

red cliffs of malpara - margaret way

For most of her life Sarie had been tormented by Blake Meredith. Now, she discovered with guilty fascination that she had never really seen him as a man. Once he had spelled out authority and restraint; now, incredibly, he was everything she wanted from the depths of her passionate nature. Blake had not changed. She was the one who had undergone the transformation from an undisciplined schoolgirl into a woman. But after that scene tonight, would Blake ever regard her seriously?

CHAPTER ONE

He was on the desert fringe now, looking out over its barren immensity. A recent whirlwind had reshaped the sand dunes, lashing them up into rearing red columns, so that they towered like pagan temples, running in great parallel waves beyond the range of his vision. The desert was interminable. Fifty-six thousand square miles of shifting, burning, deep red sand. He knew it as well as any man. Knew it, respected it, his heart and mind adjusted to the vast heart-stopping scale of the place. No spectre of death hunted him down. He was no tourist. The desert was part of his life, part of his own country.

The heat was savage and after a hard day he felt just about ready to drop, yet the desert continued to hold him hypnotically. He had seen the world. All the sights and the sounds the world had to offer, but no other place held him like his own land. Malpara. The fever of pride and possession that lived on in his blood. For him, for all the Merediths that had gone before him, a realized dream. They had come a long way from a shack in the wilderness, privation and tragedy, sickness and plague on animal and man. There were still the long years of drought and red skies of dust, the bizarre years when the oldest rivers on earth ran fifty and more miles across, but they were the reapers. They had beaten the whirlwind. Out here, Malpara was a legend, a cattle kingdom, and its power was great. It spoke to him, this language of the land, but his dark face showed no trace of emotion. It was faintly remote, a sculpture.

A few feet away from him, a girl sat her horse. Both of them seemed to conform, horse and rider - bright showy colouring, good blood, and plenty of temperament. The girl, Sarie, was aflame with antagonism, though she tried hard to control it. Blake's black arrogance always kept her at fever heat. It would never die down.

Blake had been the law in her life since she was twelve years old and her mother had run off and left her. Her father, Raoul, had been killed a few years before, a tribal brother to Blake; he had been born a Meredith though a few moves from the great seat of power. Blake had been nothing if not thorough, and his influence was far-reaching. He had taken Sarie over and he had made it all legal, though she had protested bitterly from the very day he had flown in a thousand miles to get her. He had won from her some kind of loyalty but never unswerving allegiance, cattle king though he was. It was only Malpara that was alive with magic. As it was his, she preferred he didn't know about her love for it, little realizing her face was the perfect mirror for her emotions.

Blake had forgotten her anyway, staring out over the desert. He looked what he was, unconquered man. A hero figure in this harsh, brilliant landscape. It suited him. He was starkly beautiful in his fashion, uncompromisingly masculine - too emphatic by half. He might never look the soul of patience, but he

had a quality of command that made most people do things his way on the instant. All except Sarie. She was the only one who ever really resisted him and he liked to hand out plenty of discipline, so she and Blake were at war, everlasting.

Only today she was trying to co-operate, be gracious. She badly wanted that trip into Adelaide. It would be great, an experience.

Even with his head turned away from her he continued to exert a strong influence. What was wrong with a week with the Sheltons anyway? They were very social, Leigh was her dearest friend and Peter, Leigh's brother, was out of this world. Brilliant! Someone had made mischief, that was for sure. One of Blake's informants, and there were plenty of them. Probably someone had told him Peter was in love with her. He wasn't, of course, but whatever it was, it was enchanting, and Sarie wasn't going to have Blake bring her first real romance to grief.

She tossed her head fretfully and anger burned in her eyes. Blake paid not the slightest attention to her and she stared resentfully at his dark profile. It would serve him right if she ran off and married Peter, but the very thought of marriage spelled alarm. She could still remember all the arguments between her father and mother. If that was marriage they could have it, but romance was different. It left the doors wide open. Thankfully it had been Justine, Blake's eldest sister, who had spoken to Blake. She lived in Adelaide, married to a prominent business man turned politician. Justine had watched Sarie more closely than a guard dog every week-end she had been let out of boarding school, an exclusive one, selected by Blake. All her long vacations had been spent on Malpara. If Blake didn't turn around soon she would burst into one of her childhood fits of rage. His arrogance was devastating. He always made her feel like an obstinate, irritable child.

`Well?' He swung his head towards her, tuning into her wavelength with a definite click. As well as she knew him, he always threw her into a bright burning confusion. His eyes dazzled in his face, smoky crystal against his darkly sun-tanned skin. He looked magnificent and he bedevilled her to the skin, but she was going to play this thing for all it was worth.

`Can't I, Blake? Please.' Her blue eyes melted, so blue they merged into deep amethyst like silky African violets.

`No,' he said briskly, her beauty and her pleading all the same to him.

`Tell me why?' she said recklessly, abandoning conciliation for instant calamity.

His eyes caught her and held her, brooded over her face. `I'm issuing no open invitation to young Shelton. If he thinks he's marrying into the Merediths he's got another think coming.'

`The Merediths! That perfect clan.'

`You're part of it,' he retorted.

`What? The poor relation!'

`You don't act like one,' he said evenly, but his eyes glittered. `Go, Sarie, go. Let's see you whip up a storm. How you hate authority - you've been crying rebellion since you were twelve years old. I distinctly remember carrying you out of that woman's house. What was her name?'

`As if you don't know! You know everything. Aunty Rae.'

`Aunty Rae, my God!'

`Don't you talk about her,' Sarie said, admonishing. `Aunty Rae was a good friend to Mara.'

`Your mother,' Blake corrected.

`Mara,' she said starkly. `I might as well call her that. I'll never see her again.'

`If we could only be sure,' he said with no trace of mockery, as though the thought really bothered him.

`And I won't turn into her either,' Sarie was crying, not even noticing his preoccupation, `so why won't you let me go?'

`I said no.'

A sudden quiver shot through her and she could feel her pulses throbbing. It was useless to approach Blake in that mood. Some tension was in him, she could feel it, though he continued to watch her with striking, unsympathetic attention. `I can't win with you, can I?' she asked rapidly, low-voiced and distressed. `I can't plead or placate or cajole. ..'

`And no bad thing either!' he cut in on her heavily. `You can't have it all your own way, Sarie. It's bad training for a capricious, unpredictable, perverse little wretch like yourself.'

It was a struggle to keep the hot tears in check, but she tried. `God, you're hateful!'

`So you say, no one else, Sarie. Only you. Maybe it's something elemental.'

`I know I long to lash at you,' she gritted.

`Only you're not sure how I'd retaliate. Wise girl!'

The wind swept her silky red-gold hair into her eyes and she brought up a fierce hand to brush it away. `I'm nineteen now, Blake.'

`You don't have to remind me. Maybe I'm counting the days until you're safely off my hands. Have you ever thought of that?'

Curiously that hurt. Darn it, he's a part of me, Sarie thought, growing increasingly agitated.

`Good riddance!' she said bitterly.

`But not yet! You've got a lot to learn before I'm ready to see you married, lucky man though he'll be. You're beautiful, if nothing else!'

`Thank you.' Suddenly she felt small, chasms apart in experience. Blake always managed to get the better of her, no matter what. He had a lot of assets in combination and a direct current of power. The full glare of the sun was on his face, so clear-cut and uncompromising. The sight of him should have given her pleasure, but instead she took it as a deeply felt, personal affront. If the truth were told she was just a little afraid of Blake, though she would rather ride the wild bush horses than admit it. On the other hand should he suddenly withdraw himself from her life, she would feel desperately alone, the bitter fruit of her uncertain relationship with him. She couldn't reason all these fine psychological shadings. Blake was Blake, and she was hopelessly under his thumb. He was too authentically male - it was a miracle she got her own way at all. He seemed to see her so perfectly. All her limitations, her absurd, irritating emotions. Yet crossing him was an actual experience; it made her come alive. Even at his worst, there was a considerable degree of excitement about Blake. The expressions that chased across her small, fine-boned face were transparent and multiple, colour pulsed under the satiny texture of her skin. Blake alone reduced her to a puppet figure. He saw the reasons behind each move she tried to make, and in seeing her so clearly made her lose strength. Blake had lifted manipulating people to a great art. Some days he filled her mind entirely. One day she would rationalize all his astonishing powers, though she had always fundamentally rejected them. Or tried to, Sarie thought in despair.

`Let's go home,' he said in his swift, impatient fashion. `I'm generally amused or bored by cross little schoolgirls.'

`You found Leigh attractive enough,' she challenged him.

`How stupid can you get!' he breathed with utter scorn. `Your girl friend I kept at arm's length. If her style is anything like her brother's, I'm quite justified in keeping you at home.'

`What insight! What observation!' she burst out, overcome with resentment. `Who are you to dictate to

me who my friends should be?'

`I'm a very privileged person, Selene. I'm your legal guardian.'

`Don't call me Selene. It really gets to me!'

Blake grinned. 'Selene, the moon goddess! It's true you don't rate it. You're still silly, prejudiced, little Sarie.'

'And you're my worst critic. You've always disliked me and you have a warped view of my character. You have to put me down on principle.'

'Sometimes I'd like to gag you,' he agreed lazily. 'You're so thoroughly expressive. I suppose it comes with your hair. Fluctuating moods - contrary for most of the time - the rare glimpse of great charm, overflowing with vitality or retreating into hostile little silences. When you banish all the prickly patches you might turn into a woman.'

`You can't mean that!' She tilted her chin to him by way of challenge and defiance. If he meant to break her spirit, she was untameable. Instead he only smiled.

`Don't turn your eyes on me, Sarie, remarkable though they might be. I'm Blake, remember. Nothing you do would surprise me.'

`A state of affairs I could bear more easily if you would only give in sometimes. There's no harm whatsoever in this trip to Adelaide.'

He shrugged. 'Ask them out here if you like. The thing is, Sarie, I want you right under my nose.'

`Oh, that's ridiculous! You're entirely made of granite.' Her voice shook.

`Not so young Shelton! I'm not a fool, Sarie. You'd be a godsend to that young man about town. His sister gave the impression of being remarkably acute in the things of this world, and you'd get lots of careful training and instruction. I don't even see how you two girls are compatible. All the worldly awareness is on her side. You're just a babe in the bush.'

`Well, you're much better at making out people's intentions and motives than I am,' she said, shuddering.

`Sometimes I think I'll never be free of you, and that would be alarming. You're far too clever.'

`Well, you know, Sarie, I care about you, though I don't suppose you believe it.'

`You do? Her beautiful eyes glowed, beset with a clear disbelief.

`It might not be a workable arrangement,' he agreed, 'but yes, and a fight every inch of the way!'

`You're shameless!'

`And you care about me too, only it's much more natural to you to deny it.'

She was doing her utmost to appear as insolently cool as he was, but she couldn't meet his narrowed silver gaze; it made such a vast claim on her. Blake was an enigma and he had a positive genius for rendering her incapable of a good, convincing argument. All she wanted to do was shout like the undisciplined schoolgirl he labelled her, he so tore at her volatile nerves. Probably he reasoned that she had a lot of her mother in her, but she had a strong dash of Meredith too. This time she was going to stick to her guns and a few feminine wiles might help.

`Mrs. Shelton insisted I come,' she said in her sweet, faintly husky voice. 'There'll be a few parties, some tripping around, I guess. Shopping in town....'

His harsh crow of laughter made her break off. 'Shopping in town!' he said with sharp humour. 'Listen, honey, I know you. You're very feminine, and success has gone to your head. Nevertheless I'm really sorry to have to crack down on you this time. Shelton's in love with you, right? A nice sentiment, I agree, but it won't do at all. Keeping you on Malpara is merely a sensible precaution. You should be grateful!'

'You know darn well you don't give me half enough credit. I'm a flaming miracle of virtue after all your efforts. If I can't look after myself at nineteen, I'll never be able too.'

'You said it.' he murmured laconically, looking down his straight nose at her.

'I don't get it! I really don't!' Sarie exclaimed bewilderedly.

'Well, it's quite clear to me, and so is the outcome. Peter Shelton could talk you around in no time. Stay on Malpara. It's a whole lot safer. This friendship with Shelton has gone far enough. You're not really serious about it, otherwise I might treat you a little more gently. You're just starting to feel your own power, flutter your butterfly wings. Another thing, you're nineteen, and a pretty green nineteen at that. He must be twenty-six or more, and in a different position altogether. A beautiful girl like you, with a sizeable dowry, could just tip the scales in favour of matrimony.'

'A dowry! Don't make me laugh!'

'Do you really think I won't give you one?' Blake questioned.

'I think ...' She flung out a hand in her confusion and he caught it.

'Stop now, Sarie, while you're in front. I've had a long, hard day and you're beginning to rattle me. I'm not trying to spoil your enjoyment, believe me. Just reaching a sensible decision. I'll tell you frankly I didn't much like your girl friend, and I don't like the sound of her family either.'

'I knew it!' she said, aghast. 'Precious Justine, who's supposed to be my' friend, but never before her brother, oh no! You've got your family well trained, Blake. They run to you for everything.'

'So do you when it suits you,' he said a shade wearily. 'Come on, let's ride back.'

'Where to?' she said bitterly.

'Home.'

His shimmering grey eyes were shaded by the wide brim of his Stetson. He looked very hard and masculine, sufficient unto himself. Sarie gave a funny little muffled exclamation, though she seemed unaware of it. 'If I stayed with Justine?' she suggested. 'Oh, Blake, please listen to me.'

This gave him pause. He threw up his head, a brilliant questioning look in his eyes. A moment of consideration, then: 'No, that's throwing it back on Justine, not that she shirks responsibility. We'll let this little romance cool off, shall we? I understand Shelton has been shouting it from the rooftops.'

Sarie stiffened. 'It's not true, it can't be. You'd say anything to hurt me!'

'The hell I would!' he said angrily, and his fingers bit deep into her skin. 'I wish you'd stop making me out a monster.'

'Well, you do your damned best!'

He jerked her a little towards him and the two horses moved together, ears pricked, listening; the splendid coal-black stallion and the delicate chestnut filly. 'Sarie,' he said beneath his breath, willing the hostility out of it, 'don't let's wrangle around the situation. I've got the message loud and clear and I don't like it. People talk. That's natural, and a fair bit of it has come to my ears. In the past twelve months since you've come back from overseas your photograph has appeared in so many glossy magazines, it's become a damned nuisance. There are a lot of things you don't understand; I have a few worries of my own on your account and you're just some kid bent on having a good time.'

'Why you miserable tyrant, that's not true!'

His grip tightened. 'Call me that again and I'll soon put you straight.'

'You would.' she said wildly, salty tears in her throat.

'I've got to say it. You know what you look like? Some ferocious outback dictator. King of the sand cliffs!'

'Really:' he sounded surprised, his silvery eyes in shadow, the sun on the strong line of his chin. 'Don't let's start that again. The thing is, Selene, I take excellent care of you. You're just too dim to appreciate it. Let Shelton cool off and he'll find somebody else - someone hell bent on having a good time. You're definitely not in the offing!'

Tears made the red landscape a swirling mist. 'Justine's report was a black mark against him.'

'Against the whole lot of them, and leave Justine out of it. She loves you.'

'Maybe she does,' she muttered ungraciously, knowing it was true. 'But she could be wrong about Peter. What is he, a criminal?'

'He's no criminal,' he said briskly, 'I've simply put him on the unwanted list. Got it?'

'Oh, I've got it all right.' Her violet-blue eyes were flaming with life. 'You're a judgment on me, Blake. You get worse every day!'

'I don't mind,' he said in his normal mocking tone. 'You're as helpless as a baby. Come on, Sarie, admit it. I'm the boss.'

'It's so important to you, isn't it?' she asked resentfully. 'Can't I have anything?'

'Anything and anyone you like, bar Shelton. He's not important at all.'

'Meet him. You'll like him.'

'I wouldn't really, russet-head.' His far-seeing eyes picked up and identified an approaching dust devil.

'Come on, let's go. That's coming our way.'

Sarie reacted violently, her cheeks flushed, her hat swinging back off her gleaming copper-coloured curls. To be dismissed like this when she had already eaten dust! 'And I darned well hope it gets you!'

'I'm afraid not. Come on, we've been sitting too long.' Red dust glittered as the big black stallion reared a little towards the sky. Blake reached over and slapped the silky flanks of the chestnut, then they were off in a blaze across the spinifex plain with a flock of corellas wheeling snowy white above them. It was difficult to be angry when one was galloping, pleasure and the shattering brilliance of the landscape overcoming Sarie's pentup resentment. She could never hope to match Blake, but she was a good rider, graceful and cheeky at the same time.

He could see it was meant to be a race and unobtrusively checked the big stallion. One had to go carefully with Sarie. She was as unpredictable as she was colourful and a restlessness was upon her. He took special care to let her get ahead, a small flying figure racing away across the grassland into a grove of baubins and flowering acacias. If she was spoilt - and she was - then Blake had only himself to blame, but there would be no more of it. Sarie was capable of so much; infinitely charming when she wasn't dead set on misbehaving. He didn't deceive himself for a moment that she had given up all thought of the Sheltons.

He reined into the golden green shade and saw her fling up her arms like a ballerina in a gesture of triumph,

her small face flooded with colour, enchantingly pretty.

'You're slipping,' she announced gaily.

'I'm that.'

'What on earth have you been doing?' she looked up at him imperiously.

'Waiting for you to wake up.'

Something in his voice and his dark face stilled Sarie to utter breathlessness. Very oddly, the Blake she knew dissolved into somebody else entirely different, a stranger of equal power.

'Why, you've spoilt it now,' she said, a little wildly. 'You weren't even trying!'

`Does it matter?' he asked lazily.

`It must!' she said, feeling very confused.

He smiled, the same old Blake again, mocking, emphatic and so self-contained. The strange urgency died out of her. It was an odd moment and it just happened, and she didn't want to think about it. The wind picked up again, scattering berries and blossom, but her mind stopped on this new aspect of Blake, the way her mind always stopped when she was confronted with some strange hazard that she wished would go away.

`Friends again, O.K.?' he asked abruptly.

'O.K.,' she agreed, but keeping a secret place for herself inside, a strong fortress where Blake could never enter. The horses cut a path through the dry aromatic grasses, releasing their fragrance. In the distance a herd of steers were collecting around a waterhole, then drifting off down the dry bed of a channel with an aboriginal stockboy on his compact little workhorse watching the herd as they came down to drink. Whatever her quarrel with Blake, Sarie knew this was her own part of the world. She loved it beyond reason, for she had seen it through the bad times, but Malpara had tremendous hypnotic power, the face of fear and ferocity, the appalling cruelty of drought and the rare sweeping years of flood, and after the rains ... enchantment. The fantasy world where the red desert landscape was extravagantly carpeted with wild flowers and the birds went mad with nectar and colour.

Malpara was unique. Uniquely Australian, strangely frightening and lonely and all at once miraculously beautiful. No garden, however lovely, was as spectacular as the Channel Country after rain. Mile upon mile upon mile the flowers went on in an impossible, never-ending display. Later, when the sun and wind wiped them from the desert sand it didn't seem possible they could ever bloom again, but they always did; covering the graves of the old pioneers, the explorers, the great herds that had failed.

Malpara, in flower, was a magnificent sight. Under siege of flood, with an inland sea all round, it was sheerly awesome. In time of severe drought, a more cruel and devastating land would be difficult to imagine. For a few years now the miracle rain had passed their way and Malpara was the best place in the world. A benign giant. Its breadth and vigour fitted the man, Blake; a cattle baron in the grand tradition and such a wild success at it he made Sarie feel weak.

She turned her head and saw his face. An aura of strength and purpose was bred into it, a certain imperiousness, devastating good looks, the whole spectrum. He was unyielding, too, and he stood between her and the Sheltons just as he had stood between her and her mother.

'Want to race me again?' she taunted him. `The last would qualify as a non-event!'

'You couldn't beat me, darling. Never.' There was an amused light in his eyes, silvery like some newly minted coins.

'Don't be so sure!' They were empty words, for the undefinable confusion was returning, jostling with her native-born antagonism. From that day on she would find she would never be free of it, that new dimension in her ever volatile relationship with Blake.

Featherlight though she was, panic and restlessness were being conveyed to her intelligent and sensitive mount. It began to reek in protest and a tautness came into Sarie's young face, a kind of fear and rejection of her own emotions, as though she thought she was being exploited. Blake might be able to dominate her life, but when he made her hands tremble on the reins it was time to escape.

He was still watching her in a hard, rather speculative fashion that she took to be arrogance. She had never been so shatteringly aware of it before and it completed her rebellion. She retaliated to this queer, unspoken communication by kicking her heels into the filly's sides, yearning for a physical release from

Blake's presence. The chestnut, offended, surged into flight with all the grace and speed of her fine breeding.

Its blonde mane brushed Sarie's face as she bent over the gleaming, arched neck. They were going very fast, in an excited, exhilarated rhythm. There was no time to think about anything, no new complexities of Blake to bother her. The blue sky was overhead, filled with the shrill, exultant cries of the birds. They were almost to the first line of fences; rails reared up ahead and they flew over them together with inches to spare. The wind was singing all about them, Sarie's hat whipping on her back, her red-gold curls blowing wild.

More fences reared up, then she was shocked by the sight of Blake's black stallion flying past her with its monumental stride. She had thought they were well behind her. Everything Blake did, he did far too well. Fire blazed in her blue-violet eyes, and a reckless daring. She heard him call out to her, but she didn't trouble to pay any attention. She bent her head over the filly's mane, her knees pressing into its sides, her cheeks aflame. All sense of fear had left her. She was riding with urgency and an overwhelming determination to beat Blake.

Her encounter with the fence was dreamlike. The filly, gallant as she was, swerved in terror at this new, forbidding obstacle, almost a foot higher than anything she was used to. Had Sarie driven the filly harder, giving her no choice, they might have negotiated it safely; as it was the horse jibbed and Sarie was thrown clear, blown in the wind as effortlessly as a spent leaf, slamming sideways into piles of fresh straw and hay that alone saved her from injury. The breath was knocked out of her and the foolish fire of bravado. She lay where she fell, hunched into an arc.

`You little fool!' For once Blake's voice shook, but his hard, practised hands ran over her without tremor.

`You bet!' she whispered when, painfully, her breath came back. For the moment she was utterly vanquished.

`I told you to give it away!'

'You're always telling me something.' Instinctively and ineffectually she tried to resist him. It couldn't be Blake's hand so gently on her hair, turning her face to him. He was immensely strong and she felt as feeble as a kitten. The roaring in her ears was dying away; his hand smoothed her cheek and he murmured something she couldn't hear.

'Hows Tina?' she asked.

`A damned sight luckier than you are! You must have known she'd refuse a fence like that.'

`She's brilliant usually.'

`Yes, and she's got a lot more sense than you have. Don't twist round, she's all right.' One hand pressed her backwards with such gentle intensity of purpose that she had no say. `Lie there for a moment and shut up.'

She couldn't let tears well up and disgrace her. `You sound worried, Blake!'

`And you sound dazed,' he retorted.

`I had no idea you felt so strongly. Am I too much responsibility for you?'

'Yes, ma'am.' he smiled down at her and she averted her head as if she was in mortal clanger. Now, for no reason, with Blake so close to her, she found him overwhelmingly disturbing.

`I wonder where the hell my hat is?' she asked rather frantically.

`No hurry! We'll find it. It's you I care about!'

'I'll never believe it, Blake.'

`I could make you easily enough,' he said oddly.

`How?'

`Oh, it will be years yet.'

`I might have been killed.' Sarie's voice quivered.

`But you're not. A few bruises maybe. Don't ever try anything like that again - next time you mightn't be half so lucky.'

`No.' Colour was returning to her clear, creamy skin, but her violet-blue eyes were still faintly bemused.

`I'm sorry I gave you such a fright.'

`Why, you don't hate me at all, Sarie,' Blake said softly.

`Whoever said I did?' Deliberately she rolled away from him and sat up, wincing a little over her new aches and pains. If she looked into his eyes it would be the same as surrendering some important part of herself.

`You did, on and off,' he drawled.

`Well, I was lying.' Her heart was racing behind her rib cage, jolted out of her usual vital necessity to prove

something to Blake. In some subtle, intangible way everything was changing.

His smile flashed very white in his darkly tanned face. `Oh, let me savour this moment! It might never come again. My little firebrand, Sarie!'

`I don't know what's happening to me,' she said unsteadily.

`Now that I believe!'

She gave a little shuddering glance at him. Better to have him alongside than to be cut adrift in the world. `You're deep, Blake. Deep, dark water.'

`And you're a little crystal stream!'

She stared at him, seeing the mocking, amused quirk to his mouth. His fingers brushed hers and she couldn't move, not even turn her head, speechless, carried away on a racing tide. Her beautiful eyes said quite clearly: 'Help me!' and he understood her defencelessness and young anxiety, his expression changing, crisp now and matter of fact.

'Think you can stagger to your feet?'

It was all very reassuring, the old Blake. She moaned a little as she tried to clamber up, and he pulled her right into his arms 'It's all right, Sarie. Relax. Let me help you. You're plainly not restored to your usual efficiency.'

'I'm a wreck.'

For some reason this amused him. His chin brushed her curls and he smiled at her as though she were a small, harmless child.

'Its a terrible time you've had.'

`I'm thinking you might let me go to the Sheltons?' she said hopefully.

`Stop there, Red.'

`That's settled, then?'

`Yes, and you know it. Now, I think the two of us can manage fine on Bargara. What say you?'

'I agree.'

`But how extraordinary!' Blake laughed aloud.

And it was, as Sarie very soon discovered, with Blake's arm around her narrow waist, grasping the reins. It was no new role he was playing; he had taken her up before him many times before. Why, he had taught her to ride. It was utterly absurd the turmoil she was now thrown into, too much for her to handle,

and Blake could handle all things very well. Her whole body was tingling from her shake-up. It had had a very disrupting effect on her, a sheer, singing awareness.

From time to time, she felt Blake's eyes on her profile, the sun on her hair, the line of her neck, the slight outline of her young body, but his amusement had modulated into a desire to get her home again.

As a ride it was almost ecstatic, and when they looked down at the homestead from the vantage point of Nuljiri, the Old Chieftain, the brilliant red sandstone pinnacle that stood guard over the station, her mood had settled into a strangely heightened contentment. `So this is how it started. Malpara. Treasure in the wilds. The Rainbow Gold.'

`It doesn't frighten you?' he queried.

`What if it does, a little? It doesn't matter!' She twisted her head back to him. She could do nothing else. Late afternoon sunlight splashed over him and his sparkling eyes, their disconcerting clarity. Her voice tailed off and she fell to studying his face as though she had never in her life seen it before and had to commit it to memory.

`What's bothering you, Sarie?'

'Why, nothing at all. Perhaps I'm mildly hysterical from my fall.'

`Don't kid yourself,' he said, and her eyes widened.

`No, dammit, I won't! I just don't know you sometimes. You're changing.'

`No, Sarie, I'm not.'

`I tell you it's true!' she said a little desperately.

`Well, let's keep it all under wraps.' He shrugged and changed the subject. `It's about time they had another corroboree up here.'

`So they will, with Blossom Moon. Let's go down, Blake. I could do with a soaking to iron out the kinks.'

The sun was low when at last the big stallion picked its way down the weathered bluff, heading towards the thick belt of trees that made a perfect square around the homestead and its satellite buildings. Over the years the layout had been greatly enlarged and modernised until now Malpara was rated as one of the finest beef cattle stations in the country, its great herds built up from the best bloodlines. A large part of the station's revenue came from the annual sale by auction of their champion breeders when fellow cattlemen and their families came from all over the country and overseas to attend Malpara sales and add to their own bloodlines.

The hugh show sheds and the sale sheds blended into the tree-studded landscaped grounds, to the rear of the offices and store ringed around by the various bungalows of senior members of the staff. Opposite to the stables and machinery sheds were the stockmen's quarters and the large cookhouse. The station was selfsufficient with an excellent all-weather air-strip, two light aircraft and a helicopter used for carrying men, gear and for long range mustering. It was an inspiring example of civilized, even luxurious living, so far as the main house was concerned, in the wilds.

Malpara homestead stood apart from the rest of the layout, a sweeping, rather romantic two-storied building that had cost a handsome fortune at the turn of the century. There was nothing typical about it, though it had a faintly Italian look, like some palatial villa set down in a sun-drenched landscape.

Always, returning after some little time sway from it, Sarie felt an upsurge of power and wellbeing. She couldn't help but enjoy the homestead - it was a convincing success symbol.

Inside the shelter belt of massed desert oaks, Blake shouted instructions to one of the hands to bring in Sarie's chestnut which was trotting alongside Whirlwind, Blake's beautiful palomino mare, down at the white wood enclosures. The station grounds at that sunset hour were packed with staff members and

their families and Sarie spoke now, laughing and waving to everybody with Blake's arm, crossed over in front of her, hard against her side as she leaned down to speak to Jamie Conway, Blake's overseer's six-year-old son. Jamie's tanned freckled face was wreathed in smiles as he ran alongside them, pleading with Blake for a ride on the black stallion some time. His mother Shirley called out to him to stop bothering the boss, and Jamie ran off in the direction of the Conways' neat bungalow.

All the tension and odd nervousness of earlier in the afternoon gave way to a pounding exhilaration. Sarie gave an audible sigh of pleasure, pressing back against Blake; this was home. They were swinging now towards the long line of stables, and she caressed Bargara's velvety, curved ears. The stallion circled its proud, poised head about and acknowledged her, never breaking its beautiful, long stride, precision and power its distinctive characteristic, swaying on its long legs that could move like pistons at the gallop.

On the paved courtyard Blake slid to the ground and held up his arms for Sarie. She dropped lightly into them, mouth smiling, eyes glowing as though there had never been a moment's dissension between them instead of years of in-fighting. 'That was marvellous.'

'This, honey, is a horse!'

'You can say that again! When can I ride him?'

'Never.'

She merely smiled and shrugged her delicate shoulders. Bargara was too strong for her in any case.

'All right?' Blake lifted one black eyebrow at her.

'All right!' She went on smiling, tilting up and down in her riding boots. A wave of possession was breaking over her she never thought possible. She was part of it all. Part of Blake. Malpara. Everything! All her earlier defeats had vanished. Tomorrow she might think of them again. With Blake she might have to, but now! Sarie looked at the big clock on the stable tower. Time for a leisurely bath before dinner. Her fall had had the strangest effect; she felt marvellous, a winner. She could accomplish anything. Butter-tap Blake. The thought made a smile break all over her mouth. She didn't notice Blake's eyes moving all over her face, something mocking and derisive in their clear depths.

Instinct warned him not to disturb her mood. She was plainly feeling exuberant, ready and willing to get the better of him, but belonging instead of playing the usual melodramatic outcast. Her eyes, thickly fringed by dark lashes, were flashing like sapphires, curls dancing and glistening like bright copper leaves around her small, flushed face, accentuating its cameo quality. She stood gracefully and easily, just tipping his shoulder, her peachy skin reflecting the light. She looked startlingly lovely, as untouched and innocent as any blue-eyed child, but with a blossoming quality, a fairy-tale, feminine sensuousness that spelled trouble. No wonder at all Peter Shelton was moving in fast, his intentions obvious. Justine's report had been scrupulously fair but thorough. That was one avenue Blake intended to cut off. Sarie didn't want or need the Sheltons.

'Now what are you frowning at?' she demanded suddenly.

'Maybe I got to thinking,' he said, his crystal grey eyes holding her.

'Oh, I knew it couldn't last!' she pouted.

'A good soaking is what you need. Remember?'

All the old antagonism was surfacing again, and a weird, leaping excitement, Maybe Blake was a magician. With the light flying grace that was so much a part of her, Sarie turned about and took to her heels. Living with Blake was like being on a see-saw.

CHAPTER TWO

All morning private airplanes had been landing on the strip, cattlemen anxious to lay eyes on the progeny of Malpara's outstanding Santa Gertrudis bull, Kalwaddi Eleven; all two-thousand-six-hundred pounds of him, an extremely valuable animal and the station's greatest herd sire. Breeding was the backbone of the hill stations, and owners all over the country were vitally interested in the bloodlines of their stock. Malpara's outstanding sale prices were only realized on their pedigreed livestock. Long years of cross breeding, inbreeding, testing and analysing performances had gone into building up and maintaining Malpara's impressive record, with a Trophy Room full of cups and ribbons to show for it. The Santa Gertrudis were a horned breed, solid cherry red in colour, and stood up well to the hot, dry conditions of the South-West, and Kalwaddi Eleven could trace his ancestry back to the famous Monkey from the King Ranch Texas, the foundation sire of all Santa Gertrudis cattle.

This day's viewing was a businesslike, men-only affair, unlike the coming annual auction when 'everyone and his aunty' turned up, according to Haddo Meredith, Blake's great-uncle. The famous sales on Malpara combined business and pleasure with all sorts of entertainments laid on for the cattlemen's families on the pre-sale afternoon; a gala barbecue that night, the actual business of bidding in filled stands the following morning, and a celebration ball for the visitors and buyers on the final night. It was one of the big highlights of the year when the cream of the cattle world turned up and a great many socialites as well. All the Meredith women married well, but only one of Blake's sisters - 'Scotty' born Stephanie, the youngest - had married into the landed elite like themselves.

Scotty was there that morning, lounging beside the pool, displaying a lavish amount of perfect skin coloured mid-gold. Her glossy dark hair was pinned to the crown of her head and she was only vaguely aware that she was being waited on hand and foot. The little housegirls came out, smiling their greetings, and Scotty smiled in response. She was a compulsive talker and Sarie's only source of gossip for more than a week.

'But really, darling, he can't!' said Scotty, who hadn't until that moment heard of the Sheltons but was now in full possession of the facts as seen by Sarie.

'He can and he has,' Sarie maintained. 'Blake's mad with power!'

'Oh, come now, sweetie!' Scotty looked uncomfortable. At twenty-four she had never been known to criticize her adored brother. 'Blake's totally in touch with everything. Everybody.'

'He has spies everywhere, you mean.'

'Yes, there's that! But it's no use going against him, my girl. You must admit he's exceptionally good to all of us. Why, you're family all the way. Think about it in depth, honey.'

'I have, and I'm convinced mine's the best way.'

'I suppose he's mad not to be in love with you,' Scotty said cheerfully, watching Sarie with affection and no trace of envy.

'Who?' Sarie threw up her burnished head, looking positively threatened.

'Why, your Peter!' Scotty retorted. 'Who else? I mean, he's the one you're on about, isn't he?'

'Yes, of course.' Sarie lapsed back on the recliner, looking the picture of a vivid, colourful heroine under duress. 'Peter's got class. Very smooth and blond. He's been to a lot of places and done a lot of thinks.'

'Really? All allowable, I hope?'

Impulsively Sarie threw an ice cube at her. 'Don't be silly! I'm just going to do my own thing. You know how it is, Scotty, you're not Justine.'

`God forbid! Incidentally, Clive's party looks like swinging into power.'

Sarie scowled. `To heck with that! Don't let's talk politics. Something for-everyone and all that. They're all out for themselves.'

'Clive certainly is.'

`If my luck holds out,' Sarie said, ignoring her, `I should be able to stow away with Jake. He told me I had to be the world's most beautiful jackaroo not an hour ago.'

`I'm sure he's said the same thing to me. Well, he can't afford another spectacular marriage; the last cost him plenty. He's an authority on livestock, but never on women.'

`Jake's going back to Adelaide,' Sarie interrupted.

Scotty shrugged. `You're playing with fire, child, and I don't mean your Pete, it's Blake I'm talking about. Those frosty eyes! It's only common sense not to cross him.

`I'm going to Adelaide too,' Sarie said rebelliously.

`Suit yourself.'

`Will you cover for me?'

`What price a broken neck? Really, pet, I can't.

Blake's just great at seeing through me.'

`Let me put it another way,' Sarie said, sitting up. `You won't tip him off?'

`My dear, do I look like an informer? Of course not. But think what fun and games we'll have when he finds out you've gone!'

`I'll leave him a note, that will bring tears to his eyes. I've thought it all out in my head. With Blake around a girl might never get married!'

`I am. Gayle is. Justine is. Explain that!' Scotty's eyes twinkled.

`You're his sisters!' Sarie said scornfully..

`And you're his little ewe lamb,' Scotty teased her.

`Rubbish!'

`I know what I'm talking about . Blake put up a really good fight for you. How do you think your mother gave in so easily?'

`Money, I expect,' Sane returned cynically.

`Even millionaires don't dip into their pockets so readily. Well, lead your double life if you must. I believe

you know how to look after yourself, in fact, I know you do. Perhaps Blake is being a wee bit unreasonable.'

`He doesn't know me like you do.'

`Just as well! You redheads!'

`I've come on in a lot of other different ways, and I intend to lead my own life. Blake's not going to have all

the say. Particularly now. Time has been hanging pretty heavily this week. Blake's been so busy!'

`He'll rely on you a lot when the auction's on,' Scotty pointed out..

`Big Brother!' Sarie said with a look of resigned martyrdom.

`Is that how you think of him?'

`The man who gives all the orders.'

`The man that makes this station operate. At a beaut profit, I might add.'

`Oh, stop being family. I know all Blake's good points. He's terrific. Superman.'

`You've picked up a lot of useful words for him,' observed Scotty.

`They're necessary, believe me. Blake treats me like a child.'

'A very modern child. Precious.'

`I have to have a little freedom, Scotty, Otherwise I rebel.'

Scotty looked thoughtful. `You know it's hard to know where this thing you have for Blake stems from. Don't try to put one over him, that's all, it's like turning your back on a tidal wave. He's got your best interests at heart.'

`I'm going!' Sarie said doggedly.

`I don't really want to see it, but on the other hand I don't think Blake should button down so hard.

Besides, Justine's in Adelaide.'

Sarie drew in her breath, gazing at Scotty a little helplessly. `You wouldn't ring her?'

`My dear, I follow the line of least resistance with Justine. But no, I won't. Justine has turned into an intense political hostess, very earnest and full of information, statistics, everything, and she gives it out at regular intervals. It frightens me. She's simply not interested in the ordinary things any more, horses, dogs, men. She's even hinted I'm not being terribly useful when I'm run off my feet for most of the week. Doesn't she remember what life on the land is like? She thinks I'm silly, arrested in my mental growth, because I won't vote for Clive, and I think she's strange.'

Sarie was nearly dizzy with relief. To have Justine come down on her! `Actually,' she said placatingly, 'Justine is genuinely interested in Clive's world - Government, bills through all stages, that kind of thing. She devours facts. She's marvellous at meetings. By no means the ordinary little helpmate. She's super-efficient like Blake. I think she'd make a pretty good Prime Minister myself.'

`It could happen!' Scotty shook her head as though she dreaded it.

`And why not? You're one of us!'

`I'm Sean's wife, love. That keeps me busy. I get up at dawn and I go to bed late, and this is my first break in months.'

`It's about time we women made an effort in other directions.'

`You do it for me,' Scotty said, pursuing her own mission. `Go right ahead. I'm lost in wonder and admiration.'

`A lot of things aren't right with the world, Scotty.'

`Listen, darling,' Scotty sat up quickly in protest, `you sound like Justine. I do get a few intelligent notions from time to time, but I can only do my bit. It's surprising how things could improve if we all did that. One sees these things, but it's hard to know what to do about it - I only put a bite in my mouth and Justine starts in on starvation. Everyone is well fed on our station, every man, woman and child. I'd like to do more, but I'm flat out as it is. I haven't got all the help we have here. It will be a long time before we reach this stage, and speaking of cattle barons, look who's here!' Scotty swung a hand back towards her brother, handsome and rangy, his physical vibrancy utterly maddening to Sarie at least. She returned his luminous stare with one of equal deliberation. `I didn't think we'd see you for ages.' Scotty was rippling and smiling, her love for her brother as obvious as it could be.

Blake smiled back. `And you wouldn't have, either, only some urgent business has come up. I'm flying over to Balka Downs. Want to come?'

`You bet!' said Scotty, sitting up quickly, and reaching for her silk jersey wrap. `When are you leaving?'

`In about an hour. What about you Sarie? You've had enough sun.' Blake's eyes outlined Sarie's pale golden shape and she grimaced at him accordingly, but put up no fight when he crammed her floppy

straw sun-hat over her head. It was useless anyway. A good deal depended on how she acted now.

'I think I'll stay here,' she said very pleasantly, feeling little shock waves running through her and dipping her head sideways in a pathetic desire to avoid Blake's silvery, calculating gaze.

'That's no answer,' he said crisply, very faintly malicious.

'Don't crowd the girl,' Scotty said nervously. Even as a small girl Sarie had always clashed with Blake.

'She doesn't have to come, but I will. I'd love to!'

'Why?' Blake narrowed his eyes, looking down his straight nose at Sarie. 'You usually pester me to come along.'

'Marge hasn't seen Scotty in ages. They'll have lots of news to swap. Surely you remember I was only over there a fortnight ago?'

He reached over and lifted her chin and she tossed her head a little, inwardly seething but trying to control it, her blue eyes overlaid with pure violet. 'You intrigue me, Sarie. You always have. All right, then, what are you going to do?'

'This and that,' she answered evasively.

His hand on her collarbone carried weight. 'There's a report in my office for the Royal National Association. We'll have a record showing of Santa Gertrudis this year. You might type up that.'

In the shade of her hat her wide-set eyes flashed blue fire. 'You might say please!'

'I will, when your manners improve,' he said deliberately, setting her teeth on edge.

A flicker of surprise crossed Scotty's face. 'Could an argument be developing?' she inquired cautiously.

'I've ahways succeeded in getting Blake's goat,' Sarie muttered, trying to control the wildness in her'.

'I don't feel that!' he mocked her. 'If you ride out, don't go too far.'

'Yes, Blake. No, Blake

'Go on,' he said, and for all the smile on his face she stopped there. Blake was a throwback to the age of complete male supremacy. He might spoil her in many different ways, but he demanded this maddening deference, blind obedience. He looked very hard and handsome, his eyes an extraordinary contrast to his Indian-black hair and his darkly tanned skin. Almost, for a moment, she felt her panic was showing.

There was less and less time to back out of this thing. She was aware, too, of a vaguely unsettling sense of shame, an inner struggle that she found mirrored on Scotty's usually sparkling with honesty face.

They were, in fact, partners in this enormous deceit; crossing Blake in actuality haunted them both with a deep sense of foreboding. He was still staring at her as though attempting to read her mind, which was a thing he did often with treacherous accuracy, and there was nothing she could do about it. 'How would you like the report, double space?'

'You know damned well, double space.'

'Well, I'll get dressed,' Scotty said, conscious that this thing might well blow up in her face. Blake wasn't going to make it easy for them. 'Sure you won't come, sweetie?' she inquired innocently.

'No, sweetie can stay here,' Blake cmilirmed, as though it were now a punishment, a sarcastic glint in his crystal clear eyes.

Sarie twisted off the recliner away from him and stood up, feeling a sudden rush of heat to her cheeks. 'I might as well collect my gear as well.'

He turned away casually and handed her her wrap, the vivid, feminine fabric incongruous against his hard male body. She fluttered into it, keeping her bright head lowered so he couldn't see her face or her eyes. She couldn't believe she could feel so nervous. When she finally looked up he had his dark eyebrows raised. 'I've a distinct premonition you're up to no good.'

`Oh, come off it, Blake! I'm going in to do the report.'

`I say, do be friends,' Scotty pleaded. `It's a shame to be so hard on her.'

`Stick to the facts, girl!' Blake advised his sister.

`That's just what I mean. You're so good and all. Haven't I just been saying that? Scotty demanded of Sarie. `Can't you take a joke, Blake?'

`Sarie being what she is, and about her, no!'

`It's no news,' said Sarie, and allowed her mouth to quiver, a beautiful mouth indicating a high degree of sensuous femininity. Now it looked like a hurt child's.

Scotty allowed herself a compassionate click of the tongue and Blake turned away from both of them, as though he found women's company claustrophobic. `Don't gang up on me, for God's sake! Bring the jeep down to the strip when you're ready, Scotty. You can think up lots and lots of things to tell Marge, I trust. Sarie's conversation is pretty stimulating - they laugh most of the time.'

`How do you know it's not all about you?' Sarie challenged him.

`You could at least find out a little more about me,' he responded.

`Now what in the world did he mean by that?' Sarie asked Scotty as Blake disappeared across the courtyard with his long, easy paces.

`An interesting fellow, Blake,' Scotty supplied. `He'll always be a mystery to me.'

`I wonder?' Scotty gave the younger girl an inscrutable look that made her look a little like her brother.

`Tell me, pet, do you mean to go on with this thing?' Sarie hesitated. `Funny, for a moment there I nearly disliked the whole idea that's the way Blake gets you.'

`Is it worth it?' Scotty inquired.

`I think so. To beat Blake.'

`To beat Blake!' Scotty echoed, fixing her attention on Sarie's small mutinous face. `But surely, dear, it's because of Peter What's-his-name! You're half-way in love with him, remember?'

`Oh, honestly, at this moment I don't care at all!' Sarie said very oddly. `What does Blake expect me to do? Curl up in a corner?'

`I can scarcely bring myself to mention that you've had a world trip since you left school.'

`But I'm home now, and Blake's making me feel trapped.'

`Well, maybe you do need a break at that!' Scotty murmured, suddenly understanding. `You're brooding, that's all. There's no denying Blake is unwontedly dynamic, especially when he puts the pressure on.'

`You're right .' Sarie said, and sighed.

Scotty was still receiving all kinds of intrlligences to her own moderate surprise. She was in the odd position now of trying to be fair to Sarie, of whom she was enormously fond, and her beloved, fairly formidable brother. It had never really happened to her before. She had always seen eye to eye with Blake, jollyng the young Sarie out of all her minor rebellions; but now she realized, Sarie had a point. The time had come to side with her. `If you think it's going to turn you into a happy, contented girl, I'll cover for you. When Blake finds out I'll have a hard time of it, to say the least.'

`Gosh, you're good to me!' Sarie burst out. `Don't lie to him and break your remarkable record - try not to say anything at all. Faint or something, that might be the most effective.'

`I'd have my poor darling Sean thinking I'm pregnant.'

`Ah well, I suppose you will be shortly,' Sarie teased.

`At this point, Sarie, I think we'll go inside. You don't know what you're talking about.'

`He certainly loves you,' Sarie supplied. `You're very fortunate to have Sean.'

'I think so,' Scotty said, and smiled like the sun breaking through clouds.. 'Do what you must, girl, and I'll try to act just as surprised as Blake could expect.'

'Actually it's all quite in order,' Sarie maintained with an upsurge of spirit. 'All's fair in love and war.' If so, you're having a bit of both with Blake, Scotty thought, gazing upwards at the flawless blue sky with a quick acceptance of the status quo. What Sarie imagined she wanted, she didn't want at all. It was an emotional by-product of her tug-of-war with Blake. Very likely, if she was allowed to go to Adelaide it might reduce her antagonism or whatever it was. Scotty tried to feel easy in her own mind, but she couldn't. Blake always followed the wisest possible course. On the other hand, Justine might have been too fault-finding when she considered the matter, and overcoloured her report. Oh my! she thought as both girls walked inside. It was quiet and peaceful now, but with Sarie gone, bless her, the scene would change. She didn't really have a chance. Scotty had met a lot of people on both sides of the world, but she had never yet met anyone quite like her brother. Sarie might escape a little, but it wouldn't be for long... .

Three days had gone past with no word from anyone. It couldn't have been further from Sarie's imagining. Every visitor to the Sheltons, she expected to be Blake; every ring of the phone, a call from Justine. Her heart had been in her mouth ever since she had climbed into Jake Onslow's Cherokee Warrior with a pack of lies that sounded just right. Jake had been given no idea of the true situation. As he was a close friend of Blake's, she had put him in a difficult position, but Jake was a man who inevitably forgot the follow-up questions when confronted with a pair of hyacinth eyes and a glib story. It simply hadn't occurred to him that she was lying and, in doing so, going against Blake's orders and plans.

At least she had typed up his wretched report in little under an hour, and left it neatly clipped on his desk underneath her farewell note. She had imagined his reaction would have been explosive - not that it mattered now. No one appeared to be concerned about her - an attitude she should have applauded, but in actual fact made her feel uncommonly slighted and neglected. She didn't seem to make sense these days; not to herself, not to anyone else. Scotty wasn't even going to call, her fellow conspirator. Nothing had turned out exactly as she had anticipated.

She was enjoying herself up to a point. A game full of gripping danger and difficulties when every time she swung her head she expected to encounter Blake's black anger. The Sheltons were charming to her, a huge effort from the whole family. Clearly they had taken her into account as great potential for their own ends, and she had surprised herself and them by showing a consistently poised and confident front, in no danger of being swept off her feet by Peter. She even wondered how she had ever managed to think herself a little in love with Peter. He was attractive, very attentive and amusing, and she found it flattering, but the fateful excitement was gone.

If Sarie had had any courage at all she would have visited Justine. Justine was able to command respect effortlessly, like Blake. Three days, and it seemed like an intolerable estrangement; no wonder Sarie regarded her reflection with suspicion. She didn't know herself half so well as she thought she did. Only now, she was ashamed to admit it.

She lingered at the mirror, postponing the moment to put on her dress. Once dressed she would have to go downstairs and join the party. Not a big one, forty or so; it should have made her very happy to be entertained so hospitably. She was enjoying it, but she had so expected to be missed. The Merediths had got into her system. She depended on them too much. The Royal Family, Leigh called them, and

laughed, yet Leigh had fallen for Blake full-scale, and Blake had pretty well ignored her, just as he claimed. Blake didn't take young girls very seriously, and not one of them could force him to. A knock came at the door and Leigh breezed in, a smile on her red, full-lipped mouth. 'Not dressed yet?' 'More or less. I'm made up,' Sarie smiled.

'So I see. Gosh, girl, you're gorgeous! No wonder Pete finds himself in love for the first time.' Sarie shrugged and smiled faintly. 'Peter, I'll wager, will be in love a dozen or more times before he's forty.'

'I suppose so, but it's you he wants to marry.'

Sarie pushed back a silky strand of her hair and glanced at her face again for something to do. Her eyes were brilliant and she began to long passionately for Malpara. Behind her Leigh, in a gold-spangled blouse over a long crepe skirt, with a series of fine gold bangles clanging together matching the rings on her hands, studied her as though staring avidly was not enough. 'You're the nicest thing to happen to us, Sarie. Mother is all for you when no one has been good enough for Pete - you can't do a thing wrong, and you have to admit I've been an excellent chaperone. I tried to keep up with you both this afternoon, but it was no use. I truly believe Pete loves you. I know he's been a bit of a playboy in the past, but now he's ready to settle down.'

Sarie grimaced. 'Well, that makes it all a little difficult, because I'm not.'

'Just cold feet, my lamb. Mother said it does happen.'

'Marriage for me, Leigh, is out of the question. You know perfectly well I don't know my own mind.'

'You and Pete could be very happy together,' Leigh pointedly emphasized, 'and I couldn't think of anyone else I'd want as a sister-in-law.'

'Which hardly encourages me to assume the role of Peter's wife,' retorted Sarie. 'It's an enormous step, isn't it? Peter's very charming and I know he likes me, but he hasn't spoken one single word to me on the subject.'

'Why, is that what's bothering you?' Leigh bounced up extremely alertly, as though she would instantly rush -up to set the matter to rights. 'Why, you poor little thing ... of course I understand!'

Sarie stared back at her, trying hard not to laugh. 'You don't understand at all! Stop it, Leigh, I'm not marrying anyone. I want to have some fun first.'

'Well, put your dress on and come downstairs,' Leigh urged wholeheartedly. She was perfectly sincere in her wish to have her old school friends to join the family, after all the bored glamour girls Peter had been squiring for years. Sarie was so gay and attractive in her personality; and her physical beauty was fascinating, the fine-boned delicate features and limbs, her truly entrancing colouring. If Peter and Sarie were to marry, Leigh would be genuinely, ecstatically happy.

Perhaps for once Mother's timing was wrong and they were pushing Sarie too hard and too fast. It seemed to her now, though her mother regarded it as an absolute necessity to secure at the very least an engagement, that it wasn't such a good idea. Sarie of all people would detest being cornered, and Mother hadn't by any means the whole picture - she had never met Blake Meredith, for instance. She had heard of him, and met his sister Justine at various functions, but she had never met Blake, and he explained so much more. Leigh hadn't been able to set aside the memory of him for a single day since her visit to Malpara many months before.

Blake Meredith was the centre of the picture, the seat of control. He was Sarie's guardian for better or worse, whether she was happy or unhappy or trying to build a new world for herself. As a matter of fact Leigh considered he made every man in Adelaide look pint-sized, and she couldn't wait to see him once

more. Maybe this time she would make a better impression. She had rushed him last time, been too obvious, but then she hadn't reckoned on meeting such a smooth operator in the spinifex country. She had cried quite a lot over their last meeting; it had been so disappointing. If he was faintly cynical about women, it wasn't all that important. She would adore to have him make love to her. As far as Leigh knew he was about thirty-three or four, and a big success. It was all over him, a kind of bred-in-the bone irresistible distinction, enough sex appeal to make any woman's blood pressure soar. A thrill of expectation ran through Leigh so that she gripped the end of the bed hard. Immediately Sarie stared at her friend in puzzlement.

`What's the matter? You look fairly wild-eyed.'

`I was thinking about your cousin Blake.'

Sarie blinked. `Oh, how funny! That's an immense jump, from Pete to Blake.'

`Just so.' Leigh smiled, silky soft, and not a whit abashed. Sarie could see the rise and fall of her breast under the clinging spangled blouse; Leigh had been in an agony of infatuation about Blake and obviously her fervour hadn't cooled.

`Blake is a devil of a man. Don't fall for him,' she said soberly.

`What a temptation! Actually I already have, and to hell with the consequences!'

`As I said before, Leigh, loving Blake could only be painful.'

`How would you know? You're only his cousin,' Leigh mocked.

Sarie didn't answer but threw over her head her long chiffon dress, the most beautiful mixture of jade and sapphire and aquamarine. With it went an antique necklace, a gold flower pendant of the Art Nouveau period, set with aquamarines, very delicate in character. Perfectly cut aquamarine earrings matched it, and not for the life of her could she have told Leigh they were a recent present from Blake. It threw a kind of false suggestion over the whole thing. The necklace had belonged to his family along with a whole lot of far more valuable jewellery, and it suited Sarie far better than his sisters, who favoured different designs. The aquamarines picked up life and colour from the proximity of her skin, pointing up all the blues in the misty bouquets of flowers on her long chiffon dress.

Leigh looked up and absentmindedly murmured: `Fantastic!' She was more properly engaged in thinking about Blake. His eyes were so especially compelling - colourless really, like crystal. She remembered everything about him in detail. He had made such a vivid impression on her. He hadn't seemed at all goodnatured and fun to be with like Pete, but he had incredible charisma, which Peter didn't have, for his sister at any rate. Blake Meredith had proved strong meat and drink. Very hard and handsome, sort of aristocratic; no lazy affability there. A shiver ran down Leigh's spine and she swung her blonde fall of hair. She could pursue the subject of Blake Meredith endlessly and she was determined to get another invitation to Malpara before the week was out. Being a Shelton and continually climbing the so called ladder was a full-time job, and Mother said they had to do it right.

In the centre of the room, furnished with dark, Mediterranean-type furniture, Sarie looked like some exotic illumination, her dress a wonderful foil for her colouring. There was a certain distinction to her small features which went beyond mere prettiness, and which Leigh supposed came from being a Meredith. Certainly Leigh had observed a big change in her friend. Sarie seemed more mature these days, as warm-natured as ever but not quite so volatile, more relaxed and poised.

One of the most puzzling aspects of Sarie was her relationship with her cousin Blake. She didn't seem to love him at all. In fact Leigh had seen her spitting with fury over some edict of Blake's, and Leigh had built up in her mind an entirely false picture of her friend's guardian. In fact she had gasped when she

had first met him, expecting a grim-faced, heavy-handed ogre, instead of a man of immense attraction and sophistication. Moreover she was greatly relieved to find that though Sarie didn't care about him at all, he did care about her. She was family, and he was a family-minded man.

Sarie's mother was one of the few subjects she had never discussed with Leigh. Perhaps she had died. She liked to live dangerously, so it was possible. All Leigh knew was she had gone off with an American, and that their everlasting wars had killed Sarie's father, a cousin to Blake. The broad picture was that the Merediths had taken over the young Sarie, Leigh gathered, against Sarie's strenuous protests. Blake, being the boss man, had come in for the lion's share of Sarie's inevitable animosity.

`What's wrong with him?' Leigh had often asked, to which Sarie had always replied:

`Since you ask, he's a tyrant. Don't mind me, I don't count.'

The true reason was that he always got the better of Sarie, who could usually charm the male of the species like birds off the branches.

The voice from the open doorway behind them startled both girls. It was gay, engagingly timbred, masculine. `Know what?'

Sarie whirled round to face him, blue-violet eyes mocking him as he landed a kiss on her flower-like cheek. `Tell us, Peter.'

`What?' his sister demanded, completely distracted. Peter was very much like their mother - attractive, well dressed, a good talker, with a constant self-assured air. But that wasn't everything, she had now come to find.

`I said I have news, and I have!' Peter held Sarie's arms wide so he could admire her dress, which must have set someone back a pretty penny. `We have the Richmonds coming tonight.'

`Wow!' Leigh exclaimed, turning to take a long deliberate look at herself in the mirror.

Peter preferred to look at Sarie. The overhead light glittered on her hair, her jewel-coloured eyes. He could see from their widening that he had shocked her. 'Justine and Clive?' she asked, as if he had gone mad.

Peter nodded and burst out laughing as though he had never enjoyed a joke more. `Mother's coup de grad. She's thrilled about it.'

`But how odd!' Leigh said rather helplessly. `I mean, the Richmonds have never come here before.'

`But then we've never had Sarie for more than an hour or two before," Peter pointed out rather viciously.

' Now isint that something.!'

`They're here?' Sarie demanded, her colour heightening.

`Not yet. Mother just sent me along to put you girls in the picture. She fondly imagined you'd be thrilled, darling. As it is, Mother does so love to bag a few celebrities, and the Richmonds are considered exclusive company in this town.'

`But how smashing!' Leigh fell to whirling around the room, her smile brilliant. `There will be our biggest and best party yet! Could it be possible we've won the Merediths' approval? They'll probably want to look me over as well.' She sighed tremulously.

Sarie tried very hard to rally because Peter's blue eyes, light and penetrating, were on her. Outwardly she looked the essence of beauty, very natural and graceful; but inside a great raging fire had started up, colouring her skin. Justine was not giving the seal of approval to anyone, she was merely doing what Blake told her. She could yell like a hoyden, the silly rebel she had always been, but what was the use? Justine would behave beautifully. She was a natural born aristocrat and the Sheltons would all be lost in admiration for her as Sarie's distinguished relative. It was necessary to play the same game. It was a

tradition with the Merediths to present a splendid united front in public and raise hell in private. Blake had seen to it that Justine would be here. It was a simple enough matter to pull a few strings, even from a thousand miles away. however badly Sarie felt, and she didn't really know how she did feel, her behaviour would be angelic, irreproachable. All the thoughts she was harbouring, she would not speak. Not tonight, at least.

The party was well in progress before the Richmonds arrived. Even with her back to the entrance hall, in the midst of a chattering group, Sarie could define the exact moment when the atmosphere began to recharge. Some new factor had been introduced that made giddy laughter and inconsequential conversation as lightweight and boring as a second-rate play. The best society was moving into sight, and the Sheltons' social status was about to take an enormous forward bound.

In the middle of a very entertaining story which she had promised not to divulge, Beatrix Shelton, a lively and amusing lady as sleek as a cat, and always dressed in the height of fashion, found herself, to her amazement, face to face with a man and woman who singly or together would inspire respect in even her most flippant guest. The woman she knew: Justine Richmond, the wife of the man some said was the coming Prime Minister; a statuesque brunette with the gracious air of a goddess, the sort of woman born to make her mark. The man's identity was no revelation.. He just had to be her brother, for the family resemblance was so strong. Blake Meredith.

Mrs Shelton could have beaten her breast in a mad, triumphant passion. Instead she went forward with no pretence of great pleasure to clasp Justine Richmond's outstretched hand, exulting over the introductions, applauding Justine's decision to bring along her brother who had flown in so unexpectedly. There was no question in either woman's mind that he would be made welcome. Clive Richmond materialized, listening to the interesting tonal clash of the two women's voices: an extremely distinguished man some ten or twelve years older than his wife, not handsome but with fine eyes and a firm chin, tall, solidly built and conscientious, a man of admirable control, a man who could be depended upon, a man given to bursts of great eloquence in a resonant, persuasive voice.

As impressive as he was, he couldn't hold a candle to his brother-in-law so far as Beatrix Shelton was concerned. She had never seen anyone quite like the cattle baron, the very epitome of an elegant gentleman, and no one could have been a more ambitious mama than Mrs. Shelton. Leigh, looking her very best, was somewhere close behind her. She hadn't worked so hard or so long to fail her offspring now.

What a capricious little chit young Sarie was! Instead of a harsh, domineering guardian, this. How could she have led them so far astray? Blake Meredith had a very suave manner indeed, his brilliant eyes trained on her, considering her, eyes as silvery as the sun on a clear sheet of water, but it was impossible to read what went on behind those thick, sooty lashes. Such was the strength of his presence she almost felt herself passing into a coma of delight, and when a smile made his dark face come to life it almost took her breath away. A woman could bring down the very pillars of heaven for a man like that. Which brought her thought; back to Leigh, whom she had neglected very much these days on Peter's account. Two birds in the hand, she thought, and some said no guardian angel existed!

The most valuable thing Sarie had ever learnt from her relatives was to make a good fight of it when the chips were down. Her initial flood of panic was abating.

There was nowhere to run to, in any case. Across the room she watched the very masterly display of calculated charm, Blake's white smile. It would only be a second more before his eyes found her. She blinked to stop the room swimming around in a golden haze; with no way to extricate herself the best

line of defence was attack.

`Justine!' Her clear young voice rang out with sudden radiance, a bell tone in the large room. She flew across the wide expanse of carpet looking quite magical, sparkling with colour, irresistibly appealing and so very transparent. Justine's eyes sparkled, mocking the pretence.

`Sarie!' she said tenderly, and kissed the uplifted young cheek.

`Clive!'

With a chuckle Clive came forward and kissed the rosy tips of Sarie's outstretched fingers. `You look delightful, my dear. We've missed you.'

`Blake!' She shifted her blue-violet gaze, letting her eyes play over his arrogant, aquiline features, chiselled in their perfection. She would have liked to add: `Fancy seeing you here!' but found she didn't have the nerve. He was examining her thoroughly and the smile began to freeze on her face. Trance-like she drifted forward, to have him barely brush her feverish cheek with his mouth. It was very nearly a relief not to have to wonder when he would turn up. Her full lower lip trembled, saying without words that she was too brave to run away.

Justine, at least, heard her unspoken plea for protection and linked her arm through that of her young relative, lending support while the introductions went on like a line-up visiting V.L.P.s. Leigh was almost wild with excitement and an overmastering determination to win an invitation for herself to Malpara. For all her fragile appearance, Sarie was apparently counted a great help in organizing Malpara's annual sale and the attendant entertainments. Blake and Justine both had already expressed regret that they would have to snatch her away, doubly so when it was obvious how much she was enjoying herself. However, the sales were important for all of them and there was much work to be done. Justine, as the wife of the sitting Member for Willard, would have little or no time to help out this year; Gayle was in Europe, Stephanie and Sean would be buyers themselves, and Aunt Althea was almost eighty. Sarie had to go.

So convincing were they, so charmingly apologetic, that Sarie very nearly believed it herself until she remembered that Great-Aunt Althea might be nearing eighty but she was three times the woman Sarie counted herself; and Justine had never been known to miss a sale, sitting Member's wife or not. It never for a moment crossed the Sheltons' mind there was any double dealing. Sarie and Clive alone saw through this brilliantly civil charade - and perhaps Peter in a momentary flash, for he surged up to Sarie, yearning to dance with her.

It was easier to go along with the tide. She surrendered to his ardour, allowing him to lead her out on to the gold and amber-shot gloom of the terrace. His hand holding hers tightened, his face close to hers.

`Sarie,' he breathed in her ear, all expensive male cologne. `One question. Marry me?'

`You can't be serious?' she gasped

`Yes,' he said simply, considerably dampened.

`But, Peter,' she kept peering into the shadows as though they were being watched, `doesn't the thought of marriage give you the shakes?'

He shook his head. `Well, it's bound to happen some time, so why not now?'

'Thank you. What a blissful proposal,' she said acidly.

The hand at her waist tightened and he narrowed his eyes. I've got a lot more to say, but in private.'

`That's a comfort.'

A worried expression crossed Peter's face. `Listen, sweet, that wasn't sarcasm, was it?'

Her eyes had the brilliant glow of sapphires in the gloom. 'No, Peter, I wonder you ask. You're a

beautiful dancer.'

`The best,' he agreed. 'But that doesn't answer my question. What's it to be, a simple yes or no?'

Sarie sighed. 'I don't suppose we could defer this conversation until we know one another a whole lot better?'

The heartfelt sigh was exactly what Peter needed. This rushing technique was mostly his mother's idea; if he kept it up, he might lose Sarie. He had a lot of valuable assets, charm and dash, an easy amusing manner. He could afford to wait. 'I understand, sweet,' he said, raising her fingers and kissing them. 'I'm rushing you. Unforgivable!'

`How right you are.' She smiled at him, relaxing once more. 'I won't say it's not flattering, but I'm not too happy about it either. I hadn't counted on getting married for years yet. Say twenty-five!'

Peter merely looked sharply amused, as though her words were a challenge. 'I don't think you'll last that long.'

`We'll see. The divorce rate is mounting at a considerable rate, and it troubles me. I wouldn't like to see any children I might have left poor lorn orphans. I was one myself.'

He clicked his tongue in sympathy, tempted to kiss her, but Justine Richmond was looking their way.

`You have a pretty enviable background now,' he pointed out wryly.

`It's all right,' she agreed stonily.

`Mrs. Richmond is a very striking-looking woman. A little too tall, perhaps.'

`A beautiful figure,' Sarie answered pointedly. 'I'm very fond of Justine.'

`She's a good deal like her brother.'

`To look at. They do have tremendous rapport. Justine is the eldest, but Blake is the boss.'

Peter's eyes narrowed dangerously. 'Leigh is trying her darnedest by the look of her to wangle an invitation out of him. She was in raptures over Malpara.'

Sarie didn't turn her head. She didn't want to see Blake dancing with Leigh or whatever. 'Leigh is always very welcome. You too, Peter. Would you like to stay over for the sales? We all have a marvellous time. It's quite a social occasion. Do you play polo?'

`No,' he said a little helplessly, burying his face in her shining curls. There was absolutely nothing whatsoever horsey about him.

`It can be very exciting. We have two excellent teams and Blake is extraordinarily good.'

`I'm sure,' he said smoothly, seeing the cattle baron riding hell for leather. 'Are you certain it would be all right?'

`Of course!' Sarie tipped her head back to see into his face. 'I can invite anyone I please. I do a good deal of the work, you know!'

`So I hear. How does one get there?'

`Fly in, naturally.'

He smiled wryly. 'My dear girl, I lack my own wings. Some of us do.'

`In which case, I'll ask Blake to send someone in for you.'

`And he'll do it?' Peter asked incredulously.

`Why, yes!' Sarie's eyes sparkled.

`Good God! Aren't you lucky!' Peter groaned with the liveliest envy, and she looked thoughtful.

`Well, that's a hard question. In lots of ways, I am. Blake is a very generous man - tremendous largesse. The whole family have that. You should meet Great Uncle Haddo, now he's a real character.'

`I suspected that, just from meeting the rest of them. You should have warned us about the cattle baron,'

Peter observed.

Her huge, violet-blue eyes were questioning. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'Well .. .' he explained in a rather condescending, frivolous manner. 'For one thing I was expecting some big dumb cowboy with a slow drawl, instead of which we're confronted with an Outback prince.'

Sarie did her best to control her sudden flash of anger, but it showed in her face. 'You did get your facts wrong,' she said, in a diamond-hard voice. 'I don't actually know any big dumb cowboys. They're pretty clued up where I come from, and Blake would be a miracle anywhere.'

'Hey now!' he put up a hand as though warding her off. 'I was only having a joke! You sure fire up, which is fine about one's family.'

'I don't have my real family,' Sarie said clearly. 'Blake isn't even a second cousin.'

Peter ignored that, just bent down and kissed her cheek. 'Look, sweet, I'm sorry, forgive me. It was only a joke, in poor taste I agree. Perhaps I'm a little jealous, have you thought of that?'

'If you are, I'm very surprised,' she replied.

Peter quickly thought of a lifesaver. 'Shall I get us a nice cold drink? It's a very warm evening.'

'If you like yes, I think I would like one. Thank you very much.'

'Stay here!' he pleaded in the most amicable manner, thinking she was rather a complex little thing.

Maybe she would find it hard to adjust to marriage, at that. But she was as beautiful as a dream! He hoped with all his heart she would be the future mother of his children. She might claim that the Merediths weren't her real family, but they certainly thought they were. What excellent opportunities were in store!

Sarie watched his slim, beautifully-tailored figure disappear through the sliding glass doors. She felt thoroughly rattled by his comment about dumb cowboys, disproportionately so considering that whatever he said she took into no great account. What had got into her? Blake always called her a perverse little wretch. Could it be true? Once it had seriously crossed her mind that she and someone like Peter could have a wonderful life together. Now she found his attentions vaguely irritating.

It hadn't been smart inviting him to Malpara - Blake might well march him off in the opposite direction. The whole disquieting question of Blake was beginning to affect her. Some aura pulsed around him that made her aware of him without turning her head. He was too clever, too forceful, too provoking, too complicated in every way. If Sarie didn't have it out with him soon, she would go stark raving mad. She felt like a child at school waiting to be called in to the Head.

A minute later, out of the watchful corner of her eyes, she saw Blake walking out towards her, almost startlingly elegant in his unfamiliar evening clothes. But then he looked good in anything; old jeans, a faded bush shirt, his stetson pulled down over his eyes, his dark, polished skin glistening with red dust. Her heart flipped right over, as though she was about to undergo a most painful confrontation. Her customary bravery and selfpossession deserted her. One needed a crowd around to cope with Blake, and Justine had been borne off almost forcibly by her energetic hostess.

She jumped up quickly from the white wrought iron garden seat, stood motionless for a moment then, like

some kitten scared out of its wits, she started off across the velvet soft grass. Her long chiffon skirt whipped behind her in a brilliant train, offering a little resistance in her flight. Her heels were too high; she felt a wild, anticipatory thrill as though his hard hand was already on her shoulder, but there was no footfall behind her. She kicked off her gold sandals with a kind of mad exultation and went really fast, sprinting like a red-headed nymph. It had to be midnight, the stars were so bright, and the party was in

full swing.

This was ridiculous, she thought suddenly. Probably when she doubled back, she would never find her shoes again. Mrs. Shelton's two corgis were out on the loose. Moonlight was making a fairytale transformation of a too formal garden, and the trees fluttered their leaves.

`Oh!' Her heart shuddered to a near top. Blake, true to form, was there before her.

`My poor little silly!' he said.

She was trembling right through her, the night scents and the sound of the music, drumming in and out of her swaying body. `I made a mistake! I know I did,' she burst out with a confession before it was dragged out of her. She stared up at him, her eyes wide and uncertain, her voice ragged.

`Get your breath,' he said quietly, as impassive as a judge.

Without her shoes on Sarie felt positively inadequate, as though a few extra inches would be a great help. Never strong on patience as he was, it evidently snapped in Blake, for he caught her by both shoulders, turning her towards the white radiance of moonlight. `Tell me, why were you running? It seems kind of ridiculous to me.'

`I'm not sure. It's a party!' She was aware again of his height and strength, his mastery of the situation, a light steely grip on her collarbone.

`How foolish! Will you ever learn a lesson, I wonder?'

`Get it over with, Blake!' She released her pent-up breath, trying to twist away from him, but he held her like a mad runaway. `We all have to die sooner or later!'

`How you get carried away!' In some mystifying way, his touch was changing, so that she moved a little closer towards him, betraying her own inconsistencies, or her innocence.

`You're angry, aren't you?' she demanded.

`Do I look angry?'

`I can't see with your face in the shadows.'

`I can see you,' he said very dryly. `You look very romantic, Selene. Beauty and the Beast - that's how you've type-cast us. I suppose you put that delicious confection down on account?'

`I did,' she said, sounding mortally hurt. Blake was a beast, but he was never nasty.

`Well, put your shoes on,' he advised in a sudden relaxed way, shifting his grip to support her.

`But where are they?' she asked in a softy, shaky voice, robbed of any real drama.

`Here,' he murmured laconically, reaching behind him and politely handing them to her.

`I didn't want to lose them,' she explained very earnestly.

`I shouldn't think so! Imported, aren't they? You're a cool one, Selene.'

`Yes.' She sighed deeply. `You've only got to say so and I'll go home with you.'

`Yes. Wings are already sprouting on your shoulders.'

She was fumbling with the left sandal and he took it from her in his usual decisive manner, fitting it neatly over her heel, bringing her to stand steadily on her two feet. They were still nowhere on a level. He never seemed to move like other men and she might just as well have been a puppet.

`Why involve Scotty and Jake,' he asked in a devastating, conversational tone, `neither of whom relish going against me?'

`It seemed like a good idea at the time. Besides, I didn't have any real choice in the matter. I didn't want to involve than; believe me, Scotty hated it, but it's not important now.'

`Why not? Go on,tell me all about it.'

`As if you'd understand,' she murmured somewhat pathetically.

He lifted her face. Large liquid eyes, young flawless skin, a soft tremble to her mouth, very delicate and graceful and unexpectedly subdued. 'One of your most charming traits, Sarie, is the way you give me no credit for sensitivity. It always has been.' His voice was dry.

She lowered her eyes. 'Why, Blake, I know all your good points.'

'Don't play-act with me,' he said rather abruptly, 'you're too good at it. Tell me, hasn't the trip been just what you expected?'

'I've had a marvellous time,' she said defiantly.

'Then why sound so wretched?'

'I suppose I do sound like that,' she admitted. 'It's shocking the way you can frighten me.'

His lips twisted. 'What an admission! Why, Sarie, I've never treated anyone so gently in my life!'

'I know I acted wrongly,' she said, staring into his face for an infinite length of time. Strange how strongly she was reacting to his rare, exquisite bursts of sympathy.

'In that case, I just might pardon you,' he said, in a light, mocking voice. 'Now, if you don't mind, little one, I think we'll all go on home to Justine's. I want to be back on Malpara by tomorrow afternoon.

You've cost me quite enough time one way and another, and it's got to stop.'

'Just one more thing!' She caught at his arm.

'What is it?' he rounded on her in a very determined fashion, as though this could very well be the straw to break the camel's back, black arrogance all over him.

'Oh, don't make me think I'm presuming!' she cried.

'Saints alive!' he exclaimed.

'I've asked Peter back to Malpara as a house guest at sale time. Leigh, too. I'm certain she would want to come.'

No answer for a moment and she stood there looking brave, knowing she had overstepped all her previous limits. It was a new sensation, deliberately trying to placate Blake. 'I'll work very hard,' she promised, 'to the point of collapse. It was just one of those things, the invitation. You know how it is.'

'Yes,' he said, implying nothing.

'I've never had to beg before,' she said rather desperately.

'And you don't have to now.'

'Really?'

'I'm on your side, Sarie. All the way, only you'd rather play games. Tell your friends they're quite welcome. It's precisely what I expected in any case.'

'You're really a very fine man,' she said sweetly.

'I'm not sure I like your motives for telling me,' he replied.

'The fact remains the Sheltons have nothing to do with it.' Impulsively she grabbed his arm and pressed her cheek against the fine cloth of his sleeve. 'I probably shouldn't say it.'

'Go ahead, out with it!' he said sharply.

'I love you, I think. You're so reliable; I know you're always going to be there.'

'You might call that loving,' he said, very dryly indeed. 'Let's go baby. I don't think I could possibly wait for coffee.'

CHAPTER THREE

It was even odder for Sarie to be home again on Malpara and find herself a mass of contradictions.

Always sensitive to the merest suggestion of opposition from Blake, she now found the days flying past without any kind of animosity at all. Any dissension seemed out of the question. No serious conflicts at all; nothing she was feeling made sense.

Blake, on the other hand, was his usual indestructible, self-contained self. The old way in which she had become accustomed to regarding him, a mixture of defiance and awe, had given way to a more friendly, yet curiously unsound footing: a quicksand truce that trembled with an odd excitement and an intensifying desire to be with him, and more curious yet, to sit and look at him, like some saucer-eyed cat. Occasionally Blake would be struck into taking notice of her weird, unprecedented preoccupation, and his eyes would sparkle with amusement. If she were an enigma to herself, she certainly wasn't to Blake, himself akin to a fantastically involved mathematical equation. At these times she could only utter a groan and go back to her room and wander about rather aimlessly, then glance up at the framed photograph of herself and Blake that a professional photographer had taken, unnoticed, at the Royal Easter Show. Blake must have said something amusing, for she was looking up into his face, smiling, the expression in her eyes and around her mouth saying very plainly that her mood was brilliant. The photograph had appeared in the papers, and it could have fooled anybody; anybody who didn't know, that is. One of her silly, self-styled intuitive friends had even remarked that she looked like a bride on her honeymoon.

Often when Sarie thought of that remark she felt inclined to rip the photograph from the wall, but somehow it had always stayed. The memory of some of the very good times she and Blake had now and then, the good times, made her blue-violet eyes glow softly. It was the angle of Blake's head that created a false illusion, the half-smile on his beautifully cut mouth. She wasn't sure what it was, but just lately she had to acknowledge it did look ominously romantic. She might have been ... Ah well! at that point, Sarie always got up from the bed and did something else.

So far as her organizing efforts on behalf of the sale were concerned, Blake couldn't find fault with her. She was coping extremely well, even if she said so herself. The whole family was grateful, and Great-Aunt Althea had little else to do but help out with some purely social invitations, all of which were certain to be accepted. A great deal of important business might be transacted over the two days, but that didn't stop everyone else from having a good time. This year they had decided on a picnic race meeting for the post-sale afternoon instead of last year's barbecue luncheon and polo, and the interest and enthusiasm had proved unbelievable. Even the keen city racegoers and the socialites could never say no to a good country meeting. A picnic race meeting on Malpara almost defied description.

This was due to a combination of factors. The vastness of the bush setting, the brilliant light of the Outback, the dry vivid colours, the blazing all-pervading red, the great stands of trees that nearly circled the track; and most of all the wonderful we're-here-to enjoy-ourselves atmosphere, the superb food and drink and real Outback hospitality. Every social occasion, for people who spent most of their lives in isolation, had double value.

Once-a-year gamblers brought along a few dollars to lose, usually the sheep and cattle millionaires, and the

big gamblers with rapidly fluctuating fortunes found a serious betting ring, professional part-time bookmakers and a well-known country race caller. Most of the women spent their time with their backs to the track, but the big thing was the occasion, social contact, friendship. Catching up with all the news about families, the things one couldn't say on the 'galah sessions'.

There was even a Ladies' Race over five furlongs, and Sarie had entered herself. Scotty had won it the

last time they had a picnic meeting, but this year Scotty had inexplicably decided she wouldn't enter. Sarie was rather pleased, for Scotty invariably thundered past her. She had expected Blake to object to her nomination, for he made no secret of his dislike of her reckless streak, but other than looking over the field he had made no comment. With Scotty out of the race she would go like the wind and Sun Dance was definitely a winner.

With just on a week to go, acceptances were being landed in great batches. Great Aunt Althea, a splendidly picturesque old lady who dressed most beautifully out of fashion, usually read them all very carefully, but Sarie didn't bother, not considering it worthwhile. Neither flood nor a dust storm could stop the invasion that was about to begin, but watching Aunt Althea's pure white, piled-up hair was like watching a miser counting his money, although no such thought was in Aunt Althea's mind. She simply considered it her duty, the proper thing to do, and Aunt Althea had always taken her duties very seriously as befitting a Somebody.

She had never in her life been a Nobody. Before she became Mrs. Haddo Meredith at the age of nineteen, she had been the beautiful Althea Adair, only daughter of Sir Kenneth Adair of Westwinds, one of the finest sheep grazing properties in the State of New South Wales and still in the hands of the Adair family. The only man alive today equal to Aunt Althea's Haddo was Blake himself, and aunt Althea was rigid and vocal in this belief. The mother of three daughters, a grandmother and a great-grandmother, she had been denied the not-to-be-missed blessing of a son of her own.

Sarie found her that morning in the solarium, the new glass-walled extension at the rear of the house overlooking the pool and cabana area. It was a fern and flower bower, with cool ceramic tiles on the floor and plush yellow and gold cushioned upholstery on the rattan furniture. Piles of cards had spilled over on to the circular shaggy rug under the glass-topped rattan table, unnoticed by Aunt Althea who was tracing out signatures looking very disciplined and engrossed.

`Everything O.K.? Is that light bothering you?' Without waiting for an answer Sarie walked over to the white and gold striped blind and adjusted the blazing cascade of light. `I wish you wouldn't bother with that, It's not important.'

`You ought to look through some of these yourself,' Aunt Althea said tartly. `The writing is unbelievable. The cost of education being what it is, one would expect our young people could keep up to the old required standards. Who exactly is Ducky Holland?'

`Denise. A friend of mine.'

`That's just what I mean. I've read this signature three times and it's very hard to uncover what comes after the D. It looks very much like Ducky to me.'

`You'll get plenty like that,' Sarie remarked idly; narrowing her eyes against the aquamarine glint of the pool. `Sleep well?'

`As a matter of fact, no,' Aunt Althea said. `My limbs went completely asleep, but not, alas, my head.' This set warning bells ringing for Sarie: She cast a searching glance into the old lady's face. It was still handsome, the bone structure holding its own and not blurred over with the usual signs of old age. Her first thought, that Aunt Althea looked tired, was quite right. `Leave that,' she said, her purpose stiffening. `Come and curl up right over here. I'll attend to all that, though honestly it's a waste of time. We can count on every last invitation being accepted. Here, relax!'

Aunt Althea half-fell into the chaise-longue, which was her habit of late, effecting the required result with the minimum effort from her limbs. Once settled, she patted Sarie's hand. `The big fuss will be getting up.'

`You don't have to get up at all. Not for hours yet. Why don't we share a cup of tea? I haven't had a thing since six o'clock.'

`Neither have I. No need to go away, Jess is bringing one in.'

`For both of us?' Sarie inquired.

`Yes.'

`That's dear of her.'

`We both saw your red head, which reminds me ... your eyesight is a lot sharper than mine, where are my pills?'

Sarie's winged eyebrows shot up in alarm. `Do you want one now?'

`They're not a great success, but yes, I think so. D'you see them?'

`They're not in your pocket?' Sarie asked without the heart to add, as usual.

`I flatter myself . . .' Aunt Althea began with asperity, then broke off as her groping fingers settled around her small silver pillbox. `As a matter of fact they are,' she said, shrugging her shoulders with no trace of apology.

Something in her face was making Sarie feel almost strickern.

'Water, I'll get it.' she said hastily.

'Stay here for a moment.' Aunt Althea fingered her pillbox. `The odd time I did fall off to sleep last night, I had the most terrible dream.'

`I'll get the water. Tell me about the dream later.'

`It would serve you right if I did! - oh!' Aunt Althea gave a gasp, then a groan, freezing Sarie to the spot.. From the most splendid and majestic old lady she was hunching into a small, pitiful ball, all in slow motion.

`Oh, God!' Sarie's own heart leapt in response, her limbs starting to tremble. `Darling!' She bent over the old lady, staring into her ashen profile.

`Get Blake.' It was only a whisper.

'Jessie!' Sarie called loudly behind her. `I can't leave you, Auntie.'

The words were scarcely out of her mouth before Jess Phillips, their housekeeper for many years, came into

the room with unsurpassed speed. She shot down her tray, face whitening, and advanced on the old lady with a glass of water she had ready on the tray. `The pills, you've got them?'

'Here.' Sarie shook one into her hand.

`Right, Mrs. Meredith. Try to swallow this down.'

Aunt Althea appeared not to hear, then she rallied, swallowing the capsule with difficulty.

`Get Blake.'

It was the second time now, but this time from Jess. `I can't leave her, Jessie, not now!'

`I'm here,' Jess said with the solid comfort of long years of nursing experience, `I'll look after her. We won't get Uncle Haddo for the moment. I think Mrs. Meredith will come round in a moment. She's had these turns before.'

`I've never seen one.'

'No,' said Jessie, who had. `Mrs. Meredith?' she spoke loudly, performing a number of actions at once. `I felt something like this might happen. She's been overdoing it a bit.'

`Oh!' Sarie shuddered, so fond of the old lady that she was very nearly distraught.

`She'll be all right,' Jess said in an effort to console her. `Just do as I say. Go and get Blake. He manages

his great-aunt very easily. See, she's breathing easier now. Go quickly, Sarie. Blake was with the vet not ten minutes ago. I sent morning tea down to the office.'

'She ought to be in her bed,' Sarie said anxiously.

'Blake will carry her.'

Sarie hurried away after that, her nerves in pieces. She simply couldn't bear the thought of losing Aunt Althea, and Aunt Althea was seventy-nine years old, far more than the limited life span given to most people. Why, Aunt Althea, Blake, Malpara, the family, everyone, was part of her blood and her bones. At that moment she abhorred the past stresses, every last little tantrum she had treated them all to since she had first come to live on Malpara. Aunt Althea had always been unfailingly kind, with a warm heart and a tart tongue which she bestowed on every member of the family. Right from the beginning, Aunt Althea had taken to her, eager to make excuses for this 'prickly, haughty little charmer' as Blake had dubbed her and brought into their midst.

Breathing hard, her face flushed, copper curls clinging damply to her forehead, her eyes enormous with anxiety, she burst into the office. Blake and Jeff Allen were seated, the vet talking very animatedly, pummelling one fist into the palm of his hand. Both men looked up, startled, then Blake was on his feet and beside her without scarcely seeming to have moved at all.

'What is it?'

Sarie fell against the door as though there wasn't a breath left in her.

'Sarie?' Jeff was on his feet now, with a wondering face.

'Aunt Althea!' Sarie said, the tears of fright starting to choke her.

Jeff visibly swallowed. Mrs. Althea Meredith was an institution, even more so perhaps than fantastic old Haddo. 'She's dead?'

'No.'

'Honest to God, Sarie!' Blake threw out in violent reaction, then pulled himself up abruptly. Sometimes Sarie looked so fragile, so breakable, that she frightened him. His own blaze of anxiety died down.

'She's had an attack, then?'

'Yes.'

The fright and foreboding in her shimmering eyes was too much to bear. Again he told himself all the differences between them, but it didn't seem to matter. This urgent, distressed little face was part of him, as much a part as the right arm he reached out to pull her to his side. 'Poor little Sarie! It just shows what comes of over-protecting you. Who's with Aunt Althea, Jess?'

'Yes.' Her voice was steadier now.

'Good. I'll come now.'

'Could I be of any help?' Jeff asked.

'It's all right, Jeff!' Blake said firmly. 'Go right ahead with those unbranded calves. No one can tell for sure about these attacks. The tablets help. I'll go on up to the house. Get Armstrong to help you, he's had his instructions.'

Nothing could ease the burden around Sarie's tender young heart. 'Nothing's as important as the station, is it?' she demanded, in terror lest they be too late.

He checked in his stride for a moment and looked down at her. A hard, purposeful, and yes, she had to admit it, caring man.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' she stammered. 'I didn't mean that. What a horror I am! It's a wonder you like me.'

'I don't like you at all, but this is not the moment to mention it. Now run!'

Inside the house, they found Aunt Althea reviving, with Jess and Mira, their housegirl, ranged on either side of her, keeping a sharp eye on her returning colour. A look of relief crossed Jess's plain but very capable face. 'Glad you're back.'

'Bed for you!' Blake said to his great-aunt.

'I won't be bullied, you know,' she responded weakly.

'Won't you now?' He crossed to the couch and picked up the old lady as though she were a very small child. 'You and I are going to understand one another. You're going to rest up, or you'll worry the daylights out of me. I'll get on to Base Hospital and get Bart Earnshaw out; a check-up, no more. He's due in next week in any case.'

'I'm simply ashamed of myself,' Aunt Althea said unexpectedly, usually very conscious of her own competence and value.

'Don't be absurd,' Blake murmured lightly. 'You're a marvel, when you're not being positively difficult.'

'You've always looked after me,' she said with great pride. 'You're a fine man, Blake. I know none better.'

'Unless it's Haddo, with his superhuman attributes, where the devil is he?'

'Don't call him!' the old lady pleaded. 'Worry will only harm him. You know what he's like about me, a strong man reduced to an old hen.'

'Have you seen him anywhere?' Blake asked Sarie, ignoring Aunt Althea.

'He went off with Jimmy,' she answered.

'Did he now?' Blake looked vaguely thunderous. 'Well, that explains a great deal. Come up with me, Sarie, and tuck this woman in. I'm immensely proud of your appearance, Aunt Althea, but surely you don't need all this gear on? Corsets ...'

'Foundation garment!' the old lady corrected indomitably.

'... and the rest! Jess,' Blake proceeded to stride out of the room. 'You might get on to Bart for me!'

'Will do.'

'It looks as though I'll be confined to my room, then?' Aunt Althea complained.

'I'm afraid so.' Blake's eyes twinkled.

'How tiresome!'

'For a day or two anyway. Let me give you a piece of advice, ma'am. If you want to wow 'em at the sale as usual, you'd better restrain yourself now.'

'I'll leave that to Sarie,' Aunt Althea smiled. 'She's the beauty in the family these days, but don't let Gayle hear it. I say, child!' Aunt Althea suddenly caught sight of Sarie's extreme pallor. Her wild flush had faded, and her blue-violet eyes were blazing like sapphires in her white face. 'That was only a little attack.'

Sarie came alongside and grasped the old lady's hand, raising it to her mouth and kissing it. 'I care a great deal about you,' she said with a quick indrawn breath.

'Well, I simply won't have you frightening yourself like that,' Aunt Althea said almost hardily. 'I have to go one of these days.'

'Not a sale day!' Blake smiled with a quiet air of teasing.

'I'd never be so thoughtless, but it's inevitable, you know. I've had a wonderful life - no vale of sorrows, no drudgery. Don't weep for me, my children. Life is precious, but when you get to my age, you're pretty well worn out, glad to go. I'll have no quarrel with death!'

'Well, your turn hasn't come yet,' Blake admonished her, 'just a break in the routine. Sarie, run on ahead

and turn back the bed.'

Inside Aunt Althea's extravagantly feminine and flowered Edwardian bedroom, Sarie turned back the beautiful bouquet-splashed bedspread that matched the flounces on the canopied fourposter. The sheets and the pillowcases were in her favourite apple green, could one only get to them under the dozen or so little cushions all in delicate watercolour silks to match the solid colours that upholstered the antique chairs. It was a very regal, colourful bedroom, full of Aunt Althea's exquisite collection of clutter. Splendid chests and chairs and tables; oriental screens and lacquers, a rock crystal chandelier, fine paintings, a pair of gilt bronzes, Sevres vases, rose Pompadour with beautiful gilding, on the mantelpiece, and a French repeating carriage clock with handpainted porcelain panels. An extensive collection of good antique jewellery was housed somewhere, but seeing it was only displayed rarely, no one was sure where. Aunt Althea had admitted in successfully hiding a valuable piece on herself, by Faberge, too.

Blake strode into the room and lowered his light burden on to the bed. 'Now, I'm going to stand here while Sarie gets you out of those clothes.'

'The devil you are! Not even Haddo is allowed to do that.'

'All right, I'll stare out of the window.' He grinned.

'I don't in the least object to that.'

'Now, Auntie,' Sarie said urgently, 'let me help you.'

'Thank you, dear.' Aunt Althea lay back with a singularly sweet smile and accepted Sarie's gentle ministrations.

When later they both closed the door very softly, leaving the old lady to drift into a peaceful sleep, Sarie burst into tears. For all Aunt Althea's acceptance of a day-to-day existence, the philosophy of the old, such was the effect of her revealed frailty that Sarie couldn't conceal her own feelings. Aunt Althea very simply had put the fear of death into her - the icy terror of it, the utter wretchedness and the deep depression of those that were left. She knew it was her duty to be brave, to accept the inevitable as Aunt Althea did, but she couldn't help it. The tears stood in her eyes, then spilled down her face.

'Stop it, Sarie!' Blake said roughly.

'I can't help it,' she protested, with an anguished little choke. 'I haven't your strength. I wonder you expect it, when you always find me wanting. Poor Aunt Althea! If she dies, I don't think I could bear it.'

'It might be just as hard for me, Sarie,' he pointed out.

'Oh no! You're so damned powerful. Complete. I think you could get over anything.'

'I don't think I can watch you cry,' he said in an odd voice.

'Oh yes, you can,' she moaned, 'you've seen me cry plenty of times and never turned a hair.'

'This is different. A different kind of rage.'

His voice was curiously compelling, almost tender. They had reached the end of the hall and Sarie turned up her face, tear-streaked and very endearing. Blake stood close to her, his hand still on her arm. Sarie felt she was leading a double life; there was the Blake she knew, and the Blake she didn't know at all well. He laughed softly at her expression, which was more revealing than she knew. A dazzling tension seemed to draw them together.

'I don't know you sometimes,' she said uncertainly.

'With our past!' he drawled mockingly. 'You surely don't feel ill at ease with me?'

His shimmery, light-filled eyes glittered over her so that her own expression changed subtly, because wary, as the strangest sensations made themselves felt through her body. 'Stand still,' he said in exactly

the same tone he used to a restless, frightened filly.

`Why?' she asked, looking very young and intense.

His silver eyes rested on her, narrowing. `I want to wipe the tears off your face. Have you a handkerchief?'

`A clean tissue.' She passed it to him a little frantically, feeling the relentless magnetism that was so much a part of him. Blake could make her do anything. He swivelled her right round to face him, holding the point of her chin, wiping her cheekbone.

`You're hurting me.' she said curtly.

`"That's part of it, baby.'

Suddenly, from nowhere, she had an overwhelming urge to pull his dark head down. To kiss his beautiful, hard, sardonic mouth. It made her so angry she shook herself free of him, colour flaring under her creamy skin. `That's enough!'

`No, it isn't, and you know it.'

`Don't threaten me,' she said ridiculously, twisting her proud little head away.

`In what way?' He caught at her hand and helplessly she tried to tug it away, but he held it fast. `Well?'

`In every which way, that's what!'

`Why, Sarie,' he drawled, `you surely don't think I'm going through my entire repertoire? Could it be you're

so busy flinging yourself around that you can't see what's in front of your very nose?'

`Can't accept it, you mean,' she countered.

`Fill me in,' he invited, the set of his arrogant dark head fanning the bright familiar flame in her. `Accept what?'

`That you've just got to be boss!'

`Yes, I have,' he said, and laughed at her with his brilliant diamond-clear eyes. It very nearly put her in a frenzy, that and the shock she had had. The hot blood was rushing to the very extremities of her body.

`My

poor sobbing child,' he said, `I have to admit though you've got spirit. When you're not being downright absurd, I like the way you behave!'

`Why don't you try to understand me?' she demanded.

`Oh, but I do. With certainty. You just pretend not to notice.'

`There's a lot about me you've missed.!'

'No,' he said definitely.

Sarie said wildly, `Eyes like yours are unnatural in such a dark face. Why don't you find yourself a wife?' Blake laughed. `How drastic! What is it you're suggesting? A wife would take the shine out of me?'

`She might try.'

`Tell me, is there anyone you can think of?' he inquired smoothly, sounding really interested in her answer.

`No one good enough, of course, but there are plenty who would be brave enough to try.'

`And you'd be the first to congratulate me?'

`No need to question that! If Aunt Althea's all right and the sale goes on, I can't wait until Peter Shelton gets here.'

`Neither can I,' he said in the soft quiet voice, `though your enthusiasm is a bit overdone. You're so really and truly beautiful, Sarie; staggering when you're frightened and angry. Which is now!' All kinds of notions were exploding in Sarie's head. She was mad to run away from him or do something equally urgent, but he was blocking her path. As though by itself her hand came up, a desperate little motion directed towards his dark, mocking face. Instantly his fingers shot out and encircled her wrist, bringing her hand down again.

`I never want to see you do that again,' he reprimanded her dryly.

Full realization was overwhelming. `Blake ... oh, Blake, what's happening?'

`Nothing we can't deal with,' he said steadily. `Nothing is being taken from you, Sarie. You're just coming out of your dream state.'

`Well, I wish I'd worked up to it instead of doing it all at once,' she said dryly.

`Nothing's that simple,' he answered. `Not at close range.'

`I thought you preferred it that way,' Blake said suavely. `A minute ago you couldn't get close enough!'

'You find that hard to understand, I suppose?'

'No, actually I don't think there's any better place for you. Come on, Selene, a little down-to-earth practicality. Someone has to find Haddo.'

`Me, for example?' she inquired.

`Of course. Only I'll come with you. That way I'll be sure you both arrive home again.'

Blake went a little ahead of her, a tall, lean figure moving towards the sunlight. Sarie followed him as though drawn by a strong current, a part of her hearing him giving instructions this way and that as they went.

Bart Earnshaw had promised to fly in in a few hours, and she saw his broad shoulders relax. Outside in the courtyard she looked up at him, pleading.

`I feel a little strange as though I've been called upon to reassess my whole life. You've all been so kind to me, the whole family.'

`Oh?' His eyes between their sooty black lashes were as clear as a sunlit stream. `I thought I detected some slight animosity towards myself at different times.'

`You imagined it,' she averred.

`No.'

His glance swept her face, and it wasn't kind or gentle. `You're a deep one, Blake,' she said, her rose amber head slightly bent.

`Granted. Except that I've never changed about you.'

`Yes, you have! I can tell.' She lifted her head, and the blazing sunshine couldn't find fault with her peach tinted skin.

`No,' he denied. `You're just a crazy mixed-up infant as usual, with plenty of outward defences.'

`Sometimes, not always!' she tried to retaliate.

`If I must lose my head, you're a good kid as well. If you went off and married Shelton I'd miss you more than I could tell.'

`Why?' she asked bluntly, seeing his eyes full of a brilliant irony.

`I'm excessively fond of you, Sarie'

`That's the first time I've heard that!' she retorted.

`One doesn't like to ruin you altogether,' he said in an easy, mocking voice. `I think you're aware of it.'

`For the first time in my life I'm ravenous to hear more.'

He shook his head. 'Well, you're not going to. We have to find Haddo, remember?'

'I never left myself a minute to forget. Maybe I can help you a lot better than you think. I think the trip has something to do with Uncle Haddo's work. Recording the minor tribal ceremonies, that sort of thing. Very likely he's investigating some very ancient rite only Jimmy knows about.'

'I think Jimmy just likes to draw Haddo on,' Blake said.

'Well, he does take it all very seriously.'

'And he's compiled a considerable body of work, but lately I think Jimmy's been drawing as much on a fertile imagination as anything from the past. He's a great showman!'

'He's very fey as well' she protested.

'Especially after a drink, and he's not getting any younger. Once a brood warrior of the Eaglehawks now weighing just over one hundred and ten pounds.' Blake's tone was sombre.

'It's unfair, isn't it? To grow old. It seems like an awful betrayal. Take Uncle Haddo, for instance. I know he's still marvellous, but he used to be so handsome and vital. That portrait of his in the long gallery, such mental and physical perfection! No wonder Aunt Althea fell so madly in love with him. Now we worry about him from daylight to dark, in case he wanders off or has a fall from his horse.'

Blake shrugged. 'That's why Jimmy is with him. He sees to all things. He's still quite literally hawk-eyed. If there's any real trouble Jimmy will get the message over the hills, but we might be faced with the possibility that it gets here too late. That's the pattern of our lives out here. Haddo wouldn't have it any other way. He'll probably die out there, following some legend of some lost tribe.'

'If only man possessed nine lives! Some, like Netta's little piccaninny, are seemingly grudging one.'

'It's no easy life, honey!' Blake's hand descended on her shoulder, gripping it as he studied her face, reading with the special virtue he had what went on behind her changing expressions. 'Still coming?'

'Yes, of course,' she returned instantly. 'Like Uncle Haddo, it's the only life I want!'

'You didn't mean that?' Questioningly he lifted her face, mockery sparkling in his eyes.

'No need to topple down. I did.'

Unexpectedly, he laughed. 'Honestly, Sarie, sometimes you make me go weak at the knees!'

'I hardly understand myself these days,' she retorted with something of his own dryness. 'Shall we take the jeep?'

'It will save time.'

Sarie looked up at the vivid blue sky. It was brilliantly fine, clear enough to see on for ever. A flock of little blue desert pigeons flew up into the air, and she ran towards them clapping her hands, then veered away to the parked jeep. A few seconds later Blake joined her. He shoved the jeep into gear and drove in silence out of the main compound, while Sarie's thoughts roamed rather riotously. His whole aura was that of strength and controlled power; she couldn't ever be frightened of anything with Blake beside her. Even if they were stranded in the desert she could count on Blake to get them out of it.

'The old rock pool on the other side of Nuljiri might be the most likely spot. I heard Uncle Haddo mention it last night,' she said.

'Well, he'll only get Jimmy there in broad daylight and I'd be surprised even then. The psychological angle permeates the aboriginal mind, and that particular rock pool had plenty powerful black magic. Uncontrollable bad spirits lurk there. Fortunately they cease their activities at dawn.'

'Odd, isn't it?' Sarie said, trying not to remember the way her own scalp prickled round that spot.

'Maybe.' Blake shrugged his powerful shoulders. 'It all started long years ago, with inter-tribal hostility and breaking of the laws. The Kaditcha man, in his shoes of emu feathers clotted with blood, encircled a

small native camp, took off the women and left not one man alive. The terrible fear of the pool has never ceased since then, the sounds and the whisperings of the ghosts of those who were so treacherously murdered. In my father's day an outlawed myall was caught drinking from the pool and died for no apparent reason. The water wasn't poisoned - my father had it tested. The body was examined, just another unexplained death. A few follow on the age-old rituals, as you know. It's hidden terror, as I said, the psychological angle.'

Sarie's own stomach muscles had tensed as she listened to the old story. Blake glanced at her briefly and smiled.

'Poor Sarie! What's the matter? Do you think I might ever dump you at the spot?'

'I'll tell you now it would strain my nerves.'

'Don't I know it! You love a little drama, it makes these violet eyes enormous!'

She drew in an audible breath, her slender shoulders tensed. 'I'm not responsible for my metabolism!'

'Fantastic as it is.' He leaned forward a little, narrowing his eyes. 'There's a wisp of smoke over there.!''

'I can't see it,' she said.

'It's there.' He spoke almost to himself, his keen gaze on the thin gossamer-like thread.

Sarie screwed up her own eyes, then gave up in disgust. If Blake said there was smoke she knew better than to dispute it. She took off her cream, wide-brimmed hat and began fanning her face and her neck, folding back the soft collar of her shirt. Her red-gold hair curled in damp tendrils like a small child's.

The heat was searing, the mirage already about, a shimmering silverblue reflection like water in a pool. Hundreds of indignant little zebra finches, favourite prey of the hawks and the falcons, exploded from the branches of the long lines of trees, chattering madly as the jeep swept past them. Lizards and snakes too felt the vibration and took care to keep out of the way.

They were making straight across the maze of gullies and the flower-fringed plain that lay between the homestead and Nuljiri, the great pinnacle that so curiously resembled the old chieftain. It dominated the eye in every direction, a wonderful natural monument and a great and sacred spot since the Dreaming. No enemy of the tribe had ever dared to advance to the foot of Nuljiri, coming no further than the waterhole on the far side. Cattle pads trailed across the ocean of plain, and way off in the distance a big herd was grazing belly-deep in the sweet grass. On their western boundary lay the desert and the great unbroken chains of red cliffs that reared up like the Pyramids and were even more incredibly ancient. The red sand glittered in the blazing sun like some fabulous reef, stretching north and south like the endless waves of the sea.

The trees now in their path grew in scattered patches. The baubins, the limewoods and eucalyptus, and all the time the myriad birds, strikingly jewel-coloured, the brilliantly lacquered parrots, the undulating, neverceasing formations of budgerigars, flashing emerald and bright yellow on the breast feathers.

Coolibahs, acacias, wilga and cassias followed the line of the waterways where the sweetly scented cane grass grew, the purple flowering wild orchids and the trunga lilies.

The jeep nosed into the last shallow, sandy gully and out of it. 'We'll have a rain storm tonight!' Blake said suddenly, glancing at Sarie's small flushed face and her efforts to cool it.

'I hope so. Then we'll have a sea of wild flowers over the sale.'

His eyes were like diamond chips, very nearly slashing at her. 'Perhaps Shelton will help you pick some, seeing he doesn't ride.'

'That might be rather wonderful.' She glanced back at him, half smiling.

'It should present a golden opportunity, at least!' he said dryly.

`What I really want to do,' she said in a yearning kind of voice, `is camp out under the desert stars!'
`Now there's a great idea!' He delved for a cigarette out of the pocket of his shirt. `Light this for me, baby.'
She did so with a little effort, ducking her head out of the wind, then put it between his finely cut lips, staring at him unconsciously. Noting the gleam of his darkly bronze skin, the thick black lashes any woman would envy, the straight nose and the firm chin.
`Well?' he demanded.
`Come again? She pretended ignorance, but he didn't smile.
`You're starting, Selene. You've been doing a bit of it of late.'
`You're terribly good-looking,' she said naively.
He flashed her a glance, but she masked her eyes quickly. `Can't we, Blake?'
`I wish to God I knew what you were talking about,' he snapped.
`Camp out under the stars,' she explained rather pertly. `The sandhills turned to silver-gold, the stars blazing, blue as the Hope diamond, a grove of beautiful desert oaks, boronia-scented air. ...'
`... a wild camel or two, a few donkeys on the loose, a dingo pack howling, just waiting to pull down a weakened calf.'
`Nothing like that will happen - you're coming!'
His mouth twisted ironically. `I'm great to keep you out of trouble, but in any other department I'm far from perfect. It sounds a bit boring to me.'
`Not if Leigh comes as well,' she suggested.
`In that case, flower face, forget the arrangements. I've told you before that your girl friend is wasting her time.'
`She had a definite yen for you. Would you believe too enough suitors to prove her desirability.'
`She doesn't turn me on,' he said most emphatically.
`How strange!' Sarie teased him. `I regret you're not more interested. It seems to me you'd make a perfect couple.'
`Stop talking rubbish!'
`Yes, it is a bit grim. I don't think I want you to marry at all. Your wife would never like me.'
A smile touched his mouth and crinkled his eyes. `I can guarantee she will.'
`Let's leave that subject alone. I don't want to talk about it.' Sarie shivered unaccountably.
`Why not??
`I just don't,' she said rather sharply.
`It's of the utmost importance actually, but all right, we'll leave it alone.' His voice had hardened.
`We could manage it for my birthday,' she said, pleading.
`What are we talking about now?' His brilliant gaze searched for hers.
`Starlight over the drsrrt. It could be very, very lovely.'
`And cold.' There was a flash of arrogance in his voice. `You want to go out before the sale, then?'
`Only if Aunt Althea is all right,' she said defensively.
`This is a new proposal altogether.'
`Yes, and I suppose I shouldn't be discussing it now.'
`True,' he agreed uncompromisingly.
`Blake?' she linked her hands behind her head, resting it back against the seat.

'Hmmm.' He glanced sideways and down at her. A long, level stare, silver eyes challenging, locking her to him for a moment so that she completely forgot what she was about to say. 'Oh, nothing!' She moved a little fretfully, a pulse hammering at the base of her throat. 'I'm just fishing around for a safe topic.'

'Well, you look a little unstrung, just as I was thinking you've been improving over the past few weeks.'

'Thank you. Who am I to ever disagree with your lordly opinion?'

'That's the way things have always been between us; instinctive reaction on your part. As I see it now, the Sheltons are reinforcements. Some sort of supporting column, or camouflage if you like.'

Sarie shook her head and the blood seemed to pound in her ears. 'That's simply not true!'

'We both know it is!'

His eyes pinned hers, his dark face a little ruthless. 'Don't look at me like that. It's extremely odd!'

'You mean it makes you feel odd?'

'It does,' she admitted.

'I'm sorry,' he said tersely.

'There ought to be a word for the way I feel about you, Blake.'

'And there isn't?'

'Not one. At least, I don't think so.' Her eyes were uncertain.

'One will come to you, never fear.'

'You've given me one, as it happens. I'm a little afraid of you.'

'Tell me about it,' he invited, maddeningly casual.

'Now that's quite impossible!'

'It doesn't matter, Sarie, your eyes always give the show away. You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you?'

'I wouldn't want to,' she faltered.

'Wouldn't you, Sarie?' he persisted, beating her own.

'Yes.'

'You took your time deciding,' he said lazily.

'I'm like that. The trouble with you, Blake, you demand total allegiance.'

'That's a meaningless remark.'

'Actually I mean it,' she defended herself.

'Then you're not getting down to essentials, what you really want. However, you've taken the first step. I've never heard you admit before that you love Malpara.'

'It's your country,' she murmured, 'your fortress.'

'It's your refuge. You were twelve when you came here, and a pretty terrible twelve at that. Only your pretty face saved you. Think of all the times you've told me you hated the place, hated me for making your life difficult!'

'Is it possible I really said that?' She turned her head along the seat to him, her expression very soft and contrite.

'Regularly, Sarie,' he replied. 'You were an awfull kid.'

'That hurts!' she protested.

'Maybe it's justified. You've got sharp little claws yourself, as adequate as a marmalade kitten's. I've taken a lot from you over the years - no one else in the wide world would have pulled off all your little escapades.'

'How did I?' She was honestly startled.

'It's pretty disarming dealing with one fragile little redhead. Of course, you were never loved enough as a child; I had to take that into account.'

'Don't talk about it, Blake.'

'Am I right?' he asked, his voice hard.

'Yes, but we can't ever talk about it. Mara certainly didn't want me. My father was dead, and you took me on for my father's sake. You paid Mara off, and I was family. You have to admit, though, that I'll never be

Meredith material.'

'Don't talk rot! You're very temperamental, emotional. You'll always need someone to look after you.' She shifted uneasily. 'Now that seems to me a very accurate statement. The sun is shattering, isn't it?'

For answer he ran the jeep off the track into the shade, turning off the engine and looking at her compellingly. 'So? His eyes slipped over her slender body, the folded-back collar of her shirt, her suntouched skin. He seemed to be watching her in complete absorption, and she shut her eyes abruptly.

'You have an infallible knack for very thoroughly rattling me.'

'Do you say that with a sense of self-pity?' he inquired politely.

'That's not one of my characteristics, surely?'

'No. You can be dangerously sweet and generous. On the other hand you can throw up some pretty impenetrable defences as well. It's just an old gag, all this time and energy you expend fighting me. It goes on at your deepest level.'

'I'm sorry, Blake. I know you've been very good to me.'

'Forget that,' he said very tersely, and she knew with her eyes shut that he was frowning. 'I taught you to ride, I showed you this country. I filled your rebellious little head with the sights and the sounds of it. Now you've got to wade out of your little sea of imagined grievances yourself, the inward resentments that beset you. Open your eyes when I talk to you!'

'I'm sorry.'

'Quit being sorry. Just talk to me.' His voice was harsh.

She lifted her head in surprise, her blue-violet eyes faintly bewildered. 'I just don't want to lose my individuality, Blake.'

'Yes, I can see that has some immense symbolic significance for you.' He reached out a hand and tucked a stray curl back off her face and behind her ear. 'And how do you imagine you might?'

'You're very forceful,' she accused him, feeling a kind of panic mounting in her.

'So you keep telling me,' he rejoined.

'Of course, it's possible we might get on well in time.'

That threw a switch in him. His hands shot out with devastating speed, cupping her head, his lean fingers biting into her temples. 'Pretty soon I might do something about it.'

'You might tell me when.' There was fright and confusion in her eyes, a wild apricot tint over her delicate cheekbones.

He released her abruptly, his head tilted in the old arrogant way. 'What good would it do if you were to know?'

'I could take flight,' she suggested, still feeling the touch of his hands on her skin.

'That's it exactly.' He leaned forward and switched on the ignition. 'That's why I'm taking a certain amount of pleasure out of keeping you in the dark.'

'Well, you've always done that,' she pointed out with humour. 'I suppose to ask any more of you would

be positively dangerous?'

`You're damn right! Sit still and be quiet. I'm pretty near boiling point!'

`I should be capable of letting that pass,' she said slowly, `but I can't!'

'You'd better, Selene,' he warned her.

`Yes, Miz Blake!' she drawled shyly, like one of the little housegirls trying to catch his white smile.

There was a provocative tilt to her rose-amber head, a glow in her lotus lily eyes.

`You'll never learn, will you, honey?'

'Why, Blake, I think I've learned a lot in a very short time. Like today, for instance!'

'Who would have thought it?' His voice was faintly indulgent, openly sceptical.

But I have! Sarie thought, looking away over the shimmering landscape, the mirage making weird visual effects. It was a vast land of power and violence, instant death to the foolish. Namatjira, the great aboriginal painter, had portrayed it faithfully. The baked colours, the wealth of dry ochres, the blood-red sands and the purple slashed ravines, the shining white of the ghost gums, the beautiful vivid blue of the cloudless sky, the incomparable light. I've learned that this is my world. I love it. I've learned that to leave it would kill me. I've learned, most of all, that for better or worse I regard you, Blake, as my personal property. The devastating possession I hold captive in the furthest reaches of my heart. I've learned I've spent all these years trying to elude you like some desert creature trying to elude the hunter. Hopeless! What will come of this knowledge, heaven knows.

The great shadow of Nuljiri seemed to cover the plain, guarding the great run. It stood there in all seasons, through drought and flood, welcoming the ravishing miles of wild flowers, as old as man's first beginnings. Two miles beyond it was the rock pool shelter. The cattle didn't come here, nor the wild dogs. It was a secret, rather savage place and the rock face looked ready to collapse but never had. Even in daylight it had a haunted air, with no birds to fly in their myriads and chatter and call. It wasn't a happy spot, and Sarie shook her head.

`Seems to me we've come to the wrong place,' she ventured.

`I don't think so,' Blake murmured, swinging the jeep in under a ledge. `Tracks in the desert country can last a long time.' He indicated some point on the ground and a few tussocks of grass that meant little or nothing to Sarie, who was not the best bush woman in the world.

A minute later, supporting Blake's theory, a very tough anyd wiry old aboriginal wandered almost cheerfully dawn the ominous rock face. 'Mornin', boss!'

'Afternoon, Jinunyl' Blake corrected. `Uncle Haddo with you?'

`Sure am! Afternoon, Missy!' Jimmy saluted Sarie, sweeping his battered slouch hat to his breast.

`Hello there, Jimmy, we've had quite a time finding you.'

'Anythin' wrong?' Jimmy suddenly looked very anxious, his glossy-skinned black face screwed up in what looked like self-disgust.

`I trust you, Jimmy,' Blake said calmly, `you know that Uncle Haddo is wanted home again, that's all. Mrs. Meredith isn't feeling so well.'

`I'm sure sorry to hear that. I'll go get the Big Fella.'

`Where is he?'

`The other side,' Jimmy yelled, clambering back up the nearly sheer rock like an agile old goat. `He's uncovering a terrible lot of old markings.'

`Mean anything?' Blake shouted after him.

`Can't say!'

`Won't say!' Blake murmured laconically to Sarie.

`Some things can never be said, boss,' Jimmy announced sombrely from the top, the sun like a burst of flame around him. `Plenty of blacks speared around this place, and I ain't joking.'

`This is unreal,' Sarie breathed, so sensitive that she was catching vibrations herself. The whole rock structure seemed rotten and crumbly, thick with red powder. Big boulders had fallen from the top, resting at crazy angles while others sat flat one upon the other as though erected by man. No vegetation grew in the area save the thick clumps of porcupine spinifex that the stock wouldn't touch. She was still staring wide-eyed at the unconsciously posing Jimmy when Blake walked around the jeep and lifted her out without even opening the door.

`Come along, Sarie, we're not here for the night. This is your grand opportunity to explore by daylight. Don't sit there in wonder.'

`It is a bit sinister, isn't it?' she asked uneasily.

`Keep that up and you'll have Jimmy bolting. That swagger of his is magnificent bravado; the vibrations around this place aren't favourable to him.'

"Ditto. You go ahead and I'll follow quietly!"

On the other side they all converged on Haddo Meredith at once. That he didn't turn his head betrayed the fact that he was more than a little deaf, though he had retained his acute hearing unimpaired until well into his seventies. He was now eighty-four and trying to lift a very weighty-looking rock, muttering to himself as he did it.

`Heavy as bloody lead!'

Blake went straight up to him, bending over the old man and speaking very clearly and distinctly almost into his ear. `Leave that, Haddo. I'll get it for you.'

`Good lad!' Uncle Haddo straightened at once. Over six feet in his younger days but slightly diminished by the weight of his years, he was a very fine-looking old man, much taller but nearly as spare as Jimmy. `Never knew another like you, Blake, for turning up at the right minute. Jimmy, you loafer, where did you get to?'

'Fossicking around, prospecting, you know!' said Jimmy.

`Why, Sarie, you've come along as well!' Uncle Haddo stared at her hard, seeking the cause for her sudden appearance. She left all the explanations to Blake.

`A ride in the jeep won't hurt her,' Blake said, depositing the rock on a ledge and dusting his hands on the front of his blue denim shirt. `Actually we didn't start out for that reason. Aunt Althea isn't feeling so wonderful, and she'd be a lot happier if you were home again, but naturally she didn't send me out here to say that.'

`I'll come at once. You're telling the truth, boy, she's all right?'

`No cause for alarm. I'm having Bart fly in all the same. He might as well take a look at you both.'

`Kill two birds with one stone,' Uncle Haddo grunted.

`It's a wonder you didn't kill yourself with that one,' Blake gestured briefly at the dark red rock. `What do you want it for, anyway?'

`It's what's under it, boy!'

'Artefacts?' Sarie asked. 'Coolas, dhooras?'

`Leave 'em, boss.' Jimmy spoke directly to Blake. He was obviously afraid, as though the place was full of live magic.

Uncle Haddo glared at him, beetling his bushy white brows. `The devil I will! You're a simple fool,

Jimmy.'

Jimmy looked stricken, raising one skinny arm in warning. 'We'd better push on, boss.'

'Now see here, Jimmy-' Uncle Haddo was still glaring unwaveringly.

Jimmy knew best not to answer him, hemmed in by all the hostile radiations he was receiving. Sarie herself was seeing rites and rituals full of incredible savagery, long before the shadow of the Kaditcha man fell over the place. 'What is it, Jimmy,' she asked him, 'ancestral spirits?'

'For God's sake don't discuss it now,' Blake begged them. 'Aunt Althea is waiting.'

Uncle Haddo stood his ground steadily for about a half a minute, then he began with his slow, precise movements to walk back around the base of the rock shelter to the jeep at the other side, muttering his own imprecations as he went. Jimmy followed at a proper distance, his eyes bright with fear, whispering in turn to himself. The least little thing would have made him flee on the instant, the piercing shriek of a bird, the hiss of a goanna.

'Superstitious fear is the very devil!' said Blake, remembering with surprising vividness different events from his childhood. 'It gets such a grip on the mind, the nervous system. After a lifetime under the white man's influence, Jimmy is seeing spectres all round him. The fear is inbuilt. It's quite pointless to go with this ... Sarie, come away from there!' He broke off sharply, taking note of Sarie's activities. She was busy setting out to do what Uncle Haddo hadn't; uncovering buried treasure, artefacts perhaps. She looked back at him, startled. He looked very thoroughly formidable. 'What is it?'

'There might be a curse on the damned place for all you know!'

'Well, I never!' she gasped.

'You're trampling on thousands of years of tribal history. The Merediths have only been here a few generations. I don't want to upset poor old Jimmy, or anyone else who's left of the tribe, right down to the last little piccaninny. These things are important to them. Fear of this rock will never dig out, and it's far more than any physical terror. If they think a curse goes with this place then it's best not to disturb anything, otherwise they'll believe the curse will turn back upon them. What's left of them!'

'Then why did Jimmy let Uncle Haddo explore around here?'

'This is apparently the first time Jimmy has seen the markings himself. Besides, who's ever stopped Haddo? He's a law unto himself and always has been. Jimmy is educated, but he's still a native, an elder of the tribe. It would have cost him a lot to come here in the first place, but he does so like to please Haddo. If there are any artefacts buried under that rock, he wouldn't want them disturbed, and neither do I. The black man's fear goes all the way - he can and will frighten himself to death. I'm responsible for their wellbeing. Uncle Haddo will just have to dig somewhere else. Move away from there, Sarie, and I'll cover that up. The last thing I want is trouble. I've too much work on my hands!'

Sarie stood up and moved back obediently. She felt a little apprehensive as well, as though she were about to witness a secret ceremony from which all women are debarred. The sky was so blue it hurt the eyes, the sun oppressively hot and erosive, the sun that preserved the cadavers of cattle like Egyptian mummies, the peculiar phenomenon of the Outback.

Where were the birds now, she thought, the glorious undulations of budgerigar that had followed them all the way to this spot? She glanced down at Blake's crouching form. He was staring into a concealed crevice in the rock, the set of his lean back and shoulders curiously alert. 'There's a churinga in there, a sacred stone.'

'Leave it,' Sarie begged in deadly earnest.

'I will. It doesn't concern us.'

He stood up and turned to grasp the great rock he had placed up on the ledge, preparing to ease it back into the blood red sand. Sarie moved towards him in a trance, drawn by some odd, insatiable curiosity.

`This is ridiculous. I want to see that churinga!'

`Don't try to impress me with your bravery, flower face. It's in there and it's staying.'

`We're nearly as dippy as Jimmy!'

`Jimmy's not dippy at all,' Blake said firmly. `He's the best bushman we've got, and the best tracker. He's also Haddo's loyal and unselfish companion. I trust Jimmy and I intend to respect his wishes.'

`Well, there's no need to be so solemn!' she said pertly. `I'm not about to offend some old ancestral spirit. There's not a pointing bone in there, I hope?

Even as she said it, there shot at them from nowhere a silver vortex of wind. It hurled Sarie like a featherweight back into Blake's arms. They closed round her, very hard and protective.

`Duck your head!'

She was almost smothered against his shirt front, his hands in her hair as he changed his stance with difficulty so that he could take the full brunt of the mad spinning column. It whipped at their clothes and their: skin and their hair, a blazing hot rush of air, no proper debildebil, for it had no bits of grass or red sand in it. It raged at them for a moment, a lightning menace, then flashed by like a colourless rush of flame. The wind dropped. There was silence, the distant sandhills floating in a blue mirage sea.

`What was that?' Sarie ventured to lift her head again, swallowing dryly. "The god of the desert?"

`It seemed more like a challenge to me.' Blake brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers and started to laugh. `You have to admit it's never monotonous out here. Fire, drought, flood, birds flying upside down, strange animals. Make a false move and you're on sacred ground or digging up emblems, falling foul of an ancient religion, mulkaree, deadly magic. That was some powerful old witch doctor!'

`You can say that again!' Sarie was still resting against him and Blake was still unconsciously holding her, soothing her, a characteristic she had never taken much notice of before. Now the touch of his hand, the gentle up-and-down movement on the nape of her neck, seemed to harmonize with the beat of her heart. If she were a kitten she would be purring, with no desire to move away. The mad thrill of the whirlwind had had an odd effect. She just wanted to stay there in the tightening circle of Blake's arms.

`You're not going to sleep, are you? he asked softly against her ear. `A minute ago you wanted very badly to run.'

Her eyes were a deep blue blended with purple. She nodded, taking good care not to look at him. `You're the only person I know who spells complete security to me.'

`You've taken a long time to arrive at that,' he observed.

`You've done too much bullying, that's why,' she said, pretending to scold.

`And now I'm a calming influence?'

`Not calming, no.' She gave him a sharp push away, and he smiled, looking so attractive it was impossible to describe. `Uncle Haddo had better leave this place alone.'

`He'd only be showing good judgment at that,' he agreed.

`I wonder if it whistled past them, whatever it was?'

`I hope not!' Blake murmured laconically. `I won't get any good out of Jimmy for a week. Now, flower child, that we've decided who's the stronger of the two of us, let's go back to the jeep. Remember I'm still your guide and guardian!'

You also possess a unique magic, Sarie thought, trying to disguise the effects of it; the small throbbing pulse at the base of her throat, the dense colour of her eyes, the clear stain on her cheeks. The message

was intense and now she was sensible to her own emotions.

Every nerve end seemed to stir with excitement. Blake, always Blake, gathering power. The voice of her past, of the present, the future? It was impossible for her to view any other situation. Blake was her life. She stumbled a little clambering over a boulder, and his tall shadow fell across her.

`What kind of a bush baby are you, anyway?' he demanded.

`I've had a shock,' she said, and this time she couldn't evade his eyes. They were brilliant. With mockery, or what?

`Then pull yourself together.' He reached out and lifted her down to the sand. His touch unnerved her so much, aroused such a tumultuous degree of excitement she could think of nothing else than hitting out at him like an inadequate schoolchild.

'Let me go!', she gashed.

`Yes, ma'am. Make sure that little fist doesn't connect!'

Love and antagonism were prickling at her like hot pins. He was taking an eternity to let go of her.

`Please!' she begged him, though she ached for more.

`Just so long as there's no pretence between us any more.'

She became obsessed with her own inadequacy. There was an answer to all this, but she couldn't cope with what it was. For a long time she had become accustomed to thinking of Blake as the tyrant in her life. Oh yes, she had admitted often enough that she loved him at some subterranean level - usually within his hearing, strung up over some decision or other. Blake was Blake and she saw nothing strange in loving him and hating him. He was clever and hard-working and exceptionally tolerant. On the other hand, he was quick-tempered and impatient of stupidity and delays. He was the soul of generosity and he showed a genuine interest and concern for every man, woman and child on the station, so why had she persisted with this notion of the wicked cattle baron?

Her eyes met his, half laughing, half sad. `I'm rather dense, aren't I?'

`You're nervous, of course,' he said curtly.

His silver-sheened eyes swept over her, an intolerable stimulant, and with no intention of will she whirled about and broke into a run. It was amazing to see how swiftly she moved, caught up in an all-consuming panic. Blake was affecting her too deeply and he was still, in his own way, an enigma. From now on she would have nightmares that he would go off and get married. He was free to do it, he didn't have to answer to anybody.

If that happened it would mean she would have to leave Malpara. What sort of a set-up would it be with Blake married? The very thought drove Sarie crazy. Absolutely crazy. Now at long last she had found her Achilles heel: Blake. It wasn't only a surprise, it was a tremendous shock.

Uncle Haddo and Jimmy, both sitting in the jeep, looking at her flying figure with interest, Uncle Haddo pushing his glasses back firmly on his nose. `A bit hot for exercise!'

'Exercise can save a lot of lives,' she retorted.

`The truth, undoubtedly, but I've a vague idea it doesn't extend to mad dashes. Too tiring in the heat, dear. You need a spell of rest.'

She wiped the perspiration from under her eyes and climbed into the jeep, claiming her property, her cream,

wide-brimmed hat. `Anything odd happen here in the last few moments?'

`Nothing odd at all,' Uncle Haddo said, wiping such a suggestion away with a broad sweep of his hand.

`Jimmy, you've done it again, you old wonder!'

`How so?'

`What a hell of an answer!'

Tactfully Sarie tried to ease Jimmy's difficulty. `I believe Blake doesn't want the spot disturbed.'

`Now that's interesting,' said Uncle Haddo. `Naturally I will take that from him, but nobody else.'

`Dr. Earnshaw should arrive in quite early,' Sarie volunteered with extreme caution. Uncle Haddo, thwarted, could prove very peppery.

`Be that as it may,' he announced grandly, `I don't need a doctor. Old people should get out and do something. That's the answer.'

`He's coming to see Aunt Althea particularly.'

`A slight attack?' he quizzed her, biting on his moustache, which was as luxuriant as his full head of hair.

`Nothing more. We've decided a little rest might help.'

`I shall inform her as well. Ah, Blake. ..' he broke off as Blake pulled himself into the jeep `... how deep is that hole?'

`Don't mention it;' Blake responded.

`I know, I know. We'll discuss it when Jimmy's gone.'

`Well, I hope you recall our conversations in the past.'

`But, my boy ...' Uncle Haddo protested.

`There's nothing easier than finding artefacts. Jimmy, if you wanted to, you could find a lost cave or two?'

'Sure, boss.'

`You wish me to lose interest, is that it?' Uncle Haddo asked, without heat or emphasis.

`There's a lot of things not right about this place,' Blake said just as casually. `Supremely responsible as you are, Uncle Haddo, I know you'll accept that.'

Uncle Haddo, understandably, didn't want to deny that. `You're quite right, my boy. I believe I've got together an important body of work - I'd like you to check over my last paper and give an opinion.'

`There's no reason why it shouldn't be published,' Blake said with great care and concentration, hauling the jeep back up on to the track.

`You're telling the truth,' Uncle Haddo asked, smiling slightly. `Never mind, don't tell me!' He suddenly caught hold of Sarie, perched on the extreme edge of the seat beside him, and kissed her roundly. `That's for doing my typing. Good girl, perhaps you'll get something out of it.'

`She thinks so, anyway,' Blake murmured briefly, and smiled. His brilliant eyes pinned her gaze in the rear vision mirror and she caught her breath deeply, not seeming to be able to release it for a long time. Now at long last she knew what she wanted. Blake.

CHAPTER FOUR

Something woke her. Sarie lifted her head, trying to find the direction from which the sound came. It came again and this time there was no doubt; a fine spray of pebble against the dark blue shutters. She pulled herself upright, stretching her arms above her head, willing herself wide awake. The sky beyond was filled with a soft grey translucent light with a veil of pale lemon over the horizon. Piccaninny dawn, cool and quiet, with the morning star still guarding the station. Only gradually did she realize this was her birthday. She was twenty and obviously she had horn singled out for attention. Only one person would do it this way - Blake. It was no time to linger in bed.

She slid out on to the lovely old Chinese rug that covered the polished floor and reached for her robe. It was very unusual, a present from Gayle, a white satin affair splashed with pink and yellow carnations, and she belted it tightly around her delicate next-to-nothing nightdress. For a very clear-thinking, unsentimental, very purposeful man, Blake did do the most romantic things. She stood in the centre of the room for a moment, pushing her fingers through her curls, haloing them round her head in fine-spun tendrils, then she went to the open window, leaning out precariously like the young Juliet.

Blake stood in the archway that led to the walled garden beyond, one arm uplifted, leaning against the stone. Jeans, a battle jacket, a pale blue shirt with the collar ruffled, so carelessly elegant that the world of modelling would have loved him. Her eyes clung to him fascinated.

`What is it?'

`Happy birthday.' He broke his unconscious pose and walked towards her. `Don't fall out, though I'm here to catch you.'

`Thank you for the birthday wishes,' she whispered, as though they were the only ones awake in the whole wide world.

`You look very ravishing for the first thing in the morning.'

'Is that what you came to tell me?' she asked, half shyly.

`No, actually, you might say I'm here to get a moment alone with my ward. Over-dramatic, I know, but if I wait around until the sun comes up we'll have your friends around. Get dressed and come down.'

'How totally unexpected!' she sighed blissfully, and lifted her arms to this enchanting, mother-of-pearl world. The first clear notes of the butcher bird floated pure and silvery sweet from the baubinia tree. `I'm twenty!'

`Yes, I know. It's been a long time coming.'

`I think I'll just topple out!' she said with a definite suggestion that she just might.

`That's all right with me. Didn't Gayle give you that?'

'The robe? It's gorgeous, isn't it?'

`I'll grant you that. Now, are you going to stay there and salute the rising sun or are you going to come down and get your present?'

'Try holding me back! I'm a nature-lover, but I'm not simple-minded.' Smilingly she withdrew her bright head, moving back across the room like a dancer. She was unable to suppress the excitement that was bubbling up inside her like glass after glass of champagne. In the small adjoining bathroom she brushed her teeth, splashed icy cold water over her face; then she raced back to the bedroom, reaching for the nearest thing to

hand, a halter-necked sun-dress almost the same stunning blue as her eyes. She didn't need make-up, but she put a light gloss of colour on her mouth, breathless with the suddenness of Blake's invitation.

Out in the walled garden he was waiting for her, studying her intently as she came towards him. She looked as sweetly vibrant as the new morning with a uniqueness about her like the blue wild flowers that spread and spread all over the hill country after rain, transforming; the barren landscape. Lazily he reached over and plucked a perfect yellow-gold rose, offering it to her as a tribute, keeping words to a minimum. She took it from him and slipped it into the V neck of her dress where it pulsed its incomparable flower scent over her heartbeat. He was succeeding in making her tremble, this so-familiar, terrifyingly strange Blake. She looked up at him urgently, her eyes like a violet flame.

`Well, where is it?'

`Isn't that a little pushy? You haven't said good morning yet.'

`You're absolutely right - good morning, Blake.'

`Don't I get a kiss for your birthday? he asked with a mocking, half derisive grin.

`Somebody should have warned me,' she said lightly. `I thought it was the other way about, but if you'll be kind enough to dip your head - you tower over me, you know.!'

`What would you expect?' he chided her dryly. `With you at five feet two.'

`Exactly where do I kiss you?' she asked quite reasonably.

`Work it out. It's not difficult.'

`That's what you think! It's perilous these days. I can't even consider it!'

`What are you afraid of?' he asked meaningfully.

`That's the whole point, I'm not!'

`I'm not sure I understand you, Selene!' He turned her face up, his voice rather crisp and authoritative, and all her cool and her poise simply deserted her. She fell forward like a ten-year-old and turned her face into his t shirt, avoiding the hard shiny button on his battle jacket.

`Don't tease me, Blake,' she said, her voice muffled. She slipped her arms around him and hugged him.

`How's that?'

`Terrific, need you ask!' His voice had all the old mocking charm, but the hand on her hair was gentle. After a while it closed on her nape, forcing her head up. `My poor little Sarie, it's like asking you to break every single convention at once, and I thought you were daring! You've got a lovely mouth, Sarie, very soft and sweet and passionate. It's your eyes that beg for reassurance. All right, let's go.'

`You're not angry with me? She tugged at the edge of his jacket.

`Good God, what for?'

`You sound a little terse,' she said in a small voice.

`My darling baby, far be it from me to exact a gigantic sacrifice. Let's get that straight once and for all.'

He took hold of her hand and drew her along the path of unglazed quarry tiles. The few drifts of clouds along the horizon were turning from mauve to rose pink to gold, catching fire, the air so clean and fresh that it was delicious just to breathe it.

`You're going so fast!' she protested. He was tireless, tireless, and all her senses were reeling. There was no break or falter in his lithe movements. `I have to beat Shelton,' he explained, his voice very sharp and amused. `You have to concede he's a master of intrusion.'

`You said I could have him,' she panted.

`I said nothing of the kind!'

`To visit, I mean.'

`Well, that. Tell me,' he glanced directly into her face, his eyes diamond-hard, `have you kissed him?'

`No, and doesn't bother me at all,' she said very truthfully. `Please, Blake, slow down - I'm getting a stitch in my side!'

`It's difficult to imagine what you'd do without me!' Rhythmically, he swept her right off her feet. `What a very curious pattern of behaviour, Selene!'

The sun came straight up over the rim of the sandhills, flaring over his dark face. Sarie was so very close to him, the yellow rose crushed between them. His chiselled profile was strangely taut, as though he were exercising an iron control over himself. `Please don't be angry with me. Not on my birthday!' She leaned just an inch further and kissed his polished bronze cheek. `Blake?' she said plaintively. Lights flickered odd in his brilliantly clear eyes. `Stop trembling, you little idiot.'

'I can't help it. My heart's hammering.'

'I know. I can feel it,' he answered shortly.

The profound silence of the pre-dawn was now broken. Birds started their ceaseless warbling. From the stables complex came the murmur of aboriginal voices, the soft clang of gear. The horses were all awake now, demanding feed and attention: sounds of activity came from the staff kitchens beyond. It was as though a great orchestra were starting up, bringing in each section one after the other.

'Aren't I heavy?' she said, looking up at the wall of the trees. He shook his head.

'We could walk right through the desert and I still wouldn't be exhausted. Anyway, we're here!'

He left her standing in the glorious flare of sunlight, walking away with his characteristic male liteness. She felt absolutely unguarded, the blood rushing tumultuously through her body, fighting the impulse to run after Blake and tell him she loved him. Not as she had always loved him but suddenly, differently. She would never be right again. She would never be able to look coolly into his face.. She wanted him badly in every possible way, and not being able to express it properly was an agony, like little darts of fire striking her soft skin. If

he ever touched her she would be lost. Probably he knew that and kept a barrier between them. She never had been able to strike a balance with Blake. All the loving and hating and now this new wild kind of feeling that was desire. Incredible, and she wouldn't be able to fight it much longer.

Sarie felt almost grateful for the Sheltons' early arrival, even if Leigh's attentions to Blake had been down right embarrassing and the outfit she had arrived in had been little short of sensational, her honey-blond hair swinging in a golden bell around her perfectly made up, golden-skinned face. Leigh's eyes had been trained on Blake from the very first minute, burning steadily. If Peter had been looking longingly in her own direction she had scarcely taken note of it, being too busy watching Leigh in her new role of siren. Thank goodness Scotty and Sean had turned up. Scotty had never missed her birthday yet, and it was so lovely to have her around. Sean, too, she was very fond of, relaxed and smiling and badly in need of a rest. Sean, like Blake, worked too hard and too long.

Sarie leaned against the cool bark of a tree, her skin warm and smooth with colour. Her hand came up automatically, catching at a blossom, twirling it under her nose and imprisoning the scene all mixed up with the crushed golden rose. She heard Blake call to her and she whirled about, astonished and enchanted, watching him lead out a spirited colt with the superb gold and cream colouring of his own beautiful palomino, Whirlwind.

It was too much for her and she leaned back dazedly. Horses were her weakness, but this couldn't be for her. She had expected one of Marge's golden Labrador puppies; something Blake had said had given her the notion. Her beautiful blue eyes filled with entreaty. She took a deep breath and said rather tremulously:

'He's mine?'

'Of course,' he said simply.

'Well, I don't suppose I'll ever get such a marvellous gift again!' The whole morning seemed ecstatic, intoxicating. The colt tossed its flaxen mane and she started towards it.

'Well, I am useful in a way!' Blake was observing dryly.

'But you're gorgeous!' Sarie said.

'The horse? I thought you'd think so. You've always wanted to ride Whirlwind.'

'So I have, but you've never let me.'

'Small wonder, you couldn't hold him. This is one of his from when he serviced Mitta Mitta's top mares.'

The only one, incidentally, to share his colouring - the others are chestnuts.'

She slanted a glance at Blake's face. It revealed nothing but the familiar, tantalizing indulgence. 'You're very good to me, Blake.'

'I certainly know how to spoil you,' he agreed dryly.

Her face was bewitched and bewitching, delicate and beautifully tinted with colour, her eyes like sapphires.

He was suddenly at her back, lifting her into the saddle, and she made no effort to cover her bare, slender legs, in the strangest mood of abandon. His luminous eyes burned over her, making her oddly lightheaded. 'When did it come?'

'Yesterday, when you were so busy teaching Shelton how to ride. He looked pretty frightened to me. Don't fight the motion, Peter, ride with it!' he mimicked her. 'As it was, we just made it - the lesson finishing well before time. In any case, honey, he's sitting too far forward in the saddle. You might tell him, if he gets on again!'

'Oh, heavens, I'm not going to stay here wasting time talking about Peter. Thank you, Blake, darling beast of mine!' She leant down very swiftly and caught his mouth; she felt so impossibly buoyant she could have done anything. He had his head slightly averted, rechecking the girth, so she just touched the corner of that

sensuous, very disciplined mouth, but it was enough, like powerful wings inside her.

He made a movement, but she was too quick for him, touching the colt's satin sides. It sprang away with the matchless speed and grace of its breeding, not concerned in the least at taking the big gate, though she heard Blake call to her, amused and agitated at one and the same time. Joy seized both of them, girl and animal. Sarie was a featherweight on the colt's back. Her hands and her soft singing voice were gentle but confident. Her blue skirt whipped in the wind.

It was a soaring flight and release, the colt arching over the fences. She bent her head over its golden neck and its mane brushed her face. They were out on the vast flower-strewn plains and the colt was galloping easily. Caught up in a mutual excitement, Sarie gave it its head. The image of Blake rode beside them, as he always would from now on. In the distance the red cliffs of Malpara rolled on into infinity, retaining their power and mystery; a wedge-tailed eagle paced them, soaring an effortless second. Sarie heard herself laughing and she knew this feeling for what it was. Exultation!

Blake, oh, Blake! All of her senses were alive to him: she was never to want anything or anyone as much as Blake. What a wonderful present! She glanced down at the colt's gleaming neck. 'I even know your name,' she shouted against the wind. 'Gold Dust!'

The palomino flashed up its golden head, a manifestation that it had heard and understood. It wasn't its official name for the records, but it was the most beautiful.

For the first time in a long time, the formal dining-room was used for Sarie's small family dinner-cum-birthday party. Peter Shelton looked about him with avid detachment. He couldn't begin to assess the value here, and he was something of a connoisseur. It was a very large room, with three pairs of jalousied French doors leading out on to the veranda. The high ceiling, painted a pale blue, had exceptionally fine moulded cornices, the plasterwork picked out in gold and ivory. An elegant bronze and rock crystal chandelier hung from a central rose in the ceiling just over his head, reflected in the ornately carved mirror of the credenza that held an eye-boggling variety of family silver, porcelain ornaments, a matching pair of Meissen plates with bouquets of flowers on a mazarinc blue ground and a

garniture of Sevres vases in the display alcoves. Sarie had told him, disgustingly careless of the value of that sort of thing though she obviously loved and appreciated it.

The trouble was she was used to it. Peter's mother had a few valuable things, but they were all locked away in a display cabinet. The Merediths apparently had assembled a sizeable collection over the years, and had no such qualms about putting the whole lot out on show. The miracle was that nothing was ever broken, and the housegirls must have found it a challenge.

The magnificent dining-room table and chairs were English mahogany, rather gothic in character; the gleaming polished floor was parqueted, its rich dark air lifted by the airy lightness of the blue walls and ceiling and the further colour accent of the beautiful blue-and white toile that upholstered the seats of the dining-room chairs and the ribbon-backed English settee that was placed against the far wall. A few very fine paintings hung about the walls, lit by their own brackets. Nothing strongly traditional, which surprised Peter, but the finest contemporary Australian artists - Nolan, Drysdale, Boyd, Dobell, Tucker. They were all Outback scenes filled with aesthetic vitality, and they were absolutely accurate in their colour and imagery of a haunting and often hostile land. The result was a visual assault on the senses, and it imparted a freshness and impact to an otherwise important, very formal room, which didn't lend itself easily to small gatherings. There were eight of them at table and Peter let his eyes roam over each one in turn.

Blake Meredith. Now he really was a character, his eyes the same colour as that old family silver; he made Peter feel an alien in strange territory. It was difficult to feel at ease with him, he did everything too well; not that it was a weakness not knowing how to ride and to shoot and to cut cattle. The trouble with Meredith was that he looked like he'd be a real asset just about anywhere, and his formidable good looks really suited the room, the dark elegance. It was quite a shock when he turned his head and his sheened gaze lanced around the room, not missing a detail. He was a Somebody, and he made Peter's hand close around the thin stem of his wineglass in mingled envy and irritation.

The old people, well, they were a couple of picturesque relics, not quite real, though he knew it would be treason to mention it to Sarie, who seemingly found them irresistibly loveable and funny. The old lady, Aunt Althea, was quite dead to fashion, but she was wearing a small fortune in jewels, he knew that. She still looked at her husband with shining eyes and set him up for his stories, which Peter had to admit were funny. There was a certain careless majesty about the old chap, and it wasn't difficult to imagine him as he must have been as a young man. He was extremely articulate, and the fact that anyone else wanted to talk counted for nothing. Peter decided he didn't really like him; strong-minded, forceful characters really horrified him.

The other two, the sister Scotty and her husband Sean, were typical landed elite - good-looking,, easygoing with a healthy open-air look, enthusiastic about hard work and a legacy of an immense pastoral holding. Try as one might, it was difficult to like them as well. They shared Meredith's particular characteristic, a rugged individualism. They were, in a way, larger than lifesize, too colourful, and here on their home ground they made Peter feel positively anaemic.

Sarie was different. As glamorous as Leigh looked tonight, she couldn't hold a candle to Sarie. For some reason she made Peter think of the tropics, deep blue lagoons and creamy frangipani, the dart of some brilliant exotic bird, though they had more than enough birds out here on Malpara and amazingly all on the ground, hundreds and thousands of them, picking up seed or clustering around waterholes and not in the trees as one would expect. The whole place rather gave him the willies. The vastness and those overpowering red cliffs.

Some might find Malpara fabulous, Leigh evidently found the cattle baron enthralling, but Peter found it rather frightening.

Heat was the enemy, and vast distances. It was so easy to see how so many had perished. Forget the home

stead, impressive as it was; it was only a pinprick in a million sun bleached square miles. Everything about the place was bizarre, as eccentric as the old man. The Merediths were princes out here in their vast kingdoms, for sheep and cattle were still the fountains of wealth. Even more their background influenced their character - their obvious physical courage, their tremendous selfcontainment and inborn capacity for thinking on the grand scale. Reluctantly Peter came to the conclusion that if he didn't actually feel at home with them they struck a sense of awe and respect in him.

Sarie, now, was different. She didn't belong here, her exquisite young face flushed with excitement, her slender body too fragile, too delicate. She fired his blood. The more he thought about marrying her, the more determined he had become. Her flame of hair glittered in the light from the great chandelier, her beautiful, rather bare blue silk chiffon exactly right for her eyes. She was wearing a stunning turquoise and gold necklace and matching earclips, a modern design, and a birthday present from Scotty and Sean. Peter had secretly outraged herself by buying her what he considered to be a very expensive present. Trust the Merediths to cap him so spectacularly, and that blessed horse! What was its name? Gold Dust. Why, they nearly had to prise her off it. The only odd thing about her was her enthusiasm for horses. Of course Meredith had given it to her; he was the same way inclined. They were really a pair, but Peter decided to reject that idea. He wanted Sarie for himself. Until recently, anyway, Sarie had been full of Meredith's terrible tyranny, but now her loyalty to him couldn't have been greater. Fanatical really. There was no doubt Blake was rather an heroic character, the sort of man to dominate a woman without even making an effort, proud as Lucifer probably, because he wielded so much power.

Dinner was so delicious that Peter's hard core of envy gradually thawed. Leigh was being rather aggressively seductive, but he couldn't, from his own position beside Sarie, kick her. It pained him dreadfully to see Meredith so handsome and sardonic, taking all this female adulation as his due. The only chance for Leigh was to develop a delicate softness like Sarie. Spirit, certainly, but one had to take care with a man like that. When Blake was so vividly masculine himself, it was absurd for Leigh to show such brutal aggression.

It disturbed Peter, and he would speak to her sharply later on. It was Mother, of course, who had drummed into her that one had to run after a man. It was no good mincing matters, Leigh was behaving like a perfect fool, her heart in her eyes. Meredith was fully aware of her towering passion, but he was being pretty nice about it, entirely disregarding this fairly wanton display. If he could catch her eyes for a second, he would scowl at the wretched girl. At least she looked very presentable. The more expensive the dress, the less there was of it. This one had plenty of drama, shameless really, in a warm terracotta to match the terrain. That had been deliberate, the choice of colour. Mother openly favoured triumphant gestures, incurably romantic. But they couldn't force Meredith to take Leigh on. One had to go about it in a less tormented fashion. His father, for instance, was bossed almost to death, but no woman was going to tell Meredith what to do, or usurp him as master.

Peter wasn't the only one to notice the greed in his sister's penetrating blue eyes; Aunt Althea and Scotty were to murmur about it later to their husbands. There was even a faint veil of censure in the brilliance of Sarie's blue-violet eyes, but Leigh didn't see or hear.

She was wildly animated with wine and the stir within her, a ferocious longing for a man and a great

house like this that shrieked in her own words, `Class'.

By nine-thirty dinner was over, the old people had retired and even Peter was in a mellow mood after the superb food. Girls came and went, but he was determined to get Sarie; some instinct he had for disaster told him it had to be soon. This was another world out here, as far removed from the bright noisy heart of the city as the craters of the moon. It didn't even belong to the twentieth century with Meredith ruling like a feudal lord. He might be the answer to a maiden's dream, but how could any girl hope to survive the isolation - not to speak of the responsibilities of such a place. Certainly not Leigh, hell bent on making the most of each precious hour. Being on Malpara was like being admitted to Paradise, but Peter was coming to mistrust his sister's judgment hrofonuxily.

For all her efforts she was encountering some nonexistent interest on Meredith's part. Why? Leigh was very attractive, not unintelligent. She was very expensively dressed and smelled delightfully of French perfume. She was more than willing and not pretending any different. Malpara was very remote and there were not too many women around. Except Sarie.

Naturally Peter had never inquired into the degree of their relationship, but it now seemed to him that the position Meredith held in Sarie's young life was a strange one. The bright colour flamed in her cream petalled skin every time she met Meredith's oddly unsettling gaze. Such eyes were startling in a very dark face, but there was more to it than that. An awareness that shouldn't have been there, a tension that was visible in every fine of Sarie's slender body. It was puzzeling how little store she set on her own physical beauty, when it put a man in an eternal attitude of longing. Meredith was the unforeseen element, and his interest in Sarie was far more than familial.

At least he had doused Sarie's plans to camp out overnight, and he was apparently not used to an argument. How anyone could consider a sleeping bag in preference to a soft bed was more than Peter could imagine in any case. It was Leigh who was now begging to see that phenomenally spine-chilling monument they called the Old Chieftain, by moonlight.

Peter was dismayed. He would much rather linger on the beautiful vine-wreathed veranda sipping something out of a squat tumbler, Sarie in a languorous, quiescent mood beside him. Sarie, however, was seconding Leigh's suggestion, mentioning again that it was her birthday, tantalizing enough to even defeat Meredith when she put her violet-blue eyes to it. The curious thing was that there had been very little direct conversation between them all evening. Just the pinned glance, the captive expression and an odd tension in Sarie for all her soft laughter. Almost for the moment Peter felt like risking an argument. He wanted Sarie to himself, and he was unable to accept that he might lose her to somebody else. The somebody else would have to remain nameless, Peter thought with cynicism and an acute penetration of vision. Leigh, brilliant with anticipation, was voicing the comment:

`I love driving at night. Very fast!'

`Not the best way to see the sights,' Peter observed very dryly, as they all went out. The whole Meredith plan was beginning to jar him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Outside, a huge moon silvered sandhill and plain, the stars so big and beautiful it seemed they belonged to a new country. Even Peter was impressed by their size and brilliance.

`I don't think I've ever seen such a terrific display,' he announced in a vaguely patronizing voice.

`Thank you, Peter, that's very generous of you,' Sarie said, herself in a strange mood. `No pollution, you

see, just dry, pure air. That's Orion overhead, the great hunter with his faithful hounds at his heel, Alpha Centauri, Jirrinjoonga, the Southern Cross. Take a good look. You won't see anything; like it again, certainly not in the big cities.'

'They're so extraordinarily clear,' Leigh said breathily from the front seat of the big station wagon. She had taken her position beside Blake, the driver, as a natural and well deserved honour, ousting Scotty and Sarie, who hadn't even attempted to cross her. 'Like huge diamond daisies!' Her head was turned constantly towards Blake as though held by invisible wires, but it was Sean on her other side who answered her casually.

'I can see, Leigh, that you're a romantic. A huge moon, and the stars as some sort of counter magic. There's nowhere on earth like the Outback for celestial displays; the stars never seem to look the same anywhere else. Out here they're like huge blossoms, as you say. Look at the thick cluster down the Milky Way. An avenue of stars, or the souls of the departed, the Sky People of the aboriginal legends.'

'It's thrilling!' purred Leigh, hell bent on complications, despite Blake's benevolent silence. 'Malpara. The Merediths' exclusive domain!'

Blake glanced sideways at her but otherwise made no comment, finding Sarie's brilliant fixed gaze in the rear

vision mirror. It was obvious that his mind was filled with more important concerns than taking her friends sightseeing by moonlight, consequently she scowled at him, and he smiled, his teeth a quick flash of white.

Peter was beginning to feel the bitter taste of acute jealousy in his mouth. But jealous of Meredith? What was he in Sarie's life? He turned and stared at Sarie's pure profile as though searching for something, then emboldened by the liquid brilliance of the moon and the boronia-scented atmosphere, took her hand. Scotty, the cousin, gave a funny little cough and looked pointedly out the window. No use to look for support there, though she had proved consistently, condescendingly sweet. Peter had the distinct impression that the Merediths didn't approve of him, when Sarie might well do much worse.

Mercifully she hadn't inched away unnecessarily or removed her hand, and it was marvellous, like a miracle, and Peter began to ask himself when he might best pop the question. Sarie would make a very beautiful and desirable fiancée, but he would have to keep well away from her family. Naturally, as they were so obviously fond of her, they would free her of the necessity of ever having to go out to work. It was a difficult, but still a nice situation. There were a few flaws in Sarie; one would always have to keep a sharp eye on her, but she was as charming and sexy as hell.

Peter rested his head back, relaxing for the first time that evening. If he really put his mind to it he might win Meredith's exalted approval. It was unlikely, he knew, but Sarie was headstrong and she was on occasion uncommonly hostile towards her guardian for all his indulgence. Or, for that matter, his staggering assets. Low, mournful sounds invaded the night and Peter whipped around in astonishment.

'Good grief, what's that?'

'A didgeridoo,' Scotty explained, and laughed. 'Have you never heard one before?'

'I can't say I have.' Nor would I miss it if I never heard it again, Peter thought, peering out the window.

'It's exciting, don't you think?' Scotty asked. 'All sorts of odd instruments go along with a native orchestra. Tap sticks, sand drums. A good corroboree can be tremendously exciting. The aboriginals are among the finest natural dancers in the world and they're excellent at decorating themselves with complex patterns of ochres and feather headdresses, conical shapes usually. They have a tremendous sense of rhythm, bare feet pounding the ground, and they have a dance for everything. Fertility rites,

rainmaking, love magic, protection magic and the worst kind, destructive, black magic. It can and does injure a person, kill him or damage his property. The aborigines are magic-riden, actually.'

`A magico-religious society,' Blake corrected very briefly. `In spite of intensive contact with white men, the traditional life, the fears and beliefs still go on, the practices, the totemism and mythology, and it's fascinating, as are the people. We still don't know where they came from, there's no clear genetic picture; all we know is that they've been long enough on this continent to develop a combination of physical characteristics distinguishing them from all other types. Fossilized human remains have been turned up dating back a good twelve thousand years. Authorities differ. Some hold that aborigines are a primitive survival with their own distinct line of development, others see the closeness of their relationship to basic white peoples. Aborigines are not Negroid. For all the darkness of their skin tone, with access to white blood all possible descendants will become progressively fairer with no throw-backs at all, as can happen when Negro-white blood is crossed. I've seen aboriginal children with blonde hair and some of our own women have red and gold lights in their hair. In fact there's a lot of evidence to suggest that the darkness of the skin is due in considerable measure to tanning.'

`You're pretty dark yourself, Blake!' Leigh pointed out, her eyes half glazed with excitement.

`How fascinating!' Sarie rippled into laughter.

`Goodness, you know what I mean!' Leigh burst out, discomfited by Sarie's sudden laughter. `It's a fantastic combination with light eyes. Oh, stop laughing, Sarie!'

`At least she's getting over the top of that unearthly wail. What is it?' Peter demanded irritably.

`A chant,' Sarie deigned to answer him. `Heavens, Peter, you're nervous!'

`Where's it coming from?'

`Oh, a camp site.' Sarie turned to him. `Can't you feel its primitive power?'

`Only yours. That's potent enough.'

Over the sandhills and flats came a new sound that could still create a ripple of fear in a powerful, closed car. `Dingoes,' Sarie explained, being used to their sinister howl for most of her life. `That's how they speak to one another. Devil's music, the boys call it. They have their lairs in the stony hill country. They're a real menace - they savage the calves and pull down the weaker cattle, and they've even been known to attack humans. The crossbreeds are the most dangerous. Blake hunted Dahl, the Black Prince, for over two years before he finally caught up with him and shot him. A German Shepherd dingo cross - he savaged the leg of one of our boundary riders and bit right through his boot. He was incredibly savage and cunning with all the German Shepherd's intelligence. Arrogant too, he once walked right into one of our camps and out again before any of the boys could do something about it. The coloured boys won't, of course. They brought Paraloo into the land.'

'The only wild dog I've known who was utterly unafraid of humans,' Blake said gravely. `Cattle and stockmen alike were always very uneasy about venturing into Dahl's territory. He was King of the Run, for a time, and there are still plenty of wild dogs around and the smaller, lighter tawny gold dingo.'

`They certainly have a blood-chilling wail,' Leigh murmured, feeling their disturbing effect. They were approaching the lines of the sandhills, brooding and secret, full of eternal fascination. There were no great streams of birds such as when the sun flared, just the wind and the great silence and the intermittent wails of dingoes and chanting. Malpara under an incredible flush of silver-gold light, the brilliance of the desert world and the marvellous scent of wild boronia broom and brush lilies. From the base of the towering sandstone binnacle, Nulijiri, the Great Chieftain, looked quite sinister. Peter at least, but to admit it might bring due punishment. The Merediths obviously regarded the

monument as guardian and protector. It was certainly overwhelming by moonlight, even more so than by day. In one of its springs, the wiri woman like a mermaid made her home and one could not drink there, or so Sarie had told him. They were all out of the car now, moving in the Old Chieftain's shadow.

`We've had some unforgettable corroborees here, haven't we, Blake?' Scotty asked.

Blake turned to smile at his sister, then dropped his hand lightly on Sarie's shoulder. `Remember your first one?' he mocked her. `What an adventure!'

`What he's trying to say is that I couldn't sleep for a week after,' Sarie explained.

`You were always terribly impressionable,' Blake said lightly.

`It was a very dramatic performance,' she defended herself. `Full of symbolic meaning, leaping and stamping, and the women have the most elegant hand movements.'

`All the same, it frightened you,' Blake continued for reasons of his own. Sarie glared.

`It was magic dancing, you know. Stop teasing me, Blake.'

`I wouldn't dare. Not on your birthday.'

'Then it must be taking severe self-discipline,' she retorted.

`Remember this is a fun trek!' Scotty said lightly, twining her fingers, through those of her husband.

'I wish I could see one. A corroboree,' Leigh ventured, totally bewitched. This was a private dream of hers, seeing Malpara by moonlight. Of course she could have done without the group, but she still had a week left to make her exact dream a reality. Sarie was being a little difficult, moving very swiftly ahead of them, blown along like a leaf over the moon-washed plain. She looked as insubstantial as a dream with a soft, glowing magic. Even Leigh could see that, and she tripped over a desert bush, by day a golden glory of trailing vines. Blake's hand steadied her, but his head was turned towards the path of Sarie's flight, as though she were some valuable runaway filly from the station.

`Be careful, Sari'" he called out rather curtly. `Don't climb there. It could be dangerous.'

`I don't care,' she called back.

`Over to you, Blake,' Scotty said dryly, `you have uncontested charge of Sarie.'

`Sometimes I don't know whether that's good news or bad,' he rejoined dryly.

`I heard you,' said Sarie.

`Shall we move back?' Sean suggested. `Sarie's kind of impetuous.'

She was standing now some eight feet above them, her slight, graceful figure clearly silhouetted against the huge natural monument. Her slender arms were upraised like a young priestess of some ancient cult, the moonlight stripping the flame from her hair and the blue from her eyes, leaving her a silvery maiden with her long skirt fluttering behind her like a gauzy train. It was impossible to describe the visual effect, both ethereal and burningly alive. Peter felt his own pulses beginning to throb, but Meredith the autocrat was neither impressed nor amused.

`Damn!' he said explosively. `There have been plenty of times I've wanted to turn you over my knee but didn't. Come down!'

`Anyone would think I was up four storeys,' she called.

`It makes no difference. That shelf could crumble. When are you going to turn into a woman?'

`I am Woman,' she said in a soft, carrying voice. `I am Minna Minka, the Leaf Spirit, favourite of the Great Stone God of the Desert!'

`Oh, Sarie!' Scotty burst out anxiously. `Take care!'

`This is the last time I'll say it,' Meredith said, in a carefully clipped voice that still carried a lot of weight in each syllable. `Come down!'

`All right, then! I'll jump!'`

`The hell you will!'

`Catch me!' she taunted.

`Talk about little idiots!'

For all her exotic play-acting Sarie's words had come out in a desperate rush, as though her confidence had deserted her at the last moment. She fluttered like a bird ~ to the extreme edge of the shelf and took wing, an involuntary little cry borne out of her. `Blake!'

Peter felt a thrill of fright and fell back a few feet to where the others were staring up transfixed.

Meredith

was evidently used to her, his voice sharp and pretty tough too, but Peter had to admit he moved with uncanny speed and a burst of sheer physical power. And why not? That tall, lean body was fit and hard, his eyes keen, and no one, not even Sarie, was going to upset the Meredith iron nerve. There would be no consequences of any foolhardy act of Sarie's with Meredith around.

She hurled herself directly into his arms, seemingly as delicate as a flower, her eyes glittery pools of light and near fright. The whole thing was almost balletic - Sarie, at the moment of impact instinctively drawing in all her breath sharply, holding it so as to make herself light; Blake's steel hands around her waist and narrow rib cage. He swung her in a full circle, taking the shock of it, then deposited her on the sand, pinioning her arms to her side.

`What makes you behave this way?' he demanded.

`You, mostly,' she said, quite breathless. `Cause and effect. Anyway, it was worth it - I was bent on the possibility of discovering something.'

`And did you?'

`Yes,' she replied simply. `You're always there.'

'That's crazy, Sarie, and it's got to stop. We're not in competition.' Blake's voice was sharp.

`Oh yes we are . Don't frown at me, Blake, I'm still very much alive!'

Scotty rushed forward to join them. `Darling, you do do some perilous things!'

Sarie shrugged. `My failing - I admit it. Don't you start, Scotty. It was just part of my mood!'

`Nice work, kid!' Sean said humorously. `You're going to lead some man a terrible dance!'

`I don't suppose I'll get married at all,' she said soberly.

`You will, all right!'

`I can only envy Sarie's choice,' Peter said suavely.

`Blake's choice,' Sarie amended, set on taunting him.

`This is a feudal family, and Blake is the cattle baron.'

`You seem to manage all right!' he retorted briefly. Leigh's red mouth smiled, but she was beginning to feel very thoroughly rattled. There was some significance to all this, but it seemed to be eluding her.

`You should really be thanking Blake for rescuing you,' she pointed out. `That was pretty irresponsible.'

`What an excellent idea, Leigh,' Sarie said sweetly, her hair clustering around her head like some shining garland. She bent down and broke off the pale plume of a lily, reaching out to Blake with both hands. `A thank you symbol of our sweet loving relationship.' There was clear provocation in her large eyes, and something else. `Part of the peace ritual.'

`That's not all of it, surely?' Blake queried.

`It's enough, isn't it?' she countered.

`You're nearing the end of the line, Sarie,' he said with cool emphasis.

`Now what can that mean?'

`A satisfactory payback when you least expect it,' he said.

`In that case, I'd better stay here.'

Blake tipped up her face and looked into it. `Let's see this birthday out, shall we?'

`Then what?' Her eyes widened.

`I hope you can take it. You're certainly inviting it.'

She swayed a little towards him without volition of her own. `There's more to you, Blake, than a girl might suspect.'

`Believe it,' he answered curtly.

`Say, what's got into you two?' Leigh demanded, her voice very nearly shrill.

`You've never seen them both together before,' Scotty murmured.

`A fight all the way!' Sean drew his wife towards him and kissed the top of her head.

`To my credit,' Blake said, `I've never actually taken a brush to her. God knows why not!

`Don't worry! What really matters, Sarie,' he mocked her, `is that we all love you. As long as you always give me enough warning, everything's going to be O.K. That's a promise!' He drew her back against him and fitted her neatly into the hard curve of his shoulder. Somehow she looked a part of him, a natural extension, and Leigh began to feel mortally offended as well, far more so than seemed sensible or possible to control. Her blue eyes burned. in the night. The sight of them together like that was hurting her senses unbearably.

It was a strong bond for all their fine clash of temperament. Sarie was very nearly resting against Blake, as though it were the most natural place in the world to be. For once she was surprisingly without complaint, Leigh thought bitterly - reckless one minute and sweet as a kitten the next; it was sickening, and she could see from the expression on Peter's face he thought the same.

'The truth is, Sarie,' she said lightly, `that you've always been harum-scarum. Remember the things you used to get up to at school? It's a wonder you weren't expelled.'

`Oh, come now!' Sarie's blue-violet eyes looked across at her. `I was never as bad as that.'

`Shall I give a few of your secrets away?' Leigh asked sweetly.

`We've enough raw material to work on,' Blake said in an even, faintly quelling voice. `Everyone seen enough? If so, I'd like to show you some film we shot on our last trip to the Territory. The crocs alone should guarantee a few nightmares.'

`That would be terrific,' Sean said cheerfully. `Any further along with those plans for a game reservation?'

`Too busy at the moment, but I might get you to look into a few things for me.'

`Will do!' Sean accepted the job without hesitation. `Just give me time to get everything in its place at home. Any film on buffalo?'

'Plenty.'

`Well then, what are we waiting for? Coming, love?' Sean turned round to his wife and put out a cherishing hand. `I expect you shoot, Peter?'

Peter shook his head quickly. `No, no. My talents don't extend so far.'

`Oh well,' said Sean honestly, `one has to out here. You ought to try it. The lagoons are teeming with wild fowl. The first step is to secure a teacher - Blake's never been known to miss since he was knee-high to a grasshopper.'

`Oh? Peter said with reserve. He was actually being driven to the verge of madness. It wasn't, he

decided, the happiest night of his life. Recent events had shaken him. He had been so sure that Sarie would break away from Malpara; now it seemed she was bound to Meredith with chains.

Later in the car, it was obvious from the rigid set of Leigh's head that the same idea had upset her. Fortunately she was a girl with a purpose, and her jealousy was breaking with cataclysmic fury. She had waited a long time to get to Malpara, only to find Sarie a natural enemy. It couldn't be true, Leigh thought, but glancing swiftly at Sarie's transparent face she knew. For someone who spent her time flaring defiance, that delicate cameo face radiated love. Leigh could barely control her shock. For years now, Blake Meredith had been everything Sarie most disliked in a man. He was too powerful, too autocratic, too emphatically male. In spite of that fact, she now loved him and wanted him in every way a woman wanted a man.

Leigh's eyes glittered strangely. One soon forgot friendship when a man was involved; it was the nature of things. Blake Meredith set her on fire, and it was all she could do not to turn round and lash out at Sarie with her nails. That would be a never-to-be-repeated experience. For all his sparkling enigmatic eyes, Blake Meredith was downright fiercely protective of his cousin. Leigh began to realize she would have to be cunning and careful. The most innocent actions could be misinterpreted, and Sarie was so beautifully headstrong and impulsive. Surely between them, Peter and herself, they could engineer something?

In the white and gold luxury of her bedroom, Sarie paced about restlessly. Fragments of colour caught her eye, the blue silk of the cushions, the Chinese rug lavish with birds and flowers, the paintings and the small assemblage of antiques one or other member of the family had given her. Only the Kuan-Yin was serene, the beautiful blanc-de-chine porcelain faintly tinged with pink, the delicate hands the essence of repose. Sarie's own seemed locked in a duel. It was almost an hour since the household had retired, but her thoughts and feelings were so chaotic that she couldn't find one single reason for pulling the sheets over her head. Sleep wouldn't take her mind off anything; she would feel exactly the same in the morning.

For most of her life she had been tormented by Blake. Now, she found with guilty fascination, he was a man she had never really seen. Once he had spelled out Authority and restraint; now, incredibly, he was everything she wanted from the depths of her passionate nature. It left her with the oddest sensation that made her want to laugh and cry all at once. She was tied to Blake by so many links they could never sever their relationship - but now different, unsuspected, more powerful emotions were being fed by the thought of him. Dormant desires, only now realized. To do anything about them was impossible. Blake was just the same, never changing. She was the one who had undergone the transformation, from an undisciplined schoolgirl into a woman.

Not that Blake thought so. Not after that scene tonight. She would always, inevitably, be a terrible teenager to Blake. Yet now she was twenty, and the full spell of him was upon her; a dimension beyond her experience for all the well-remembered years of her adolescence.

She opened her shutters and stared out at the night. The sky was dazzling, making her reluctant to turn around, take off her party dress and go to bed. The breeze whispered through the trees, the leaves quivering with eagerness as she was. Night-time was something else again. It made one tremendously aware. Sarie took long deep breaths of clean scented air, fighting these newly established and unsettling emotions. The radiance of the moon was startling, heightening her strange excitement and urgency. Even her body was trembling, pierced through with feelings that mercifully no one had to know about.

Blake, her first and her last love. There was no one else like him. It was her role to defer to him as the local lord of creation, but she was not permitted to fall in love with him; that was in nobody's plans. Even in the darkness she could trace the exact mould of his features, and doing this she broke off and clasped her hands together in some agitation. Only then did she become aware that her opal ring was missing. It had been a present from Aunt Althea. She had taken it off her own finger that same morning with a dryly affectionate, 'Take it. You've been hankering after it for years!' As usual she was right, and it was very generous of her, for the ring was both beautiful and valuable. A hoop of four precious crystal opals flashing their lovely tints from a heavy gold setting, the ring had adorned Aunt Althea's little finger for many long years. Saris had long admired it and pointed out every so often that it was cutting off Aunt Althea's circulation. The opals had come from Coober Pedy, the Inland Sea of prehistory with its glorious relics, the opalized shells and marine fossils and the great seams of opal. She had promised Aunt Althea she would take the greatest care of it, and certainly care had prompted her to put it down somewhere. The ring needed altering, as Blake had informed her. It was too loose for safety even if she wore it on her fourth finger. She would have to think sensibly of where she had taken it off. She had worn it at dinner; Leigh had been frankly admiring when it was obvious she felt like hell about a few other things. It was better for Leigh not to stay too long. A new element had upset their friendship and Leigh's feline attitude was apparent, not endearing her to Aunt Althea or Scotty, though Sarie herself tried to overlook it. Liking and friendship had blown away on the breeze over Blake. Perhaps it was too much to ask for anything else. If she could only isolate the minute when she had taken the ring off! Aunt Althea would be unlikely to sit there and smile should Sarie tell her she had lost it. It was in the house somewhere - most probably in the drawing-room. At least there was no possibility it could have been stolen. She would find it and win back some peace of mind. Turning, she ran across the room and opened the door. Two wall brackets lit the long gallery. They always remained on when there were guests in the house. She made her way along it quickly and flew down the stairway. The library and drawing-room lights were still on - that was a relief, Blake still hadn't gone to bed. Sarie's heartbeats picked up to a great crescendo. It would be foolish to risk a wrong move tonight. She would be leaping an unbridgeable abyss, yet she went after him. Didn't she care about anything, or was she going to go through life inviting trouble? She should turn about and find the ring and be double quick about it. There was no one in the drawing-room. The entrance hall was a pool of silvery gloom, the moonlight shafting in through the patterned leadlights. Her footsteps tapped lightly on the diagonal marble tiles, the brilliance of the great chandelier dimmed. She peered into the dining-room. Somebody moved, or she was imagining things. 'Blake?' she called. 'Venture in,' his voice invited dryly. 'Why aren't you asleep?' 'I almost never sleep on my birthdays.' 'I seem to remember.' She took a step forward. 'Where on earth are you, and what are you doing?' 'Having a drink. Want to join me?' 'What is it?' she asked him.

`Whisky.'

`No, thank you,' she answered, appalled.

`That's too bad. Frankly, I needed someone at the moment.'

`Turn a light on,' she suggested.

`Why?'

`So we can see one another.'

`I can see you.'

`Well, you have the advantage as usual. Oh ... What a quiet-moving man you are, Blake.'

His hand moved from her shoulder and slid down her arm. `What are you doing here, if you're not here to cheer me?'

Light flared from a standard lamp and she was left blinking at him. He had taken off his jacket and loosened a few buttons of his soft, ruffled shirt. For a cattleman he was fantastically elegant, his diamond eyes gleaming and his head tilted to one side, smiling at her, half mocking, half surprised by her sudden appearance. `Well? I asked you a question.'

He excelled at this, throwing her off balance. There was a delicate flare to her nostrils, a trace of annoyance, the old pent-up antagonism on her young face. `I've lost the ring Aunt Althea gave me. Not lost it exactly, but I put it down some place for safe keeping.'

`So you did,' he said smoothly. `I think I'll hold on to it until I have time to get it fixed. It's too big for you.'

`You think I'm irresponsible, don't you?' she demanded.

`Did I say anything? I merely mentioned I would have it fixed.'

`I'm foredoomed with you. Anyway, I'm glad you found it. I was numb with anxiety.'

`You're not numb now,' he said softly. `Every pulse is beating away like a bird's.'

`Why do you expect so much of me, Blake?' she asked shakily.

`It's not easy to tell you.' His eyes in the lamplight were narrowed and gleaming with devilment.

`Don't kid me, Blake,' she said sharply. `Everything's easy for you.'

`You couldn't be more wrong, my foolish little girl. Tell me, what does it feel like to be twenty as opposed to nineteen?'

`There you go again, but I refuse to be drawn.'

`Not at all, I'd just like a truthful answer. Come into the library and talk to me.'

`Is that a challenge?'

`It is.'

She drew a deep breath. `I'll come. I assume you have the ring?'

`In my jacket pocket. Want to see it?'

`Oh no, that's all right I feel better now.'

`Naturally,' he drawled softly. His mouth twisted and he turned to smile at her.

Desire hit her like a fiery arrow and she turned her face away, feeling suddenly enormously shy of him.

`On

the other hand, it's late!'

`You're not in the nursery now,' he observed.

`I feel pretty much like it.'

`Be brave. I'll never hurt you, Selene, believe it.' Something in his expression made her fling caution to

the winds. 'What if I want you to?'

His eyes narrowed over her, an intense illumination in his dark face. 'No deal. I think you should remember I'm your guardian.'

'What's a guardian exactly?' she asked sarcastically, trying to justify the strange mood that drove her.

'Many things,' he said briefly, 'most of which you've told me.'

For a few seconds she simmered, her skin burning. He was so frankly, vibrantly male that it was inevitable he should antagonize her. Moreover he seemed to go out of his way. She went over to the sofa and sat down, burying her face against the pile of velvet cushions. He watched her in return, curled in the corner, her bright hair against the champagne-coloured fabric. She turned her face back again and reached out a hand. 'I'm sorry, Blake,' she said bravely. 'I know you've been very good to me.'

'Dear me!' he said abruptly, and drained his glass.

'No, seriously. I suppose you find it hard to believe, but I really do love you.'

His lips tightened. 'I can't believe that, not even to save myself. You haven't the slightest idea what love's all about.'

'I know it's uncomfortable,' she said, nervously rubbing the wrist he had pinned.

'What else?'

'It could send one mad.' She tried to smile at him, but couldn't quite make it as innocently alluring as a wild rose.

'Especially after midnight! Sarie, come here!'

He was leaning back against the wide mahogany desk, an odd stillness about him, the big portrait of his father just behind his head. She had meant to stay where she was, but somehow she was moving towards him, completely and immediately, torn to find her true place. Her eyes fixed themselves broodingly on his dark, handsome face. Would she ever know him? There was no trace of lightness or amusement there. With devastating suddenness he drew her close, linking his hands behind her narrow waist, seeing the haunting uncertainty in her violet eyes.

'Is this some new phase you're going through?'

She over-reacted to his very crisp tone. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You do, and keep still. You've been more or less asking for it for most of the night.'

Her face reflected her anger, if anything heightening her beauty. 'Do you have to be so brutal about everything?' she flung at him. 'I beg for nothing from you!'

'Oh, what the hell!' he said harshly. 'You don't have to. You've never had to. If we have to get you over another hurdle, why not on your birthday?'

'Touch me and I'll scream.' She tried to back away.

'How unoriginal! Couldn't you do better than that? Quit all the play-acting. Sarie, you've always been my concern.'

She threw back her head, arching away from him, and the overhead light flared over her red-gold head. He wasn't hurting her, but exerting just enough force to lock her still. 'I don't understand you. I never have done.'

'That's all right,' he said shortly, 'we'll work out the details later on. It happens, Sarie, I should have done this before.' His hands came up and closed over the fine bones of her shoulders and her blood began racing, licking along her veins like a brush fire out of control.

'I hardly know you in this mood, Blake. What is this, some kind of a test?'

'You said you loved me.' Some violence of emotion was in him, matching her own. He picked her up

easily and walked back with her to the sofa, and there was no way she could have stopped him. Blake was a very dominating man and always would be.

`You have to know everything, don't you?' she hissed at him, almost buried against his shoulder the moment he put her down. `What you feel about me must remain an absolute and irrevocable secret.'

`Exactly.' He pushed her long skirt aside and sat down beside her so that she had to retreat right back against the velvet-upholstered arm, sitting up very taut and straight. 'The time is ripe for that little payback. I did warn you it could very likely be dangerous.'

`Please don't!' Panic beyond all endurance was in her voice.

`I have to, you know that damned well. Shut your eyes, Sarie, and pretend it's not real!'

He reached for her very deliberately, unlocking her fiery pride.

`I'm going to look at you,' she said fiercely, fixing her great eyes on him. `You won't be able to do anything!'

He surprised her by laughing and pulling her fully into his arms, all strength and the mastery she thought she deplored, cupping her chin and brushing her mouth very gently with his own as though it were part of a game. She twisted her own head back and forth and he tugged at her curls, pinning her head into the curve of his arm. She wanted to say something to hurt him, something that would make him shrivel up and die, but her heart was committed to him.

`You fiend!'

His warm breath brushed her throat and she slipped sideways a little, fitting more fluidly against the hard lines of his body.

`I've the distinct impression, Sarie, that you're seeing me for the first time.' His voice mocked.

`Kiss me properly!' she said wildly, as sensation flashed along her veins.

He said something, but she was unable to hear him or even answer him, the blood pounding in her ears. He bent his head and brought down his mouth, so hard and punishing that she almost moaned; then he changed, slackening his relentless grip, and everything was lost in the quickening of desire. It burst like a dam, so volcanic that the whole world dropped cleanly away. There were just the two of them, Sarie like a hummingbird feeding on the treacherous sweetness of Blake's mouth, the driving force in him that reached out for her and claimed her. His own special magic.

She should have been struggling against the tongues of flame which shot through her, the sparks that flew from his long-fingered hands, but the rare mystery and familiarity of him was too much for her, sensation rushing and surging, hitting her in great waves. If this was ecstasy, it was not unmixed with peril. In her distant mind's eye, realization flickered and died. Her feelings were compulsive, not to be denied. From this minute on she was Blake's. A possession, perhaps, like property. Malpara. The vast tracts of land he owned in the Territory. The homestead with all its valuable and rare contents.

Everything. She was handing herself over to him, and she was powerless to stop it.

Suddenly he jerked back his head in the high-mettled way he had, as though visibly jamming on brakes. Her hair was tumbled, her bemused eyes a brilliant sapphire, her mouth a throbbing red. `This isn't real, is it?' she whispered, surprised that she could talk at all.

`It so happens I'm still holding you.'

`I don't want you to stop.'

`Normal procedure for a birthday?' he asked sardonically.

`Don't make me mistrust you, Blake.'

He raised his eyebrows. `How could I ever do that?'

`Quite easily. You know a lot about women.'

`I'm thirty-four, flower face!'

Languorously Sarie drew in her breath and he dropped a brief, hard kiss on her mouth. `That was bound to happen, and you're still losing things. Here.' He retrieved one of her earrings and handed it back to her. `Kissing you is quite shattering. I feel more like a drink than ever!'

The hard glittery look was back on him. Sarie felt a deep puzzle and a pain. `Blake?' She reached out a hand and drew it down his cheek. `Have a little pity on me.'

He caught the palm and kissed it. `Baby, I've never treated anyone more gently in my life.'

`What am I, some kind of possession?' she trailed off uncertainly.

`A priceless one, Sarie,' he said, a sudden tautness to his expression. `We'd better call it a night. You're making me nervous.'

`And you're making me wild!' she said furiously.

`You've always been wild.'

His silver eyes were filled with that maddening mockery, his black eyebrows uplifted. She brushed her hands across her face and her hair as if she was trying to shake off his fragrance, but it clung to her, spilling right through to her bloodstream, hammering every ounce of pride from her.

`Certainly no one's got what you've got.' Gently he lifted her to her feet and kept a hold on her, for she was trembling. `I'll carry you up if you like.'

`No! Don't you know how I feel?'

`You're learning,' he said, watching her, his dark face a mask. `You used to talk endlessly about hating me.'

`I don't hate you at all,' she said breathlessly.

`Are you still afraid of me?' he questioned.

`A little.'

`So there's still part of the wall left. Go to bed, Sarie.'

`Aren't you coming?'

`Please go ahead,' he invited stiffly.

`What do you want?' she asked him suddenly, as though she were smashing herself against a brick wall.

`Work it out for yourself!' he rapped.

Her breath caught, rejection written all over her face. `It's like dashing myself against stone, and I do it all the time. If I had any sense at all I'd run away and forget you.'

`We're too closely intertwined for you ever to do that. Why so sad, Sarie? You're everything any man could Want.'

`Except you,' she returned bitterly.

He turned away as though he had already forgotten her, conditioned to taking everything, big or small, in his stride. She flung a burning glance at his broad shoulders, love and humiliation warring deeply within her.

He really knew how to handle her. How did he ever get so much power over her?

`I intend to make you sorry, you know that?'

`All's fair in love and war, Sarie. For a first attempt you've done surprisingly well. Now if you don't go...'

Her voice shook. `Don't worry! I consider the whole thing a disaster.'

`I'm bound to agree.'

`Oh!' She recoiled as though he had hit her, looking very young and fragile, her world crashing around

her. 'You're damned right! I'll steer clear of you in future.'

Impulsively she picked up a heavy, leather-bound volume, and hurled it at his arrogant dark head. He gathered it in with his right hand, and his mouth twisted wryly.

'My speciality, Sarie.. Taking that you fling at me.'

'Except myself,' she retorted.

'Be careful!' There was a world of soft violence in his voice.

'Don't threaten me!' She took a few prudent steps backwards, her eyes brilliant with excitement and pain and a sudden shimmer of tears. She dashed her hand across them like an impatient fiery child.

His laugh was the last straw. It awoke a fire of rage, and she spun on her heel, her flimsy skirt flying.

There was only one answer - escape.

CHAPTER SIX

After that, nothing was the same. Sarie's nervous energy was such that, when Blake made no effort to restrain her, no one else had the power. Her inner turmoil was reflected in her face, her extreme vivacity and the tirelessness of her actions. She had lost weight and the fine, delicate bone structure was showing too clearly through the thin layer of skin.

Aunt Althea was beginning to grow anxious. Sarie was a beautiful child with a singular capacity for deep feeling, but her natural courtesy towards others was deserting her with Blake. It seemed for the past week she had completely forgotten her great debt to him. Not that she knew much about it, for Blake had kept so much from her; Mara's avarice and scheming, the vicious rumours and stories she had put about which had no basis in fact. Mara had settled for a small fortune and the whole family had approved, fearing for Sarie's future with such a mother, but it was only in very recent years they had beaten Mara's menace. Greedy Mara, twisted with hate; now she had found a rich man ten years her junior to support her, having gained 'not a penny piece' from the Merediths, or so she claimed.

In many ways Sarie had been an underprivileged child, but Malpara had saved her, and her beauty and charm of manner had coloured Aunt Althea's world. Sarie had always shown her the greatest consideration.

She had considerable conversation for a young girl and was a good listener as well; and no one could make a

story come alive like Sarie. She had a natural flair for drama or comedy and a very pretty voice. A compulsive reader all her life, Aunt Althea had little patience or eyesight left for the fine print, so Sarie read to her by the hour.

Not so, of late. Sarie was seldom available these days, and her manner with Blake, always high-spirited, was such that no one - even Aunt Althea - would have blamed him if he had shaken her until her teeth rattled, as Haddo had suggested. The puzzling part was that Blake didn't appear to notice, but seemed rather remote and preoccupied with Sales Day.

The Sheltons were determined to stay on, a bitter disappointment to Aunt Althea, who was coming to dislike both of them heartily, a most unusual occurrence when she had practised charity all her life. The young man, Peter, although undeniably good-looking and occasionally witty, was glossy on the outside and dull underneath. The sister, Leigh, was plainly guilty of the black sin of jealousy. Aunt Althea knew full well of her infatuation for Blake, but did she have to be so underhand, so cunningly deceitful about Sarie, trying to shake her position as their most cherished young relative? One or two episodes of late

had been quite flagrant, all with a bright face and a ready smile, but Aunt Althea was not deceived; nor would Justine be when she arrived.

What would worry Justine was Sarie's attitude to Blake. Justine adored her brother, and thought showed her love best by taking to task all who dared beset him. Sarie was a favourite, but even Aunt Althri had to admit that a good talking to from Justine would be a fair punishment.

Sipping her tea, Aunt Althea let her contemplative eyes wander over the pattern the sun made polished floor. She had become accustomed to having morning tea alone; Scotty had gone home and she had no wish to see Leigh across the silver and fine china Sarie was always welcome, but Sarie was driving herself towards nervous collapse. There was something at the root of her behaviour, some incurable passion, but it wasn't for Peter Shelton. Of that Aunt Althea was certain, much as that young man might have wished it and tried to manipulate events with the help of his sister.

There was too much conniving there. It appeared to run in the family, but oddly it seemed to suit Sarie to have the Sheltons there. Peter was her constant shadow, companion on all her excursions, and Aunt Althea didn't like it. Not that Sarie didn't know how to look after herself; she did. It was Sarie's way to behave recklessly, but there was a good deal of character there, and plain common sense, would the child only give herself a chance. She was unhappy, that was it. For all the brilliance of her eyes, the flush of health in her cheeks, Sarie was just as unhappy as she could be. Aunt Althea would just have to extract the reasons from her.

Footsteps sounded and Aunt Althea threw back her snowy head, smiling. 'My dear! Come to join me?' Sarie swung into the sun porch. She was wearing a simple tee-shirt and jeans, not the most feminine gear in

the world, but it didn't seem to matter. 'I have.' She bent over and kissed. Aunt Althea's lightly powdered cheek. 'I'm sorry I've been neglecting you. Entertaining, you know. My friends.'

'But are they?'

Sarie's tone was brittle. 'Naughty, darling, don't let's talk about that. They act as a buffer.'

'Now what does that mean?'

'I'm being honest for once.'

'Pardon me, my girl,' Aunt Althea spoke with asperity, 'but you're always honest. It's the way you've been brought up.'

'Too honest perhaps,' Sane said tersely. 'It doesn't pay to reveal oneself.'

'Sarie,' there was anxiety in Aunt Althea's eyes, 'what's wrong? You're not at peace with yourself any more.'

'Just a bad patch, love. Here, let me top up that tea.'

'Aren't you going to have one?'

'I'd better fetch a cup.' With her graceful movements she was on her feet, darting into the dining room, selecting a cup and saucer. Nothing utilitarian, but an exquisite piece, gros blue and gold. Nothing unusual in

that so far as Sarie was concerned, and Aunt Althea could hear Blake's voice saying emphatically that they had all of them spoiled her trying to make up to her for what she had missed. Haddo's reply had nevertheless silenced him. Blake had to take the lion's share of the credit. And the blame.

Sarie poured the tea in silence, then settled back in her chair, stirring the sugarless tea. Aunt Althea pushed the sugar towards her.

'I've come to you for advice!' Sarie announced suddenly, as though they were high up on the Tibetan

mountains.

`Then you'd better tell me at once,' Aunt Althea said gently.

`Peter has asked me to marry him.'

`Mercy! I'm more worried than ever.'

`You don't like him, do you?' Sarie questioned.

Aunt Althea frowned a little in some vexation. `My child ...' she began, a little helplessly.

`It's all right,' Sarie waved away any attempt at an explanation, `I know you don't. Scotty didn't either, and neither will Justine.'

`I'm sure of it,' Aunt Althea was pressed into saying. Justine did so like to speak her mind. `While we're on the subject, she'll be perturbed about the state of affairs between you and Blake.'

Sarie sat forward and rattled her cup down.

`Careful, child. That set is kept for the most special occasions.'

`Sorry,' Sarie hastily inspected it, `I didn't mean to do that. Nothing broken.'

Aunt Althea looked carefully to see that this was so. `It's not so much the saucer I'm worried about. It may only be a little thing, but why are you goading Blake so much lately?'

`Haven't I always done that? Sarie asked tautly.

`Not to the same vehement degree. He's treating you very lightly indeed for a man of his type. You seem to revel in it as much as it's hurting you. And it is hurting you. You're wounding yourself - I'm a woman, I know.,'

`Blake doesn't notice, at any rate!' Sarie said moodily.

`He notices, my dear. When has Blake ever missed anything? just disregarding it for the present. He's hard-pressed with affairs of the station, yet you seem to be taking a perverse delight in further pressuring him.'

`I hardly see him,' Sarie defended herself.

`You make up for lost time when you do. Dinner is a real effort these days. The two of you wage looks and words as though it were a battle.'

`Oh, I'm sorry. How unforgivable!' Sarie looked stricken.

`That's all right, I take precious good care not to listen, and Haddo forgets his hearing aid. Just tell me what's wrong?'

`It's Blake!' Sarie said firmly, her cheeks flushing. `When did you last see him smile at me?'

`When did you last give him the chance? He works so hard. He's a strong man, I know, but it doesn't seem fair. This girl friend of yours - what's her game, if I must use a vulgarity?'

Sarie burst out laughing, but it wasn't a happy sound. `It's too late to talk about Leigh. She'll be going home soon in any case. If I married Poor she would be my friend again.'

`She was never your friend!' Aunt Althea said emphatically.

`Maybe not. I know who my friends are!'

`Your best friend is Blake.'

`Never.' Sarie flushed again. `He's my enemy of late!'

`I venture to contradict you flatly, miss!'

Sarie sighed. `You would. Blake has a way with women. So it's thumbs down to Peter?'

`I'm sorry to disappoint you, Sarie, but I don't think you should really be considering him.'

`He's certainly considering me,' she said pertly.

`Why not?' Aunt Althea burst out wrathfully. `You're everything he could possibly ask for, served up on

a

silver plate. Perhaps he wouldn't be quite so smitten if your name wasn't Meredith.'

Instead of firing, Sarie observed her aunt calmly. 'There's that, of course. Actually I don't think Peter knows, much less appreciates, the real me.'

'Then why on earth should you insist on marrying him?'

'Who else is there?' Sarie said lightly.

'Don't be stupid, Sarie. You're not that!'

'I am. I'm a stupid and headstrong dolt, and good heavens! I'm late!' She looked past Aunt Althea's shoulder, a brilliant, quite meaningless smile on her face. 'I'm sorry, Peter. I forgot.'

Peter Shelton strolled into the sun porch with a certain flamboyance. He had acquired a deep golden tan and it suited him, playing up his best points, his hair and his skin, his neatly compact figure. His blue shirt and cream slacks fitted him to perfection. 'Good morning, Mrs. Meredith,' he said with such deference that it was impossible to tell whether he was sincere or not, 'don't let me disturb you. I'd gladly sacrifice Sarie to her aunt!'

'That's very kind of you, Peter, to spare me her time. Tell me, where are you planning on going?'

'Ilya Valley,' Sarie said with some sort of effort. 'A lot of small springs are there, and some native art galleries.'

'You're interested in cave drawings, Peter?'

'Not up until now, Mrs. Meredith.' He smiled charmingly.

'Then it's not too late to change. The cave drawings at Ilea, all of which my husband has recorded, are quite different from those on other parts of the Run. I've been a stranger to them for a very long time - it's rough country. Well, run along. Your sister not going?'

'She has plans of her own,' Peter responded, and smiled.

Rather desperately, Aunt Althea fancied, Sarie moved away to the door. 'Are you taking the horses?' she asked.

Sarie paused. 'Peter doesn't like riding. We'll be taking the jeep.'

'All right then, I'll tell Blake.'

'Do that!'

Sarie spoke so bitterly that Aunt Althea was justifiably annoyed. 'You know as well as I do, Sarie, Blake is responsible for us all, and our safety. It's just as well to say where one's going!'

'I know, we're all poor, mean creatures compared to Blake! There, darling,' Sarie came back repentant, putting her arms around Aunt Althea's shoulders. 'Don't think too badly of me.' she whispered. 'I'm a woman possessed. Shall I read to you tonight? I never did finish that thriller.'

'Meta did. She turned it into high comedy, taking no notice of the full stops. But yes, I like to hear your voice. Take care, Sarie. It's obvious something's driving you so much you can hardly bear to sit still. I'll see you later on, Peter, shall I?'

'That you will, Mrs. Meredith!'

Out in the jeep, Peter tried to control his irritation. Putting up with Sarie's fluctuating moods seemed a great price to pay. For a girl who looked as she did, with her violet eyes and soft exquisite mouth, she was downright frigid. He was not himself at the moment, maddened with passion. He was tired of it all; tired of acting the gentleman. Tired of seeing Leigh make such a fool of herself. He had tackled her about it last night, and she had been outraged. Well, he had intended to outrage her. She could have

beaten Blake Meredith with a hammer and he still would have said no.

Sarie chose that moment to turn and smile at him, conscious of his critical and faintly disgruntled regard. A sudden shift in her mechanism, he imagined, for the smile made the bright blood boil in his brain. Sarie was a siren, or more accurately a terrible tease. The time was coming for some straightforward strategy. Meredith's precious, untouchable cousin, was she?

She was bewitching in a way Leigh could never be, for all her hard work and rigid beauty programme, and Leigh was a good-looking girl. When Sarie smiled like that it was impossible to reject her. She had grown overly slender, but there was a lovely allure to the soft curves of her body, the delicate limbs. Perhaps she was holding herself under restraint; so much was expected of her as a Meredith. If only he could hold that slender body quite still in his arms. There should have been endless opportunities, but he had only kissed her three times and gained astonishingly little response. Perhaps she was frigid. A lot of women were. It had happened to him before, to his moderate surprise. Not that he would have been happy with a demanding woman, for they presented so many more difficulties.

`What's the matter, Pete?' she asked him.

`You're looking at a frustrated male,' he said lightly.

`So?'

`Feel for me. I asked you to marry me.'

`And I said no. Politely, I hope,' she responded.

`There was a time you gave me to understand you might.'

`I don't think so, Peter.' She shook her bright head. `You read something into my actions that simply, wasn't there.'

`Why won't you let me love you?' he asked, in a peeved, distracted voice.

`Make love to me?' she queried. `What's the difference?'

`A lot. All the difference in the world, really.'

`Don't sound like a nice girl, Sarie,' he jeered at her. `How dull!'

`It's not that I'm so nice. The best woman in the world could be trapped by her emotions, I imagine. There's always the one man who can make her something else again.'

`Oh, stop the jeep, will you?' he asked irritably.

`Why? We're not there yet.'

`I want to get out. Besides, it's a beautiful spot. Some place, this Malpara. I thought I'd be heading off into an arid desert and here we are among the flowers. I'd like to get you down in them. What are those?' Sarie switched off the engine and hopped out to join him on the thick cushion of grass. `Carpet of Snow. You can see why, of course. Those over there are Mexican poppies. Watch them, they're prickly.'

He caught at her fingers and held them. `No more so than you. Sarie.'

`Hmm?' She looked up at him, her beautiful hair pulsing in the sunlight, throwing out all the coppers and reds imaginable.

`Have I been clumsy in some way?' he inquired.

`Of course not.'

`Rushing you?'

`No.'

`Well, what's happened between us? I think I've a right to know. We got along famously in Adelaide.'

He drew a deep breath. `It's Meredith, isn't it? He doesn't approve.'

Her small head was thrown up, and he noticed for the first time how delicately determined her chin was.

It seemed she was trembling slightly. 'I don't give a damn for Blake's approval.'

'Oh, but you do! Stop kidding yourself, Sarie. He's the big man in your life. He's got much too much say - surely at twenty you want to be independent. Get away from him and his influence. Get a unit in the city, find your own feet. You'll always have me for a friend, and that way we could get back to what we were before. Meredith isn't at all as I imagined him. These types, these cattle barons, born to wealth and authority, what do they know?'

Sarie seemed to wince a little. 'Blake works harder than any man I know. Let's change the subject.'

'He arouses pretty powerful feelings in you,' he accused her sharply. 'I don't like it.'

'You know what you can do!' she returned sharply.

He didn't answer but tugged her by the arm, hurting her; she was a cruel little cat and she deserved it. Unexpectedly she relaxed, went pliant, her violet eyes troubled. 'It's never been my intention to hurt you, Peter.'

'You're so lovely!' he groaned, his anger deflected. 'Let me kiss you. Please.'

She turned up her face, beautiful and extremely grave. Peter felt his heart give a great lunge, a primitive need for her rising. Why, oh, why did he have to settle on Sarie? She was no good to him. A menace.

But how he wanted her! His hand slipped under her hair, willing her to respond to him. She tried, her lids falling. Why should one man's kisses be so different from another's? Peter's mouth was warm and practised, but it inspired nothing, no hunger or urgency, only the wish to have it all over. Blake had awakened her to such a pitch of sensuality that she couldn't be making this comparison or even allowing it. It was cruel. Her body didn't move, but mentally she was stiffening.

Peter slipped his arm further around her body, gathering her in. 'Relax!' His voice was muffled against her neck. 'There's no risk in relaxing.'

'You don't understand,' she began slowly, turning her head.

'I do.' His mouth caught hers again. 'If you'd only give a little, Sarie. I promise I'll do nothing you don't want.' His mouth tried to shut her off again, but she wanted no part of it. She broke away from him, speaking impatiently.

'This is getting us nowhere. The truth is, Peter, I've got nothing to give you. I'm sorry to have to put it that way, but maybe it's kinder.'

Her words dropped heavily into the silence, as sharp and dull as stones.

Peter stared. 'You know something, Sarie? I think you're a fraud. A vision that's not real, like the mirage you have out here. You're so lovely, so vividly desirable, but you don't know how to give or receive love.'

'Oh, but I do. Extravagantly!' Her voice changed.

His face flushed and he nodded maliciously. 'Yes. I've been waiting to hear something like that. Let me tell you, it's folly.'

'Look, Peter,' she said hotly, 'if I were you, I'd mind my own business.'

'Mistakenly, I thought you were. Shall we go home again? We don't seem to be in accord.'

She could see she had hurt him, slashed at his pride. He was vulnerable, just as she was..

'Truly, I'm sorry,' she said in a soft, charming voice. 'Don't let's waste such a beautiful day. I've said my little speech. Why can't we be friends like we used to be, and respect one another's privacy?'

He looked at her steadily. 'If that's what you want, but you'd be much happier if you could break away from Malpara.'

`Well .. .' she looked down into the heart of the Wild flowers, `don't let's trouble about that now. Want to drive?'

He shrugged. `Why not? It's lonely out here, isn't it?'

'Not with the birds. Voices everywhere, and gorgeous flashes of colour!'

`One could hardly fail to notice them. They're fantastic really.'

They walked back to the jeep, each of them striving to normalize the situation between them. The sun shone down brilliantly and the beauty of the morning seemed to check all harsh feelings. It was a kind of peace to be at one with nature, Sarie thought. There was no passion in the giant landscape, but a commanding, companionable quality. She loved Malpara, the vast open spaces, the peace and the freedom. Even the danger which lurked in unexpected places.

The cassias and the acacias were heavy with blossom, blooming independent of season, and the recent over night showers had brought up a wealth of wild flowers, their sweet scent carrying for miles. Peter took the wheel and they drove down the narrow track into the valley.

`It looks pretty rough to me,' he observed, with no native inclination towards exploring. `I'm lost without traffic lights. Tell me, are there snakes?'

'This is the bush, Peter,' Sarie pointed out dryly.

`Well?' he persisted.

'What more can I say? Of course there are snakes, but most of them are harmless.'

`That's reassuring.'

`Don't let's anticipate trouble. I've never been bitten in my life. Snakes will ignore you if you ignore them.'

`A familiar argument, but one I don't propose to test out.'

`Don't you want to see the caves? We have to go on foot, you know.'

`Not particularly. You must know, Sarie, it's you I want, and the caves were as good an excuse as any. You

know I'm a city boy at heart!'

`Well, you're missing a golden opportunity to see some fine examples of a very ancient culture.'

`Spare me. It seems vaguely barbaric to me.'

`You ass!'

`No doubt. I can't say why, pet, but I'm beginning to feel nervous.'

`Really?' She turned to look at him in astonishment.

He did look rather pinched about the nostrils.

`There's no danger, believe me. If you like, we'll go back again. I thought you'd be interested, that's all.'

`How sweet and naive!'

`I must be.'

A westerly had sprung up, sending up little spurts of red dust from the ground.

`The wind, I hate it!' said Peter, `Isn't the sun shattering?'

'Pull in under the baubins,' Sarie suggested.

`The which?'

`Those flowering trees over there. The pink and cerise.'

`They're pretty and shady,' Peter said gratefully.

Across the flat the mirage was dancing, creating weird and beautiful effects; even cattle where there were none.

`Incredible, isn't it, the mirage? he asked admiringly.

`One never gets used to it. Stay here, Peter, in the shade. You look rather flushed. I'll climb to the top of that ridge; there's a small gully on the other side, or there should be. The Run is covered with a maze of channels, creeks and lagoons. In the good seasons millions of wild birds crowd there. Herons and egrets, cranes and pelicans, jabirus and swans, all the duck and geese imaginable. You should have brought a hat. Now that is dangerous!'

`You should talk!'

`I have mine here.' Sarie reached over to the back seat, ramming her cream stetson on her head. Her silky curls were flames against the brim. `Blake would skin me alive if I went without one.'

`I'm mortally afraid of snakes!' Peter announced, looking anxiously about at all the black, dead-looking sticks. `Snakes figure pretty largely in aboriginal ritual, don't they?'

`There's a thirty-foot drawing of the Great Rainbow Snake in one of the caves.'

`I'll take your word for it. This isn't my world at all, darling, as I think you've observed. It's primordial.'

`It's the real Australia!'

`So you say! Personally I find the Sydney Opera House more inspiring.'

She turned away, feeling completely cut adrift from her companion. `I'll only be a minute. If there's water, I'll signal.'

Peter's heated face registered approval. The world was full of all kinds of people; he simply wasn't pioneer material, but he was perfection itself on a dance floor. Delicately, he put out his shoe and turned over a large flat stone. Such a wealth of life was squirming under it that he kicked it back again with a shudder. This trip to Malpara should have been a pleasure, but it was turning out to be painful. Sane was an odd sort of girl really. A raving beauty, yet she preferred this jilleroo life. All this love of horses and vast open spaces wasn't good. It was as well, perhaps, she had a mass of money behind her. The great thing was to get her away from the clan. Back in the city she was everything a rising young businessman could wish for in a wife; Meredith couldn't possibly control her emotional life for ever.

After a while Peter glanced up to the top of the hill, irritated. Where on earth was she? Surely five minutes had elapsed since she had disappeared down the other side. She did lead him into such places, a regular Eve. Rather gingerly he climbed out of the jeep and set his feet down as though testing the ground. Nothing wriggled. He continued to pick his way up the rise, dislodging a few loose chunks of earth.

`Sarie?'

She didn't answer. For some inexplicable reason, Peter's heart began pounding. He was profoundly out of his depth here, every nerve in his body jangling. A great flight of budgerigars chirruped and undulated overhead, a green cloud blocking the sun. Where had they come from, a waterhole? The native spring Sarie was talking about? He arrived at the very top, his palms sweating and the shirt sticking to his back. He looked over the top and the hair stood up on his neck.

There beneath him was Sarie. A small, frozen figure bailed up by a great, mottled grey stallion. A wild horse; a rogue. Even with his lack of experience, Peter could see that. The horse looked bad, incredibly vicious and powerful, standing in the display position, had he known it. He fell flat in the long grass, panicking, his heart in his throat.

`Oh, my God!'

A minute passed - two - an eternity, before he put his head up again. He had never been so frightened in his life, nor so helpless. What could he do? Sarie, with her knowledge of horses, was standing stock still.

Shouldn't he do the same? They were the trespassers, this was the brumby's territory. To move or to run would trigger a rush. Once as a child he had been savaged by an Alsatian. He still bore the scar on his leg. A brute of a thing.

The black dusty mane of the brumby was bristling, the powerful hoofs pawing the ground, the neck arched. What to do now? Rush over the top, arms flailing and scare it off? He had done that to the Alsatian, and been attacked for his trouble. Would it work any better now? He had no experience of wild horses, nor indeed any horses except the glamour horses of the track, and then from the saddling paddock. A wrong move on his part could bring Sarie into terrible danger. But wasn't she in enough danger already? She was making no attempt to move, as still as a wild creature herself. The only thing he could do was get help. This was Meredith's world - they were only twenty minutes out by jeep from the compound.

Frantically, tasting blood in his mouth from his bitten lips, Peter scrambled back down the slope, tearing his hand and dashing his ankle, but he didn't feel it. Even his initial fear of snakes had receded in the light of the present danger. He flung himself into the jeep, breathing heavily like an old man. Madly he drove back along the track, bouncing over obstacles with the birds shrilling ahead, giving the warning, the wild bush glittering in the heat. He had no preparation, no training for this kind of thing, guilt and fear rode within him. He should never have left Sarie, but what else could he do? Any act on his part might very well have precipitated a fatal accident. Sarie had encountered these dangers before. Nevertheless, she was in great physical danger.

Where was bravery? Had the stallion made a rush for him, he would have melted in terror. Sarie loved horses, knew them well. Perhaps she could control the wild force in the stallion. Horses, like dogs, could be subdued with the power of the mind. Peter prayed so. The best thing he could do was find Meredith, let him deal with it. He was capable of anything. Bearding a lion in its den ...

Sarie was on her own for the first time in her life; she had moved into that twilight zone beyond fear. She was still alive, even though a mad rush could be imminent. This was a lone stallion with no harem to guard, but that made it all the more dangerous. The stallion had all the time in the world to torture her. There were no mares to catch up with, no new stud to fight. She was the target. The rough hide bore the scars of many a battle, yet it was still in its prime. An outlaw.

She had never seen this horse before. The white stallion, the leader of the brumbies, she knew well, but this one was a loner. A good sixteen hands high and powerful, its nostrils distended, flecks of foam coming from its open mouth, its sides heaving as though it had run a great distance, Instinct warned her that it was a killer, and it had come from nowhere. One moment she had been alone. The next, it was there, wild and undisciplined. She continued to stand motionless; it was all she could do. Stallions could bail up trespassers for hours. Only her fists were clenched tightly, the nail biting into the skin. Not a muscle of her face moved.

Soon she would try talking to it. She had the gift, and horses responded to the right tone of voice. Even wild horses. Sarie's eyes were glittering, the intense blue of sapphires, darkening with tension. Tomorrow she might very well be dead.

Whose heart would she break? Blake's? She couldn't continue to think like that. It was cowardly, macabre. She would get out of this. For the only time in her life Blake wasn't between her and danger - it had to come. Peter had deserted her. It was as well. There was no need for two deaths.

The stallion exploded into action and her heart gave a great, sickening lurch. It began to whirl back and

forth in a half circle while she stood there with her back to the rocks. She was lucky she wasn't out in the open, she thought, where the horse could charge her from any given point of a circle, pounding her into the dust with those powerful, striking legs. It couldn't hurt her, she wouldn't let it. Was it her imagination, or did Blake stand beside her, talking to her, willing her what to do next? It had to be the sun on the back of her neck, she couldn't start imagining things now. Oh, Blake! Her voice when it came was as soft as a lullaby, so that the stallion paused, astonished, focusing its white-ringed eyes on her, its ears pricked up straight. She continued to talk to it softly, trying to calm it, calm herself, trying in all the ways Blake had taught her. So dazzling was her vision of him that he might have been at her side.

When Peter finally reached the home grounds, his face was ghastly. He began shouting; all round for Blake, and miraculously, within seconds, Blake was before him, fighting the impulse to hurl the young man bodily through the air.

`Where's Sarie?'

The words cracked like a whip. Peter's vision was blurry, the sweat pouring down his face. `I had to leave her, come for help. It was all I could do.'

`Where is she?'

Peter shook his head helplessly. 'Ilya Valley. Just inside it - the first ridge. She went up by herself to look for water. A stallion had her bailed up on the other side. A great brute of a thing, ugly, a dark grey.'

`And you left her?'

Horried, thinking the boss was about to attack Peter, Mike Conway, the overseer, broke away from the office door and interposed himself between Blake and his house guest.

`You damned dingo!' Blake said violently.

Peter took the insult, his face flushing. He looked utterly intimidated, as well he might.

`At least he came back,' Mike offered rapidly, disliking the set of Blake's head. The boss was a man of iron control, but he had his limits.

Blake ignored both of them, presenting such an air of contempt and icy anger that Peter felt driven to weeping. Those silver eyes were slashing at him like daggers. He went to lean his face over the wheel, but Blake blasted at him.

`Get out, you fool. Mike, give me a rifle.'

`What are you going to do with it?' Peter almost passed out.

`Shoot the damned horse. Or you. Don't stand in my way. And you left her? You astound me!'

`I didn't know what else to do.'

`Damn it, Blake, he's trying to be honest!' Mike cut in.

Blake's next few words blistered them. `Give me the gun, Mike,' he tacked on at the end.

They stood well back, their hearts faltering, as he backed the jeep, rammed it into gear and swept out of the compound.

`I did the wrong thing,' Peter condemned himself, with a nervousness that showed in his trembling hands.

`Pray God you haven't!' Mike took pity on him.

`Blake will turn into a madman if anything's happened to Sarie.'

`I'd better pack.'

`That wouldn't help. Start praying, that's my advice to you. And another thing, say nothing to nobody

until Blake gets back. The shock to the old people might wellnigh kill them. I'll take the station wagon and follow at a distance. Blake may need me. I'm afraid you've violated his trust.'

'I never wanted to!' Peter jerked his head up, his eyes filling. 'I couldn't consider going down there myself!'

Mike studied him long and hard for an instant. 'It strikes me the boss is right! You are a damned dingo!' 'I'll clear out.' Peter was trembling.

'You'll wait, that's your punishment. Sooner or later every man comes to know himself. Maybe you can learn from it.' Then Mike was gone.

It had to come in some part of Blake's life, this terrible fear, the sickcning throb of his heart. It was not for himself. Sarie's phantom seemed to float in the air, moving before him. His body was poised and he moved with great caution, purposefully, a strange flickering light in his eyes. His skin beneath his dark tan was white, a muscle jerking beside his chiselled mouth.

Nearing the top he knew a great surge of foreboding. even physical malaise. He brushed his hand across his eyes, the rifle in his left hand. It would have stopped an elephant, and he was a crack shot, but he usually aimed emotionless. Now Sarie was involved. He felt the icy chill about his heart again, holding him rigid with suspense.

Keep at it, Sarie. Talk to it. Communications are important. Many an attack has been warded off by the use of a voice. Gently, gently, darling, any kind of animal can be stimulated into aggression by panic. Keep the scream until last. The final scare.

His own lips were moving as though he were trying to calm the maddened animal himself. Sarie had plenty of courage; she had experience of wild animals and the bush. It was his candle of hope. If anything had happened to her he would put Shelton through a living hell. Such cowardice filled him with revulsion. A man became heedless of his own protection when women and children were involved. And a loved one? God!

At the top of the rise he jerked his head upwards, listening, then he stood upright, taking in the situation at a glance. Harshly his breath whistled out of him. Now that she was safe, the wind whipping around him, the birds stunned into silence, he took aim and dropped the wheeling, snorting animal at a shot. A feeling of triumph shot through him. The great threat had passed. No violent end would come to her as it had come to his mother.

As suddenly as it had begun, for her it was all over. Sarie stood for a second longer, then she slid to the ground, bending her head over.

'You're safe!'

Blake's arms cradled her, turning her to him, crushing her up against him. She couldn't speak. He gave a sigh, feeling the first tremors hit her, the bird-flutter of her heart. He lifted the damp curls gently back from her forehead, his silvery eyes blazing in his dark face. 'It was bad? Talk about it.'

She shook her head against his chest.

'Sarie, it's all over now!'

'I nearly had it,' she whispered. 'Then just as I was talking it round, it seemed to regain the advantage. I've

never seen it before, have you?'

'We'll none of us see it again. It's an outlaw. We've had a few of them. A rogue like that wouldn't want to acknowledge defeat. You're pretty brave. I'm proud of you.'

`What happened to Peter?'

`He broke under pressure. Anyway, he gave the alarm.'

`Poor Peter!' she said faintly.

Blake gave a brief, jarring laugh. `Poor Peter indeed! I shouldn't be surprised if he's packing at the moment.'

`As bad as that?'

`Not bad at all, considering the way I felt. I really ought to go back and smash him to pulp.'

`That strikes me as violent.' She tried to smile.

`That's how I am about you. Try to stop trembling, Sarie.'

`I can't seem to stop. Isn't that odd? Reaction, I suppose. All my muscles are locked.'

`I think you could get up if I help you. I want to get you home.' His hands moved over her, thawing the chill of fright.

`All right,' she agreed laconically. `You're the boss!'

On her feet she swayed a little, and he put a bracing, hand at her back. `You drive.'

`You're joking!' she exclaimed. `No, I'm all of a dither.'

`I don't think I can.'

`You'd have to if I was injured. All right, then. You've got plenty of nerve.'

`You're a funny mixture, Blake. Big brother, a lover. and a tyrant.'

`Which one do you want?' he asked quickly.

She flashed him a glance, seeing the dancing lights in his eyes again. Her extreme pallor was easing and he drew a deep breath of relief. Above them in the cobalt sky carrion birds were wheeling. Sarie looked up and reeled slightly, but Blake's hand propelled her into the driver's seat. `Come along.'

She stared back at him for a moment, stunned at his hardness when she had survived a disaster. 'Don't be surprised if we don't get there.'

`Under other circumstances I wouldn't care. just see how you go!'

After ten minutes he signalled her to pull over. `Not bad, little one!' He shifted her bodily, then took the wheel, driving back to the homestead in silence. For a little while Sarie tried to sit upright, taking deep breaths and willing her quivering nerves to a halt.

`You're wilting, baby!' Blake said abruptly, and drew her up against his side, keeping his left arm around her. She gave up all thoughts of being brave and rested her head. Blake was a breed apart. She could rely on him utterly.

Over dinner that evening conversation remained careful and general; Peter had even revived sufficiently to pass the occasional remark. Very little had been said about the events of the morning and Aunt Althea's eyes went from one to the other, trying to fathom the strange undertow. Sarie for once seemed incapable of defying Blake. Really, the child was growing ethereal!

`Eat up, Sarie!' Aunt Althea found herself saying sharply. 'If you get any thinner we'll have to shake the sheets to find you.'

`I can't seem to manage it tonight.'

'Don't bother,' Blake unexpectedly defended her stand, stopping Aunt Althea with one of his rare and very devastating smiles. `Don't fuss, I beg of you. She'll feel better in the morning.'

`What's going on around here?' Uncle Haddo suddenly demanded. Sarie for answer suddenly slid from the seat.

Aunt Althea gave a little screech. `She's not eating, I told you!'

'I'm all right,' Sarie protested languidly, the colour of paper.

'That was a faint!' Blake said emphatically, kneeling beside her on the floor, supporting her.

'I quite realize that,' she murmured dryly.. 'Need we go into that?'

'I can't defy you tonight. I can't even get up!' Her lemon dress swirled about her and she had her arms tightly crossed. Blake was just holding her, his lean body, close to her, a yellow rosebud.

Peter and Leigh were struck silent as though the whole delicate situation could blow up in their faces. Leigh stared searchingly at her brother and he back at her. Both of them felt like traitors, Leigh for what reasons she wasn't sure. Peter had given her a perfectly satisfactory explanation of the morning's incident and Sarie and Blake had said nothing at all - now Leigh realized there was far more to it than Peter had revealed.

Uncle Haddo uncoiled his long length and stormed around the table. 'Don't argue the point over, get her up to bed. Funny, she's never had a faint before!'

'Overdoing it,' Aunt Althea maintained in a peculiarly tight voice. 'I've warned you all along!' In a minute she was sure, her face would pucker.

'If you must know, I'm dead tired,' Sarie said and closed her eyes.

'Then you'll be glad to go to bed!' Blake lifted her like a child, the warmth of his body flowing into her.

'I'll come with you!' Aunt Althea said, and attempted to rise.

Leigh frowned at her brother and he jumped to attention, but Haddo was there before him for all his advanced age. 'You'll do nothing of the kind, my dear. You'll stay here and finish your perfectly good meal. Blake is quite competent. The child is exhausted. You only have to look at her. Look in on her later on.'

'That's what's wrong with young people today,' Aunt Althea maintained, subsiding. 'They don't eat correctly.'

'No, sir!' said Uncle Haddo, 'they don't!' He walked round the table and resumed his seat. 'I have a story that might interest you, Leigh. I once had a cockatoo that drank whisky. It used to sleep it off for hours.'

'Not that again, Haddo!' Aunt Althea protested. 'You're placing me in an intolerable position.'

'Leigh and Peter haven't heard it. Neither have you for a long time!' Haddo plunged straight into his story without a moment's hesitation.

After a moment Aunt Althea began to relax, listening with a decided lack of good will. Very, very occasionally, Haddo's stories were deplorable. This one was quite true, of course, but he should never have given the cockatoo the stuff, even if it had lived to a ripe old age!

Meta helped to undress her, shaking her curly black head wonderingly. 'That never happen to you before miss. Faintin'.'

'Then I haven't done too badly at all. I had a fright this morning. Perhaps it was that.'

'Miz Blake know?' Meta inquired shrewdly.

'Of course - not that, Meta.' Sarie shook her head at the nightdress Meta was holding up. 'Something less festive.'

Meta, revelling in challenge, reached out something even more cobwebby. Sarie patted her face dry and put her towel back in the bathroom. 'The blue one,' she urged.

'That old thing!'

'It will do. It's pretty and practical and it suits how I feel; washed out. Hang up my dress, there's a good girl!'

In another minute, Blake rapped on the door sharply.

Sarie was surprised he hadn't done it before; patience wasn't his strong point. Meta was a darling, but she was inclined to go into raptures about clothes. 'Let Mr. Blake in,' she said.

'I see you made it.' Blake walked into the room in a flame of impatience. 'That will do, Meta, and thank you.'

'A pleasure, Miz Blake. Good night, Miss Sarie. Anything you want, sing out!'

'Right! I've got a couple of tablets here. Hop in.' Blake proceeded across the room as though he could scarcely wait to get back to his dinner.

Sarie bristled. 'Don't rush me! I'll take no more of your time up than is necessary!'

'It's not that, you little donkey. You look as if you can't stand up a moment longer.'

'I've had a hard day.' Sarie ran her hand through her silky hair, haloing it around her head.

'No use crying about it,' he said briskly.

'Who's crying?' She rounded on him in astonishment, her eyes brilliant. 'The sight of a woman's tears might kill you.'

'Are you going to get into bed?' he asked quietly.

'I begin to ask myself what's the real rush. Oh well, I might as well, there's nowhere else I can go!' She swished around the bed in a faint tantrum, feeling herself dismissed.

Blake stood still, watching her. It was impossible not to smile at her. She looked like a cross child, meticulously arranging the soft, flower-sprigged sheets around her. She looked too small for the huge four-poster bed, but she had begged for it, all eyes, her always slender body bordering on fragility. She could ill afford to lose weight, but it had always been difficult to put a restraint on her. She had such a very volatile temperament.

'Gosh, you're a hard man!' she was now flinging at him, seizing her pillow and inflicting several punches.

'Poor Sarie'

He turned away to pour out a glass of water and held the tablets out to her.

'What are these?' she asked.

'They'll give you a good night's sleep. No nightmares!'

She held them suspiciously for a moment, then swallowed them, her delicate shoulders slightly bent, her hair like a flame in the light of the bedside lamp. 'Here's to you, my guardian and protector!'

His dark face was quite impassive, though his eyes flashed. 'Thank you, Sarie.' He walked away across the room and switched off the main light.

'That's it, that's it!' she cried a little hysterically.

'Plunge me into darkness, I don't mind. Is there a fire downstairs?'

'Settle down, Sarie!' he said reasonably. 'I'm only turning off the chandelier. You don't need six or seven bulbs to light the one room.'

'Well, well, economy! Don't send Leigh up, for God's sake. Or Peter.' She looked suddenly anxious.

'That goes without saying. Aunt Althea will want to look in.'

'That's different. I hope I didn't frighten her?'

'You did,' he was forced to admit, 'but Haddo will look after her. He's been doing that for a long, long time.'

'He's marvellous! I wish I'd known him as a young man. No use to look for a display of affection from you,

however!

'What is it you want?' he asked sharply.

'Oh, nothing. Good night, Blake, and thank you for everything - my life. It's unimportant, but it's yours.'

'I'll take good care of it.'

The light hit obliquely across his dark face, making it all planes and shadows. 'Good night, little one. I'll look in on you later. You'll be asleep by then.'

'Then you'd better kiss me now,' she said hopefully.

'I'm afraid I remember the last time.'

'I've no idea if that's true or not!' she flashed a cool look at him. 'You're a deep one, Blake Meredith!'

'I'm not conscious of it.' He bent down and cupped her chin. 'Good night, baby face!'

'I'm not a baby.' She reached her arms up very swiftly and locked them about his head, the tips of her fingers caressing the nape of his neck. 'I'm trying desperately to be my age.'

'Don't I know it?' he said, low-voiced and mocking. 'I can read the signs!'

'After all this time, we're still playing the same game!'

'All this time?' he echoed. 'Why, Sarie, you've been a babe!'

'Are you going to kiss me or not? Take it or leave it!'

He gave a brief laugh in his throat, slipping his arm under her with the swift, frightening energy he had, almost lifting her from the bed. Something of her own recklessness lay over him; he looked amused and darkly relentless at the same time.,.

'You're no match for me, Sarie!'

An element of excitement and danger flashed between them.

'You know darned well I am,' she answered hotly.

'Prove it!'

'You wouldn't acknowledge it if I did!'

'Let's see!'

Thus challenged she tried to break free, but his hand in the small of her back was like a steal grip.

'You're hurting me, Blake. You have the advangtage.'

'All right, we start equal.' he sank down on the bed, just looking at her.

She hesitated. 'I'm afraid I don't know how to start.'

'Oh, Sarie!' He reached for her, pulling her right into his arms, shaping her against him, his hand spearing into her curls and placing her head exactly where he wanted it, in the hard circle of his arms. Her skin suffused with colour as though she were on fire already. Her eyes, very beautiful and intense, were lined on him. 'If I had to leave you, I'd die.'

She hadn't meant to say that, but somehow it had come out. Some answering feeling flashed in his eyes.

'Don't say things like that if you don't mean it!' His hand closed under her skin and he turned up her mouth, her words like a lick of flame towards dynamite. She could feel his arms tautening to steel, imprisoning her, but she revelled in it. All her clashes with him were only a pretence; they were fire on fire. All she had ever wanted, all along, was Blake. The rest was just one of the strange tricks of fate. Her mouth was exquisite, moving convulsively under his, her love for him devouring her. It was breathtaking, this deep vein of passion, a miraculous unparalleled feeling. Yearning drove her closer and closer. She had no thought of denying him anything, lifting his lean hand and pressing it to her breast. His sharp intake of breath caused her own heart to flutter.

'Sarie!' He drew back abruptly, a kind of severity in his face.

So totally beloved to her was he that she felt punished. 'What is it?' She had to moisten her mouth with the tip of her tongue to talk to him as he pushed her back into the crook of his arm with a half-blind frustration.

The set of his dark head seemed as arrogant as the devil. 'I can't stay here, don't you see?'

'Who's going to talk?' she demanded on the fine edge of frenzy. 'I want you so much I'm even prepared to tell you I do!'

'Well, I for one am going to pick the right place and the time!' He locked her two hands together and held them against his chest. 'It will be pretty soon, I'm thinking. Things seem to be critical.'

She crumpled abruptly, shocked at his hardness and determination. 'Why have you always got to make the decisions?'

'Because that's the way it is with us. You belong to me.'

'I belong to myself!' she said untruthfully.

'Really? That's not what I found out a minute ago!'

She made a strangled little sound at such very cool passion. 'What are you, a parson?'

The set lines of his face broke into laughter. 'Discard that one, little one. You must understand!'

'All right. All right!' Something was pressing on her like a soft downy pillow. Gently she nuzzled her face against his hand. 'I guess you do care about me in your fashion, but Blake Meredith just has to call all the shots!'

'I wouldn't worry about it,' he said suavely, 'one day you will!'

She looked up at him, surprised. 'For someone who's definitely not a parson, you certainly like to talk in parables. Much as it affects me, I can't cope with them tonight. All of a sudden I'm wondering how I'm keeping my eyes open.'

'I'm not surprised,' he said dryly. 'You should sleep through a good ten hours.'

'You've drugged me!' she exclaimed.

'For your own good. Dr. Earnshaw would approve.'

She put up her hand and touched it to her forehead. 'I won't say it's not working. I'm floating.'

'So am I!' He laid her back gently, his long shadow falling across the bed. For a few seconds more she stared at him as though he were the only source of energy in the world, then she made a funny little sound, her heavy lashes falling. 'How odd!'

'Nothing odd about it at all. Good night, little one.'

'That's beside the point,' she murmured.

'What is the point?' he asked humorously.

'What's wrong with me? Her voice was plaintive.

'At the moment I can't see a darn thing wrong with you.'

'You're bound to find something tomorrow,' she muttered sleepily.

'We'll see. Go to sleep, Sarie!'

'It's all got to work out!' She pressed her hands over her closed eyes, then turned on her side, burying her face in the soft mound of pillows. There had to be a solution - and Blake always acted for the best.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Justine looked around the ballroom with familial pride and pleasure. One forgot how beautiful it was, how grand! Nowadays it was only opened up for the Sales, or very occasionally for an extra big party

when different branches of the family were assembled: her wedding reception, one of the social events of the year, had been held here. Scotty's too. Gayle's would very likely, whenever she took time off to settle, and of course little Sarie's. It was a most beautiful room, running the full length of the house, entered through double cedar doors leading off the drawing-room and opening out on to the rear floodlit terrace. There was a wealth of detail in the plaster work, excellent Neo-Renaissance work by master craftsmen, moulded in squares in very delicate shades of blue, pink and gold. Four superb Venetian chandeliers were reflected in the huge wall mirrors along with the tantalizing sight of white shoulders and arms, the pale and brilliantly flaring colours of evening dresses, the glitter of jewellery. She had taken the chandeliers down two days ago and cleaned every last piece separately with the help of Sarie, the only one she trusted with the job. A lot of work, but well worth it. They looked fabulous. Remote as the property was, the ballroom had been used far more in her great-grandfather's day than their own. Wesley Meredith had apparently known how to entertain, his wealth and his family expanding. The old pioneers, once settled and established, had insisted on solid comforts and a life style that was splendidly incongruous in the wilds. One simply had to triumph over one's environment. Malpara homestead, built on the grand scale, was commonly recognized as equal to any of the finest mansions in Adelaide or Melbourne.

The morning had passed in an extremely businesslike and profitable fashion, and the afternoon in a haze of heat, thudding hooves, and excitement. Anyone who was anyone was here. All the top pastoral families and syndicate management, a fair sprinkling of overseas and interstate buyers, and Justine had invited the more amiable and interesting of her political-cum-socialite friends. The picnic race meeting had proved enormously successful. One had to thank Sarie a great deal for that; she was more competent than a lot of people gave her credit for. Sarie was settling nicely.

De Bona's, the Adelaide caterers, handled everything, from musicians to glasses. Everything had been flown in and they were making such a magnificent job of it that one really couldn't take exception to the bill, astronomical to most people. It all paid off in the end. These big `do's' were expected, and it left the family free to concentrate on selling and socializing.

Everything had really gone splendidly. There had been a distressing little incident late afternoon, but Blake wanted it played down. Justine had been furiously indignant herself, but saw his point. Some stupid young hothead, not on the Malpara payroll, had attempted to ride one of the Brahma steers. The steer had gone haywire and the would-be cowboy a little mussed up for his trouble. The whole thing could have been far more serious, only Blake and Bart Earnshaw had dune to his rescue. Bart rather bravely, for after all he was a medical man, but he could, at a pitch, throw a steer. It was largely left to Blake. It was his steer, his property and technically his guest. The upshot was Blake had sustained a rather nasty gash in his arm, one that required stitching, from a ripping side-swipe of the horns. Bart had insisted on stitching it and Blake had had all his shots.

Poor little Sarie had arrived late on the scene, and almost passed out at the blood; Blake's sleeve had been soaked with it. It looked far worse than it was. Somehow she had gained the impression that Blake had been far more seriously injured. In due course it came out that the girl, Leigh, was at fault. She had apparently reported the situation blind. In Justine's opinion she had wanted to give Sarie a good fright, inexplicable as that might be; some people had a very bizarre turn of mind. Sarie had seemed shattered, pressing against Blake's side, he with his good arm around her and the other extended to Bart. For a while, Justine herself had felt rather sick. It hadn't been a pretty sight.

Blake, thank heaven, was indestructible. He looked so handsome, so dynamic, Justine felt her heart thrill

with pride. Blake was her special weakness, and she adored him. Tonight he was besieged by her lady friends. Mabs Reyburn would make him a very suitable wife, nice Justine thought. She looked particularly tonight, and she was very intelligent and ambitious, and she voted for the right party, which was a great help. Justine had hand-picked her herself. It was about time Blake married - he was obviously a terrific eye-opener to Tania Tate-Jones, who hadn't seen him before. Tania though an heiress, was much too fluffy and she drank rather too much at parties. Thus buried in her speculations, Justine gave a tiny shriek when her sister tapped her on the shoulder.

'I've got to hand it to you, Tina, you certainly know how to make people sit up and take notice. This is fabulous!'

'Thank you, dear.' Justine smiled very cordially, her most hostessy expression on her face. 'I think everyone's enjoying themselves, and Blake doesn't seem any the worse for wear, thank God. That young fool! I could have choked him.'

'Well he did have to be carried out!' Scotty said dryly.

'He's recovered, hasn't he?' Justine said grandly.

'Oh, yes. A bit concussed, that's all. Your friend dancing with Blake looks pretty blissful. What's her name again?'

'Rayhurn. Madelaine Rayburn.'

'That's right, her father's in politics.' Scotty nodded wisely.

'One of Clive's most ardent supporters,' smiled Justine.

Scotty sought for a diplomatic comment. 'Clive looks very distinguished tonight. So do you. As always!'

'Yellow's my colour,' Justine murmured, pausing to glance down her exclusive and original model.

'Haven't you put on the teeniest bit too much weight, dear? One simply must look after one's figure.'

Scotty's amusement showed in her face. 'This is as good a time as any to tell you that you're going to be an aunt.'

Justine nodded sharply. 'Any fixed time?'

'Six months from now.'

'And you mean to tell me you couldn't have told me before?'

'One likes to be sure. Hurdle the first months, and all the rest,' Scotty grinned.

'Well, it's wonderful news, darling. I yearn to see more little Merediths.'

'It's Sean's baby as well. Ever thought of having one yourself?'

'The thought's there,' Justine said gravely, 'but, darling, I haven't a minute to spare.'

'Don't delay any longer,' Scotty advised her sister.

'Don't worry, darling, I have everything planned.'

'It might be a nice gesture for the coming election.'

'Really, Scotty!' Justine said with dignity.

Scotty's gaze wandered away, and her face brightened. 'Look, there's Sarie. She rather wipes out the rest of us. Isn't that a dream of a dress? It reminds me for some reason of my wedding dress, though it's nothing like the same. I've always liked her in white. Beautiful white lace over a jersey petticoat. It's really like a close-fitting caftan.'

Justine smiles. 'Excellent taste, has Sarie; unless I'm very much mistaken she got that from Trent. Which reminds me, she has a bit of a problem with those Sheltons, hasn't she? I could have wrung that girl Leigh's neck. How extraordinarily vindictive! She went right out of her way to frighten Sarie. I have an instinct about such things.'

`She's stuck on Blake,' Scotty laconically supplied.

Justine looked down her straight nose at her. `What's that got to do with it? I can't think they'll want to stay after the ball, in any case.'

`They're going home tomorrow, as a matter of fact, I asked Blake.'

`Fine,' Justine said simply, and smoothed her hair at the back as though her feathers were ruffled. `I'm glad there's no more talk of an engagement. Sarie's very young, and she can do much, much better than Peter Shelton.'

`I'll say she can!' Scotty burst out emphatically.

Her sister turned on her a drilling gaze. `Anybody here?'

`I'm not permitted to say.'

`To your own sister? Your elder sister, moreover.'

`I thought you were the smart one.'

`So I am, but I feel a little drained with all the work I've done. Being super-efficient occasionally catches up with one. But anyway, darling, I'm just as pleased as I can be about the baby. I promise you Clive and I shall dote on it. Look, he wants me!'

'Does he? I thought he was being charming to that lady.'

`We have these little signals worked out beforehand,' Justine assured her, `one has to '

Scotty laughed, and stood back on the edge of the dance floor. There was nothing awkward about her, like some of the very young girls across the room. She was an assured and poised young matron, and this was her family home. Sean, coming up behind her, slipped his arm around her waist.

`Dance? What do you think?'

`Of course. You're an awful fusspot, Sean, I feel great!'

He examined her smilingly, painfully proud of her. `You're even more precious to me now than the day I married you. If that's possible!'

The smile and the words nearly broke Scotty's composure. She hadn't felt at all well of late, but now love and true anticipation surged through. It was going to be so wonderfully worthwhile!

Peter, dancing with Sarie, felt bitter and cheated, but he was keeping it admirably under control. His shortcomings, at least, hadn't been held against him, but it was very cold comfort. Tomorrow he and Leigh were to go home. They had joined forces just as Mother had told them, but none of their manoeuvres had worked out. Mother would be filled with rage and defeat. She would say it was all his fault when it was more properly Leigh's; she had behaved like a moonstruck and unpleasant schoolgirl. Peter felt deeply aggrieved, thwarted ambitions tearing at him.

Sarie looked up and smiled at him, and it gave him just enough confidence to ask:

`Coming up for the Arts Festival? I'd like you to stay with us.'

Her surprise wasn't at all assumed. Just as she was thinking what to answer him a voice cut in on them:

`You might remember, Sarie, this dance was promised.'

It was Blake. She tried to drag her eyes away from him. `You seemed very thoroughly preoccupied with Miss Reyburn.'

`Well, now I'm available again. How are you, Peter?'

Peter surrendered with a pleasant shrug. `Having a wonderful time. The floor's specially sprung, isn't it?'

'Hmm. I'm glad you're enjoying it.'

`Peter was just asking me about the Arts Festival,' Sarie put in, `he wants me to stay with his family when I'm in town.' Now why had she said that? It was the very last thing she wanted or intended.

Peter blossomed, but only for a minute.

`Impossible, darling,' Blake said blandly, `we'll be in the States by then.'

`The two of you?' Peter asked blankly.

Sarie stood there saying nothing at all, her blue-violet eyes widening, her composure completely shaken. Blake nodded.

`Just a few details to attend to. Miss to Mrs., and so forth.'

`I've never been so surprised in my life!' Peter cried truthfully.

Sarie's sapphire earrings swung against her dazzling skin. Blake: The infernal, impossible arrogance of him! She went to say something, but Blake put his hand on her shoulder. `Sarie's speechless. It's a big decision!'

`May I be the first to congratulate you?' Peter said, very visibly affected

`It's not at all official,' Blake announced. `I appeal to you to keep the news to yourself until later on in the evening.'

`Yes, of course,' was the numbed reply.

`Thank you, Peter,' Blake smiled charmingly. `I knew I could rely on you.'

'To be sure. I wonder you ask.' Dazedly, Peter backed away, clutching his fierce hatred to himself. What a night's work! Meredith had carried her off like a pirate, and Sarie was showing a sad lack of resistance. Outside on the far reaches of the terrace, Sarie was demanding an explanation. She was understandably bemused and annoyed; Blake as usual was ignoring her, his silver eyes taunting, staring into her ominously mutinous face.

`No one could say I was selfish, Sarie.'

`I can hardly believe that's an explanation.'

`I take my responsibilities very seriously,' he offered at last.

`I know that!'

'Well, then, I'm sure I can make a very good wife of you.'

'You're crazy!' she exclaimed.

`You know how lovers are!' He was leaning back against the balustrade, eyes sparkling like diamonds in the half-light.

`You're not my lover,' she said with intensity.

`I'm going to be.'

`Never! Never could I meet such a high-handed man.. Don't I have any say in it?'

`Certainly. Yes or no, but I remind you we have guests in there.'

She hesitated, frowning, shocked by his lack of ardour. `What is this, a board meeting?'

He shrugged. `It would be to your advantage to give me a quick answer.'

`All right,' she hurled at him, `it's no!'

His dark face, seen through a shimmering haze, was mocking her. She swept up her skirt with finality, now

that she had defied him a terrible desolation sweeping over her. He might never ask - no, tell her again.

`A minute more to repent,' he drawled, then laughed.

It was too much! There would never be an end to this turbulent relationship. She shook her head emphatically, starting uncontrollably when he stood up and moved away from the balustrade. She spun round in full retreat, however dangerous it might have been for her.

At the entrance to the back staircase he caught up with her, holding her still in a very practised manner.

'Is there any more need for these games?'

She fought a brief, losing battle with him, giddy now that she was within the circle of his arms. 'A bid for independence, Blake, I've got to make it now.'

'You mean you want to be an old maid? It might present a few difficulties. You look like a flame tonight.'

'That's not important!'

'That's what you think! I can't go on just looking at you for much longer. My decision, my infant, is carefully thought out and irrevocable. I want to marry you.'

'You can't really mean what you're saying?' she asked incredulously.

'Don't be a fool.' he said his eyes sliding over her.

'Well, couldn't you ask me, not tell me?' she implored him. 'I tell you, Blake, it's not good enough. I'm an adult!'

'Oh, do shut up!' he said without apology. 'My love for you, my silly little girl-child, is all-enveloping. I'm prepared to take the good with the bad, but I'm tired of this masquerade. I haven't got time for it any more. God knows I've waited long enough!'

She was obviously thinking deeply, staring up at him, at all that splendid dark arrogance. Yet there was some note in the dark-timbred voice that made her "give a convulsive little movement towards him. 'You love me for my own sake?'

'I love you for my sake!' he explained very evenly. 'It would be quite easy for you to drive me crazy, but yes, I want you, I need you, and I swear I'm not waiting any longer!'

'Then there's no one in the whole wide world I'd rather have!' she cried emotionally, burying herself against him. 'Because I love you. I love you.'

'Yes,' Blake answered before his ardent mouth silenced her. His lean hands held her slender body implacably, as if he would never ever let her go.

They were, each of them, one to the other, necessary for survival, like water in the desert. Sarie was home, loved and safe. As had happened once, a long time before, this was Malpara and together they would reap the whirlwind.