cathy.' He looked at her steadily.

To her horror she found sudden tears rolling down her cheeks, then to her further despair Charlie leapt out and contrived to get her into the car and reposition himself behind the driving wheel.

'How have you left him?' he asked, patting her hand and offering her his handkerchief.

'I left a note on the pillow,' she wept. 'And I closed the bedroom door so everyone would think I was asleep——'

He lifted an eyebrow, 'Everyone?'

'Yes,' she said bitterly. 'They're out on the terrace toasting the dawn.'

'I see. But Tom was not in the bedroom, I take it?'

'No. He was asleep downstairs—they didn't see me go. Oh, Charlie, he didn't even speak to me after...after...' She couldn't go on.

'Listen,' he said after a while, 'if you really want to leave him, even temporarily, you need to go somewhere, don't you?'

'I suppose so,' Cathy said indistinctly. 'I haven't thought about it yet.'

'Ever seen the Barrier Reef?'

She took his hanky away from her eyes. 'No.'

'Everyone tells me you shouldn't leave Australia without seeing it. Come up there with me. Now.'

'I couldn't!' she protested.

'Why not?'

'It might.. .it might create a terrible scandal to go *anywhere* with you, besides getting your hopes up and—no. Thank you, Charlie, but——'

'Well, where are you going to go? Or is this just a bit of bravado? Are you planning to frighten him for a couple of hours and then go back?'

Ten minutes later, Cathy heard herself say, 'So long as you understand, Charlie. I'm only travelling with you. I'll pay my own way, I'll sleep in my own bed, in my own room, and I'll expect you not even to touch me, because the first time you do I'll——'

'I get it,' he drawled. 'Yes, ma'am! All your conditions will be met. Scout's honour.' And he placed his hand on his heart.

'All the same,' Cathy said worriedly, 'if people recognise you, even travelling together——'

'We won't hit the high spots.'

'But——'

'In any case, I have a disguise!' He reached forward to the glove box and with a flourish withdrew a red wig and a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

For the life of her Cathy couldn't help smiling feebly, then more so as he put them on with the wig back to front. 'Well...'

They spent two weeks drifting through the sun-soaked Barrier Reef, and Charlie observed all his promises to the letter—so much so that Cathy was moved to comment on it once with gratitude, and in doing so, provoked a curious conversation.

'There's something about you, Cathy,' he said lazily, as they were lying side by side on a golden beach, 'that makes it impossible to be any other way. For me,' he added ruefully.

'What do you mean?' she asked after a moment.

'Well,' he thought for a bit, 'you're so innocent, I guess, and sort of...untouched, if you know what I mean. Which is a bit of a mystery—I mean, how you survived two years of Tom West and stayed this way has to be some sort of miracle.'

'I'm not,' she protested, but with a frown in her eyes, and sat up abruptly.

Charlie grinned. 'I don't mean you're dumb, if that's what you thought. It's something else—much as I don't go for the guy, I can sort of understand why he kept you under double wraps until he had this change of heart. There'd be plenty of blokes around who'd want to change that—I just don't happen to be one of them,' he added with his usual candour, and sat up as if struck by a sudden thought. 'Be odd if we had anything in common, wouldn't it?'

'What... who?'

'Me and your old man,' Charlie said with a grimace that deepened into a fleeting frown.

'I...what could you have in common?' asked Cathy.

Charlie shrugged. 'The way we take care of Cathy West,' he said with an ironic little grin, and refused to elaborate.

'Well, I still don't see why I need such care taken of me,' Cathy said finally and irately, but added in a different voice, 'I can't really be so innocent and untouched.' She stared at him.

'Can't you?' Charlie cocked an eyebrow at her. 'You don't think you'd have given Ms Bishop a run for her money or even a sock in the eye, otherwise? You don't think you might have made it plain to all and sundry that he might be Mr Director but he

was first of all your husband—if the guy really got to you, I reckon you would have.'

'Oh...' she said, and it sounded uncertain even to herself.

And that night, on her own in her own room, she lay awake for a long time examining her new feelings of uncertainty, and found herself suddenly wondering fearfully whether she'd been more of a Cinderella than she'd realised, and not through anyone's fault but her own. And as the long, dark, lonely night ticked away a lot of little things occurred to her, stretching back like a guided path through her mind... How, for example, she had been completely unconscious of Charlie's feelings for her, how she'd had to be jolted into seeing all was not well with Bronwen, how Tom had told her there were some things she might never understand and also used Charlie's very words to her once—I don't have to keep you under double wraps any more...

Was that what he'd done through their marriage? Gone out of his way not to disillusion her or let anyone else do so, rather than the things she'd accused him of? Had he in fact been trying to protect her? Was that why after two years of marriage she still came across as an 'innocent'? Because she *was*, and she'd never really changed, and Tom had understood—as Charlie thought he understood.

She sat up suddenly with her heart pounding, remembering what Charlie had said about having something in common with Tom and then clamming up on her. Could he have meant that they

were both in love with her but because of the way she was...

But I did change, she thought despairingly. Even if it wasn't as much as I thought, I did try to get out of my chrysalis—why couldn't Tom accept it?

It was two weeks to the day after she had left him that Cathy picked up a newspaper and leafed through it with not much interest. Then she stiffened, and Charlie pushed his straw hat back. 'What?' he queried.

'Bronwen's. ..got married,' Cathy said with difficulty.

Charlie sat up and brushed sand off his hands. 'Er...seeing as it couldn't be to your old man without making him a bigamist, let me guess—Duncan?'

'Yes,' whispered Cathy.

'Cathy,' he said in a different voice altogether, 'I suppose you want to rush back and hold his hand.'

'I have to go back some time—I can't just disappear.'

'What about us? I've done everything you asked me to or *not* to, but——'

Cathy gathered all her mental resources and took his hand in hers. 'I know, and I thank you, Charlie, but I have to explain some things.'

CHAPTER NINE

'WHEN'S Cathy coming back, Mr West?'

Cathy stood at the open kitchen window and watched Tom and William unseen. It was a beautiful afternoon and Mount Macedon was as clear as a bell in the sunlight. Tom and William had come into view, William carrying his inevitable football, and from the fact that his socks were dangling about his ankles and they both looked hot and had stopped at a tap, she made the inevitable deduction which explained why they wouldn't have heard the taxi that had deposited her. Why they would be unaware that she could hear their conversation, unaware that Mount Macedon and, after that cursory glance, William, had faded from her field of vision. And supremely unaware that as she stared at Tom, her heart was beating heavily in her breast and she felt like a thirsty traveller confronted with a mirage.

'I don't know, William.' Tom cupped his hands beneath the tap and took a drink. 'Want some water?'

'Thanks. Is she still on holiday? Hasn't she written and told you when she's coming back?'

'William, it could be a long holiday, old son, and we'll just have to get along as best we can without her.'

'Shouldn't you have someone to look after you, though?' William asked thoughtfully after a pause. 'Gran reckons without Cathy the place must be in

an awful mess and you prob'ly aren't getting enough to eat. She said to tell you to come for dinner any time you want.' He looked up suddenly. 'I could come and stay with you till she comes back.'

Tom ruffled his hair and smiled down at him. 'That's a very kind offer,' he said gravely, 'but then we both might go hungry. I'll be fine.'

But William persisted. 'Aren't you lonely, Mr West? It just doesn't seem the same without Cathy. Why don't you go on holiday with her?' he added with sudden inspiration. 'Gran reckons it's strange you haven't anyway.'

Tom took a moment to answer. Then he said, 'William, the fact is Cathy might not be coming back. We... well, it's probably hard for you to understand, but when you're older, you will, but we might not be the right people for each other, you see, and then the best thing is to stay apart.'

'But...' William's eyes were suddenly huge and anxious. 'But she'll be so lonely. Won't she?'

'I don't think so. I think she's found someone who's right for her—William, these things happen, but I'm still here and I think I can hear your gran calling you. Come back tomorrow afternoon and we'll work on your tackling. Off you go!'

William went with a sudden spurt as his grandmother's voice made itself clearly heard. Tom stared after him, then squared his shoulders and started to walk towards the kitchen door.

Cathy unfroze and spun away from the window, suddenly panic-stricken, and taking several deep breaths to calm herself.

Tom didn't see her immediately as she stood like a statue in the same jeans and white blouse she had

come back to him once before in. In fact he went straight to the sink and washed his hands, and only then, as he turned round, did he go still as his eyes came to rest on her and they narrowed as though he was looking through sunlight. He made no move to reach for the towel for about ten seconds—as if she really was the last person he expected to see. Then he said quietly, 'Hello, Cathy.'

'Tom——' Cathy had difficulty with her voice '—how did you know I'd gone away with Charlie? That is what you meant when you told William I'd found the right person, isn't it?'

His eyes rested on her sombrely. 'I saw you drive off with him.'

'But...' Her lips worked.

He shrugged. 'I woke up not long after you left and decided to go for a walk to clear my head and to get away from the rabble.' He grimaced. 'Of course I didn't realise until I got back to the villa that you'd actually left for good... with him.'

'I hadn't planned to go with Charlie at all,' she said hoarsely. 'It...just happened, and I was going to tell you about it, anyway.'

'Were you?' His lips twisted. 'What went wrong?'

'Wrong?' She stared at him.

'With you and Charlie.'

'Nothing. I was never in love with Charlie or anything like that,' she whispered.

'He was certainly in love with you.'

Cathy took a breath and cautioned herself to take hold. You've done nothing wrong, she told herself. Don't go on the defensive... She pulled out a chair and sat down, looking around as she did and noting for the first time that the kitchen was in a fairly

pristine condition. 'You aren't in a mess,' she murmured, and smiled faintly. Then she looked at him levelly and her eyes were very blue. 'He thought he was,' she said steadily, 'but we decided he was really in love with a will-o'-the-wisp—like Chloe, something he'd never really understand, not as well as you did...' She stopped and waited for some reaction, but all she saw was a faint movement of his eyelid.

Then he said, 'You actually convinced him of that?' His gaze was suddenly supremely sceptical.

Cathy gripped her hands together. 'Well, he had no choice really, and——' she raised her eyes and they were oddly defiant '—because Charlie is also more a *gentleman* than you ever gave him credit for, he agreed to...' She loosened her fingers and gestured instead of adding that Charlie had in fact promised to be there for her to his dying day. 'Which,' she went on with determination, 'leaves us with Bronwen.'

Tom pulled out a chair himself. 'Bronwen is out of the game,' he said casually. 'She married Duncan.'

'I know,' said Cathy. 'That's why I'm back.'

'To hold my hand?' he queried.

She winced but said coolly, 'Does it need holding?'

Although he'd only just sat down, he stood up abruptly and said something like, 'Not by you...' beneath his breath, then, more audibly, and normally, 'Is that the only reason you came back? You said in your note...'

'I said in my note that it was obvious you didn't want me any more, Tom. I came back,' her voice

faltered but she made herself go on, 'in case I was... mistaken.'

'Because you think that without Bronwen or anyone I'll go to the dogs?' he said with a dry little smile.

Cathy stared at him and remembered her resolution on the long flight home: to try to explain her new understanding of herself to him, to be honest in the face of all odds—as well as to nurture the seeds of hope in her heart that Duncan might have been right, and Charlie in his oblique comment which could have meant that both he and Tom were in love with her...

She said quietly, 'No. Because I've been wanting to come back almost ever since I left, Tom. I'd rather be with you than anyone——'

'Cat—Cathy,' he corrected himself, causing her to tremble with apprehension, 'there are reasons for that, but they're not necessarily the right ones. Let's examine them. All this,' he gestured around, 'represents a home and security to you, and those things are important to you because you know rather well what it's like to be on your own. That's also why when someone like Charlie offers you freedom, you're wary of it even though you're dying to spread your wings, because you also want *roots*'

She said slowly, 'That's true, but I'm not so immature as to want them with anyone just for the sake of them, and——'

'Let me finish—and because there were the good times as well as the bad, you can't help feeling some concern for me now. But there's no need.'

He said it quietly but quite definitely, and if she thought she saw a shadow of strain in his eyes, as

so often happened, it was gone before she could be sure.

She thought for a moment, then chose another tack. 'Because she's married Duncan? That needn't mean anything other than that you're both too proud to back down.'

'Cathy, it's not that.' Tom's voice was clipped and curt now.

Then what was it, and why did you affect each other so?'

The only way we affected each other...' He stopped, then started again after a moment. 'Contrary to what you believed the night we shot the final scene, I did what I did because in the end it was the only way to wring what it needed out of her. When you have more experience, you'll understand how it's impossible for directors and actors not to be moved by each other, especially over interpretations, because... well, often I have to try to get inside someone's head and thoughts. It was just unfortunate,' he said wearily, 'that that was the only key left in the repertoire and it had the significance it did.'

Cathy took an unsteady breath. Tom, are you trying to tell me you don't love Bronwen any more?'

He moved his shoulders restlessly and said shortly, 'All I'm trying to make you understand is that you don't have to feel sorry for me and I don't need my hand held.' His hazel gaze was suddenly piercingly acute as it captured hers. 'Would you have come back otherwise? When did you find out?'

She bit her lip. Tom saw it and his mouth twisted; he pushed himself away from the wall and went

over to the window to stand staring out at Mount Macedon with his back to her.

She watched his tall frame in jeans and a check shirt, and thought that, even for him, his hair needed a trim—which she was quite good at doing herself, which reminded her of a time when he'd slipped her damp hair through his fingers and dried it for her.

'I don't think that point has as much significance as you're attributing to it,' she said in a low but stubborn voice.

He turned and smiled wryly. 'Let's not get too academic, Cathy I really am fine, and——'

'On the other hand,' she tilted her chin at him, 'I can't deny it gave me hope. The hope that if you and Bronwen had found out it was all over, there might be another chance for me.'

Tom laughed, but with no amusement. 'A chance for what? Don't you think you might have suffered enough at my hands, Cathy?'

'No, I don't,' she said quietly. 'And if you'll let me, I'll tell you why in a moment, but in the meantime, Tom, I am still your wife, and if there's no longer another woman in your heart, at least I deserve to know, don't you think?'

He eyed her with his mouth set in a hard line.

'And to know why,' she added.

He continued to stare at her in the same way. Her heart started to beat rather oddly and she found her palms were damp, so she hid them in her lap and sat with a straight spine returning his look bravely.

Until suddenly a smile twisted his lips and he shrugged. 'The Spanish Inquisition in blue jeans

and a silk blouse—all right, I'll tell you. It was a battle royal of the sexes between me and Bronwen; it was a sexual confrontation of the worst kind with each of us fighting for supremacy, and both of us more concerned for ourselves than each other. And the spark of what attracted us to each other in the first place soon got lost in the carnage, but we fought on. Do you know why? Because we're both the same kind of egotists and we neither of us knew what love was. Strange, isn't it?' he said drily. 'I mean that we can admit now that if we'd ever stopped fighting there would have been nothing left. I have no regrets about her marrying Duncan, Cathy,' he said straightly. 'I hope she's very happy, and in fact she rang me and told me the news herself. She also told me that after she'd got over the public aspect of shooting the finale, it seemed to have acted as a catalyst for her and washed all the bitterness and self-deception down a drain. The same,' he paused, 'had already happened for me. Does that satisfy you?'

Cathy gripped her hands in her lap. 'When——?'

But he ignored her. 'It also means we all, you included, can get on with our lives now.'

'Oh, can I?' Cathy said with a little glint of anger in her eyes. 'I'm sorry to keep repeating myself, Tom, but you and I are *married*.'

He turned back to the window. 'That was a mistake, my mistake, and a bad one, my dear,' he said evenly. 'I hope you'll let me retrieve it as best I can.'

'Because you *did* marry me to get back at Bronwen or something like that?' she whispered.

He didn't turn. 'Something like that.'

Cathy took a deep breath and knew she had to take the plunge. 'And you don't think discovering you never loved Bronwen might have had something to do with... me?'

He turned slowly at last and his eyes were bleak. 'Cathy, I care very much about you, but——'

She smiled sketchily. 'I'd understand, of course. I've worked a few things out about myself lately. I'm really very naive—I might always be a bit. That has to be why I didn't know Charlie was falling in love with me, for example. And why I sailed through those first weeks in Queensland trying to like Bronwen when everyone must have been wondering—why is she doing this? Or at least—how can she be so unaffected? How can you work with a man who's your husband so unaffectedly, especially with an old mistress around getting thinner and paler by the day?' She grimaced. 'And they didn't know half of it! But how can you? Only if you're like me, more of a Cinderella than I ever dreamt, and even though I first used the comparison, until——' her voice faltered '—something

happens to shake you out of it.'

'What?' he asked in a different voice.

Cathy lifted her shoulders. 'The thought of losing you. The frustration of waking up out of my frozen time warp and not being able to get through to you, of not having the right interpretation put on it—of you thinking I was longing to spread my wings and be free—but afraid to do it.'

Tom walked back to the table and leant on his chair. 'Was it the wrong interpretation? Cathy,' he said gently, 'don't feel guilty. It was quite a normal

thing to happen even without the abyss of my affair with Bronwen that I'd opened at your feet and dragged you down into.'

'Do you know something, Tom? I'm glad you did, now, because it's made me understand how you'd protected me for so long, because you *knew* what an emotional virgin I still was——' Cathy stopped as he made a restless movement, then stilled it. 'And I can't blame you for misunderstanding later. But I'm no longer that way.'

Their gazes held for a long, breathless moment, then she said barely audibly, 'Tell me honestly—why didn't you want me to have a baby? Surely you can do that for a wife of two years even if she's on her way out? At least tell me the truth before I go. Was it so you wouldn't be tied to me irrevocably?'

Tom closed his eyes suddenly. 'No. It was the opposite. It was,' he hesitated, then said bleakly, 'like closing the trap on you.'

'What trap?' she whispered.

'The trap I opened by marrying you when you were too young to know what you were doing,' he said harshly.

'That's what I wondered, and that's what I want to tell you, Tom. I'm not too young now to know that I love you, to know that things have gone far beyond my "orphan" days when I didn't know any better than to fall in love with you. So any guilt you feel is unnecessary—do you still feel guilty?' she asked directly.

He stared at her with a nerve flickering in his jaw. 'Yes...'

'Then let's deal with it for once and for all—I'd hate you to have me on your conscience when I'm gone.'

'*Cathy!*' he said brutally.

She slipped out of her chair but didn't attempt to approach him. 'I love you, Tom, in every way it's possible for a woman to love. When you're making love to me, when your body is on mine, inside me, I feel,' she said softly, 'so wonderful it's hard to describe. And it hurts me to think it might not be the same for you. That's why I got desperate and angry sometimes. That was my way of telling you how much I loved you, that was me waking up at last.'

'Cathy,' he straightened, 'all right, I concede——'

'Tom,' she overrode him, 'if you made love to me one more time, now, would you be able to send me away?'

She saw the tightening of all his muscles, the tension about his mouth and in his eyes, but he said quite steadily, 'It's not going to happen, Cat. It would be insane.'

'Because you don't love me the way I love you?' she queried, barely audibly but with a little pulse of hope beating in her heart. 'Or because you don't *believe* in me? You don't believe I've matured sufficiently towards having your children and making it work. You think that, if fame and fortune comes my way, I'm going to be lured away by it—is that what you think?'

He sighed and rubbed his face wearily. 'It's myself I don't believe in,' he said at last, his eyes capturing hers. 'I'm still the same kind of egotist

I always was, I'm possessive and jealous, and if I protected you from anything, it wasn't without an ulterior motive.' He looked past her. 'I did want to keep you the way you were—you accused me of it, and you were right.'

'Why?' she whispered.

Tom said nothing.

She tried again. 'But then you tried to give me away. Was it easy to give me to Charlie, Tom?'

'It was the hardest...' He stopped and said grimly, 'I wasn't giving you to Charlie, Cat, so much as letting you have the opportunity to make up your own mind. It was also obvious he worshipped you and wouldn't willingly hurt you.'

Cathy took a careful breath. 'You mentioned just now that you and Bronwen had cared more for yourselves than each other—if it was that hard to give me to Charlie but you still did it, mightn't that mean you loved me enough to want what you thought was best for me, Tom?'

'Hell,' he muttered through his teeth, 'you should have been a lawyer. *Yes*, and it's still best that you should get away from me, Cathy. One day you'll understand.'

She moved at last, one step closer. 'No, I won't. I'll never understand why you're sending me away if you love me, Tom. Do you?'

'Love you!' he burst out on a suddenly tortured breath. 'I think I fell in love with you when I first kissed you and you looked up at me out of those blue, stunned eyes. Why do you think I went on seeing you when I knew I shouldn't, when I knew you deserved a few years to find your feet, to test your powers of dazzling young men, to spread your

wings—instead of being shackled to a world-weary cynic like myself? Why do you think I tried to go away and didn't succeed—why do you think I wouldn't admit it to myself? Admit that your mixture of wisdom and innocence, your home-making skills, your *wifely* skills—just the way you move and look and are... meant more to me than anything in the world,' he said softly but with a suddenly blazing glance. 'I wouldn't admit it,' he went on, and she could see the greeny depths of his eyes and that he was breathing heavily, 'so that when the time came to let you go, I'd be able to do it. But at the same time, another part of me went out of the way to keep you as you were to guard against ever having...to lose you,' he said deliberately. 'Now do you understand why I'm no good for you, Cat?'

She took another step and there was a shimmer of tears in her eyes, tears of relief, but she knew the battle was still not won and she had to choose her words with care. 'If you send me away, I'll be like lost property for the rest of my life.'

His teeth shut hard. 'That's not all of it. It wasn't only my conscience that stepped in and wouldn't let me foist a family on you—it was a disinclination to share you with anyone—even a baby.'

Cathy put out a hand and laid it on his sleeve. 'Perhaps you also knew I wasn't ready for a baby. Looking back, I don't think I was. It was more a guard against being lonely, against sensing there could be so much more between us but not being able to find the right key to make it happen. But now I can. Do you think I could understand all this—and still be the way I was, Tom?'

'I think,' he said with an effort, 'you can go ahead now and all you've learnt and become could be put to better use, Cat.'

There's no better use for me, Tom.' She slid her fingers down his sleeve and took his hand. 'It will all be wasted.'

His fingers closed harshly around hers, then relaxed, but he didn't look at her or say anything.

'And you're wrong about something else, Tom. I always did love you, even when I should have known better, even when I didn't know how to express it properly, and through all these awful weeks I never stopped.' She withdrew her hand. 'But now it's up to you. If you still want me to go, I will.' She smiled tremulously up at him. 'But I'll always believe I could have made it work if only you'd trusted me.'

'Cat,' he said roughly, 'how do you know I can change?'

'What's to change?' she whispered. 'Sometimes you're quite a perfect husband.' The tears were sparkling on her lashes now.

He said beneath his breath, 'Oh, hell...'

'And you *did* change. Tell me one last thing, Tom. When did you admit to yourself that you loved me and not Bronwen?'

He was gripping the back of the chair so hard his knuckles were white, she saw, and he said eventually, 'I don't know. It kept... it was a series of times, and none of them to do with Bronwen really. It was times such as the day you lay in the grass at Mount Macedon and decided to go on with me; it was the relief I felt. It was the time you yourself said you'd never had the opportunity to

spread your wings and I knew you were wondering about yourself, and us, and Charlie. That boat trip,' he told her unevenly, 'was supposed to switch your focus back to me, but do you know what happened?'

'Your conscience?'

'Yes—plus the fact,' he said grimly, 'that I was suddenly afraid to make love to you because more and more I wanted to do it in a way that would leave you incapable of even thinking about the likes of Charlie Westfield. Or anyone but me. That's when I even thought of giving you the baby you thought you wanted just to keep you.'

Cathy's eyes widened. 'You were afraid to make love to me? Oh,' she said softly, 'that's the best news I've ever had, Tom.'

'You couldn't have had much good news to compare with it, then,' he said ironically.

'You could make love to me any way you liked now,' she said huskily.

'Cat...' He stopped abruptly and she saw the turmoil in his eyes.

'You could do anything you wanted, bind me in chains, give me babies galore, although it's not really necessary, because I've changed my mind and I'm just not going to go away, you see. I did warn you once how stubborn a Kerris could be, didn't I?' Her lips curved into a smile. 'Sorry.'

He stared down at her, into her radiant eyes, and closed his briefly, then he took her hand and seemed about to say something, but at last his control broke and he was holding her so hard she could barely breathe, saying her name over and over.

The bedroom was quiet and peaceful in the last of the afternoon sunlight despite the clothes strewn everywhere and despite the fact that their loving had at last achieved an equality and there had been no holds barred in the way Tom had lost himself in her and his desire neither had had to be reined nor could have been reined. And for once, it was he who slept in her arms, and she who watched over him lovingly.

But he didn't sleep long. He stirred and his lashes lifted. Cathy brought her fingers up to stroke his face and to still the faint wariness in his eyes before they focused on her properly. He stared into her eyes for a long moment before he buried his head in her shoulder and murmured, 'Welcome home, my love. It was the most barren place on earth without you.'

'So was where I was,' she whispered with a shudder she couldn't control.

'Oh, Cat, it's over, I'll never let you go again.' And he spent the next minutes holding her and speaking the words of love she'd longed to hear until she was soft and reassured in his arms. Then he said, 'You've no idea how many times I nearly came and got you.'

A minute went by, then she tilted her face up again and her eyes were wide and uncomprehending. 'You knew where I was?'

He nodded.

'But how?'

'Charlie rang me from Brisbane Airport.'

This time only a moment elapsed before she freed herself and sat up. 'Charlie... he didn't!'

'He did, an hour or so after you drove off with him and while you were in the shop buying something to read. That's how I know young Charlie Westfield is more of a gentleman than I gave him credit for and why I...decided to let you be.'

'What did he say?' Cathy was still incredulous.

Tom fingered the sheet that was caught about her waist, then took his hand away. 'He explained how it had come about—that he'd discovered you walking down the road with your bag and how he'd thought that if you were running away from me you'd be safe with him. He said,' he went on quietly, 'that I could rest assured that, as much as he loved you, he wouldn't take advantage of you and the state you were in—although he added,' Tom smiled slightly, 'quite belligerently, that I deserved to be shot for treating you the way I had and that no one in their right minds could blame him for trying to court you himself if you really decided to leave me.'

'Well!' Cathy exclaimed, filled with some indignant confusion.

'Well what, my love?' Tom said gently, his gaze resting on her breasts, her shoulders, her mouth and finally her eyes.

'I...don't know!'

'Perhaps you were enjoying thinking of me suffering the torments of the damned and this has taken the edge off it? I was, Cat,' he said differently. 'But because I knew then, or thought I knew, that Charlie could be... the right one for you after all as opposed to just someone who wouldn't hurt you.'

Cathy stared down at him, then the corners of her mouth trembled into a smile and she lay back. 'Perhaps I was,' she conceded ruefully. 'I do hope he finds someone,' she added anxiously.

'He will,' murmured Tom, drawing her back into his arms. 'I'm afraid this is going to be something that will happen with monotonous regularity—we should have a name for it. How about "the Charlie Westfield syndrome"?''

Cathy blushed, which he studied through half-closed lids, and she felt her skin, where his fingers lay on it, shiver expectantly. But he went on, 'As for your career, are you really not interested in it?'

She considered. 'I still find it hard to believe in, Tom. I...'

He waited, then said as she looked confused, 'It has worked, you know—rarely, I grant you, but husbands and wives can achieve it. In fact we had no trouble at all *working* with each other.'

She opened her eyes wide in surprise, then lowered her lashes to hide from him the fact that she knew her career, if ever it existed, would always be difficult for him to cope with, and that it would take tact, time and patience to overcome his fears. So she said softly, 'We'll see,' and kissed his shoulder.

But Tom saw more than she realised. He said with a wry little smile, 'Am I being humoured?'

She opened her mouth, closed it, then said gravely, 'That's for me to know and you to wonder about, Tom.'

'Oh, Cathy——' he buried his head against her breasts '—just don't ever forget how much I love you.'

She stroked his hair and the back of his neck.
'Or I you,' she whispered.

His hands started to move on her urgently, but suddenly a strange shuffling sound made itself heard on the gravel of the driveway outside the bedroom window and they both stilled.

'What the hell was that?', Tom raised his head.

'I don't know, but...' Cathy started to say when the doorbell rang.

Tom swore and raked his hair out of his eyes.
'We won't answer it.' But it rang again and was accompanied by a thin knocking this time.

'All right,' he said savagely, and got out of bed to stride over to the window. But with his hand on the curtain, the taut long lines of his back relaxed and he turned to her ruefully. 'Come and have a look.'

Cathy wrapped the sheet around her and stumbled over to the window which looked across the drive towards the front door. And there, with his hand raised to knock again and his back to them, stood William.

But there was more. A large suitcase lay beside him, half open and disgorging a jumble of clothes, his pillow, his football and a battered teddy bear. He also, as they watched, looked anxiously over his shoulder as if expecting his grandmother to arrive in hot pursuit.

'Oh, Tom,' Cathy breathed. 'He's come to stay with you so you won't be lonely!,'

'Oh, William,' Tom said, his eyes suspiciously bright for a moment, 'you're a mate among mates. And have I got a surprise for you!,'

'Let's ring up his grandmother and ask her if he can stay the night,' Cathy begged. 'I'll make him his favourite dessert.'

Tom turned to her and took her into his arms. 'Done,' he said seriously, 'provided we can come back here once he's in bed and I can have *my* favourite... dessert.'

'Of course,' she smiled, 'anything you like. Oh, I really feel as if I'm home now——' She stopped and blushed. 'I mean...' She stopped again and for a long time he simply watched the colour in her cheeks enigmatically.

Then finally he took her face in his hands and kissed her lingeringly. 'Don't look like that—home will never, ever be the same without you. I love you, I always will.'