

Harlequin Romance 2096

.95

The Thistle and the Rose

MARGARET ROME



THE THISTLE AND THE ROSE

Margaret Rome

Helen considered that Damon, Marquis of Sanquhar, had treated her young stepbrother very shabbily, and she made up her mind to get her own back on him. As luck would have it she learned that the Marquis was looking for a secretary to work on his Scottish estates, and she managed to get the job. So far, so good. But she had already sadly underestimated the Marquis, and the effect he was to have on her, and she only realised that she had fallen in love with him when it was too late--for it was clear that he returned his glamorous sister-in-law's interest in him. What was going to happen to Helen's plan of revenge?

CHAPTER ONE

FROWNING slightly, Helen tightened her grasp around many and various-shaped parcels and began carefully picking her way up the flight of stairs leading up to her flat, irritated by the discovery that the lift was once again out of order—as it had been the last time she was home. In bustling, cosmopolitan Brussels where she was at present working such things were attended to with a minimum of delay so that the city's jealously guarded reputation for superb service might not be impaired, service amounting almost to pampering which the citizens lavished upon their new elite—Common Market ministers, executives and their secretaries—Helen being one of the latter.

Her frown had been replaced by a smile by the time she reached the door of her flat. 'How fortunate I am,' she reflected, fumbling for her key, 'in having a job I enjoy so much, to find work more of a pleasure than a chore, the effort to reach the top of the secretarial ladder an exciting challenge and not the monotonous plod some maintain it to be!' She hesitated, her ears pricking up as a muffled melody penetrated from behind the closed door. Someone was playing her records. It couldn't be Chris, not *again!*

She twisted the key in the lock and stumbled inside, depositing her parcels in the hall before hurrying into the sitting-room, her eyebrows twin enquiring arcs.

'Hello, Sis!' He waved a languid hand in her direction but made no effort to disturb his lean frame draped crosswise across an armchair. Nonchalantly he continued threshing his legs through the air in time to the music.

Without bothering to reply she walked across to the record player and with a decisive click turned it off. Swiftly she spun round to face him.

'Why are you here, Chris—I understood you were working somewhere in the wilds of Scotland?'

He uttered a short derisory laugh but shifted uncomfortably beneath her demanding stare. 'It might improve your geography, Sis, if instead of gallivanting off to "furrin parts" you did a tour of the British Isles.

Dumfriesshire, dead end neck of the woods though it might be, is not situated in the far north of Scotland but is a mere stone's throw away from the English border.'

'Thank you for the information,' her tone was dry. 'Now enlighten me further by telling me what happened to *this* job.'

The emphasis brought a flood of colour to his cheeks. Warily he weighed her up, wondering how far he[^] dared try the patience of his stepsister who, though devoted as ever, had begun recently to show symptoms of impatience with his penchant for changing jobs. He decided to adopt the little-boy- lost air that had never yet failed to placate her.

'Honestly, Sis, it wasn't a job, more a prison sentence. My erstwhile employer was a despot with mind attuned to the Middle Ages when his ancestors had scores of lackeys to do their bidding and over whom they exercised utter and complete control. The Marquis of Sanquhar, Earl of Ettrick and Baron Montague, is an embittered man with a warped, devious mind who has barricaded himself from modern society as effectively as his forebears protected themselves from their enemies. Ghillies patrol the perimeter of his estate to keep out unwelcome strangers and though he has been forced, for economic reasons, to throw open the castle and grounds to the public the dates and times are strictly enforced so that there is never any danger of his being contaminated by contact with the common herd. Employees' rights he dismisses with a contemptuous flick of the finger, and as for having a life of one's own,' his voice rose with indignation, 'it's quite out of the question! Any employee who steps across the threshold of Sanquhar Castle is immediately doomed to a life of serfdom, accountable to the Marquis for his every action, expected to be grateful for the very air he breathes while under the laird's patronage.'

Conditioned to her half-brother's flair for exaggeration, she protested, 'No one could be that bad.'

'Couldn't they just!' When he jumped to his feet wearing an irate expression she felt forced to believe him. Whatever his faults, Chris was not given to unreasonable bursts of temper, on the contrary, his nature was so languid she often longed to shake him. 'You've never ever given me the benefit of

the doubt, Sis,' he accused heatedly. 'Even when we were children you were always more inclined to listen to my antagonist's argument before mine whenever I became involved in a scrap. I just wish you could judge the set-up for yourself, travel across the border to Scotland, ask as I did for directions to Sanquhar - and be told as I was: *Oh, it's the home of Black Murray you're wanting!* '

When he stormed out in disgust she sank into a chair and tried to evaluate the situation. All the pleasure of homecoming had gone, she had looked forward for months to enjoying a hard-earned rests in the flat she had so lovingly put together as a home for herself and her young half-brother. He had been, barely fifteen when their parents had died within months of each other, and she just twenty, teetering « on the threshold of life with a string of secretarial qualifications and an eagerness to take her first step into the world of business.

'Don't jump at the first job offered,' her stepfather had advised, 'take your time, look around, and choose carefully.' But in the end circumstances had ruled that salary and not prospects should be' her first consideration. With a fifteen-year-old half-brother to bring up and the surprisingly small amount of money left by their parents, she could; not afford to be choosy.

She leant her head against the back of her chair and slowly assessed her surroundings. The sitting- room, furnished bit by bit over the years, was her main joy. The off-white suite of supple leather had been one of the few things salvaged from their home. The brown, long-piled carpet flecked with cream had been a great extravagance, purchased by way of weekly instalments over two long lean years; she still felt guilt each time she thought of how her mother and stepfather would have disapproved of such a method of payment. Then gradually, as her salary had increased, she had added carefully chosen pictures to the bare walls, rich velvet curtains to the windows, then latterly, when travelling on the continent had become part of her job, exquisite pieces of porcelain, glassware, and an assortment of unusual articles that had taken her fancy.

Chris's voice startled her.

'I'm sorry I yelled at you, Sis, I'm a selfish brute, you must be tired after your journey. Would you like me to whip up an omelette and a salad? It won't take me more than ten minutes; I'm sure you must be starving.'

She could forgive him anything when he grinned his engaging grin and cocked his head to one side as he did while he waited for her answer.

'Thank you, Chris, that would be lovely. Let's do it together. I'll prepare the salad while you cook the omelettes, that way we can catch up on each other's news.'

They kept jogging each other's elbows as they worked companionably side by side in the tiny kitchen. But it was fun to be together again and after six months' separation they had lots of news to exchange.

'How long will you be staying this time?' Chris questioned, popping a plump prawn into his mouth.

'Three months,' she told him with satisfaction. 'Sir Alec, my boss, hasn't been at all well lately, so his doctor has advised him to take a prolonged holiday. I was quite prepared to carry on with his replacement until he returned, but both Sir Alec and Lady Caulder insisted that I needed a rest as much as they did. I must admit I didn't argue. Life has been hectic these past months. As I think I mentioned in one of my letters, Lady Caulder had to return home to deal with some family crisis, so I was called upon to act as stand-in hostess at the many social functions that had been arranged too long previously to be cancelled. What with working flat out during the day and socialising until the early hours I feel completely drained and am looking forward enormously to relaxing here in the flat, visiting a few friends, perhaps, and going to bed each evening no later than ten o'clock.'

He shot her a look of disgust. 'Good lord, what a way to spend a holiday! The programme you've just outlined would drive me up the wall.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that, my dear,' she chuckled. 'But haven't we always held completely opposing points of view? To me, gadding about has always been a bind, whereas you revel in it, and also, whereas I enjoy my job,' she had

relaxed enough to tease, 'you consider work to be no more than a necessary evil.'

'Dead right,' he nodded agreement. 'We think differently, act differently, and don't even look much alike. Which is hardly surprising, I suppose, considering the fact that we had different fathers.'

Busy shredding lettuce, she paused, her brow wrinkling. 'I often have to remind myself of that fact. Mother was widowed very young; I was a mere infant when she married again, so naturally Daddy was the only father I ever knew. I was five years old when you were born,' she reminisced with a smile, 'and Daddy was so delighted he tossed me up in the air until I yelled for mercy. Yet never once over the years did he show favouritism. He divided everything between us equally, his love, his understanding--'

'Everything but his money,' Chris cut in, the bitterness of his tone freezing the remainder of Helen's words.

'What do you mean?' she gasped.

Chris concentrated all his attention upon the contents of the pan. He shrugged, his back turned towards her, and condemned in a low, resentful voice, 'You can't deny that you had the advantage of private schooling and, not content with that, Dad insisted upon your taking a full two-year course at an expensive secretarial college. Whereas I, after being allowed a mere taste of privilege—just enough to whet my appetite—was separated from the friendswith whom I'd grown up and deposited in a State school, left to continue,my education in a place where I was regarded as an outsider by teachers and pupils alike. It was no joke,' he told her bitterly, 'to be plucked from the privileged environment of small classes and highly qualified teachers and dumped in the midst of classrooms containing thirty-odd pupils none of whom had either the desire nor the ability to learn, in charge of teachers struggling against insurmountable odds in order to carry out their jobs.'

Helen remained stock-still, a petrified image of remorse. 'I knew you were upset when you left private school,' she husked, 'but I never realised how

deeply you were affected. But even so,' she swallowed painfully, 'you can't blame Daddy for that. He didn't choose to die.'

'Neither did he choose to make ample provisions for his family," Chris replied hardly. 'It was rather selfish of him, don't you think, to arrange his affairs so that we were all comfortably off during his lifetime but destitute upon his death?'

'He wouldn't think,' she whispered miserably, 'probably didn't even consider dying as young as he did.'

'Perhaps not,' he agreed tersely, 'but I've thought, have had plenty of time to consider, doing one deadend job after another, unable to achieve promotion because I have no qualifications, no influential contacts, no prestigious school tie to flaunt around the clubs in the city.'

Helen felt bound to protest. 'Ability and determination can overcome all obstacles,' she flashed. 'I could have sat back bemoaning my fate, feeling doomed to spending the rest of my working life in the horribly boring ambiance of my first job. But instead, I went to night school until I'd mastered three other languages, kept my eyes and ears open to opportunity until finally I landed a plum job. If a man is good at his job what does the colour of his tie matter?'

'It's easier for a woman.' His surly reply angered her. 'For a man to get a decent job even in these enlightened days he has to be seen in the right company, accepted in the right circles. It doesn't matter a damn whether he has brains, ability or determination, the only thing that counts is his being sponsored by the right people—which reminds me, I have a favour to ask. But first let's carry this lot through into the dining-room, so we can talk as we eat.'

Helen felt the crisp salad and appetising omelette would choke her. She picked up her knife and fork and played listlessly with the food on her plate, dreading his request being put into words. Because of previous hints to which she had turned a deaf ear, she could guess the substance of the forthcoming request and dreaded the outcome of the refusal which even now was formulating in her mind.

Chris had a prodigious appetite for one so slim. Halfway through the meal he lifted his head long enough to ask, 'Did you bring any duty-free goodies back from Brussels?'

'Yes, some bottles of wine and boxes of cigars. I left them in the hall.'

'Why didn't you say so earlier?' he reproved, jumping to his feet. 'I would have set the wine to chill. No matter, warm wine is better than no wine at all.'

Helen sighed as she waited for his return. His expensive tastes were a constantly nagging worry because she suspected he would go to any lengths to indulge them. Refusing the proffered wine with a shake of her head, she forestalled the dreaded moment by sidetracking him.

'Tell me more about your last employer, about his family. Is his wife cowed and are his children spiritless?'

'They would be if he had any, but he's still unmarried,' Chris replied promptly. 'He lives a hermit-like existence within his stone fortress with a witch for a housekeeper and a tribe of awe-stricken locals to pander to his needs and those of the boy.'

'The boy ... ?' she queried.

'A child aged about five, the Marquis's nephew, I believe, son of his younger brother, Murray the Red.'

Thinking he was amusing himself at her expense, she rebuked sharply, 'Don't be facetious, Chris! I'm interested, I really want to know.'

'Believe me, Sis,' he looked pained, 'the feudal set-up has to be experienced to be believed! There really is a Black Murray and a Red Murray. According to local gossip two such brothers have cropped up in the Murray family time and time again throughout the generations—the elder always black and the younger fair. Not that I've ever set eyes on the younger brother, he's reputed to be a bit of a reprobate, turning up like the proverbial bad penny to unload his misfortunes on to Brother Grimm. But enough of

the Murrays, if you don't mind, I've severed all connections with that family; I'll be especially happy never to set eyes upon Black Murray again. Won't you join me in a little of this excellent wine?" he urged. 'I must say I admire your taste, Sis. You have the expertise of a connoisseur due, no doubt, to your close association with the privileged classes.' He filled his own glass for the third time.

'Not just now, thank you,' she refused, conscious of the need for a clear head and quick wits to combat his persuasive arguments.

'Very well, let's take our coffee into the sitting- room—don't bother clearing away, I'll do that later.'

Provided the favour you're about to ask is granted, she thought, then chided herself for being cynical. Not until he was stretched out in an armchair drawing appreciatively on a cigar did Chris broach the subject that had hung between them for the past hour. Almost casually he requested, 'Could you use your influence with Sir Alec Caulder on my behalf? I know that at present his time is fully taken up with affairs of the Market, but he is a director of many companies and I'm sure if you asked him nicely he would find an opening for me somewhere.'

It was exactly as she had thought. But her arguments were marshalled. Gently, having no wish to hurt him, she refused. 'I'm sorry, Chris, we've been over this ground before and the answer is still no. As I told you previously, I feel a strong aversion to imposing upon my boss's kindness.'

He leant forward to impress, 'But you have no need to employ a boss-secretary approach—ask him as a friend; he holds you in very great esteem and has admitted many times his complete dependancy upon you. Once I overheard him singing your praises to a colleague: "Helen possesses extremely good degrees, unimpeachable loyalty and total dedication. In some women that would be a frightening combination, but she carries it all with disarming feminine charm.'"

'So ... ?' Small stubborn chin jutted; amber eyes blazed. 'Are you daring to suggest that I should pressurise my boss into finding you a job?'

'Don't be ridiculous!' His agitation was such that he stubbed his half-smoked cigar into a squashed heap. 'All I'm asking is that you give him a gentle prod in the right direction, use your feminine wiles, sob a little on his shoulder as you pour out your worries concerning your young half-brother whose talents are many but who needs someone of influence to help him on to the first rung of the ladder. All I want,' he implored, 'is a chance, Sis, just *one!*'"

She jumped to her feet and began pacing to try to relieve anger knotting her inside. 'You don't know me very well if you think I would stoop to such depths,' she swung on her heel to charge. 'My employer also lists among my attributes cool unflappability and sufficient common sense to work out my own problems. How do you suppose he would react, knowing me as he does, if I were to suddenly collapse against his shoulder in a welter of emotional tears? Use your imagination, Chris! Not only would I look ridiculous, Sir Alec would be profoundly embarrassed.'

He strode towards her, halting near enough to glower into her troubled face. As they stood together trapped within the beam of an overhead lamp a superficial likeness was apparent. Both had silver-blond hair, each was slim, but whereas his mouth was weak with self-pity hers, though full and shapely, showed more than a hint of determination, reflected also in amber eyes sparkling jewel bright as they clashed with his pale blue gaze.

'Not half so embarrassed as I'm going to feel standing at the tail-end of a dole queue!' he accused, sounding as if he thought she were to blame. 'You're hard and selfish, Helen—everything you've ever wanted has fallen straight into your lap: an interesting job; travel; a salary good enough to maintain this flat which you so magnanimously allow me to share. You've been very lucky, very lucky indeed!'

'And the harder I work the luckier I get,' she choked sarcastically, appalled by his resentment.

'Don't give me that!' he cut in viciously. 'If our positions had been reversed and I'd been the one to reap the benefits of an expensive education I wouldn't make you beg for crumbs from my table! If I had a decent job I could get a flat of my own and have money in my pockets. But I'm

beginning to suspect that you prefer me to remain as I am, utterly dependent upon your charity. Does it give you some kind of a kick? Are you one of those repressed females who *need* to feel wanted in order to assuage frustrated maternal instincts? You are a good-looker, Sis, I'll give you that,' he scrutinised her cruelly, 'yet you've never had a steady boyfriend, so far as I'm aware, much less an affair. Shall I tell you why? It's that cool, superior image you project. It puts men off—you'll have to rid yourself of it before any man will dare to approach you. But in any case I'm not prepared to wait for miracles to happen. I'm cutting loose from your apron strings—I want my freedom and I want it *now*! Believe me, it will be very much to your advantage to help me get it!'

CHAPTER TWO

HELEN slept little that night. Chris's change of attitude had inflicted a wound too painful as yet to be probed. Success was not conducive to friendship, she had discovered early on in her career. Resentment, spite and even downright malice was the price one had to pay for daring to aspire, much less achieve the top of one's particular tree. To Helen, friendship implied total commitment, utter loyalty, shared rejoicing in happy times and deeply felt sympathy in misfortune. It had taken her a long time to come to terms with the fact that others did not react in the same way, in fact, quite the reverse. Jealous barbs had left their marks upon her sensitive feelings to such an extent she had finally retreated into a shell of aloof indifference, pinning all her faith upon the one person she knew really cared about her: Chris. But now he, too, had betrayed her trust and though her instinctive reaction had been to shelter behind a cool facade of nonchalance while his torrent of abuse had rained upon her head, here in the privacy of her bedroom she gave rein to scalding tears. Sobs racked her slender body stretched listlessly across the bed as she allowed herself to sink beneath waves of bewilderment, feeling lost, abandoned, a piece of human flotsam devoid of anchor.

Outwardly she had regained her composure when she joined Chris for breakfast the next morning. Guilt made him appear edgy, but a smile lightened his sullen features when in a low controlled voice she told him:

'I've decided to do as you asked. I'll telephone Sir Alec this morning to inquire whether he can spare me a few minutes of his time before he leaves for his house in the country.'

'Sis, that's great news!' He moved towards her, but she side-stepped his intended hug, at the same time reminding him coldly:

'I'm doing this very much against my better judgment and I want your word of honour that should anything come of my interview with Sir Alec you will do your utmost to make a success of whatever job might be offered. Not only your future but mine will be at stake. If, after my personally recommending you, you should fail either of us, I couldn't continue working for my boss knowing he'd lost faith in my judgment.'

'I promise, Sis, you need have no fears on that account. All I need is a favourable opening, one real chance to make good, and I'll prove you're not the only member of our family capable of reaching the top!'

Sir Alec himself replied when she telephoned his home requesting an interview.

'Helen, my dear, of course I've time to spare— come round immediately, if you can. Winifred reckons she has just a small amount of packing to do, so,' his tone became droll, 'I must have at least two hours to spare before we leave for the country.'

Helen stammered her thanks and rang off, then immediately telephoned for a taxi. Fifteen minutes later she was ringing the doorbell of Sir Alec's elegant London home and seconds afterwards was ushered into his study where he was waiting to greet her. One shrewd glance told him that his usually composed secretary was overwrought. Tactfully, he made no reference to it but waited until she was seated before instructing his butler, 'Fetch coffee and biscuits for two, if you please, William.'

He waved away her protest and kept the conversation superficial until the butler returned, then, with the aroma of freshly poured coffee wafting a soothing influence, he settled back in his chair, and urged quietly, 'What is it, child, is something worrying you ...?'

She took a hasty sip, then set down her cup and saucer upon a nearby table. Masking her nervousness with a voice so overbright it rang false in his ears, she began with an apology.

'I feel my presence here is a dreadful imposition, Sir Alec. You've been so kind to me in the past, so generous and understanding, I feel ashamed to ask a further favour.'

He leant forward to encourage, 'You've received nothing from me that has not been deserved. You underestimate your own value—a man would be a fool not to reward such a helpful and conscientious employee. Were it not for your sweet-tempered willingness to undertake duties far beyond what's expected of a secretary,, I should have found these past six months an

intolerable strain. As it is, my dear, I am very much in your debt, so any favour that's within my power to grant will help in some small way to ease my burden of gratitude.'

Tears spurted to her eyes and were quickly blinked away. For a moment she was incapable of speech, so he busied himself replenishing his cup, curbing curiosity aroused by the girl who had shared with him a four-year boss-secretary relationship and yet had still managed to remain a complete enigma.

In the beginning he had been reluctant to fall in with his wife's suggestion that Helen should be approached to undertake the duties of hostess in her absence. Throughout his years in business he had learned the wisdom of keeping employees at a friendly distance. In the past too many had abused the privilege of closer relationship, but with Helen he had discovered the reverse to be true—it was she who had maintained a barrier of reserve, fitting beautifully into the slot his wife had vacated, earning praise from his blase, cosmopolitan guests for the way in which she had interpreted their needs, yet never, in spite of the reliance placed upon her, encroaching by so much as a pert look or a flippant remark upon their business relationship.

His interest had grown intense by the time she began tentatively to force out the words. 'I don't know whether you recall my mentioning my young half-brother?'

He nodded, impatient for her to proceed. 'He was fifteen when your parents died, was he not? And you have made yourself responsible for him ever since.'

She swallowed hard. 'Yes, but unfortunately I haven't been very successful in carrying out my obligations. Though he possesses a keen brain, Chris's education has been sketchy. Up until Father died he attended a private school, but afterwards there was only my salary to keep us both and as it wouldn't run to school fees we had to rely upon State education. Naturally the transfer unsettled him. Even now, at twenty years of age, he feels frustrated and resentful, convinced he has the ability to do well but lacking the opportunity of proving it to himself and to others.'

Sir Alec began to see the light. 'My dear girl,' he sighed his relief, 'am I right in supposing that the extent of the favour you wish to ask is the small matter of finding an opening for your brother?'

Large amber eyes widened as, for the first time since she had begun to speak, she lifted her head. '*Small* matter?' she croaked. 'Sir Alec, you have no idea how much it would mean to Chris—to us both!'

'Then we must certainly see what can be done. He is twenty, you say? Still young enough to learn. What would you say is his best subject?'

'He has always been clever with figures,' she faltered.

'And where was he last employed, and in what capacity?' He was puzzled by the wave of colour that ran beneath her cheeks.

'His last employer was the Marquis of Sanquhar—he was employed as assistant estate manager.'

His head shot up. 'The Marquis of Sanquhar? That in itself is recommendation enough. Damon is an old friend of mine.'

'Damon...?' she puzzled, then vigorously shook her head, somehow sensing that the name represented a threat to Chris's chances. 'No, his name is Murray, I believe.'

Sir Alec beamed. 'So it is, my dear, Damon Murray, Murray being the family name of one of the oldest and most respected clans in the Scottish Borders. When he inherited the estate it was all but bankrupt. There were family heirlooms, of course, but Damon was adamant that they should be retained—and they have been. Sanquhar is not only one of the most attractive and historical of castles housing a famous art collection, it is now part of an estate internationally renowned as a model of dynamic and enlightened rural land management. Fortunately, Damon turned out to be a vigorous agriculturalist with a keenly developed flair for business. He embarked upon an ambitious programme of replanting woodlands and modernising farmsteads, and now, thanks to him, Sanquhar is a thriving rural estate. But then I suppose your brother will have told you all this—no

one who has worked with Damon could help but admire and respect the man for his sheer grit and determination?'

There was a question mark at the end of Sir Alec's words which she decided to ignore. She could hardly confess that Chris would have heatedly disputed this description of his previous employer. It was puzzling, until one remembered that Sir Alec was viewing the Marquis from a very different angle from that of an employee and was probably unaware of the man's tyrannical attitude towards those unfortunate enough to be employed by him.

'Now to business I' Sir Alec sat down at his desk, pulled a sheet of paper towards him, and began to write. 'Tell your brother to take this letter to the firm of accountants whose address I shall put on the envelope. I'm sorry I can't be present at his interview, but I shall write a letter of recommendation to the head accountant and that should be enough to ensure that your brother is favourably received. The post has already been advertised, so he will have to compete with other applicants. Naturally, the head accountant's decision will be final,' he shot her a keen look, 'but if your brother makes a favourable impression this letter should go a long way towards ensuring his employment.'

'Thank you, Sir Alec.' Her voice was husky with gratitude as she accepted the precious envelope containing Chris's passport to happiness. 'He is ... we're both ... extremely indebted to you.'

'Nonsense, my dear.' He gave her shoulder a kindly pat. 'If he is half as industrious as his sister he will be an asset to any firm.'

Helen picked up her bag, anxious to delay him no longer, but as he was escorting her to the door he questioned, almost as an afterthought, 'By the way, will you be remaining in London for the whole of, your holiday?'

'Yes, I imagine so ... at least, I have no particular plans at the moment.'

'Good.' He frowned slightly. 'It's just that, should anything urgent crop up, I want to know where I can reach you. I have your address, but if you should

decide to go away would you mind leaving a forwarding address with William, just in case ...?'

'Certainly I will.' She smiled, turning to shake his hand before stepping across the threshold. 'But I hope it won't come to that, both you and Lady Caulder deserve an undisturbed holiday.'

'And you, my dear,' he replied gruffly, 'and., you ...'

She could hardly wait to get back to Chris. Clutching the precious envelope in her hand, reluctant even to trust it to the safety of her handbag, she ran upstairs and burst into the flat. He was sitting staring moodily out of the window, but when she appeared waving the letter beneath his nose like a flag of triumph he shot to his feet, his expression a mixture of expectancy and disbelief. When he had scanned the address on the envelope he sank back into his chair, too stunned to speak.

'Well?' she urged. 'Does the firm meet with your approval?'

'Meet with *my* approval?' he croaked. 'What you should ask is will I meet with *theirs*! They're one of the best respected firms in the city.'

She had to laugh at his fearful expression. 'Isn't that what you wanted?' she teased, momentarily lighthearted.

'Of course,' he agreed shakily, 'but this firm sets such high standards, Sis! What if I can't cope?'

She sat down to face him, suddenly sober. 'You will be given every help and encouragement, Sir Alec assured me of that. You'll have to start at the very bottom, of course, but if your work is satisfactory there's no limit to the heights you can reach. Please promise you'll stick in, try your very hardest, for my sake as much as for your own?'

She could not doubt his sincerity when, with an infant's solemnity, he promised, 'Don't fret, Sis, this is my big chance, I promise I won't muff it.'

They endured an anxious but happy weekend, filling in the interval between late Friday and early Monday with happy conjecture and a return of the loving companionship they had shared before Chris's outburst. The fact that their relationship was now indelibly marred she thrust to the back of her mind, refusing to allow pain to intrude upon the aura of happy anticipation that accompanied them in everything they did. And they did plenty. To speed the lagging hours, Chris insisted upon a celebratory dinner that evening. A sightseeing tour, visiting places they had not seen since childhood, took up the whole of Saturday, and on Sunday a trip to Brighton to visit friends became so extended it was well after midnight by the time they let themselves into the flat.

'Goodnight, Sis.' Chris kissed her lightly above heavily drooping eyelids and laughed when she smothered a yawn. 'Only nine more hours to go before I discover my fate!' He stretched exultantly, already confident of success. 'Go to bed.' He gave her a small push. 'I'm too overwrought to sleep, I'll read for a while.'

Tired but happy, she started towards her bedroom, but could not resist turning back to protest, 'Chris, you must rest. First impressions are important and you don't want to attend the interview with bags under your eyes and--'

'Bursting with enthusiasm is what I'll be,' he promised. 'Honestly, I'm much too excited to sleep, I just want to sit here and savour for a while the intoxicating taste of opportunity. Success is just a few hours away! From today onwards my life is going to take a dramatic turn for the better!'

Helen experienced a swell of pride when he set out for his interview later that morning. In spite of lack of sleep he looked bright-eyed and alert, his newly-pressed suit sitting well upon a slim frame that would have made even sackcloth appear elegant. If looks alone were the main criterion he would get the job without Sir Alec's help, she thought, watching through the window as his taxi slid away from the kerb. Involuntarily, her fingers crossed and remained so all during the long, agonising hour between his departure and his return. She did not realise, until his key scraped in the lock, that she had stood immobile, her body tense, her mind a vacuum, while she waited ...

'Well?' she croaked when he stepped inside the room. 'How did it go?'

'Quite well, up to a point.' As he moved forward her anxious eyes were quick to note that much of the spring had gone from his step.

'But ...?' she urged.

He dropped into a chair before replying. 'But they require a reference from my last employer.'

She expelled a breath of relief. 'Surely that's no problem!' She darted forward, full of maternal encouragement. 'If you did your work in a satisfactory manner the Marquis of Sanquhar must say so. No man would allow personal issues to disrupt another's career; he would hardly write a derogatory reference simply because you and he didn't quite hit it off.'

'Wouldn't he ...?' Chris jeered, his eyes mirroring raw despair. 'We'll soon find out. The head accountant is writing to him tonight.'

After what seemed to them both a never-ending week the letter eventually came, a formal, brief communication thanking Chris for his application but informing him regretfully that the position had been filled.

Helen had been out shopping when the post had arrived and had returned to the flat to find it empty, the letter lying face upwards on the carpet where Chris had thrown it in disgust before storming out. She picked it up and read the politely phrased sentences three times before the message finally registered. Her main emotion was one of tremendous pity for Chris, then fear. He teetered on the thin dividing line between stability and immaturity and this disappointment could be a push in the wrong direction, a crushing blow that might send his volatile nature completely haywire.

Then inwardly she began to burn as staring down at the typewritten page she imagined she saw, in the blank spaces between the lines, the hand of Black Murray. Only his influence could have overruled that of Sir Alec's. Obviously, he must have written a damning indictment of his former employee. He was, as Chris had said, a callous, ruthless tyrant—a power

maniac—who had not hesitated to rip apart the fabric of a young man's life simply to indulge his own petty spite.

An hour later Chris arrived home. She heard his boisterous voice long before he entered the hall, inviting someone: 'Come in, Oliver, won't take me a minute to pack!'

Her heart sank. Oliver Newton was one of the few drawbacks Chris had suffered from his years at private school, a characterless, spoiled youth with money to burn but very few friends with which to share it. She thought Chris had abandoned the friendship long ago.

Her worst fears were realised when they both staggered into the sitting-room and stood swaying, glassy-eyed, with stupid fixed grins upon their faces.

'You've been drinking, Chris!' she condemned, registering disgust.

'Too true I have, big sister!' he slurred, 'and for a very good reason. However, you need turn up your fastidious nose no longer—I'm leaving!'

She stared. 'Leaving?' she gasped. 'But where will you go ...?'

He threw a fond arm around Oliver's shoulders. 'On holiday with my good old pal, here,' he carefully enunciated, 'a prolonged hitch-hiking tour of the continent, so I can't tell you where I'll be or when I'll be back.'

'No, Chris, you mustn't! There'll be other jobs, other opportunities ..

He brushed her aside, walked unsteadily into his bedroom, and began throwing random items of clothing into a suitcase.

'Shan't need a lot of clobber, old boy,' Oliver stuttered, leaning heavily on a door jamb, 'jeans and a few tee-shirts will suffice.'

Frantic with anxiety, Helen began pleading with Chris to stay, but he turned a deaf ear to her protests that he was being foolish, could find himself stranded in a strange country with no means of support and no money for his return fare.

'Oliver has enough filthy lucre for both of us,' he assured her, swaying before her as she barred his exit. Then, his voice hardening, he demanded, 'Move out of the way, Sis, I'm going—who knows,' he shrugged, 'perhaps for good. I'm sick to death of this damned country and its tight old-school-tie network and feudal society—offend- one and you offend the lot!' he jeered. 'Black Murray has it in for me. I'll never be offered a decent job within his sphere of influence so I might as well clear out. Goodbye, Sis, I'll write ...'

Hours later, her eyelids red and swollen with crying, Helen began tidying his disarranged drawers and found a newspaper Chris must have thrust among his belongings when he left Scotland,]It was a fortnight old, full of parochial news, farm- j ing articles and columns of advertisements.

One was especially outstanding, a boldly outlined square of print containing words as terse and autocratic as the man on whose instructions it had been inserted: *Secretary wanted to work within 1 country estate miles from nowhere. No bright lights i and absolutely no manufactured entertainment. I Only competent persons need apply. Written applications only to: The Marquis of Sanquhar, Sanquhar Castle, Dumfriesshire.*

Over and over again she read, silently mouthing \ the words, and as gradually the message sank in her normally-calm, sensibly-controlled emotions became swamped by a fierce, urgent longing for revenge ...

CHAPTER THREE

SANQUHAR CASTLE was not hard to find. As Helen crossed the border in Chris's abandoned Mini she found it difficult to believe that she was actually in another country. For the past half hour she had been driving through fertile farmland with, stretching as far as the eye could see, the same panoramic view—miles upon miles of fields carpeted hedge to hedge in lush green, quiet countryside made up of shapely hills threaded by streams; prosperous farm lands, woods, and in the distance high heather-clad hills.

Occasionally she passed derelict keeps and once a ruined castle, its empty shell thrusting proudly skyward, its harsh, riddled contours a reminder that this was the Debatable Land, a land which for centuries had heard the ring of steel against steel; the pounding hoof beats of horses carrying English raiders deep into Scots territory; piercing clan cries as foe met foe; the heartbroken sobbing of mothers staring after young, nubile daughters being flung across saddles and transported across the Border never to be seen again. Then the aftermath: long, silent crocodiles of determined men—fathers, cousins and brothers—their faces etched deep with bitterness, disappearing into the night shadows, then reappearing silhouetted against the skyline before being once more swallowed into the safety of protective hills as, their hearts black with revenge, they made stealthy progress towards enemy lines.

Helen shuddered. She had read a little of the turbulent Border history after receiving a reply to her application for the job of secretary to the Marquis of Sanquhar. She too, had crossed the Border thirsting for revenge, but now she was beginning to feel qualms. According to history, English and Scot had been fairly well matched, victories and defeats evenly divided, but that had been long before civilised living had exerted a cultured influence upon even the tough English Borderers. According to Chris, such influence lay like a deceptive cloak across the fiery Scottish temperament—a thin veneer of polish through which barbarity and cruelty were ever ready to erupt.

Gradually, as she drove, place names on signposts took on a decidedly Scottish ring: Maxwelltown, Locharbriggs, Blackcraig, then finally Sanquhar! With a fluttering of the pulses, she noted that the castle was

separately signposted. Arrowed notices placed strategically along quiet county lanes guided her like a moth towards flame along a road cut through forests, between hedges so high and thick she could see neither through nor above them, then along what instinct told her was a drive, wide, gravelled, scything between a dense mass of rhododendron bushes towering eight feet tall, bursting with blossoms, a brilliant purple flare-path leading her on and on until with shocking suddenness she drove into the open and there before her, set haughtily aloft, stood the awesome edifice that was Sanquhar Castle.

Immediately she braked, switched off the engine, then simply sat and stared. It had a fortress-like severity, softened slightly by rich carvings over porch and windows. A horseshoe staircase swept down from the main entrance, outflung arms of stone shaped as if in readiness to embrace—or crush. Above the clock tower in the centre she picked out a carving of a ducal coronet, then slowly her eyes moved on, charmed by the pinkness of stone, the thrust of little lead cupolas, the perfectly-balanced proportions of the castle made invincible on sides and rear by a protective forest of dark Douglas firs.

She parked her car in the shadow of the lower colonnade and mounted stone steps leading up to a huge oak-studded door. She took a deep breath, then gave a brass-handled doorbell a massive heave. The ensuing sound did not penetrate the great walls, but minutes later the door groaned open and she stood face to face with a sharp-featured crone dressed head to toe in dusty black. Gimlet eyes full of distrust took stock of Helen, then an uncompromising trap of a mouth opened to spit, 'The castle's closed to the public, opening hours are set out on a board next to the main gate—plain for all with eyes to see!'

Helen stared, momentarily taken aback, then rallying cool dignity she parried sweetly, 'My name is Helen Paris. I have an appointment with the Marquis of Sanquhar. Would you be kind enough to tell him that I've arrived?'

Not one whit dismayed, the old woman retreated inside, indicating with a nod of the head that Helen should follow.

'Wait here, I'll see what mood he's in,' she commanded before stomping the length of the hall to disappear into shadows.

See what mood he's in!

Helen sank on to a wooden settle and stared around, feeling an immediate lightening of the spirits as she took in signs of civilised living. Fine oil paintings, a magnificent French long-case clock, a rare Italian statuette, seventeenth-century chairs set against a background of wallcovering bearing gilded hearts stamped upon leather.

After minutes of heavy silence broken only by the ominous ticking of the clock, she felt courage enough to walk across to a fireplace which she was surprised to discover was made of wood skilfully constructed to resemble local stone. Deeply chiselled into its surface was a ducal crest with underneath a motto: *Crede quod habes, et habes*, fairly uncomplicated Latin she was able to decipher as 'Believe that you have it, and you have it!'

She was still puzzling over the implication when a thin voice spoke in her ear.

'The laird will see you now.'

Helen stiffened. The moment of confrontation was almost upon her; in a few seconds she would be face to face with a man she had come to hate, would have to show the deference due to a prospective employer, smile prettily, sit with hands demurely folded, while all the time fighting a feline urge to run fingernails down the length of his pitiless face.

She was ushered unannounced through a door leading off the hall and, because she thought the room into which she had stepped was empty, was able for a few startled seconds to evaluate its beauty. Walls colourwashed in palest green made a perfect foil for gilt-framed watercolours, an elegant bell-shaped mirror and centuries-old corner shelves laden with exquisite porcelain. Gilt chairs and footstools were covered in gros-point needlework and a beautifully inlaid corner cupboard held a Meissen tureen decorated with ormolu dragons. But comfort had not been sacrificed. Set at right angles to the fireplace was a comfortable settee piled with chintz-covered

cushions, flanked either side by tables holding ivory-stemmed lamps with shades of pleated cream silk. A scattering of farming magazines formed a homely oasis and bowls of sweet-smelling flowers helped disperse a little of the formal dignity that had been her first overwhelming impression.

A movement by the window caught her attention. Her startled glance swung in that direction and met the first impact of questing eyes, black as ebony and equally hard, mirroring an insulting lack of interest as they roved her slim, tense body, solemn face and wide eyes framed by lashes contrasting startlingly as soot against the silver sheen of her hair. He towered, his lean frame held rigidly erect, unbending as the tall firs guarding his home.

'Miss Paris?'

She jerked to attention, feeling almost impelled to curtsy, then as the absurdity of the notion struck her schooled herself to reply in a relaxed, even tone.

'Thank you, Lord Sanquhar, for allowing me this interview.'

She had expected his voice to be harsh, but its deep-timbred resonance surprised her, coming as it did from lips so granite stern they seemed in no danger of being cracked by a smile.

'From the outset, I want you to be under no illusions as to the nature of the conditions prevalent in this area,' he intoned like an automaton so used to repeating the words he knew them by heart. 'There are no cinemas, no discotheques, no pubs with jukeboxes, in fact, none of the type of entertainment without which your generation seems incapable of existing.' His sharply imperious glance stabbed through her armour of aloof dignity, awakening sensations of insecurity lain dormant for years. Not since presenting herself for her first interview after leaving college had she suffered stampeding pulses, sweating palms, and a dry caking of the lips beneath a nervously flickering tongue.

'I ... I have no liking for such things,' she stammered, 'nor have I ever had, not even when I was a teenager. I'm twenty-five years of age, Lord Sanquhar, old enough to have formed more discriminating tastes.'

'Perhaps. We shall see,' he chopped her off. Without making a move he indicated that she should sit and waited until she was settled upon the settee before shocking her with the ruthless admission:

'I have been left with very little choice but to offer you the job on a trial basis because yours was the only reply I received to my advertisement. I would have preferred to employ a male secretary, but as very few men are proficient in the twin arts of shorthand and typing it was a vain hope. I had become somewhat reconciled to accepting second best—a woman—but a *Scotswoman*! However, you will have to do. I take it you can type,' he shot hatefully, 'that your shorthand speed is, at the very minimum, twenty words a minute, and that you are capable of transcribing dictation without misspelling or glaring grammatical errors?'

Her eyelids drooped to hide from him a sudden amber flame. 'I think you will find my skills adequate,' she replied, biting her bottom lip to stem a spate of angry words.

'Must I rely upon your word for that?' Again the smooth voice held a barb. 'Have you no written qualifications, no references from past employers?'

He did not miss her startled jerk. Fool that she was! In her eagerness to confront this hateful man she had completely overlooked the necessary requirements.

'Er..She felt herself beginning to blush and was furious because she could not bring herself to meet his eyes. 'I... I...'Oh, forget it!'

Never had she heard a voice so laden with contempt.

Tour capabilities I can assess for myself and if, due to some past indiscretion, you have been unable to find work elsewhere, here at Sanquhar you are hardly likely to be tempted to err. If you should feel tempted to take off with the family silver you will be stopped before you reach the Border and if, as seems more likely,' she suffered the scorch of his glance from top to toe, 'it was some indiscretion with a member of the opposite sex that caused your downfall then you will be hard put to find a replacement on whom to lavish your attentions.'

Outraged by such brutal frankness, she shot to her feet.

'How dare you!' she trembled.

'Oh, I dare,' he replied, sounding bored. 'Can you deny that if I should insist upon a reference you would not be able to supply one?'

Wildly she cast about in her mind for words to bring about the downfall of this arrogant brute who was enjoying her humiliation. If she should phone Sir Alec for a verbal reference there would be endless questions which she would be unable to answer. Qualifications she had in plenty, but of such distinction they would be bound, if presented, to arouse his suspicions. What reply would she give to the almost certain question: 'Why should a highly qualified, tri-lingual secretary be applying for a third-rate job in the backwoods of Scotland?' There was nothing else for it but to swallow the lump of pride that was choking her and whisper.

'No, I couldn't ...'

She had thought his voice cold until he instructed her further, then the chill of it took her breath away.

'You may begin a month's trial tomorrow morning. I'll ring for Janet to show you to your room—I take it you did as I advised and brought with you sufficient luggage to last you over a short period?'

He sounded as if he thought a month would be more than adequate, and on this point she fervently agreed. She had mapped out no exact plan of revenge, had applied for the job on impulse while temper was at white heat, and had ventured no further in her mind than the thought that once she was within close proximity to the Marquis of Sanquhar an opportunity was sure to arise. She clung to that hope still, determined more than ever now that she had discovered for herself just how hateful he could be, that at whatever cost she would bring Black Murray to his knees.

The thought had barely become concrete when, for the first time in her presence, he moved. An old-fashioned bell pull hung on the wall a few yards away and as he stepped towards it her surprised glance clung, noting

with an instinctive surge of pity that he had a very definite limp. The discovery actually hurt—a feeling akin to the shocked dismay she had felt once in a London park at the sight of a virile male swan, its wings broken and limp, its majesty shattered by a hail of airgun pellets.

She had not realised that she was staring and felt mortified when his cutting tone confirmed, 'Yes, Miss Paris, as you can see, I'm a cripple. Perhaps now you can better understand my reference to the dearth of eligible males in the vicinity? If you'd counted upon adding my scalp to your belt I'm sure you must now be revising your thinking.'

His sneering sarcasm broke the last barrier of her control. Pity fled as with stormy, furious eyes, she berated, 'It seems to me that you have an illness of the mind as well as of the body, Lord Sanquhar. To be unable to bear an affliction is in itself a great affliction!'

'My God!' His face was thunderous. 'Am I to suffer a month of priggish clichés? But then I suppose I ought to be grateful that you spared me pity and comforting thoughts! But where, I ask myself, do you find the nerve to taunt me? I am your very reluctant employer, Miss Paris, and you are desperate for a job. One would think it politic on your part to keep a civil tongue, or is it simply,' his voice took on a mocking note, 'the age-old urge of the female to joust against the male? Are you attempting a verbal flirtation—an exercise in coquetry which you feel confident can be carried out simply because you are agile and I am not? It might be as well if I were to warn you in this early stage of our relationship that although at this present moment I might appear to you repulsive, just as to me you appear unattractive, too much provocation on your part and lack of diligence on mine could alter the situation, precipitating a sudden change of attitude. How would you react then, I wonder? But really I need not wonder; I have no doubt that with typical female treachery you would deny ever leading me on, swear that flirtation was the last thought in your mind, then probably collapse into tears, sobbing avowals of maidenly modesty. Therefore, before you continue on such a course, Miss Paris, I must advise caution and remind you that in these days of equality of the sexes the trend is for woman to be condemned a temptress and man acquitted for being virile enough to respond.'

Helen's furious resentment was so great she saw his face as if through a sheet of flame. Frantically she sought for words to wound, sharp verbal thrusts that would cut into his pride as he had cut into hers. Twice, three times, she began to speak and was prevented by rage blocking her throat. He saw her dilemma and was amused by it, his taunting profile slashed in bold strokes against a pastel background, rock-hard jaw, mocking eyes, and an intolerant mouth. But he was sensitive to his disability. That weapon he himself had put into her hands!

She used it. Too enraged to care about the outcome, wanting only to avenge her outraged feelings, she aimed at wiping the smile from his face.

'You seem to have an obsessive dislike of my sex, Lord Sanquhar. Could it be that you are merely putting up a front? That in spite of your iron will and professed contempt of women, you actually feel cheated, frustrated by bonds of self-imposed celibacy?' She laughed, a shrill sound that astounded her. 'If that really is the case then you are indeed to be pitied. Here am I—a young, passably attractive female—and you're stuck with me as your secretary. What aggravation! I must appear to you like a present of almonds to a man with no teeth!'

CHAPTER FOUR

A WEEK later Helen was surprised to find herself still in the employ of the Marquis. After her impulsive outburst, which afterwards she had regretted, she had expected to be despatched bag and baggage the very next morning. But for some puzzling reason he had allowed her to remain.

'There are more ways than one of skinning a cat.' seemed to be a favourite expression of Janet's. Helen interpreted the oblique remark as meaning: There are various ways of carrying out any task, and so far as the task of punishment was concerned there were, and the Marquis knew every one of them.

For a full week she had endured a battle of wills —on his part an adamance to work her until she dropped, and on hers a determination that he would never gain the satisfaction of even one slight whimper of protest. On Monday morning she had followed his grim figure into an office situated right in the centre of activity. He had indicated a desk piled high with work, bills, invoices, statements, and a dictaphone containing one full reel and two replacements, also full. In a few terse sentences he had outlined the intricacies of the filing system, thumped an address book next to her typewriter, then stomped into the adjoining office, instructing with a snide smile: 'Tell out if you need anything.'

She had been in need, but she had not yelled.

Grimly she had struggled through the morass of unfamiliar work, checking and double checking to ensure that he would find no ground for complaint. The first few days had been an exercise in confused frustration, but gradually a satisfying pile of mail had begun to form. Impeccably typed letters were despatched into his office for signature and returned without a word of praise—or complaint—and by the time Friday arrived Helen found she was actually beginning to enjoy pitting her skills, against the avalanche of work, knowing she was winning.

At three o'clock on the hot, humid Friday afternoon he limped into her office. Instinctively, she braced for combat, eyeing his bronzed, muscular figure clad in open-necked denim shirt and light-coloured slacks with the

wariness of a suspicious cat, but had her fur smoothed when briefly he remarked :

'You can knock off for the day, it's too damned hot, and besides, you seem to have cleared most of the backlog.'

It was stilted, it was reluctant, but it was almost *praise!*

With masochistic stubbornness she refused. 'I'll carry on for a little while longer. There are--'

"For God's sake! Spare me the female martyrdom and do as I say. Put the cover on that typewriter and go *now!*"

She jumped to her feet, mortified, and with head held high stalked outside to brave the covert grins of men working close enough to have heard the laird's command booming through wide-open office windows. But the grins were sympathetic, she found, when as she sauntered past a group busy sawing wood, the man in charge approached her and directed respectfully :

'If you take that path through the wood, miss, you'll come to a summerhouse overlooking a waterfall—the coolest spot on the estate, I'll warrant.'

'Why, thank you,' she blushed, nonplussed by the first kind words thrown her way for over a week. 'Along here, you say?'

'Yes, miss, the path is well arrowed for the benefit of visitors touring the grounds, but they're not allowed into the summerhouse. Because of its age, it has to be protected from damage. If you wait a second I'll fetch the key, I'm sure the laird won't mind.'

Looking doubtfully after his retreating back as he headed towards the office, she hesitated, anticipating the laird's refusal, but was surprised when he returned and proffered the key.

'Here you are, miss. Be sure to lock up and give the key back to the laird when you've finished with it.'

The path cut a trail of delight through woodland glades. Helen sauntered slowly, breathing in the scent of massed flowering shrubs, coming unexpectedly upon dells carpeted with sweet-smelling wild flowers, resisting the impulse to explore offshoots of path meandering through the undergrowth in case she should become lost in the grounds of an estate so huge it seemed to comprise almost a county in itself.

The path began to climb, then petered out into a clearing in the centre of which stood a circular building with a conical roof. Curiously she approached, puzzled by the unfamiliar-looking texture of the walls, and when she was near enough to touch gasped astonishment at the discovery that the whole of the small summerhouse had been constructed from heather, the walls a solid woven framework topped by a thatched roof. Eagerly she unlocked the door, stepped inside, and was drawn immediately towards an aperture shaped like a window but containing no glass. She looked out and was enchanted at the sight of a rocky gorge far below with, at the bottom, a fall of water, sparkling, rushing, slapping against a scattering of boulders.

There and then she felt a sensation of blissful contentment. There was magic in the air around her, built up, she imagined fancifully, during centuries of strife-torn history when this small summer-house had become an oasis of peace for the occupants of Sanquhar, a place that had housed only joyful, happy people, a place where perhaps couples had shared reunions after long separation, a place where lovers had kept tryst, where blissful children had played at the feet of loving mothers ...

She gave a long, luxurious stretch. It was heaven to have been given a respite from the mountain of correspondence necessary to the running of such a large estate. The extent and variety of the laird's interests had surprised her. From the letters that had passed through her hands she had learnt how cleverly he was utilising his assets. Timber from the forests around the castle was felled by his own lumberjacks, processed in his own private sawmill, and the finished timber sold to local merchants. The upkeep of farms and the raising of stock was a full-time job in itself. Ghillies were employed to ensure that good sport was enjoyed by parties of fishermen who paid well for the privilege of casting their flies in the well stocked

rivers. Others looked after the interests of shooting parties who, again for a price, were allowed the run of woodland and moor in search of game.

A surprising amount of revenue accrued from visitors who flocked to admire the interior of the castle, then lingered to buy refreshments in the up-to-date tea-rooms constructed out of empty stables and to purchase books, picture-cards and items of local handicrafts, handwoven scarves—cobweb-light; animals carved from wood and the cast antlers of male fallow deer; distinctive jewellery, even toffee, fudge, and rum butter, all manufactured by the industrious fingers of estate workers and their wives.

When a voice interrupted her daydreams she jerked erect, wondering if the small figure that had appeared was a figment of her imagination. But no, he greeted her again.

'Hello, I'm Rik Murray. Who are you?'

With matching gravity she replied: 'My name is Helen Paris, and I work for the laird.'

His small solemn face showed neither surprise nor interest. He could not have been more than six or seven years old, yet he showed no trace of childish immaturity, looking, in spite of a mop of bright red hair, reminiscent of an elderly professor.

'I see, then you must be Uncle Damon's new secretary.'

'The laird is your uncle?' she asked. This must be the nephew Chris had mentioned, the son of the laird's brother. It was hardly surprising that she had encountered neither of them during the past week. Volume of work had kept her confined in the office all during the day and at night her meals had been served separately in an anteroom on the ground floor of the castle. Each evening she had been glad to tumble into bed as early as possible in order to recoup her strength for the next trying day.

'How do you do, Rik,' she held out her hand, resisting an urge to smile. 'I'm pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'And I yours.' He took the hand she proffered and gave it a slight shake. His quiet dignity was inherent, she decided, not a put-on as at first she had suspected. Used to the precocious, well-travelled children of Eurocrats, she found his manner quaint. It also made her feel somehow sad.

Scrambling up beside her, he fixed her with a large-eyed gaze and with almost paternal indulgence queried, 'Do you like working for my uncle? Some people do and some don't, depending on whether they get on his right side or not.'

'I find it—stimulating,' she prevaricated.

He looked disappointed. 'Aren't you afraid of him, then?'

'Goodness, no! Should I be?'

He nodded. 'I think so. Daddy says that anyone who works for Uncle Damon must have a hide as thick as a rhinoceros and the stamina of a pack-horse—you look quite nice. He can be terribly bad-tempered, you know, but it's not really his fault,' he excused kindly, 'it's all due to the curse.'

'The curse?' Her voice rose high and enquiring.

'The curse of the Murrays,' he confirmed. He wriggled into a more comfortable position and though she knew she ought not to encourage him to gossip she was too fascinated to protest. 'Kate told me all about it. Kate's ancestor was a witch, did you know that?' When she shook her head he hastened to enlighten her: 'Yes, for her crimes she was tied to a stake, strangled and then burnt. Kate thinks it highly likely that it was her ancestor who put the curse on the house of Murray. If Kate had been alive hundreds of years ago she would probably have been burnt at the stake, because she has the second sight too.'

'Oh, I hardly think so--' Helen's weak protest was blocked.

'She knew when my guinea-pig was going to die,' he defended fiercely, 'she told me a whole week beforehand! You mustn't mock the power of witches,'

his eyes were round as saucers. 'That's what my ancestor did and that's why Uncle Damon is lame!'

'Oh, really...!' Helen stuttered a protest, ashamed of having allowed the child to go so far. But Murray determination showed itself in the small chin that tilted a couple of inches higher as he recognised disbelief in her expression.

Fiercely he insisted, made word-perfect, Helen suspected, by constant repetition: 'Many centuries ago Kate's ancestor, because of her ability as a seer, was employed as advisor to the Murrays of Sanquhar. After the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 the chief of the Murrays was called to London on State business, leaving his wife at home. As her husband was taking a long time to complete his business, Lady Murray asked her seer to tell her what her husband was doing. At first she wouldn't say, but Lady Murray kept on pestering her. For weeks she continued to refuse, then finally, at a great gathering of the Murray clan in the hall of Sanquhar castle, she told her the truth: "Your Lord has little thought of you or his children or of his home. I see him with his arm around a fair lady's waist and her hand pressed to his lips! "

'Because Lady Murray had suspected this truth herself she was enraged and humiliated and vented her wrath upon the unfortunate seer, condemning her to death for engaging in witchcraft. She pleaded for her life, but when she found that Lady Murray wouldn't change her mind she made a final prophecy that was more of a curse.

"I see far into the future," he intoned with chilling fervency, ' "and read there the downfall of my oppressors. I see in each generation a Black Murray and a Red Murray. Red shall possess charm enough to compensate his lack of fortune. Black will inherit all that is due as eldest son, plus the burden of his brother's misfortunes. As a sign by which it may be known that these things will come to pass, each male infant born to the Murray clan shall bear a mark—Red a deformed finger and Black a deformed foot."

'See!' he wagged a small crooked finger in front of her nose, 'aren't I lucky to have been born a Red?'

'Stop it!' Helen covered her ears with her hands, horrified, and furiously angry with Kate for instilling into a child's mind with such intensity he could repeat it parrot fashion, the shockingly superstitious fantasy.

The red-haired mite looked smugly satisfied by the violence of her reaction. 'I told you not to scoff! You believe me now, don't you?'

'Believe you? I've never heard such a load of utter rubbish! I shall speak to Kate about this, she has no right to fill your ears with such stupid tales!'

As she jumped to her feet, feeling for some unknown reason unbearably agitated, he followed her example and faced her, glaring mutinously.

'It is not silly rubbish, and when I am laird I'll see to it that you're punished for saying such a thing!'

'When *you* are laird?' In spite of his youth, or perhaps because of it, Helen felt such arrogance should not be allowed to pass unchecked. 'That's hardly likely to occur. Your uncle is a comparatively young man—he'll marry, have children of his own who will take precedence over you.'

His scornful look did nothing to prepare her for the shock of his reply.

'Uncle Damon will never marry. No woman would be prepared to bear his crippled child even if he should wish it—which he does not.'

Outraged as she was by his mature opinion and unchildlike composure, this last statement was too glibly pat to be the product of his own powers of reason. It must be the result of eavesdropping on grown-ups' conversation, grown-ups who should know better, she thought fiercely, than to put such outrageous thoughts into words within the hearing of a small, lonely boy left too much to his own devices, driven by boredom into soaking up servants' gossip.

Her grip descended upon Rik's shoulder with such force that he winced. 'Take me to your mother!' she commanded, a glint of temper warning him that she intended to be obeyed. 'I have a few words to say to her.'

'My mother doesn't live with us,' he told her sulkily.

'Your father, then.'

Suddenly the cloak of maturity fell from him and he was a small, uncertain boy. 'I'm not sure where he is,' he gulped, 'and anyway, he doesn't like me to bother him.'

'I'm sure he doesn't,' Helen thought grimly, then, her anger evaporating at the sight of his small teeth digging into a trembling lower lip, she bent to give him a reassuring hug.

'Let's play a game of seek the treasure,' she decided upon a change of tactics. 'First one to find your father will have a wish granted!'

For a moment his inclination warred—one part of him hankering after maturity and the other tempted by the novelty of playing a childish game. Novelty won.

'All right,' he gasped. 'I think he might be in the pool. Remember, the first one to set eyes on him is the winner!'

As he set off running she followed, unaware, as yet, of the incongruity of feeling such strong sensations of anger on *behalf* of Black Murray—the man she had sworn to hate!

CHAPTER FIVE

RIK ran out of the woods, through a stone-paved, sunken rose garden at the rear of the castle, past tennis courts, then disappeared into an orchard with Helen close at his heels. She saw his small figure zig-zagging between fruit trees, then lost sight of him when he rounded a row of raspberry canes. But his excited voice led her in the right direction, and as she broke into the open she saw him standing on the brink of an old-fashioned swimming pool, a deep pit scooped out of the ground and lined with the same pink stone as the castle, with six utilitarian wooden steps leading down into water which, in spite of the brightness of the day, looked cold and uninviting because of the lack of customary sun-reflecting tiles.

A lean body was cleaving through the water and at Rik's excited hail a bright red head lifted and the figure began swimming towards the steps.

'I've won, Miss Paris, I saw him first, I get the wish!'

'Yes, dear, you do.' She patted his head absently, wondering, now that confrontation was imminent, how to phrase her angry sentiments with diplomacy.

At the sound of an appreciative whistle her head swivelled in the direction of Rik's approaching father. 'Well done, Rik, old son,' he congratulated. 'Are there any more beautiful fairies like this one at the bottom of the wood?'

Controlling a blush, Helen eyed him steadily and was reassured by what she saw. A charming, lopsided smile—well-practised, she decided, to ensure maximum impact—merry, flirtatious eyes that ought to have disconcerted as they roved her slim figure, but did not. After emerging unscathed from the romantic onslaughts of many young Eurocrats she was able to face him with a composure so serene he became immediately aware that his shower of charm was dripping from her as quickly as the rivulets of water were evaporating from his sunbathed torso. His grin slipped a little as he reached for a towel, his slight shrug implying: 'Well, you can't win 'em all!'

A suspicion of a smile curled Helen's grave mouth—this man was no fighter, he liked things to fall into his lap—definitely not of the same indomitable calibre as his brother.

Rik's delighted laughter rang out. 'She's not a fairy, Daddy. This is Miss Paris, Uncle Damon's secretary!'

She warmed to him a little when for Rik's benefit he pretended astonishment.

'You don't say! I could have sworn...! Well, anyway, how do you do, Miss Paris,' he extended a welcoming hand. 'I heard a week ago that you'd arrived, but had begun to think the information misleading. Where on earth have you been hiding?'

'I found her in the summerhouse, Daddy,' Rik broke in, 'and we had a race to find you and I won, so I get a wish!'

'To find *me*.' he murmured, raising an interrogative eyebrow in Helen's direction. 'I'm flattered.'

'Yes,' she confirmed hurriedly, 'I have a very special reason for wishing to speak to you, Mr...' she faltered, unsure which form of address was correct.

'Call me Lewis,' he smiled, 'and I'll call you ...?'

'Helen,' she supplied.

'Very well, Helen, if you can wait just long enough for me to get dressed my attention will be entirely yours. Meanwhile, young man,' he swung round to Rik, 'isn't it your supper time?'

Rik's face mirrored disappointment, but he did not attempt to argue. As Helen watched his small, dejected back retreating towards the castle she again felt a spurt of anger. The boy was more neglected and cut off from society than any orphan, surrounded by the trappings of wealth yet starved of understanding.

When his father returned dressed in a casual safari-style suit, his dark red hair already lightening as it dried beneath the heat of the sun, she wasted no time with frills but launched into hard facts. Waiting only long enough for him to settle next to her on a rustic bench, she aimed straight from the shoulder.

'I made the acquaintance of your son less than an hour ago and already I'm concerned for his welfare. Do you realise, I wonder, that the child is the recipient of servants' gossip? That Janet has filled his head with tales of superstitious rubbish which he firmly believes to be the truth?'

Lewis slapped his knee, at the same time giving a shout of laughter. 'Is that all? Good lord, Janet's stories are part of our heritage. Damon and I grew up with them and they did us no harm. I assure you the boy will soon learn to distinguish fact from fantasy.'

'But isn't it rather unfair on him,' she pressed on quietly, 'to allow him to believe that one day he will inherit this estate? To let him continue to believe the fantasy that his uncle will never marry because of some ludicrous, mythical curse?'

Immediately Lewis sobered. 'Did the little devil really tell you that?'

'He did,' she confirmed dryly, 'and a great many other things besides.'

'Right, thank you for telling me,' he scowled. 'I'll make it my business to ensure that in future he keeps our family's affairs to himself.'

She stared, aghast by his obtuseness. 'But that's hardly the point! Don't you see, the boy actually believes these tales! Surely it's most important that he be given a careful explanation, an assurance that this gossip he's overheard is nothing but a tissue of lies.'

'But it isn't.' He answered with a shocking sincerity that took her breath away. 'The curse of the Murrays does exist and Damon made plain years ago his avowed intention never to marry. I should know if anyone does,' his lips developed a wry twist. 'There was one girl in particular who did her damndest to make him change his mind and almost succeeded.'

Unfortunately for her, Damon dug in his heels at the last minute, so she married me on the rebound. It didn't work out. A year after Rik was torn she insisted upon going her own way—she wanted to resume her career, she said, but the truth of the matter was,' his voice grated harshly, 'I didn't come up to Damon's standard. I ought to have known better than to try to compete with my brother. Even when we were boys it was always his hook that landed the finest salmon, his pony that was first past the winning post, his gun that had the most deadly accurate aim. The only time I could outwit him was on foot, but Damon, always sensitive of his limitations, never attempted the unattainable. He put marriage into that category, so you see in time Rik *will* inherit the estate.'

She passed a hand across dazed eyes. 'I'm not sure I understand,' she faltered. 'You're surely not implying that he believes his disability is the result of some curse? No, that simply can't be possible ... Your brother is far too intelligent—you're both too intelligent!'

'My dear Helen, intelligence has nothing whatsoever to do with it. Here, see for yourself!' He held up a bronzed hand, perfectly proportioned except for one curiously disjointed finger.

'That's nothing!' she scoffed, made angry by the constant harping upon one small hereditary quirk. 'It would have been a comparatively simple matter to have that finger straightened when you were a child. Were you ever examined by a doctor—was your brother?'

He seemed taken aback by her simple logic. 'No,' he admitted, 'but each generation of Murrays has come to expect——'

'Exactly!' she flashed. 'So much so that it's even written into your family motto: *Crede quod habes, et habes!* Believe that you have it and you have it!'

Her vehemence was such his head jerked up. 'My, but you're quite a spitfire! An ice-cool shell with a fiery centre. I'm gratified that you should feel so concerned on our behalf—or,' his eyes narrowed, 'is your concern not so much for my family as for one member of it? I wish I knew the secret of my brother's attraction for the opposite sex!'

She stood up, fighting an angry trembling. 'My interest in your family is purely that of an onlooker amazed by your susceptibility to superstition. Everyone here seems to have roots buried in the past, a morbid insistence upon clinging to ancient taboos that ought to have been interred with their instigators centuries ago.' She glanced towards the castle casting its shadow across the sunlit orchard and made a small gesture of helplessness. 'I can understand the immovable, unchanging nature of bricks and mortar, but not the stagnation of men's minds. Outside the perimeter of Sanquhar the world has changed much in the past three hundred years. Are you aware,' 'She queried with a hint of sarcasm, 'that the very first man to set foot upon the moon had his roots not many miles from here?'

His lips twitched. 'I am. Remind me to show you the tree Neil Armstrong planted in the castle grounds when he visited us a few years ago.' When his impudent grin drew from her a hesitant smile he continued. 'Also, on Damon's behalf I must refute your allegation of stagnation. He has, after all, turned this estate into a showpiece. Nothing that can be made to show a profit has been overlooked—even our home,' her ears pricked up at a hint of bitterness, 'is turned twice a week into a circus for the amusement of gawping tourists.'

'Your brother, I imagine, will dislike that even more than you do, therefore it must obviously be a necessary evil.'

'And Damon can always be relied upon to do the right thing, however unpleasant the outcome!' Lewis confirmed with a short laugh. 'How I wish I could see him, just once, stripped of his damnable arrogance, suffering the same torments and frustrations that beset the lesser beings over whom he rules. However,' he shook off the tension that had set his teeth on edge, 'hunger tells me that it's almost time to eat. I insist that you join us for meals in future.' When vehemently she shook her head he overruled, 'But yes! Having to eat with my morose brother is bad enough at any time, but to carry on doing so knowing I have the alternative of dining with a beautiful, intelligent woman would be unthinkable. Change into something frivolous and feminine,' he urged with his lopsided grin, guiding her in the direction of the castle, 'and meet us for a pre-dinner drink in half an hour.'

Lewis could be as commanding as his brother when he set his mind to it, consequently, five minutes later Helen found herself rummaging through the contents of her wardrobe, frowning slightly at the dearth of frivolity. She decided finally upon a simple sheath of fine silk jersey, superbly cut to hug in all the right places, a dress that called for a flawless figure and when gratified rewarded its wearer well. Having donned its stark whiteness she stood slim as a candle topped by a head of silver flame. Brilliant eyes, tawny amber, set delicately beneath a curve of sooty lashes held an anticipatory flicker. She was by inclination a solitary person, but even for one of her nature the rigid seclusion of the past week had begun to pall so that the prospect of dining with two companions—one pleasant, the other daunting—brought an animated curve to her slightly quivering mouth.

The laird, she decided, would not be pleased. But then was he ever?

To her dismay it was he whom she encountered first as lightly she tripped across the width of the great hall. He was standing with his back towards her, hands thrust deeply into pockets, his intent attention fixed upon a bronze statuette. She caught a glimpse of writhing female bodies, one at the feet and one held in the arms of a dominant male, before he swung round at the sound of her approach. Nervous of his examining eyes, she assimilated a composure she did not feel by peering behind his arm at the object of his interest.

'That looks interesting,' she smiled, hating her own false brightness.

His distant expression was no less intimidating than his sombre reply. 'The Rape of the Sabine Women, attributed, I believe, to one Giovanni da Bologna.'

He moved aside so that she caught the full impact of bronzed nude bodies portraying conflict between unwilling female and rampant male. For some reason, with his brooding eyes upon her, she felt acutely embarrassed and turned aside.

'The tableau offends you?' He sounded dryly amused.

'I'm always offended by a show of bestiality,' she replied coolly, 'and have never been able to understand what satisfaction man derives from a victory that's purely physical.'

'But was it purely physical? In this case, were not the Sabine women reputed to eventually enjoy their capture?'

'Could any discriminating woman enjoy slavery?' she defended fiercely. 'Could any man?'

'No,' he agreed, 'but then women are cowards and men are not. It's the cowardice of slaves that perpetuates slavery.'

She retreated from his contempt but felt bound to argue. 'Women are no more cowardly than men!'

'I must disagree,' he frowned down upon her candle-slimness. 'Women are slaves to their own emotions and are never satisfied until they find a mate to shoulder their burdens, whereas a man values his freedom. Loving a woman is bondage—a man must always be on his guard against becoming a reluctant slave.'

Helen stared up at his disdainful face, wondering if he spoke true sentiments or was merely erecting a barricade in order to quieten the clamourings of a very masculine man straining against the bonds of celibacy. His curt voice interrupted before she could decide: 'My brother has expressed a wish that you should join us for dinner, and as you seem to have come prepared,' his glance disparaged her finery, 'I take it you have no objection?'

As she preceded him towards the dining-room she burned. His tone had implied that he thought the wish was at her instigation, but as she could put up no defence against unspoken implications she could do no more than bite her lip while he escorted her in silence to where his brother was waiting.

It was strange being seated between two men, one red as fire, the other black as sin, but both equally handsome dressed in formal jackets and black ties, their white evening shirts a pristine foil for features deeply tanned. And she

between, slender, waxen white, outwardly serene yet feeling inadequately equipped to cope with the contrasting natures of her two companions.

The oak-panelled room had originally been the entrance hall with access from the courtyard through a large oak studded door set between two stone fireplaces. Family portraits lined the walls, each with a small bronze plaque beneath stating their titles and the year of birth and death of each subject. In the centre of the oval mahogany table, to which more leaves could be added at will, were set two twin-light silver sconces bearing a cypher and a crown, and light from smoking candles flickered over a huge silver wine cistern deeply embossed and scrolled, bearing two handles, one fashioned into the likeness of a unicorn with sharp horned head, the other a griffon with talons out-thrust, snarling fierce opposition.

How apt, she thought with a shiver of apprehension, attributing to Lewis the virtues of the mythical unicorn, supposedly the only animal that dared venture to attack the mighty elephant, so wily he could be trapped only by the placing of a young virgin in his haunts when, at the sight of her, he would run to lie at her feet and so suffer himself to be captured by the hunters.

Damon, on the other hand, could only be the griffon—that mythical monster fabled to be the offspring of the lion and the eagle. An animal so evocative of nobility it was used as the emblem of princes, incorporated into the coats of arms of many of the noble families of Europe.

Their dinner was served on silver plate, and noticing Helen's slightly upraised eyebrows Lewis laughed, tapping the priceless plate with a thumbnail.

'Don't look so disgusted, Silver Witch, their use arises from expediency and not from an urge to ape our more flamboyant ancestors. Kate and her helpers have worked their way through so many porcelain dinner services we were left no option but to utilise these. Silver can't be cracked—rather like yourself,' he admired her pale hair with its startling silver sheen, 'it hides its toughness beneath a mantle of deceptive fragility. Did you know that ancient alchemists thought silver representative of the moon?'

'A hunter's moon...?' a hateful voice questioned. As Damon reached for salt he cast a look so stinging she felt her throat caught in the grip of an eagle claw.

'Helen the Huntress?' Lewis's voice scorned the comparison. 'She's hardly that. Helen the humane— now that I can accept! In spite of her look of mediaeval innocence Helen has a deep concern for the welfare of others—as she demonstrated less than an hour ago, together with a very modern contempt for the mysticism surrounding our family.'

Very deliberately Damon sliced a pear. 'I was not aware that anyone in our immediate circle was in need of Miss Paris's concern.' Very much the laird concerning himself with the welfare of his tenants, he questioned with hauteur: 'Might I know the name of the unfortunate on whose behalf your sympathies have been aroused? Together with the nature of his dilemma?'

A drift of candle smoke caught in her throat so that momentarily she was unable to reply. 'It... it's your nephew,' she gasped, fighting a tight, choking sensation, 'but as I've already spoken to his father the matter need hardly trouble you.'

His nostrils dilated. Laying down his knife, he leant forward to impress, 'I am responsible for every person on this estate, Miss Paris, for their actions as well as for their wellbeing. Lewis does not take his responsibilities as a father as seriously as he ought, therefore if there are any further problems concerning the boy kindly discuss them with me.'

Her scandalised eyes flew immediately to Lewis, but in this instance the unicorn head remained bowed. Then as if sensing her bewilderment he lifted his eyes, but there was no fight in them when they slewed across the table towards his brother, merely a disappointing hint of spite.

'If that is the case, Damon, it's just as well that your back is broad. If you are so omnipotent that you feel you must bear the burden of everyone's misdemeanours I wonder you can sleep at night considering the damage that was caused by one of your employees--a man whose flaws should have been glaringly obvious to one of your insight.'

Helen stiffened. No name had been mentioned, so why, therefore, was fear stabbing her senses alert?

Damon's knuckles showed white as he exerted pressure upon a walnut, the sharp crack of the shell causing them both to jump. 'I admit to being guilty of an error of judgment in the instance you are referring to,' carefully he separated kernel from shell. 'It has been instilled into us for generations never to trust the English, yet I have disregarded that advice —twice! That is why,' his glance speared so suddenly Helen felt stabbed, 'you will find me in future especially alert, especially watchful—and very mindful of past warnings against trusting plausible strangers from across the Border.'

CHAPTER SIX

RIK crept stealthily into Helen's office the next morning, a quivering bundle of apprehension. Very conscious of treading on forbidden ground, he cast an anxious look towards the door connecting with the adjoining office.

'Miss Paris!' he hissed. 'When do I get my wish?'

She pushed aside a pile of bills and patted the space she had cleared on her desk. 'Sit here and we'll discuss it.'

Nervously he backed away. 'Better not, Uncle Damon might come in.'

She frowned. 'So he might,' she agreed. 'What of it?'

'He said I was to keep out of your way, that you're employed to work and are not to be treated as one of the family.' Curiosity overcame fear as, with head cocked to one side, he studied her. 'I don't understand how just talking to you can make you one of the family, Miss Paris. Wouldn't Uncle Damon have to marry you first?'

'Heaven forbid!' Her fervent disclaimer startled him, 'but before he could continue along the same lines she interrupted, 'Forget your uncle for a while, he's gone out to one of the farms and won't be back until lunchtime. Now, tell me about this wish of yours, and if it's at all possible I shall see that it's granted.'

With the threat of his uncle's presence removed, Rik scrambled with her help on to the desk and launched excitedly into his project.

'I'd like to see the family Brock again, if you please, Miss Paris. I've only seen them once before and they were wonderful. Uncle Damon promised to take me again, but he hasn't had the time, so if you could--'

'Hold on a minute!' she laughed, applying a brake to his enthusiasm. 'Now, tell me slowly, where does this family live and how do we get there?'

'I'm not sure exactly,' he surprised her by saying. 'Somewhere on the estate, but only Uncle Damon knows exactly where.'

'Oh,' she began reluctantly, 'then I'm sorry, Rik, -but...' She hesitated. A look of dull resignation had clouded his eyes. He swallowed hard, then slid down from his perch, his body stiff with disappointment.

'Grown-ups never keep their promises,' he almost choked on the accusation and set his lips firm to control a quiver. 'But I thought ... I thought you might be different!' Not trusting himself to speak further, he broke into a run and was almost through the door when her desperate voice halted him.

'Rik, are you quite sure that only your uncle can take us to this family? Surely there must be others on the estate who could show us the way?'

He remained stock still but did not turn. 'They only come out for Uncle Damon. Everyone else frightens them away.'

'Oh...' She eyed his stiffly resentful back, conscious that one false step on her part could do irreparable damage to a child's faith in human nature. Obviously he had suffered many rejections in the past; she had no wish to be classed in his mind as yet another unreliable adult. Very much against her better judgment she capitulated. 'Very well, Rik, I'll speak to your uncle as soon as he comes in—I can't promise anything, mind!' she hastened to add when he bestowed upon her a delighted beam, 'but I'll do my best.'

'Thank you, Miss Paris!' he breathed. 'Tell Uncle Damon I'll be very quiet and very, very good.'

When he ran off Helen tried to resume her work, but her mind refused to abandon conjecture about the peculiar family whose hermit-like existence would be abandoned for only one man. Of course they could hardly refuse to see the laird, he was probably their landlord and as such would be entitled to enter their home at will. Nevertheless, their self-imposed seclusion struck her as sinister and she shivered, feeling prickles of apprehension at the thought of having to meet them and worse still, of having to beg a favour of the laird.

The pile of bills had barely diminished by the time he appeared to check up on her progress. As usual, she received prior warning of his proximity by a sensitive prickling on the nape of her neck and she lifted her head to see him standing in the open doorway eyeing her from across the dividing threshold, the thin strip of no-man's-land they were both loath to breach.

'I have some letters to dictate, but I see you're not through yet, so I'll come back later.' Though his tone was mild she sensed rebuke and was immediately rattled.

'Dictate them now, by all means,' she reached for her pad and pencil. 'I dallied with these,' she cast the bills a disparaging look, 'because I had nothing else lined up. I find I work faster under pressure.'

'Then we must see that pressure is applied,' he stated dryly, stepping aside as she swept past him into his office. He was a swift, decisive dictator, phrasing crisply, never using two words where one would do, so utterly sure of what he wished to express he never needed to backtrack nor to change so much as a word or a comma. Her fingers clasped around the pencil were nerveless by the time he had finished, but she hung on to her aura of unflappability and gave no hint of the relief she felt when finally his dictation ceased.

He stood up with the hateful murmur, 'You ought to find that pressure enough, Miss Paris, but if not just let me know.'

'Er...' The brief syllable was enough to halt his progress towards the door. Usually it was she who made the first move, scurrying back to her office with a haste that spelled out clearer than words her distaste for his company.

'Yes?' he enquired, one black eyebrow winging. ⁴'Do you have a problem?'

She swallowed hard. 'Yes, I have, but it has no connection with work.'

He returned to the chair he had vacated, eyeing her flushed, embarrassed face across the width of the desk. 'Well?' His tone was loaded with impatience.

'*Arrogant beast!*' He caught the message cast by her blazing eyes and his lips twitched. It was hard to appear placating before ^ya man she detested, but she drew in a deep breath and tried.

'Yesterday, Rik and I had a small wager which I lost.'

'I'm not surprised.' He looked bored. 'You seem to me one of a type who consistently backs losers.'

Ignoring his sarcasm, she continued steadily, 'I promised Rik that if he should find his father before I did he would have a wish granted.' She knew by the thundercloud that crossed his face that he had jumped to the wrong conclusion. 'I wanted to speak to him about Rik,' she explained desperately.

'No need to make excuses,' he sneered, 'your reasons for chasing after my brother are of no interest to me. I take it Rik managed to lead you to his father and is now demanding his just reward?'

'Yes,' she glared, 'and that's where you come in.'

<it The stiff monosyllable could not have sounded more discouraging.

'He wants to pay a visit to a Mr and Mrs Brock and their famih and insists that you are the only one who can take us to their home.'

For a split second she could have sworn his eyes blazed with laughter before eagle hoods came down, obstructing her scrutiny.

'That is correct,' his grave voice betrayed a puzzling tremor, 'we visited the family once and he has spoken of them frequently ever since. Unfortunately I haven't been able to spare the time for a second visit and this is the little monkey's way of forcing my hand.'

'Then you'll take us?' she breathed a sigh of relief.

'I'll take Rik.' She recoiled as if from an icy splash. The unpleasant brute surely didn't think she *wanted* his company! She stood up, her dignified body taut with affront.

That will suit me fine. I have no wish to make the acquaintance of yet another boorish Border family.'

But Rik was not prepared to accept the compromise and said so with stormy, tearful passion. Later that evening the laird sought her out. He appeared, leading the rebellious boy by the shoulder, and crossed with limping stride across to the window seat where she was sitting looking out into the darkening garden.

'It seems, Miss Paris, that we've hit upon a snag,' he informed her stiffly. 'Rik insists that it's part of his reward that you should accompany us. As the wager was struck between yourself and the boy I feel that it's up to you both to sort it out.'

Rik slipped his uncle's clutch and ran to plead, 'Please, Miss Paris, say you'll come with us, now, this minute—we must get there before dark or the Brocks will be out!'

'They will...?' she questioned weakly, more reluctant than ever to encounter this peculiar family who shunned the daylight hours and were fond of nocturnal wanderings. She glanced at the laird and saw that his expression was aloof. Nevertheless, she felt she owed it to Rik to honour their bargain.

'Very well, I'll get my coat.'

It was a silent trio that made its way in the direction of the wood where, once among the trees, dusk closed in on them as they trod paths as still as the aisles of a dark, sepulchral cathedral. As Rik skipped between them, one small hand in Helen's, the other in his uncle's, she found the courage to ask:

'Won't these people object to us turning up at their house without an invitation?'

Rik jerked to a standstill, almost overbalancing her. 'People?' he squeaked. 'They're not--'

'They're not likely to ask us in to supper,' his uncle cut in gravely.

Suddenly Rik collapsed on to the path, a heap of giggling mirth.

Helen shot a suspicious glance at the laird and saw that he, too, was having difficulty containing a grin. Suspicion reared its head.

'Are you two playing a trick on me?' she asked hotly, beginning to feel foolish. Obviously they were both enjoying a secret joke at her expense.

The laird picked up his nephew and began dusting him down. 'We shall have to tell her, Rik. Will you explain or shall I?'

But Rik was too overcome to speak, tears of mirth were rolling down his cheeks and his childish laughter rang clear as a bell through the silent forest. Even in that moment of humiliation Helen's mind registered the fact that the laird looked years younger wearing a face-splitting grin.

'The Brocks are a family of badgers, Miss Paris, and their house is known as a sett. As they are entirely nocturnal we have to settle ourselves downwind outside of the sett well before dusk. Badgers have an extremely acute sense of smell and if they scent us they w'on't come out. They can detect if a human has crossed one of their pathways and I although their sight is not good the slightest movement will disturb them, so we must keep very still and they'll pass right beside us without knowing we're there.'

Helen stared, hating his grin yet unable, because of a stirring of amusement, to feel angry.

'Brock—badger... Of course!' She acknowledged the connection, then began to giggle. Soon they were all three laughing, the sound disturbing birds from out of their nests and small creatures from their burrows in the undergrowth. She was surprised to discover that the laird had an attractive laugh; many times she had judged a man, rightly, even before knowing anything of him, by the quality of his laughter. The contradiction was

puzzling, but she found it impossible to be angry with one with whom she had shared laughter.

The laird was first to sober. 'I find your sense of humour pleasantly surprising, Miss Paris. Often I have thought the English very much lacking in this respect. Someone once said that we're in the world to laugh because in hell we shall no longer be able to do so and in heaven it would not be proper.'

'How true!' Helen wiped her eyes, then for some reason could not resist adding a sting to the tail. 'There must be hope for you yet, Lord Sanquhar. Where there is humour there must somewhere be tolerance.'

'You may address me as Murray.' Though his lips had tightened the permission was kindly given. 'It's the form of address most favoured by my employees,' he added, in case she should think he was softening, - 'I dislike formality even more than I dislike familiarity.'

She nodded assent, surprised by the concession yet knowing she could never bring herself to address him by name. 'Tell me more about the badgers,' she veered from the subject, 'they sound fascinating.'

'They are,' he agreed. 'It's well worthwhile making some effort to watch them, for when the initial difficulties have been overcome it's possible to study them for a short while at very close quarters. No other animal is more rewarding or more exciting to watch. Shortly we will come upon a sett—they're usually in a wood but they can also be found in hedgerows and sometimes on a bank. The first signs we shall see will be great mounds of earth that have been excavated, and in spring and autumn piles of bedding that have been removed from the sett and replaced by fresh material. They use the same setts for hundreds of years and they extend very far underground.'

'Badgers are very, very clean, Miss Paris,' Rik chimed in, 'and they regularly springclean their setts. Some of them prefer grass as bedding, others bracken or leaves—they scrape up a large bundle and hug it to their chests with their forepaws and chin, then they shuffle backwards to the sett. We watched them, didn't we, Uncle Damon, last September.'

'Quiet now,' his uncle warned. 'From now on we must remain silent.'

In front of them were the mounds of earth he had described and very clearly marked criss-crossing paths seeming to lead nowhere in particular. Moving as stealthily as possible, he positioned Helen with her back against a tree, then crouched down with Rik in front of a bush, settling patiently to wait.

Half an hour passed before rumbling, grunts and squeals heralded the emergence of the badgers. The noise went on for some time, then the boar appeared, sniffing the air suspiciously before making way for the sow who, after satisfying herself that all was well, began ushering out her cubs.

Frozen into delighted immobility, Helen watched the family's antics. First of all they enjoyed a prolonged, ecstatic scratch, then the cubs decided to play games—leapfrog, hide and seek and friendly scuffles carried out beneath the eye of their indulgent mother. Then, in the half-light, they filed past, almost tripping up over her feet, grunting as they padded along on their night's foraging—noisy, talkative bundles of fun.

For almost an hour they entertained their silent watchers before the heavy dark grey bodies with black and white striped faces began disappearing into the sett. Obeying the laird's signal to remain silent, they tiptoed away, and not until they were back once more on the pathway leading out of the forest did Rik break into speech.

'Wasn't that simply wonderful, Miss Paris? Didn't you just love the cubs? They were only about eight weeks old and just learning to fend for themselves.'

'Yes, dear,' she agreed absently, not wanting the magic moments dispersed by discussion.

As if sensitive to her feelings they walked back to the castle in silence, not a tense, confined silence but the deep companionable silence of shared pleasure. They parted in the great hall, Helen volunteering to escort a very drowsy boy up to his room. As the laird turned to walk to his study where a pile of work awaited his attention she managed to voice her shy gratitude.

'Thank you for letting me share a wonderful experience.'

His head inclined, reverting once more to the role of laird, haughty and unbending.

'I consider we are amply compensated for the lack of modern amenities, Miss Paris, even if our entertainment is of a very special brand. It's unfortunate,' his tone became droll, 'that you'll be leaving us soon. Our tableaux are seasonal, you see, so it's impossible for them all to be contained within one month.'

She retreated up the stairs feeling she had been caressed on one cheek and slapped on the other, reminding herself that she loathed the man and hoping fervently that her business at Sanquhar could be concluded well within the month stipulated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BY the time three weeks had passed Helen's office routine had been firmly established, correspondence was up to date, as were bills, invoices and statements, and the filing system assembled into impeccable order. Yet she was no nearer a solution to her own problem—that of finding a way to pay back the laird for his heartlessness towards her brother.

She was struggling with the problem during one of the less busy spells that were becoming more and more frequent as her confidence and efficiency grew. The man seemed as impregnable as his castle, physically protected by an army of estate workers who, much to her surprise, she had discovered would have laid down their lives for him, spiritually and mentally protected by a hard shell of self-sufficiency neither words nor looks could dent. Her one faint hope hung upon the realisation that he was becoming more and more dependent upon her skills. Not that he had ever said so, but signs of strain had disappeared from around his eyes and mouth, the speed with which he tackled work was less demented and moments when he stopped for a chat and a joke with the men were now daily occurrences.

It had not been her intention to make his burden lighter, she fretted, venting her agitation upon the pencil she was mangling between her fingers, yet her month was almost up. Only five days remained in which to formulate a plan.

She was deep in study when after a light tap upon the door Lewis walked in. Her welcoming smile faded when she noted his worried frown.

'Helen, can you spare a minute?'

'Yes, of course, is something wrong?'

'I hope not ... I'm not sure. It's Rik. Janet says it's nothing to worry about, but...' he paused, struggling with old loyalties, then continued slowly, 'It seems foolish to doubt her word, after all she nursed Damon and myself through all the childish ailments and everyone on the estate considers her to be an oracle of wisdom so far as diagnosing illness is concerned, yet ...'

'You want me to give a second opinion?'

'If you would.' He sounded as if he had just cleared a major obstacle. 'But first I must warn you that Janet won't be pleased.'

She had been inside the nursery only once before and though her visit had been momentary she had been struck even then by the chill dank atmosphere. As she stepped inside Rik's bedroom a draught feathered her skin and automatically she rubbed bare arms to dispel goosepimples that had suddenly erupted.

Rik's thin body seemed swallowed into an enormous bed, squashed flat by a pile of heavy blankets, his small head with over-bright eyes and flushed cheeks outstanding against the whiteness of his pillow. Janet sat crouched beside him, like a large black spider, Helen thought, drooling over a fly caught in her web.

'Miss Paris,' he croaked as soon as he caught sight of her, 'my throat hurts.'

'Does it, darling?' Helen hurried to his side. 'You must have a chill. And it's hardly surprising!'] Angrily she rounded on Lewis. 'Isn't there a more comfortable room than this?'

Before he could reply Janet stood up to bridle across the width of the bed, 'The round tower has always housed the nursery, generation after generation of Murray boys have been reared in this very room.'

'Then it's a wonder any of them survived,' Helen replied crisply, eyeing with a shudder the window, a mere slit hewn through stone four feet thick with, in case the sun should dare to penetrate, an outside curtain of black pines whispering sinister messages as they brushed against the outer stonework. A scattering of thin rugs covered the floor and on one part of the wall, half obscured by a tallboy, a dark patch caught her eye.

'What's this?' She stepped towards it, then spun round to accuse with damning incredulity, 'It's damp! There's actually water running down the walls!'

'There's only that one small patch,' Janet snapped, 'and it's been there for years, as long as I can remember!'

Lewis shifted uneasily. 'She's right,' he mumbled.

'Damon and I used to moisten our stamps on it—to save us licking them,' he explained lamely.

Helen straightened, appalled by such neglect, wondering how on earth numerous generations of Murrays had managed to survive.

'If I were you, Lewis,' she told him firmly, 'I would call in a doctor. If you do so, I'm certain he will agree that the boy should be moved into a warmer, more comfortable room as quickly as possible.'

'Doctor?' Janet's neck arched, like a cobra about to strike. 'No doctor has ever set foot inside Sanquhar castle. I've always attended to the sick and so did my mother and grandmother before me!'

Helen ignored her, giving all her attention to Rik's small pained face, and waited for Lewis to speak. She had given her opinion, for what it was -worth, now the decision rested with him.

'Er ... I don't suppose it would do any harm, Janet, just this once. I'll go and telephone right away.'

He hurried out with the haste of a man made uncomfortable by female bickering and embarrassed by having had to take sides. When the door closed behind him Janet's spite-filled eyes bore down upon Helen's face.

'I knew the day you came here that you were up to no good,' she intoned, her voice a deadly evil monotone that caused a flash of alarm to chase across Rik's pale face. 'You came to do harm, I sensed it immediately I saw you standing on the threshold like Queen Boadicea, who sought out her enemies vowing vengeance for wrongs inflicted upon her family. Clearly, I saw the halo of vengeance around your head and saw you lick your lips as if savouring the first sweet taste of revenge, but I did not worry then nor do I worry now, for my power as a seer tells me that before very long you will leave this castle with the bitter taste of remorse upon your tongue!'

Helen shivered, impressed in spite of her scepticism. Could it be that witches really did exist? Within this peculiar atmosphere things might happen according to prophecy., Cross with herself, she shook off the mantle of fear Janet had thrown across her senses, common sense telling her that it was far more likely that things were *made* to happen in order to prove prophecy right!

To her relief the doctor, when he arrived, turned out to be young, filling in as locum to one of the local doctors, he explained, while waiting to join the staff of a hospital specialising in the treatment of children's diseases. His breezy opening remark sent Janet downstairs into her kitchen muttering dire warnings about the folly of trusting to amateurs.

'Good grief, is this a nursery or a dungeon? What mischief have you been up to, young man, that warrants the punishment of being pinned on the rack?' With a flick of his wrist he disposed of half of the blankets, then delved beneath the top sheet in search of Rik's wrist. 'Ah!' he held it high. 'No manacles, I see!'

Rik gave a weak giggle while the doctor checked his pulse, then began gently, showing a great deal of interest, to manipulate the crooked little finger. He had just finished his examination when Lewis walked in.

'I'm Rik's father, Lewis Murray, and you'll be Doctor ...?'

'Bonney,' he grinned, 'by name and by nature, I hope.'

'How do you do, doctor. What about the boy, is his condition serious?'

'Not at all.' He replaced some of the blankets around Rik's shoulders, then nodded meaningfully towards the door. 'If I might have a word ...?'

'You, too, Helen!' Lewis foiled her intention to sit at the bedside. 'As the doctor is here at your instigation I think you ought to hear what he has to say.'

She ensured that the drowsy boy was comfortable before following them outside and felt completely vindicated when the doctor began, 'Before

giving a diagnosis, I'd like to run a few tests—but later, of course, when the boy is feeling better. Meanwhile, first priority must be given to moving him into more suitable quarters. I must admit, Mr Murray, I find this wing an odd choice for the siting of a nursery, enclosed as it is by trees and completely cut off from warmth and sunshine.'

Lewis shrugged. 'We were merely following tradition. This wing was being used as a nursery long before the trees existed.'

'How interesting!' As the doctor wandered off down the corridor with Lewis Helen heard him eagerly questioning until long after they had turned into another passage and disappeared from sight. 'I'm extremely interested in the history of the area, Mr Murray. I find its traditions and customs fascinating. I originate from Glasgow, you see, so stately homes and border traditions are rather out of my ken ...'

The dressing-room leading off from her own bedroom would, Helen decided, be ideal for Rik. It was small without being confined and as it was at the back of the castle it caught the maximum amount of sunshine. The single divan was small enough for him to curl up inside like a duckling in its nest and also there was the added advantage of herself being near at hand if he should want anything during the night.

Completely forgetting that her main duties lay in the office, she set to dusting and rearranging the furniture so that the room would be ready when Rik awoke. She had just completed the task to her satisfaction when footsteps resounded along the passageway, firm, yet infinitesimally hesitant, as if their owner was frustrated by a limp.

Instinctively she tensed into the state of frozen rigidity adopted by a rabbit sensing a predator.

He attacked with eagle swiftness the moment he caught sight of her. 'Miss Paris,' he thundered, 'why has the office been left unattended and the telephone left to ring?'

'Oh!' Her hand flew to her mouth, amber eyes widening as she realised the extent of her negligence. 'I'm so sorry...! I ought to have arranged for

someone to answer the phone, but things came upon me so suddenly I forgot.'

'What sort of things?' Just then he noticed the duster in her hand, his eyes quizzically tracing a trail of dust streaking her nose from bridge to tip, and the bright yellow kerchief she had tied gypsy fashion around her hair. 'Why are you doing housework?' he demanded sharply. 'Is Janet ill?'

'No, not Janet.' She whipped off the kerchief and shook her hair free.

'Who, then?' he gritted, obviously calling upon his patience.

'Rik. We had to call in a doctor—don't worry, it's nothing serious,' she hastened to assure him, 'just a chill, but the doctor suggested moving him into a warmer room, so I thought--'

'You seem to have been doing a lot of thinking on our behalf lately, Miss Paris. Is it your intention to make yourself indispensable, or are you just naturally meddlesome?'

She stepped back, outraged by his attitude. 'I was merely carrying out the doctor's instructions, Lord Sanquhar, but if that's what you think, then *here*,' she threw the duster at his feet, 'do the job yourself! From now on my duties will be strictly confined to secretarial work and if you want help in any other direction you'll have to *beg*.'

'Good.' He seemed completely satisfied. 'As there's not the remotest possibility that I should ever beg your favours, Miss Paris, perhaps you will continue with the job I employed you to do and leave the running of the household to those more qualified to do it.'

'Meaning Janet, I suppose?' she flashed, incensed by his ingratitude.

'Exactly,' he iced. 'How dare you usurp her position by calling in a doctor? Thanks to Janet's skill and care, and those of her predecessors, we Murrays have never had need of a doctor.'

'Never?' Her tone held disbelief. 'Are you telling me, Lord Sanquhar, that for generations you and your family have been misguided enough to put your health solely in the care of muddled, superstitious old women? Tell me,' curiosity gave her courage, 'when Lewis and yourself were children were you susceptible to chills, were you ever weak and feverish as Rik now is?'

'Many times,' he scoffed. 'Such minor illnesses were cured simply by Janet supplying us with hot water bottles, piles of blankets and plenty of hot drinks.'

As the germ of a notion struck her she stared so long in silence he became impatient. 'If your cross-examination is quite finished would you kindly take that dumbfounded look off your face and get cracking in the office? I've left two full reels of dictation and I'd like the letters typed and ready for signature in an hour.'

'But what about Rik?' she protested, dragging her mind back to the present. 'He'll be awake soon and the doctor wants him moved from the round tower as soon as possible.'

'The boy will stay where he is,' he clamped. 'You are not to mollycoddle him!'

'But you can't go against the doctor's advice, that would be criminally stupid!' She whirled from his impassive face, temper flaring like a rocket at the thought of the child's suffering being prolonged simply because of one man's domineering insistence upon having his own way. 'Border barbarian!' she flung across her shoulder. 'You won't be satisfied until the boy is as crippled as you are yourself!'

Immediately the horrifying words were spat she felt bitterly ashamed. His lean face looked stricken —no man should be made to look like that except, perhaps, at the thrust of a dirk or the agonising stab of a rapier. Certainly never by the cut of a woman's tongue.

When his hands clenched until the knuckles showed white Helen knew she had gone too far and decided to run. She had almost made her escape, one

foot was over the threshold, when with incredible speed he caught her by the shoulder and spun her back into the room. She fell to her knees on the floor and with terrified compulsion watched while he kicked shut the door and crossed towards her. Crushing hands lifted her by the shoulders until she stood upright. Fingers, talon-cruel, dug into the soft flesh of her shoulders, gouging deep and unmerciful as his rage.

It was their very first physical contact, not even a handshake had breached the yawning chasm of antagonism dividing them. The shock of it sent tremors through her body, tingling along a network of nerves causing a choking sensation in her throat, an involuntary flexing of her fingers, a curling up of her toes.

'I warned you, did I not, what might happen if you should persist in tilting at my authority? Your wilfulness appeals to me, Miss Paris. I like nothing better than to tame the untamed; to school a thoroughbred until it bends a knee; to train a falcon to perch upon my wrist; to teach a resistant woman to beg for my kisses—all of these things I find equally enjoyable!' The strength of the lion was in his grip the intimidation of the eagle in a head bending lower and lower until she could see her own terror reflected in black taunting eyes. 'Sorry to have to disabuse you of the notion that I am a dedicated celibate,' he murmured, moving his lips a fraction closer. 'I'm no monk, Miss Paris, on the contrary, when goaded I react as any other man—I *bite!*'

He proved his point by swooping upon her lips, plundering their sensitive purity with savage deliberation, forcing them apart so that he received the uttermost pleasure from taking what she fought to retain. His hands bruised through the thin silk of her blouse, then began slowly to caress, as if becoming suddenly conscious of soft, voluptuous curves beneath. A great shudder ran through her. Of protest? Of weakness? She was not given time to analyse as the seduction continued, a sensual defilement of her innocence, a storming of the secret places of heart, body and mind, an exercise of superb technique that made her very much aware that one slip of will could plunge her into a turmoil of sensuous, wanton womanhood.

She was breathless, nerveless, and shocked when he lifted his head. Fierce flame had died from his eyes, leaving behind a dangerous smoulder. He

seemed dazed, sounded slightly shaken when he whispered against her ear, 'Silver witch, were you sent to heighten my torment?' Then roughly he thrust her away.

She staggered then, hating him with her eyes, deliberately scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Did you dislike my kisses so much?' he taunted with a grin.

'I loathe being mauled, especially by a ... by a...'

'Cripple?' he suggested. 'I am glad you found it distasteful. One likes to be certain that the punishment has fitted the crime.' Sketching a mocking salute he turned on his heel and left.

She did not move for a long time, waiting for clamouring nerves to settle, for the heat of her body to cool. Then finally she dropped into a chair, feeling faintly comforted by the one piece of information her enemy had betrayed during his attack upon her defences. He was vulnerable! Omnipotent though he might think himself, he had the same weaknesses as other men. The feel of curves beneath silk excited him; smooth skin and quivering lips he found tormenting! What better way, therefore, to extract revenge than to lead him on, pretend willing then, once his confidence had been won, to swiftly, triumphantly, turn the tables on the barbaric Celt?

CHAPTER EIGHT

HELEN had opened the letter without thinking. It should have been separated from the pile of business correspondence before the mail reached her office and not until she had slit open the envelope and withdrawn the perfume-scented pages did she realise that it was personal. Only four flamboyant words registered before she hastily folded the sheets and slipped them back into the envelope.

'My own darling Damon.'

The words had caused her heart a jolt and for a moment she felt breathless—with surprise, she decided—holding the envelope between shaking fingers, surprise that anyone dared lay claim to such close affinity with a man possessed of an iron-clad heart.

She drew in a deep breath before nerving herself to tap upon the communicating door and walking into his office. This was to be their first encounter since the previous evening, the moment she had chosen for the charade to begin. His black head was bent over a pile of papers as she walked across to his desk, but it snapped upright when she spoke in a dulcet tone that betrayed none of the churnings inside her stomach and the terrible weakness of her knees. 'Damon, I do hope you'll forgive me—I opened this letter by mistake.',

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he concentrated his black gaze upon her face, staring intently as if there he might discover the reason behind her unusually friendly approach.

She did not find it hard to blush nor to imitate shy confusion. The hardest part was hiding the dislike in her too-bright, too honest eyes. She knew she had succeeded when he smiled, a twist of the lips portraying cynical conceit.

'That's quite all right, *Helen*.' His emphasis showed amused acceptance of her use of his christian name. 'It's probably a letter from one of my many aunts.'

She had to force herself not to run when, after handing him the letter, she turned to leave. Her heart was beating madly and colour was running shame-hot along her cheeks. What foolish game had she begun, and how would it end?

'Just a moment, Helen.'

Her feet felt stuck in treacle as she obeyed his command and waited while he crossed towards her, still scanning the letter in his hand. To her horrified amazement his arm slid casually around her shoulders while he explained:

'This letter is from Caroline, Lewis's wife.'

My own darling Damon! The words were branded upon her mind.

'In her usual impulsive fashion,' he went on, 'she has invited a party of friends to join her here for a holiday, and only now, after the deed has been done, has she thought fit to ask if the visit is convenient.'

Helen could barely take in his meaning, her mind being busy with other things—the very possessive way in which his hand was running along the smooth roundness of her shoulder, then down the length of her spine, the twinkle in his eye that told her he was not taken in but that for reasons of his own had decided to play along until the game ceased to be amusing.

'That will be nice for you,' she gasped. 'For all of you,' she qualified, 'especially Rik. He must miss his mother terribly.'

Her quivering nerves quietened a little when he frowned and moved away. 'The boy is hardly aware of her existence. Caroline is a very attractive, very amusing woman, but one completely devoid of maternal instinct. No, if she's welcomed here at all it will not be by Rik.'

Suddenly incensed on Lewis's behalf, Helen all but snapped: 'And what about you?'

'I?' He looked surprised. 'Oh, I see, Lewis has told you about my previous involvement. So far as I'm concerned Caroline can come here any time she wishes, there will always be a welcome from me to my *brother's wife*. There's just one snag,' he frowned down at the letter, 'Caroline tells me that she intends coming here a few days beforehand to prepare the way for her guests. As she and Kate don't get on, I wonder if you would mind giving her a hand? Caroline is a great one for parties, she's sure to want to put on a do of some kind while she's here, and to be honest,' he sent her a nerve-jolting smile, 'I rather fancy seeing the old place decked in finery once more. I'd like you to see the castle as it used to be in my parents' lifetime when they entertained frequently—the sound of music filling every corner of the castle; couples dancing in the great hall with blazing chandeliers adding extra sparkle to jewellery, soft brilliance to silver and ice-blue fire to crystal goblets. Yes,' he decided, 'we've worked long and hard at Sanquhar, we ought to take time off to relax. What do you say, Helen, are you willing to help?'

Her name on his lips made her shy. 'Yes,' she stammered, completely charmed, forgetting that only yesterday she had threatened to make him beg, 'I'll do anything I can.'

Rik, though much improved, showed no enthusiasm when told of his mother's imminent visit. 'I'd far rather have you, Helen,' he confided, delighted at his being installed in the next bedroom to hers. 'Mummy never stays long, but when she's here there's always lots of noise and if I try to talk to her she tells me to run away and play. Not like you—you're nice. Why don't you marry Uncle Damon and stay here for ever?'

'Enough of that!' she reprimanded sternly, tucking the bedcovers around his shoulders. At the sight of his crestfallen expression, however, conscience smote her, her voice had sounded sharper than she had intended, she was becoming over-sensitive to even the mention of his uncle's name!

'Try to sleep, darling,' she dropped a penitent kiss upon his forehead. 'The sooner you're well the sooner we can take that trip into town. Doctor Bonney wants you to visit him in his surgery, remember, and I'd like you to be fit enough to show me around the shops when we go.'

'I will be, I promise!' He snuggled down to sleep. 'My throat is just the teeniest bit sore still, but by tomorrow it should be all better.'

'Let's give it until the end of the week,' she suggested, 'just to be extra sure.'

She passed Lewis on her way to the office, pacing around the great hall staring moodily into space. She had to smile at his resemblance to his small, mutinous son.

'Hello, Lewis,' she greeted lightly. 'Why the thundercloud?'

He did not return her smile. 'You'll have heard the news?'

'About your wife's visit? Aren't you glad?'

'Why should I be?' he glowered. 'She only ever comes to be near Damon.'

She wanted to protest that he was wrong, but could not truthfully do so. 'I'm sorry, Lewis, it must be very painful for you. Is there no chance at all of a reconciliation?'

'Not so long as my brother remains unattached.' He shrugged his utter helplessness. 'It's *damnable* having to stand on the sidelines watching the only woman I've ever loved, the mother of my son, throwing herself at another man's head! But I can't in all fairness blame Damon,, he's never given her the slightest encouragement. Since our marriage his attitude towards her has always been very correct— avuncular even—but she's never given up hope that he'll change his mind.'

'How awkward for all of you,' she faltered, upset by his obvious misery. 'Perhaps this time will be different.'

'Perhaps pigs will fly,' he snorted. 'Even more unlikely, perhaps Damon will begin showing an interest in some other female. That's the only thing that will put her off. Caroline is a fighter, but she's practical with it, if something she wants is out of reach she'll settle for second best—it happened that way once and it could happen again, but only if she's convinced that there's no hope.'

Helen left him kicking an imaginary stone around the floor and hurried back to the office, wondering why she had allowed herself to become involved to such an extent with the affairs of a family with whom she had no real sympathy. They were an arrogant, self-sufficient entity, pride-ridden, tutored from birth to giving orders but never to taking them, so why should she be feeling so sorry to find one of their number possessed of feelings? Sorry enough to be determined to do all she could to help fiim!

She burst into Damon's office and helped by a heart overflowing with compassion for Lewis, launched straight into an attack. 'I've just left |

Lewis, he's very upset about his wife's visit and I think it's disgraceful that he should have to suffer the agony of knowing she's coming here solely on your account! You could help him if you wanted to —Lewis insists she would turn to him if only she could be made to realise that you're not interested. But instead of making this plain you encourage her! Don't try to deny it!' she stamped her foot with temper. 'I read the heading on her letter, I didn't mean to, but--'

'But being a woman you jumped to all the wrong conclusions!' He tipped back his chair to eye her with lazy insolence. 'Could it be that you're just a little bit jealous, Helen the Huntress? You've had a clear field up until now with two very susceptible men, perhaps the notion of having to share us with another woman doesn't appeal?'

Remembering just in time her newly-adopted role of subservience, she dropped her eyes and with a delicate fan of lashes brushing her cheeks, whispered, 'I'm what you've made me, Damon. Have I the right to be ... jealous?' She gritted her teeth, sensing his dark shadow hovering nearby, and waited. He stood very close but did not touch her, and when he spoke he sounded full of angry cynicism.

'As I told you previously, I allow no woman to claim rights over me. A little dalliance with no strings attached is as far as I'm prepared to go.' When his finger tilted her chin she saw that he was frowning. 'You seem to have little control over youremotions. Do you always parade your feelings with such impulsiveness? Is that the reason why you appeared here out of the blue

lacking references, were you running away from some romantic entanglement that ought never to have been allowed to happen?"

'No!' Her swift denial was an involuntary protest against being labelled fickle, a defence against the distaste curling his lips. Then she shrugged. After all, what did his opinion of her matter?

'It matters a great deal' a small inner voice reminded, *'if he's to be deceived.'*

But not even for Chris's sake was she prepared to allow the Marquis to think her promiscuous, so she compromised. 'I can't help it if men find me attractive,' she husked. 'I've never invited any man's attentions.'

'I believe you,' he surprised her by saying. 'But your cool touch-me-not attitude is bound to arouse men's interest even without encouragement. And yet there has been one exception...' He enclosed her face within his palms, pinning her in his sights. 'Yesterday you scrubbed my kisses from your lips, but today you have indicated that you would not be averse to more. Which am I to believe?'

It was a terrible strain having to look him straight in the eye and lie. 'My action yesterday was the normal reaction of a woman taken by force, and yet...' she swallowed hard, 'there was something wonderful, a feeling I haven't been able to forget...'

'A sweet sensation, as if one had suddenly been given wings?' he whispered, as if re-living an actual experience. 'Some people might call it love, Helen,' he growled against her ear. 'What would you call it?'

'I ... I'm not sure.' She stared back, hoping his suffocating nearness, the touch of his hands, the threat of a lowering mouth, were not being endured for nothing. 'Let's wait a while,' she pleaded shakily, 'and give ourselves time to find out.'

'Time cures one of everything,' he reminded in a murmur, 'even living.' Then he straightened up. 'But perhaps you're right.'

A tap came upon the office door, a summons she was glad to answer. One of the estate workers stood on the threshold.

'Would you please tell the laird, miss, that his sister-in-law has arrived and is asking for him?'

'What, already! *Damnation!*' Damon grabbed her by the elbow and kept tight hold while he ushered her round to the front of the castle where a midget sports car was standing in the drive. Lewis was unloading luggage from out of the boot and a girl Helen judged must be Caroline was leaning negligently against the stone balustrade, a half- impatient smile on her lips.

'Do be careful with that one, Lewis, it's almost new!'

'How much darned luggage have you managed to pack in here?' His voice resounded from the depths of the boot. 'Couldn't you have sent some of it on?'

'Darling, I arrived back from the continent only two days ago and haven't even bothered to unpack. Some of my outfits will be dreadfully creased, I'm afraid, but then Janet is still with us, I hope, presiding over her legion of excellent women?'

'Her legion of excellent women, as you call them, have more to do than to press your bits and pieces,' Lewis growled, adrift in a sea of suitcases. 'Why don't you try doing some work ^yourself, darling? There must be some chores you could manage without soiling your lily-white hands.'

Helen winced. His words were loaded with sarcasm; how on earth could a reconciliation be achieved if he persisted with such an attitude? She made a mental note to discuss the matter with him as soon as possible before irreparable damage was done to the relationship.

'Damon, *darling*...!' Caroline's delighted eyes were upon his face, soaking in every shade of expression, every facet of his appearance, the tall, lean length of him, the rangy, slightly hesitant stride, the proud black head, the usually grim face now lightened by a welcoming smile. With hands outstretched she ran to meet him, then, ignoring his proffered handshake,

she flung her arms around his neck to bestow a kiss so long and passionate that Helen and Lewis exchanged embarrassed glances. It was hard to tell who surfaced first, but Caroline seemed very reluctant to be set aside and clung to Damon's arm as, completely uncaring of the two listeners, she scolded:

'Why didn't you answer my letters? I've written at least once a week and all I've had from you is a short note scrawled in haste.'

'I've been very busy.' Helen was made furious by his indulgent tone.

'Too busy even for me?' Her eyes adored him. 'I'll never believe that, Damon.'

Obviously seething, Lewis cut in, 'And what about my letters to you, sweet wife? What excuse do you have for the dearth of replies and for the lack of interest in the welfare of your son?'

'You're here, are you not?' she flashed him a look of scorn. 'Why must everyone assume that simply because one has borne a child one automatically gains motherly instincts the moment it arrives? I never knew *my* mother, yet I survived! But then,' she scoffed with a toss of the head, 'my father was *no* man's shadow!'

Helen's outraged gasp was drowned by Damon's sharp protest. 'Can't you two stop bickering even for a moment? Rik is not quite recovered, Caroline, he's still confined to bed, but I know he'll be anxious to see you.'

Helen's eyes were glued upon Caroline's face, fascinated by her beauty yet repelled by the utter selfishness of her expression. 'Must I go right this minute?' she pouted. 'I've waited so long to talk to you, Damon, let's go into your study where we can be ... comfortable.'

She had intended to say *alone*, but not even she had the nerve to brave Damon's displeasure to such an extent. With blue eyes distended she waited, mutely begging the favour of his company. A slight breeze wafted strands of hair on to her brow— streaks of black silk against snow—and moulded her dress of silken jersey to her figure, accentuating superbly shaped

breasts, a hand-span waist, a sweeping curve of thigh. She posed like a model, head tilted, shoulders straight, pelvis slightly outthrust, very much aware of the impact she was making upon the two watching men.

'Before we go inside,' Damon's lazy drawl gave no warning of the bombshell he was about to drop, 'let me introduce you to the newest member of our household. Helen,' he held out a hand and pulled her forward, 'I'd like you to meet my sister-in-law, Caroline.'

Languidly, Caroline inclined her head.

'Caroline,' he almost smiled, 'meet Helen Paris, my fiancée.'

CHAPTER NINE

ALTHOUGH gratified and shocked by Damon's solution to the problem of Caroline, it became no easier for Helen as the days went by to accept his affectionate arm around her shoulders, to tolerate his fond looks and teasing remarks whenever Caroline was within their vicinity. Once outside of her orbit, however, he reverted to normal and though she forced herself to persist with her efforts to disarm, she suspected she was getting nowhere fast.

But at least her elevation to the role of Damon's fiancée had achieved a modicum of success. Caroline's advances were no longer blatant, her eyes still held hunger as they followed his every movement, her voice still caressed, but all other signs of affection were held in check—temporarily, Helen suspected—because Caroline was not entirely deceived and was merely biding her time, convinced that the unsuitable alliance would not last.

Helen's suspicions were confirmed by Damon who, after two uneasy days had passed, halted abruptly in the middle of dictation to declare:

'We must get you an engagement present. Caroline has been asking some very pointed questions, it might lull her suspicions if she were to see some concrete evidence of our engagement.'

Helen looked up, pencil poised in suddenly rigid fingers. 'There's surely no need to carry out the farce to such an extent?'

'I think there is,' he contradicted. 'Although there are suitable pieces among the family jewellery I would prefer you to have something that you can take with you when you leave.' He smiled unpleasantly. 'A small token of remembrance—or will you perhaps regard it as a vexing reminder of what might have been?'

She blushed hotly, but managed to swallow back an angry retort. Reminding herself that Caroline was not the only one who had to be deceived, she adopted an expression of extreme hurt and bit deeply into her lip.

'You can be very cruel, Damon. Why do you distrust me so much?'

He uttered a derisory laugh. While he had been working his fingers had raked his hair, releasing black scrolls that fell upon his forehead, giving him a rakish youthful look.

'You dare to ask me that?' His mouth took on a mocking tilt. 'You, a woman with a past—and an Englishwoman, at that!'

This was the opening for which she had so patiently waited. In reply to tentative inquiries about the last English person employed at Sanquhar Lewft had replied with a disinterested shrug: 'Damon's last assistant left under a cloud, I believe, but I was away at the time, so all I've heard are rumours.'

Carefully casual, she asked: 'Why do you dislike the English so much? Are there not good and bad in all races?'

'Certainly. I can even number a handful of Englishmen among my friends—but only after very careful vetting of their characters. Our family history supplies ample proof of the duplicity of your countrymen, their treacherous instincts and the lengths they will go to to extract revenge.'

Inwardly she winced, yet, ignoring an inner whisper urging caution, she persisted: 'And what of you Scots and your insistence upon keeping alive past grievances? Would it not be better to bury them with your dead?'

His eyes narrowed and for one shaky moment she thought he had guessed that her interest was personal rather than objective.

'We would, if ever we were allowed to,' his black eyes seemed to probe the depths of her soul, 'but unfortunately the flaws I have listed are as prevalent today in the English character as they were centuries ago. Indeed, only recently---' He broke off, his lips thinning at some unpleasant reminder. 'But enough, that matter is hardly worthy of discussion. Come to my study when you're ready; there's an excellent jeweller in town who ought to be able to supply our needs.'

'Oh, but Rik's appointment with Doctor Bonney is scheduled for today!' she remembered suddenly. 'He wants to examine him thoroughly,' she faltered, as lowering brows showed his opposition to the idea. To her great relief he did not veto the arrangement. 'You're very persistent, aren't you,' he growled, half impatient, half resigned. 'First of all you insist upon his having a change of bedroom, and now this! However, I can't fault your interest in the boy's welfare, so we'll take him with us— there are other business matters I can attend to while you're with the doctor.'

As it turned out, when later that afternoon Helen and Rik presented themselves at the doctor's surgery she discovered that her presence was not required.

'No need for you to stay if you have shopping to do, Miss Paris,' the doctor told her cheerfully. 'Take your time, Rik can play in the garden with my partner's children if I'm finished with him before you get back.'

'But...' she looked doubtful, 'Rik might need me. He's feeling a little apprehensive.'

'Don't fret,' he grinned, giving her a gentle push towards the door. 'I promise he'll think it's all a game and if there are questions that need answering I'll see you when you return.'

Feeling firmly dismissed, she returned to Damon who was waiting in the car, 'They don't need me,' she supplied stiffly, sliding into the adjacent seat, and felt even more huffed when he laughed aloud.

'Your maternal feathers seem ruffled, my dear, obviously it's time you had children of your own.'

The county town, though small, was a perfect gem, with a river slicing through its middle, spanned by twin bridges under which swans were preening at their reflections in the water and were deigning with hauteur to accept hunks of bread being thrown by picnickers on the river banks. Helen had passed through it on her way to Sanquhar and had wished then that there had been sufficient time to explore narrow streets ascending from the river plateau into a busy shopping centre swarming with tourists eagerly buying

samples of tartans, Harris tweed, Fair Isle jerseys and Ayrshire white needlework known locally as 'the floo'erin', delicate embroidery incorporating flowers with lace inserts worked on white cotton, cambric or muslin.

She lingered outside a shop with, at the centre of its display, an incredibly delicate woollen shawl, a pale cream cobweb suspended against a backcloth of dark green tartan.

Realising he had mislaid his companion, Damon retraced his steps and commented across her shoulder:

'I see you are admiring one of our famous Shetland shawls; they each weigh around two and a half ounces and have to pass the old test of being fine and soft enough to be drawn through a wedding ring. The old patterns are still being handed down from grandmother to granddaughter and so on, without the benefit of a blueprint or a written pattern.' He pointed to an adjacent window display. 'The same applies to those heavy fishermen's jerseys. Different districts stick to their own particular pattern—the Isle of Lewis, for instance, provides the "church windows" and "lobster claw" designs, while Eriskay is known for its "tree of life" and "links of love", all patterns being symbolic of the objects lived with, based on the sea, the countryside, and family life.'

Encouraged by her intense interest, he smilingly continued: 'The patterns travelled great distances via the fishergirls who, when they journeyed from, say, Barra to Mallaig or Whitby to gut fish, would meet other girls from other districts and exchanged designs. These days, the colours are many and varied, but fishermen's jerseys from the island of Eriskay were always knitted in black or dark navy on fine needles, so that the fabric was virtually wind- and waterproof. As each family used its own variation of pattern it was unhappily not uncommon for a jersey to be used as a means of identifying the body of a fisherman drowned at sea.'

Helen was still pondering on the information when he halted outside a discreet frontage tucked away in an unpretentious street, but once they stepped inside the quality of service became immediately evident. An

elderly gentleman hastened to greet them. With great respect, yet lacking subservience, he bowed:

'You do our establishment a great honour, Lord Sanquhar. I hope we can be of service .. .'

'I hope so, too, Mr Ogilvie. Miss Paris, my fiancée, wishes to choose an engagement gift. Have you Something suitable?'

'Most certainly. Would the young lady prefer a Luckenbooth brooch, or perhaps an annular brooch, instead of the usual engagement ring?'

Not unnaturally, Helen looked completely mystified.

'I can tell by your fiancée's expression, Lord Sanquhar, that your marriage will be a mating of the thistle and the rose. Am I correct in assuming that the young lady is a Sassenach?'

'Quite correct, Mr Ogilvie,' Damon smiled. 'I suggest you show her what is available and let her choose for herself.'

They were ushered into an inner sanctum and seated at a table where upon a cloth of black velvet the elderly gentleman began reverently to lay out a selection of brooches, all exquisite, many bearing the motif of the intertwining Celtic cross Helen had seen carved on ancient stones in the castle grounds. Others were large and circular with deep, intricate engravings of leaves, animals and interlacing lines. But the one that brought an involuntary gasp of pleasure to her lips was shaped in the form of two linked hearts surmounted by a crown. Damon and the old jeweller exchanged a smile when tentatively she reached out to cradle it within her palm.

'A discriminating choice, Miss Paris, if I may say so,' Mr Ogilvie chuckled. 'That is a Luckenbooth brooch, traditionally given as a betrothal token but also allegedly a protection against witches. One other additional, rather charming custom is that the brooch is usually used to fasten the shawl of the first baby at its christening.'

Overwhelming shyness made it impossible for Helen to meet Damon's eyes. Hastily she replaced the brooch on its velvet nest.

'It looks unique and very beautiful,' she replied desperately, 'but something less expensive will suffice.'

An astonished silence fell. Too late she realised her gaffe—the Marquis of Sanquhar would hardly be likely to quibble about the price of a gift for his future bride 1

'We'll take it,' Damon instructed smoothly. 'The English cling to the belief that Scotsmen keep their fists tightly clenched around their purses, so it's up to us, Mr Ogilvie, to disprove the myth.'

The delighted old gentleman seemed quite unaware that the ensuing laughter covered up Damon's displeasure and Helen's own deep embarrassment. She had been prepared to accept a modest ring, though even that would have been returned once she had left Sanquhar for good, but the brooch with its intertwined hearts seemed to signify deep personal commitment. Knowing further protest would be frowned upon, she remained silent until the purchase was completed, consoling herself with the thought that the brooch, if rumour did not lie, might at least provide some sort of barrier between herself and Kate's baleful witch's eye.

At her insistence he dropped her outside the doctor's surgery and as he left to conclude his other business, he promised:

'I've just one quick call to make, I'll pick up you and the boy in about half an hour.'

Doctor Bonney was waiting for her and as he ushered her into his surgery she heard Rik's happy laughter trilling from the garden where a vigorous game of rounders was in progress.

'What conclusions have you reached, doctor?' she enquired, accepting his invitation to be seated in a chair positioned directly opposite his desk.

He considered her thoughtfully before replying with a further question. 'How much do you know of the boy's circumstances, Miss Paris, of the Murray family as a whole?'

'Not a great deal,' she admitted, 'just bits and pieces of information gleaned from Rik's father, the housekeeper, and the boy himself.'

'Hmm ... Rik is quite a little chatterbox, isn't he? How much credence can be placed upon his rather startling-beliefs?'

Helen sighed. 'He's been telling you about the family curse. It really is too fantastic, doctor, but they all believe in it, even the laird!'

'Fantastic?' he considered. 'I think fascinating is a more apt description.'

She gasped. '*You* surely don't believe ... I'

Grinning widely, he held up his hand, mockingly warding off her verbal onslaught. 'Now hold on, Miss Paris, hear me out before you begin lecturing me on the folly of believing superstitious tales. Folklore interests me—indeed, to such an extent that I've made a study of it. I find mystery is as irksome to my mind as a grain of sand is to an oyster. You are prepared to dismiss the Murray curse as being merely an old wives' tale, but before you do, ask yourself this question: Have you any reason to think that people of centuries past were any more credulous than we are today? Like us, they were prone to the fears and uncertainties of their day, and so they had recourse to their powers of imagination to explain what lay beyond the limits of their knowledge.'

'Yes, but, doctor,' she waved a hand in protest, 'you can't seriously believe--'

'Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Paris?' he asked abruptly.

She sat upright, a denial freezing on her lips as she recalled hesitating before walking the length of a particularly dark, sombre corridor housed within the castle and the eerie, spine-chilling atmosphere that had caused her a fluttering of panic.

'Er, no—yes! I'm not sure ...'

He chuckled. 'Ah, I see that, like many of us, you are guilty of an odd kind of double thinking about ghosts. You would deny their existence yet would be loath to spend the night alone in a haunted house, is that not so?' When she gave a shamefaced nod, he carried on, satisfied that his point had been made. 'My interest lies in superstition when allied to medicine. Recent medical research has often confirmed the healing properties of cures originally prescribed by village herb-women—the juice of willow leaves, for example, was once used to treat fevers; in the form of drugs based on salicylic acid it is used for the same purpose today. An extract of witch-hazel is still used to soothe sprains and bruises, and penicillin recalls the mould poultices which white witches once made from bread, yeast, carrots and other vegetables. So you see, it doesn't do to scoff.'

'But,' she looked bewildered, 'where is the connection with the Murray curse?'

'The connection, my dear, could lie in the fact that over the centuries what is now regarded as a curse might have originated as a simple malady, one to which—either through environmental or inherited tendencies—each generation has been prone.'

'You mean,' slowly she collated the information, 'that this affliction of the laird's could be--'

'A chronic muscular defect,' he enlightened her triumphantly, 'caused, unless I'm very much mistaken, by the persistent use of a cold, damp nursery.'

Helen stared, dumbfounded for a second, then began to stammer: 'The family has always had an aversion to medical men and has relied entirely upon homespun cures supplied by Kate and her predecessors. Yet that hardly adds up,' she went on desperately, wanting to believe yet still uncertain, 'when you consider that it was one of Kate's ancestors who was purported to have instigated the curse!'

The doctor laughed. 'In a deeply superstitious age when people believed unreservedly in magic and the supernatural and lived in constant fear of the forces of evil, a witch's medicine, whatever it was composed of, could have effected many remarkable cures. And by the same token, a clever witch—and remember, my dear, witches, owing to the fact that they were constantly being called upon to tend the sick, were the forerunners of today's medics—could cleverly twist circumstances to suit themselves. Very likely Kate's ancestor, having the wit to recognise a family weakness, seized upon the trait and proclaimed it a curse in the absence of anyone mindful enough to point out that earlier members of the family had suffered the same ailment. It is now generally realised that fear, tension, or other mental stresses can result in painful symptoms and that the best treatment in such cases is directed at the mind and not at the body. Witches' spells may have been useless for the treatment of bodily ills, but they were strong medicine for the mind.'

Helen sank back in her chair, shattered by his logic yet infinitely relieved, realising only then how very heavily Damon's affliction had weighed upon her mind.

'Tell me in simple terms, doctor,' she begged, 'exactly what all this means.'

'I can't be a hundred per cent certain at this stage,' he obliged cheerfully, 'but I'm fairly confident that the Murray curse is actually a rather rare type of muscular disease, having its onset in early infancy, and affecting mostly male children, showing as one of its symptoms a deformity of the extremities—either fingers or toes.'

'Is it curable?' she urged, her eyes fastened hopefully upon his face.

She expelled a deep breath when he nodded. 'Yes, Miss Paris. With the help of massage, movement, and various electrical aids, recovery under treatment has been recorded.'

CHAPTER TEN

CAROLINE'S guests were due to arrive on Saturday and the party was to take place that same night. Work had eased off in the office, so after putting in an hour each morning in order to despatch any urgent correspondence Helen had the rest of the day in which to help Caroline search out crystal goblets from the depths of dusty cabinets, restore tarnished silver to its original sheen, supervise the removal of furniture and the cleaning and polishing of the floor of the great hall in which the dancers were to be accommodated.

Lewis showed unexpected enthusiasm and was a great help in many ways, but whether his presence stemmed from a genuine wish to be involved or was merely a pretence that kept him in close proximity to his wife Helen could not decide. But the two of them were getting on famously, she thought with relief, watching Lewis removing a streak of dust from Caroline's nose with tender solicitude and seeing his face light up when she demonstrated her thanks with a sweet smile. Caroline seemed a completely different person when Damon was not around, less hostile, more relaxed, and far more amenable to her husband's advances. Helen almost felt a liking for her when, with a protective kerchief tied around her head and a smudge of dust still faintly visible on her nose, she appealed to Lewis.

'I'm worried about the choosing of wines, dear. Damon was very offhand when I mentioned it to him, he even went so far as to imply that the matching of a particular wine with a particular dish was nothing more than dreary snobbery. Of course, he hasn't had your experience, or studied the subject in depth as you have, so I'm sure he won't be offended if I ask you to take over the task.'

Helen turned away to hide an amused smile when Lewis puffed out his chest, seeming to grow in stature before his wife's coaxing eyes.

'Damon has a better cellar than he deserves,' he stated with authority, 'due entirely to the discriminating palate of an earlier Murray. If you jot down a list of the courses that are to be served, I promise that even the most gourmet-minded of your friends will find no cause for complaint. The occasion is gastronomic, in which case appreciative company and good food deserve the finest wines.'

Caroline beamed, then swung round to enquire of Helen, 'Isn't it wonderful to be able to rid our minds of one major problem? I'm hopelessly inept at the choosing of wines, aren't you?'

Carried along on the wave of her enthusiasm, Helen forgot to be cautious.

'I've dabbled a little in the subject, but I'm no expert,' she admitted. 'The extent of my knowledge is limited to an awareness that sherry is acceptable with soup; dry white wine is a safe choice with shellfish or as an aperitif; a fuller white wine mates deliciously with freshwater fish, chicken, veal or pork, and light red with simply-roasted or grilled red meat. Any red wine is right with cheese and sweet white with puddings. Oh, yes,' she laughed, 'and champagne can be drunk with anything and at any time!'

She could have bitten out her tongue when questioning silence followed her thoughtless chatter and was even more annoyed with herself when Caroline's eyes acquired a shrewd, inquisitive look and a hardness that echoed in her voice when she replied:

'You surprise me. One does not normally expect to find a secretary possessing even a sketchy knowledge of such a specialised subject. I've always thought the love of wine a slightly esoteric pleasure involving a blending of the senses, an enjoyment comparable with soaking in a scented bath, savouring a delicious meal, or making love.'

'Are you implying,' Helen strove for dignity, incensed by Caroline's supercilious expression, 'that such pleasures are the privilege of the upper classes and that anyone of a lower order must be so devoid of sensitivity as to be unable to recognise or appreciate such sensuous pleasures?'

Caroline looked nonplussed. 'Not exactly,' she shrugged uneasily, 'but you must admit that people of your ... er ... social standing are seldom able or indeed interested enough to pursue such knowledge.'

Helen had to laugh, and as her amusement escalated so too did Caroline's bewilderment.

'Oh, really, Caroline!' she spluttered finally. 'You are out of touch with the proletariat, aren't you? Continental holidays are within the reach of most people's pockets these days. Indeed, in recent years most of my own holidays have been spent exploring the wine-growing areas of France, Germany and Italy, and I know my preference is shared with hundreds of others with minds too active to sustain the boredom of idling on a beach or at the side of a swimming pool.'

'Oh, you mean package tours and the like?' Caroline's voice echoed with bored distaste.

'And the like...' Helen nodded agreement, not one whit deflated.

Sensing his wife's change of mood, Lewis intervened with false heartiness, 'Helen is right about one thing, champagne is a must. As she said, it can be drunk with anything at any time.'

'But preferably shared late at night or in the early hours of the morning with a companion of the opposite sex,' a voice drawled from the direction of the doorway. Damon strolled inside the room, the wicked twist of his lips indicative of devilment. Helen caught a sharp breath, wondering how she could once have been misguided enough to think him celibate.

'*Crede quod habes, et habes.*' 'Believe that you have it and you have it!'

The motto projected an arrogance she had some-how overlooked. The Marquis of Sanquhar wanted for nothing—whatever he coveted he took!

She felt her colour rise as he moved forward, his eyes upon her face. 'Have I shocked you, little puritan?' he murmured. 'Forgive me, I keep forgetting your unworldly inhibitions. Doubtless you disapprove of a wine regarded as the epitome of luxurious and frivolous living, a wine some men regard as an essential aid to successful sexual seduction?' By this time he was enjoying her blushing confusion from a mere step away, his display of teasing solicitude purely for the benefit of their audience. She tensed when his hands settled upon her shoulders, hard thumbs gouging a sadistic massage upon tender flesh and almost flinched away when he bent to brush hard lips across a dark mole positioned proudly by nature to draw attention to a

perfectly shaped mouth, soft, curving, betraying at that moment a quivering uncertainty.

'With you as a companion, my love, no man would have need of an aphrodisiac. Soft lights and music, perhaps, to help quieten your misgivings.' He shook her slightly to release her from a trancelike state, the hypnotic effect of eyes so compelling she had felt wholly dominated until a flash of mockery had broken the spell. Only he was aware of the shudder that racked her before she shook herself free of his painful embrace.

Praying her voice would remain steady, she managed a light reply. 'To reach a successful conclusion the object of one's interest must feel equally attracted—in which case a cup of tea would be equally effective and far less expensive.'

Unaware of the underlying tension, Lewis laughed. 'Good for you, Helen!' he chortled. 'Keep my brother dangling—far too often in the past women have succumbed too easily to his charms. Initially, I suspect that it's his disability that plays upon their maternal instincts, though I must admit that once they're hooked they never seem in any hurry to get away.'

This tinge of acid was directed towards his wife, who was struggling unsuccessfully to hide her chagrin.

With a blandness that curdled, she objected, 'I find the notion of your fiancée's naivete contradictory, Damon, considering she has just displayed a surprising knowledge of wines and admitted to having travelled widely on the Continent. She can't, therefore, possibly be as unworlly as you imply.'

Her eyes took on a triumphant light when she saw his start of surprise and seemed not in the least deflated by his swift reproof.

'I was referring to simplicity of character, not to simplicity of the mind, Caroline. Well travelled though she may be, Helen still possesses delight in simple things and a sense of humour that's totally lacking in bitterness or cynicism—we could learn from her, you and I,' he concluded slowly, as if surprised by the truth contained in his words.

This thorn of truth pricked Caroline's pride. Viciously, she turned on him, asperity making her shrill. 'If you're so besotted by your fiancée why not tell the world by announcing the date of your wedding? Yes, that's a great idea,' she challenged, eyeing his impassive features for signs of dismay and feeling slightly discomfited at finding none. But she had gone too far to retract, so defiantly she pressed him for an answer. 'What do you say, Damon, shall we make Saturday's party your engagement ball?'

Silence fell as they waited for his reply. Coolly, seemingly in no hurry to answer, he considered each of them carefully. Caroline's expressive face wore challenge like a banner, her eyes defiant, daring him to admit what she had long suspected—that the engagement was little more than a blind manufactured with the sole intention of throwing her into her husband's arms.

Lewis looked pathetically eager, as if he, too, had doubts about the alliance and was in need of reassurance.

Helen's expression was less easy to read. Her initial reaction had been one of wide-eyed dismay, then, as an idea had presented itself, churning emotions of fear, excitement and trepidation had caused a knotting of her stomach muscles and a constriction in her throat that rendered her almost unable to swallow. The idea was preposterous, but time was running out and she had come to Sanquhar not to ease the problems of the Murray family but to add to them. '*Dare I,*' she breathed silently, struggling with a conscience shrieking that it was wrong to decimate a man's pride. A cameo flashed into her mind's eye, a picture of the great hall thronged with family relatives and friends all eagerly applauding the announcement of a Murray betrothal. She saw Damon trapped by circumstances into accepting their congratulations, his furious resentment cloaked by an urbane smile that was suddenly annihilated by a look of stricken pride when, in front of the assembled guests, she threw his engagement gift in his face and told him in one succinct sentence exactly what she thought of his despicable character.

Through a drumming in her ears she heard Damon's smooth reply.

'That decision must be Helen's.' She looked up in time to catch his confident smile. 'But as we've been engaged for such a short while I'm sure she will prefer that we savour our secret for a little while longer.'

From a long way away she heard her own voice contradict, 'Oh, I don't know, Damon. After all, your friends are entitled to share in our happiness, and as it's hardly likely that there'll be another party at Sanquhar in the near future I think Saturday's occasion would be very appropriate for the announcement.'

His incredulous look stabbed across the length of the room, tipped with astonishment, disbelief, and grim displeasure. With a pinned-on smile she braved the look, waiting for the flush of triumph that should have followed her besting of the haughty Celt but experienced instead a numbing terror.

She had to admire his swift recovery; only she was aware of the blow he had been dealt as with a casual shrug he clamped: 'So be it.'

From somewhere behind her she heard Caroline's strangled murmur as she rushed from the room and when Lewis hastened after his wife a warning jolt made her aware that if she, too, did not hurry she would be left alone to face the lion in his den!

Fear lent wings to her feet as, close upon Lewis's heels, she attempted an escape, then, when she was just a mere step from safety, a hand clamped upon her shoulder and she was forcibly drawn back into the room and the door slammed shut, cutting off her retreat. Dumbly she stared into his furious face, her mind a vacuum, her tongue so dry it felt stuck to the roof of her mouth.

'I think an explanation is due, don't you?' A voice raised in anger would not have sounded half so menacing as his sibilant hiss.

'I ... I ...' She swallowed painfully, then ran the tip of her tongue across dry lips. Her silence added fuel to his anger.

'Don't bother to concoct lies,' he spat, 'the reason behind your action is clear enough! Fool that I am, I played right into your hands, giving you a

heavensent opportunity to achieve respectability—*making a good catch*, I believe it's known in your circle— and to think,' his contemptuous look scarred the full length of her trembling body, 'that only minutes ago I was actually praising your simplicity of character. Ye gods! You must be the most devious, the most self-seeking female it's ever been my misfortune to encounter!'

Helen fought down her fear of him, knowing that from somewhere she had to find words convincing enough to fool him into letting the engagement stand. As she stood with lashes demurely downcast, her head bowed as if with shame, colour rose and fell in her cheeks, a gamut of shades ranging from delicate pink to a rush of humiliated red. Furiously her mind raced, then, as if a lifeline had been cast, she recalled her brother's advice of long ago: '*Use your feminine wiles. Sob a little on his shoulder.*'

Showing a weakness that disconcerted him, she collapsed against his shoulder and began quietly to sob.

'I'm so sorry, Damon ...' He had to bend his head to catch the words muffled against his shirt front. 'I know it was a silly thing to do, but I was desperate. You see ... I'm in love with you, so much so that the idea of actually being acknowledged as your future wife presented such wild, sweet temptation I lost my head. Please ... !' she lifted amber eyes swimming with tears as huskily she pleaded, 'please, Damon, don't humiliate me in front of Caroline and Lewis. What harm could be done by allowing the engagement to be announced as planned? I wouldn't dream of holding you to it—how could I? I promise that on Sunday morning I shall disappear from your life and you'll never hear from me again.

Only *please* let me have one night to remember I Is it such a lot to ask—a night of happiness to compensate for a lifetime of lonely exile?'

Her stifled gasp of triumph must have sounded to him akin to a sigh of relief when she felt his arm creeping slowly around her waist. *The conceit of the man!* She pressed her exultant face against his damp shirt.

'I wish' Triumph fled at the sound of his strangled tone, her slim body tensing into amazed immobility at the touch of a hand upon her head, a hand unbelievably unsteady tenderly caressing her satin-smooth cap of hair.

'Yes, Damon ... ?' she whispered. 'What is it that you wish?' Smothering a surge of self-disgust, she forced herself to play out the farce to the bitter end.

When he drew her closer she shivered. 'You know, Helen, that I've sworn never to marry?' he husked against the tender curve of her throat. 'Up until recently,' his hands clenched tightly around her waist as he fought an inward fight against the cross he felt he had been born to bear, 'that vow has caused me no regret. I have never felt deeply for any woman, have never met one with whom I wanted to share every moment of every hour of every day—not until you entered my home and walked straight into my heart. I have fought long and hard against the feelings you aroused, many times while we've been working together I've had to restrain myself from stroking your beautiful hair, touching your cheek, plucking your aloof little body from behind the barricading desk and melting the ice from your veins with hungry kisses. I reminded myself continually that you were English and therefore bound to be deceitful and unworthy of trust. I made excuses to explain away your lack of references, told myself that you were entitled to retain whatever secrets lay in your past. None of those things matter now, my darling, I can't blind myself any longer to the fact that I want you desperately, love you to distraction. Yet,' he seemed to choke on a lump in his throat, 'even so, I can never ask you to become my wife, could not bear the agony of burdening you with an afflicted child ...'

Helen lifted her head to a face blazing with sincerity, his features stripped of pride, his grim mouth twisted into lines of regret and frustrated longing. Now was the time to dispel the myth of the Murray curse by repeating word for word what Doctor Bonney had told her. Even had not that outlet been available she could have reminded him that in today's enlightened society couples were free to choose whether or not they should have a child. But then she was reminded of Chris and revenge raced like a fever through her veins. Success was within reach and though her nature recoiled from carrying out such a cold-blooded scheme the thought of her brother's ruined life strengthened her determination that Black Murray should be given no quarter.

Feigning heartbreak too agonising to be borne, she tore out of his grasp and ran sobbing from the room, sickeningly conscious as she raced across the hall that he remained motionless, making no attempt to catch her up, a tall, lonely figure with black head bowed, his dark eyes fathomless with despair.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM inside the office Helen heard the first of the guests' cars arriving. Reluctantly she placed the cover on her typewriter. She had promised Caroline to put in an appearance to help settle them in and as there had been a dearth of correspondence that morning she had no excuse to linger inside the small, now scrupulously tidy office which she regarded as a haven, the only place in Sanquhar where she felt secure.

Crossing to a small mirror hanging behind the door, she checked that her hair was tidy and that there were no carbon smudges on her nose. Listless eyes stared back at her, their jewel brightness dulled by the burden of unhappiness she had carried with her ever since Damon's astonishing confession. For the umpteenth time his words ran through her mind and as always, whenever she was reminded of that traumatic incident, it was as if a giant hand squeezed her heart causing a breathless sensation and a rush of hot, desolate tears.

She had had two days in which to examine her symptoms and to diagnose her ailment. At first she had rejected the conclusion that had presented itself, but eventually honesty had forced her to admit that the unfamiliar emotions she had been suffering, the anguish of mind, the tensing of her body at the sound of approaching footsteps, the wild rush of blood through her veins as she recaptured the feel of his arms crushing and caressing, the many times she found herself subconsciously fingering the mole against which his lips had brushed— all could be confined within one word. Love! The lash of revenge had recoiled upon her, she knew now that she was deeply and confusingly in love with the man she had sought out expressly to hate.

Occasionally, even in the midst of despair, hope had raised its head; Damon had confessed to sharing feelings similar to her own, all that was needed was a reciprocal confession, together . with Doctor Bonney's reassurances, which would remove the last barrier remaining between them and a gloriously happy future. But such thoughts had been quickly stifled by a feeling of disloyalty to Chris; she could not snatch happiness at his expense. Years of responsibility had left their mark, she knew only too well what his reaction would be—disgust, contempt, bewilderment at being deprived of his only anchor in a hostile world.

A fleet of cars had drawn to a standstill by the time she arrived at the front of the castle. Caroline hailed her the moment she appeared and Helen drew in a steadying breath as all eyes turned in her direction. At first, when a second voice called out her name she thought her imagination was playing her tricks, then when a distinguished figure detached itself from the assembled company she blanched, feeling a sword of Damocles hovering above her head.

'Helen, by all that's wonderful! What are you doing here?'

'Sir Alec!' she stammered, conscious of Caroline's avid curiosity. 'I... I might ask you the same thing,' she looked wildly past him. 'Is your wife with you?'

'Are you acquainted with Winifred, too?' A dreaded voice spoke behind her as Damon moved forward to take Sir Alec's outstretched hand. 'Welcome to Sanquhar, Alec, your friendship with my fiancée makes you doubly welcome.'

For once in his contained, well-regulated life Sir Alec's mouth was allowed to fall agape. 'Your fiancée...?' The flat statement echoed with incredulity. When Damon's eyes narrowed Helen gathered her scrambled wits and swiftly directed, 'Let me show you up to your room. Obviously we have much to talk about, but not here on the castle steps. Let's leave it until later, shall we?'

She blessed her boss's quick perception when immediately he responded to her call for help.

'Capital idea! I must confess I found the long drive tiring and wouldn't be averse to a wash and brush up. Lead the way, Helen my dear—as you say, there'll be plenty of opportunity to talk later.'

She felt Damon's eyes boring into her back as she led Sir Alec into the castle, almost stumbling in her haste to get away. Not until she had shown him into his bedroom did she feel safe enough to expel a relieved breath. She would have carried out her suggestion to the letter, but as she was turning to leave Sir Alec made plain his wish that she should stay.

'No, you don't, young lady, not until you've cleared up^this mystery! Only a few weeks ago when Damon's name cropped up in conversation you made no mention of having even met one of my oldest friends, yet now, within this short space of time, he introduces you to me as his fiancée!'

She slumped down upon a chair. Sir Alec was credited with being possessed of one of the country's most brilliant legal minds, there was no chance whatsoever of his being hoodwinked by lies, and in any case she could not bring herself to speak anything but the truth while under his cool, clear scrutiny.

'I'd better begin at the beginning,' she said.

'As good a place as any,' he agreed, taking a seat opposite with the attitude of a barrister prepared to cross-examine if not completely satisfied with her explanation.

It all tumbled out in a rush: Chris's joyful excitement at the prospect of decent employment and his utter dismay when it was snatched out of his grasp at the very last moment by the callous interference of his previous employer. She then told him of her reaction to the Marquis's advertisement for a secretary, her honest admission that she had arrived at Sanquhar purely to extract revenge and the curious family tangle that had resulted in her becoming engaged to the Marquis. He heard her out in silence until she faltered out the fact that it had been her intention to disgrace Damon in front of his friends, to gain satisfaction by attacking his only weak spot, his fiery Celtic pride.

'Good heavens!' Sir Alec jerked upright. 'You surely wouldn't have dared—even an insane person wouldn't have that much courage! In any case, my dear,' his eyes softened as they rested upon her pale unhappy face, 'you must realise that now I'm in possession of all the facts I could not allow you to do it.'

The flower-patterned carpet swam in front of her eyes as, with head downbent, she choked:

'I know, and I feel enormously relieved. I'm not sure whether or not I could have forced myself to try.'

'Not you, Helen,' he leant forward to pat her knee, 'you haven't a malicious bone in your body.'

'What will you tell Damon?' She forced the agonised question through a tear-tight throat.

'As little as possible,' he replied promptly. 'Now that I'm assured you intend him no harm. I consider little would be served by repeating any of what you've just told me. However, I think you owe it to him to give whatever explanation you think feasible in order to stop the announcement of your engagement at this evening's party, don't you?'

Miserably she nodded as, rising to his feet, Sir Alec concluded, 'No doubt he will be as relieved as you are to put an end to the farcical situation. Trying to help his brother is one thing, but pinching my invaluable secretary and embroiling her in intrigue is quite another.'

'You won't mention that I'm employed by you?' she begged. 'I'll be leaving Sanquhar as early as possible on Sunday morning. After I'm gone you can tell him as much as you like, but until then--'

'I'll evade the subject, and if asked any direct questions I shall be vague,' he promised, 'however difficult it might turn out to be.'

'Thank you, Sir Alec. I always seem to be thanking you for something ...' she trailed off miserably.

He felt a stab of compassion for the forlorn girl, so different from the cool efficient secretary he was used to dealing with. 'I'm sorry things didn't work out for your brother,' he told her gruffly.

Her shoulders lifted in a dejected shrug. 'So am I—I was right, though,' her pleading eyes begged to be contradicted, 'it *was* Damon who put paid to Chris's chances?'

'I'm afraid so,' he frowned. 'Your brother conducted himself very well at the interview, his appointment hung solely upon Damon's reference which, when it arrived, caused quite a stir in the office. I'm afraid, Helen, that Damon doesn't hold a very great opinion of your brother.'

The old feeling of antagonism stirred. Rising to her feet, she mustered what dignity she could. 'Anyway, thank you for trying,' she replied coolly. As she was making towards the door she suddenly stopped and turned to address him further. 'By the way, you didn't get around to telling me why you're here.'

'Oh, this isn't my first trip by any means,' he smiled. 'I enjoy the fishing at Sanquhar tremendously, so when Winifred was once again summoned to the bedside of her ailing aunt I decided to join a party of friends who had previously mentioned that they were coming here.'

'As simple as that,' she sighed, but whether with regret or relief he could not decide.

'Exactly, so you see, my dear, how easily life can become complicated simply because one small thing invariably leads to another.'

Helen spent the rest of the day in her room, too cowardly to face the questions Damon would be bound to ask. But all during the slowly creeping hours while she read a little, washed and set her hair, then finally began preparing to dress for the party, Sir Alec's ultimatum weighed heavily upon her conscience. The announcement had to be put off. Somehow, and soon, she would have to face him with a plausible excuse. She pondered upon a solution until her head began to ache. Given the least encouragement she would have thrown her belongings into a bag and made her escape without ever seeing Damon again. But that was a coward's way out. Besides that, in spite of her fear of the consequences, she was not strong-willed enough to leave without one last meeting.

She finished dressing, then crossed over to a full-length mirror to assess the result. Without vanity, she stared at her reflection, not terribly interested in the discovery that the dress she had chosen had a contradictory modesty. High-necked, long-sleeved, showing not one particle of creamy shoulder or

enticing cleavage, the clinging material added a voluptuous tilt to shapely breasts, coaxed the eye downward along an incredibly slender waist, curvaceous hips, and a slim length of thigh, ending where soft blue folds flirted around shapely ankles and played hide and seek with small feet encased in diamante- studded sandals. It was a dress which when previously worn had excited many oohs and aahs of admiration and for this reason she had chosen to wear it, to add to her confidence, to boost her shaky morale when faced with Damon's certain cross-examination.

She frowned, displeased with the childish image presented by silver-fair hair curling gently on to her shoulders, and reached for the diamond hairclip that had been a parting gift from her boss's grateful wife.

'Hmm ...' she considered, 'that's better.'

Satisfied with the severity gained by confining the silver mass within the clip, yet wishing she had more time in which to dispel wispy fronds clustering upon her forehead and cheeks with infant abandon, she turned impatiently away. 'Oh, that will just have to do!'

She stiffened when a knuckle rapped a demand for admittance upon the door. 'Who is it?' she quavered, some sixth sense supplying the answer even before she heard the firm reply.

Damon. May I come in?' The door knob turned and he strode inside before permission could be given. Helen stared as with slightly limping gait he walked towards her across the width of carpet. Even when dressed in workaday denim he looked handsome, but tonight, wearing formal evening dress, his unruly hair schooled into neatness, his tanned features outstanding against a pristine white shirt with gold-linked cuffs and immaculately placed tie, she became forcibly aware that not only was he attractive, he was also aristocratic. Tonight he was not merely her tormenting, aggravating employer but was very much the Marquis of Sanquhar in whose presence she felt terribly shy.

'Before we go downstairs there's something we must discuss.'

She jerked; his tone was peremptory, echoing none of the affection he had earlier professed. 'Won't you sit down?' she edged nervously away. 'I'm pleased you came—I, too, have a problem I find worrying.'

He halted, her invitation falling upon deaf ears as he studied the beauty of form poised so gracefully before him. Colour rushed to her cheeks as his eyes devoured her. '*Like a gourmet savouring the prospect of a specially tempting dish,*' she thought irritably, made nervous by his moody smouldering.

'You first,' she invited, her voice sounding falsely falsetto. She cleared her throat and began again. 'How can I help you?'

'By sitting down,' his tone was extremely dry. 'preferably behind a thick screen.' She sat. not because of his sarcastic request but because her knees had suddenly given way.,

He seemed to make a determined effort to gather his thoughts, but just as he was about to launch into speech checked himself and ordered briefly, 'No, first I'll hear you out.'

'Very well.' Helen suppressed a nervous quiver, puzzled by his simmering anger yet anxious to be rid of her guilt. 'I've changed my mind about the announcement of our engagement. It was a silly idea, I don't know why--'

'Don't you?' The two angry words were accompanied by hands that gripped her shoulders and lifted her clean to her feet. 'Then shall I tell you why?' With lips parted with surprise she withstood his fierce glare, impervious for the moment to the agony of his grip.

'You know?' she gasped, suspecting that Sir Alec had let something slip.

'I was a fool not to have guessed sooner,' he spat. 'Do you think me blind, deaf, and totally devoid of reasoning power? I saw the effect Alec Caulder's appearance had upon you—you were dumbfounded, afraid, and more than a little anxious to know whether or not his wife had accompanied him. He's the man in your past, isn't he? The one behind the reason why you, a highly qualified, superbly competent secretary, applied for a third- rate job in a

quiet backwater! Obviously the situation between you two had become embarrassing. I've already questioned Alec and his evasiveness only served to heighten my suspicions. Tell me the truth, how well did you know Alec before you came here?"

She experienced a dreadful searing pain and through her numbed mind ran the mildly surprised thought that, although she had heard of hearts breaking, she had not connected the phenomenon with physical pain. Then she became aware that the pain was not imaginary but factual, caused by the savage pressure of fingers gouging into her shoulders. She had to speak. *Was being forced to speak!* Only by doing so would she find relief from the pressure being exerted more and more strongly the longer she remained silent. He seemed capable at that moment of breaking every bone in her body—and enjoying doing it!

'All right! It's true, I did know Sir Alec well, he was my boss—is my boss. Oh, I don't know any more ...'

'Your boss—and what else?' Through a red haze of pain she felt the pressure slacken and the relief was so enormous she dropped back on to the chair, almost on the point of fainting. From far away she heard Damon's voice, low in tone, airing angry suspicions. She wanted to scream out a denial, to assure him that he had jumped to horribly wrong conclusions, but pain had rendered her speechless. Then as physical agony began to wane a thought stabbed through waves of pain. Why disabuse him? This could be the solution she had been seeking. Let *him* break off the engagement. He would be glad of the excuse, for, however much he might profess to love her, Murray's pride would forbid him to covet another man's cast-off!

Suddenly he was frighteningly close, shaking her so viciously the diamond clip fell from her hair.

'How can you admit to being a man's mistress,' he blazed black fury, 'and still look so damned innocent, so clean and untouched! The man is old enough to be your father!' Again he shook her, - throwing a silver screen of hair across her face, hiding tortured eyes and a painfully working mouth.

'Can I assume,' she dared to choke, 'that our engagement will not now be announced?'

'The devil it will!' he gritted, eyeing her with furious disgust. 'Winifred Caulder is a dear, sweet person, too trusting ever to suspect her husband of duplicity. I've no doubt in my mind that Alec himself came to his senses in time and tried to put an end to the association. But once he walked back into your clutches you became determined to tempt him back! Well, take note of this! I have no intention of allowing you to hurt Winifred. Our engagement will be announced as planned and tonight Alec, as well as the whole county, will hear of it. He's too much of a gentleman to try to cuckold me under my own roof,' he stated grimly, 'so I have no worries on that score. But if you should dare--' he grabbed a handful of silver hair and tugged until her agonised face was mere inches away from his. 'If you should dare,' he repeated with terrifying softness. 'to deny that our engagement is genuine, or try to make any attempt to escape, I shall follow you, hound you from burgh to burgh, from country to country, if necessary, and when you have been recaptured,' his choice of words did not strike her as inappropriate, 'you will discover just how tempestuous, how barbarously inhuman, is the nature of the primitive Celt!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

HELEN approached the assembled company with the dignity of a queen, albeit Mary, Scotland's tragic young monarch on her way to be beheaded.

As she descended the staircase on Damon's arm light cast by an enormous chandelier turned silver to flame as its brilliance fell upon her bravely erect head. The magnificent chandelier, weighing almost a hundredweight, had branches in the form of dolphins and mermaids. Fashioned entirely out of silver, it seemed suspended from a thread directly above the staircase, and as their descent continued her eyes flickered upwards with the wish, quickly dismissed, that the thread might snap, thereby putting an end to her misery. But the fine cable that had withstood the test of centuries did not oblige, and her footsteps continued downward towards the sea of eyes that were critically examining the English girl who had bewitched their laird into forsaking the vow that had long caused frustration to the womenfolk and regret to the men.

Helen shivered, feeling the battery of eyes grow colder. They did not want her here, their basic mistrust of the English was too ingrained to allow a softening even towards the Marquis's intended bride. Centuries after the Treaty of Union between Scotland and England had been signed there still endured within the partisan Scots an attitude of distrust, resentment, even outright enmity that a skimming of superficial friendliness could not hide.

"Thank goodness," she breathed, "I shall never again have to face this hostile tribe!"

But although the atmosphere had pervaded the room to such an extent she could almost feel it, moments later she was disarmed into thinking it part of a dream. A cheer rose from lusty throats as, when they had completed the descent of the staircase, Damon, with a sweep of his hand, presented his bride-to-be. Friendly voices greeted her, handshakes so firm they crushed, gave lie to her doubts of sincerity as elegant women and suave men donned their cloaks of civility and wore them with aplomb right throughout the interminable dinner.

Festivities were in full swing and developing along the lines of lusty enjoyment by the time she managed to exchange a few words with Sir Alec. Detached momentarily from Damon's side, she glanced around and saw her boss approaching carrying a glass of champagne.

'Down this, my dear,' he offered it with a smile, 'you look to me as if you need it.'

'Is my inadequacy so obvious?' She accepted wryly.

'On the contrary,' his smile was replaced by a reproving frown, 'you have conducted yourself with distinction. But did I not warn you against the folly of allowing the engagement to be announced? You did promise to forget the whole idea, why did you change your mind?'

'My mind was changed for me,' she murmured bitterly, toying with the stem of her glass. 'Sir Alec, it's terribly important that we talk—there's something you ought to know, something you'll find shocking, but I can't explain here ...'

His eyebrows elevated. 'Then we had better find some place where we can't be overheard.' He put a guiding hand upon her elbow, preparatory to leading her away, but just as they began moving Damon intercepted them.

'I see that you, too, are a believer in the wine of seduction, Alec.' His contemptuous glance flicked the glass trembling between Helen's nerveless fingers.

'I'm afraid the significance of that remark escapes me.' Sir Alec's bewilderment was obvious.

'No need to prevaricate further.' Damon impaled his friend with a glance of steel. 'The game is up, hasn't she told you?'

Just then a crowd of youthful revellers descended upon them, urging Damon to join a prancing crocodile of dancers weaving in and out of the downstairs rooms with noisy gusto. His terse refusal was ignored by the high-spirited

youngsters who, by sheer force of numbers, answered Helen's prayer by sweeping him out of sight.

'Quickly,' she tugged Sir Alec's sleeve, 'I know a place where we can speak privately with no risk of being discovered. Follow me!'

Without delaying even long enough to fetch a wrap, she hurried outside with Sir Alec following. Muttering a brief request to him to wait a second, she slipped inside Damon's office and emerged clutching the key of the summerhouse door. Unquestioningly, he followed her along darkened paths and remained silent while she fumbled the key into the ancient lock, then slipped inside the heather-house, urging him softly to follow.

Once inside he gave rein to burning curiosity. 'I'm certain, Helen, that what you have to tell me is important, but why the need for such melodrama— couldn't we talk more comfortably inside the castle?' He peered at her through the darkness and saw by her troubled expression that something was very wrong.

'Damon would not have allowed us any time together, that's why I chose this place, he'll never think of looking for us here. You see, Sir Alec,' she swallowed a nervous lump in her throat, 'he has decided that you and I shared more than just a boss-secretary relationship. Because he has convinced himself that your wife's happiness is at risk he insisted upon our engagement being announced as planned supposedly to confound you. But don't worry,' she hurried on when he tried to interrupt, 'there's less danger than ever of the mythical engagement becoming reality. He despises me so deeply,' her voice shook with the effort of containing tears, 'that once you've been removed from out of my dangerous orbit I shall probably be thrown out of the castle with the same ruthless indifference his ancestors reserved exclusively for the English.'

He dropped down on to a wooden bench, momentarily deprived of speech. As Helen crossed slowly to the unglazed window to gaze sightlessly into the night she heard his amazed gasp above the sound of water pounding the rocks below and did not turn when his shocked voice questioned through the darkness.

'But why didn't you disabuse him of such an outrageous idea? It would be easy enough to prove him wrong, Winifred herself could assure him--'

'He wants to believe it,' she returned in a dull monotone. 'Please forgive me, Sir Alec, I know I had no right to involve you so deeply, but it seemed an ideal solution—letting him believe his suspicions were true. Only a few days ago he told me that he was in love with me, but I imagine this shock will have killed that love completely, don't you?' She continued speaking as if to herself, raw pain evident in her summing up. 'However low his opinion of me, it's well deserved. I could have ridded him of his heaviest burden. For years he has suffered the agony of thinking it unfair to ask any woman to become his wife, yet I could have told him that the so-called Murray curse has been proved to be no more than an hereditary weakness aggravated by the damp conditions prevailing within the castle. Hungry for revenge, I denied him that relief, let him continue to believe he could never in all conscience father a child. Don't you think such wickedness deserving of punishment?' she cried. 'Don't I deserve to suffer?'

Sir Alec jumped to his feet as her last words were uttered. 'My dear girl, I don't know how you came by your information, but I do know that it's wrong. Damon and I have been friends and confidantes for a very long time. Years ago, after a thorough medical examination, he was told that his limp was the result of a muscular weakness which, if treated at the onset, might have been arrested. Unfortunately, owing to the lapse of time, a cure was ruled impossible in his case. I remember well his vehement condemnation of the parental irresponsibility he blamed for his disablement. I'm not sure,' he concluded slowly, 'whether he's aware that the dampness within the castle is a contributory factor, but I can assure you with certainty that he holds the Murray curse in as much contempt as you do yourself.'

He eyed her petrified stillness, wondering what thoughts were concealed behind her stricken expression.

'Would you repeat that again slowly,' she husked, an amber spark of rage kindling in the depths of stunned eyes. 'No, on second thoughts you needn't bother, I've heard enough! You realise what this means?' she charged, her voice rising with anger. ⁴He deliberately set out to make me look foolish,

told fiendish lies, acted the role of stricken lover while all the time...' She broke off, too humiliated to continue.

Sir Alec shifted uneasily. 'You must be the best judge of that, my dear. Personally, I can't think of any reason why Damon should--'

'Nor can I!' she broke in. 'But I certainly intend to find out!'

Seconds later all he could see of her was the blur of her dress as she sped along the pathway leading back to the castle. Involuntarily he started after her then paused, resumed his seat on the bench, and withdrew a cigar from an inner pocket, absently murmuring as he set a light to its tip a quote he had thought long forgotten: *Of all the griefs that harass the distressed, Sure the most bitter is scornful jest!* He sighed, feeling a sudden jolt of sympathy for Damon who was about to discover that woman seldom forgives a man who makes her blush.

Helen had no difficulty finding Damon, who was prowling the grounds in search of her. As their shadows collided, simultaneously they spat:

'Where have you been?'

'I want to talk to you!'

'We'll go to my study.' Damon grabbed her by the elbow and began leading the way. Inwardly seething, Helen contained her fury, but once inside the study she swung on him with the fire of humiliated womanhood.

'Liar! Barefaced, unscrupulous cheat! You've known for years that the Murray curse is no more than a myth, yet you tricked everyone into thinking you believed in it, and if that were not bad enough you pretended to have fallen in love with me, acted the role of dejected lover with such expertise I actually began to feel sorry for you! Why do you do such things? Is it because you get some kind of perverted joy from building up a woman's hopes, then letting her down? Is your self-pity so great it needs to be fed larger and larger amounts of female sympathy? Or, what's more likely, are you a sadistic devil who plays upon female compassion by employing your disability as an aid to seduction?'

'Something of the sort.' His admission winded her, coming as it did with such insulting nonchalance. His own fury seemed to have subsided while he listened to her outburst, his thin angry lips tilting into lines of cynical amusement when she gasped her outrage.

'You dare to admit it!'

'Certainly I dare, just as women in the past have dared to plague me with spurious affection, embarrass me with emotional outbursts, lied, wheedled, provoked and enticed me into compromising situations in order that I might marry them! I finally seized upon the Murray curse as a form of defence, a defence that has proved its worth. Especially so,' his voice took on a hard mockery, 'in the case of a certain English girl who, deprived of one promising meal ticket, decided that I would suffice as second- best. A girl who professed to love me, who threw herself into my arms hoping her sobs would melt the iron from my soul and who could barely hide her triumph when she thought she had succeeded.'

The gauntlet was flung down with a vengeance! All she could do was stare.

'What's wrong, dear Helen?' he smiled unpleasantly. 'Are you really so surprised to discover that I'm not the simpleton you took me for? Did you actually think me so lacking in intelligence that I wouldn't think to question why a superbly trained secretary should choose to leave London—the Mecca of secretary birds, where one of her capabilities could command her own salary—and settle in a quiet backwater working for mere peanuts? Even without Alec's arrival to throw light on the matter, the situation remained unconvincing. For weeks previously I had read dislike each time our eyes met, felt your aversion to the slightest physical contact, was puzzled by the condemnation charging your voice whenever you addressed me. Yet within the space of one evening your attitude changed and I was expected to ignore all earlier signs of dislike and believe only that you were in love with me.' His cynical mouth twisted as he leant forward to reprove. 'No, dear Helen, you're a poor loser. Admit it, I played you at your own game and you lost!'

Through a haze of shame the taunt reached her, prodding her into an admittance of the deep resentment she had thought well hidden. Stonily she

faced him, lierve shattered, senses numbed, sensitive feelings lacerated, yet from somewhere finding enough courage to fire one last broadside at the victorious Marquis.

'How very astute of you! Correct in every respect but one!'

'Oh?' he questioned, prepared to be kind in victory. 'And where did I go wrong?'

'You were wrong to suspect Sir Alec. My relationship with him has never encroached beyond that of employer and employee. My motive for coming here was personal—I had a score to settle with you because of the very grave wrong you did a member of my family, a wrong I came here determined to revenge. However,' she straightened, a slight, dignified figure with head unbowed even in defeat, 'we're not all as ruthless as you Scots when it comes to extracting an eye for an eye. I feel no shame in admitting that, had I been victorious, I would be feeling much worse than I do at present.'

She had felt his keen interest from the moment she mentioned revenge. It was a word he understood well, she thought bitterly, a word guaranteed to excite his sympathy!

'You mentioned a member of your family,' he questioned. 'In what way am I connected?'

'My young stepbrother was employed by you,' she choked, 'a young man eager to make his mark, whose enthusiasm you dampened, whose spirit you crushed and finally, when he left in search of a more amenable employer, whose future prospects you shattered by penning a spiteful, totally misleading assessment of his character when asked to supply a reference. Christopher Sleigh—do you remember him, or is he just one of many flies that have been crushed beneath your imperious jackboot?'

'Remember him!' Again she felt fear, fear of the glitter of dislike that appeared on his face at the mention of her brother's name. 'Yes, I remember him. I have a permanent reminder here on the estate of my misguided judgment, of a stifled conscience that resulted in my overlooking a weak

mouth, bumptious conceit and immature character, so there is little likelihood of my ever forgetting your brother's presence here!' He strode towards her with such suddenness she was startled, to imprison her shoulder with fingers that homed instinctively to their previous resting place, the tender skin, bruised black, beneath the filmy material of her dress.

'Come with me!' As the harsh command rasped against her eardrums she felt deathly cold. Within Black Murray was housed a devil. Leashed, as a rule, by iron will. Chained by cool control. But now— the devil was rampant!

Without thought for her flimsy dress and frivolous footwear he made at a furious pace towards the french windows and out into the grounds with his hand locked around her elbow, forcing her to keep up with his pace. Too afraid to question or protest, she half ran to keep up with him as with anger-blackened features he all but dragged her towards the rear of the castle and on to a stretch of road leading towards a scattering of cottages housing the families of estate workers. As yet, the cottages were far in the distance, a mere necklace of lights strewn across the night sky. Just as she was about to begin a breathless protest, one pencil-slim heel connected with a stone and she fell to her knees in the rutted roadway. Roughly she was hauled her to her feet and without a word of concern hastened onward.

'Please stop! My ankle twisted when I fell!'

Damon seemed not to have heard. Driven by some furious impetus he forced her onward, uncaring that her dress was torn, her sandals caked with mud, and that pitiful gasps were tearing from her lungs. A dozen times she stumbled as they progressed along the mile of road and each time she was hauled to her feet without a word of sympathy and forced to resume the punishing pace. By the time they reached a white gate leading into a small garden she was almost crying with vexation, exhaustion and rage. As he stopped to undo the latch she leant against a fence to gather her breath for one final protest.

'I can't go in there! Look at my dress, my shoes ...!'

For once he did as he was asked, flicking his glacial stare across cheeks flushed with exertion, a brow streaked with dust where she had brushed

away tendrils of hair with a hand that had been in contact with the dusty road.

'No one in the cottage will care about the way you look, they have more serious things on their minds.' He pushed her along the path up to the cottage door, then after rapping hard held her firmly so that she was unable to back away. When the door opened she recognised the man standing on the threshold as a worker she had often seen about the estate.

'Good evening, Jamie, I'm sorry to call at such a late hour. May we come in?'

The man took a surprised step backward. 'Certainly, Lord Sanquhar, you are welcome at any time.' Damon nodded his thanks and pushed her inside, retaining his punishing grip while he bundled her along a narrow hallway, then into the main room of the cottage, a cosy sitting-room furnished with a chintz-covered settee, comfortable armchairs, shelves lined with books and a table bearing a lamp glowing upon the head of a young boy engrossed in a pile of paperwork. A woman seated in one of the armchairs rose to her feet when they entered, her brown eyes widening with surprise as she noted the condition of one of her visitors. Good manners forbade her to stare, so after a shy greeting she looked away, pretending not to have noticed the dishevelled state of the laird's proposed bride.

Damon crossed immediately to the boy's side.

'How are you feeling today, Stewart—one of your better days, I assume, since you're burning the midnight oil?'

When the boy drew back from the table Helen registered with shocked dismay that he was in a wheelchair. He couldn't have been more than fourteen years of age, with red hair, a cheerful grin, but beneath his sprinkling of freckles a pallor indicative of recent illness.

'He was in pain earlier today,' his mother supplied in a soft Scottish burr, 'but he insisted he felt I like working this evening, so,' she shrugged, 'as I did not want to tire him with argument, I gave in.'

'What are you studying?' Forgetting her dishevelled state, Helen bent to peer at the papers.

'School subjects—English history this evening.' The boy gave her a shy grin. 'I try to study a different subject each day, but I'm so far behind with my lessons I fear I shall never catch up.'

Her eyes dropped to the rug covering the boy's knees. As she hesitated, uncertain whether or not to pry, the boy's father replied to her unspoken question. 'My son has an exceptional intelligence, miss, all his teachers predicted a brilliant future, but a few months ago he was knocked down by a car and his spine was badly damaged. Thanks to the laird here, my boy has received the attention of the country's finest specialists and there is hope that eventually he might walk again. But naturally, during months of pain he was unable to study, so as he feels he has fallen behind in his schooling he is anxious to study as much as he can in order to catch up.'

Helen's blood chilled. 'What a tragic accident!' she whispered. 'I'm so sorry ...'

'Not an accident,' Damon's harsh voice grated, 'but an act of criminal irresponsibility! The driver of the car was employed by me at the time, so of course, I feel partly responsible.'

'You shouldn't, Lord Sanquhar!' 'It was no fault of yours!' The boys parents protested in unison.

'I feel that it was,' he continued his self-inflicted lashing. 'Against my better judgment, always suspecting the presence of an unstable character, an immaturity of mind, I gave the man a job in the hope of easing my own burden of work. As it turned out he was more of a liability than a help, lazy, incompetent, and forever itching to return to the bright lights he had left behind. He had been seeking diversion in town on the night of the accident.' Helen sensed the explanation was being directed especially to herself. 'After spending hours in a pub he drove back to Sanquhar in a drunken state, overcoming several minor mishaps on the way before finally, while racing along the last stretch of road at an insane speed, braking too late to avoid hitting Stewart when he cycled round a bend straight into his path.'

The boy's mother sighed. 'Stewart was not blameless, he swerved too soon into the middle of the road in order to negotiate the garden gate.'

'That may have been the finding of the inquiry following the accident, but I still maintain that had the driver been carrying out my orders to restrict speed while within the boundaries of the estate he would have had ample time to avoid disaster. Everyone I employ is made aware of this ruling and must abide by it—the driver concerned was lucky to get off so lightly, not even the charge of drunkenness could be proved against him. It's not as if the culprit is possessed of a conscience. At one stage he actually had the brass-necked cheek to threaten to sue me for unfair dismissal! Fortunately for him he changed his mind.'

'Who was this man?' Helen faltered, a weight like lead in the pit of her stomach.

'Christopher Sleigh is his name,' Stewart's mother told her, unaware that her softly-spoken words were rapiers inflicting deep agonising wounds. 'A young southerner—not unlike yourself to look at, miss, but cruel and deceitful,' she shook her head, 'something a lady like you could never be.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'WHERE are you going, Miss Paris?' The small voice piped from behind, frightening the wits out of Helen as silently she crept along the passageway leading to the staircase down which she had intended making her furtive escape from Sanquhar castle.

'Rik!' She spun round holding a finger to her lips. 'Shhh! Don't waken the household, that's a good boy.'

'Why are you carrying luggage?' Signs of panic stirred in his eyes.

Reluctantly she set down her suitcase and bent down to whisper, 'Come back into your bedroom and I'll explain. I hadn't meant to leave without saying goodbye—I've left you a note—but because you seemed to be sleeping soundly I didn't want to disturb you.'

'You're not leaving!' Though his bottom lip trembled, his sturdy body took on a determined stance as if positioned to detain her. Placing an arm around his shoulders, she coaxed him back" into his bedroom and closed the door. Keeping her voice low, she tried to explain.

'I'm sorry, Rik, but I must return to London. I promise to keep in touch and you'll write to me every week, won't you, telling me all your news?'

To her touched surprise he flung himself into her arms and began to sob. 'I don't want you to go! They said you were going to marry Uncle Damon and stay here for ever. I've been so happy while you've been here and so has Uncle Damon—he won't let you go, I know he won't!' He struggled out of her arms. 'I'll go and get him and let him tell you himself.'

'No, Rik, you mustn't!' The urgency of her tone checked his exit. Young though he was he recognised a thread of naked fear. 'Please, Rik, try to understand! I don't want to leave you, but when you're older you'll realise that often circumstances force grown-ups into doing things they have no wish to do. I'd like to explain further, but I can't, all I can do is ask for your trust and your help to get away quietly and without anyone knowing. Could you help me, Rik—I'd be so grateful if you could?'

The appeal to his manliness did not go unheard. It broke her heart to watch his thin shoulders square up beneath his striped pyjama jacket as he choked back reproaches and struggled to appear adult.

'What do you want me to do, Miss Paris?'

'It won't be easy, Rik, but I'd like you to go back to bed and to mention this meeting to no one. If you're asked outright you mustn't lie, of course, but I would prefer that my departure is kept secret for a few hours, just long enough to allow me to reach the Border.'

After a long fraught silence during which he brushed away two fat tears that were rolling down his cheeks, he whispered, 'Very well. But you will write? I'll wait every day for the postie to see if he's bringing me a letter!'

Helen almost broke down as she hugged close the small affectionate boy attached by love-strings to her heart. 'I won't forget.' She pushed him away. 'Forgive me, darling, I must go now ...'

Dawn was breaking and as she pulled out the choke and revved up the engine reverberations from the ancient Mini shattered the early morning calm. Tears blinded her as she headed up the drive flanked by blossoming shrubs, forcing herself not to look back even once at the pink stone castle set against a backcloth of black Douglas firs. She swerved, startled out of her wits by a piercing cry—* the cackling of a delighted witch? Firmly she dismissed Janet from her mind, clinging to the notion that the cry had come from a bird disturbed by the noise of the engine. .

She had the road to herself, so she stepped on the accelerator, driving furiously south as if all the devils of hell were threatening to overtake her. But as hard as she drove she could not escape torture of mind, could not, and would never, forget the agony of Damon's exposure of her brother. During the long flight while she had tossed and turned, sifting, rejecting and finally coming to terms with the shattering knowledge, she had finally admitted to herself that Damon's actions had been completely justified. Chris's indifference to the harm he had done the boy, his blustering attempts to disclaim responsibility when faced with the consequences of his folly, were wholly typical. Many times in the past his actions had run parallel to the

ones described, and while previously she had given him the benefit of the doubt this time she had to face the truth: her stepbrother was a weak character, lying, deceitful and selfish in the extreme.

Last night she and Damon had returned to the castle in silence, he grimly aloof now that honour had been satisfied, and she completely dumbfounded, disillusioned and utterly ashamed.

Janet's prophecy ran repeatedly through her mind. *'Before long you will leave this castle with the bitter taste of remorse upon your tongue!'* Helen shivered and pressed her foot harder upon the accelerator, anxious to leave behind this region of witches and curses and arrogant, angry men.

She was still travelling across what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, stretches of fields and pine-covered hills as far as the eye could see, when the engine coughed, spluttered, then finally died. Her horrified eyes flew to the petrol gauge. 'Oh, Helen, you fool!' she groaned. It registered empty! There was nothing else for it but to continue on foot, hoping to beg a can of petrol from the nearest farm or, with the help of great good fortune, from a nearby garage. The sun grew warm against her back as she set out to walk. For the first half hour she enjoyed the early morning sweetness perfumed by wild flowers clustered beneath dykes and by the tang of grass and leaves refreshed by showers of dew. Her only companions were herds of cattle munching stolidly through acres of sweet grass, lifting their heads only occasionally to gaze without interest at the girl peering nervously from the opposite side of the hedge.

Fear of cows was a weakness Helen had never been able to overcome. She despised her own timidity, had listened eagerly to assurances that the gentle-eyed creatures would do her no harm, and had promised herself that one day she would conquer her fear by walking alone into the middle of a herd to pat a silky rump or stroke her hand down the length of an enquiring muzzle. But though she had teetered on the brink many times it had never yet happened. No sooner was she within a few feet of a quietly grazing animal than it would toss its head or begin pawing the ground with a restive hoof so that all her good intentions fled, and she with them, hurrying to reach a gate behind which she might cower, firmly convinced that, to her

uninitiated eye, the cow she had chosen to befriend was either a fully grown bull or a fractious bullock.

Then she saw the farmstead, just a glimpse of a roof behind a broken line of trees with, between herself and the building, a long stretch of meadow dotted with grazing cows. Her heart took a frightened leap. She was faced with one of two choices, either she could walk on hoping to find a more accessible farmhouse or she could take up the challenge presented and rid herself once and for all of her cowardly fear by walking boldly through the herd. Without giving doubts time to materialise she unlatched the gate and with churning stomach began marching across the meadow.

By the time she had reached the first of the cows she was sweating slightly, fingernails digging deeply into her palms. When the nearest animal lifted its head, gave her a mournful look, then turned without interest to resume munching, she expelled a relieved breath, and when the next did not pay her even that much attention and yet another merely swished its tail, her spirits rose to the extent that she was able to deride her own timidity.

'What a cowardly city sparrow I am!' she told a white-nosed calf that immediately edged nervously nearer to its mother. 'Don't be afraid, I won't harm you,' she assured it anxiously, then laughed aloud, remembering the times such advice had been offered in reverse. Gaining confidence with each step, beginning to relish the early morning walk and the heady sense of achievement gained by the conquering of fear, she stepped lively. She was halfway to the farmhouse when for some intuitive reason she felt a prickle of fear. She glanced around and saw to her dismay that the cows she had so blithely passed had formed a queue and were now ambling in her wake. The old panic-stricken fear roared into life, tensing her slim frame and quickening her steps to a run. She was almost through the herd, only a handful of cows remained between herself and the farmhouse and most of them had their backs towards her. Chancing another frightened peep across her shoulder, she saw that the cows were matching their steps to hers, seemingly intent upon overtaking her fleeing figure.

Imagining she could feel their hot breath upon her neck, she began sprinting towards a gap in the distance, praying that the animals she had yet to pass would not decide to join in the ambush. Not daring to look back, she bolted,

uncertain whether the noise she could hear was caused by pursuing hooves or by the blood pounding in her ears. She was pelting along, glazed eyes fixed upon the farmhouse, breath rasping from her lungs, when firm ground gave way beneath her feet and she began sinking into a depth of squelching mud. To her city-conditioned mind, used to the secure solidarity of hard pavements, this was the last terrifying straw. Tales told by Janet of bogs that in the past had swallowed up horses and regiments of hated English soldiers flooded her mind and hysterically she began to scream, convinced she had been condemned to die a lingering death in the choking mud.

With her progress effectively checked the cows were able to amble to within a few feet of her to form a circle and watch with large enquiring eyes the yelling intruder who had appeared in their midst. As one, bolder than the rest, pranced forward Helen heaved an ankle from the mire, intent upon backing away from the enormous beast with wickedly glaring eyes and horned head lowered as if to charge. But as the mud parted with a horrid sucking squelch she overbalanced, falling flat on her face in the foul-smelling bog. Blinded and crazed with fear, she floundered in the ooze, convinced that in a matter of seconds she would become swallowed into the sticky grave, fighting unseen pressure that was dragging down her limbs. Spitting out a mouthful of loathsome mud, she drew in her breath and screamed, then was winded by hands administering a savage shaking and a terse angry, wonderful voice shouting glorious abuse.

'Of all the stupid, panic-stricken little idiots! For heaven's sake, calm down and stop that hideous row!'

His words had the desired effect. With his hands still clamped upon her shoulders she trembled into stillness, covered from head to foot in mud, recognisable only by amber eyes that fastened upon her deliverer blazing grateful adoration.

'Damon,' she choked, 'thank God you came in time! Just a few more minutes and that bog would have swallowed me up—either that or I would have been trampled to death by the herd!'

His bleak features did not lighten as crisply he disabused her. 'That bog, as you call it, is no more than a few inches deep, and cows, as I've assured you

so often previously, are the most curious animals on earth. Anything out of the ordinary excites their interest and where one goes the rest will follow. A smack on the leader's rump would have sent them all scattering.'

Her mouth formed a mud-caked ooh. Then, conscious of looking ridiculous, she glanced miserably down at her muddy clothes and whispered, 'What am I to do now?'

'You'll have to return with me to Sanquhar,' he told her with a distaste that rubbed salt into the wound of humiliation. 'It's still early, so with luck we can get you back to your room so that you can clean up without anyone being the wiser.'

They were halfway back to the castle, speeding along deserted roads, before Helen summoned enough courage to ask in a small dejected voice:

'How did you know where to find me?'

'Only one road leads south from Sanquhar.'

'Yes, but how did you know I'd left the castle? No one saw me leave except--'

'Rik,' he affirmed.

'He told you?' Her question echoed with pained disappointment.

'In a very devious fashion,' he agreed dryly. 'Don't worry, he didn't break his promise but merely found a cunning way around it. About an hour ago he wakened me requesting a glass of water. As I'm aware that a jugful is placed by his bedside each night my suspicions were naturally aroused, even more so when he made a flimsier excuse to get me down to my study from where, he insisted, he was sure had come the sound of movement that had disturbed his sleep. As he was so obviously bursting with suppressed information I followed the lead he had given and went down to my study where I found the letter you'd left for me to find, probably after breakfast, by which time you ought to have been well across the Border.'

There was no fire in his tone, no threat of the retribution he had promised would be the outcome of any attempt she might make to escape. Helen found this puzzling, especially since the contents of her letter had outlined her plan to humiliate him and also, for the sake of the friendship between the two men, the true state of affairs existing between herself and Sir Alec, her kind, considerate, always courteous employer. Damon mentioned neither of these things—and she dared not. Though his manner was calm, his hands clasped around the steering wheel were showing white at the knuckles and his eyes, which turned only twice in her direction during the journey, thrust glints of some emotion she could not name but which was frightening in intensity. Dislike? Resentment? Aggravation? It could be any one of those or all three, she decided sadly. One thing was certain, the air was charged with danger, a high-voltage current ran between them, an atmosphere similar to that existing when lightning split the heavens, warning of an imminent storm.

Not a soul was stirring as they entered the castle; the only sound the sonorous ticking of the long- case clock in the tomb-quiet hall where priceless furniture was ranged stiffly around gilded-leather walls and early morning sun played upon rare statuettes and oil paintings depicting stern-featured Murrays glaring censorious affront upon the English intruder standing shivering her disgust of filthy mud-caked clothes. A shaft of sunlight lit upon a copper cauldron inside which, Janet had alleged with relish, a sixteenth-century English commander had been boiled alive. Hastily Helen looked away, consoling herself with the thought that today's Scots, though still only partially civilised, were not quite capable of duplicating such a barbaric act.

But when Damon's voice, icily aloof, scythed through the silence she began to wonder if physical pain might not be preferable to mental torture.

'If you hurry you should reach your room unobserved,' he suggested coldly. 'Remain there until I send for you. Our guests have a very full programme mapped out for today. Lewis is accompanying one of the shooting parties and is taking the boy along with him while Caroline, I believe, has arranged to go riding. We ought, therefore, to have complete privacy for our impending talk. You do realise,' he fixed her with an icy look, 'that a discussion is imperative?'

Her slender neck drooped as, avoiding his eyes, she stared hard at the carpet. 'Yes.'

'Very well then, Miss Paris,' his formality caused her teart to sink even lower, 'let us see if, just this once, you can carry out my orders without default. In the past you have proved to be aggravating, wilful, devious and completely untrustworthy—all very English traits. Why not try substituting Scottish characteristics--'

'Such as arrogance, ruthlessness and brutal in- sensitivity! Are those the qualities you have in mind?' Unbearably agitated, she glowered up into his impassive face. 'If you don't mind, Lord Sanquhar, I'll retain my own standards—at least we English live in the present and have sense enough to realise that the iron hand of autocracy will not be tolerated in a modern society!'

When he took an intimidating step forward she refused to blanch. 'You rebel,' he mocked, 'yet like all women you enjoy the penalties you rail against. Come, be truthful, admit that your sex prefer men of steel to those that can be bent like the willow. Just as mine is drawn most towards a virgin possessed of a minute streak of harlot.'

Helen quivered from the insult. 'Is that how you see me?' she gasped. 'Even though you've read my letter of explanation you don't believe me—are still sceptical ...'

'A sceptic is not one who doubts but one who investigates,' he brooded down at her. 'Let us say that my mind is not completely closed to persuasion. So make the most of the next few hours, Huntress Helen, marshall your arguments well and, who knows, you might yet manage to convince me that you're capable of speaking the truth!'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A LONG wallow in a generously scented bath relieved Helen of much of her physical discomfort but did nothing to ease a mind reduced to a state of apathetic numbness, impervious to worry, to hope and even to conjecture beyond what to wear for the imminent meeting. It was as if hurt had cast a blanket over her feelings, smothering quivering senses, bestowing an air of false calm, a fatalistic acceptance of the fact that she and Damon had reached the end of the line and all that was left to be endured was one last meeting, one final goodbye.

Reaching for a fluffy bath-towel, she patted her body dry, slipped into a robe, then went into her bedroom where she crossed to a windowseat, positioning herself so that warm sun rays fell upon her head to form a silver nimbus around newly-washed hair. Counting methodically each stroke of the brush across the silken strands, concentrating all her attention so that thoughts of Damon were unable to intrude, she whiled away the time until finally she heard laughing, chattering guests departing in search of various forms of enjoyment. Knowing she could delay no longer, she unlocked one of her cases and stared down at the contents. No need for anything elaborate, she decided. Already two of her best outfits had been ruined, the dress she had worn the evening before and the suit she had worn that morning now lying in a revolting heap on the bathroom floor.

Lying at the top of her suitcase was the serviceable grey skirt and white blouse she had worn often while working in the office. 'An ideal outfit,' she murmured to herself a trifle bitterly, 'for confrontation with a man I shall always associate with rough handling.' She dressed quickly, her shaking hands barely able to manipulate zips and fasteners, then crossed to the mirror to adjust her hair. A Quaker image stared bade at her, small pinched face, white as the blouse buttoned high against her throat; mouth with quivering stilled, willed into adopting an alien sternness; clear amber eyes washed bright with passing tears and a proud head, slightly tilted, its cap of silver hair shining bright as courage.

A shaken sigh heaved from the depths of her, then, as a last errant tear sprang into her eyes, she blinked it away, spun round, and made bravely towards the door.

As she reached the stairs descending into the great hall music assaulted her ears. Someone was playing the piano, brilliantly, passionately, extracting angry revenge from the keyboard. She hesitated, knowing Damon was the punisher and that the dark, demonic Chopin etude had been chosen to match his mood. Nothing on earth would have induced her to enter the room at that moment; she sank down upon the stairs and waited almost half an hour until, with fire and passion spent, he lapsed into a quieter passage. Praying his savage breast had been soothed, she slipped silently through the half open door and stood with hands clasped, a little away from him, waiting to be noticed.

Oblivious of her presence, he played on, his light sensitive touch upon the keyboard strangely contradictory in a man with whom she had always associated brutal insensitivity. But with a shaft of sunlight playing over his black head and softening the grim contours of his face into lines of peace he seemed almost human. No! Involuntarily she shook her head as mentally she made a correction—he had always been aggressively human, no more so than when displaying earthy masculinity.

Her movement, slight though it was, attracted his attention. His head jerked up and at the same moment his fingers crashed discord from the keyboard, plucking a jarring accompaniment from her taut nerves.

'How very prim you look!' Narrow eyes stripped her. 'Do I take it you've dressed to suit the part you mean to play—that of a woebegone child, sensitive to a degree, bewildered that her actions should have been misconstrued?'

Helen gathered up English courage to use as a shield against her Scottish foe. 'Think what you wish, I'm no longer interested in your opinion of me.'

A cloud darkened his face and as he stood up to mp towards her she wondered fleetingly if perhaps his foot was giving him pain. 'No *longer*

interested,' stressed. 'Your choice of words seems to indicate that you might once have been *very* interested.'

She shrugged out of reach, turning her back upon her tormentor. 'No useful purpose can be served by debating upon what once was or what once might have been. If things had gone according to plan I would be back in England now—as it is, I agreed to this one last meeting not to endure recrimination but to say a final goodbye.' She spun round and was shocked to find him close, so close that her swing of hair brushed across his shoulder. Utterly confused, she jerked away, but was caught by the shoulders and held still while he scanned her face. She felt seared by his inner anger as, with eyes blazing, he pulled her close. His passionate fury puzzled her. He had made no secret of his contempt, of his distaste of her presence at Sanquhar, so why did he not dismiss her with a cursory goodbye? Was he, in his usual sadistic manner, enjoying her agony?

'Did you really expect me to believe all the lies contained in your letter—that Alec had been no more to you than a very kind employer, that you've worked with him in close proximity, entertained his guests, withstood all the temptations of a very cosmopolitan society in one of the world's gayest capitals and still remained pure as driven snow?' His derisive laughter grated in her ears. 'With a mouth like that,' his voice dropped to a sensuous murmur as he stroked her trembling lips with an exploratory finger, 'how could it possibly be so?' She was pinioned against his hard frame with a swiftness that knocked the breath from her body and as his mouth closed upon hers she grasped his shirt and clung on hard—to willpower, to common sense, to *sanity*! The savagery of his kisses made her fight with every ounce of spirit to be free and to damp down the urgent clamouring racing through her veins. Damon kissed her in hatred. He desired her body but rejected the heart he had labelled fickle, regarding her as second-hand, a female object useful only for ridding a male of his frustrations.

Her suspicions were proved horribly right when she felt his fingers fumbling with the buttons on her blouse. She struggled, hating him and hating weak tears that had sprung into her eyes. He was not worth the spilling of one solitary tear, he was a loathsome, brutal monster and she *hated* him! Pinned as she was by the power of his arms, muted by the pressure of his lips, there

was but one defence left to her. She kicked him, so hard and viciously against the shin that he uttered a surprised gasp of pain. The moment her lips were freed she bit deeply into his chin, her small white teeth snapping quick as a trap, drawing blood.

'Damnation ...!'

Retribution was shocking, humiliating and swift. Savage hands closed around her neck, she tensed the muscles of her throat expecting pressure, but choked with shame when with a vicious oath he grabbed flimsy material between his hands and with a mighty rip tore her blouse from neck to hem. Too shocked to speak, she stared her horror and for one short second Damon, too, seemed taken aback by his momentary madness. That split second was enough. She fled past him, across the hall and upstairs to her room, too demented to notice a solitary figure entering the hall through the main doorway, too terrified to become aware that her angry pursuer was stopped in his tracks by Sir Alec's incredulous tone as he demanded of his friend:

'Damon, what in heaven's name have you done!'

Helen remained in her room just long enough to throw a jumper over her shivering body, then, after assuring herself that the coast was clear, she ran along the passageway, down a back staircase, and out through the rear of the castle, sobbing as she ran, utterly convinced that for her own safety she had to leave the confines of the castle where a demon reigned as king. Without conscious thought she sped along paths between trees and was almost surprised when eventually her footsteps faltered into the clearing surrounding the summerhouse. By some happy chance the door had been left unlocked. Thankfully she slipped inside and sank down upon a bench, a quivering, nauseated bundle of bewilderment.

Hours later, Rik found her. She saw his small shadow on the floor of the summerhouse at the same moment his voice piped out:

'Are you playing a game of hide and seek, Miss Paris?' Her muscles jerked from their numbed trance. *'Oh ... er ... Yes, Rik,'* she lied.

'I thought you might be.' He scrambled up beside her. 'Uncle Damon has been looking for you for hours, but when I asked if I could join in the fun he looked very angry and told me to get out of his way. So I decided to seek you out myself.'

'You ... didn't tell anyone where you thought I might be?' she tensed.

'No,' he chuckled, and snuggled closer. 'This is our secret place and I didn't want anyone else to know about it. Besides, I don't think anyone would have listened, they all seem terribly anxious and upset. I believe Uncle Damon and his friend have had a terrible row.'

'They have...?' Helen despised herself for encouraging the child to gossip,-yet human weakness made her urge: 'About what, do you suppose?'

'You, I think,' he told her cheerfully. 'We only heard the tail-end of the row when Daddy brought me back to the castle for tea. Just as we were passing the drawing-room we heard Sir Alec scolding Uncle Damon.'

' "You must find that girl and humbly ask her forgiveness," ' he mimicked Sir Alec's aloof tone. ' "Though I, for one, would not condemn her if she refused to breathe the same air as yourself after such an experience."'

Flattered by her rapt attention, Rik became melodramatic. 'Then Uncle Damon, looking all white and shaken as if he were feeling terribly ill, groaned:

' "Hell, Alec, what a mess I've made of everything! Why didn't you tell me all this before?"'

'Then Sir Alec, seeming awfully sorry for Uncle Damon, spoke more kindly.

' "Because my secretary's feelings are her own affair and I don't make a habit of analysing my employees' characters. Indeed, I would not have done so in this instance had I not been so appalled by the totally wrong impression you've formed."'

'Then they set out to look for you.' Rik's voice became more matter-of-fact, sorry that his part in the drama had ended. 'Will you forgive Uncle Damon for being naughty, Miss Paris?' He cocked his head on one side to peer through the dusky interior at her haunted face.

Helen pulled herself together, slightly ashamed of using the boy to satisfy her curiosity. 'It hardly matters now, Rik,' she told him dully. 'I have no intention of staying at Sanquhar a moment longer than I can help.' Then as a method of escape presented itself she asked him quickly, 'Will you do something for me?' Without giving him time to argue she hurried on, 'Will you please go and find Sir Alec and bring him here to me—only Sir Alec, mind, no one else!' she warned, her voice slightly panic-stricken at the thought that Damon might appear.

'All right.' Reluctantly he slid to the ground. 'When I find him I'll whisper so no one else can hear. Shan't be long, I'm pretty sure I know where to find him.'

When he had scampered off Helen sank back on the bench, rubbing her upper arms with the palms of her hands to disperse a crop of goosepimples. The summerhouse was growing chilly, dusk had crept up unawares, lengthening shadows bearing witness to the amount of time she had spent inside, shivering, sick to the stomach, feeling more defiled than she had that morning when Damon had hauled her out of the bog. She shied from dwelling upon the degrading episode and grasped instead upon thoughts of returning to the safety of her flat, then as soon as possible afterwards to the work she found so satisfying. Once back in Brussels she would be able to forget the barbaric Scot who had stripped her mind as well as her body of all dignity. And to think she had once imagined herself in love with him! Had lain awake many nights imagining the feel of his arms around her, his kisses upon her lips, filled with an aching longing she had found almost unbearable. A woman would need to be insensitive, uncaring, terribly hard, to spend a lifetime with such a man. She was none of those things—on the contrary, she was too easily hurt, too generously affectionate, too stupidly forgiving. What a lucky escape she had had!

Why then was she crying?

She gave in to the flood of tears so long dammed, folding her arms upon the window-ledge to use them as a pillow for her aching head while sobs racked her body and tears spouted as furiously as the waterfall crashing on rocks far below.

Her tears were all but spent when she heard a sound and held her breath, wondering if she had imagined a voice speaking her name. It came again.

'Helen...?'

She lifted her head, then cowered from the dark shadow filling the summerhouse.

'Please don't flinch from me.' Damon sounded weary, dispirited, but she was too overwrought to care.

'Go away!' she gasped. 'I don't want to talk to you.'

'Believe me, I understand and respect your feelings,' he astounded her by saying. 'I won't touch you, won't come nearer than I am at this moment, if only you'll hear me out.'

Taking her silence for assent, he thrust clenched fists deep into his pockets and began speaking in a low, flat tone. 'I won't insult you by trying to excuse my behaviour, but I feel I must at least try to explain the motivation behind my actions.' When she made no response he carried on, choosing his words as carefully as a man pleading his last defence:

'From birth I was taught never to trust the English and very few members of your race have caused me to revise that deeply instilled opinion. Up until recently Alec was the only exception. If I had become even slightly mellowed, your brother helped harden my feelings—consequently, when you arrived at Sanquhar, though I was not aware of any connection, my treatment of you was rough in the extreme. But gradually as we worked together I came to recognise in you qualities I could not help but admire, and I was almost ready to confess as much when Alec arrived and suspicion once again reared its head. Feelings I labelled hatred and contempt caused me to act in a manner which, although I can't expect you to believe this,

Helen, was completely alien to my nature. I wanted to hurt you, told myself that however despicable my actions they were fully justified.

'Then,' he drew in a shuddering breath, 'I was shocked by the discovery that however hard I might try to fight it, however much I despised my own weakness, I'd fallen in love with you, and the contempt I was feeling was for myself because for the first time in my life I was unable to control emotions that ran riot whenever you came near me. While seeming to punish you I was actually punishing myself, refusing to believe your explanations, refusing to believe even Alec, a long-trusted friend, until he very forcibly made me see reason. Though reluctant to discuss your feelings, he explained in depth about your aversion to casual affairs, of the many men, rich, influential and presentable, who had tried without success to overcome an attitude of cool friendliness which, in his opinion, was in reality a protective armour shielding unsophisticated, easily bruised feelings.'

He wiped a hand across his eyes as if to brush out of sight a scene so deplorable that the memory of it would live for ever in his mind, then charged in a low, bitter tone, 'How lacerated those feelings must be now—how deeply you must despise me ...' He hesitated as if hoping for some small contradictory sign, but when Helen did not speak, did not move even fractionally from the state of immobility she had adopted the moment he began to speak, he sighed heavily and concluded with deep regret, 'I'm truly sorry for all the hurt I've caused you, Helen, but, willingly or not, you will have your revenge—the worst punishment ever inflicted upon me will begin the moment you walk out of my life.'

She heard him turn on his heel, then walk, slightly limping, towards the door. She lifted her head and saw through tear-blurred eyes his shadow moving across the threshold.

'*Damon ...!*' she cried on a heartbroken sob. His tall shadow turned to stone. He did not turn, did not speak, just waited—tense, immobile, with shoulders squared to accept recriminations he could not deny were deserved.

She groped for words. His confession had sounded startlingly sincere, yet she had been misled before by his ability to project hurt, to manipulate her heartstrings with brilliant acting. *Yet how she wanted to believe!*

'You ... you said once before that you loved me and sounded every bit as convincing then as you do now ...'

He swung round to face her. 'No, Helen, even if you can't take my word, you must sense that there's a difference. Last time I was on the defensive, bedevilled by doubts about your sincerity while you sobbed on my shoulder and pleaded with me to allow the engagement to stand. *Let me have one night of happiness!* you begged, yet even while I was holding you in my arms you were plotting my humiliation.'

Her bright head bowed. 'We were both equally deceitful,' she admitted shakenly, 'so perhaps we both deserve to suffer.'

'But not indefinitely, Helen.' He sounded as if he were groping for a ray of hope in the darkness.

'No.. ,' she breathed, lifting her head in search of him. 'Even criminals can look forward to eventual freedom!'

She flew towards him and strong arms gathered her close, bound her with bands of steel and pressed her hard against his chest. 'Helen,' he groaned, 'sweet, forgiving heart!' Then he kissed her, hungrily, madly, infinitely adoring. Tears dried upon her flushed cheeks. They fused into one, slaking their thirst for each other, their kisses a balm that healed the hurt of every harsh word, every painful action, chased away every last doubt, every uncertainty. Shaken, but gloriously happy, they clung together, wondering at their narrow escape from a life of separation—a prospect too unbearable, as yet, to be put into words.

'Marry me, sweetheart?' he begged, still needing to be convinced.

'Yes, please, darling griffon,' she sighed, and was folded against his heart. He bent with a groan of desire to seek her lips and to share a kiss as moving as music, as deeply committing as a prayer. Happiness overflowed inside her as she clung, glorying in his passion, blessing the inherent shyness that had kept her untouched, reserved entirely for this one utterly possessive man.

When Damon slackened his grip to look down upon her flushed, bemused face he saw a small cloud dimming the glory of her eyes.

'What troubles you, amber bright, some last small doubt...?'

She nodded, then, a little shyly because she was not used to such looks of naked adoration, she whispered, 'We will have children, won't we, Damon?'

He laughed as he folded her back against his heart, murmuring wickedly in her ear, 'Brazen hussy! Yes, of course, my love, we must have children in order to perpetuate the tribe. I can't guarantee that they won't be red-haired chatterboxes like Rik or black-browed images of their father. Nor,' he frowned, 'can I say with certainty that all will avoid the accursed Murray limp ...'

'I can.' She snuggled into his shoulder and, greatly daring, began toying with the buttons on his shirt. He tolerated her absorption until her teasing fingers strayed to stroke the tangle of fine black hairs upon his chest. Grabbing her hand, he squeezed it hard, then began kissing her fingers one by one.

'Promise you'll always love me,' he urged, 'that you'll never allow my hellish temper to drive you away.'

Helen stood on tip-toe to whisper against his mouth, 'Never be uncertain of my love, darling. I'm yours now until the day I die.'

His answering kiss was humbly repentant yet full of exciting promise.

Rik, leading Sir Alec by the hand along the path leading to the summerhouse, stopped abruptly when he saw two shadows merging in the dusk.

'Oh, dear, Miss Paris will be annoyed,' he looked anxiously up at Sir Alec. 'Uncle Damon has found her first!'

To his great surprise Sir Alec chuckled and, lifting him shoulder high, began walking back along the path leading to the castle. The boy's bewilderment was complete when he overheard Sir Alec's satisfied murmur: 'A man

cannot take a rose without first suffering the prick of thorns. How sweet is pleasure after pain!