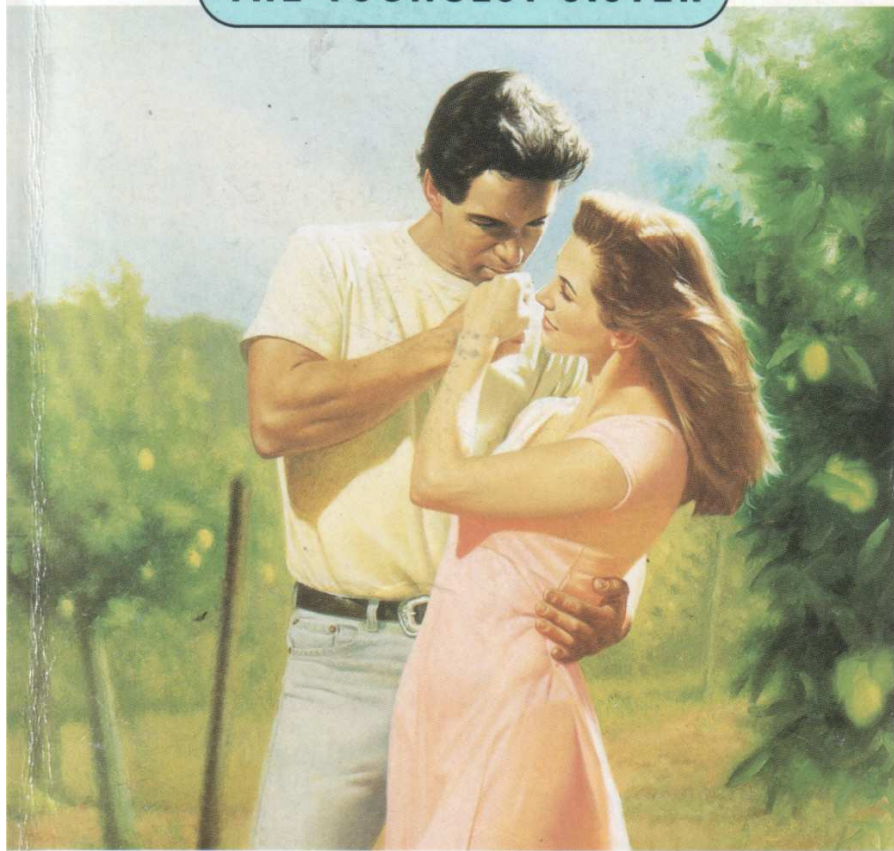


Harlequin Mills & Boon



Anne Weale

THE YOUNGEST SISTER



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Her Prince Charming?

Cressida Vale was the youngest in a family of thin, glamorous, beautiful women. Only she wasn't thin or glamorous, and only the kindest of souls would ever call her beautiful.

Which was why Nicolas Talbot's interest in her was so surprising. Yet since meeting Cressy he had become a regular knight in shining armour... offering her a place to stay and his undivided attention. Cressy was half in love with him already. But did Nicholas regard Cressy as merely a damsel in distress or his modern day Cinderella?

CHAPTER ONE

USUALLY when Cressy Vale travelled by air it was on the cheapest charter flight available.

Today she was flying business class on Centennial's scheduled service because the journey was urgent and all the ordinary seats on airlines serving the island of Majorca were fully booked.

It was late June, a popular month with people who wanted to avoid the crowds of the high season as well as the more intense heat of the Mediterranean in July and August. This was the perfect time to go to the beautiful island off the east coast of Spain where the Spanish royal family spent their summer holidays.

Cressy was not going for pleasure, but to answer an SOS message that an elderly member of her father's family, who had retired to Majorca, was in trouble.

Her flight to Palma, the island's capital, took off at nine-thirty. By twelve-forty, Spanish time, she would be in golden sunshine instead of the cold, wet weather which had persisted since Easter in England.

Cressy lived and worked in London. On the train from Victoria station to Gatwick airport, she was one of a number of young people travelling in casual clothes with their belongings in rucksacks and roll-bags. But she wondered if, at the airline's business class check-in desk, she would be conspicuously out of place in her jeans and faded indigo cotton sweater.

Her jeans were freshly laundered and the sweater had been expensive when her sister Anna had bought it. But now it was three years old and had undergone several repairs. Even her dark blue deck shoes had once been in Anna's wardrobe. Both her sisters spent a lot of money on clothes, but they earned more than she did and needed to dress well for their jobs and their non-stop social lives. Cressy was saving for an expensive group trip to the Galapagos Islands, a sanctuary for rare wildlife in the Pacific. She felt lucky to have a family who supplied her with top-quality hand-me-downs.

However, when she reached the check-in any fears that she might be made to feel like a bag lady at a gala ball were driven out of her mind by the sight of the person being checked in ahead of her. When her questing glance dropped from the sign above and behind the desk to the tall figure standing in front of it, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Never in her life had she seen such a gorgeous male back-view.

For a moment her heart stood still, the way it had the first time she saw the soaring white summit of the Jungfrau on a family holiday in Switzerland.

The Jungfrau was there for ever. In a hundred years' time it would still be stopping the hearts of impressionable schoolgirls. But any minute now the man she was looking at would finish his business at the desk and she would see his face. The probability was that his front wouldn't match his scrumptious rear.

Bracing herself for the inevitable let-down, she savoured the brief illusion that here was the kind of man she had always dreamed of meeting—and not merely a fellow traveller in the same teeming airport, but actually going where she was going.

He was tall, the top of his head at least six inches above her own, with shoulders to match, and long, powerful but shapely brown legs exposed by very short shorts. But they weren't the beach shorts of someone going on a sand, sun and sangria holiday. These were the serviceable shorts worn by trekkers, and this particular pair had seen a lot of service. As had his leather boots.

Above the waist he was wearing a dark blue cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up high over deeply tanned elbows and the kind of biceps and forearms that could hoist their owner up a rock face more easily than most people climbed stairs.

His black curly hair was long and would have flowed over those impressively wide shoulders if it hadn't been neatly bound by a length of black tape. Midway down the rim of one ear there was a glint of silver.

Cressy knew what it was because she had one herself, at home, in the miniature chest of drawers where she kept her few bits of jewellery. It was a little silver climbing figure. Hers had come from a market stall selling strings of turquoise beads and earrings of lapis lazuli. She wore it as an open-backed ring, but if the man in front of her was a rock climber he would regard rings as a hazard. Curled round the rim of his ear, the silver climber was less likely to catch on something.

For some moments she feasted her eyes on every visible detail of him, from the upright muscular shoulders, lean hips and hard male backside to the strong but elegant legs which, for a man with black hair, were not as furry as dark men's legs usually were.

She was jolted out of her trance by being jabbed on the backs of her own legs. Before she turned round she knew what had caused the painful thrust—the front bar of the baggage trolley of someone behind her.

The woman in charge of the trolley was an ash- blonde, forty-something, in a pastel suit with a lot of gold jewellery and a matched set of expensive suitcases. Without a word of apology, she said, 'This is the business class queue.'

'I know. I'm in it,' said Cressy.

'Then why are you hanging back here? The desk's free,' the woman said abruptly.

Had Cressy's mother or either of her sisters been addressed in that tone, they would have made a cutting retort about bad manners. But Cressy had a high threshold of tolerance. If people were rude, she assumed they were under stress. It might be that the woman was secretly terrified of flying. Surprisingly many people were.

As Cressy turned back towards the desk, no longer blocked by the tall man, she glanced in the direction she would be going in after check-in. She was just in time to catch a glimpse of him loping gracefully out of sight, leaving her with an impression of a long, elastic stride and a body in peak physical condition.

But she still didn't know what his face was like.

Nicolas settled his tall frame in one of the comfortable chairs in the business class departure lounge and downed half a glass of chilled orange juice from the courtesy bar in one long, refreshing swallow.

He had taken a copy of *The New York Herald Tribune* from a selection of newspapers on a table near the door, but he didn't start reading it. After months in the back of beyond he had long since broken the habit of following world events and was in no hurry to resume it.

Instead he glanced round the lounge at his fellow passengers, but none held his eye for more than a second. They were the usual mixed bag of pallid-faced businessmen travelling on expense accounts and well-to-do middle-aged to elderly couples returning to their retirement villas in the expatriate colonies that were dotted round most of Majorca's coastline.

Not that everyone in the lounge was bound for the same destination. Centennial didn't have its own lounge, but shared it with various other small airlines.

He was about to turn his attention to the front-page headlines when someone unexpected made an uncertain entrance.

At first he thought she must have come in by mistake and would be redirected by the stewardess on duty at the desk. But after a brief conversation the newcomer nodded and smiled, and came towards the non-smoking end of the lounge where he was sitting. Having chosen a seat, she divested herself of her backpack, which was small enough to be stowed in an overhead locker on whichever plane she was catching. Then she went to the self-service bar, where coffee was waiting on a hotplate alongside a comprehensive range of alcoholic drinks, the appropriate mixers being stored in two glass-fronted fridges under the counter.

Although she carried herself well, Nicolas had the impression that the girl was inwardly self-conscious, feeling herself out of place in this quiet and

softly lit enclave of cosseted comfort so different from the hurly-burly endured by tight budget travellers.

She looked to be about nineteen and, in an era when teenagers' role models were either as thin as starved cats or built like greyhounds with implanted breasts, her figure was unfashionably Amazonian.

He watched her dropping ice cubes into a glass before filling it from the jug of orange juice. Barefoot, she would be about five feet nine or ten. A big girl in every sense. But her curves were firm and well-proportioned, and would be a cuddly armful. He had never been attracted by delicate, doll-like women.

She returned to her place, stepping carefully around the outstretched legs of a sleeping transit passenger who was relying on the stewardesses to wake him in time for his next flight. Her hair was light mouse with blonde streaks. But they were like children's blonde streaks, not the result of expensive sessions at the hairdresser. Her face appeared bare of make-up. She looked an open-air girl, which was also how he liked them. Except she was too young, and probably not going where he was anyway.

At a different time of year Nicolas would have put her down as a chalet girl, bound for a winter of cooking and cleaning for skiing parties. Assuming her interests to be sporting, he wondered what she would look like stripped off except for a minuscule swimsuit, speeding across the water on a windsurfer.

His train of thought was broken when, after looking round the lounge as he had a few minutes earlier, the girl met his eyes and realised he had been watching her.

For a second or two she was visibly disconcerted, and then a delicious blush suffused that clear outdoor skin and she turned her face towards the door. Her shyness amused and intrigued him. Even at nineteen not many girls were flustered by a stranger's stare. In his experience, the signal he had been sending—albeit not deliberately—was usually returned with tacit permission for him to make the next move.

Cressy set her glass down on the table alongside her chair and, bending forward, pretended to be looking for something in one of the pockets of her backpack.

She hadn't expected to find the dark man staring at her, but that wasn't why she felt agitated. She was in a dither because his face had *not* been the let-down she had anticipated. It was extremely attractive. More than that, it was a face she had often tried to visualise but never quite succeeded in putting together in her mind— the face of her dream man.

Like a police detective composing an Identikit picture, she had often mentally assembled the various facial characteristics she expected him to have. A firm mouth and chin. A nice smile. Eyes both intelligent and kind. But somehow, like an Identikit, the face she had seen in her mind's eye had never been more than an approximation of her ideal.

To be suddenly confronted by the real thing, the genuine article, took a bit of getting used to. Had it been a trick of the soft light from the silk-shaded table lamps? If she looked again would the illusion vanish?

Certainly, in that brief moment of eye contact, the impression she had registered hadn't been one of kindness and niceness. She had felt the same sort of frisson she would have expected to feel on finding herself within yards of a magnificent but dangerous wild animal.

Even his impressive back-view hadn't prepared her for that extraordinary face—the tanned skin stretched tautly over a bone structure that seemed to belong to the chieftain of a remote mountain kingdom somewhere in wildest Asia rather than here in Europe where, in her observation, real men had almost died out.

She wanted to look at him again, but she didn't dare in case he was still watching her. She calmed herself with the thought that it was most unlikely they would be sitting together.

Half an hour later, when she found that they weren't, she was perversely disappointed. They were seated in the same row but she had been allocated the window seat on the port side and he had the other window seat, with an elderly couple next to him. On Cressy's side of the aisle there was only one seat next to hers and its occupant hadn't shown up yet.

Some passengers were still boarding when those in the business class section were offered a choice of orange juice or champagne. Cressy decided to stay with orange juice. When the aircraft took off the seat next to hers was still empty.

No sooner was the plane airborne and the No SMOKING sign switched off than the dark man rose from his seat with a polite, 'Excuse me, please,' to his neighbours.

Cressy assumed he must want to go to the loo. But, after waiting for the others to resume their seats, he looked down at her and said, 'Would you mind if I joined you? This airline doesn't have a no smoking policy, and I don't want to spend the flight behind a chain smoker.'

Following the direction of his nod, Cressy saw the top of Forty-something's candyfloss hairdo and a spiral of smoke.

'Not at all,' she said politely, but without the friendly smile she would have given to anyone else making the request.

As he sat down next to her she was aware of the same inner turmoil she had felt in the lounge. From the pouch on the back seat she took out the in-flight magazine and put on a show of becoming deeply immersed in it.

Even in business class Nicolas found the leg room inadequate, but he was used to enduring far worse discomforts. The girl's aloof manner amused him. He guessed it was caused by shyness. Shy girls were rare nowadays. He sensed that the one beside him, pretending to be absorbed in the magazine, was a throwback to his mother's generation. As his mother had, she smelt delicious. The scent was one he didn't recognise, a delicate, flowery

fragrance which didn't invade the nostrils like the heavy stuff worn by the blonde in front of his previous seat.

A Spanish stewardess distributed menus and another took orders for pre-lunch drinks. Expecting the girl to ask for another orange juice, he was mildly surprised when she ordered Campari and soda, her manner unexpectedly decisive. He liked the sound of her voice and the size and shape of her hands. He didn't like women whose bones felt as fragile as those of small birds when he shook hands with them. Nor, when making love, did he like having long nails drawing blood on his back. The girl's nails were short and clear-varnished. She was wearing a gold signet ring on the fourth finger of her left hand. She could have bought it in an antique shop because the crest appealed to her. It could mean she had something serious going with a boyfriend. Or it could be a family heirloom.

As the man beside her ordered a gin and tonic Cressy was aware that the pretty Spanish stewardess, her slender figure set off by a navy skirt and white blouse with red and blue stripes on the reverse of the collar, was making it clear that she fancied him.

Well, who wouldn't? thought Cressy, sneaking a glance at the long length of rock-hard brown thigh parallel with her own leg.

She studied the four-course menu, written in Spanish and English, wondering what Nebraska-style meant in relation to salmon pâté with palm heart sticks and baby corn cobs.

She wasn't a strict vegetarian but, like a lot of her friends, she no longer ate meat when she had any choice in the matter. She wouldn't be choosing the veal tournedos. The alternative was a mixed-meat kebab with pilaf rice, peas and Parisienne carrots, whatever they were. She would eat the rice and vegetables, leave most of the kebab and fill up with cheese and fruit, which were shown as two separate courses.

After their drinks had been brought to them, with the usual sachet of peanuts, the man beside her said pleasantly, 'May I open the packet for you?'

Although the bags were famously difficult to open, Cressy was taken aback by the gallantry of his offer. Big girls like herself were widely regarded as being able to fend for themselves in every respect. Even ultra- feminine babes like the doe-eyed stewardess weren't being overwhelmed with chivalry these days. In the words of a guy Cressy knew, most men had taken so many put- downs from women who read sexism into every well- meant gesture that they had given up doing all that stuff their mothers had taught them. If women wanted to be equal, he'd said, that was fine by him. He would go on being nice to old ladies, but anyone else could open doors for themselves, change their own wheels and pay for their own meals.

'Oh...would you...? Thank you,' she said, handing over the peanuts.

The brief contact with his fingers as the packet changed hands sent a strange tingle up her arm. She had had several boyfriends, none of them serious, but couldn't remember ever being as strongly aware of their physical presence as she was now with this stranger.

Having opened the packet and put it back on her tray- table, he said, 'Are you on holiday?'

'No, I'm not. Are you?'

'I live on the island.'

'Really? What do you do there?'

'I relax and recharge my batteries. My job involves a lot of travelling. When I'm at home I sit in the sun and vegetate.'

She was about to enquire what his job was when he beat her to it by asking, 'If not a holiday, what takes you to the island?'

'I'm going to see my great-aunt.'

'Have you stayed with her before?'

She shook her head. 'I've never been to Spain at all.'

'Where on the island does your relative live?'

'I'm not entirely sure,' Cressy admitted.

Had this been a holiday, she would have read a guidebook before coming away. There hadn't been time to do that. She had only the common knowledge that Majorca was the largest island in a group called the Balearics— one of which, Ibiza, had once been a mecca for hippies, and possibly still was.

'The house is called "Es Veil". It's somewhere near a town called Pollensa,' she told him.

'That's up north, nowhere near Palma airport. Will there be someone meeting you?'

Again Cressy shook her head. 'Aunt Kate doesn't know I'm coming. She's a bit of a recluse. It was her Spanish neighbour who let us know she was ill. She rang up yesterday afternoon. Luckily the person who took the call speaks some Spanish, so she could make out roughly what was being said. Aunt Kate has broken her leg. At seventy-eight that's serious.'

He lifted an eyebrow. 'Wasn't there anyone older who could have come out to take charge?'

'How old d'you think I am?'

'Eighteen? Nineteen? Rather young to cope with the situation you've outlined...especially if you don't speak Spanish.'

'I'm twenty-three,' Cressy said briskly. 'And, apart from not speaking Spanish, I can probably cope a lot better than some people twice my age. I work for Distress Signal, an organisation which specialises in dealing with domestic emergencies.'

'I've heard of it, but I would have thought they'd be staffed by sensible middle-aged ladies, not girls who could pass for teenagers.'

'They're staffed by a wide range of people...of both sexes,' Cressy informed him. 'Normally a situation like this one would be dealt with by someone Spanish- speaking. But in this case, when there's a close relation who can come to the rescue, that's obviously preferable to employing an outsider.'

'If you've never been to Spain before, and your aunt is a recluse, it doesn't sound as if the relationship between you is a close one.'

'No, it isn't,' she conceded. 'But I do know a lot more about her than a stranger would. At one time she and my parents had a good relationship. But then she went off to the Mediterranean and they gradually drifted apart. My parents lead very full lives—and they'd rather go to France for their holidays. My mother wilts if it's too hot.'

As she spoke she wondered why she was confiding in him. Chatting to strangers had always been one of her foibles. When she was younger, her lack of caution in making friends had been a worry to her elders—especially to Maggie, who'd run the house while Mrs Vale was busy helping to run the country from the House of Commons. Cressy had lost count of Maggie's warnings that talking to strangers could be hazardous. But that had been when she was younger and less competent to judge whether people were trustworthy or not.

'How long have you worked for Distress Signal?' he asked.

'Two years. What do you do?'

'I'm a freelance journalist and travel writer. If you ever read travel articles you may have seen my byline ... Nicolas Alaro.'

Her eyes widened in astonishment. She had read a lot of his pieces. He had been to all the places she would have liked to visit. Sometimes she cut out his articles and filed them away against the day when she might meet a suitable travelling companion and take off on a round-the-world trip. She didn't fancy going alone, which was why she was going with a group to the Galapagos Islands.

The last clipping she had filed had been about an expedition on a yacht called *Endless Summer*, sailing the channels of Patagonia.

"Alaro" sounds Spanish, but you don't write as if English was your second language. Are you completely bilingual?"

With his black hair and tanned olive skin, he could pass for a Spaniard in some ways. But his eyes weren't brown, they were dark indigo-blue—the colour her sweater had been before many washings had faded it.

'I had a Mallorquim grandfather who left me his house on the island. I also use his name for working purposes. My real surname is Talbot...and you are?'

'Cressida...usually called Cressy.'

Deliberately, she didn't mention her surname. He might connect her with her mother. She was proud of her mother's achievements but she had learnt a long time ago that Virginia Vale was either admired or loathed, and he might be one of the loathers. Many men were.

She said, 'Travel writing must be a marvellous way to earn a living. I enjoyed your piece about the voyage on *Endless Summer*.'

'I enjoyed researching it. South America's a fascinating continent. I'm going back there early next year. I want to get to the summit of Aconcagua. It's the highest point in the western hemisphere...the highest mountain outside Asia.'

She saw by the light in his eyes that the project excited him, and she felt her own heartbeat quicken at the thought of such an adventure.

She still hadn't fully adjusted to the astonishment of finding that, in a sense, he was someone she knew. She rarely bought books in hardback but hadn't been able to resist buying all his as soon as they came out, the most recent being a collection of his travel essays.

She had bought it at Stanfords, the London bookshop known to travellers from all over the world for its fine range of maps and guides. If she had known beforehand that he was doing a signing session at the shop she would have gone along to have her copy autographed. It had been a big disappointment to discover she had missed the chance of meeting him, if only for the few seconds it would have taken him to write his name on the fly-leaf.

To meet him by chance seemed almost...as if it were fated.

The practical side of her nature made short shrift of this proposition, reminding her sharply that what mattered was his intimate knowledge of Majorca. He could supply her with much-needed information.

Cressy's practicality was really her only asset. Even her family acknowledged that, although disastrously lacking in academic ability, she was very strong on common sense.

'What's the best way to get to Pollensa?' she asked, when the salmon paté had been set before them. 'Is there a bus service to it? Or would a taxi be better?'

'A taxi will get you there faster but will also cost a lot more. Does your great-aunt have a car?'

'I don't know for certain. I'd think so. She certainly had one the last time she came to stay with us in England. But that was ages ago. I must have been about eight then. I remember the car she was driving because a boy I used to play with made such a fuss about it. He was a car fanatic, and Aunt Kate's was something unusual.' She searched her memory for the name. 'He called it a roadster...a Cord roadster. I forget the year it was made, but some time in the 1930s. My father was rather taken with it too.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Nicolas. 'It's one of the legendary cars from an era of luxury motoring before the roads became choked with assembly-line vehicles. What's more,' he went on, 'that Cord is still running...or was, up to a couple of years ago. I saw it going through Alcudia with an elderly lady at the wheel. She aroused my journalist's curiosity. I asked around and was told

she was Katherine Dexter, once a leading combatant in the battle of the sexes.'

Cressy's mother and sisters would have corrected that description. She let it pass. 'How did she look when you saw her?'

'It was only a glimpse. At that time she looked pretty good. So did the car. I was told it was very rare. The makers went out of business with only about two thousand Cords on the market. According to my informant, your great-aunt's model was being kept in repair by a garage mechanic who was hoping she would leave it to him. Whether it's still on the road—*quien sabe?*' T Remembering she had no Spanish, he translated. 'Who knows?'

'Old cars can be temperamental. If it *is* still running, I don't think I'd want to drive it,' Cressy said, thinking aloud. 'Maybe I can rent a motor scooter.'

'If you need one, there'll be no problem. In July and August, yes. But not at this stage of the year. As for reaching Es Veil today, I'll run you there.'

Again she was taken aback.

Before she could say anything, he went on, 'My house is in the same part of the island. I don't know your great-aunt's place but I doubt if it's more than a few kilometres off my route.'

'It's extremely kind, but I really couldn't impose—'

'If you're worried about the risk of accepting a lift from a stranger,' he said, looking faintly amused, 'we can get over that quite easily. By virtue of my distinguished maternal grandfather, I'm quite well-known in Mallorca...as the Spanish call it. There'll be people at the airport who'll convince you that you won't be risking your safety if you accept my suggestion.'

Cressy found it hard to fathom the generosity of his offer. She was attracted to him but didn't flatter herself that he was attracted to her.

Research had proved men were attracted to women who more or less matched them in terms of physical assets. For that reason the men she

attracted were guys whose faces and physiques could be classed as averagely pleasant rather than to-die-for. She had never appealed to anyone with Nicolas's outstanding looks and she didn't expect to. He was in her sisters' league. Therefore, his offer had to be prompted by disinterested helpfulness rather than being the first move in a holiday romance.

Casting about for some reason why Nicolas would want to help out a girl like herself—presentable but nothing special—Cressy suddenly realised the solution was under her nose.

He was a journalist. Aunt Kate, in her day, had been a celebrity. The motive behind his offer of a lift must be the hope of an interview with her. As well as writing travel articles, he did occasionally do profiles of interesting people encountered on his journeys.

In his book there was a profile of Edward James, a millionaire patron of the arts with an extraordinary house in Mexico. The introduction to the profile said that Nicolas had been a backpacking teenager when Edward James had consented to be interviewed by him. It had been his first journalistic coup, the foundation of his career. It could be that he saw Cressy as the means to an end—the end being a profile of Aunt Kate.

The possibility that, far from being genuinely helpful, he was using her, or attempting to do so, was curiously upsetting. But two could play at that game. If he meant to use her, he couldn't complain at being made use of himself.

'I don't think we need to go to those lengths. I can check your bona fides for myself. What is your latest book called, and what is the last place in it?'

Looking amused, he said, 'It's called *Faraway Places* and the last piece was about Nantucket. I called it "Yesterday's Island". But, beyond confirming that I am who I claim to be, I don't see that it proves anything.'

'It proves you're a well-known name, unlikely to be a serial killer or "The Mystery Rapist of Majorca".' As she said this, she wiggled her fingers to indicate she was quoting the kind of headline seen in the popular Press. 'I'd

be very grateful for a lift to Aunt Kate's place. Thanks for the offer. How far is it from Palma to Pollensa?'

'Now the motorway's finished, it takes less than an hour.'

While they were eating the main course, he said, 'Tell me about your job. Why did you choose it, and what sort of things do you do?'

Actually, Cressy hadn't chosen it. The job had been set up for her by her mother, who had met the director of Distress Signal.

'We do a huge range of things, from emergency child- minding to visiting people in hospital when their next of kin can't. Last week I drove a rather wobbly old man to spend a holiday with his house-bound sister on the other side of England. This week I was going to look after a Down's Syndrome child while her mother is in hospital, but now someone else will be doing that.'

'You must be a good deal wiser and more capable than most twenty-three-year-olds,' he said dryly.

Cressy shrugged. 'It's a question of horse sense. Sometimes clever people don't have much. I'm a total dud academically, but I'm good at practical things like—' She broke off, aware that she was letting her tongue run away with her.

'Like what?' he prompted.

'Oh...unblocking drains...that sort of thing.'

'You sound an ideal travelling companion. Equal to every contingency. Never fazed when plans go awry. Does adventurous travel appeal to you?'

She knew from his book that he had been to many remote and potentially hazardous places.

'If you mean like your journey through the Atlas Mountains with a mule, I think that would be *too* adventurous for me.'

'That was a long time ago. Do I gather you've read my books?'

Her mouth being full, Cressy replied with a nod.

'As far as I know, I don't have many women readers.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to remark that he would have thousands if his publishers put his picture on the back of the jacket, or included shots of the author in the pages of illustrations. But the only glimpse his readers had ever been given was an anonymous figure with wind-tousled dark hair—not as long as he wore it now— sitting with his back to the camera in wilderness terrain.

She said, 'You seem very camera-shy. There's never a photo of you with any of your travel pieces.'

He shrugged. 'As I'm not an actor or a male model, what I look like is irrelevant.'

His answer surprised and puzzled her. He must know he was, if not strictly handsome, compellingly attractive. Her mother and sisters were all fully aware that their looks were a major asset. Her mother had been one of the first politicians to seek the advice of an image consultant, and to take advantage of a photogenic face and a flair for speaking in sound bites to advance her career.

Having grown up with people who knew and exploited the value of their faces and figures, Cressy found it hard to believe that Nicolas was without vanity. He must have realised how easily he could have dated the most attractive women. Yet he spoke as if his looks were a matter of indifference to him.

It suddenly occurred to her that he might be married. Not that the way he had stared at her in the airport suggested he was a man whose love for one woman had made him blind or indifferent to the rest of her sex.

'How does your wife occupy herself during your absences? Do you have lots of children?' she asked.

He said dryly, 'Even in the quieter parts of Mallorca it's virtually impossible to find a woman content to sit at home having babies for an absentee husband. I wouldn't want that sort of wife anyway. But, conversely, there still aren't many women prepared to spend months on end living in primitive conditions. Those who don't mind roughing it are usually dedicated to good works, or not feminine enough for my taste. How's your private life?'

Was that very slight emphasis on 'private' a subtle riposte for her cheek in asking him intimate questions? Or was she imagining a nuance where there wasn't one?

'I don't have one,' she said cheerfully. 'I'm still living with my parents. My job doesn't pay enough for me to set up independently. Well, it might in the country, but not in London, where the cost of living is higher.'

She had put her watch forward by an hour immediately after fastening her seat belt. When a sensation in her ears told her it wouldn't be long before they landed, she couldn't believe how quickly the time had passed since they took off.

Her first aerial view of the island made it look very brown and barren. Almost rising out of the sea was a range of steep, jagged mountains and then the land flattened out and became a patchwork of farmsteads and groves of grey-foliaged trees.

When Nicolas leaned closer to her in order to look out of the window, Cressy was sharply aware of the natural aroma of his skin. Judging by his shorts and boots, he had flown into London that morning from somewhere remote. Obviously he had changed his shirt and had a shave at Gatwick; the shirt was too crisp to have been slept in and his jaw had no trace of dark stubble. But she doubted if Gatwick had facilities for taking a shower, as she knew there were at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. Yet he smelt good. Better than men who sloshed on expensive lotions. He smelt as good as old books and summer grass and clean towels warm from the airing cupboard. She wanted to close her eyes and inhale the scent of him.

Instead she kept her eyes open, studying his face in profile and the way his springy black hair grew from his forehead and temples.

A shiver ran through her. She had a crazy impulse to reach out and stroke his cheek to see what effect it had on him.

In her mind she saw his eyes blaze before, pinning her shoulders to the back rest, he brought his mouth down hard on hers in a kiss unlike any she had ever experienced before.

The fantasy felt so real that, when he did turn his head, she gasped and gave a nervous start.

Slowly Nicolas sat back. 'What's the matter?' he asked.

'Nothing...only...you startled me.'

'I'm sorry.' His blue eyes narrowed as he scrutinised her face. 'You're nervous. Are you worried about landing? Don't be. It's a good airport.'

'I'm not,' she assured him truthfully.

But either he didn't believe her or he pretended not to. Reaching for her nearest hand, he held it firmly like an adult taking charge of a child.

'We'll be down in a minute and then you can shed your sweater. You won't need it again till you go back.'

Cressy said nothing, feeling, for a different reason, as tense and panicky as if she really were afraid of what might happen as the plane came in to land. Short of an embarrassing struggle, there was no possibility of extricating her hand from his until he chose to release it.

The infuriating thing was that having her hand held was nice. It reminded her of being small and walking with Maggie in the park. She had always felt safe with calm, capable Maggie, and a little afraid of her brisk, energetic, sometimes quick-tempered mother.

Now, with Nicolas holding her hand, she felt both secure and nervous. Secure because in the unlikely event that anything did go wrong she would have him beside her, a man accustomed to danger. Nervous because

intuition told her that meeting him and accepting his offer of a lift might put her far more at risk than she was at this moment.

Soon afterwards they touched down and the pilot applied reverse thrust.

Still holding her hand, Nicolas said, 'Welcome to Mallorca... *illa dels vuit vents*..'

'What does that mean?' she asked.

'It's Mallorquin for "island of the' eight winds". We've been using wind-power since the fourteenth century, and our eight winds are also the reason so many yachtsmen come here.'

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN the aircraft had come to a standstill, Nicolas rose to his feet and opened the overhead locker where Cressy's backpack was stowed. But when she would have taken it from him he shook his head, saying, with a glint of amusement, 'You're in macho territory now.'

She wondered if he was teasing her, or if, in the less touristy parts of the island, Majorcan manners and attitudes were still very different from those in London.

His own pack, when it appeared on the carousel in the baggage-reclaim hall, was a massive rucksack packed solid with equipment and, she guessed, too heavy for her to lift off the ground, let alone carry for long distances. But he swung it off the conveyor belt with the practised ease of a man who had done it many times before and whose body, compared with those of most of the tourists struggling awkwardly with their suitcases, was as different as that of a leopard from a crowd of overfed lap dogs.

With both packs on a trolley, they went through to the main concourse where a thickset man with grizzled hair was waiting for Nicolas. To Cressy's surprise their greeting was very demonstrative. They embraced, they exchanged cheek kisses, they smiled at each other with the warmest affection she had ever seen shown by two men. Had they not been so dissimilar, she would have taken them for grandfather and grandson.

Eventually Nicolas turned to her. 'This is Felio. He and his wife Catalina look after things when I'm away. He's known me since I was born, and my mother as well.'

Thus he introduced her to Felio, who took the hand Cressy offered but whose smile was more reserved than the beam which had lit up his face at the sight of Nicolas.

It was like shaking hands with the exposed root of an old tree. Felio's palm and fingers had been callused by years of manual labour. His face had the texture of a dried fig. He was a perfect match for the sun-baked landscape she had seen from the plane.

On the way to the car park, the two men talked to each other in a language which didn't sound like Spanish. She supposed it must be Mallorquin. Then, out of this flow of words which made no sense to her, came two which did. Kate Dexter. Evidently Nicolas was asking if Felio had heard of her great-aunt.

The older man answered at some length, his reply accompanied by gestures which left Cressy uncertain as to whether he had or hadn't.

When he finished, Nicolas said, 'Felio knows where Miss Dexter lives. It's only about fifteen minutes from my place. So that's no problem.'

The vehicle in which Felio had come to fetch his employer was a military-green Range Rover.

'Would you mind sitting in the back?' said Nicolas as Felio unlocked the doors.

'Of course not,' said Cressy. 'If you've been out of touch for a long time, you must have a lot to catch up on.' She made a mental note to ask him later where he was returning from.

In contrast to her first impression of Majorca from the air, what struck her as they left the airport was the luxuriant blossom on the tall bushes lining the road. They looked rather like pale pink azaleas but she knew they were oleanders. The blue sky, the golden sunlight and these wonderful hedges, thick with flowers, combined to lift her spirits as if she were starting a holiday rather than being on a mission which might be fraught with problems.

She had thought that Nicolas would take the wheel, but he was in the front passenger seat, and from time to time he interrupted his conversation with Felio to turn and smile at her.

Usually when he did this Cressy would be gazing out of the window at the passing scene. But she always knew when he was looking at her and found it impossible not to return his smile. Each time he faced forward again she would have liked to continue looking at him, but she knew that if she did he

would know it. She didn't want him to guess she was far more interested in him than in the island's hinterland.

She recognised that, although she had only just met him, she was in the grip of the most powerful physical attraction she had ever experienced. Everything about him was perfection and, to make matters worse—because she wasn't comfortable with the feelings he aroused in her—his mind, as revealed in his books, was as pleasing as his person. Somehow she had the feeling that this was too good to be true, that there had to be a catch in it somewhere.

Neither of her sisters, who had everything going for them—brains, beauty, personality, wit—had been lucky in love. Why should she be? Except that she believed in love in a way that they no longer did and perhaps never had.

When they turned off the motorway where it was crossed by a minor road, she had a brief glimpse of a signpost indicating that Pollensa was seven kilometres further along the main road.

Not far along the side road the vehicle slowed down again to pass between massive stone pillars, one carved with the name Ca'n Llorenc.

Turning to her, Nicolas said, 'In my Mallorquin grandfather's time this was one of the largest estates in this part of the island. The main crops were almonds, oil and figs, but everything his family ate was grown or bred here. It was a self-sufficient community like the great estates in England. It could be still, if I wished it. But I prefer to travel, leaving the land in other hands.'

The drive was more like a farm track than the way to a great house. A long way ahead she could see the roofs of a number of buildings surrounded by what, at a distance, looked like giant feather dusters. Beyond them, in the distance, lay mountains, the farthest ones pale dove- grey in the afternoon light.

The track was flanked by ploughed land on one side and hay stubble on the other, with drifts of sky-blue wild flowers growing along the edges of the track.

Closer up, the feather dusters revealed themselves as date palms, with bunches of ripening orange-coloured fruit dangling among the branches. Then they passed through another stone gateway giving onto a large courtyard formed by the protruding wings of an old house built of rough stone with cut-stone lintels and sills above and below its many green-shuttered windows.

'We'll drop off Felio and my pack, and I'll just say a quick hello to Catalina, and then we'll go on to Miss Dexter's place,' said Nicolas. 'While I'm gone, come and sit in the front.'

Cressy climbed out. After sitting still for several hours, she was glad of a chance to stretch and do a few limbering exercises. When the two men had disappeared, she put one hand over her shoulder and the other behind her back. With her fingers locked, she exerted the light pull needed to recover her normal flexibility.

The double doors leading into the shadowy interior of the house were shaded by the branches of an ancient vine trained over wires stretched between the wings of the building. In the centre of the courtyard stood a huge stone urn, overflowing with brilliant red and pink geraniums. A well-fed black cat was drowsing in the shade of their leaves.

When Nicolas came back, Cressy was standing, storklike, on one leg, her other foot being held behind her to loosen her thigh muscles. Quickly she put it down and stood normally.

Behind him, lurking inside the doorway, wanting to see without being seen, was a woman in a print pinafore. Cressy smiled in her direction before turning and climbing back into the Range Rover.

'You're very supple,' said Nicolas, sliding behind the wheel. 'Are you a dancer as well as a rescuer of people in distress?'

'Oh, no...I was just doing what your cat will probably do when he wakes up.'

'He's supposed to be a mouser,' said Nicolas. 'But Catalina feeds him. Sometimes he brings in a young bird, but he's no threat to the mice.'

As they started back down the drive, Cressy said, 'It's incredibly good of you to go to these lengths for me. I'm sure you must be longing to have a cold shower and relax. How long have you been in transit?'

'Around forty-eight hours, but I'm used to it. Jet lag doesn't affect me any more. I can sleep anywhere.'

'Where have you come from?'

'I never talk about my trips until they're in print.' He took his eyes off the track to smile at her. The smile made his answer less of a snub than it might have sounded otherwise. 'I find if I talk about places it saps some of my enthusiasm. I've heard novelists say the same about their stories.'

The remark made her wonder about his friends, and if they included many fellow writers and other creative people, artists and craftsmen, as well as men like himself who spent their lives doing adventurous things. She had a feeling his circle would be very different from that of her parents and sisters, for whom the twin peaks of achievement were power and money.

Sometimes Cressy felt so much like a changeling that she wondered if there could possibly have been a mix-up at the expensive private clinic where she had been born. Not only was she physically unlike her sisters but she lacked their diamond-bright minds and their driving ambition. Nor, except in her size, was she like her father, a leading architect whose buildings she secretly disliked.

'You look worried,' said Nicolas. 'Don't be. I have nothing to do for the next few days. I'm happy to be your driver and interpreter.'

Cressy hadn't realised that her face was reflecting her thoughts. Quickly brightening her expression, she said, 'Is everyone in Majorca as helpful as you are? Is it a Majorcan characteristic?'

'It's a human characteristic, unless people have been corrupted by wretched living conditions in overcrowded cities. The islanders who work in the tourist resorts can sometimes be less than friendly, but most of the country people will try to be helpful.' He had been watching the road as he spoke, but

now, with a clear stretch ahead, he gave her a quizzical glance. 'In any part of the world a girl with your looks doesn't usually have any trouble drumming up help when she needs it.'

She didn't know how to handle this. Compliments had come her way, but not often, and never from a man like Nicolas whose own looks were so compelling.

To her relief, he went on. 'When you're my size you sometimes feel like Gulliver in Lilliput...a giant in a world of mini people. My father was tall and my mother is tall for a Spanish woman. By the time I was fifteen, I was taller than everyone at Ca'n Llorenc. Teenagers are always self-conscious. For a few years I felt like a freak.'

'Oh...so did I,' she agreed, with deep feeling. 'It's all right for a boy to be tall, but for a girl it's a pain. I used to hunch my shoulders, trying to look a bit shorter. But then I would be told off for bad deportment.'

'Where did you go to school?'

She told him the name of her boarding school, wondering if he knew it was famous for academic excellence and the alma mater of many of Britain's most brilliant female minds. She had been one of its failures.

'Were you educated here?' she asked.

'No, I went to my father's school in England.' He brought the vehicle to a halt, giving-way to a large flock of sheep coming in the opposite direction.

As they streamed by on both sides of the Range Rover Nicolas leaned out of the window and called a greeting to the shepherd. When only the back of his head and a quarter of his face could be seen, he looked very foreign. No Englishman ever had hair as black and springy as the thick, lustrous mass tied back at his nape, like the locks of an off-duty rock musician. All she could see of his face was the slanting line of his cheekbone, the forceful thrust of his jaw and his long neck.

It was impossible, now, to imagine him as a lanky adolescent, as unsure of himself as she had been at that age—and to some extent still was. Not with the peopleshe worked with, but with her family and all their high- powered friends.

When the flock had gone past, bleating, Nicolas drove on until they reached a sandy by-way flanked by trees she recognised, from a family holiday in southern France, as olives.

They had travelled at least a mile along this meandering track when a small house came into view. It looked a ramshackle place, as did the various outbuildings. There was no garden around it, only olive trees and bare earth where some hens were scratching.

'It looks closed up,' said Cressy as they approached it on foot.

'The shutters being closed doesn't mean no one's at home. The Spanish believe in keeping the sunshine out. The rooms stay cooler that way. But I would expect the door to be ajar, and it isn't,' said Nicolas.

A bell, which looked like a goat's bell, was suspended beside the door. He pulled the string. When no one answered and no sound came from inside, he tried the handle. The door was locked.

'It seems you were right. It is closed up. But someone's keeping an eye on the place.'

'How do you know?'

'That goat has been milked today.' He pointed towards a nanny goat standing tethered under a tree, chewing and staring at them with indifferent yellow eyes.

A moment later they heard a distant voice calling something Cressy couldn't make out.

'Someone's coming,' said Nicolas. 'They must have seen us arriving from somewhere higher up the hill. This terrain might seem deserted but there's always someone about. No one comes or goes without being noticed.'

They did not have long to wait before a small portly woman came hurrying round the side of the house. At the sight of Nicolas she broke into a torrent of Mallorquin, at the same time producing a large old-fashioned iron key from the pocket of the pinafore she was wearing over her dress.

When she finally paused for breath, Nicolas said, 'This is Senora Guillot, who telephoned the bad news. I'll explain to her who you are.'

When he had done this, the Spanish woman smiled and offered Cressy her hand. But, having observed the niceties, she turned back to him, clearly expressing concern.

'She thinks, as I did at first, that you're far too young to deal with the situation. She says Miss Dexter is an obstinate woman who needs someone more authoritative to take control,' said Nicolas.

'Please tell her I have a lot of experience in dealing with old and sick people,' Cressy said firmly. 'When exactly did the accident happen? Could she tell us as much as she knows? Perhaps while you're talking I could take a look inside.' She indicated the key and then touched her chest and pointed at the house.

Instead of handing it over, the Spanish woman mimed that the lock wasn't easy to open. It took several attempts, accompanied by muttered imprecations, before she got it to work and stepped inside.

Cressy had already noticed that the electricity poles along the side of the minor road didn't branch off up this lane. If there was no electricity there wouldn't be mains, drainage or any other modern amenities.

As she followed the *senora* inside she noticed that the place had the musty odour of neglect. Even before one pair of shutters was thrown open, the sun coming in through the door showed it was a long time since the floor had been swept. More light revealed more disorder: a wind-blown film of

powdered earth lying thickly on all horizontal surfaces and clutter everywhere. Dusty cobwebs, made by long-dead spiders, draped the rafters supporting the upper floor, which was reached by an unrailed staircase in a corner of the living room.

While the others talked Cressy took in the signs of a solitary life which perhaps had never been orderly and now had descended into squalor. She had had to deal with it before—visiting old men and women who had either given up on the effort or become too infirm to cope.

Presently Nicolas said, 'The accident happened early on Sunday morning. The old lady fell down the stairs, breaking her wrist and her thigh. She might have lain here till she died, but luckily the noise made by the goat, which is milked morning and evening, made Senora Guillot realise something was wrong. Equally luckily, she had a nephew visiting her who did his military service in the Cruz Roja—the Red Cross. So he knew what to do until the ambulance arrived. He was also bright enough to search for some clue to the whereabouts of Miss Dexter's next of kin. He didn't have far to look—there was an envelope nailed to the wall above her bed with "Instructions in the event of my death" written on it in Spanish. Inside was your family's London telephone number.'

The *senora* was mounting the stairs, beckoning them to follow her.

'What about water and sewage?' Cressy asked over her shoulder as Nicolas followed her up. 'Will there be a well?'

'If not there'll be a *cisterna*—an underground water store. Sewage will be dealt with by a *pozo negro*, a cesspool. Depending on its construction, it will either be pumped out into a tanker or will drain itself.' After a pause, he added, 'You can't stay here, that's for sure. The place is a dump.'

'It only needs a good spring clean,' Cressy said cheerfully. 'I've dealt with a lot worse in London.'

The bedroom, when light had been admitted, revealed itself as even more chaotic than the room below. Here there were signs that when the island had rain the roof leaked. An array of old family photographs, some in tarnished

silver frames, stood on top of a chest of drawers: sepia prints of people in the clothes of the Twenties and earlier stood behind black and white snaps of more recent vintage. There was one of Cressy and her family, taken about nine years ago.

But she didn't point it out to Nicolas, partly because she had looked a mess at that age and partly in case he might recognise her mother.

Fortunately most of his attention was given to Senora Guillot, who was still chattering nineteen to the dozen.

It wasn't until they were driving away that he gave Cressy a condensed version of the little woman's outpourings.

'She's been worried about the old lady living there alone for a couple of years. She would have been glad to do some cleaning and cooking for her, but Miss Dexter wouldn't hear of it. She kept herself to herself. The only time she was seen was on market day in Pollensa, but she only went to buy provisions, not to socialise with other expatriates. She speaks fluent Spanish and has nothing to do with the foreign community.'

As they came to the road Cressy said, 'Pollensa's quite near, I gather. Will there be a car-hire firm there?'

'Yes, but if you're going to suggest that I run you over there and leave you to tackle this mess on your own, forget it. We'll go back to my place to freshen up before going to the hospital together. This is a situation where you need local advice. You can't handle it on your own any more than a Spanish girl with no English could cope with a similar situation in England.'

Cressy could tell from his tone that he would ignore her protests. He had made up his mind to be helpful and that was that.

Her sisters, accustomed to giving instructions rather than taking them, would undoubtedly have resented having their wishes overridden in that authoritative voice. It didn't worry Cressy. She knew he was absolutely right. She *did* need his help and was deeply grateful he was prepared to give it.

'Thank you,' she said warmly. 'Let's hope if a Spanish girl ever finds herself in this sort of situation she'll meet an Englishman who'll be as obliging as you are.'

The glance he shot at her held a gleam of amusement. 'You speak as if I were Spanish.'

'As you live here, I assumed you felt more Spanish than English.'

'I live here because I have a house here...and I prefer the climate. I don't feel Spanish or English. My roots here were broken when I was sent away to school. Now I feel comfortable in most places. If I hadn't been left Ca'n Llorenc, my base would have been a very small flat in London I share with a guy who's hardly ever in it. We were at school together, and he now earns his living as an expedition guide.'

She didn't ask where it was because then he might ask her where she lived. If he knew London well her answer might give the game away. Her parents lived close to the Houses of Parliament, in a neighbourhood occupied almost exclusively by MPs.

To divert the conversation into a safer channel, she said, 'Does the island have a good medical service?'

'I can't answer that. I've never needed to use it and fortunately no one at Ca'n Llorenc has had any illnesses or accidents that I can remember. When they have minor aches and pains they consult a pharmacist in Pollensa. It's cheaper and quicker than going to a doctor. But I can make some enquiries.'

'I was thinking it might be better to have Aunt Kate flown back to England.'

'It would be very expensive. She's unlikely to have any medical insurance to cover repatriation by air.'

'Most unlikely!' Cressy agreed, remembering the state of the cottage. 'But I'm sure my father will pay for whatever is necessary. On the other hand, she may be receiving first-class treatment where she is.'

By this time they were re-entering the gateway of Ca'n Llorenc. As they entered the courtyard for the second time Cressy's anxiety about her aged relative was temporarily supplanted by intense curiosity to see how Nicolas lived.

The door was open and he ushered her through it, not into a hall but into an enormous room with another large double door on the far side of it. Like the living room at Miss Dexter's cottage, this much grander room also had a bare stone staircase in one corner. But here the stairs were protected by a rail on one side and a thick black rope attached to the wall on the other.

The next thing to catch her eye was the painting on the chimney-breast of the huge fireplace, at present occupied by a large wicker basket crammed with a mass of dried flowers. With their small mustard-coloured heads, they looked like some kind of herb.

'What a wonderful picture,' said Cressy, moving towards it.

As she gazed at the deep blue mountain peaks in the background, and the pink and white blossom on the trees in the foreground, Nicolas, standing behind her, said, 'It's called *Noria entre Almendros*, which means "noria among almond trees". A noria is a water wheel, worked by a donkey plodding round in a circle, with buckets attached to the rim for raising water from a well into irrigation canals. You saw them all over Spain when I was a child. They must have been introduced by the Moors because the name comes from the Arabic ⁴⁴*na'ara*" which means to creak.'

'Who is the painting by?' asked Cressy.

'An artist born in Pollensa called Dionfs Bennassar. Here's his signature.' Nicolas pointed to the left-hand corner where the painting was signed in red.

She said, 'The way the blossom is painted reminds me of Samuel Palmer. He painted my favourite picture, *The Magic Apple Tree*'

'I like that picture too,' said Nicolas. 'I first saw it in the Fitzwilliam Museum when I was at Cambridge.'

'At the university?'

'Yes. I didn't really want to spend three years there— it's viciously cold in winter—but it seemed a good idea to have a geography degree to fall back on if I couldn't earn a living as a travel writer.' He moved away and, raising his voice, called, 'Catalina.'

Almost at once the woman Cressy had glimpsed earlier came from a room leading off the main room.

Nicolas introduced her and, like Senora Guillot, she smiled and shook hands. But behind the show of friendliness Cressy sensed she was being subjected to a critical appraisal.

'Catalina will show you a bathroom where you can have a shower before we go to the hospital. I need to get into clean clothes, and I also have some telephone calls to make. I'll be down in forty minutes,' said Nicolas. 'If you're ready sooner Catalina will bring you tea or a cold drink out on the terrace.' He gestured towards the door at the rear of the house, then translated all this into Mallorquin for the housekeeper's benefit.

A few minutes later, mounting the stairs behind her, Cressy smiled to herself at the memory of her dismay when the travel agent had said there were no economy seats left on the flight to Palma. For, although all her expenses were being paid by her father, she had learnt thrift from Maggie and never liked wasting money.

However, as things had turned out, being obliged to travel more expensively had actually been a stroke of luck. If she hadn't met Nicolas it would have been a major problem to locate her great-aunt's cottage, let alone find out what had happened and discover Miss Dexter's present whereabouts.

The window of the bathroom where Catalina left her overlooked the roof of a single-storey part of the building. Patches of golden lichen spattered the weathered clay tiles, and a creeper with orange flowers had climbed the wall at the end of it and was spreading up the gable of another wing of the building.

When Cressy started running a bath she found that almost boiling water gushed from the hot tap with a vigour suggesting that, in matters of mod cons, Ca'n Llorenc was at the opposite end of the spectrum from Miss Dexter's primitive living quarters.

Having adjusted the flow to lukewarm, Cressy added some bath oil from a selection of toiletries Catalina had indicated were for visitors' use.

While the bath filled she sat on the window ledge and thought how lovely it must be to live here, surrounded by beauty and peace, instead of in noisy, fume-ridden central London.

* * *

In his bathroom, Nicolas had stripped off and was enjoying a shower. After a long time away, it was always good to come back to the creature comforts missing from most of his trips. When he had cleaned up and changed, he intended to make some enquiries about where an elderly lady would get the best medical care which wouldn't involve her great-niece helping to nurse her.

In some Spanish hospitals, patients were fed, washed and watched over by their mothers, daughters or other close female relations. The hospital staff provided medical care only. But he had other plans for Cressy, as she'd said she was called.

Usually, Catalina being an excellent cook, he would dine at home on his first night back. Then, having already made some duty calls to his Mallorquin relations on the island, he would ring one of several numbers in the address book on his desk.

They were the telephone numbers of women who had come to the island as wives but had since been discarded in favour of younger models. It was something which happened quite frequently in the various groups of high-living foreigners who frequented the small resorts. As a result, the island was littered with 'thirty-somethings' and 'forty-somethings' on the lookout for a man—either a replacement meal-ticket or a lover. It meant that anyone who had had to batten down his sex drive for weeks or months had no

problem in finding someone to let off steam with if that was what was required.

This time, by a stroke of luck, it looked as if he wouldn't even have to make a phone call. Someone far more alluring than any of his usual bed partners had turned up. Cressy was the most delectable creature he had seen in a long time. Far more attractive than any of the women in his address book.

Luckily she wasn't as young as he had first thought.

As far as he was concerned, girls with no previous experience were like wild flowers. Not for picking. But at twenty-three Cressy had to be a lot more savvy than she looked. The thought of her lying in the bath on the other side of the house was a turn-on. He wished he had her here with him now, that gorgeous Amazonian body sleek and slippery against his.

Taking Cressy to bed would be the perfect reward for four months' celibacy, he thought with a growl of anticipation.

Cressy was drying herself on a fluffy white bath-sheet. Then, as there was plenty of time, she massaged her legs with an after-bath lotion scented with the same subtle fragrance as the bath oil.

She was humming to herself, her spirits unaccountably buoyant in spite of her concern about her great-aunt's injuries, when she remembered something that instantly changed her mood.

Nicolas's behaviour wasn't prompted by disinterested kindness; she mustn't forget that he had an ulterior motive. Aunt Kate, in her day, had been as famous as Germaine Greer and Gloria Steinem. He was hoping the end product of being helpful to Cressy would be an exclusive interview with her, like the profile of Edward James which had been his first journalistic coup and the foundation of his career.

Still in her jeans, but wearing a clean white T-shirt, she went downstairs and outside onto the terrace, and found Catalina there before her. The

housekeeper was transferring an earthenware jug and two tall glasses from a tray to a large low table surrounded by comfortable chairs.

'Limonada, senorita.'

'Muchas gracias, senora.'

This, plus hello and goodbye, was the limit of Cressy's Spanish.

The housekeeper filled a glass with the juice and then, using a ladle which hooked on the side of the jug, fished for a couple of ice cubes to drop in the glass. Then she left Cressy on her own.

The terrace was paved with clay tiles in the same mellow terracotta colours as the Roman tiles on the roof. Here and there a few had been removed to make a space for a lemon tree to grow. It must have been from one of these trees that Catalina had picked the fruit whose chilled juice now left its tangy freshness on Cressy's tongue.

Above her, forming a canopy, grew an enormous vine dripping bunches of half-ripened green grapes from a tangle of leafy branches. In the blazing light of a Majorcan afternoon it was heaven to sit in the shade, sipping freshly made lemonade and gazing at the haze- veiled mountains.

Footsteps on the stone stairs announced the arrival of her host. But when he came into view he was not the long-haired, heavy-booted traveller whose back-view she had admired at Gatwick airport.

'You've cut off your hair!' she exclaimed.

He laughed, showing excellent teeth. 'I don't wear it long at home, only in places where there aren't any barbers. Tomorrow I'll have it cut properly, but this will do for tonight.'

Because it was naturally curly—with a looser curl than a perm gave—no one would have guessed he had cropped it himself. It was the kind of hair which, like animals' fur and birds' plumage, would always spring back into place after a vigorous shake. The silver climber on his ear had also disappeared,

she saw. He was wearing a shirt of dark blue and white striped cotton and a pair of dark jeans. When he sat down and crossed his long legs, she noticed that his ankles were bare and that his trekking boots had given way to a pair of dark brown deck shoes.

He took a long swig from his glass. 'Mmm...Catalina makes great lemonade. Felio has some bee-hives in the hills, where the wild thyme grows. Lemonade sweetened with honey tastes better than stuff made with sugar.'

He looked her over, his eyes taking in, but not lingering on the curves defined by the T-shirt. 'You look very cool and fresh. I've told Catalina to make up a bed for you.'

'But I can't stay here,' she protested.

'Yes, you can. You have no alternative. It's not easy finding a room in the big hotels. They're all full of package tourists. There are *hostals* in most of the towns but, though clean, they're really intended for travelling salesmen. They can be very noisy in summertime, when street life goes on till the small hours. You'll sleep far more soundly out here in the country.'

He made it difficult to refuse, and part of her didn't want to. Yet, mindful of the awful warnings drummed into her during her teens, she also felt faintly uneasy.

He was a well-known writer and, judging by this house and the estate surrounding it, his forebears had been people of standing on the island. But that didn't alter the fact that he was a stranger, and bad things had happened to girls who placed too much trust in strange men.

She didn't really suspect him of being a psychopath who during the night might rape her and throw her down a well, his faithful retainers keeping their mouths shut about her unexplained disappearance out of misguided loyalty to his family. That was the kind of scenario only dear old Maggie would envisage! But what if he just made a pass? Some men felt entitled to sex after taking a girl out to dinner, going to a lot less trouble than Nicolas had for her. If he made a pass, how would she handle it?

CHAPTER THREE

PERHAPS I can stay at the hospital,' Cressy suggested. 'Most hospitals have rooms where close relations can sleep when people are critically ill. A broken thigh isn't critical, but it's pretty serious when it happens to someone of Aunt Kate's age. And she must have been in shock when they found her if she'd been lying there some time.'

Nicolas glanced at his watch. After draining his glass, he said, 'Let's go and find out exactly what the situation is, shall we?'

Cressy had repacked her rucksack, with the discarded shirt in a plastic bag to be washed at the first opportunity. She had left the rucksack at the bottom of the stairs. As she picked it up and slung it over one shoulder she noticed that near the terrace door was a large antique table piled with stacks of old and new books. A title which caught her eye was *The Mayan Prophecies: Unlocking the Secrets of a Lost Civilisation*. Another was *The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture*.

It reactivated her uncertainty about being able to rebuff any sexual advances Nicolas might make without offending him. In the past she had fended men off without caring if they took umbrage. She had always tried to do it tactfully, unless they had been so crass that they hadn't deserved to have their feelings respected. But with Nicolas it was different. She didn't want to go to bed with him—not at this stage, anyway—but nor did she want to annoy him.

Whether or not he was using her, she liked him and wanted to know him better.

As he stood aside for her to pass through the courtyard door ahead of him she was surprised to see the Range Rover had gone. In its place stood a pale blue open-topped sports car, obviously many years old but still in gleaming condition.

'This was my father's car, and I still use it when I'm here and not driving on country tracks,' Nicolas explained, opening the passenger door for her. As

she un- slung her pack he took it from her and put it in the back. 'You'll need a scarf over your hair. There's one in the glove compartment.'

The scarf was a long length of filmy hand-sewn silk chiffon in a progression of colours from dark purple through violet to pearl-grey. As Cressy draped it over her hair and anchored it round her throat she smelt the lingering aroma of a sophisticated scent. She wondered which of his girlfriends had left the scarf behind and, for some reason, never retrieved it. Perhaps they had had a row. Perhaps he had tired of her. Perhaps she had wanted a lover who was always around, not at the ends of the earth.

'What is this car?' she asked as Nicolas slid in beside her.

'It's a 1934 Bentley, the twin of one ordered by Prince Bira, the Prince of Siam—now Thailand—who was an ace racing-driver. He had his painted pale blue—the colour matched to a dance frock worn by a Danish girlfriend. The first owner of this preferred dark green. My father bought it for eight hundred and fifty pounds in 1966, the year before he was killed. A few years ago the Prince's Bentley came up for auction in London. It fetched a hundred thousand pounds, even though it no longer had its original interior, as this does.'

'How romantic...to have the car painted to match his girlfriend's dress. Did he marry her?'

'I don't know. His brother, Prince Chula, married an English girl. But Bira was more of a playboy. He gambled at Monte Carlo and liked going to race meetings. He was also a rather good sculptor.'

As he spoke Nicolas produced two pairs of goggles, and handed one to her.

'It's just as well to wear these. A piece of grit in one's eye is no joke.'

With his eyes—his dominant feature—reduced to a deep blue gleam behind the tinted glass, the strong bones of his face became even more striking. The cheekbones, the chin, the wide mouth all hinted at reckless courage and a powerful lust for life.

The car had been fitted with seat belts, which it wouldn't have had originally. As she fastened the clip, Cressy hoped she wasn't about to be treated to a macho display of fast driving. She didn't like high speeds, and once or twice when she was younger had had to sit gritting her teeth while boyfriends showed off.

However, only a maniac would have driven at speed on this drive, or on the minor roads. Even when they were on the main road Nicolas didn't seem inclined to spend the journey overtaking everything in sight. Cressy relaxed.

Having found a space in the hospital's car park, Nicolas said, 'I'll wait for you in the reception area. I hope to meet Miss Dexter later, when she's better. But not yet. In any case I doubt if they'll allow anyone but a blood relation to see her.'

This was a relief to Cressy because it meant she could continue to keep her real surname from him. The harmless masquerade of being Cressy Dexter, great-niece to a woman whose famous past was too far behind her for most people to remember it, was extraordinarily restful after spending her life in the shadow of Virginia Vale MP and her almost equally high-profile elder daughters.

'I think you'll find the receptionist speaks English,' said Nicolas as they walked towards the building. 'Most Mallorquins who have to deal with foreigners do speak some English and German. But if you have any difficulties I'll be on hand.'

'I'll try not to keep you hanging about too long.'

'Don't worry about me. I'll find someone to fill me in on what's been happening on the island in my absence.'

Sending Cressy to the reception desk on her own was a deliberate strategy on Nicolas's part. He was curious to see how she handled the situation. He

didn't mind helping people, provided they also helped themselves and didn't expect to be nannied. He had no time for helpless females, however luscious. Nor had he patience with featherbrains. In his view, to be truly attractive, a woman must be able to stand on her own feet and make reasonably intelligent conversation between sessions in bed.

Stationing himself in a place where he could watch her face as she joined two other people awaiting attention, he was pleased to see that, when her turn came, she prefaced her enquiry by smiling and saying 'good morning' in Spanish. That it was now late afternoon didn't matter. She was showing the right spirit. Too often foreigners neglected the basic courtesies and then complained to each other that the locals were unfriendly.

Watching Cressy's exchange with the receptionist, Nicolas liked what he saw. He was beginning to feel this was going to be a very pleasant interlude on all counts. Presently he would have to shut himself away and concentrate on his next book. But that could wait for a couple of weeks. Meanwhile he intended to make the most of this unexpected gift from the gods.

Before Cressy was allowed to see her father's aunt, she was taken to the office of a middle-aged woman doctor who shook hands and invited her to sit down.

'Are you Miss Dexter's only relation?' she asked, raising her eyebrows.

'No, but I'm the only one who was able to come as soon as we heard the news. How is my great-aunt, Doctor?'

'She is a very sick woman. Her body is extremely frail, but she has a very strong will and is determined to recover. I thought at first she suffered from osteoporosis—the crumbling of the bones which afflicts many elderly women. But now it seems her condition may be the result of not bothering to eat enough. She's too old to live by herself. She needs to have the love and support of her family,' the doctor said, her tone critical.

Cressy was aware that in Spain family ties were stronger than in her own country. She felt guilty about her share of her family's neglect of Miss Dexter. Her parents and sisters were busier than her. She could have made time to write letters, to give as much thought to her own elderly relation as to those she met in her job.

'I know...and as soon as she's better we'll try to persuade her to come back to England,' she said. 'Perhaps she could live at my parents' weekend place, or at any rate somewhere near.'

'I doubt if she will agree to that,' the doctor said dryly. 'She tells me she couldn't endure the climate in England. In her opinion, your country is not what it was. She prefers Spain.'

'Well, she's entitled to her views, but I think England's a wonderful country,' Cressy said stoutly. 'Last year I spent my holiday walking up the centre of England, and in a different way it's just as beautiful as this lovely island. All the people I met were nice, too.'

The doctor's manner warmed a little. 'I'm sure they were. I have enjoyed several holidays in England. Come, I'll take you to see your relative. I must warn you, she may not show that she's pleased to see you. She is not an easy personality.'

Cressy had been expecting her great-aunt to be an older version of the dominating, colourful woman she remembered from long ago. But the white-haired, emaciated figure who lay in a high white bed in a room at the end of the corridor was unrecognisable as the person she remembered.

As they entered she appeared to be sleeping. But, when the doctor said her name quietly, her eyelids snapped open and she glared. When she spoke, it was in Spanish. And although Cressy couldn't understand the words she guessed it was something like, What now? Can't I have a moment's peace?

'You have a visitor, Miss Dexter,' the doctor told her, in English. 'This young lady tells me she is a member of your family. I will leave you together.'

Cressy moved forward to stand by the side of the bed. 'Hello, Aunt Kate. Do you remember me?'

'Of course I remember you, Cressida...the youngest of Paul's three girls. The last time we met, you had a pet mouse called Moonshine. There's nothing wrong with my mind. It's only my leg which has gone phut. I've still got all my marbles.'

This somewhat indignant reply made it clear that while Miss Dexter had altered physically she had not lost the trenchant manner which had quelled even Cressy's mother.

'Pull up a chair,' she instructed. 'Why have they sent you here? Why didn't Paul come himself?'

When Cressy returned to the lobby, Nicolas saw her coming and rose to his feet with an enquiring lift of his straight black eyebrows.

Cressy rolled her eyes and pretended to totter for a few steps. 'Wow! Have I been put through the wringer?'

'We'll go and have a restorative coffee somewhere.' He turned to say a courteous goodbye to the man with whom he had been in conversation. Then, turning back to Cressy, he took her lightly by the elbow and steered her towards the exit.

'What happened? Wasn't Miss Dexter pleased to see you?'

'I think so—yes. But it was like being grilled by an interrogator. She has an intimidating manner. The last time I saw her she didn't pay much attention to me. This time I got the full force of her rather abrasive personality.'

'I'm sure she took to you,' he said, looking down at her. 'Who wouldn't? You're very engaging.' His fingers moved caressingly on her elbow.

Having put on a show of being weak at the knees moments earlier, Cressy now felt the real thing. But this time she kept it hidden. Oh, God, he was dangerously attractive. If there was wine with dinner tonight, as there almost certainly would be, she would have to be careful not to drink much. He could make her insides turn to jelly when she was sober. With a few glasses of wine inside her she would be a sitting duck.

'What about her physical condition?' asked Nicolas, on the way to the car.

Cressy recounted what the doctor had said, adding, 'I think Kate—as she's told me to call her—is in considerable pain. She's refusing to take any painkillers or sedatives. She doesn't want to be "doped to the eyeballs", as she puts it. But they may be giving her something to dull the pain through the drip she's on, although they've told her it's only glucose.'

Nicolas continued to hold her elbow until he opened the car door for her. 'Did you tell her you'd been to the house and talked to her neighbour?' he asked.

'Yes. I explained about meeting you on the plane, and how helpful you'd been.'

'Did you tell her you were staying at my place?' he asked.

'She didn't ask about that—I should think her house would make it clear that she's not like most people's great-aunts. There's nothing conventional about her. She wouldn't feel it her duty to worry about my accommodation. She would take it for granted that I could fend for myself.'

By now he was in the driving seat. But instead of starting the engine he turned his body towards her, resting his forearm on the back of her seat.

'Are you cast from the same mould as she is? You don't look the stalwart type who doesn't need a man to fend for her.'

'It depends on the circumstances,' said Cressy. 'I can fend for myself in most ways, but I have to admit if a madman with an axe suddenly burst from those bushes, I would expect you to defend me. I think most women would.'

'I'd do my best,' he said, smiling. 'But for my part I'd like to feel that while I was grappling with him you'd be looking round for a weapon, not screaming or having hysterics.'

'I don't *think* I'd go to pieces. But how can one tell till it happens?'

'I'm prepared to take you on trust.' He straightened to switch on the engine and backed the car out of its space.

But can I take *you* on trust? Cressy asked herself, watching his long shapely fingers handling the wheel.

They had coffee in a pavement cafe where she was aware that most of the women present were appraising her companion. And probably wondering what he was doing with a strapping great foreign girl when he could have been escorting a more delicate Spanish beauty. There were a lot of them about—lovely girls with dark hair and eyes, and willowy figures.

'I ought to call home,' she said. 'Will there be a pay- phone inside?'

'Yes, but you won't be able to hear yourself speak with the TV going full blast and everyone talking at the top of their voices. Also, Spanish pay-phones are designed to swallow money the way harbour cats gulp down scraps. Why not call home when we get back?'

'Only if you'll promise to let me pay you for the call.'

'If you insist.'

'I do. Already I feel very beholden to you.'

'There's no need. You're actually doing me a favour.'

'I don't understand?'

'It's a long time since I had any female companionship. I hadn't expected to find myself sitting here with a beautiful woman beside me so soon after my arrival.'

The way he talked, she could almost believe she *was* beautiful. But she knew it had to be a line. She would only ever be a beauty to a man who loved her, and she couldn't delude herself that someone like Nicolas had fallen in love at first sight. Neither had she...had she? No, she hadn't. Definitely she hadn't. To love a man you had to know him. What she felt was merely a violent attraction—nature attempting to undermine the decision she had made, and kept, not to become like her sisters. Not to treat sex the way men did, as if it were no more important than a slap-up meal or a movie, or any of life's passing pleasures.

'Nicolas!'

He rose to his feet as an elegant woman in white greeted him with a flood of Spanish.

He responded in English, introducing her to Cressy. Her name was Elena something. When Cressy stood up to shake hands, their eyes were more or less level because of Elena's high heels.

'Will you join us?' Nicolas invited.

'I can't. I have an appointment. I'm late already. *'Dios.'* With a flicker of perfectly manicured fingers she smiled into his eyes, nodded briefly at Cressy and went on her way, leaving a waft of her scent lingering on the air.

Was she the owner of the scarf? Cressy couldn't be sure.

Before they left town, Nicolas had some shopping to do.

'I have a very good bookseller who knows what interests me and orders books I might otherwise miss,' he explained. 'I'm probably his best customer,

so if there's something in his selection that I don't want he's happy to put it into stock.'

The welcome Nicolas received when they reached the shop made it clear he was liked for himself as well as for his custom. As he checked through the books selected for him in a back room she could see from the jackets that many were scholarly works which would be heavy going for her, even if she could read Spanish.

She was an avid reader, but not of the serious stuff the rest of her family read and discussed. She had lowbrow tastes which, if the others noticed her with her nose in a popular novel, would make them exclaim, 'How can you waste your time on that trivia, Cressy?'

'I'm enjoying it,' she would say sheepishly, making the others sigh and shake their heads, having long given up any serious attempts to make something of her.

At twenty-three it was too late. She was never going to amount to anything. The truth was she didn't want to be somebody. She was content to remain a happy-go-lucky nobody. In any other family her lack of ambition wouldn't matter, or not as much. But in hers, where everyone else was outstandingly gifted and strongly motivated, it was uncomfortable to be the only one without a brilliant brain.

While Nicolas was intent on the books she couldn't help wondering if, should they be stuck in a situation where there was only the two of them—say, marooned on a desert island—he would quickly get bored with her conversationally. But on a desert island all the things she was good at—what her family teasingly called 'Cressy's Girl Guide skills'—would be particularly useful. So perhaps her practical abilities would compensate for her intellectual shortcomings.

The thought of being alone with Nicolas—alone in a situation which might go on for a long time—sent a curious shiver through her.

He startled her out of her daydream by suddenly looking up and saying, 'This is very boring for you, Cressy. I shan't be much longer.'

'I don't mind in the least,' she assured him. 'I've got plenty to think about.'

She felt guilty that she hadn't been thinking about what should have been on her mind—Kate's situation.

When they returned to the house, Nicolas said, 'Would you like to have a swim?'

'In the sea?'

"No, in the pool."

She hadn't realised Ca'n Llorenc had one. 'I didn't bring a swimsuit,' she said regretfully.

'No problem. There are several spare suits in the women's changing room. I'm sure one of them will fit you. This way.'

The swimming pool was not visible from the terrace because it was in a walled enclosure beside an enormous barn, its walls thickly clad with purple bougainvillea and pale blue plumbago.

'This was my mother's workplace,' said Nicolas, pausing by the entrance to the barn. 'She was, and is, very artistic. She could have been a professional painter if she had concentrated on it. But she didn't have the necessary dedication. She allowed her creative energy to be diffused by the other claims on her time...her household, her family and friends, a lot of lame ducks and good causes. It's impossible to say whether she could have been an important artist, but she's certainly greatly loved by everyone who knows her. That's not a common achievement.'

'Are there any of her paintings in the house?' Cressy asked, looking round the cool, dim interior of the barn. Now, apparently, it was used for large parties. There were several massive country tables arranged in a long row, with cushioned wooden benches on either side and, at one end, a smoke-blackened chimney over a barbecue grill.

'They're in my workroom,' he said. 'I'll show you later. We'll have our pre-dinner drinks there.'

Beyond the shallow end of the large pool was a seating area with sun umbrellas over tables and lots of chairs and loungers. Behind it was a stone building, largely overgrown with flowering creepers, and two doors, each with a window beside it.

These were the changing rooms. In the women's room, Cressy found shelves stacked with cornflower- blue pool towels and, hanging on hooks, half a dozen swimsuits ranging from an outsize floral number with reinforced cups to the skimpiest possible bikini. At the back of the changing room was a shower compartment and a lavatory.

Cressy undressed and selected a stretch seersucker one-piece in green and white stripes. Although her face, neck and forearms and part of her legs were still lightly browned from her walking holiday, she was conscious that the rest of her was an unattractive off-white.

Before she was ready she heard the splash of Nicolas entering the pool. When she opened the door he was still under the water, a long, dark shape gliding towards the deep end. He surfaced like a seal, giving his head a quick shake which sent dozens of bright drops flying from his wet head like a halo of diamonds.

Then, turning, he saw her stepping into the tray of the poolside shower.

'Hang on a minute, Cressy.'

Puzzled, she watched him come back, swimming a powerful crawl which, although the pool was a long one, brought him back to the shallows in less than thirty seconds. As he stood up the water streamed off a body so beautifully structured that she caught her breath. He was built like a merman, broad shoulders tapering to a lean waist and a midriff as flat and taut as a teenage boy's. Except for professional athletes, she had never seen anyone in their thirties who had kept that shape. But then all her sisters' lovers had been City types, bankers and brokers, who, if they exercised at all, did it in a gym— not by leading a tough outdoor life as this man

did. Even at this time of day newcomers can get burnt, especially when they're as fair-skinned as you are,' said Nicolas. Til get you some factor fifteen sun-cream.'

He stepped past her, giving her a brief, breathtaking view of the back muscles which had propelled him through the water.

Reappearing with a tube of sun-cream in his hand, he said, Turn round, I'll do your back for you. That's the part that's exposed when you're swimming.'

Cressy turned, automatically putting up her hands to hold her hair out of the way. Many times in the past, on holidays, her sisters or girlfriends had sun-oiled her back for her. But it was the first time a man had done it.

She felt a splotch of cream being squeezed between her shoulderblades. Then four cool fingertips began to spread it over her skin. Clearly this was a service Nicolas had performed many times. He must have tossed the tube onto a nearby lounge because presently he used his other hand to lift each of her shoulder straps and cream underneath them. That done, he did the same with the edges of the top of the swimsuit, taking the cream a couple of centimetres underneath where the fabric would lie when he replaced it.

The slow sweep of his middle finger down the side of her back, then in a U-curve sweeping below her waistline and up the other side, had the same effect on Cressy as the time when a man who had kissed her, unexpectedly and not unpleasantly, had then suddenly thrust his fingers through the gap between the buttons of her shirt to touch her breast. For a second his touch had excited her, and then she had pushed him away with a vigour he hadn't expected. Oddly, although it was less intimate, the effect of Nicolas's touch was actually more exciting and sensuous. It was all she could do not to gasp aloud at the strong reaction it sent thrilling through her.

'There you are. Now, when you've done your front, you can sunbathe for up to half an hour if you want.'

'Thank you.' She took the tube he handed her, hoping he couldn't sense the turmoil going on inside her.

But it seemed that he couldn't, because he dived back in the pool and headed for the deep end.

Nicolas had plunged back into the pool because touching her had turned him on, and she wasn't the kind of girl he could make love to there and then without any romantic preliminaries to put her in the mood.

Actually, she was half in the mood already. He had felt her quiver when his finger crossed her spine and there had been other tell-tale signs of excitement, as well as her flushed face, when she had turned round to take the sun-cream from him.

He had known a lot of women and he was fairly sure that, behind the facade of not being very sure of herself but as friendly as a puppy, Cressy had the potential to be hot stuff in bed.

He had noticed her looking daunted by Elena's glamour. Elena pretended to be a siren but, like many sexy- looking women, when it came to the crunch she closed her eyes and thought of Spain. Cressy, once she overcame her inhibitions, would be far more passionate. Later tonight, when he turned out the downstairs lights and took her upstairs, he hoped to be close to the point when she would be as ready and eager to make love as he was.

'We'll have dinner early tonight, because you aren't used to Spanish meal times and I've been living with people who get up at sunrise and go to bed at sunset,' said Nicolas as Cressy came out of the pool and wrapped a towel round herself.

He had left the water before her and was now stretched on a lounge with a glass of what might be iced water or gin and tonic at his elbow.

He sprang up. 'What can I get you to drink?'

'Water, please.'

She was lying on a lounge with the back propped at forty-five degrees when he returned with a tall glass. All the lounges had towelling covers to match the pool towels.

'You need to drink a lot of water here when the weather's hot. You're not a vegetarian, are you?'

She shook her head. 'Are you?'

'No, but I'm not a carnivore like the Argentinians, who practically live on huge steaks. A lot of my friends in London are halfway veggies, and a few eat nothing but macrobiotic food. Tonight Catalina is cooking fish.'

Somewhere nearby a telephone rang. Nicolas rose and disappeared into the barn. A few minutes later he stood in the doorway and said, 'It's my editor calling from London. I'll talk to him from my workroom. Would you mind listening in till you hear me speaking to him, and then replacing the receiver?'

As he handed it over, he said, 'If I don't come back, come up to my room at seven. It's directly opposite the top of the stairs. Your room is the one you went through to the bathroom you used earlier.'

With only half an hour left in which to make herself presentable, Cressy opened the shutters in her room and leaned out to see if there were hooks on the wall to hold them in place. Not that it looked as if a wind might blow up. The sun was sinking in a clear flamingo-coloured sky which promised another cloudless day tomorrow.

Although the contents of her pack did include a skirt and a top to wear if she had to go somewhere where jeans and shorts wouldn't be acceptable, she decided not to wear them tonight. Both would need pressing, and Catalina would be busy preparing the evening meal and not want to be bothered with a request for the ironing board. Instead Cressy washed her hair with the bath's shower attachment and blow-dried it with the dryer thoughtfully provided by whoever had equipped the bedroom—presumably Nicolas's

mother. Before leaving the room, she hooked a pair of little silver acorns through her ears.

The door of Nicolas's room was already wide open, but she tapped on the heavy dark wood before crossing the threshold in response to his 'Come in.'

The room was a very large one, and the first thing she noticed was that the walls were hidden by crowded bookshelves and many paintings hanging almost frame to frame. One end of the room was a working area, with a PC on a wide desk, filing cabinets and a fax machine. At the other end of the room were comfortable chairs, some sophisticated equipment for playing music and a king-size bed.

It was an unusual bed, the tall headboard and the footboard both stained a soft blue-green colour and embellished with fanciful birds with flowers in their beaks. The style in which they were painted looked more Scandinavian than Spanish. Perhaps it had been a present from Nicolas's English father to his Mallorquin bride, or perhaps it owed its decoration to a local craftsman who had been away from the island and had copied it from a bed seen on his travels.

Although she was interested in its history, Cressy didn't enquire. Had it been anywhere else, she would have asked about it. But this was Nicolas's bed, and although at the moment it was covered with a bedspread of heavy dark blue cotton, which set off the yellow birds and the vivid flowers, in her mind's eye she could see him in it, sleeping or reading, his long, lean body naked under the sheet, his tanned shoulders turned to bronze by the light of the reading lamp.

Or the room in darkness except for a shaft of moonlight, and Nicolas making love to someone. Someone who, in a few hours' time, might be herself.

CHAPTER FOUR

'If YOU want to phone home, the phone's over there,' said Nicolas, indicating the desk. 'I'm just going down to refill the ice tub. I shan't be long. I've written the code for England and my number on the telephone pad.'

Predictably, her parents' telephone rang twice and then she heard her father's recorded voice giving the answering machine message.

Prepared for this, she said, 'This is Cressy. Everything's under control. Aunt Kate is in hospital with a broken wrist and thigh, but she's going to be all right. I'm staying at a farmhouse not far from her cottage. If you want to contact me, the number is...' she read it off the pad '...otherwise I'll call you again when I know how long I'm likely to be here. Bye for now.'

The call made, she stayed where she was, looking at the desk where Nicolas wrote his books. Unlike her father and sisters, who were constantly upgrading to the latest state-of-the-art equipment, his PC was nothing spectacular. The most noticeable things on his desk were not electronic gadgets but personal things, including photographs of his parents and grandparents. His own looks were a recognisable combination of his father's rawboned features and light-coloured piercing eyes, and his grandfather's raven colouring.

He came back. 'Did you get through all right?'

She vacated his chair and moved in the direction of a group of paintings. 'I left a message on the machine. They may ring back.'

Inwardly, she doubted it. Her parents rarely dined at home, unless they were entertaining, and wouldn't think it necessary to call unless she failed to make contact for some considerable time. Maggie would be anxious about her, but Maggie wouldn't ring a foreign number for fear of what it might cost. Maggie lived in a time warp and still thought a pound was a lot of money and a hundred pounds a small fortune.

'What would you like to drink? I'm having Campari and soda.'

'Could I have tonic with ice?'

He didn't try to persuade her to have something in it, for which she was grateful. He, too, was still in the clothes he had been wearing earlier. As he filled two tall glasses, he said, 'The area of tan on your legs suggests that some time in the last month you were out of doors in shorts and walking boots. Or is there some other explanation for the paler skin below your calves and at the top of your thighs?'

'You should have been a detective,' Cressy said, smiling. 'Yes, I spent my holiday walking the Pennine Way.'

He came to where she was standing, looking at a picture of a fig tree growing at the side of a white-washed cottage with a neat stack of wood outside it.

'That's one of my mother's paintings. The fig is her favourite tree. This is the same tree in winter, with the shadow of its branches on the wall.'

'Have you inherited her talent?' Cressy asked.

'Unfortunately not. I'd like to be able to sketch, but I have to make do with a camera. Who did you walk the Way with? A boyfriend?'

'No, another girl. Have you done it?'

'A long time ago, when I was an undergraduate. Did you do the whole walk from Edale to Kirk Yetholm?'

'Yes, but we'd had enough by the time we'd finished. How long did it take you?'

'Eleven days. Did you sleep in a tent or stay at youth hostels?'

'At hostels. The weather wasn't ideal. We were held up by several wipe-outs. We didn't like the idea of stumbling into a bog. Somebody told us a man actually died of exposure when his tent blew away in a gale.'

'I read about that—but he had been warned by a shepherd that he ought to turn back,' said Nicolas. 'Have you done much walking, or was that trip a one-off?'

'I've always liked walking. But, if you're a woman, walking in isolated places does make you feel slightly at risk. That's why I persuaded a friend to go with me. But she didn't enjoy it. She was bored. I suppose that wilderness scenery isn't to everyone's taste.'

He had handed over her glass and now he said, '*Salud*,' and drank some of the deep pink liquid in his own.

Cressy echoed the toast and was sipping her tonic when he said, 'Which was your college? Girton... Newnham?'

That she should be taken for a product of either of those illustrious pinnacles of scholarship made Cressy laugh.

'I wasn't *at* Cambridge. I didn't go to any university. I wasn't nearly bright enough.' She chose not to mention that her mother and one of her sisters were Oxford graduates.

He looked at her thoughtfully. 'I'm sure you were, but perhaps not good at exams. If you weren't at Cambridge, how come you know *The Magic Apple Tree*?'

'It caught my eye as a postcard in the shop at the National Gallery. There was something about it which made me want to see the original. So I went to Cambridge for the day. It's such a beautiful town. The ancient buildings...the gardens along the river...the marvellous bookshops. You must have enjoyed your time there.'

'I enjoyed the work. I detested the weather in winter and I didn't much care for the social life. The majority of my contemporaries had their sights set on Parliament, the City or top jobs in the media. I can't relate to those sort of people. They either bore or disgust me.'

Cressy wondered what he would make of her family, and they of him.

'Do you only like people like yourself...adventurers?' she asked.

'Not at all. I like a wide range of people, as long as they're not hell-bent on achieving power for themselves and success for its own sake.'

Having thought about that for some moments, she said, 'I don't think those are great objectives, but is it fair to condemn them when you yourself already have all the trappings of a "top person"? This lovely house...a Bentley and a Range Rover...the means to buy all the books you want.'

Amusement creased Nicolas's cheeks and formed fans alongside his eyes.

'Do you disapprove of inherited privilege, Cressy?'

She shook her head. 'I don't disapprove of anything ...except cruelty.'

To her astonishment he put out his hand and touched her cheek with the back of his forefinger. 'I'm beginning to like you very much. I hope it's mutual.'

She felt something akin to the sensation when he had touched her bare spine—but that had been purely physical, and this was combined with a curious pain in her heart.

'How could I not when you've been so extraordinarily kind to me? Do you have any more of your mother's paintings in here?'

'Yes, several. They're up at that end.' He made a gesture towards the bedroom area.

The two she had already seen had been watercolours. The ones hanging near his bed were larger paintings in oils. One was a study of a fig tree just coming into leaf in the middle of open countryside, with a profusion of wild spring flowers in the foreground and a line of distant mountains in the background.

'That's glorious,' she said sincerely. 'Your mother obviously loves the Majorcan landscape. She must miss the island—does she?'

'I don't think so...not very much. She believes that home is where the heart is, and her heart is wherever her American husband wants to be.'

On the other side of the bed, next to another painting of the island's mountains, was a portrait of Nicolas, painted when his face was still immature. The elements of it were there but not yet fully formed. If his eyes had been dark, he could have been taken for a tousle-haired gypsy boy. They shone out of the boyish brown face as vividly as they did now, but without the rather cynical glint they had acquired in the years since his adolescence.

'I think supper will be ready shortly. Let's go down, shall we?' he suggested. 'But first you'd better put some insect repellent round your ankles and wrists. There should be a stick of it in a basket on your bedside table.'

'I've already used it,' she said. 'Was it your mother's idea to supply guests with all those useful bits and pieces, not to mention a hair-dryer?'

'Yes, but I think she borrowed it from the Americans, who are particularly good at providing for every possible need their guests might have. Catalina is an excellent housekeeper, and looks after the place as carefully as if it were her own, but it's Mama who decides when the slipcovers need replacing, and that sort of thing. She and Tom and my stepbrothers and sister spend a holiday here most years. They'll be here in September.'

'How many "steps" do you have?' asked Cressy as they went down the stairs.

'Three. Two boys and a girl. Have you any brothers and sisters?'

'Two elder sisters.'

She didn't elaborate and was glad when he didn't ask about them. It gave her a welcome sense of freedom to be in a place where, apart from Kate, who had been out of touch for years, no one knew anything about her background. Here she wasn't Paul and Virginia Vale's youngest daughter, or the sister of Frances and Anna Vale. She wasn't anyone's appendage. Only herself.

On the terrace a table had been spread with a blue and white cloth on which stood an earthenware bowl piled with lemons, some with their dark green leaves attached to them. The side plates were of glazed brown earthenware, and the cutlery had sapphire-blue transparent plastic handles. The pepper and salt were in large wooden grinders and chunks cut from a crusty loaf lay in a basket lined with a blue and white napkin, matching the cloth and the other napkins.

It was all a far cry from the formal, professionally catered dinner parties her parents gave twice a month in their fashionable crimson dining room for guests chosen for their importance or their usefulness.

Cressy liked this much better. Not that she was ever included in the dinner parties at home, although Frances and Anna sometimes were.

Nicolas drew out a chair for her. The places were set at right angles to each other, and he put her in the chair facing the mountains.

At her parents' dinner parties, vintage wines were drunk from elaborately cut crystal glasses. Here Catalina had put out only two glasses apiece, a simple wineglass and a water glass.

Nicolas hadn't yet finished his Campari and Cressy had a little tonic left. He filled their water glasses from an earthenware jug but ignored the two bottles of wine. The white wine was standing in a clay cooler. The red was labelled 'Binassalem'.

'On my first night home, Catalina always starts supper with what, in a restaurant, is called *entremeses del pais*,' said Nicolas as the housekeeper appeared carrying a tray, on which were many small dishes. These she arranged so that all were within their reach while he described their contents.

'Cabbage salad with raisins and carrots, chopped olives, quails' eggs, dried cod pate, cucumber in sweet and sour sauce, pickled onions, mountain ham from the mainland, *butifarra*—which is a spicy pork sausage— and the bright coral sausage is *chorizo*, which you may have had in England. The pink bread is called *pa amb oli* and the colour comes from tomato pulp. It's

very garlicky but, as all Mallorquims eat garlic every day, the only people who notice it are the foreigners, who refuse to try it.'

'I like garlic,' said Cressy. 'Don't tell me this huge spread is just for starters?'

'Normally, yes, but as you need time to get used to Catalina's peasant cuisine, and I've had to tighten my belt on the trip I've just finished, tonight she's only giving us fish.'

At earlier stages of her life, Cressy had eaten too much. She realised now that it had been comfort eating to make up for being tall and clumsy and not as clever as her sisters. Now she had her weight under control and was careful to counterbalance parties and spells of en-forced over-indulgence with days of reduced intake and increased exercise.

She would do the food justice now—but early tomorrow morning, while the air was still cool, she would creep out and go for a long run before breakfast.

'Is there much crime on the island? Can-you leave the doors unlocked during the night?' she asked.

'Out here, off the beaten track, we can. Felio has two dogs. You may hear them barking in the night if something disturbs them. But the next nearest house is too far away for their pack of hunting dogs to bother us.'

'Oh, I always sleep like a log. Nothing disturbs me,' said Cressy.

Then it crossed her mind that she might not sleep well tonight if she went to bed agitated by having had a pass made at her. But surely he wouldn't just pounce, taking her consent for granted? Surely a man of his sophistication would, so to speak, test the water before he plunged in?

Watching Cressy peeling the freckled shell from a quail's egg, a task which drew his attention to the long, silky sweep of her eyelashes, Nicolas noticed the sudden soft flush of colour suffusing her petal-fine skin and deduced that it had to do with her last remark.

Obviously she was aware that she wouldn't be sleeping alone tonight, and was shy and nervous about it.

Everything about her made it equally clear that she wasn't a girl who had slept with whoever took her fancy. Not going to a university or poly would have reduced her opportunities to experiment. It might be that none of her partners had known enough to make it equally enjoyable for her.

He found himself oddly annoyed at the thought that her first time might have been botched, and subsequent experiences not a lot better. He had always felt sorry for girls, because often their pleasure wasn't guaranteed in the way it was for most men. However inexpert a girl was, her partner would normally enjoy himself. It wasn't true in reverse. A woman could spend her whole life wondering what all the fuss was about, and many of them did.

He said, 'Let's reverse the usual order and have some red wine with this and white wine with the fish and the cheese, shall we? Or would you prefer to stay with one colour all through?'

She said, 'If you don't mind, I'll wait till the fish and have some white with that. I don't drink a lot.'

'Sure...whatever suits you,' Nicolas said, reaching for the bottle to fill his own glass.

Before he took his first mouthful of one of the island's best reds, he lifted his glass to her. 'Happy days,' he said, smiling.

And happy nights...for both of us, was his unspoken addendum.

Chance had brought them together and, for all kinds of reasons, it couldn't be more than a brief encounter. But, while it lasted, he'd make sure it was as good for her as it was for him.

Relieved that he wasn't going to press her to drink more wine than she could handle, Cressy determined to enjoy her dinner and not allow it to be spoilt by jitters about what might or might not happen afterwards.

'What made you decide to walk the Pennine Way?' Nicolas asked.

'Fuzzy and I were at school together. She comes from a walking family. Her grandfather's in his eighties and he still walks for miles. They all do. They lent me all the equipment, except for the boots. I had to buy those.'

'What sort of boots did you buy?'

She told him the make and he nodded approvingly. 'A lot of people jib at the cost of good boots, but trainers are useless. Pity you don't have them with you. I could have shown you some of our walking country. What size shoe do you take?'

'Six.' Cressy had grown out of being self-conscious about her feet.

'My mother's boots will be too small but there are others here which might fit.'

'I don't think I'll have time for walking,' said Cressy. 'It's going to be quite a big job to put Kate's house in order for when she comes out of hospital.'

Evidently not much interested in the subject of Miss Dexter's cottage, Nicolas said, 'Tell me more about your walk with Fuzzy. Which stretch did you like best?'

They were still discussing the route when Catalina removed the remains of the first course and brought a platter of fresh sole accompanied by a green salad.

While Cressy was eating her fish and enjoying a glass of white wine, she was pleased to find that Nicolas didn't keep topping it up, a manoeuvre which exasperated her friend Fuzzy—who went out on dates more than she did.

It wasn't until her glass was almost empty that he said, 'Would you like some more?'

'Yes, please.' Two glasses wouldn't cloud her judgement. More than that might.

The meal ended with two cheeses. Nicolas explained that the one wrapped in fig leaves was *cabrales*, a soft goat's cheese, and the hard one was an extra-mature *Manchego*, taking its name from La Mancha on the mainland, although this particular cheese had come from Menorca, the neighbouring island.

By this time it was dark and he had lighted candles to illuminate the table.

'Before we have coffee, shall we go for a stroll as far as the gate?' he suggested, after draining his glass and discarding his napkin.

Cressy thought it an excellent idea. A full moon was rising. Soon the terrace and the countryside beyond would be as clearly visible as it was by day, except that the moon cast more mysterious shadows than the sun.

Their way round the side of the house took them past the lighted window of a large kitchen where Catalina was loading a dishwasher. Nicolas paused at the window to say something to her, perhaps to compliment her on the meal, as she gave him a satisfied beam.

As they walked down the drive they could see the glitter of lights from resorts on the coast in the opposite direction from the mountains. But, whatever glitzy nightlife might be happening there, here there was only the peace of a scattered rural community where life went on much as it had for hundreds of years.

Remembering the herd of sheep which had passed them that afternoon, she said, 'We came across a lot of black-faced Swaledale sheep when we were walking the Way. I expect you did too.'

'I had a close encounter with one,' said Nicolas. 'Someone had cut a hole in the side of a plastic drum, for what purpose I've no idea. Anyway, this sheep

had put its head through the hole, looking for water or food, and had then got its horns stuck inside. I tried to pull it off the same way you'd pull a sweater over a child's head. When that didn't work, I had to get astride the sheep to hold it still and yank the drum off forwards.'

'I hope it looked suitably grateful.'

'It looked pretty done in,' he said dryly. 'But I expect it recovered. They have to be tough, Pennine sheep. Talking of sheep, I was once staying with friends on the mainland who had a very old Englishwoman living nearthem. If you'd seen her in the village you'd have taken her for a Spanish widow. She dressed in black, as the oldest widows still do, and she was completely bilingual. My friends didn't know her, but they'd heard interesting stories so I went and introduced myself. She invited me in for tea and told me tales of her youth. She had been a doctor and travelled in very wild places. Once she'd crossed an unrailed bridge across a ravine by walking between two sheep and holding tight to their fleece. She was a splendid old bird.'

'Do you meet many women on your travels? Women travellers, I mean?'

'Hardly any. They do exist, of course. A handful have written books about their journeys. There've always been women adventurers...as distinct from adventuresses. To your great-aunt's generation, adventuresses were women who traded sex for self-advantage.'

'You must think me terribly dim to need that explained.'

The riposte came out more sharply than Cressy had intended. It was partly a reaction to years of being patronised by her sisters. But he wasn't to know that.

'Not at all,' said Nicolas. 'I'm just used to people these days having some gaps in their vocabularies because they watch more TV instead of reading. Haven't you noticed how people who write TV dialogue often have no sense of period? They write a play set in the Twenties and the characters use Nineties' idioms.'

'Perhaps they assume, as you did, that the viewer won't understand terms which have gone out of use.'

His reaction to that was to reach for her hand and thread his fingers through hers.

'Don't be cross. I wasn't putting you down. Did your last boyfriend do a lot of that?'

The gesture, the statement and the question were all so unexpected and disturbing that Cressy took what seemed like a minute, but was probably only a few seconds, to collect her scattered wits.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to sound tetchy.' She turned her face up to his, smiling an apology, hoping he wouldn't see she wasn't at ease holding hands with him. Which was not the same as disliking it. The worry was what it did to her—the effect it had on her pulse rate.

By now they had reached the point where the drive met the minor road. He released her hand and turned round. He had been holding her right hand. Now he found and captured the other, and she let him. What else could she do? Keep it out of his reach? Pull it free? To do either would have looked foolish. At the same time she knew that by allowing him to hold it she was implying consent to whatever his next move might be. A kiss in the shadow of the palms? Her insides clenched with excitement and apprehension.

'You haven't answered the question,' said Nicolas.

'The answer is no, that wasn't the reason I stopped seeing him. His company sent him abroad and it wasn't the kind of friendship which survives separation.'

'How long ago was that?'

'About six months.'

'And there's been no one else since he left?'

'No one important,' said Cressy. Actually, the man she was talking about hadn't been important either. None of her relationships had. She had tried hard to fall in love, but up to now it hadn't happened. Up to now.

'So we're in the same boat,' he said quietly. 'Two lonely people in need of some TLC.'

She said, 'I would have thought you were a loner by nature...and need to be for the life you lead.'

'I don't mind being on my own for long periods if necessary—that doesn't make me a loner. Human beings need to pair...although not always for life.'

Cressy registered the unequivocal warning. He could hardly have made it plainer. If they paired, it was at her own risk.

'Hardly ever for life these days,' she answered dryly. 'At school, I was the only one in my form whose parents weren't divorced. And none of the girls who were in my year has a stable relationship with a man now.'

'But your parents have one.'

'Yes, but most of their friends don't. They change partners as if they were doing the Paul Jones...if you know what that was?'

She had heard about this dance from Maggie, who, in her youth, had been a keen ballroom dancer and had met some of her boyfriends by changing partners when the sexes formed moving circles on the dance floor until the music stopped.

She saw the gleam of his teeth as he grinned before saying, '*Touche!*'

Then he let the conversation lapse and walked in silence, his thumb moving gently over the back of her hand in a way that could have been absent-minded but she thought was deliberate.

It felt as if some strange energy was flowing between their clasped hands, making her body feel more alive than before, making every nerve tingle, making her in- sides melt.

Before he had even kissed her she was in a state of surrender. Unless she pulled herself together she would be putty in his hands.

Ahead of them, near the house, a figure emerged from the shadows into the moonlight. It was Catalina. She waved to them.

'Where is she going?' asked Cressy.

'She and Felio have their own place. It's not far from mine but you can't see it from here. Their roof is hidden by the barn. When I'm not at home they close up the big house and only go in to give it an airing now and then.'

'Oh...I see.'

'If you were as young as I first thought, I would have asked Catalina to sleep in the house tonight, to chaperon you. I can still do that...if you wish?'

He had made it clear where he stood. Now he was asking where she stood. She knew she had only to say yes and he would do as he'd offered—call the housekeeper back and, tomorrow, look for a girl who would find his terms acceptable and give him the physical pleasure which was all he required of a woman.

The moments of indecision while her mind and her body were in conflict seemed to Cressy the longest of her life.

Then, before she was fully conscious of arriving at a decision, she heard herself saying, 'I'm sure she'd prefer to sleep in her regular bed. Does the duenna still exist? I thought Spain was very much part of the modern world now—that duennas had died out, like governesses.'

'They have,' said Nicolas. 'Spanish girls are as free as all other liberated women.'

A light, pleasant breeze had sprung up. As they came near the palms she could hear the rustle of their fronds brushing together overhead.

'Does coffee keep you awake?' he asked. 'It doesn't affect me that way, but I know a lot of people who don't drink it after dinner.'

'So do I, but I drink it myself.'

Now, although she had given him tacit permission to make his move, Cressy wanted to stave off the actual moment when he would take her in his arms. There was still a part of her mind which wasn't happy with the vote given by her senses, her curiosity, her awareness of hope deferred.

To borrow a phrase from Fuzzy, Cressy had 'fancied him rotten' from the moment she'd seen his back-view. He fancied her. All the circumstances were propitious. So why did she have lingering doubts about doing something they both wanted? Other people jumped into bed on first dates. Other people followed their impulses without ruinous results. Why shouldn't she?

As she preceded him into the lamplit living room Cressy's eyes went to the painting over the fireplace. Somehow it reassured her. Where, if not in this beautiful house full of beautiful things, would she find a beautiful experience to remember when she was old? It was their sins of omission, all the chances they *hadn't* taken, that people regretted later.

While Nicolas was filling coffee-cups from a glass jug left on a hot plate by Catalina, Cressy looked at some of the other paintings.

One was a portrait of a woman in a low-necked dress with bunches of ringlets hiding her ears and a gold *fer-ronniere* across the top of her forehead in the fashion of the time when Queen Victoria had come to the throne. Cressy's grandmother had collected Victorian jewellery and had left her one or two pieces she never had an opportunity to wear. But they had aroused her interest, and she was able to date the portrait to the period between 1835 and 1845.

'What is this?' she asked as Nicolas straightened from bending to place two cups on the table in front of a large, comfortable sofa.

'That's a copy of the Stieler portrait of Jane Digby,' he said, coming to stand beside her. 'That rather soulful expression was put on for the portrait. She was a lusty lady who got through a lot of husbands and sundry lovers before she finally found true love in an improbable marriage to a Bedouin sheikh.'

'Really? How extraordinary,' said Cressy. 'Is she an ancestor on your English side?'

'No, I just liked the portrait when I saw it in a country saleroom while I was up at Cambridge. I bought it for twenty pounds, very dirty and damaged, and had it cleaned up and restored. Then I did some research and found out who the sitter was. She was a real wild child until she went to Syria and met her Bedouin. Then she settled down and became a reformed character.'

After a pause, he added, 'You're rather like her. Given that spaniel's ears hairdo and with your eyes raised to heaven, you'd be remarkably like her, except for this plumpness here.' He touched the curve of the painted jaw, lit by a reflected glow from the pearly skin of the sitter's neck and shoulder. 'Your jaw is more clear-cut, and your irises are larger. But in looking at portraits one has to allow for the conventions of the day. The rosebud lips and devout expressions of most portraits of this period could be as unlike real women as the sulky pouts one sees in the pictures in *Vogue*.'

'I wouldn't have taken you for a *Vogue* reader,' said Cressy, keeping her face straight.

He laughed, pretending to aim a punch at her shoulder, his fist stopping short of contact. 'I've read more unlikely things than that when I've run short of books. Come and have your coffee.'

Rather than sitting on the sofa, Cressy picked up one of the cups and saucers, intending to continue her inspection of the paintings. She noticed that he had also put out some liqueur glasses and two bottles, one of brandy and another with the hand-written label *Hierbas*.

'That's a concoction made by Catalina,' said Nicolas, seeing her glance at it. 'It's made with herbs, and *ants* made from aniseed. Would you like to try some?'

'Just a little, to see what it's like.'

He took her at her word, pouring no more than a tablespoon into one of the glasses.

Cressy transferred her cup to her left hand and took the glass in her right. She had been trained by Maggie never to pull a face if she didn't like something, but it was hard to maintain a polite expression after sipping the pungent spirit tasting of liquorice and unknown herbs.

'Most people think it's vile,' said Nicolas. 'I quite like it. I'll have that glass for myself and give you some brandy to take the bad taste away.'

Watching him pour a more generous slug of the brandy, Cressy decided she needed it—not merely for the purpose he'd suggested but to relax the mounting tension inside her.

Her second decision was not to continue wandering but to sit down on the sofa. To stay on her feet would only postpone the moment when he acted on their unspoken agreement.

Sinking onto the feather-filled cushions, she said, 'I've only just realised, this room isn't white like the bedrooms. What is this colour? It's too soft to be called salmon-pink.'

'My mother calls it pale terracotta. This is mainly a winter room. In summer we live on the terrace, by the pool and in the barn. In winter white walls can look cold, so in here Mam£ broke with tradition and had it painted this colour. It's been quite widely copied.'

He settled his long, lean frame on the sofa beside her—not close, but not as far away as he could have sat.

'I'm not surprised,' said Cressy. 'It's a lovely room... very soothing.'

'But not, I think, soothing for you at this moment,' Nicolas remarked dryly.

She flashed an uncertain glance at him.

'You're exerting terrific control but, under a superficial air of poise, you're quaking. Why are you all strung up?'

'I—I don't know,' she said unevenly.

'I do.' He took away her half-drunk coffee and put it beside his own on the table. Then, sliding an arm round her shoulders, he drew her closer. 'You feel it's happening too fast...right?'

'Yes,' she admitted, sharply aware of the hard arm behind her shoulder and the faint lime scent of his aftershave.

'Time is an illusion anyway. Five minutes' pain seems interminable. Five minutes' pleasure seems to pass in a flash.' His voice was a husky rasp which sent shivers down her spine. 'Do you really want to postpone something we both want? Shall I make up your mind for you?'

He turned her face towards his, his blue eyes blazing a message which made her draw in her breath in the last sane moment before she closed her eyes, and an instant later she felt him kissing her lids.

CHAPTER FIVE

HE WAS kissing her welcoming mouth when the silence of the house was broken by a peculiar sound.

They stopped kissing, listening, alert.

Almost immediately Nicolas relaxed. Td forgotten... it's only Juanito coming in through the cat flap.'

He was looking at her lips, pausing a moment before resuming their kisses. Then a movement in the room behind him caught Cressy's eye. She looked to see what it was and gave a cry of dismay.

The black cat she had seen earlier had just deposited a pathetic little bundle of dishevelled feathers on the largest of the three Oriental rugs covering the floor between the two outer doors.

Nicolas looked over his shoulder. 'Oh, God...that bloody cat!'

As they both jumped up from the sofa Juanito's satisfied smirk changed to a vigilant stare.

Til grab him—you see to the bird,' said Nicolas, springing towards him.

But the cat had already snatched up his trophy and was streaking to the shelter of the table laden with books. He crouched there, looking aggrieved that his cleverness wasn't being received in the manner he thought appropriate.

Nicolas shot in pursuit, diving under the table, but without success as Juanito retreated behind its pedestal and backed out of reach. As he withdrew, Nicolas cracked his head on the table's rim. He stood up, rubbing his scalp and cursing in Spanish.

'It's hopeless,' he said. 'We've had this happen before. He's as quick as greased lightning, damn him.'

'But the bird's still alive,' Cressy wailed as the cat demonstrated his speed by breaking cover and flashing past her. This time he took cover in the space at the back of the hearth, behind the basket of dried herbs.

'I doubt if it is,' said Nicolas. 'It's probably died of fright. Don't make a big deal of it, Cressy. I know it's nasty, but it's the way cats are. Put it out of your mind. We'll leave him and go to my room.'

He put his arms round her, tipping her face up to his, the cat and the bird dismissed as he put a hand to her face, stroking her cheek with the backs of his knuckles.

But for her the spell had been broken. She couldn't forget the terror the bird, if alive, must be feeling in the jaws of its captor.

Drawing back from him, she said, 'I think we should say goodnight. It's been a long day. I'm tired.'

He wouldn't let her go. 'Til give you my special treatment. You'll wake up tomorrow feeling like a million dollars. We both will.' He was smiling as he said it.

For an instant she weakened, longing to go where he led, longing to sleep in his arms. Then she pulled back more firmly.

'I'm sorry...I'm out of my depth...this is happening too fast...too soon. I should never have let you kiss me.'

He released her, beginning to frown. 'You're not making sense. Two minutes ago you were ready and eager to make love. If you're still upset about the bird...'

'It's not only that,' she said quickly. 'In a way I'm glad that it happened. Sorry for the bird, but glad to be brought down to earth. I'm not comfortable with this, Nicolas. I'm not used to sleeping with strangers.' She drew a deep breath. 'I'm not used to sleeping with anyone. It may sound silly to you, but Fuzzy and I made avow that we wouldn't sleep around.. .that we'd both wait

for Mr Right. She changed her mind and regretted it. I've managed to stick to it.'

By the time she finished explaining, the expression on Nicolas's face had changed from annoyance to perplexity.

'Am I hearing this right? Are you saying that at twenty-three you've never been to bed with anyone?'

'Yes—I mean no, I haven't. I know it's unusual, but—'

'That's the understatement of the year. It's not unusual—it's phenomenal. I've never met anyone your age who's still a virgin.'

'Well, you have now,' she retorted. 'I really don't see what's so incredible about it. It used to be thought quite normal in days gone by.'

'It's not normal now,' he said dryly. 'I'd already sussed that you hadn't a lot of experience, but not to have any is amazing. What's the idea of it?'

'I guess the basic idea is not to do something just because everyone else does...or says they do. Fuzzy and I started talking about it at school. At the beginning of term, girls would come back and boast about what they'd done in the holidays. One girl, who was later expelled, had tried cocaine. Not surprising, really, as her mother was hooked on it. Another had shoplifted clothes her mother wouldn't buy for her. They'd nearly all had sex with boys. But when we asked them about it, you could tell they'd been disappointed.'

'That's equally unsurprising.' His tone was sardonic. 'Most teenage boys make love with as little finesse as rams. They get better as time goes on.'

'Hopefully some of them do,' said Cressy. 'But a lot of them don't. You'd be surprised how many girls in their twenties are still disillusioned about sex. From what I hear, it's less a joy than a bore.'

She expected him to look affronted, but instead was surprised to see his mouth twitch at the corners. 'How am I going to convince you of my proficiency if you won't let me touch you?'

That his sense of humour was still intact and functioning so soon after being rebuffed came as a pleasant surprise. From things told to her by Fuzzy and others, she knew that sex was a minefield of misunderstandings, and most men were supersensitive on issues relating to it. But perhaps Nicolas wasn't one of them. He was different in many other ways, and perhaps also in this area.

'I think it's too soon for touching. I think there are other things people need to know about each other before they get to that stage.'

Nicolas looked at her thoughtfully. After a long pause, he said, 'Okay, if that's how you want it, that's what we'll do. Goodnight, Cressy. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Goodnight, Nicolas. Thank you...for everything.'

She turned in the direction of the staircase. She was on her way up when he said, 'Oh, one other thing...'

She stopped and looked down. He was still where she had left him. 'Yes?'

'None of the bedroom doors has a lock, but don't let it worry you. You have my word that you'll be as safe in this house as you would be in a convent.'

He turned and went back to where they had been sitting.

It was hours before Cressy slept. Those ecstatic moments in his arms, when he had kissed her with such disarming tenderness on her eyelids, her cheeks and her neck before finally finding her mouth, had been an experience she would never forget even if nothing more came of it.

She knew in her bones that he would be a marvellous lover. Although whether that intuition would ever be proven now seemed unlikely.

What was certain was that in their short time on the sofa he had succeeded in arousing her to a point far beyond anyone else's effect on her.

At the same time she knew she had been right to resist him. It would have been rushing their fences to go to bed within hours of their meeting. A pledge was a pledge—even a pledge to oneself.

In his room at the end of the corridor, Nicolas was also awake, thinking about this strange girl he was saddled with, for the time being.

His first impulse, after she had disappeared up the stairs, had been to call one of the women who had been in his mind earlier on and work off his frustration in one of their beds.

But Cressy would have heard the car, wondered where he was going, and perhaps been nervous all on her own in a strange house far from home. With some girls he wouldn't have cared if they were alarmed by the night noises of the old house. But for some reason she revived protective instincts which didn't get a lot of scope in a world where many young women seemed to resent the attitudes instilled in him by his mother. Now those old-fashioned manners were only exercised when he was with women of an age to enjoy chivalrous treatment. With most of Cressy's contemporaries gallantry wasn't welcomed—it was read as sexist superiority.

He wondered if her protracted virginity was really caused by a hang-up rather than strong moral principles. But she hadn't held back when he had kissed her. She had seemed to enjoy it.

Maybe, if he was patient, he might yet get her into bed. On the other hand, if she really had scruples about not making love with anyone but her future husband, perhaps he should let her alone.

Cressy didn't oversleep because she had set her travelling alarm-clock. But when it woke her she groaned, knowing before she opened her eyes that she hadn't had enough rest. Her mother could manage on five hours and her sisters were rarely in bed before midnight at the earliest. But she needed

eight hours to feel good the following day. She definitely wasn't up to the early- morning run she had planned as her start to the day.

A bath made her feel a bit brighter, but she wasn't keen to face Nicolas after what had happened last night. It seemed more than likely he would make it clear that although she had been welcome yesterday today she wasn't, and had better find somewhere else to stay.

Nicolas was already at the table, reading what looked like a long fax message, when she stepped onto the terrace.

He put it aside and stood up to pull out her chair. 'Good morning.' He didn't ask how she had slept.

'Good morning.' As he moved the chair in from behind her his nearness was a vivid reminder of last night's much closer contact.

'What do you usually have for breakfast?' he asked.

'Muesli, toast and fruit. But I'm happy with anything you're having.'

'Muesli, toast and fruit plus a French omelette. Actually, it isn't toast. I don't eat sliced bread unless I have to, and proper bread is hard to cut so that it fits in a toaster. We have a sandwich toaster which takes cuts of village bread. But it gets very hot, so you need to be careful not to burn yourself.'

He indicated the gadget which was sitting on a sidetable, plugged in to an outside socket outlet. Then he passed her a bag of muesli.

'The milk in this carton is a brand my mother considers healthier than the usual long-life stuff. Catalina is a traditionalist. In their own house, she and Felio eat the same stuff their forefathers ate. But what she cooks for me is influenced by Anglo-American ideas on healthy eating drilled into her by my mother and stepfather.'

He had effectively dispelled most of Cressy's feeling of awkwardness. She was grateful for his diplomacy.

'Don't mind me if you want to finish reading your fax,' she said.

'Thanks, I will.'

He picked up the roll of clipped-together pages and re-rolled them the opposite way to straighten them. This morning he was wearing a shirt the colour of apricots and white denim shorts with a braided leather belt slotted through the loops. His hair was still wet from the shower, or possibly from a pre-breakfast swim in the pool.

While he was reading a clockwork timer in the shape of a lemon gave a warning ping. Nicolas rose, opened the sandwich toaster, took out some chunky pieces of wholemeal bread and dropped them in a napkin-lined basket. After covering them with the napkin, he transferred the basket to the table, reloaded the toaster and reset the timer.

He was still intent on the fax, rereading parts of it and looking preoccupied, when Cressy finished her muesli and helped herself to coffee, toast, low-fat spread and honey in a plastic pot with Spanish writing on the side of it.

The honey had a flavour she didn't recognise, but it wasn't until Nicolas had returned his attention to his breakfast that she asked what it was.

'Eucalyptus,' he said. 'If you don't like it, there are probably other flavours on offer. Rosemary... thy me... orange and lemon blossom. By the way, while I was out on my morning run I had a brainwave. Some friends of mine have a daughter who's studying in Barcelona, where she uses buses and taxis to get about—so her little car is sitting idle. I've asked if you can borrow it. It's already quite beaten up—Pilar is famous for being Mallorca's worst parker—but it's mechanically sound. After breakfast we'll go and fetch it. Then you can visit the hospital as often as you like without feeling you're imposing on me.'

'I think I should find a hotel. Then I'll be out of your hair altogether.'

'You're not in my hair, Cressy. It's better that you stay here. You'll be more comfortable, and you can ask my advice.'

The firmness of his tone made it difficult to demur. And did she really want to leave this beautiful place and its owner?

'All right. Thank you very much. But if my presence should become an intrusion, I hope you'll be frank and say so.'

'You can count on it. Here comes my *bete noire* and your deliverer.'

Following his glance, she saw the black cat strolling towards them. As Cressy took in the implications of Nicolas's description of him, Catalina came out of the house with a freshly made omelette.

'Would you like one?' Nicolas asked as the housekeeper placed it in front of him.

'No, thank you.'

On her way back to the kitchen, Catalina spoke to the cat in Mallorquin. Cressy hoped he would follow her. Instead he sat down near the table and began to groom himself. As long as he stayed there it was impossible not to think of the passionate embrace the cat had interrupted.

Evidently Nicolas was having similar thoughts. He said, 'I moved the basket in the fireplace this morning but there was nothing there. I hope the death of the bird didn't give you bad dreams.'

'I slept well, thank you.' It was true. When she had finally dropped off, she had slept soundly without dreaming. 'You mentioned your morning run. How far do you go?'

'I run by time, not kilometres. After half an hour I turn back. Then, when I'm here, I do some lengths in the pool. Are you a runner?'

'Not in London. I sometimes run at my parents' weekend place.'

'Where is that?'

'In West Sussex, not far from Midhurst—if you know that part of the country.'

'No, I don't know England well—only the area round Cambridge. Tell me about your family. What does your father do?'

'He's an architect.'

'And your mother?'

'She's...into good works,' said Cressy. It was a partial truth. Virginia Vale did support various charities and social-reform lobbies.

'You mentioned sisters. Older? Younger? Married?'

'Older, but not married yet. For the time being they're wedded to their careers.'

'From what I hear, most clever women are these days. One can see their point. They want to be in a stronger position than their mothers and grandmothers. More coffee?'

'Please.' When he had poured it, she said, 'Do you have to worry about sponsorship for your journeys, or do the estate and your books make *you* independent?'

'The estate just about breaks even, and fortunately my books have done well in America and in paperback, so I don't have to kowtow to sponsors. But I can't afford to sit around enjoying Ca'n Llorenc for long. The key to success in my line is a steady output and journeys which either haven't been done before or are in the footsteps of some obscure but fascinating guy like Arminius Vambery.'

'I've never heard of him. Who was he?'

⁴A Hungarian born in 1832 who taught himself Turkish and Arabic and travelled, disguised as a dervish, to Bokhara and Samarkand. But I'm not going to tell you any more. Wait for my next book.'

The telephone rang in the house but Nicolas ignored it until Catalina appeared and beckoned him. As he rose from the table he said, 'When you've finished your coffee we'll make tracks.'

Cressy would have liked to linger at the table, talking, but obviously he had a lot to do—as had she, come to that. She hurried upstairs to brush her teeth again and make sure she had everything she might need in the day- pack which she preferred to a shoulder bag—except on the rare occasions when she was dressed up.

Nicolas was still on the telephone when she passed his room. Waiting for him in the drawing room, she had another look at the portrait of Jane Digby whom he said she resembled.

On either side of the fireplace were shelves of books in Spanish, English and several other languages. She was admiring the leather bindings of the older volumes when she heard Nicolas coming down the stairs with that unexpectedly light step for a man of his height and physique.

'Cressy?' he called.

'I'm. here.' She stepped into view.

At the table his neck had been bare but now he had knotted a light scarf of faded Indian cotton round his long neck and, like her, a day-pack was slung across one broad shoulder. He looked casual yet debonair, a man to turn women's heads wherever he went. She wondered what Fuzzy would make of him.

As they were leaving the house Catalina called to him from the kitchen.

'Won't be a minute,' said Nicolas.

This morning it was the Range Rover which stood in the courtyard, all four doors left open to keep the interior cool, for already the day was hotting up. Cressy was about to climb in when she realised the back seat was occupied by a dog.

'Hello. Where did you come from?'

The brown and white spaniel raised its head from its paws. It had a furtive air and, looking more closely, she saw it was in appalling condition—thin, its coat dull and matted, with a horrible open sore on its flank.

Hearing Nicolas coming, she looked over her shoulder. 'There's a stray dog in the car.'

He leaned into the vehicle from the driver's side and looked at the spaniel with undisguised distaste. 'Where the hell has this sprung from? Out dog...come on, out!' He clapped his hands at it.

The (Jog didn't budge.

'I shouldn't touch it,' said Cressy. 'It might snap at you and it doesn't look well, to say the least. It could even be rabid.'

'I have no intention of touching it,' he said curtly. 'I doubt if it's rabid, but it's probably riddled with fleas and ticks, and that sore's not a sign of health.'

Taking a heavy-duty torch out of a compartment, he tried to induce the dog to move by poking its scrawny backside.

Still it wouldn't budge.

'Poor thing, it looks so miserable,' Cressy said sympathetically.

'Poor thing be damned. It's not staying in here,' said Nicolas. 'Get me a walking stick from the stand just inside the door, will you, please?'

'You can't hit a starving dog. It's half-dead already.'

'I'm not going to hit it...just use enough force to make it shift itself.'

'I know how to get it to move,' she exclaimed. 'Offer it some food...some meat.'

'All right. We'll try that.' He went away to fetch some.

In his absence, Cressy spoke kindly to the spaniel. 'Poor old thing, are you starving? I wonder what happened to you? Did you get lost? Did some vile person dump you? Never mind—we'll look after you.'

Followed by Catalina, Nicolas came back with a bowl of food which he brandished under the dog's nose and then set on the ground. It was clear from the spaniel's expression that it was torn between staying in a safe place and relieving its hunger.

Hunger won. It heaved itself onto its feet, flopped unsteadily to the ground and began to wolf the bowl's contents.

'It's on its last legs, poor love. Are spaniels a popular breed here? Or d'you think it's a foreigner's dog?' asked Cressy.

'As it isn't wearing a collar, the chances are it belonged to someone who doesn't want it any more and has dumped it as far as possible from where they live,' said Nicolas.

'How can people do things like that?' Her anger made her voice shake.

They do worse than abandon their pets,' Nicolas answered sardonically.

'Is there a vet in this area?' she asked. 'That sore needs professional attention.'

At this point an angry hiss made them turn to find Juanito behind them, his back arched in outrage at the sight of a strange dog on his territory.

Having licked the bowl bare, the spaniel retreated behind the Range Rover.

The housekeeper spoke to Nicolas.

Translating, he said, 'Catalina will make enquiries and find out if anyone around here has lost a dog. We must get moving; I said we'd pick up the car soon after nine.'

As they set out for his friends' house Cressy said, 'If I had my way, people who ill-treat animals would be put in prison and fed on bread and water for a few weeks.'

'You'd get on well with my mother,' said Nicolas. 'If not restrained, she'd take every down-and-out tyke for miles around under her wing.'

'You wouldn't, I gather.'

'I wouldn't ignore an animal which was obviously lost or suffering—but nor would I adopt it. If it couldn't be restored to an owner who wanted it, I'd pay to have it put down.'

'Is that what you'll do with this one?'

'If there's no better alternative—yes.'

She knew he was right. It was the sensible course. But it hurt her to think of the spaniel—a young dog, and probably a healthy one before whatever had happened to it—being given a lethal injection. Animals trusted people. To break that trust seemed scarcely less unforgivable than betraying a human being's trust.

She was thinking about it when Nicolas suddenly put his hand on her leg, just above the knee, and gave it a brief squeeze. 'Don't worry. It may not come to that in this case. I can see you've taken a shine to our uninvited guest—I'll try and sort something out for it.'

'I hope you can. It looks a very nice dog.'

'Do you like it enough to give it a bath?' he asked.

'Of course! I'd be happy to bath it.'

Nicolas slanted a mocking glance at her. 'I may put you to the test.'

'You're welcome to. I'm not squeamish.' She told him about an experience with a small balloon-shaped boy she had been instructed to meet off a plane

at Heathrow and escort to his home on the other side of London. During the journey he had been suddenly and copiously sick in her car.

Her light-hearted account of the incident made Nicolas laugh. 'I can see you're made of sterling stuff, Cressy.'

'I felt sorry for the poor little wretch. Not, admittedly, when he was throwing up all the junk he'd gorged on the plane—but I did afterwards. He was the son of a couple who had split up and remarried. They'd both made new lives with new partners and new babies and, reading between the lines, he'd become surplus baggage. That's a dreadful situation for a child. I'm sure he was making a pig of himself because he sensed he wasn't wanted.'

For some moments Nicolas made no comment. Then he said, 'You may not be squeamish, but I think you're very tender-hearted. Perhaps rather too compassionate to be in the job you're doing.'

'Oh, no, not at all,' said Cressy. 'You can't do the job properly unless you care about people. But my boss says the main qualification is being able to see the funny side of situations. You do agonise a bit sometimes, but you also get a lot of laughs.'

By now they had reached the gateway of a large modern house whose upper storey was visible above the wall surrounding its grounds. Nicolas pipped his horn and a minute later the heavy wrought-iron gate disappeared into a pocket in the wall.

'-Luis is a self-made man with Hollywoodian tastes, but he and Victoria are a nice, generous couple,' said Nicolas as he drove up to an imposing entrance.

Victoria came out to meet them—a plump woman in her forties, with elaborately coiffed hair and a vivacious manner. She greeted Nicolas with kisses and shook hands with Cressy. She spoke good English.

The car she was lending was housed in a four-car garage with an empty space where her husband kept his Mercedes. She also ran a Mercedes, and the four-wheel drive alongside it was for family picnics in the country.

When Cressy attempted to thank her for the loan of her daughter's runabout, Victoria dismissed it with a smiling '*De nada*. Nicolas is a dear friend. We are very glad to help any friend of his. I would like to offer you coffee and show you the house, *senorita*, but I have to visit my hairdresser.'

Although Cressy felt sure she could remember it, Nicolas insisted on leading the way to the hospital.

'It will give you a chance to get used to driving on the right,' he said adamantly.

So she followed him back to the main road and then along the route they had driven the day before. Changing gear with her right hand took a little getting used to, but she had always liked driving and soon began to feel at home.

She thought when they reached the hospital's car park that he would continue on his way. But the park wasn't full and he drove in and stopped in a place where his vehicle wouldn't obstruct those coming and going.

After Cressy had parked and locked the borrowed car, he beckoned her to the Range Rover.

'From now on we'll keep Spanish hours. I'll expect you back for lunch at three. If you run into problems, call me on this number. I'll be back at Ca'n Llorenc from about eleven.' He handed her a number written on a scrap of paper.

'Thank you.'

'Drive carefully.' Unexpectedly he reached out an arm, captured one of her hands and, leaning out of the vehicle's window, carried it to his lips. '*Adios, guapa*.'

Cressy walked away feeling as if she were floating. It was a heady combination—the touch of his lips on the back of her hand while being the focus of a look reminding her of her response to last night's kisses on the sofa.

In the hospital, the receptionist was speaking English to an elderly couple. When Cressy's turn came, before explaining her reason for being there, she said, 'I don't have a Spanish dictionary with me—is there a word which sounds like "gwarper"?''

The receptionist smiled. 'I think you must mean *guapa*. It's spelt like this.' She wrote the word on a message slip. 'If a man calls you *guapa*, it means he thinks you are beautiful.'

'Oh...really?' Cressy said, smiling, trying not to blush. 'I've come to see Miss Dexter. Is it all right to go up to her room?'

On the way to her great-aunt's bedside, she put the slip in her pocket with the telephone number.

Could Nicolas really think her beautiful? Or was it something he had said to hundreds of girls?

Kate seemed pleased to see her, and had a string of errands she wanted Cressy to run for her—one of them being to go to her cottage and find certain books.

'Where are you staying?' she asked.

Cressy explained. 'Have you read Nicolas's books? Have you heard of him?'

'Heard of him, yes. In days gone by his mother's people were one of the island's leading families. But I hadn't heard that he'd married. He used to have the reputation of being what the Georgians called a rake. Now known as a stud, I believe.' Miss Dexter's tone indicated that she didn't think much of the new term.

'He isn't married.'

'But there are people in the house... aunts... cousins... stray relations.'

'There's a stray dog,' said Cressy, smiling. 'And a housekeeper and her husband. He does the garden.' She chose not to mention that they occupied separate quarters.

'It wouldn't have done in my youth. Fifty years ago, staying with an unmarried man would have been what was called a compromising situation. That code of morals has long gone. Nowadays people do what they like and nobody raises an eyebrow—unless one of the parties involved is a public figure and the tabloid Press make a scandal of it. I dare say, even at your age, you've slept with more men than I have.'

This left Cressy momentarily tongue-tied, and before she could answer her aunt continued, 'Did you think I was an elderly virgin? Well, the young can never imagine their elders enjoying sex. Each generation thinks it's something they invented. Have you read any of my books?'

'All of them.' This was a half-truth. Cressy had made a serious effort to read them but had found Kate's three long volumes of feminist polemic heavy going.

'Then you'll know I was anti-marriage—anti-women allowing themselves to be hobbled to the kitchen sink and the cradle. But I wasn't against men as friends and lovers...only as husbands.'

Suddenly she closed her eyes, her head sank back against the pillows and her lips compressed.

'Are you in pain? Shall I call a nurse?' Cressy asked. The woman in the bed gave a long sigh. 'The worst pain in life is regret,' she said in a low voice. 'There's no medication to dull that ache. I'm tired now. Thank you for coming. Come again tomorrow.'

Having been taken under Nicolas's wing, Cressy had not changed money at the airport *cambio* on arrival. After leaving the hospital her first task was to provide herself with enough pesetas for the foreseeable future. She then

bought the things Kate needed, plus a bunch of carnations, and delivered them back to the hospital.

On the drive back to Ca'n Llorenc, she thought out a letter to send to her boss at Distress Signal on Nicolas's fax machine. At the moment she had two weeks' leave of absence, but it seemed likely she would be here for at least a month, and possibly longer.

As she walked into the house Catalina bustled through from the kitchen to give her a fold of paper. Written on a word processor, the note read:

Busy transferring my travel notes to disk. If you swim before lunch, don't forget factor fifteen and don't sunbathe till late afternoon. N.

He was in her mind all the time she was swimming. She remembered the long brown shape gliding under the surface, and later the drops on his chest like crystal beads on brown satin. What would it be like to spend along afternoon on the king-size bed in his room, with the shutters closed against the sun and the table fan near the bed sending eddies of coolness over their naked bodies?

The thought of it sent a delicious frisson through her. What if he kissed her again tonight after dinner? Would she be able to resist him a second time?

'Senorita...senorita...te llaman al telefono.'

Startled out of her reverie by the urgent voice, Cressy looked round and saw Catalina standing by the edge of the pool, holding an imaginary telephone in one hand and beckoning urgently with the other.

While Cressy swam to the side and hoisted herself out of the water the housekeeper scurried to fetch the towel she had left by the steps.

There was a wall-mounted telephone close to the entrance to the barn. Cressy dried her hands, said *'Muchas gracias,'* to Catalina and lifted the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Hi! How's it going?' The speaker was instantly recognisable as her sister Frances. 'I've been deputed to check out the situation. Ma's on a fact-finding mission and Pa is locked in battle with a planning authority. What are you doing?'

'A minute ago I was having a swim before lunch.'

'Some people have all the luck. I'm in the office having a sandwich at my desk. What's the latest on the old girl?'

While Cressy was giving her sister an update they heard the sound of Catalina replacing the receiver of the kitchen telephone.

'What sort of shape is she in mentally?' Frances asked. 'In her day she had a mind like a razor. But that was way back in the Sixties. She must have long since lost her edge, living alone in the back of beyond for years.'

'She says she has all her marbles and I believe her,' said Cressy.

'In that case watch out she doesn't try to bully you. Even Ma didn't argue with Kate. She was a big gun intellectually.'

'Perhaps she's mellowed a bit. Anyone would, living here. It's the most heavenly place. We must be insane to live in London when we could be here, with glorious views everywhere you turn.'

'Glorious views are nice, but one also needs bread...in both senses,' Frances said crisply. 'Gotta go, Cress. As usual I'm up to my eyebrows.'

'I haven't told you my exciting news,' Cressy said quickly, before her sister could ring off. 'You'll never guess who I've met—who is helping me with the language problem.'

'Some ancient film star who's in retirement out there?'

'A writer, but he's not ancient. He's about your age,' said Cressy. 'Nicolas Alaro...the travel writer. You must have heard of him, Frances, even if you've never read him.'

There was silence at the other end of the line. Cressy wondered if her sister had her hand over the mouthpiece while she talked to someone who had come into her office.

Then Frances said, 'Nicolas Alaro...whose real name is Nicolas Talbot? Is that the man you mean?'

'Yes, that's right. Have you met him?' Cressy felt oddly disappointed.

In the course of their work, the rest of the family were always meeting famous or important people. Normally she never did. Now, having met someone outstanding, she had been hoping that for once it would be Frances who was impressed and curious.

'Yes, I knew him a long time ago. So did Anna. Where did you meet him?'

'On the flight coming out. I couldn't believe my luck.'

'How did he react when you introduced yourself? Did you tell him who you were?'

'If you mean have I mentioned Mother, no, I haven't. It hasn't come up.'

'There are plenty of Vales besides us, and you don't look like the rest of us. I suppose he hasn't made the connection. It could be that he's forgotten.' Frances sounded thoughtful.

'Did you know him well? Was he a boyfriend?'

'He was a prize rat,' said her sister with sudden vehemence. 'Have nothing to do with him, Cress. His books may be good, but he's not. Don't let him add your scalp to his belt.'

'I don't understand,' said Cressy. 'What did he do? I've never heard you mention him.'

'And you're not to mention him either. Don't ever breathe his name to anyone in this family. I mean that. I'm dead serious, Cress. Say nothing about him. Keep your mouth shut.'

'But—'

'There's a call on the other line. I'll talk to you later.' Her sister rang off.

CHAPTER SIX

As CRESSY hung up the receiver her mind seethed with unanswered questions. Why was Nicolas's name taboo? What could he possibly have done to cause Frances to issue such melodramatic warnings?

All her pleasure in the lovely weather and her beautiful surroundings evaporated. At first she had been glad that her sister had taken the trouble to call her—now she wished she had gone to fetch Kate's books before lunch. Then Catalina would have said she was out and Frances might not have bothered to call back. She always had a packed diary and a lot on her mind.

Cressy went to the changing room to dry and dress. Then she took the borrowed swimsuit and pegged it to a line at the back of the barn where Catalina hung the household linen.

She was starting back to the house to do something about her wet hair when she suddenly remembered the dog. What with one thing and another she had completely forgotten the vagrant spaniel.

She was crossing the yard between the barn and the terrace when she was astonished to see the subject of her thoughts lying at ease in the shade of the vine, inside a large dog basket, looking a different animal from the dejected creature of a few hours earlier.

In the meantime he—or it might be she—had been thoroughly washed and brushed, and the ghastly sore had been covered with a professional-looking dressing.

'What happened to you?' she exclaimed. 'Who gave you a bath? Catalina? Are you feeling better?' The dog didn't cower when she put out her hand to stroke it. The attentions it had received seemed to have restored its faith in the human race as being well-disposed towards canines.

Catalina reappeared to set the table. "You?" Cressy asked, pointing at her, at the dog and then at her own still damp hair.

The housekeeper shook her head. To, *no...el senori- to—* she made a gesture towards the top floor of the house '*—y esto...*' she indicated the dressing '*...el ve- terinario.*'

So Nicolas had washed the spaniel himself, taken it to a veterinary surgery and unearthed an old basket used by a larger dog. It didn't seem to tie in with Frances's description of him as a 'prize rat'.

In her bathroom Cressy upended a canister of conditioning and styling mousse and squeezed a dollop of foam onto her palm. As she applied it she wondered if Nicolas had decided to bath the dog himself to save her the trouble of doing it. If he had—if she wasn't deluding herself—it must mean that he really liked her. Or that was the conclusion she would have drawn before talking to her sister. For what man went to that kind of trouble, unless he was crazy about dogs, except for a girl he liked and wanted to please?

But now, after Frances's cautionary, 'Don't let him add your scalp to his belt', it was hard to know what to think. Perhaps he had looked after the dog because he thought it was quicker to do it himself and get the chore out of the way.

The door of his room was open when she passed it on her way down, but she didn't glance in. He was on the terrace before her, drinking a glass of orange juice.

'How did your morning go?' he asked.

'Fine, thanks.' She gave him a brief account of her activities. 'Catalina tells me you are responsible for the dog looking so much better.'

'I felt you had enough on your plate. The dog is a bitch, by the way. So far there's no indication of where she came from. The vet doesn't know her, and Catalina's enquiries drew a blank. If she's going to be here for some days we had better give her a name. Any suggestions?'

While he was talking he had been pouring orange juice from a vacuum jug into a tall glass for her.

'Thank you.' After drinking some, she said, 'What about Star, from that poem by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Edmund Wilson?'

'I know the poem.' Nicolas laughed. 'Star it is.' After a pause, he added, 'You've just passed one of my congeniality tests.'

'I have? How?'

'I'm irritated by "don't knows". I like people who, when asked a question, have something positive to say...even if I don't agree with it. It's the same with suggestions. It's exasperating when people are asked to put up ideas for a day out, or whatever, and they have nothing to offer.'

'Do you have a lot of congeniality tests?' she asked, wondering if she had already failed several.

'A fair number, yes. Doesn't everyone? Don't you?'

Cressy thought about it. 'I don't much like people who never help with the chores...who sit back and expect to be waited on.'

She was thinking of some of the guests at her parents' weekend place, who didn't even make their beds and took it for granted that invisible hands would take care of all the domestic arrangements.

'Do you find that, because of your job, your family and friends expect you to sort out their difficulties?' he asked shrewdly.

'I meant people generally. I do see a good deal of selfishness in other people's families, but not in my own,' she said staunchly.

'Catalina tells me you've had a call from England.'

'One of my sisters rang up to ask how I was getting on.'

She wondered how he would react if she were to repeat what Frances had said about him.

But was Frances's 'prize rat' accusation justified? There were a number of men who were on her sisters' blacklists. Their love affairs had seldom ended amicably. One month they were mad about the guy, a month later they would be wishing they'd never set eyes on him.

Catalina came out with their lunch—an earthenware dish filled with salad, sliced avocados and anchovies. A large loaf of village bread was already on the table under a protective dome of fine mesh.

As he had the previous evening, Nicolas saw that Cressy was seated before sitting down himself.

After helping herself to the salad and turning the olive-wood servers in his direction, Cressy said, 'This afternoon I'm going to the cottage again. Kate wants some books, and I want to look round more leisurely and plan how to make it comfortable for when she comes out of hospital.'

'Are you sure you can find your way there?'

'Yes, no problem, I've got an excellent sense of direction... said she modestly.'

Nicolas laughed. 'There was no need for that rider, Cressy. You've already established that you're not conceited. I suspect your opinion of yourself is too low rather than too high.'

'What on earth makes you say that?'

'A wide experience of human nature. For a year, after Cambridge, I worked as a guide for a travel company specialising in treks. You become a good judge of people's characters and how they'll react when the going gets rough, as it frequently did on those trips. Will you have a glass of wine?'

'Not for me, thanks.'

'I don't drink at lunchtime either, not when I'm writing.'

'Do you have any secretarial help?'

He shook his head. 'It might have been necessary in pre-PC times. But with a computer I don't need any hired help. Frankly, I'd just as soon not have a secretary hovering around. I work best in solitude.'

'That makes me feel an intruder on your peace and quiet. I was going to ask if I could help with any clerical chores as a small return for your kindness. But obviously not.'

Nicolas was eating with his fork. He was right-handed. He put his left hand on her forearm.

'You are definitely not an intruder. I'm very happy to have you here for as long as you wish to stay. Are you an experienced PC user?'

'Not in my job, but in my free time, yes.' Cressy was sharply aware of the long fingers resting on her arm. 'I know my way around most systems.'

'Do you indeed? That's unusual.'

His hand was still on her arm, his thumb moving gently back and forth.

Her throat tight, she said, 'I do a newsletter for a club I belong to, and I'm typing the memoirs of a darling old man who can't afford to have them privately printed. He wants half a dozen copies to send to his children and grandchildren scattered round the world. His handwriting is a bit tricky, but once I've deciphered it the typing and lay-out is easy. Photocopied and spiral-bound, the copies will cost a fraction of printed memoirs.'

Nicolas said, 'I guess so. Has he had an entertaining life?'

Although he listened to her answer, he was more interested in watching her. He could feel the tension in her arm and see by the way she kept pausing and swallowing that she was reacting to his touch.

The more she revealed of her character, the more obvious it became that she was an extremely nice girl—in his mother's definition of that term. But it was the other kind of girl he needed right now, and he thought it likely that Cressy had it in her to be a passionate woman as well, if she chose.

Even after this short time in Majorca she had begun to ripen, like a melon placed on a sunny windowsill. It would take several days for her skin to turn golden, but already she had a glow she had lacked the first time he saw her. He thought it was because she knew he found her attractive and felt the same way about him.

But was it fair to take advantage of her feelings when there could be no future in it?

She had finished talking and was trying to eat her salad. He could see she had lost her appetite. That happened when other, stronger appetites intervened. He felt the same way himself.

He removed his hand from her arm, saying briskly, 'I forgot to mention that we've been invited to a drinks party tonight. I don't usually go to them, but it's a spectacular house which I think would interest you. It's typical of Mallorca in a quite different way from this one. We'll leave about six-fifteen, if that's all right with you?'

An hour later Cressy obtained the key of Kate's house from her neighbour and took a second look at the mess inside the cottage. She had seen this sort of thing before in the houses and flats of old people who basically had no reason to go on living. But as Kate still had her faculties, including a formidable intellect, why should she lose interest in life?

Cressy had a feeling there had been a clue to the enigma in Kate's behaviour this morning when she had given that sigh and had murmured that regret was the worst pain. What was it she regretted?

Catalina had lent Cressy some cleaning equipment. After throwing open all the shutters, and letting the sunlight flood in, she swept the floors, dealt with an accumulation of washing-up, stripped the bed of threadbare sheets and pillowcases, which should have been replaced long ago, and started a grand tidy-up.

It was the wrong time of day to be active, and soon her T-shirt and the waistband of her shorts were soaked with sweat. As there was no one about, she stripped down to her bra and briefs which felt a lot more comfortable.

At five o'clock she closed up, took back the key and deposited a bin-bag of rubbish in the boot of the car. Somewhere along the way she had noticed a big receptacle for rubbish by the roadside. Tomorrow she would track down a launderette. No doubt Catalina would allow her to use the washing machine at Ca'n Llorenc, but she didn't want to ask for more favours than she was receiving already.

After she'd had a shower, she decided she would have to ask Catalina if she could use the iron to press her skirt to wear for the drinks party.

To her embarrassment, Catalina insisted on doing it for her. In mime, she indicated that Cressy must rest. She would bring the skirt to her room.

Half an hour later, she tapped on the bedroom door and handed over a clothes hanger with the skirt immaculately pressed attached to it by its loops.

'Muchas, muchas gracias, senora.'

'De nada, senorita,' the housekeeper said with a smile.

As she closed the door Cressy made a mental note to buy her some flowers or chocolates, and to acquire a Spanish phrasebook.

The skirt was an Italian cast-off from Anna's holiday wardrobe. It was made of white cotton gabardine and, when she was standing still, appeared to be almost straight from hip to hem. When she moved the seams broke into slits from her knees to her ankles. Anna had had the hem turned up, but luckily she hadn't worn it long enough for that hem to make a permanent line when Cress had let it down to suit her own longer legs. The style was no longer top fashion, but that didn't worry her. With it she wore a clean T-shirt and a pair of white sneakers. Finally she added some imitation amber earrings and a transparent bracelet the colour of honey.

She heard Nicolas going downstairs while she was checking her appearance in the long mirror.

I'm afraid I'm not very elegant. I hope this will do,' she said apologetically when she joined him.

He looked her over. 'You have something going for you that none of the other guests will have.'

'I do?' she said, baffled.

'You* re young. Your face has no lines. Your body is firm. Your hair thick. They've lost all those assets. Unless some of them bring younger house guests, the average age will be sixty, if not older. If it gets too deadly, we'll leave early. It's Catalina's night off, so we'll eat out.'

'I could have cooked for us. I'm quite a good cook,' said Cressy. 'But maybe Catalina wouldn't like someone else using her kitchen.'

'She approves of you,' said Nicolas. 'She doesn't mince words if she takes a dislike to my guests.'

'What have I done to earn her approval?'

'You made your bed this morning, left your bathroom in order and you have a good appetite. People who push food round their plate annoy her.'

'Do she and Felio have children?' she asked as they left the house.

'Three sons and a married daughter. They get together on weekends.'

This evening the Bentley had its hood up so it wouldn't be necessary to wear a scarf. As Nicolas waited for her to arrange the panels of her skirt before he closed the passenger door Cressy said, 'Oh...what about the animals? Might Juanito go for Star if there are no people here?'

'I've put her basket in one of the outhouses. She's sleeping a lot. I expect it's a reaction to the time she was adrift.'

'Tell me about the people giving the party,' said Cressy as the car rolled forward.

'They're multi-millionaires, some of the many who have holiday houses on the island. You would never know they were among the super-rich. They're

a nice, unpretentious couple. They live in considerable style, as you'll see when we get there, but it's not an ostentatious display of wealth. There's a lot of that here as well, but I avoid those people...and the ones whose money may come from dubious sources.' He changed the subject by asking, 'How did you get on at the cottage?'

'It's looking a bit more civilised. But what it needs is to be repainted, inside and out, and the kitchen and bathroom improved. I don't think Kate has the funds to do that. I'm going to write to my father and ask if he'll put up the money.'

'Why not fax your letter?' Nicolas suggested. 'Otherwise it could take a couple of weeks to reach him. Have the people at the hospital given you any idea how long Miss Dexter will have to remain there?' *

'I asked about that this morning, after I'd seen Kate. She was tired, so I didn't stay long. The doctor says her leg will need to be in plaster for about twelve weeks, and her wrist half that time. Luckily the fracture of the femur wasn't a really bad one. They've pinned and screwed it to a plate.'

Nicolas said, 'I've heard that people of eighty heal as well as children of eight, providing their bones aren't diseased. The problem with older people is their muscle tone isn't as good. If they're immobilised for long, the wasting of the muscles can be irreparable.'

'That's exactly what the doctor told me. She wants to get Kate on her feet at the earliest possible moment, and she talked about the importance of physiotherapy. I think she's a very good doctor...very well-trained, with all the latest know-how at her fingertips. Is there a nursing home on the island where Kate could be cared for between leaving hospital and going home?'

'I'm not well up on that sort of thing. Ask the advice of the people you'll be meeting at the party. They'll be experts on the subject.'

Privately Cressy thought that although their advice might be good, if you happened to be in their income bracket, it might not be applicable to Kate, dependent on a pension and probably without an investment to her name.

Cressy had no doubt that her father would stump up the cash to put the cottage to rights, but her parents weren't rich enough to subsidise Kate indefinitely. They both had good incomes, but also a lavish lifestyle. They liked to keep up with the Joneses, and, in their milieu, the Joneses spent a lot of money on things which weren't really necessary but made them feel good.

Her train of thought led her back to her sister's cryptic warning on the telephone, a worry she had been trying to put to the back of her mind.

If she had had a phonecard, and the opportunity to use it, she could have rung Frances back at her flat this evening. Not that it was ever easy to catch her sister in—the flat wasn't really a home. It was merely where she kept her clothes and slept, when she wasn't spending the night with the current man in her life. Tracking her down was difficult at the best of times. From rural Majorca it would be virtually impossible.

But I have to know what she meant, Cressy thought worriedly, perhaps at the hospital tomorrow there will be a trolley-phone I can use. Then I'll ask them to let me pay for it at once, so it doesn't go on Kate's bill.

The door was answered by their host, a distinguished- looking man with silver hair and silver-grey eyes in a lined brown face. He welcomed Nicolas warmly and was pleasant to Cressy.

The party was taking place outside. As they passed through the house she noticed many examples of modern art, both paintings and sculpture, and a lot of opulent furnishings. But the style of the house was international *grand luxe*, rather than predominantly Spanish like Ca'n Llorenc.

On a terrace, overlooking a magnificent garden with fountains and larger sculptures, about thirty people were drinking champagne while two or three local women handed round trays of cocktail snacks.

Cressy noticed that Nicolas's arrival caused a lull in the conversation. Everyone there seemed to know him— if not personally, then by sight and reputation. However, their host was intent on steering them to meet his wife. People who thrust forward to greet Nicolas found it politely but firmly made clear that they would have to wait.

Their hostess, whose name was Alice, was as charming as her husband. Dressed in a simple frock of pale blue linen with a wide emerald suede belt cinching her still slender waist, and no jewellery other than small pearl earrings and a gold wristwatch, she made Cressy feel more comfortable about her own outfit.

'Cressy needs some advice, Alice,' Nicolas told her after a few minutes' small-talk. 'I'll leave her to explain the situation to you while I do the rounds.' He moved away, his tall figure easy to keep track of among people of average height.

'Now I know why Nicolas agreed to come,' said Alice, looking amused. 'He's not a party person. I always ask him, when he's here, and he always makes an excuse unless it's a small dinner party. He hates going out to drinks and meeting a lot of people with whom he has nothing in common. Have you known him long?'

'Since yesterday morning,' said Cressy. 'But it feels much longer. He's been so incredibly kind that I almost have the feeling I've known him all my life.'

She spoke without stopping to think, and then regretted her impulsiveness in case she sounded foolish.

But her hostess nodded. 'I know what you mean. He had that effect on me the first time we met. But then I'm older than his mother, so it's rather different.' Her pretty hazel eyes twinkled. 'He isn't noted for his kindness to young women of your age. Don't lose your heart to him, will you? He's in thrall to the world's wild places and has incurable wanderlust. Such men make impossible husbands, as his mother discovered.'

'You know her?'

'Very well. She comes here every summer and we spend a lot of time together. She's a lovely person, and Nicolas has a lot of her in him. But he's also his father's son. I never met Josh Talbot, but we know people who did. They say he and Marisa Alaro were as incompatible as an eagle and a dove.'

'But they loved each other and were happy until he was killed?'

'Yes, very happy,' said Alice. 'But, although it sounds a strange thing to say, perhaps it was best that he was killed. It brought an end to the agonies of worry she suffered while he was away on his climbing expeditions. Such men can be very selfish. When Nicolas was born his father was in the Himalayas, attempting to conquer a peak which had already claimed many lives. She has never mentioned how she felt, but I can guess, can't you?'

'Yes,' said Cressy. 'I can.'

She thought it a little odd that Alice should tell her all this on such short acquaintance. But perhaps her hostess was extremely quick on the uptake and knew that it didn't take long for susceptible women to fall victim to Nicolas's magnetism.

'What is the problem of which you need advice?' Alice asked.

When Cressy explained, Alice not only gave her opinion but appealed to other people present to add their recommendations.

This led, eventually, to her being drawn down onto a sofa to listen to a history of ailments suffered by and treatments prescribed for an elderly woman who had lived on the island for years.

Cressy had been lending a sympathetic ear to this catalogue of woes for some time when Nicolas loomed over them. 'Good evening,' he said *to* her companion. 'I'm sorry to butt in, but we have to leave soon and I know Cressy particularly wants to see the swimming pool. Would you excuse us?'

It was gracefully done, and Cressy was relieved to make her escape. But, in the light of what Alice had said about him, she couldn't help wondering if he had perfected ways of extricating himself, equally smoothly, from relationships with women which had begun to bore him. Perhaps that was what lay behind her sister's dislike of him. Maybe either she or Anna had been given the brush-off and it still rankled.

On the far side of the terrace they were offered yet another tray of delicious nibbles by one of the helpers, and fresh glasses of champagne by another.

'You are very good at hiding boredom,' said Nicolas. 'If I hadn't known that old bird, and what a dead bore she is, I would have had the impression she was as interesting to talk to as someone like Freya Stark.'

'Did you ever meet Dame Freya?'

'No, but I greatly admired her...and all those intrepid women travellers who went alone, apart from their local guides, into places where few men had been. Did Alice have useful advice?'

'She was very helpful. They all were. What a marvellous garden,' said Cressy, admiring the flowering creepers twining up the supports of the pergola which was the approach to the pool.

'It needs a lot of upkeep. They have as many gardeners as maids, and they only use the place for short periods. Does this lifestyle appeal to you, Cressy?'

She shook her head. 'Kate's house is more my style. I could make a lovely little garden on her patch of land. The millionaire life wouldn't suit me.'

'Wait till you see their pool before you dismiss it out of hand.'

A moment later, turning a corner, they came to it, and it did make her catch her breath. The water was as still as glass, revealing the intricate mosaic laid on the floor of the pool—a design of deep blues and greens with flashes of silver in a stylised representation of undersea life. Around the pool, like a broad frame, were herbaceous borders thickly planted with flowers in a similar range of colours to the delicately scented chiffon scarf Cressy had wound round her head the day before. They were not flowers she would have expected to find in a Spanish garden, and perhaps they only survived there by being assiduously tended. But the effect was beautiful.

'It's a dream,' she said. 'But I like your pool just as much. I prefer its more open setting. You can see for miles from your windows, but here, lovely as it is, the mountains are rather oppressive. If I lived here I'd feel hemmed in.'

'That's the effect it has on me. This area is very exclusive. Only the richest foreigners and a handful of Mallorquins who have made their money from tourism can afford it. But to me it's slightly unreal. All these magnificent houses have been imposed on the landscape, they haven't evolved from the land. They don't go back hundreds of years.'

Before leaving the party, which showed no sign of ending, they said goodbye to their host and hostess.

'You must come to dine with us,' said Alice. 'I should like to meet your great-aunt, Cressy, if you can convince her we're not entirely frivolous. Anyway, let me know if there's any way I can help.'

'They're good people, those two,' said Nicolas as they were driving away. 'Alice has helped a lot of people in trouble. They always remind me of that verse "Hearts just as true and fair may beat in Belgrave Square as in the lowly air of Seven Dials." Has your job ever taken you to Seven Dials? Is it a squalid part of London?'

'I don't know. I've never been there. Where did you learn those lines?'

'Possibly from my English grandmother. She knew lots of amusing or improving rhymes. An American one I like is, "And this is good old Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, where the Lowells talk only to Cabots, and the Cabots talk only to God".'

They had supper in a small restaurant overlooking the sea at Puerto de Pollensa, a fishing port and one of the very first places to have rich people's holiday villas built at the beginning of the century—and to remain comparatively unscathed through the worst excesses of the Sixties' tourist boom.

When they were seated, and had been presented with menus, Nicolas said, 'Shall I choose for you? You had better tell me what you don't like.'

'Only rare steaks,' said Cressy.

'I don't eat those either...except in Argentina, where, as I said, it's hard to avoid them.'

As he ordered the meal in Mallorquim she had no idea what was coming until a plate of artichokes in hollandaise sauce was set before her.

'Is there a builder you rely on when Ca'n Llorenc needs repairs?' she asked as they started to eat.

'I ca\$ put you in touch with a very good builder. Better still, he speaks English and German, having seen it would be an advantage with so many people of those nationalities needing things done in this area. But you mustn't expect to get work done in a hurry. The *manana* attitude applies here as much as on the mainland—if not more.'

'Is the English side of you irritated by that?'

'On the contrary, I'm more irritated by the obsessive hurry of the rat-race cultures,' said Nicolas. 'That outlook is coming to Spain, but obviously more in the cities than in the rural areas.'

Their main course was kebabs of lamb with an imaginative salad. He had ordered water, not wine, and this suited Cressy, as three glasses of champagne had left her slightly light-headed. No doubt his head was stronger, but she enjoyed the meal more because he wasn't drinking. In her late teens she and most of her girlfriends had had some scary experiences after dates with boyfriends who'd drunk more than was sensible.

The only thing she had to worry about tonight was whether, when they got back, Nicolas would make another pass—which this time would not be interrupted by Juanito. It wouldn't surprise her to learn that Star wasn't the only one who had been confined to an outhouse before they set out.

For their pudding he had chosen home-made almond and honey ice cream.

The restaurant was crowded now and the noise level had risen.

'Let's have coffee at home, shall we?' Nicolas suggested.

On the way back he didn't talk, and if he had she would have found it hard to listen attentively when her whole body was tense with mingled apprehension and excitement.

The return journey seemed to take only a fraction of the time of their outward journey.

The house was in darkness, and in the deep shadow cast by the vine Cressy would have had to explore the door with her hands in order to find the keyhole. Nicolas found it easily and went in ahead of her to switch on the lamps. Then he relocked the door with a sound which intensified her awareness that they were shut in together until morning.

While he was attending to the percolator, she took a deep breath and said, 'Nicolas, there's been a misunderstanding which I ought to put straight.'

He turned to look at her, lifting one level dark eyebrow into an inverted tick.

'Tonight you introduced me to those people as Cressy Dexter. I should have explained before that Kate is the sister of my father's *mother*, not his father's. My surname isn't Dexter. It's Vale. My mother is Virginia Vale, the Member of Parliament. You may have heard of her.'

Her mouth dry she waited for his reaction, dreading that it would confirm the truth of her sister's accusation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'THE MP who thinks the whole of central London should be a pedestrian area, and owners of private cars should only be allowed to use them for a limited number of journeys?'

Although his tone was expressionless, Cressy was instantly convinced that he thought her mother a crank. If he did, he wasn't alone. There were millions who thought that. Cressy herself felt some of her mother's ideas were bordering on lunacy. At the same time, she was fiercely loyal when other people criticised Virginia.

She said defensively, 'Why not? A lot of her constituents have children with asthma aggravated by traffic pollution. It's an issue she feels very strongly about.'

'She may well be right, but she hasn't a hope in hell of convincing the rest of the House,' Nicolas said dryly. 'Why didn't you tell me at once that I'd got your surname wrong?'

'It didn't seem important.'

He eyed her intently. 'And it can be difficult being the daughter of an MP who raises a lot of people's hackles, right?'

His insights into her mind always disconcerted her, especially when she found *his* character rather impenetrable.

'Sometimes,' she admitted.

'I'm more interested in Spanish politics than in what's happening in Britain,' he said. 'I've seen your mother a couple of times on TV when I've been staying in London. She's obviously popular with the media because she has forceful views and has mastered the art of the sound bite. You aren't at all like her, are you? Either to look at or in your personality.'

'No, I'm not. My sisters are like her, but I don't take after either of my parents.'

The mention of her sisters caused no visible reaction. Either he had forgotten ever being involved with one of Virginia Vale's daughters or he had exceptional control over his reactions.

'Would you like brandy with your coffee?'

'No, thanks.' She hovered on the brink of saying, My sister Frances seems to know you, and seeing what effect that had. But, conscious that her mission would become a lot harder if he withdrew his help, she remembered one of Maggie's maxims—let sleeping dogs lie.

Whatever had happened between him and one of her sisters a long time ago had no bearing on the reason she was here—to help Kate. It was better to hold her tongue until she knew more of the facts.

Nicolas said, 'I bought some chocolates today. I like chocolates sometimes. Do you?'

'It's only incredible willpower that keeps me from being a raging chocoholic.'

Throwing her a look of amusement, he filled the cups and took them to the far end of the room where two throne-like oak chairs, now fitted with comfortable cushions, stood on either side of a large flat-topped trunk, patterned with brass-headed nails, which looked as if it had once been a marriage chest. Then from a corner cupboard he produced a cardboard box, broke the seal on it and offered her the contents.

Cressy recognised hand-made Belgian chocolates when she saw them, although she had never been given any and would not have bought them for herself. She chose a dark one.

Before biting into it, on impulse she said, 'When I was reading your books, it never occurred to me that one day I'd be sitting in your house eating chocolates with you. Somehow one doesn't think of wilderness travellers liking things like chocs.'

'I like all the pleasures of the flesh,' he said, before putting a hard-centred chocolate between his teeth and biting it in half. 'Given the choice, I would have preferred some cheese, but apart from the ones we had last night Spain isn't noted for its cheeses. Do you like French cheeses?'

She nodded. 'They're another of my weaknesses.'

Nicolas pushed the box closer to her. 'Don't stop at one. Go a little mad. Why not?'

There was a message in his eyes that she couldn't interpret. Or was it a private joke at her expense?

He said, 'Colette said that if she had a son who was ready to marry, she would tell him, "Beware of girls who don't like wine, truffles, cheese or music."'

'Do you like her books?' she asked, faintly surprised. Like chocolates, the works of the famous French novelist did not fit her idea of him.

'No, but I remember that nugget of wisdom. I wonder if it's good advice? What do you think?'

'I'm not sure I've ever had a dish with truffles in it. I agree about the other three. To marry or shack up with someone and then to find out that one of you liked punk rock and the other liked medieval plainsong would be asking for disaster, wouldn't it?'

He laughed, but his eyes narrowed slightly as he said, 'But shacking up is not something you would ever do, is it? You will only surrender that "long-preserved virginity" after you've walked down the aisle to "Here Comes The Bride" and have a ring on your finger.'

She recognised the sardonic allusion to Andrew Marvell's poem and felt a spurt of anger at his casual mockery of her values.

'Yes, and what's more I'll *stay* married,' she said with indignant emphasis. 'It may seem laughable to you, but I believe in "till death us do part". If I can't find a man who shares that conviction I'll live by myself, as Kate has.'

'I doubt if she holds your views. I should think she's single because she sees marriage as a form of servitude. Most militant feminists do.'

'I've no idea how she sees it,' Cressy said shortly. 'I'm looking forward to talking to her. But whatever her views are, she won't make me alter mine. I want "the world well lost", not a series of tacky affairs with partners who, a few years on, might not even remember my name.'

She watched him closely to see how he reacted. But the deep blue eyes didn't flicker. They met hers calmly and steadily.

'Don't we all?' he said dryly. 'But the world well lost for love is a romantic theory, impossible to put into practice. There is no escape from the world...no long-term escape.'

'You've escaped from it. That's why people enjoy your books...because they give them a vicarious sense of freedom.'

'I know. But it's an illusion. Like everything else, my kind of freedom has its price. Most of the armchair travellers who enjoy reading my stuff wouldn't like the reality. I leave out or gloss over the downside of a wilderness traveller's life—the interminable waits to have papers checked, the rough rides on mountain roads with the wreckage of other buses littering the landscape below. I don't mind that. There are other times which make up for the boring and bad bits. But it isn't the kind of travelling a lot of people would enjoy.'

I would, she thought. If I were with you, I'd enjoy going to hell and back.

Nicolas drained his coffee-cup and rose to his feet. 'If you'll excuse me, I'll go up and do some more work. May I leave you to turn out the lights? They can all be turned off from the switches at the bottom of the stairs.'

'Of course...and thank you for taking me to the party, and for dinner.'

'My pleasure. Goodnight, Cressida.' He crossed the room, very tall and straight-backed, and still, even with his hair cut and his long legs hidden by trousers, as powerfully attractive as he had been at the check-in.

His departure left her deflated. Had he gone because he was bored with her? She would have liked to believe he had gone upstairs early, by Spanish standards, to avoid the temptation to make another pass. But she couldn't convince herself that it was the reason. A third possibility was that he had remembered whatever it was that her sister had been alluding to. He might feel himself to be in an awkward situation now that his house guest had turned out to be the sister of someone with whom he had parted on bad terms.

At breakfast Catalina gave Cressy a note:

Cressy, I've been up most of the night, writing. Shall now catch a few hours' sleep and may not wake till mid-morning. See you at lunch. N.

At the hospital, she made enquiries about using the mobile telephone, if they had one. They did, but it was in use. They promised to have it brought to Kate's room as soon as it was available.

Kate was in a brighter mood. 'I'm getting used to this bed and to the hospital noises. I had my first decent night's sleep since the accident,' she said, in response to being asked how she was. 'Did you bring the books I asked for?'

Cressy unpacked her day-pack and took out the books and some bits and pieces she had stopped off to buy. A look round Kate's bathroom had revealed a dearth of the toiletries considered essential by most women. Even her toothbrush was long overdue for replacement.

'I hope you don't mind, I opened the drawers in your bedroom to find your nightdresses. But all I could find were two pairs of winter pyjamas.'

'Never wear nightdresses. When the weather's hot, I sleep in my skin,' said Kate. 'This gown they've given me will do. What's this you've brought? Not scent?'

'It's the toilet water Virginia takes with her on journeys. If your hands feel sticky it's refreshing.'

'You shouldn't have wasted your money, but it was a kind thought,' said Kate. 'How is Virginia? Still upwardly mobile?'

'Still deeply involved in politics,' said Cressy, ignoring the sarcasm.

'She will never achieve her ambition to be Prime Minister. There may be another woman PM in your lifetime, but I wouldn't bet on it,' said Kate. 'It certainly won't be your mother. What's the latest bee in her bonnet?'

Her hostile tone was surprising. Cressy had always had the impression that Kate had been her mother's role model and had encouraged and approved of her political career.

Before she could answer, there was a tap on the door and one of the staff wheeled in the telephone trolley.

When Kate would have sent it away, Cressy explained that it was she who needed to make a call.

Having already looked up the codes she would need in the telephone directory at Ca'n Llorenc, she dialled the number of Frances's office. Her sister wrote a City gossip column for the business section of one of the Sunday newspapers, and also wrote profiles of leading businessmen.

The call was answered by Frances's secretary. 'I'm sorry, Frances is in a meeting. May I take a message?'

'No, thanks. It's nothing important,' said Cressy. Which was a lie. It was desperately important. It had been on her mind half the night.

'Why are you ringing your sister?' Kate asked.

'She rang me yesterday. There was something I wanted to check. Which reminds me—what about your mail, Kate? If it's not delivered to the cottage where does it go?'

'I have a box at the *correos*. You'll find the key in the top right hand drawer of my desk. But I don't receive many letters. My books are all out of print. I've lost touch with most of the people I used to know.'

She said it matter-of-factly, without any hint of self- pity, but to Cressy it seemed dreadfully sad to be so alone at her age.

'Perhaps, when you're fully recovered, you should think about coming back to England, rejoining the family circle,' she suggested. 'I'm sure we could find you a nice little place in Sussex not far from ours. I know the weather's not wonderful, but there are compensations.'

'To spend my last years in the cosy bosom of my devoted family,' Kate declaimed in a saccharine voice. Her laugh sounded more like a bark. 'You are a romantic, Cressida. You see the world through a rosy haze of illusion. Your family is anything but cosy. They are driven by ambition, the lot of them. And I was one of the people who encouraged those self-centred attitudes. But I know better now...'

When Cressy returned to Ca'n Llorenc, she was longing for a swim to restore her.

'You look a bit down,' said Nicolas, rising from one of the loungers where he had been stretched in the sun with a long drink within reach.

'It's been quite a gruelling morning.'

'Get changed and have a swim. I'll fix you a pick- me-up.'

Half a dozen lengths of the pool made her feel a new being.

'Perhaps it's partly the heat. I don't usually feel flaked out before lunch,' she said as she mounted the steps at the pool's shallow end, her arms raised to squeeze the water from her hair.

Nicolas was wearing dark glasses and she didn't actually see him looking at her body. But she sensed his appraisal, and quickly picked up the pool towel she had left on a chair and swathed it round her.

'It's a common reaction for visitors to feel tired around this time of day. Even people on holiday experience it. It's the heat, a different environment, perhaps a touch of dehydration. I prescribe a siesta.'

Somehow the way he said it made her think not of sleeping but of making love. The thought had occurred before and now it came back more vividly, making her shiver.

'You're not feeling feverish, are you?' In a single lithe movement Nicolas rose from the lounge and put his hand on her forehead.

Intensely aware of his body—clad in the briefest of swimwear—looming over hers, she said quickly, 'I'm fine now...better already.'

'Good, but knock back a glass of water before you get to the sangria. It's not the knock-out stuff they serve at some ex-pat parties. This is fruit and wine sweetened with honey.'

Cressy sat down on the lounge alongside his, and loosened the towel.

'What time did you wake up?' she asked.

'Not till noon. When I'm writing I keep odd hours. It doesn't bother Catalina. She's accustomed to it. Why was your morning gruelling?'

'I unwittingly triggered a furious tirade from Kate. Not at me—at the women's movement. For years it was like a religion to her. Now she's lost faith, and has no one with whom to discuss her disillusionment. So this morning it all poured out and I wasn't sure how to handle it.'

'How did you handle it?'

'Very badly,' Cressy said ruefully. 'In trying to calm her, I inflamed her. All my attempts to be positive made her increasingly negative. She worries me. When people lose something central to their existence, they sometimes do desperate things.'

'You think she might take her life?'

'I don't know. Not where she is. But if there is nothing left for her to hang on to—' Cressy stopped short. 'I shouldn't be unloading all this oh you. You're preoccupied with your book. You can do without other people's troubles.'

'I have no problem taking yours on board, Cressy.'

She wasn't sure what to make of this.

Nicolas saw her confusion and was himself surprised to find that he'd meant what he said. Experience had taught him to avoid being involved in other people's predicaments, but Cressy was different. She had the same effect on him that the spaniel had had on her—he wanted to wipe that anxious look off her face.

As if their minds were linked and his thought had got through to her, she suddenly sat up straight, exclaiming, 'What about Star? Is she still shut in the outhouse? Oh, dear, I forgot all about her.'

'She's fine. Catalina let her out. When last seen, she was lying in the shade of the stone bench at the far end of the terrace. If I whistle, she'll probably come.' He did so.

Cressy relaxed, her eyes fixed on the archway where the spaniel would appear if she responded to the signal. Nicolas looked at her long, shapely legs and wished he could persuade her to siesta in his room.

But even if she were willing, which she had made clear she wasn't—or not yet—the situation was complicated by last night's revelation that she was a member of the Vale ménage.

He had already tangled with one of them and, although it had been a long time ago, she might still bear a grudge. On his side, it had been a struggle to remember her name. He had dismissed her from his mind and wouldn't have remembered her at all except that her mother was a determined self-publicist who never lost an opportunity to air her views on television or in the press.

For the time being he saw no reason to mention the matter to Cressy. It was unlikely she knew about it. A much younger sister wouldn't have been privy to her sisters' free and easy love lives.

It was curious that, growing up in their orbit, she had turned out a puritan. Or claimed to be. But was she really? Far more than her sisters—whose appeal owed a lot to clever exploitation of average assets—this girl was gorgeous, but seemed to have got it into her head that she was too tall and well-built to be attractive. Apparently devoid of vanity, she had none of the confidence of a physically alluring woman who knew her power over men.

The day before yesterday, when he had introduced Elena, he had seen her wistful admiration of someone who—did she but know it—wasn't a patch on her.

Cressy reminded him of the girl in a pantomime his English grandmother had taken him to see as a small boy. Reading between the lines of what she had told him, and what he already knew of the Vales, there was a marked similarity between Cressy's situation and Cinderella's. Her sisters were far from ugly, and she had a selfish mother rather than a cruel stepmother, but there was still a strong parallel between her life and that of the downtrodden Cinders.

But, although Cressy's Prince Charming might materialise eventually, he didn't see himself in that role. He had recognised a long time ago that his way of life was incompatible with any serious relationship with a woman. If she were amenable, they could have a lot of fun together. But there could never be any serious commitment.

The stray appeared in the archway, and Cressy jumped up and ran to meet her. Nicolas watched her long-legged Junoesque figure hurrying away from him. When she crouched down to pet the animal, the posture accentuated the lovely curve of waist, hip and thigh. He felt a surge of desire to teach her all the things she didn't know about, and would unquestionably enjoy once he had coaxed her out of her inhibitions.

As the girl and the dog came to join him he realised his body's response to the thought of making love to her would, if she saw it, embarrass her.

He rose from the lounge and did a shallow header into the pool.

Cressy had known Nicolas was watching her and, in the moment between his standing up and disappearing, had seen the reason for his sudden plunge into the pool.

The confirmation that he wanted her made her heart lurch in her chest. As she went to the changing room she was momentarily walking on air, her heart going like a rock group's drummer and all her most primitive instincts clamouring for release and fulfilment.

But while she was dressing she realised that it wasn't really her he wanted. It was a woman—any woman. Like any other male animal who had been alone for a long time, he was on the prowl for a mate. But not with a view to becoming a lifetime pair, like the singing gibbons in the wild parts of South East Asia, whose idyllic existence was threatened by deforestation. She had watched them on TV the previous week, the young males practising the songs that would attract a female with whom they would set up a new family unit in an area of jungle exclusive to them and their young.

Their happy life in the treetops had brought a lump to her throat. Maggie, watching the programme with her, had afterwards made the comment that it was a pity human beings had forgotten how to live like that.

Cressy had said, 'Some of them still do, Maggie.'

The housekeeper had given one of her characteristic snorts of disapproval. 'Precious few of them nowadays. I read in the paper this week that one in every three marriages will end in divorce.'

'The papers always look on the black side. That means that two out of three marriages *don't* break up,' Cressy had argued.

Remembering that conversation, she gave a deep sigh. She hadn't known then that she was going to lose her heart to a man who, by all appearances, had no intention of giving marriage a try.

'What's your plan for this afternoon?' Nicolas asked during lunch.

'I thought I'd go back to the cottage to do some more sorting out. Kate has given me *carte blanche* to go through her things and make the whole place more organised. This evening I may go and see her again. Nothing will induce her to watch television and she finds reading tiring—I think she needs stronger glasses or may have a cataract—so the evenings are boring for her.'

'Is it too soon for me to come with you?' he asked. 'Would a strange man upset her?'

'I don't see why it should. Her views on the male sex have mellowed. In fact I think it's her pen friendships with two professors, one in Germany and one in America, which have kept her going. But don't you want to get on with your book?'

'I'll be working on it this afternoon. All work and no play...'

'I wouldn't have thought a hospital visit to an eccentric old lady constituted play,' said Cressy.

Nicolas leaned back in his chair, his long fingers toying with a glass of iced spring water. 'But afterwards I'll be taking a beautiful young woman out to dinner,' he said, his eyes on her mouth.

'If we're going to eat out again, it's my turn to be host,' said Cressy, hoping she sounded casual, as if taking men out was something she did all the time.

'As I told you the day you arrived, this is macho territory,' said Nicolas. 'In Mallorca men pick up the bills and women are happy to let them. They feel that being a charming companion is sufficient contribution, and I agree.'

But what was his definition of charming companionship? she wondered. Did he expect a good deal more than conversation at table?

She had the feeling that, having backed off after her declaration on the first night, he had changed his mind and was now returning to the attack—or, if that was too blunt a term to describe his intention, at least to practised seduction.

It would be easier to deal with him, she thought, if she didn't like him as well as being attracted to him. It was impossible to relate her sister's description of 'prize rat' to the man sitting beside her who, so far, had demonstrated only those qualities which women liked and admired. She wondered what Kate would make of him.

Catalina appeared. *'Telefono por la sefiorita.'*⁹

Cressy picked up the receiver of the telephone on the table by the chair where she had been sitting when Nicolas had said goodnight the previous evening.

'Hello?'

'I have a message to call you back,' said her sister.

'Oh, Frances...hello. I thought it was the hospital calling—that I might be needed there.'

'Is something wrong with the old girl? Apart from the bones she's broken?'

'No, no...nothing specific. When I saw her this morning she was fine.'

Although the doctor hadn't mentioned it, since that morning's outburst Cressy had been wondering if Kate might have high blood pressure which, if she became too worked up, might lead to a stroke. But she wasn't about to share that concern with her sister, who wouldn't be interested anyway.

'Why did you call me?' asked Frances.

'When you rang yesterday...' Cressy paused, wondering if Nicolas could hear her end of this conversation from the terrace. Dropping her voice, she went on, 'You said things which puzzled and worried me. Why were you so mysterious? Why can't you tell me what happened?'

Frances didn't need reminding of yesterday's conversation. She had the kind of retentive, accurate memory which enabled her to repeat conversations verbatim months after they had taken place.

'Because it's confidential,' she said. 'When Anna gets back from the States you can ask her, and maybe she'll tell you. If I were you, I wouldn't ask her. It was a bad time in her life and it's left scars. She's never fully recovered. Just take my word for it, Cressy, Nicolas Talbot is bad news. He behaved contemptibly.'

'But he seems so nice. Was it all his fault? Wasn't some of it down to her?'

'She wasn't as bright as she is now. She was more like you then—too trusting for her own good. Don't tell me you've fallen for him. If I thought he was after you, I'd come out and send him packing. He wouldn't make mincemeat of me! Tell him you're Anna Vale's sister. Tell him your sister Frances hates his guts. See what he says to that.'

'I have told him who I am. At least, I told him who my mother is. He didn't react at all.'

'Which just proves what a swine he is.' The pent-up anger in Frances's voice vibrated down the line. 'If you need help with the language barrier, find and pay an interpreter. Dad will cover all your expenses. I'm warning you, Cressy—have nothing to do with that bastard. You'll save yourself a lot of

grief. If Anna knew you were seeing him, she'd go berserk. He damn nearly ruined her life.'

'When is she coming back?'

'Some time next month. When d'you think *you* might be back?'

'I don't know. It's hard to say.' Cressy explained the situation.

'It's just as well we've got you to sort things out for her. I wouldn't know where to start,' said Frances. 'I must rush, Cress. I have an important appointment, I don't want to be late. Bye for now.'

Cressy replaced the receiver but stayed where she was for some minutes. As far back as she could remember, Frances had been making dramas out of situations which didn't merit her histrionics. Especially in matters to do with her love life. Was this another instance of her tendency to exaggerate? Did Nicolas really deserve to be called a bastard? Had he really behaved contemptibly? Of had it, as Maggie would say, been six of one and half a dozen of the other?

When Cressy had been in her teens she had worshipped her sisters for their glamour, their brains, their wit. But Maggie—who loved them too, but saw them with shrewder eyes—had made her realise that they weren't as perfect as she thought.

'Your sisters are clever girls, but they've been spoilt,' she had said. 'The fact is, your father and mother have been too busy to give them proper attention, so they've given them everything they wanted to make up for never being there. It happens all the time these days, and I'm glad I shan't be around to see the results of it. What both your sisters need is a strong man to give them what they should have had when they were growing up—a firm hand, a bit of discipline. But I don't think they'll get it, because most of the men they meet are the weak-kneed sort who wouldn't say boo to a goose.'

Amused by Maggie's old-fashioned ideas, Cressy asked if she also needed a firm-handed husband.

'Not you, my lamb, you're different,' Maggie told her. 'All you need is loving kindness.'

Remembering that conversation, Cressy also remembered how, on her first night here, Nicolas had said they were two lonely people, both in need of some TLC.

Had that just been a line he used? Was he an unscrupulous womaniser, as Frances claimed, or could she trust her own instinctive feeling that—whatever he might have done in the past—he didn't mean to harm her?

'From England?' he asked when she rejoined him at the table.

'From one of my sisters. The same one who rang yesterday. She says she's met you. They both have. Why didn't you tell me?'

'It was a long time ago. Francesca came to one of the college balls, as someone else's partner but in the same group as us.'

'Her name is Frances,' she corrected.

'Well, it's a decade ago, and we only danced once or twice. Then I met her again in London. She invited me to a party. Your other sister was there. It was an attraction of opposites which quickly burned itself out. Most people make those mistakes while they're finding out who they are.'

Could he speak about it so easily if he had behaved as abominably as Frances alleged? Cressy couldn't believe it.

When lunch was over, Nicolas went back to work and Cressy drove to the cottage. The day before she had noticed there were silverfish about, and other rather nastier insects with a great many legs but different from centipedes. She planned to remove all the books and spray the shelves before replacing them, and also to empty the drawers and put them outside in the sun to get rid of the musty smell.

The books were a task for a day when she felt more energetic than she did today, after her restless night. But clearing out a chest of drawers wouldn't

be too much effort. Kate had some nice pieces of antique furniture, presumably shipped out from England when she'd retired from her post as a university lecturer.

In her bedroom there was a walnut tallboy and an oak chest of drawers. In one of the drawers Cressy came upon some bundles of letters tied with white tape, and an envelope containing an assortment of photographs. Some were of Kate when she'd been about Cressy's age, and some were of a young man. Only one showed them together, and from the way he was smiling down at her, it was obvious he was in love with her.

Cressy would have liked to read the letters to see if they might explain Kate's strange remark about regret being the worst pain. But she knew that Miss Dexter must have forgotten they were there, and her consent to having her belongings sorted out certainly wouldn't extend to having her letters read—even if they had been written many years ago.

It was hot in the bedroom, even with the windows open, and after a while Cressy began to feel drowsy. This morning, to her vexation, she had forgotten about the laundry in the boot of her borrowed car. It would have to be dealt with tomorrow. Meanwhile the bed was stripped, except for its pillows with their old-fashioned black-striped ticking.

Cressy decided to lie down for a short siesta, as Nicolas had recommended. Nicolas... she was thinking of him as she closed her eyes and surrendered to the soporific heat of the Majorcan afternoon.

When she opened her eyes he was beside her on the uncovered mattress, propped on one elbow, watching her, smiling slightly.

She could tell from his face that a moment ago he had kissed her. It was the touch of his lips on hers which had woken her.

For a moment she was flooded with happiness, knowing him to be her love, the only man she would ever want in her whole life. He said, 'I wasn't in the mood for work so I came to see what you were doing.' Then he bent to kiss her again.

CHAPTER EIGHT .

WITH his free arm arching across her, Nicolas hovered above her, so close that she could see all the tiny micro- points combining to make the intense blue of his eyes.

He said, in a husky murmur, 'Do you want to wake up, Sleeping Beauty?'

She felt her will slipping away, like water running out of a bath.

'Yes.' It came out as a whisper.

'You're ruining my concentration. All I can see on my screen is the shape of your mouth.' His own mouth was inches above it, deliberately postponing the moment when they would come together.

Cressy began to tremble. She had never felt like this with anyone—as if her body were plugged in to some invisible current which was coursing through her in long, slow tremors of pleasure.

A sound came from deep in his throat, sounding between a growl and a purr. Then his head came down and closed the gap, his lips fastening softly on hers.

This time was better than the first time. She had been nervous then, and shy, conscious that he was a stranger. Now aH she knew was that to be here in the shelter of his shoulders, close to his powerful body, parting her lips to the sweet persuasion of his mouth, was to experience a bliss beyond anything she had imagined.

Nicolas shifted closer, the bed creaking under his weight as he slid an arm underneath her, pressing her to him. But there was none of the impatience, none of the urgent gropings she had come to dread. His feelings were under control. This was persuasion and tenderness, not the aggressive lust which had always turned her off.

He released her mouth for a moment. 'What is it about you?' he whispered close to her ear, his teeth softly nibbling the lobe, before his mouth moved down her neck to the base of her throat.

'Senorita...'

It was Nicolas's smothered curse rather than the voice of Kate's neighbour which brought Cressy down to earth.

'I don't believe this...first the cat, now that flaming woman. What the hell does she want?'

'Perhaps she will go away,' Cressy breathed.

'No, she won't...she'll come barging up here. I doubt tact is something she's ever heard of.' He sat up, shaking his head as if to clear it. 'I'll go down and tell her you're busy, and keep her talking while you comb your hair and compose yourself. If you come down now, looking rumpled, in twenty-four hours the whole neighbourhood will believe we've been up to no good.' He gave a reluctant laugh. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

As he rose from the bed and moved away Cressy felt laughter bubbling up inside her. She continued to lie where she was, a hand over her mouth to muffle any sounds. She recognised her mirth as being slightly hysterical, the kind of convulsive laughter which came in moments of stress, and sometimes dissolved into tears.

Now that the current was switched off, and her body was returning to normal, was she frustrated or relieved? It was difficult to be sure.

Minutes before, Kate's bedroom had seemed like a golden cocoon enclosing her with a man from whom, as he already held her heart, it seemed foolish to withhold her body.

But now, when she looked around, it seemed a frowsty place to make love.

She got up and tidied herself. Then, quickly gathering up some of the things Kate had kept but would never make use of again, she went down to join the others.

Evidently Nicolas had explained that she was having a clear-out. Now Senora Guillot seemed less interested in the possible impropriety of the situation than in picking over any rejects. Her gaze focused on what Cressy was carrying and Nicolas, seeing the acquisitive look, said something which he then translated.

'I've told her that if there's anything of use to her in the stuff you're discarding, she's welcome to have it,' he said. 'Her generation throw nothing out if there's a possibility it can be recycled.'

When the cottage had been closed up, and they were returning to their vehicles, Nicolas slipped his hand inside Cressy's upper arm, just above the elbow, and drew her to a halt.

'Perhaps it's just as well there is an active neighbourhood watch around here,' he said quizzically. 'That wasn't the best time or place.'

His fingers slid down her arm until, closing on her hand, they lifted it for him to kiss in the traditional gesture of homage and gallantry.

'Next time I'll make sure everything is perfect,' he promised, before walking away to where he had left the Range Rover in the shade of a carob tree.

Later, on the way to the hospital, Cressy said, 'Kate only wears pyjamas when the weather is chilly. She has no light summer nightclothes. She's having to wear the gowns the hospital issue, things with tapes at the back. I'd like to buy her a couple of decent nighties. Do you know of a shop where they sell them?'

'I'll take you to the one my mother shops at—or did when she lived here,' said Nicolas.

Like her, he had showered and changed. Cressy was having to wear the same skirt she had worn to the party with a different T-shirt—pale blue with a bunch of white roses stencilled on the chest. It was French, one of Frances's cast-offs.

Nicolas was wearing a white linen shirt with dark blue cotton trousers. As usual, a cotton scarf gave the open-necked shirt a touch of formality. Cressy had noticed that, while most men who wore scarves either knotted them or pulled the ends through a ring, he put the scarf on backwards, bringing the ends round to the front so that the knot left only very short ends. It was a method which might derive from the cloths worn by Bedouins and other wilderness travellers, where the air was full of sand or bitterly cold. It could only work on a long, lean neck and it had a panache rare in heterosexual men, unless they happened to be artists. She had often wished her family knew more creative people, instead of all the dull power-seekers and moneymakers who made up their milieu. Given a choice, she would have liked her father to be a painter or musician, and her mother a creative homemaker.

'You've gone very quiet,' said Nicolas. 'Something on your mind?'

'Only thoughts about what shapes our lives.'

'We shape our lives,' he said firmly. 'We have to accept our heredity and our childhood environment, but after that it's up to us. Everyone has the option to go with the flow, whatever it happens to be, or to say, "No, I want something different" and to make it happen. What's your secret dream, Cressy?'

To love and be loved was the answer. But she couldn't say that to him. It would sound as if she was fishing for a proposal, holding a gun to his head, implying that without commitment there wouldn't be a 'next time'.

'I'm not sure that I have one,' she said. 'Apart from the commonplace things that everyone wants. Perhaps I'm a late developer and some consuming passion will come to me later in life. The grandmother of some children I escorted from Heathrow to spend a holiday with her told me she didn't discover her *metier* until she was forty-five. Her husband had been in the

Army and they'd lived all over the world in Service quarters. It was only when he retired and they bought a house with a neglected garden that she became a passionate gardener.'

'That can happen,' he agreed. 'I know several people who've found their forte late in life.'

As he told her about some of them Cressy realised he was the first man she had ever enjoyed listening to. The previous men in her life—if they could be called that, and if Nicolas could be included with them—had talked about cars, sport, programmes on TV and what Fuzzy called 'trouble at t' mill', meaning problems with difficult superiors and office politics in general.

Cressy had listened out of politeness rather than with real interest. But with Nicolas it was different. He had a much broader perspective, and she sensed that his mind was already so richly stocked that if he talked for a lifetime she would never be bored. The question was, could she keep him interested?

Nicolas stayed in the waiting area at the end of Kate's corridor while Cressy went to see if Miss Dexter felt equal to receiving a visitor.

'By all means. Wheel him in.'

'I've brought you a couple of nighties. Would you like to change into one of them? Shall I get someone to help you?' Cressy suggested, thinking the old lady might not like to expose her body to a much younger relation.

'I'm sure young Alaro won't give a damn what I'm wearing, so I'll stay as I am. But it's a kind thought, Cressida. I'll change to a nightdress tomorrow. This hospital gown reminds me too much of a shroud...and I'm not ready for one of those yet.'

Cressy went to the door. She could see Nicolas flipping through a dog-eared magazine, but just then he looked up and saw her beckoning.

When he came through the doorway she introduced them, watching him come to the other side of the bed and take Kate's good hand in his. Would she succumb to his charm? Cressy wondered. Or would it alienate her? In the books written in her heyday, she had seemed to hate men as a sex. But she must have felt differently about the young man in the photographs or she wouldn't have kept his letters.

To her relief, they seemed to take to each other. It turned out that Kate had been a pioneer backpacker in the days when it had been safe—or much safer than now—for a woman to hitchhike and walk round Europe alone. She had been to Kathmandu before the hippie invasion, and to Goa when no one had heard of it.

When Kate's supper tray was brought in, Nicolas looked at it and said, 'That's not very appetising. There's a restaurant round the corner where Cressy and I were going to eat—I'll get them to do some take-out for the three of us. I shan't be more than half an hour.'

When he had gone, Kate said, 'There was a time when that authoritative manner would have raised my hackles. Now I see it differently. My problem was I was brought up by a father who thought men were gods and women were slaves. I was forty-five before I was able to look at the male sex with an unbiased eye.'

Cressy would have liked to ask her about the man in the photographs, but felt it was not the right moment. Instead she asked Kate why she had chosen Majorca as her retirement home.

'Because twenty-eight years ago it was a cheap place to live. The other reasons—its beauty, its climate, its seclusion—are still valid. The Spanish are generous in their concessions to pensioners, their own OAPs live well. But my pension and savings have shrunk. God knows how I shall manage if I last another ten years.' She looked thoughtfully at Cressy. 'You have no idea how fast life passes, Cressida. Make the most of being young and beautiful. It doesn't last long.'

As if she could read Cressy's mind, Kate went on, 'You don't think you are beautiful, do you? And I didn't notice it either the first time you walked in

here. But now I can see that you are. It isn't a conventional beauty. You are how I visualise Boudicca, the queen who led a rebellion against the Romans and, when it failed, poisoned herself. You have the looks of a warrior queen...without the temperament,' she added dryly. 'I suppose, in the same way that my mother and I were browbeaten by my father, you've been intimidated by your mother and sisters.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Cressy. 'Although it is a bit deflating to be the only unclever one in a brilliant family.'

Kate gave one of her bark-like laughs. 'They may be clever in one sense but, judging by what your father writes in his duty letter at Christmas, your sisters have made the same mess of their personal lives that I made of mine. I'm not even sure that your parents are happy. Their incessant round of activities suggests to me that they're trying to avoid confronting the lack of any real communication between them.'

'Do you think so? I hope not,' said Cressy, although she knew it was true. Maggie had said much the same thing a long time ago.

'Do you have a young man?' asked Kate.

'No...no, I don't.'

'That's a good thing.'

'How do you mean?'

'It would complicate matters if you had a "steady" at home. Without that complication, you can enjoy falling in love with Nicolas. Falling in love—provided it's with someone suitable—is one of life's greatest pleasures, if not *the* greatest.'

It seemed pointless to deny the truth of Kate's statement. Cressy said, 'But Nicolas isn't at all suitable. Loving a man who won't ever love you is a pain.'

'What makes you think he won't? He seems to me *very* taken.'

'Wanting to have a love affair with someone isn't the same as loving them.'

'It's a step in the right direction. He's getting to the age when transient affairs begin to lose their appeal and a permanent relationship starts to seem more attractive. I expect he would like a son to inherit his property.'

Cressy was about to protest that she didn't want to be married for practical reasons but because she was loved for herself. But just then she recognised the sound of Nicolas's footsteps returning.

The supper he brought in was delicious, and, although there had been a glass of wine on the hospital supper tray one glass would not have made Kate as vivacious as three did.

But perhaps it was having some company, as much as the food and wine, which wrought the transformation from the rather curt person she had been on Cressy's first visit to the relaxed and cheerful woman who bade them goodnight when they left.

'It's too early to go home. Shall we walk around town for a while?' Nicolas suggested, after he had returned the baskets in which the restaurant had packed the bowls of food and the necessary china and cutlery.

Cressy was happy to join in what Nicolas presently told her was called the *paseo*, a nightly parade of local people greeting their friends and forming and re-forming chat-groups.

Depending on age, they showed off new clothes or new babies, sized up potential boyfriends and girlfriends, romped with other small children or, at the extremes of the spectrum, sat on benches or in prams and pushchairs looking at the passing throng with curiosity or indifference.

Although pleased at the chance to see and be part of this aspect of Spanish nightlife, she was somewhat puzzled that Nicolas should have proposed it. She had thought that as soon as they had eaten he would whisk her back to Ca'n Llorenc to pick up where they had left off that afternoon.

But if that was what he intended to do later on he seemed in no hurry. They looked in various shop windows and he had one or two brief exchanges with people who knew him, introducing them to her but not conversing for long because they didn't speak English. Finally they sat in a cafe, drinking coffee and watching the passers-by.

He was silent on the drive home and Cressy was tense with indecision. She was thinking about Kate's admonition to make the most of being young and beautiful. *Was she beautiful?* Did she *really* look like a warrior queen? It was an exhilarating thought. But, as Kate had added, she definitely didn't have the temperament to sweep through life making bold and reckless decisions. It just wasn't in her nature.

Glancing at Nicolas's profile, lit by the glow reflected from the beams of the headlamps, she thought he looked rather stern and wondered what he was thinking about. His book, perhaps. Not her.

She looked out of the nearside window at the moonlit countryside, a black and silver landscape which seemed a million miles away from the familiar streets of London and yet, in some curious way, more homey than the neighbourhood she had known all her life.

Her thoughts turned to a piece she had clipped from a newspaper and put in a folder full of miscellaneous oddments. The headline had been—BISHOPS DIVIDED OVER 'LIVING IN SIN'.

The paper had interviewed a couple who had lived together before marriage and another who had chosen to remain celibate throughout an eight-month courtship. They had not been a fuddy-duddy pair but a handsome Etonian wine-broker of thirty-one and his equally attractive wife, who had been two years older than Cressy when she'd married him. Cressy had found their determination to stay with their decision not to sleep with each other until their wedding night an encouraging support for her own views. But now she wasn't so sure.

It seemed unlikely that, even if Nicolas was starting to think about marrying, he would choose her from all the women who would be eager to marry him. It looked like a now-or-never situation. Could she face growing old without

ever knowing what it was like to lie in his arms and experience the ecstasy of which she had had a foretaste this afternoon?

Nicolas still hadn't broken his silence when they passed through his gates. As he had the night before, he stopped the car and got out to close them.

The headlamps were on full-beam but they didn't reach as far as the house, which she saw as a dark silhouette in the middle distance with the dim outlines of the mountains in the background.

She knew that the sight of Ca'n Llorenc from its gateway would be imprinted on her memory for ever—the palms, the uneven ridges and irregular angles of the roofs built at different times by different generations, the dark thickets of oleander, their white flowers luminous in the moonlight.

Tomorrow, if you like, I'll ask my builder to come and look at the cottage,' said Nicolas, fitting his tall frame back behind the wheel. 'But first perhaps you'd like to talk to your father. Why don't you call him in the morning? Don't be shy about using the telephone.'

'Thank you...and thank you again for organising the supper. It did wonders for Kate, and I enjoyed it too.'

'She's an interesting woman...far removed from the icon of militant feminism which is how -the Press still depicts her. I found her very good value.'

As they reached the courtyard he added, 'I'm going to work tonight, so I may not see you at breakfast. Go ahead and call your father at whatever seems the best time to catch him.'

Moments later, having unlocked the door and switched on the interior lights, he bade her a brisk goodnight and disappeared upstairs.

In the early hours of the morning Cressy awoke, feeling cold. She realised a wind was blowing, and got up to close the windows and to unfold the blanket on the ottoman and spread it across the bed.

Before she got back into bed, she opened her door very quietly and looked down the corridor to see if a light was still showing under Nicolas's door at the far end of the corridor.

She had stayed downstairs for ten minutes after he had gone up, looking for something to read because she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep. When she had passed his room she had heard the rapid clicking of a keyboard.

Now the corridor was dark, but perhaps it wasn't long since he had finished working and had gone to lie down on the bed where she had half-expected to be sleeping with him tonight.

She looked at her watch. It would soon be dawn.

When she rang her father at home, she said, 'Dad, can you ring me back? I need to talk to you, but it's a private phone which someone is letting me use.'

After Paul Vale had rung back, and they had talked for some time, Cressy went for a swim. The night wind had dropped. A few cotton wool clouds were drifting across an ocean of pale blue sky. It was going to be another perfect day.

As she ate her breakfast she debated ringing Frances and asking her to call back too. But there was always the risk that Nicolas would come down in the middle of their conversation, or even pick up the extension in his room and overhear them discussing him.

Nevertheless, she felt that if she were going to stay in Majorca until Kate was fit to look after herself, she must know what lay behind Frances's allegations.

After breakfast she drove to the hospital where, on her way to Kate's room, she was intercepted by the doctor.

Nicolas was on the terrace when she got back for lunch. He was sitting under the vine in an old rocking chair, with Juanito curled on his lap and Star lying nearby in the shade of a large clay pot overflowing with pink pelargoniums.

Rising to greet her, to the annoyance of the cat, who resented being disturbed, he said, 'Juanito has decided to keep the peace. I don't think they'll ever be best buddies, but at least it's live and let live. How's Kate today?'

'Improving all the time. She's even beginning to wonder if she has one last book in her. An American leaving the hospital after an accident on a yacht has left her a copy of Betty Friedan's last book, *The Fountain of Age*. Years ago Friedan, as Kate calls her, wrote *The Feminine Mystique*. She inspired one of Kate's early books. Now, it seems, she's inspired her again.'

'That's good...just what she needs. There's nothing like working on a book for taking one's mind off other problems,' said Nicolas.

As he fixed Cressy a drink and replenished his own glass he thought that it might help Kate to forget about her physical infirmities but it wasn't proving too helpful in subduing his physical urges.

It might be partly because of the monastic life he had been leading recently, but it seemed to him that his need to take Cressy to bed was the most powerful hunger he could ever remember feeling since he had grown out of that phase, in his middle teens, when every half-passable girl had had him pawing the ground like a young bull.

To exacerbate matters, the longer she spent in this climate, the more golden and luscious she looked—the female equivalent of a ripe nectarine. At the same time, the better he knew her the more compunction he felt about using his knowledge of women to persuade her to go against her convictions, even though he thought them irrational.

'I've made a decision,' said Cressy as they sat down at the lunch table.

'Expound,' said Nicolas.

She thought he looked faintly amused by her resolute tone.

'I've talked it over with Kate and decided to stay with her until she's completely recovered, which won't be until the autumn. Then we'll review the situation.'

'I think that's an excellent idea.'

Her conviction that he was sincere made Cressy very happy.

She said, 'So I'm going back to London. I have to explain to my boss at Distress Signal why I need three months' leave of absence, and I have to sort out some things that I'll need while I'm here...and I have to say goodbye to Maggie.'

'Who is Maggie?'

'Officially she's our housekeeper, but she's more like a surrogate granny. She came to us as my nanny when I was small, and every time we had a domestic crisis she stepped into the breach. When I was eight, and about to go off to boarding school, there was a major crisis—the cook gave notice and the daily woman had to have a hysterectomy. Maggie took over the whole running of the house and she's done it ever since. With outside help, of course. She's a darling person, but she's getting on. She keeps talking about retiring.' Cressy paused for a moment. 'I'm worried she may overdo it and make herself ill.'

Nicolas put his hand on her wrist and gave it a bracing squeeze. 'She sounds far too sensible to neglect herself. Perhaps when you've seen Kate through her present difficulties it might suit Maggie to come and spend her old age here in the sun. There's a book of my mother's somewhere about. It's called *Two Middle-aged Ladies in Andalucia* and it was written by Penelope Chetwode, the wife of the poet John Betjeman. She was one of the middle-aged ladies, and the other was the horse she rode through the mountains of southern Spain. Perhaps Kate and Maggie might work well together as two elderly ladies in Mallorca.'

Cressy looked at him in astonishment. 'How extraordinary! The very same thought had struck me.'

'It could solve problems for both of them. Maggie could run the cottage with one hand tied behind her, I should imagine, and Kate would have someone to see that she ate properly, and so on. But would Maggie drive her mad by wanting to chat all the time?'

'No, no...Maggie's rather taciturn. She reads a lot. Not books Kate would approve of—Maggie likes whodunnits.'

They were having lunch in the barn today, eating pate on pieces of crusty bread while Catalina cooked spare- ribs on the barbecue. When these had been served, with a green salad in a big olive-wood bowl, Cressy said, 'My ticket's an open return. If I can get a seat, I'd like to fly back tonight. I can take the car back to the people who lent it to me and get from there to the airport by taxi.'

'Don't be silly, I'll run you to the airport.'

'Oh, please...there's no need for that. You're busy with your book. I don't want to waste any more of your time.'

Nicolas was helping himself to salad. 'Don't argue, Cressy. I insist. It's not good to spend all day, every day glued to a PC. I need to take regular breaks. Running you to the airport will be a pleasure.'

Cressy had never much liked barbecued spare-ribs, but these were unusually delicious.

When she said so, Nicolas said, 'Catalina marinades them in some secret concoction. A lot of our guests have tried to prise the ingredients out of her, but she's not telling.'

He was holding the spare-rib in his fingers, biting the meat off the bone with his beautiful, sexy teeth. Cressy wanted to sit back and watch him. She had often been repelled by the way some people ate—she had never been turned on before. The thought of leaving him suddenly filled her with dread. In only

a few days this man had become the centre of the world for her. She wanted him in every possible way...sexually, emotionally, companionably. As a lover and a friend, and also as someone to look after if he were ever ill, injured or upset in some way. For even a man like this—strong, self-sufficient, decisive—must have times when he needed comforting, needed to turn to someone who would hold him in loving arms and speak tenderly to him.

To her horror her eyes filled with tears, and Nicolas saw them.

'Cressy...what is it?'

He dropped his spare-rib and rapidly wiped his hands on his napkin, his expression concerned.

It was the most embarrassing moment of her life—for not only did her eyes brim, they overflowed. As if she were four years old, two big tears plopped onto her cheeks.

Mercifully it didn't occur to Nicolas—it wouldn't to any sane person—that she was reduced to tears by the thought of some horrible thing which might happen to him. He assumed she had turned bright red because she was choking.

He was on his feet, ready to deal with the situation, when Cressy gulped and said hoarsely, 'It's all right...I'm fine...it's nothing.'

'Have some water.' He put a tumbler into her hand.

She drank from it, relieved that the sudden blaze of hot colour suffusing her face and neck was beginning to subside.

'I—I swallowed the wrong way,' she said.

'So I gathered. Not nice.' He patted her shoulder before sitting down.

The spare-ribs were followed by fruit. While he was pouring out coffee Nicolas suggested she should go to her room and fetch her flight ticket. Then he would ring the airport to find out if a seat was available.

'It's unlikely you'll be delayed on a scheduled flight,' said Nicolas, when they were nearing the airport on the road lined with oleanders which had given Cressy such a favourable first impression of the island. 'People travelling on charter flights often have to hang around for hours and some of those flights are bad times to fly in the first place.'

'You'd think people would refuse to be treated like cattle,' said Cressy. 'I've been in airports during those long delays. Mothers with very young children have looked at the end of their tether. One wonders why they do it. But I guess keeping up with the Joneses is one of the reasons. Some people really worry if they aren't doing the things everyone else is doing.'

He gave her a sideways glance. 'But you go your own way, regardless.'

It was a statement, not a question, and only a birdbrain could have missed what he meant.

'I try to,' she said.

His response surprised her. 'Good for you. I might not agree with your way in some of the specifics, but I applaud your independence of thought. Too many people are brainwashed by fashionable ideas.'

At the airport he parked the car and carried her baggage, both rollbag and backpack, to the departures section of the large modern terminal.

'Please don't hang around,' she said as they walked to the check-in.

'I'll just see you checked in, then I'll leave you to it.'

The formalities completed, they moved away from the desk. Cressy put her boarding card and passport in the pocket of her shirt and stowed her flight

ticket in the back pocket of her jeans. Nicolas still had her backpack slung over one shoulder.

'I've been trying to find words to thank you, but I can't think of anything adequate,' she said, looking up at him.

And then, on impulse, she thrust her arms round him and hugged him, her cheek pressed against his chest. 'Please take it as read that I'm hugely, massively grateful.'

He returned her embrace with a bear hug. But when she felt his arms slacken, and would have stepped back, he kept one arm round her while his hand tipped up her chin.

The next moment, regardless of the travellers milling around them, she was being kissed.

While she was still in a daze he let her go, turned her round and put her arms through the straps of the backpack as if she were a little girl having her schoolbag put on. Then he turned her to face him, shook her hand and leaned down to kiss her, Spanish-fashion, on both cheeks.

'Goodbye, Cressy. Take care of yourself.'

Driving back to Ca'n Llorenc, Nicolas was aware of being relieved that now he could give his full attention to his work, yet feeling sorry to see her go. He had known a lot of girls in his time, but never one quite like Cressy. She was such an extraordinary mixture of shyness and practicality, diffidence and obstinacy.

When she had flung herself at him, while saying goodbye, it had been like a schoolgirl hugging a much-loved big brother. But when he had kissed her, her lips had parted under his as softly and invitingly as those of a practised seductress.

It was easy, when she was with him, to forget the rules he had made for himself as soon as he'd known what he wanted to do with his life. The first and most important rule was—no entanglements.

It was also easy to forget she was the sister of a girl with whom he *had* been entangled.

For Cressy, the flight to Gatwick seemed to pass in a flash. As soon as she reached the baggage retrieval hall she separated a trolley from several long lines of them. It would save her carrying her rollbag from the carousel to the top of the escalator leading down to the railway platforms.

As she emerged onto the concourse, where people waiting to meet friends and relations were held back by barriers, to her astonishment she saw her father standing there.

'Dad! What are you doing here? Is anything wrong? Not Maggie...?'

'Everyone's fine, Cressy.' Paul Vale leaned across the barrier to kiss her.

They separated and rejoined on his side of the barrier. As he took charge of the trolley she said, 'How did you know I was coming?'

'We had a phone call from a friend of yours. He didn't give his name. He thought it was late for you to be on the train to Victoria by yourself. He seemed to think there might be lager louts travelling with you and making a nuisance of themselves. Is he an elderly man? He didn't sound it.'

'He isn't, but he's half-Spanish and very chivalrous. Also, he thinks I'm still wet behind the ears. I'm sorry he made you feel you had to drag yourself out here. Rather a chore at the end of a long hard day.'

'It's not that far,' said her father. 'The drive back will give us a chance to talk about Kate in more detail than we could on the phone.'

As they made their way to the short-stay car park, where Mr Vale had left his opulent beige BMW, Cressy thought about Nicolas not giving her father his name.

She remembered her sister saying, 'Don't ever breathe his name to anyone in this family.'

Clearly Nicolas knew that he was *persona non grata*. But why? What could he have done to make himself still unacceptable all these years later?

CHAPTER NINE

BEFORE she went to bed, Cressy spent half an hour alone with Maggie in her small private sitting room.

'Something's happened to you,' said the housekeeper. 'You're not the same as you were four days ago.' She gave Cressy a searching look over the top of the half- glasses she wore for sewing. 'You've met someone special, is that it?'

'Oh, Maggie, what makes you say that?' Cressy said, smiling.

'I've known you since you were in your playpen. You had just the same look about you the December you were going to be given a bicycle for Christmas. And later, when you were fifteen and made a prefect at school. You've always had a glow in your eyes whenever something good's happened. Don't tell me you've fallen in love with a Spaniard?'

'A half-Spaniard. But he's never going to fall in love with me. He could have anyone he wants.'

'If he's got any sense, he'll have you. You're worth ten of the flibbertigibbets I see strutting about, dressed up like tarts, looking so pleased with themselves.' Maggie was a forthright critic of current fashions.

Putting aside her needlework, she leaned back in her comfortable chair. 'I'm not sure I like the idea of you marrying a foreigner, even if he's only half-foreign. Marriage is difficult enough without any extra complications like different religions and so on.'

'Well, don't lose any sleep over it, darling, because it's most unlikely he'll ever ask me.'

'If he wants you, and he knows his own mind, he'll propose to you,' said Maggie firmly. 'If he only wants you to live with him, then he doesn't know his own mind and you're better off by yourself.'

Cressy had heard Maggie speak on this subject before, as had Anna and Frances. They dismissed her ideas as outdated.

Cressy said, 'He's a man who knows his own mind. If he loved me, I'm sure he would marry me. But he doesn't...not yet...if ever. I'm tired. I must go to bed. It's been a long day.'

They exchanged a hug and a kiss. Then Cressy went up the stairs to the room which must once have been slept in by an overworked, underpaid servant. Then it would have had a bare floor, no heating and a washstand without running water. Now it was cosily carpeted and attractively furnished with a shower room *en suite*. But she found herself missing the bedroom at Ca'n Llorenc, with its glorious view of the mountains. Here there was only an enlarged skylight.

Toeing off her loafers, she stretched on the bed and dialled Nicolas's number. His answering machine was operating. She said, 'Nicolas, it's Cressy. I'm just ringing to tell you I'm home. It was a lovely surprise to find Dad waiting to meet me. But you needn't have worried about—'

Her message was interrupted by Nicolas coming on the line.

'Hellp. How's the weather in London?'

'Not raining, but not like Majorca. I was just going to say you needn't have worried about me, but it was nice that you did.'

'Even though Mallorca is upgrading its image, some of the south coast resorts still attract the type of youth who's harmless enough when he's sober but can be a pain when he's tanked up on alcohol. I didn't like the idea of your having to spend forty minutes in a train full of young louts.'

'Thanks to your call, I didn't. I talked over my plan with Dad and he thinks it's a good one. He's even talking of visiting the island himself, to redesign Kate's cottage. He thinks any plan would need to be submitted through a local architect but that he could save Kate money by having the donkey-work done in his office.'

'You can tell him I know a local architect who would handle the formalities for him. You should be in bed, asleep.'

'That's where I'll be any minute.'

She half expected him to say something he knew would make her blush, but he didn't. Perhaps it was only she who was thinking about their being in bed together.

'Goodnight, Cressy. Sleep well.'

'Goodnight, Nicolas.'

She kept the receiver to her ear until she heard him replacing his. The sound of his voice was still with her when she turned out the light.

When the woman who ran Distress Signal had heard Cressy's explanation of why she wanted to be taken off the register for the rest of the summer and perhaps longer, she said, 'We shall be very sorry to lose you, but this is a case where the old saying "charity begins at home" is applicable. Of course you must put your great-aunt's needs first. If and when you want to come back, we'll always be delighted to have you, my dear.'

Her understanding relieved Cressy's mind of one concern. However, she was prevented from going to see Frances about the other, far more important concern, by the fact that Frances was attending an out-of-town conference.

Although Cressy had plenty to occupy her, the day seemed a long one. She knew why. Every day would seem long until she was back on the island.

That night she took Maggie to the early-evening showing at a West End cinema and then they had supper at an Italian place in Soho.

By lunchtime the following day Cressy would have been ready to return to the island had it not been for wanting to talk to Frances when she came back to London.

After lunch she went to see the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy. When she returned to the house, Maggie was on the watch for her.

'There's a message for you. He asked for me by name, but he didn't leave *his* name. You're to ring this number as soon as possible.'

The number she had written down had the central London code in front of it. Puzzled, Cressy went up to her bedroom and dialled.

It rang eight times before a voice said, 'Hello?'

Cressy drew in her breath. 'What are you doing in London?'

'You remember our hosts at the party...Chris and Alice?'

'Of course.'

'They run a private jet. I saw Chris in Pollensa yesterday. He mentioned they were coming over, and I scrounged a lift. Are you free for dinner tonight?'

'With the three of you?'

'No, with me. Just the two of us.'

'I'd love to. Where?'

'Scotts, in Mount Street. Have you been there?'

'No.'

'Good. You'll enjoy it all the more. It's my favourite restaurant for special occasions.'

'Is this a special occasion?'

'It will be the first time we've dined together in London.'

The sound and tone of his voice made her head swim. She couldn't think of anything to say.

'Also, there's something I want to discuss with you. Is seven-thirty all right?'

'Yes, fine.'

'I'll see you there.' After a pause, he added, 'I've missed you, Cressy,' and rang off.

Cressy sat very still, taking it in. He was here in London. He was taking her out to dinner. In less than three hours they would be together. What was more, he had missed her. *Nicolas had missed her!*

Suddenly she knew what it was to be a firework—one moment you were a dull-looking package of combustible materials, then someone ignited your fuse and you were soaring skywards to explode in a great flower of lights. That was exactly how she felt—suspended in space, shimmering.

The illusion was brief, abruptly brought to an end by the panic-stricken thought, 'What am I going to wear?'

She rushed down to confer with Maggie, an unfailing source of advice and practical suggestions.

'Maggie, have you ever heard of Scotts...a restaurant in Mount Street?'

'I believe it's very fashionable. I remember that during and after the war all sorts of famous people went there. Sir Winston Churchill...Marlene Dietrich. I seem to remember that Sir Laurence Olivier took Marilyn Monroe to dinner there, when she was married to that nice-looking playwright. I liked the look of him. Pity she didn't stay married to him.'

When Maggie started talking about the past, it was sometimes hard to bring her back to the present.

Cressy said urgently, 'I'm going there tonight...to Scotts. What should I wear? Will it be terribly elegant?' 'Is there anywhere terribly elegant left?'

said Maggie with a sniff. 'When your father took me out to dinner on my sixtieth birthday I wasn't at all impressed by the standard of dress. I remember when—'

'Yes, yes, darling, I know it's all gone to pot. But even so, Scotts must be smarter than the place we went to last night.'

'I should hope so. That was very scruffsville,' said Maggie disapprovingly. 'Why are you laughing?'

'Where did you pick up a word like "scruffsville"?'

'From the paper, I suppose. I'm not as old-fashioned as you think. But I only use slang when it's appropriate. Who's taking you to Scotts? The man with the nice voice?'

'Yes.'

'Is he the one you're in love with?'

'Yes, but keep it under your hat, darling. I don't want anyone else to know.'

'Have I ever passed on private things?'

Cressy shook her head. 'I'd trust you with my darkest secret.'

'If he's followed you here from his island, it looks to me as if you might soon have some news you won't want to keep secret. From what I hear, Scotts is the sort of restaurant a man might choose if he's planning to pop the question,' said Maggie. 'In which case you must look your best for him. I'll come upstairs and go through your wardrobe with you. If there's nothing suitable in it, we might put an outfit together from some of your mother's things. Uhe won't mind you borrowing from her, although if you want her permission I have the fax number of her hotel in Manchester.'

'Let's sort out something first, and then I must wash my hair and have a bath and do my nails.'

By six forty-five she was ready.

'I'll call a taxi,' said Maggie, looking with approval at the result of their putting their heads together.

'No, I'll walk,' said Cressy. 'It's a lovely evening. It's not far. Walking will calm me down. At the moment I'm sick with stage fright.'

'If he does ask you to marry him, bring him to see me before you give him an answer. You're a sensible girl and you've never done anything silly. But you've only known him five minutes, and being in love is like having one drink too many—it makes people do foolish things they would never do when they're sober. I'll know at once if he's the right man for you.'

'I think you're jumping the gun. Marriage is probably the last thing on his mind. Goodnight, darling. Thanks for your help...but don't stay up till I come in. I may be very late.'

'Well, that's up to you,' said Maggie, pursing her lips. 'You're a grown-up woman and were never as giddy as your sisters. But I'll say no more. You know my views on *that* subject. Enjoy yourself, my dear. You can tell me all about it in the morning.'

Making her way towards Mayfair by crossing The Mall not far from Buckingham Palace, and cutting across Green Park to Piccadilly, Cressy wondered if Maggie was privy to the matter Frances had hinted at. If she were, she would never disclose it.

With that thought came another—why had Nicolas arranged to meet her at Scotts rather than coming to fetch her? Was it because he wished to avoid running into other members of her family?

She put that disturbing notion to the back of her mind and concentrated on enjoying the beautiful midsummer evening.

Other people were also taking a short cut through the oasis of greenery on their way to an evening out. From the looks given her by some of those she passed, she had the uplifting feeling that tonight she looked a different person from her everyday self. She certainly felt more glamorous in the outfit found tucked away in her mother's walk-in clothes closet.

It wasn't the sort of thing Virginia Vale usually wore and might have been a mistake, something she should have discarded after her image consultant had redesigned her appearance to appeal to a broader section of voters. Perhaps, because they must have been very expensive, the consultant had suggested retaining the nutmeg silk top and wide-legged trousers in case an occasion came up for which they were appropriate.

Luckily Cressy had a pair of low-heeled bronze pumps, and among her mother's collection of twenty or thirty bags she had found a small one of fudge-coloured glaze kid on a thin strap, and with a discreet gilt metal label inscribed CHARLES JOURDAN, PARIS attached to the darker leather lining. She wasn't wearing any jewellery other than earrings which only imitated beaten gold but, worn with the expensively cut satin separates, looked as if they might be the real thing.

Turning the corner of North Audley Street, Cressy stopped short at the sight of a tall man standing on the opposite pavement, looking in the window of one of Mount Street's expensive antique shops, close to the blue-awned restaurant which was her destination.

As she watched him he lifted the cuff of a lightweight but elegant suit to check the time. Then he glanced in the direction of Berkeley Square before turning to catch sight of her and came striding towards her. His shirt was a dark coral-pink and his tie a lighter pink.

'Cressy...my God...you look fabulous.'

She had put her hair up—or rather, Maggie had done it for her. There were no wispy ends, no trailing tendrils. Held at the back by an elegant version of a bull-dog clip given to her by Anna as a present from Italy, her newly washed hair was brushed to the shape of her head and held by a light mist of spray. Very sophisticated.

'It's not kind to sound so surprised,' she said, laughing, holding out both hands.

Nicolas took them in his and squeezed, but gently. The force he could have exerted would have broken her knuckles.

'I'm only surprised to find that Queen Boudicca, as Kate calls you, can metamorphose into this glamorous vision I see before me. Is this your London look? Were you only pretending to be a simple country girl?'

She wondered what else her great-aunt had said about her, and what he had said in reply.

'All this is borrowed finery...an attempt not to look out of place at this very chic rendezvous,' she said with a glance at the restaurant's facade.

'You could never look out of place. What is that wonderful scent?' Still holding her hands, he bent to inhale more deeply the subtle, delicious aroma from a bottle in the drawer where her mother kept a battery of perfumes.

'It's...' Cressy broke off as he put his lips to her cheek, first one and then the other. 'I'm glad you like it,' she finished, trying to match her manner to her clothes.

'I like everything about you. I thought you knew that.'

What did other women say when men said things like this and looked at them in the way he was looking at her?

'Am I late? I decided to walk and I may have mistimed it.'

'You're spot on. If I'd known it was going to be such a balmy evening, I'd have picked somewhere with a garden. But I think you'll like it here. One can talk without being overheard, and the food is excellent.'

Releasing her hands, he shepherded her into the restaurant, its entrance lobby dominated by a huge Georgia O'Keeffe-style painting of a flower behind the reception desk.

In an alcove in the bar, while they were waiting for drinks to be brought to them, Nicolas said, 'A few years ago, a man walked in here and asked for a dish he'd enjoyed in the Sixties. It wasn't on the current menu and they didn't have the ingredients, but within the hour they served it to him. Scotts is that sort of place.'

Cressy was glancing around, eager to take in every detail of an ambience familiar to him but strange and wonderful to her. All her previous dates had been pizza or pasta suppers after a movie. No one had ever wined and dined her in style before.

Another huge painting, of a fish, hung above an ornate griffin-legged side table, and Chinese fish flirted their tails on the Roman blinds half-screening the bar from the street. On either side of the alcove were frames showing the stages of an oyster's growth. Having jumped up to look more closely at one of these, Cressy wished she had restrained her curiosity. But she couldn't help being interested in everything, even if it did reveal her naivety.

But when she returned to her place on the Art Deco velvet banquette, Nicolas wasn't raising an eyebrow in mocking amusement. He was looking at her in a way which almost stopped her breath. It was a relief when the maitre d'hotel presented them each with a menu.

As the back of the menu related that the original Mr Scott had established himself as a shell-fishmonger in 1851, it wasn't surprising that oysters were a major feature of the menu, as were three kinds of caviar—the best Beluga at a price which made Cressy blink.

'Do you like oysters, Cressy?' Nicolas asked.

'I don't know. I've never tried them.' She wondered if it was true that they were an aphrodisiac.

'Then how about sharing a seafood platter for our main course, and if you don't like them I'll eat yours and you can have all the *langoustines*,' he suggested. 'Or would you rather play safe and have turbot or Dover sole?'

She said, 'The platter sounds great.'

A glimpse of the pleasures in store came when, on the way to their table in the restaurant, they passed a magnificent still-life display of lobsters and shellfish arranged on a bed of ice and lit by some of the downlighters which cast soft pools of brilliance in the restaurant.

Here the walls were a warm shade of coral, and the dominant feature was an explosion of flowers supported by a silver dolphin and flanked by two pillars of shadowy antiques glass.

Their table was tucked in a corner with a full view of the room. But although, as the evening progressed, Cressy was dimly aware of the other tables being occupied by the sort of glamorous people the restaurant's reputation attracted, it was the man beside her who held her attention.

They started their meal with asparagus.

'The scents of lilac and asparagus cooking always remind me of the summers I spent at Cambridge,' said Nicolas as they dipped the succulent tips of the green spears in melted butter. 'When I was twenty, you were still a little girl.'

Again he gave her the look which made her tremble inwardly.

When the seafood platter came, he showed her how to dig an oyster out of its shell and, after swallowing it, drink the juice from the curved bottom shell. Cressy wasn't sure that she liked it, but she felt there was nothing she wouldn't try with Nicolas as her tutor.

It wasn't until they had concluded their meal with a lemon and raspberry soufflé and were having coffee that he said, 'I went to see Kate yesterday.'

'That was kind of you.' She was surprised that he should have bothered.

'Not at all. She's a woman of parts...knows all kinds of interesting things. I thought she'd be bored without you around, but in fact she's all fired up about the new book she's planning. I gather it's to be a rebuttal of the book that made her famous thirty years ago. That'll cause a furore among the sisterhood of hardcore feminists.'

'I know, but if it sells it could make the difference between Kate spending her old age in independent comfort or having to rely on help from the family—which would be a drain on them and humiliating for her.'

'I asked her about her working methods,' Nicolas went on. 'Last time she dictated the text onto a Dictaphone and paid one of the secretarial staff at her university to type out innumerable drafts. I've suggested that this time all those drafts could be eliminated by using a word processor.'

'But she doesn't know how to use one. She probably can't even type. Besides, there's no electricity at the cottage.'

'You know how to use one. If you're willing to be her typist, and if you both come to live at Ca'n Llorenc until she's better and the cottage has been modernised, she can write the book and have it ready for publication in three or four months.'

Cressy could hardly believe she was hearing him correctly—that he was willing to encumber himself with two women who, a week ago, he hadn't known existed. Correction—he had known Kate existed. But a lot of people knew that, or remembered her in her prime, and probably assumed that, as nothing was ever heard of her, she had died.

'Is this what you wanted to discuss with me?'

Nicolas nodded. 'I haven't mentioned it to Kate yet. I wanted to confer with you first.'

It wasn't a proposal of marriage, Cressy thought ruefully, but it was a kind of commitment, and not one most men would make—especially those who were basically lone wolves, not hearthrug dogs.

Reminded of Star, she asked if anyone had responded to the ad he had placed in an island newspaper.

'Not a nibble. I suspect I'm stuck with her.'

'That's a lot less of a burden than being stuck with two women,' Cressy pointed out.

'I have thought this through,' he said dryly. 'Don't worry about me. Look at it from your own point of view. Is it something you want to take on?'

'I've already committed myself to staying with Kate till she's better. Doing that at Ca'n Llorenc would be ten times easier and more comfortable than at the cottage. I can't imagine anything I'd like better. But have you considered where everyone is going to sleep when your family come over from America?'

'They're not coming this year. They've been invited to cruise around the Greek islands on someone's yacht. So you won't be in anyone's way.' After a slight pause he added, 'We can get to know each other properly.'

Their eyes met and held for what seemed to her a long time.

Nicolas said, 'You've mentioned your friend Fuzzy several times. I expect you took to each other from the beginning. Most close friendships begin with an instinctive liking. But the best friendships are like fine wine— they take a while to mature. By the time Kate's written her book and you're free to take on something else, we'll all know each other a lot better.'

Was there a subtext to what he was saying? Could he be telling her he felt the same way as she did, but that common sense dictated that he didn't say so until they had known each other longer?

'Try one of these,' said Nicolas, offering her the dish of chocolates that had come with the coffee.

Taking this as a hint that he had said all there was to say at this stage, and didn't expect her to comment, Cressy took refuge in practicalities.

'How would I get my PC to the island? A desktop isn't something you can take on a plane.'

'Although I don't upgrade often, when I do I always keep my previous PC as a back-up in case the one in use crashes. You can use the back-up. It's more than adequate for word processing.'

It was after eleven when they left Scotts, but the four hours had passed as quickly as they always did in his company.

Nicolas had already confirmed that he was staying at the flat he co-owned with a friend. However, as the friend was also there at the moment, it was unlikely he would ask her back for coffee and the usual finale of most people's dates with someone they fancied.

'Shall we walk, or would you rather taxi?' he asked.

'It's a lovely evening. I'm happy to walk if you are.'

'I walk every where... unless it's raining. Ben uses a bike. It's a quick way to get around London, if you don't mind the traffic fumes. I wonder how, fifty years from now, they'll have dealt with the traffic problem? Something has to be done about it. What are your theories?'

No one in Cressy's family ever canvassed her views on big issues, and she was pleased and flattered that he took it for granted she would have opinions worth hearing.

With Nicolas choosing their route, they walked via Berkeley Square.

'Too bad I'm not a member of Annabel's,' he said as they passed the awning-covered steps leading down to London's most elegant nightclub. 'We could have danced there. Ten years ago I did belong for a while, but it's a hefty subscription and I'm not in London often enough or long enough to justify it. Also, one grows out of that scene. Do you like dancing?'

'Not enormously. My height is a disadvantage. There was usually a shortage of partners of your height or, if there were some, I wasn't the girl they wanted to dance with.'

'Callow youths rarely recognise the girls who, in five years' time, will be the real pearls,' said Nicolas. 'Mostly they go for the ones who look the most likely to cooperate after the dancing is done. The touch-me- not air that intrigues us later can be a turn-off when we're still looking at women as sex objects, rather than friends with whom that side of it will be great but isn't the be-all and end-all of the relationship.' As he spoke he took off his coat and put it over her shoulders.

Cressy had been wishing she had brought a wrap with her, not because it was significantly colder than when she had set out but because the warmth of the restaurant made the night air seem colder by comparison. But she didn't want to be warm while he felt chilly in his shirtsleeves.

'No, no, I can't take your jacket,' she protested.

'Certainly you can. I'm warm. Feel me.' He captured her hand and, as if the warmth of his palm were not enough proof, held it against his chest so that through the back of her hand she could feel the warmth and vigour of his body through the thin layer of cotton.

'You may get cold without it,' said Cressy.

'If I do, we'll jump in a cab.'

From Berkeley Square he chose to walk up Hay Hill and circle round to the Piccadilly end of Bond Street, which wasn't the most direct way but took them past some of the most exclusive shop windows in London.

'Maggie talks nostalgically about the days when the jewellers could leave their windows full of lovely things at night,' said Cressy as they passed a shop whose wares she admired more than most. But at this hour the velvet display shelves had been cleared and the lights, which on winter afternoons made the jewels shimmer more brilliantly, had been turned off. 'When she was young there were lots of what she calls "streetwalkers" in the streets between Shepherd Market and Piccadilly. But she didn't mind them. Now she's frightened to go out at night in case somebody mugs her.'

He had not let go of her hand. 'Are you nervous?'

'No, but if I were by myself tonight I'd avoid the quiet streets and keep my eyes peeled for trouble.'

His fingers tightened round hers. 'It's disgusting that women should have to take those precautions, and old ones like Maggie are terrified of being attacked.' She could feel his anger coming through to her as if, holding hands, they were like linked computers, able to access each others' thoughts and feelings.

She said, 'Maggie spends too much time reading the papers and watching the news on TV. If you do that, you get the impression the world is full of horrors. It isn't really like that. Millions of people go about safely every day. Nothing nasty has ever happened to me. Oh, look...what a lovely display.' Her eye had been caught by one of the lighted shop windows filled with finely crafted leather goods.

They Stopped to admire the costly cases and bags, cleverly accessorised with mohair throws, silver and shagreen hip-flasks, field-glasses and shooting sticks.

But when Cressy happened to look up and catch sight of Nicolas's reflection in a sheet of mirrored glass at the back of the display, his eyes weren't on the luxurious travel equipment. They were on her. For a second or two, before he broke the contact, she saw in his expression a tender solicitude that expressed as clearly as words his concern for her safety and well-being.

They moved on and nothing was said to confirm that unguarded look. But now she was sure he cared for her and was only biding his time until, as he had said earlier, their friendship had had time to mature.

Yet although it was, in a way, what she would have expected of him, at the same time she couldn't help longing for him to want her so urgently, and with such total conviction that they were right for each other, that his passion would not allow him to be prudent and patient.

At the traffic lights on Piccadilly, Nicolas released her hand in order to clasp her elbow as they crossed the road. As they strolled down St James's, past the windows of the gentlemen's clubs whose names and members were part

of the fabric of history, he walked with his hands behind him, and she wondered why.

Walking along the Mall towards Admiralty Arch, she said, 'When are you going back?'

'Tomorrow morning. Chris and Alice came over for the opening of an exhibition of paintings by one of their daughters-in-law. They jet around Europe the way ordinary people catch buses. Why not come back with us? Or do you need to stay longer?'

'Yes, I do. I'll come back as soon as possible, but there's something I have to sort out first.'

Near her parents' house, Cressy said, 'Would you like some more coffee? My parents are out and won't be back yet, and Maggie will have gone to bed.'

'Thanks, but I won't tonight. I need to talk to Ben about things to do with the flat. We don't often get together. This is a rare opportunity to talk things over. He went to a meeting at the Royal Geographical Society this evening, but he'll be back by now.'

They had reached the opening in the railings protect-ing the area between the Vales's basement and the pavement. She turned to him. 'Thank you for a wonderful evening.'

He smiled down at her. 'Thank you for looking as you do. I was the envy of the restaurant. You don't believe that, but it's true. You lit up the room. You light up the street.'

He took her in his arms.

'What time did he bring you home?' asked Maggie when Cressy joined her in the kitchen for breakfast. Her parents had breakfast on a tray in their room.

'Just before midnight, but I didn't get to sleep for hours.'

Cressy had listened to Big Ben—the bell in the clock tower of the Houses of Parliament—chiming the small hours. With all her emotions stirred up by Nicolas's goodnight kiss, it had been between two and three before she had finally drifted to sleep.

'I can see that,' said Maggie. 'You'll have to do something about those dark marks under your eyes if you're seeing him again today. You always did look a poor thing when you went short of sleep.'

'I'm not seeing him. He's going back to Majorca.'

'Did you have a nice time?'

'Lovely...lovely,' said Cressy. 'I'll never forget it. I wish you could have met him, Maggie. I'm longing to introduce him. I'm certain you'll like him.'

'I hope so, my dear. Indeed I do. I'd be sorry to see you hurt. There've been enough broken hearts in the family already.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's all water under the bridge. Over and done with...better forgotten. Just run this tray upstairs for me, will you, dear? Your legs are younger than mine.'

Later Cressy pressed her to amplify her cryptic remark, but Maggie was not to be drawn.

'I was silly to mention it. Forget I spoke, there's a good girl.'

On Friday the Vales were giving a dinner party to which Frances was coming. But Cressy could not be included.

'You don't mind, do you, darling?' said Virginia. 'It would upset my table plan and you wouldn't enjoy yourself anyway. We'll be talking politics and high finance...rather over your head. Why not take yourself to the theatre? You and Fuzzy, if she's free. I'll pay for the tickets and a meal somewhere afterwards.'

'Thanks, Mum, but Fuzzy's abroad and there's nothing I want to see. I'll have my supper with Maggie.'

'Oh, all right, if that suits you better. Darling, could you *not* call me Mum? I have asked you before. Now you're grown up, I prefer to be called Virginia.'

Cressy was about to apologise, and then surprised herself by saying, 'I don't think of you as Virginia. Dad doesn't mind being called Dad. What's your problem with Mum?'

For a moment Mrs Vale looked flummoxed. 'I think it sounds rather common.'

'Oh, for Pete's sake!' Cressy exclaimed. 'How can you stand on political platforms, spouting all that highhanded twaddle about the entire female sex being sisters under the skin, and then say a word like "Mum"— which is probably used by ninety-five per cent of your constituents and voters generally—is common? If you really despise it that much I'll try to call you Mother, but I'm not going to call you Virginia. It doesn't come naturally to me.'

It was the first time that she had ever asserted herself at home, and it made her feel good.

Especially when Mrs Vale's response, after looking even more flabbergasted, was to say, 'Oh, very well...we'll compromise on Mother. I had no idea you felt so strongly about it. I suppose this sudden strong-mindedness is from coming under Kate's influence. She always insisted her students stood up for themselves. Well, if she makes you more resolute I shall be delighted. Up to now you've seemed to take after Granny Vale, who never had a thought in her head beyond catering to her husband's every

whim and doting on her children. Which was par for the course in her day, but women today have broader responsibilities.'

Cressy knew Frances had left her evening things at her parents' house before going to her conference. When her train pulled in, she would jump into a taxi and just have time for a bath and to re-do her face. To go to her flat and then grab another taxi would have been cutting it too fine.

Cressy didn't disturb her while she was bathing and dressing. But, a quarter of an hour before the first guests were due, she put her head round the door of the guest room her sister was using.

'Frances, I have to talk to you.'

'Maggie said you were here when she opened the door to me. Are you back from Majorca already? I thought you might be there weeks.'

'I'm going to be; this is just a flying visit. Look, I know it's a bad time to pick but I have to know what you meant by what you said on the telephone about Nicolas Talbot. It's important to me, Frances.'

Her sister stopped doing her eyes and gave her a searching look. 'Don't tell me you've fallen for him? There hasn't been time for that.'

'There's been time,' Cressy said quietly. 'I knew as soon as I saw him he was someone special.'

'Oh, God, this is ghastly,' said Frances. Forgetting the need for haste, she closed her eyes and put her fingers to her forehead, as if she had been hit by a blinding headache.

Frances was rarely fazed, and perhaps she only seemed so now because she had had a tough week topped by a difficult rail trip and was not in the mood for anything but a stiff drink. Or so Cressy hoped.

Then her sister opened her eyes and visibly took a grip on herself.

'Look, there isn't time to wrap this up for you. I'm due downstairs any minute and the party will go on till all hours, and tomorrow I'm totally tied up. So I've got to give it to you straight from the shoulder.'

She drummed her long nails on the glass top of the dressing table. 'That man is off-limits, Cressy. You've got to forget you ever met him. He's brought enough grief to this family. When Anna was twenty he had an affair with her. Then he dropped her...leaving her pregnant. She had to have an abortion. She's never really got over it.'

CHAPTER TEN

'I DON'T believe it,' said Cressy. 'Nicolas wouldn't do that. He's too responsible...too kind. I just do *not* believe it.'

'You have to. You must. It's true.'

'Do Dad and Mum know? Does Maggie?'

'No, no one but us three...you, me and that bastard Talbot. If you knew what he'd put Anna through you'd never speak to him again. After the abortion she was so depressed and distraught she thought about suicide. I went round to see her unexpectedly, because I was worried about her. We've always been very close and I had an intuition something was wrong. I found her in bed. There was a bottle of gin on the night table and a whole lot of pills, including some she'd sneaked from my bathroom cabinet.'

Cressy sank down on the bed. She couldn't believe she was hearing this horrible, sordid scenario.

'I thought you were both too clued-up to get pregnant,' she said, baffled. 'How could it happen? Wasn't Anna taking the pill?'

Frances sighed. 'No contraceptive is a hundred per cent infallible. She'd had a bad tummy upset...sickness and diarrhoea. That can leave you exposed. Anyway she got caught, which wouldn't have mattered if he had loved her. Not that she wanted a baby, but she wouldn't have had it aborted if he hadn't dumped her.'

'She needn't have done that anyway. *Why* did she do it? She could have had the baby adopted, or even kept it. Dad and Mum would have helped her. We all would.'

'You're so sentimental, Cressy,' her sister said impatiently. She began to go on with her make-up. 'Just imagine Virginia's delight at having a sleazy story about a fatherless grandchild making headlines in the gutter Press. I'm not saying she wouldn't have stood by Anna if she'd had to. She might even have managed to make capital out of it,' she added cynically. 'But although it

would only have been a nine-day wonder in the Press, it would have been a drag on Anna for years. Being a single parent is tough. She made the practical choice.'

'I'm sure Maggie knows,' said Cressy. 'It ties in with something she said to me about enough broken hearts in this family already.'

'She knows that we've both been kicked in the teeth by men. She couldn't possibly know about Anna's pregnancy.'

'What happened to you?' Cressy asked.

'Nothing as bad as Anna's catastrophe. I was more in love with Euan than he was with me. I don't suppose you remember him. We had a thing going for six months and then he decided to end it. God, I wasn't expecting to have to rake over all this tonight. Nip down to the den and fix me a drink, will you? I can't face a roomful of big names without something to perk me up.'

When Cressy returned, with two drinks, Frances was almost ready. She gulped down some vodka and tonic. 'That's better.' Then she looked more closely at Cressy. 'You look shattered, poor kid. But it's better to find out now before you become too embroiled. What a louse the guy is, knowing this, to want your scalp on his belt. You haven't slept with him, have you?'

Cressy shook her head.

'Thank God for that. I think Anna would kill him if she found out he'd been after you. You must never let on to her, Cressy. It's dangerous to reopen wounds. She was close to a nervous breakdown. It's left her awfully unstable. I hoped she would meet someone else and put it behind her. But that hasn't happened...to either of us.'

On Saturday, after a late breakfast, the Vales, their housekeeper and Frances drove down to their weekend place. Cressy stayed behind. She needed to be alone. They would be back before dark the following evening.

On Sunday morning Nicolas rang up to ask the time of her flight on Monday. It was hard not to pour it all out to him on the phone, but she knew she must wait until they were face to face. The hours seemed to drag interminably.

When the weekenders returned, Frances made a point of speaking to Cressy in private before returning to her flat.

'From what Dad's been telling me, it seems you're committed to a rescue operation for Kate. Pity. It may make it difficult to avoid all contact with Nicolas. But don't let him con you, Cressy. If you ask him, I expect he'll deny it...claim that Anna was promiscuous, that it could have been anyone's baby. But it wasn't. There was no one else. He was the father of it.'

Cressy didn't argue. She didn't want to discuss it. Not until she saw Nicolas.

He was waiting for her at the airport. But this time she didn't fling herself into his arms—nor did he kiss her, but he held out his hand and said, 'How was your flight?'

'I came tourist this time, so there were fewer trimmings, but it was fine, thanks. I telephoned Kate before I left home and she said she was being discharged tomorrow.'

Nicolas took charge of the trolley on which, this time, Cressy had a suitcase weighing the maximum allowed.

'That's right, and everything's ready for her. You didn't see it before, but the wing which juts out on the right of the courtyard is a self-contained granny cottage, organised years ago when my mother thought she might still be living at Ca'n Llorenc after I married. It's never been used so it needed a major spring-clean. Luckily, for plumbing reasons, the bathroom is on the ground floor, so Kate won't have to negotiate the rather awkward staircase. She can inhabit the ground floor with you on the floor above.'

If he noticed that Cressy was not very talkative on the drive to Ca'n Llorenc he didn't remark on it.

When they arrived, she was greeted by Catalina and shown the quarters she and Kate would occupy. And as soon as his housekeeper had left them, he said, 'What's the matter, Cressy? What's happened?'

Although she had spent hours thinking about this moment, and how best to tackle it, she found it hard to begin. 'What makes you think anything is the matter?' she asked.

'I could see it in your face the moment you came through from airside. The night we had dinner at Scotts you looked wonderful. Now you look like a junior doctor who's been on duty so long she's at dropping point.'

'I know how they must feel. I haven't had much sleep myself.' She braced herself. 'On Friday night my sister Frances accused you of something...vile. I know it isn't true, Nicolas. But if Frances believes it, and Anna swears it's true, I don't see how you can clear yourself. Which means I shall have to choose...between our friendship and my family.'

While she was speaking, his expression had changed. Already serious and questioning, now it was stern and cold. It seemed to her that his eyes had the glitter of arctic ice.

'What am I accused of?'

'Having an affair with Anna and, when she got pregnant, dropping her.'

'I see. But you think I didn't?'

'I'm certain you didn't. I think you might have dropped her if she had begun to bore you, but I don't believe you'd walk out on a girl who was having your child.'

'A lot of men have.'

'I know...but you wouldn't.'

'You're very trusting, Cressy.'

Her answer came from her heart. She didn't stop to think that it might not be welcome.

'I love you, so of course I trust you,' she said impetuously.

Then, with the words irretrievable, she gave a gasp of dismay and felt a deep flush of embarrassment flooding her face from hairline to neck.

'I love you too,' said Nicolas, starting to smile. 'But I wasn't going to tell you yet.'

He opened his arms to her.

Some time later, after she had burst into tears of relief, making damp patches on his shirt which were now beginning to dry, Cressy gave a long, tremulous sigh and pulled herself together.

'Sorry to be so emotional, but these last few days have been awful. However much you care for someone, it's still a major decision to break with your family.'

Looking down at her upturned face, he said gravely, 'Would you really do that for me?'

'Of course. That's what love is...the world well lost.'

'I hope it won't be necessary,' said Nicolas. 'It seems to depend on Anna being willing to tell the truth.'

'What is the truth?' Cressy asked.

He frowned. 'There've been some women in my life, but none that I loved until you turned up. Because of the way I live, I didn't want to fall in love. It was hard for my mother and it's going to be hard for you, Cressy. I'm not as likely to get killed as my father was, but inevitably you're going to have to

put up with a lot of long separations. Even for love of you I can't change the way I am.'

⁴'I wouldn't expect you to. That's another thing about love,' she said seriously. 'You have to see people as they are and like them that way...not try to alter them.'

'Not everyone realises that,' Nicolas said dryly. He let her go and moved away, as if what he had to say was better said from a distance.

'I was attracted by Anna, but we hadn't known each other long before I found out she had someone else in her life. I wasn't prepared to share her. That was the end of it. If she was already pregnant it wasn't by me. To be brutally frank, if a guy doesn't want to be landed with paternity problems he doesn't take a girl's word that she's making sure it won't happen. When I have children, I want them to be planned and welcomed—not inconvenient accidents.'

'But if it was the other man who was the father, why did she blame it on you?'

'Only she can answer that. Perhaps he was married,' he suggested. 'Perhaps she loved him enough to not want to make trouble for him and was angry with me for walking out on her. It's a long time ago. I expect she's grown up and changed. But at the time I knew her her character wasn't as attractive as her looks. I suspect she was the female equivalent of a womaniser. It's possible she was running several other lovers, but Euan was the only one I knew about.'

Cressy stiffened. 'Euan? Are you sure that was his name?'

'Certain of it. Why?'

'That was the name of Frances's boyfriend...the one who dumped her.'

They looked at each other in silence.

'All is explained,' said Nicolas. 'It's very simple...when you know the answer. Anna couldn't resist trying her wiles on her sister's guy, and he fell for her. Then, when she became pregnant, he ran out on them both. She couldn't tell Frances the truth, and I was a convenient scapegoat. Which wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't met you and fallen in love with you.'

'The only way out of the impasse that I can see,' Cressy said slowly, 'is for Anna to invent another lover who could have been the father. She can never tell Frances the truth. That would put their relationship on the scrapheap for ever, especially as Frances believes there's a special bond between them.'

'I expect there's a solution somewhere,' said Nicolas. 'But right now I'm more concerned with our relationship.'

He came back to where she was standing. 'I was planning to ask you to marry me about six months from now. With the rest of our lives ahead, I felt I could afford to wait until you'd had time to be sure how you felt about me. But now that seems unnecessary. Shall we count ourselves engaged? To be married as soon as our families can be brought together without any awkward undercurrents?'

Cressy put her arms round his neck. 'To be honest, Maggie is my nearest and dearest, and, after her, Dad. What I feel for my mother and sisters is not much more than affection. We have so little in common. The person whose approval concerns me far more than theirs is *your* mother.'

'Perhaps, if there's room on the yacht, we might propose ourselves and go island-hopping with Mama and Tom and their brood. Catalina will take care of Kate.'

'That would be heaven.'

There was a glint in his eyes and a quirk at the corner of his mouth. 'But only, of course, if there are *two* cabins to spare so that you can stick to your vow.'

Cressy laughed. 'My vow was not to hang on to my "long-preserved virginity" until I was safely married— only until I loved someone and knew he loved me. Those conditions being fulfilled, I'm yours for the taking.'

Nicolas crushed her against him. '*Esta noche, mi vida,*⁹ he said in husky Spanish.

Cressy didn't need a translation to tell her that tonight she would sleep in his arms in the painted bed.